

The Body of Christ, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: The Church Christ Built

Matthew 16:13-19

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This first lesson sets the foundation for everything that follows, and what is doctrinally at stake here is enormous. Jesus stakes the existence of the church on a single confession: that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. The church is not a human invention or a voluntary society of like-minded people. It is the people Christ Himself promised to build, on the truth of His own deity and lordship, with Himself as the one head (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18). Your aim is to help the class feel the weight of three claims in this text: the church is one ("my church," singular), the church belongs to Christ (He builds it, He owns it), and the church is real and permanent (the gates of Hades will not prevail). Each of these stands against a live error, denominational division, the idea that the church is optional, and the notion that the church is merely an invisible abstraction with no concrete life.

Handle the "rock" carefully and pastorally. The point of the passage is not to elevate Peter into an office, but to ground the church on the confessed Christ. The whole context is the confession, and the church across the New Testament rests on Jesus as the chief cornerstone and the apostolic and prophetic foundation (Ephesians 2:20; 1 Corinthians 3:11). Lead the class to marvel that Christ builds His church on the truth Peter just spoke, not to argue about Peter himself.

At the same time, this lesson is not merely an argument to be won. It is an invitation to belong. Many of your students carry a thin, consumer picture of church, a place they attend rather than a people they are. Your deeper aim is formational: to move them from spectators to members, from borrowed answers about Jesus to a confession they own, and from treating the church as optional to loving it as the body Christ purchased with His own blood. Keep the tone one of wonder at what Christ has built, and gentle pressure toward belonging.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus asks His disciples this question in the shadow of Caesarea Philippi, a place crowded with the temples and idols of the nations. Why do you think Jesus chose this setting to ask "Who do you say that I am?", and what does it tell us that the answer to that question is the foundation everything else in this passage rests on?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set the scene before you handle the doctrine. Caesarea Philippi sat at the foot of a massive rock face, riddled with shrines to Pan and a temple to Caesar, a place saturated with the religion of the nations. Jesus deliberately brings His disciples here, to the edge of pagan territory, and asks the question of questions. The setting is the sermon: surrounded by dead gods, He asks who the living God's Son is.

Notice the movement from the crowds' opinions (John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah) to the pointed personal question. The crowd's answers were all flattering and all wrong. They placed Jesus among the great men. The text is teaching us that admiration is not confession. Everything in the passage, the church, the keys, the promise, hangs on getting the identity of Jesus right.

Stress that this is the foundation question for the whole study of the church. You cannot understand the church until you understand whose church it is. The church is defined by its head. If Jesus is merely a prophet, the church is merely a religious movement. If He is the Christ, the Son of the living God, then the church is the people of God gathered around the living Lord.

Help the class see why Jesus grounds the church on this confession and not on consensus or sincerity. The truth about Jesus is revealed by the Father, not invented by us (v. 17). The church is built on revealed truth, which points ahead to the New Testament's role as our authority.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The deity and lordship of Jesus Christ as the foundation of the church.
- The difference between admiring Jesus and confessing Him.
- Truth about Christ as revealed by the Father, not a matter of human opinion.
- The church defined by its head, not by human preference.
- The setting at Caesarea Philippi as a deliberate confrontation with the gods of the nations.

Discussion Prompts

- Why might Jesus have chosen such a pagan setting to ask the most important question?
- What is the difference between the crowd admiring Jesus and Peter confessing Him?
- How does the way we answer "Who is Jesus?" shape everything we believe about the church?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus pressed past secondhand opinions and asked His own followers directly, "But who do you say that I am?" Where in your own life are you still living on borrowed answers about Jesus, the answers of your parents or your church or your culture, and what would it look like this week to answer Him for yourself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first self-examining question, and it presses Jesus' own pivot in the text: "But who do you say that I am?" The word "you" is emphatic and personal. Jesus is not satisfied with reported opinions. He wants a confession from the person standing in front of Him.

Help students name the borrowed answers many of us live on. We can repeat the right words about Jesus, learned from parents, preachers, or songs, without those words ever becoming our own. There is no inheriting faith secondhand. Each person must come to his or her own confession.

Move the conversation toward honesty rather than guilt. The goal is not to shame anyone for a borrowed faith but to invite them into a personal one. Ask where their picture of Jesus actually comes from, and whether it can bear the weight of their real life.

Aim for a concrete next step. A confession that stays in the head changes nothing. Press gently toward this week: where is one place their own answer about Jesus needs to start shaping their words and actions?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal confession of Christ versus inherited or secondhand faith.
- The emphatic, personal nature of Jesus' question to each disciple.
- Self-examination as a healthy and ordinary part of discipleship.
- The danger of right words without personal conviction.

Discussion Prompts

- Where did your picture of Jesus first come from, and has it become your own?
- What is the difference between knowing the right answer about Jesus and confessing Him yourself?
- What is one place this week your confession of Christ needs to show?

Question 3

Student Question:

Peter confesses, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," and Jesus says this truth came not from flesh and blood but from the Father (vv. 16–17). What does Peter's confession claim about who Jesus actually is, and why does the whole identity of the church depend on the deity and lordship of Christ being true?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a heavier doctrinal question. Peter's confession has two parts: Jesus is the Christ (the promised Messiah, God's anointed King) and the Son of the living God (sharing the very nature of God). Both must be held together. He is the long-awaited King and He is divine.

Stress that Jesus accepts and blesses this confession rather than correcting it. When others called Him merely a prophet, He let it stand as the crowd's error. When Peter calls Him the Son of the living God, Jesus says the Father revealed it. Jesus receives worship and the title of deity, which He would never do if it were false.

Connect the confession to the church. The entire identity of the church depends on this being true. If Jesus is not the divine Son, the church is a memorial society for a dead teacher. Because He is the living Son of the living God, the church is the living body of a living Lord who still reigns (Ephesians 1:20–22).

Guard against any view that softens the deity of Christ. The lordship and deity of Jesus are central New Testament truths and central to our heritage. Make sure the class hears that Peter is not merely praising a great man; he is confessing God in the flesh.

Note how this anchors later lessons. The plan of salvation, the worship of the church, and the authority of the New Testament all rest on Jesus being exactly who Peter says He is.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The deity of Christ: the Son of the living God.
- The messiahship and kingship of Jesus: the Christ.
- Jesus accepting the confession of His deity rather than refusing it.
- The church as the body of a living Lord, not a memorial to a dead teacher.
- The lordship of Christ as the foundation of all church doctrine.

Discussion Prompts

- Why must we hold together both titles, the Christ and the Son of the living God?
- How does the deity of Jesus change what the church actually is?
- What does it mean for your daily life that Jesus is not merely a great teacher but the living Son of God?

Question 4

Student Question:

Peter spoke his confession out loud, in the open, surrounded by the idols of his day. In what ordinary settings of your week are you most tempted to keep your confession of Christ quiet, and what would change if you let the truth of who Jesus is shape how you speak and act there?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question follows the truth of Christ's lordship into the open air. Peter confessed Christ aloud, in a setting hostile to that confession. Discipleship is not a private opinion; it is a public allegiance.

Help students identify the specific settings where their confession goes quiet, the workplace, the family table, conversations with skeptical friends. Naming the place is the first step toward faithfulness in it.

Avoid turning this into a call for loud or obnoxious religion. Confessing Christ is less about announcements and more about a life and speech visibly shaped by His lordship. Let the truth of who He is govern how they treat people and talk about their hope.

Point them toward courage rooted in the previous question. Because Jesus really is the Son of the living God, there is no setting where He is not Lord, and no place where confessing Him is out of place.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Confessing Christ as a public allegiance, not a private opinion.
- Courage to name Christ in unfriendly settings.
- The witness of a life visibly shaped by Christ's lordship.
- The difference between obnoxious religion and faithful confession.

Discussion Prompts

- Where does your confession of Christ most often go quiet?
- What would faithful, unforced confession look like in that setting?
- How does the truth of Jesus' lordship give you courage there?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus responds, "On this rock I will build my church" (v. 18). Considering the confession Peter has just made, what is the "rock" on which Christ builds, and why does it matter that Jesus says He will build the church, rather than leaving it to us to build for Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Return to careful doctrine. "On this rock I will build my church." The rock is the confessed Christ, the truth Peter has just spoken. The whole context is the confession, and the New Testament consistently makes Jesus the foundation and cornerstone (1 Corinthians 3:11; Ephesians 2:20). The church is built on the reality that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Handle the question about Peter gently. There is no need to elevate Peter into a special office, and the passage gives no warrant for it. Peter himself later points to Christ as the living Stone and to all Christians as living stones built on Him (1 Peter 2:4-5). The honor goes to the One confessed, not merely the one confessing.

Stress the word “I.” Jesus says, “I will build my church.” The church is His project, not ours. We do not invent it, design it, or franchise it. We submit to it as He builds it according to the New Testament pattern. This is a guard against treating the church as a human organization to be remodeled at will.

Draw out the comfort here. Because Christ builds the church, its success does not finally depend on our cleverness or strength. He is the builder; we are the building. Our task is to be built in, not to take over the work.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ as the rock and foundation on which the church is built.
- The church as Christ’s work (“I will build”), not a human enterprise.
- Christ as the only foundation, with no second foundation needed.
- The danger of treating the church as a human organization to be redesigned.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the “rock” on which Jesus builds, and how do you know from the context?
- Why does it matter that Jesus says “I will build” rather than leaving it to us?
- How does it comfort you that the church is Christ’s project and not ours?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus calls it “my church,” claiming it as His own possession, bought and built by Him. Do you tend to think of the church as something Christ owns and is building, or as an organization you choose to attend? How would seeing it as His change the way you give yourself to it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question turns the truth of “my church” toward the heart’s posture. Do students think of the church as something Christ owns, or as a service they consume? The difference shows up in how they give themselves to it.

Help them see the consumer reflex in all of us. We evaluate the church by what it offers us rather than asking what Christ is building and how we fit. The shift from customer to member is a shift from “what do I get?” to “who am I called to be here?”

Connect ownership to belonging. If the church is Christ’s possession, purchased with His blood (Acts 20:28), then to love Christ is to love what He bought. We cannot hold the bride at arm’s length and claim to love the Bridegroom.

Aim for a concrete reorientation. Invite them to name one way they have treated the church as optional or as a vendor, and one way they could begin giving themselves to it as members of something Christ owns.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The church as Christ's possession, purchased with His blood.
- The difference between consuming church and belonging to it.
- Loving the church as an expression of loving Christ.
- The move from spectator to member.

Discussion Prompts

- Do you tend to evaluate church by what it offers you, or by what Christ is building?
- What does it mean that Christ purchased the church with His own blood?
- What is one way you could begin giving yourself to the church as a member, not a visitor?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus speaks of building one church, not many competing bodies, and the New Testament knows nothing of rival denominations (v. 18). What does it mean that Christ promised to build a single church on the confession of His name, and how does that promise stand against the idea that one church is as good as another?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is doctrinally weighty. Jesus says "my church," singular. He promises to build one church, not a collection of competing denominations. The New Testament knows one body (Ephesians 4:4), and Paul rebukes division as a contradiction of the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:10-13).

Present the church Christ built as undenominational. It wears His name and confesses His lordship, not the names of human founders or party platforms. The aim is not to attack people in the denominations but to call everyone back to the one church revealed in the New Testament, the church of Christ (Romans 16:16).

Address the common modern assumption directly: that one church is as good as another, and that doctrine does not much matter. Jesus' words cut against this. He built one church on one confession. To say the body does not matter is to say little of the One who bought it.

Keep the tone of marveling, not merely arguing. The wonder is that Christ is gathering one people from every background around Himself. Unity is not uniformity of personality; it is a shared Lord, a shared confession, and a shared submission to His word.

Be pastorally wise. Many students have family and friends in denominations. Lead them to love these people while still holding to the one church the New Testament reveals, and to long for the unity Jesus prayed for in John 17.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The oneness of the church: “my church,” not many competing bodies.
- The undenominational nature of the church Christ built.
- Wearing the name of Christ rather than human party names (Romans 16:16).
- Division as a contradiction of the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:10–13).
- The error that one church is as good as another.

Discussion Prompts

- What does Jesus’ phrase “my church” suggest about denominational division?
- How can we hold to the one church without attacking people we love in the denominations?
- What would it look like to long for the unity Jesus prayed for in John 17?

Question 8

Student Question:

Many people today treat membership in the Lord’s church as optional, a nice addition to a private faith. After hearing Jesus speak so personally about “my church,” where do you sense Him challenging any quiet assumption that you could follow Him while holding His church at arm’s length?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question follows the doctrine of oneness into attitude and action. If Christ built one church, how should that shape the way students think about labels, division, and party spirit, even within a faithful congregation?

Help them see that division is not only a denominational problem; it shows up in our own hearts as cliques, factions, and a quickness to divide over preference. The same spirit Paul rebuked at Corinth can live in any congregation.

Guide them toward humility and peacemaking. Loving the one church means working for its unity, refusing gossip and faction, and prizing what Christ prizes. It also means valuing sound doctrine, because true unity is unity in the truth, not at the expense of it.

Press for one concrete commitment: a relationship to mend, a faction to refuse, a habit of speech to lay down for the sake of the one body.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal responsibility for the unity of the body.
- Factions, cliques, and party spirit as threats from within.
- Unity grounded in shared truth, not the abandonment of truth.
- Peacemaking as a mark of those who love Christ's one church.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you see the spirit of division at work in your own heart?
- How is unity in truth different from unity at any cost?
- What is one concrete step you can take this week toward the unity of the body?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus promises, "The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it," and gives "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (vv. 18–19). What is Christ claiming here about the permanence, the authority, and the real existence of His church, and why do these words rule out the idea that the church is merely an invisible or optional thing with no concrete life in the world?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson. Jesus makes three staggering claims: "the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it," and "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven," with binding and loosing. Take them in turn.

The gates of Hades not prevailing means the church is permanent and indestructible. Death itself, which swallows every human institution, cannot defeat what Christ builds. This is a promise of the church's permanence and of Christ's victory through the resurrection. The church He started has never needed to be re-founded, and never will be destroyed.

The keys of the kingdom and the language of binding and loosing point to the authority Christ gives to His apostles to open the kingdom through the gospel and to declare, by the Spirit's guidance, what is bound and loosed in heaven. We see this fulfilled in Acts, where the apostles proclaim the terms of entrance into the kingdom (Acts 2). This grounds the authority of the apostolic message, now preserved for us in the New Testament.

Use this to refute the idea that the church is merely invisible or optional. Jesus speaks of a real people with real authority, real entrance, and real permanence. The kingdom has doors and keys. The church is concrete: it assembles, it has a confession, it has appointed work and worship. An "invisible church" with no visible life is not the church Jesus describes here.

Tie the kingdom and the church together. In this passage Jesus moves seamlessly from "my church" to "the kingdom of heaven." The church and the kingdom are closely bound; the kingdom was at hand in Jesus' ministry and was established when the church began (Mark 9:1;

Acts 2). Christ reigns now as King over His church. There is no need to wait for a future earthly reign; the King is already enthroned (Ephesians 1:20–22).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The permanence of the church: the gates of Hades will not prevail.
- The authority of the apostles and the keys of the kingdom.
- Entrance into the kingdom through the apostolic gospel (Acts 2).
- The church as real and visible, not merely an invisible abstraction.
- The close relationship of the church and the kingdom, already established.
- Christ reigning now as King, against the idea of a future earthly reign.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that death itself cannot prevail against the church?
- How do the keys of the kingdom connect this promise to what happens in Acts 2?
- Why does this passage rule out the idea that the church is merely invisible or optional?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across Matthew 16:13–19 as a whole. Having seen the church as the people Jesus Himself promised to build on the confession of His name, name one specific way Jesus is calling you to take your place in His church, and what is the first step He is asking of you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the capstone, drawing the whole passage toward personal response. The lesson has shown the church as the people Jesus Himself promised to build, on the confession of His name, against which death cannot win. The question is now simply: where is your place in it?

Lead students to move from agreement to belonging. It is possible to affirm every truth in this lesson and still hold the church at arm's length. The aim is a specific, nameable step: confessing Christ and being added to His body, recommitting to faithful membership, taking up a neglected work, or mending a broken tie.

Be ready for students who realize they have never truly entered the church Christ built. Without pressure, point ahead to Lesson 2, which takes up exactly how one enters. Let the wonder of belonging to Christ's church draw them.

Close with hope. Christ is still building, and He means to build you in. The first step is not to admire the church from a distance but to take your place inside what the living Lord is doing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moving from agreement with the truth to actual belonging.
- The church as the people Jesus is still building.
- Confession and membership as the beginning of finding one's place.
- Christ's ongoing work of building His people, including the student.

Discussion Prompts

- What is one specific way Jesus is calling you to take your place in His church?
- What first step is He asking of you, and what holds you back?
- How does it change things to know Christ is still building, and means to build you in?