

# THE CORE OF CHRISTIANITY

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*By the Book™* A Chapter by  
Chapter Bible Study Series  
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## Let's Begin

We often hear the expression “I just want to know what makes it tick.” Sometimes that’s used of a football team and the winning streak they’re having. Others use it of a person meaning that they’d just like to know what the driving force is in that person’s life. Sometimes the phrase is used of a company and its successful product.

Today we will explore what makes Christianity tick. Exactly what is the heart of the Christian faith? Matthew 16 tells us clearly. As we proceed through this chapter, note *three truths* we’ll be exploring together:

- I. The Christian Faith is about a Person—Who is the Christ? (vv. 1-17)**
- II. The Christian Faith is about a People—Who is the Church? (vv. 18-20)**
- III. The Christian Faith is about a Power—What is the Cross? (vv. 21-28)**

## I. The Christian Faith is about a Person—Who is the Christ? (vv. 1-17)

Chapter sixteen begins with the Pharisees teaming up with the Sadducees in order to put an end to Jesus (v. 1). Their team was evidently a last ditch strategy because the two groups were avid theological enemies. Yet since they failed so often to trap Jesus individually, they worked out a deal, laying aside their differences in order to put the Galilean away for good.

The agreed plan was to request a sign, one which Jesus refused to give (vv. 2-4). Jesus later offered commentary to His disciples while alone with them (vv. 5-12). However, His disciples were still much too green to understand the spiritual intent of Jesus’ words (v. 11). This brief scenario serves as the backdrop for the most explicit revelation Jesus had offered them up until this point in the Gospel.

Caesarea Philippi stands as a major dividing point in Matthew. Jesus openly reveals who He is and for what purpose He came. He asked His disciples, “Whom do men say that I the Son of Man am?” (v. 13).

*First of all, take note of this perennial question* (vv. 13-14). Everybody had an opinion about Jesus. The disciples rehearsed the opinions, which were informative and revealing. Some said He was John. Perhaps

it was Jesus’ focus on preaching repentance that stimulated that opinion. Others said Jesus was Elijah, perhaps Jesus’ prayers drove such association. Still others mentioned Jesus was Jeremiah, perhaps noting the passion Jesus had which was reminiscent of the “weeping prophet”.

While all those notions were both informative and revealing because they uncovered what people really thought about Jesus, they were also inadequate. The fundamental flaw woven among them all was comparing Jesus to other men. To do so was a treacherous dishonor.

People today still offer opinions about Jesus. These opinions are never out of vogue. But these opinions remain just as inadequate now as they were then.

It’s true that many religions hold Jesus up as a great prophet. Once again, however, this is an inadequate view and the flaw shows itself openly—*prophets are only men and Jesus was no mere man.*

We can always match every great man in the world with another great man. Where there’s a Shakespeare, there’s a Tennyson; where there’s a Spurgeon, there’s a Whitefield; where there’s a Moody, there’s a Graham. But when we mention Jesus, He always stands alone (Acts 4:12).

### Reflection Connection

*What would you say is the foremost opinion people have concerning Who Jesus is today? Do you think there are differences based on age? How about nationalities?*



### Reflection Connection

*Why do you suppose Jesus inquired about what others thought of Him? Do you think it was easier then than now to accept Who Jesus was? Why or why not?*

### Reflection Connection

*Why does the identity of Jesus we offer need to be a personal issue? When did you come to the conclusion about Who Jesus is? Be ready to share with the group.*

*Second, the question Jesus asked was a personal question (vv. 15-16).* Jesus narrowed the focus for the disciples: “but whom say ye that I am?” (v. 15). What others say about Jesus is no substitute for what one personally says about Jesus. In fact, what one personally says about Jesus determines whether one is personally saved.

Jesus was actually being confrontational with His question, “whom say ye” (v. 15). *In short, Jesus was stating that no one can be neutral about Him.* How often people attempt to be neutral about Jesus but frankly, it is impossible. In fact, there really are only four possibilities about the identity of Jesus.

*The first possibility is that Jesus was a legend.* More simply put, He was a myth. He didn't really exist. *A second possibility is that Jesus was a liar.* While it's true He existed, His life's purpose was to be a deceiver. Jesus was the Devil! *The third possibility is that Jesus was a lunatic.* In other words, He was a victim, a poor diseased man whose mind was demented. *Finally, the fourth possibility is that Jesus was Lord.* He was who He said He was.

Since no person can escape answering this question about the identity of Jesus, which one of the four possibilities do you propose? Your answer will be personal because it is a personal confrontation with which Jesus approaches you.

It is also a *personal confession* (v. 16). Here Peter climbs the height of inspiration. He goes to the head of the class. Peter has been wrong before, but not this time. We can be certain we'll never be better than when we confess who Jesus is: “thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

The term “Christ” means the “anointed one.” In the Old Testament, Israel had three offices that bore the description, anointed. There was the anointed prophet, the anointed priest, and the anointed king. Though not fully understanding it at the time, when Peter said “thou art the Christ” he, in essence, was saying Jesus was the anointed prophet, anointed priest and anointed King.

*Third, the question Jesus asked was also a providential question* (v. 17). Peter did not come to answer it by human ingenuity. Instead it was given by the Father's revelation: “flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.” No one can make or conjure it up. If one comes to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God and Savior of the World, it will be because God revealed it (cp. John 6:44). The core of Christian faith begins with who Jesus is. He is the Christ, the Son of God and Saviour of the world.

## II. The Christian Faith is about a People: Who is the Church? (vv. 18-20)

In these verses Jesus speaks exactly one half of all references He made to the church. In fact, the only other reference is in Matthew as well (18:17). This makes these words critically important.

In the New Testament, the term “church” is used in two primary ways. *The first way pertains to a local assembly.* Most references in the New Testament are local. *The second way the term “church” is used is universal.* It refers to the whole body of blood-washed believers. That's the way Jesus used “church” here—as a reference to the *universal* aspect of the church. The term “church” itself refers to “an assembly.” For the Hebrew people, it referenced ones who were “called out” to



come together. In contrast, for the Greeks, the term referred to those assembled together for a “town hall” meeting.

The Church is a mystery in God’s heart. It never existed before the period of the New Testament. Jesus reveals for the first time, three particular features about the New Testament church. *First, Jesus reveals the church’s solid foundation:* “upon this rock, I will build my church” (v. 18). The foundation of God’s Church is built upon the person of Jesus Christ. There is a play on words here that is not evident in the English version of the Bible.

The term “Peter” means a “loose stone” or a “single pebble.” However, when Jesus spoke of the rock upon which the Church would be built, He used a term that meant a “mass of rock,” which would be firm and immovable. No man could sustain the weight of God’s Church being built upon him. It would take God Himself to sustain the church.

In the Old Testament, God is pictured as a rock (cp. Deuteronomy 32:31, 1 Samuel 2:2). Jesus Christ is the rock of our salvation (1 Corinthians 3:11). Thus, He is the foundation of the Church (1 Peter 2:4). This makes the church the most stable entity ever created. God Himself sustains it. In fact, Christ says, “I will build my church.” Jesus learned the fine art of carpentry as He grew up under Joseph and Mary’s care. He still builds. Now, rather than working with wood, He builds spiritual tabernacles both in heaven (John 14:3) and on earth.

The beauty for us is that we are Jesus’ personal helpers. Paul calls us “laborers together with God” (1 Corinthians 3:9). We use the tools of love (1 Corinthians 8:1); faith (Jude 20); Scripture (1 Corinthians 14:4) and gifts (1 Corinthians 14:12) as we build up the body of Christ.

*The second feature is our secure future as the Church:* “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (v. 18b). Jesus secures our future from the Church’s sworn enemies, the Devil and hell. Hades is the realm of the dead for the lost (cp. Luke 16:23). It is a picture of both the Devil and death. Nevertheless, Jesus pronounces the church’s victory, for the “gates of hell” shall not prevail. Though it may seem at times that the church is defeated, the church can never lose. The war is won already through Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection (Acts 2:27, 31; cp. Revelation 1:18).

This does not mean that local churches never die. In fact, too many churches die because some forsake the Gospel! Others die because the demographics change and the church fails to reach the people around it. But the Lord’s church will never cease. Its future is secure.

*The third feature revealed about the church is its special function:* “And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (v. 19). The simple truth is, Jesus gives to the church the grand opportunity (keys) to unlock for the world the truths of God.

Incredibly, the Church can lock people out of the kingdom or open the door to the kingdom. This is a privileged opportunity. It is also a massive responsibility. The Church has a job to perform: to do His will on earth as in heaven! That’s who we are—the Church of the living God!

### Reflection Connection

*How can we distinguish between the local church and the universal church? Is the Lord’s Supper a local church ordinance or a universal church ordinance? How about baptism? Explain (Ask your Pastor to join you to explain if you need assistance.)*

### Reflection Connection

*What opportunities exist in your neighborhood to “loose” the gospel message? Are there some opportunities that need consideration? Be specific and note some ways your group can offer to the pastor for consideration.*



### III. The Christian Faith is about a Power: What is the Cross? (vv. 21-28)

We've learned *who Christ is* (vv. 1-17) and *who His Church is* (vv. 18-20). Now Matthew switches focus to the *cross—the power of God, the plan from God*. As Matthew records the words of Jesus, *three clear truths* of the cross are revealed.

**First, we observe the reality of the Cross:** “From that time forth began Jesus to show unto his disciples...” (v. 21). This was no fairy tale or Greek myth. It was a reality the disciples had yet to learn. Jesus spoke of a real Roman cross, a horrible instrument of death. This was something very real and it was necessary.

*The cross was not an after-thought of God.*

#### Reflection Connection

*Why was the cross necessary? Why could God not have just pronounced people forgiven? Explain.*

In fact, when Jesus spoke of the cross, He spoke in terms of absoluteness. The cross was not something that might be, but that must be (cp. John 3:14; Luke 24:26). The cross was not an after-thought of God, something God added because of some unknown response He had not anticipated. The cross upon which Jesus died was a part of the divine plan for all eternity.

What makes it doubly difficult is that the cross was not only necessary, it was brutal as well. Jesus said that He must “suffer many things.” Admittedly, Jesus spoke both of emotional suffering as well as physical. But the spiritual suffering through the separation of Jesus from the Father was the heaviest load of all. Furthermore, the brutality of the cross would result in His death. Victory was assured. The victory over the grave was just as necessary as the cross itself!

**The second truth revealed is the rejection of the cross** (vv. 22-23). The words Jesus spoke were more than Peter could stand. Peter liked the idea of Jesus being the foundation of the Church. He accepted the keys to the Kingdom and the responsibility put upon him by Jesus. But of the cross, Peter wanted no part! Thus, Peter rebuked Jesus for even thinking in such a way (v. 22). How much we adore the positive aspect of faith, when we're promised future victory and life eternal. But let the cross be focused upon too long and we tend to bail out quickly.

Peter flat out rejected talk of the cross. It didn't even dawn upon him how arrogant this was. Jesus, however, stopped Peter in mid sentence as it were and set the fisherman straight (v. 23). The voice may be Peter's but the words came from Satan himself. Peter thought about himself and maybe even others when he rebuked Jesus. But who was Peter to lecture God on how best to redeem sinful human beings?

**Finally, the third truth revealed about the cross is its reception** (vv. 24-28). Peter rejected a cross for Jesus. Now Jesus added a cross for Peter and every one else who desired life eternal.

To receive a cross involves decision. What kind of decision? First, it would be a *serious decision* to take up one's cross and follow Jesus. There was a call to leave a self-centered life. Jesus takes precedent in every aspect of one's living. This was a

#### Reflection Connection

*The Bible indicates that we must pick up our own cross and follow Jesus. What does the image of picking up a cross bring to your mind? Does it mean we must all be martyrs? Why or why not?*



serious decision, the seriousness of which is also revealed in its continued focus. That is, to follow Jesus is a process, a daily walk with the cross.

Second, it was not only a *serious* decision, but also a *sensible* decision (vv. 25-26). The only way to live is to die. Thus, if one would have life, one must choose the way of the cross. Have you chosen the way of the cross?

Third, it was a *satisfying* decision (v. 27). In this age it is the *cross one bears*. But in the next world, it is a *crown one wears*. One day the cross is exchanged for a crown. Sweet reward!

### Golden Greek Nugget

The term translated in all English Bibles as “church” is the term “*ecclesia*”. It occurs only here in Matthew and in chapter eighteen. However, it is found well over a hundred additional times in the New Testament. It literally means “called out ones”. It was used in the Greco-Roman world for political assemblies very similar to our “town hall” meetings today. The disciples of Jesus employed the term in accordance with Jesus’ own usage as an assembly of “called out ones” who forsook all to follow Him. As the early church developed in the New Testament (from Acts 2 forward), so did the term, becoming the main designation for the community of God’s people, the church.

### Wrap Up

*Some years ago there was a bumper sticker which read, “When we die, the one with the most toys wins.” The problem is that our life is not over when we die. In many ways it’s just beginning. Have you settled in your heart Who Jesus is? Have you committed yourself to what Jesus wants? Are you willing to take up your cross and follow Him? There is no turning back now. You must decide today.*

