

Who Do You Say Jesus Is?

David Egya

11 August 2024

INTRODUCTION

Few historical figures have sparked as much debate over their identity and significance as Jesus Christ. This is understandable, considering the profound implications of understanding who he truly was.

After many centuries and a wide range of opinions, the debate about Jesus's identity remains popular. The world hasn't stopped being fascinated with Jesus, even though it may not agree with what the Bible claims about him.

In today's secular world, views on Jesus vary widely. Here are some of the most common opinions:

Good Teacher: Many people see Jesus as a wise and influential teacher whose moral and ethical teaching, such as the Sermon on the Mount, remain relevant and inspiring

Reformer: Some view Jesus as a social reformer who challenged the status quo, advocated for the marginalised and oppressed, and promoted justice and compassion.

Moral Example: Jesus is often regarded as a paragon of virtue and moral integrity, whose life and actions serve as a model for ethical behaviour.

Cultural Icon: In popular culture, Jesus is sometimes seen as a superstar or a symbol of various ideals, often depicted in art, literature, and media in ways that reflect contemporary values and issues.

Myth or Legend: Some consider the stories about Jesus to be myths or legends, created and embellished over time. They may acknowledge his existence but question the supernatural aspects of his life.

There are also different views of Jesus among other religious groups today:

The debate about Jesus's identity is not new! Over 2000 years ago, the world was equally fascinated with Jesus. Numerous views circulated like we have today. However, few ordinary people had a rare opportunity to have Jesus's true identity revealed to them.

As we read together from Matthew 16:13-20, you will gain insight from what was revealed about who Jesus was and is.

Bible Reading: Matthew 16:13-20

Earlier in Matthew's narrative of Jesus' life and ministry, he made it clear Jesus was:

Matt.1:1- Jesus is Christ, the Messiah (God's anointed one).

Matt. 3:17- God the Father confirmed it at his baptism.

Matt. 8:29- the evil spirits (demons) testified about Jesus.

THE SPECULATION (Vs 13-15)

But the characters in the narrative, including the crowd who followed him and the disciples, struggled to identify Jesus (Matt 7:28-29, 9:33, 13:54). The religious teachers of that time (called the Pharisees) who should know better repeatedly asked for a sign, suggesting that even they were trying to find out who Jesus was (Matt 16:1).

In a movie or play, that's called **dramatic irony**. It's a literary device in which the reader or audience knows more about the situations and their resolutions before the leading characters or actors.

While Matthew's narrative has given us insight into the identity of Jesus, the characters in Jesus' time were still navigating with incomplete knowledge of who he really was.

They had seen Jesus display supernatural power in healing people, feeding multitudes with few loaves of bread and fish, and teaching with authority in a way that was different from what they'd seen before. During this time, Israel was awaiting a promised Messiah—God's anointed one—a Saviour who would save them from their enemies. They expected that the Messiah would be a political or military warrior who would deliver them from the oppression of the Roman occupation. So, when Jesus was moving from one region to another, doing miracles and teaching about the Kingdom of God yet not making moves to deliver them from the Roman rule, they couldn't figure out who he really was.

The scene of our passage today was the region of Caesarea Philippi.

Matthew 16:13

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi [Map]

Caesarea Philippi is 25 miles (40 km) north of the Sea of Galilee. It had been a centre of the worship of (1) Baal, then (2) the Greek god Pan, and then (3) Caesar. The name Caesarea Philippi differentiates it from the city of Caesarea, built along the Mediterranean coast. At this time, it was an

important Greco-Roman city. It had a primarily pagan Syrian and Greek population. So, this is a non-Jewish district.

Matthew's Gospel has so far narrated that Jesus' teachings and miraculous activities extend beyond the traditional Jewish settlements around the Sea of Galilee to areas occupied by non-Jews (the Gentiles). Earlier, Jesus healed a Gentile woman's daughter around Tyre and Sidon and healed many people in the region of Decapolis, both in Gentile territories.

This time, he visited Caesarea Phillipi, another gentile territory. Our passage today focuses entirely on Jesus' interaction with his disciples, suggesting he had taken time away from the crowd to discuss with them.

Here Jesus asked his disciples:

Matthew 16:13

... "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

In Matthew and other Gospels, Jesus often uses the Son of Man to describe himself. This title signifies his status as a humble and suffering servant (Mt 9:6) but indicates his future glory as a King and Judge

Being aware of what the people at that time were speculating about, the disciple replied:

Matthew 16:14

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

- **John the Baptist:** Perhaps because of his uncompromising and fearless teachings. Also, earlier in Matt. 14:2, we already read how Herod the Tetrarch thought Jesus was John the Baptist who came back to life.
- **Elijah:** The Jews remembered that Elijah did not die (2 Kings 2:11) and believed that he would return to earth to announce the end of time (Mal. 4:5). He was also famous for great signs and healing, including restoring a dead child to his mother.
- **Jeremiah:** A catalyst for spiritual reformation and revival in Judah during King Josiah (2 Chronicles 34:35). He was so deeply sorrowful about the fallen condition of Judah that he earned the title "weeping prophet". Jeremiah acted as God's faithful messenger despite many oppositions. Jesus faced fierce opposition from the Pharisees later in Matthew's narrative, but perhaps the crowd had noticed some similarities already.

- **One of the Prophets:** The public recognised Jesus as a messenger of God with miraculous acts, so he must be a prophet. Moreover, Jesus once compared himself to a prophet when he was rejected in his hometown of Nazareth (Matt. 13:57).

One thing to note about the public view of Jesus is how they honoured him by identifying him with past significant historical figures. Today, people feel they honour Jesus, too, when they see him as a good teacher, a reformer, and a moral example.

But Jesus' follow-up question in Matthew 16:15 clearly shows that the common views of Jesus do not measure up to his real identity. **Why?** Because if Jesus were to be only any of these, then he couldn't be a personal Saviour to anyone.

"If Jesus is a teacher only, then all he can do is to tantalize me by erecting a standard I cannot attain" – [Oswald Chambers – The Utmost for his Highest]

If Jesus was only a good moral example, then what is the use of setting an ideal bar that none of us could possibly come near?

If Jesus was only a prophet (a messenger of God), what is the use of teaching us to be what we never can be, to be pure in heart and to be perfectly devoted to God? His teachings (e.g. Sermon on the Mount) and his exemplary life would only leave us in despair and nothing more.

No wonder he wanted his disciples and all of us today to know him beyond these common views.

Matthew 16:15- But what about you? He asked, Who do you say I am?

Now Jesus turned to the disciples and asked, what about you?

Perhaps you are not a Christian and are familiar with what others think Jesus is. Like these disciples, Jesus wants you to know him personally and not get stuck in the public opinions about him.

So, **who do you say Jesus is?**

THE REVELATION (Vs 16-17,20)

Simon Peter, who usually acts as a spokesman for the disciples, declared:

Matthew 16:16

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

These disciples have become closer to Jesus, listened to his teachings, seen his compassion for the people, and witnessed God's power displayed through him. Now, Peter has recognised Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah—the Son of the living God.

Peter's confession is a watershed moment and has a few key elements to note:

- **Identifies Jesus as the Messiah**, the anointed Saviour who will deliver his people
- **Acknowledgment of Jesus' divine sonship**: Affirms that Jesus is the Son of God, highlighting his unique relationship with the Father.
- **Expression of faith**: This confession is a personal declaration of faith and belief in Jesus' identity and mission because it directly responds to the question Jesus directed to his disciples.

Was Peter right about Jesus?

In the BBC quiz show "**Pointless**", contestants aim to give correct but obscure answers that few people thought of. The more obscure the answer, the fewer points it scores, with the ultimate aim being to find a "pointless" answer, which scores zero points.

How many of you have seen the show before?

Jesus says Peter's confession was not only **Correct** but **Pointless!**

It was **Pointless** because no one would have figured it out without God's revelation. Even though the disciples were eyewitnesses to all that Jesus did, Jesus said their recognition of him as the Saviour, was not only from their intellectual insight but ultimately from a divine revelation from God

[Matthew 16:17](#)

... for this was not **revealed** to you by flesh and blood, but by **my Father in heaven**

God revealed who Jesus was to Peter and the disciples. The same God is revealing Jesus to you and many others through his written word today. Like Peter, we encounter Jesus through our senses—seeing, hearing, and touching—but ultimately, it's God who reveals the truth about his Son in our hearts. **Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him who Jesus is (Jn 6:45)**

Maybe you are exploring faith and would like to know more about Jesus. As you read or listen to the Bible, please do so with an open mind. God will reveal to you who Jesus is.

It is also a sober reminder to us, the followers of Jesus. We may play a vital role in helping our friends and loved ones learn more about Jesus. This is right, and Jesus himself commanded us to share the Good News with them. However, we should always remember that God plays the most active role in revealing Jesus in people's hearts. So we must share the good news in total dependence on God alone.

Given the significance of revelation about Jesus, isn't it surprising then to read in verse 20 that Jesus:

Matthew 16:20

Then he (Jesus) warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ-

Jesus knows people's misconceptions of who he was. He knew that if the disciples told the crowd he was the Messiah before His prophesied death and resurrection (Mt 17:9), they would attempt to start a revolution against Roman occupation to make Him King of Israel (Jn 6:15). That would be based on a misunderstanding about what the Messiah had come to do on earth because most people at that time were expecting a political and military Messiah.

At his perfect time, Jesus commissioned Peter and other disciples to proclaim him as the Saviour of the whole world (Mt 28:18-20). According to Acts 1:8, he empowered them to proclaim him in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the world.

That is the same good news that Jesus commissioned every believer to proclaim. We are to proclaim Jesus, the Saviour of the world, not only with words but also by the testimony of our lifestyle. He wants our lives to shine his light so that the world will see our good deeds and give God glory.

So, to all the followers of Jesus here, who do you say Jesus is through your words and your lifestyle?

In our passage for today, you would have noticed that Jesus not only commends Peter's confession but also provides additional responses that only Matthew records and Mark and Luke's gospels do not.

FOUNDATION (Vs 18-19)

Jesus further responded in verse 18:

Matthew 16:18

And I tell you that you are Peter, and **on this rock I will build my church**, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Jesus' additional response to Peter is one of the most debated texts in the Bible. The key question here concerns Peter's relationship to what Jesus called "**this rock**" in the passage.

Peter (in Greek) has a designative meaning of 'rock' or individual stone:

Petros [Peter] means 'rock' or 'individual stone'

Petra [this rock] means 'rock' or 'bedrock' or 'large rock formation.'

Jesus' wordplay with Peter's name and 'this rock' has led to questions about what or who exactly does 'this rock' in this passage means.

Several suggestions have been made on how to interpret 'This Rock' (v18) in our passage but let me highlight only two here.

1. **"This rock" – Peter himself** – Jesus will build his Church on Peter.
2. **"This rock" – Peter's confession** – Jesus will build his Church on the confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living.

My goal here is not to resolve the arguments that scholars put forward but to create a helpful connection between this section and the rest of the passage we read today. However, I'm happy to chat further with anyone who wants to discuss the different arguments.

Since the passage itself does not provide more information on how to interpret this section, I applied one helpful method for studying the Bible: relating this text to other passages in the Bible. The idea here is to use the Bible as its own commentary to increase our understanding of a given text.

First, many Bible passages highlight Peter's role in building the church:

- He was one of Jesus' close disciples who witnessed significant events in Jesus' ministry, including Transfiguration (saw Jesus divine glory – Mt 17:1-9), Garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:36-46)
- A key leader in the early Christian community. Spread the Gospel, particularly among the Jews, preach a sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2), and 300 people came to faith
- Led a prominent Gentile's conversion (Cornelius - Acts 10), opening the way for the good news of Jesus to reach the Gentiles.
- Wrote 2 Epistles (1 & 2 Peter) of the Bibles

- Jesus commissioned him to “feed my sheep” (John 21:15-17) – i.e., to lead his followers.
- Peter historically speaks on behalf of the other disciples and is often seen as their leader.

On the other hand, was Peter also acting as the spokesman for the disciples in today’s passage. Even though the declaration of Jesus’ identity came through Peter, we know that the other disciples shared the same belief in Jesus as Peter.

In other parts of the Bible, the authority delegated in verse 19 explicitly includes other disciples:

Matthew 18:18

“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

John 20:23

If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

Therefore, it is right to say that even though Peter played a leadership role in the church's earliest days, Jesus' authority and mission in today’s passage were not exclusive to Peter.

Matthew 16:19

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Peter, along with the other disciples, was given the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, i.e., the authority and power to proclaim the good news of forgiveness of sin through faith in Jesus. Through their witnessing, God opened the gate of heaven for others to come in. Like them, we (who share the same faith today) have the privilege of showing others the way into the Kingdom.

Peter, along with the other disciples, was given the authority to establish rules and regulations in the church. The technical terms “**bind**” and “**loose**” in verse 19 refer to this delegated authority. Notably, they were **not given the authority to determine but only to announce** what God (in heaven) “bound” and “loosed”. In other words, whatever they authorised or forbade on earth had already been sanctioned in heaven.

Through obedience to the mission and the faithful use of their God-given authority, Peter and the other disciples proclaimed the good news of Jesus to the world.

Matthew 16:18

... **on this rock I will build my church**, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Through them and many generations of believers after them, Jesus kept his promise to build his church, and the opposing forces could not overcome it.

So the church, comprising all who believe in Christ as their Saviour, exists today because of the fundamental truth that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. The acceptance of this revealed truth is the force that prevents the gates of Hades from prevailing against Christ's church.

Let me pray as I invite the band to lead us in a response song.

Thank you, Father, for revealing to us who Jesus truly is. Could you please help us to reveal Jesus as the Saviour to those around us through our words and lives. Please reveal the true identity of Jesus to those who exploring faith and learning more about Jesus. Amen.