

The Church Jesus Builds (Matthew 16:13–20; Romans 12:1–8)

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August 23, 2026

Last month, when I went for my driving test, the instructor asked me to start the car. I had the key in my hand. Technically, I had the authority to drive. But as I held that key, I found myself asking a very serious question: “What am I going to do with this authority?” Something is humbling about being given the keys to a car.

I had more than thirty years of driving experience in India. But suddenly, with the testing authority sitting beside me, I became nervous. I was not only thinking about whether I knew how to drive. I was thinking about whether I had the maturity to handle the responsibility. I was also trying to retrain myself because, in India, we drive on the left side of the road, while here I have to keep to the right. We might ask a similar question when our sixteen-year-old receives the keys to a car capable of traveling a hundred miles an hour: “Does this young person really have the maturity to handle this much power?”

And that brings us to today's Gospel. Jesus says to Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” Why did Jesus give such huge responsibility to Peter? Had Jesus looked carefully at Peter's record?

Peter often speaks before he thinks. Just a few verses after today's passage, Jesus will say to him, “Get behind me, Satan!” because Peter has set his mind on human things rather than divine things. Later, Peter will deny Jesus three times.

So we might ask: Why would Jesus entrust the keys of the kingdom to someone who seems so immature and unstable? The answer tells us something essential about **the church Jesus builds.**

I have five suggestions about that church.

1. The Church Jesus Builds Begins with a Confession, Not a Reputation

Jesus begins with a question: **“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”**

The disciples give Him a variety of answers: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. In other words, people were trying to understand Jesus through categories they already knew.

And the church has been tempted to do the same thing ever since. We can understand Jesus through Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Barth, Billy Graham, or another theologian or preacher we admire. We can understand Jesus through our denomination, our culture, our theological tradition, or our personal experience. But then Jesus makes the question personal:

“But who do you say that I am?” And Peter answers:

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Notice Jesus' response.

Jesus does not say, “Peter, you have demonstrated extraordinary leadership ability.” Instead, He says: “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”

Peter's authority begins with revelation and testimony. Peter has experienced something about Jesus that he cannot simply attribute to human wisdom. He has come to confess who Jesus is. That is the foundation of the church.

2. The Authority of the Church Comes as a Gift, Not as a Reward

Jesus continues: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

Christians have debated for centuries what exactly “this rock” means. Some understand the rock to be Peter himself. Others understand it as Peter's confession of faith. Still others point

ultimately to Christ. But whatever interpretation we choose, one thing is clear: Peter did not manufacture this authority for himself. Jesus gave it to him.

Keys are symbols of authority. But Christian authority is very different from worldly authority. Authority is entrusted to the church so that it will not dominate the world but to serve, discern, welcome, teach, forgive, reconcile, and be a witness to the world.

3. The Church Jesus Builds Is a Body of Many Members and Many Gifts

This brings us naturally to Paul's words in Romans 12. Paul says:

“For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ.” Here Paul gives us another picture of the church. Jesus speaks about building a church, but Paul speaks about forming a body.

And the two images belong together. A body needs different parts. The eye cannot say, “I don't need the hand.” And one Christian cannot say, “I don't need another Christian.” The church Jesus builds is not a collection of people who all think alike, speak alike, or possess the same gifts. It means that everyone has something to offer. This applies at three levels. First, each believer is a body offered to God. Second, the local congregation is itself a body. And third, the worldwide church is the body of Christ. The global church is larger than any denomination, nation, culture, language, or theological tradition.

4. The Church Jesus Builds Is Transformed by Grace and Participates in God's Work

Paul says: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what the will of God is—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” There is a reciprocity between God's initiative and human participation. God transforms us—but we must present ourselves to God. God gives gifts—but we must use

those gifts. God gives grace—but we must discern God's will. God builds the church—but we are called to participate in what God is building. A transformed mind produces a transformed life. And transformed individuals become a transformed community. That is the church Jesus builds.

5. The Church Jesus Builds Exercises Authority Through Humility and Mutual Dependence

Finally, we return to Peter. Peter receives the keys. But the Peter who receives the keys is not a finished product. He is still learning. He will misunderstand Jesus. He will fail Jesus. He will deny Jesus. And yet Jesus entrusts authority to him. That should humble every person who exercises authority in the church. Pastors are not given authority because we are perfect. Church leaders are not given authority because we are always right. Laypeople are not given gifts because they are more worthy than others. Everything is grace. And that is why Paul says: “By the grace given to me, I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.” The church Jesus builds is therefore a community where authority and humility belong together. We have authority, but we are accountable. We have gifts, but we need one another. We have keys, but they belong to Christ. The church is powerful because Christ gives it authority. But the church is also fragile because Christ entrusts that authority to imperfect human beings. And perhaps that is the mystery of the church. God chooses to work through people like Peter. However, the church ultimately does not belong to Peter. It belongs to Jesus Christ because Jesus says, “I will build.” But the keys are placed in our hands. And perhaps we, too, should pause and ask: “Lord, what am I going to do with this authority?” The answer is: “Use it to open.” Open the doors to grace. Open our hearts to mercy. Open to communities who are searching. And open our lives to one another. That is **the church Jesus builds. Amen.**