

The Rock-Foundation of Matthew 16:17-20

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 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. 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." Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. (Matthew 16:17-20)

ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Μακάριος εἶ, Σίμων Βαριωνᾶ, ὅτι σὰρξ καὶ αἶμα οὐκ ἀπεκάλυψέν σοι ἀλλ' ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς." καὶ γὰρ ἐγὼ σοὶ λέγω ὅτι σὺ εἶ Πέτρος, καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν, καὶ πύλαι ᾧδου οὐ κατισχύσουσιν αὐτῆς." δώσω σοὶ τὰς κλεῖδας τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν, καὶ ὃ ἐὰν δήσῃς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται δεδεμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, καὶ ὃ ἐὰν λύσῃς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται λελυμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς." τότε ἐπετίμησεν τοῖς μαθηταῖς ἵνα μηδενὶ εἴπωσιν ὅτι αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ Χριστός. (Matthew 16:17-20, UBS Greek Text)

Introduction

For many years, the Roman Catholic church has used this passage to substantiate the doctrine of the papacy. On the other hand, many non-Catholic people have explained this passage with a combination of "bad Greek" and bad exegesis leading to a conclusion that supposedly invalidates the papacy. Yet, both of these traditional explanations of this passage are incorrect.

Since the doctrine of the papacy is a very emotional issue, people can be tempted to make their minds up about this issue first, and then look for ways to make the Scriptures say what they already believe. This is not the way to understand the Word!

There are many persuasive and conclusive arguments against the papacy, both Scriptural and historical: The doctrine of the papacy does *not* depend upon a particular understanding of this passage. Yet, the proper exegesis of this passage is critical to understanding the role of Peter in the early church. Here we will discuss this passage with a view towards understanding what the Scriptures intend to communicate to us in this passage. Who is the rock foundation of the church—and what does it really mean?

What Does "Petros" Mean?

The basis of the traditional non-Catholic understanding of this passage is the assertion that *petros* (πετρός, masculine in gender) is a small, fragmentary rock and that *petra* (πέτρα, feminine in gender) is a large, immense rock. From this supposed difference in meaning, it has been

concluded that Simon Peter is not the rock-foundation of the church in Matthew 16:18. For instance, Alan Richardson¹ claims:

... "petros" means a fragment of "petra," rock. ... The saying can hardly mean that Peter is the rock on which the church is built, since the foundation-rock of the church is Christ (or faith in Christ). Rather, it is Peter's rock-like faith in Christ which is to be the foundation of the church.

Another alternative is offered by Cairnes:²

Christ called Peter a petros, or stone, but He spoke of the rock on which he would build the church as petra, a living rock. The word "rock" that is applied to Peter is masculine in gender, but the "rock" on which Christ said he would build his church is feminine in gender. There is good reason to believe that the correct interpretation is that Christ was by the word "rock" referring to Peter's confession of Him as "the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

One problem here is that the authors' *a priori* assumptions of the "foundation of the church" prevent a reasonable exegesis. Read what they said again! They assume what they set out to prove. The mere assertion of a claim does not make that claim truthful.

More seriously, reputable non-Catholic Greek scholars have similar difficulties with this basis and conclusion. For instance, Oscar Cullman discusses the masculine *petros* and feminine *petra* in the following way:³

The masculine "petros" is used more for isolated rocks or small stones, including flints and pebbles for slings. Since there is such a great difference in content, the emphasis should be noted, though in practice one cannot differentiate too strictly between "petra" and "petros;" they are often used interchangeably.

Colin Brown says:⁴

It seems most likely that the original word Jesus used for both "petra" and "petros" was the Aramaic "kepa," and that the difference in the Greek was due to the appropriateness of giving Peter a masculine form of the word for "rock". Although "petros" can mean a detached rock or stone and "petra" a mass of living rock, the two words could be used interchangeably. Without further clear indication it is impossible to build any firm argument on the distinction between the two words.

Following on Brown's comments, it is instructive to see how the Scripture supports his conclusion, based upon *its* definition of *petros*:

¹ Alan Richardson, *A Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, Collier Books, New York, 1950, p. 204

² Earle A. Cairnes, *Christianity Through The Centuries*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1981, p. 116

³ Oscar Cullman, "Petra," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1974, Volume VI, p. 95

⁴ Colin Brown, "Petros," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1975, Volume 3, p. 386

Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter) (John 1:42).

The point here is this: *kepa* ("Cephas") could not be translated into *Petra* because *petra* is feminine, while *petros* is masculine and thus could be appropriate as a name for a man. The feminine *petra* and the masculine *petros* both have the same root, namely *petr*, for *petros* is derived from *petra*. It should also be noted that words having the same root and the same meaning but different genders occur frequently and are well known in Koine Greek. The claim of an *inherent* difference in meaning between the two words is false. Any difference in meaning must be supported by the context of how the words are used.

At this point in our study we need to consider the context of this passage to see how *petros* is used in Matthew 16:18.

How Matthew Uses "Petros" in Matthew 16:18

There are two aspects of context that ought to be considered. The first aspect is the sentence structure and grammar of the surrounding words in the saying. This materially relates to translation. The second aspect of context concerns how the meaning of the surrounding paragraph relates to the usage of the word in question.

The text uses the conjunctive phrase *kai epi tautee* (καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ), which is rightly translated "and upon this." *Kai* typically indicates continuity of thought between two words or clauses, in contrast to the adversative conjunctions *alla* (ἀλλὰ) or *de* (δε), which would be translated "but." *Tautee* is the near demonstrative pronoun, in contrast to the far demonstrative pronouns *hetera* (ἕτερα) or *ekeinos* (ἐκεῖνος) which would be translated "that." This conjunctive phrase builds upon the previous clause in the sentence. It serves to equate the second rock with the first.

Now some have pointed out the grammar rule that Greek adjectives must agree in case, gender and number with the nouns they modify. Citing the gender difference between the two words *petra* and *petros*, they conclude that Simon Peter is not the foundation-rock of the church.

However, the rule doesn't apply here because both words are nouns, not adjectives.⁵ This is an example of the "bad Greek" I referred to at the outset.

Some have suggested that the lack of the article in front of *petros* and the presence of the article in front of *petra* means we should understand this saying as: "You are *a* rock, Simon, and on *the* rock I will build my church," with this understanding implying a rock-foundation other than Simon Peter. This is another example of "bad Greek," showing a lack of understanding of Greek grammar and sentence structure. The predicate nominative never has an article—as a matter of fact, this is how a predicate nominative is recognized. Thus, pointing out the lack of an article in front of *petros* is utterly irrelevant.

⁵ *Petros* is the "predicate nominative" of the "to be" verb *eimi* in the first clause of the sentence. *Petra* is the indirect object of the "I will build" verb, *oikodomeo*, in the second clause of the sentence.

D. A. Carson comments:⁶

... on the basis of the distinction between "petros" and "petra," many have attempted to avoid identifying Peter as the rock on which Jesus builds his church. Peter is a mere "stone," it is alleged, but Jesus himself is the "rock," as Peter himself attests (1 Peter 2:5-8). Others adopt some other distinction: e.g. "upon this rock of revealed truth- this truth you have just confessed- I will build my church." Yet if it were not for Protestant reactions against extremes of Roman Catholic interpretation, it is doubtful whether many would have taken "rock" to mean anything but Peter.

... Had Matthew wanted to say no more than Peter was a stone in contrast with Jesus the Rock, the more common word would have been "lithos" ("stone" of almost any size). Then there would have been no pun- and that is just the point!

Cullman adds:⁷

... the parallelism of "thou art rock" and "upon this rock I will build" shows that the second rock can only be referring to the first. It is thus evident that Jesus is referring to Peter ... to be the foundation of his "ecclesia." To this extent Roman Catholic exegesis is right and all Protestant attempts to evade this interpretation are to be rejected.

In this sentence and paragraph, *petros* and *petra* are equated and thus have an equivalent meaning.

Exegetical Alternatives and The Search for "Obvious Meaning"

Non-Catholic scholars who claim that the rock-foundation of the church isn't Peter have made many suggestions about what the rock is. Some, like Richardson above, offer more than one answer—in his case, faith in Christ, or Christ himself. Other popular suggestions are Simon's confession and the truth of his confession, namely Jesus' identity as the Messiah. This collection of options presents some serious difficulties.

First, the lack of a *clear* exegetical alternative to Peter being the rock-foundation of the church only helps to prove that he is indeed the rock-foundation of the church. Naively, one might be persuaded that the many "possibilities" being offered strengthen the traditional non-Catholic position. In fact, the opposite is true—none of the alternatives is obvious enough from the text to be obviously correct. Each of these alternative "obvious meanings" requires some unnatural and odd perspective to be utilized.

Secondly, none of these "possibilities" are confirmed in the sentence. Jesus didn't say Simon's confession was a rock, or that his faith was a rock, but that Simon himself was a rock. And remember, Jesus named him Rock prior to the event (John 1:42).

A Priori Biases and Figures of Speech

⁶ D.A. Carson "*Matthew*," The Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984, Volume 8, p. 368

⁷ Cullman, op cit, p. 108

Taking a different approach, some point to 1 Corinthians 3:11, Ephesians 2:20 and/or 1 Peter 2:7-8 and claim that the foundation of the church is clearly Christ. Then they go into Matthew 16:18 with this *a priori* bias and, missing what Jesus says, claim that Jesus is the foundation of the church and therefore the rock-foundation of the church. However, such an approach doesn't say anything about the rock of Matthew 16:18 but rather simply avoids honest exegesis. We must ask the question: what was *Matthew* trying to communicate to his readers?

Figures of speech need to be understood in their contexts, for the New Testament writers used similar figures of speech in different contexts and with different meanings. For instance, Jesus is the Firstborn, but so are Christians (Colossians 1:15,18, Hebrews 12:23). Jesus is the Light, and so are his disciples (John 8:12, Matthew 5:14). Jesus is the Son of God, but Christians are sons of God (Mark 1:1 Galatians 3:26). Jesus is an apostle, but so are Christians (Hebrews 3:1, Romans 1:5). Jesus is the Lamb of God, but his followers are sheep (John 1:29, John 10:8). Jesus is the builder of the church, but so was Paul (Matthew 16:18, 1 Corinthians 3:10).

What is the point? Does the Scripture contradict itself? No! But figures of speech must be understood *in their context*; apart from its context, a figure of speech means nothing. Just because the idea of the "foundation" of the church is spoken of in one passage, the details of the metaphor do not necessarily "transfer" to other passages. Plainly, the ideas taught by 1 Corinthians 3:11, Ephesians 2:20 and 1 Peter 2:7-8 don't have anything to do with the *exegesis* of Matthew 16:18.

Based on the preceding discussion of the meaning of *petros*, how *Matthew* uses *petros* in Matthew 16:18, the exegetical difficulties with other alternatives, and the nature of figures of speech, we may conclude that Simon Peter is the rock-foundation of the church in Matthew 16:18. The next step is to understand what Matthew 16:18 says Peter's role actually was to be.

Peter's Role in the Kingdom

Peter has three basic roles in the kingdom/church according to the passage in question.

- The foundation of the church/kingdom
- The keeper of the keys of the kingdom/church
- The "binder and looser" on earth

We see the "foundation" aspect of Peter's work fulfilled in Acts 2:38, when Peter is the one to answer the question, "What shall we do?" The answer comes from Peter's mouth; it is in this sense that he is the foundation of the church. People initially entered the church based on what he said.

We see the "keys to the kingdom/church" aspect of Peter's work fulfilled in his words "repent and be baptized" in Acts 2:38. Simon the Rock now announces the means of entry into the kingdom/church. 1 Corinthians 12:13 tells us that baptism is indeed the means of entry into the church.

In considering Peter's role of "binding and loosing" on the earth, first we need to discuss an important aspect of the Greek text. Matthew 16:19 uses a grammatical structure known as a future- perfect periphrastic in describing this binding and loosing in heaven.

A future- perfect periphrastic uses the future tense of the Greek "to be" verb *eimi* and the perfect participle of another verb. The kind of action described by such a verb is that at some future point in time, the results of something that was done previously will still be true.

Because of the future- periphrastic verb structure in Matthew 16:19, the binding and loosing that has been done in heaven at some point in the past will still be true when Peter acts to bind and loose at this future date. This finds its fulfillment in Acts 2, where Peter opens the kingdom for "all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39) with a message not from his own creativity or imagination but something that was *already* "bound and loosed": repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38). Of course, these were taught by Jesus during his earthly ministry; see Luke 13:3, John 3:3-5 and Matthew 28:19.

Jesus was not giving future authorization and approval to whatever creative ideas Peter may have devised, he was assuring that Peter would do the exactly proper thing—binding on earth that which had already been bound in heaven—when the time came to answer the famous question of Acts 2:37. This specifically and exclusively refers to the means of entry into the kingdom/church. At no other time in the early church did Peter ever act to bind anything in a similar way. Advocates of the law-making powers of Peter will be disappointed to see that Peter never really made any laws, he simply expressed laws that had already been made.

This concept of binding and loosing is far more significant to the doctrine of the papacy and its pronouncements than the discussion about whether Peter is the Rock. Yet, the future-perfect periphrastic is rarely discussed in discussing this passage. When properly understood, however, the concept makes perfect sense and fits together well with other parts of the Scripture.⁸

Now once the kingdom came and its means of entry was explicitly revealed, Peter's unique role, as discussed in Matthew 16:18-19, was fulfilled. After this time, all of the apostles exercised equal authority in the teaching of the early church; notice who the teachers are in Acts 2:42.

Conclusion

We have shown by sound means of exegesis that Simon Peter is the rock-foundation of the church in Matthew 16:17-20. We have discussed some objections to this position and have shown both the source and difficulties with these objections.

In terms of the papacy, there are several appeals to make. First, the papacy does not rest upon the question of whether Simon Peter is the rock-foundation of the church in Matthew 16:17-20. Logically speaking, Peter can be the Rock without creating a papacy, since the papacy does not exist in the New Testament.⁹

⁸ For what it is worth, the future-perfect periphrastic is also used in Matthew 18:18. This passage also takes on a new light when properly understood.

⁹ There is no evidence from the early post-apostolic period to support the existence of the papacy. The primacy of the bishop of Rome first is discussed in the late second and early third centuries, according to the writings of Irenaeus, Origen and Cyprian.

Second, the comments of the non-Catholics Colin Brown, D. A. Carson and Oscar Cullman referenced above need to be heeded. They have not defended or supported the papacy. Rather, they have appealed to the proper understanding of the words involved in this passage, and a proper exegesis of this pivotal piece of Scripture. We have seen these explanations in contrast to some of the unnatural interpretations of this passage that defy logic and seek to circumvent the obvious meaning of the passage.

In addition, we have discussed what this passage teaches about Peter's role in the beginning of the church, and we have seen how his role fits in harmony with the balance of the New Testament. Just as God chose Noah, Abraham, Moses and others in times past, he chose Peter for the task of opening the doors of the kingdom of God to the world.

These facts leave us with one sound alternative: to accept the clear teaching of this passage that Peter is the rock-foundation of the church in Matthew 16:18.

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