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## WAS SAINT PETER THE FIRST POPE?

by Michael F. Ross

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Does Matthew 16:13–20 establish the fact that Jesus declared Peter the first pope, and that others followed him in what is called *apostolic succession*? The passage in discussion and dispute is verses 16–19:

*Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (ESV).*

The Roman Catholic Church clearly sets forth the doctrine that Jesus made Peter the first pope:

*The Lord made Simon alone, whom he named Peter, the "rock" of His Church. He gave him the keys of His Church and instituted him the shepherd of the whole flock. "The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of apostles united to its head." This pastoral office of Peter and the other apostles belongs to the Church's very foundation and is continued by the bishops under the primacy of the Pope.*

*The Pope, Bishop of Rome and Peter's successor, "is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful. For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered."<sup>1</sup>*

**The Revelation of Jesus Christ.** The context of this passage is a question Jesus asked His disciples: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Matt. 16:13). The title "Son of Man" comes from Daniel 7:13–14, and points to the Son of God, who is to rule over the Kingdom of God and the nations of the earth, and to judge all mankind. "Son of

Man” is Christ’s favorite title for Himself. So here Jesus is asking, “Who do people say that I am” (Mark and Luke’s way of asking the question: Mark 8:27; Luke 9:18).

Peter answers that Jesus is *the Christ* (Messiah) and *the Son of the Living God* (Divinity). Jesus praises Peter, and informs him that he did not figure these truths out by himself. Peter had received a *revelation* from the Spirit of God about Christ.

The entire thrust of this passage rests on this revelation and Peter’s subsequent confession of faith. It is on this confessing of faith in Jesus as both Christ and God that Christ builds His church. The *Catholic Catechism* clearly acknowledges this truth: “Moved by the grace of the Holy Spirit and drawn by the Father, we believe in Jesus and confess: ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ On the rock of this faith confessed by St. Peter, Christ built His Church.”<sup>2</sup>

**Peter, the “Rock.”** Because of Peter’s confession of such faith, Christ singles him out for special privilege and responsibility: “And I tell you, you are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church” (v. 18). Jesus does not say that He will build His church on Peter the man (Rome’s view) or on Peter’s profession of faith (popular evangelical view), but on the confluence of both. Christ’s teaching, summarized in the Scriptures, is the ultimate foundation of both the Christian life and the Christian church. Ephesians 2:20–21 clearly states that Christ is the *cornerstone* of the Church and the prophets and apostles the *foundation*. As a group, the prophets and apostles received God’s revelation, inscribed it in written form, and passed it on to the church, which became the “pillar and support” of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15). Peter became “the rock” not as an individual with an office, but as the leader of the apostolic band of men who received and recorded New Testament revelation.<sup>3</sup>

As D. A. Carson correctly maintains,<sup>4</sup> there is no doubt that Peter is assigned a position of preeminence in the New Testament church. But this primary position is neither absolute nor perpetual. Nowhere does the New Testament mention a line of apostolic succession. Peter’s role dies with him. That he is the first among equals seems indisputable; that his is an office transferred to others is indefensible. In fact, in Matthew 18:1–6, the apostles argue over preeminence, something moot had Peter been made the first “Pope” by Jesus. The New Testament knows no Head but Jesus Christ. Peter was (and still is) widely honored in the church. That he was the “primate of Rome” is simply not true.

When Jesus said, “You are Peter (*petros*) and upon this rock (*petra*) I will build my church,” he was referring to one in the same person. *Petros* is merely the masculine form of *petra*, the Greek word for “rock.” We need not downplay Jesus’ use of a play on words to establish the truth of the passage. But neither should we make a pope out of an apostle. Michael Green maintains this exegetical balance:

*The Catholics have the more natural interpretation of the passage, up to a point. It is more probable that Peter (Petros in Greek) is the rock (petra in Greek) on which the church is built than that anything else, such as his faith, is given that role. The rock is not just Peter, however, but Peter in his confessional capacity. And if the Catholics are right in thinking it is primarily*

*Peter, albeit the believing Peter, who becomes the church's rockman, the Protestants are surely right in pointing out that the passage contains nothing that this role should devolve on any successors in Rome or anywhere else. It affords no grounds for the claims preferred by the papacy; in fact, this verse was not attached to those claims until long after they were first put forward.<sup>5</sup>*

Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the church, and the revelation of the prophets (Old Testament) and apostles (New Testament) is the foundation of Christ's church (Eph. 2:20–21). The revelation given to Peter, confessed by him, and later preached and inscripturated by Peter and the other apostles remains the one and only foundation of the church—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**The Keys to the Kingdom.** When Jesus gives Peter the keys, He speaks metaphorically of opening the kingdom of God (salvation) through the preaching of the gospel, and gathering professors into the church through baptism and teaching (Matt. 28:18–20). Neither Peter himself as a pope nor the apostles as a group are being granted authority to forgive sins or condemn to hell.

Three observations are critical here. First, “binding and loosing” are rabbinical terms for approval or disapproval concerning the teaching of the Law and the regulations of conduct.<sup>6</sup> Second, what is bound is “whatever” (*ho ean*) but not “whomever” (*hos ean*). In other words, the use of the neuter points to “something” being bound or loosed—conduct, belief, moral codes, doctrine—not people. Third, Peter shares this authority with the other apostles (John 20:23) and with the church in general (Matt. 18:18); they too can “bind or loose” conduct and confession. Here, Jesus is granting the church the power to exercise church discipline.

What is most telling about this verse is the Greek verb tense used: the future perfect. The correct translation should read: “and whatever you bind shall have been (already) bound in heaven; and whatever you loose shall have been (already) loosed in heaven.” “This makes the apostles’ acts a matter of inspiration or heavenly guidance.”<sup>7</sup> We can only bind what Scripture binds or loose what Jesus looses. The church’s actions do not obligate God in heaven.

Knox Chamblin summarizes the biblical position well:

*The True apostolic succession consists in the church's faithful preservation and propagation of the apostolic word, with the rest of the biblical revelation; this is Messiah's chosen way of building His church. “The keys of the kingdom” are still employed by church leaders who are committed to biblical truth and who—precisely on that basis—make judgments about persons beyond and within the church. The New Testament offers no support for the ideas that Peter (a married man, 8:14; 1 Corinthians 9:5) was the first bishop of Rome, and that the apostolic succession is realized in the history of the papacy.<sup>8</sup>*

**A Clear Calling.** A faithful interpretation of Matthew 16:13–20 will not support the Roman Catholic doctrine of the papacy and the infallibility and supremacy of the

“Bishop of Rome.” Quite the contrary. Jesus calls Peter, the apostles, and the church to believe in His messiahship, submit to God’s standards, teach Holy Scripture, and preach the gospel, bringing people to Him and into His Kingdom and church. Peter would lead the early church in this great mission. Those faithful to Christ, the Word, and the church can carry on that mission without the institution of the papacy.

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## NOTES

- 1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 233–34, par. 881–2. This passage is referencing Matthew 16:18–19.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 106, par. 424.
- 3 On this see Craig S. Keener, *Matthew: The IVP New Testament Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 271.
- 4 D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to Matthew: The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 1992), 424n32.
- 5 Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 179.
- 6 Keener, *Matthew*, 273; Carson, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 426–27; William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew: New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids; Baker Books, 1973), 651.
- 7 Carson, *Gospel*, 426; Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 652.
- 8 Knox Chamblin, *Matthew: A Mentor Commentary*, vol. 2 (Geanies House, Fearn, Tain, Scotland: Christian Focus Publishers, 2012), 826.