

## **Peter, the Rock of the Church**

Scripture: Matthew 16

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**“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ. (16:18–20)**

In Matthew 16:18–20 Jesus points up at least seven features and characteristics of the church that He builds. He speaks of its foundation, its certainty, its intimacy, its identity and continuity, its invincibility, its authority, and its spirituality.

First, Jesus set forth the foundation of the Church: **And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church.**

For more than fifteen hundred years the Roman Catholic church has maintained that this passage teaches the church was built on the person of Peter, who became the first pope and bishop of Rome and from whom the Catholic papacy has since descended. Because of this supposed divinely ordained apostolic succession, the pope is considered to be the supreme and authoritative representative of Christ on earth. When a pope speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, in his official capacity as head of the church, he is said to speak with divine authority equal to that of God in Scripture.

Such an interpretation, however, is presumptuous and unbiblical, because the rest of the New Testament makes abundantly clear that Christ alone is the foundation and only head of His church.

**Peter** is from *petros*, a masculine form of the Greek word for small stone, whereas **rock** is from *petra*, a different form of the same basic word, referring to a rocky mountain or peak. Perhaps the most popular interpretation is therefore that Jesus was comparing **Peter**, a small stone, to the great mountainous **rock** on which He would build His church. The antecedent of **rock** is taken to be Peter's divinely inspired confession of Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (vv. 16–17).

That interpretation is faithful to the Greek text and has much to commend it, but it seems more likely that, in light of other New Testament passages, that was not Jesus' point. In his letter to Ephesus Paul says that God's household is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone" (Eph. 2:20). In all four gospel accounts Peter is dearly the leading apostle, and he remains so through Acts 10. He was most often the Twelve's spokesman during Jesus' earthly ministry (see, e.g., Matt. 15:15; 19:27; John 6:68), and he was the chief preacher, leader, and worker of miracles in the early years of the church (see, e.g., Acts 1:15–22; 2:14–40; 3:4–6, 12–26; 5:3–10, 15, 29).

It therefore seems that in the present passage Jesus addressed Peter as representative of the Twelve. In light of that interpretation, the use of the two different forms of the Greek for **rock** would be explained by the masculine *petros* being used of Peter as an individual man and *petra* being used of him as the representative of the larger group.

It was not on the apostles themselves, much less on Peter as an individual, that Christ built His church, but on the apostles as His uniquely appointed, endowed, and inspired teachers of the gospel. The early church did not give homage to the apostles as persons, or to their office or titles, but to their doctrine, "continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). When the Jews outside the Temple were astonished at the healing of the crippled man, Peter quickly warned them not to credit him with the miracle, saying, "Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk?" (Acts 3:12). Although it was he alone who commanded the man to walk (v. 6), Peter replied to the crowd in John's behalf as well as his own.

Because they participated with the apostles in proclaiming the authoritative gospel of Jesus Christ, the prophets of the early church were also part of the church's foundation (Eph. 2:20). In fact, as Martin Luther observed, "All who agree with the confession of Peter [in Matt. 16:16] are Peters themselves setting a sure foundation." The Lord is still building His church with "living stones ... built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:5).

Therefore, whether one interprets Matthew 16:18 as referring to Peter as a small stone placed on the mountainous stone of his confession of Christ or as referring to his being one with the rest of the Twelve in his confession, the basic truth is the same: The foundation of the church is the revelation of God given through His apostles, and the Lord of the church is the cornerstone of that foundation.

Because it is His Word that the apostles taught and that the faithful church has always taught, Jesus Christ Himself is the true foundation, the living Word to whom the written Word bears witness (John 5:39). And “No man,” Paul says-not even an apostle-“can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11). The Lord builds the church on the truth of Himself, and because His people are inseparable from Him they are inseparable from His truth. And because the apostles were endowed with His truth in a unique way, by their preaching of that truth they were the foundation of His church in a unique way.

That the Lord did not establish His church on the supremacy of Peter and his supposed papal successors was made dear a short while after Peter’s great confession, When the disciples asked Jesus who was greatest in the kingdom of heaven, He replied by placing a small child before them and saying, “Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:1–4). Had the Twelve understood Jesus’ teaching about the **rock** and the keys of the kingdom (Matt. 16:18–19) as referring exclusively to Peter, they would hardly have asked who was greatest in the kingdom. Or, had they forgotten or misunderstood Jesus’ previous teaching, He would have answered by naming Peter as the greatest and probably would also have chided them for not remembering or believing what He had already taught (cf. Matt. 14:31; 26:24; John 14:9).

A short while after that, the mother of James and John asked Jesus to give her sons the chief places of honor in His kingdom, one on His left and the other on His right (Matt. 20:20–21). We learn from Mark 10:35–37 that James and John were themselves directly involved in the request, one they would never have made had they understood Peter to have been given primacy as Christ’s successor. Or, as with the previous incident, had James and John misunderstood His teaching about the foundation **rock** of the church and the keys of the kingdom, Jesus would have taken the occasion to restate and underscore Peter’s supremacy.

Although Peter recognized himself as an apostle (see, e.g., 1 Pet. 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1), he never claimed a superior title, rank, or privilege over the other apostles. He even referred to himself as a “fellow elder” (1 Pet. 5:1) and as “a bond-servant” of Christ (2 Pet. 1:1). Far from claiming honor and homage for himself, he soberly warns his fellow elders to guard against lording it over those under their pastoral care (1 Pet. 5:3). The only glory he claimed for himself was that which is shared by all believers and which is yet “to be revealed, ... when the Chief Shepherd appears” (vv. 1, 4).

Second, Jesus pointed up the certainty of the church, declaring, “**I will build My church.**” As Peter had just confessed, Jesus is the Son of God; and God cannot lie or be mistaken. Therefore, because Jesus said, “**I will build My church,**” it will be built. It is the divine promise of the divine Savior.

In using the future tense, Jesus was not saying, as some contend, that He had not built His church in the past. The idea is that He would continue to build His church just as He had always done. As will be discussed below, **church** is used here in a general, nontechnical sense and does not indicate the distinct body of believers that first came into existence at Pentecost.

Jesus was not emphasizing the time of His building but its certainty. No matter how liberal, fanatical, ritualistic, apathetic, or apostate its outward adherents may be, and no matter how decadent the rest of the world may become, Christ **will build** His **church**. Therefore, no matter how oppressive and hopeless their outward circumstances may appear from a human perspective, God's people belong to a cause that cannot fail.

Several years ago a man traveled across the United States interviewing pastors in a number of large evangelical churches. He concluded that wherever there is great growth there is a corresponding great desire on the part of the church leadership to build the church. Perhaps the man misinterpreted some of the responses given to him, or perhaps the pastors did not express their objectives in the best of terms. In any case, however, no Leader in Christ's church should have the desire to build it himself. Christ declared that He alone builds the church, and no matter how well intentioned he may be, anyone else who attempts to build it is competing with, not serving, the Lord.

I once visited a church at which the pastor pointed to a certain man and said, "He is one of my converts." "That's wonderful," I replied. "When did he come to the Lord?" "I didn't say he was the Lord's convert," the pastor explained. "I said he was one of mine."

By human reason, persuasiveness, and diligence it is possible to win converts to an organization, a cause, a personality, and to many other things. But it is totally impossible to win a convert to the spiritual church of Jesus Christ apart from the sovereign God's own Word and Spirit. Human effort can produce only human results. God alone can produce divine results.

When he studies and is obedient to the Word, and when he walks in the Spirit and produces the fruit of the Spirit, a believer can be sure he is living where Christ is building His **church**. It is not faithful believers who build Christ's church, but Christ who builds His church through faithful believers. Wherever His people are committed to His kingdom and His righteousness the Lord builds His church. If believers in one place become cold or disobedient, Christ does not stop building but simply starts work somewhere else. His true church is always "under construction."

Jesus said, “All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me” (John 6:37). At Pentecost, Peter declared that from among both Jews and Gentiles, Christ builds into His church “as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself” (Acts 2:39). It was not the apostles but the Lord Himself who “was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (v. 47; cf. 11:24). When the Gentiles of Pisidian Antioch heard the preaching of Paul and Barnabas, “they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region” (Acts 13:48–49). That preaching, true and faithful as it was, was not capable by itself of winning converts to Christ. Only those whom He had sovereignly chosen for salvation and who believed the truth of His Word were saved.

The New Testament is replete with commands and guidelines for believers’ attitudes and conduct. It gives direction for selecting godly men and women to serve in the church. It gives abundant instruction for righteous living, for prayer, and for acceptable worship. Many of the Lord’s blessings are contingent on His people’s obedience and trust. But the most sincere and diligent efforts to fulfill those commands and standards are useless apart from Christ’s own divine provision and control. He desires and He uses the faithful work of those who belong to Him; but only He builds His church, the church that He loves and for whom He “gave Himself up ... that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:25–27). Men are able to build human, earthly, physical organizations, but they cannot build the eternal, spiritual church.

Third, Jesus alluded to the intimacy of the fellowship of believers. “It is **My church**,” He said. As Architect, Builder, Owner, and Lord of His **church**, Jesus Christ assures His followers that they are His personal possession and eternally have His divine love and care. They are His Body, “purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28), and are one with Him in a marvelous, holy intimacy “The one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him” (1 Cor. 6:17). Christ is not ashamed to call them “brethren” (Heb. 2:11) and “God is not ashamed to be called their God” (Heb. 11:16). That is why when men attack God’s people they attack God Himself. When Jesus confronted Paul (then known as Saul) on the Damascus road, He asked, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4). By persecuting Christians (see 8:3; 9:1–2) Saul had been persecuting Christ.

God has always identified Himself with His people and jealously guarded them as His own. He several times referred to His chosen people Israel as the apple, or pupil, of His eye. Through the prophet Zechariah He declared to them, “He who touches you, touches the apple of His eye” (Zech.

2:8; cf. Deut. 32:10; Ps. 17:8; Prov. 7:2). The front part of the eye, the cornea, is the most sensitive exposed part of the human body God was therefore saying that to harm Israel was to poke a finger in His own eye. To harm God's people is to harm God Himself, and to cause them pain is to cause Him pain.

Fourth, Jesus emphasized the identity and continuity of His people. They are His **church**. The word *ekklesia* (**church**) literally means "the called out ones" and was used as a general and nontechnical term for any officially assembled group of people. It was often used of civic gatherings such as town meetings, where important announcements were made and community issues were debated. That is the sense in which Stephen used *ekklesia* in Acts 7:38 to refer to "the congregation" of Israel called out by Moses in the wilderness (cf. Ex. 19:17). Luke used it of a riotous mob ("assembly") incited by the Ephesian silversmiths against Paul (Acts 19:32, 41).

Matthew 16:18 contains the first use of *ekklesia* in the New Testament, and Jesus here gives it no qualifying explanation. Therefore the apostles could not have understood it in any way but its most common and general sense. The epistles use the term in a more distinct and specialized way and give instructions for its proper functioning and for its leadership. But at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus' use of *ekklesia* could only have carried the idea of "assembly," "community" or "congregation." If He spoke in Aramaic, as is probable, He would have used the term *qahal* (taken directly from the Hebrew), which means an invited gathering, and was commonly used of synagogue meetings. In fact, the word *synagogue* itself originally referred to any gathering or congregation of people. Only during the Babylonian exile did Jews begin using it to denote their formal and organized place of religious activity and worship. And only after the Day of Pentecost did the term *ekklesia* take on a new and technical significance in reference to the distinct redeemed community built on the work of Christ by the Holy Spirit's coming.

In describing the inhabitants of heaven, the writer of Hebrews speaks of "the general assembly and church of the first-born" (Heb. 12:23), referring to the redeemed saints of all ages. That seems to be the sense in which Christ uses **church** in Matthew 16:18, as a synonym for citizens of His eternal kingdom, to which He refers in the following verse. The Lord does not build His kingdom apart from His church or His church apart from His kingdom.

Fifth, Jesus spoke of the invincibility of the church, which **the gates of Hades shall not overpower**.

**The gates of Hades** has often been interpreted as representing the evil forces of Satan attacking the church of Jesus Christ. But **gates** are not instruments of warfare. Their purpose is not to conquer but

to protect those behind them from being conquered, or, in the case of a prison, to keep them from escaping. And **Hades**, which corresponds to the Hebrew *sheol*, refers to the abode of the dead, never to hell, as it is sometimes rendered in the King James version.

When the terms **gates** and **Hades** are properly understood, it becomes clear that Jesus was declaring that death has no power to hold God's redeemed people captive. Its **gates** are not strong enough to **overpower** (*kattschuo*, to have mastery over) and keep imprisoned the church of God, whose Lord has conquered sin and death on her behalf (Rom. 8:2; cf. Acts 2:24). Because "death no longer is master over Him" (Rom. 6:9), it is no longer master over those who belong to Him. "Because I live," Jesus said, "you shall live also" (John 14:19), Satan now has the power of death, and he continually uses that power in his futile attempt to destroy Christ's church. But Christ's ultimate victory over Satan's power of death is so certain that the writer of Hebrews speaks of it in the past tense: "Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14; cf. Rev. 1:18).

It is that great truth of which Peter spoke at Pentecost, declaring that "God raised [Christ] up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power" (Acts 2:24). It is the truth about which Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers who were wavering in their belief in the resurrection. He declared, "Death is swallowed up in victory," and then asked, "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:54–57).

In light of what He was about to teach them concerning His own death and resurrection and their own willingness to deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow Him (Matt. 16:21–24), Jesus now assured the Twelve, and all believers who would ever come to Him, that **the gates of Hades**, the chains of death itself, could never permanently **overpower** them and hold them captive.

Sixth, Jesus spoke about the authority of the church. "**I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,**" He said; "**and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.**"

The Lord was still addressing Peter as representative of the Twelve, telling him that **whatever you shall bind**, that is, forbid, **on earth shall be bound in heaven** and that **whatever you shall loose**, that is, permit, **on earth shall be loosed in heaven**. He told Peter and the Twelve, and by extension

all other believers, that they had the astounding authority to declare what is divinely forbidden or permitted **on earth!**

Shortly after His resurrection Jesus told the disciples, “If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained” (John 20:23). In giving instruction for church discipline to all His people, Jesus said that, if a sinning believer refuses to turn from his sin after being counselled privately and even after being rebuked by the entire congregation, the church not only is permitted but obligated to treat the unrepentant member “as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer” (Matt. 18:15–17). He then said to the church as a whole what He earlier had said to Peter and to the other apostles: “Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (v. 18). In other words, a duly constituted body of believers has the right to tell an unrepentant brother that he is out of line with God’s Word and has no right to fellowship with God’s people.

Christians have such authority because they have the truth of God’s authoritative Word by which to judge. The source of the church’s authority is not in itself, anymore than the source of the apostles’ authority was in themselves or even in their office, exalted as it was. Christians can authoritatively declare what is acceptable to God or forbidden by Him because they have His Word. Christians do not *determine* what is right or wrong, forgiven or unforgiven. Rather, on the basis of God’s own Word, they recognize and proclaim what God has already determined to be right or wrong, forgiven or unforgiven. When they judge on the basis of God’s Word, they can be certain their judgment corresponds with the judgment of **heaven**.

If a person declares himself to be an atheist, or to be anything other than a believer in and lover of the Lord Jesus Christ, Christians can say to that person with absolute certainty, “You are under God’s judgment and condemned to hell,” because that is what Scripture teaches. If, on the other hand, a person testifies that he has trusted Christ as his saving Lord, Christians can say to him with equal certainty, “If what you say is true, then your sins are forgiven, you are a child of God, and your eternal destiny is heaven” The authority of the church lies in the fact that it has heaven’s word on everything “pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence” (2 Pet. 1:3). When believers are in agreement with God’s Word, God is in agreement with them. Believers can declare a persons spiritual state with divinely granted authority by comparing that person to the Word of God.

Finally, Jesus reminds the disciples that His church is a *spiritual* reality, as **He warned them that they should tell no one that He was the Christ**. Most Jews, including the disciples, expected the



Messiah to come as a conquering King, as a military and political leader to set them free from Rome, not as a Savior to set them free from sin. The people's expectations were so warped and selfishly misguided that to **tell** them that Jesus **was the Christ** would be to cast pearls before swine (see Matt. 7:6).

Jesus declared to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm" (John 18:36). When Christians mix their faith with politics and various humanitarian causes, they run the risk of losing their spiritual focus and their spiritual power. Although human government is divinely ordained by God (Rom. 13:1–7; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13), the state is no more to be an instrument of the church's program than the church is to be an instrument of the state's.

Like the kingdom of God, the church is "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God" (Rom. 14:17–18).

This great teaching of our Lord only introduces the subject of the church, which from Acts on dominates the rest of the New Testament.

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