

“Upon This Rock I Will Build My Church” A Theological Exposition of Matthew 16:13-20

The eight verses in Matthew that describe the confession of Simon regarding Jesus as the Son of God have generated much controversy in Christian history. The subsequent discussions around what has been called the “storm center of New Testament exegesis”¹ have put more attention upon the person and office of Simon than upon the Messiah that Simon confessed. This is unfortunate, for Simon put the emphasis upon his teacher, Jesus, rather than upon himself, a disciple of the teacher, in his own life and writings. The same emphasis, moreover, is evident in the redactions of Matthew. The hope in this essay is to unravel the controversy in an effort to reemphasize the Christ-centeredness that Simon confessed and Matthew recorded. Let us first recollect the text.

Coming into the area of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus queried His disciples, saying, “Who are men saying that I, the Son of man, am?”

And they said, “Some John the Baptist, others Elijah, yet others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

And answering, Simon Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

And answering, Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are ‘Petros,’ and upon this ‘Petra’ I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not be victorious over it. I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and what you bind upon the earth will have been bound in heaven, and what you loose upon the earth will have been loosed in heaven.”

Then He warned His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ (Matt. 16:13-20; author’s translation).

In order to arrive at a proper theological interpretation of this passage, we shall follow a grammatical-historical approach and interact with the major interpretations offered in the history of the Christian churches. In agreement with Gerhard Ebeling and Brevard S. Childs, this approach to biblical theology laments the unfortunate divorce of biblical exegesis from the theological interpretation of the church and laments the atomization of the canon.² While rejecting the modernist hubris involved in such a willful lack of historical awareness regarding prior Christian interpretations of the whole canon,

¹ Oscar F. Seitz, “Upon This Rock: A Critical Re-Examination of Matt 16:17-19,” *JBL* 69 (1950): 329.

² Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 79-97. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology: A Proposal* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 1-12.

this approach also rejects any hint that the Christian tradition is the final arbiter of proper theological exegesis. Systematically, after analyzing the linguistic nature of the passage, we shall turn to the historical and canonical context in which it was written, then the historical context in which it has been interpreted. Only then may we attempt to offer some preliminary theological conclusions.

1. Linguistic Considerations

Literary Structure

It has been noted that the literary structure of this passage exhibits a striking “unity” and “symmetry.”³ Indeed, for some modern interpreters, the symmetry is so profound that it is difficult for them to believe that the passage is anything but an interpolation that the Matthean redactor has put into the mouth of Jesus Christ. For others, this and the coordinate passage in Matthew 18:15-18 resulted from “the strained encounter between Hellenistic and Jewish Christian traditions.”⁴ Although we find the literary structure of Matthew reflects a highly nuanced redaction, we deny the insupportable presupposition that because the result is theologically complex, then the words do not fully reflect the teachings of Jesus and the confession of Peter. Moreover, we affirm the canonical presupposition that the author and his text were inspired by the Holy Spirit and, therefore, the original Matthean manuscript remains free of historical error, even as the extant manuscript tradition is infallible (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21).

With these presuppositions made plain, we now turn to the linguistic structure of the passage in question. This reader finds four sections in the subject pericope, with the opening line of the first section and the entire fourth section providing the transitions required for placing the pericope within the historical progress of the gospel of Matthew. The first three sections of the pericope follow a conversational format; specifically, Matthew relates a rhetorical discourse of question and answer between a Jewish Teacher, Jesus, and some students, the disciples of Jesus. We have taken the liberty of identifying the structure of the words of the Rabbi and His students in a bullet format. In this way, it becomes noticeable that the first and second sections each contain a query and a response, while the first and third sections each contain a triplex delineation.

³ Bernard P. Robinson, “Peter and His Successors: Tradition and Redaction in Matthew 16.17-19,” *JSNT* 21 (1984): 86.

⁴ Günther Bornkamm, “The Authority to ‘Bind’ and ‘Loose’ in the Church in Matthew’s Gospel: The Problem of Sources in Matthew’s Gospel,” in *The Interpretation of Matthew*, 2nd ed., ed. Graham Stanton (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1995), 111. Cf. Robins, “Peter and His Successors,” 98.

Structural Outline of Matthew 16:13-20

Ἐλθὼν δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἰς τὰ μέρη Καισαρείας τῆς Φιλίππου
ἠρώτα τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ λέγων·

? τίνα λέγουσιν οἱ ἄνθρωποι εἶναι τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου;
οἱ δὲ εἶπαν

- οἱ μὲν Ἰωάννην τὸν βαπτιστὴν,
- ἄλλοι δὲ Ἡλίαν,
- ἕτεροι δὲ Ἰερεμίαν ἢ ἓνα τῶν προφητῶν.

λέγει αὐτοῖς

? ὑμεῖς δὲ τίνα με λέγετε εἶναι;
ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ Σίμων Πέτρος εἶπεν·

- σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος.

ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτῷ·

- μακάριος εἶ, Σίμων Βαριωνᾶ,
 - ὅτι σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα οὐκ ἀπεκάλυψεν σοι
 - ἀλλ' ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ ἐν [τοῖς] οὐρανοῖς.
- καγὼ δέ σοι λέγω ὅτι σὺ εἶ Πέτρος
 - καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν
 - καὶ πύλαι ᾗδου οὐ κατισχύσουσιν αὐτῆς.
- δώσω σοι τὰς κλεῖδας τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν,
 - καὶ ὅ ἐὰν δήσῃς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται δεδεμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς,
 - καὶ ὅ ἐὰν λύσῃς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται λελυμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

τότε ἐπετίμησεν τοῖς μαθηταῖς ἵνα μηδενὶ εἴπωσιν ὅτι αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ χριστός.

The threefold delineation of the first and third sections gives special prominence to the second section, which does not contain such a complex delineation. The unique nature of the second section's answer, with its relative simplicity and placement in the structural center of the discourse, thereby grammatically highlights the Christological confession of Simon. That the third section does not contain a query, but nevertheless contains a long response, indicates the authority of the speaker. In other words, the literary structure gives prominence to the Teacher, on the one hand, and to the confession of the student regarding the Teacher, on the other hand.

Son of Man and Son of God, and Son of Jonah

Also within the purview of linguistic considerations may be considered the frequent wordplays that are employed throughout the pericope and in its relationship with the preceding and following pericopes. Within the pericope, the wordplays focus on the mutual naming between Jesus and Simon. To Simon's $\sigma\upsilon\ \epsilon\iota$, Jesus responds also with a $\sigma\upsilon\ \epsilon\iota$. The wordplays begin with their unique parental generation. Jesus is, on the one hand, self-described as "the Son of Man," a title that could have been taken as an appellation of nothing more than his own humanity,⁵ especially when coupled with Jesus' query regarding what other "men" are saying. But Jesus is, on the other hand, confessed by Simon as "the Son of the living God," a title that sets off Jesus as so much more than any other human. Indeed, Simon's ascription of divine generation to Jesus is endorsed by the latter as a revelation by "my Father who is in heaven." Jesus, who is the son of man, is concurrently the Son of God. This God is, moreover, no mere deity; rather, He is the only God who lives; He is "the living God."

In comparison with such an exalted ascription, the third time that "son" is mentioned, in the identification of Simon as the "son of Jonah," the listener is reminded not only of Simon's father, John, but also of a rebellious prophet. The fallen humanity of Simon—his limited "flesh and blood"—is thereby placed in sober comparison with the exalted humanity and unique deity of Jesus. The title of "Christ" is also here ascribed to Jesus, and comprises part of the reason for the enthusiastic response by Jesus. But "Christ" was believed to be also a "Son of David," a title already being ascribed to him in Matthew (Matt. 9:27, 12:23). Interestingly, "Son of God" had also already been ascribed to Jesus, but with increasing degrees of certitude (4:1-11, 14:33).

The critical point seems to be the concurrent accumulation of these titles in a personal confession voiced by a human directly to Jesus. The personal nature of the confession is key to understanding its meaning, as is the accumulation of titles ascribed to the one being addressed. Indicative of the importance of the amassing of these titles is Jesus' similar equation of "Christ" and "Son of God" with "Son of Man." This personal accumulation is the turning point in his trial before the Sanhedrin. The high priest condemns Jesus as an utter blasphemer for having agreed, "under the oath of the living God" that "you are the Christ, the Son of God" (Matt. 26:63-65). The contrast between the blessing of God upon Simon (16:17) and the judgment of God upon the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:11; a judgment poignantly pronounced by Peter) is determined by whether one personally accepts or personally rejects Jesus as the messianic Son of God.

⁵ Birger Gerhardsson, "The Christology of Matthew," in *Who Do You Say That I Am? Essays on Christology*, ed. Mark Allan Powell and David B. Bauer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 20.

Πέτρος and Πέτρα

Another wordplay concerns the well-known problem of Christ's renaming of Simon. Simon, son of his father John on earth, is now to be known as Peter, because he correctly repeated a revelation from the Father in heaven. This revelation, by the way, was not given to Peter alone, but also to the others who heard the Father's voice at the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:17). Simon is given a new name, because Simon has confessed as his own that which had been confessed to him. Simon is renamed because he no longer spoke about a revelation as a distant matter; rather, Simon now received that revelation as his own and confessed it personally as an epistemological reality. Simon's Christian name is now Peter, literally Πέτρος. According to Oscar Cullmann, πέτρος in common Greek use "tends to denote the isolated rock."⁶ This is where properly interpreting the wordplay surrounding Simon's renaming becomes important, for it is not upon Πέτρος but upon the πέτρα that Christ will build His church.

There are three important notes to be made with regard to the words πέτρος and πέτρα in the Greek. First, the masculine form, which becomes Simon's new name, is "used more for isolated rocks or small stones, including flints and pebbles." Second, the feminine form, upon which the church will be built, is "predominately used in secular Greek for a large and solid 'rock,' [such as an] individual cliff or a stony and rocky mountain chain." But, third, "they are often used interchangeably."⁷ In other words, the lexicon may seem to provide a ready solution to the problem, but ultimately, lexicology leaves the question open as to whether one may utilize the imagery of Peter as a small rock in comparison to the mountain upon which the church is built. Moreover, unlike the πέτρος, what the πέτρα is to be identified as is not directly stated. As we shall see, lexicology has left Romanists and Reformers with no end to their argument in sight.

At this point, many interpreters have appealed to the Aramaic, the language of the original statements of which the Greek is a likely translation. However, this effort ultimately relies upon an argument from silence. Moreover, for the one who presupposes the divine inspiration of the Greek text, an appeal to an Aramaic source—largely about which only educated conjectures can be made—is simply not germane. Since the Holy Spirit inspires the biblical author and the resultant text, the extant biblical text—whether written in Greek or Hebrew, or rarely Chaldean or even more rarely Aramaic—must be deemed sufficient for the task of theological exegesis. If an evangelical or free church scholar ignores the wordplay in the inspired Greek text in favor of a conjectural Aramaic text, he implicitly denies one of his own fundamental theological principles, the inspiration of the New Testament. In other words, a vague appeal to the Aramaic, though interesting, does not settle the question.

Without the lexicon and without the Aramaic, the conservative Christian interpreter is left with the Greek text itself, and the Greek text uses not one word, but two. One may not ignore the distinction in noun genders simply because the lexicon does not provide a firm definition regarding their distinct meanings. The fact remains that there are two similar words in use here; although they are similar words, they are not the same word. Consider this somewhat literal translation: "I say to you that you are 'Petros,' and upon this 'Petra' I will build My church." If Jesus was going to identify Simon himself,

⁶ Oscar Cullmann, "Πέτρος," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 6, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 101.

⁷ Oscar Cullmann, "Πέτρα," in *ibid.*, 95.

now renamed Peter, as that upon which the church will be built, He could simply have used πέτρος in both places. The fact is that the Lord did not do so, and this verbal change is significant, in spite of the inconclusions the lexicon generates. But how significant is the wordplay? Could Jesus and Matthew and the Holy Spirit have chosen to use the masculine and feminine terms simply for the sake of providing a verbal pun? Now, God is not past delivering a good joke—one thinks here of that incredibly funny story of Balaam and his donkey, or of Jesus describing the camel squeezing through a needle.

Yes, Jesus could have made a pun, but let us consider the serious nature of the human sinner's eternal *Sitz-im-leben* for a moment. I mean, Dr. Allen, if the Son of Man and Son of God were discussing your eternal salvation with you, indeed the safety of the church in its war with hell, do you think He might pull a joke on you and say, "Dr. Allen, you are David, and I am going to build my church on Davidina!"? Dr. Allen and I love a good laugh together, but wisdom says that there are different times for laughing and weeping (Ecc. 3:4). It is highly doubtful that Christ, His apostle, and the Spirit would have thrown a meaningless pun into such a carefully structured passage in which wordplay has already indicated profound theological nuances. Consider the serious issues being discussed in this and the following pericope: God, man, heaven, hell, spiritual war, death, resurrection, Satan. Perhaps the issue is not the wordplay as a simple verbal pun, but the wordplay as indicative of a deeper truth. If so, then the use of the feminine πέτρα rather than the masculine πέτρος may not be a reference to Peter himself, but to something related to Peter in some way, something related to the reason for his new name. Indeed, if God wanted to refer to Peter, he could have used πέτρος again or the second-person pronoun.

Sign, Word, Doctrine

One of David Allen's favorite sayings is, "Friends, we deal in words." By this, the good dean means that the words of Scripture and the words that we preach are extremely important. I agree with him in this. Because they are brought together by the Spirit to form the Word of God, words in Scripture are serious and are to be seriously considered, distinguished, correlated, and formulated into the doctrine that the Christian believes, lives, and teaches. Words formed into thoughts and taken as ultimate truth become our doctrines, and doctrines can give life or take life. Jesus tried to press this truth home when He taught the disciples about their need to search for the depth of meaning in what He spoke. It was earlier in this same chapter that Jesus gave the disciples two lessons in the significance of words.

First, he told the disciples that the problem with the Pharisees and the Sadducees was that they sought a "sign," but this wicked generation would only be given one sign, the sign of Jonah (Matt. 16:1-4). Now, if they had thought about it, they would have remembered that shortly before this, Jesus had explained the sign: like Jonah, the Son of Man would be in the depths for three days and three nights. The sign of Jonah indicated Jesus' impending death and resurrection and it demanded that sinners should hear Him and repent. Because the religious leadership of Judaism would not repent and believe, they would face a greater judgment than even the wicked Assyrians to whom Jonah preached (12:38-42). Bringing to their minds this previous lesson, Jesus now teaches his disciples another lesson, a lesson regarding the discernment of doctrine.

In the second lesson, Jesus warned His disciples about “the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (16:5-12). However, rather than rising to the occasion and engaging in appropriate theological exegesis, the disciples displayed their earthly narrow-mindedness. The disciples had “little faith,” because they did not yet “understand” the meaning of Christ’s ministry and words. The words for thought and perception occur numerous times in the second lesson of chapter 16. Jesus was calling His disciples to think according to the gospel, to think as theologians, not to remain rank materialists. The disciple of Jesus should not be characterized by his appetite for sensual gratification but by his desire for divine doctrine. Listen to the thinking words, the focus upon faithful doctrine, in that conversation: “Oh, you of little faith, why do you reason among yourselves because you brought no bread? Do you not understand, or remember . . . ? How is it that you do not understand . . . ?” Then they understood that He did not warn them about the leaven of bread, but about the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

The proper hermeneutical method of a Christian disciple is to look for the theological meaning behind the signs that Jesus worked and the words that Jesus taught. And those visible signs and those verbal signs signified something deeper. In like manner, when we come to a discussion of the words πέτρος and πέτρα, the Christian disciple will not get hung up on the “sign” of Peter, but will turn to the “doctrine” of Peter. We are dealing here with words, words that have meaning. Do we not understand whom Christ has been asking them to identify? Do we not remember what Peter has said? The focus of the entire gospel up until now has been upon the Teacher and His doctrine, but with two words, πέτρος and πέτρα, is the focus now going to shift radically away from the Teacher and His teaching to Peter himself? Perhaps, we may surmise that Jesus did not focus upon Peter, but upon the doctrine of Peter. And do we not understand that the doctrine of Peter that Jesus praised is the epistemological reality of who Jesus is?

Is the πέτρα about Peter? Yes, but he is only the sign of something more. Is the πέτρα, then, about the doctrine of Peter, the confession of Peter? Yes, but the doctrine of Peter is composed of words, words that function as verbal signs pointing to a deeper reality. As Augustine reminds us, the sign must be distinguished from the thing signified.⁸ Is the πέτρα, then, Jesus, “the Christ, the Son of the Living God”? Perhaps the disciples understood that Jesus did not talk to them about a mere man, Peter; but about the doctrine of Peter, the confession of Peter; that is, about Jesus. The passage is concerned with Jesus: Jesus, the son of man, the Messiah, the Son of the living God, the owner of the keys to heaven and hell, the builder of the church, the one who binds and looses on earth because He binds and looses in heaven. Jesus, the one going to the cross, the one to be taken off the cross and laid in the grave—He is the one who will stride right into the gates of hell, the one who will take the keys from the hands of death and Hades and walk back into life. He is the one who will commission His disciples and ascend into glory. He is the one who will be present with His gathered church while remaining with His father in glory, whence He will come to judge the living and the dead. Yes, the πέτρα has something to do with Peter, but the πέτρα is not Πέτρος. Πέτρα is the confession of Πέτρος; Πέτρα is Jesus Christ.

⁸ “No one uses words except as signs of something else; and hence may be understood what I call signs: those things, to wit, which are used to indicate something else.” Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.3.

Other Linguistic Considerations

It is unfortunate that we too often treat scriptural pericopes as independent units of thought. Rarely are they such. Every passage in Scripture must be read in the context of its immediate surrounding texts, in the context of its book, in the context of its genre, in the context of its testament, and in the context of the canon. Matthew 16:13-20 should not be read independently of Matthew 16:1-4 nor of Matthew 16:5-12, as we have seen, for those earlier passages help us understand the significant focus upon doctrine in the context in which Peter's confession is made. Moreover, Matthew 16:13-20 should not be read independently of Matthew 16:21-23. The back-to-back pericopes form a verbal diptych teaching the two parts of the Christian creed. If our subject pericope concerns the person of Jesus, or who He is, then the following pericope concerns the work of Jesus, or what He does. In Matthew 16:16, Peter confesses correctly who Jesus is; in Matthew 16:21, Jesus confesses what He will do. Matthew recognized that a proper Christology concerns not only the Person of Christ, but also the Work of Christ. Peter, however, failed to receive properly the revelation of Christ's work. The Christian is called to remember Peter's fallibility and avoid it.

Throughout the book of Matthew, Peter and the disciples are shown at their highs and at their lows. The disciples as an anonymous community and Peter as a personal individuality are the examples of what the Christian should be and should not be. Peter and the disciples serve as both positive examples and negative examples. What is amazing with Peter, the representative disciple and spokesman for the other disciples, is that he charges from one extreme to the other. Compare Matthew 16:16-19 with Matthew 16:21-23. In one moment, Christ is lauding him for confessing what the Father has revealed; in the next moment, Christ is blasting him for denying what the Son has revealed. In one moment, Peter is an orthodox Christian, confessing Christ's person; in the next moment, Peter is the consummate heretic, denying Christ's work. In one moment, Christ is full of praise, comparing Peter with the rock of the church; in the next moment, Christ is full of reprimand, comparing Peter with a stumbling block to the ruler of the church. In one moment, Christ has renamed Simon as Πέτρος; in the next moment, Christ has renamed Simon as Σατανᾶ, the occupant of the pit. In one moment, Simon Peter is a powerful force that we must follow; in the next moment, Peter is a powerless failure that we must resist.⁹

2. Historical Considerations: The Biblical Era

The Old Testament Background

There are four specific Old Testament passages that create the ideological backdrop for the statements of Jesus in Matthew 16:17-19. These passages may be found in Psalm 118 and Isaiah 8, 22, and 28. What is striking with regard to these passages is that they concern the military governance of the people of God in the midst of war. These

⁹ This pattern of success and failure in discipleship continues throughout the book of Matthew, both for Peter and the disciples as a whole. R.T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 245-46; Michael J. Wilkins, *Discipleship in the Ancient World and Matthew's Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 181-85, 264; Jack Dean Kingsbury, "The Figure of Peter in Matthew's Gospel as a Theological Problem," *JBL* 98 (1979): 72.

passages describe the conflict between two great communities, the people of God and foreign oppressors. The military situation doubtless came to the mind of Christ and the apostles in light of the geographical area in which they stopped to converse. It was here at the foot of Mount Hermon—near the modern Golan Heights that have kept Syria and Israel in a state of war—that the assaults from the northern powers of Assyria and Babylon first came. The language evokes the terror of a surge of water from the Euphrates River (Isa. 8:6-8), for wave upon wave of soldiers, following established military doctrine,¹⁰ repeatedly swept through the land, bringing total destruction (Ps. 118:11-12a). From their vantage point beside Caesarea Philippi, the disciples remembered that this was where Israel had seen “the overflowing scourge as it passes through” (Isa. 28:18), overwhelming the people of God time and again. In a panic, the Jerusalem and Samaritan governments made covenants with the foreign powers—covenants doubtlessly sealed with acts of idolatry with the foreigners’ gods—only to be overwhelmed by these foreign powers, prompting the prophet to describe any such agreement as a “covenant with Sheol” or “covenant with death” (Isa. 28:15, 18).¹¹

The prophets warned Judah that their only hope was in covenant with the living God. Even as the gates of Sheol opened to issue forth their endless hordes of idolatrous warriors, so God and His Messiah could become the rock upon which the people of God might rest secure in His fortress. The “rock” or “stone” is the central metaphor of these passages in Isaiah and the Psalms, and the metaphors of “sanctuary,” “gates,” and “keys” are dependent upon that central metaphor. Psalm 118 declared that the “gates of righteousness” would open to allow the believer into the safe presence of the Lord (Ps. 118:19-20). For the Psalmist, “salvation” within these gates was dependent upon an unassailable outcrop of rock previously deemed unfit by the architects of the nation: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone” (118:21-22).

Jesus Christ, as Matthew reports, applied Psalm 118:22 to himself, too. He asked his listeners whether they had ever read Psalm 118:22 and then let them know they were subject to judgment for rejecting the rock (Matt. 21:42-44). The critical decision of life depends upon one’s relation to the rock. As Martin Luther, a man who battled so much *Angst*, recognized, this stone upon which the believer’s safety depends is the Christ. It should cause little wonder, then, that the sixteenth-century author of the well-known hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” claimed this particular psalm “more than any other as his own.”¹² For when the attacks are relentless and death itself is haunting us, even with the approval of the Lord, who allows His own to be chastened with death, the believer may cry in faith with the Psalmist, “I shall not die, but live” (Ps. 118:17).

Like the Psalmist, Isaiah also centered upon the imagery of the “rock” or “stone,” a metaphor that explicitly evoked the solidity of the divine character. The difficulty for the people of Israel concerned whether they would allow this rock to shelter them or to shatter them. In Isaiah, one’s response to the divine rock is critical:

¹⁰ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 519.

¹¹ Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Judah’s Covenant with Death: Isaiah XXVIII 14-22,” *Vetus Testamentum* 50 (2000): 472-83.

¹² Ronald M. Hals, “Psalm 118,” *Interpretation* 37 (1983): 282.

To those who sanctify him, who give him a place of importance in their lives, who seek to allow his character to be duplicated in them, he becomes a sanctuary, a place of refuge and peace. But to those who will not give him such a place in their lives, he becomes a stone to trip over. He does not change; only our attitude determines how we experience him.¹³

Isaiah 8:14 emphasizes the negative aspect of the immutable nature of God: “He will be as a sanctuary, but a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, as a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.” Isaiah 28:16 emphasizes the positive aspect of the immutable nature of God and His Messiah: “Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; whoever believes will not act hastily.” The last phrase in Isaiah 28, “which may have been understood to be the inscription on the cornerstone,”¹⁴ is particularly interesting, for it links salvation to faith in the rock itself. Isaiah also pictured the keys to the gates of Israel being given to a steward, an instrument of God who would open and close the safe city of God to the people of God (Isa. 22:22).

The New Testament Background

Jesus Christ and his disciples took their Bible, the Old Testament, very seriously. In the Gospel of Matthew in particular, Jesus affirmed the inviolability of the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17-20) and interpreted His own life and ministry in light of their Scriptures (26:56). Then again, it is just as appropriate to say that the New Testament interprets the Old Testament in the light of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:25-27). A Christian may never forget that the New Testament is a Christological text, and must remember that the New Testament authoritatively treats the Old Testament in a similar manner. As they rang like music in the minds of the apostles, the metaphors of the Old Testament reinforced the message of Jesus Christ that they recorded in the New Testament, and their interpretations of the Old Testament and of Jesus Christ reinforced the interpretations of the other apostles.

This Christological description of the canon, of course, includes Matthew. According to Birger Gerhardsson, “The Gospel of Matthew is from beginning to end a christological book.”¹⁵ Later, Gerhardsson repeats this affirmation: “Matthew paints a composite and yet coherent picture of Jesus with the aid of diversified material. His Gospel is from beginning to end a christological book.”¹⁶ R.T. France agrees with this perspective and furthers it by noting that when it comes to the church, Christology has the priority. Some have referred to Matthew as the “ecclesiastical gospel,” especially in light of the Petrine gift of authority. But France is very sober in comparison: “Ecclesiology is subordinate to christology, and the ‘church’ which emerges is not a shining army with banners, but a relatively unstructured gathering of ‘little ones’ who belong to Jesus, a body which impresses the reader more with its vulnerability and need of correction than with a sense of awe.”¹⁷

¹³ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, 234.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 519.

¹⁵ Gerhardsson, “The Christology of Matthew,” 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁷ France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, 251.

The Christocentric nature of the Gospel of Matthew should not be forgotten when we consider the rock upon which the church is built and the role of Simon Peter with regard to the definition of the rock. As noted above, Matthew treats Peter not only as the exemplary personal disciple of Jesus, but also as the representative of the disciples and the spokesman for the disciples. The representative nature of Peter on behalf of the other disciples should be recognized. In our subject pericope, the plural pronouns indicate that it is to the disciples as a group that the questions are addressed, and the first set of answers comes from the disciples as a group. Moreover, it is Peter as the spokesman of the other disciples that offers the confession of Christ's person. The representative nature of Peter on behalf of the disciples is a recurrent phenomenon within Matthew, a phenomenon noted by more than one scholar.¹⁸

May we conclude, therefore, that it is to Peter as the representative of the other disciples that the blessing of Christ and the gift of authority are given? In other words, is the language of Peter's primacy one that concerns the office of Peter as first among the disciples, or in speaking of Peter's primacy, should we be more concerned with his historical role in the early churches? The New Testament witness affirms the historical role of Peter as a leader in the early churches, and the New Testament does not elevate Peter officially above the other disciples beyond the seminal period. In the Gospels, we learn that Peter's greatest triumph occurred with his confession, and his greatest failure occurred with his denial of Jesus during the latter's trial (Matt. 26:69-75). Peter is identified as among the first to see the empty tomb (John 20:6-7) and to encounter the resurrected Lord (1 Cor. 15:5). In a painful encounter, Christ poignantly reminds Peter of His commission to the apostles to look after the church, restoring the latter to the task that he had forsaken by returning to his boat (John 21:3, 15-19).

After the ascension of the Lord, Peter took the lead in the church established by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, preaching the gospel with powerful effect in Jerusalem alongside the other disciples (Acts 2:14-39). Peter and John extend the healing ministry of Jesus, drawing attention to the power of the risen Lord before the people of Jerusalem (Acts 3:1-11) and the Sanhedrin in particular (4:5-12). Peter also exercised leadership in discerning the spiritual welfare of the church membership and proclaiming the Spirit's judgment (5:1-11), and in the calling of the seven to relieve the twelve so that they might focus upon the proclamation of the Word (6:1-7). In fulfillment of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20) and Christ's program for its spread to the nations (Acts 1:7-8), Peter served the critical role of expanding the membership of the earliest church to include the Samaritans (8:14-15) and the God-fearing Gentiles (10:47-48) through triune baptism. Importantly, he functioned in this critical way while being sent by the Jerusalem leadership and remaining accountable to it (8:14, 11:1-18). So, in the critical phase of the churches' expansion in Jerusalem and its extension to the Samaritans and the Gentiles, Peter dispensed the Word of God and interpreted its application. However, by the time of the critical meeting of the Jerusalem church regarding the matter of circumcision, Peter was surpassed by the leadership of James in Jerusalem (15:13-22) and by the leadership of Paul in the mission to the Gentiles (15:22-28:31).

¹⁸ France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, 244-46; Wilkins, *Discipleship in the Ancient World and Matthew's Gospel*, 211-16; Kingsbury, "The Figure of Peter in Matthew's Gospel as a Theological Problem," 71-76.

The “Foundation” of the Church

Another factor supporting the priority of Christology and the “salvation-historical” nature of Peter’s so-called “primacy”¹⁹ is the way in which the concept of the church’s foundation is treated in the New Testament. The apostles Paul, Peter, and John each have something to say in this regard. We begin with the twofold treatment of the foundation by Paul. First, Paul treats the foundation of the church in such a way that we may not oppose Christ to the apostles, nor oppose the apostles to Peter. Second, maintaining the priority of Christology, Paul states, “No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” The church, as a “temple,” is being built upon the foundation of Him alone (1 Cor. 3:11, 16). But recognizing the place of the apostles as necessary conveyors of the revelation of that foundation, Paul elsewhere includes them within the foundation. The church is being “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). Extending the metaphor further, Paul elsewhere quotes Isaiah 28:16 so as to emphasize that faith in Christ is the proper foundation, while pursuing the law indicates one has stumbled over the “stumbling stone” of faith in Him (Rom. 9:33-34). Paul also refers to Peter and the Jerusalem apostles as the “pillars” of that local church (Gal. 2:9).

The apostle Peter himself, however, has a distinctly non-Petrine and non-apostolic understanding of the rock upon which the church is built. B.H. Carroll relates 1 Peter 2:4-8 directly to Peter’s “greater confession” in Matthew 16: “[Peter] makes it very clear that the foundation of the church is Christ, the rock; he does not understand that the church is built upon him.”²⁰ If Peter is referring back to Matthew 16, and he may be doing so both here and in Acts 4:11, then Carroll is most certainly correct. According to Peter, Jesus Christ is “a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious” (1 Pet. 2:4). And paralleling Paul’s more extensive architectural imagery, Peter considers the members of the church to be “living stones,” who are being built into “a spiritual house” upon the “living stone,” Jesus Christ (2:5). Peter then quotes the Old Testament passages that lay in the background of Matthew 16, all of which are referred to God in Christ: Isaiah 28:16 in verse 6, Psalm 118:22 in verse 7, and Isaiah 8:14 in verse 8. Like Paul, Peter makes Jesus the foundation of the church, but unlike Paul, Peter does not include the apostles in that foundation.

Matthew 16 placed aside for a moment, the New Testament witness with regard to the foundation of the church seems to be clear: According to Peter, Jesus Christ is the “living stone” (λίθον ζῶντα, 1 Pet. 2:4), “cornerstone” (λίθον ἀκρογωνιαῖον, 2:6; cf. 2:7), “stone of stumbling” (λίθος προσκόμματος, 2:8), and “rock of offense” (πέτρα σκανδάλου, 2:8), the last noticeably utilizing the critical Greek term, πέτρα. According to Paul, Jesus Christ is the “foundation” (θεμέλιον, 1 Cor. 3:11) and the “chief cornerstone” (ἀκρογωνιαίου, Eph. 2:20), but the apostles and prophets share in His “foundation” (τῷ θεμελίῳ, Eph. 2:20) and are reputed “pillars” (στῦλοι, Gal. 2:9). The primacy in the non-Matthean passages belongs to Christ, and while Peter participates in the architecture, even in the foundation, he is not individually considered except as a pillar of the

¹⁹ Kingsbury, “The Figure of Peter in Matthew’s Gospel as a Theological Problem,” 71, 81-83.

²⁰ B.H. Carroll, *The Pastoral Epistles of Paul, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude, and 1, 2, and 3 John*, An Interpretation of the English Bible, ed. J.B. Cranfill (1948; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 173. Cf. Paige Patterson, *A Pilgrim Priesthood: An Exposition of the Epistle of First Peter* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 71-80.

Jerusalem church, and even then Peter is listed after James. Finally, according to John, the New Jerusalem has 12 foundations that are identified with the 12 apostles, but Peter is not explicitly named (Rev. 21:14).

The Church, the Gates, and the Keys

The bulk of our attention in this paper has properly focused on the central metaphor of the rock, but there are other metaphors and terms in the passage that must be considered. As noted in our structural analysis, the response of Jesus to Peter's confession has three parts. In the first, he pronounces that Peter is blessed, because God and not man revealed the confession to him (Matt. 16:17). In the second, Jesus proclaims that Peter is to receive a new name, that Jesus will build His church upon the rock, and that the gates of Hades will not overpower it (16:18). In the third, Jesus announces that he will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven to Peter, the representative disciple, and that the decisions of the disciple and heaven will be coordinated (16:19). We must consider the proper interpretation of the words, "church," "gates of Hades," and "keys."

I have elsewhere discussed the biblical definition of the "church" as the gathered congregation, and will refer you to that essay²¹ and to the following paper by Thomas White on the universal church and the local church. In Matthew 16:18, we note that Jesus Christ is the one who builds the church, although Paul sees Christian ministers as coming alongside to help in that construction (1 Cor. 3:9-17). Also, notice that Jesus Christ uses the future tense here: οἰκοδομήσω, "I will build." In light of the New Testament witness, this probably means that Christ began building His church with the first local church's gathering at Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-47), continues building His church with every local church throughout Christian history, and will conclude building it with the universal church's first complete gathering at the marriage supper of the Lamb, when all of the servants of Christ will gather to worship Him (Rev. 19:5-9).²²

The "gates of Hades" (πύλαι ᾗδου) is of Old Testament provenance and was likewise common throughout the Near East. "Many peoples in antiquity viewed the underworld as a land, city, fortress, or prison with strong gates which prevented escape and barred access to invaders."²³ References can be found in the mythologies of Babylon, Egypt, Greece, and Persia. Biblically, the phrase "gates of Sheol" is found only in Isaiah 38:10, where Hezekiah laments his impending death. "Sheol" is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word, "Hades," indicating the realm of the dead, rather than "Gehenna," the eternal lake of fire. The related terms of "gates of death" (Pss. 9:13, 107:18; Job 38:17), "the gates of darkness" (Job 38:17), and "the bars of Sheol" (Job 17:16) also appear. Joachim Jeremias believed that the gates of Hades were "the aggressors," "the ungodly powers of the underworld which assail the rock."²⁴ Moreover, both heaven and hell are

²¹ Malcolm B. Yarnell III, "Article VI: The Church," in *Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America's Largest Protestant Denomination*, ed. Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 55-70.

²² H.E. Dana understands the usage here as a generic reference to the local church. H.E. Dana, *A Manual of Ecclesiology*, 2nd ed. (Kansas City, KS: Central Seminary Press, 1933), 38-40.

²³ Joachim Jeremias, "πύλη," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 6, ed. Friedrich, 924. "The image in Matthew is of the rulers of the underworld bursting forward from the gates of their heavily guarded, walled city to attack God's people on earth." Joel Marcus, "The Gates of Hades and the Keys of the Kingdom (Matt 16:18-19)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 445.

²⁴ Jeremias, "πύλη," 927.

considered to have gates, or stronghold entrances where a city was ruled, defended, and attacked. The collective imagery again evokes a savage war between two great cities protected by their gates manned by stewards with their keys. The point here is that Hades will not be able to overcome the rock.

The word “keys” (κλείς) has a number of figurative and largely apocalyptic uses in the New Testament, primarily found in the Synoptic Gospels and the Revelation of John. There are keys to Hades (Rev. 1:18), the key to the abyss (Rev. 9:1, 20:1), the key of knowledge (Luke 11:52; Matt. 23:13), keys to heaven (Luke 4:25; Rev. 11:6), the key of David (Rev. 3:7), and the keys of the kingdom (Matt. 16:19). These keys belong ultimately to God, who has power over heaven, who in Christ has regained power over Hades (Rev. 1:18), and who grants these keys to angels (Rev. 9:1, 20:1) and men (Matt. 16:19) to employ as He decrees.²⁵ The keys that are granted to Peter in Matthew 16 are promised as the future tense of the verb (δώσω) indicates, but were not delivered at this time. This is a point that Luther emphasized, for the keys were only promised to Peter as the representative disciple, but were delivered by Christ after His resurrection to the disciples as a whole (John 20:23), that is, to the congregation (Matt. 18:18, understood proleptically).²⁶

The power of the keys in “binding” and “loosing” have been interpreted in three senses, each of which seems to be used in the New Testament. First, the power of the keys has been interpreted as the power to bind demons and free those being oppressed by the demonic. This power can be found in the inter-testamental tradition and in the New Testament itself (cf. Matt. 7:34-35; Mark 3:27; Luke 10:17, 13:16; Rev. 20:1-3).²⁷ While this sense deserves more attention, the other two senses are more commonly discussed among scholars. Second, there is the disciplinary sense of the keys of binding and loosing. It is important here to define what discipline here is not. It is definitely not a juridical power, nor is it a legislative power, and is perhaps best not even described as an executive power. Rather, the disciplinary use of the keys of binding and loosing should be described as a pastoral function. The exercise of discipline by the church is never intended to bring condemnation but redemption. Although following a careful process, the keys as pictured in Matthew 18:18 have this pastoral function of redemption in mind.²⁸

The third use of the keys, of proclamation and interpretation, is what is being promised in Matthew 16. This sense of the keys goes back to the Rabbinic context of normative Judaism from which the terminology likely derived, and is thus used in the teaching of Jesus. In this sense of the keys, binding is the declaration of uncleanness or unrighteousness, while loosing is the declaration of cleanness or righteousness. It is sin that is bound or loosed, and the teacher applies the Scripture as binding or loosing

²⁵ Joachim Jeremias, “κλείς,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 744-53.

²⁶ Martin Luther, *Against the Roman Papacy, An Institution of the Devil* (1545), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 41, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 306, 319.

²⁷ Richard H. Hiers, “‘Binding’ and ‘Loosing’: The Matthean Authorizations,” *JBL* 104 (1985): 233-50.

²⁸ Bornkamm, “The Authority to ‘Bind’ and ‘Loose,’” 106; France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, 249.

through interpretation.²⁹ The proclamation by the Jewish teacher of binding and loosing is, moreover, first based upon the biblical text. Since the text must be interpreted, the application of the biblical text regarding debated matters must also be considered. According to Mark Allan Powell, this is a continuing function of the church, best understood at the level of the local congregation.³⁰

However, although taking the terminology of binding and loosing from the Rabbinic tradition, Jesus separated his followers from that legal tradition by pointing to their abuse of the keys of interpretation: the Jewish leaders used the “key of knowledge” to prohibit entrance to the kingdom rather than to grant it (Luke 11:52). Although Jesus did not do away with the law, his burden is light and his yoke is easy, providing rest for weary souls (Matt. 11:29-30). The primary emphasis in the use of the keys should, therefore, be upon the extension of grace and not the retention of sins. Luther, in his exposition of these verses, agrees with this emphasis. The Reformer said that the keys regard the preaching of the Word of God and faith. Through the proclamation of the Word, forgiveness is applied to those who believe and judgment to those who do not exercise faith. “The keys and the power to bind and loose sin was not given to the apostles and saints for their sovereignty over the church, but solely for the good and use of sinners.”³¹ Although the preacher of the Word is instrumental and necessary, the work of binding and loosing is reserved for God: “To retain or forgive sins is the work of the divine majesty alone.”³²

This emphasis upon the primacy of divine grace also coalesces with the unusual syntax employed by Jesus when speaking of “binding” and “loosing.” The action that occurs in heaven is described through future perfect passives, both in Matthew 16:19 and Matthew 18:18. The translation should technically be “will have been bound” (ἔσται δεδεμένον) and “will have been loosed” (ἔσται λελυμένον), rather than the more common translation as a simple future tense, “will be bound” and “will be loosed.” The use of the simple future tense makes it easier to picture Peter (Matt. 16:19) or the church (18:18) as somehow automatically obligating heaven for their earthly decisions. The use of the future perfect passive in our translation may help put the emphasis on a decision’s origination in heaven rather than upon earth.³³ If a person is loosed from sin upon earth through faith in the proclamation of a Christian disciple, it is because God is applying His grace at a spiritual level. It is only the disorderly hubris like that of some medieval popes

²⁹ J. Duncan M. Derrett, “Binding and Loosing (Matt 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23),” *JBL* 102 (1983): 115.

³⁰ Mark Alan Powell, “Binding and Loosing: Asserting the Moral Authority of Scripture in Light of a Matthean Paradigm,” *Ex Auditu* 19 (2003): 81-96.

³¹ Luther, *Against the Roman Papacy*, 315-16.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Commentators are not entirely agreed on this result. Like this author, France is convinced that the literal tense removes the *ex opere operato* nature of binding and loosing. Carson points out that one could just as easily argue for perfect communication between heaven and earth on the basis of a future periphrastic perfect translation. Carson’s point is accepted, but the unusual nature of the verb as expressed in a more literal translation would still mitigate a sacerdotal understanding by opening afresh for the vernacular reader the question of the precise meaning of the sentence, prompting further study. Cf. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 626-27; D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Biblical Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gabelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 371.

that would demand that a spiritual leader on earth automatically obligates divine application and human salvation.

3. Historical Considerations: Christian Interpretations

Our considerations of the history of Christian interpretation of this passage will necessarily be of a summary nature. There are four major periods requiring elucidation: the Patristic, the Medieval, the Reformation, and the Modern.

Patristic Interpretations

John A. Broadus, in his 1886 magisterial commentary on Matthew, divides Patristic responses regarding the identity of the rock into three categories: what he calls the “natural interpretation,” and what we will call the confessional interpretation and the Christological interpretation. The natural interpretation, he says, is to regard the rock upon which Christ builds the church as Peter. Among those holding this interpretation were Origen, Cyprian, Basil, Gregory Nazianzus, Ambrose, Jerome, and Cyril of Alexandria. But the confessional interpretation was proclaimed by Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Isidore of Pelusium, Hilary of Poitiers, Theodoret, Theophanes, Theophylact, and John of Damascus.³⁴

Chrysostom’s commentary here is instructive, since it recognizes the doctrinal context of the Matthean pericope. Peter is blessed because he holds “no longer a human opinion, but a divine doctrine.”³⁵ As a result, “upon this rock” is another way to say, “on the faith of his confession.”³⁶ Moreover, the commentator who speculates so as to focus upon Peter has begun to “lessen the dignity of the Son.”³⁷ Chrysostom draws a strong line between thinking with heavenly doctrine and thinking with “human and earthly reasoning.”³⁸ The Christian interpreter’s mind should be upon the cross and upon heaven. The Christian should no longer be earthly minded, but “set your love on the country above.”³⁹ Augustine’s position is perhaps the most nuanced one, for he early held that the church was founded upon Peter as the rock, but later he came to preach that Christ was the rock, and that the entire church becomes a rock when it confesses Christ. Augustine’s canonical approach was eclipsed in the Middle Ages by a juridical approach, but would later be restored under the Reformers.⁴⁰

³⁴ John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, American Commentary Series (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), 356. Cf. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary*, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 370-72.

³⁵ John Chrysostom, *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, 2 vols. trans. John Henry Parker (Oxford, 1844), 2: 730.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 731.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 735.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 737.

⁴⁰ Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 356; Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 373-75.

Roman Catholic Interpretations

The Roman Catholic interpretation of Peter's gift of authority is that it is juridical, doctrinal, and soteriological, and that such total power is granted to the episcopal successors of Peter, who was considered to be the first bishop of Rome. This is why the pronouncements of various popes and Roman councils in history have been so controversial with other Christians both East and West. In November 1302, the bishop of Rome, speaking in the bull *Unam Sanctam*, wrote, "We therefore declare, state, define, and pronounce that it is entirely necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff."⁴¹ Vatican I makes similarly broad claims: "In this way, by unity with the Roman pontiff in communion and in profession of the same faith, the church of Christ becomes one flock under one supreme shepherd."⁴² Again, at Vatican I, we hear that when the Roman pontiff speaks *ex cathedra*, "he possesses, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his church to enjoy in defining faith or morals."⁴³

And, in case one believes that Vatican II turned the corner on such grand claims, consider the recent work of the current pope, Benedict XVI, on the apostles. Therein, he focuses in on the role of Peter. Peter is the bishop of the universal church, and "the Episcopal Succession of the Church of Rome becomes the sign, criterion and guarantee of the unbroken transmission of apostolic faith."⁴⁴ Because Peter is called to be "Pastor of the Universal Church," his successors fill the same role.⁴⁵ This means that Peter and his successors in the see of Rome possess "primacy of jurisdiction" over all Christians.⁴⁶ As a result, "Peter must be the custodian of communion with Christ for all time. He must guide people to communion with Christ; he must ensure that the net does not break, and consequently that universal communion endures."⁴⁷ In other words, the Pope believes that the promise of authority to Peter is granted to the Bishops of Rome. The problem is that Scripture does not speak of the universal church as already extant, of Peter as having the power of communion, of Peter ever being the bishop of Rome, nor of a succession of such power to subsequent bishops of Rome.

It is easy to see how such grand claims may result in tyranny. Consider the Council of Constance, which met between 1414 and 1418. There, John Wyclif was anathematized for teaching, "That the pope is supreme pontiff is ridiculous. Christ approved such a dignity neither in Peter nor in anyone else."⁴⁸ And because John Hus "declared the said John Wyclif to be a catholic man and an evangelical doctor," he too must be condemned.⁴⁹ Wyclif was dead, so they could not punish him. But Hus was alive, so Hus was condemned, relinquished to the state and burned at the stake, for among

⁴¹ Boniface VIII, Reg. 5382, cited in James of Viterbo, *On Christian Government: De Regimine Christiano*, ed. R.W. Dyson (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 1995), xiv.

⁴² Vatican I, Session 4, *Constitutio dogmatica prima de ecclesia Christi*, 3, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols., ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 2: 814.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 816.

⁴⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *The Apostles and Their Co-Workers: The Origins of the Church* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2007), 40.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁸ *Concilium Constantiense*, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 1: 423.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 427.

other things, saying, “Peter neither was nor is the head of the holy catholic church.”⁵⁰ Bad scriptural exegesis regarding Peter now led to the judicial murder of a Christian theologian. Many more were to follow. The beautiful painting of Christ granting the keys to Peter in the Vatican’s Sistine Chapel by Pietro Perugino may seem beautiful in its symmetry, but any who denied its subject matter as a human invention were subject to be killed in the name of an unbiblical orthodoxy.

The Reformation Revolt

One can perhaps understand why Martin Luther’s response to such Roman exegesis was severe. In his book, affectionately entitled, *Against the Roman Papacy, An Institution of the Devil*, written in 1545, Luther challenged the poor exegesis of Matthew 16 conducted on behalf of the Roman primacy. The cover illustration, crafted by Lucas Cranach, speaks volumes as to the book’s contents. The book itself is rough reading, for Luther was a vulgar man, whose tastes the modern effete scholar may find offensive. And yet, his many points about the abuses of the Matthean pericope should be remembered. Perhaps the most germane saying in that book, from the perspective of this conference, concerned the distinction between the churches and the church. “We know that,” he said “it has been so arranged that churches are equal, and there is only one single church of Christ in the world.”⁵¹ In other words, the local churches must be kept distinct from one another and the universal church should not be uniquely tied to any particular church.

The Modern Commentators

John A. Broadus has been described as showing “a remarkably current and open attitude toward the more recent science of textual criticism.”⁵² Although Broadus believed in the inspiration of the Scriptures, he also considered criticism an important tool in exegesis. Unfortunately, Broadus sometimes also utilized higher criticism, such as the attempt to look behind the text to the original oral traditions that went into the Scripture. This leads to a great deal of speculation, speculation that can harm proper exegesis. Broadus correctly refused to let the Reformation interpretation of Matthew 16 drive his exegesis. But he went too far in peering behind the Greek text to the supposed Aramaic oral sayings. As a result, he returned to the “traditional interpretation” of the rock as Peter himself. Listen to the vehemence of his words, “But there is a play upon words, understand as you may. It is an even far-fetched and harsh play upon words if we understand the rock to be Christ; and a very feeble and almost unmeaning play upon words if the rock is Peter’s confession.”⁵³ Broadus did deny the Roman extension of the Petrine interpretation,⁵⁴ but he never explained exactly what the “play upon words” was intended by Jesus to mean. Although Oscar Cullmann’s 1952 historical-theological study of Peter has been given credit for the development, for Cullmann agrees with Broadus’s

⁵⁰ Ibid., 429.

⁵¹ Luther, *Against the Roman Papacy*, 358. Cf. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 118-26.

⁵² Richard Melick, “New Wine in Broadus Wineskins?” in *John A. Broadus: A Living Legacy*, ed. David S. Dockery and Roger D. Duke (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 107.

⁵³ Broadus, *A Commentary on Matthew*, 355.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 356-57.

higher criticism in this regard,⁵⁵ it was Broadus who first established in the English-speaking world the standard interpretation now followed by most evangelicals.⁵⁶

Perhaps with his eye on Louisville's continuing flirtation with the historical-critical method, B.H. Carroll, at one time a trustee at Broadus's seminary and subsequently the founder of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, responded, in his comments on 1 Peter 2:

He [Peter] was not bothered as a great many modern theologians in interpreting that passage in Matthew 16, and they would have saved themselves a great deal of trouble if they had allowed Peter, to whom the words are addressed, to give his own inspired understanding of what Christ meant. And it seems always to me that there must be disrespect for the inspiration of Peter when any man says that in Matthew 16:18 the rock upon which the church was built was Peter, and it is disrespect also for Paul, because he is just as clear as Peter: "Other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, Christ Jesus."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Cullmann carefully works his way through the life of Peter, the historical interpretations, and the attempts to dismiss the passage as an interpolation. Like Broadus, he affirms an identification between the two Greek terms on the basis of their Aramaic source. Oscar Cullman, *Petrus, Jünger—Apostel—Märtyrer: Das Historische und das Theologische Petrusproblem* (Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1952); Oscar Cullmann, *Peter, Disciple—Apostle—Martyr: A Historical and Theological Study*, trans. Floyd V. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 185, 206-7.

In what is perhaps the most recent substantive study, Gérard Claudel does not challenge the conclusions of Cullmann regarding Peter and the πέτρα. Engaging the historical-critical debate, Claudel agrees that the Matthean pericope contains the most primitive confession of the church, but that the pericope has been redacted so as to make Peter the connecting point between the later Matthean church's practice of discipline and Christ's original granting of the keys. Beside the problem with his use of the historical-critical method, Claudel unfortunately also sees the focus of the saying as being on the person of Peter: "sa focalisation sur la personne de Pierre." Gérard Claudel, *La Confession de Pierre: Trajectoire d'une Péricope Évangélique*, Études Bibliques, n.s. 10 (Paris: Librairie LeCoffre, 1988), *passim*, 376, 439.

⁵⁶ Among those holding the "traditional interpretation" of Peter as the rock, typically built on the speculative argument from the supposed Aramaic oral form of both terms as *kepha*, are, besides Broadus and Cullmann: W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann, *Matthew: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1971), 195; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 251-52; W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988-1997), 2: 627-28, although Davies and Allison allow for a possible distinction beyond the identification with Peter; Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 270-71, although Keener seems to allow for the composite view; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 667-70, although Nolland allows for the option of a reference to something else.

Among those holding the confessional or revelational interpretation are: Willoughby C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), 176; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 333-34; R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing, 1943), 624-28;

Among those holding some composite view are: Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 376-77; Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 422-24; and the present author.

⁵⁷ Carroll, *The Pastoral Epistles of Paul, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude, and 1, 2, and 3 John*, 173.

4. Theological Conclusions

Allowing the founder of Southwestern Seminary to have the last word in the history of interpretation, please consider these five preliminary theological conclusions:

1. Although the rock upon which the church is built is not Peter personally or officially, the rock certainly has to do with Peter, specifically with his confession of the divine revelation, which itself points to Jesus Christ.
2. The church that Peter led for a time in its early years was the local church in Jerusalem, not the universal church.
3. The foundation of the church is Jesus Christ, and the apostles, including Peter, share in that foundation alongside the prophets as inspired witnesses to the Word that is now our Bible.
4. The gates of Hades indicate both death and the realm of demonic activity, and Christ has conquered both.
5. The keys of the kingdom of heaven include Christian authority to loose those under the influence of demons, to practice church discipline, and most importantly, to preach the saving Word of God, which, when accepted by faith, results in the salvation of the hearer.

© Malcolm B. Yarnell III
Director, Center for Theological Research
Fort Worth, Texas
Plenary Session, 25 September 2008
Fourth Baptist Distinctives Conference, "Upon This Rock"
Riley Center, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary