

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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YOU ARE PETER (1)

Matthew 16:13-20

There is probably no passage in the teaching of Jesus that has called forth more discussion than Matthew 16:18. In Matthew 16:18, the Lord Jesus says this. *And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.* As you know, this has been the most important passage in the interpretation of claims to papacy and indeed in the question of whether there should be a pope at all. Protestants have reacted very strongly to the Catholic church's understanding of this verse.

The foundation of the church

Jesus' words here deal with the foundation of the church. 'I will build My church on this foundation, the rock.' What then is the foundation of the church of Christ? We will try to answer that question on the basis of Matthew 16:18. Let's begin by looking at the context of that controversial verse. We will read from v. 13. Matthew 16:13-20.

Matthew 16:13 When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?"

14 So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

16 Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

17 Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

18 "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

19 "And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

20 Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.

Many people are puzzled by Jesus' order to His disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Messiah. The reason is quite simply that the Jews had the wrong concept of Christ. They thought of Christ in terms of a leader who will deliver them from the power of Rome and establish Israel as a political force in the world. And to spread the news that He was the Christ could only foster a misguided enthusiasm among the Jews. People might set Him up as king and start a revolt against the Roman government. That was certainly not God's plan for Israel. Even though Jesus was the Messiah, He still had to suffer, be rejected by the leaders, be killed, and rise from the dead (v. 21).

In our lesson today, we will concentrate our attention on v. 18. *And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.*

The metaphor ‘gates of Hades’ is found in OT writings where in Hebrew it is the ‘gates of Sheol.’ Hades and Sheol both represent the realm of the dead. The RSV Bible translates it as ‘the powers of death.’ The ‘gates’ symbolize the imprisoning power of death. This means that death will not be able to imprison and hold the church. In other words, the church of God will never be destroyed. It will never die.

Why will it never die? How is it that the powers of death will not prevail against the church? It is because the church is built upon the rock. ‘On this rock I will build My church,’ Jesus says. Then the question becomes, ‘What is the rock that will make the church to be so strong?’ Or, put quite simply, ‘What is the church built upon?’

The Catholic position

The Catholic church takes the view that the ‘rock’ is Peter, and that the church is somehow built upon Peter. Catholic theologians interpret Jesus here to say, ‘You are Peter, and upon you, Peter, I will build My church.’

In The Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 552, we read the following text.

“Simon Peter holds the first place in the college of the Twelve; Jesus entrusted a unique mission to him. Through a revelation from the Father, Peter had confessed: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Our Lord then declared to him: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. Christ, the “living stone,” thus assures his Church, built on Peter, of victory over the power of death. Because of the faith he confessed Peter will remain the unshakeable rock of the Church. His mission will be to keep this faith from every lapse and to strengthen his brothers in it.”

Notice the statement. ‘Christ thus assures his Church, built on Peter, of victory over the power of death.’ The church is built on the person of Peter and all his successors. That is the official position of the Catholic church.

Petros and petra

There are several problems with this interpretation. Look again at Matthew 16:18. If Peter were the rock, we would have expected the Lord Jesus to say something like this. ‘You are Peter and upon you, I will build my church.’ But He did not exactly say that. He said, ‘You are Peter and upon this rock I will build My church.’ Jesus first talks about Peter and then He goes on to speak about a rock. The use of these two words, Peter and rock, side by side, is significant. And we cannot automatically assume that the rock refers to Peter.

In fact, someone reading the gospel in its original text, in Greek, would not have immediately concluded that Peter was the rock. There is a play on words that could not have been missed. Jesus said, ‘You are Peter (*Petros* – masculine), and upon this rock (*petra* – feminine) I will build My church.’ He didn’t say, ‘You are Peter (*Petros*), and upon this rock (*petros*) I will build My church.’

The word Jesus chose to use for ‘rock’, *petra*, is a feminine noun that refers to a mass of rock. It is used in Matthew 7:24-25 in connection with the bedrock upon which a wise man built his house. *Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who*

built his house on the rock (petra). It is also found in Matthew 27:60 with reference to Jesus' tomb which workers have carved out of solid rock. ...*And laid it in his new tomb which he had hewn out of the rock (petra)*...

Peter's name, *Petros*, is masculine in gender and refers to a detached stone. It is a stone which comes from a bigger piece of rock. Therefore it is much smaller in size. It is normally used of a small stone that can be picked up and thrown.

Jesus' statement could be translated in this way: 'You are Stone, and upon this bedrock I will build My church.' The change from 'Stone' to 'bedrock' is deliberate and it seems to indicate that the rock on which the church would be built was something other than the person of Peter. Anyone reading this verse in Greek would not have spontaneously equated the rock (*petra*) with Peter (*Petros*).

Some people (Catholics, but also Protestants) disagree with this understanding of the words *petra* and *Petros*. They argue that when Jesus taught, He undoubtedly spoke in Aramaic, not in Greek. And in Aramaic, there is no distinction between a separate stone (*Petros*) and the massive rock (*petra*). It only has the word *kephas*. So when Jesus spoke the words in Matthew 16:18, He did not shift from *Petros* to *petra* but repeated Peter's Aramaic name *Kephas*. 'You are *Kephas*, and upon this *kephas* I will build My church.' 'From that context,' they say, 'it is clear that in Jesus' mind Peter was to be the foundation upon which the church would be built.'

I personally don't think that this argument is valid. You see, the NT was written in Greek, not in Aramaic. What Jesus might have said in Aramaic is conjecture. We can only speculate about it. If the Lord really used the word *Kephas*, why didn't Matthew simply import the Aramaic word? There are six places where the Bible refers to Peter as *Kephas* (John 1:42; 1Corinthians 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; Galatians 2:9). Matthew could have done the same thing here too, but he does not. And he does not repeat the word *petros* either. When the Holy Spirit inspired Matthew to write his gospel, the Spirit of God purposely made a distinction between Peter (*Petros*) and the rock (*petra*). That distinction must be taken into account in the interpretation of the phrase. We will explain later the reason for the difference.

Additional interpretation problems

The objection to Peter as the rock can also be argued from this observation: There is simply no NT teaching which tells us that Peter is the foundation of the church. There is no such teaching. In 1Corinthians 3:11, Paul expressly declares that Christ is the foundation upon which the church is built. *For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ*. In Ephesians 2:20, he speaks of the church as *having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone*. Here Paul pictures Christ as the primary stone and the apostles and prophets as secondary stones. But there is nothing in the Scriptures that says that Peter alone is the foundation of the church.

But now, think about it. How can the church be built on the foundation of a human being, even if he is an apostle? We know the character of Peter. He was the loudest in proclaiming his loyalty. He was the one who led the other disciples and said, 'Jesus, we will die with you. We will never leave you. We will stick with you till the end.' Then came this woman, a simple servant-girl, who said to him, 'Were you not with Jesus of Galilee?' And what was Peter's response? 'I don't know who you are talking about.' Three times he denied Christ, even with an oath. Would the church be built on a man like that, who denied Christ and to whom Jesus said, *You are a stumbling block to Me* (Matthew 16:23)? Would the church be built on any man?

And besides, what would be the point of building a church on a person who has died and not yet come to the resurrection, no matter how great he was? Jesus said, *On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it*. The powers of death shall not overcome it.

Could that apply to Peter? Certainly not. Like any other man, Peter died. The powers of death have prevailed against Peter, for the moment at least, until the resurrection, until Jesus raises us up again.

Alternative interpretations

What then is this rock? Could we say instead that the rock is Jesus? Well, if the rock here refers to Christ, then there is a problem with Jesus' sentence. Look carefully at the verse again. *You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church...* What is the point of saying, *You are Peter* if Jesus is the rock? This introduction seems irrelevant. The Lord Jesus could have simply said, 'On this rock I will build My church.' If He wanted to say, 'I'm going to build my church upon a rock, and the rock is Myself,' He did not have to say *You are Peter*. But these words are there for a reason. There has to be some kind of connection between the words *You are Peter* and *upon this rock*. Any kind of interpretation must take that into account.

Some have tried to link the words *You are Peter* with the following words *upon this rock* by saying that the rock is not Christ but rather the confession of Peter. 'You are Peter and the confession that you have just made of Me, on this rock, I will build My church.' They argue that the rock refers back to the confession of faith Peter gave in v. 16. *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*. The truth contained in that confession will be the foundation of all believers. This view was promoted by Luther and the reformers as a reaction to the Catholic position. Although it makes a better link between the words *You are Peter* and *upon this rock*, this interpretation is using an argument from silence. In the words *You are Peter* or in the sentence as a whole, there is no obvious reference to Peter's confession. We have to read hard in between the words and somehow deduce that the confession is implied.

When Jesus said, *You are Peter*, He put the emphasis on Peter. Thus we have to recognize that the natural reading of the sentence is that it is Peter who is the rock upon which the church is to be built. But we saw that it cannot be Peter himself. If the rock cannot be the person of Peter, it has to be something about Peter. But what is this 'something'?

In this study, we considered the three main views regarding the meaning of the word 'rock'. Some have supposed that it refers to Peter. Others have said that it refers to Peter's confession. A third possibility is that Christ is the rock. Unfortunately, each of these views has its own problems. In the next lesson, I will present a different interpretation of the word 'rock'.