

Why Peter is the "rock" upon which Jesus says in Matthew 16:18 that He will build His church

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I realize that what I am about to say is not the position of most Protestants and Baptists. But please bear with me. I am not about to become a papist.

Matthew 16:18 is one of the most debated verses in the Bible. To begin to understand it, let's look at the verses that lead up to it:

When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

You Tell Me, and I'll Tell You

In verses 17 and 18, Jesus is saying to Simon, My Father has told you that I am the Christ, the Son of the living God. This is revelation from heaven. Now I will give you more revelation. I am also telling you (in verse 18, the emphasis of the Greek is on these words at the beginning of the verse) that you are Peter. That is, you have told me by special revelation who I am. Now I am giving you more revelation by telling you who you are.

A Spiritual Son of Jonah

Jesus here explains why He has given Simon the name Cephas (see John 1:42), which in Greek is *Petros* and in English, Peter. Why? He had just called him in verse 17 "Simon Barjona." This means, Simon son of Jonah. It is assumed by most people that this means that Simon was the son of someone named Jonah. But there is no additional evidence that Simon's father's name was Jonah. Simon's brother, Andrew, is never called son of Jonah or "Barjona." While

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James and John are called the "sons of Zebedee" (Mark 10:35 and elsewhere), Simon and Andrew are never called the sons of Jonah. I think this is significant.

I believe that this was another of Jesus' nicknames for Simon. Jesus means that Simon is a spiritual son of Jonah. That is, he has the characteristics of Jonah. Thus, Jesus is referring to Peter's running away from his responsibility when Jesus was arrested—from his denial to his going fishing and ending with his casting himself into the sea (see John 21). Jesus also has in mind Simon's being the first to take the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10), just as Jonah brought the message of repentance to the Gentiles at Nineveh.

A Small Stone to Be Used in a Big Way

Then Jesus, continuing the idea of identifying someone's characteristics with names, calls Simon *Petros*, a small stone. Much is made by some Protestant commentators of *Petros* (Peter) being masculine and *petra* (rock) being feminine, and of *Petros* referring to a stone and *petra* referring to a massive rock shelf. But the masculine-feminine argument is proved of no consequence by simply examining 1 Corinthians 10:4, where *petra* (feminine) refers to Christ as the Rock. And the difference in meanings between *Petros* and *petra* is explained when we understand that the words are not intended to be exact equivalents, as explained below.

These verses have been used by Roman Catholics to try to prove Scriptural authority for a pope and by Protestants to try to disprove Scriptural authority for a pope. Both groups have been so intent on trying to prove something that is completely outside of the biblical context that they have basically massacred the original meaning of the text. In doing so, they have so promoted their biased interpretations that most of us cannot see these verses without one of these biases. Since we all seem to approach these verses with preconceived ideas of what they mean, it can help to see what these verses are really saying by first looking at a hypothetical example such as the following: Suppose Jesus, instead of giving Simon the name Peter, had given Simon the nickname Candlelight. Suppose Jesus then said, "You are Candlelight, and with this beacon I will light up the world." In other words, in and of himself, Simon is merely Candlelight, but once Jesus starts to use him, he will become a beacon to the world.

Now let's look again at verse 18. Jesus is saying, You are Peter, a little rock, and upon this massive rock I will build my church.* In other words, of himself, Simon is just a little rock, but in Jesus' hands, he becomes a massive rock that Jesus will use on the Pentecost after His resurrection to start calling the church (notice that verse 20 of Matthew 16 explains that Peter and the other disciples were not to do this any earlier). The idea is not that the church rests on Peter, but that it begins upon an act of Peter—his preaching the Gospel.

Does this mean that Peter was the first pope? No. Jesus is merely alluding to the fact that He would use Peter to preach the first sermon that called in the church on Pentecost and that He would also use Peter to first bring the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10). In this way, Peter would be foundational to the beginnings of the church. But this is a far cry from saying that Peter was the first pope. The Catholic position is absurd, and I won't bother to address it any further in this article.

Let's Get Our Analogies Straight

But what about one of the Protestant interpretations of this verse that the rock upon which Jesus builds the church is Himself? Certainly, Jesus is, in other contexts, called the Rock. In Romans 9:33 and 1 Peter 2:8, Jesus is the Rock that causes those who were appointed to disobedience to stumble. First Corinthians 10:4 refers to the Rock in Exodus 17 and Numbers 20 that poured out water that the Israelites drank and that typified Jesus Christ. But these Scriptures do not refer to Christ as a rock upon which the church is built.

In 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, Paul writes, "According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." If you read the context, you will see that Paul is speaking of Jesus Christ as being the only acceptable doctrinal foundation upon which the spiritual temple of the saints can be built. The foundation of doctrine, and, thus, of the saints built on that doctrine, is Jesus Christ Himself.

* As I have stated many times before, "church" is more than a poor translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, it is a wrong translation. It does not in any way convey the idea Jesus intended of the *ekklesia* being the people God is spiritually calling out of this world to His spiritual assembly.

In Ephesians 2:20-22, Paul writes to the Ephesian Christians that they are "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit." Jesus Christ is the chief corner stone of the foundation. However, the foundation includes the apostles and prophets.

But in Matthew 16:18, Jesus is giving a different picture. It is not a picture of a "fitly framed" temple resting and growing upon an established foundation of the doctrine of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the chief corner stone. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus is showing the beginnings of the church, and He pictures Himself not as the foundation but as the One doing the building. He says, "Upon this rock I will build." The Greek word here for "build" is *oikodomēsō*, which literally means house-build. In Greek, the word for house is the same as the word for family. I think it is quite possible that Jesus is playing upon this double meaning. Jesus is a wise man, and He is going to build His house upon a rock, but the house He is building is His family (see Matthew 12:48-50), the people whom Peter would begin calling from the Jews on Pentecost and from the Gentiles in Acts 10.

Other Protestants say that Peter's confession is the rock upon which Jesus builds His church. A problem with this explanation is that Jesus' statement about the rock is too far removed grammatically from Peter's confession. In other words, why would Jesus insert "and I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter" between Peter's confession and "upon this rock" if the rock is Peter's confession? "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter" is out of place in this explanation. It's only purpose would be to add a play on words, but if the rock were the confession and not Peter, the play on words is unnecessary and confusing.

In summary, when we let the Bible interpret itself, we see that, in the verses in question, Peter states something about Jesus' identity; and then, Jesus states something about Peter's identity. Peter tells Jesus that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus tells Peter that Peter got this from the Father—that it was a revelation. And, Jesus then gives him more revelation by telling Peter something about Peter's identity. He is Peter, a small stone, who, through the power of God, Jesus will be able to use as a massive stone to begin house-building His people whom He is calling out of this world to His assembly, the church or, more properly, the *ekklēsia*.