

Matthew 16:13-20
The Rock of Matthew 16
by Grover Gunn
pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church
Jackson, TN

We are going to focus today on one of the emphases of the Protestant Reformation, and that is the doctrine of authority. Back in 1302 A.D., Pope Boniface VIII wrote a papal bull entitled **Unam Sanctam**. He ended this papal decree with this statement:

“We declare, state, and define that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff” (New Catholic Encyclopedia (Washington D.C.: Catholic University, 1967), **Unam Sanctam**, p. 382).

Pope Boniface wrote this a few centuries after 1054, the year when the church split in two and was divided into the western church and the eastern church. The western church submitted to the bishop at Rome, and the eastern church did not. In **Unam Sanctam**, Pope Boniface said that the Greeks (that is, the multitudes of eastern Christians) and any others who do not submit to the Roman bishop are not a part of Christ's flock. In other words, they are not true Christians and are not saved and are not going to heaven because they do not submit to the allegedly universal authority of Rome.

A few centuries later, in the sixteen century, the western church split at the time of the Protestant Reformation. Godly men such as Martin Luther and John Calvin concluded that they could not submit both to Scripture and to the Roman pope because the Roman pope's teachings and commands were contrary to Scripture. The Roman church responded to the Protestant Reformation by reaffirming the authority of the Roman pope. After the Reformation in 1564, Rome issued a document called the Tridentine Profession of Faith. This statement of faith required a person to state, "... I vow and swear true obedience to the Roman pontiff ..." and to state, "I do ... freely profess and truly hold this true Catholic faith, without which no one can be saved."

In 1870 at a Roman council called Vatican I, the claims of papal authority are again reaffirmed and even intensified. Vatican I added to the primacy of the pope the teaching of the infallibility of the pope. According to Vatican I, when the pope speaks as pastor and teacher of the church, his teaching is infallible. Teaching that is infallible cannot contain error, cannot be questioned, and cannot be changed. After so defining papal infallibility, the decrees of Vatican I ended with this statement,

“But if any one - which may God avert - presume to contradict this our definition: let him be anathema.”

Now when the Roman church makes these audacious claims regarding papal authority, the passage which is repeatedly quoted is our text for today, the passage in Matthew 16 where Jesus says, "... you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My

church.” Rome says that this passage teaches all of the following:

- that Jesus gave to Peter alone a primary judicial authority over the entire church and even over the entire world;
- that included in this authority is the ability to teach infallible truth to the entire church, infallible truth which can never err, infallible truth which can never be questioned or judged or corrected;
- that Peter's unique authority passes down for all time to each bishop of Rome, who is called the pope; and
- that all professing Christians must submit to the pope's authority in all areas of faith, morals and discipline in order to be saved.

Now what I want to do today is to argue that this is not the meaning of our text. When Jesus made that statement to Peter about building His church upon a Rock, Jesus said nothing about the bishop of Rome and nothing about future popes and nothing about any pope having the power to teach infallibly. Such teachings simply are not there. Those who see them there must read them into the text and presuppose them.

The Protestant Reformers had their own understanding of Matthew 16. I want to argue today that the Protestant understanding was not some new understanding when it was taught in the 16th century. The Protestant interpretation of Matthew 16 was a recovery of the teaching of the early church. No early church father taught the later Roman understanding of Matthew 16. By the time of the Protestant Reformation, Rome

had drifted far from the teaching of the early church on a number of issues. What the Protestant Reformers taught was not some absolutely new innovation. The Protestant teaching was largely a rejection of the incremental doctrinal drift of Rome into error through the centuries and a return to the Scripturally valid teachings of the early church. The Reformers recognized Scripture alone as the only infallible rule of faith and practice, but they did not reject the teachings of the church fathers out of hand. The Reformers respected the teachings of the church in the early Christian centuries, but they did not regard them as infallible. They measured them by the teachings of Scripture, which were their only recognized infallible measure of truth. The Reformers had the same spirit toward the non-inspired teaching of the early church fathers as the Berean Jews had toward the teaching of the Apostle Paul in Acts 17:11: they searched the Scripture's daily whether those things were so.

Let me begin by pointing out the common interpretation of Matthew 16 from the third to eighth centuries of the Christian era. The common interpretation during these early centuries is that the Rock upon which Jesus builds His church is not the bishop of Rome but is either Jesus Himself or Peter's confession which pointed to Jesus as the Christ.

To begin with, let's look at the interpretation of the fifth century church father St. Augustine. St. Augustine is considered by many to be the most important theologian of the church after the age of the apostles for the first twelve centuries of the church age. In his **Institutes of the Christian Faith**, John Calvin quoted St. Augustine more often than any other church father. Here is what St. Augustine said about the Rock of Matthew 16:

“Christ, you see, built His Church not on a man but on Peter's confession. What is Peter's confession? 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' There's the rock for you, there's the foundation, there's where the church has been built, where the gates of the underworld cannot conquer.”

Obviously St. Augustine's view was not the later Roman view. Let's look at what some other respected church fathers had to say about the Rock of Matthew 16. Here is the interpretation of Ambrose:

“Faith, then, is the foundation of the Church, for it was not said of Peter's flesh (his person), but of his faith, that ‘the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’”

Here is the view of Basil of Seleucia:

“Now Christ called this confession a rock, and he names the one who confessed it ‘Peter,’ perceiving the appellation which was suitable to the author of this confession. For this is the solemn rock of religion, this is the basis of salvation, this the wall of faith and the foundation of truth: ‘For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Christ Jesus.’”

The view of Bede:

“You are Peter and on this rock from which you have taken your name, that is on myself, I will build my Church, upon

that perfection of faith which you confessed I will build my Church ...”

The view of John Chrysostom:

“Therefore He added this, 'And I say unto thee, Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church; that is, on the faith of his confession ...”

The view of Cyril of Alexandria:

“Now by the word ‘rock’, Jesus indicated, I think, the immovable faith of the disciple...”

The view of Jerome:

“The rock is Christ, Who gave to His apostles, that they also should be called rocks, ‘Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church.’”

This was the common teaching of the early church fathers. They viewed the Rock of Matthew 16 as the Christ whom Peter confessed or as Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ. This interpretation is consistent with Peter's own teaching on the church's foundation Stone found in 1 Peter 2:4-8:

- 4 Coming to [Jesus] as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious,
- 5 you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

- 6 Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, “Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.”
- 7 Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone,”
- 8 and “A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.” They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed.

Peter said that Jesus is the Rock which is the chief cornerstone in Zion. And here is what the Apostle Paul said about the Rock and the Foundation of the church:

1 Corinthians 10:4

- 4 ... For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:11

- 11 For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

In a primary sense, the Church has only one foundation, and that foundation is Jesus Christ Himself. There is, however, a secondary sense in which Peter and the other apostles were foundation stones of the church. We see this in Ephesians 2:20:

- 20 [the household of God has] been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone,

This verse still gives Jesus Christ the prominence in the foundation of the Church. He alone is the chief cornerstone. But the apostles and the new testament prophets who spoke the inspired apostolic tradition in the apostolic age and pointed to Jesus as the Christ, these were foundational stones in this secondary sense.

In this secondary sense, Jesus founded and built the church upon the apostles who witnessed to Him. There were a few church fathers who interpreted the Rock of Matthew 16 in this secondary sense. Yet none of these interpreted the passage in the later Roman Catholic sense. They viewed Peter not as the lone, unique foundation stone, but as a secondary foundation stone along with all the other new testament apostles.

In Matthew 16, Jesus entrusted to Peter the keys of the kingdom:

Matthew 16:19

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.”

This verse refers to the proclaiming of the gospel message which opens the doors of heaven to all those who respond in faith, and seals those doors shut to all who respond in unbelief. Jesus gave this authority to Peter first because Peter confessed the true faith first, but Jesus would later make clear that He gave this authority to all the apostles:

John 20:21-23

- 21 So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”
- 22 And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.
- 23 “If you [plural] forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you [plural] retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

In John 20, Jesus was addressing not only Peter but all of the apostles. Jesus entrusted the gospel message as the keys of the kingdom to them all. And the apostles and their associates inscripturated this message in the inspired New Testament and thus handed these life giving keys to the church throughout the ages.

I am not denying that Peter played a prominent role among the apostles in the early days of the Christian church. Peter is the one who preached on the Pentecost recorded in Acts chapter two when the new covenant age first came to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Peter together with the Apostle John traveled to Samaria and ushered in the new covenant age there. And Peter was given the privilege to meet with the Roman centurion Cornelius, and the Holy Spirit was poured out upon Cornelius in new covenant fullness in Peter's presence. Peter had this prominent role in using the keys of the kingdom in the early chapters of Acts, and yet Peter never had any special authority over the other apostles.

The church father Cyprian was one of the few who interpreted the Rock of Matthew 16 as referring to Peter, but Cyprian also

quoted John 20 and said that all the other apostles were equally foundational rocks in this secondary sense. Cyprian's quotation is long, and I won't read it all. I do want to read these words near the end:

“Certainly the other Apostles also were what Peter was, endued with an equal fellowship both of honour and power; ...”

Now what you won't find in any early church interpretations of the Rock of Matthew 16 is an application of the passage to the bishop of Rome as Peter's successor. Also, none of the early church fathers taught that Matthew 16 in any way taught the doctrine of papal infallibility, the idea that the bishop of Rome has the ability and authority to speak any infallible teaching in addition to what is found in the pages of the Bible.

The Church is built on a Rock. In a primary sense, that Rock is Jesus Christ. In a secondary sense, that foundation is the inspired apostolic tradition which witnessed to the Christ in the apostolic age and which was inscripturated for us in the pages of the New Testament. The gospel message of Jesus is the Rock, and that is what we must build our house of faith upon. There is no other foundation other than Jesus Christ. Jesus alone is the Rock who can withstand every storm. Every other foundation is sinking sand.

The church father quotations were taken from “Appendix A: The Patristic Exegesis of the Rock of Matthew 16:18” in **Holy Scripture: The Ground and Pillar of Our Faith, Volume II: An Historical Defense of the Reformation Principle of Sola Scriptura** by William Webster (Battle Ground, WA: Christian Resources, Inc., 2001). See also William Webster's internet page at www.christiantruth.com.