

You are Peter, and on this Rock

Matthew 16:13-20

A Sermon for the Season of Pentecost

In the Gospel text for today from Matthew 16, Simon Bar-Jona confesses: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." And Jesus says to him: "You are Peter."

What do we make of this famous text? One New Testament professor has said this exchange between Peter and Jesus took place near Caesarea Phillipia where there is a big rock dedicated to the Greek god Pan. What happened is that Jesus was standing there and he said: "You're Peter and on this rock, that is, on me, not that rock for the god Pan, that huge idol, I'll build my church."

This text is the most disputed text in the New Testament because it is used by the Roman Catholic Church as its constitution. If you go to the Vatican, you see the dome which goes up 450 feet. At the lower edge of the dome in huge six and a half foot gold letters in Latin, it says: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. I will give you the keys of the kingdom."

There have been four main ways that people have used this text. First, for Roman Catholics this text is the basis for the whole structure of their Church. The text says: "You are Peter" (Petros), and then it uses almost the same word, "on this rock," (Petra) I will build my church. It means Peter is the Rock.

Second, others have said: "No," it is not Peter because the foundation of the church cannot be a human being. The foundation is the confession Peter has made; the confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God," is the rock.

Third, still others have said: "It's not the confession but it is Peter's faith." Of course, the confession and the faith are together in that confession.

Fourth, some say that because 1 Cor 3:11 states: "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ," and Ephesians 2:20 states that "Christ Jesus is the cornerstone," that it has to be that Christ Jesus is the rock.

How do we sort this out?

One possible approach is to say: "We could have a vote." We could today with modern electronics have a vote by all those who claim to be Christian. But what kind of majority would we need to have?

A second way would be to have an ecumenical council. But who would call that council? Just as critically, who would be the chair? For Roman Catholics the matter is not open but settled by the First Vatican Council (July 18, 1870) which formally defined: "This is what this text means."

Third, we could say: "We can get all the scholars together." But who determines who is a scholar? And it is no surprise that the scholars don't agree.

Fourth, another way that people try to settle this is to say: "Those who are truly Christian, they know in their heart." That's really an appeal to the Holy Spirit: "We're truly Christian. We're the ones that have the Holy Spirit. It's self-evident what it means. We just know."

The fifth way is to say: "It's really settled by the historical evidence." Most people know better than to say the text is a video tape, or even an audio tape. Nevertheless, the common view is that the text is close enough to what really happened. Therefore what it means is that Jesus said: "I am the rock."

But of course, if you are going to be historical, if you are going to say: "This is pretty close to the way it was," there is one huge problem that people forget about. Jesus spoke Aramaic, which is a dialect of Hebrew. When we go to the Aramaic, we see there's no difference between "rock" and "rock." You can't say it's "Petros" and "Petra." In the original as Jesus would have said it, it says: "You are *Kephas* and on this *Kephas* I will build my church."

What can we learn from this survey? We can learn four things:

First, if you go to the New Testament and try to say this tells us what kind of church structure, church government, we ought to have, we have a problem. A modern Roman Catholic scholar, Jerome Quinn, has written about this.¹ The fact that he is Roman Catholic is significant here. He described how we can find every form of church government in the New Testament. We can find Congregationalism, Presbyterianism, Episcopalianism, and the Papacy. We can find them all. Then what do we do?

Second, we learn from this survey that everyone says: "We use the Bible." The question is how? Everyone says: "I take what is really there." But even agreement on "what is really there" does not bring unity among Christians. There is a good

¹ Jerome Quinn, "Ministry in the New Testament," *Eucharist and Ministry. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue 4*. Eds. Paul Empie and T. Austin Murphy (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1970) 69-100.

illustration of this by Dorothea Wendebourg, a leading Lutheran scholar in Berlin, Germany. She has written about the official Dialogue between Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox, that is, the non-Chalcedonians, the people in 451 who did not go along with the settlement at the Council of Chalcedon about the nature of Christ. After all, that's 1,500 years ago. But today the Eastern Orthodox have found that all of the difficulties between them and the rest of us in the Western Churches don't make much difference. Wendebourg concludes: In spite of their newfound agreement, the Dialogue didn't go anywhere. Why didn't it? Because the question is not: "Do you take the Bible seriously?" The question is: What is your authority? (For the Eastern Orthodox their teaching authority is Tradition with a capital "T." For Roman Catholics their teaching authority is the Pope.)

Third, we learn from this why we in the Reformation tradition say our teaching authority is the Gospel. Because "the Gospel" is a big word and can be an abstraction, one could also say: "What is salvation?" This is how we sort out the Bible. As you well know, we say that salvation is by the cross alone, in Christ alone, by faith alone. That's it. Paul writes pointedly in Galatians 1:8: "Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be damned."

What is the Gospel? What is salvation? We state very simply: It's about "in Christ alone, by the cross alone, through faith alone." But that message is changed when others say: "Yes, the cross, but also something more." And then they add something more, for example: The Gospel plus you have to make a decision for Christ. Or: The Gospel plus you have to have a special kind of priest. Or the Gospel plus living a certain way. All of these add-ons undermine the cross and thus change the Gospel, as Paul pointedly says.

This means three things: First, an intrinsic aspect and necessary aspect of "the Good News" is to broadcast it far and wide: "Go tell it on the mountains, over the hills and everywhere." The most important thing we have to do is get the Gospel out.

Second, our certainty is in him alone. Add-ons undermine certainty in him. When we are told we have to do certain works or have feel certain feeling, we end up in spiritual pride or spiritual despair. Have I done enough? Have I done it right? His cross and resurrection is all-sufficient. That's certain. We don't have to fumble and worry about those other things.

Third, he gives us freedom, “the glorious freedom of the children of God,” as Paul writes in Romans 8:21. We have freedom to live as his creatures here and now without having to worry: Can we make it? Have we done it right? We talk about church structures. All that matters is: Which one is the best for getting the Word out.

Melanchthon wrote that he would even support having a pope as long as it was regarded as a human structure [*iure humano*], not a sacramental requirement [*iure divino*].²

Finally we turn back to the question of Peter. After all, he was the one best known among the Twelve. He was the one who frequently spoke up. He is one who in Matthew 10:2 is listed first: “The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter . . .” At the same time there are some negative things about Peter. In Matt 16:23 Jesus turns to Peter and says: “Get behind me, Satan!” In the accounts of Jesus’ passion all four Gospels describe Peter denying Jesus three times. In Acts 15 James, the brother of the Lord, chairs the council of elders, not Peter (Acts 15:13).

In Gal 2:11-14 Paul opposed Peter and rebuked him not over some trivial question but because Peter was not “straightforward about the truth of the Gospel” (Gal 2:14). This was really serious. We have a different picture of Peter here, a picture which is like the one from Matthew 14:22-33 about walking on the water. Peter walked on the water and then he fell into the water.

What we have is Peter as the typical Christian like you and me. His name should be Rocky, not Rocky in the sense of the movie, “Rocky,” but rocky like you and me. Sometimes we confess Christ and we say, “Yes!” and then we fall on our faces and deny him and sink into the water. We are at all times totally sinner and totally saved.

Karl Barth, perhaps the greatest theologian of the Twentieth Century, said that one of the best proofs for God is that the church continues to exist in spite of the way it acts. Salvation is not because of what we do and what the church does but rather because of him. We see that the Rock is really his doing, and we can say with Peter: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Amen

² Smalcauld Articles 15; BC Tappert 316-17, Kolb/Wengert 326.