

What is the True Identity of the Rock upon which the church is built?

Matthew 16:16, And Simon Peter answered and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Matthew 16:17, And Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal [this] to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 "And I also say to you that you are Peter [Gk: petros - a boulder or stone], and upon this rock [Gk: petra - a large mass of rock] I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it. Matthew 16:19, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (NASB).

I have heard of two major alternatives to the Roman Catholic identification of the Rock upon which Jesus would build his church. One is that *Peter's confession* of Christ is the rock upon which the church is built. That is to say, by "this rock" Jesus meant the foundational revelation that Peter was the first man to confess, that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God." The second alternative is that **the Rock was Jesus himself**, while Peter was the first stone to be built upon the rock of Christ in the church, which Christ Himself is building. This latter interpretation makes more sense to me, because it is in perfect harmony with the tradition which the Scripture itself establishes concerning the spiritual meaning of the word "Rock".

Allow Scripture to interpret Scripture

An important principle in evangelical thinking is to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. Since "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." it follows that every interpretation of Scripture should be in harmony with the rest of Scripture. The Scriptures have a lot to say about who the rock is. For example:

1 Corinthians 10:4 "and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ".

Romans 9:33 just as it is written, "Behold, I lay in *Zion* a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, And he who believes in Him will not be disappointed."

Habakkuk 1:12 Art Thou not from everlasting, O Lord, my God, my Holy One? We will not die. Thou, O Lord, hast appointed them to judge; and *Thou, O Rock*, hast established them to correct.

Isaiah 26:4 "Trust in the Lord forever, For in God the Lord, [we have] an everlasting Rock .

Psalms 144:1 (of David.) Blessed be the Lord, my rock, Who trains my hands for war, [And] my fingers for battle;

Psalms 94:22 But the Lord has been my stronghold, And my God the rock of my refuge.

Not only is the Lord God Himself consistently portrayed as the rock throughout both the Old and New Testaments, but the Scriptures go so far as to say that *only the Lord God* is our rock.

Psalms 62:2 He *only* is my rock and my salvation, My stronghold; I shall not be greatly shaken.

Isaiah 44:8 'Do not tremble and do not be afraid; Have I not long since announced it to you and declared it? And you are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me, Or is there any [other] Rock ? I know of none.' "

2 Samuel 22:32 "For who is God, besides the Lord? And who is a rock, besides our God?"

The interpretation of the Lord God being our only true rock ties in nicely with the words of the apostle Paul, "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Christ Jesus" (1 Corinthians 3:11). Truly then, Jesus is the foundation upon which the true church is built, not Peter.

Peter therefore, cannot be the primary rock on which Jesus will build his church. As we will see, Peter himself did not have the stability or the stature to be the foundation rock upon which the eternal church of Christ was to be built. Peter denied the Lord during the trial of Christ. And a few verses later in the Matthew 16 passage Jesus identifies Peter as being inspired by Satan (Matthew 16:23), while in Galatians 2:11 Paul reports an incident which revealed Peter's ongoing tendency to weakness. According to Paul, Peter was in the wrong and stood condemned, and was not being straight forward about the truth of the gospel! This is hardly the image of a solid infallible rock upon which all future generations of Christ church were to be built. Only Jesus Himself can carry that weight, and thank God, He does.

It seems to me that Roman Catholics have taken their conception of Peter as the rock upon which they build their entire system. Church history reveals the moral depths to which these so-called vicars of Christ have fallen. I'm not sure it is edifying to go into a full list of these things, but if it turns out to be important to some of my readers I may make the effort to document this on another web-page. In any case, it seems that common sense as well as the Bible itself would indicate that Jesus was not meaning that Peter was *the* rock upon which he would build his church. We can all freely acknowledge that Peter had a key role in the development of the early church and that he did have a great deal of spiritual authority from Christ. This is beyond dispute. But the Roman Catholic position goes far beyond this, and in so doing, gets our eyes of Christ and onto men, something which is never advisable for those wishing to build a solid and enduring relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

It is also interesting to note that Peter certainly did not fit into the current conception of a pope, since he had a mother-in-law, meaning he was married. Read Mark 1:30, which speaks of "Simon's wife's mother". The topic of celibate priesthood is outside the scope of the current discussion, but it is another aberration from the plain teaching of Scripture (1 Timothy 3:2-4; 1 Timothy 4:2).

Incidentally, the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven were not given exclusively to Peter. The same authority of binding and loosing were given to all Jesus' disciples in Matthew 18:18. All Jesus' disciples have the authority to use his Name, and the truth is, Jesus never gave anyone the authority to abrogate (nullify) His own plain words and teachings.

Did the Gates of Hell Prevail Against the Church Christ Built?

The reasoning of the Roman Catholic church is circular on this point, because they assume and do not prove from Scripture that Jesus was describing their system as "His church". Their point would be powerful if they could prove that at some point in history there were no disciples of Christ who did not acknowledge the bishop of Rome as their supreme pontiff. However, history just doesn't support this view. The supremacy of the roman bishop indeed rose because of the political power of Rome as the capital of the empire, but there were always groups of Christian disciples who did not hold to the doctrine of the papacy. The doctrine of the papacy wasn't really spelled out until the time of Gregory the Great in any case, in the 6th century.

The Eastern Orthodox church, for all its weaknesses, doubtless did include many true believers in Christ, and the schism which was formalized in the 11th century between Rome and the

Orthodox church based principally at Constantinople reflected a major difference in opinion concerning the authority of Roman bishops that had been going on already for centuries. At that time the pope and the Patriarch at Constantinople basically excommunicated each other because of their differences - a natural outcome of their common rejection of the Word of God as their highest and supreme authority. For their man-made traditions had evolved in different directions and because of this neither could accept the other as truly being of God.

Apart from this, I'm sure there were many Christian churches, such as the Celtic churches in the British Isles and many nameless faceless Christian groups with no political power who enjoyed the life of Christ without seeing the pope as their spiritual Father. (Incidentally Jesus himself taught against the use of the word "father" as a spiritual title for men (Matthew 23:9). I have never heard any reasonable Roman Catholic explanation on why this verse has been apparently abrogated in the favor of popes and priests!). In the middle ages, various groups such as the Waldenses, the followers of John Huss, Wycliffe and others were faithful believers in Christ and suffered cruel persecution for their stand against the Roman Catholic tyrants of the day.

Furthermore there were obviously people in the Roman Catholic system itself who, for all their loyalty to the pope, had a revelation of the true Christ and were truly the Lord's children. A shining example of Christian discipleship was St. Francis of Assisi. Whichever way we look at it, the church was not utterly defeated by Satan at any time although obviously there were some pretty dark moments.

God has always had a faithful remnant, and today they number in the hundreds of millions - a fact for which we may praise God. Truly the gates of hell have not overcome the true church of Christ. Believers in Christ are more than ever on the increase today and with the increase of knowledge that is upon us today there is no way that we will ever return to the Dark Ages where men just simply did not have access to the Bible in their own language to check out things for themselves.

I hope it is noticed that I am not arguing that all believers who identified with Rome were not real Christians. I am sure than many Roman Catholics today are true born again Christians. But this is true in spite of, not because of the teaching of the Roman Catholic church.

If Matthew 16:16-19 does not mean what the Roman Catholic church says it means, then what does it mean? We can get plenty of valuable truth out of Matthew 16:16-19. Firstly, God the Father Himself revealed to Peter the true identity of Jesus as being the promised Messiah, or Christ - the one whom God sent to save the people from their sins. Secondly, this had nothing to do with the fact that Peter saw Jesus physically as a man. This makes this kind of revelation available to us also. It is timeless. Thirdly, Peter confessed with his mouth the revelation which he received from God the Father. Fourthly, Jesus pronounced a blessing on Peter on account of this revelation of who Jesus was.

We too will be blessed if we received from God a true revelation of who Christ is and then confess Him before others. The surest way to open yourself up for such a revelation is to read the Bible for yourself with an open heart and mind. The Bible says, "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." (Romans 10:9). If you have not done this I urge you to believe the teaching of this Scripture here and begin to openly confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Master in all you say and do.