

Doctrine of Peter and the Founding of the Church

1. Following Peter's great confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lord told Peter that He would build His church upon the apostle.
 - *Matthew 16:18 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. 19 And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*
2. Bible students and Greek scholars are divided as to whether or not there is a play upon words by Jesus for the Lord said, "*Thou art Peter [Petros],*" that is a stone," "a pebble", "a rolling rock." Then the Lord adds, "*And upon this rock [petra],*" "a ledge of rock," something solid, "*I will build my church.*"
3. Because of these words of Jesus there are many Christians who sincerely believe the church has been founded upon Peter, and the keys to the kingdom of heaven, representing the power to accept or excommunicate, were given specifically to him. Through apostolic succession, the keys of the kingdom were passed on so that certain church officials still hold them.
4. Other Christians are not so certain that is the correct understanding of Matthew 16:28.
5. The argument is advanced that it was not the masculine *Petros*, or Peter, the man, on which the church was to be built, but upon the feminine form of the word, *petra*. The Greek word *petra* is not a name.
6. Why is that significant? Because *petra* could be a reference to Peter's confession to which Jesus was referring, and not to Peter himself.
7. The reason why the effort is made to make Peter something less than the foundation on which the church has been built is because of other considerations.
 - There is a desire to avoid contradictory Scripture. How can Peter be the foundation of the church when Peter himself said that Christ is the *cornerstone* on which the living stones of the apostles and believers are built into a *spiritual house*?

1 Peter 2:4 To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, 5 Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. 6 Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded. 7 Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, 8 And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.

- There is a desire to support the teaching of the apostle Paul who said that we can only build on the foundation that is already laid, which is only Christ Jesus.

1 Corinthians 3:11 For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

- There is a desire to protect the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in whom all the building is fitly framed.

Ephesians 2:20 And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; 21 In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:

8. The question arises as to whether or not the Lord would build His church on Peter who mingled doubt with faith and was prone to misunderstanding vital gospel truth. Peter could be weak and vacillating.

- Peter mingled doubt with faith. *Matthew 14:28 And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water. 29 And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. 31 And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?*
- Peter was prone to misunderstanding. *Matthew 16:22 Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.*
- Peter was weak. *Matthew 26:69 Now Peter sat without in the palace: and a damsel came unto him, saying, Thou also wast with Jesus of Galilee. 70 But he denied before them all, saying, I know not what thou sayest. 71 And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there, This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth. 72 And again he denied with an oath, I do not know the man. 73 And after a while came unto him they that stood by, and said to Peter, Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech bewrayeth thee. 74 Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew. 75 And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly.*
- Peter was vacillating. *Acts 10:13 And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. 14 But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. 15 And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.*

9. There is something else. The Lord said that the “*gates of hell*” would not prevail against the church. The word for hell (Gk. hades) is “sheol” in the Hebrew, and refers to the sphere of the dead. Only Christ has conquered death. Only Christ holds the keys to death and hell, or the grave.

- *Revelation 1:18 I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.*

No mere human could ever stop the gates or forces of hell from being victorious, except the God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

10. While the concerns about the church being built upon Peter are valid, care must be taken not to challenge what the Lord Jesus plainly said He would do. The Biblical revelation is that Christ did build the early church on Peter, not as he was in the flesh, but as he became, following the resurrection, and his restoration to fellowship with the Lord.

11. The Acts of the Apostles teaches how the early church was built on Peter.

- It was Peter who preached the sermon at Pentecost, and 3000 souls were converted (Acts 2:41).
- It was Peter who spoke again in Acts 4, and 5,000 more souls were added to the membership of the redeemed.
- It was Peter who took charge of the election of Matthias to replace Judas (Acts 1:15-22).
- In the lists of the Twelve, it is Peter whose name is listed first.

12. When the Lord promised to build the church on Peter, that did not negate the fact that Christ Himself is the true foundation on which the church is built.

13. For example, a father who has established a business might one day say to his eldest son, “You are my son, and upon you I will build my business.” Everyone understands. The future of the business will be guided by the son because the foundation and existence of the business already exists.

14. Not only did the Lord promise to build the church on Peter, which He did, the Lord also told Peter he would be given the keys to the kingdom.

15. Having the keys to the kingdom is commonly understood to be a reference to the authority to allow people entrance into the kingdom. Peter, then, was given the power and authority to bind souls on earth to spiritual decisions with eternal repercussions.

Special Note.

The concept of binding souls on earth brings up the issue of church discipline. In the New Testament, we read that church discipline took place, illustrated in Acts 5.

Acts 5:1 But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, 2 And kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? 4 Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? And after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God. 5 And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things. 6 And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him. 7 And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in. 8 And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much. 9 Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out. 10 Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband.

The end result of this binding of sin by Peter was that great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things.

Godly fear is a wonderful deterrent to spiritual sins. The local church must once more come to believe in the proper place of personal accountability, not in principle alone, but also in practice. The objective is not to hurt anyone, but to hold everyone to a higher standard of behavior. Naturally, nobody wants anything to do with discipline if they can help it. But the disciple of Christ must accept the discipline of the church.

16. It is instructive that the apostle John, and the apostle Paul, confirmed the concept of the church being built upon the Peter, and upon all the apostles.
 - Paul. *Ephesians 2:20 And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone;*
 - John. *Revelation 21:14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.*
17. Concerning the difference between the Lord's use of the word *Petros* (Peter), referring to a small stone, and *petra*, meaning a massive rock, several observations are necessary.
 - First, Christ did not speak to the disciples in Greek. The Lord spoke Aramaic, the common language of Palestine at that time. In Aramaic, the word for rock is *kepha*, which is what Jesus called him in everyday speech. In John 1:42 Jesus told His new disciple, "You will be called *Cephas*". What Jesus said in Matthew 16:18 was: "You are *Kepha*, and upon this *kepha* I will build my Church."

In Aramaic the word *kepha* has the same ending whether it refers to a rock or is used as a man's name. In Greek, though, the word for rock, *petra*, is feminine in gender. The translator could use it for the second appearance of *kepha* in the sentence, but not for the first because it would be inappropriate to give a man a feminine name. Therefore, Matthew put a masculine ending on it, and Peter became Petros.

- Second, the premise of the argument against Peter being the rock on which the church is built is simply not valid. In first century Greek the words *petros* and *petra* were synonyms. The two words had previously possessed the meanings of "small stone" and "large rock" in some early Greek literature, but by the first century this distinction was gone. Dr. D. A. Carson acknowledges the cultural acceptance of the two words as synonyms in his work, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Books]).

Unfortunately, the effect of Christ's play on words was lost when the Lord's statement was translated from the Aramaic into Greek.

- Third, in English, like Aramaic, there is no problem with endings; so an English rendition could read: "You are Rock, and upon this rock I will build my church."

18. It was a wonderful promise the Lord Jesus made to Simon on that day. Peter, as weak as he was, became the object of amazing grace. He was chosen to become the rock on which the future of the church was to be built. And it happened exactly as Jesus said it would happen.