

Solid Rock or Stumbling Stone?
Matthew 16:13-23

So, what are we Protestants supposed to do with this passage? “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church. I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” It’s because of these verses that our Roman Catholic friends insist that Jesus made Peter the first pope and thus gave him and his successors absolute authority over the whole church for all time. So, are they right?

Well, we cannot deny that Jesus was speaking to Peter as an individual – after all, the King James Version does a good a job of correctly translating the distinction in the original Greek between the singular “thou” and “thee” and the plural “you” and “ye.” By the way, we Southerners do the same sort of thing between the singular “you” and the plural “y’all,” but our modern translators haven’t caught up with us yet.

Anyway, Jesus clearly says, “I will give thee – singular – the keys of the kingdom.” Jesus says, “Whatsoever thou – singular – shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.” There can thus be no doubt that Jesus is talking to Peter as an individual.

Moreover, if we look forward to the book of Acts, chapter 2 makes it clear that Peter was indeed the spokesman for the Church on Pentecost Sunday. And in Acts chapter 5, Peter was in fact the one who pronounced God’s judgment on Ananias and Sapphira, a couple who had conspired to lie to the Church, and thus to the Holy Spirit. We thus cannot deny that Peter actually possessed the kind of authority that Jesus is talking about in today’s passage.

But at the same time, Peter wasn’t the only one who held such authority. After all, he wasn’t the only one who proclaimed the gospel in the book of Acts. For example, chapters 6 and 7 recount how Deacon Stephen defended the faith in such an impassioned way that it cost him his life – and in the process, his face appeared to be that of an angel and he had a vision of Christ standing at the right hand of the Father. You can’t get much more authoritative than that.

And although Paul started out as a persecutor of the Church, he became one of its greatest evangelists, writing a significant portion of the New Testament in the process. No, Peter obviously wasn’t the only first-century Christian who spoke God’s Word with authority.

Just so, the early church doesn’t seem to have treated Peter like he was in charge of everyone else. Instead, if we look forward to Acts 15, which records the time the Church had to make its first significant theological decision, we find Peter simply standing alongside Paul as one who gave testimony to the General Assembly. On that occasion it was Jesus’ brother James who served as spokesman for the group, and it was the whole gathering of elders who approved the decision, setting up ethical guidelines for Gentile believers to follow. No, there simply weren’t any individual bishops telling everyone else what to do in the early church, and there certainly wasn’t any pope.

So, what are we to make of Jesus’ words? Since Acts 15 tells us that all the elders of the Church exercised the authority of the keys together, it is much more likely that Jesus speaks to Peter as an individual in Matthew 16 because Peter had just made an individual confession of his faith. It is thus the faith of Peter, faith in the identity of Christ, that forms the rock on which the Church is built. And thus it is all those who share Peter’s faith who collectively wield the keys of the kingdom, a fact which we Presbyterians acknowledge by rejecting bishops and popes and instead organizing ourselves along the lines of Acts 15, with our elders gathering into sessions, presbyteries, synods and general assemblies to make decisions that are binding on us all.

But those decisions can only be truly binding to the extent that they are based on the rock, on the firm foundation of the faith that Peter confessed. For if Jesus really is Who Peter says He is, if Jesus really is the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed ruler who fulfills all the Old Testament prophecies, if Jesus really is the Son of God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, then of course only those decisions that agree with His perfect and divine will can possibly claim to have any authority over anyone. Martin Luther and the rest of the Reformers were thus correct to say that because only Christ is the Head of the Church, it is only the Word of God that can serve as our infallible rule or measure of true faith and practice.

And it turns out that the early church believed this as well. For the reason they decided in Acts chapter 1 that they needed someone to serve in Judas' place as an apostle wasn't because Peter told them so, but because he quoted from two of the Psalms to prove his point. Likewise, in Acts chapter 15, it wasn't until James quoted from the book of Amos that the General Assembly agreed to welcome uncircumcised Gentiles into the body of believers. The church's authority has thus always rested on the Word of God, not on the word of any one man, or any particular group of people for that matter.

But if it's true that the whole church shares in the authority which is based on the rock of Peter's faith, the whole church is equally capable of being a different kind of rock, a stumbling stone for both believers and unbelievers, an offense to God and man, a hindrance to the gospel. And we all too often cause others to stumble for the same reason and in the same way that Peter did.

For let's be honest – it isn't just the Roman Catholic popes and bishops, the ones who claim to be the legitimate successors of Peter, who have fallen into scandal after scandal. It isn't just cardinals like Theodore McCarrick who do things like preying on young men, only to have the church turn a blind eye to their sin because they are such good fundraisers. No, we've heard stories about counselors at evangelical camps who've been accused of similar things. We've even seen ministers in our own presbytery break their marriage vows, devastating their families and congregations, calling the truth of everything they've ever preached or taught into question.

And every time a leader in any denomination of the church falls into sin, the whole Church gets a black eye. For let's face it – unbelievers don't know the difference between Presbyterians and Pentecostals, let alone the distinctions that separate the PCUSA from the EPC or the PCA. When those outside the Church see priests abusing altar boys or pastors marrying same-sex couples or deacons misusing church funds, they just say, "See? That's what Christians are really like. You can't believe anything they say."

But it isn't just pastors and elders and deacons whose actions can have such a devastating effect on unbelievers, is it? No, anytime any one of us Christians fails to live up to the code of conduct we claim to embrace, whenever any of us turns our attention away from the glory of God and the good of others to focus on our own pleasures and desires we are giving unbelievers a license to say, "There's nothing to this Christianity. It doesn't really change anyone's life, no matter what they claim to believe."

And there's a lot of truth in such criticism. For why was it that Jesus called Peter an offense, a stumbling-block to Him? Why did Jesus call Peter, "Satan?" Because he was setting his mind on the things of men, not the things of God. He was thus allowing his worldly reason and his worldly experience and his worldly desires to guide him, instead of listening to the clear Word that Jesus had spoken to him.

Now, we can't deny that Peter's intentions were good, at least from his admittedly limited perspective. After all, it didn't make any sort of political sense for God's anointed ruler to go to Jerusalem to be killed. For how could a dead man have done what Peter and the rest of the apostles

expected Him to do? How could a dead man have gone on to reestablish the Davidic dynasty, and to expel the Romans from the Middle East? No, given Peter's single-minded focus on the things of this world, trying to keep Jesus from going to the cross made perfect sense.

And all too many leaders of the church today demonstrate the same sort of focus, as they jettison the clear teachings of Scripture in order to be more "relevant" to our times. After all, the materialistic modern world insists that food and clothing and housing are all that are really important to people. So, why shouldn't we believe the lies of the prosperity gospel, embracing its materialistic creed? Indeed, why shouldn't churches forget about all that preaching and teaching and just turn themselves into food banks and homeless shelters?

In addition, the Romantic modern world claims that human sexuality is just about fulfilling people's mutual desires. So, why bother to keep your marriage vows if they're just making you miserable? Why not let two men or two women marry if they are genuinely attracted to each other? Moreover, if we think that the whole point of the Christian faith is just to make people happy, then why bother with all that Bible study? Why not just do what makes sense and what feels good to us?

Why not? Because in doing what seems right and feels good, in thus elevating our reason or our emotions over the clear teaching of Scripture, we not only rebel against the clear instructions of our Lord and King. We also turn away from following Him. For whenever we seek only to serve and please ourselves, we are following the example of Satan, not following the Christ Who sacrificed Himself for us.

For what is the essence of the Christian faith? What is it that forms the firm foundation of our theology and our ethics, of our belief and of our practice? Not only the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One to Whom all the prophets testified. Not only the fact that Jesus is the Son of God, the One to Whom all power in heaven and earth has been given.

No, we believe what Jesus told His disciples in verse 21 – that He hadn't come to be the kind of Messiah they expected, the kind of King Who just brings worldly blessings to His people so that they might be prosperous and happy. No, He came to die for His people so that our sins might be forgiven. He came to rise from the dead so that all who trust in Him might not only have eternal life with Him forever, but resurrection life today, a life of freedom from the power of sin and death, a life of holy self-sacrifice. He came to show us what true love really is, by giving us what we really need, regardless of the fact that it would cost Him His life.

And it is only as we proclaim this truth and live according to this truth, it is only as we turn our attention away from the things of men and set them on the eternal Word of God that we can possibly wield the keys of the kingdom in the way and for the purpose that Jesus intended. It is only as we lay down our lives for one another, doing the hard work of self-examination and mutual accountability that we can all grow more into the likeness of Christ, displaying His true love to all the world. And it is only through such an unmistakable, humble, faithful witness to the reality of Christ within us that we can possibly expect God to reveal Himself to unbelievers, in the same way that the Lord opened Peter's eyes to see Jesus for Who He really is.

For that is the way that the last promise Jesus makes in verse 18 will be fulfilled. It is as we acknowledge Who Jesus is, as we base all our lives on the firm foundation of His Word, as we abandon our insincerity and hypocrisy in order to display His self-sacrificial love to others, well, that's when the gates of Hades, the gates of the place of the dead will not be able to prevail against us.

For as we live into our profession of faith, as we live lives of obedient trust in Christ, lives of faithful, humble self-sacrifice, we ourselves will live in increasing victory over the power of sin and death. And as unbelievers see Christ in us the way Peter saw Him in verse 16, as they respond to the grace of Christ

with faith and love, they will also be set free. They will also live in the power and truth of the resurrection, walking out of their bondage in the same way that Jesus walked out of His tomb. Truly, the gates of death and hell will not be able to imprison anyone who trusts in Christ as Savior and bows the knee to Him as Lord.

So, let us turn away from self-centered hypocrisy, and the scandal, the stumbling-block it causes for us and for others. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, founding our lives on the unshakable rock of faith in Him. For it is only in Him that we can ever hope to find true victory over sin and death.