

UPON THIS ROCK - Mt. 16:18

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Various interpretations of this phrase have been given since early in the second century.
1. Some have said the rock on which the church was founded was Peter.
 2. Others have argued that the rock was Peter's confession - the faith that Peter confessed was the foundation of the church.
 3. Still others have seen this reference to the rock as a reference to Christ Himself as the foundation of the church. [Richards, *The Teacher's Commentary*, p. 567]
- B. It is the purpose of this lesson to present a short explanation of each of these viewpoints and try, if possible, to draw the scriptural conclusion. However, be forewarned, this lesson may raise more questions in our minds than it answers. That is not a bad thing, if we use this lesson as a "jumping off place" for further intensive personal study. Yet, if we sit by and wait on the preacher's opinion or rely on a favorite commentary to establish our conclusion - then this lesson will remain a stumbling block to our learning and perhaps even our faith!

II. DISCUSSION

A. **The Rock is Peter.**

1. This is the Roman Catholic position. The church through the pope is the "Vicar of Christ on earth." The power of making binding decisions has been given to Peter and his successors. This notion did not gain prominence in church history until after the Bishop of Rome gained preeminence over other bishops. They base their doctrine on the wordplay between Peter (petros) and Rock (petra). They believe that in this passage Christ is installing Peter as the head of the Apostles. The problem with this theory is that Christ forgot to tell the other Apostles (Mt. 18:1; 20:21).
2. Churches of the Protestant Reformation chose to either reject the Catholic view or accept Peter as the Rock in the more general sense that the church was built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus as the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20). Some believe that Peter is shown to be the foundation of the church by his possession of the "Keys of the Kingdom" and the fact that he was the first to bring the gospel message on the day of Pentecost (to the Jews) and later to Cornelius (the Gentiles). Some Greek lexicographers such as Vincent argue that the sentence structure will not allow any other interpretation than Peter as the Rock. (*Word Studies*, Vol. 1, pp. 91,92.) Barnes states that "*the whole meaning of the passage is this: I will make you the honored instrument of making known my gospel first to Jews and Gentiles and will make you a firm and distinguished preacher in building my church.*" [*Barnes' Notes* on Matthew, p. 170.]
3. Further arguments against Peter as the Rock. *Petros* and *Petra* refer to the difference between a stone (Peter) and bedrock. By using the word "this" instead of "you" Christ points toward a different antecedent than Peter. Sixty-eight out of eighty-five ancient commentators (pre-Roman Catholic) believed that Peter was not the Rock.

- B. **The Rock is Peter's Confession.** Those that hold this position argue that the most fundamental truth on which the whole superstructure of the Christian system is based - is the truth that Jesus Christ is the Savior, the Son of God. Jesus is the architect, Peter holds the keys to the gate, and the truth that Jesus is the Christ is the foundation.

1. The imagery is of one city (built on a rock) pitted against another (represented here by Hades - referring to "death"). Jesus the architect would build his city on Peter's great confession and allow Peter and the other apostles to control who might enter that city via the "keys to the kingdom." The cities are at war. But the gates of death will not prevail against the city built on the rock of Peter's confession. [McGarvey, *Commentary on Matthew* pp. 144-146.] The strength of this city is that not even death can destroy it because it is everlasting.
2. Henry interprets the passage: After Peter's great confession, " Now, saith Christ, this is that great truth *upon which I will build my church.*" [*Matthew Henry's Commentary, Vol. 5*, pp. 187,188.] Henry then goes on to point out:
 - a. Without this truth the church falls to the ground. If Jesus is not the Christ then His church does not exist.
 - b. Without this confession anyone calling himself a Christian does not hold on to the foundation and falls away into infidelity.
3. Of the eighty-five ancient commentators mentioned earlier, 44 held this view.

C. The Rock is Christ. The distinction between the word *petros* and the word *petra* has led some Bible scholars to believe that the rock is Christ. They based their thinking on the following three points:

1. The symbolic use of the word "rock" in the Hebrew scripture always refers to God and never to man. Twice in Deuteronomy it is used of false gods in comparison to the "rock of Israel." Otherwise the term is applied directly to God or the Messiah. (See Duet. 32:4; Ps. 18:2; 18:31; Isa. 28:16)
2. Peter never identified himself as the rock or the foundation of the church, yet he obviously identifies Christ as the "chief cornerstone" of Psalms 118:22 in 1 Pet. 2:4-8 and Acts 4:10,11.
3. The teachings of Paul also point to Jesus as the "rock." (1 Cor. 3:11: "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.") In Eph. 2:20 Paul uses the apostles and prophets as a figure of the foundation - teaching that it is their inspired teaching concerning Christ (not their person or office) on which the church rests. (Chumbley's *Commentary on Matthew*, pp. 296-300)
4. Jesus identifies Himself as the Rock of Ps. 118: (Mt. 21:42)

III. CONCLUSION

- A. Peter indeed receives the distinction of being the first preacher of record to take the gospel to both the Jews and the Gentiles (day of Pentecost, household of Cornelius). But, Peter was not infallible nor was he the superior apostle. He made doctrinal blunders before and after being filled with the Holy Spirit. God could not found the church on an imperfect man. He and the other apostles laid the foundation of the church, with Christ as the chief-cornerstone and every believer (including the apostles) as "living stones" of the building itself (the church). "Believers are added to the church... as they are saved." Peter is not the pope and he is not the bedrock on which the church is founded.
- B. Peter's confession is the "contract" to build. His confession is not the bedrock on which the church is built; it is the bedrock on which his own salvation is based. In a similar vein, our individual confessions of Christ as Lord, set in motion an agreement between ourselves and God that we want to become part of His building - we want to be "living stones" in His service. If the church was built on Peter's confession then in that same sense the church continues to grow every time a new soul is added to the building. Every new believer renews the contract first established between Peter and the Lord.

C. Lyricist S.J. Stone used scripture and poetic beauty to craft these words:

*The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord,
She is His new creation by water and the word;
From heaven He came and sought her to be His Holy Bride;
With His own blood He bought her,
And for her life He died.*

D. The bedrock of the church is Jesus Christ her Lord. Jesus Christ is the Word of God Incarnate (Jn. 1:1). For all practical purposes for the world today it is God's word (the Bible) that stands as the foundation of Peter's faith, our faith, and the faith of believers to come. Will everyone present here today dedicate himself or herself to "standing on the promises of Christ the King" our "rock and hope of eternal salvation?" You can if you obey His word.