

‘The Rock’ of Christ’s Church

In June of this year I spoke over a weekend on a number of topics given to me by a local church. The topics all related to Roman Catholicism and one of the subjects allocated was ‘**The Papacy**’. In the course of my preparations for that particular talk one of the important issues that needed to be addressed was the Roman Catholic claim that the Apostle Peter is ‘**the rock of Christ’s Church**’. There is a saying that goes something like this ‘*when a text is taken out of context it becomes a pretext*’. Basically this means that if a verse of scripture is ‘wrenched free’ from the verses surrounding it then it can be used as the basis of false teaching. Keeping that saying in mind I want first to quote the relevant verses from **Matthew 16** in the course of which Rome bases her claim that Peter is ‘**the rock**’ upon which Christ would build His Church. These are the relevant verses – **13 – 23** –

¹³ When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? ¹⁴ And they said, Some *say that thou art* John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. ¹⁵ He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? ¹⁶ And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. ¹⁷ And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed *it* unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. 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. ²⁰ Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ. ²¹ From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day. ²² Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee. ²³ But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.

You will note that in these 11 verses I have highlighted and underlined what for Rome is the kernel truth of these verses namely that Peter is **‘the rock’** upon which Christ will build His Church. In Dr James Butler’s Catechism [This catechism carried the approval of ‘The Four Catholic Archbishops of Ireland when published in 1944] the question is asked on page 28 –

‘When was St Peter made Pope or head of the Church?’ and the answer given - ‘Chiefly when Christ said to him **“Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church and I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Feed my lambs, feed my sheep”** – Matthew 16: John 21’.

Let me quickly deal with the **‘giving of the keys of the kingdom of heaven’** and the command to **‘feed my lambs, feed my sheep’**. The giving of these roles and responsibilities within the church were not restricted solely to Peter. **‘The keys’** must not be divorced from what follows namely the subject of **‘binding’** and **‘loosing’**. We learn from **Matthew 18:15-18** that these issues deal with the matter of sin in the life of a professing believer. In those verses we read –

¹⁵ Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. ¹⁶ But if he will not hear *thee*, *then* take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. ¹⁷ And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell *it* unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. ¹⁸ Verily I say unto you, **Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.**

Pastor John MacArthur in his Study Bible makes these comments on **Matthew 16:19**

‘These [the keys] represent authority and here Christ gives Peter authority to declare what was bound or loosed in heaven. This echoed the promise of John 20:23 where Christ gave the disciples authority to forgive or retain the sins of people. All this must be understood in the context of Matthew 18:15-17 where Christ laid out specific instructions for dealing with sin in the church...any duly

constituted body of believers, acting in accord with God's Word, has the authority to declare if someone is forgiven or unforgiven...When they make such judgments on the basis of God's Word they can be sure heaven is in accord. In other words whatever they "bind" or "loose" on earth is already "bound" or "loosed" in heaven'.

Clearly this authority [**'keys'**] within the church resides with the 'ruling elders' and was not the sole prerogative of Peter who wrote in **1st Peter 5:1** "**The elders who are among you I exhort, who am also an elder**"- Peter viewed himself as merely being a fellow-elder, on a par with local church elders and not superior to them.

Moving on then, is Peter the only one able to **'feed my lambs, feed my sheep'** as quoted in Dr Butler's catechism? Well, if I continue on from the quote from **1st Peter 5:1** Peter goes on to write these instructions to the elders in **verse 2** "**Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight of it**". This echoes very much the parting words of the Apostle Paul to the elders at Ephesus when he was taking his leave of them. In **Acts 20: 28** we read these words of instruction from Paul to the elders "**Take heed therefore unto yourselves and to all the flock over which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers to feed the church of God which he hath purchased with his own blood**".

The **'keys'**, the **'binding'**, the **'loosing'** and the **'feeding'** of God's sheep were not roles and responsibilities given solely and exclusively to Peter [and to his supposed papal successors] but according to God's Word are roles and responsibilities given to and exercised by local elders in local churches.

Dr Butler's catechism that I quoted was the 1944 edition – have things changed in more recent times in Rome's understanding of the issues we have been considering. The most up to date Roman Catholic Catechism was published in 1994. **Paragraph 881** of that catechism reads –

'The Lord made Simon alone, whom he named Peter the "rock" of his Church. He gave him the keys of his Church and instituted him shepherd of the whole flock. The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of apostles united to its head [This

‘head’ is not Christ but the Pope for Vatican 2: Volume 2 states in paragraph 22 of *Lumen Gentium* on page 375 “The college or body of bishops has for all that no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff, Peter’s successor, as its head”]. This pastoral office of Peter and the other apostles belongs to the Church’s very foundation and is continued by the bishops under the primacy of the Pope’.

Paragraph 936 of the catechism reinforces these claims by Rome in these words –

‘The Lord made St Peter the visible foundation of his church. He entrusted the keys of the church to Him. The bishop of the Church of Rome, successor to St Peter, is head of the college of bishops, the Vicar of Christ and Pastor of the universal Church on earth’.

Rome still maintains these teachings to this day and the assertion that Peter is **‘the rock of Christ’s Church’** is based firmly on **verse 18** of **Matthew 16**. In determining whether or not this claim by Rome is true I want in the first instance to set out now a verse-by-verse table of **Matthew 16:13-20** and then later I will do likewise with **verses 21-23**. This is the first table –

Verse	Text	Theme
13	When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?	The Person of Christ
14	And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.	The Person of Christ
15	He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?	The Person of Christ
16	And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.	The Person of Christ
17	And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.	The Person of Christ (Divinely revealed)
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	The Foundation upon which Christ’s Church will be built
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.	Christ’s authority over and delegation of a function to His Church
20	Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ.	The Person of Christ

These 8 verses begin and end with the Saviour focussing upon **His Person**. Verses 14-17 that precede Peter's great declaration also focus upon **The Person of Christ**. In the context it is clear that Christ is preparing His disciples to learn a great truth about **His Person** – and what is that truth? - the truth that upon **“this rock”**, that upon the divinely revealed truth that He is **“the Christ, the Son of the living God”**, He will build His Church. And because it will be His Church in verses 18-19 He demonstrates His authority over it by entrusting **‘the keys’** to His disciples. What can we understand by **‘the keys’**? I believe we find the answer in **Acts 2:42** where we learn that the early Christians **“continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship and in breaking of bread and prayers”**. The Lord entrusted **‘the keys’** of right doctrine and right practice to His disciples and those **‘keys’** today are still in the care and keeping of faithful church elders. This was a great theme of Paul in his pastoral epistles – just a few verses by way of example –

“If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things [the threat posed by ‘seducing spirits and doctrines of devils’] thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine...Till I come give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine...Take Heed unto thyself and unto the doctrine” [1st Timothy 4:6, 13 & 16]

“Thou therefore my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that thou hast heard from me among many witnesses the same commit thou to faithful men who shall be able to teach others also” [2nd Timothy 2: 2]

“For a bishop (elder) must be...Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the opposers” [those who contradict sound doctrine] Titus 1:7 & 9]

“But speak thou the things which become [are proper for/in keeping with] sound doctrine” [Titus 2:1]

‘Sound doctrine’ and the practice and disciplines that flow from it [such as dealing with sin within the professing church as we read earlier] are **‘the keys’** that have been entrusted by Christ to the

ruling elders of His Church and that is why Christ’s Church should be **“the pillar and ground of the truth”** [1st Timothy 3:15]. To wrench 3 words **“thou art Peter”** from the context of these 8 verses and build a doctrine of Papal rule as enshrined in the Catholic Catechisms is a glaring example of turning **‘a text’** into **‘a pretext’**.

But the identification of **“the rock”** upon which Christ is building His Church does not end with verse 20. The foundational theme is carried over into the next 3 verses, as we shall see from the following table –

Verse	Text	Theme
21	From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.	The Redemptive Work of Christ on The Cross
22	Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee	The Redemptive Work of Christ on The Cross rejected by Peter
23	But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.	The Redemptive Work of Christ on The Cross is God’s plan

Foundational to the building of His Church is not only **‘the Person’** of Christ but also **‘the Redemptive Work of Christ on The Cross’**. These 2 elements in the foundation of The Church are inextricably linked as only **‘the Person’** of Christ could satisfactorily perform **‘the Redemptive work of Christ on The Cross’**. Only **‘the Christ, the Son of the living God’** could offer an acceptable, redemptive ransom price to God His Father [Matthew 20: 28] by which rebel sinners could be freed from sin’s curse, hell’s claims and the grave’s constraint.

Only Christ’s shed blood could propitiate His Holy Father’s just and righteous anger against sin [Romans 3:25]. Only Christ’s shed blood could purchase redemption for those who were slaves to sin and its curse [1st Peter 1: 18-19]. Only Christ’s shed blood could obtain justification [the divine verdict of ‘not guilty’] for guilty hell-deserving sinners [Romans 3: 26 & 5: 1]. Only Christ’s shed blood could effect reconciliation between an offended Holy God and a straying sinful people who were by nature enemies of God [Romans 5: 10].

So where is Peter in all this – is he as Rome claims **‘the rock’** upon which Christ would build His Church? The reference to Peter in the midst of verses 13-20 is incidental to the main **‘theme’** of these

verses that centre and focus supremely upon **'the Person of Christ'** as the foundation of His own Church.

And in the next 3 verses the role of Peter is to demonstrate how Satan would seek to blind men to the truth of the **'theme'** of these verses that, essential to the foundation of Christ's Church, is **'Christ's Redemptive work on The Cross'** – **"the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them who believe not"** [**2nd Corinthians 4:4**].

It is clear that Peter learnt great lessons from this encounter for on the day of Pentecost, in the midst of his sermon and referring to the person and death of Christ on the Cross, he said that Christ was **"approved of God"** ['The Christ'] and **"delivered [to 'The Cross'] by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God"**. He was unveiling **'the rock'** upon which Christ would build His Church and on that day alone about **"three thousand souls"** [**Acts 2:41**] were added to Christ's Church and these **"lively [living] stones"** were laid upon the foundation of **"Jesus Christ and him crucified"** [**1st Corinthians 2:2**].

The verses of **Matthew 16:13-23** teach a truth that Paul would later repeat when dealing with factionalism within the Corinthian church. There were elements there that wanted to align themselves with people like Paul, Apollos or Cephas [Peter] [**1st Corinthians 3:22**] but earlier in verse 11 Paul declared **"Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid which is Jesus Christ"**.

Paul, on another occasion and referring to the Old Testament scriptures wrote, **"whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning"** [**Romans 15:4**] and in a similar vein in **1st Corinthians 10:11** he wrote, **"they are written for our admonition"**. Can we learn anything from the Old Testament scriptures about the identity of **"the rock"** that will be for our **"learning"** and **"admonition"**? I believe we most certainly can.

When it comes to understanding what the Scriptures teach there are a number of universally accepted principles or laws. There is a principle known as 'hermeneutics' and there is also 'the law of first mention'. Under the principle of 'hermeneutics' we should interpret any scripture in the light of other scriptures. In other words, when considering a particular topic or theme we must consider all the

relevant verses in the scriptures that pertain to that particular topic or theme in order to get the 'full/complete picture' to enlighten our understanding.

Then in relation to 'the law of first mention', when considering a subject, attitude or principle we should look for its 'first mention' in the scriptures to see what meaning is revealed there for that meaning will hold good throughout the rest of scripture. A useful website that has an article on these principles/laws is

<http://bibleresources.bible.com/Bstudy.php>

There also you can do a word or passage search and it will list all relevant usages in the entire scriptures. When it comes to the word '**rock**' we find that the 'first mention' is found in Exodus 17:6 that reads as follows –

“Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the **rock** in Horeb; and thou shalt smite the **rock**, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink”.

Here we find people wandering in the wilderness who were saved when a rock was 'smitten' and it brought forth life-giving water. The Apostle Paul made reference to this incident in **1st Corinthians 10:1&4** when he wrote, “**our fathers...drank of that spiritual ROCK that followed them and that ROCK was Christ**”. Pastor John MacArthur in his bible study notes writes “The Jews had a legend that the actual rock Moses struck followed them throughout their wilderness wanderings, providing water for them. Paul says they have a Rock providing all they need but it is Christ’. All that is needed for spiritual life is found in Christ and that echoes the words of Christ Himself in **John 7:37** “**In that last day...Jesus stood and cried...If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink**”.

This first mention of '**rock**' In Exodus 17:6 is a picture of Christ and His Redemptive work on The Cross. **Isaiah 53** is known as a prophetic picture of the sufferings of Christ on The Cross and there in **verse 4** we read of Christ being “**smitten of God**”. The weight of what Christ would have to do and endure to redeem His people began to weigh heavily upon Him when he went to Gethsemane after the Last Supper and there to His disciples Jesus said “**All ye shall be offended because of me this night; for it is written, I will**

smite the shepherd and the sheep shall be scattered” [Mark 14:27 making reference to Zechariah 13:7].

We tend to think of the **‘rock’** that Moses smote as being a very large boulder but in Vine’s Expository Dictionary we read this about the **‘rock’** of Exodus 17:6 - **‘means “rocky wall” or “cliff”**. **This is probably what Moses struck in Exodus 17:6’** and by way of further illustration Vine goes on to say **‘Thus God hid Moses in a cleft of the “rocky cliff” [Exodus 33:21-22]**. My how the hymn writer captured it so well **‘Thou blest rock of ages, I’m hiding in thee’**. One final illustration of how **‘rock’** clearly refers to a **“rocky cliff”** is found in **2nd Chronicles 25:11-12** **“And Amaziah strengthened himself, and led forth his people, and went to the Valley of salt and smote of the children of Seir ten thousand. And other ten thousand, left alive, did the children of Judah carry away captive, and brought them unto the top of the rock [‘rocky cliff’] and cast them down from the top of the rock [‘rocky cliff’] and they were all broken in pieces”**.

Keeping this picture of Christ being like the **‘rocky cliff’** that was smitten by Moses to bring forth life-giving water the significance of the location where Christ made His statement that **“upon this rock I will build my church”** should not be overlooked. From **verse 13** we learn that the location was **‘Caesarea Philippi’** as in the picture below.



This pictured **'rocky cliff'** (I had the privilege of visiting this location during a trip to Israel back in 1986) could possibly have been the backdrop to the dialogue between the Lord and His disciples. This **'rocky cliff'** at Caesarea Philippi was the 'home' to statues of Pagan gods like 'Pan' that were located in 'clefts' in its surface. How all the more fitting then would it have been for the Saviour to declare, in the face of this natural 'shrine' to Paganism, that upon **'the rock'** of His sinless Person and of Him being **'smitten'** like a **'rocky cliff'** of old that brought forth life-giving water, He would build His Church. How truly inspired Paul was when he wrote, **"whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning"** [Romans 15:4].

One final thought in conclusion. Vine's Expository Dictionary also has this to say about **'rock'** – **'In some cases this noun is an epithet or meaningful name of God'**. There are many examples of this to be found in the Old Testament but let me just cite two from the book of Psalms. In **Psalm 40:1-4** we read **"I waited patiently for THE LORD... He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a ROCK... he hath put a new song in my mouth even praise unto our GOD... Blessed is that man who maketh THE LORD his trust"** and then in **Psalm 62:1-2 & 5-7** we read, **"Truly my soul waiteth upon GOD... He only is my ROCK... My soul, wait thou only upon GOD... He only is my ROCK... In GOD is my salvation and my glory, the ROCK of my strength; my refuge is in GOD"**.

We learnt earlier that the **1994 Roman Catholic Catechism** declares in **Paragraph 881** **'The Lord made Simon alone, whom he named Peter the "rock" of his Church'**. God's Word teaches clearly that **'the [foundational] rock'** of Christ's Church is not Peter but rather it is **'The Person'** and **Redemptive Work on The Cross'** of Christ Himself. Are foundations important? Let me finish with this parable told by the Lord Himself in **Luke 6:47-49** and as you will see I have highlighted and capitalised just a few crucial words to emphasise the importance of the right 'foundation'

—

<p>⁴⁷ Whosoever cometh TO ME, and heareth MY SAYINGS, and doeth them, I will shew you to whom he is like: ⁴⁸ He is like a man which built an house, and digged deep, and laid THE FOUNDATION ON A ROCK: and when the flood arose, the</p>
--

stream beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it: for it was **FOUNDED UPON A ROCK.**⁴⁹ But he that heareth, and doeth not, is like a man that without a foundation built an house upon the earth; against which the stream did beat vehemently, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of that house was great.

Cecil Andrews – 'Take Heed' Ministries – 19 September 2008