

On This Rock

I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it (Matthew 16.18).

Introduction

Many see this passage as the beginning of Christianity and the establishment of the Church. The Lord's words are viewed as giving Peter the leadership of the Church and Christianity. Is this the correct interpretation of the passage?

The Rock

Jesus declared, "upon this rock will I build my church." Who was the rock? Was it Peter? Do the Scriptures provide evidence what the Lord had in mind with His statement and the identity of the "rock?" Paul and Peter give valuable insight into the identity of the "rock." Paul wrote the Corinthians:

¹ For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; ³ and all ate the same spiritual food; ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ (1 Corinthians 10.1-4).

Paul's passage referred to the first time the imagery of the rock was used in the Scriptures of Christ (Exodus 17). After God delivered the Jews from slavery in Egypt He led them into the wilderness. Water became scarce and the people became so angry with Moses that they were about to kill him (Exodus 17.4). Moses appealed to God who said:

Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.” And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel (Exodus 17.6).

Moses obeyed God and water came from the rock. The Jews understood nothing more of this miraculous event than that they now had water. They had no idea God was using the incident to portray the work of Christ. We know now that the struck rock portrayed Christ being struck for our transgressions to give us life. We see how intricately God wove these events and how He had our salvation in mind all along. Indeed, everything God did in revealing Himself to the Jews spoke of Christ (Luke 24.13-27). Moses faced a similar situation again, recorded in Numbers 20.1-11. In that incident, he failed to obey God. Yet God was faithful and provided water. But because of his disobedience, God did not permit Moses to enter the promised land (Numbers 20.12). Israel’s experience of God bringing water from the rock was well known to the Jews (cf. Psalm 78.16, 20, 105.41, 114.8; Isaiah 48.21).

Peter also referred to Christ as the Rock:

⁴ And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, ⁵ you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For this is contained in Scripture: “Behold, I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious cornerstone, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.” ⁷ This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, “The stone which the builders rejected, this became the very cornerstone,” ⁸ and, “A stone of stumbling and a rock of

offense”; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed (1 Peter 2.4-8).

Peter quoted the Messianic passages Isaiah 8.14, 28.16, and Psalm 118.22. In these passages, God revealed how He would work to secure man’s salvation.

The Old Testament Witness of the Rock

Two Hebrew words are used for rock. One is אבן and the other is סלע. No significant difference exists in their meanings—they are used interchangeably. The word “stone” אבן is also used (Psalm 118.22; Daniel 2.34-35, 45). The word “rock” is used 108 times in the Old Testament. At least half of the times it referred to Christ. These include the following: Exodus 17.6; Numbers 20.8, 10-11; Deuteronomy 8.15, 32.4, 15, 18, 30-31; 1 Samuel 2.2, 23.28; 2 Samuel 22.2-3, 32, 47, 23.3; Psalm 18.2, 31, 46, 19.14, 27.5, 28.1, 31.2-3, 40.2, 42.9, 61.2, 62.2, 6-7, 71.3, 78.16, 20, 35, 89.26, 92.15, 94.22, 95.1, 105.41, 114.8, 144.1; Isaiah 2.10, 8.14, 17.10, 22.16, 26.4, 30.29, 32.2, 33.16, 44.8, 48.21, 51.1, Habakkuk 1.12. A sampling is the following:

Deuteronomy 32:4 The Rock! His work is perfect, For all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He.

Deuteronomy 32:31 Indeed their rock is not like our Rock, Even our enemies themselves judge this.

1 Samuel 2:2 There is no one holy like the LORD, Indeed, there is no one besides You, Nor is there any rock like our God.

2 Samuel 22:2 He said, The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer;

2 Samuel 22:3 My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge; My savior, You save me from violence.

2 Samuel 22:32 For who is God, besides the LORD? And who is a

rock, besides our God?

2 Samuel 23:3 The God of Israel said, The Rock of Israel spoke to me, 'He who rules over men righteously, Who rules in the fear of God,

Psalms 18:2 The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

Psalms 18:31 For who is God, but the LORD? And who is a rock, except our God,

Psalms 18:46 The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock; And exalted be the God of my salvation,

Psalms 19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.

Psalms 28:1 A Psalm of David. To You, O LORD, I call; My rock, do not be deaf to me, For if You are silent to me, I will become like those who go down to the pit.

Psalms 31:3 For You are my rock and my fortress; For Your name's sake You will lead me and guide me.

Psalms 42:9 I will say to God my rock, "Why have You forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"

Psalms 61:2 From the end of the earth I call to You when my heart is faint; Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

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

Psalms 62:6 He only is my rock and my salvation, My stronghold; I shall not be shaken.

Psalms 62:7 On God my salvation and my glory rest; The rock of my strength, my refuge is in God.

Psalms 71:3 Be to me a rock of habitation to which I may continually come; You have given commandment to save me, For You are my rock and my fortress.

Psalms 78:35 And they remembered that God was their rock, And the Most High God their Redeemer.

Psalms 89:26 "He will cry to Me, 'You are my Father, My God, and the rock of my salvation.'

Psalms 92:15 To declare that the LORD is upright; He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.

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

Psalms 95:1 O come, let us sing for joy to the LORD, Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation.

Psalms 144:1 Blessed be the LORD, my rock, Who trains my hands for war, And my fingers for battle;

Isaiah 8:14 "Then He shall become a sanctuary; But to both the houses of Israel, a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over, And a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Isaiah 17:10 For you have forgotten the God of your salvation And have not remembered the rock of your refuge. Therefore you plant delightful plants And set them with vine slips of a strange god.

Isaiah 26:4 "Trust in the LORD forever, For in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock.

Isaiah 30:29 You will have songs as in the night when you keep the festival, And gladness of heart as when one marches to the sound of the flute, To go to the mountain of the LORD, to the Rock of Israel.

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.'

Habakkuk 1:12 Are You not from everlasting, O LORD, my God, my Holy One? We will not die. You, O LORD, have appointed them to judge; And You, O Rock, have established them to correct. _

All these passages refer to the LORD, □□□□□□, the Lord Jesus Christ, the God of Israel, as the Rock. Perhaps the most telling verse is God's declaration of Himself to Isaiah:

'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' (Isaiah 44:8).

Paul stated the Rock is Christ (1 Corinthians 10.4).

Given this Scriptural evidence, what are we to make of Jesus' words to Peter? Jesus' statement to Peter was a pun. He told Peter that he was [Πέτρος](#) (a rock) and that on this [πέτρα](#), (i.e., Himself), He would build His Church. The phrase reads: ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ (upon this the rock). The definite article with the demonstrative pronoun denoted Christ was speaking of Himself and because Peter correctly identified Him, that He would build His "church" on the basis of this identification. Jesus told Peter that by virtue of his confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16.16), that he was a "chip off the old rock."

The point of the passage is that Jesus asked His disciples who they thought He was. They answered that some said He was John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or another of the prophets. He then asked them directly, who they thought He was. Peter responded that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God. Peter's confession, that He was the Christ, the Son of God, was the required faith component of the gospel of the kingdom. To be saved under that gospel one had to recognize that Jesus was the Messiah, the King, the Son of God. Peter passed the test and Jesus declared that on the basis of his confession He would "build His church."

What is the Church?

The next question to be resolved is what did the Lord mean by "church" in this passage? Did He mean the Church, the body of Christ, or something else?

This passage is the first of only two passages in the Gospels (both in Matthew) which use the word "church."¹ The word "church" is [ἐκκλησία](#). It means an assembly of people. The particular sense of the word is derived from the context.

Acts 19 provides a good example to illustrate this. This

passage is Luke's account of Paul's visit to Ephesus. Paul's preaching had angered the silversmiths because the Ephesians were turning away from false gods, represented by idols, to Christ. This was a serious threat to the business of the silversmith. In retaliation, the silversmiths stirred the population into a riot. We read,

So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the assembly was in confusion and the majority did not know for what reason they had come together (Acts 19.32).

The word "assembly" is the word ἐκκλησία, the word often translated "church." But this was no church—it was a *mob*. After the secretary gained control over the crowd, he declared,

But if you want anything beyond this, it shall be settled in the lawful assembly (Acts 19.39).

In this instance "assembly," (ἐκκλησία) was a *court*. After this, we read,

After saying this he dismissed the assembly (Acts 19.39).

In this case, the "assembly" (ἐκκλησία) was the *crowd*. So, in the Acts 19 passage we note that the word ἐκκλησία was used for a "mob," a "court," and a "crowd." Thus, the basic meaning of ἐκκλησία is an "assembly" and its particular meaning is determined by context.

The one other time the word ἐκκλησία is used in the Gospels is in Matthew 18. In this case, Jesus gave instructions about dealing with a sinning believer. Matthew recorded:

¹⁵ *"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.*

¹⁶ *But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with*

you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (Matthew 18.15-17).

Jesus' management principle was to solve the problem at the lowest level. But notice Jesus' words about how the individual was to be regarded if the counsel failed. The sinning brother was to be treated as a Gentile and a tax collector. This hardly sounds like a church which included and welcomed Gentiles or one in which Jew and Gentile were equal in Christ (Galatians 3.28). It wasn't.

If Jesus was not speaking of the Church, the body of Christ, what "church" did He mean? Jesus was speaking of the Jewish "church," the assembly of Jews who believed the gospel of the kingdom. They believed, as Peter had stated, that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God (cf. John 11.25-27).

The Lord had not yet revealed the Church, the body of Christ, in which Jew and Gentile are equal in Christ. God kept this truth secret until He revealed it to Paul (Ephesians 3.1-10, 2.13-18).² Luke's record of Peter's message at Pentecost (Acts 2), as well as his sermon in Acts 3, confirmed this. Peter addressed Jews only. He had no idea about the Church, the body of Christ. Everything that occurred on the day of Pentecost concerned Israel, not Gentiles. Even as late as Acts 11.19, we read the gospel was going to Jews only. Had the gospel been going to Gentiles, God would not have had to give Peter a special vision to lead him to go to Cornelius' house (Acts 10). Furthermore, the believing Jews in Jerusalem would not have criticized Peter for going to Gentiles if such evangelistic efforts were already underway (Acts 11.1-3). Lastly, no other writer mentions the Church, the body of Christ. Peter, James, John, and Jude never mention it. The

reason for this is that it was a revelation the risen Lord gave to Paul alone. The Twelve learned of the Church, the body of Christ, from Paul.

Conclusion

Peter had nothing whatsoever to do with the Church, the body of Christ. Peter was an apostle of Israel, not of the Church. His ministry was to Jews, not Gentiles (Galatians 2.7-9). His destiny, as declared by the Lord, was to occupy a throne with the other eleven apostles and rule the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19.28). Peter had nothing to do with Gentiles, nor with the Church, the body of Christ.

Christendom has been confused and has gotten almost everything exactly wrong about this subject for nearly 2,000 years. The Lord did not make Peter the head of the Church, the body of Christ. Peter was an apostle of Israel and spokesman of the Jewish assembly. Peter never had a ministry to Gentiles. None of the Twelve have a ministry to Gentiles. Their evangelistic efforts were confined to Jews (Acts 2-3; Galatians 2.7-9). The ascended, glorified Lord commissioned Paul to be "the apostle of the Gentiles" (Romans 11.13) and revealed to Paul the Church, in which Jew and Gentile were equal in Christ (Galatians 3.27-28). Peter knew nothing of this until he learned it from Paul. Paul laid the foundation of the Church and is the founder of Christianity according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 3.10-11).³

The Scriptures reveal Christ is the Rock. Jesus declared on the basis of Peter's confession that He was the Messiah, the Son of God, that He would build a Jewish assembly upon this truth. This is exactly what He did under the gospel of the kingdom. That gospel continued until Acts 15.11, when it was supplanted by Paul's gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20.24; 1 Corinthians 15.1-4). The gospel of the kingdom will return after the Lord removes His Church and be operational in the final seven years of the Tribulation (Matthew 24.14). That

gospel will serve as the basis for salvation during the Tribulation. The focus of the gospel of the kingdom is upon Christ's *identity*; the focus of Paul's gospel is upon Christ's *work*.⁴

¹ The word ἐκκλησία only occurs two times in the gospels (Matthew 16.18, 18.17).

² See the author's studies, [The Church \(the Body of Christ\)](#), and [Paul's "Mystery"](#) for more on this subject.

³ See the author's studies, [Paul: Chief of Sinners?](#) and [Why Paul?](#) for more on this subject.

⁴ See the author's studies, [The Gospel](#) and [The Gospel of the Kingdom](#) for more on this subject.

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