

TRUTH HANDLING AND TEACHING AUTHORITY

Matthew 16



**Part IVb:
The Primacy of Peter**



Matthew 18

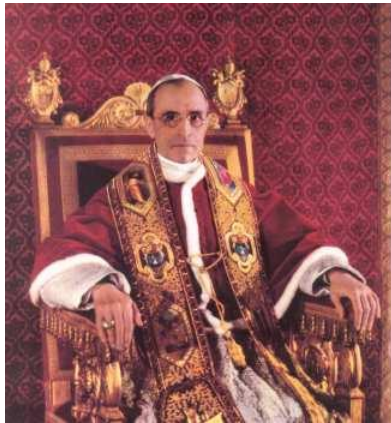
Matthew Chapter 16, Verse 18: The Primacy of Peter

Perhaps a most pivotal passage of the Bible which divides Catholic Christians from Protestant and Pentecostal Christians is the scripture where **Christ singles out Peter from the rest of the Apostles** for special consideration and authority. That Bible passage is in the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 16, verse 18.

The Catholic Church teaches that the first principle of hermeneutics, the science of the translation and interpretation of the Bible, is the literal meaning of the text.

Divino Afflante Spiritus (Pius XII, September 30, 1943)

“... discern and define that sense of the biblical words which is called literal ... so that the mind of the author may be made clear. ... the exegete must be principally concerned with the literal sense of the Scriptures.”



Spiritus Paraclitus (Benedict XV, September 15, 1920)

“As Jerome insisted, all biblical interpretation rests upon the literal sense ...”

The definition of the literal sense: **The sense which the human author directly intended and which his words convey.**

The question to be asked in seeking to grasp the literal meaning of Matthew in conveying what Christ had in his mind in these words to Peter is

what was understood by Peter and the other apostles and what was handed on (*paradosis*) by the Apostolic Church and the constant faith and practice of the Church regarding the meaning of these words of Christ.

Some basic facts about the author, Matthew, are in order to aid the proper search for the meaning of his gospel.

Matthew is the tax collector called by Christ in 9:9-13;
Matthew is one of the twelve Apostles, an eye witness;
Matthew's gospel is directed to a Jewish audience;
Matthew's gospel is a Gospel of the Church, the only evangelist to use the word "church," and use it twice, 16:18 and 18:17.

The context for interpreting the meaning of the passage is set in the confession of Peter.

Matthew 16:13-17

When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter said in reply, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus said to him in reply, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.”

Christ then gives Simon son of Jonah a new name and a commission.

Matthew 16:18

And so I say to you, you are Rocky, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.



Matthew 16:18-19
Pietro Vannucci, known as Perugino
(Pieve 1445/50 – Fontignano 1523)

Since the New Testament was written in **the Greek language**, it is right to begin the consideration of this critical passage in the language in which it was written:

kago de soi lego oti su ei **Petros** kai
I also And to you say - You are **Peter** and

epi taute te **petra** oikodomeso mou ten ekklesian;
on this - **rock** I will build of me the church;

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As Greek declined in the Mediterranean world and Latin became the common tongue, the first translations of the Bible were in the Latin language. Hence, it is natural for us to consider also the way in which this critical passage was translated into **Latin by Jerome** (Rome, 383/384 AD).

et ego dico tibi quia tu es **Petrus** et
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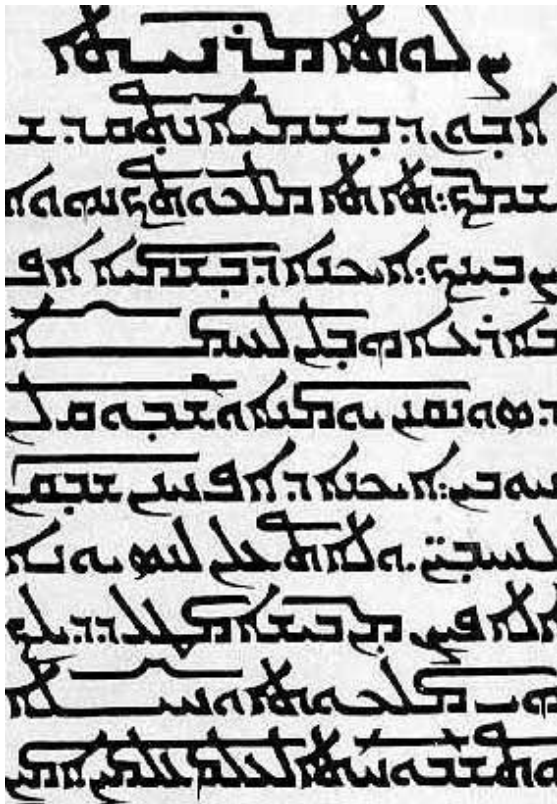
Two observations must be made on the Greek and the Latin translations of Matthew 16:18.

Note in the Greek that the name of Peter is *Petros*, and the word for rock is *petra*. In Latin the name of Peter is *Petrus* and the word for rock is *petra*.

This follows from the demands of the respective languages. Nouns in these languages, unlike English, have gender: some are masculine (e.g., -os or -us ending to words); some are feminine (e.g., -a or -am ending to words). The word for a rock in both languages is, of its nature, feminine; Peter, being a male, could not take a feminine ending to his name. It would be like calling him “Rockette” instead of “Rocky.” Quite a difference!

Hence it is only the demands of language that the gender of the words is different.

The Aramaic Language



The Lord's Prayer in Aramaic

Aramaic, language belonging to the West Semitic subdivision of the Semitic subfamily of the Afro Asiatic family of Languages.

After the Jews were defeated by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., they began to speak Aramaic instead of Hebrew. They retained Hebrew as the sacred language of their religion.

Although Aramaic was displaced officially by Greek after the coming of Alexander the Great, it held its own under Greek domination and subsequent Roman rule.

Aramaic was the language of Jesus.

Following the rise of Islam in the 7th cent. A.D., however, Aramaic began to yield to Arabic, by which eventually it was virtually replaced.

Parts of the books of Ezra and Daniel in the Bible were written in an Aramaic dialect, as were some notable Jewish prayers, such as the kaddish.

In the course of its long history the Aramaic language broke up into a number of dialects.

Grammatically, Aramaic is very close to Hebrew. The Aramaic alphabet was attested in the 9th cent. B.C.

After c.500 B.C. its use became widespread in the Middle East.

Papias of Hierapolis is quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea as affirming that Evangelist Matthew first “wrote the sayings of Jesus” in Aramaic.



An incense burner

Jesus renamed Simon bar-Jonah for a purpose. The literalness of the play on words--a linguistic pun--is made clear. A pun is a pun because of the literalness of the play on words. This was precisely what Jesus was saying. "You are Rocky and on this rock I will build my church." His intent becomes clear when we examine **the Aramaic in which language Jesus addressed Peter.**

'aph 'ena' 'amar-na' lak da'(n)t-(h)uw ke'pha'
and I say - I to thee that-thou-art **Kephas**

we`'al hade' ke'pha' 'ebneyh le`i(d)tiy
and upon this **rock** I will build her namely my church

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Note that the word for Peter, *ke'ha'*, is the same word for rock. The words are equated: Peter is the rock.

The core of the meaning appears to rest in the two words for a “rock.” If Matthew recorded that Christ used the same word both for

(1) the proper name of Peter and

(2) the foundation on which Christ says he will build the church, then an interpretation follows that **the foundation of the church is Peter.**

Because the Word of God as recorded in Matthew had to be intelligible in its literalness for all people including the more simple people of the early centuries of the Church, a more involved interpretation demanding extensive hermeneutics and linguistic acumen would be unwarranted. Ultimately, when there are differing interpretations, the principle question then becomes, “by what authority is the truth appealed.”

When there is error or misunderstanding, the teaching authority of the Church is appealed.

The Catholic Church has infallibly defined the interpretation of Matthew 16.

The Council of Ephesus, 431 AD

“No one doubts, in fact, it is obvious to all ages that the holy and most Blessed Peter, **head and Prince of the Apostles, the pillar of faith, and the foundation of the Catholic Church**, received the keys of the kingdom from our Lord Jesus Christ, the savior and redeemer of the human race.”



First Vatican Council, 1870, *The First Dogmatic Constitution of the Church of Christ*, Chapter 2

“Therefore if anyone says that the blessed Apostle Peter was not constituted by Christ the Lord as the **Prince of all the Apostles** and the **visible head of the whole Church militant**, or that he received immediately and directly from Jesus Christ our Lord only a primacy of honor and not a true and proper **primacy of jurisdiction**: *anathema sit.*”



Christ continues with **the conferral of the “keys”** which appears to be a clear statement of a position of leadership authority.

Matthew 16:19-20

I will give you (singular) the keys to the kingdom of heaven. **Whatever you bind** on earth shall be bound in heaven; and **whatever you loose** on earth shall be loosed in heaven.



This biblical commission echoes one other conferral of keys in the Bible. Eliakim, son of Hilkiah receives the keys of the royal palace.



Isaiah 22:22

I will place the key of the House of David on his shoulder; when he opens, no one shall shut, when he shuts, no one shall open.

Apart from this passage, there is no background in biblical language for binding and loosening. In Rabbinical Judaism, the words signify rabbinical decisions; **to bind is to give a decision that imposes an obligation, and to loose is to give a decision that removes an obligation.**

Matthew 18:15-18

If your brother sins (against you), go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church (*ekklesia*). If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector. Amen, I say to you, **whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven**, and **whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.**

In Matthew 18:18, the Apostles share in the power to bind and loose that was given to Peter in 16:19; what was given to Peter alone is now shared by the whole Church in the person of the Apostles.

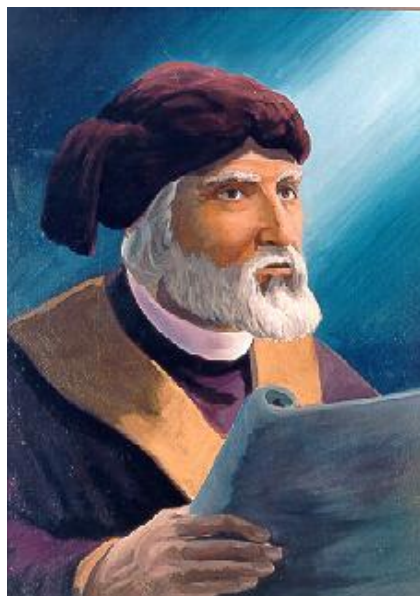
If Peter held a position of primacy, the other Apostles would have to know that and would have reflected that role thrust on Peter by Christ in their relationships to him. In other words, does the Bible reveal a primary place or role for Peter consciously acknowledged by the New Testament writers?

Yes, the biblical portrait of Peter presented earlier in this chapter attests to the preeminent role of Peter among the writers of the New Testament.

Among the Apostolic Fathers, the same recognition can be shown.

Tertullian (Rome, 160 - 220 AD), *On Monogamy*, Chapter 8

“Peter alone do I find ... to have been married. Monogamist I am led to presume him by consideration of ***the church, which, built upon him***, was destined to appoint every grade of her Order from monogamists.”



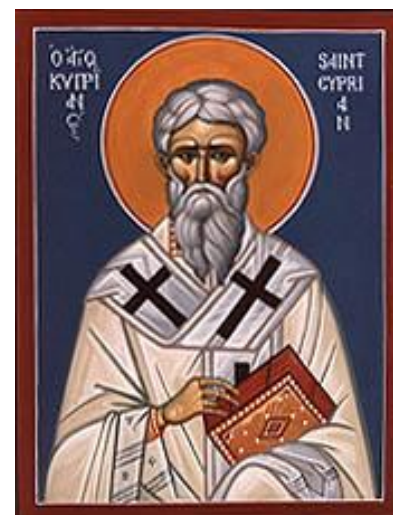
Clement (Alexandria, 150 - 215 AD), *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?*, Chapter 21

“Therefore, on hearing those words, the blessed Peter, **the chosen, the pre-eminent, the first of the disciples**, for whom alone and Himself the Savior paid tribute, quickly seized and comprehended the saying. And what does he say? ‘Lo, we have left all and followed Thee’.”



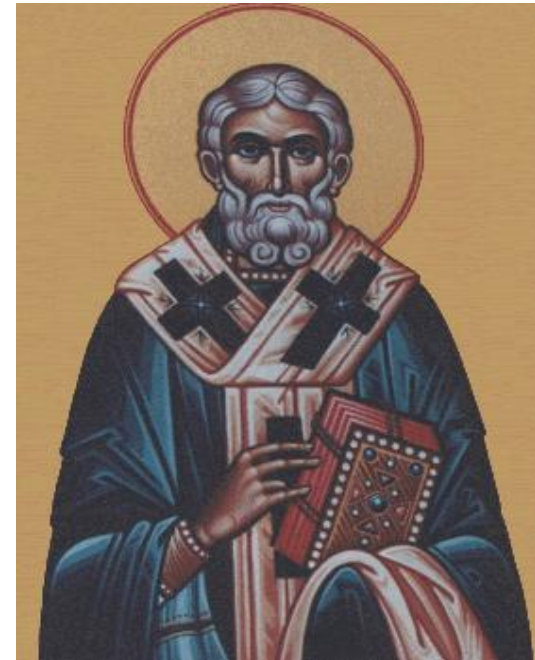
Cyprian (Carthage, 200 - 258 AD), *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, Chapter 4

“Upon him (Peter), being one, **He (Christ) built His Church** and although after His resurrection He bestows equal power upon all the Apostles, and says: ‘As the Father has sent me, I also send you. Receive the Holy Spirit: if you forgive the sins of anyone, they will be forgiven him; if you retain the sins of anyone, they will be retained’ (Jn 20:21), that He might display unity, He established by His authority the origin of the same unity as beginning from one.”



Cyril (Jerusalem, 315 - 387 AD), *Catecheses*, No. 2:19

“Peter, **the chiefest and foremost** of the Apostles, denied the Lord thrice before a little maid: but he repented himself, and wept bitterly.”



Augustine (Numidia, now Algeria, 354 - 430 AD), *Letters, No 53*

“For, if the order of succession of Bishops is to be considered, how much more surely, truly and safely do we number them from Peter, to whom, as **representing the whole Church**, the Lord said: ‘Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it’ (Mt 16:18). For, to Peter succeeded Linus, to Linus Clement, to Clement Anacletus, to Anacletus Evaristus ...”



End of
Truth-Handling and Authority, Part IVb

Go to
Truth-Handling and Authority, Part IVc