

## Was Peter a Pope?

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The Catholic Church strongly believes that the apostle Peter was the first Pope. And, they claim that Jesus made that promise to Peter in Matthew 16:18-19:

“18 And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

19 And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Catholics say Peter is the rock in verse 18. According to Catholic teaching, Jesus said He would build His church on Peter. Catholic belief holds that Peter was the Pope and that he was the *first* Pope. And that means that there is a perpetual line of Popes as long as the world stands!

Belief in the Pope is dear to the hearts of Catholics all over the world. This is by far the largest denomination on earth, with almost one and a half billion followers. And, the role of the Pope is so important to Catholics that if you question it, they become very defensive.

But that is exactly what we are about to do. Since Catholics quote Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:18-19, we have the right and the responsibility to test this claim. The Bible says the people in Acts 17:11 searched the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul and Silas taught was biblical. We need to do the same with Catholic teaching or any other teaching.

There are two key questions in the dispute between Catholics and non-Catholics about what Jesus means in Matthew 16:18-19:

1. Who or what is the *rock* upon which Jesus built the church? This has been highly controversial for centuries. There is still a big debate about it. In fact, the interpretation of this one word is a dividing line between millions of people who believe in Jesus.

2. What is the binding and loosing in verse 19? Catholics say God gave Peter the authority to bind and loose doctrines and practices in the church. They say this is what Jesus promised Peter. Of course, they mean that the Holy Spirit *guides* the Pope and the College of bishops in their teaching. In that sense the Pope binds and looses.

The plan in this discussion is to look at the following:

- *What does the Greek text say?* We need to examine the Greek in Matthew 16:18-19 because Catholics say the Greek proves that Peter was a Pope. But strangely enough, people who are not Catholic say the Greek shows that Peter was *not* a Pope. People on both sides of the issue appeal to the Greek text! Is there anything in the original text that proves or disproves that Peter was the first Pope?

- The second and more important question is: *What is the context?* This is the real question, the determining principle in the debate. There are two levels of context we will examine: first, the immediate context, which is Jesus’ discussion with His disciples about who He was; second, the remote or overall context, that is, verses in other parts of the Bible which clarify Matthew 16:18-19.

Catholics make their case on the Greek word for Peter and the Greek word for rock. *Peter* is from *petros*. This word means a stone or rock. Jesus also gave Peter an Aramaic name which means a rock. In John 1:42 He told Peter, “You shall be called Cephas (which is translated, A Stone).” Then, when Jesus said “on this rock I will build my church,” the word *rock* is from *petra*. Catholics say this must be Peter. The two words are obviously similar. Does this mean they refer to the same thing?

Let's take a look at these words in the Greek text. The Greek text is on the top in black and the words in red letters below it are a literal translation. If you do not know anything about Greek that will not be a problem. I will explain what you see, but actually you will be able to make out some of the words because they look similar to English.

The Greek word for Peter comes first. It is the word *petros* (πέτρος). Then when Jesus said He would build His church on "this rock," the word is *petra* (πέτρα). If you have never looked at the Greek words, now you can see why Catholics use this verse. They say these words are so similar they must mean the same thing. The rock must be Peter. That is basically the Catholic case for Peter being a Pope based on the Greek text.

On the other hand, many who argue against the Catholic view go straight to the Greek to try to disprove it. This is usually a mistake. That is because they use arguments from Greek that are not sound.

Here are three false arguments made against the Catholic position. These are based on a misunderstanding of Greek grammar and usage.

One of the most common arguments is based on the two words in Matthew 16:18, *petros* and *petra*.

- The argument is that Πέτρος (Peter) refers to a small stone, but πέτρα (the rock upon which the church is built) refers to a large slab of rock, a ledge or a rock cliff. Therefore the Lord did not build His church on a small stone (Peter, πέτρος) but upon a large rock as in Matthew 7:24: the wise man "built his house on the rock" (πέτρα). Therefore, Peter cannot be "this rock."
  - This argument will not work.
1. In classical Greek πέτρος did not always mean a small rock in contrast to a ledge or large slab of rock. Thayer defines πέτρος (which this argument says must mean a small stone) as "an appellative proper name, signifying 'a stone,' 'a rock,' 'a ledge' or 'cliff'" (*Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 507). It was used in classical Greek to refer to a throwing stone, but it was also used to describe "a *boulder* forming a landmark" (Lidell-Scott, *Lexicon*, p. 1398).
  2. Likewise, πέτρα can refer to a ledge or cliff of rock as in Matthew 27:60 where Joseph of Arimathea's new tomb had been "hewn out of the rock." But in I Peter 2:8 Jesus is "a stone (λίθος) of stumbling and a rock (πέτρα) of offense." This illustration is based on a man stumbling on a smaller stone, not a ledge or a cliff. Romans 9:33 uses πέτρα in the same sense.

A second unsound argument from Greek concerns the gender of these two nouns. The word for Peter, πέτρος, is masculine, but the word for this "rock," πέτρα, is feminine. This argument says that "Peter" cannot be "this rock" because πέτρος is a masculine noun and πέτρα is a feminine noun.

This argument is not sound. For instance, in I Cor. 10:4 Paul said, "For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ." In this verse the word "Rock" is πέτρα which is the same word for "rock" in Matthew 16:18. It is a *feminine noun*. But the word for "Christ" is χριστός, a *masculine noun*. Paul used a masculine name to identify a feminine noun! There is no "rule" of Greek grammar that says a feminine noun cannot be used to describe something about a masculine noun.

Another invalid argument against Catholic teaching is based on verse 19. The point made about the Greek is correct, but the application is wrong. It concerns the participles in verse 19 regarding binding and loosing. These are in the perfect tense, which means the action they express takes place in the past and the results of that action remain. For instance, in Matthew 4:

4, 7, 10, Jesus responded to Satan with the words, “It is written.” The word *grapho* is used in the perfect tense in these verses. This means the Scriptures had been written, and they stand or remain written.

In Matthew 16:19 the words “bound” and “loosed” are both perfect participles. “Bound” is from *dedemenon*, from the verb *deo*. It means “having been bound.” “Loosed” is from *lelumenon*, from the verb *luo*. It means “having been loosed.” The things that are bound on earth have already been bound in heaven before they are bound on earth. The things that are loosed on earth have already been loosed (in heaven) and they stand or remain loosed on earth. Bear in mind that this binding or loosing takes place BEFORE these things are bound or loosed on earth. That is the basic force of the perfect tense.

The argument often used to refute the Catholic interpretation of verse 19 is this: The men of the Catholic Church cannot bind or loose anything. God binds or looses in heaven and then those things are bound or loosed on earth. Even Peter’s binding or loosing had *already been* decided in heaven and was then bound or loosed on earth. The perfect tense indicates this. Therefore, the Catholic use of this passage is wrong because the Catholic Magisterium claims the (authority) power to bind or loose on earth.

The problem with this argument is that Catholics agree with the meaning of the perfect tense. They agree that anything bound or loosed was bound or loosed *before*, in heaven, and *then* revealed through the apostles. They have no objection to the meaning of the Greek text. However, they claim that they stand in the same position as the apostles. They say that God has already decided what is bound or loosed in heaven, *then*, the Holy Spirit *reveals* these truths to the Catholic Magisterium today just as He did to Peter and the apostles. This is why it is useless to apply this argument to Catholicism. If we do, they will just say, “You just made our case; God has already bound or loosed in heaven and the Holy Spirit guides the Magisterium to do the same on earth.”

So, disproving the Catholic claim is not a matter of Greek exegesis of the binding and loosing in Matthew 16:19. It is a matter of disproving that the Pope and the college of bishops are successors of the apostles and have the same authority they did. More importantly, it is a matter of disproving the claim that the Holy Spirit guides the Catholic church today. That is the real issue.

Instead of looking for a definitive argument from Greek, we need to spend more time with the context. That is where the answer lies. After all, the average Greek-speaking person in the first century didn’t approach the Scriptures with the mindset of the arguments we just mentioned. He simply followed the flow of the discussion. In other words, he used the context, and that context is the same in Greek, English, Spanish, or any other language.

Now let’s examine the context of Matthew 16:18-19. The context is about Christ, not Peter. The focus is on *who Jesus is*, not *who Peter is*. Jesus set the direction of the discussion in verse 13 when he asked, “Who do men say that I, the Son of man, am?” and, even more when he asked, “But who do you say that I am?” in verse 15. Peter gave the right answer in verse 16: “You are the Christ, The Son of the living God.” That is the topic Jesus introduced. That is the correct answer. That is what Jesus continues to discuss in verses 17-18.

When Peter gave this answer, Jesus immediately said, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (v. 17). This verse is critical. Many times when preachers respond to the Catholic view of verse 18, they briefly mention verses 13-16, but, they barely notice verse 17.

The key word in this verse is *revealed*. Something was made known or revealed to Peter. What was it? It was Peter's answer in verse 16: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Catholics and Protestants agree so far on this point. But *how* did God reveal this to Peter? That's where the disagreement begins.

Catholics wrongly assume several things about the revealing of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, to the apostle Peter:

1. That God revealed this to Peter alone in this case
2. That God revealed this to Peter in a special way
3. That God reveals truth to the Catholic Magisterium in the same mysterious way today.

Catholics say God did the same thing with Paul. In Galatians 1:11-12, Paul said, "But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ." Catholics say this is what Jesus meant in Matthew 16: 17 — that God *directly revealed* who Jesus was to Peter in a way He did not reveal Jesus to others.

But Paul's situation was not the same. Jesus appeared to Paul on his way to Damascus. Paul saw and heard the risen Jesus in heaven. Do Catholics believe Jesus appears to the Pope today like he appeared to Paul?

*But how did God reveal who Jesus was to Peter?* This is no different from asking how God revealed His Son to anyone in the New Testament. Let's begin with Jesus' baptism. In John 1:31, John the Baptist said, "But that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water." John baptized so that Jesus would be *revealed to Israel* — not just to the apostles!

And what happened when Jesus was baptized? "A voice came from heaven, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'" (Matthew 3:17). Anyone who heard these words could know Jesus was the Christ. That was direct revelation, and it was revealed to the Jews in general, not specifically to Peter.

God revealed who Jesus was through the Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in Him and the miracles He did. These are all from the book of John:

- Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."—John 1:45
- There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."—John 3:1-2
- In John chapter 4 the Samaritan woman said, "Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" "Then they said to the woman, 'Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.'"—John 4:29, 42
- Jesus said, "But I have a greater witness than John's; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me."—John 5:36
- In the same chapter, Jesus told the Jews, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me."—John 5:39
- The disciples said, "Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."—John 6:69. All the disciples confessed that Jesus was the Christ, not just Peter. God revealed His Son to all of them in the same way.

- In John 10 we read: Then the Jews surrounded Him and said to Him, "How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me." John 10:24-25
- In the same context Jesus said, "If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him."—John 10:37-38
- In the famous meeting with His disciples the night before His death, Jesus answered Philip with these words: "Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves."—John 14:9-11
- Then toward the end of the book of John we find these words: "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."—John 20:29-30

The evidence of these verses is overwhelming. There is no mystery about how God revealed Himself or His son.

Sometimes Catholics, and, some Protestants, misuse Matthew 11:25-27 to teach some kind of unpredictable and incomprehensible mode of divine revelation. This passage says, "At that time Jesus answered and said, 'I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.'"

How did God *hide* these things to some and *reveal* them to others in verse 25? The "wise and prudent" were the Jewish leaders, especially the scribes and Pharisees. God "hid" the truth from them—not by withholding revelation, but by expressing it and showing it in such a way that the proud in heart would stumble at the simplicity of the message. Jesus explained this in Matthew 13:10-17. The parables were stated in such a way that sincere souls would see the truth, but dishonest souls would not. This is a general feature of divine revelation—Christ, miracles, or the Scriptures. So how did God *reveal* His truth to babes? In the same way he *hid* his truth from the wise and prudent—not by some mysterious voice of God, but *by the nature of the revelation itself!* That is how the "will" of the Lord worked in this passage.

How God revealed the Son to Peter or anyone else in the New Testament is no different than how the Son revealed the Father. One is no more a mystery than the other. Jesus *reveals* the Father (Matthew 11:27). He has *declared* Him (John 1:18) by His life and teaching (John 14:9-11). God revealed the Son through Jesus's life, His miracles, His teaching, and through the prophecies fulfilled in Jesus. That is how Peter and all others in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John knew who Jesus was.

Let's notice again the flow of the context in Matthew 16:13-19. Jesus asked the disciples who He was (v. 13). Peter said he was the Christ (v. 16). Jesus said God, not men, revealed this to him (v. 17). Then in verse 18 the word "And" *continues* the same thought; it links verse 18 with verse 17, and, verse 16. Notice the connection:

- In verse 16 Peter said You are the Christ
- In verse 17 Jesus said the Father showed this to Peter
- In verse 18 Jesus said: *And*—I will build My church on this rock—the same thing that was revealed in verse 17, which was what Peter confessed in verse 16!

The simple force of the context, not some technical Greek distinction, shows the meaning of Matthew 16:18.

Peter is secondary, not central, in this passage. Jesus mentioned his name Peter, which the Lord gave him, in contrast to his family name, Simon the son of Jonah. Peter was not just the son of Jonah anymore; he will be Cephas (John 1:42), a rock in the kingdom of God. But, he will not be its foundational stone. That distinction belongs to Jesus alone.

The next aspect of the interpretation of this passage is how it relates to the rest of Scripture. We call this level of context the total or overall or remote context. In this step or phase we look at other verses in different books of the Bible on this topic. These passages shed light on Matthew 16:18-19. They give additional details. They make certain aspects of the passage even clearer.

One of these verses is I Corinthians 3:11. “For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” Paul had just said, “you are God’s building” (v.9). He then cautions preachers to make sure they build on the right foundation in verses 10-12. He also says that Christians are the temple of God (w. 16-17). Preachers build on this foundation—Christ—by planting and building up congregations. But only Christ built the church in the sense of starting or establishing it. And He built it on the foundation of His being the Christ, the Son of God. This verse harmonizes beautifully with Jesus’ words in Matt. 16: 18, “upon this rock I will build My church,” especially since Peter had just confessed Jesus as the Christ.

Another verse that uses this image is Ephesians 2:20: “having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone.” Verse 21 says this is the building or temple of the Lord. What is “the foundation of the apostles and prophets?” This verse does not mean that the apostles and prophets *were* the foundation. Instead, this is the foundation the apostles and prophets *laid* by preaching Jesus as the Son of God. Paul made this clear when he said that Jesus Christ Himself is the chief corner stone in this foundation.

The figure or illustration is slightly different from the rock in Matt. 16:18, but the basic idea is the same. It is Jesus, not men or a man, who is the foundation of the church. This is consistent with Old Testament prophecy and its New Testament fulfillment. Psalm 118:22 said the Messiah would become the chief cornerstone. This psalm was fulfilled in Jesus according to Matthew 21:42, Acts 4:11 and I Peter 2:6-7. It is interesting that Peter himself, the supposed first Pope, said this about Jesus in these latter two passages.

There is a point that should be mentioned about Matthew 16:18. Some protestant commentators who obviously say the office of the Pope is unbiblical, do believe that the rock in Matthew 16:18 *is* Peter. Although I don’t agree with their interpretation, I would say that, speaking hypothetically, *if* the rock in Matthew 16:18 is Peter, that still wouldn’t prove Peter was the Pope. It would only mean that Jesus built the Church on the work Peter was going to do in preaching the gospel! In other words, even if we concede that the rock in Matthew 16:18 is Peter, we would only be saying what Ephesians 2:20 teaches — not that the church is built on Peter, the other apostles, and the prophets, but that the church is built on the *message* they preached. Peter laid this foundation when the church began by saying Jesus was Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). Other apostles and prophets and disciples did the same.

Another passage that sheds light on Matthew 16:18-19 is Matthew 18:18. Let's read verses 15-18. "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Here we find the same wording that we saw in Matthew 16:19 about binding and loosing. We also see the same construction in Greek with the perfect tense. The context is how to settle conflict in the church when one brother or sister has sinned against another. The first step is in verse 15. If this doesn't work, the next step is given in verse 16. If this doesn't resolve the situation, then the offended brother is to take the matter to a higher, more public level in verse 17. If the efforts of the congregation fail to bring the brother who sinned to repentance, then the church is to withdraw fellowship. That is what verse 18 is about: church discipline. Church discipline involves the first, second, and third step. There are two possible outcomes:

1. The brother who sinned may repent. In this case the brother he sinned against is to forgive him and treat him as he did before. This is the *loosing* of verse 18. The relationship is restored. If the church is involved in this situation, then the church looses or recognizes the repentance of the brother.

2. The brother who sinned may not repent. If he does not, even after others warned him and also after the church becomes involved in trying to restore him, then the offended brother and the congregation are to withdraw fellowship from him. These steps are the *binding* of verse 18. The brother who sinned is being held accountable by others—first, by the one he wronged, then by one or two more, then by the church as a whole. This change in the relationship is *binding*. It is authorized by God Himself.

God knew there would be conflicts in the church. He *revealed* how to deal with such matters in this verse and other verses. Where does an individual or a congregation get the *right* or the *authority* to do what Jesus mentioned in this passage? From the Lord Himself—in the Bible! Not from the Magisterium! When a brother and the congregation exercise this authority, they are only binding or loosing according to the authority God had already decided in heaven. The biblical way of how to deal with disputes had already been bound or loosed in heaven, and then it was revealed in the Scriptures.

The expressions about binding or loosing in this passage do not apply only Peter and the other apostles. Matthew 18 applies to all Christians. The difference is that, in Matthew 16:19, the binding and loosing came through direct revelation given by the Holy Spirit to Peter (and the other apostles, and, other inspired men in the first century such as the prophets), but in Matthew 18:18, it is given by the Holy Spirit in the *inspired* revelation—the Scriptures—to all Christians. In either case, the authority behind binding and loosing comes from God and is given by the Holy Spirit who *permanently deposited and presented* it in the *Bible*, not in the leadership of the Mormon church, the Catholic church, or any other group of men.

The Catholic claim of special authority from God is based on another key doctrine of the Roman Catholic church: Apostolic succession. Catholics believe that the Pope and the college of Bishops are successors to the apostles and have the same authority the apostles had. One verse that is irreconcilable with this claim is II Corinthians 12:12. Paul said, "Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds." These were obviously miracles. People could know that the apostles were genuine men

of God not merely by what *they said* they were, but by what they did — the working of miracles. Jesus' miracles proved He was God's Son (John 3:1-2; 10:37-38); the miracles of Peter and the other apostles proved they were sent from God. These signs confirmed the truth of their preaching (Mark 16:20; Heb. 2:1-4).

The fundamental problem with Catholicism is that, like other false religions, Catholic leaders claim to have the same authority of the apostles but give no proof of that claim. The real apostles of the New Testament gave signs—miracles—that proved they were sent by God. That is what Paul said in II Corinthians 12:12. Since the Catholic Magisterium can give no evidence like Paul and the other apostles gave, why should we believe God speaks through them any more than we believe He spoke through Joseph Smith, Ellen G. White, or that He speaks through false teachers today? If they cannot show *signs* of an apostle, why should we believe that they stand in the *place* of the apostles?

There are other points that could be made about the Catholic view of Matthew 16:18-19:

1. Peter had a wife (Matthew 8:14; I Corinthians 9:5). But, the Pope must not have a wife. I know that Catholics respond by saying that the celibacy of the Pope is a matter of *practice* in the Catholic church, not a permanent dogma. They tell us that the Magisterium has the right to enact or rescind these matters of discipline; but, they insist, the Magisterium can't change matters of *dogma* such as the doctrine of Jesus' virgin birth. But how can they claim to have this kind of authority to make these distinctions, to declare some matters bound and others loosed? That is why they appeal to Matthew 16:18-19 among other things. But that is a false claim as we have shown. And what other proof do they give? In the end, they give no proof—just the fact that they said so.

2. If Peter was the Pope, he certainly didn't act like the Pope in Acts 10. When Cornelius fell down at his feet and worshipped, Peter "lifted him up, saying, 'Stand up; I myself also am a man'" (Acts 10:25-26). Can you imagine the Pope today saying this to someone?

3. Paul said, "I am not at all inferior to the most eminent apostles" (II Corinthians 11:5). He did not hesitate to rebuke Peter in the presence of others in Galatians 2:11-14. How could Peter be above Paul when Paul said he was not inferior to the other apostles?

4. There is no mention or implication of the office of the Pope, the authority or existence of the Catholic Magisterium, or the doctrine of Apostolic succession in the New Testament.

These and other points show the problems with Catholic belief. There is much more that could be said. But this discussion has not been about the Pope in general. It has been a look at Matthew 16:18-19 in contrast to the Catholic view of these words of our Lord. My prayer is that you have learned something from it.