Matthew - Commentaries by Clifford Henry Brown

Did Christ Build His Church Upon Peter?, Did Christ Build Upon Peter?

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Probably no tenet of the Roman Catholic Church is more vigorously propagated than that our Lord Jesus Christ constituted the Apostle Peter the foundation of His church. It is our purpose herewith to examine this ambitious claim in the light of God's Word. The Scriptures warrant us in this approach to the question, for the prophet Isaiah instructs us, "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (ch. 8:20). Let us then imitate the Bereans of Paul's day, who "searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11).

That the Apostle Peter was granted a special place of administrative responsibility in connection with the early beginnings of the Christian economy, no thoughtful student of the Word would deny. But to confuse such an admittedly privileged position with the gratuitous assumption that our Lord thus indicated Peter as the rock foundation of His church is to do violence to many plain and unequivocal statements of Scripture.

From early times Catholic theologians have labored assiduously to prove their baseless assumption of the foundation character of Peter's commission by calling attention to the cognate relationship of the two Greek words used in the historic passage of Matthew 16:18. "Thou art Peter [petros, masculine gender and meaning 'a stone'], and upon this rock [petra, feminine gender, here correctly rendered 'rock') I will build My church." To seek to force these two Greek words of different genders into the same identical linguistic connotation is to ignore all the standard Greek lexicons. We will here cite a few selected passages from some recognized authorities. The first is the great work of Liddell and Scott, pp. 1206-1207:

"Petra, a rock, ledge or shelf of rock. There is no example, in good authors, of petra in the sense of petros, a stone."Petros, a stone, and thus distinguished from petra in Homer. The usual prose word is lithos."

Our next authority is the lexicon of Robinson, page 579:

"Petra, 1. A rock, cliff, ledge, literally a mass of live rock . . . on such also houses and villages were founded for security (Matt. 7:2425). 2. Figuratively, of Christ, in allusion to the rock whence the waters flowed in the desert (1 Cor. 10:4). . . . So, too, of Christ as a rock of offense or stumbling; that is, as the occasion of destruction to those who reject Him (Rom. 9:33; 1 Peter 2:8). Petros, a piece of rock, a stone. . . . In New Testament only as proper noun Peter, the surname of Simon, one of the apostles, son of Jonas."

Our third citation is from Edersheim, Life and Times of Jesus, vol. 2, pp. 8283:

"Petros is used in Greek for 'stone,' and also sometimes for 'rock,' while Petra always means a 'rock.' . . . We can further understand how, just as Christ's contemporaries may have regarded the world as reared on the rock of faithful Abraham, so Christ promised that He would build His church on the Petrine in Peter — on his faith and confession" (italics supplied).

Our last citation is from Vine's Dictionary of New Testament Words, vol. 3, page 302: "Petra denotes a mass of rock, as distinct from petros, a detached stone or boulder, or a stone that might be thrown or easily moved . . . . Petra, 1 Corinthians 10:4 (twice), figuratively, of Christ; in Romans 9:33 and 1 Peter 2:8, metaphorically, of Christ; in Matthew 16:18, metaphorically, of Christ and the testimony concerning Him; here the distinction between petra, concerning the Lord Himself, and Petros, the Apostle, is clear."

As if to anticipate the preposterous claim of Rome that Christ intended to build His church on Peter, the same chapter records the humiliating fact that the Lord had to administer to the man Peter (Petros) as stern a rebuke as one might think possible: "Get thee behind Me, Satan: thou art an offense unto Me: for thou savorest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men" (Matt. 16:23). No! Our Lord never founded His church upon one who could so readily and immediately be a mouthpiece of Satan.

But if Christ did not mean to convey to us the Romish idea of placing His church upon the man Peter, what did He mean by this most contested passage in Matthew 16? I think we cannot do better here than quote from the well-known expositor, William Kelly, as he writes in his volume on Matthew, in loco: " 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church.' What rock? The confession Peter had made that Jesus was the Son of the living God. On this the church was built . . . . 'Thou art Peter' — thou art a stone — a man that derivest thy name from this rock on which the church is built" (italics supplied).

We are firmly convinced that Mr. Kelly has, in these words, given us the mind of the Spirit of God in the passage under consideration. That Peter himself had this view of the Lord's words addressed to him in Matthew 16 is fully corroborated and easily evidenced by his own epistles. In 1 Peter 2:4-8, we hear the Apostle comparing believers to stones and Christ to a rock. It is true, the word for stones here is not petros but lithos, yet this is easily accounted for in the fact to which our attention was called in Liddell and Scott's lexicon: "The usual prose word is lithos." This does not in the least weaken our contention that the rock, petra, is not Peter, but Christ. "Unto you therefore which believe He [Christ] is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, and a stone [lithos] of stumbling, and a rock [petra] of offense, even to them which stumble at the word" (1 Peter 2:7-8). Here Christ is plainly designated a rock [petra]. In verse 5 of this same chapter Peter shares his "stoneship" with his brethren by admitting them to his privilege of being a living stone [lithos] built upon the living stone (lithos), Christ of verse 4. Remember always that Petros in the New Testament is never used save as a proper name and is applied to Peter only. But whenever Peter desires to designate a stone, he uses the ordinary Greek term, lithos. According to all the Greek lexicons, the two words, lithos and petros, are synonyms.

Augustine, the great church father and bishop of Hippo, Africa, 355-430 A.D., gives a clear-cut paraphrase of Matthew 16:18. We quote: “Thou art Petros, and on this petra which thou hast confessed, saying Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God, will I build My church: that is to say, on Myself. I will build thee on Myself, not Myself on thee.” How infinitely above the gross conception of a poor, failing, inconsistent Peter is this incisive statement of Augustine.

Let us now summon the testimony of another venerable church father, Chrysostom, 345-407 A.D., patriarch of Constantinople: “On this rock; that is, on the faith of his confession; He did not say upon Peter, for it was not upon man, but upon his faith.” And if space permitted we could multiply citations from the fathers which show the same interpretation was advocated by them.

Peter was addressed as “Satan” by our Lord (Matt. 16:23), denied his Lord with oaths and curses (Matt. 26:74), played the hypocrite at Antioch (Gal. 2:11-13), and confessed his own difficulty in apprehending Paul’s exalted line of ministry (2 Peter 3:16). In the light of these revealed facts as to Peter, can we think for a moment that our Lord built His church on such a poor, failing instrument? No! There is but one MAN who is worthy to be the foundation rock of that blessed institution: He is “the MAN CHRIST JESUS” (1 Tim. 2:5).

In conclusion we would call attention to a plain and incontestable scripture which forever banishes Rome’s frantic, if futile, attempts to place the church upon Peter. We refer to 1 Corinthians 3:11. It is from the pen of the great Apostle of the Gentiles, the one to whom was entrusted the ministry of the truth of the divine mystery of Christ and the church, the one who said, “I was not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles.” Let us hear his testimony: “Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

Thus we see that Christ — not Peter — was the foundation of the church. Peter’s priority in the administrative work of the early chapters of the Acts we happily admit and rejoice in. He was the one chosen of God to open out the new truth of salvation through a risen and glorified Saviour (Acts 2:38). He was the one to interpret that stupendous event, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-16). He was the one to gain official recognition to the admission of the hybrid and despised Samaritans (Acts 8:14-17). He was the one who received the heavenly vision teaching God’s acceptance of the Gentiles (Acts 10:28), and it was he who officially threw open the door to them at the meeting in the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:43-48; cf. Acts 15:6-11). But all these wonderful privileges are clearly distinct and separate from any pretense on Peter’s part to be the foundation of the church of God which is the body of Christ.

We desire to close this brief review of the question at the head of this paper by quoting a passage from J. N. Darby as found in his article, “Romanism: or An Answer to the Pamphlet of a Romish Priest, Entitled, ‘The Law and the Testimony.’ ” On pages 85-87 of Mr. Darby’s answer we read, “But Peter, let men say what they will, is never called a rock. He is called a stone; he partook of the nature of the rock, God having quickened him with this life and given him to confess Christ in this character. But Peter means a stone and does not mean a rock. People do not build upon a stone, even if it partake of the durability of the rock to which it belongs. Peter is not the rock or a rock; he is, as to his name, a stone. Peter having just confessed the true, living and divine foundation of the new thing, which the rejected Christ was going to raise up in contrast with rebellious Israel, and Christ, having recognized that the Father Himself had taught Peter this great truth, carrying far beyond the hope of Israel, says, ‘Thou art a stone,’ thou participatest in this truth, and on this rock, this eternal truth of My person, which you have been given of the Father to own, I will build the church. The Father had revealed this great truth of Christ’s nature to Simon, and Christ gives him, besides, the name of Peter, for the confession of truth, by divine teaching, connects a man with the strength and durability of the truth he so confessed: He abides livingly with it and by it.”

The Christian Shepherd: 2004, "A Bruised Reed"

“A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall He not quench” (Matt. 12:20).

When the Lord Jesus was here, it was said of Him, “A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall He not quench.” Isn’t that lovely? A bruised reed of what account is it? He will not break it. That blessed, gentle Man would not break that bruised reed. And smoking flax that is a lamp with a flaxen wick. It is smoking not giving much light. He will not quench it not put it out. He will tenderly remove the crust and coax it back until it gives light.

God does not despise weakness. Saints of God, do not surrender and give yourselves up to indifference because you have little gift or because there are only a few. Numbers do not count with God; they do not. Go through the life of the blessed Lord Jesus and see how often you find His ministry to one individual; He was not too busy to sit down and spend an hour with some lone individual man or woman. He was not too big a Man to listen to little children. That blessed Man went up and down the pathways of Galilee, and, except for that little trip up around Tyre and Sidon, so far as I know, He was never out of that country, save as a babe in His mother’s arms. He was not too busy for the small things of life.

“Behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice” (1 Kings 19:11-12).

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