



# GOD'S PURPOSE FOR THE CHURCH

PART II

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THE NEW TESTAMENT  
of Our Lord and Saviour  
Jesus Christ

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The Roman Catholic teaching regarding Peter is that he was the “rock” upon which the Church is built and therefore both the exclusive and ultimate authority for the Church; consequently, Roman Catholicism affirms apostolic succession and the authority of the Pope.

**I**t is a fundamental doctrine of Scripture that the specific plan and purpose of God for the Church is to be distinguished from regenerate national Israel.<sup>1</sup> The Church is exclusive and unique to this age (dispensation). The origin of the Church was still future during Christ’s earthly ministry, and did not come into existence until after His resurrection (cf. Matthew 16:18; Acts 1:4-5; 2:32-33; 11:15-17; 1 Corinthians 12:13). The holy calling of the Church as distinct from that of Israel is evident from an understanding of both the foundation and origin of the Church.



#### FOUNDATION OF THE CHURCH

The first use of the word church (Gk. *ekklesia*) in the New Testament is found in Matthew 16:16-19. In response to Peter’s statement that He is “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus said to him, “flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” Speaking to Peter (Gk. *petros*, “stone”), Jesus promised, “upon this rock [Gk. *petra*, “rock”] I will build my church.” In regards to the foundation of the Church, there is much interpretative labor to identify the “rock” upon which Jesus promised to build His Church. Roman Catholicism identifies the “rock” as Peter who is believed to have been the foundation for and ultimate authority of the Church. Based on the doctrine of apostolic succession, Roman Catholicism teaches that final authority and infallibility resides in the Pope.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Suggested Foundations*

There are many interpretive views regarding the meaning of Matthew 16:16-

19, but all focus upon two persons, Christ and Peter. Some Protestants believe Peter is the “rock” upon which the Church is built. The prevailing evangelical view is that Christ is the one, essential foundation upon which the Church is built. The Roman Catholic teaching regarding Peter is that he was the “rock” upon which the Church is built and therefore both the exclusive *and* ultimate authority for the Church; consequently, Roman Catholicism affirms apostolic succession and the authority of the Pope. Some Protestants believe Peter is the “rock” but only in the sense that he was given the apostolic privilege to extend the universality of the Church to Gentiles (Acts 15:17).<sup>3</sup> This view is supported by the extension of the Church as recorded in Acts 2, 8, 10.<sup>4</sup> Most evangelicals are uncomfortable with this view not for lack of biblical support but due to apprehension that it may lend support

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to the conservative Roman Catholic understanding. “Yet were it not for Protestant reactions against extremes of Roman Catholic interpretation,<sup>5</sup> it is doubtful whether many would have taken ‘rock’ to be anything or anyone other than Peter.”<sup>6</sup> Prominent evangelical New Testament scholar D. A. Carson identified five reasons why it may be best to identify Peter as the “rock.”<sup>7</sup>

1) The meaning of *petros* and *petra* can mean “stone” and “rock” respectively in classical Greek, although the distinction is generally confined to poetry. Christ Jesus spoke Aramaic here, as “Bar-Jonah” indicates (Matthew 16:17), and in that language *kepha* would have been used in both clauses. The Greek New Testament preserves the pun because the feminine, *petra*, would not be suitable as a name for Simon.

2) Paronomasia (rhyming of words similar in sound, but not necessarily in sense) is common in the Bible, and should not be disregarded.

3) If Matthew wanted to indicate that Peter was a stone (Gk. *petros*) in contrast to Jesus the Rock (Gk. *petra*), he would have used the more common word *lithos* (“stone” of any size) and there would have been no pun (which is exactly the intent)!

4) The objection that Peter regarded Jesus as the Rock is unconvincing because metaphors are commonly used in various manners, until there is a stereotype, and sometimes even then it is maintained. In Matthew 16:16-19, Jesus will build His Church (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:10-11; Ephesians 2:19-20; Revelation 21:14). In Revelation 1:18 and 3:7, Jesus has the keys to the Church. Jesus is the Rock in Romans

9:33, 1 Corinthians 10:4, and 1 Peter 2:8. In John 9:5, Jesus is the light of the world, but in Matthew 5:14, His disciples are specified as such. None of these pairs jeopardizes the uniqueness of Jesus. These examples simply indicate how metaphors must be interpreted principally with reference to their immediate contexts.

5) In Matthew 16:16-19, Jesus is the Builder of the Church and it would be a peculiar combination of metaphors to regard Him within the equivalent clauses as the foundation.

To regard Peter as the foundation of the Church does not necessitate one to affirm the Roman Catholic teaching of papal succession and infallibility, nor the priority of Peter. The Church has been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20) of which Peter may be regarded as the first among equals.<sup>8</sup>

The Messiah is going to build His Church . . . for which Peter is to supply the foundation. It is quite clear that here Christ Himself is not the foundation-rock or foundation-stone. He is the Builder of the edifice, determining when, where, and how it shall be raised. He is the source of all activity in framing the building.<sup>9</sup>

Another prominent evangelical view is that the “rock” upon which the Church was built is Peter’s confession of Christ (Matthew 16:16). This is a common view that is a mediating position between Peter himself as an apostle and Christ as the essential and unique foundation. Lightner wrote, “Peter’s confession of faith is viewed by some as the foundation of the Church. This view is closely related to the prominent evangelical belief that Christ

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is the foundation of the Church. Though the views are not identical, they can hardly be separated from each other; together they constitute an evangelical consensus.”<sup>10</sup> The majority of evangelicals believe that the “rock” is Christ Himself upon which the Church is built. “However, this seems to create a disjuncture between the two rocks contrary to their close connection in the text itself.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, Ryrie concluded:

Perhaps the truth combines elements... that is, the rock is Peter using the keys of the kingdom (v. 19; Isa. 22:22) in proclaiming the truth about Christ to Jews and Gentiles. Thus Christ is the Founder of His church in that He chose the apostolic foundation, gave basic teaching concerning relationships in the church, gave His life to become the Cornerstone, and then sent the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost to activate the church.<sup>12</sup>

#### *The Origin of the Church*

Matthew 18:17 is in the context of church discipline. Following a specific order for discipline, Jesus said the final procedure is to bring the matter “to the church.” Matthew’s reference to the church was a reference to the natural Jewish mindset of an “assembly”; it is even possible (although not likely) that Matthew was referring to a Jewish “assembly” as the synagogue in 18:17. In both Matthew 16:18 and 18:17, the designation of “Church” is in reference to a new entity of which Christ Jesus is the Founder. Walvoord remarked:

Obviously, church organization, as seen in the New Testament, had not yet been established, and it is more probable that



He was referring here to a Jewish assembly, with which the disciples were familiar. If the offender refused to correct the matter in front of the whole assembly, he was then to be considered an outsider and was no longer worthy to be considered a brother. It is significant that there was no recognition of church authority, such as a bishop or elder, or even the authority of the disciples themselves.<sup>13</sup>

In regards to the origin of the Church, Erickson commented:

It is notable, however, that Jesus makes only two references to the church (Matt. 16:18; 18:17), and that in the former case he is speaking of the future (“I will build my church”). The fact that Luke never uses *ekklesia* in his Gospel but employs it twenty-four times in Acts is also significant. It would seem that he did not regard it as present until the period covered in Acts. (While Acts 7:38 uses *ekklesia* of the people of Israel in the wilderness, it is likely that the term is here being used in a nontechnical sense.) We conclude that the church originated at Pentecost.<sup>14</sup>

Although Peter may be identified as the rock who used the keys of the kingdom “in proclaiming the truth about Christ to Jews and Gentiles,” Ephesians 2:11-3:11 is clear that Christ is indeed the “Founder of His Church.” Scripture declares:

Therefore, remember, . . . you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise . . . that in Himself He might make the two into one new man . . . fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets . . . that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery . . . which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel . . . and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God . . . this was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.

#### *Christ Is the Founder of His Church*

Much discussion has occurred regarding the distinction between *petros* (stone) and *petra* (rock). Many evangelicals believe that the rock upon which the Church is built is not Peter, who is a mere stone, but Jesus Himself, the Rock of foundation (cf. 1 Peter 2:5-8). It does appear conclusive that Peter is the rock (Matthew 16:16-19), but this does not deny that Jesus is the Builder of the Church and that other passages, such as 1 Corinthians 3:11, teach Christ is the foundation.<sup>15</sup> “Finally, Peter stands only as the first among equals, who shares, . . . founda-

tional activity with the other apostles. The same authority of binding and loosing is common to all the apostles (John 20:23) and ultimately to the entire Church (Matthew 18:18).”<sup>16</sup>

Peter never claimed a position of infallibility or ultimate authority for himself (Acts 10:25-26; 1 Peter 1:1; 5:1-3). Indeed, Peter denied being the source or authority upon which the Church is founded (Acts 2:21; 10:43). The teaching of Peter's final authority and infallibility is contrary to his ministry. Immediately following his confession of faith and declaration by Christ, Peter was censured severely by the Lord (Matthew 16:22-23). Furthermore, it was essential for Paul to confront Peter for hypocrisy and confusing the truth of the Gospel (Galatians 2:11-14). Peter never exerted a controlling authority in the early Church. He was not the exclusive authority involved in choosing a replacement for Judas (Acts 1:15-26), selecting of deacons (6:1-7), and leading the council at Jerusalem (15:1-33).

Moreover, the specific teaching of Scripture in other passages declares Christ as the foundation for the Church (1 Corinthians 3:11; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-7). Ephesians 2:20 refers to the Church as a building, and all the New Testament apostles and prophets are identified as components of the foundation. The authority given to Peter by Jesus (Matthew 16:18-19) was given to all the Apostles (Matthew 18:18; John 20:23). It may be said that Peter did extend the Gospel through His proclamation of Christ and thereby opened the door to the Church at Pentecost (Acts 2), among the Samaritans (Acts 8), and subsequently to the Gentiles (Acts 10).

The binding and loosing in Christ's word to Peter relate to delivering the message of the gospel. When he gave the mes-

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sage, the people were able to be released from their sins. If he withheld the message, they would remain bound in their sin.... We may conclude from Christ's own words (Matt. 16:18) that he (Christ) is the foundation of the church; in complete harmony with [1 Corinthians 3:11; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter. 2:4-8].<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The nature of the Church as a new entity that originated at Pentecost, founded upon the New Testament apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20) is a fundamental doctrine of Scripture. Christ's headship over the Church distinguishes the relationship of the Church as unique (Ephesians 1:22-23). Therefore, the Church should not be confused with Israel, the kingdom of God, or another phase in salvation history. The Church is a distinct entity in this age, which is evident from a consideration of the foundation and origin of the Church. Both the Church and Israel have special relationships with God but they must be distinguished. Since the Church came into existence on the Day of Pentecost, the Church is distinct from Israel, and cannot inherit the unconditional promises that God made with Israel. Such a fundamental understanding drastically affects how one understands the fulfillment of the biblical covenants, the blessings and curses upon Israel (cf. Deuteronomy 28-30), and future earthly purposes. (MC)

## ENDNOTES

1 There are, of course, certain similarities (e.g. Leviticus 20:7; 1 Peter 1:16).

- 2 "From the beginning this acknowledgement ["You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"] of Christ's divine sonship will be the center of the apostolic faith, first professed by Peter as the Church's foundation" [Catechism of the Catholic Church, Section 442 (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 124].
- 3 "Giving these keys to Peter meant that to him would be given the power and authority to release the door of gospel opportunity initially at the commencement of this age. That is the reason Peter (and not one of the other disciples) was the God-chosen preacher to instruct his Jewish listeners how they were to receive God's grace and 'the free gift of the Holy Ghost' (Acts 2:38, 39)" [Merrill F. Unger, *New Testament Teaching on Tongues* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971), 25].
- 4 Ibid., 35-50.
- 5 Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor, 1986), 401.
- 6 D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:368.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Compare Matthew 10:2; 14:28; Mark 1:16; 8:29; 9:2-5; Luke 5:1-12; etc.
- 9 Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1963), 228.
- 10 Robert P. Lightner, *Handbook of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1995), 229.
- 11 Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 402.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 John F. Walvoord, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 137
- 14 Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 1048.
- 15 These conclusions are adapted from Dr. Ken Hanna, "Theology 405" (unpublished class notes, Dallas Theological Seminary, Summer 2000), 10.
- 16 Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 64.
- 17 Lightner, *Evangelical Theology*, 231.