

Voices: The church is not built on Peter

November 29, 2022

Matthew 16 was the Bible passage for the morning sermon. When the Sunday service ended, one of our worship team members approached me and said: "I always thought Peter was the rock Jesus referred to. You know, the one on whom Jesus built his church." A few others from the congregation echoed the same sentiment.

We attend a Filipino Baptist church in the Houston area. Many of us grew up in a country where most people believed the apostle Peter founded the church. He was the first pope and a sort of "prime minister" of God's kingdom on earth.

When we became believers of the Lord Jesus Christ, many turned away from that church, disclaimed its tenets as idol worship, rejected veneration of Mary as a mediator between God and man, and rejected the pope as the vicar of Christ. However, false doctrines remain embedded until the Holy Spirit performs an open-heart surgery through the word of God.

One of the misinterpreted and misunderstood biblical passages is found in Matthew 16:18, where Jesus said, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."

It is unfortunate that some Bible study leaders and even Baptist pastors promote the idea Peter is the rock spoken of in Matthew 16:18.

It does not help that a footnote in the New International Version of the Bible reads, "The Greek word for *Peter* means *rock*." It is almost an affirmation that Peter truly is the "rock" referred to in that Bible verse.

However, there are a number of reasons why this is not so.

Understanding the context

I remember my training with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship when I was in college on how to study the Bible. One important lesson I learned is to know and understand the context by reading the previous passages and the succeeding verses. It will help paint a clearer picture.

Let us apply that lesson by considering Matthew 16:13-20. Jesus and his disciples came to the region of Caesarea Philippi. He asked his disciples who people think the Son of Man is—a reference to himself.

They said some people thought he was John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Jesus then narrowed down the scope of his inquiry and made it personal by asking the disciples: “What about you? Who do you say I am?”

Peter declared, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Jesus immediately told Peter and those around him that what Peter said did not come from a natural source, not from Peter, and not from any human being. It was a supernatural declaration of who Jesus is, revealed to Peter by God the Father. Peter was blessed to be the mouthpiece of that profound declaration.

Jesus continued: “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:18-19).

“Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah” (Matthew 16:20).

Foundation of the church

Jesus said he would build his church upon the rock. That rock is the foundation of his church. That rock must be supernaturally strong, stable, immovable, dependable and so reliable that it is able to support the church.

The church Jesus will build is supernaturally powerful. The gates of Hades—or the realm of the dead—cannot withstand its onslaught or attack.

How can Peter be the immovable, reliable rock if he denied Jesus three times? How can Peter be the dependable rock if, after being told to pray, he fell asleep in the garden of Gethsemane?

No, Peter is not the rock. It is the declaration Peter made of Jesus. The church is founded on the truth that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

The realm of the dead cannot prevail

Jesus declared the gates of Hades—the realm of the dead—could not overcome the church. Which is more powerful, the church or the rock the church is built upon? If the realm of the dead could not prevail against the church built upon the rock, then it is powerless against the rock itself.

Peter cannot be the rock, for he died and remained dead, but there is one who conquered death. Jesus died as the sacrifice for our sins. He rose again to demonstrate his ultimate power against sin, death and the grave. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead proved the gates of Hades could not prevail against him.

Jesus Christ is the solid rock. He is the foundation of his church. He alone lay claim to this title, for he has the power and authority to raise himself back to life that death may die.

The hymn writer puts it:

“On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand:
all other ground is sinking sand;
all other ground is sinking sand” (Edward Mote, 1834).

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