

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

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Of Broken Hearts and Broken Shackles, Part 1

By Timothy F. Kauffman

The case for Petrine Primacy, and ostensibly the case for Roman and Papal Primacy, rests entirely on Jesus' response to Peter's confession: "upon this rock I will build my church;" "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it;" "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom;" and "whatsoever thou shalt bind [and] loose..." (*Matthew* 16:18-19). His response has taken on such a mythical character that the words have long been subordinated to the myth, obscured either by pious guesswork and ancient speculation or by centuries of attempts to clarify or to correct the conjecture. Two religions have thus emerged from the vortex of Jesus' response. One rests confidently on the man, Peter, and the other points to the implications of his confession, eager to stand on more solid ground than Peter can provide. A comparatively simple textual analysis reveals that Jesus built His Church neither upon Peter, nor upon his confession, nor upon the apostles, nor even upon Himself, but upon the Words His Father had commanded Him to speak. Even Christ himself concedes that His Father's Words are the only appropriate foundation, a truth confirmed by Isaiah whom He cites authoritatively. Once this is understood, it becomes clear that Jesus' further promises about "the gates of hell," "the keys of the kingdom," and "binding" and "loosing" must also refer to "the foolishness of preaching," a commission He had received from His Father and would soon confer on the Eleven.

Interpretations of *Matthew* 16:18 are varied and diverse. Peter was the first to confess Christ's divinity, says one Roman Catholic apologist, and therefore Jesus meant to build his Church upon

Peter.¹ A Protestant responds that Peter was "first to confess," so *his confession* is the rock.² Peter's confession was "so strong," says another, that Jesus promised to build his Church upon *the apostles*.³ No, "Christ is the Rock," says another.⁴ Or perhaps Peter is the rock "*by virtue of his confession*," says yet another.⁵ The early writers are of no assistance, exhibiting no uniform understanding of the passage. Tertullian (199 AD) understood Peter to be "the rock" who had "the keys,"⁶ but binding and loosing "had nothing to do with the capital sins of believers" or the particular power of the Roman bishop.⁷ Cyprian of Carthage (250 AD) took "upon this rock" to mean that "the Church is founded upon the bishops,"⁸ and Firmilian of Caesarea (256 AD) held that "the foundations of the Church were laid" upon Peter, but not upon the bishop of Rome.⁹ In a fawning letter to Damasus (376 AD), Jerome

¹ Dave Armstrong, "50 New Testament Proofs for Peter's Primacy and the Papacy," October 13, 2015, accessed August 27, 2022, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/davearmstrong/2015/10/50-nt-proofs-for-petrine-primacy-the-papacy.html>.

² "Is Peter the 'Rock' / Pope in Matthew 16:18?" accessed August 27, 2022, <https://reformedwiki.com/peter-rock-pope-matthew>.

³ Allan Ross, "24. Peter's Confession and Christ's Church (Matthew 16:13-20)," March 31, 2006, accessed August 27, 2022, <https://bible.org/seriespage/24-peter-s-confession-and-christ-s-church-matthew-1613-20>.

⁴ <https://blog.tms.edu/upon-this-rock>.

⁵ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-does-this-rock-refer-to-matthew-1618/>.

⁶ Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics* 22 (c. 199 AD).

⁷ Tertullian, *On Modesty* 21.

⁸ Cyprian, *Epistle* 26 1.

⁹ Cyprian, *Epistle* 74 17.

affirmed that the bishop of Rome was “the rock on which the church is built,”¹⁰ but when Jovinianus argued for a married clergy (for Jesus had built his church on Peter, *a married apostle* (393 AD)), the histrionic and misogynistic Jerome reversed himself, insisting that Jesus had built his church upon “all the Apostles, and they all receive the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and the strength of the Church depends upon them all alike.”¹¹ Lacking any compelling evidence, and certainly finding none in the early church, the *Catholic Catechism* simply declares that *Matthew* 16:18-19 is a summary description of a multifaceted Petrine, Papal, Roman prerogative.¹²

These diverse and conflicting interpretations may be attributed to the longstanding assumption — ancient and modern, Protestant and Catholic — that Jesus responded as He did because Peter was the *first* of the apostles to believe. The apparent primacy of his confession makes the words “thou art Peter” (*Matthew* 16:18) the governing construct through which the rest of Jesus’ response is interpreted. The rock, the gates of hell, the keys of the kingdom, the binding and the loosing — are all loaded on Peter’s frail shoulders because of his allegedly exemplary confession.

However, it is evident from the Gospels, Jesus’ prayer to His Father and the events leading up to Peter’s confession, that ten other apostles had already confessed their faith. The substance of their confession was simple: “they...have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me” (*John* 17:8). Of this simple truth, Andrew (*John* 1:41), Philip and Nathanael (*John* 1:45, 49) confessed upon their first meeting. The rest confessed on their way across the Sea of Galilee (*Matthew* 14:33), leaving only Judas and Peter in unbelief.* When Peter finally confessed Jesus as the Son of God, he was the *last* of the

apostles to believe, completing the chief objective of Jesus’ preaching ministry: to deliver the Father’s Word *to the Eleven* (*John* 17:8-12). “All that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you,” he told them (*John* 15:15), and to his Father, “I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them” (*John* 17:8). When Peter’s confession is thus understood as the *completion* of a task rather than its *beginning*, the focus shifts away from Peter and back to the task: delivering his Father’s Words. The subsequent promises are understood in light of *that task alone*.

Because the miracles of the loaves and fishes contextualize Peter’s confession, we shall begin with a harmonization of the Gospel accounts to show that the Father’s Words remained the focus of Jesus’ interaction with Peter from beginning to end. Once that context is established, we shall demonstrate that each subsequent phrase — “upon this rock,” “the gates of hell shall not prevail,” “I will give unto thee the keys” and “whatsoever thou shalt bind...and...loose” — are also shown to refer not to a Petrine administrative ecclesiastical primacy, but rather to the preaching ministry Jesus had received from his Father and the Eleven would receive from Christ. Then, because *John* 20:23 — “Whose soever sins ye remit...and...retain” — is often interpreted through the lens of “binding” and “loosing,” we shall conclude with an analysis of that verse as well.

The Harmonized Loaves Narrative

What is lost in the historical exegesis of *Matthew* 16:19 is that Jesus responded to Peter’s confession in the aftermath of the two miracles of the loaves and fishes — the feeding of the 5,000 and of the 4,000 — a narrative in which Peter’s confession is shown to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy that the Church would be built upon the Words of the Father. After the first miracle of the loaves on the eastern shore (*Matthew* 14:13-21, *Mark* 6:30-44, *Luke* 9:10-17, *John* 6:1-13), the people confessed that Jesus was “that prophet that should come into the world” (*John* 6:14), a reference to *Deuteronomy* 18:18 in which the Father promised to raise up a Prophet and “put my words in his mouth.” Thence crossing the sea, the apostles encountered Jesus walking on water and confessed, “Of a truth thou art the Son of

¹⁰ Jerome, *Letter* 15 2.

¹¹ Jerome, *Against Jovinianus* 1, 26.

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC, hereafter), 553 (compare 881).

* Clearly Judas was not among those in the ship who believed, for Jesus later attests that Judas had not and would not believe (*John* 6:64). Had Peter believed with the rest in the ship as they crossed the Sea of Galilee (*Matthew* 14:33), Jesus’ response in *Matthew* 16:18 would not have been so salutary or inflective.

God” (*Matthew* 14:33). That confession, of course, excluded Judas who would never believe (*John* 6:64) and Peter who had returned to the boat full of doubt (*Matthew* 14:31). At the western shore, they encountered the scribes and Pharisees whom Jesus roundly criticized for “making the word of God of none effect” (*Matthew* 15:1-14; *Mark* 7:1-16). Venturing by foot through Tyre, Sidon, and then round about to Decapolis on the eastern shore in search of “lost sheep,” they witnessed more healings and confessions of faith (*Matthew* 15:21-31, *Mark* 7:24-37). Having witnessed another miracle of multiplication (*Matthew* 15:32-39, *Mark* 8:1-10) and sailing again to the western shore, Jesus admonished the Jews not to murmur at his many followers, for Isaiah had prophesied “they shall be all taught of* God” (*John* 6:41-47, citing *Isaiah* 54:13). Facing the Pharisees and Sadducees who demanded a sign from heaven (*Matthew* 16:1-4, *Mark* 8:11-13, *John* 6:30-59), He refused, and His challenging responses were too hard for them, so “from that time” onward, many of his disciples “went back,¹³ and walked no more with him” (*John* 6:60-66). Departing again for the eastern shore, he warned the apostles of the “doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees” and the Herodians (*Matthew* 16:5-6, *Mark* 8:14-15). He implored them to discern the meaning of both miracles (*Matthew* 16:7-12, *Mark* 8:16-21), whereupon the focus of the conversation pivoted back to the doctrine of His Father. With crowds thinning because of His “hard saying,” and with no recorded confessions since the Syrophoenician woman many days past (*Matthew* 15:21-28; *Mark* 7:24-30), and meandering through Bethsaida (*Mark* 8:22) and “the coasts” and “towns” of Caesarea Philippi (*Matthew* 16:13; *Mark* 8:27), two significant questions pertained: “Will ye

also go away?” (*John* 6:67)[†] and “Whom do men say that I am?” (*Matthew* 16:13; *Mark* 8:27; *Luke* 9:18). At long last, Peter finally confessed what ten others had already realized: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (*Matthew* 16:16), acknowledging as well that he could not turn away, for “thou hast the words of eternal life” (*John* 6:68). Having accomplished His mission of bringing the Eleven to faith, He immediately began to instruct them of his coming death and resurrection (*Matthew* 16:21; *Mark* 8:31; *Luke* 9:22), but not before observing that Peter, too, had fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy. All who are “taught of God” and have “learned of[†] the Father, cometh unto me,” Jesus had told the Jews (*John* 6:45). Now, at long last, Peter too had been taught by the Father: “Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, *but my Father which is in heaven*” (*Matthew* 16:17).

Upon This Rock

This harmonization shows how prominently *the Father’s Words* factored into the narrative leading up to Peter’s confession,^{*} and thus, how

[†] Some commentaries assume this conversation took place mere hours after the feeding of the 5,000, but the text does not allow it. The miracle occurred before Passover (*John* 6:4), when many of the Jews, and certainly the scribes and Pharisees, would have been in Jerusalem “to purify themselves” (*John* 11:55). With Passover on the 14th of Nisan (*Leviticus* 23:5) and seven more days for the Feast of Unleavened Bread (*Leviticus* 23:6), Jesus’ conversation with the Jews in *John* 6:30-32 would have taken place many as two weeks after the miracle. His question to Peter in *John* 6:67 would have taken place days or weeks after that, allowing time for John’s observation, “From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him” (*John* 6:67). Only then did Jesus ask, “Will ye also go away?”

[†] “learned of the Father” has the sense here of “learned from the Father,” as Jesus confirms in his response to Peter, *i.e.*, “my Father which is in heaven...hath...revealed it unto thee”

^{*} Peter’s confession in *Matthew* 16:16 is substantively the same as that of *Mark* 8:29 (“Thou art the Christ.”), *Luke* 9:20 (“The Christ of God.”), and *John* 6:69 (“You are the Holy One of God.”). While some commentaries allege three separate, progressively significant confessions, first on the Sea of Galilee with the rest (*Matthew* 14:33), then in Caesarea Philippi (*Matthew* 16:16, *Mark* 8:29 and *Luke* 9:20), and again in *John* 6:69, such an ordering detracts from the simplicity of the desired confession: “that I came out from thee,” and “that thou didst send me” (*John* 17:8). If Peter had confessed with the others on the Sea in *Matthew* 14:33, it is unclear why Jesus

* as the rest of the verse implies, “taught of God” (διδασκτοῖ τοῦ Θεοῦ) has the sense of “taught by God” rather than “taught about God.”

¹³ The Greek, ἀπῆλθον εἰς τὰ ὀπίσω, is literally “went away back,” returning to their previous locations. They “walked (περιεπάτου) no more with him” has the meaning of no longer traveling about with him throughout the “villages, or cities, or country” (*Mark* 6:56), implying a passage of time as disciples struggle to accept his teachings, give up following him about from place to place, and turn back to their own villages, cities and towns.

prominently *the Father's Words* factored into Peter's answers and Jesus' response. In this account of Jesus' and Peter's interaction, not one, but two questions had been asked of him. In response, Peter expresses belief in His teachings —*i.e.*, “thou hast the words of eternal life” (*John* 6:68), a material confession of belief in the Father's words (*John* 14:24). What is more, Peter's confession, “You are the Holy One of God” (*John* 6:69) is shown to be substantively the same as that of the witnesses to the first miracle, “This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world” (*John* 6:14), which is also a material confession of belief in the Father's Words (*Deuteronomy* 18:18). That confession, Jesus says, was a fulfillment of *Isaiah* 54:13, “And all thy children shall be taught of the LORD” (*John* 6:45). Those two questions, and Peter's response to them, therefore show that the focus of Jesus' conversation with him — *the only focus of His conversation* — was the Words of His Father. Because Peter's confession fulfilled *Isaiah* 54, we may now discern what He meant when He promised to build His church “upon this rock.”

It is in *Isaiah* 54 that the Lord not only identifies himself as the Church's husband — “For thy Maker is thine husband ... and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel” (*Isaiah* 54:5) — but also promises to build His Church upon a foundation of stone: “O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, *I will lay thy stones* with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires.*

considered his confession in *Matthew* 16:17 to be new information. Similarly, the title used in *John* 6:69 is similar to that of *Isaiah* 54:5 in which the Church's husband redeemer is identified as “the Holy One of Israel,” a title indistinguishable from “the Holy One of God,” a term Peter also uses of Him in *Acts* 3:14. Therefore we may say first, that Peter did not confess with the others in *Matthew* 14:33, and second that *John* 6:69 records the same confession after the second miracle of multiplication, as recorded in the Synoptics.

* It is of some significance that Jesus' Old Testament citations were often from the Septuagint, as is the case in *John* 6:45 citing *Isaiah* 54:13. An interesting artifact of the Septuagint is that *Isaiah* 54:11 refers to a singular “stone”: “I will give carbuncle for thy stone (*λιθον σου*), and for your foundations, sapphire.” Peter indicates that “stone” (*lithos*) and “rock” (*petra*) are interchangeable in both Old Testament and New (*Isaiah* 8:14; *1 Peter* 2:8) as do *Matthew* (13:15) and *Luke* (8:6). As Jesus implies in *Matthew* 16:17, and Peter later realizes in *1 Peter* 1:23, he had been reborn by the “stone” of *Isaiah* 54:13.

And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncles, and all thy borders of pleasant stones. *And all thy children shall be taught of the LORD; and great shall be the peace of thy children”* (*Isaiah* 54:11-13).

Understanding Peter's confession in the light of *Isaiah* 54:13 illuminates the phrase “upon this rock,” showing that it refers neither to Peter, nor to his confession, nor to Christ but to the revelation of the Father: “flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (*Matthew* 16:17). Peter had been taught by the Father, as *Isaiah* had prophesied, *and Jesus would build His church upon that: the Word of His Father.*

Of this the Scriptures abundantly testify. *Isaiah* wrote, “Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste” (28:16). The prophets spoke beforehand by the Spirit of Christ in them (*1 Peter* 1:11). Jesus received a preaching ministry from his Father (*John* 12:49, *Deuteronomy* 18:18), delivered His Father's words to the apostles (*John* 15:15) and reported to his Father that he had delivered His Words to them (*John* 17:8,14). He promised the Father would send the Spirit who “shall not speak of himself” but only what he had heard (*John* 16:13), reminding them of his Father's Words (*John* 14:24-26). He prayed not for the whole world, but only for those who would believe His Father's Words (*John* 17:9,20). Peter applied *Isaiah's* prophecy to Christ, for to believe “on him” — “a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence” — is to believe on “the word” that he preached (*1 Peter* 2:6-8). But to believe Jesus is to believe the Father, “For I have not spoken of myself” (*John* 12:44,49). The stumbling stone, that offensive rock upon which the Church is built can be nothing other than the Word of the Father. As Jesus said, “whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them” is like a man whose house survived the storm because “it was founded upon a rock” (*Matthew* 7:24-25; *Luke* 6:48), a precept that comes to us directly from *Isaiah* 54:11, in which the Lord promises to lay a foundation for his Church, “tossed with tempest,” but storm-worthy nevertheless. The Church is built upon Jesus, the apostles and prophets (*Ephesians* 2:20) not because it is built upon the men or their offices but because

Jesus was commissioned to deliver the Father's Word, and commissioned the prophets and apostles (*John* 12:49; *1 Peter* 1:11; *John* 16:13) to deliver the things "now reported unto you" (*1 Peter* 1:12) There simply is no other viable candidate for "this rock" than the Word of the Father that Jesus, the prophets and apostles delivered.

Jesus' Wordplay in Matthew 16:19

Roman Catholicism has of course planted her flag on Peter. Her apologists allege that by renaming him Peter, Jesus assigned Simon "a particular powerful role" as "the foundation stone of the Church" based on the Scriptural precedent of naming and renaming people based on their special roles.¹⁴ Scriptural examples of this are several: Eve (*Genesis* 3:20), Abraham (*Genesis* 17:5), Sarah (*Genesis* 17:16), Jacob (*Genesis* 32:28) and Jesus (*Matthew* 1:21). In each case, the reason for the name is provided explicitly, but Jesus gives no such reason here. He renamed Simon but assigned no role at their first meeting (*John* 1:42). By the time Jesus calls him Peter again, He first calls him Simon, son of his earthly father, then calls him Peter, now child of his Heavenly Father, contrasting Simon's earthly patrimony with Peter's heavenly patrimony: "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee..." (*Matthew* 16:17). "... but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter..." (*Matthew* 16:17-18).

The wordplay is immediately evident, and it was not lost on Peter who would later conclude that we are born again not of flesh and blood *but of the Word of the Father*, just as Jesus taught him at his confession: "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever" (*1 Peter* 1:23).

Jesus had played Peter's given name (Simon) and earthly patrimony (Jonah) against his new name (Peter) and the revelation of the Father (the rock) to illustrate this very construct: it is the rock of his Father's Word, not flesh and blood, that is the incorruptible seed by which we are born again. Unbelieving Simon was born of the corruptible seed

of his father, Jonah, but believing Peter of the incorruptible seed of the Father's Words, the foundation stone of *Isaiah* 28:16 and *Isaiah* 54:13, "the rock" of Jesus' parable (*Matthew* 7:24-25; *Luke* 6:48), the "stone of stumbling" and "rock of offense" of *Isaiah* 8:14—the very rock Peter identifies as "the word" that Jesus spoke (*1 Peter* 2:8), and that Jesus identified as His Father's words (*John* 14:24). Jesus had not assigned "a particular powerful role" to Peter, but rather had acknowledged the "particular powerful role" *the Father's Word* had played in Peter's rebirth.

"The Nearest Antecedent" Fallacy

In the eyes of the Roman apologist (and indeed of some Protestants), "upon this rock I will build my church" must refer to what immediately preceded it, namely "thou art Peter." Roman Catholic apologist Suan Sonna cites a Protestant theologian to support his argument: "The emphatic, 'this,' as in 'upon this rock' naturally refers to the nearest antecedent, Peter."¹⁵ Such a claim, however, betrays a lack of familiarity with how Jesus communicated. Indeed, in the very Loaves Narrative leading up to Peter's confession, Jesus does precisely what Sonna believes he ought not, making "this" refer not to the nearest antecedent, but to one further removed:

I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. *This is the bread* which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. (*John* 6:48-50)

Applying the Roman rules of grammar, "This is the bread of life" would have referred to its nearest antecedent, the manna that had left their fathers dead, a wholly unnatural reading. A more sober contextual reading points rather to "I am that bread of life." The same is true in *Matthew* 16:18. As we have demonstrated above, "upon this rock" refers not to its nearest antecedent, "thou art Peter," but to the revelation by which Peter had learned from the

¹⁵ Sonna, Suan. "Peter (Not His Profession of Faith) Is the Rock." *Catholic Answers*, 25 May 2022, <https://www.catholic.com/audio/caf/peter-the-rock-not-his-profession>. Sonna cites Marvin Richard Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*: Volume 1, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903, 91-92.

¹⁴ Fr. Hugh Barbour, O. Praem. "Names Written in Stone." *Catholic Answers*, 23 August 2020, <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/names-written-in-stone>.

Father. Peter had been taught by the Father in accordance with *Isaiah* 54:13, for Jesus was laying the stone of his Father's Words as the rock foundation for His church in accordance with *Isaiah* 54:11. Ten other apostles already stood upon that rock. With Peter's confession, Jesus' task to deliver the Father's words *to the Eleven*, was finally complete.

The Gates of Hell

Building upon its claim that "this rock" must refer to Peter, the Catholic *Catechism* claims "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (*Matthew* 16:17) must refer to "the great Church that is here [at Rome]."¹⁶ Jesus' statement is thus construed to guarantee that the infallible Roman church can never stumble into error. However, the harmonized Loaves Narrative again reveals the correct understanding. As with "upon this rock," the Words of the Father are still in view.

The "gates of hell" in *Matthew* 16:18 are none other than the "gates of death" (*Job* 38:17; *Psalms* 9:13, 107:18) and the "gates of Sheol" (*Isaiah* 28:10) identified for us in the Old Testament. It is a metaphor for death, for to approach the gates is to prepare for the final transition from life to death. But the Father's words have the opposite effect: "He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life" (*John* 5:24). "And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day" (*John* 6:40).

This is the Good News Jesus preached: "whosoever believeth in him should not perish" (*John* 3:16). "They shall never perish" (*John* 10:28). "He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (*John* 11:25). "On such the second death hath no power" (*Revelation* 20:6). "Death is swallowed up in victory" (*1 Corinthians* 15:54). "I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone," sayeth the Lord, "and your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand" (*Isaiah* 28:16-19). It is not the infallibility of Peter or the Roman religion that Jesus had in mind, but the infallibility of His

Father's Words that cannot fail to accomplish the purpose for which He sent them (*Isaiah* 55:11). The gates of hell cannot prevail against his Church because his Church is made up of "all thy children" who have been taught by the LORD (*Isaiah* 54:13), and therefore have "passed from death unto life" (*John* 5:24) and "shall never perish" (*John* 10:28).

The Keys of the Kingdom

As with "the gates of hell," the Roman Catholic focus remains ever on Peter when Jesus says, "and I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven." The *Catechism* insists that Jesus thus granted a "specific authority to Peter...to govern the house of God."¹⁷ The Roman Catholic apologist camps on *Isaiah's* reference to "the key of the house of David" which the Lord lays upon the shoulder of Eliakim. "So he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open" (*Isaiah* 22:22). Apologist Trent Horn explains,

Just as King Hezekiah gave Eli'akim authority to oversee the kingdom of Israel, Christ gave Peter authority to oversee his Church (*i.e.*, the 'keys to the kingdom'), which included the authority to "bind and loose" — in other words, to determine official doctrine and practice.¹⁸

We dismiss the claim outright. Jesus, citing the same passage from *Isaiah*, claims that He "hath the key of David," and has "set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it" (*Revelation* 3:7-8). We hardly need a key from Peter to open a door that is already open and that he cannot shut. Peter obviously could do nothing with such a key.

Peter does not have the keys of hell and death either, for Jesus currently has them in His possession: "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death" (*Revelation* 1:18). These keys are clearly and irrevocably tied to his victory over hell and death, a victory that will be ours at the resurrection: "then shall be brought to

¹⁷ CCC, 553.

¹⁸ Trent Horn. "Defending the Papacy." *Catholic Answers*, 23 April 2020, <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/defending-the-papacy>.

¹⁶ CCC, 834.

pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (*1 Corinthians* 15:54-55). Since Jesus currently has the keys, and the promise of our victory over death "shall be brought to pass" in the distant future at the resurrection of the dead, we can safely say that Jesus currently remains in possession of them. We may conclude therefore, as with the Key of David, that Peter does not possess the keys of hell and death, either.

But Peter certainly gained possession of "the keys of the kingdom," as Jesus promised. Upon inspection we find again that Jesus was referring to the preaching ministry He had received from His Father, which ministry He would shortly pass on to His disciples. We learn from the Scriptures that one of the keys of the kingdom is Knowledge, for Jesus explicitly identified it as such. According to *Matthew* 23:13 and *Luke* 11:52, the teachers of the Jews "shut up the kingdom of heaven" by taking away "the key of knowledge," preventing people from entering. By "knowledge," we refer to the Word of the Father, "the word of the kingdom," as it is evident from the Scriptures that the Key is delivered by the "foolishness of preaching" (*1 Corinthians* 1:21). "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" because "thou hast forgotten the law of thy God" (*Hosea* 4:6). It is "the word of the kingdom" that Satan eagerly comes and takes away (*Mark* 4:15) "lest they should believe and be saved" (*Luke* 8:12). Peter had not been granted the key of Knowledge so that he could stand at the gate and regulate access, but so that he could pass the Word to others through preaching, something the scribes and Pharisees had failed to do.

Seeing that one key is Knowledge, we easily discern that the second is Faith, for we know that God has imprisoned* all in unbelief (*Romans* 11:32) and in sin (*Galatians* 3:22). According to *Romans* 11:30-32, and *Galatians* 3:22, a man is released from that prison only by belief, so "that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe." As Jesus observed in the Parable of the Sower, if one possesses "the word of the kingdom"

and "belief" in that word, he is saved (*Luke* 8:12). Faith is the gift of God (*Ephesians* 2:8) which "cometh by hearing" the preached Word (*Romans* 10:17). Thus, the Key of Faith, like the Key of Knowledge, comes by preaching the Word of the Father.

Neither key alone is sufficient. If one hears the word, but does not believe, it is not enough, for *knowledge* must be *believed*: "... the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it" (*Hebrews* 4:2). "And if any man hear my words, and believe not...the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day" (*John* 12:47-48). These had knowledge of the Word but not faith. Similarly, faith is not sufficient unless it has knowledge (the Word) as its object. In the Parable of the Sower, some "for a while believe[d]" (*Luke* 8:13), but their faith was not in "the word," for they were immediately offended "when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake" (*Mark* 4:17). They possessed *belief*, but not belief in *the Word*.

Faith and Knowledge, therefore, are the keys by which men gain entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven. Both come by the preaching of the Word of the Father. That the keys were entrusted to Peter and the rest simply refers to *a preaching ministry* that all disciples receive—a ministry of preaching the Word that faith may come to the hearers—for the Son sets men free by the truth of his Father's Word (*John* 8:31-38), and the apostles would do the same (*Romans* 6:17-18).

That Peter understood the Keys of the Kingdom to refer to *a preaching ministry* is evident from his interaction with the centurion in Joppa. When Cornelius was directed by an angel (*Acts* 10:1-6) to summon Peter from Joppa in order "to hear words" (*Acts* 10:22), Peter "opened his mouth" and preached "the word" (*Acts* 10:34-36). "While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word" (*Acts* 10:44), and they believed (*Acts* 11:17). Peter's grasp of those keys is evident from his interjection at the Council of Jerusalem: "Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel [Knowledge], and believe [Faith]" (*Acts* 15:7).

* the Greek words for "key" (κλεις *kleis*) and "imprison" (συγκλείω *sugkleiō*) share a common root. (Bauer, Walter, *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2nd edition, University of Chicago Press, 1979, 433-434, 775.

Such is the foolishness of preaching, that the Word of the Father is preached, and faith comes by that preaching. Of this Jesus also attests: “He that heareth my word [Knowledge], and believeth on him that sent me [Faith], hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life” (*John* 5:24). “I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, and have known [Knowledge] ... and have believed [Faith] ... Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe [Faith] on me through their word [Knowledge]” (*John* 17:8,20).¹⁹

As with “upon this rock,” and “the gates of hell shall not prevail,” “the keys of the kingdom” refer not to a Petrine administrative gatekeeping function, but rather to the ministry of preaching the Father’s Words by which men hear the truth, receive faith, and gain entrance.

Whatsoever Thou Shalt Bind [Up]...and Loose

Intoxicated as she is by the inference of an infallible, administrative Petrine prerogative from Jesus’ promises about “this rock,” “the gates of hell” and “the keys of the kingdom,” Rome gleefully embraces the power to bind and loose. Such power effectively makes Peter the sole arbiter

¹⁹ See this pairing of knowledge and faith unto salvation throughout the New Testament (*John* 5:24; 6:68-69; 17:8; *Romans* 10:8-11; 10:13-14; *Ephesians* 1:13; *Colossians* 1:4-5; *2 Timothy* 3:14-15). It is true that other passages mention faith with “works” (*James* 2:14) or knowledge and faith with fruitfulness (*Luke* 8:15), “charity” (*1 Corinthians* 13:2) or “virtue,” “patience” and “godliness” (*2 Peter* 1:5-8), but in such passages, the context is clear that fruit, works, charity, patience and virtue, *etc.*, refer to the sanctifying effects of having *believed* the *truth*. If one “bears fruit” from the preaching of the Word, it is because one has *believed* what was *preached*. If one is a “hearer of the word [Knowledge], and not a doer” (*James* 1:23), it is because he has not really believed it [Faith] (*James* 2:14). Additionally, if one has “all knowledge” and “all faith” but not “love,” it is evident that one’s “knowledge” and “faith” are imperfect and incomplete, for they exist in continuous violation of the Law (*1 Corinthians* 13:4-7). “Virtue,” “patience” and “godliness” are the sanctifying effects of *truth* that is *believed* (*2 Peter* 1:8). These are the fruits of having entered the Kingdom of Heaven, but they are not the “keys” of entrance. Thus, while Faith and Knowledge are frequently listed with other virtues, those virtues are the fruit of the Faith and Knowledge. They are not themselves additional keys.

of truth, salvation, and discipline, the infallible gatekeeper of heaven. Her *Catechism* states: “The power to ‘bind and loose’ connotes the authority to absolve sins, to pronounce doctrinal judgments, and to make disciplinary decisions in the Church.”²⁰ “The words bind and loose mean: whomever you exclude from your communion, will be excluded from communion with God; whomever you receive anew into your communion, God will welcome back into his. Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God.”²¹

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* calls this the pope’s “universal coercive jurisdiction,” ostensibly “derived from the current terminology of the Rabbinic schools,” in which “to bind” referred to the legislative and judicial authority to prohibit, and “to loose” referred to the similar authority to allow.²² Peter, it seems, had been endowed by Christ with supreme, plenary, magisterial authority to administer the kingdom.

Such a sweeping claim requires proof, and there is none to be found for it. To rely upon contemporary Rabbinic legal theory to interpret Jesus’ statement is mere guesswork. Could we not as easily guess that Jesus referred to *Job* 38:31, in which constellations are alternately bound and loosed, to show that Peter had the power to declare on earth the relationships of the stars of the heavens? One guess is as good as another, but guessing is folly. Jesus already revealed the meaning of “to bind” and “to loose” at the beginning of His preaching ministry.

The longstanding exegetical error — committed equally by the ancient writers, by Roman Catholics and by Protestants (this writer, included) — has been to take “to bind” and “to loose” as opposites, as if Peter had been commissioned either to bind or to loose *something*. All that is left is to determine what that “thing” is. There are no commentaries on this passage that take any other approach, vary though they may on the object of Peter’s prerogative.

Part 2 will continue in the next *Trinity Review*.

²⁰ CCC, 553.

²¹ CCC 1445.

²² *Catholic Encyclopedia*, “The Pope.”