

THE GREAT CONFESSION

Peter's great confession of who Jesus is was recorded by the three synoptic gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). This passage immediately follows a section which has been described as *Luke's Great Omission*. The things recorded in Matthew 14:22 through Matthew 16:12 fit in the space between Luke 9:17 and Luke 9:18. It is interesting to note that while Luke has a *great omission* here, he also has a *great insertion* later (see below on Luke 9:51, etc.).

The location for this event is Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:13). The area was also known as Paneas. Today, there is a small village of *Baniyas*. There is a large rock cliff in this area from which a perennial stream flows into the Jordan River.

Jesus asked His disciples whom others said that He was. After hearing a variety of answers (verse 14) Jesus asked, "But whom do you say that I am?" This was a searching question. It is easy to describe what others are saying. But it takes some courage to open up the inner thoughts to the searching gaze of others.

Peter, never at a loss for words, spoke on behalf of all the others: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." (verse 16). Jesus praised Peter and said that the Source of this insight was God Himself (verse 17). Peter must have been thrilled by the thought that he had just been a spokesperson for God. But he was about to hear even more astonishing things.

In Matthew 16:17-19 are some of the most powerful words ever directed toward an individual. In verse 17, Jesus calls him *Simon Barjona*. This means *Simon, son of John*. In verse 18, Jesus calls him *Peter*. The name, *Peter* means *rock*. And so I like to think of Peter as being *Rock Johnson*. The Roman Catholic church uses this passage to support the authority of the church. They teach something called *apostolic succession*. This is the teaching where Jesus made Peter to be the first leader of the church. This authority was passed down from Peter to Linus; and from Linus to Anacletus; and from Anacletus to Clement I; and from Clement I to Evaristus; and so on until John Paul II. In other words, Jesus basically made Peter become the first Pope.

And Protestants have bought into this thinking, at least to some degree. There are many jokes which describe coming to the gates of heaven after a person has died. When the person reaches heaven's gates, he has to meet Peter at the gate. Peter decides who can enter, and who cannot enter. Again, this is based on Matthew 16:18,19.

Some Protestant pastors try to remove Peter from such a position of authority through some linguistic reasoning. They point out that the word, *Peter* comes from a Greek word, Πετρος [petros] which means *a small stone or pebble*. On the other hand, Jesus said that He would build His church "upon this *rock*" (16:18). The word, *rock* is actually the Greek word, πέτρα [petra]. This word refers to a large rock, like a cliff or something like that. While this argument sounds appealing at first, it is extremely weak when you look at the whole linguistic picture.

For one thing, Jesus was probably speaking in Aramaic and not in Greek. The name, *Simon Barjona* is an Aramaic name. When Jesus gave the name, *Rock* or *Peter* to the man previously known as *Simon*, this name likened Peter to a rock (John 1:42). On the occasion of giving Peter this name, Jesus used the Aramaic word--Cephas. And it is mentioned that the interpretation of this word is Πέτρος [Petros], or *a stone* (in English). And so in Matthew 16:18, Jesus was using a kind of pun. He was making a play on words based on the meaning of Peter's name.

To further complicate matters, there is no way to translate the Aramaic word into Greek without causing a problem. In Greek, the word for *rock* is πέτρα [petra]. But this word is in a feminine form. There is no way that any respectable man would have a name that was feminine. And so, when his name was translated into Greek, Peter could not be called Πέτρα [Petra]. That would have been a woman's name. And so he was called Πέτρος [Petros]. This was a good name for a man (being in the masculine form). But it happened to mean something slightly different. It meant a smaller stone.

And so we cannot use a Greek argument to prove the real meaning of the *rock* that Jesus was talking about. To make matters even more exciting, there were at least three rocks that Jesus could have been talking about. There was a large rock cliff at this location. Peter's name meant rock. And Jesus Himself could have been the Rock upon Whom the church would be built. We only have the words of Jesus recorded. We cannot see where He was pointing when He said that He would build His church "upon this rock". And so it can be helpful to compare these words with other portions of scripture to gain insights into the real meaning.

Paul tells us that Jesus Christ was the *rock* that followed Israel (1 Corinthians 10:4). He uses the word, πέτρα [petra]. But, to play Devil's advocate, some might say that Peter and Paul would not agree with each other on this matter. Perhaps Paul would not acknowledge the authority of Peter for some reason (jealousy or otherwise . . .).

In 1 Peter 2:3-5 we see that Peter says that Jesus came as a *Living Stone* (verse 4). He continues by stating that God's people are also *living stones*. In some way, we mirror this attribute of Jesus. But, someone might say, the word here is different. Matthew 16:18 speaks of a *rock* or πέτρα [petra], whereas 1 Peter 2:4 states that Jesus is a *stone* or λίθος [lithos]. On the other hand, even though the exact word is different, the basic concept or semantic domain is the same. Peter is describing Jesus as being the *Rock* upon Whom the church is built. But Peter continues writing (1 Peter 2:6-8). In the end, he states that Jesus is known to some people as a *Rock* of offense (1 Peter 2:8). Here, the word used is πέτρα [petra]. And so, Peter states very clearly that the *Rock* is Jesus Christ. He is the One to Whom the Old Testament pointed when its various writers spoke of *the Rock* (cf. Deut. 32:4; Ps. 62:7; Isa. 28:16). Paul stated this another way when he mentioned that Jesus was the only *foundation* (1 Corinthians 3:11). There is no other foundation which will stand the test of time.

And so, Jesus was not building His church upon Peter, or Rock Johnson. He was not building His church on the rock face or cliff at Caesarea Philippi. He was building

His church on Himself. And one more evidence of this follows. Jesus predicted that He would be killed and would rise again on the third day (Matthew 16:21). He stated these words very soon after the conversation about the rock. Peter could not bear to hear such things. He began to rebuke Jesus (Matthew 16:22). At that point in time, Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me Satan . . ." (Matthew 16:23). These must have been shocking words. First, Peter is a spokesperson for God Himself. Then, a few minutes later, he is a spokesperson for Satan. But Jesus had just said that "the gates of hell" (or the grave) would not prevail against this church (Matthew 16:18). Peter was not such a person. A few minutes after speaking words of life, "the gates of hell" were prevailing over him. Eventually, he would die, as all men do. But the church would not die.

I am encouraged by this story. Notice the details. Peter speaks for God. Then he is praised by Jesus. After that he speaks for Satan. Jesus looks at Peter and tells Satan to leave. Please keep these words in mind. Through this whole experience, Peter belonged to Jesus. He wanted to follow Jesus. And yet, he spoke not only words from God, but also words from Satan. Please remember this. When you hear someone (maybe even me) speaking words that you know are from the Devil, it does not necessarily mean that the person belongs to the Devil. It may be a person who belongs to God, but who is speaking the words of the enemy. I do not have to put labels on people and decide who will be lost and who will be saved based on the words that I hear. I can do what Jesus did. I can call the person away from such a danger while asking God to draw him or her back to the path toward heaven.

There is another challenging statement in Matthew 16:19. Jesus promised to give Peter *the keys to the kingdom of heaven*. These words have caused many people to think of *Saint Peter at the gate* deciding who will be allowed to enter heaven. Once again, I believe that we can gain insights into the meaning of this passage if we compare a similar scripture. On one occasion, Jesus was stating woes to Pharisees and others. One of these woes is most insightful. There was a special woe stated for lawyers (Luke 11:52). Their problem was that they had taken away the *key of knowledge*. They were not only refusing to enter the kingdom, but they were also keeping others out. In this passage, the word *kingdom* is not actually used. But the concept is very clear. These people are refusing to enter and they are hindering others from entering. Refusing to enter what? Well, the previous verses talk about persecuting prophets, etc. And then, these words appear. The people who pointed others to God were being killed as martyrs. And then came the rebuke at how they hindered people from entering. This is talking about the kingdom of God. And the word *key* is used. What was the key? It was *the key of knowledge*. I believe that this helps us to understand Matthew 16:19. Peter was given the *key of knowledge*. He could share with people the knowledge which would lead them to become a part of the kingdom of God.

And we have the same responsibility. We have the *key of knowledge*. We can share with people the precious truths which will lead them to be saved in the end. Or we can withhold these truths, and these people could miss their chance for heaven. This concept was so serious that Jesus continued to talk about the way it works. Unfortunately, most Bible translations have completely garbled the meaning of Jesus' words. The last

part of Matthew 16:19 reads something like this, "Whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven". These words are powerful. They actually give support to the Roman Catholic idea of church authority. When church leaders or representatives make decisions, heaven is bound by those decisions. But this translation is not the true translation of Matthew 16:19. This is a misunderstanding of the Greek words which are used here.

The first part of each statement is a simple future tense. It is translated very well in most translations of the Bible.

"Whatever you shall bind on earth . . ."

"Whatever you shall loose on earth . . ."

This is an excellent translation of a simple future tense in Greek. But the second part of each statement gives a completely wrong idea.

". . . shall be bound in heaven."

". . . shall be loosed in heaven."

In most translations of the Bible, this is also translated as a simple future. As a result, the reader is given the wrong idea of how the process works. Such translations give us the idea that the action begins on earth and that heaven follows what we have done.

We bind things on earth, then God binds the same things in heaven.

We loose things on earth, then God looses the same things in heaven.

But this idea is completely wrong. It turns Jesus' words backwards. So, what did Jesus actually say. The words of Matthew 16:19 include a rare form of Greek which was not well understood by the translators (or else they deliberately translated this passage in a way that would give the church extreme authority).

In the New Testament, the only way to indicate a FUTURE PERFECT in a passive voice is through a periphrastic form. The future indicative of εἶμι [eimi] (the *be* verb) is followed by the perfect passive participle. In Matthew 16:19 this comes out as εἶσται δεδεμενον [estai dedemenon]. This should be translated, ". . . shall have been bound . . ." The same kind of construction is at the end of the verse. εἶσται λελυμενον [estai lelumenon]. This should be translated ". . . shall have been loosed . . ."

What does this mean? It means that the action in heaven happens BEFORE the action on earth. First, God binds something in heaven, then the church binds it on earth. First, God looses something in heaven, then the church looses it on earth.

In English (and in Greek) there are times when we want to talk about two past actions. But one action happens before the other action. As an example, notice this sentence. "I put on my shoes, and then I went outside." But what if I want to say the same

thing without using the word, *then*? I would state the past action with a simple past tense. I would state the previous past action with a past perfect or past participle. Notice this sentence. "I had put on my shoes when I went outside." In this sentence, "I went outside." is a simple statement of a past event. "I had put on my shoes." is a statement of a past event which preceded the other past event.

The same kind of thing can happen in the future. Notice this English example. "I shall study the lesson. Then I shall write an exam." In these sentences, both actions are in the future. The first action comes before the second action. We know the order of events because of the word, *then*. But the same thing could be stated without the word, *then*. In such a case, I would need to use a future tense for the one action. And a future perfect would indicate another future action which would happen before the normal future action. Notice this English example. "I shall have studied the lesson when I shall write an exam." In this sentence, "I shall write an exam." is a simple statement of a future event. "I shall have studied the lesson" is a statement of a future event which precedes the other future event.

We could indicate this sequence by a kind of chart.

Past Perfect ---> Past ----> Present -----> Future Perfect -----> Future

The time of talking or writing is the present. All other things are happening now, or in the past, or in the future. But the past is divided into earlier and later portions and the future is also divided into earlier and later times.

And so what does this mean for my understanding of Matthew 16:19? It is very important. Jesus said, "Whatever you shall bind on earth *shall have been bound in heaven*; and whatever you shall loose on earth *shall have been loosed in heaven*. This is a powerful promise. It is the promise that we can know God's will. When we are dealing with matters of church discipline (handling the keys to the kingdom) *we can know the will of God*. What we do on earth will follow the pattern of what has already been done in heaven. This is a powerful promise.

In the future, there are things that we will have to bind or loose on earth. But when we get to that time, we will discover that these things have already been bound or loosed in heaven. Our decisions and actions will be a reflection of the decisions and actions which have already happened in heaven. Praise God for such a promise that we can know His will!

This same concept is repeated using the same words and verb forms in Matthew 18:18. There it is dealing directly with the matter of church discipline. In Matthew 16:19, it is dealing with the keys to the kingdom of heaven. In both cases we have the promise that God will lead us to know what He has done in heaven so that we can do the same on earth.

I have sought to give all evidence directly from the Bible. It is interesting to note

that Ellen White talked about the Rock and the keys very clearly. She indicated that the rock is Jesus Christ Himself and that the keys of the kingdom are the words of Jesus (DA 413). While it is comforting to see the support of her words, I like to establish all things by comparing scripture with scripture.

On a related note are her words about the day when we actually get to heaven. After describing the way Jesus conquers Satan and takes his people to heaven, she tells about the day when the New Jerusalem comes to the earth again. She tells about Jesus sitting on a very high throne. The enemies of God can see this throne. But who is around the throne? Notice her own words on the matter (GC 665):

Nearest the throne are those who were once zealous in the cause of Satan, but who, plucked as brands from the burning, have followed their Saviour with deep, intense devotion. next are those who perfected Christian characters in the midst of falsehood and infidelity, those who honored the law of God when the Christian world declared it void, and the millions, of all ages, who were martyred for their faith. and beyond is the "great multitude, which no man could number . .

What a glorious day that will be! But notice who was nearest the throne. These were the people who had been working for Satan. These people recognize how close they came to losing everything. They are appreciative for the life that they have received in Christ. Peter probably will understand these people. He had spoken for God. He had also spoken for Satan. But, in the end, he stood firmly for the Master.

FORGIVENESS AND HUMILITY

Jesus said many things about forgiveness. Due to time constraints, we had to look at this matter extremely briefly in class. But I do not want to pass over His words about how to deal with sin. Earlier, Jesus had discussed what to do if your brother has something against you. In such a case, the Christian should take the responsibility of finding the "brother" and making things right (Matthew 5:23,24). But what happens when your brother has sinned against you? Matthew 18:15-20 discusses this point. And it is here that Jesus brings up the point that what we bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven (verse 18). (cf. 7 T 260-264)

Notice the details of how to deal with a person who is doing what is wrong. There is a kind of four step process.

First, we are to approach the other person one-on-one. Do not wait for him to make the first move. Initiate the action. Seek him out. Make sure that you are not spreading some kind of story about this person. Go to him alone (Matthew 18:15).

Second, if he does not hear you, take one or two other witnesses (Matthew 18:16). What is the purpose of doing this? Is it to have more support in order to make him see your own point of view? No. It is to establish every word. This was to follow the instruction of Deuteronomy 19:15 where one witness was not sufficient to condemn a

person. There should be at least two or three witnesses. And so, the extra person or two should come along in order to establish what was actually said.

Third, if he refuses to hear you along with the other witnesses, take it to the church (verse 17). What does this mean? Does it mean that we should proclaim the specific sins of this brother from the pulpit of the church? No. That is not only against God's will, it is also unethical and illegal. A number of years ago I was listening to the radio and was shocked to hear a story about such a thing happening. On Sunday in church, the minister stood up and pointed out the specific sins of a certain church member. People were shocked. The man was furious. He sued the church--and won. They lost a lot of money as a result of such actions. But this was not what Jesus was talking about.

By the way, SDA church policy forbids such an approach. If there is a problem that requires the church membership of an individual to come into question, there is a specific process to be followed. At the time that the matter is brought to the church for a vote, it is not to deal with the specifics of the case. The only time when you may legally discuss such specifics is at the local church board when the board has gone into executive session. Any person may visit a church board meeting. But when the board enters executive session, all non-board members must leave the room. At that time, the details can be discussed, but the matter is not allowed to go out of the room. If one of the board members should take the matter out of the room, at that time, he or she can be in danger of violating the law.

But Jesus' words give us safety. Taking the matter to the church does not mean proclaiming the specifics to the world. Notice what Jesus said. Each step in the process was moving toward a greater and greater number of people. This is a series of three concentric circles. The principle is to deal with the matter at the smallest possible level. If that is not sufficient, then move up one notch so to speak--not two. At some point along the way, the intention is to rescue the person from the destructive action.

Fourth, if the brother even refuses to listen to the larger group, there is still action to be taken. This person is to be treated as a heathen and a tax collector (verse 17). What does this mean? Does it mean that he will forever be outside the group? No. Remember, Jesus came to save heathens and tax collectors (cf. Matthew 9:9-13; Luke 5:27-32). This means that the person will no longer be considered to be inside the group, but he is still a person in need of salvation. He is still a person to whom we should reach out.

When I was a student at Weimar College, there was a teacher who told a story about such a situation. I think that this was Pastor Bob Hancock, Sr. who told the story. At any rate, a certain local church elder had the habit of using alcohol. The man wanted to lead a godly life, but he could not gain the victory over this destructive habit. Pastor Hancock knew that the man's wife would fight fiercely to keep him in his responsible position. So Pastor Hancock approached the man privately and discussed his plan.

The problem was that the man could never gain the victory as long as he lived as

a hypocrite. Every time he tried to stop drinking alcohol, he would get so discouraged because he knew that he was living a two-faced life. And so he could not gain the victory. Pastor Hancock persuaded the man to allow the church to quietly disfellowship him. The specifics of his case would not be revealed. He would merely lose his church membership at his own request. At that point, he would no longer be living a lie. He would no longer be professing to be an SDA church leader while living a life of slavery to alcohol.

Once the bigotry had ended, the man could gain spiritual power from God to overcome his addiction. His life would be consistent with his profession. And he could come into the church as a convert. As the man went through this process, he gained a tremendous sense of relief. At first, his wife was extremely angry that her husband had lost his important position of authority in the church. It was so embarrassing. But, in the end, she was able to see the wisdom of the plan. Her husband was no longer tormented by his realization that he was a hypocrite. He could focus his energy on overcoming his alcohol addiction by the power of God. And he gained the victory over alcohol. After that, he was able to become a Seventh-day Adventist church member again. If I remember correctly, he eventually became an elder again. I believe that this is exactly what Jesus was talking about. The whole idea of Matthew 18:15-20 was not to get rid of people. It was to save people from their own destructive choices.