

Christ, His Church and Peter

The First Call

The Apostle John was a disciple of John the Baptist so in his Gospel he was able to tell us about the earliest days of Christ's preaching. He reports the Baptist telling his followers that Jesus was greater than himself. When the Baptist pointed out Jesus to his disciples, two spent some time with Jesus. While John does not write that he was one of the two, his ability to report what occurred in detail and several of his later remarks, indicate that he was.

They both became convinced that Jesus was the Messiah and, John's companion, Andrew, brought his brother to meet Jesus. John describes their meeting: **Jesus looked at him, and said, "So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas" - which means Peter. (John 1: 42).**

Being in Palestine Jesus had spoken in Aramaic, a form of Hebrew. But John was writing for a mainly Greek audience so translated the word 'Cephas' for them. The word for rock in Greek was Petra, The significance of this change of name was not immediately apparent at this first meeting. Luke also mentions the change of name (Luke 6: 13-16)

Matthew in his Gospel explains that Jesus then went into the desert for forty days (Matthew 4: 1-2), and on His return, He called Peter and Andrew. They had had time to contemplate what they were undertaking and discharge their responsibilities. So they now followed Jesus without further discussion. (Matthew 5: 18-22).

Peter was not the first to meet Jesus, but Matthew places his name first in the list of the twelve called by Christ. (Matthew 10: 1-4). In Mark's Gospel and in Acts we also see Peter's name placed first (Mark 3: 16-19; Acts 1: 13).

When Jesus takes three disciples apart - Peter, James and John - into a high mountain to see the Transfiguration, we note that Peter's name is listed first. When Christ asks a question it is Peter who answers for himself and the other two. (Matthew 17: 1-8, Luke 9: 28-36 and Mark 9: 1-7).

Matthew tells us that Jesus not only taught his disciples, but also trained them to preach. (Mt 10: 5- 11: 1, Mark 3: 14-15). Christ was forming them into a team of Apostles (Luke 6: 13). A disciple is one who follows, while an Apostle is one who is sent.

The Rock And The Keys

Jesus was becoming known as 'The Son of Man'. Matthew writes: **Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi he asked the disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is? And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.**

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."((Matthew 16:13-19)).

Christ had told a parable involving rock: **"Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock".** (Matthew 7: 24-27). See also Luke 6: 48.

John the Baptist had been killed recently, Elijah and Jeremiah had been prophets in the past and many Jews believed they would one day return. The word 'Bar' meant 'Son of'. But as the Hebrew language didn't have a word for 'species', 'Son of' also meant 'of the same nature as'.

As mentioned earlier, in Aramaic the word 'Cephas' meant 'Rock'. Today we use the word 'Rose' to mean both a plant and the personal name for a woman. In Aramaic Christ was saying: "Thou art Cephas and upon this Cephas I will build My Church". The significance of the change of Peter's name was now becoming apparent.

Quotations from the Bible in this article are taken from 'The Revised Standard Version', which is used by both Protestants and Catholics. In other translations, **'the powers of death'** is translated as: 'the gates of hell' or 'the gates of Hades' or 'the gates of the underworld'. Christ was promising that nothing would stop the work of the church. This was the first time Jesus had referred to his kingdom as 'church'.

The giving of keys had an important significance. Most towns were surrounded by a wall with a gate. If the keys of the gate were handed over it signified that authority over the town was being transferred. Today the possessor of the keys of a house is master of the house; he can admit or refuse who he wishes. Peter was to be appointed the steward of Christ's kingdom.

The Apostles would have recalled Scripture: **“And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.”** (Isaiah: 22: 22).

Jesus then gave Peter the authority to ‘bind and lose’. This was the Jewish legal term for the power to discipline, make laws and interpret them.

Strengthen Your Brethren

Luke informs us of words spoken by Christ at his last supper with his disciples: **“You are those who have continued with me in my trials; as my father appointed a kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel”.** **“Simon. Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren”.** (Luke 22: 28 - 32).

In this instance, as Christ appoints his Apostles, He doesn't say He or the Holy Spirit will strengthen them, but that Peter would. This again stressed the leadership position of Peter in the future. The word translated as: ‘strengthen’ is sometimes rendered as ‘confirm’.

The Shepherd

John reports an incident that took place when Christ was with His Apostles for the third time after His resurrection. John, who was present, writes:

“When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs”. A second time he said to him, **“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes Lord; you know that I love you”.**

He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him a third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep”. (John 21: 15-17).

Peter had been asked the same question three times. So it is not surprising that: ‘Peter was grieved’. But Jesus was stressing the immense importance of the moment as He was conferring authority and responsibility on Peter.

The Resurrection

When told of the empty tomb, Peter and John ran to it. John arrived first and, looking in, saw the linen cloths. But he waited for the slower Peter so as to allow him to enter first. (Mark 16: 7 and John 20: 2 –10).

Farewell

Just prior to ascending to His Father, Christ said to his eleven loyal disciples: **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age”.** (Matthew 28: 18-20).

Christ commanded them (not just Peter) to teach and baptise all nations. We hear this again in Acts 1: 8 when the Apostles are told to be witnesses of Jesus, “to the end of the earth”. This was an impossible task as they all would soon be dead. They could not achieve their mission by writing, because the command included the order to baptise. If, however, we see them as an organisation, there is no problem. As an organisation (i.e. the church) their task could continue beyond their deaths.

The Early Church

The book of Acts, written by Luke, does not provide a comprehensive history of the early church. But it does record instances of where Peter fulfilled his position of leadership after Christ had ascended into heaven:

Peter takes the lead in filling the vacancy caused by Judas (Acts 1: 15).

At Pentecost (Acts 2: 1- 36), it is Peter who stands up and preaches the first summons for all to come to salvation (Acts 2: 14 - 36).

The world accepts him as leader and speaker for the others. (Acts 2: 37-41)

He works the first miracle on behalf of the Church and comments on it to those standing by. (Acts 3: 1-10).

He defends the Church before the rulers (Acts 4: 8ff).

He utters the first anathema and God ratifies his word (Acts 5: 2-11).
Only his shadow works miracles. (Acts 5: 15).

He is the first to raise a dead person (Acts 9: 40).
It is to him that it is revealed that the Church is open to Gentiles (Acts 10:)

He baptizes the first Gentiles and convinces others to do likewise (Acts 11)

He is the first to be rescued from death by a divine intervention, while another Apostle is killed (Acts 12: 1-11).

He opens the first Church council and lays down principles “By my mouth” to be accepted by all (Acts 15: 6-12).

Further teachings

In Matthew’s Gospel 13: 11-13 we read that Jesus explained all things to his disciples without parable. We read this again in Mark 4: 34.

From Acts 1: 3 we learn that Jesus, after his resurrection, spoke to his Apostles about the kingdom of God during a period of forty days.

In John 14: 25- 26 we read: **“These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, ...”**

These teachings and explanations are not recorded in the New Testament. Catholics say they were not lost. They were confided to the Apostles and passed on in the collective mind of the Church (i.e. ‘Divine Tradition’).

Paul

After Paul's dramatic conversion Ananias, a member of the church, was told by Jesus to cure Paul's sight. (Acts 9: 3-15). This he did and then baptised Paul. He then helped him escape from his enemies.

Paul went to Arabia for what must have been a time of prayer and to deepen his knowledge of Christ and his teachings. After three years he emerged to commence a life of preaching the good news. But his first act was to visit Peter and to stay with him for fifteen days. (Galatians. 1: 16-18).

In his later letter to the Galatians, Paul stresses that he was not converted by anyone in the church but by Christ himself. This meant he could preach from his personal experience of Christ. But Paul did not restrict himself to such activity. He baptised, established churches, appointed bishops, issued rules and excommunicating heretics. He never claimed to have been given this authority by Christ, so must have received it from Peter during the fifteen days they were together. (i.e. Paul was ordained a bishop).

Fourteen years later Paul went up to Jerusalem to meet key members of the church so as to explain what he was preaching. He wished to have confirmation that what he was teaching was correct. "Lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain". (Galatians. 2: 1-2).

Most of the Apostles had already left Jerusalem, but he did meet James, Cephas and John. These three were called 'the pillars' because they had been present at the Transfiguration. They agreed that he was teaching correctly. (Galatians 1: 9-10).

At a later date Peter visited Antioch and was eating with Gentiles until some Jewish Christians, who were still living according to Jewish law, arrived. To please them at meal time, Peter separated himself from the Gentiles. In response, Paul criticised him for giving bad example. This was not a matter of doctrine, as this had already been agreed. It was Peter's personal conduct and tactics that Paul considered to be giving a false signal. Paul was not denying Peter's authority. (Galatians 2: 11-21).

From Paul's many instructions and letters to various churches we see that the Church was a united body. When he writes of the Apostles he mentioned Cephas by name, thereby setting Peter apart as the centre of authority. For example in Corinthians 1: 1-12, 3: 22, 9: 5 and 15:5.

Papal Authority

There was disorder in the church at Corinth and a letter was sent asking Rome to restore order. Clement of Rome wrote to the Corinthians and opens his letter by apologising for his delay. He blames it on a year of serious disorganization in Rome.

Two years fit this description – 69 and 96 AD. If it was during the first, Clement was replying on behalf of Pope Linus. If it was during the second year, Clement himself was Pope. Whatever the date, the Corinthians were recognizing Rome as having the authority to settle the matter. Yet John and possibly other Apostles were still alive and living much closer to Corinth.

The early Christian leaders such as Polycarp, Irenaeus, Cyprian and those that followed all spoke of one Divine visible Church teaching with authority, under Peter.

The High Priest and his Council

While Jesus lived and preached in Palestine, the Jewish High priest was offering sacrifice in the Temple and holding meetings with his Council. He and the Council had supreme authority over religious affairs.

Jesus accepted their authority but was preparing a new covenant to replace the existing. He prophesied the destruction of the Temple. “... **there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.**” (Matthew 24: 2). When the destruction came in AD 70 and the Jewish priesthood and Council ceased to exist, Christians saw this as confirmation of how Peter and the Apostles had superseded the old priesthood in leadership and authority. The existing Western or ‘Wailing’ Wall in Jerusalem was not part of the Temple but a buttress wall constructed to provide a level site.

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