

Commentary on Matthew 16:13-20

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THE PERSON AND WORK OF JESUS THE SON OF MAN. 16:13-28.

I. THE PERSON OF JESUS THE SON OF MAN. 16:13-20.

A. The Turning Point.

"The region of Caesarea Philippi" (v. 13a, a city so named to distinguish it from the coastal Caesarea) was largely Gentile territory (Carson, 364). Jesus comes here, not to evangelize Gentiles (as in 15:21-39), but to withdraw from the Jewish leadership (16:1) and the crowds into a time of instruction for his disciples exclusively (in accord with 13:11-17). As shown by the questions of 16:13 and 15, it is to be expected (1) that by this stage of the ministry, both the crowd and the disciples will have drawn conclusions about Jesus, and (2) that those conclusions will differ markedly from each other. Not that Jesus will cease henceforth to serve the crowds (see 17:14-18; 19:2) or to debate the authorities (see 21:23-27; 22:15-32). Nonetheless the present passage is a turning point in his ministry; henceforth he will **concentrate increasingly** upon instructing his disciples, to prepare them for what is soon to happen to him (16:21-17:9) and for what they are to do after his departure (17:14-18:35).

B. The Judgments of the People.

1. The question, v. 13. "The people" (**hoi anthrōpoi**) means the Jewish population viewed in the most general way - to the exclusion however of the religious leadership, whose judgments about Jesus would have been considerably more negative than those of v. 14. In Mt the question concerns "the Son of Man," in both parallels simply "me" (Mk 8:27; Lk 9:18). That Mt 16:13 refers to Jesus himself is self-evident, not only from the previous usage of the title "Son of Man" in Mt (8:20; 9:6, etc.) but also from the immediate context: Jesus next asks the disciples, "Who do you say I am?" (16:15). Matthew's choice of the title rather than the personal pronoun, may be explained both **literarily** (the instance in v. 13 forms an **inclusio** with the two of vv. 27-28, the only other instances of the title in this passage) and **theologically** (the presence of the title in the opening question of the section, reflects the conviction that judgments about Jesus - whether those of the populace or those of the disciples - are responses not merely to Jesus' ministry

but to Jesus' **particular interpretation** of that ministry - namely, that he has come **as the Son of Man**).

2. The answer: "They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets'" (16:14). The first view recalls that of Herod Antipas (14:2). The second attaches the rôle of forerunner to Jesus instead of John the Baptist (cf. 11:10-14). While all Synoptists mention "the prophets" generally, Matthew alone refers specifically to Jeremiah (for possible reasons, see Carson, 365). While all these ascriptions express great respect for Jesus, none is an adequate response to what his ministry has set forth about his person and work. In no such case has the required **revelation** (that of 11:25-26) occurred.

C. The Judgment of the Disciples.

1. The question, v. 15. The "you" is **plural**, which shows us already that Peter answers as the disciples' representative. It is also **emphatic** (unlike **hoi anthrōpoi** in the other question, **hymeis** stands first in its clause), to oppose the disciples' judgment to that of the crowds.

2. The answer, v. 16.

a. "You are the Christ." There are six previous instances of **Christos** in Mt. In the first four, Matthew is himself declaring - right at the beginning of his book - that Jesus is the Christ, or Messiah (1:1, 16-18). The other two are indirect references, 2:4 (Herod inquired "where the Christ was to be born") and 11:2 ("John heard in prison what Christ was doing"). Thus within the story that Matthew records, Peter's confession is the **first direct affirmation** of Jesus' Messiahship. What about the references to "the Son of David" in 12:23 and 15:22? (1) This is unmistakably Messianic language (cf. the emphasis on "Christ" as "Son of David" throughout ch. 1). (2) In 12:23 the people are not declaring that Jesus is the Son of David, but wondering whether he might be. On the other hand the Canaanite woman, 15:22, is clearly affirming that Jesus is Messiah in some sense. But we do not know what precise concept of Messiahship underlies the woman's affirmation or the people's question. (3) Judging from the disciples' answer in 16:14, among the Jews Jesus was not widely believed to be the Son of David; this accords with the evidence of the above two passages (Jews do no more than ask a question, 12:23, but the Gentile confesses her faith, 15:22). (4) Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah, cannot be separated from the rest of his confession. A person who affirms that Jesus is Messiah but who thinks of him as merely the Son of David, has an inadequate view of Messiahship. This prepares us for the next point.

b. "the Son of the living God." These words occur only in the Matthean account. According to Mk 8:29, Peter answered "You are the Christ"; according to Lk 9:20, "The Christ of God." As all three Synoptists speak of Jesus as "the Son of God," it matters little whether the words peculiar to Mt are (1) a part of the original confession that Mark and Luke chose to omit (cf. Carson, 365-66), or (2) a Matthean addition to the actual confession (cf. David Hill, Matthew, 260). The really important point is that the words "the Son of the living God" serve to distinguish the **right concept of Messiahship** from erroneous ones. For the Messiah whom Matthew proclaims, is "the Son of God" not merely by virtue of his Messianic **office** (on which level the title could be applied to Jesus' predecessors in David's line; cf. D. Kidner, Psalms, on Ps 2:7), but by virtue of his **being** (cf. comments on 1:21-23). To affirm Jesus' Messiahship without acknowledging his deity, is to hold an essentially erroneous view. Did Peter here affirm Jesus' deity? I believe that he did, considering what he had already witnessed (cf. comments on 14:22-36), and what Jesus says in v. 17 (where Peter's insight is explained as a **revelation** from God).

D. Jesus' Words about Simon Peter. 16:17-19.

In face of arguments that these vv. are Matthew's composition (so e.g. Gundry, 330-36), see the case for their authenticity in Carson, 366 (following B. F. Meyer).

1. The pronouncement of **blessing**, v. 17. Jesus declares Simon to be "blessed." The underlying Greek is **makarios**, the word used in the Beatitudes of 5:3-12. Here, as there, **makarios** points to blessings presently experienced, and to blessings received from the gracious God. In the present instance, God blesses Simon by **revealing** to him truth about Jesus, namely that declared in v. 16. (To judge from Lk 9:18, it is a revelation for which Jesus has prayed.) To be more precise, Mt 16:16-17 offers an example of God's activity as described in 11:25-26. There is the strongest connection between the two passages. In both, (1) Jesus speaks of God as "my Father" (11:27; 16:17); (2) the Father acts as **revealer** (this link is especially strong, given the fact that three of the four instances of the verb **apokalypō** ("reveal") in Mt occur in 11:25, 27; 16:17); and (3) the subject of the revelation is Jesus **the Son** of God the Father (on the illegitimacy of driving a wedge between "Son" and "Son of God" in the Gospels' presentation of Jesus, see Donald Guthrie, New Testament Theology, 304-5). Knowing that Jesus interprets Peter's confession as he does in 16:17 (together with 11:25-26), we must take the words "the Son of the living God" as an ascription of deity.

2. The assignment of **position**, v. 18a. We now come to the most hotly debated verse in the passage. See the commentaries.

a. The application of the words. By "this rock," Jesus (I believe) means not Peter's **confession** (thus A. H. McNeile, Matthew, 241), nor **God** (thus G. C. Morgan, Matthew, 211), nor **Jesus** (thus R. C. H. Lenski, Matthew, 626) nor his **teaching** (thus Gundry, 334, comparing "the rock" of 7:24-25), but **Peter himself** (thus Carson, 368). Consider the following points: (1) The reference to "this rock" is preceded immediately by the words **su ei Petros** - a direct and emphatic (as shown by the addition of the personal pronoun **su** to the verb **ei**) reference to Peter himself. Moreover, Jesus speaks not merely of "the rock" but of "this rock." Behind "this" is the Greek demonstrative pronoun **tautē**. The demonstrative pronoun is used when "it is desired to call attention with special emphasis to a designated object, whether in the physical vicinity of the speaker or the literary context of the writer" (H. E. Dana and J.R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek NT, 127). Moreover, "for that which is relatively near in actuality or thought the immediate demonstrative [**houtos**, "this" - of which **tautē** is a form - as distinct from **ekeinos**, "that"] is used" (ibid.). Whether then referring to what is physically close to Jesus, or to what is literarily close in Mt, the pronoun "this" most naturally refers to Peter - instead of to the rather more remote confession of v. 16 or to the far more remote figure of 7:24-25. (2) The link between the clauses is made yet stronger by the play on words (or **paronomasia**, a most popular device among the Jews): "You are Peter [**Petros**], and upon this rock [**petra**]..." In the underlying Aramaic which Jesus employed (note the Aramaic "bar Jonah" in v. 17), the connection would have been even closer - if, as is most likely, **kepha** stood behind both **Petros** and **petra** (thus Carson, 368; Oscar Cullmann, TDNT 6: 106); cf. Jn 1:42, "'You will be called **Kēphas** [Greek for Aramaic **kepha**]' (which, when translated, is Peter [Greek **Petros**])." Matthew's Greek makes the appropriate distinction between the masculine **Petros** (as the first clause refers to the man Peter) and the feminine **petra** (as the purpose of the figure in the second clause is to refer to a "rock" or "crag," **petra**, rather than to "a piece of rock" or "a stone," **petros**; see Liddell and Scott, Greek-English Lexicon, s.v. **petra** and **petros**, and Cullmann, TDNT 6: 95), without losing the play on words - as would have happened had he chosen **lithos**, "stone," instead of **petra** (cf. 1 Pet 2:8), or had he simply said "on **you**." Indeed, while an underlying Aramaic with a repeated **kepha** preserves the play on words by a shift from the second person ("you are Peter") to the third ("upon this rock"), the word play is actually heightened by the Greek's distinction between the masculine **Petros** and the feminine **petra**.

b. The meaning of the ascription. If, as just argued, "this rock" is Peter, we must now inquire into Jesus' exact meaning. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that Peter is addressed in a **particular capacity**, namely as one who possesses **apostolic authority** and bears **apostolic witness**. Jesus confers the

name **Petros** upon Simon as a signal of his apostolic calling (Jesus' present pronouncement, 16:18, is anticipated in 10:2, cf. Jn 1:42; on the reason for Jesus' choice of this name, see E. below). It is precisely **as an apostle** (or apostle-designate) that Peter utters the confession of 16:16. And it is precisely **as the confessor** that Peter receives the designation "this rock" from the Lord Jesus (cf. F. F. Bruce, Matthew, 55: "It is not Peter in his own right, but Peter the confessor, that is the rock"). Cullmann, having argued strongly for identifying "this rock" as Peter (TDNT 6: 104-8), nonetheless affirms: "For the foundation of the Church is simply the [apostolic] attestation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and of the identity of the Christ who promises and the Christ who is exalted" (p. 108). Moreover, while Jesus here addresses Peter individually (all the "you's" of vv. 18-19 are singular), he also addresses him as **representative** of all the apostles. The "you" of v. 15 is plural; in v. 20 Jesus reverts to addressing all the disciples; and the authority granted to Peter in 16:19 is extended to all the disciples in 18:18; see E. below. We conclude this paragraph with the comment of Alfred Plummer: "Neither the confession of Peter nor the faith of Peter is an adequate explanation [for the phrase "upon this rock"]. But at the same time it is clear that the promise is made to Peter as confessing his faith, and also as confessing it on behalf of the Twelve" (Matthew, 229, his emphasis).

3. The bestowal of authority, v. 19. Jesus now speaks directly, and by means of a new image, of Peter's exercise of apostolic authority.

a. "The keys of the kingdom." As in 7:21, God's kingdom is depicted as a realm to be **entered**; accordingly, using the "keys" means having authority to permit or to prohibit entry (thus e.g. Carson, 370). Jesus will give those keys, i.e. grant that authority, to Peter.

b. "Binding and loosing." Behind the verbs **deō** ("to bind") and **luō** ("to loose") stand the Hebrew **'asar** and **hitir** or the Aramaic **'asar** and **sh^era** (F. Büchsel, TDNT 2: 60). According to the customary meaning among the rabbis, "to bind" was "to **forbid**," and "to loose" was "to **permit**" (ibid.). Relating this to the figure of the keys, we conclude that Peter's "binding" means **prohibiting** entry into the Kingdom to those who **reject** the apostolic witness, and that his "loosing" means **granting** entry to those who **accept** the witness. (Like Carson, 372, I take the neuter "whatever" in v. 19 to denote persons.) For an instructive parallel, compare Jn 20:23 (addressed, like Mt 18:18, to all the disciples): "If you **forgive** [for **aphiēmi**, which basically means "to let go"; cf. **luō**, "loose"] the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you **retain** [for **krateō**, which basically means "to hold"; cf. **deō**, "bind"] the sins of any, they are retained." (For the view that the "keys" of 16:19 are a symbol for judging responses to the apostolic preaching, see

Carson, 373; for examples of Peter's "loosing" and "binding" respectively, see Acts 2:38-41; 8:20-23. In Mt 18:18, the principle is extended to judgments about persons **within** the church, "binding" being the brother's excommunication, v. 17, and "loosing" his exoneration, v. 15.) It must now be emphasized that what the apostles "bind and loose on earth" reveals and ratifies the **prior decision in heaven**: "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" (v. 19b, NASB). For a defense of this rendering of **estai dedemenon** and **estai lelumenon**, see Gundry, 335, and Carson, 372. "Thus God will not ratify at the last judgment what Peter does in the present age, but Peter does in the present age what God has already determined" (Gundry, 335). This accords well with the above observations concerning Peter's apostolic authority. For Peter and the other apostles learn "what God has already determined" by **his revealing truth to them** (16:17). It is precisely that revealed truth (whether in the indicative of the gospel or the imperative of the commandments) that enables Peter and the other apostles to make judgments ("binding" or "loosing") about persons both within (18:18) and beyond (16:19) the church.

E. Jesus' Words about Himself. 16:18-19.

The central figure of this passage is not Peter but Jesus. What Jesus says about Peter, must be viewed in the light of what he says here about himself.

1. Jesus the authoritative **Speaker**. Let us not forget who utters the words of vv. 17-19. As God the **Son** he knows that Peter's insight (v. 16) is revealed by God the **Father** (cf. 11:27), and that earthly decisions rest on heavenly ones (v. 19). His words in v. 18a, "And I tell you [**kagō de soi legō**]," are reminiscent of his authoritative declarations in 5:21-48, "But I tell you [**egō de legō hymin**]." Jesus then (in consequence of the Father's revelation) pronounces Simon the recipient of God's blessing, grants him the name "Peter," identifies him as "this rock," and promises him "the keys." In other words, whatever Simon is to be and to do according to these verses, is the direct effect of **Jesus' authoritative declaration about him**. But most significant of all are the words of v. 18b.

2. Jesus the **Lord**. Jesus declares, "And on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (v. 18b). He thus identifies himself as the church's Lord.

a. The new community. That Jesus speaks of "my church [**mou tēn ekklēsian**]," does not deny the reality of the church in the OT (cf. Acts 7:38, Moses "was in the congregation [**tē ekklēsia**] in the desert"). Rather, Jesus' words here are in keeping with his purpose of reconstituting the people of God around his

person, as shown already (e.g.) in his choice of **twelve** apostles (10:1). The actual building of Jesus' church will commence (note the future tense, "will build") in the wake of his death and exaltation (Acts 1-2 **et seq.**). On the relation between the **kingdom** that Jesus comes to inaugurate, and the **church** that he comes to build, see the concise statement by George E. Ladd, "The Kingdom and the Church," EDT, 611.

b. The victorious community. Given the fact of Jesus' Lordship, "the gates of Hades will not overcome [the church]" (16:18b). This statement affirms two things: (1) that **Satan** and the demons under his control will never prevail against the church, but will on the contrary be vanquished by the church's Lord (12: 25-29); and (2) that **Death** will never prevail against the church - i.e., the gates of the realm of Death "will never close on the new community so that it is irretrievably extinguished" (F. F. Bruce, Matthew, 55; cf. Carson, 370, the church "cannot die"; and Gundry, 335, who thinks that the death by martyrdom is especially in view) - for Jesus will defeat Death (Rev 1:18). As conqueror of Satan and of Death, Jesus speaks assuredly of the outcome of his building project; the success of the enterprise does not depend ultimately on the effectiveness of Peter and the other apostles, but on the might of the church's Lord.

3. Jesus the **Builder**. Jesus declares, "On this rock **I will build** my church." A principal way in which Jesus conquers Satan and Death is by building his church. The church does not merely **withstand** assaults of evil powers, it **advances** against them - which explains why those powers are so vehement in their opposition to the church and its leaders. Jesus himself is the builder. Far from being the - or even a - builder, Peter is part of the **building**. This, I believe, explains Jesus' choice of the name **Petros**: he is a **foundation-stone** in the new edifice. As other passages make clear, this is an honor that Peter shares with the rest of the apostles: "built upon the **foundation** [consisting] of **the apostles** and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the keystone" (Eph 2:19-20, NRSV). "The wall of the city had twelve **foundations**, and on them were the names of the **twelve apostles** of the Lamb" (Rev 21:14). Significantly, the very next verse in Eph 2 speaks of the church as "a holy **temple** in the Lord" (v. 21; cf. 1 Cor 3:16). Cf. Peter's own reference to believers as "**living stones** ... being built into a spiritual house" (1 Pet 2:5), and Paul's designation of Peter, James and John as "pillars" (**styloi**) in Gal 2:9 (see F. F. Bruce, Galatians, 122-23; and 1 Tim 3:15, "the church...the pillar and foundation of the truth").

F. The True Apostolic Succession.

1. The eminence of Peter. The prominence of Peter among the apostles cannot be denied. In the lists of the Twelve, his name is always first. Among the

Twelve, he was one of the "inner three." If the above exegesis is correct, Jesus addressed him personally and directly as the person upon whom the church would be built. In time he became one of the "pillars" of the Jerusalem church and (judging from the early chapters of Acts) its most prominent leader, preacher and spokesman. Significantly, in Acts' record of the church's outreach according to the commission of Acts 1:8, Peter - and he alone - is present at each major stage of that outreach, namely in Jerusalem (ch. 2, where he delivers the sermon at Pentecost), in Samaria (ch. 8, where he is one of two apostles sent to pray for and lay hands on the new converts), and among the Gentiles (ch. 10, where Peter enters the home of Cornelius in response to the vision on the housetop). Within the circle of the Twelve, he is clearly **primus inter pares** ("first among equals").

2. The limitations of Peter. To judge from the NT evidence, in no sense can Peter be called infallible. The NT clearly presents him as a fallible, sinful human being. All four Gospels record his denial of Jesus (Mt 26:69-75 and parallels). Lk 22:31-32 implies that had Jesus not prayed for Peter, he would have gone the way of Judas (cf. 22:3). At Antioch it was Paul, not Peter, who clearly perceived the implications of the Gospel; in that famous confrontation Paul rebuked him for acting out of accord with his principles (Gal 2:11-14). Nor does the NT provide evidence for Peter's exclusive authority. As observed, the power of the keys, granted to Peter individually in Mt 16:19, was later given to all the disciples, 18:18. According to Acts 8:14-25, "the apostles in Jerusalem sent Peter and John" to Samaria (v. 14). In time James, the half-brother of Jesus, succeeded Peter as the principal leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15). Observe that the church in question is that of Jerusalem! The NT offers no support for the idea that Peter was the first bishop of Rome, or the idea that the true apostolic succession is realized in the history of the papacy. Cf. WCOE, Chapter 27 ("Of the Church"), section 6, which says in part: "The Lord Jesus Christ is the only head of the church, and the claim of any man to be the vicar of Christ and the head of the church, is without warrant ... in Scripture."

3. The primacy of the Word of God. In keeping with the foregoing exegesis, the true apostolic succession lies in the faithful transmission of the **apostolic gospel**. It is by this means that Jesus Christ builds his church. We read in Acts 2:41, "Those who accepted [Peter's] **message** were baptized, and about three thousand were **added to their number** that day." Then immediately we read, "They devoted themselves to **the apostles' teaching**" (v. 42). Cf. Acts 6, where (in face of the crisis over food distribution) the apostles renew their commitment to "the ministry of the **word**" (vv. 2, 4). "The keys of the kingdom" are still employed by church leaders who are committed to Biblical Truth and who - **precisely on that basis** - make judgments about persons both beyond and within the church.