

Is Peter the Rock, or is the Rock only his Confession of Faith? What do the Bible and the Early Fathers Teach?

Steve Ray's Response to an Eastern Orthodox Christian

Hello Anthony:

I read your post with great interest. I hope you don't mind if I respond. I will begin with your comments and then respond. You mention you are doing a term paper on the "Patristic Interpretation of 'the Rock'" and you gave some conclusions at which you have arrived.

Okay, let's look at "the Rock" if you don't mind that I join you in your quest. I wrote a book entitled "[Upon this Rock](#)" and here are some of the things I discovered while writing my book.

Scripture repeatedly refers to the God as the "Rock." In each place—in the Old and New Testaments—where "rock" is used, there is a reference to the divinity of God. (Ex 17:6, 33:12; Deut. 32:4, 32:15, 32:18, 32:21; I Sam 2:2; II Sam 22:2, 22:32; Ps. 28:1, 31:3, 62:2, 89:26, 92:15, 95:1; Isa 17:10, I Cor 10:4, etc.). One could conclude that "rock" can only refer to God and to use it for a man would take away from the glory and strength of God or somehow be sacrilegious.

But this would be a false assumption. God is also spoken of as the Shepherd (Psa 23), and Jesus is the Good Shepherd (Jn 10). Does that preclude others from being shepherds? No, in fact Peter was a shepherd just like he was the rock. Does it take away from Christ being the Rock or the Shepherd? No, Peter can share in his "rock-ness" and "shepherd-ness."

Abraham is also referred to as a Rock. "Hearken to me, you who pursue deliverance, you that seek the Lord; look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were digged. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you; for when he was but one I called him, and I blessed him, and made him many" (Is 51:1-2).

At the inception of the great Abrahamic covenant, God says He set up a rock from which the nation of Israel was hewn. Along with the designation as rock, Abram's name was changed from Abram (father) to Abraham (father of a multitude). And in Matthew 16 he changes another name, this time changing Simon's name to "Rock" upon which the Church will be established.

Referring to Matthew 16, and Peter as the Rock, Protestant professor David Hill writes, "In favor of interpreting the word-play as a personal reference is the rabbinic saying about Abraham: when the Holy one wanted to create the world, he passed over the generations of Enoch and of the Flood; but when he saw Abraham who was to arise, he said: 'Behold, I have found a rock on which I can build and found the world' therefore he called Abraham 'rock,' as it is said [Is 51:1] Look to the rock from which you were hewn'" (David Hill, *The New Century Bible Commentary on The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmann Publ., 1972], 261). The Jewish listeners would immediately understand the import of Jesus' words, richly couched in their Jewish heritage. The parallels were drawn between Abraham and Peter: name changes to designate new statuses, the designations of both as "rock", and both standing at

the fountainhead of the two major covenants of God with his people. In each case God began with one person to achieve a much larger goal.

So if your point is that only Christ can be the foundation, you begin with a great handicap because we see biblical warrant for other things to be referred to as “a foundation.” You cannot interchange descriptive figures of speech willy-nilly between different illustrations—commonly called “mixing metaphors.” Mixing metaphors does great violence to each textual illustration and is a good example of poorly “dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). In the metaphorical description in Matthew 16, Jesus couldn’t be the foundation—he clearly states he is the builder, not the foundation! Builders lay foundations, they are not the foundation.

But first let’s look at Christ, what is he? In Scripture Jesus is represented as the foundation (1 Cor 3:11), the builder (Mt 16:18), the cornerstone (Acts 4:11), and the temple (Rev 21:22).

We also see the apostles and/or believers as: builders (1 Cor 3:10), foundations (Eph 2:20; Rev 21:14), stones (1 Pet 2:4), buildings (1 Cor 3:9), and temples (Eph 2:21). In 1 Timothy 3:15 the Church is the foundation (of the truth). If we are allowed to speak *only* of Jesus as rock and foundation, we will have to cut several verses out of the Bible.

You see Anthony, when you read the Scriptures with a Protestant bias or with tunnel vision you inevitably come up with skewed interpretations—you are forced to “mix the metaphors.” As a former Evangelical Protestant I discovered this very quickly. Though you say you are Orthodox, you sound very much like an Evangelical Protestant. You cannot mix metaphors and say things like “because Christ is the foundation, nothing else can be.” This is poor reasoning and poor exegesis.

By the way, as we delve into the Church Fathers next, remember they were very creative with Scripture and didn’t hesitate to interpret passages allegorically depending on the matter at hand. For example they would understand a passage literally and historically, but also allegorically in the tradition of Paul (Gal 4:26) who allegorized the text to find deeper spiritual meaning. Origen did this with Matthew 16 in his commentary on Matthew at the end of his life. Did he deny the literal meaning, that Peter was the Rock upon which the Church was built? Heavens no. He had already affirmed that in several places. He was allegorizing to find deeper meaning for each Christian. But we will get into that later.

Many Fathers used Matthew 16 to defend the deity of Christ. In so doing, were they implying that Peter was not the Rock? No. Though Scripture has many applications it does not have many literal, historical meanings.

Also I find it disturbing that you seem so selective in your use of the Fathers. This is the way Jehovah’s Witnesses and Protestant Fundamentalists do with the Bible when they selectively use their favorite passages—with no serious attempt to research the whole body of work and give an honest assessment of the overall picture. In Evangelical circles we used to call it “proof-texting”. Find a text you like, ignore any information to the contrary and say, “there, that proves it.” In fact, you end your post with the words, “Pretty hard to argue that.” No it is

not, especially if one steps back and looks at the whole picture.

I could approach your list of quotes in two ways: *First*, I could show from the *same* Fathers passages where they acknowledge *Peter* as the Rock, and not only that, but that he was in a position of primacy, and that he had successors and that Rome was his See. At worst this would show that the Fathers used the passage for different reasons in different arguments. At worst it would show they were confused, forgot what they had written earlier, or vacillated in their theology. I will take a few examples from your list of Patristic quotations to show that the Fathers you quote not only don't *deny* Peter was the Rock, but *recognize* him as the Rock foundation of the Church.

Second, I could address your list and take each reference and explain in detail *why* the Fathers refer to Christ as the Rock, and not Peter. I will take a few examples to do just that. Origen is a classic example—and I will discuss him in more detail later.

But the bottom line is that you have to be honest and not just proof-text the Bible or the Fathers. If that is all your research paper does, you will not be honest, you will not be objective, and you will have lost integrity in the eyes of those who know better.

So, let's look a few of your examples. I will approach a few key quotes with both prongs, first showing that they did accept Peter as the Rock; and second, explain briefly why the Church Father said what you quote him as saying. Let's start with Chrysostom:

You wrote: "The Rock on which Christ will build His Church means the faith of Confession" (St. John Chrysostom (d. 407), 53rd Homily on St. Matthew).

You put quotation marks around this sentence implying it is a direct quote—which it is not! The direct quote is this: "Therefore He added this, "And I say unto thee, Thou art Peter, and upon this rock will I build my Church;" that is, on the faith of his confession." And also, in your research paper you better cite the correct homily: it is not Homily 53, it is Homily 54, section 3.

Setting aside the context of Chrysostom's statement for the moment, let's take our first approach first. Does Chrysostom refer to Peter as the Rock elsewhere in his writing? Let's look.

"Peter himself the chief of the Apostles, the first in the Church, the friend of Christ, who received a revelation not from man, . . . THIS VERY PETER,--AND WHEN I NAME PETER, I NAME THAT UNBROKEN ROCK, THAT FIRM FOUNDATION, the great Apostles, the first of the disciples" (*Hom. 3, de Poenit.*).

What can we make of this in light of your dogmatic statements to the contrary? Did you not know this quotation existed? Let's look at a few more.

"[Peter] always is the first to begin the discourse. Lo, there were a hundred and twenty (Acts 1:15); and he asks for one out of the whole multitude. Justly: he has the first authority in the matter, as having had all entrusted to him. For to him Christ said, and thou being converted, confirm thy brethren' " (*Acts of the Apostles, Homily 3 in The*

Faith of Catholics, ed. by Rev. T. J. Capel [New York and Cincinnati: Fr. Pustet & Co., 1885], 2:34).

St. John Chrysostom (c. 347–407) says of St. Paul:

“What can be more lowly than such a soul? After such successes, wanting nothing of Peter, not even his assent, but being of equal dignity with him, (for at present I will say no more,) he comes to him as his [Paul’s] elder and superior. And the only object of this journey was to visit Peter; thus he pays due respect to the Apostles, and esteems himself not only not their better but not their equal. . . . He says, to visit Peter; he does not say to see, but to visit and survey, a [Greek] word which those, who seek to become acquainted with great and splendid cities, apply to themselves. Worthy of such trouble did he consider the very sight of Peter; and this appears from the Acts of the Apostles also” (*Commentary on Galatians* 1, 18 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, ed. by Philip Schaff [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983], 13:12).

St. Chrysostom also wrote:

“See how Paul speaks after Peter, and no one restrains: James waits and starts not up, for he (Peter) it was to whom had been entrusted the government (primacy)” (*Acts of the Apostles Hom. 33* in *The Faith of Catholics* ed. by Rev. T. J. Capel [New York and Cincinnati: Fr. Pustet & Co., 1885], 2:34).

“He [Jesus] said to him, Feed my sheep.’ Why does He pass over the others and speak of the sheep to Peter? He was the chosen one of the Apostles, the mouth of the disciples, the head of the choir. For this reason Paul went up to see him [Peter] rather than the others. And also to show him that he must have confidence now that his denial had been purged away. He entrusts him with the rule [authority] over the brethren . . . If anyone should say, Why then was it James who received the See of Jerusalem?’ I should reply that He [Jesus] made Peter the teacher not of that see but of the whole world” (*Homilies on John* 88, 1).

It is not a light thing for John Chrysostom, an Eastern bishop to teach that Peter was the universal teacher of the universal Church. And again:

“Why did Christ shed His blood? That He might obtain possession of those very sheep, WHICH HE ENTRUSTED TO PETER, AND TO HIS SUCCESSORS. Naturally then did Christ say, Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his lord shall MAKE RULER OVER HIS HOUSEHOLD.” (*The Priesthood, NPNF*, p.39; IT. I II. li *De Sacerd.* N. I pg. 454).

In this document St. Chrysostom, an Eastern bishop, recognizes the primacy of Peter in the see of Rome and the continued primacy which was entrusted to Peter’s successors. Peter and his successors were the shepherds which had been given authority over the whole flock—“one flock with one shepherd” (Jn. 10:16). If the shepherd is commanded to govern the sheep, the obverse is also true: the sheep are commanded to follow and obey the shepherd.

“And yet after so great an evil (his denial), He again raised him to his former honor, and entrusted to his hand the primacy over the universal Church” (*Hom. 5, de Poenit*).

So, Chrysostom is not so easy to dismiss as you had hoped. He refutes you with his *own words*. So, now let’s look at the context of the actual passage you *almost* quote correctly (you paraphrased it).

Are you aware that even within the context of Homily 54 (not 53)—which you quoted—that St. Chrysostom says that Peter is the *rock*? Did you put that in your research paper? Let’s look:

“For those things which are peculiar to God alone, (both to absolve sins, and to make the church incapable of overthrow in such assailing waves, and *to exhibit a man that is a fisher more solid than any rock*, while all the world is at war with him), these He promises Himself to give; as the Father, speaking to Jeremiah, said, He would make him as a brazen pillar, and as a wall;’ but him to one nation only, this man in every part of the world” (emphasis mine). Ouch!

Now, who is Chrysostom’s audience? Who is he addressing and what is he arguing against? It is crucial to ask this question in order to understand any document. You can’t just take a short quotation out of its historical and contextual surroundings to suit your own purpose. So who was Chrysostom writing against? The Manicheans and the Arians. He was dealing with the deity of Christ and Jesus’ relation to the Father and to the Old Testament. His intent at the time was not to discuss Peter or the primacy of Rome—it was to defend the divinity of Christ. He was using Matthew 16 as a weapon against heretics in the context of the Person of Jesus Christ.

Early in his homily Chrysostom says that Christ had proven his divinity by his works, his deity and of His “unanimity with the Father.” This is the context of Jesus’ question to Peter, “Who do men say that I am?” Would the disciples recognize him as divine? The Arians did not; but Peter sure did—Peter acknowledged him as God. Therefore it was Peter’s confession that was so profound, and because of that confession Peter is chosen to “lead the choir”, to be the “rock”. Chrysostom says this himself. But Chrysostom, in refuting the Arians and Manicheans, is encouraging everyone to make the same confession as Peter made, in order to have true theology related to Christ and save their souls. Does his encouragement to make the same confession, negate the literal sense of the passage—that Peter is actually and literally the Rock? No, of course not.

Chrysostom applies the passage in such a way as to affirm the historical literal sense, but to go even deeper to challenge anyone who denied the deity of Christ! Read the whole Homily and you will clearly see this for yourself.

One more example, though we *could* analyze each one you cite. Remember, the Catholic has nothing to fear by your “proof-texting”. We have not come to our conclusions lightly. It has been

built on the teachings of the Scriptures, the Apostles, the Fathers, and the Councils of the Church—by the Holy Spirit.

Let's look at one more example—a quotation you use from Origen.

“If you believe that God has raised the whole building of His Church on Peter alone, what will you say of John, the Son of Thunder? What will you say of each of the apostles? Will you venture to say that the gates of hell shall not prevail against Peter in particular, but shall prevail against all others? Are not the words addressed to them all?” (Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*).

Before we discuss this quotation, let's start with our two-step approach. Does Origen refer to Peter as the rock and/or foundation elsewhere in his writings? Yes.

Origen (c. AD 185–c. 254) “Peter, upon whom is built the Church of Christ, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail, left only one Epistle of acknowledged genuinity. Let us concede also a second, which however, is doubtful.” (*Commentaries on John 5, 3*).

“Look at the great foundation of the Church, that most solid of rocks, upon whom Christ built the Church! And what does the Lord say to him? O you of little faith, He says, why did you doubt!” (*Homilies on Exodus 5, 4*).

“He [Origen] wrote also to Fabianus, bishop of Rome, and to many other rulers of the churches concerning his orthodoxy.” (Eusebius 6, 36, 4). Jerome tells us, “Origen himself, in the letter which he writes to Fabianus, bishop of the city of Rome, professes his penitence for writing such things and lays the blame of indiscretion on Abrosius because he had published a private composition” (Epistle 84).

So, not only does Origen profess that Peter is the Rock and foundation, but out of respect for the Roman bishop writes to explain and hopefully exonerate himself, which would allow him back into good graces with the universal Church.

Now to the context of Origen's comments in his commentary on Matthew, let's move to question 2 in our approach: Origen's *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, in the passage on chapter 16 is often used by Protestants and Orthodox in an attempt to attack the Catholic understanding of Matthew 16. We have already established that Origen accepted the literal and historical intent of this passage (more in my book [Upon this Rock](#) and my debate with [William Webster](#)), when he clearly stated that Peter is the rock upon which the Church is built. So, why does Origen seem to contradict this later in life?

There are several reasons. Origen viewed the Scriptures as a treasure chest full of spiritual treasures. “If the apparent sense of a given passage contradicts the necessary convictions of morality or the nature of God [or the understanding of the reader], there must be some deeper lesson underneath the surface of the passage. This conviction led Origen into what we usually call the allegorical interpretation of Scripture’. He held that there are three levels of meaning in the Bible: the literal sense; the moral application to the soul; and the allegorical or spiritual

sense” (Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* [Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982], 100). So far so good, this is the teaching of the Catholic Church today, following the lead of St. Paul (Gal 4:21–31).

Does Origen intend to reject the literal sense of Matthew 16? We know in other contexts he readily accepts the literal interpretation of the passage (held by Catholics from the beginning). Intentionally or unintentionally, he does not mention the literal and historical sense in *this* context. He is “digging deeper” for a personal and spiritual application. Protestant author Tenney writes, “This method of [non literal] interpretation has done much harm to the cause of correct interpretation of the Scriptures and has resulted in absurd and, often, unbiblical theological ideas” (Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publ. House, 1970], 120). This certainly seems to be the case here with Matthew 16. Another historian writes, “[A former Jew] had told Origen how Scripture was like a house full of locked rooms: God, he said, had confused the keys, and it was up to his heirs to fit the right key to each lock. Origen considered this view a beautiful tradition and showed himself an inventive opener of some very secret doors. His allegories were totally false to the plain meaning of Scripture. . . . In his own commentaries, we find Origen taking a similar view” (Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* [New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987], 524).

These Protestant writers go too far in denigrating the allegorical method of biblical interpretation, which has been an appropriate level of Scripture study from the time of the Jews before Christ and the apostles after Christ. The Catechism of the Catholic Church recommends it even today—properly applied (CCC 115–119).

There is another possible explanation of why Origen did not explain the *literal* interpretation in this particular passage.

Origen may have interpreted this verse—“you are Peter [Rock] and on this rock I will build my Church—inconsistent with the plain meaning of the author as a subtle means of retaliation for his earlier excommunication, not only by the synod of bishops gathered in Alexandria, but also upheld by the bishop of Rome. Here we see HISTORICAL CONTEXT may be just as important as textual context.

Origen’s commentary on Matthew was written in his old age. Is it not inconceivable that after fighting with the leaders of the Church and losing the battle, that Origen would attempt to diminish their authority—an authority he recognized (as is proved by his letter of apology and penance written to the bishop of Rome)—by interpreting the passage in a way that would diminish their prestige and attack office. While acknowledging the authority of the office of bishop, he makes the comment in *Matthew* that bishops, regardless of their office, only possess the “keys of Peter” if they live a moral life. He seems to be denigrating the government of the Church, maybe to vindicate himself among his many followers.

Origen’s allegorizing of this passage in no way diminishes the authority of Peter or his successors, nor the power of the bishops. At the end of his life—excommunicated by pope and local bishops alike—Origen may be interpreting the words in this way to denounce them, giving evidence that he might be trying to counteract a clearly and universally accepted teaching on the

authority of bishops and the primacy of Rome.

In conclusion Anthony—and I end here due to time alone, not desire of lack of further information—I would suggest you dig a bit deeper. Look beyond your own tradition. Look at the other writings of the Fathers and look at them more closely in their context. Don't be afraid to examine Catholic teaching honestly without fear or antagonism.

Until later, may God richly bless you,

Steve Ray