

Webster Stumbles “Upon this Rock”: David Palm Responds

Webster’s words are blue, italicized and indented;
David Palm’s words are to the left and normal black text.

Webster wrote:

Mr. Ray’s main argument rests on an argument from silence,

Horsehockey! There is loads of positive evidence in your book.

They never denied that Rome had a primacy, but it was interpreted as a primacy of honor since the Church was located in the capital of the Empire and was the site of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul.

Not always, which is precisely your point. Again, Webster is disingenuous in his use of the evidence. When they cite political reasons for the Roman primacy he “agrees” with them (although he does not really agree with them, he just uses that as a weapon against the Catholics). When they cite spiritual/biblical/theological reasons he conveniently ignores them or dismisses them with a wave and a sniff about it not being a “Vatican I” style position.

This is because their comments apply to Peter alone. They have absolutely nothing to do with the bishops of Rome. How do we know this? Because Augustine and the fathers do not make that application in their comments. They do not state that their descriptions of Peter apply to the bishops of Rome.

This is an argument from silence on Webster’s part.

Steve, you can review what you said about Augustine in your book (I lent out my copy). I don’t know if you made the case that Augustine actually held to Roman primacy based on his comments on Petrine primacy. But simple Petrine primacy in the Fathers DOES make a big difference, whether or not that particular Father made the connection to the Roman primacy. Here’s what I’ve written on that (from my article **James White vs. Jesus, Peter, and the Keys** on my Web site). I underlined what I consider to be the really salient bits:

Any complex theological edifice (including distinctively Protestant ones, such as *sola Scriptura*) must be built up a brick at a time. And it is a very legitimate technique to call upon “hostile witnesses” in support of some points of one’s case; this happens in courtrooms throughout the world every single day. Now White grouses, for example, when Catholics use citations from Protestant scholars to support their case. “Citations are multiplied (often out of context, or lacking very necessary caveats) from well-known Protestant scholars so that it looks like the

authors have done their homework, and that anyone who disagrees is really out of step with even the majority of Protestant scholarship.” It is a fact that White’s own understanding of Matt 16:18 is out of step with the majority of modern Protestant scholarship; it would be helpful if he would simply admit this, even if it does not effect his position. But the authors of *JP&K* have simply tried to establish that the majority of Protestant scholars now agree with Catholics on the placement of the first few bricks in the case for the papacy. Of course these Protestants don’t follow us all the way down the path; if they did, they would be Catholics. That should be so obvious to the reader as to obviate explicit mention.

The same principle of building a case a piece at a time lies behind the use of citations from the Fathers to illustrate the role of Peter in the New Testament. White claims that,

The Roman apologist must demonstrate that [sic] for such statements to be meaningful that the Father under discussion believed that the bishop of Rome alone is the sole, unique successor of Peter, so that any such exalted language about Peter is to be applied in that Father’s thinking to the bishop of Rome alone. If such a basis is not provided, references to Peter are irrelevant.

Perhaps Catholic apologists need to be more explicit about the way in which they are building their case, but White’s criticism that they use every individual nugget of evidence as stand-alone proof of the full-blown system is simply false. Patristic citations concerning St. Peter are far from irrelevant. It may be that certain Fathers did not apply their particular interpretation of Petrine Scripture texts to support ongoing papal prerogatives, although this is at best an argument from silence and often their other words or actions indicate that they admitted papal authority to an extent that would be anathema to the Protestant. But that aside, their testimony on the meaning of Gospel texts such as Matt 16:18-19 and John 21:15-17, even as they relate strictly to Peter, forms a legitimate plank in a full-orbed apology.

My own progression of thought is perhaps not atypical of those who come ultimately to embrace the Catholic doctrine of the papacy. Long before I had any inkling of becoming Catholic I came to embrace the current majority report among Protestant scholars, namely, that “this rock” of Matt 16:18 refers to the person of Peter and that he is the foundation on which Christ would build His Church. I was challenged later, by those same scholars and by Catholic apologists, to see from the use of Isa 22:22 in Matt 16:19, that our Lord, as the son of David and new King of Israel, reestablished the office of “steward” or “one who is over the house” (in modern parlance, the prime minister). He gives that office to Peter, as symbolized by the “keys of the kingdom.” This establishes that *in principle* there is nothing antithetical between the supreme Lordship of Jesus Christ and a mortal man serving as His “vicar” on earth.

Succession of this office eventually became altogether reasonable to me given (1) that the office was a successive one in the Old Testament economy, (2) that the promise of the Lord to “build my Church” did not pertain only to the New Testament Church, so there is a future thrust right in the text—this text then appears more as a prophecy than as an exclusive promise to Peter, (3) that if the Kingdom would last till the end of time, and the King would certainly be enthroned until the end of time, then there is no good reason to suppose that the newly established office of prime minister would cease after the death of Peter, (4) that the Lord in parables speaks of stewards who are placed “over the house” until His *Parousia* (see e.g. Matt 24:45ff.), (5) that the papacy represents the logical “historical embodiment of Christ’s promise” to Peter, (6) that the covenant people of God have always had this kind of earthly, patriarchal headship and there is no good reason to suppose that will end in the New Covenant, (7) that if the leadership of the New Testament Church was constituted this way then there is no good reason to suppose that the Church’s fundamental structure would change radically when the Apostles died, (8) that the early Church had a lively understanding of the direct succession of its leadership from the Apostles in general, (9) that in the aggregate the Church, in its belief and practice, early and continuously, ascribed to the bishops of Rome as the successors of Peter the same sort of overseeing authority that was indeed promised in the New Testament itself, (10) that the *need* for such an office certainly did not cease in the first century with the death of Peter. So it is illegitimate to say that Catholics don’t give arguments, both biblical and patristic, for both the existence of the office or its continuity throughout the Church age. Certainly there is considerable evidence presented in *JP&K* in support of all these theses.

But for James White it is all or nothing; he gives no quarter when it comes to arguments on the papacy. And frankly, from the purely pragmatic view of preserving his tradition in the face of Catholic challenges, there is a certain necessity to his position. One thing the authors of *JP&K* establish, definitively in my opinion, is that Peter was constituted by Christ as the prime minister of His Kingdom and the chief pastor of the universal Church. And they also show that the work of a significant number of conservative Protestant scholars (e.g. D. A. Carson, W. F. Albright, R. T. France, F. F. Bruce, *et al.*) supports this conclusion. The issue of succession aside, it is a significant breach in the historic Protestant position to find, in both Scripture and the testimony of the Fathers, that a mere mortal can hold such a position in Christ’s Church at all! In centuries past the only possible label for a man in such a position would be Antichrist; now they find this office in the pages of the Sacred Text, in the very source on which they claim to model their own communions.

For Protestants who go along with the majority report on the exegesis of Matt 16:18, there can be no more appeal to the “independent local congregation” or some other provincial model of Church government as “apostolic,” since the apostolic Church itself had this mortal man at its head, appointed by our Lord as the prime minister of the Kingdom. There can be no more claim that having a

universal pastor, an earthly head of the Church, violates the exclusive prerogatives of Christ, since it was our Lord Himself who established just such a position in the New Testament Church. In principle, then, there can be no objection to the office of the papacy and at best the Protestant is left arguing that this was a merely temporary arrangement in the Church. He is left arguing a negative position of discontinuity in the face of much positive evidence for continuity; this rear-guard position becomes increasingly weak in light of a mass of evidence. That is the slippery slope down which many of us have slid and which White, rightly from his vantage point, seeks to block entirely by denying even those first few planks which the preponderance of Christian scholarship now affirms. This is why biblical and patristic evidence concerning St. Peter is important, even if in some sources there is no explicit connection made to the ongoing prerogatives of the bishops of Rome. And in my opinion, anyone who can read JP&K and still contend that the biblical and patristic data on the role of Peter in the Church exclude his position as universal pastor and “vicar” of Christ is simply not being honest with the evidence.

Now of course, succession of this office is another matter and Catholics have never said otherwise. It is often asserted even by those Protestants who agree that Jesus conferred this lofty office on Peter that there is no basis in the Scriptural text at all for the idea of this being an ongoing office. As I have shown above, Catholics do indeed point to indications in Scripture and the early Church that the office is ongoing. But this is not enough for our Protestant brethren. Only an explicit command in Scripture will do. But frankly, there has not been nearly enough self-reflection on the part of Protestants on just how *they* determine the ongoing applicability of other texts of Scripture. For example, the vast majority of Protestant denominations continue to practice the Lord’s Supper. But where is the explicit Scripture text telling them that they should do this? There is none....

These are exalted titles but in using them Chrysostom does not mean that Peter possesses a primacy of jurisdiction in the Church or that he is the rock upon which the Church is built.

See my discussion below on *prostasia* and *epistasia*.

The term coryphaeus, for example, was a general title applied by Chrysostom to several of the apostles, not to Peter exclusively. It carries the idea of leadership but implies no jurisdiction.

True.

This would seem to indicate that Chrysostom taught that Peter was the supreme ruler of the Church. However in the passage cited above Chrysostom speaks of the apostle John as also receiving the charge of the whole world and the keys equally with Peter

“Chief authority over the brethren” = “charge of the world”? BWAHAHAHAHAHA!

I wrote in a debate with an Orthodox lady:

On your counter-citations from St. John Chrysostom, you would have a case if you could cite an instance in which he says that any of the other Apostles had “chief authority” (Greek: *prostasia*) or “presidency” (Greek: *epistasia*). The *Liddell and Scott Greek-English Lexicon* (abridged) defines *prostasia* as “a being the head of, presidency, chieftainship, leadership” and *epistateo* (from which we get the noun *epistasia*) as “I. to have charge of a thing, to be set over, preside over. II. to be chief President in the assembly” (page 261). Lampe’s *Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford, 1961) has this for *prostasia*, “1. support, protection, patronage . . . 2. charge, government, leadership” and for *epistasia*, “1. control, authority.” These words seem to have an intrinsically “jurisdictional” force and they are (as far as I can determine) applied only to St. Peter by St. John Chrysostom.

Guettee, in his *The Papacy* (reprint Blanco, TX: New Sarov Press, n.d., p. 157) claims that St. John C. used *prostasia* of St. Paul in his Homily on Romans 32 but the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers series has *koruphaios* here (see Series 1, vol. 11, p. 561). I need to verify this in Migne but I suspect that Guettee got a little overzealous and that NPNF is correct, since *koruphaios* fits the context of this passage better (in my investigations, *koruphaios* seems to have the notion of “chief” but does not necessarily carry with it any actual controlling authority, though it can).

He goes on to speak of Paul as being on an equal footing with Peter

Equal in heavenly stature, not in earthly jurisdiction. Good grief!

In all his remarks about Peter, where does Chrysostom apply them to the bishops of Rome in an exclusive sense? He never does that. He never personally makes that application in his statements and it is historically dishonest to assert that that is what he meant when he personally never said it.

True. But I don’t think you did that.

Clearly, Chrysostom cannot be cited as a proponent of a Petrine or papal primacy in the Roman Catholic sense

Webster did not bring forth evidence that Chrysostom *opposed* papal primacy, only that he did not specifically comment on it. Argument from silence.

The antipathy to Rome which finds its echo even in the works of St. John Chrysostom became more pronounced as the Eastern Church came more and

more under the control of the emperor and effected eventually their estimate of St. Peter.

Wasn't there an instance when even St. John C. appealed to Rome? I don't have the details with me but, as you point out well in your book, these guys' actions frequently speak louder than their words. I have thrown out the challenge to Orthodox apologists numerous times and have yet to receive one answer. You might want to pose this to Webster:

We know of many instances in which Eastern priests, bishops, and even patriarchs appealed to the Roman bishop after receiving unjust treatment at the hands of their fellow Eastern bishops. Can you cite even one example of a Western priest or bishop appealing to an Eastern patriarch after losing his case before the Roman bishop?

Isn't it interesting too that Webster cites Winter approvingly here, and yet Winter is stating that the antipathy toward the Roman primacy was based primarily on political and not theological considerations? The Protestants hate it when the Church is over-influenced by the State, unless of course it just happens to skewer the "Roman" position.

Please note the defense Mr. Ray employs for his position that the Fathers of the church apply the prerogatives of Peter to the bishops of Rome in an exclusive sense as a refutation of my statements. He gives a questionable quotation from a ninth century Eastern theologian. . . . In addition, the ninth century is hardly what we would call the patristic age.

You said explicitly "Fathers *and* theologians."

I was simply making reference to the fact that Tertullian is the first church Father to identify the rock of Matthew 16 with Peter and I use his treatise On Modesty as an example of that fact.

Tertullian was not a Church Father. So strike one for Mr. Webster's expertise.

To say that he is the "first to identify" is overly general because we do not know if he's the first; he may just be the first whose *work survived*. Strike two.

Then, in trying to wiggle out of this charge he cites the early Tertullian that is pro-Peter, then says,

"Though Tertullian states that Peter is the rock he does not mean it in a pro-papal sense. We know this because of other comments he has made. But if we isolate this one passage it would be easy to read a pro-Roman interpretation into it. "

How does Webster know this? Because, dear reader, in his MONTANIST PHASE Tertullian rebuts the “pro-Roman” view. But again, Webster does not inform the reader that there has been a massive shift of perspective on the part of Tertullian in between these two writings. And that’s just the point. It is Webster who *reads back* the later anti-Roman interpretation into the former citation, without reason, without evidence, without informing the reader. Strike three, you’re out!