

Peter's Confession and the Foundation of the Church

This passage is an important milestone in Matthew's account. Each person who hears of or encounters Jesus will be confronted with the question of his identity. Who is Jesus? And more crucially, what is he to me?

"The son of Man" (v13) -> "I" (v15)

- ESV doesn't have "I" in the first question (unlike KJV), but the identification with Jesus is still present.
- Jesus often chose to refer to himself as the son of man. To most people, this was simply a poetic Hebrew expression for "a human being" (Ezekiel uses this phrase to describe himself). But for some, the title would also evoke the words of Daniel's prophecy about a human-like figure coming from heaven (Daniel chapter 7)

"John the Baptist... Elijah... Jeremiah... one of the prophets"

- The people who witnessed Jesus were genuinely amazed at his power, authority and wisdom. They might not have fully comprehended who he is, but they were prepared to consider supernatural explanations... like one of the old prophets had come back from the dead (as Herod believed).

"Simon Peter replied"

- Peter is often seen being a spokesperson for the disciples. As we will see later, this is not always a good thing. HE was clearly passionate and forthright with his words. But this does not mean the other disciples were necessarily less in tune with what Jesus was saying.

"You are the Christ"

- The Messiah. God's chosen man to bring about the hopes and expectations of Israel's future based on God's promises to forgive their sin and defeat their enemies.

"The Son of the living God"

- The "living God" is a Jewish expression which singles out the God of Israel (Jehovah, Yahweh, the LORD) as the one true God in comparison to the false, "dead" gods of the nations. This is important for gentiles to understand. Jesus is not just another member of the pantheon in the way that Zeus had many children. But he is uniquely linked in divine nature and power with the one infinite

God. It is unclear how much Peter understood at this point of Christ's relationship with the Father. But for the Jewish mind, to be the "Son of God" was a claim to equality with God in some sense.

"Blessed are you Simon Barjona [Son of Jonah/John]"

- Christ graciously responds by reminding Peter that just as Peter knows him, so he knows Peter ("Son of God" -> "Son of Jonah").
- He is blessed because God has dealt graciously and favourably with him in bringing him into this knowledge of Christ as follows...

"flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father..."

- Peter did not have someone tell him this answer. He could not have figured it out by his own means, nor even from diligent study of the old testament (especially the term "Son of God"). But God has revealed this to him.
- We might ask now how God revealed this to him, and why, but the passage gives us no clear answers.
- Some jump to the conclusion that God "implanted" this truth into Peter's mind. That is possible, but not necessary. We might be more gentle in our interpretation, and suggest that God brought about the external influences and circumstances which allowed Peter to come to this conclusion.
- God, in his sovereign will, chose Peter to be in a position close to Christ, to witness him in ways that others did not have the privilege. He worked with and responded to Peter's heart, whether he "had ears to hear", and so gave more to him than already had (Matthew 13:12). Peter responded to the prompting of God, and so came into the blessedness of revealed truth.

"you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church"

- This is a hotly debated verse, primarily because in Catholicism, it is used to justify the papacy (which they believe was started by Peter, the supreme figure of the church on earth). This is an extrapolation far beyond what this passage allows.
- Peter (Petros) and rock (Petra) are very similar words in Greek. So the question is, what is the "rock"?
- There are two (or three) main views summarised below:
 - The rock is Peter. This is the most straightforward reading. The difference in words is purely grammatical (Rock is feminine noun which needs to be made masculine to be used as a man's name).
 - We might argue that Peter is representative of the apostles generally, rather than being singled out (Ephesians 2:20). But we can also see historically in the gospels and Acts, ways in which Peter himself was foundational to the Church.

- The Rock is Christ. In older (classical) Greek, there was nuance in the two words. Petros was a stone, but Petra was a large mass of rock. So Christ is turning from the limited strength of Peter to himself (in the place of God who is called the Rock in the old testament)
- The Rock is Peter's confession. This could work grammatically, as the confession is the next nearest antecedent in the sentence after "Peter".

"build my church"

- This is the first mention of "church" (or "assembly", "gathering"). It was used of gatherings that people had for various purposes. It is one of two foundational words used to describe the body in which Christians interact with each other. The other word is "fellowship" (or "communion"). So Christ is now revealing to us, that he intends his disciples to gather together, forming a community of people with shared identity and purpose.
- The Church is a major idea in the new testament, but we most often see it represented practically as many small interconnected communities or congregations of his disciples. We will see something of the function and character that these local communities are to have in the 4th sermon (chapter 18).
- Christ uses the metaphor of building. But a "church" in the biblical sense is not a building, but a community of people who gather together. Christ builds it in the sense that it because of his coming, ministry (past and present), and sacrificial death, that people are being gathered up (like the fish in the net of Matthew 13).

"the gates of hell shall not prevail against it"

- Reflecting on the "infiltration of evil" that we saw in the parables of Matthew 13, Christ is saying that the Church will not be overcome or defeated by the forces of evil from within, evil from without, or even death itself. This community which Jesus is building will endure and prosper, now and eternally.

"I will give you the keys... and whatever you bind.. and whatever you loose"

- These words are spoken in the singular, that is to Peter himself. We can see Peter's important role in the early church and interpret it through these words. But it is also not unreasonable to see Peter's role as representative of the apostles generally, and the whole church more broadly. We will see similar language being used in chapter 18 that shows how Christ gives a real authority to local churches over their members for example.
- The idea of "keys" goes back to the old testament. The king had the final authority to shut and close the gates of the city, and he entrusted his servants with this authority on his behalf.

- People debate the precise meaning of "bind" and "loose" in this context, but in a general way, we might understand that the church (or the apostles specifically), had the privilege to preach the gospel where they would to whom they would.