

Papal Infallibility

by Jim Seghers

Introduction

The beliefs taught by the Catholic Church stand on a three-legged stool. Two of these legs provide the content of the faith handed to the Church by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. They are Sacred Scripture, the Bible, and Sacred or Apostolic Tradition. Both come from the one source - the word of God. The third leg is the teaching office of the Church, called the Magisterium, which under the guidance of the Holy Spirit provides an inerrant interpretation of the word of God. This essay will explore the biblical basis for the Catholic teaching on Papal infallibility. However, before discussing passages from Sacred Scripture, it is important to understand the meaning of Papal Infallibility.

“The mission of the Magisterium is linked to the definitive nature of the covenant established by God with his people in Christ. It is this Magisterium’s task to preserve God’s people from deviations and defections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error... To fulfill this service, Christ endowed the Church’s shepherds with the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals.”¹

“The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful - who confirms his brethren in the faith - he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals...The infallibility promised to the Church is also present in the body of bishops when, together with Peter’s successor, they exercise the supreme Magisterium,’ above all in an Ecumenical Council.”²

Often those who object to the doctrine of infallibility confuse it with **impeccability** or **personal inerrancy**. It is neither. Impeccability means that a person is incapable of sinning. Popes, like other Christians, are sinners. Personal inerrancy means that Popes cannot make mistakes. **Infallibility**, on the other hand, refers on to that guidance of the Holy Spirit that guards Popes from officially teaching error in matters of faith and morals.

The foundational elements of the doctrine embody the following points. First, Jesus established Peter in a dynastic office as head of the apostles and empowered him with his authority in deciding matters of faith and morals. Secondly, Jesus intended that this office and authority be passed on to Peter’s successors.

Matthew 16:16-19

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 [**petros**], and on this rock [**petra**] I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will

¹ [Catechism of the Catholic Church, #890.](#)

² [Ibid., #891.](#)

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.”

Name changes are very important in the Bible, especially when God makes them.³ Furthermore, the Old Testament rarely uses the term “rock” to refer to anyone other than God.⁴ One exception is Isaiah 51:1-2. What is also illuminating is that this passage refers to the barrenness of Abraham and Sarah out of which God hewed a people. Jesus draws on this parallel to stress that Peter is a rock, barren of himself, upon whom he will build his Church. Jesus is staking his claim by becoming the guarantor of his Church just as Yahweh staked his claim on Abraham, Sarah and Jacob. Peter is the human foundation, but Jesus is the builder.

The translations “powers of death” (RSV) and “gates of hell” (KJV) are more literally rendered as “gates of Hades”. *Hades* is Greek for the Hebrew word *Sheol*. Both refer to the abode of the dead, not to the hell of the damned, which is rendered by the term *Gehenna*.

The meaning of the conferment of “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” is discovered in Isaiah 22:19-22 to which Jesus is referring. In this passage from Isaiah an unworthy prime minister, Shebna, is being removed in favor of Eliakim. David is long since dead, but his dynasty continues. Eliakim, the new prime minister, will replace Shebna when he is invested with the complete authority of the king. The plentitude of authority given to Peter finds its expression in the stunning affirmation: “whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

It is also important to note that the common rabbinic understanding of the power of the keys with the power of binding and loosing was the ability to impose or remove an obligation by handing down an authoritative interpretation of Scripture.⁵

Objection: Petra verses Petros

The text from Matthew 16:16-17 is so explicit in affirming Peter’s primacy that Protestant apologists have sought to dilute its clear meaning. A very popular approach has been based on the masculine form of the Greek word for rock, *petros*, in contrast to the feminine variation, *petra*. The argument goes like this.

Petros is a small stone indicating Peter’s weak human capabilities. *Petra*, on the other hand, refers to a massive rock Peter’s profession of faith upon which Jesus builds his Church. Clearly, then, the point of the passage is the necessity of faith. It says nothing about Peter being installed in an office of primacy.

³ Gen 17:5; Gen 17:15; Gen 32:28, 34:10; Is 43:1, 48:1

⁴ There is no biblical evidence of any Jew ever being called Rock.

⁵ See: J. Michael Miller, *The Shepherd and the Rock: Origins, Development, and Mission of the Papacy*, Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, p. 19; Stanley L. Jaki, *The Keys of the Kingdom*, Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, p. 43; and Michael Schmaus, *The Church: Its Origin and Structure*, New York: Sheed and Ward, p. 36.

If ever there was a bogus distinction without any linguistic merit, this is it. In the Greek language endings determine if a word is masculine or feminine. One word for rock in Greek is *petra*, which is feminine. In giving Simon the name Rock, the Greek language would demand that this word be given a masculine ending — thus, *petros*. A comparison with the Spanish language might clarify the point. The word for house in Spanish is *la casa* - feminine. However, if a man was given the name house, he would not be referred to as *La Casa*. The word would be given a masculine ending, for example, *El Caso*.

The word *petros* is used 154 times in the New Testament. In all but one case it is used as the second name for Simon. In the other case it is used to give the meaning of “Cephas” (Jn 1:42). The use of Cephas in this passage and in Paul’s epistles⁶ as the name of Peter is also very persuasive. Cephas is the Greek transliteration of the Aramaic word Kephass, which means rock without gender. This underscores the weakness of the *petros* versus *petra* distinction.⁷

In addition the New Testament uses the word *petra* in passages that clearly refer to a small stone. For example, in Lk 8:6,13 it is used for the rocky soil upon which seed fell. In Rom 9:33 and 1 Pet 2:8 it is used for a stumbling stone. Furthermore, had Matthew intended to make a clear distinction between Peter the small rock as opposed to the big rock of his profession of faith, he would have used the word *lithos* as he did in chapter 4:30.⁸

The reality is that the words *petros* and *petra* are used interchangeably in the New Testament with no distinction in meaning. Numerous Protestant scholars support this conclusion.⁹

The renowned Protestant scholar Oscar Cullmann argued convincingly in his book *Peter, Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* that Jesus was building his church on Peter as head of the apostles not on Peter’s faith or profession. Similar statements can be found in other Protestant commentaries. D. A. Carson *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* on Matthew; Craig L Blomberg, *New American Commentary*; R. T. Francis, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, W.F. Albright and C. S. Man, Howard Clark Kee, *Interpreter’s One Volume Commentary on the Bible*; and H. N. Ribberbos, *Bible Student’s Commentary*.¹⁰

Nuances in the Greek of Matthew 16:18 makes it clear that Jesus is identifying Peter as the rock upon which he will build his church. The expression “upon this rock” uses the dative case demonstrative adjective, *tautee*, with the dative article, *tee*. This usage adds the force of “this very,” or “this same” or “even this.” Thus the passage has this emphasis: “You are Peter and

⁶ 1 Cor 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:5; Gal 1:18, 2:9, 11, 14.

⁷ *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. III, p. 384, 386.

⁸ *lithos* is also used by Peter to describe Christians as living stones (1 Pet 2:5); and by John to describe the stones the Jews wanted to hurl at Jesus (Jn 10:31).

⁹ For example, see: Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*; and the *Dictionary of Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. III, pp. 384-386.

¹⁰ *Jesus, Peter & the Keys: A Scriptural Handbook on the Papacy* by Scott Butler, Norman Dahlgren, and David Hess published by Queenship Publishing Company is must reading for anyone seriously interested in the subject of Peter’s primacy. Beginning on page 14 the authors cites numerous Protestant scholars who support the position presented here.

upon this same rock I will build my church.” Protestant translations of the Bible verify that this interpretation of Greek grammar is legitimate.

King James Version — The same dative construction is translated as “the same” in 1 Cor 7:20 and “this same” in 2 Cor 9:4. In Mark 14:30 it is translated as “even [in] this.” New International Version, New American Standard Bible, New English Bible — translate this demonstrative adjective as “this very” in Luke 12:20. New American Standard Bible — renders the same dative construction as “this very” in Acts 27:23.

Additional Biblical Support of Peter’s Primacy

1. Peter acts as the spokesman for the Apostles (Mt 19:27; Mk 8:29; Lk 12:41; Jn 6:69).
2. The apostles called “Peter and his companions” (Lk 9:32; Mk 16:17; Acts 2:37).
3. In listing the apostles Peter is always listed first (Mt 10:1-4; Mk 3:16-19; Lk 6:14-16; Acts 1:13).
4. Peter is named 191 times more than all the rest of Apostles together. John, whose name appears most after Peter, is only listed 48 times.
5. The New Testament tributes the following firsts to Peter:
 - Decides to elect successor to Judas (Acts 1:13-26)
 - Preached the 1st sermon (Acts 2:14)
 - Received the 1st convert (Acts 2:41)
 - Performed the 1st miracle (Acts 3:6-7)
 - Exercised authority in judgment of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11)
 - Exercised authority in 1st excommunication (Acts 8:21)
 - 1st to raise someone from the dead (Acts 9:36-41)
 - 1st to get revelation to receive Gentiles into the Church (Acts 10:9-16)
 - Exercised authority in deciding that the 1st Gentile converts be baptized (Acts 10:44-48)

Additional Protestant Objections

It is sometimes argued that Peter himself denies a position of primacy when he refers to himself as a “fellow elder” (1 Pet 5:1). This is a superficial argument. Peter’s claim to be a minister or “fellow elder” is not a negation of his authority any more than the president using the phrase “my fellow Americans” is a denial of his office.

More common is the objection that Paul rebuked Peter at Antioch over the issue of table fellowship (Gal 2:11-14). Clearly, this admonition is an indication of Peter’s fallibility not his infallibility. This argument confuses impeccability, the ability to sin, with infallibility. Infallibility protects Peter and his successors from officially teaching error, not from sinning.

Problem with Succession

A growing body of Protestant scholars now concedes that Jesus did install Peter as head of the apostles. However, there has been no concession regarding the issue of succession. They argue that this primacy ended with Peter’s death. This was a special charism that was only needed in

the infant Church. Two problems readily come to mind with this approach, one is based on common sense, the other is based on Scripture.

What's wrong with this picture? The men and women who were taught by Jesus, witnessed his miracles and were filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and who were intimately familiar with the Old Testament and the languages of the Bible needed the special charism of Peter's authority. However, we who have none of these advantages do not need the guidance of an interpretative authority. The history of Christianity and common sense refutes this approach.

Secondly, Protestantism is founded on the principle of *sola scriptura* — that the Bible is the only authority of faith. Therefore it is fair to ask this question. Where does the Bible teach that the primacy that Jesus invested Peter ended with his death?

What Sacred Scripture does indicate is that Jesus established a kingdom. That kingdom is called his church. In his kingdom he established dynastic offices and appointed men to fill them. They were called the apostles. Jesus appointed one of these apostles, Peter, as the chief minister. Just as Jesus' kingdom continues so do these offices which are now filled by the successors of the apostles, the bishops, and the successor of Peter, the Pope. This is the understanding Peter gives for the election of Matthias (Acts 1:15-26). It is interesting that the King James Version translates verse 20 as "and his bishoprick let another take." Clearly Peter is referring to a dynastic office.

November 25, 1998