

Patrology: Peter the Rock and the Keys

by Jim Seghers

Some Protestant apologists claim that the early Church Fathers never referred to Peter as the head of the apostles, nor did they apply Matthew 16:18-19 to Peter. Both claims are not supported in the writings of the Fathers as is evident below.

Clement of Alexandria

(c. 195) “The blessed Peter was the chosen, the preeminent, the first of the disciples for whom alone and himself the Savior paid tribute.”¹

Tertullian

(c. 197) “What man of sound mind can possibly suppose that these men were ignorant of anything, whom the Lord ordained to be teachers?... Was anything withheld from the knowledge of Peter, who is called the rock on which the church should be built, who also obtained ‘the keys of the kingdom of heaven’ with the power of loosing and binding in heaven and on earth?”²

(c. 212) “From what source do you usurp this right to “the church”? Is it because the Lord has said to Peter, ‘Upon this rock I will build My church’ and ‘to you have I given the keys of the heavenly kingdom’? Or ‘Whatever you will have bound or loosed in earth will be bound or loosed in the heavens’? You presume that the power of binding and loosing has come down to you—that is, to every church of Peter. What sort of man are you! You subvert and completely change the clear intention of the Lord. For He conferred this power personally upon Peter... This would mean that in Peter himself the church was reared.”³

(c. 213 *Monogamy*) “Peter alone [among the Apostles] do I find married, and through mention of his mother-in-law. I presume he was monogamist; for the Church, built upon him, would for the future appoint to every degree of orders none but monogamists. As for the rest, since I do not find them married, I must presume they were either eunuchs or continent.”⁴

Origen

(c. 228) “Peter, on whom the church of Christ is built—against which the gates of Hades will not prevail—left one epistle of acknowledged authenticity. Suppose we allow that he left a second; yet, this is doubtful.”⁵

¹ David W. Bercot, Editor, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs: A Reference Guide to More Than 700 Topics Discussed by the Early Church Fathers*, Hendrickson, c. 1998, p. 516.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ William A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, The Liturgical Press, c. 1970, Vol. 1, # 381.

⁵ Bercot, *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, p. 516.

(c. 245) “If we, too, have said like Peter, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living god’—not as if flesh and blood had revealed it to us, but by light from the Father in heaven having shone in our heart—we become a Peter. So to us there might be said by the Word, ‘You are Peter, etc.’”⁶

Cyprian

(c. 250) “Peter, upon whom by the same Lord the church had been built, speaking one for all, and answering with the voice of the church, says, ‘Lord, to whom will we go?’”⁷

(c. 250) “Peter, on whom the church was to be built, taught... that the church will not depart from Christ.”⁸

(c. 250) “The Lord spoke to Peter, saying, ‘I say unto you, “You are Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church’.”⁹

(c. 251-256 *The Unity of the Catholic Church*) “And again He says to him [Peter] after His resurrection: ‘Feed my sheep.’ On him He builds the Church, and to him he given the command to feed the sheep; and although He assigns a like power to all the Apostles, yet He founded a single chair, and He established by His own authority a source and an intrinsic reason for that unity. Indeed, the others were that also which Peter was [Apostles]; but a primacy is given to Peter, whereby it is made clear that there is but one Church and one chair.”¹⁰

(c. 271 *Letter to the Lapsed*) “Our Lord, whose commands we ought to fear and observe, says in the Gospel, by way of assigning the episcopal dignity and settling the plan of His Church: “I say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it. And to you I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatever things you bind on earth will be bound also in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, they will be loosed also in heaven.”¹¹

(c. 251 *Letter to All His People*) “There is one God and one Christ, and one Church, and one Chair founded on Peter by the word of the Lord.”¹²

Treatise on Re-Baptism

(c. 257) “Peter himself was the leader and chief of the apostles.”¹³

Peter of Alexandria

(c. 310) “Peter, the first of the apostles, was often arrested, thrown into prison, and treated with dishonor. He was finally crucified at Rome.”¹⁴

⁶ Ibid., p. 517.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. 1, # 555-556.

¹⁰ Ibid., # 571.

¹¹ Ibid., # 573.

¹² Bercot, *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, p. 517.

¹³ Ibid.

Juvenicus

(c. 326 *History of the Gospel in Matthew*) “Then the Lord thus answers to Peter: ‘Thou shalt be blessed.’ Thou supportest the name of Peter with worthy fortitude; and upon this foundation and upon the strength of this rock I will place My edifice that shall stand for ever with everlasting walls.”¹⁵

Aphraates the Persian Sage

(c. 336-345 *Treatises*) “And Jesus handed over the keys to Simon, and ascended and returned to Him who had sent Him.”

James of Nisibis

(c. 340 *Sermon*) “Simon, who was called a rock, was deservedly called a rock because of his faith.”¹⁶

(c. 340 *Oration*) “And Simon, the Head of the Apostles, he who denied Christ, saying “I saw Him not,” and cursed and swore that he knew him not, as soon as he offered to God contrition and penitence, and washed his sins in the tears of his grief, our Lord received him, and made him the Foundation, and called him the Rock of the edifice of the Church.”¹⁷

“Peter, who was called Cephas, he who was captured on the sea-shore, and who received a testimony from the great Pastor, that ‘Upon this rock I will build my church,’ by means of the priesthood received also the keys of heaven, as worthy (of them).”¹⁸

“He was the prince of the Apostles, and had received the keys and was accounted the shepherd of the flock.”¹⁹

Ephraim

(c 338-378 *Homilies*) “Simon, My follower, I have made you the foundation of the holy Church. I betimes called you Peter, because you will support all its buildings. You are the inspector of those who will build on earth a Church for Me. If they should wish to build what is false, you, the foundation, will condemn them. You are the head of the fountain from which My teaching flows, you are the chief of My disciples.”²⁰

Cyril of Jerusalem

(c. 350 *Catechetical Lectures*) “In the power of the same Holy Spirit, Peter, both the chief of the Apostles and the keeper of the Keys of the kingdom of heaven, in the name of Christ healed

¹⁴ Scott Butler, Norman Dahlgren and David Hess, *Jesus, Peter and the Keys: A Scriptural Handbook on the Papacy, Queenship*, p. 225.

¹⁵ Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. 1, # 693a.

¹⁶ Butler, Dahlgren & Hess, *Jesus, Peter and the Keys*, p. 226.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

²⁰ Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 706.

Aeneas the paralytic at Lydda, which is now called Diospolis; and at Joppa he raised the beneficent Tabitha from the dead.”²¹

Hilary of Poitiers

(c. 356 *About the Trinity*) “Blessed Simon, who after his confession of the mystery was set to be the foundation-stone of the Church, and received the keys of the kingdom.”²²

Zeno of Africa

(c. 362 *About Circumcision*) “Simon, on whom He built his Church.”²³

Gregory of Nazianzen

(c. 370) “Seest thou that of the disciples of Christ, all of whom were great and deserving of the choice, one is called a Rock and is entrusted with the Foundations of the Church.”²⁴

“Peter, the Chief of the disciples, but he was a Rock, not as a fisherman, but because full of zeal.”²⁵

Gregory of Nyssa

(c. 371) “The memory of Peter, the Head of the Apostles, is celebrated; and magnified indeed with him are the other members of the Church; but (upon him) is the Church of God firmly established. For he is, agreeably to the gift conferred upon him by the Lord, that unbroken and most firm Rock upon which the Lord build His Church.”²⁶

Basil the Great

(c. 371) “The house of God, which is the Church of the living God, the foundation of which are on the holy mountains, for it is built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets. One also of these mountains was Peter, upon which rock the Lord promised to build His Church.”²⁷

Damasus I

(c. 382 *The Decree of Damasus*) “Likewise it is decreed: After the announcement of all these prophetic and evangelic as well as apostolic writings which we have listed above as Scripture, on which by the grace of God, the Catholic Church is founded, we have considered that it ought to be announced that although all the Catholic Churches spread through the world comprise but one bridal chamber of Christ, nevertheless, the holy Roman Church has been placed at the forefront not by the conciliar decisions of other Churches, but has received the primacy by the evangelic voice of our Lord and Savior, who says: ‘You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it; and I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you shall have bound on earth will be bound in eave, and

²¹ Ibid., # 835a.

²² Butler, Dahlgren & Hess, *Jesus, Peter and the Keys*, p. 231.

²³ Ibid., p. 232.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 234.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 235.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 235-236.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 236.

whatever you shall have loosed on earth shall be loosed in heaven.’ In addition to this, there is also the companionship of the vessel of election, the most blessed Apostle Paul, who contended and was crowned with a glorious death along with Peter in the City of Rome in the time of the Caesar Nero... The first see, therefore, is that of Peter the Apostle, that of the Roman Church, which has neither stain nor blemish nor anything like it.”²⁸

Ambrosiaster

(c. 380-384 Commentary on Ephesians) “The Lord said to Peter: ‘On this rock I will build my church;’ that is, in this confession of Catholic faith I will consolidate the faithful for life.”²⁹

Didymus the Blind

(c. 385 *Treatise on the Trinity*) “Though he saw God on earth clothed in flesh and blood, Peter did not doubt, for he was willing to receive what ‘flesh and blood have not revealed to you.’... Upon this rock the Church was built, the Church which the gates of hell—that is, the arguments of heretics—will not overcome. The keys to the kingdom of heaven were given to Peter in order that, ‘baptizing them in the name of the Father, and Son, and the Holy Spirit,’ he might open the gates of God’s kingdom to those whose faith agreed both with his own confession and with those things which he and the other apostles heard from Christ.”³⁰

Epiphanius

(c. 385 *Against All Heresies*) “And the blessed Peter, who for awhile denied the Lord, Peter who was the Chiefest of the Apostles, he who became unto us truly a firm Rock upon which is based the Lord’s faith, upon which (Rock) the Church is in every way built; first, in that he confessed that Christ was the Son of the living God, and heard that upon this Rock of firm faith I will build my Church... Further, he then also became a firm rock of the building, and Foundation of the house of God, in that having denied Christ, and being again converted, being both found of the Lord and found worthy to hear, ‘Feed my sheep and feed my lambs’.”³¹

Ambrose

(c. 381-397 Commentaries on Twelve of David’s Psalms) “It is to Peter himself that He says; ‘You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church.’ Where Peter is, there is the Church. And where the Church, no death is there, but life eternal.”³²

Asterius

(c. 387 *Homily*) “The Only-begotten denominates Peter the foundation of the Church... ‘Other foundation no man can lay but that which laid, which is Jesus Christ.’... Peter is called the rock of faith, and the foundation and substructure of the Church of God.”³³

²⁸ Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 910a.

²⁹ Butler, Dahlgren & Hess, *Jesus, Peter and the Keys*, p. 237.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 240-241.

³² Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. II, # 1261.

³³ Butler, Dahlgren & Hess, *Jesus, Peter and the Keys*, p. 243.

John Chrysostom

(c. 387 *Homily on Penance*) “Peter himself the Head or Crown of the Apostles, the first in the Church, the Friend of Christ, who received a revelation, not from man, but from the Father, as the Lord bears witness to him, saying, ‘Blessed art thou, & c.’ This very Peter—and when I name Peter I name that unbroken Rock, that firm Foundation, the Great Apostle, the First of the disciples, the First called, and the First who obeyed—he was guilty of a deed not slight, but exceeding great, even denying of the Lord.”³⁴

Jerome

(c. 393-398 *Letters*) “As I follow no leader save Christ, so I communicate with none but your blessedness, that is with the chair of Peter. For this, I know, is the rock on which the church is built! This is the house where alone the paschal lamb can be rightly eaten.”³⁵

(c. 393-398 *Commentary on Matthew*) “‘Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church.’ As He bestowed light on His Apostles, so that they were to be called ‘the light of the world,’ and as they obtained other titles from the Lord, so also to Simon, who believed on the Rock Christ, was given the name Peter (Rock). And in accordance with the metaphor of a rock, it is justly said to him, ‘I will build my Church upon thee.’”³⁶

(c. 393-398 *Commentary on Jeremias*) “Christ is not alone in being the rock [see Christ as Rock in 1 Cor 10:4], for He granted to the apostle Peter that he should be called ‘Rock’.”³⁷

Augustine

(c. 391-430 *Sermons*) “Before His suffering the Lord Jesus Christ, as you know, chose His disciples, whom He called Apostles. Among these Apostles almost everywhere Peter alone merited to represent the whole Church. For the sake of his representing the whole Church, which he alone could do, he merited to hear; “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of Heaven’.”³⁸

(C. 400 *To Generosus*) “For, if the order of succession of bishops is to be considered, how much more surely, truly and safely do we number them from Peter, to whom, as representing the whole Church, the Lord said: ‘Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it’ (Mt 16:18). For, to Peter succeeded Linus, to Linus Clement, to Clement Anacletus, to Anacletus Evaristus, to Evaristus Sixtus, to Sixtus Telesphorus, to Telesphorus Hyginus, to Hyginus Anicletus, to Anicletus Pius, to Pius Soter, to Soter Alexander, to Alexander Victor, to Victor Zephyrinus, to Zephyrinus Calistus, to Calistus Urban, to Urban Pontian, to Pontian Antherus, to Antherus Fabian, to Fabian Cornelius, to Cornelius Lucius, to Lucius Stephen, to Stephen Sixtus, to Sixtus Dionysius, to Dionysius Felix to Felix Eutychian to Eutychian Gaius, to Gaius Marcellus, to Marcellus Eusebius, to Eusebius Melchiades, to

³⁴ Ibid., p. 244.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 247.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. III, # 1526.

Melchiodes Sylvester, to Sylvester Marcus, to Marcus Julius, to Julius Liberius, to Liberius Damasus, to Damasus Siricius, to Siricius Anastasius.”³⁹

(*Psalm 119*) “Peter, who had confessed Him the Son of God, and in that confession had been called the rock upon which the Church should be built.”⁴⁰

(*Retractations*) “[In my first book against Donatus] I mentioned somewhere with reference to the apostle Peter that ‘the Church is founded upon him as upon a rock’.”⁴¹

(*Christian Combat*) “These miserable wretches, refusing to acknowledge the Rock as Peter, and to believe that the Church has received the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, have lost these very keys from their own hands.”⁴²

Zosimus

(c. 417 *Ad Africanos*) “Although the tradition of the Fathers has assigned so great an Authority to the Apostolic See, that no one should dare to dispute about a Judgment given by it, and that See, by laws and regulations, has kept to this; and the discipline of the Church, in the laws which it yet follows, still pays to the name of Peter, from whom that See descends, the reverence due,—for canonical antiquity, by universal consent, willed that so great a Power should belong to that Apostle, a Power also derived from the actual promise of Christ our God, that it should be his to loose what was bound, and to bind what was loosed, an equal state of Power being bestowed upon those who, by His will, should be found worthy to inherit his See, for he has charge both of all the Churches, and especially of this One wherein he sat; nor does he allow any storm to shake one particle of the Privilege, or any part of the Sentence of that See to which he has given his name as a foundation firm and not to be weakened by any violence whatever, and which no one can rashly attack but at his peril;—seeing then, that Peter is the Head of such great authority, and that he has confirmed the subsequent decrees (or statues) of the Fathers; that, by all laws and regulations, both human and divine, the Roman Churches strengthened; and you are not ignorant, you know, dearest brethren, and as priests you are not ignorant, that we rule over his Place, and are in possession also of the Authority of his name, nevertheless, through so great be our Authority that none may refuse (or reconsider) our Sentence, we have not done anything, which we have not, of our will referred by letter to your knowledge, conceding this to the Brotherhood.”⁴³

Cyril of Alexandria

(c. 424 *Commentary on John*) “He suffers him no longer to be called Simon, exercising authority and rule over him already as having become His own. But by a title suitable to the thing. He

³⁹ John R. Wells, *The Teachings of the Church Fathers*, Ignatius, c. 1966, pp. 73-74.

⁴⁰ Butler, Dahlgren & Hess, *Jesus, Peter and the Keys*, p. 251.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 252.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 253-254.

changed his name into Peter, from the word *petra* (rock); for on him He was afterwards to found His Church.”⁴⁴

Peter Chrysologus

(c. 449 *Letter to Eutyches*) “We exhort you in every respect, honorable brother, to heed obediently what has been written by the Most Blessed Pope of the City of Rome; for Blessed Peter, who lives and presides in his own see, provides the truth of the faith to those who seek it. For we, by reason of our pursuit of peace and faith, cannot try cases on the faith without the consent of the Bishop of the City of Rome.”⁴⁵

(*Sermon*) “Just as Peter received his name from the rock, because he was the first to deserve to establish the Church, by reason of his steadfastness of faith, so also [Pope] Stephen was named from a crown... Let Peter hold his ancient primacy of the Apostolic choir.”⁴⁶

(*Sermon*) “Peter is the guardian of the faith, the rock of the Church, and the gatekeeper of heaven.”⁴⁷

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⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 257.

⁴⁵ Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 2178.

⁴⁶ Butler, Dahlgren & Hess, *Jesus, Peter and the Keys*, p. 259.

⁴⁷ Ibid.