

YOU ARE PETER

By D.B. Knox

THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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When the Pope visited the World Council of Churches at Geneva, last year, he said in reply to their address of welcome, "Our name is Peter", so pinpointing the basis of the Roman Catholic denomination, which consists of those, who submit to the jurisdiction claimed by the Pope over all churches and all Christians.

The first Vatican Council anathematized anyone who denied this direct, primary, jurisdiction of the Pope over all Christians and all churches. The dogma, however, has no basis in the Bible, or in the early history of the church. The papal claim to jurisdiction depends on three points, each of which must be true if the claim is to succeed. These are: (1) that Jesus gave to Peter a primacy of jurisdiction i. e., of rule over his fellow apostles and fellow Christians, (2) that Peter had successors in this jurisdiction; (3) that the bishops of Rome are these successors. If only one of these 3 points were disproved, the papal claims collapse. In fact, none of the three points can be proved. Not only is there complete silence in the scripture and in the early church on any of these three points (which is extraordinary if they were true, for they are such remarkable claims) but the evidence contradicts them.

Let us look first of all at Peter's place in the New Testament. It is plain that although he was a younger brother he had natural gifts

of leadership. He was impetuous and ardent by nature. For example, he avowed that he would die rather than deny Christ; yet only an hour or two later he fell into that awful sin. At the arrest of Jesus he snatched out his sword, presumably to kill his assailant, though he only cut off his ear and Jesus had to rebuke him for his impetuosity, just as he rebuked him on a previous occasion when he sought to turn aside Jesus from his mission (Mt. 16:23). Earlier, however, at Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asked his disciples for their opinion of Himself, Peter took the lead and affirmed his faith in Jesus as the Messiah, and the Son of God. It was not the first confession by an apostle of Christ's Messiahship for Nathaniel had acknowledged Jesus as Messiah and King of Israel in a first flush of enthusiasm in following Him. Peter's confession, however, came at the end and it had a tone of settled conviction, for it rejoiced Jesus and evoked His blessing "Blessed are you, Simon, son of John, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but My heavenly Father. I say that you are Peter and at this rock I will build my church and death will not prevail against it and I give to you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven; whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatsoever you loose on earth shall be loose in heaven." (Mt. 16:17-19). No-one can take from Peter this honour of being the first with settled conviction to express faith in Jesus as

Messiah. God honoured this faith so that Peter with his God-given gifts of natural leadership was used by God in the early days of the church to be the first to preach the gospel to the Jews on the day of Pentecost and the first to preach to the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius at Caesarea. But this honour was personal, and of privilege rather than of jurisdiction, and it is just as foolish to think of Peter as having a successor in this honourable position of being the first to acknowledge Christ and the first to preach the Gospel as it is to think of Armstrong having a successor in the honour of being the first man on the moon! When Jesus added "I give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatsoever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven." He was referring to the privilege of knowing and preaching the Gospel. A little later Jesus repeated the gift to all his followers, using identical words in Matthew 18:18. The keys are the keys of knowledge, a knowledge of the mind and purposes of God, that He forgives for Christ's sake all who come to Him. Every Christian has received this great privilege to know and to make known the knowledge of God's purposes of grace and forgiveness, given to Peter when he confessed faith in Christ. It is not Peter's alone, as Jesus made clear in Matt. 18:18, but is given to every Christian who, like Peter, believes in The Lord. Though Peter had a position of honour in the sense that he was the

first to acknowledge Christ and the first to preach the gospel to Jew and to Gentile, yet nowhere in the New Testament has he a position of jurisdiction over his fellow Christians. In fact, Luke tells us that at the Last Supper, at the end of Jesus' ministry, the apostles were quarrelling as to who should be the greatest. This would have been quite impossible if Peter had already been designated as their leader by Jesus. Moreover, when Jesus rebuked His disciples for this quarrel he did not point out to them that a leader had already been appointed, but rather he told them that they had no ruler, but that whoever wished to be the greatest among them should be the servant of all. (Luke 22). On an earlier occasion Jesus had said that the apostles had no leader but Jesus himself. "Call no man your father upon the earth, for one is your father who is in heaven, neither be called masters, for one is your master, even Christ". (Mtt. 23:9,10).

The New Testament yields other evidence which contradicts the claim that Peter had jurisdiction over his fellow Christians. For example, in 2 Corinthians, II:23, St. Paul said that he himself is burdened with the care of all the churches, he could not have used this form of expression if it was known that Peter was responsible for all the churches. While in Acts 15 at the first Council of Jerusalem, as it is sometimes called, we find that James presides and delivers the ver-

dict. Peter is present but only gives testimony, He himself does not make the decision. It is James who does this (Acts 15:19). This would have been quite impossible if it were known that Jesus had given Peter jurisdiction over his fellow Christians, as the pope claims. A little earlier at Antioch, Paul tells us that he rebuked Peter for his decision as to how Christians should behave, "I rebuked him to his face because he was to be blamed". (Gal. 2:1). The pope claims that his decisions are the way in which Christians should behave, and he bases this on the fact that Peter had a similar jurisdiction but it is plain that the apostle Peter had no such jurisdiction, for he was rebuked by Paul when his decision failed to conform to the gospel. It is the gospel which directs Christian behaviour, and which alone has jurisdiction over Christians. Ministers (and this includes the bishop of Rome) have the duty of exhorting their fellow Christians to conform to the gospel. This is a very different concept from laying down directions on one's own authority.

Again St. Paul is quite unaware of any primacy of jurisdiction given to Peter when he writes that he himself is not a whit behind the chiefest of the apostles (2 Cor. 11:5). Plainly he knew of no primacy of jurisdiction possessed by Peter. Peter himself is unaware of it, for in his letter, he states that he is a fellow elder with other elders (I Peter 5:1). He makes

no claim for jurisdiction in the manner so characteristic of the Popes who constantly enforce their own prerogatives.

So much then for the New Testament evidence about Peter's jurisdiction over his fellow Christians. There is not the slightest trace of it and there is abundant evidence to contradict the notion. I need only say that it was not known in the early church either, and when it was first put forward by the Popes it was rejected by the Christian church at large.

Thus, the papal claim that Jesus has given the Bishop of Rome jurisdiction over all Christians has no basis in fact, it is merely an assertion. There is no evidence in the New Testament that Peter was ever at Rome; at all events, when St. Paul wrote his letter to the church at Rome at the end of his life, Peter does not seem to have been there because though the chapter is full of greetings to Christians at Rome that Paul has known, Peter's name is not mentioned. When Paul arrived a little later at Rome, himself, the last chapter of Acts tells us that he called together the Jews at Rome and spoke to them about Christianity, they said that they had never heard anything directly on the matter, which surely shows that Peter had not visited Rome, as he was the apostle to the Jews. St. Paul was a prisoner in Rome for at least 2 years at the end of his life, and he wrote

several letters while in prison which sent greetings from Roman Christians. Again, amongst those who sent greetings in these letters Peter is not included. Plainly, he was not in Rome at the time. Again, in one of the last letters that Paul wrote on the eve of his death, that is, his second letter to Timothy, Paul says "Only Luke is with me". What then are we to make of the tradition of much later times, that Peter lived for 42 years in Rome and was executed with Paul there?

But perhaps the most famous verse which modern Roman Catholics use to support their claims about Peter are Jesus' words: "You are Peter, on this rock I will build My church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it", (Mt. 16:16). Modern Roman Catholics say that Jesus means that Peter is the rock on which the church is built. The Council of Trent, however, did not take it this way but regarded Peter's faith in Christ as the rock and foundation of the church (session 3). Amongst the early Christian writers there is no unanimous view as to the meaning of the word "rock", though most agree that it is Christ who is the rock referred to. For example, St. Augustine and St. Jerome, two of the most famous fathers of the church, state that Christ is the rock and not Peter. (For Augustine see page 1097 tome 5 Lenedict edition and for St. Jerome page 178 Vol. 7 Paris 1602).

It is plain that the early church didn't regard Peter as the rock of the church from which the papal jurisdiction is derived, as otherwise there wouldn't be this variety of opinion as to the meaning of the verse. But leaving aside the early fathers, let us see if we can understand what Jesus meant when he said "thou art Peter and on this rock I will build My church". Here there is both a similarity and a contrast - a similarity, 'rock' 'petra' and 'stone' 'Peter' (Petros), and a contrast between "thou art Peter" on the one hand, and "on this rock" on the other. The similarity and the contrast is best accounted for by taking the rock to mean Christ and Peter the Christian who has confessed Christ. The Christian who shares the Spirit of Christ and thus reflects his character, is as it were a stone from the great rock. We may ask what is the background of Jesus' use of this word 'rock' here. The most famous rock in the Old Testament is the rock of Horeb out of which water flowed for the children of Israel when they were in a desert without water. The same experience was repeated later at Kadesh when God commanded Moses to assemble the people before the rock and to speak to it so that from it there might flow the water they needed. The Old Testament records how Moses disbelieved in God on this occasion and so dishonoured Him, and as a consequence, he was not able to go into the Promised Land but shared the fate of all the other members of that Old

Testament church who through their disbelief died in the Wilderness. The gates of Sheol prevailed against Moses and all the church that assembled at the Rock.

St. Paul quite definitely stated that the rock from which the water flowed, represented Christ "that rock was Christ" (I Cor. 10). Thus, we may conclude that when Jesus said "on this rock I will build my church", he also had in mind the rock of Horeb and the rock of Kadesh which were signs of himself. It is worth noting that the Greek preposition, used here with the dative case, should be translated "at this rock" or "in front of this rock I will build my church", rather than "on this rock". When it is used with an active verb, to build on something, as in the case of the man in the parable who built his house on the rock, the preposition is always in the accusative case. But here it is in the dative. So Jesus is saying that just as Moses assembled the Old Testament church in front of the rocks of Horeb and Kadesh, so he will assemble His church around Himself. But unlike that Old Testament church where unbelief brought death, in Christ's church there is a god-given faith which flesh and blood did not create, and so the gates of Hades, that is, death, would not prevail, as they had prevailed against Moses and the church in the wilderness.

Faith in Christ means resurrection,

and victory over death. This is the wonderful gospel truth, that Christ triumphed and those who are in Him through faith, and are added by Him to His assembly around Himself in heaven, are already victors over death, are already seated with him in the heavenlies. Jesus saw with His prophetic eye these wonderful consequences of faith in Him, the first time it was uttered by Peter at Caesarea Philippi. Like Peter we share the character of Christ, our Rock, for we share the Holy Spirit, we are living stones. We are members of Christ's heavenly assembly already, raised in Christ and victors over death through our faith in God's Messiah. It was these great truths of Christian experience that Jesus was referring to in that famous passage.

How far removed from all this are the empty baseless claims of papal jurisdiction,

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