

T H E

P R O T E S T A N T

F A I T H

---

S T. P E T E R A N D R O M E

---

by

D. B. KNOX

There is nothing to suggest that the keys of the kingdom of God has any reference to jurisdiction, as though Peter or his successors were door keepers, perpetually letting in or keeping out people from God's presence in Heaven.

The pamphlet I spoke of deals fully and interestingly with Peter's leadership in the early days of the Christian Gospel but when the writer deals with the connecting link so important for modern Roman Catholic claims, namely the relationship of Peter to Rome, the pamphlet fails. Only one page is devoted to this crucial point and then no evidence at all is brought forward. Of course, the fact is there is no evidence to bring forward. All the evidence of the Bible is against Peter's connection with Rome. Thus, when St. Peter wrote his first epistle he stated that he was in Babylon, where there was, of course, an important colony of the Jews; and so was a place where he would naturally go to preach the Gospel since he was especially the Apostle to the Jews. Moreover he wrote his letter to churches in a remote part of Asia Minor, mentioning them geographically from East to West as though his letter were coming to them from the East; which confirms his statement that he was in Babylon when he wrote the letter.

Other important evidence is St. Paul's letter to the Church at Rome, which he wrote in about 57 A. D., that is seven years before the traditional date of Peter's death. In this letter to the Christians at Rome St. Paul sends greetings by name to 28 different Christians living at Rome. Peter is not mentioned among these 28, which would be absolutely incredible if he was living there

and was their bishop, as St. Jerome writing over 300 years later, maintained, saying that St. Peter had been living in Rome from about 42 A. D. As I say, this tradition is incredible as St. Paul's letter is irrefragible evidence that Peter was not at Rome in 57 A. D. when that letter was written. Further, three years later, in 60 A. D., St. Paul himself visited Rome as a prisoner. He was met by the Christians at Rome as mentioned in Acts 28:15, but St. Peter is not mentioned. Three days later, so the book of Acts tells us, St. Paul called together all the chief of the Jews at Rome to expound to them the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The narrative makes clear that these chief men of the Jewish Synagogue at Rome had up till then no first hand knowledge of the Christian doctrines, which they asked St. Paul to expound to them, and which he does (see Acts 28 vv 20,22,24?). Moreover these Jewish leaders admit that their knowledge of the Christian Church is only second hand and hearsay knowledge, (see v.22?). Both these things would have been impossible and incredible if St. Peter had already visited Rome when St. Paul arrived, because as you will remember the Bible says that he was especially the Apostle to the Jews, and yet the Jews at Rome knew nothing of the Christian Gospel when St. Paul arrived, so that plainly the little Christian church at Rome was a Gentile Church, having little or no contact with the chief men of the Jewish Synagogue. Moreover, as I say, amongst the 28 persons mentioned by name in St. Paul's letter to the Church at Rome, St. Peter's name is absent.

You may, of course, remember that recently a tomb has been excavated under St. Peter's church at Rome, but there is nothing of course to identify this tomb with that of St. Peter. The area abounds with tombs.

One of my listeners has kindly sent me, though anonymously, a Catholic Truth Society pamphlet entitled "St. Peter and his Successors". I have read it with great interest. The Roman Catholic Church places great emphasis on its claim that St. Peter founded the Church at Rome and was its first bishop and that his authority passed on to the bishops of Rome, now called popes, and they freely designate the bishopric of Rome as the See of St. Peter.

The Roman Catholic bishops of New South Wales have recently invited all who do not acknowledge that the Bishop of Rome has any authority outside his own diocese, to return to the See of Peter as they put it. It is remarkable that so imposing a super-structure and claim should rest on so slender a foundation of evidence. It may not be realised by all but the fact is that the earliest historical reference to Peter's visit to Rome is made by Dionysius, Bishop of Corinth, in about 170 A.D., at least 100 years after Peter's death, and then he does not say that Peter visited Rome but only mentions Italy. The pamphlet that I was sent is not able to make out any real case for St. Peter in connection with Rome. Most of its pages deal with what no reader of the Bible denies, namely that Peter was gifted in personality as a leader amongst Jesus' disciples and that our Lord confirmed these gifts of God by giving him special responsibilities with regard to the beginning of the Gospel. He was one of the three closest companions of the Master, the brothers James and John being the other two.

Peter is really a nickname which Jesus gave to Simon the son of John. The word means

'a stone' and when, towards the end of Jesus' ministry, in reply to Christ's question to his disciples as to their opinion about Himself, Peter confessed his faith in Jesus as God's anointed one, the Son of the living God, Jesus in acknowledging the truth of this, said to Peter "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church". It was a play on words. In the Greek the words for stone and rock sound alike, Petros and Petra. But to what was Jesus referring when He said "You are Petros and on this petra, on this rock, I will build my church"? The majority of the early Christian Fathers were of the opinion that Jesus was referring to Peter's confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God. This seems the most likely reference of the words 'on this rock will I build my church', for it is indeed upon faith in Jesus as Lord that the Christian church has always been founded and built. It is interesting to note that the Roman Catholic Council of Trent itself in Session 3 also endorsed this as the right interpretation, namely that it is faith in Jesus, which is the rock on which the church is built.

The modern Roman Catholic suggestion that it is Peter himself who is the rock to which Jesus refers on which the Church is built is not likely to be correct. As I say, it is not the view of the Council of Trent or of the early Christian writers. Jesus added "I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of Heaven". Keys are for opening doors, and the promise to Peter of the keys was fulfilled when God gave him the privilege of being the first to preach the Gospel to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost, and the first to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius. He opened the way into the kingdom both for Jews and Gentiles.

There is a further point to consider. Even if it is established that St. Peter visited Rome after these events and shortly before his own death, and this would not be impossible for Apostles were itinerant missionaries, and Rome, the great metropolis of the world, would be a natural centre for such a visit. We know that St. Paul for many years was anxious to visit Rome and we may ascribe the same anxiety to St. Peter, although as I say, no contemporary evidence survives that he made such a visit. But even if he were to have done so, Roman Catholic claims are not really advanced, for there is nothing to suggest that St. Peter was Bishop of Rome. Paul also was an Apostle and visited Rome, tho' no-one claims that he was bishop there, or for that matter bishop anywhere else, for apostles weren't bishops but missionaries, which is what their name means. Even if it is conceded (in spite of the lack of evidence, or likelihood) that Peter was Bishop of Rome, it does not follow that he was infallible as a leader of the Christian community. In this passage St. Paul says that when Peter came to Antioch "I resisted him to the face because he stood condemned". We know also that at the time of the Sixth General Council in the seventh century there was still no concept that the Bishop of Rome was infallible, because that Council condemned Pope Honorius for teaching heresy. Whether Honorius taught it or not I leave to his defenders, but the fact that the Council and many popes that followed all condemned Honorius as a heretic shows that they were quite unaware that a pope was infallible. Indeed the idea is a novel one, first made de fide at the first Vatican Council 90 years ago.

Although every reader of the Bible readily recognises that Peter had been given by God natural gifts of leadership, and that this leadership amongst the Apostles was confirmed by Christ to Peter, yet there is nothing to suggest that he was infallible. The evidence is all to the contrary. There is no contemporary evidence that he ever visited Rome, let alone that he handed on to the bishops there his position as leader, any more than he handed on his natural gifts of leadership. As for the use of the keys in opening the door of the kingdom of Heaven, there can be no further use for them, for once the door of the Gospel has been opened to Jew and Gentile, it has remained open ever since. The Roman Catholic use of St. Peter's name has a very flimsy basis.

6th January, 1963.

63-1