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Matthew 16:13 - 16:20, 16:27 - 16:28



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg examines the encounter between Jesus and Peter at Caesarea Philippi as described in Matthew 16. Gregg discusses four peculiar clauses in Jesus' statements and considers the apostolic succession doctrine. He suggests that Jesus is not saying he will build the church on Peter, but rather that he is the chief cornerstone, with the apostles as the foundation stones upon which the church rests. Gregg also offers a different interpretation of the phrase "gates of Hades," suggesting that it is not a reference to forces coming against the church. Instead, he argues that loosing and permitting on earth is permitted by God in heaven.

Transcript

Let's continue our examination of this encounter, this exchange between Jesus and Peter, which took place at Caesarea Philippi in Matthew chapter 16. Beginning at verse 13, Jesus, we find, took his disciples up to Caesarea Philippi. There he asked them, who do men say that I am? And they gave several answers, which they apparently knew from having associated with the crowds.

They knew what the opinions were out there about Jesus. And they said, whom do you say that I am? And then Peter spoke up and said, you're the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus said, blessed are you, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood is not revealed unto you but my Father who is in heaven.

And then Jesus went on and said, I also say to you that you are Peter, which word means in the Greek, a rock. And upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

And then he commanded his disciples that they should tell no one that he was Jesus the Christ. Now, these statements to Peter are, all of them, somewhat difficult to understand. First he said, you are Peter, which means a rock, and upon this rock I'll build my church.

Okay, we'll talk about that. Then he said, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against

it. We need to talk about what that means.

He says, I'll give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Well, we'll have to figure out what that means. And then he says, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

So we have no less than four peculiar clauses or statements that are not all that self-explanatory and worthy of some consideration. Let's look first of all at Jesus saying to Peter, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. As you may know, this verse is probably the primary verse in Scripture upon which the Roman Catholics base the understanding of apostolic succession and the primacy of Peter.

Now, if you're not acquainted with the Roman Catholic doctrine on this, it's a very important doctrine to the Roman church. It is that Peter was given something of a primacy over the other apostles, and that the church itself is built upon his primacy, upon his authority. Jesus said, you are Peter, which means a rock, and I will build my church on this rock, meaning that, according to their understanding, that the authority of Peter is the rock upon which the true church is built.

Now, when you add to the doctrine of the primacy of Peter, the doctrine of apostolic succession, you have this as the result. You see Peter passed along his authority to the next bishop of Rome, and when that bishop of Rome died, he passed it along to the next, and to the next, and so forth, so that throughout all generations, the bishop of Rome, where the Catholics believe that Peter was once bishop, is in the same seat as Peter, that he is in the seat of primacy. And therefore, the church is built, the true church is built, they say, upon the authority of whoever is the bishop of Rome who is in the seat of Peter and has Peter's authority.

So, this gives Peter quite a tremendous authority over all the rest of the church. And if the apostolic succession doctrine is true, then whoever is the bishop of Rome at any time has this authority of Peter, invested in him, and must be obeyed. If you're going to be part of the true church, you must be part of the church that is built upon the authority of Peter, which is the papal church, according to the papal people, the people who hold to that doctrine.

Now, is that what Jesus is saying? Is Jesus saying that the church is built on the authority of Peter, or on his primacy in the church? I will say that I don't believe Jesus is saying that, and there are different ways of understanding this statement that have given rise to alternate Protestant interpretations. Now, sometimes Protestants point this out, that the word Peter in the Greek is petros, but when Jesus says, upon this rock I will build my church, the word rock is petra. In other words, there are two different words here.

He says, you are petros, and upon this petra I will build my church. The most common way for Protestants to interpret this, at least in my experience, has been that they would

say, well, petros and petra are not the same word, and therefore Jesus is not saying that he's going to build his church on Peter. They say that petros refers to a small rock, but petra refers to a great rock, perhaps a mountain of immovable rock, like the rock city of Petra, which was the capital of Edom for some period of time.

And therefore that Jesus would be saying, Peter, you are a small rock, a petros, but there's an immense rock, a petra, upon which I will build my church. And then there are different theories as to what that petra is. Some would suggest that it is Peter's confession.

When Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, that this is the petra, the confession of Peter, is that great rock upon which the church is built. Some would say that Jesus gestured toward himself and said, upon this petra, meaning himself, I will build my church. Peter, you are a little rock, I am a big rock, and I'm going to build my church on this big rock, which is myself.

There are even some who feel that the reference to it was revealed to you by my Father is the rock, that the revelation of Christ by the Father to individuals is that rock upon which the church is built. There's many theories about this. However, they all have to do with the difference between petros and petra.

Now, the Roman Catholics have a pretty good answer to this, it seems to me, although I don't share their views. The Roman Catholics point out that the word rock in the Greek is a feminine word. All the nouns in Greek are either feminine or neuter or masculine.

And it happens that rock is a feminine word. And it is petra. Petra has a feminine word ending.

Now, the word petros has a masculine ending, but petros is not really an ordinary word for rock. It is simply the masculinization of the word petra. Because it was given as a name to a man, it would be strange to call him petra, which is the ordinary word for rock, because it's a feminine word, he's a man.

So that Jesus simply masculinized the name, or that the writers of Scripture masculinized it and made it petros, which is the male form. But what else would you do? You don't give a man a female name. And therefore, the distinction between petros and petra is not so much as Protestants say it is.

It is simply that it's the same word, but in the Greek it's a feminine word, but when applied to a man, it's given a masculine form, petros. In which case, it could preserve the Catholic idea that Peter is, in fact, the petra, the petros, upon which the church is built. Now, we could allow this, by the way.

As Protestants, we could still have our doubts about the primacy of Peter in the church, and the apostolic succession, and all those things that give the Pope his authority. We

could doubt those things and still accept that Jesus is referring to Peter as the rock. Because, you know, it says in Ephesians chapter 2 that we, the church, are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone.

And if the church is seen figuratively as a building under construction, and Paul tells us that we are built on the foundation of the apostles, well, Peter was one of those apostles, we could allow that Jesus would be saying to Peter, you are a rock upon which the church will be built. You apostles are, in a sense, the stones that make up a foundation of a spiritual structure I'm building. And that church is built on the structure of the apostles, Peter being one, a representative of the group.

And you are, interestingly enough, called petros, a rock. And you and the other apostles with you will be, you know, rocks, as it were, upon which the church will be built. He could be making a statement about apostolic authority, and simply making the statement to Peter because he was in conversation with Peter.

Peter was the one who spoke up for the other apostles, and he spoke up on their behalf. And Jesus may be speaking to Peter as their agent or as their representative. You know, okay, what he's saying is true of Peter and the apostles.

Now, if we could allow that, if Jesus would say, yes, you, Peter, are a rock, like the other apostles, upon which my church will be built, then we would not have any problem at all recognizing that he's simply making a statement that the apostles are those that were the founding members, the founding stones of the early church and of the whole church. And the church has been built upon that foundation. Now, of course, Paul shifts metaphors from time to time because in 1 Corinthians 3, Paul says other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Christ.

But he also says in Ephesians 1 that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and Christ is the chief cornerstone. Now, we needn't hold Paul to a strict compliance to using the same metaphor all the time. Seen one way, Christ is the foundation of the church.

It's built upon him. Seen another way, Christ could be seen as the chief cornerstone, using imagery from the Old Testament, and the apostles would be like the other foundation stones upon which the church rests. And it is true.

The writings of the apostles and the prophets, the Scriptures, in other words, provide the foundational authority for the church in every age, and that's what Protestants believe. Protestants don't believe that a modern pope or modern bishops have the authority of the apostles. There's no evidence in Scripture that the apostles passed along their authority to others to hold offices of apostleship in every generation.

The evidence of Scripture is that the apostles wrote down authoritatively the things that God revealed to them, and the church has rested on the authority of the apostles ever since, namely the writings and the truths and the teachings of the apostles are the authority upon which the church is built. And so the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church both believe that the church rests upon apostolic authority. The difference is that the Catholic Church believes there's a living representative of apostolic authority in the person of the pope and the bishops, and the Protestants say, no, the apostolic authority was in the apostles themselves only, and their writings have been preserved for us so that we might have the authority of their writings to build the church upon.

Well, this difference of opinion will probably go on until the Lord comes, and I don't intend to settle the dispute here, but what I'm saying is it is not a problem for Protestants to recognize that Jesus could have been referring to Peter when he said, upon this rock I'll build my church, but not just that rock, but the rock of all the apostles. After all, he goes on to say to Peter, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Two chapters later, he said the same thing to all the apostles.

In chapter 18 of Matthew, he was speaking to the whole church there. In Matthew 18, he said to all the apostles, he says, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. So what he said to the apostles as a group in Matthew 18, he said to Peter individually, probably as a representative of the group in Matthew 16, and in saying that the church would be built on the rock of Peter, he didn't mean Peter alone, but the rock of Peter and his companions, the apostles.

Now, on the other hand, of course, Peter himself recognized Christ as the stone of significance in the church, and we find this in Peter's own writings. In 1 Peter chapter 2, Peter says in verse 4, He says you also as living stones are being built up a spiritual house. Now, Peter was a stone, and all Christians are stones.

The difference is that Peter and the apostles were the first stones. The ones you lay first in the building are the foundation stones, and all other Christians are built on top of them as living stones on top of that foundation. He says you also as living stones built up to a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Therefore, it is also contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes in him will not be put to shame. And then he refers in verse 7 to Christ as the stone which the builders rejected. And so Peter refers to Christ as the significant stone, but we're all, the rest of us are all stones too.

Christ is the one upon whom all authority really rests, but Peter and the apostles and the

rest of us, we're all living stones also. To use that imagery, it just so happens that the apostles were the first followers of Christ, and he gave them an authority upon which all the rest of the structure rests, so that we are living stones built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. And that's not really a problem for Protestant theology.

You don't have to be a Roman Catholic to agree that Jesus could be referring to Peter when he says that upon this rock I'll build my church. Now when he says the gates of Hades will not prevail against it, what did Jesus mean the gates of Hades will not prevail against? Hades was traditionally in the King James Version translated hell, although it's questionable whether that's the right English translation for Hades, and therefore most modern translations, including the New King James, which I'm reading here, they simply leave the word untranslated. Hades is the Greek word.

It's equivalent to the Old Testament Hebrew word Sheol, and in King James you'll find these words translated hell more often than not, but in modern translations they usually leave them untranslated because it's not believed by scholars that Hades and Sheol are equivalent to what we usually mean by hell. Hades and Sheol, Sheol is the Hebrew and Hades is the Greek in the Bible, simply refer to the place of the dead, the place where the dead go. Now the older King James Version, which said the gates of hell will not prevail against the church, led some to believe that the gates of hell has something to do with the authority of Satan, because hell and Satan are somehow associated in the minds of Christians, and because of that when Jesus said the gates of hell will not prevail against the church, it was thought that this had something to do with the demonic attacks against the church or Satan's assaults against the church, and that the church would survive these assaults.

And there are many Christians who would still understand that way today. They would say, well, you know, the gates of hell will not prevail against the church, and to them that means the church will not succumb to all the battering and all the attacks and all the assault of the enemy. However, this interpretation doesn't seem to be very likely to be the correct one.

First of all, he does not say the battering rams of hell will not prevail against the church. He does not say the catapults of hell, the bows and arrows and spears of hell. He says the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

Now gates are not instruments of assault. Gates in ancient times, every city had walls to protect it against invaders, and the gates were the point of vulnerability where the invaders would hope to get through. It's much easier to break down the gates and get through there and just pour through on the street than to climb over the walls.

So the gates were one of the primary defenses of the city. They had to be strong, and they had to be able to prevail against battering from the enemy. But it's not the gates of the church that prevail.

It's the church prevails against the gates of hell or the gates of Hades. So the gates of Hades would not be a reference to the forces of Hades coming against the church. If anything, the picture would be the church assaulting the gates of Hades.

It is not a matter of the church on the defensive, but the church on the offensive. It's not the church defending itself against an assault from hell. It's rather the church assaulting the gates of Hades, and the gates of Hades cannot prevail.

They cannot withstand that assault. So first of all, the statement suggests a church that is challenging the gates of Hades. Now still, we need to be cautious about associating the gates of Hades with the demonic powers.

Because again, this association largely comes from the old English translation, the gates of hell. And for some reason we associate demons with hell. Actually, demons are not specially associated with hell in the Bible, nor is the devil specifically associated with hell in the Bible.

Nor is Hades necessarily hell. Hades is the place where the dead bodies go when they die, and apparently dead spirits too, unless they're Christians, in which case they go to heaven. But the point is that the dead go to Hades.

The Hades is the place of the dead. Now, in saying the gates of Hades will not prevail against the church, does this mean that the church is trying to break into the place of the dead, or that the place of the dead is trying to break into the church? I don't think so. But suppose we saw it as the church trying to break out of the place of the dead.

In other words, it's not that the church is outside Hades trying to break down the gates to get in. What if the imagery Jesus has in mind is the church is in Hades trying to get out? Now, in other words, it would be referring to the Christians who have died. And in the resurrection, the gates of Hades cannot hold the church down.

When Jesus comes to raise the church from the dead, the church is coming out of Hades. The church is coming out of the grave, as it were. Those graves are going to have to release those bodies.

And the bars of death and the gates of Hades will not be able to prevent the church from rising. This is at least one interpretation of Jesus' words that some have understood Him to mean. He is saying that the gates of Hades are the jaws of death, as it were, the bars of the grave.

That when Jesus chooses to raise His church on the last day, those bars of Hades will not hold the church down. They will not prevail against His church. The church will be delivered out of Hades, out of the grave, and will come forth in resurrection on the last day.

That is a possible meaning of this phrase, too. It's very different than what most of us have been taught or have considered. Well, there's a little more here, but although it's only a little, there's a lot to consider.

Jesus said then, I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. I believe the keys have to do with binding and loosing. In other words, the person who has the keys can open or close the locks, can bind or loose prisoners or whatever.

Now, the binding and loosing here is a term that was used frequently by the rabbis in Jesus' day. A rabbi who forbade a certain course of action was said to be binding it, and a rabbi who permitted a certain action was loosing it. I believe that what Jesus is suggesting is that Peter and the other apostles, to whom he says this again in Matthew 18, 18, they have the keys, figuratively speaking.

They are the ones who open or close. They're the ones who bind or loose certain actions. They have the authority in the church to forbid or to allow certain things.

If that's what he means, then it means that the writings of the apostles that have come down to us in the epistles, Peter's epistles and John's and Paul's and so forth, that the instructions they give, the commands they give, and they say, don't do this and do that, that this is them exercising this authority to bind and to loose, that they are binding on earth what has already been bound in heaven. That is, they are forbidding us on earth to do what God in heaven forbids us to do, and that they are loosing or permitting us on earth to do what God in heaven permits. But the apostles are the ones who have the authority to speak on God's behalf and to allow or disallow certain things for Christians.

And this would be simply another statement of the special authority the apostles have that others in the church do not have. Jesus gave them special apostolic authority, which is why their writings, which are found in the New Testament, carry such a high authority in the life of the believer who is a true follower of Christ. More on this next time.