

## SPECIAL STUDY: ON THE ALLEGED "PRIMACY OF PETER"

The entire Roman Catholic system (hierarchy and theology) is based on one claim, and one only, namely, that Peter was the first occupant of the Roman bishopric, and hence that all subsequent occupants of this office were, and are, the divinely authorized successors to the Apostle, clothed with the special authority which, it is held, was vested in him by the Head of the Church Himself, Christ Jesus. The scripture cited for this alleged divine authorization is Matthew 16:13-20. Here we read that, following Peter's voicing of the Good Confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16), Jesus said to him, "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father who is in heaven. And I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (vv. 17-19). In the Greek text, in the words, "Thou art Peter," the masculine gender (*Petros*) is used, whereas in the phrase that follows, "upon this rock," the feminine form (*petra*) is used. Obviously, since the feminine gender could hardly refer to Peter himself, it must refer to something else, which surely could be nothing other than the **truth** just voiced by the Apostle, the fundamental truth of Christianity, the truth that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God." In a word, Christ's Church was to be built on the rock of the revealed truth of the Messiahship of Jesus. And the "keys" mentioned by Jesus referred not to Peter's faith, but to the privilege promised him as a reward for it, the "keys" themselves being the terms of admission to the privileges of the New Covenant, that is, to membership in

the Church of Christ or citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The following New Testament facts are sufficient to negate completely any claim that might be made for Peter's primacy or for the absurd notion that Peter himself was the rock on which Christ founded His Church: (1) The promise of "binding and loosing," a well-known Hebraism (implying of course the use of the "keys"), as made to Peter, Matt. 16:19, was repeated later, substantially in the same terms, to the entire Eleven (John 20:21-23). As stated above, the promise to Peter recorded in Matt. 16:19 indicated simply that to him was given the **privilege** of opening the door of the Church (stating the terms of pardon under the New Covenant) to both Jews and Gentiles (as related in the second and tenth chapters of Acts respectively); certainly, however, it did not indicate any special delegation of authority to Peter alone. (2) That the Apostles were of equal rank is further indicated by the language of Jesus in Matt. 19:28, in Luke 22:29-30, in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of John, and in Acts 1:1-8. (Cf. also Acts 1:26 and 2:1-4, 2:43, 10:39-42). In all these instances the divine promises are represented as having been addressed to the entire apostolic group, or their fulfillment is pictured as having been enjoyed by the entire apostolic group. (3) The Cornerstone of the spiritual temple of God, the Church of Christ, we are told expressly, is the risen Christ Himself, and the true foundation of this divine Temple is that of the apostolic and prophetic revelation of the Word of truth (Ps. 118:22-24; Acts 4:10-12; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 1:10-12). (4) The promise of the advent of the Holy Spirit to guide them into all the truth was made to all the Apostles, and the Holy Spirit was conferred upon all of them alike (John 14:16-17, 14:26, 15:26-27; John 16:7-15; Luke 24:45-49; Acts 1:1-8, 2:1-4, etc.). Paul tells us that he received his

knowledge of the Word "through revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:12), that is, special revelation to him, as "to the child untimely born," to qualify him to be in a special sense the Apostle to the Gentile world (Acts 26:16-17, 1 Cor. 15:8). (5) There is no evidence from the Gospel narratives that any special revelations were made to Peter that were not made to the other Apostles, with the single exception of the visions on the housetop at Joppa designed to overcome his prejudice against preaching to Gentiles (Acts 10:9-48, 11:1-18, 15:6-11); the evidence is, in fact, to the contrary, namely, that Jesus Himself taught the equality of all the Apostles (Luke 22:24-30, John 13:12-20). (6) In filling the vacancy caused by the fall of Judas from the apostleship, Peter did not arrogate unto himself the authority to appoint Judas' successor; rather, at his own suggestion, the appointment was made by a vote of the entire assembly (Acts 1:15-26). (7) The same democratic method was employed in the choice of "deacons" in the Jerusalem congregation (Acts 6:1-6): indeed it is most significant that the Apostles did not take it upon themselves to appoint these seven men but referred the matter to the entire congregation for a congregational selection. (8) James, not Peter, presided over the first council of Apostles and elders at Jerusalem about A.D. 48. Indeed, it seems that the entire Jerusalem congregation consented to the decrees which were formulated and sent out to the outlying local churches (Acts 15:4-22). (9) Peter himself received a commission (together with John) to go down from Jerusalem to Samaria to qualify the newly-made Samaritan converts with the evidential gifts of the Holy Spirit: this he did at the decision and direction of the entire apostolic group (Acts 8:14). (10) Peter himself was taken to task by his Jewish brethren for preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles (in the persons of Cornelius and the members of his household), and was called on the carpet to make explanations (Acts 11:1-18). (11) Peter was re-

buked by Paul, on one occasion at least (Gal. 2:11-21): as someone has facetiously remarked, in this instance the "pope" was rebuked by one of his "cardinals." (12) Peter himself made no claim to primacy among the Apostles or to any special authority over them. He modestly speaks of himself as being only "a fellow-elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ" (1 Pet. 5:1; cf. Acts 10:39-41). Surely all this evidence is sufficient to show conclusively that the dogmas of Petrine primacy and of "apostolic succession" in general are figments of the ecclesiastical imagination, and perhaps I should add, "working tools," so to speak, of clerical ambition. And clerical ambition has been the curse of the Church from the time of the Apostles themselves (Cf. 2 Thess. 2:7).

To summarize: Authority is of two kinds, namely, **primary** and **delegated**. The primary Authority in Christianity is, of course, God Himself: He is Perfect Wisdom, Perfect Justice, and Perfect Love (that is to say, He is Wholeness or Holiness). However, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has seldom chosen to govern men by the exercise of His primary authority. That would be equivalent—would it not?—to government by coercion, that is to say, government by what is commonly designated "miracle." Rather, God has chosen to exercise His authority through His Word as revealed and executed by faithful men: in the Patriarchal and Jewish Dispensations, through the patriarchs, the "judges," the kings, and the prophets, and in the present Christian Dispensation, through apostles, prophets, evangelists, elders and deacons (Heb. 1:1, 11:1-40; 1 Pet. 1:21; John 1:17; Gal. 3:19; Eph. 4:8-16).

The first delegation of authority in Christianity was from the Father to the Son (1 Cor. 11:3, 15:28; Col. 2:9, 1:19, 1:15; Heb. 1:3; John 1:1-3, 1:14, 1:18; Matt. 3:17, 17:5; 2 Pet. 1:16-18, etc.). While the Son, Christ Jesus, was on earth, He exercised His authority (as Uncrowned

King, so to speak) personally, as, for example when He forgave sins and when He pardoned the penitent thief on the cross (Matt. 9:6; Luke 23:43; Mark 2:5, 9; Luke 5:20, 23; Luke 7:48). It was not until after His conquest of death, however, that the risen Lord could make the stupendous claim which He did make in prefacing the Great Commission "All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18; cf. Phil. 2:9-11; Heb. 1:1-4; 1 Cor. 15:20-28).

Now when the Son returned to the Father, after completing the work which the Father had given Him to do (John 17:1-5), another delegation of divine authority became necessary: this was the delegation of authority from Christ the Son to the Apostles whom He had chosen (Acts 1:1-4). Obviously, in the delegation of this authority from the Father to the Son, no danger of error was involved, because the Son was as divine as the Father. (Cf. John 14:6, 9; John 10:30). But the Apostles were human beings, subject to the frailties of body and mind to which all men are subject; hence there was danger that in this second transfer of authority, error might obtrude itself into the Plan of Salvation as a result of the mishandling by the Apostles, of the revelation which Jesus had vouchsafed them while sojourning with them in the flesh. It became necessary, therefore, to qualify the Apostles with divine power and guidance, to clothe them with infallibility in communicating the Christian revelation to mankind. Hence, we read that at different times, Christ promised them the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit to guide them into all the truth, this endowment to take place upon His leaving them and returning to the Father. This promise was fulfilled, as we all know, on the great Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles in baptismal (overwhelming) measure and they all began to speak "as the Spirit gave them utterance." (See John 20:21-23; Matt.

10:18-20; John 17:17-18; John 14:16-17, 14:26, 15:26-27, 16:7-14; Luke 24:45-49; Acts 1:1-8, 2:1-4, 2:32-33, 10:19, 13:1-3, 15:28, 16:6-10, etc.). The mission of the Comforter (Paraclete) specifically was that of clothing the Apostles with authority and infallibility in their task of completing the record of God's revelation to mankind (1 Pet. 1:3; Jude 3; 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

I am now ready to affirm, without fear of successful contradiction, that following the first delegation of authority in Christianity from the Father to the Son, and the second delegation from the Son to the Spirit-guided Apostles, **there was no further delegation of such divine authority. There is not one iota of evidence anywhere in the New Testament that the Apostles ever delegated divine authority to any other man or group of men.** The transfer of divine authority ended with the Apostles: they are still exercising this authority through the instrumentality of the Word. The New Testament is the final Word of truth; divine authority for the guidance of the Church is embodied in it. The Gospel is **the power** of God unto salvation. Hence, we repeat that the dogmas of Petrine primacy and apostolic succession are entirely without Scripture warrant.

Divine authority today is in the apostolic testimony, the Word of truth, the New Testament Scriptures (1 Cor. 2:11-16, 1 Thess. 2:13). The specious claim that it was the Church which determined the Canon, and therefore ultimate authority is in the Church, not in the Scriptures, is absurd. The fact is that the Word was at first proclaimed **orally** by apostles and evangelists; this proclamation had to occur first, because by the acceptance of it and obedience to its terms, beginning with the three thousand converts on the Day of Pentecost, the Church came into existence. (The incorporation of the Body is described in Acts 2:37-47.) Although the Canon was determined later, the Word was the instrumentality through which the Church

was established and by means of which it was extended over the Mediterranean world in the lifetime of the Apostles (Matt. 28:18-20, Acts 1:1-8, 8:4; Rom. 10:6-15). Therefore divine authority is in the apostolic testimony as permanently embodied in the New Testament writings, and not in the hierarchical church and its fallible human councils.

# ANCHOR IN HEAVEN

... by two utterly immutable things, the Word of God and the Oath of God, Who cannot lie, we who are refugees from this dying world might have a source of strength, and might grasp the hope that He holds out to us. This hope we hold is the utterly reliable anchor for our souls, fixed in the very certainty of God Himself in Heaven... "  
--Heb. 6:18, 19 (Phillips Trs.)

