

Words of Encouragement: Petros and Petra

In Ephesians 1:17 Paul prays that Christians would be filled with a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God. He then expands on what he means, culminating with a picture of Christ seated in the heavens above all rule, authority and power. This is not the only reference we find to the spirit of God revealing Jesus. In Matthew 16:13 and following we find a similar pattern. This is the well-known passage where Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Their responses are wide-ranging, and don’t get to the heart of the matter. So Jesus presses the point asking, “But who do you say that I am?”

This is a telling question. Evidently it is not enough just to know who Jesus is in some general cultural sense. Jesus was looking for more than that. He was pressing the matter of his identity. Who is this Jesus anyway? After all the headlines die down, who is this Jesus? It is a vital matter of revelation—because being acquainted with who Jesus is through what others can see or have said will always prove inadequate. Surely the seven sons of Sceva found this out the hard way: At the critical moment their revelation of Jesus failed them—for in fact it wasn’t theirs at all but they were trying to borrow Paul’s! (Acts 19:11-16)

Peter is the disciple that boldly answers Jesus’ follow-up question with the phrase, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” So where did Peter get his information? Jesus tells us directly: “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” God gave Peter a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. The Spirit of God revealed to him who Jesus was. This is the same operation of the Holy Spirit for which Paul prays.

What follows next is quite remarkable both in terms of what it says and what it does *not* say. I would have expected Jesus to expound on the revelation of who he is—his authority, his messianic role, how he could be God and man, etc.—but he does not. Instead, Jesus immediately begins talking about his Church: “...you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,

and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven....” It is as if the authority and role of the Church is inextricably tied to the revelation of Christ. Think about this. Jesus isn’t suddenly changing the subject here, rather he is expounding on the implications of the revelation of who He is on the spiritual, political and physical realities of our world.

Another striking aspect of this exchange is how Jesus addresses Peter. In Greek, Peter’s name is *Petros* and the word for bedrock is *Petra*—so Jesus is using a play on words. We can follow it better if we use the more familiar nickname “Rocky” for Peter. After Peter’s revelation, Jesus’ responds in effect, “Simon, that revelation didn’t come from men but from God. Now, you know I call you Rocky—in fact it’s on this rock that I will build my church.” In other words, Peter, or “Rocky,” was participating in a revelation of Jesus Christ that would become the bedrock foundation of the New Testament Church.

Now, scholars have long debated Jesus’ exact meaning when he said, “on this rock I will build my church.” Was Peter the rock? Or was Jesus referring to himself as the rock? Or was he talking about Peter’s revelation? Thankfully we need not anguish over finding an exact answer because all three are true. Of course Jesus is the rock of our salvation—none would argue. But this isn’t the first time Jesus mentions building on a rock: remember the parable of the house built upon the sand? (Matt 7:24-27) Jesus said that hearing and acting on His words is like building on a solid rock. In other words, responding in faith to a God-given revelation offers a sure foundation for life—and so in fact for the whole Church.

But let’s not overlook Jesus’ word play. “You are Rocky, and I can build on such as that.” What was it that made Peter “Rocky”? It was the revelation of Christ. He had received something from the Rock, and the Holy Spirit was producing the Christ in him. On this point of revelation, Peter was beginning to look like Jesus. And with that revelation in place, Jesus did indeed build his church in part upon the work of this early disciple. This is astounding! In the greater scheme of things, God can build toward the fulfillment of his ultimate purposes on the earth by using the likes of Peter—and you and me. May we look to the rock from which we were hewn (Is. 51:1) as we build on the foundation that has been laid.