

The Confession of St. Peter  
St. Mark 8:27—9:1

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

If we were to review all the accounts of St. Peter from Scripture, we could make this generalization: sometimes he is so rock solid, but sometimes he is soft and wavering.

Sometimes, Peter is solid as a rock. And well he should be given that his name “Peter” means “rock.” First of all, we have from the account from our Gospel lesson this morning the confession Peter makes. Jesus asks the disciples who people say He is. The words on the street are that he’s John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah or some other prophet. Not one of them is correct, but that’s what people believe. So, he turns to the disciples and asks them, “But who do you say that I am?” “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Peter confessed. He is correct, and here’s why: flesh and blood has not revealed this to him, but the Father who is in heaven. (cf. Matthew 16:17)

As if to confirm Peter’s solid-as-a-rock confession, Matthew tells us that Jesus goes on to say, “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on 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.” (Matthew 16:18-19)

Some would like you to believe that the rock Jesus spoke of is Peter; that the church is built upon this “first” apostle, so to speak. If that’s the case, then Peter was given authority over the church—an authority to say, “Whatever I say goes.” Then, it would follow that when Peter died, whoever took over for Peter, perhaps whomever Peter would have appointed as his successor, received Peter’s authority, and so on and so forth. The one who now claims to hold the authority of Peter answers to the name Francis, the Pope of the Roman Catholic church.

A better explanation is that rock refers to Peter’s confession. That Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God is a rock-solid confession, and the confession of all of those who are in the Church. You cannot go wrong confessing, “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And, as Jesus says and is later corroborated no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit. (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:3) So, this rock-solid confession is made ONLY by those who are Christian, though it is difficult to say if the one saying it is really making a confession as much as it is difficult to say if the one who says the Muslim creed and confession, “*Allahu akbar*,” is truly Muslim or not. So, while the calling St. Peter’s confession the rock is better than calling Peter himself the rock, it is not the best explanation.

No, the best explanation is that the rock refers to Jesus, himself. In fact, the Scriptures testify to this, even from the lips of Jesus Himself who said, “Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the Scriptures: “The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD’s doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes?”’” (Matthew 21:42) Peter refers to Jesus as this stone in today’s first reading. (cf. Acts 4:8-13) Even St. Paul echoed this when he wrote, “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:19-22) The Church is built on Jesus, the rock that the builders rejected that becomes the chief cornerstone. And the gates of hell NEVER prevail against Him.

The keys of heaven, then, are this: the proclamation of Gospel—the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Jesus Christ. Peter will tell of Jesus Christ and Him crucified to all who will hear. When people hear that Gospel and believe, their sins are loosed from them and the gates of heaven are opened. These, then, joyfully echo what Peter said in today’s text: “[Jesus is] the Christ.” Those who refuse to hear and receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins, however, have their sins are bound to them and the gates remain locked.

So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me,

I also send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:21-23)

Backtracking a bit, it’s a good thing that Peter is not the rock. After all, as was mentioned, sometimes Peter is rock solid, and sometimes he is not—sometimes, he’s anything but rock solid. Take, for instance, what happened to Peter just after he confesses Jesus to be the Christ. Jesus “began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes Him. Without hesitation, Jesus says to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.”

One moment, Peter is told that His confession is from God, the next, he’s being told that his mind is not on godly things, but the things of man. One moment, he is to proclaim the free salvation found in Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God, the next, he’s preventing you and everyone from being forgiven. One moment, Peter is rock solid, the next, he’s not.

Or recall the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. Peter told Jesus that he will defend him at all costs. He pointed out a sword, and later even hacked off the ear of Malchus, a temple guard—all in defense of his rabbi. Peter even says that he would never forsake Jesus. But, when the temple guards seized Jesus in Gethsemane and led Him away, Peter forsook Jesus and fled, but followed them at a distance, then denied knowing Jesus three times before the rooster crows. One moment, Peter is rock solid, the next, he’s not. (cf. Luke 22:38; John 18:10-11; Mark 14:50, 53-54; Matthew 26:66-72)

Consider, also, when Peter stood in defense of Gentile believers, proclaiming that all men, Jew or Gentile, are saved solely by grace. There were believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees who had protested that Gentile believers needed to be circumcised to be saved. After the council had deliberated a bit, Peter stands and declares,

Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? *But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.* (Acts 15:7-11, emphasis mine)

“We will be saved by grace—we circumcised Jewish believers—just as they will—they uncircumcised, Gentile believers.” But, Peter being Peter, he had also wavered, as he had believed that Gentile converts should observe Jewish customs—among them, circumcision. Thankfully, Paul was there to rebuke him:

Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, “If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.” (Galatians 2:11-16)

At one time, Peter is rock solid, the next, he’s not.

No, it's a good thing that the rock is not anything about man, that it is not Peter or his fellow men who waver from time to time, nor his work, such as a confession of the mouth, which also is undependable. Why, even St. Paul confesses as much:

For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. (Romans 7:15-20)

A man highly respected in the Church throughout the centuries admits to being "weak," for lack of a better term—of being unable to do what he knows to be the right thing. The same can be said for all of you—you are no rock, nor are your works rock-like.

Now, all of this is not to say that Peter and Paul deserve any less respect than what the Church has rendered to them throughout the ages. Here are a couple of men chosen by Christ—despite their weaknesses, insecurities, and failings—to spread word of Him around the world. Peter makes an absolutely amazing confession of faith, one that you by God's grace boldly confess with him. Paul was an extraordinary messenger of the grace of God, and you boldly confess with him that by the works of the law will no man be saved. However, neither of them are the solid rock upon which the Church is built; both of them are soft and wavering at times, as are you. Both of them struggle and succumb to sin, as do you. Thankfully, both of them knew this—by God's grace, hear these words that you may know it, too.

Still, it is very easy to prop up these men (and others like them, like the other apostles) and give them honor not due to them. The Church, faith, and the faith is not based or founded upon these men, but on the One to Whom they point. But, looking to these men and those like them as the basis of faith has been a problem in the Church as long as there has been a Church. Paul writes of this:

For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:11-13)  
For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal? Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. (1 Corinthians 3:4-7)

It continued through the years with the Papacy, as was mentioned earlier. And, it continues today as one televangelist after another thumps his chest to proclaim the great works he has done (even non-televised preachers, too, I would assume). Each of these people may say and do some rock-solid things at times, but they are each also human and struggle with sin and waver.

Related to this is the danger of putting stock the personality of the preacher. It goes something like this: "If the preacher has a personality you like, then what he has to say must be right; but if he does or says something that you don't like or acts in a manner that you don't like, then you think that what he says must not be true." The danger lies in the fact that false teachers can have a charismatic personality and be very appealing, while faithful pastors may have a dull personality and may not be appealing; an appealing personality does not equal being solid as a rock and vice versa. If you're going to church or not going to church because of the personality or appeal of the preacher, you're going or not going for the wrong reasons. The Church is not built upon the charisma or appeal of the preacher.

Or perhaps the preacher says things that you like, things that puff you up, or things that encourage you to live your best life now. These can be great things; there can be a need for motivational speaking. But there is also a danger that such speaking can sound Christian but be completely devoid of Christ and what He has done to bring you to the Father. If you're going to church because of the uplifting and encouraging message that makes you feel good about yourself, you're going to church for the wrong reasons. The Church is not built upon the motivational speech of the preacher.

No one is rock solid all the time—not Peter, not Paul, not any man who has filled this or any other pulpit, nor any of you—only Jesus Christ! Everyone else struggles with being anything but rock solid. All have tempers that they lose. No one is perfectly patient. There's certainly a problem with gossip, leading to false and misleading perceptions of people. You don't keep every promise and make promises you never intend to keep. You shift blame, not taking responsibility for your own actions. And I could go on and on. No, no one is rock solid!

But, Jesus Christ is the solid rock of the faith. And He has forgiveness and life and salvation to freely give you! Where you grow impatient and lose your tempers, Jesus gently and patiently leads you to confess your sin and forgives you. Where you gossip and spread rumors and lies, Jesus truthfully tells you of your condition and gives of Himself, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Where you break your promises and make promises you don't intend to keep, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise to redeem His people, you included. Where you shift blame and take no responsibility for your actions, Jesus quietly received the blame for all of your sins, took responsibility for all of your actions, and suffered for them under the wrath of the Father and in His death on the cross in your place.

What great good news this is! Jesus Christ is the rock Peter pointed to as the foundation of faith. Jesus Christ is the rock of Peter's confession. Jesus Christ is the rock upon which the Church is built, and no other! He is the only one who lived a perfect life without sin—rock solid all the time. He is the only one who took your sins upon Himself—rock solid all the way. He is the only one who died in your place to redeem you from your sin—rock solid like no other. He is the only one who rose again from the dead to give you victory over death—the Rock against which the gates of hell NEVER prevailed and NEVER will.

And since Jesus is the rock, He is the one who makes Peter's confession rock-solid. If Jesus weren't the rock, then Peter's confession would have been a lie. Furthermore, since Jesus is the rock, He is the one who make Peter rock-solid at times. For those times that Peter is solid as a rock, it's because of Jesus; those times when Peter wavers, it's because of Peter. Peter denied knowing Jesus three times that night in the courtyard, but when Jesus rose again from the dead, the angel at the tomb told the women, "But go, tell His disciples—and Peter—that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you." (Mark 16:7) Peter, the denier, is singled out, forgiven and made rock-solid!

Jesus gives the keys of the kingdom of heaven so that the proclamation of Him and Him crucified is made. By that proclamation the gates of heaven are swung wide open to all who receive Christ, His Word, and His forgiveness. The proclamation started with Peter and continues today as faithful, though weak, insecure, and failing, preachers continue to proclaim the Gospel in all of its purity—as they continue to proclaim Christ crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins—just as Peter did, just as Paul did, just as, by God's grace, every pastor that filled this pulpit has. It is that God-given proclamation that makes them faithful.

And so, you, dear hearers, make confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, and your confession is rock-solid because of Jesus Christ, the Rock of your salvation. You, also, are made solid as a rock, like faithful Peter because Jesus has died and risen for you. In your hearing today, the gates of heaven are flung wide open as the Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified is proclaimed to you—the office of the keys is in use in your hearing. Jesus, the Rock of your salvation, is here, and His death is being applied to you; therefore, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.