

Peter a Fellow Elder

Serving Rather than Ruling

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Message Flüehli, Schwarzenburg (Switzerland), 5 Oct. 2008, somewhat more detailed

Texts: 1 Peter 5:1-4; John 21:15-23; Matthew 16:13-24

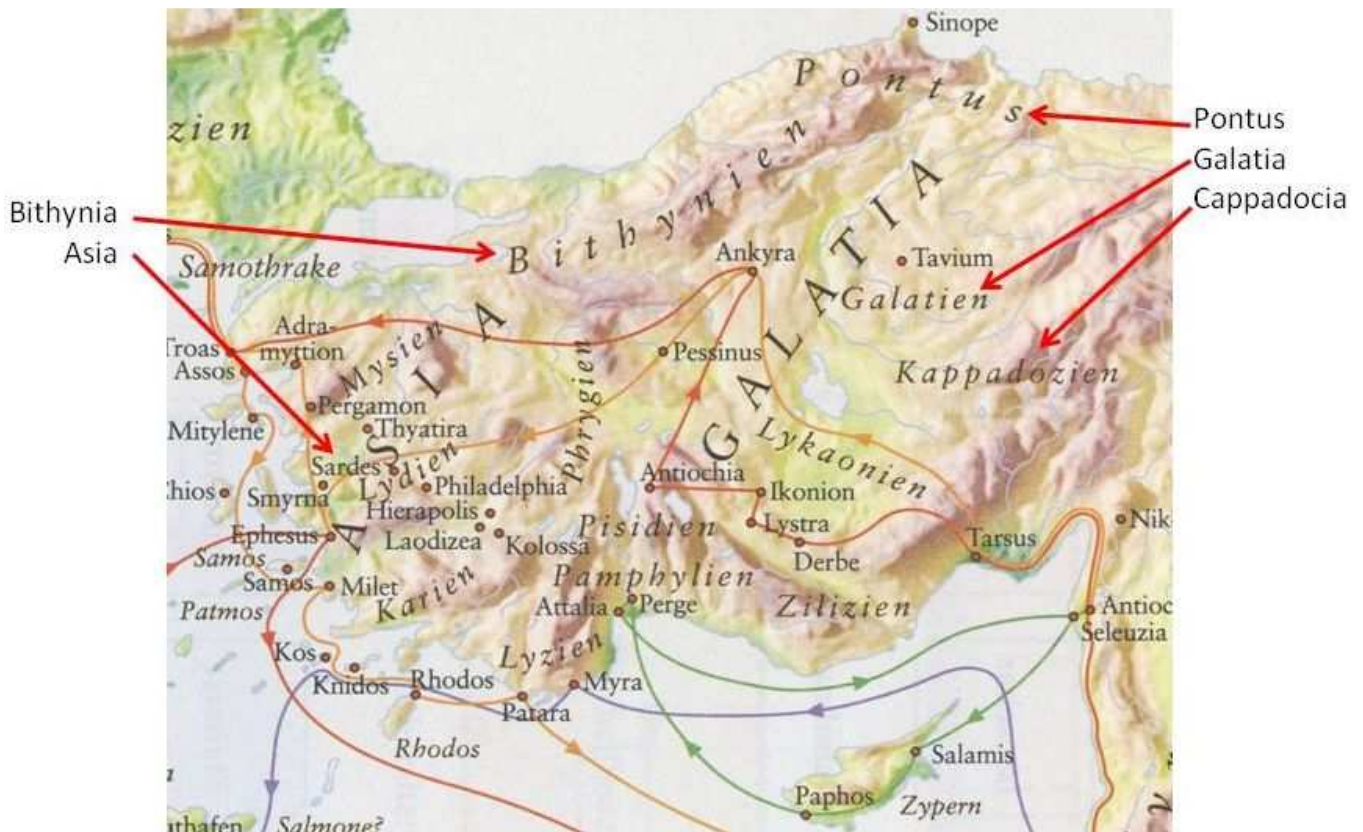
(biblical texts are taken from the English Standard Version 2007)

1. Apostles and Elders

In his first letter, Peter designates himself as an "apostle of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:1-2):

¹ Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ² according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

He calls the recipients of the letter "exiles of the dispersion". "Dispersion" stands for the Greek *diaspora*. This was used for the Jews living outside the land of Israel, who were dispersed among the gentiles (or non-Jews). The christian churches to whom Peter wrote consisted of both Jews and gentiles. But seen from the spiritual point of view, *all* christians of the ancient *and* of the modern world are in fact "exiles": "For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come" (Hebrews 13:14). But christians are not homeless: they have an incomparable, personal relationship to the tri-une God; they are "*elect ... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood!*" Their eternal home, their lasting city to come is with God.



From "Die Reisen des Apostels Paulus" (Elberfelder-Bibel 2007, R. Brockhaus Verlag Wuppertal)

When Peter explained the sensational event of Pentecost to the throng gathered in Jerusalem, there were Jews from the diaspora of Asia Minor, among other places. Now Peter wrote to churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia – regions in Asia Minor. Apparently, these were churches to whom he had a special relationship.

Peter began his letter in a way customary in those days: first the author and the recipients, then a salutation. The normal salutation in a Greek letter was *chaíre* ("enjoy", singular) or *chaírete* (plural). To this day, in Greece, "hello" is *chérete* (written *chaírete*).¹

Soon, Christians replaced *chaírete* by *charis hymin kai eirênê* ("grace to you and peace"). The words *chaírete* ("enjoy") and *charis* ("grace") derive from the same root. The genuine, lasting joy is grace – an undeserved gift – from the Lord Jesus Christ, and this joy is a result of a deep peace of heart in the Lord.

In every church, some elders were installed soon after its founding (Acts 14:23):

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

In Acts 20:17-38, we find Paul's farewell address to the elders of Ephesus: "Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the *elders* of the church to come to him" (verse 17). Among other encouragements, he exhorted them (verse 28):

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

Thus, Paul uses the designation *epískopos* ("overseer") for the very same people whom Luke, the narrator, had given the designation *presbýteros* ("elder"). *Presbýteros* later became "presbyter" and "priest", while *epískopos* became "bishop". In this way, a distinction unknown in the original church was introduced. Furthermore, each of these original churches had several "elders" or "overseers", not just a single elder for a local church and a bishop for several or many churches, as is usual today in various denominations.

In 1 Peter 5:1-4, Peter addressed the elders in particular:

¹ So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Peter emphasized that he was writing as a "fellow elder" (*sympresbýteros*). It is here only that this designation occurs in the Bible. With it, he expressly put himself on the same level with the elders of the local churches. By contrast to the elders who are to be faithful shepherds of the flock, he called Jesus Christ the "chief Shepherd".

2. Apostles – Eye Witnesses of the Risen Lord, and His Slaves

In both of his letters, Peter called himself an "apostle of Jesus Christ", similarly Paul in seven of his letters. Doesn't this indicate that they emphasized their office of apostle and their authority going with it? On the other hand, the apostle John never called himself an "apostle", but designated himself as "the elder" in two of his letters. Peter, John, Paul and Jude all called themselves "servants [*literally 'slaves'*] of Jesus Christ".

Thus, these authors didn't want to emphasize their own authority, but – on the contrary – they had to underline the fact that the gospel they preached came from their Lord, Jesus Christ, and is, for this reason only, certified by God. Any authority their words may have applies to God and his Word, not to the persons of the human authors.

They called themselves "servants" of Jesus Christ. In this way, they placed themselves on the same level as the other Christians, as brothers in the Lord. John wrote his second and third letters to Christians in churches dominated by false teachers who rejected him, the apostle. Even so, he did not emphasize his apostleship, but called himself "the elder", indicating that it was not the task of the

¹ The Greek letter χ (chi) is usually transliterated by "k" or "h" in English, but "ch" in German. As there is no such sound in English, the German convention, "ch", is used here. The "k" sound corresponds to the Greek κ (kappa), the "h" sound to the aspirational sound designated by a superscript ḥ, as in ὑμῶν, here transliterated *hymin*.

apostles to give binding orders to a local church. It is up to the elders of the church itself to solve such problems.

In Revelation, he starts by emphasizing that this revelation was given him by God, but he nevertheless put himself, as a "servant" of Jesus Christ, on the same level as the other "servants" of the Lord, to whom he was writing (Revelation 1:1):

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John...

What decided the issue of who was an apostle is that they had known Jesus since John's baptizing and that they had seen him as the risen Lord (Acts 1:21-22). Being eye-witnesses enabled them to proclaim, in a particularly credible way, the central message of the gospel, namely that Jesus the Son of God has died for the sin of all and that he then rose again. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4:

³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,...

Then he mentions the many witnesses to whom Jesus had appeared after his resurrection, among others "more than five hundred brothers at one time" (verse 6), and added (verses 8-10):

⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, ...

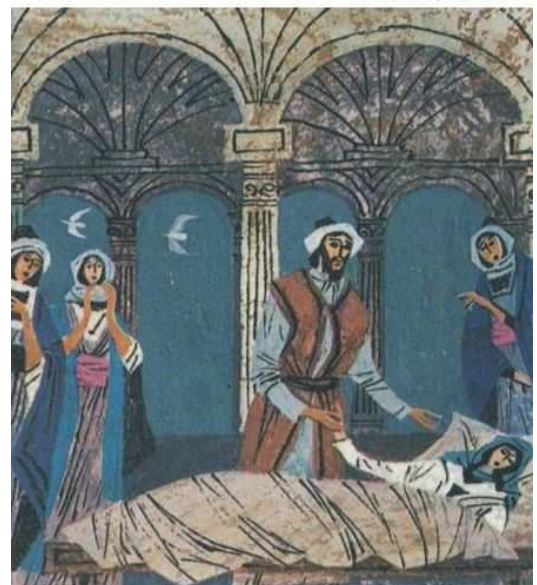
Similarly, *all* Christians depend on God's grace, and are only by the grace of God what they are – no matter how large and weighty the gifts are that they received, even those among them who had to put down in writing the divine revelations for the definitive word of God in the bible.

3. God's Word – Foundation for the Direction of the Church

Paul discussed the topic of "gifts of grace" (*charísmata*) or "spiritual gifts" in 1 Corinthians 12. There is a large variety of different gifts, but Paul emphasized that none of them is more important than the others, as all of them are special gifts of the Holy Spirit. Therefore there cannot be any boasting about one's gifts. In verse 28, Paul then lists some of these gifts:

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.

Paul marked apostles, prophets, and teachers, in particular, by "first... second.. third". This neither means that they were the most important people in the church, nor that they had a special office or authority. But it underlines the decisive importance of God's Word in the church. Perhaps it also indicates the temporal sequence in which God's Word came to the people who constituted the first churches. First, it was formulated by the *apostles* – eye-witnesses of Christ resurrected, then proclaimed by *prophets* – who had these New Testament documents or testimonies in hand, and then taught by *teachers* – those who interpreted the scriptures in their own local churches.



M. Kennel, "Die Bibel", III, © Advent Verlag Zürich, no date

After these three gifts, mighty works (miraculous powers), gifts of healing, and helps are mentioned. Paul stated that "signs", "wonders" and "mighty works" are typical signs coming with a true apostle (2 Corinthians 12:12):

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.

Among the mighty works, there would be healings, which demonstrate God's omnipotence and his great love for each one, at the same time. When the New Testament had not yet been completed, the ministry of the apostles was of a decisive importance. Helps, helping and serving others, were and are very significant in every christian church, and the love required for such acts forcefully draws people to Jesus.

It is only afterwards, after the "then" – so to speak among the "also ran", that the direction of the church, with which the elders are entrusted, gets any mention. The designations "elder" and "overseer" do not appear in any of the different lists of gifts of grace in the New Testament. Instead, we find here the concept of "administrating". The Greek text has the plural *kybernêseis*, which is derived from *kybernáo* ("to navigate a ship"). These are the gifts which serve the direction, steering, guidance of the local church, which is likened to a ship.

4. Shepherds as Examples to the Flock

Peter reminded the elders of their spiritual gifts and the appropriate character traits (1 Peter 5:2-3):

² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.



The good shepherd (Anne de Vries, "Die Kinderbibel", Friedrich Bahn Verlag Konstanz, 1957)

It is their task to "shepherd the flock of God", to be shepherds (in Latin, shepherd is *pastor*, a term which is also used for ministers). They should not do it "under compulsion" – because they believe themselves to be under an obligation –, nor "for shameful gain" – to draw a good salary –, nor "domineering over those in [their] charge" – because they like it when others look up to them. No, they should do it "willingly", "as God would have [them]", "eagerly", as "examples".

Peter himself endeavored to be a good shepherd – following to the example of Jesus, who said of himself (John 10:11-16):

¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

"This fold" referred to Israel, and the "other sheep" to gentiles who would come to trust in Jesus. But they all will be *one* single flock. Every one of them is directly

"owned" by the good shepherd (verse 12) – and by him alone, who knows and guides each one personally. At that point, there was not yet a question of under-shepherds, just of useless, irresponsible hired hands.

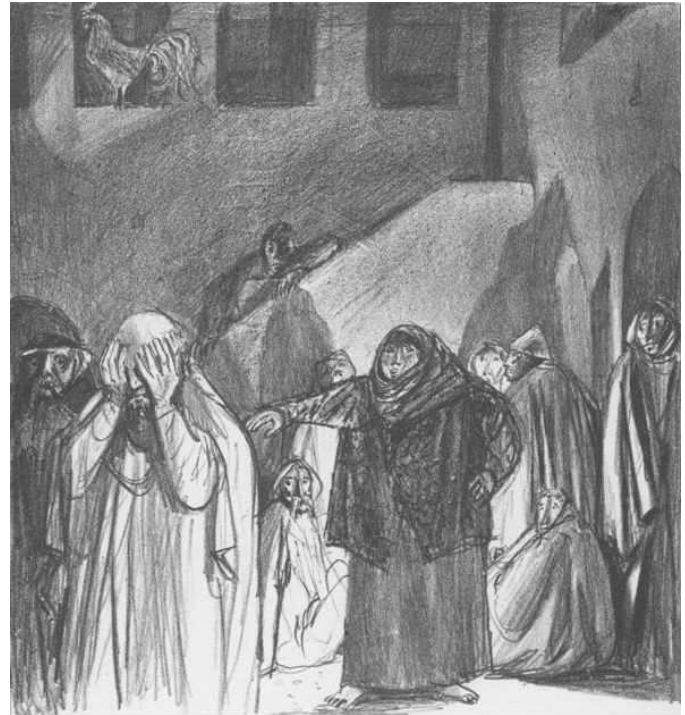
But Peter also remembered a later, very personal conversation with the risen Lord, which emphasized the demands on a good under-shepherd (John 21:15-19):

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you **love** me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you **love** me?" He

said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." ¹⁹ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me."

After his resurrection, the Lord is looking for under-shepherds, and in particular for such having a very specific qualification. What Jesus asked for three times, emphasizing it as the most important quality of all, is loving him, Jesus. And as a conclusion, he pointed to an unconditional following right to death, which for Peter would be a violent one.

Peter was grieved because Jesus asked him three times whether he loved him, but he realized that it certainly would be justified to doubt his love, after his having explicitly denied Jesus three times. Thus Peter was rather humble, not at all his self-confident, even reckless former self any more. Nevertheless, he remained fully conscious of his loving Jesus. But in this, he left it to Jesus to assess this love. Twice, Jesus asked him "do you love me?" – using (in Greek) *ἀγαπᾶς με*, designating a very strong, absolute love (emphasized by a bold italic font style in the text above). Peter however responded with "I love you" – using *φιλοῦ σε*, definitely a weaker expression, almost like "I like you". The third time, Jesus came down to Peter's level, asking him "do you love me?" – using *φιλεῖς με*, and Peter stayed with his *φιλοῦ σε*.



Peter denies the Lord

("Bilderbibel", Felix Hoffmann, Zwingli Verlag Zürich, 1961)

In his *Sprachlichen Schlüssel zum griechischen Neuen Testament* (Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament), Fritz Rienecker comments (my translation): "*ἀγαπάω* is a question of the will and of a decision based on a value judgement... *φιλέω* is a question of one's feeling and of affection based on the satisfaction at a nice object".

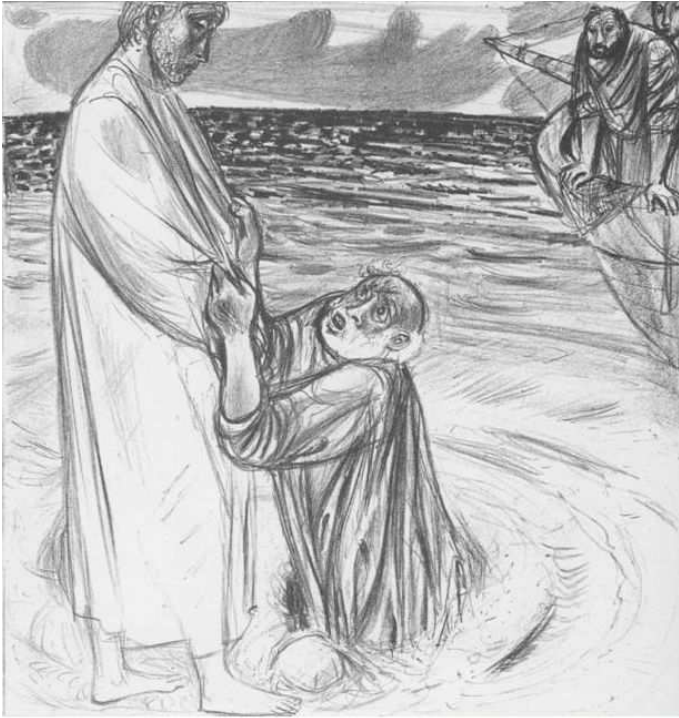
Peter called Jesus the chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4), and this is the only place in the New Testament where this term appears. He understood himself to be one among many under-shepherds. A right under-shepherd is one who first of all loves Jesus and follows him unconditionally – and who therefore humbly places himself on the same level as the flock entrusted him as an under-shepherd.

5. Christ, the Rock and Foundation

The importance of the leaders being humble and of all believers being placed on the same level can be seen in the continuation of the conversation between Jesus and Peter (John 21:20-22):

²⁰ Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who had been reclining at table close to him and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" ²¹ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" ²² Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!"

What would happen to John was none of Peter's business. The Lord himself would take care of that. Each believer is directly responsible to the Lord Jesus. Relationships between believers are next in line only. An under-shepherd trying to lord it over any other believers is offending Christ, who alone is Lord over all.



Peter doubts and sinks

("Bilderbibel", Felix Hoffmann, Zwingli Verlag Zürich, 1961)

There are theologians – particularly in a certain denomination – who believe that the Lord himself appointed Peter as the "prince of the apostles" and as a foundation for the one universal christian Church, claiming that it was on Peter that Jesus would build his church. They are referring to Matthew 16:18, where it says:

... you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

But this in no way means that the church would be build on Peter. "Rock" is *pétra*, but *pétros* (Peter) is a "stone". The word *pétra* is used in only three other places in the New Testament: in Matthew 27:60, it designates the rock into which the tomb had been cut into which Jesus was laid after his death. In 1 Corinthians 10:4, Paul refers to the rock which Moses stroke, so that water came out of it and Israel could drink. Paul then comments explicitly: "...and the Rock was Christ". And in 1 Peter 2:8, Peter himself refers to Christ as "a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense" ("stone" here is *líthos*, not *pétros*). Paul

is quoting Isaiah, where these expressions refer to God himself (Isaiah 8:13-15).

Thus, "this rock", on which Jesus wants to build his church, is *he*, Jesus Christ himself. This also becomes clear in the whole context of Matthew 16:13-24. *Before* verse 18, it says (verses 13-17):

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

It isn't Peter who is in the center of attention, but Jesus: the essential point is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God – unique, not just one among many prophets. And the church which is going to be built is the church of Jesus, not the church of Peter: its foundation is the Son of God incarnated, the Christ.

To claim, on the basis of the similarity between the words *pétros* and *pétra*, that Peter was intended to be the fondation of the church is a grave abuse of the Word of God. A stone is a small piece broken out of the rock, out of the huge rocky mass of the earth's crust. In fact, Jesus tells Simon that he gave him the new name Peter in order to show that he, Simon Peter, belongs to him, Jesus, the rock. And with the revelation that God gave Simon, namely that Jesus is the Christ, Peter would contribute to the building of the church of Christ, whose foundation is the rock, Christ.

... a *stone (pétros)* is no *rock (pétra)*!



Porto (Corsica), looking south onto Capo d'Orto (1294 m)

6. The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven

After Matthew 16:18, Jesus then continues (verse 19):

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

The interpretation that Peter alone received this competence of binding and loosing, is just as abusive as the one of verse 18 criticized above. In fact, in Matthew 18:18, Jesus tells *all* disciples – in connection with their responsibility for one another:

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

The same promise of the so-called "power of the keys" was therefore given *all* disciples. Thus it is basically a competence given *all* believers. It is not an authority of commanding other believers, but a specific ministry in the church, namely, to explain God's will – that is, to "bind" what is *not* according to his will, and to "loose" what is *in accordance* with his will. This also corresponds to the old rabbinic understanding of "binding" as "prohibiting" and "loosing" as "permitting" – where those locally responsible for this task were under obligation to judge according to God's law, not their own considerations. But papal infallibility is a heresy that arose later.

Yet, in the original church, Peter had a quite different and very special task of "keys": he was allowed to start the proclamation of the gospel, first in his address to the Jews from many countries coming to Jerusalem for the feast of pentecost (Acts 2), then in the first gospel preaching to gentiles in the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius in Caesarea (Acts 10-11). Thus, it was Peter who began, by proclaiming the gospel, to open the kingdom of heaven to all peoples. But he would have asked for judgement if he had proclaimed anything else instead of the gospel of Jesus having died for the sins of the world and his resurrection! He must not omit anything, nor add anything.

Then, Jesus strictly charged his disciples "to tell no one that he was the Christ" (Matthew 16:20), because at that time, it was still too early for that proclamation: it must be based on the facts of the death and resurrection of the Lord *accomplished*. It is *this* only which can be the foundation of the church.

In Matthew 16:21-24, we then read, furthermore, how Jesus prepared his disciples for these future events which still had to come to pass:

²¹ From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." ²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

It is true that Peter was a born leader, but this was no guarantee at all for his judgements being right – how much less those of his supposed successors! When Peter tried to foist on Jesus his own, human ideas, Jesus immediately got it straight that, with this, Peter was placing himself into the service of Satan, the tempter. Every attempt to evade the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and of his once-for-all propitiatory sacrifice on the cross is staged by Satan.

7. Gifts of the Spirit for Building the Church

In the church of Christ, there is no room for a hierarchy of powerful officials who dominate their subjects, as Jesus reserves for himself the guidance of his church, which is his "body".

The Lord gives the believers quite different gifts, and he gives the local churches quite different gifted believers. *Each* believer will have certain gifts. All believers have the same rights before the Lord, no gift is more important or more valuable than another one. It would be meaningless to claim that certain members in the body are more important than others (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12-26). All members are needed. And for each gift, there is a corresponding ministry.

The church must be built up and equipped for its various ministries. The Holy Spirit gives the appropriate gifts. Everything that happens in the church is to glorify God and to contribute to the salvation of as many people as possible by bringing them to Jesus – and through him to the church. The gifts and the ministries are described in God's Word.

Therefore, the proclamation and interpretation of God's Word is of cardinal importance in the church. It happens in most different ways. Apostles and prophets formulated the written Word of God. Even before 100 A.D., this written revelation was definitely concluded by the apostle John – with his book of Revelation. All later writings are *not* God's Word!

Ryland's Papyrus 52



front: John 18, 31:33 reverse: John 18, 37:38

ΟΙ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΟΙ ΗΜΙΝ ΟΥΚ ΕΞΕΣΤΙΝ ΑΠΟΚΤΕΙΝΑΙ
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The Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death." This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die. So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

...I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world - to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him."

Today, it is the work of the evangelists and teachers, who proclaim and interpret God's Word, that is most visible. But many other gifts contribute to the proclamation of God's Word and his will, although these other ministries are often hidden from public view, like e.g. prayer and many helps.

Actually, *all* members have a share in the guidance of the church: by the exercise of their gifts, they contribute to the mediation of God's Word and the building up of the church.

Those who are new to the faith must develop and grow, first by consuming milk, later solid food (cf. Hebrews 5:12-14). An increasing responsibility goes along with their increasing abilities and experiences. Those who have become richer in natural and spiritual experience and understanding may influence the church in important ways. Normally, these would be older people, but this is not always the case, as some grow in experience and knowledge much faster than others (and unfortunately, there are also some who spiritually remain stuck in their infancy). In practice, various gifts of leadership and the diligent commitment may also be of importance.

To such believers, the *Lord* will then entrust leadership functions in the church. In the bible, they are called "elders" (without regard to their age).

8. Domineering Attitudes Destroyed the Church

Tragically, a strong tendency to abuse such leadership functions by domineering has been in evidence repeatedly since New Testament times. In most cases, it will not be possible to be sure whether one is dealing with a believer fallen prey to a temptation or a person who never was a genuine, born-again believer at all. But in any case, the church should release such people from their leadership functions, if they refuse to repent.

In the parable of the king who gave a wedding feast for his son, those first invited were not worthy (Matthew 22:8). In this way, Jesus himself was rejected by Israel's leadership, and one of his twelve first disciples betrayed him to his murderers (John 13:21). Sadly, church history after pentecost, as well, was full of sin, betrayals, and apostasy. Even in the first years of the primeval church, we find the beginnings of such deviations, as the apostles already had to warn of heretics arising in the very church itself.

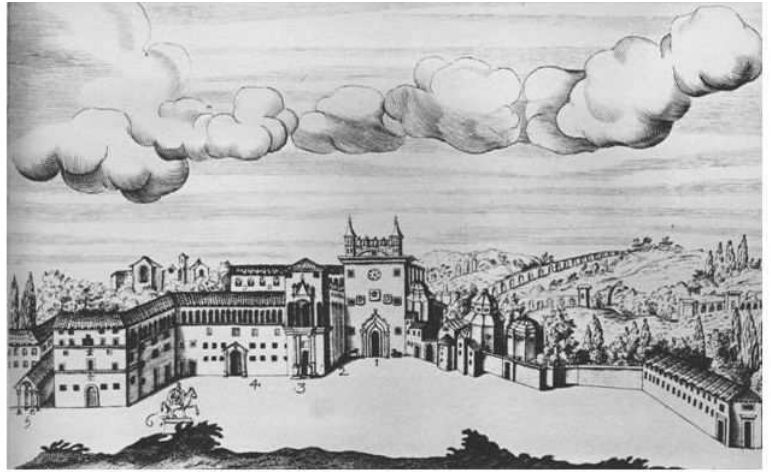
Paul had to tell the Galatians that anyone preaching "a gospel contrary" to the one they received would be accursed (Galatians 1:9). The Holy Spirit let Paul know that many would depart from the faith (1 Timothy 4:1). He warned the elders of the Ephesian church that from their own midst men would arise "speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:30). In Hebrews 6:4-6, as well, we read of those "who have once been enlightened, ...and then have fallen away". Peter predicted that there would be false teachers in the christian church (2 Peter 2:1). Jude wrote of "ungodly people" who "crept in unnoticed" and then denied Christ (Jude 4). Diotrefes, who liked "to put himself first", did not acknowledge John's authority (3 John 9). The church in Thyatira tolerated a self-declared prophetess who seduced the believers to sin (Revelation 2:20).



**Emperor Constantine's dream:
"Conquer by this sign"**

Piero della Francesca, ca. 1460

(Peter Bamm, "The Kingdoms of Christ"
McGraw-Hill Book Company, London, 1959)



Emperor Constantine's Lateran palace

*with "St. John Lateran", the first church built by him, decorated with much gold;
it was in the house of "Fausta in Lateran" (Fausta was the empress)*

*that **now the church magnates met** in full publicity*

*(G. Ciampini, "The sacred buildings constructed by the great Constantine", 1693)
(Peter Bamm, "The Kingdoms of Christ", McGraw-Hill Book Company, London, 1959)*

Later, in contradiction to New Testament teaching, a special class of people arose, who were called priests – following the Old Testament system of offerings. These alone were given the authority to distribute the Lord's Supper. For groups of local churches, overseers were installed, called bishops, to whom the other priests were responsible. A group of bishops was placed under an archbishop, archbishops under a patriarch, and finally, the bishop of Rome declared himself pope ("father"), who supposedly has absolute dominance over the global church. A hierarchy of power wielding officials was formed.

Quite early, one also began to baptize infants, to stock up on church members, so to speak. With this, of course, the church was increasingly overpowered by unconverted, nominal christians, as by far not all who had been baptized as infants became believers.

In the 4th century, on the basis of a vision of a cross, emperor Constantine turned to christianity. But it is not clear whether he ever became a genuine christian. Thus worldly power was now infused into the church: a church until then persecuted suddenly became the official state church and state religion. Power blinds. Soon, one began to persecute non-christians, just as christians had been persecuted previously. In order to extend the power of that pseudo-church, one began to make supposed "christians" out of defeated tribes of pagans by baptizing them, even by force.

persecuted previously. In order to extend the power of that pseudo-church, one began to make supposed "christians" out of defeated tribes of pagans by baptizing them, even by force.

9. Christ Alone is Lord

But Christ alone is Lord of his church and of each individual christian, and he doesn't leave this supremacy to any pope or bishop or priest. After his return in glory, he shall reign as *pantocrator* (sovereign over all) over the whole world, including all angelic powers of the invisible world.

But until that day, he forces no-one to submit to his reign. He forces no-one to believe in him, either. This fact alone invalidates any power hierarchy in the church. Any church office invested with an authority to give orders to other believers is antichristian, as it implies somebody assuming Christ's authority over other believers (*anti* means "in place of").

Not all official authority and compulsion is bad, for *secular* power structures imply these, of course, and this is necessary. But the church of Christ is not identical with secular society. It has different principles – be it the global Church or any local church or any association of local churches.

Giving other believers orders in the spiritual domain robs them of their own responsibility for their actions in believing and living. And this means offending God, their Creator, who has given them their personal dignity and responsibility, and Christ, their Lord, to whom alone they are responsible. Whom Christ does not want to coerce, no human being is entitled to coerce.

It was their profound biblical insight which made the reformers formulate: Christ *alone*, by grace *alone*, by faith *alone*, according to the scriptures *alone*.

- The salvation of sinful humans cannot be achieved by means of any kind of ecclesiastical institutions, sacraments, or saints, but only through **Christ** in his work of salvation completed on the cross.
- One cannot secure one's salvation by cooperating in the augmentation of a "supply of grace" administered by a church and earning an "eternal reward", nor by the abominable practice of buying "letters of indulgence", but only by God's **grace**.
- One's justification before God cannot be earned by works, but one obtains it only by personal **faith** in Jesus Christ.
- The definitive criteria for the christian faith are not given by some ecclesiastical tradition, but only by God's Word recorded in the **Scriptures**.

This is the gospel which has to be proclaimed to all nations. According to Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus sent all his followers into the world with the following charge:

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

Cristo Pantocratore – Cattedrale di Cefalù, Palermo, Sicily



Maranatha – Lord, come

(www.maranatha.it)