

Peter's Confession

by John Owen

The sermon explores the significance of Peter's confession in Matthew 16:16 and its implications for the church, arguing that the Lord Christ is the foundation of the church, not the person of Peter.

Scripture: Matthew 16:16

Topics: "Faith in Christ", "The Foundation of the Church"

Description

John Owen expounds on Peter's confession of faith in Christ as the Son of the living God, emphasizing its significance as the foundation of the church. He critiques the Roman Catholic interpretation that positions Peter as the rock upon which the church is built, arguing instead that it is Christ himself who serves as the sole foundation. Owen highlights the necessity of genuine faith in this confession, asserting that true belief is revealed by God and is essential for salvation. He warns against the dangers of relying on human authority, such as the papacy, which can lead to spiritual ruin. Ultimately, Owen affirms that the church, built on Christ, will withstand all opposition from hell.

Transcript

Peter's Confession; Matt. xvi. 16 -- Conceits of the Papists thereon -- The Substance and Excellency of that Confession.

Our blessed Saviour, inquiring of his disciples their apprehensions concerning his person, and their faith in him, Simon Peter -- as he was usually the forwardest on all such occasions, through his peculiar endowments of faith and zeal -- returns an answer in the name of them all, Matt. xvi. 16: "And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Baronius, and sundry others of the Roman Church, do all affirm that the Lord Christ did herein prescribe the form of a general council. "For here," say they, "the principal article of our Christian faith was declared and determined by Peter, whereunto all the rest of the apostles, as in duty they were obliged, did give their consent and suffrage." This was done, as they suppose, that a rule and law might be given unto future ages, how to enact and determine articles of faith. For it is to be done by the successors of Peter presiding in councils, as it was now done by Peter in this assembly of Christ and his apostles.

But they seem to forget that Christ himself was now present, and therefore could have no vicar, seeing he presided in his own person. All the claim they lay unto the necessity of such a visible head of the church on the earth, as may determine articles of faith, is from the absence of Christ since his ascension into

heaven. But that he should also have a substitute whilst he was present, is somewhat uncouth; and whilst they live, they shall never make the pope president where Christ is present. The truth is, he doth not propose unto his disciples the framing of an article of truth,¹ but inquires after their own faith, which they expressed in this confession. Such things as these will prejudice, carnal interest, and the prepossession of the minds of men with corrupt imaginations, cause them to adventure on, to the scandal, yea, ruin of religion!

This short but illustrious confession of Peter, compriseth eminently the whole truth concerning the person and office of Christ:-- of his person, in that although he was the Son of man, (under which appellation he made his inquiry, "Whom do men say that I, the Son of man, am?") yet was he not only so, but the eternal Son of the living God:-- of his office, that he was the Christ, he whom God had anointed to be the Saviour of the church, in the discharge of his kingly, priestly, and prophetic power. Instances of the like brief confessions we have elsewhere in the Scripture. Rom. x. 9: "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." 1 John iv. 2, 3: "Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God." And it is manifest, that all divine truths have such a concatenation among themselves, and do all of them so centre in the person of Christ -- as vested with his offices towards the church -- that they are all virtually comprised in this confession, and they will be so as counted by all who destroy them not by contrary errors and imaginations inconsistent with them, though it be the duty of all men to obtain the express knowledge of them in particular, according unto the means thereof which they do enjoy. The danger of men's souls lieth not in a disability to attain a comprehension of longer or more subtle confessions of faith, but in embracing things contrary unto, or inconsistent with, this foundation thereof. Whatever it be whereby men cease to hold the Head, how small soever it seem, that alone is pernicious: Col. ii. 18, 19.

This confession, therefore, -- as containing the sum and substance of that faith which they were called to give testimony unto, and concerning which their trial was approaching -- is approved by our Saviour. And not only so, but eminent privileges are granted unto him that made it, and in him unto the whole church, that should live in the same faith and confession: (verses 17, 18:) "And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

Two things doth our Saviour consider in the answer returned unto his inquiry. 1. The faith of Peter in this confession -- the faith of him that made it; 2. The nature and truth of the confession: both which are required in all the disciples of Christ -- "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation:" Rom. x. 10.

1. The first thing which he speaks unto is the faith of Peter, who made this confession. Without this no outward confession is of any use or advantage. For even the devils knew him to be the Holy One of God; (Luke iv. 34;) yet would he not permit them to speak it: Mark i. 34. That which gives glory unto God in any confession, and which gives us an interest in the truth confessed, is the believing of the heart, which is unto righteousness. With respect hereunto the Lord Christ speaks: (verse 17:) "And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven."

He commends and sets forth the faith of Peter -- (1.) From its effect; (2.) From its cause. Its effect was, that it made him blessed in whom it was. For it is not only a blessed thing to believe and know Jesus Christ, as it is called life eternal; (John xvii. 3;) but it is that which gives an immediate interest in the blessed state of adoption, justification, and acceptance with God: John i. 12. (2.) The immediate cause of this faith is divine revelation. It is not the effect or product of our own abilities, the best of which are but flesh and blood. That faith which renders them blessed in whom it is, is wrought in them by the power of God revealing Christ unto their souls. Those who have more abilities of their own unto this end than Peter had, we are not concerned in.

2. He speaks unto the confession itself, acquainting his disciples with the nature and use of it, which, from the beginning, he principally designed: (verse 18:) "And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

From the speaking of these words unto Peter, there is a controversy raised in the world, whether the Lord Christ himself, or the pope of Rome, be the rock whereon the church is built. And unto that state are things come in religion, among them that are called Christians, that the greatest number are for the pope and against Christ in this matter. And they have good reason for their choice. For if Christ be the rock whereon the church is built, whereas he is a living stone, those that are laid and built on him must be lively stones also, as this apostle assures us, 1 Epist. ii. 4, 5; they must be like unto Christ himself, partaking of his nature, quickened by his Spirit, so, as it were, to be bone of his bones, and flesh of his flesh: Eph. v. 30. Nor can any be built on him but by a living faith, effectual in universal obedience. These things the generality of men like not at all; and, therefore, the fabric of the living temple ³²on this foundation is usually but small, seldom conspicuous or outwardly glorious. But if the pope be this rock, all the Papists in the world, or all that have a mind so to be -- be they ever so wicked and ungodly -- may be built upon him, and be made partakers of all that deliverance from the powers of hell which that rock can afford them. And all this may be obtained at a very easy rate; for the acknowledgment of the pope's sovereign authority in the church is all that is required thereunto. How they bring in the claim of their pope by Peter, his being at Rome, being bishop of Rome, dying at Rome, fixing his chair at Rome, devoting and transmitting all his right, title, power, and authority, every thing but his faith, holiness, and labour in the ministry, unto the pope, I shall not here inquire; I have done it elsewhere. Here is fixed the root of the tree, which is grown great, like that in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, until it is become a receptacle for the beasts of the field and fowls of the air -- sensual men and unclean spirits. I shall, therefore, briefly lay an axe unto the root of it, by evidencing that it is not the person of Peter who confessed Christ, but the person of Christ whom Peter confessed, that is the rock on which the church is built.

1. The variation of the expressions proves undeniably that our Saviour intended we should not understand the person of Peter to be the rock. He takes occasion from his name to declare what he designed, but no more: "And I say also unto thee, Thou art Peter." He had given him this name before, at his first calling; (John i. 42;) now he gives the reason of his so doing; viz., because of the illustrious confession that he should make of the rock of the church; as the name of God under the Old Testament was called on persons, and things, and places, because of some especial relation unto him. Wherefore, the expression is varied on purpose to declare, that whatever be the signification of the name Peter, yet the person so called was not the rock intended. The words are, Σὺ εἶ Πέτρος, καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ. Had he intended the person of Peter, he would have expressed it plainly, Σὺ εἶ

πέτρος, καὶ ἐπὶ
σοὶ, κ. τ. λ. -- "Thou art a rock, and on thee will I build." At least the
gender had not been altered, but he would have said, Ἐπὶ
τούτῳ τῷ πέτρῳ, which
would have given some colour to this imagination. The exception which they lay hereunto, from the use of
Cephas in the Syriac, which was the name of Peter, and signified a rock or a stone, lies not only against
the authentic authority of the Greek original, but of their own translation of it, which reads the words, "Tu
es Petrus, et super hanc petram."

2. If the church was built on the person of Peter, then when he died the church must utterly fail. For no
building can possibly abide when its foundation is removed and taken away. Wherefore they tell us they
do not intend by the person of Peter, that singular and individual person alone to be this rock; but that he
and his successors the bishops of Rome are so. But this story of his successors at Rome is a shameful
fable. If the pope of Rome be a true believer, he succeeds, in common with all other believers, unto the
privileges which belong unto this confession; if he be not, he hath neither lot nor portion in this matter. But
the pretence is utterly vain on another account also. The apostle, showing the insufficiency of the
Aaronical priesthood -- wherein there was a succession of God's own appointment -- affirms, that it could
not bring the church unto a perfect state, because the high priests died one after another, and so were
many: Heb. vii. 8, 23, 24. And thereon he shows that the church cannot be consummated or perfected,
unless it rest wholly in and on him who lives forever, and was made a priest "after the power of an endless
life." And if the Holy Ghost judged the state of the Jewish Church to be weak and imperfect -- because it
rested on high priests that died one after another, although their succession was expressly ordained of
God himself -- shall we suppose that the Lord Christ, who came to consummate the church, and to bring it
unto the most perfect estate whereof in this world it is capable, should build it on a succession of dying
men, concerning which succession there is not the least intimation that it is appointed of God? And as
unto the matter of fact, we know both what interruptions it hath received, and what monsters it hath
produced -- both sufficiently manifesting that it is not of God.

3. There is but one rock, but one foundation. There is no mention in the Scripture of two rocks of the
church. In what others invent to this purpose we are not concerned. And the rock and the foundation are
the same; for the rock is that whereon the church is built, that is the foundation. But that the Lord Christ is
this single rock and foundation of the church, we shall prove immediately. Wherefore, neither Peter
himself, nor his pretended successors, can be this rock. As for any other rock, it belongs not unto our
religion; they that have framed it may use it as they please. For they that make such things are like unto
the things they make; so is every one that trusteth in them: Ps. cxv. 8. "But their rock is not as our rock,
themselves being judges;" unless they will absolutely equal the pope unto Jesus Christ.

4. Immediately after this declaration of our Saviour's purpose to build his church on the rock, he reveals
unto his disciples the way and manner how he would lay its foundation, viz., in his death and sufferings:
verse 21. And thereon this supposed rock, being a little left unto his own stability, showed himself to be but
a "reed shaken with the wind." For he is so far from putting himself under the weight of the building, that
he attempts an obstruction of its foundation. He began to rebuke Christ himself for mentioning his
sufferings, wherein alone the foundation of the Gospel Church was to be laid; (verse 22;) and hereon he
received the severest rebuke that ever the Lord Jesus gave unto any of his disciples: verse 23. And so it is
known that afterward -- through surprisal and temptation -- he did what lay in him to recall that confession
which here he made, and whereon the church was to be built. For, that no flesh might glory in itself, he

that was singular in this confession of Christ, was so also in the denial of him. And if he in his own person manifested how unmeet he was to be the foundation of the church, they must be strangely infatuated who can suppose his pretended successors so to be. But some men will rather have the church to be utterly without any foundation, than that it should not be the pope.

The vanity of this pretence being removed, the substance of the great mystery contained in the attestation given by our Saviour unto the confession of Peter, and the promise whereunto annexed, may be comprised in the ensuing assertions:--

1. The person of Christ, the Son of the living God, as vested with his offices, whereunto he was called and anointed, is the foundation of the church, the rock whereon it is built.
2. The power and policy of hell will be always engaged in opposition unto the relation of the church unto this foundation, or the building of it on this rock.
3. The church that is built on this rock shall never be disjoined from it, or prevailed against by the opposition of the gates of hell.

The two former of these I shall speak briefly unto, my principal design being the demonstration of a truth that ariseth from the consideration of them all.

The foundation of the church is twofold: (1.) Real; (2.) Doctrinal. And in both ways, Christ alone is the foundation. The real foundation of the church he is, by virtue of the mystical union of it unto him, with all the benefits whereof, from thence and thereby, it is made partaker. For thence alone hath it spiritual life, grace, mercy, perfection, and glory: Eph. iv. 15, 16; Col. ii. 19. And he is the doctrinal foundation of it, in that the faith or doctrine concerning him and his offices is that divine truth which in a peculiar manner animates and constitutes the church of the New Testament: Eph. ii. 19-22. Without the faith and confession hereof, no one person belongs unto that church. I know not what is now believed, but I judge it will not yet be denied, that the external formal cause of the Church of the New Testament, is the confession of the faith concerning the person, offices, and grace of Christ, with what is of us required thereon. In what sense we assert these things will be afterwards fully cleared.

35That the Lord Christ is thus the foundation of the church, is testified unto, Isa. xxviii. 16: "Thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste." It is among the bold inroads that in this late age have been made on the vitals of religion, that some, in compliance with the Jews, have attempted the application of this promise unto Hezekiah. The violence they have offered herein to the mind of the Holy Ghost, might be evidenced from every word of the context. But the interpretation and application of the last words of this promise by the apostles, leaves no pretence unto this insinuation. "He that believes on him shall not be ashamed" or "confounded," Rom. ix. 33; x. 11; 1 Pet. ii. 6; that is, he shall be eternally saved -- which it is the highest blasphemy to apply unto any other but Jesus Christ alone. He, therefore, is alone that foundation which God hath laid in and of the church. See Ps. cxviii. 22; Matt. xxi. 42; Mark xii. 10; Luke xx. 17; Acts iv. 11; 1 Pet. ii. 4; Eph. ii. 20-22; Zech. iii. 9. But this fundamental truth -- of Christ being the only foundation of the church -- is so expressly determined by the apostle Paul, as not to need any farther confirmation, 1 Cor. iii. 11: "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

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