

## Peter the Rock

One of the points I try to emphasize when giving a seminar is that you can begin to be an effective apologist right away; you don't have to wait until you become a theological whiz. Just work with what you know, even if it's only one fact.

I illustrate this from my own experience, and you can use this technique the next time you have verses thrown at you by an anti-Catholic.

Some years ago, before I took a real interest in reading the Bible, I tried to avoid missionaries who came to the door. I had been burned too often. Why open the door, or why prolong the conversation (if they caught me outside the house), when I had nothing to say?

Sure, I had a Bible. I used it perhaps the way you use yours today: to catch dust that otherwise would gather on the top shelf of the bookcase. It was one of those "family" Bibles, crammed with beautiful color plates and so heavy that my son didn't outweigh it until he turned five.

As I said, I had a Bible, but I didn't turn to it much; so I had little to say about the Bible when missionaries cornered me. I didn't know to which verses I should refer when explaining the Catholic position.

For a layman, I suppose I was reasonably well informed about my faith—at least I never doubted it or ceased to practice it—but my own reading had not equipped me for verbal duels.

Then, one day, I came across a nugget of information that sent a shock wave through the next missionary who rang the bell and that proved to me that becoming skilled in apologetics isn't really all that difficult. Here's what happened.

When I answered the door, the lone missionary introduced himself as a Seventh-Day Adventist. He asked if he could "share" with me some insights from the Bible. I told him to go ahead.

He flipped from one page to another, quoting this verse and that, trying to demonstrate the errors of the Church of Rome and the manifest truth of his own denomination's position.

### Not much to say

Some of the verses I had encountered before. I wasn't entirely illiterate with respect to the Bible, but many verses were new to me. Whether familiar or not, the verses elicited no response from me, because I didn't know enough about the Bible to respond effectively.

Finally the missionary got to Matthew 16:18: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church."

"Hold it right there!" I said. "I know that verse. That's where Jesus appointed Simon the earthly head of the Church. That's where he appointed him the first pope." I paused and smiled broadly, knowing what the missionary would say in response.

I knew he usually didn't get any defense of the Catholic position at all as he went door to door, but sometimes a Catholic would speak up as I had. He had a reply, and I knew what it would be, and I was ready for it.

"I understand your thinking," he said, "but you Catholics misunderstand this verse because you don't know any Greek. That's the trouble with your Church and with your scholars. You people don't know the language in which the New Testament was written. To understand Matthew 16:18, we have to get behind the English to the Greek."

"Is that so?" I said, leading him on. I pretended to be ignorant of the trap being laid for me.

"Yes," he said. "In Greek, the word for rock is *petra*, which means a large, massive stone. The word used for Simon's new name is different; it's *Petros*, which means a little stone, a pebble."

In reality, what the missionary was telling me at this point was false. As Greek scholars—even non-Catholic ones—admit, the words *petros* and *petra* were synonyms in first century Greek. They meant "small stone" and "large rock" in some ancient Greek poetry, centuries before the time of Christ, but that distinction had disappeared from the language by the time Matthew's Gospel was rendered in Greek. The difference in meaning can only be found in Attic Greek, but the New Testament was written in Koine Greek—an entirely different dialect. In Koine Greek, both *petros* and *petra* simply meant "rock." If Jesus had wanted to call Simon a small stone, the Greek *lithos* would have been used. The missionary's argument didn't work and showed a faulty knowledge of Greek. (For an Evangelical Protestant Greek scholar's admission of this, see D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., 8:368).

"You Catholics," the missionary continued, "because you don't know Greek, imagine that Jesus was equating Simon and the rock. Actually, of course, it was just the opposite. He was contrasting them. On the one side, the rock on which the Church would be built, Jesus himself; on the other, this mere pebble. Jesus was really saying that he himself would be the foundation, and he was emphasizing that Simon wasn't remotely qualified to be it."

"Case closed," he thought.

It was the missionary's turn to pause and smile broadly. He had followed the training he had been given. He had been told that a rare Catholic might have heard of Matthew 16:18 and might argue that it proved the establishment of the papacy. He knew what he was supposed to say to prove otherwise, and he had said it.

"Well," I replied, beginning to use that nugget of information I had come across, "I agree with you that we must get behind the English to the Greek." He smiled some more and nodded. "But I'm sure you'll agree with me that we must get behind the Greek to the Aramaic."

"The what?" he asked.

"The Aramaic," I said. "As you know, Aramaic was the language Jesus and the apostles and all the Jews in Palestine spoke. It was the common language of the place."

"I thought Greek was."

"No," I answered. "Many, if not most of them, knew Greek, of course, because Greek was the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean world. It was the language of culture and commerce; and most of the books of the New Testament were written in it, because they were written not just for Christians in Palestine but also for Christians in places such as Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch, places where Aramaic wasn't the spoken language.

"I say most of the New Testament was written in Greek, but not all. Many hold that Matthew was written in Aramaic—we know this from records kept by Eusebius of Caesarea—but it was translated into Greek early on, perhaps by Matthew himself. In any case the Aramaic original is lost (as are all the originals of the New Testament books), so all we have today is the Greek."

I stopped for a moment and looked at the missionary. He seemed a bit uncomfortable, perhaps doubting that I was a Catholic because I seemed to know what I was talking about. I continued.

## Aramaic in the New Testament

"We know that Jesus spoke Aramaic because some of his words are preserved for us in the Gospels. Look at Matthew 27:46, where he says from the cross, '*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*' That isn't Greek; it's Aramaic, and it means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"

"What's more," I said, "in Paul's epistles—four times in Galatians and four times in 1 Corinthians—we have the Aramaic form of Simon's new name preserved for us. In our English Bibles it comes out as *Cephas*. That isn't Greek. That's a transliteration of the Aramaic word *Kepha* (rendered as *Kephas* in its Hellenistic form).

"And what does *Kepha* mean? It means a rock, the same as *petra*. (It doesn't mean a little stone or a pebble. What Jesus said to Simon in Matthew 16:18 was this: 'You are *Kepha*, and on this *kepha* I will build my Church.'"

"When you understand what the Aramaic says, you see that Jesus was equating Simon and the rock; he wasn't contrasting them. We see this vividly in some modern English translations, which render the verse this way: 'You are Rock, and upon this rock I will build my church.' In French one word, *Pierre*, has always been used both for Simon's new name and for the rock."

For a few moments the missionary seemed stumped. It was obvious he had never heard such a rejoinder. His brow was knit in thought as he tried to come up with a counter. Then it occurred to him.

"Wait a second," he said. "If *kepha* means the same as *petra*, why don't we read in the Greek, 'You are *Petra*, and on this *petra* I will build my Church'? Why, for Simon's new name, does Matthew use a Greek word, *Petros*, which means something quite different from *petra*?"

"Because he had no choice," I said. "Greek and Aramaic have different grammatical structures. In Aramaic you can use *kepha* in both places in Matthew 16:18. In Greek you encounter a problem arising from the fact that nouns take differing gender endings.

"You have masculine, feminine, and neuter nouns. The Greek word *petra* is feminine. You can use it in the second half of Matthew 16:18 without any trouble. But you can't use it as Simon's new name, because you can't give a man a feminine name—at least back then you couldn't. You have to change the ending of the noun to make it masculine. When you do that, you get *Petros*, which was an already-existing word meaning rock.

"I admit that's an imperfect rendering of the Aramaic; you lose part of the play on words. In English, where we have 'Peter' and 'rock,' you lose all of it. But that's the best you can do in Greek."

Beyond the grammatical evidence, the structure of the narrative does not allow for a downplaying of Peter's role in the Church. Look at the way Matthew 16:15-19 is structured. After Peter gives a confession about the identity of Jesus, the Lord does the same in return for Peter. Jesus does not say, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are an insignificant pebble and on this rock I will build my Church. . . . I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Jesus is giving Peter a three-fold blessing, including the gift of the keys to the kingdom, not undermining his authority. To say that Jesus is downplaying Peter flies in the face of the context. Jesus is installing Peter as a form of chief steward or prime minister under the King of Kings by giving him the keys to the kingdom. As can be seen in Isaiah 22:22, kings in the Old Testament appointed a chief steward to serve under them in a position of great authority to rule over the inhabitants of the kingdom. Jesus quotes almost verbatim from this passage in Isaiah, and so it is clear what he has in mind. He is raising Peter up as a father figure to the household of faith (Is. 22:21), to lead them and guide the flock (John 21:15-17). This authority of the prime minister under the king was passed on from one man to another down through the ages by the giving of the keys, which were worn on the shoulder as a sign of authority. Likewise, the authority of Peter has been passed down for 2000 years by means of the papacy.

### **My turn to pause**

I stopped and smiled. The missionary smiled back uncomfortably, but said nothing. We exchanged smiles for about thirty seconds. Then he looked at his watch, noticed how time had flown, and excused himself. I never saw him again.

So what came of this encounter? Two things—one for me, one for him.

I began to develop a sense of confidence. I began to see that I could defend my faith if I engaged in a little homework. The more homework, the better the defense.

I realized that any literate Catholic—including you—could do the same. You don't have to suspect your faith might be untrue when you can't come up with an answer to a pointed question.

Once you develop a sense of confidence, you can say to yourself, "I may not know the answer to that, but I know I could find the answer if I hit the books. The answer is there, if only I spend the time to look for it."

And what about the missionary? Did he go away with anything? I think so. I think he went away with a doubt regarding his understanding (or lack of understanding) of Catholics and the Catholic faith. I hope his doubt has since

matured into a sense that maybe, just maybe, Catholics have something to say on behalf of their religion and that he should look more carefully into the Faith he once so confidently opposed.

—Karl Keating

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