Peter

and the Founding of the Church

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Peter's life and work

The name Peter, given by his parents, was apparently the Hebrew "Simeon" (Acts 15:14; 2 Peter 1:1) or "Simon," though his brother Andrew was given a Greek name. This diverse linguistic heritage is not surprising: "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Matthew 4:15), Peter's home territory, boasted a rich mix of Greek and Aramaic, of Jews and Gentiles. To Jerusalem ears, Peter's spoken Aramaic was so accented as to identify his origins (Mark 14:70).

Reared in a fishing family, Peter left his home town of Bethsaida (John 1:44) to settle in Capernaum (Mark 1:21, 29). Both towns were located on the shores of Galilee. Of the details of his upbringing, age and education, we know nothing; but although he received no formal training in the law (see Acts 4:13, which does not mean Peter was illiterate), he certainly inherited the piety and customs of his people, and continued them well into his Christian years (Acts 10:14). Married by the time he started to follow Jesus (Mark 1:30; with what family we do not know), Peter later chose to bring his wife with him on some of his journeys as an apostle (1 Corinthians 9:5).

According to John, at least Andrew and perhaps Peter himself were disciples of John the Baptist before they became disciples of Jesus. Indeed, it was the Baptist who pointed Jesus out to them as the promised Messiah (John 1:35-42). This initial transfer of allegiance to Jesus helps to explain the promptness of Peter's and Andrew's response when Jesus subsequently called them by the lake (Mark 1:16-18). The constitution of the more restricted and intimate circle of apostles apparently came still later (Mark 3:16ff.).

At their first meeting (John 1:35-42), Jesus gave Peter the Aramaic name *Kepha*, rendered "Cephas" in most of our Bibles. The Greek equivalent was *petros*, "Peter." Whether in Aramaic or Greek, the word simply means "rock," and (so far as our sources go) was unknown as a personal name before this time. There is no good reason for thinking that Peter was first given that name only at Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:18).

Peter during the ministry of Jesus

When the portrayals of Peter in each of the four gospels are compared, notable differences emerge. In Mark, Peter is portrayed with more negative overtones than in the other three; but the same is true of all the apostles, whose failure to understand the nature and work of Jesus Messiah Mark takes pains to highlight. Peter crops up more frequently as a spokesman in Matthew. Luke makes no mention of Jesus' sharp rebuke of Peter (9:20-22) and generally presents Peter's failures in milder guise; for his attention is turned less to apostolic misunderstanding than to the developments then taking place in the history of redemption, including the role Peter himself must play in it–all in anticipation of the second part of Luke's two-volume work, the book of Acts. Peter retains his prominence in John, who includes some episodes not recorded by the synoptic evangelists (for example, the call of Andrew and Peter in John 1:35-42; Peter's reaction to Jesus' washing of his feet, 13:6-11).

But despite minor differences in emphasis, the composite picture of Peter that emerges from the four gospels is remarkably stable. Peter always stands first in the list of disciples; indeed, he was one of the three who formed an inner ring (Mark 5:37; 9:2; 14:33). If he sometimes appears as spokesman for the Twelve, it is partially in function of an energetic, impetuous nature that dares to say what others think. If on the night Jesus is betrayed it is Peter who emphatically insists he will never disown his Master, the other disciples soon voice their agreement (Mark

14:31). If the Twelve sometimes find Jesus' words hard, Peter speaks for all of them when he refuses to defect: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69).

About ten episodes in which Peter plays a prominent role are recorded during the period of Jesus' ministry, before the passion; and another dozen are linked with the passion and resurrection of Jesus. The former include Peter's walk on the water and subsequent loss of faith (Matthew 14:22-31), and the great catch of fish (Luke 5:1-11), with its impact on Peter's commitment. But the event that stands out most sharply in his own mind is the transfiguration of his Master (Matthew 17:13); for he himself alludes to it in his epistles (1 Peter 5:1; 2 Peter 1:16-18).

The Passion and Resurrection

Those events that link Peter to Jesus' passion and resurrection reveal Peter at his best and his worst. His courage in vowing never to disown his Lord was doubtless honest and well-intended; but his vile oaths when he denied he knew Him were as inexcusable as they are understandable. His alertness and boldness when he unsheathed his sword and sliced off Malchus's ear (doubtless Peter was aiming at his neck!) testified to his devotion to Jesus; but he still had no comprehension of a Messiah with Jesus' formidable powers who would *choose* ignominy, pain, and death. So he fled with the rest, skulked behind the crowd on the way back to the high priest's residence, and tarnished his courage with the deepest shame. But no thoughtful Christian today wants to point an accusing finger; for the depth of Peter's shame was matched by the depth of his repentance when he wept bitterly at the crowing of the rooster.

The Peter who joined the others in tremulous fear, behind locked doors, during those wretched hours when Jesus lay in the tomb and hope lay in ashes, was graciously marked out by the risen Lord by the announcement of the resurrection (Mark 16:7). Joining his close associate John in a race for the empty tomb (John 20:3-9), Peter found his hope rekindled. First among the Twelve to witness the resurrected Christ (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5), publicly reconciled to his

Master and commissioned to tend the flock of God (John 21), Peter learned that his own vaunted strength and resolve were far less important than the Lord Jesus' forgiveness and commission. Doubtless this is the origin of the utterly different strength, the strength of brokenness and meekness, that so profoundly characterizes his two epistles.

Peter's confession and commission

Few passages have occasioned more debate in the history of the church than the three synoptic texts that record Peter's confession of who Jesus is, and Jesus' commission in return (Matthew 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21). The Roman Catholic church has often appealed to these verses as the foundation of the papacy; in reaction, Protestants have too frequently imposed on the same verses an assortment of interpretations scarcely less fanciful. Among the disputed points that deserve brief comments are:

1. John's gospel finds Peter and Andrew confessing Jesus as the Messiah in the first chapter. Why then do the synoptic gospels, especially Matthew, treat this confession of who Jesus is as such a major turning point? This is one reason some scholars think John is hopelessly anachronistic. Nevertheless, the two stances need not be set at odds. What John describes in his first chapter is intrinsically likely; for after all, what could have induced the brothers Peter and Andrew to leave the Baptist at the peak of his popularity and go over to Jesus unless they perceived Him to be *greater* than the Baptist?

But Jesus turned out to be a Messiah quite different from any of the contemporary expectations, including those of His disciples. Jesus' claims were often ambiguous, His stance was not aggressive, He displayed no eagerness to set up David's throne and throw the Romans out of the land, and He seemed more interest-

ed in preaching, healing the sick, and eating with harlots and other public sinners than in setting up a messianic administration. The crowds were therefore ambivalent about Jesus. Even they could perceive His greatness and thought Him at least a prophet (Matthew 16:14); but it took nothing less than special revelation from God to perceive that Jesus really was, despite the evidence apparently to the contrary, the promised Messiah (Matthew 16:16-17). That Peter's grasp of this revelation was still deficient is made clear in the ensuing verses when he insists that Jesus could not possibly be killed (Matthew 16:21-27). Aided by divine revelation, he might be prepared to accept this meek leader, Jesus, as the Messiah; he was not yet prepared to accept a crucified Messiah.

2. Many have argued that "this rock" on which Jesus will build His church is not Peter but Peter's faith, or the confession Peter has just enunciated that Jesus is the

Christ. After all (it is argued), the word for "rock" is *petra*, the feminine form of *petros*, from which we derive "Peter." And does not Peter himself elsewhere insist that *Jesus* is the rock (1 Peter 2:5-8)? But metaphors can be applied in different ways in the New Testament. For instance, here Jesus builds His church, whereas in 1 Corinthians 3:10 Paul is the builder; in 1 Corinthians 3:11, Jesus is the church's foundation, whereas in Ephesians 2:20 the foundation is "the apostles and prophets"; in John 9:5, Jesus is the light of the world, but in Matthew 5:14 His disciples are the light of the world. Moreover the difference between *petra* and *petros* is in the nature of a pun; and the pun connects Jesus' saying with Peter, with the very name that Jesus Himself had given him. Jesus is saying that Peter is the rock on whom the church will be built. This is consistent with the first half of the book of Acts.

3. The promise of the keys and of the "binding and loosing" (Matthew 16:17-19), first given to Peter, is later extended to the other apostles (18:18). Probably they are related to church discipline, based on the authority of the gospel itself.

4. Even if it could be demonstrated that the bishops of Rome were the direct successors of Peter (and it cannot be), it does not follow that whatever is promised to Peter in these verses will also be transferred to them in some exclusive way. Jesus says nothing of the sort. Peter's *distinctive* role is as the "foundation" of the church a role which by its very nature cannot be transferred to others.

Many in the Western, Latin church have rightly labelled Peter *primus inter pares*, "first among equals." There is no evidence Peter was set over the other apostles; indeed, at one point the apostles *sent* Peter and John on a mission (Acts 8:14). But there is ample evidence that Peter achieved a certain founding preeminence, what some have called "a salvation historical primacy," that can be traced out in the early years of the church.

Peter in the early church

Like the other apostles and the initial group of 120 believers, Peter remained in

Jerusalem after the ascension, waiting for the promised Spirit. Even before Pentecost, however, Peter emerged as the leader who prompted the newborn church, on the basis of Scripture, to appoint a replacement for Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:15-26).

On the day of Pentecost, all of those first believers declared "the wonder of God" (2:11) in tongues; but it was Peter who preached and saw 3,000 converts. The heart of his message was simple: the phenomena of Pentecost are nothing other than what the Old Testament Scriptures anticipated when they looked forward to the messianic age when the Spirit would be poured out. Jesus Himself inaugurated that age; for the Scriptures, rightly understood, declare not only that "great David's greater Son" had to suffer, but that He would not see corruption. Rising from the dead, He would be exalted to the right hand of God, as Lord and Christ. The appropriate and urgent response of the people must be to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Messiah so as to receive forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Among miracles, rising persecution, growing ability to cite the Old Testament, a difficult case of church discipline, multiplying numbers, and the need for administrative helpers, Peter remained the dominant figure, grasping each opportunity. What must have appeared to outsiders as a Jewish sect was a body of Spirit-filled believers eager to devote themselves to the apostles' teaching. As early as Acts 4, Peter insisted that the Jesus he preached could not be reduced to one option among the various strands of Judaism: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (4:12). When the Samaritans were evangelized by Philip (Acts 8), it was Peter and John who were sent to examine the situation; and they served as the agents who mediated the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans, thereby ensuring that the Jewish believers in Jerusalem and the Samaritan half-breed believers farther north would begin on the same footing and belong to the same body.

Jews and Gentiles

Even after the conversion of Saul (Acts 9; *c.* A.D. 33), the church lacked any profound grasp of the conditions of entrance into the church, the messianic community, by Gentile Christians. A substantial number of Jewish believers held that Gentiles had to become Jews first and commit themselves to observing the law of Moses before they could legitimately accept the Jewish Messiah. By miraculous means, Peter learned that what God makes clean – whether of foods the Old Covenant considered unclean, or principally of non-Jewish peoples – is clean (Acts 10). The resulting conversion of Cornelius and his household, and the descent of the Spirit on them, even though they had not pledged themselves to live as Jews, is so crucial a turning point in the history of the church that Luke devotes a large amount of space to the episode (Acts 10-11). When Peter returned to Jerusalem to face hostile questions from fellow Jewish Christians, Luke records Peter's answer at length, even though it is largely repetitious of the previous chapter; for the church's principial acceptance of Peter's conclusion (11:18) bore far-reaching results. Not only did it stimulate Gentile mission, but it laid the basis for new and complex theological relationships between the New Covenant and the Old, relationships that forever removed the possibility that Christianity would degenerate into a relatively obscure Jewish sect.

This does not mean that controversy on these points was silenced. By A.D. 49 or 50, similar issues had again become so central in the wake of Paul's multiplying Gentile ministry that a council was held in Jerusalem (Acts 15). Peter again played a crucial role (15:6-11). Referring afresh to the conversion of Cornelius and the events that surrounded it, he concluded with language that is very nearly Pauline: "Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have

been able to bear? We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are" (Acts 15:10-11).

Peter and Paul

These crucial convictions of the apostle Peter must be borne in mind when the clash with Paul in Antioch (Galatians 2) is assessed. True, Paul did publicly rebuke Peter; but the rebuke was not sparked by fundamental disagreement over the nature of the gospel, but over Paul's perception that Peter was failing to live up to the gospel Peter himself preached. There seems little evidence to support the theory of some scholars that Peter and Paul represent not merely different emphases in the early church, but thoroughly antithetical theological systems. Peter's failure in Antioch was almost certainly a well-motivated but ill-judged step aimed at keeping peace in Jerusalem, without adequate reflection on the damage he was doing to Gentile believers.

Peter's movements after the death of Stephen can be sketched in only roughly; after the Jerusalem Council, they are certainly obscure. We find him, before Acts 15, in Joppa, Caesarea Maritima, Antioch, and elsewhere. This suggests he embarked on missionary work in Palestine (as it was later called) and Syria. Presumably his absence from Jerusalem contributed to the assumption of leadership in Jerusalem by James, the half-brother of Jesus. After a miraculous escape from prison (Acts 12), Peter apparently undertook missionary journeys of greater scope. There is reason to think he ministered for a while in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12); his first epistle suggests close links with believers in Asia Minor and other Roman provinces of what is now called Turkey.

Peter's death

There is no evidence that Peter founded the church in Rome; but there are good reasons for thinking he ministered there. He may well have written his first epistle while residing in that city. The story of his death in the apocryphal *Acts of Peter* cannot be credited: we are told that he was martyred under Nero, but asked to be crucified upside down because he was not worthy of suffering death on the cross in an upright position as his Master had done. But however poorly attested this tradition is, we can well believe that at the end Peter was deeply concerned to glorify God by his death (compare John 21:18-19). Probably both Peter and Paul were martyred under the same persecuting outburst; but under what circumstances, we cannot now be sure.

Peter's epistles

It is more than a little ironic that Peter's first canonical epistle should be devoted to informing believers how to live with Christian hope, fidelity, and integrity in the midst of suffering and opposition. The apostle who had disowned his Lord with oaths in order to escape detection had been so transformed by the grace of God

Opposite: Statue of Peter, St Peter's, Rome.

operative in his life over three decades that he could write a profound tract on suffering.

The second epistle of Peter has often been judged inauthentic. Arguments based on the differences in style between the two epistles are inconclusive: Peter may have used different amanuenses (stenographers) and in any case the differences in style are no greater than those between 1 Timothy and Titus, where unity of authorship is almost universally acknowledged. Certainly the themes are very different: 2 Peter is designed to warn the reader against a false teaching, and Peter appeals to the return of Christ as an incentive to faithfulness and a threat to the ungodly. However, 2 Peter can refer to itself as the second letter (3:1) and makes mention of its author's presence at the transfiguration; so it is hard to avoid the conclusion that if Peter did not write it, the pseudonymous writer was self-consciously trying to deceive his reading audience. In fact the evidence against the traditional authorship is not as strong as sometimes thought, and it seems simpler to accept the letter's ascription of itself to Simon Peter (1:1). The substantial overlap of material between 2 Peter and Jude is no impediment; for even if 2 Peter borrowed from Jude (currently the majority view), given the frequency of copying others' work in the ancient world it is hard to see how any jeopardy to apostolic authorship exists.

Peter's literary remains cannot compete in number or depth with those of Paul. But his Spirit-anointed courage, preaching, and leadership brought the church through the first years of its life. His sure grasp of the sufficiency and finality of the revelation of God in Christ Jesus, especially in the cross and resurrection, helped bring the church to self-conscious awareness of its own identity. His frequent citation of Scripture, his appeal to Christ's teaching, and his unswerving commitment to the lessons learned in the Cornelius episode prevented a major split in the early church and paved the way to the rich theological formulations of the apostle Paul.