

The Seventy Faces of Peter's Confession: Matt. 16:16-17 in the History of Interpretation

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Abstract

In Matthew's version of Peter's confession, the disciple says to Jesus, "You are the Christ the Son of the living God," and Jesus responds, "Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood have not revealed this to you but my Father in Heaven" (16:16-17). In the history of interpretation these two verses have been used in debates about the Trinity, Christology, revelation, and personal salvation. This intriguing history has not been properly documented by scholars, since reception histories have focused on the re-naming of Peter as "the rock" (vv. 18-19) and the feud between Protestants and Catholics over the papacy during the Reformation. This paper explores the forgotten exegesis of vv. 16-17 from the patristic to the modern period, organizing readers synchronically in terms of what they believe Peter meant by his confession (v. 16) as well as their explanation of why Jesus blessed Peter (v. 17). While primarily descriptive, the article shows how exegesis of Matt. 16:16-17 highlights theological debates unique to the time of each thinker, exposes the creativity of interpretive methods, and replicates the logic of larger theological systems in miniature.

Keywords

Christology; Gospel of Matthew; intertextuality; hermeneutics; history of interpretation; Peter

Modern exegetical literature and histories of interpretation of Matt. 16:13-20 have focused on its last third, particularly vv. 18-19.¹ This

¹ Cf. for example, H. Koch, *Cathedra Petri: Neue Untersuchungen über die Anfänge der Primatslehre* (BZNW 11; Giessen: Töpelmann, 1930); Oscar Cullman, *Peter, Disciple—Apostle—Martyr* (trans. F.V. Filson; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), pp. 158-

interest is understandable given that these verses contain Jesus' famous promise to establish his church on "this rock" and have been a source of debate about the papacy ever since the fifth century. However, the focused attention on the end of the pericope has ignored the history of interpretation of Peter's confession and the first sentence of Jesus' blessing: "Simon Peter answered and said, 'You are the Christ the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered and said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood have not revealed this to you but my Father in Heaven'" (Matt. 16:16-17).

The focus of this article is a key disagreement in the history of interpretation concerning *the reason why* Jesus blesses Peter, and the study will be organized synchronically around three interpretive options. This synchronic structure in no way assumes that the text has certain intrinsic features or timeless meanings. To the contrary, the synchronic grouping actually highlights the diversity of interpretive moves and the instability, or at least elusiveness, of textual meaning. Neither does the study assume that the three groupings offered here are the only organizational possibilities. The choosing of three well-represented exegetical *conclusions* merely allows one to track and compare the vastly different exegetical *means* employed to reach such conclusions.

Three interpretive options are as follows. The first and most popular reads Peter's confession as a theological statement about the identity of Jesus (e.g. his Messiahship, divinity, the union of his two natures, etc.) and claims that Jesus blesses Peter (v. 17) *because of the accurate content* of his confession. Here Peter is the theologian. The second reading stresses not so much what Peter says as how he says it: Jesus blesses Peter *because of his character or disposition*. Here Peter is the good disciple. The third option is that Peter is blessed only because "the Father in Heaven" has given Peter knowledge not possible by "flesh and blood."

70; B.L. Ramm, "The Exegesis of Matt. 16: 13-20 in the Patristic and Reformation Period," *Foundations* 5 (1962), pp. 206-216; P. Stockmeier, "Das Petrusamt in der frühen Kirche," in G. Denzler et al. (eds.), *Zuma Thema Petrusamt und Papsttum* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1970), pp. 161-79; J.A. Burgess, *History of the Exegesis of Matthew 16.17-19 from 1781-1965* (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1976); Gert Haendler, "Zur Frage nach dem Petrusamt in der alten," *SrTh* 30 (1976), pp. 89-122; U. Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; trans. J.E. Crouch; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), pp. 370-75.

In other words, Jesus blesses Peter *because of the way Peter came to this discovery*: illumination from the Father of lights. Here Peter is the vessel of the Holy Spirit.

A comprehensive history of interpretation of Matt. 16:16-17 should address hymns, art, drama, and other forms of media, but this study is limited to its literary reception in commentaries, treatises, sermons, and letters. The goal of the study, as mentioned above, is to unpack the creative exegetical logic at work in these various readings, paying special attention to the use of intertextuality, grammatical and syntactical observations, key theological presuppositions, and the like. An essay of this scope can only deal with a select number of thinkers if it wishes to engage the exegesis on any substantive level, so I have chosen those readings which are most idiosyncratic and, in my opinion, interesting.

Readings which Stress the *Content* of Peter's Confession

Son of God Not Son of Joseph

While living in the belly of the beast, Flavius Josephus had to speak reservedly of "the stone not hewn by hands" in the vision of Daniel 2 (*Ant.* 10.210). The Messianic and political undertones were not exactly congenial to his predominantly Gentile audience. Later Christian theologians were also interested in Daniel 2, but, unlike Josephus, the significance of the stone was not primarily political. For them, the odd detail "not hewn by hands" was surely a prophecy of the virgin birth.² The significance of the stone, therefore, was not so much its function in demolishing the imperial statue but rather its unique origin and nature. The Christological parallel is obvious enough: The unique identity of Jesus comes not from his political office as the Messiah of Israel but from his miraculous birth and divine constitution.

Irenaeus of Lyons was one key thinker to make this argument. Irenaeus claimed that Jesus "recapitulated" God's past revelations as well

² See Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 76; Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies* 21.7; Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Visions of the Prophet Daniel* 2.34, 35. Cf. Gerhard Pfandl, "Interpretations of the Kingdom of God in Daniel 2:44," *AUSS* 34 (1996), pp. 249-68.

as humankind's moral development into "the image and likeness of God" (Gen. 1:26). This recapitulation began in the womb where God and humanity were united in the miraculous conception of Jesus.³ In his view, then, Jesus' very *identity* as the one who recapitulates is inseparable from the knitting together of the divine and the human in his mother's womb. Given this larger context for his thought, it is fitting that Irenaeus would find in Peter's confession of Jesus' identity a veiled statement of Jesus' divine generation.

Irenaeus developed this understanding of the incarnation in debate with Gnostics and Ebionites and at one point draws on Peter's confession to support his case:

If he (Jesus) were the son of Joseph, how could he be greater than Solomon, or greater than Jonah, or greater than David, when he was generated from the same seed, and was a descendant of these men? And how was it that he also pronounced Peter blessed, because he acknowledged him to be the Son of the living God?⁴

Here Irenaeus attacks the Ebionites who had used the phrase "son of Joseph" to support their view that Jesus was a mere human and not born of a virgin. Though the reference to Matthew 16 is brief, it assumes two interesting interpretive moves. The first is that he uses v. 17 to interpret v. 16. His point is that Jesus' blessing (v. 17) alerts the reader to the importance and the accuracy of Peter's claim that Jesus is the Son of God (v. 16). Jesus surely would not have blessed Peter, the logic goes, if "Son of God" were mistaken.

The second move is that Irenaeus clarifies the meaning of the phrase "son of" by juxtaposing "son of Joseph" and "Son of the living God." As modern exegetes know all too well, the phrase "son of" seems to obscure more than it clarifies *in what sense* Jesus is the son "of Joseph" or "of the living God." The quotation above presupposes that the Ebionites understood "son of Joseph" to mean "generated from the same seed." This definition, however, if accepted by Irenaeus, works greatly in his favor, for if "son of" implies "generated by," then "Son of God"

³ Cf. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper, rev. edn, 1979), pp. 170-74.

⁴ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 21.8.

means that Jesus was generated by God and thus “greater than” the “son of Joseph.” Irenaeus does not have to appeal to the infancy narratives explicitly (which the Ebionites rejected as spurious anyway) to interpret Matt. 16:16-17 or to support the divinity of Jesus. He rather allows the Ebionites to sharpen their own sword with “son of Joseph,” which he then uses to his own advantage.

Irenaeus’ argument against the Ebionites is also an argument against the Gnostics, who, in his view, failed to incorporate the conclusion of John’s prologue into their theology: the word *became flesh*. For Irenaeus, “Son of God” presupposes the virgin birth because it was in Mary that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Peter’s confession is *both* that Jesus is the divine Son (contra the Ebionites) *and*, as Paul says, that he was born of woman, born under the law (contra the Gnostics). Thus, the confession functions with both sets of interlocutors as a confession of the incarnation. The Ebionites rejected the virgin birth because it unduly exalted Jesus; the Gnostics because it made him fall too far from heaven. The incarnation was a stumbling stone for Gnostics in particular because, as Irenaeus says, “that preeminent birth which is from the Most High Father ... (*is*) *also* that preeminent generation which is from the virgin.”⁵ Peter’s confession in Irenaeus’ eyes is thus a linking together of Jesus’ humble entry into history in Mary’s womb with his divine identity.

Irenaeus’ reading carries a further rhetorical punch against the Gnostics because he claims the incarnation which Peter confessed was also “proclaimed by all the prophets and the apostles.”⁶ Throughout *Against the Heresies* Irenaeus argues for a fundamental unity of the Old and New Testaments and posits that the apostolic message had been transmitted publicly (rather than secretly) until his own time. Matt. 16:16-17 is woven into this larger salvation-historical scheme: Irenaeus’ Peter affirms the expectations of the prophets of old and publicly transmits another important tradition of the church. This Peter is a theologian, to be sure, but not a Gnostic with “secret” knowledge about Jesus. As

⁵ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 29.2 (my emphasis). See also Eusebius of Caesarea, *Gospel Questions and Solutions* 1.8.

⁶ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 29.2.

Irenaeus says, Peter's confession is understandable to all Christians "who have attained to even a small portion of the truth."⁷

Light of Light

For the exegetes considered in this section, the heart of Peter's confession is *the divine connotations* of "Son of the living God."⁸ Unlike Irenaeus above, these theologians do not ground their reading in the birth narratives but look elsewhere in the Old and New Testaments for support. For some, divinity is not a proposition to be proved (as Irenaeus contra the Ebionites), but rather a starting point that can be assumed. As the proto-orthodox tradition established that Jesus is the "Son" of God in a divine sense, many in turn used such tradition as a criterion

⁷ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 29.2.

⁸ Many modern exegetes are reserved in the implications they draw from this episode, but many agree that, for Matthew, "Son of God" means more than "Messiah." See W.M.L. De Wette, *Kurze Erklärung des Evangeliums Matthäi* (Leipzig: Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1857), p. 209; John Albert Bengel ("... the knowledge of Jesus as the Son of God is sublimer than that of Him as the Christ") in *Gnomon of the New Testament* (trans. James Bandinel; Philadelphia: Smith, English and Co.; New York: Sheldon and Co., 1860), vol. 1, p. 322; Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers* (London: Rivingtons; Cambridge: Deighton, Bell and Co., 1881), p. 118; Theodore Zahn (paraphrases Peter: "Sie muß ein Wesen höherer Ordnung sein") in *Das Evangelium des Matthäus* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1922), p. 539; R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1943), p. 621; D. Wilhelm Michaelis, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus. 2 Teil: Kap. 8-17* (Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1949), pp. 337-39; Walter Grundmann, *Das Evangelium Nach Matthäus* (THZNT; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1968), pp. 384-86; W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988-1997), vol. 2, p. 620; John P. Meier, *Matthew* (NTM 3; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1980), p. 181; Donald A. Hagner ("[Jesus] somehow participates in God's being") in *Matthew 14-28* (WBC 33B; Dallas: Word Books, 1995), pp. 468-69; Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 184; Wolfgang Wiefel, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1998), pp. 298-99; Michael Wilkins, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p. 559; John Nolland ("[Jesus] is to be worshipped as one in whom God is immediately encountered") in *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 665.

for weighing the merit of readings.⁹ If it was granted, then, that “Son of God” denotes divinity and does not require further argument, the exegetical question became “in what sense divine?” or “what is the nature of the relationship between the Son and the Father?”

Origen is one thinker who read Matthew 16 to elucidate the nature of Jesus’ divinity rather than to prove divinity outright. In his *Commentary on Matthew*, his reflections begin with an observation that anticipates modern redaction criticism: Mark’s Peter only says “You are the Christ” (Mark 8:29), while Matthew’s Peter says “You are the Christ the Son of the living God” and further receives Jesus’ blessings (Matt. 16:16-19). How is this difference to be explained? Origen’s solution is that Matthew includes the additional blessing in vv. 17-19 because of the ever-important addendum to Mark: “the Son of the living God.” Mark did not include Jesus’ blessing because the mere recognition that Jesus is “the Christ” does not merit such a blessing.¹⁰

Origen understands Peter’s confession of Jesus’ divinity to be of a higher order than other similar-sounding confessions in Matthew’s Gospel. He knows that elsewhere individuals and groups say that Jesus is “the Son of God.” The most immediate and relevant case is that of the disciples in the boat after Jesus walked on the Sea of Galilee (Matt. 14:33). But the key for Origen is that Jesus did not bless this confession or any of the others as he did Peter’s. The blessing is a signal that Peter had made further progress in his knowledge of Christ, and that even though he said the same words, he must have meant something more profound by them.¹¹ The logic is clarified by a distinction Origen makes between “believing” and “knowing” Christ.¹² The disciples in the boat believed in Christ, but they did not know much about him.

⁹) For the term “proto-orthodox” see Bart D. Ehrman, “General Introduction” in *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 4-6. For the role of tradition in exegesis see J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 36-40.

¹⁰) Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 12.9 (ANF 10: 455). Cf. David H. Wallace, “An Exegesis of Matt. 16.13-20,” *Foundations* 5 (1962), pp. 217-25 (220); D.A. Carson, *Matthew* (EPC 8; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 367.

¹¹) Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 12.9.

¹²) See Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea* (ed. and trans. John Henry Newman; Southampton: Saint Austin Press, 1997), vol. 1, pp. 583-84.

Peter is blessed not just because he believed, but because he excelled in knowledge. He went beyond blind faith to the higher rational faith, even if his knowledge was still imperfect. Origen finds Jesus' rebuke "Get behind me Satan!" only moments later to be evidence that Peter's knowledge needed to be supplemented by the scandal of the cross, for only then is the secrecy about Jesus' identity lifted (Matt. 16:20; cf. 28:18-20).¹³

Thus, Peter's ascent from belief to knowledge makes Matthew's version of the confession not just a story about Peter and *his* unique blessing. Only the literal sense of the text is about Peter the fisherman. According to the spiritual sense the story is about *any* disciple who accepts divine revelation and ascends to higher knowledge of Christ.

If we say it as Peter, not by flesh and blood revealing it unto us, but by the light from the Father in heaven shining in our heart, we too become as Peter, being pronounced blessed as he was, because the grounds on which he was pronounced blessed apply also to us, by reason of the fact that flesh and blood have not revealed to us with regard to Jesus that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God, but the Father in heaven, from the very heavens ... we become a Peter, and to us there might be said the word, "Thou art Peter" etc. For a rock is every disciple of Christ ...¹⁴

¹³ Jerome and Augustine make the same claim. See Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew* 16.20-23; Augustine, *Letter 147* in *The Works of Saint Augustine: Letters 100-154* (trans. R. Teske; Hyde Park: New City Press, 2003), pp. 317-49 (335).

¹⁴ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 12.9. The notion that Peter's experience resembles the experience of every Christian in confessing Christ became especially popular after the Reformation and appears in many Protestant commentaries. For example, see William Nast, *A Commentary on the Gospels of Matthew and Mark* (Cincinnati: Poe & Hitchcock, 1864), pp. 412-13. Nast goes as far as to paraphrase Jesus' blessing: "You are Peter", (is as if) he had said, "Thou art a true believer" (p. 413, emphasis original). See also J. Trapp, *A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments* (Eureka: Tanski Publications, 1997 [orig. 1865-68]), vol. 5, p. 200; Melancthon W. Jacobus, *Notes on the Gospels, Critical and Explanatory* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1867), p. 172; William Kelly, *Lectures on Matthew* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1867), pp. 328-34; William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), pp. 149-52; H.N. Ridderbos, *Matthew* (trans. Ray Toogman; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), pp. 301-302.

The quotation makes clear why Origen would view Peter as a prototype of every “spiritual” Christian. Jesus blesses Peter not because there is something unique about Peter’s intellect, but because “flesh and blood have not revealed this (confession) to you, but my Father in heaven” (v. 17). Origen takes “flesh and blood” to refer to Peter’s own cognitive ability, which Jesus claims is not responsible for this excellent knowledge. The knowledge came from the Father who, as he says later in the commentary, “takes away the veil upon (the) heart.”¹⁵ Thus, if Peter’s confession was a gift from the Father, all Christians are potential recipients of gifts from the same Father who enjoys giving good gifts to his children.

Origen relies on other biblical texts to show why Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ the Son of the living God,” contains a deeper knowledge of Jesus’ identity than the adoration of the disciples in the Sea of Galilee (14:33). Origen finds curious the adjective “living” to describe God and traces the term through the Old and New Testaments. He notes that Jeremiah had said of the God of Israel, “They (God’s people) have forsaken me the spring of *living* water” (Jer. 2:13), and Jesus had said of himself in John, “I am the way, the truth, and the *life*” (John 14:6). As both God and Christ used “life” self-referentially, Origen reasons that Peter employed the term to pinpoint the shared divine nature of the Son and the Father.¹⁶ He thoughtfully instructs, “Consider carefully, whether, as the spring of the river is not the same thing as the river, the spring of life is not the same as life.”¹⁷ Peter’s confession was thus no mere confession of divinity; it was a step toward Origen’s doctrine of the Trinity and the notion of the “eternal begottenness” of the Son.¹⁸

¹⁵) Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 12.11.

¹⁶) See a similar reading by Peter of Laodicea, *Des Petrus von Laodicea Erklärung des Matthäusevangeliums* (ed. D.C.F. Georg Heinrici; Leipzig: Dürr, 1908), p. 184; C. Lapidé, *The Great Commentary* (trans. T.W. Mossman; London: John Hodges, 1877), vol. 2, p. 211.

¹⁷) Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 12.9.

¹⁸) Cf. Origen, *Commentary on John* 2.9. Here Origen anticipates Athanasius of Alexandria who used Matthew 16 in his battles against the Arians. At one point he claims (against the Arian bishop George of Laodicea) that Peter’s confession was about “the Son of God’s everlasting Godhead which is the Father’s.” He stresses that Peter’s

Origen was not the only one who argued that Peter confessed Jesus' unique relationship to the Father. The renowned homilist John Chrysostom arrived at a similar conclusion, though by means of very different arguments. In one of his many homilies on the Gospel of Matthew, he explains why Peter's confession was praiseworthy. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Nathaniel had claimed, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel!" and Chrysostom notes that, although Nathaniel was reverent and sincere, his confession fell short: "[T]he Son of God is not King of Israel only, but of the whole world."¹⁹ The interpretive clue appears to be Jesus' response to Nathaniel, which differs markedly from the one given to Peter. Peter received a blessing, but Nathaniel was told "you shall see greater things."²⁰

Peter's confession is worthy of blessing because, unlike Nathaniel, he confesses that Jesus was "in the true sense a Son ... chief above all ... (of) the substance of the Father."²¹ Chrysostom bases this conclusion on a series of creative observations. He notes, first of all, that Peter's confession appears later in the Gospel and not at the beginning (like Nathaniel's). This is important because by this time Jesus had "done many signs ... (and) also spoke many things to them concerning his Deity."²² In addition, he observes that the confession follows a list of inadequate proposals about Jesus' identity, all similar in that the options are "mere men." Jesus, fully aware of his coeternal and consubstantial relationship to the Father, asks the further question, "Who do you say that I am?" to prod the disciples toward "higher thoughts concerning him."²³ Chrysostom here implies that the narrative context of the

confession is *before* Jesus' resurrection and Peter's speech in Acts 2 (a favorite of the Arians) where it is said that "God has made him both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2.36). Jesus was thus the Christ and Son of God *before* being exalted to the right hand of the Father, and, Athanasius therefore assumes, since eternity past. See *Against the Arians* 2.15.18. See also *Letter 29* [fragment].

¹⁹ See J. Chrysostom, *Homily 21* [Jn. 1.49-2.4].

²⁰ J. Chrysostom, *Homily 21* [Jn. 1.49-2.4]. Contrast this view with Augustine, who believes that both statements are theologically equivalent (*Tractates on the Gospel of John* 7.20).

²¹ See Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, 1:584.

²² Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, 1:581.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, 1:581. Augustine makes a similar claim: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Not as a prophet, not as John, not as some great

confession, both the Gospel as a whole and the immediate setting, point to a high Christological reading of “Son of the living God.”²⁴

Chrysostom also supports his case by means of three details in the confession and blessing itself (vv. 16-19). The first is simply the observation that Jesus claims that the Father *revealed* this knowledge to Peter. Chrysostom reasons that only the confession that Jesus was “begotten of the very Father Himself” would require a work of revelation, for no other proposal requires supernatural knowledge. He also connects the term, ἀποκαλύπτω, used in Jesus’ blessing (v. 17) to the subsequent Johannine Thunderbolt, where Jesus speaks in exalted terms of his unique relationship to the Father. Chrysostom believes that in Matt. 11:27 Jesus had spoken “manifestly” of his shared “honor and substance” with the Father, and the word link in Matt. 16:16 with ἀποκαλύπτω suggests to him that this relationship was precisely what Peter had confessed.²⁵

Second, Jesus takes the prerogative to rename Simon. For Chrysostom the point of this renaming is not just the significance of the name

just man, but as the only One, as an equal” (*Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 26.5.3).

²⁴ For a similar argument see Juan de Maldonado, *S. Matthew’s Gospel* (ed. and trans. Georg J. Davie; London: John Hodges, 1888), p. 32. Maldonatus notes that the four suggestions given by the disciples were all “sons of God by adoption” which suggests that Jesus was “the Son of God, not by adoption, but by nature.” Another interesting use of narrative context is to connect the confession of Peter with the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin at the end of Matthew’s Gospel. In both places three Christological titles are used in close proximity—son of man, Christ, and Son of God—and for some, like nineteenth-century Methodist William Nast, the *reaction* of Caiaphas indicates “that the Jews themselves understood by ‘Son of God’ the true Godhead”, *A Commentary on the Gospels of Matthew and Mark*, p. 412; cf. R. Watson, *Exposition of the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark* (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason, 1834), p. 170. It is difficult to identify the genesis of this reading, but, as far as my research has shown, its logic is first found in Athanasius’ *Against the Arians*. Though Athanasius did not look to the trial scene itself, he notes that “the Jews” in John’s Gospel reacted to Jesus’ claim to be God’s Son by accusing him of blasphemy. He concludes: “for had he [Jesus] called himself one of the creatures, or said, ‘I am a work’ (opposed to the un-created Son), they would have not been startled at the intelligence, nor thought such words blasphemy” (*Against the Arians*, 2.22.73).

²⁵ See J. Chrysostom, *Homily 54*. Cf. T. De Kruijf, *Der Sohn Des Lebendigen Gottes* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1962), p. 83.

“rock” but the *authority of Jesus* presupposed in giving new names. Here Jesus shows that “it is he who gave the Old Testament and changed names, calling Abram Abraham, and Sarai Sarah, and Jacob Israel.”²⁶ Thus, Chrysostom reads the blessing as having the same implication as Jesus’ claim in John: “Before Abraham was born, I am” (John 8:58).

A third point Chrysostom makes concerns the description of Peter as “the son of Jonah” (v. 17). Chrysostom claims that Peter’s “Son of the living God” (v. 16) and Jesus’ “son of Jonah” (v. 17) parallel each other, and he paraphrases Jesus’ point: “[S]ince you have proclaimed my Father, I too name him who bore you.” The Trinitarian implication of Chrysostom’s reading is clear: As Peter’s father bore him, so too Jesus is begotten of the Father and of the same substance. Thus, for Chrysostom, when Jesus calls Peter “the son of Jonah,” he is not merely saying something about Peter but is actually saying something about himself and his relationship to the Father.²⁷

Hilary of Poitiers also found in Matthew 16 details about Jesus’ divinity. In his treatise *On the Trinity*, Hilary’s *Ausgangspunkt* is the initial question Jesus poses: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Since Jesus says who he is in the very question posed to the disciples (i.e. the Son of Man) and since Hilary assumes “Son of Man” refers to Jesus’ physical appearance, Hilary reads Jesus’ question as a prod to speak “beyond what appeared.”²⁸ Jesus’ congratulation indicates that Peter passed the test successfully, as Jesus says “flesh and blood have not revealed this to you” (v. 17). Whereas Origen and Chrysostom took “flesh and blood” to refer to *Peter’s* cognitive abilities, Hilary believes it refers to *Jesus’* appearance in flesh and blood. Thus, for Hilary, Jesus’ question in v. 13, as well as his reward in v. 17, show that his divinity is “something concealed.”²⁹

²⁶ J. Chrysostom, *Homily 19*.

²⁷ Theophylact of Ochrid says, “Just as you are the son of Jona, so am I the Son of My Father in heaven, and of one essence with Him” (*The Exposition* [trans. Christopher Stade; House Springs: Chrysostom Press, 1997], p. 140). Also Peter of Laodicea: “After calling him, ‘bar Jona’ ... he teaches that thusly he is the Son of God as Peter is of Jona, being of the same *ousia* with the one who had given birth (to him)” (*Des Petrus von Laodicea Erklärung des Matthäusevangeliums*, p. 185, my translation).

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, 1:580.

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, 1:580.

The notion of the hiddenness of divinity is crucial for Hilary because it provides a link to other stories in the Gospel. To be sure, in Matthew there are few places where the identity of Jesus is manifest: two from God (the baptism and transfiguration), two from men (Peter and the soldiers at the cross).³⁰ But for Hilary it is important that the transfiguration in particular follows this pericope, because there Jesus' physical appearance *is changed* when God corroborates Peter's confession from the cloud. In addition, Hilary observes that God's pronouncement contains not only the term "Son" (like Peter's) but also the ever-important copulative "is." God says "this *is* my Son," which means, for Hilary, *in nature*, not in resemblance.³¹ In Matthew 16 he finds that Peter, like God, is not a maker of similes. Peter declares "*you are* (σὺ εἶ) ... the Son of the living God." For Hilary, therefore, Peter's confession merited blessing not because he saw some resemblance between Jesus and God, but because he declared that Jesus *is* the divine Son in nature rather than in name.³²

³⁰ Cf. Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Four Homilies*.

³¹ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 6.36.

³² A similar attention to detail is found in the work of Theophylact of Ochrid and a host of others who claim that the use of the article on "Son of God" in Peter's confession points to Jesus' unique identity as the divine Son. The disciples in the boat had worshipped Jesus as θεοῦ υἱός, but Peter declared Jesus was ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ—in the sense of "the One and the Only." In his own words: "He (Peter) did not say, 'Thou art the anointed one, a son of God', without the article 'the', but with the article, 'the Son', that is, 'He Who is the One and the Only, not a son by grace, but He Who is begotten of the same essence as the Father'. For there were also many other christs, anointed ones, such as all the priests and kings; but the Christ, with the article, there is but One" (*The Exposition*, p. 139). See also Juan de Maldonado, *S. Matthew's Gospel*, p. 33. C. Lapidé also notes that χριστός has the article, and he deduces from this grammatical fact that "the anointing" of Christ was a unique anointing, and thus points to the hypostatic union. So too the article attached to "Son of God" indicates that "Christ was peculiarly the Son of God" (*The Great Commentary*, vol. 2, pp. 211-12). See also Bédaride, *The Testimony of St. Matthew* (trans. Paul Joseph Oligny; Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1968), p. 205. Hermann Olshausen argues that the article does not so much contain the church's Trinitarian theology as much as it distinguishes Jesus as "the Son of God" unique and beyond comparison. See *Biblical Commentary on the Gospels, Adapted Especially for Preachers and Students* (trans. H. B. Creak; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1841), vol. 2, p. 217.

Hilary, like Chrysostom, also makes a great deal of Jesus' blessing in v. 17. To him the blessing suggests that Peter's confession was not a "general confession"³³ (e.g. without nuance). He notes that, taken by itself, "son of God" is rather obscure because *all* believers are "born as sons of God through the sacrament of regeneration."³⁴ But for Hilary the blessing demonstrates that this general understanding of "son of God" was not what Peter, or Jesus, had in mind. Hilary concludes from this blessing that the promises about the rock and keys and the gates of Hades (vv. 18-19) were all conditional on the theological precision of Peter's confession (v. 16). Hilary's exegetical point implies that the blessings of the church depend upon the accuracy of its confession of Christ. As many others had argued and would argue after him, the "rock" upon which Christ builds the church is Peter's confession; and for Hilary this "rock" necessitates Trinitarian nuance.³⁵ Such a reading makes Hilary's debate with his Arian interlocutors—against whom he constantly argues in *On the Trinity*³⁶—of utmost importance. Only those who understand and confess with Peter receive Christ's blessings; the rest are out of luck.

God-Man "Without Separation"

For the thinkers in this section, Peter's confession is fundamentally Christological (Christ's two natures) rather than Trinitarian (Christ's relationship to the Father). The readings analyzed in the last section dealt primarily with Christ's relationship to the Father (or, "the Divine"), and, fittingly, most date from the period of the great Trinitarian controversies in the third and fourth centuries.³⁷ The Christological inter-

³³ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 6.36.

³⁴ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 6.36.

³⁵ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 6.36. Cf. Alexander Jones, *Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), p. 189.

³⁶ Cf. Ambrose of Milan, *On the Christian Faith* 15.129-35.

³⁷ Concerning Christ's relationship with the Father, some read the confession as an attempt to distinguish Jesus from the Father thus censuring the heresy of Patropasianism. Cf. Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean* 21.4; Novatian, *The Trinity* 26.13; Fulgentius, *Letter 10: To Scarilla Concerning the Incarnation of the Son of God and the Author of Vile Animals* 10.16. For discussion of the theological debate here, see J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 150.

pretations surveyed here emerge during the Christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries.

Cyril of Alexandria and Pope Leo the Great were largely responsible for the Christology adopted in Chalcedon in 451,³⁸ and they claimed Peter was on their side. Cyril's reading of Matthew 16 has to be reconstructed from two letters and a short Greek fragment, but in all three places his observations logically correspond to his mature Christology and to his arguments against Nestorius. Cyril had challenged Nestorius' claim that only the humanity of Jesus suffered the virgin's womb and that the two natures of Christ were united through a bond of will. For Cyril this meant in the end that God was a coward who also fled from Gethsemane with the disciples. Cyril countered by saying that the union of the divine and human was a *hypostatic* union (καθ' ὑπόστασιν)—which he claimed was more substantial than a bond of volition. This debate was of supreme importance for Cyril, because in his view the salvation of humankind was only as secure as the bond between the human and divine natures of Jesus.

According to Cyril it was Peter himself who confessed *the union* of the divine and human in Jesus. The fragment reads:

Peter did not say, "You are the Christ or a son of God," but "the Christ the Son of God." For indeed there are many christs according to grace that are worthy of adoption, but only one Son of God by nature [φύσει]. Therefore by linking [them] together he says "The Christ the Son of God." And after calling him Son of the living God he shows that he is life and his death does not rule [Rom. 6:9?]. For even if the flesh was weakened for a little while by death, but being raised, the λόγος was not able in it [the flesh] to be seized by the bond of death.³⁹

Cyril's comments here relate to the modern translator's dilemma on how to punctuate Peter's confession: Should a comma be placed between

³⁸ Cf. William Placher, *A History of Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster, 1983), pp. 68-87. For key primary texts see R.A. Norris, Jr. (ed.), *The Christological Controversy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1980).

³⁹ Cyril of Alexandria, *Fragment 190* in Joseph Reuss (ed.), *Matthäus-Kommentare aus der griechischen Kirche* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957), p. 215, my translation.

“Christ” and “Son of the living God” or not?⁴⁰ A comma could indicate either that the phrases are a case of non-restrictive apposition, in which the second phrase (“the Son of the living God”) merely repeats the first (“the Christ”), or, alternatively, that the second phrase expands or qualifies the first (e.g. “the Christ,” how much more, “the Son of the living God!”).⁴¹ For Cyril, however, both options would be misleading. Christ and Son of God are not mere synonyms as non-restrictive apposition would suggest—as he says “there are *many* christs according to grace” but “only *one* Son of God.” But the second option is also misleading because, while it accurately recognizes the difference between the titles, the syntax pits the two phrases against each other. The comma divides between the lesser and the greater and informs the reader of this distinction.

For Cyril a comma would distract from the main point of Peter’s confession, which is not the particular nuance of either “the Christ” or “the Son of the living God.” Cyril assumes certain definitions, to be sure, but the point of the confession is *both* “the Christ” *and* “the Son of the living God.” Peter’s confession is not a burst of new insight regarding the definition of terms like “Christ” or “Son of God.” It is, as he says, a “linking together,” thus making the hypostatic union near to hand. Peter sets together “the Christ” and “the Son of the living God” without division and without separation.

One further detail in Cyril’s reading shows that the hypostatic union was on his mind, though the theological context is necessary to grasp the significance. The *Theotokos* controversy—which was important for the generation of Cyril’s Christology—was worth debating because it was assumed that the birth of Jesus was related to the death of Jesus. If God could not suffer birth, as Nestorius claimed, then God could not suffer death on a cross. In Cyril’s view, such division between the divine and human natures of Christ left redemption unachieved. But Cyril’s solution was to claim that the divine nature, *hypostatically united*

⁴⁰ Cf. Joel Marcus, “Mark 14:61: ‘Are You the Messiah-Son-of-God?’,” *NovT* 31 (1989), pp. 125-41.

⁴¹ See D.W. Michaelis, *Das Evangelium nach Matthaus. 2 Teil: Kap. 8-17* (Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1949), p. 338.

to Jesus' humanity, endured birth, life, and death impassibly.⁴² This debate is related to Matthew 16 because Cyril's reading assumes that Peter's description of God as "the living God" looks forward to Jesus' death. The point in the quotation above that "the flesh was weakened" yet "the λόγος was not able in it [the flesh] to be seized by the bond of death" assumes that the divine Word would be present but not suffer change on the cross. Thus, Peter's confession, for Cyril, is not just a statement that Jesus is the God-man but that he is the God-man yesterday, today, and forever. It is a declaration that no womb, no cross, no death will force a comma between "Christ" and "Son of the living God."

Cyril and Leo agree that Christ is one person with two natures, but the stress of their reading of Matthew 16 falls on the unity of Christ's two natures rather than his person.⁴³ Karl Barth's reading of Matthew

⁴² For discussion see J. Warren Smith, "Suffering Impassibly: Christ's Passion in Cyril of Alexandria's Soteriology" *ProEcll* 11 (2002), pp. 463-83.

⁴³ Unlike Cyril, however, Leo does not elaborate on "the Christ" and "the Son of the living God" as shorthand for Christ's two natures (see *Letter 10*; *Letter 33*; *Letter 119*; *Sermon 3*). Leo instead brings into play Jesus' self-description in v. 13: "the Son of Man," by which Jesus means "in a condition of servitude by the reality of the flesh" (*Letter 28*). Because Jesus asks, in essence, "Who do you say that I, this fleshly-human-being, am?" Peter's confession is an answer: "You, the human-fleshly-being (Son of Man), are also the divine Son of God." Thus, Peter's confession does not replace Christ's humble self-description but supplements it. Jesus professed his human nature, Peter the divine and, by implication, that both are united in one person. Similar readings were offered by Mark the Hermet ("Therefore if even you, after ... [hearing of] the Son of Man, who had been born from Mary, you will confess 'Son of God,' he will bless you fully, just as also the holy Peter ..." [*On the Incarnation* 44]); M. Rabanus ("And by a remarkable distinction it was that the Lord Himself puts forward the lowliness of the humanity which He had taken upon Him, while His disciple shows us the excellence of His divine eternity" [cited in Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*: 1:581-82]); Photius of Constantinople ("... and [Jesus] confessed himself in human terms ... so through the answer of the disciples of the two natures he might [show] the truth of the divinity and humanity" [*Fragment 68* in *Mathäus-Kommentare aus der griechischen Kirche*, p. 308, my translation]); John J. Owen, *Commentary on Matthew and Mark* (New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1857), p. 204; Philip Schaff ("This is the germ of the true and full statement respecting the Divine-human person of Christ" [*The Gospel According to Matthew* (IRCNT 1; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1882), p. 215]); H.J. Holtzmann ("He [the author Matthew] found

16 is similar and, in general, more at home in the patristic era than in the strange new world of critical scholarship. Like Cyril, Barth has his own Nestorius: the *division* of Christ's humanity from his divinity in liberal Protestant scholarship. But in Barth's view Christ is divided far more easily than Cyril had anticipated: The division occurs anytime a theologian abstracts the humanity from the divinity, or vice versa. For some of Barth's interlocutors the humanity of Jesus was a matter for historians and exegetes to debate, while his divinity was only a theological abstraction hidden beyond Lessing's ditch. For others the divinity took such prominence that Christ never quite touched the ground. As Barth explains in *Dogmatics*, both of these models are heretical: The former model leads to Ebionitism, the latter to Docetism.⁴⁴ Textbooks may claim that Cyril won the day against Nestorius, but Barth would say that this debate of abstraction could only make Nestorius the victor (and the Ebionite and Docetist to boot).

In Peter's confession Barth finds an alternative to these two models. The confession about Jesus' identity was a theological statement, to be sure, and Peter was blessed for it. But Peter expressed this knowledge "not as a synthetic but as an analytic statement."⁴⁵ In other words, Peter did not "arrive" at knowledge about Jesus' identity by means of his own intellectual categories. The fact of Jesus' identity was the *entry* to understanding, not the *end*. The logic here is simply Barth's doctrine of revelation in miniature: Theology is not the human quest for knowledge of God; it is God encountering humankind and making demands. Thus, Barth reads Peter's Christological statement through the lens of Jesus' blessing: "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven" (v. 17). Peter did not conclude (active) a long epistemological journey to find Christ at its end; he accepted a fact given to him (passive) by God the Father.

What, then, was "the fact" that Peter confessed? Barth is more explicit in a sermon delivered early in his career. Barth paraphrases Peter:

in the theology of the first ["son of man"] the flipside of the second ["Son of God"]" [*Hand-Commentar zum Neuen Testament: Die Synoptiker* (Tübingen; Leipzig: Mohr, 1901), p. 257]).

⁴⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (trans. G.W. Bromily; London; New York: T & T Clark, 2004), pp. 403-404.

⁴⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 404.

You are not one of the men of God who have come and then gone again, after it had been enough for them to have illumined one piece of the divine glory among men; rather in you we have seen the entirety of what was scattered and spread out in those men. God's power and God's love, God's righteousness and God's mercy, the repentance and the grace, the justice and reconciliation, the salvation of the soul and the salvation of the world, everything which those men knew in scattered form and brought to others, that we have found summed up and united in you. You are not only a beam of the Light of God, rather that eternal Light of God itself. That is what the expressions "Christ" i.e. "the King" and "Son of God" mean. Both say the same thing; Peter wanted to say: You are the complete and perfect revelation of God, you are the current in which all rivers and brooks must flow into in order to reach the sea ...⁴⁶

The quotation makes clear some of the deeper theological moves outlined above: (i) Christ *as* God's revelation, and (ii) revelation as an act of God rather than an achievement of the human thinker. In addition, the sheer length of the quotation has its own point to make: It is impossible to comprehend with all the saints the width and length and height and depth of who Christ is. It is impossible to know fully what exceeds knowledge. For Barth, Peter's confession, though short, did not get Christ all in one bite.

Barth's challenge of propositional revelation is thus clearly at work in his reading of Matthew 16. It probably explains why Barth reads "Christ" and "Son of God" as synonyms, for to give each of these terms a unique definition is implicitly to circumscribe Christ with a category. These Christological titles function, then, to witness to Christ's person, which no title can contain. Christ's identity cannot be separated and analyzed, categorized and defined—it can only be affirmed.

"der Retter seines Volks"

Though Barth's reading of Matthew 16 is similar to Martin Luther's in that Christ is the summation of God's revelation, Luther's reading emphasizes more than Barth the role of Christ in salvation history. For Luther, the theological content of Peter's confession (v. 16) that deserves praise (v. 17) is more the recognition of *Christ's office and work* than

⁴⁶ Karl Barth, "Predigt 3: August: Matthäus 16, 13-17" in K. Barth, N. Barth, and G. Sauter, *Predigten 1913* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1994), pp. 386-87.

his person (though Barth would surely reject such a dichotomy). Christ is the one to whom all the scriptures point, or, to use Luther's own analogy, scriptures are swaddling clothes and the savior of the world is hidden inside of them.⁴⁷

Histories of interpretation have given ample attention to Luther's attack on the papacy in Matt. 16:18-19.⁴⁸ Like many before him, Luther reads "the rock" on which the church is built to be Peter's confession of Christ, not Peter himself.⁴⁹ Less attention, however, has been given to the foundation of that argument: not v. 18 but v. 16. Luther reflects on Peter's confession in his *Against the Papacy* (1545), which we will take apart in turn:

In these few words of Peter, which he confesses with all the other disciples, for they are all represented in Peter's reply, is included the whole of the gospel, indeed, all of Holy Scripture. What else does Scripture from beginning to end intend to say, except that the Messiah, the Son of God, should come and through his sacrifice, "like that of a lamb without blemish" (1 Pet. 1:19), bear and take away the sin of the world and thus deliver from eternal death to eternal salvation? Holy Scripture, Genesis 3 (15), "Her seed shall bruise your head." And Eve, Genesis 4 (1), as she speaks of Cain, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord." In their meaning these words sound exactly like Peter's, for she wants to say, "Now I have the seed, the right Man, the Messiah, the Jehovah, that is, God and Son of God, who is to do what was promised to us." But she mistakes the person—otherwise her words at this place are very similar to the words of St. Peter.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Cf. Martin Luther, *Preface to the Old Testament* (LW 35; trans. Theodore Bachman; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), pp. 235-36. Cf. David Steinmetz, "Luther and the Hidden God," in *Luther in Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2nd edn, 2002), pp. 23-31.

⁴⁸ Cf. Joseph Burgess, *A History of the Exegesis of Matthew 16: 17-19 from 1781 to 1965*, pp. 15-18; O. Cullman, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr*, pp. 162-64; B.L. Ramm, "The Exegesis of Matt. 16:13-20 in the Patristic and Reformation Period," pp. 211-14.

⁴⁹ See Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 124.5; also *The Retractions* 1.20.1. For others, see Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, 1:585-87. Isho'dad of Merv states, "He [Jesus] calls Cepha; not the person of Simon, but the confession and the right faith that were in him, which the Father had caused to flow into his mouth [confession], which is incorruptible and immovable forever" (Margaret Dunlop Gibson [ed.], *The Commentaries of Isho'dad of Merv* [Horae Semiticae 5; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911], vol. 1, p. 66).

⁵⁰ Martin Luther, *Against the Papacy, an Institution of the Devil* (LW 41; trans. Eric W. Gritsch; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 313-14.

Four observations follow. First, Luther identifies Peter's confession as "gospel." For Luther this does not necessarily refer to the proclamation of Jesus in the "Gospels," but rather any place, Old or New Testament, where God acts for undeserving sinners. He gives a rough sketch of this notion when he quotes 1 Peter and refers to Christ taking away the sins of the world. Further, for Luther, at the center of this gospel is Christ himself—the achiever of God's salvation, "the man of God's own choosing." This will be important below in the fourth point.

Second, Luther believes that the scriptures groaned with eager anticipation for the revelation of the Son of God and the full manifestation of the gospel. In the quotation above the "protoevangelium" (Gen. 3:15), which many theologians read as the first prophecy of Christ's defeat of sin and Satan,⁵¹ was for Luther the beginning of that groaning. Interestingly, he then reads Eve's comment about her son Cain (Gen. 4:1) to be a claim that the protoevangelium had been fulfilled in her son. Though Eve was wrong, Peter's confession was essentially the same as Eve's "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord," but this time not mistaken. The connection Luther draws here is not linguistic but thematic: Both Eve and Peter speak about prophetic fulfillment. Thus, Peter's confession in Luther's eyes has as its horizon not the Gospel of Matthew alone but the whole of salvation history beginning in Genesis. Peter rightly claims that Christ is "the seed" (Genesis 3), "that man" (Genesis 4), who will crush the head of the serpent. Peter's answer to Jesus is the answer that all creation has been longing to hear.

Third, it is therefore evident that Luther reads Peter's confession to be more about Christ's role and office than his unique divine/human nature. A comparison between Luther and Hilary of Poitiers makes the point. When Hilary read Peter's "you are," he believed Peter was saying "you are *in nature*." Peter had peered *into* the strange constitution of the word become flesh. Luther's Peter doesn't look *into* Jesus' being but looks *back* in time: Peter's "you are" means "*you fulfill* what God promised in the beginning." For Luther, Peter's Christology here is not

⁵¹ See e.g. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against the Heresies* 21.1; Hippolytus, *Fragments on Genesis*; Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 15.5; Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on the Nativity* 3. Cf. Johann Michl, "Der Weibessame (Gen 3:15) in spätjüdischer und frühchristlicher Auffassung," *Bib* 33 (1952), pp. 476-505.

speculative theology (though, of course, he accepts the classic creeds of the church); this is Christology united to soteriology, Christology with traction in salvation history. The confession “the Christ the Son of the living God” is not a statement of who Jesus is in himself; it is a statement of who Jesus is in relation to all in need of God’s redemption.

Lastly, it now becomes clear that Luther’s reading of vv. 16-17 is foundational for his polemic *Against the Papacy*. We can work backwards: If “the rock” is Peter’s confession, and the confession is about “the whole gospel,” and the whole gospel is about Christ’s activity in achieving the salvation of sinners, *then* the implication is that the central task of the church is to give *Christ* first place in all things. For Luther, this “first place” is, not unexpectedly, to trust/believe (*glauben*) in Christ’s saving work and not to pile up a treasure of human merit which moth and rust destroy. The centrality of Christ, in other words, brings along with it Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith alone. So too the blessings that follow—the keys of the kingdom, the binding and loosing, the victory against Hades’ gates—become the property of all Christians who are built on “this rock.” The very structure of the pericope becomes a microcosm of the *coram Deo*: The sinful believer trusts in Christ alone (v. 16), and God gives in return more than one could ever ask or imagine (vv. 17-19). Peter is thus not a stand-in for the Pope; he is, like all Christians, a beggar. As one of the hymns of Charles Wesley (who understood Luther well on this point) reads, “I’ll take the gifts He hath bestowed, and humbly ask for more.”

Thus, in Luther’s reading, Christ becomes the stone which smashes the edifice of human merit and becomes a mountain that fills the whole earth. Calvin followed Luther in many ways but also went beyond him, and his reading of Matthew 16 is no exception. Calvin also believed that Peter had confessed Jesus’ office as the Messiah of Israel but made a different argument to get there. He writes in his *Harmony of the Gospels*:

The confession is short, but it embraces all that is contained in our salvation; for the designation Christ, or Anointed, includes both an everlasting Kingdom and an everlasting Priesthood, to reconcile us to God, and, by expiating our sins through his sacrifice, to obtain for us a perfect righteousness, and, having received

us under his protection, to uphold and supply and enrich us with every description of blessings.⁵²

Calvin knows that *χριστός* comes from *משח*, which means “to anoint.” He also knows that this anointing was reserved not only for kings but also for priests (cf. 1 Kgs 1:39; 2 Kgs 9:6; Exod. 28:41; Lev. 8:12). Thus, in the appellation “Christ,” Calvin conjoins these kingly and priestly *offices*. As the priest Jesus not only offers the sacrifices of the people, he becomes the sacrifice and “expiat[es] our sins.” As the king Jesus protects and blesses his people. The logic here is similar to Luther in that Calvin also looks back to the Old Testament to unpack Peter’s confession. For both thinkers the salvation-historical scheme connecting the two Testaments is central to “the gospel” and thus to Peter’s confession. Both can claim that Peter’s confession is “the whole gospel” (Luther) or “all that is contained in our salvation” (Calvin) because the confession is about the *role of Christ* in winning salvation. After all, the council of Trent failed because, in the eyes of the reformers, believers stand before the judgment seat having been fully clothed in Christ, not just in part.

But there are also a couple of interesting differences between these two reformers. Whereas Luther selects a few passages which are *prophetic* in his view, Calvin looks to a *general typology* in the Old Testament that is not, generally speaking, prophetic. Luther’s reading is, therefore, characteristic of the way he reads the Old Testament “forward” to its fulfillment in the New, whereas Calvin has room in his system for a more independent role for the Old Testament and its Law. Calvin’s Jesus is part of the story, even if at its head; Luther’s Jesus is the story.

In addition, Calvin’s “functional” understanding of Peter’s confession only stands for its first part: “the Christ.” For the second half—“the Son of the living God”—he resembles his forbearers in the faith who found a description of Christ’s divine nature.⁵³ He writes:

⁵² John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* (trans. William Pringle; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), vol. 1, p. 289.

⁵³ The following exegetes post-Calvin would agree: David Dickson, *A Brief Exposition of the Evangel of Jesus Christ According to Matthew* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1981), p. 224; Floyd V. Filson, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*

For the redemption, which God manifested by the hand of his Son, was clearly divine; and therefore it was necessary that he who was to be the redeemer should come from heaven, bearing the impress of the anointing of God. Matthew expresses it still more clearly, "Thou art the Son of the living God;" for, though Peter did not yet understand distinctly in what way Christ was the begotten of God, he was so fully persuaded of the dignity of Christ, that he believed him to come from God, not like other men, but by the inhabitation of the true and living Godhead in his flesh.⁵⁴

Here Calvin's answer to the question "why the God-man?" was similar to that of Anselm: "It was necessary" that the achiever of divine salvation be divine. The logic interestingly moves *from* the functional Christology outlined above in the first part of Peter's confession (i.e. what Jesus does) *to* the ontological Christology of the second part (i.e. who Jesus is). For Calvin's Peter, Jesus is recognized as who he is because of what he does.

The quotation also reveals that Calvin does not assign full Nicene and/or Chalcedonian nuance to Peter's confession. Calvin claims that Peter did not "understand distinctly" how Christ relates to the Father. Peter only knew what he had experienced of Christ, and that experience revealed not the details of *homoousios*, *hypostasis*, and *prosopon*, but merely "the dignity of Christ." In contrast to Barth's reading, the knowledge in Peter's confession was surely a deduction, a synthetic *a posteriori* based upon a set of observations about Christ. "The Christ," Calvin's Peter reasons, could be no other than "the Son of the living God." But like Barth, Calvin asserts that Jesus blessed Peter (v. 17) not because Peter was the best and brightest disciple, but because Christ desired "to show in what the only happiness of the whole world consists."⁵⁵ In other words, Christ blessed Peter to publish the theology of Peter's confession.

(New York: Harper, 1961), p. 186; R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 619; ; R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, p. 621.

⁵⁴) John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:289.

⁵⁵) John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:290.

Readings which Stress the *Character* of Peter

Peter's Confidence

According to the exegetes in this section, Jesus blesses Peter because of his heart, not his mind. Peter's confession was theologically accurate to be sure, but it was not for that reason alone that he was given the keys to the kingdom. When Jesus says "on this rock I will build my church," he says, in effect, "on this confident and unwavering person or statement I will build my church." The earliest appearance of this reading I can find is in a sermon by St. Peter Chrysologus. Chrysologus claims that Peter got his name "rock" because "(of) the firmness of his faith (and thus) he was the first to deserve to be a foundation of the church."⁵⁶ He does not elaborate. In the context of the sermon, however, it is clear that Chrysologus reads the confession to be important because of its conviction in comparison to the four wavering opinions of the masses.

The famous classicist Desiderius Erasmus would offer a similar reading in his *Paraphrase on Matthew*. The first key element of Erasmus' reading is his interpretation of the leading subject and verb in Peter's confession: "you are." It was noted above that Hilary of Poitiers took the copulative to refer to Jesus' divine nature, and Cyril of Alexandria found in the same the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures. Erasmus gives a third option. "You are" reveals more about Peter than Jesus: It shows that Peter's confession is given *with utter confidence*. Peter does not say, "I think you are," but only "you are." The "you are" does not indicate theological precision, and, in fact, Erasmus claims that Peter did not fully understand the meaning of what he said. Peter claims that Jesus was the Messiah and "in some unique way the Son of God."⁵⁷ Erasmus' Peter has confidence that Jesus is the answer even if he does not fully get the answer.

⁵⁶ Peter Chrysologus, *Sermon 154*.

⁵⁷ Erasmus, *Paraphrase on Matthew* (*Collected Works of Erasmus* 45; trans. Dean Simpson; Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. 245 (my emphasis).

Erasmus continues to say that Jesus blessed Peter (v. 17) because “(Jesus) was delighted by a confession so ready and assured.”⁵⁸ Jesus calls Peter “a solid rock, not wavering this way and that according to the various opinions of the crowd; and upon the rock of your confession I will build my Church.”⁵⁹ Thus, Erasmus connects the terse confession in v. 16 with the general attributes of “rock” in v. 18. Unlike other exegetes who look to the Old Testament or even to other sayings of Jesus to understand “rock” (Ps. 118:22 and Mark 12:10-12 and par. are popular)—particularly those who claim “the rock” is Christ—Erasmus looks to the common qualities of a stone as something solid and static. This gloss on stone corresponds with the entire mood of the pericope according to Erasmus’ *Paraphrase*, especially, as he has it, the bluntness of Peter’s confession.

Whereas Erasmus makes his case on the connotations of single words (e.g. “rock”) and individual phrases (e.g. “you are”), a later exegete in the modern era grounds his similar reading in the narrative context of Peter’s confession. In Heinrich Meyer’s 1883 commentary on Matthew, he notes that the confession occurs “at (a) turning point in His ministry”:⁶⁰ Jesus will now move from the ministry of teaching and healing in Galilee to his suffering and death in Jerusalem. In this context, Meyer claims, what Matthew’s Jesus desires is not a nuanced understanding of his identity, for such knowledge is only possible after the resurrection.⁶¹ What Jesus desired was “a religious confession deeply rooted in their convictions to enable them to confront the trying future on which they were about to enter.”⁶² In other words, the disciples are about to weather the storm of Jesus’ rejection and execution—contrary

⁵⁸ Erasmus, *Paraphrase on Matthew*, p. 246. Cf. Matthew Henry, *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments* (London: Samuel Bagster, 1811), vol. 5, p. II [1.]; H.N. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, p. 301.

⁵⁹ Erasmus, *Paraphrase on Matthew*, p. 246.

⁶⁰ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew* (trans. Peter Christie; Winona Lake: Alpha, 1979 [orig. 1883]), p. 295. See also Theodore Robinson, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Harper, 1927), p. 140; Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, p. 183; R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 612.

⁶¹ Heinrich Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 295.

⁶² Heinrich Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 293.

to all their Messianic expectations, according to Meyer—and they need an anchor.

Interestingly, then, the importance of “accurate theology” in Peter’s confession is completely sidelined by Meyer. In fact, he makes arguments to show that Peter’s confession is *not* an accurate grasp of Jesus’ identity. Again focusing on the narrative context, Meyer notes that Jesus cursed Peter only a few verses later for his misunderstanding of the Messianic office (16:23). This indicates that Peter’s confession moments earlier was similarly confused. He also looks back to the scene on the Sea of Galilee where the disciples worship Jesus as “Son of God,” and claims that Peter’s confession went beyond the disciples’ confession not in its theological depth but because it was “more deliberate” and “far more deeply rooted in conviction.”⁶³

Thus, in Meyer’s view, Peter’s confession is laden with false Messianic expectations even though it is firmly spoken. Jesus is willing to “accommodate”⁶⁴ Peter’s lack of understanding and will throughout the rest of the gospel teach by example what “the Christ the Son of the living God” really means. Jesus accepts, in other words, the *form* of the Messianic declaration but will invest it with his own *content* as the suffering servant in what follows. Peter’s confession is thus a starting point, not an end, and it looks forward to the cross in Jerusalem rather than back to the wonders and teachings in Galilee.

Peter’s Zeal or Love

For a few exegetes, Peter is blessed by Jesus not because of his confidence but because of his zeal or love for Christ. It is only Peter, after all, who takes the fateful step out of the boat on the stormy waves of Galilee. In Matthew 16, Peter is given the keys of the kingdom because the same desire is evident in his confession.

Gregory of Nazianzus makes this claim in his second *Theological Oration* while discussing the mystery of the Godhead. The context of his exegesis of Matthew 16 is a reply to Eunomius, who argues that the Father and the Son were not united on the level of substance (thus

⁶³ Heinrich Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 295.

⁶⁴ Heinrich Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 295.

challenging the ruling at Nicea). As the essence of the Father is ungenerate, he claims, so must the essence of the Son be generate. Nazianzus responds by saying it was impossible to know fully the essence of either the Father or the Son. Theologians only see the “back parts of God” as did Moses on Mount Sinai.⁶⁵ Just because the Son is generated by the Father does not mean theologians can claim *his essence* is generate.

It is easy to see how the debate included Matthew 16. If Peter indeed confessed Jesus’ *essence* as “Son of the living God,” it could serve Eunomius’ case that Jesus *is* the Son of—in the sense that he was *generate(d)* of—the Father. But for Nazianzus, Peter was blessed not because he had “knowledge of Christ” but because “Peter was more zealous than the others ... and received a blessing for this and was entrusted with the greatest gifts.”⁶⁶ In another work, *On St. Basil*, he assumes a similar reading: “[St. Basil] imitated the zeal of St. Peter ... (and because of that) the keys of heaven were also entrusted to him.”⁶⁷ He does not exposit the text in any detail so it is not clear how he understands Jesus’ claim about revelation from the Father (v. 17) in relation to “knowledge of Christ.” But, in any case, his basic point is straightforward enough: God rewards eager hearts, not perfected minds. For Nazianzus, Jesus’ question to the disciples “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15) is the equivalent of “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” (John 21:15).

He supports his reading by connecting Peter with the seers Isaiah and Ezekiel (a move otherwise unattested in the history of interpretation). These Old Testament prophets, he claims, “(never) stood before the council and essence of God ... or proclaimed the nature of God.”⁶⁸ He does not elaborate, but the observation appears to be a *kal vachomer*: If Isaiah with lips burned by the coal and Ezekiel with eyes blinded by

⁶⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus, *The Theological Orations* 2.19

⁶⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, *The Theological Orations* 2.19.

⁶⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *On St. Basil* 76. St. Basil thought that Peter was going to be the one to “exact the mighty wrath of God” because he was preferred above the other disciples in his zealous confession. See *On the Judgment of God*. Cf. J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. Matthew* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1856), p. 196.

⁶⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Theological Orations* 2.19.

the throne *did not* proclaim “the nature of God,” how much more did Peter the fisherman, who merely saw Christ in the flesh, *not* proclaim his essence? Nazianzus here supposes that the visions and the confession intend to evoke an ethical response rather than to state a new doctrine, to inspire a desire for God rather than to satisfy an intellectual curiosity about God.

In the West, St. Augustine was also interested in Peter’s disposition during this climactic scene and concluded that Peter was blessed *because of the love behind his confession*. In a sermon on 1 John, Augustine works his way to Peter’s confession through a web of intertexts. The author of 1 John claims “[E]veryone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (1 John 5:1). But, Augustine reasons, such a statement cannot be taken in isolation, because the scriptures elsewhere state that those who believe also live as Christ commanded (cf. Matt. 7:21-23; Jas 2:2-24). James is unequivocal: “Faith without works cannot save” (Augustine’s paraphrase). Augustine further clarifies that “the work of faith is love,”⁶⁹ probably drawing on Paul in Gal. 5:6. When Augustine reads all these texts together, the point is this: The one who believes that Jesus is the Christ will also manifest that belief in a living action of love, and such a person is born of God.

1 John’s “believe that Jesus is the Christ” brings Peter’s confession to Augustine’s mind. And when read in light of 1 John, two things become clear to him. First, Peter does exactly as the author of 1 John, James, and Paul require. His confession is “belief that Jesus is the Christ,” and, as genuine belief, *an act of love* towards Christ. Faith without the work of love is dead, and Jesus would not have blessed a dead faith.⁷⁰ Second, in reading Matthew and 1 John together, Augustine seems to imply that Peter had been “born of God” as John says. This Johannine phrase read beside the confession scene gives it the character of a *conversion experience*. Augustine’s Peter becomes a model not just for experienced theologians trying to articulate the nature of Christ (as in readings given above) but also for pagans who wish to enter the fold.

⁶⁹ Augustine, *Tenth homily: 1 John 5.1-3*.

⁷⁰ Cf. Orosius of Braga, *Defense Against the Pelagians* 23.

In addition to the intertextual exegesis, Augustine supports his reading by drawing on the exorcism stories (he has no predecessor for this move). In Mark's Gospel in particular, but also in Matthew, the demons are the best theologians: They understand more than anyone that Jesus is "Son of God" and state it boldly (cf. Mark 1:24, 34; 3:11-12; 5:7 and par). Augustine claims that, theologically speaking, the confession of the demons is the exact same confession as Peter's: Both grasp Jesus' divine nature. But for Augustine there is also a major difference between Peter and the demons: Christ blesses the one and rebukes the others. Accurate theology has no say in this blessing, for, as Augustine believes, the demons knew Jesus' identity just as well. The key difference is that the mouth speaks from the abundance of the heart: "[T]he demons make that declaration from fear Peter from love."⁷¹ The demons wanted to make Christ depart from them, but Peter "meant to embrace Christ."⁷²

Readings which Stress Peter's *Mode of Knowledge*

Recipient of God's Revelation

For the exegetes in this last section, the clue as to why Jesus blesses Peter is v. 17: "Blessed are you *because* flesh and blood have not revealed this to you but my Father in Heaven." In other words, Peter is blessed because of what God did to him rather than what he said to Jesus. Peter is blessed because he did not allow his "flesh and blood" to quench the Spirit.

For Clement of Alexandria, the whole scene is but a case study in reading for the "spiritual sense" of scripture: The literal word veils the spiritual meaning which only the Father can reveal. He reasons that, as Jesus' divinity was "veiled" in his flesh, inaccessible to Peter's normal modes of intellection (e.g. "flesh and blood"), so too the spiritual truth of the scriptures is hidden in the literal.⁷³ The disciples and the

⁷¹ Augustine, *Sermon 234* ["*On the Resurrection of Christ According to St. Luke*"].

⁷² Augustine, *Tenth homily: 1 John 5.1-3*.

⁷³ Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* 15.

masses could follow Jesus and “study him” intensely, yet they could not *perceive* his true identity as the divine Son of God.⁷⁴ In Clement’s view, God placed the truth below the surface—in the scriptures and in the Son—in order to spark curiosity, (ultimately) increase knowledge, and shame Greek philosophers. His reading of Matt. 16:13-20 follows this structure closely: Jesus asks questions of his disciples to expand their minds and gives the Father, rather than Peter’s philosophical acumen, credit for the confession.⁷⁵ Clement’s reading focuses on the material before vv. 16-17, particularly the various opinions of the people reported by the disciples. The contrast between these proposals and Peter’s confession is simply a matter of God’s activity: “Only the Father can reveal the Son” (Matt. 11:27).

Another interesting reading belongs to St. Jerome, who comes to a similar conclusion in his *Commentary on Matthew*. The most intriguing element of Jerome’s reading is his discussion of “grace” and “the Holy Spirit” in the confession, for he claims that Peter was blessed because “the grace of the Holy Spirit has revealed.”⁷⁶ Neither the term “grace” nor “Holy Spirit” appear in the pericope, but Jerome seems to assume that the presence of both is presupposed by two odd details in Jesus’ blessing. The first is the description of Peter as “the son of Jonah,” which, he notes, means “son of the dove” in Hebrew. The dove imagery takes Jerome to the Baptism scene at the beginning of the Gospel, where the Holy Spirit takes the form of a dove as it descends upon Jesus. Thus, he concludes, Jesus calls Peter “the son of Jonah” to call him “the son of the dove/Holy Spirit.” Peter’s confession, like the voice of God at the baptism, confirms Jesus’ identity as God’s “Son.” The Spirit was active at the Jordan, and Peter is blessed because he became the mouthpiece for the same Spirit.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* 15.

⁷⁵ Cf. Cyril of Jerusalem *Catechesis* 11.1-3.

⁷⁶ Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew* 16.17.

⁷⁷ Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew* 16.17. For a similar reading of “son of Jonah” see Venerable Bede, “Homily I.20 (Matt. 16:13-19)” in *Homilies on the Gospels* (CSS 110; trans. L.T. Martin and D. Hurst; Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991), vol. 1, p. 198; C. Lapede, *The Great Commentary*, p. 213; Hermann Olshausen, *Biblical Commentary on the Gospels*, pp. 218-19; W.M.L. De Wette, *Kurze Erklärung des Evangeliums Matthäi*, p. 209.

But Jerome also thinks it is strange that Jesus would call Peter the “son of Jonah,” because elsewhere Peter’s father is named “John” (John 1:42; 21:15-17). Instead of suggesting “Jonah” is a textual corruption of “John,” as some apparently did in Jerome’s day,⁷⁸ Jerome suggests that both names are intended even though Jesus used “Jonah.” The significance is that, like “Jonah,” John has what he calls its own “mystical sense”: John means “grace of the Lord.”⁷⁹ The language of grace, coupled with Jesus’ claim that “flesh and blood did not reveal this to you,” directs Jerome to Paul’s autobiography in Galatians. Here Paul claims that God “revealed his Son” to Paul “through his grace” and that he did not consult “flesh and blood” (Gal. 1:15-6). Jerome does not spell out the implications of this parallel in any detail, but it seems he believes that the same passivity involved in Paul’s call/conversion is also present in Peter’s confession: God took the initiative and deserves the praise. Paul is blessed because he was chosen by God’s grace to be the “apostle to the Gentiles;” Peter is blessed because he was chosen by God’s grace to receive the witness of the Holy Spirit. Thus, “son of Jonah” directs attention to Peter’s dependence on the Holy Spirit, “son of John” to God’s grace—and both serve to remind that Peter’s confession was nothing of his own doing, it was a gift of God so that he may not boast.

The prolific exegete Matthew Henry also finds in “son of Jonah” evidence that Jesus blessed Peter because he was a vessel of God’s revelation, though his analysis of this phrase is quite different from Jerome’s. Henry claims that “son of Jonah” was intended to remind Peter “of his rise and original state, the meanness of his parentage, the obscurity of his extraction.”⁸⁰ In this reading, “son of Jonah” is not “mystical” (Jerome’s word) at all: It is a simple description of Peter’s father. Jesus’ intent is to remind Peter that “he was not born to this dignity, but

⁷⁸ Jerome, *Commentary on Mathew* 16.17.

⁷⁹ Jerome, *Commentary on Mathew* 16.17.

⁸⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*, vol. 5, p. II [1.]. Here resembling Martin Luther, *Against the Papacy, an Institution of the Devil*, pp. 313-14; Balthasar Hubmaier, “On Free Will (1527)” in George Huntston Williams (ed.), *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (LCC 25; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), pp. 115-35.

preferred to it by the divine favor; it was free grace that made him to differ.”⁸¹ Thus, for Henry, Peter’s confession and Jesus’ blessing resemble the relationship between the individual Christian and God: God works through the believer in ways he or she is not capable of (v. 16), and God gets the glory for this work (v. 17). Henry’s Presbyterian leanings are evident throughout his exegesis, as he draws attention to God’s free grace, Christianity as “a revealed religion,” and the importance of humility. He even speculates that Peter’s confession was tainted by “something of pride and vain glory,” which Jesus immediately extinguished by reminding Peter that God revealed this knowledge (v. 17). Jesus’ blessing is thus an expression of the sovereignty of God and the dependence of humanity on God.

Exemplar of True Faith

Many of the early Protestant theologians claimed Augustine as their own because his arguments against Pelagius became their arguments against the Catholic Church. Luther, for example, used *The Bondage of the Will* (an Augustinian idea) as leverage against the notion of compounding human merit in the Catholic *ordo salutis*. Zwingli the Swiss theologian also found throughout scriptures ample support for the depravity of humankind as Augustine and Luther articulated it, and Peter’s confession in Matthew 16 was no exception. Like the readings above he too argues that the confession and blessing exemplify the gracious gift of God and the passive role of the individual in relationship to the divine. But he takes a step further and reads Peter’s words as not only expressive of the free gift of God but also as *true faith in God*. We will conclude our study with this Protestant reading in which faith, *sola Christi*, and “the priesthood of all believers” are conjoined in one exposition.

As pointed out above, Luther and Calvin’s readings of Matthew 16 focus on the exalted office of “the Christ the Son of the living God.” Christ takes center stage and draws all to himself. For Zwingli the context is a bit different—he writes against the Catholic Church as well as against other Protestant thinkers—but his interpretation places more

⁸¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*, vol. 5. p. II [1]. Cf. Daniel Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 232.

stress on the role of Peter himself in his brief dialogue with Jesus. The interpretation emerges in many of his writings which deal with different crisis events in the Protestant movement, such as a polemic against the Catholic Church regarding the forgiveness of sins. The debate involves “binding and loosing” (v. 19), a rite which Catholics argued was given to Peter by Jesus and thus to the Pope and the Church. Zwingli is in good company in his response that “the rock” is not Peter but Peter’s confession, and thus forgiveness is not simply the privilege of the Holy See. But he also claims that Peter’s response to Jesus was *in behalf of all the disciples*. Thus, Peter is not the superior apostle; he is the spokesperson for the twelve.⁸²

Zwingli is not unique in claiming that Peter spoke for the twelve, but he is unique in the emphasis he places on it. Zwingli claims that, had Peter not spoken on behalf of the rest, Jesus would have gone around the circle and asked them each individually. This supposition leads to the heart of Zwingli’s interpretation. He believes Jesus would go around and ask the disciples individually because the question “who do you (ὁμῆϊς) say that I am?” (v. 15) is, as he says, “a question of salvation.”⁸³ The logic of the reading hinges on his understanding of “blessing” in Jesus’ response. According to Zwingli, when Jesus says “blessed are you” he does not mean “good for you” or “happy are you.” Jesus means that Peter has entered a state of grace: The blessing takes on soteriological significance.⁸⁴ The blessing indicates that a “marvelous exchange” has occurred and that Peter is made fit for the kingdom of heaven.

Thus, for Zwingli, Matthew 16 is about the mechanics of personal salvation. He draws on other texts in the New Testament canon having to do with the same theme in order to support his interpretation. He cites 1 John 4:15-16 and treats it as a commentary on the Caesarea Philippi episode:⁸⁵ “And we have seen and testify that the Father sent

⁸²) H. Zwingli, *The Fiftieth Article: On Remission of Sin in Writings* (trans. E.J. Furcha and H.W. Pipkin; Allison Park: Pickwick Publications, 1984), vol. 1, p. 301.

⁸³) *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 301.

⁸⁴) Cf. Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (McLean: MacDonald Publishing Company, 1962 [orig. 1669-76]), vol. 3, p. 76.

⁸⁵) H. Zwingli, *The Fiftieth Article: On Remission of Sin in Writings*, vol. 1, p. 301.

the Son, savior of the world; whoever should confess that Jesus is the Son of God (ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ), God shall remain in him and he in God (ὁ θεὸς ἐν αὐτῷ μένει καὶ αὐτὸς ἐν τῷ θεῷ).” Zwingli assumes that Peter said that Jesus ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ and it seems, also, that Zwingli takes the “blessing” of v. 17 to be equivalent to ὁ θεὸς ἐν αὐτῷ μένει καὶ αὐτὸς ἐν τῷ θεῷ. Elsewhere Zwingli calls upon Jesus’ monologue about the vine and the branches in John 15 to bring out the same point: Peter’s confession is the connection, the source of life for the branch, the “faith” that brings forth good fruits in season.⁸⁶ Zwingli was probably drawn to the 1 John text because the first person plural in the statement, “we have seen and we have testified” (v. 15), supports his view that Peter was the spokesperson for the twelve.

Zwingli’s reading, then, is built on a set of assumptions about justification, God’s grace, the importance of faith, and personal salvation.⁸⁷ In his eyes Matthew 16 is a typological scene: The point is not to narrate the foundation of the church in the past but to sketch the proper behavior of the individual believer in the future. Christ does not bless the historical Peter; Christ blesses the model believer Peter represents. Zwingli reminds the historian that the term “confession” (which, admittedly, I have opted to use throughout this article as shorthand for Peter’s words) is not found in the pericope itself but instead functions to appropriate and standardize Peter’s actions. “Confession” is a particular interpretation of Peter’s words, since confessions are spoken with the heart as well as with the lips. Peter’s “You are the Christ the Son of the living God” is not the abstract musing of a theologian; it is a “firm and solid confession”⁸⁸ of Peter’s faith and dependence on Christ. His confession is an act of worship, a leap, a venturing out, a statement of trust. Unlike the exegetes above who distinguished the disciples’ confession in the Sea of Galilee from Peter’s—for example, by claiming theirs was theologically inferior or lacked gusto—Zwingli *conjoins* them. As the

⁸⁶ H. Zwingli, *Die Kirche—gegen Emser* in *Writings*, 1:211-12.

⁸⁷ Cf. A.C. Gaebelien, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (New York: Our Hope Publications, 1910), vol. 2, pp. 45-46.

⁸⁸ H. Zwingli, *The Fiftieth Article: On Remission of Sin* in *Writings*, 1:302. Cf. Ephrem the Syrian, *Three Rhythms Concerning the Faith* 1.14-16 in *Select Works of S. Ephrem the Syrian* (trans. J.B. Morris; Oxford: Parker and Rivington, 1847), pp. 371-72.

disciples “worshipped” Christ as “Son of God” in the boat, so too, he claims, Peter’s confession was an act of “worship.”⁸⁹

Zwingli’s reading therefore leads to, or grows out of, a particular understanding of “the church.”⁹⁰ The church is a collection of Peters who have each individually been brought into the fold by following Peter’s example in confessing faith in Christ. He fittingly reads all of the blessings Christ bestows upon “Peter” through the lens of the confession (v. 16). By faith Peter gets Christ, but also, along with him, God graciously gives all things. By faith all receive the keys of the kingdom, all serve as priests to their neighbors, all will overcome the gates of Hades. In Zwingli’s words, “[T]hose who believe, as the disciples and Peter believed, that Christ is the Son of the living God, are built upon the Rock and therefore called ‘men of the Rock.’”⁹¹ Matthew 16 does not create a hierarchy in the church; it abolishes all hierarchies. For in Zwingli’s view all must stand before Christ individually and answer the question, “Who do you say that I am?”

Conclusion

The Peter of Matt. 16:16-17 has had a long and illustrious career in the history of biblical interpretation. He confronted the Ebionites and the Docetists, tutored “spiritual” readers of scriptures, rebuked the Arians, attended the councils of Nicea and Chalcedon, censured Pelagius, bolstered the papacy, critiqued the papacy, spoke from the pulpit, sat in the pew. It is ironic that a brief statement about the identity of Jesus—which, in the context of Matthew’s Gospel, is supposed to narrow the disciples’ understanding of the person and work of Jesus (cf. vv. 13-15)—could create more diversity than it eliminates. But so it is. Peter’s confession has seventy faces.

⁸⁹) H. Zwingli, *As to the Things that Luther Wrote in His Book, On the Adoration of the Sacrament* in *Writings*, 2:301.

⁹⁰) Heinrich Bullinger makes a similar argument when discussing “the true marks of the Church.” He uses Matthew 16 as an example of “confessing Christ with true faith.” See “Of the Holy Catholic Church,” in *Zwingli and Bullinger* (LCC 24; trans. G.W. Bromiley; Philadelphia: Westminster press, 1953), pp. 307-308.

⁹¹) H. Zwingli, *The Fiftieth Article: On Remission of Sin* in *Writings*, 1:302.

The purpose of this study was to describe, as sympathetically as possible, what various thinkers concluded about Matt. 16 and the kind of arguments they made or assumed in the process. The synchronic grouping of readings thus served as a heuristic tool for the purpose of addressing exegetical logic. But the study inevitably raises larger theoretical questions about the ways readers interact with texts. In presenting and discussing these readings I tried to avoid suggesting either of two extremes: on the one hand, that the causative or generative factor in reading was the detached, decontextualized intellect; on the other, that readings of Matthew 16 were mere reflections of social and intellectual setting. What I know is this: The author of Matthew could not have foreseen the theological controversies of the later centuries, yet his Peter was hardly a stranger and enigma to these times. What particular theory of reading the reception history of Matt. 16:16-17 implies, however, I do not know.⁹²

⁹²⁾ Thanks to Dale Allison, Nancy Klancher, and my wife, Liberty Ferda, for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this article.



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