

“God-breathed”). It is not a promise or hope or belief that the pope will be sinless (that is called impeccability). It is not even a guarantee that everything the pope says or teaches is true. It applies in carefully defined circumstances:

CCC 891 “The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful – who confirms his brethren in the faith he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals. ... The infallibility promised to the Church is also present in the body of bishops when, together with Peter’s successor, they exercise the supreme Magisterium,” above all in an Ecumenical Council. When the Church through its supreme Magisterium proposes a doctrine “for belief as being divinely revealed,” and as the teaching of Christ, the definitions “must be adhered to with the obedience of faith.” This infallibility extends as far as the deposit of divine Revelation itself.

Moreover, the pope can also exercise binding leadership in resolving disputes, even when not defining dogmas at the very highest level (called “ex cathedra”)

CCC 892 Divine assistance is also given to the successors of the apostles, teaching in communion with the successor of Peter, and, in a particular way, to the bishop of Rome, pastor of the whole Church, when, without arriving at an infallible definition and without pronouncing in a “definitive manner,” they propose in the exercise of the ordinary Magisterium a teaching that leads to better understanding of Revelation in matters of faith and morals. To this ordinary teaching the faithful “are to adhere to it with religious assent” which, though distinct from the assent of faith, is nonetheless an extension of it.

Common Objections Briefly Answered

Paul Rebukes Peter at Antioch (Gal 2:11-14): Peter is rebuked for his behavior, not his words. In fact, the very accusation of hypocrisy suggests that his words were right, but his actions were not, for the hypocrisy of the Pharisees was precisely due to the fact that they taught the right belief without living it (Mt 23:2-3). Papal infallibility doesn’t mean (in Catholic teaching) that God protects the Pope from sinning, but rather, that God prevents the pope from teaching error of faith or morals when he binds all Catholic believers and requires them to hold a particular doctrine or dogma.

Peter in Rome: In 1 Peter 5:13 the first pope mentions “Babylon”, widely thought to be a code word for Rome. This is consistent with all reports about Peter and his remains being found in Rome. Virtually no reputable historian would deny this. The church in Rome attained a primacy in the early Church because both Peter and Paul were martyred there.

Papal Succession: Judas has a successor (Acts 1:15-26). It makes perfect sense in light of this that Peter would also, especially because of the stronger promise God makes to his Church — the gates of hell will not prevail against it — and the ongoing Great Commission to evangelize all nations (Mt 28:19).

Infallibility and the Analogy of Prophecy: If, in the Old Testament, God granted the gift of infallible prophecy to the prophets (often expressed in inspired utterances: now recorded in the prophetic books), why would it be thought that a lesser gift of infallibility is implausible or impossible? While the Jews were promised only conditional protection based on the Mosaic Law and their adherence to it, Jesus promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against the visible city on a hill: the Church.

Is Only God Called “Rock”? Until Peter, this was pretty much the case (e.g., Deut 32:4; 1 Sam 2:2; Ps 78:35). Catholics do not think that Peter is God (!!!), but God made him (and his papal successors) into a “rock” for the sake of the Church, which is the “pillar and foundation” of the truth (1 Tim 3:15). He was given a title that brings to mind an image of the stability of the living God (as opposed to being based on Peter’s own character, which was given to vacillation and even to denying Christ at one point). It all goes back to God. He gives Peter and popes all throughout history the gift of infallibility, in order to lead the Catholic Church and to prevent it from ever falling into heresy and false teaching.

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Petrine Primacy & The Pope’s Authority



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Petrine Primacy and the Authority of Popes

The Catholic biblical case for the papacy is based on a lot more than merely Matthew 16:18-19. Other passages and biblical context improve, rather than weaken, the case for Peter, his office (a primitive version of pope), and an unbroken line of successors (apostolic succession). But before we get to the more complex issues of the papacy, infallibility, and apostolic succession, let's first establish common ground by examining how the New Testament presents Peter the apostle.

Peter is Special

Peter often appears as leader and spokesman of the apostles even before the Resurrection (Matthew: chapters 10; 14-17; 19; Mark: chapters 3; 8; Luke: chapters 6; 8-9; 12; John 6:68-71). Peter is the leader of the apostles after the Resurrection, too (Acts: chapters 1-5; 8-12; 15; Gal 1:18; 2:11-14).

Judging by his relations with the other apostles — Often it is “Peter and the apostles” or “Peter and the disciples” when they appear in a group — Peter seems to possess a special kind of authority. It's not reading too much into the text to notice that, given the choice, Jesus sits in and teaches from Peter's boat (Luke 5).

Peter is Unique and Preeminent

Jesus specifically prepares Peter on several occasions: He is uniquely commanded to feed the sheep (Jn 21:15-17) and is told to strengthen the brethren as Jesus prays for his faith (Lk 22:31-32). On top of that, Peter is notable for many firsts: first to confess the faith, first to receive converts, first to work a miracle after Pentecost, etc.

Peter appears alone and stands out at crucial points of Jesus' ministry and Passion. He walks on water (albeit briefly), witnesses the transfiguration and the Agony in the Garden, he denies Christ three times as prophesied, and he is the first apostle that Jesus appears to after the Resurrection. James and John share some of these experiences, but Peter is present in all. The apostles are given the power to “bind and loose” (Mt 18:17-18); Peter is given this authority in his own name — not as merely one of a group (Mt 16:19).

At the very least, with Paul, and to a lesser extent, James and John, Peter stands out among the rest of the apostles, and is plainly the leader of the initial twelve disciples.

Peter the Rock and Possessor of the Keys of the Kingdom

With these points in mind, let's look at Matthew 16 and its conceptual reference to Isaiah 22.

Isaiah 22:22-23 “And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open. And I will fasten him like a peg in a sure place, and he will become a throne of honor to his father's house.”

Many commentators (including numerous Protestant scholars) believe that Jesus has this passage in mind, when He says:

Matthew 16:18-19 “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Just like the peg in the sure place, Peter is the Rock. Just like the servant of King David has the keys to open or shut, this servant of the King of Kings also has the keys to open and shut, or “bind and loose.” How do we know this doesn't apply to all the apostles? After all, in Matthew 18:18, all the apostles are given the authority to “bind and loose.”

The difference is that only Peter is ever given these extraordinary “keys.” Nobody else is given “keys” in the New Testament, and, whatever it means, it cannot mean something indistinct, for what use is a key that is too soft to open a lock?

Peter Exercises Papal Authority at the Council of Jerusalem

In the first council in Church history (Acts 15), there is “much debate.” Peter speaks for several verses, silencing the room. Paul and Barnabas share unrecorded testimony. James, the local bishop, deferring to “Symeon” (Peter's original given name), quotes a psalm and presents the final formulation of Peter's teaching, and writes a formal letter. This decree is delivered to all churches nearby (Paul is specifically described as doing so in Acts 16:4) and is taught as binding on all Christians.

This single chapter is pivotal in understanding the governmental structure of the Church and early Christian ecclesiology (study of the Church), because even at this early stage, papal authority is already present and recognized by a gathering of many “apostles and elders.”

It's true that this description does not include a detailed description of how Peter's authority works or a particular

and specific formulation of the doctrine of papal infallibility, but if that's the standard then Calvinists would have to (on the same basis) discard TULIP and the Lutherans, consubstantiation. The Catholic view is well supported by history and the Church fathers.

Peter is Called “Cephas” (“Rock”)

Paul calls him “Cephas”: from the Aramaic “kepha”: “Rock” (Gal 2:9, 1 Cor 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:5). It's important to understand that, unlike other name changes in the New Testament, Peter's name change is a true parallel to the Old Testament name changes (notable examples: Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel). It is a dramatic declaration (Mt 16:18-19), and this name is used thereafter, with just a few exceptions (Acts 10:5, 17-18, 32; 11:13; 15:14; 2 Peter 1:1: “Simeon Peter” in RSV). He is called Peter or “Cephas” through the whole New Testament, even in chapters of the book of Matthew that precede the description of Jesus giving him his new name (Mt 4:18; 8:14; 10:2; 14:28-29; 15:15; 16:16).

All this fits in nicely with Catholic teaching (summarized in the catechism below). It doesn't explicitly prove Catholic teaching, but it doesn't have to — it fits Catholic ecclesiology more snugly than the Protestant model, which tends to reject Peter's importance in resolving disputes and the deeper significance behind his name change and being given a unique set of mysterious keys by the incarnate God. Given the abundance of evidence regarding Peter's preeminent role in the early Church, and the fact of apostolic succession attested by Acts 1:15-26 and Church history, the Catholic position is substantially more scriptural than any alternative scenario that disagrees with it.

CCC 936 The Lord made St. Peter the visible foundation of his Church. He entrusted the keys of the Church to him. The bishop of the Church of Rome, successor to St. Peter, is “head of the college of bishops, the Vicar of Christ and Pastor of the universal Church on earth” (CIC, can. 331).

CCC 937 The Pope enjoys, by divine institution, “supreme, full, immediate, and universal power in the care of souls” (CD 2).

CCC 938 The Bishops, established by the Holy Spirit, succeed the apostles. They are “the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches” (LG 23).

Papal Infallibility

Infallibility (as is often wrongly thought) is not inspiration; only Holy Scripture is inspired (literally,



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