

# SAINT PETER & COMPROMISED CHRISTIANITY

With Saint Peter, we get a long look at the life and times of a man in the eye of the storm. Of Jesus' apostles, Peter's story is most engaging – for at least three reasons:

- *More is written* in the New Testament about Peter than any other apostle; he is also reputed to be the author of two canonical epistles and perhaps a non-canonical gospel.
- Both for Jesus and subsequently for Paul and James, Peter is the *whipping boy* – the person constantly caught in the middle between competing desires to do the right thing and simultaneously to please those whom he values.
- Most fundamentally, Peter represents the apostle who attempted to stake out *middle ground* between opposing views of what Christianity was really about. Peter's moderate position found no allies. Christendom has faced the consequences of an on-going struggle for its soul ever since.

So, get prepared! It's time to consider the man front and center in shaping a community that has energized followers of Jesus the Christ – both then and now.

## BACKGROUND OF PETER THE APOSTLE & WRITER

Most of what we know about Peter is not from his own (reputed) hand, but from what others have to say about him. Of the twelve apostles, Peter receives far more mention from the gospel writers.

Peter is cited as a source of information for the Gospel of Mark. The early second century church patriarch, Papias writes about Mark's reliance on recollections of Peter in writing the Markan gospel.

However, Papias also notes that: "Peter used to *adapt his teachings* to the occasion, without making a systematic arrangement of the Lord's sayings, so that Mark was quite justified in writing down some things just as he remembered them." In short, Peter acted on the fly, a characteristic noted both in the New Testament (prompting rebukes from Jesus) and later – possibly prompting a loss of leadership status in the early church.

## COMPROMISED CHRISTIANITY

Peter is a simple man who lived amid complex circumstances. So, it is no simple matter to cut to the core of his legacy on behalf of the Christian movement. Rather, there is a progression in Peter's changing apostolic role that is worth watching as it unfolds.

***Peter as Foil for Jesus:*** There is no better place to view Peter as the straight man/fall guy for the antics of Jesus than from the vantage point of Mark's gospel. For Jesus, the opportunity to use Peter as a foil appears most clearly as the master begins to teach "quite openly" of the coming rejection and suffering he would endure as the Son of Man.

Mark writes that: "... Peter took him (Jesus) aside and began to rebuke him." Jesus responds abruptly: "But turning and looking at his disciples, he *rebuked Peter* and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' "

And so it goes. Mark's gospel portrays Peter in the harshest light. But while the touch is lighter in the other three gospels, the role is much the same – whether it is Peter announcing his grandiose plan for Jesus, Elijah and Moses at the transfiguration or denying his leader at the time of Jesus' arrest.

***Peter as Early Christian Spokesman:*** From the perspective of Luke as probable author, Acts is all about the transition of early church leadership from Peter to James to Paul. Peter figures prominently in 11 of the first 15 chapters of Acts, but is not mentioned once from chapter 16 forward to the conclusion at Chapter 28.

We pick up the account at the beginning of the post-Jesus church, immediately after the ascension of Jesus:

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, *Peter*, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

As in many similar gospel accounts, Peter is mentioned first in a listing of the disciples. However, note a significant development in the re-emergence of Jesus' mother and brothers. During his earthly ministry, Jesus and his blood kinsmen were often at odds. Now, the family including Jesus' brother James re-enters the scene as key players in early church formation.

Fifty days after the Passover, the event now known as the day of Pentecost arrives. Amid derision and skepticism, Peter launches the post-resurrection Christian movement by speaking to a crowd largely composed of Jews gathered from dispersed lands at Jerusalem.

Peter starts from a position of strength – like a rock. He boldly addresses the crowd on behalf of the other 11 apostles, as "Men of Judea ..." He immediately refutes the suspicion that the apostles might be drunk, then goes right to the three key themes of his message:

- A hearkening back to a prophecy of the Hebrew scriptures in which men and women are filled with the Spirit of God.
- A proclamation that anyone who "calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."
- Confirmation that this Jesus of Nazareth whom "you crucified and killed" is both the Messiah and has conquered death by his resurrection.

The writer of Acts records that, upon hearing this message, many in the crowd “were cut to the heart.” So, Peter preaches repentance, baptism and the forgiveness of sin. Peter does not stop here, but goes on “with many other arguments.” Acts records that the number of Jesus’ followers increased by about three thousand persons.

Peter and John are eventually arrested by the authorities – primarily at the instigation of the Sadducees who are annoyed over any suggestion that “in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.” The Sadducees recognize the “boldness” of Peter and John, despite the fact that “they were uneducated and ordinary men.” After a private consultation, the two are warned not to proselytize any further.

Both Peter and John answer: “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for *we cannot keep from speaking* about what we have seen and heard.” This is vintage Peter, repentant from the prior denial – to deny his master no more.

***The Incident of Ananias & Sapphira:*** The bizarre and sobering tale of the *partially generous* couple Ananias and Sapphira features Peter as judge and perhaps as executioner. It is Peter presides over and, at the very least, condones the proceedings.

Does Peter’s role go further? Is the author of Acts cloaking a human act of judgement and execution within a robe of divine justice? Did Peter go too far?

The author of Acts never says that the deaths were the result of direct divine intervention. Ananias dies after hearing Peter accuse him of lying to God; he simply collapses. Whether this was an act of God or a heart attack brought on by acute anxiety, who knows? Peter has no clearly indicated role in this first death.

The situation with Sapphira is different. After hearing her story, Peter essentially tells her she is about to die. At Peter’s bequest, the “young men” arrive to carry her out. Whether Peter’s role is merely predictive or more overtly prescriptive, again who knows? Luke the reputed author does not directly say. But by not making a definitive statement, the door is left open to interpret Peter as having taken a decidedly more active hand in this second death.

Indeed, Acts twice reports that “great fear *seized* the whole church” as a result of the incident with this couple. After all, this was the same Peter who John’s gospel describes as cutting off the ear of the high priest’s slave – at the time of Jesus’ arrest prior to crucifixion.

There is at least one other indication that at least some early Christians suspected Peter as having taken a more active hand in the deaths of these two donors to the first century church. Interestingly, the story is indicated in the form of a denial or rebuttal to the discussion of Petrine homicide from the fourth century Christian bishop John Chrysostom of Constantinople.

Speaking of Paul’s harsh criticism of the Galatians, Chrysostom mentions the incident with Peter in passing: “ If on this account Paul is to be called a ‘reviler’, *Peter may likewise, on account of Ananias and Sapphira, be called a homicide.*”

What is interesting is not the denial by Chrysostom, but the fact that he feels compelled to defend the actions of both Paul and Peter. Is it possible that there were concerns among the early Christians of the first four centuries that Peter acted rashly in this matter? We do not know for sure. However, Chrysostom's vehemence appears to have been sparked by issues he wanted to settle once and for all.

Whether the event involving Ananias and Sapphira was interpreted as an overzealous imposition of church discipline leading to the later ascent of James is a matter of conjecture. But what is clear is that this event signals *the peak* of Peter's influence as leader of the followers of the Way.

***Peter's Denouement:*** Shortly after this incident, a young man named Saul makes his first appearance in Acts. Saul comes on the scene at the stoning of Stephen; he is the man at whose feet the coats of the witnesses to the stoning are laid. Saul is subsequently portrayed as "ravaging the church," arresting and imprisoning both men and women.

During this time, it is not entirely clear whether Peter, while still a disciple of some repute, remains in charge. The text indicates that Peter and John are "sent" by others at Jerusalem to Samaria. It is increasingly clear that others (such as Philip) also are now stepping forward to lead the process of church evangelization and discipling.

Meanwhile, Saul is blinded and converted on the road to Damascus. Saul eventually tries to join the core group of disciples at Jerusalem, but is instead spirited off to Tarsus. Now, Peter reappears on the scene. What follows are two events that set the stage for the decision to take the Christian message beyond a primarily Jewish audience – through Peter as messenger.

The story of Dorcas (Tabitha) takes place in the Palestine coast – in Joppa – indicating the movement of the Christ message westward from Jerusalem and Galilee. Dorcas is described as a disciple – the only woman to be so described anywhere in the New Testament. Peter is reported as raising her from the dead – an event that "became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord."

Following this comes Peter's encounter with the Roman centurion from Caesarea on the Israeli coast. The account provided in Acts never explicitly says how the centurion responded to Peter's message. Rather, the text notes that even before Peter had finished speaking: "... the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word."

Peter returns to Jerusalem to find unhappiness from other circumcised believers – *the first such direct criticism* leveled at Peter as recorded by Acts. Peter responds with an argument that appears to convince the skeptics: "When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given *even to the Gentiles* the repentance that leads to life.' "

Only later events demonstrate that Peter's victory was incomplete. He may have won this battle with the rest of the Jewish church, but Peter went on to lose the war.

Barnabas recruits Saul from Tarsus to assist him with a ministry at Antioch, the place where “the disciples were first called Christians.” Acts now returns to Peter, but the stage has been set. A principal actor is about to retire in favor of a new lead:

About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.

Upon his miraculous and angelically prompted release, Peter goes to the house of one Mary, the mother of John Mark. When Peter is finally able to get inside the house, his first request is: “Tell this (about the release) *to James* and to the believers.”

Jesus’ brother James has suddenly appeared – virtually from nowhere – but now in some position of apparent authority. It was important for Peter to get some communication back to James.

Other historians have noted the change in authority given to Peter. For example, the 20<sup>th</sup> century writer W.H.C. Frend writing in *The Early Church* observes that when “...Peter was released from prison; he was, however, no longer leader of the Christian community.”

Following the death of Herod, Barnabas and Saul are commissioned as emissaries to the Gentiles. It is only upon the subsequent return of Saul (now Paul) to Jerusalem to discuss the issue of Gentile circumcision that we encounter Peter one last time.

At this first Jerusalem council, Peter begins the discussion. Peter advocates an accommodation with Paul to avoid “placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear.” Barnabas and Paul then tell of their experience; however, it is James who has the last word.

With this one event, the author of the Acts of the Apostles seals Peter’s fate. Peter must defer to Jesus’ brother James for the final decision of the Jerusalem church. And from this point forward, Paul and Barnabas take center stage – with no further mention of Peter through the last thirteen chapters of Acts.

***Paul on Peter:*** We can glean one last tidbit of interest – from Paul’s view of his relationship with Peter (as described in his letter to the Galatians). At the time of this letter, a long period has elapsed since Paul’s first encounter with the leadership of the Jerusalem church:

*But when Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you,*

though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

Peter had previously endured criticism from members of the Jerusalem church for catering to non-Jews. Now Paul criticizes him for apparently reverting back to the company of those who espoused the Jewish rite of circumcision.

**Peter the Author:** While much of what we know about Peter is from what others have written about him, we also have a body of writing attributed to the man himself. This includes two documents from the New Testament canon – I and II Peter – and a non-canonical work in the fragmentary Gospel of Peter.

The Gospel of Peter, though fragmentary, takes us places no other gospel goes – except Mark. For example, both Mark and Peter appear to end with women leaving the tomb after the resurrection of Jesus in fear (despite the angelic assurance).

The most fascinating new information is of an apparent split in the Jewish leadership over the wisdom of having crucified Jesus. This split in Jewish leadership over how to handle Christianity occurs at least one more time – a generation later – with the death of Jesus brother, James (as recorded by Josephus). If reliable, this non-canonical account also reinforces the notion of a strong effort to reconcile Judaism and Christianity – both pre and post Easter – a message carried by James until his untimely death.

## PETER IN SUMMARY

We come to the end of our consideration of a man called Peter – the disciple about whom more has been written in the New Testament than any other. At the end of this journey, two questions remain:

- How was this heir apparent to the ministry of Christ, this recognized leader of the fledgling church at Pentecost, so easily shoved aside by James and Paul?
- What is the ongoing relevance (if any) of Peter’s life, his writings, his example, to this current generation?

Peter’s reputation for acting before thinking – an asset at Pentecost – became a liability as the early church required stronger leadership. The unusual deaths of Ananias and Sapphira may have been *nails in the coffin* for Peter’s leadership. And compared to Paul, James (and John), Peter was no intellectual giant. Rather, he was a man who wore his heart on his sleeve.

Peter had a problem with articulating and then holding to a position. Vacillation over the issue of gentile circumcision undoubtedly lost friends on both sides of the aisle. His heart may have been in the right place, but he could never articulate the case for a moderate position clearly enough to hold his own in the heated debates of the early church.

Over time, Peter has fared substantially better in the annals of Church history than his early counterpart in leadership, James the brother of Jesus. This is despite Peter's loss of official church leadership to James and transfer of missionary mantle to Paul.

Maybe this is because so many of us see something of ourselves in Peter. A man with a heart of gold, but for whom courage evaporates at the critical hour. A person who can be bold and impetuous, yet who ultimately compromises for sake of keeping everyone happy.

Both in life and death, Peter exemplifies personal struggles that many followers of the way have also experienced over the last two millennia. Sadly, his message of conciliation is not the message that carries the day. Rather, Christianity has been led by dogmatics – heirs to the actions of a more rash Peter combined the more narrow (albeit conflicting) theologies of Paul and James.

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This excerpt is adapted from the "The Heresy of Peter: Compromised Christianity," further detailed in the approximately 360 page book *12 Heresies of Christianity*. For more, check the full web site [www.jesustheheresy.com](http://www.jesustheheresy.com).