From the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus traveled north along the banks of the Upper Jordan. Mark tells us He passed Bethsaida Julias where He restored the eyesight of a blind man. Then, continuing on His journey, He arrived at a town of some importance. It was beautifully situated near the springs of the Jordan at the southern base of Mount Hermon. This was Caesarea Philippi, formerly called Paneas from the heathen god, Pan. He was worshiped by the Syrian Greeks in the limestone cavern nearby where the headwaters of the Jordan bubble up into the light. Its current name was given by Philip, the tetrarch of Trachonitis, in honor of Caesar Augustus. His own name was appended (Caesarea Philippi, or Philip’s Caesarea) to distinguish it from the other town by the same name on the Mediterranean coast (Caesarea Maritima, or Caesarea by the Sea). This town was proud of its white temple that was built by Herod the Great for the first Roman Emperor. Philip, Herod’s son, constructed villas and palaces in this territory and gave the town its new name.

While He was away in that remote, secluded region, Jesus devoted Himself to secret prayer and to conversation with His disciples on topics of deep interest. In one of these conversations, He called attention to Himself. He introduced the subject by asking the Twelve the question, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Mt. 16:13). He did not ask the question because He needed to be informed, or because He was overly sensitive like certain egotistical men feel when they listen to the opinions of others. He desired His disciples to recite the current opinions that were being expressed. This would serve as a preface to a profession of their own faith in the eternal truth about Him. He thought it would be good to draw a profession out of them at this time, because He was about to communicate with them on another subject - namely, His sufferings. He knew this would severely try their faith. He wanted them to be committed to the doctrine of His Messiahship before He spoke in plain terms on the unwelcome theme of His death.

From the response of the disciples, it seems that their Master was the subject of a lot of conversation among the masses. We should have expected this. Jesus was a very public and a very extraordinary person, and to be talked about by many people is one of the inevitable consequences of being a prominent person. The good works and the claims of the Son of Man were freely discussed in detail by many people in those days. He was talked about, either with
seriousness or with levity, with prejudice or with sincerity, with decision or with indecision, intelligently or ignorantly. This is the way people respond in every period in history. As the Twelve mingled with the people, they heard many opinions about their Lord which never reached His ear. Sometimes they heard things that were kind and favorable, and it made them happy. At other times, they heard unkind and unfavorable things, making them sad.

The Opinions About Jesus

Most of the opinions held by the majority of the people seem to have been favorable. For Jesus referred to them when He questioned His disciples (Lk. 9:18). Everyone agreed that He was a prophet of the highest rank. They only disagreed as to which of the great prophets of Israel that He resembled most. Some said He was John the Baptist who had come back to life. Others said Elijah, while still others identified Him with another of the great prophets such as Jeremiah. These opinions are partially explained by an expectation people had in those days, that the coming of the Messiah would be preceded by the return of one of the prophets by whom God had spoken to their fathers. And they are partially explained by the perception that there were real or supposed resemblances between Jesus and one of the prophets. His tenderness would remind one hearer of the author of the book of Lamentations. His sternness in denouncing hypocrisy and tyranny would remind someone else of the prophet of fire, Elijah. Perhaps His parables led others to think of Ezekiel or Daniel.

When we reflect on the veneration in which the ancient prophets were held, we cannot fail to see that these differing opinions held by the Jewish people about Jesus imply a very high sense of His greatness and excellence. To those of us who regard Him as the Sun and the prophets as lamps (at best) who differed in brightness, these comparisons may not only seem inadequate, but dishonoring. Yet we must not be offended by them. They are the testimonies of open-minded, but imperfect contemporaries as to the worth of Him whom we worship as the Lord. If we take their comments separately, they show that in the judgment of candid observers, Jesus was a man of surpassing greatness. When taken together, they show many aspects of His character and His superiority to any of the prophets. For those who witnessed His works and heard Him preach could not have compared Him to all of the prophets, unless He had manifested them all in His one person. Therefore, the very diversity of opinion about Him showed that One greater than Elijah, or Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, or Daniel, had appeared.

These opinions are valuable as testimonials to the excellence of Christ. We must admit that they also indicate that the people who cherished and expressed them had good dispositions. This was a time when those who thought of themselves as superior to the multitudes found no better names for the Son of Man than “Samaritan,” “devil,” “blasphemer,” “glutton and drunkard,” and “companion of publicans and sinners.” So it was significant that these people believed that Jesus,
the One falsely accused, was as worthy of honor as any of the prophets whose sepulchers were being carefully cared for by those who professed to be godly. These same religious leaders were removing honor from - even putting to death - the prophets’ living successors. The multitudes who held their opinions of Jesus might fall short of true discipleship. But at least they were far more advanced in their views than the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to tempt Him and to ask for a sign from heaven. Yet no sign, either in heaven or on earth, could win them over or convince them.

The Report of the Twelve
How, then, did Jesus receive the report of His disciples? Was He satisfied with these favorable and, under the circumstances, really gratifying opinions that were held by the people? He was not. He was not content to be put on the level with even the greatest of the prophets. To be sure, He did not express any displeasure against those who assigned Him this position. He may have even been pleased to hear that public opinion had advanced so far on the way to the true faith. Nevertheless, He declined to accept the position that they granted Him. The meek and humble Son of Man claimed to be something more than a great prophet. Therefore, He turned to His chosen disciples from whom He expected a more satisfactory statement of the truth. Pointedly, He asked what they thought of Him. “But who do you say that I am?” (Mt. 16:15).

In this case, as in many others, Simon Peter answered for the Twelve. His prompt, definite, memorable reply to his Master’s question was this: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16).

Jesus was satisfied with this view of Himself. He did not accuse Peter of extravagance by going this far beyond the opinion of the people. On the contrary, He wholeheartedly approved of what the eager disciple had said and did not express His satisfaction in cold or calculated terms. Perhaps He never spoke with more animated language or with a greater sense of deep emotion. He solemnly pronounced Peter “blessed” because of his faith. For the first time He mentioned a church that would be founded and profess Peter’s faith as its creed. He promised Peter great power in that church. It almost seemed as if He was grateful to him for being the first to put this very important truth into words and for speaking so boldly in the midst of prevailing unbelief, and crude, defective belief. And He expressed, in the strongest possible terms, His confidence that the church that was yet to be founded would stand in all ages against the assaults of the powers of darkness.

Peter’s Confession
Peter’s confession, when it is properly interpreted, seems to contain these two propositions: (1) that Jesus was the Messiah, and (2) that He was divine. First he said, “Thou art the Christ.”
He said this while conscious of the reported opinions of the people. “Thou art the Christ,” and not merely a prophet that has come to prepare Christ’s way. Then he added “the Son of God,” to explain what he understood by the term Christ. The Messiah that was looked for by the Jews was simply a man, although a very superior one. He would be the ideal man who was endowed with extraordinary gifts. The Christ of Peter’s creed was more than a man; He was superhuman, a divine being. He tried to express this truth in the second part of his confession. He called Jesus the Son of God, obviously referring to the name His Master had just given Himself - Son of Man. He meant to say, “You are not only what You have now called Yourself, and what, in humility of mind, You are prone to call Yourself - the Son of Man. You are also the Son of God, partaking of the divine nature as well as the human.” Finally, he prefixed the word “living” to the divine name to express his consciousness that he was making a very important declaration and to give that declaration a solemn, deliberate character. It was as if he said, “I know it is no light matter to call anyone, even You, the Son of God, the One who came from the living eternal Jehovah. But I will not shrink from the assertion, no matter how bold it is, no matter how startling it is, or even if it seems blasphemous. I cannot make any other comment that would do justice to all that I know and feel about You, or convey the impression that has been left on my mind by what I have witnessed during the time I have followed You as a disciple.” This is the way Peter was urged on, in spite of his Jewish monotheism, to recognize his Lord’s divinity.

Jesus’ Response to Peter
The famous confession was spoken in the neighborhood of Caesarea Philippi. It really contains in seed form, the doctrine of Christ’s divinity. This might be inferred by the simple fact that Jesus was satisfied with it. He certainly claimed to be the Son of God in a sense that cannot be proclaimed by a mere man. Note the synoptical accounts of His teaching (cf. Mt. 11:27). But when we consider the unique words by which He expressed Himself concerning Peter’s faith, we are even further convinced of this conclusion. He said to Peter, “Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 16:17). These words evidently imply that the person addressed (Peter) had said something very extraordinary. He must have said something that he could not have learned from the traditional established belief that his generation had about the Messiah. It was something new even for himself and for his fellow-disciples, maybe not in words, but at least in meaning (compare John 1:49). He could not have attained these words by the unaided effort of his own mind. The confession is virtually represented as an inspiration, a revelation, a flash of light from heaven. It was not the utterance of a crude fisherman, but of the divine Spirit speaking a truth through his mouth that had been, until now, hidden. It was only dimly comprehended by Peter, the one to whom it had been revealed. All this agrees well with the supposition that the confession contains an acknowledgment of Jesus’ Messiahship. But it also is a proclamation of the true doctrine concerning the Messiah’s person, namely, that He was a divine being who had been manifested in the flesh.
The rest of our Lord’s address to Peter shows that He assigned the doctrine he confessed to a fundamental place of importance in the Christian faith. The purpose of these remarkable statements (Mt. 16:18-19) is not to assert the supremacy of Peter but to declare the supremely important nature of the truth he confessed. In spite of all the difficulties in interpreting this text, this remains clear and certain to us. Who or what the “rock” is, we believe, remains open to question. It might be Peter, or it may be his confession. It is a point on which scholars, who are sound in the faith, differ in opinion. It would not be wise to be dogmatic about it. We are confident of this: Peter’s faith, and not his person, is the fundamental matter in Christ’s mind.

When He says to that disciple, “You are Peter,” He means, “You are a man of rock, worthy of the name I gave you by anticipation the first time I met you, because you have finally gotten your foot planted on the rock of the eternal truth.” He speaks about the church that will come into existence for the first time in connection with Peter’s confession, because that church is to be comprised of people who adopt that confession as their own and acknowledge Him to be the Christ, the Son of God (Note: this was the usual formula by which converts confessed their faith in the apostolic age). He alludes to the keys of the kingdom of heaven in the same connection, because no one shall be admitted within its gates but those who agree with the doctrine that was first solemnly spoken by Peter. He promises Peter the power of the keys, not because it is to belong to him alone or to him more than to others. But Jesus is giving him honor to compensate him for the joy he has given his Lord through his superior energy and decision of his faith. He is grateful to Peter, because he has most emphatically believed that He came forth from the Father (Jn. 16:27). And so He shows His gratitude by promising first to him, individually, a power which He later conferred on all His chosen disciples (Mt. 18:18; Jn. 20:23). Finally, if it is true that Peter is called the rock on which the church will be built, this is to be understood in the same way as the promise of the keys. Peter is called the foundation of the church only in the same sense as all the Apostles are called the foundation by the Apostle Paul (Eph. 2:20). They are the first preachers of the true faith concerning Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God. And if the man who first professed that faith is honored by being called individually the “rock,” that only shows that the faith, and not the man, is the true foundation after all. That which makes Simon Peter a Petros, a rock-like man, fit to build on, is the real Petra on which the Ecclesia (the church) is to be built.

After all of these remarks, we do not think it is necessary to question what the term “rock” refers to in the sentence, “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church.” At the same time, we must say that it is by no means clear to us that the rock must be Peter and can be nothing else. Some modern commentators seem to assert this position. To the words, “You are Peter, a man of rock, and on you, as on a rock, I will build My church,” it is possible to assign an intelligible scriptural meaning. But we confess our preference for the interpretation by which our Lord’s words to His disciple would be paraphrased in this way: “You, Simon Barjonas, are Petros, a
man of rock, worthy of your name Peter, because you have made that bold, good confession; and on the truth you have now confessed, as on a rock, will I build My church; and as long as it abides on that foundation, it will stand firm and unassailable against all the powers of hell.” Read in this way, we make Jesus say not only what He really thought, but what was most worthy to be said. For divine truth is the sure foundation. Believers, even people like Peter, may fail and prove to be anything but stable. But truth is eternal and never fails. In saying this, we have not forgotten the counterpart of this truth, that “the truth” is dead and provides no source of stability unless it is confessed by living souls. Sincere personal conviction, along with a life that corresponds to it, is needed to make faith, in the objective sense of the word, a virtue.

We cannot leave these memorable words of Christ without referring to the strange fate which has come to them in the history of the church. We do this with a solemn reverence. In this text, the church’s Lord declares that the powers of darkness shall not prevail against her. And yet, the passage has been used by these powers as an instrument of assault, and with too much success. What a gigantic system of spiritual oppression and blasphemous assumption has been built on these two sentences about the rock and the keys! With their help, the kingdom of God has nearly been turned into a kingdom of Satan! One is tempted to wish that Jesus, who knew beforehand what would happen, had so framed His words in such a way that it would have prevented the wrong interpretation. But the wish is vain. There are no forms of expression, no matter how carefully chosen, that could prevent human ignorance from falling into misunderstanding. Neither could it stop people, who were serving a specific purpose, from finding in the Scripture what suited that purpose. No Christian, who really thinks about it, believes it would have been desirable for the Author of our faith to have adopted a prepared, discreet style of speech. His words were not intended to avoid causing people to stumble over their honest stupidity or to be an excuse for moving into dishonesty. If they had been, the spoken word would have no longer been a true reflection of the Word incarnate. He intended to give a faithful expression to the actual thoughts of His mind and feelings of His heart. All the poetry and passion and genuine human feeling which make up the charm of Christ’s sayings would have been lost. Nothing would have remained except dull platitudes like those of the scribes and theological intellectuals. No. Let us receive the precious words of our Master, with all of their characteristic intensity, and vehemently assert them without qualification. And if ordinary or insincere people try to manufacture unbelievable doctrines from them, let them answer for it. Why should the children be deprived of their bread and only the dogs cared for?

Before we leave this subject, let us consider one more remark. We find Peter playing a part in this incident at Caesarea Philippi. This prepares us for being able to believe the historical account of him in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. There are some profound scenes, such as that which is recorded in chapter 10. The Tübingen school of critics tells us that Acts is a composition that
is full of situations that have been made up and adapted to defend the faith. And they maintain that the book has been written to make Peter act like Paul as much as possible in the first part, and for Paul to act as much like Peter as possible in the second. They regard the conversion of the Roman centurion through Peter as a prime example of Peter being made to look like Paul - as a universalist in his views of Christianity. The following is all we have to say on the subject here: The conduct which is ascribed to the Apostle Peter in Acts 10 is believable in the light of the narrative we have been studying. In both, we find the same man who is the recipient of a revelation. In both, we find him to be the first to receive, speak, and act on a great Christian truth. Is it incredible that the man who received one revelation as a disciple should receive another as an Apostle? Isn’t it psychologically probable that the same man, who now appears so original and bold in connection with one great truth, will again demonstrate the same attributes of originality and boldness in connection with some other truth? For our part, we are far from being skeptical about the historic truth of the narrative in Acts. We would have been very surprised if Peter had been found playing a part that was totally devoid of originality and boldness in the history of the early church. In that case, he would have been very different from his former self.