

The Early Church Fathers on The Primacy of Peter / Rome

The first Christians understood that Peter and his successors held a place of primacy in the Church and exercised authority over it. They believed that a rejection of Peter's authority was a rejection of Christ's authority. As the Scriptures tell us, Peter and Peter alone received the keys of the kingdom with the power to bind and loose (Matthew 16:18-19). It is true that Peter and his successors are sinful human beings. But it is also true that all of the biblical authors were sinful human beings. And yet God was able to keep them from teaching error. That same God keeps Peter and his successors from teaching error.

Clement of Rome

Accept our counsel and you will have nothing to regret. . . . If anyone disobeys the things which have been said by him [Jesus] through us, let them know that they will involve themselves in no small danger. We, however, shall be innocent of this sin and will pray with entreaty and supplication that the Creator of all may keep unharmed the number of his elect (*Letter to the Corinthians* 58:2, 59:1 [A.D. 95]).

Ignatius of Antioch

You [the See of Rome] have envied no one, but others have you taught. I desire only that what you have enjoined in your instructions may remain in force (*Epistle to the Romans* 3:1 [A.D. 110]).

Irenaeus

... the greatest and most ancient church known to all, founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles. Peter and Paul, that church which has the tradition and the faith which comes down to us after having been announced to men by the apostles. With that church, because of its superior origin, all the churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world, and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the apostolic tradition (*Against Heresies* 3:3:2 [inter A.D. 189]).

Clement of Alexandria

[T]he blessed Peter, the chosen, the preeminent, the first among the disciples, for whom alone with himself the Savior paid the tribute [Matt. 17:27], quickly grasped and understood their meaning. And what does he say? "Behold, we have left all and have followed you" [Matt. 19:27, Mark 10:28] (*Who is the Rich Man that is Saved?* 21:3-5 [A.D. 200]).

Tertullian

[T]he Lord said to Peter, "On this rock I will build my Church, I have given you the keys of the kingdom of heaven [and] whatever you shall have bound or loosed on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven" [Matt. 16:18-19]. ... Upon you, he says, I will build my Church; and I will give to you the keys, not to the Church; and whatever you shall have bound or you shall have loosed, not what they shall have bound or they shall have loosed (*Modesty* 21:9-10 [A.D. 220]).

Letter of Clement to James

Simon [Peter], who, for the sake of the true faith, and the most sure foundation of his doctrine, was set apart to be the foundation of the Church, and for this end was by Jesus himself, with his truthful mouth, named Peter, the first-fruits of our Lord, the first of the apostles; to whom first the Father revealed the Son; whom the Christ, with good reason, blessed; the called, and elect (*Letter of Clement to James* 2 [A.D. 221]).

Origen

And Peter, on whom the Church of Christ is built, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail left only one epistle of acknowledged genuineness (*Commentaries on John* 5:3 [A.D. 226-232]).

Cyprian

With a false bishop appointed for themselves by heretics, they dare even to set sail and carry letters from schismatics and blasphemers to the Chair of Peter and to the principal church [at Rome], in which sacerdotal unity has its source" (*Epistle to Cornelius* [Bishop of Rome] 59:14 **[A.D. 252]**).

Constantine Augustus

And that the opposing parties who were contending persistently and incessantly with each other, should be summoned from Africa; that in their presence, and in the presence of the bishop of Rome, the matter which appeared to be causing the disturbance might be examined and decided with all care (*To Chrestus* **[A.D. 314]** as recorded by Eusebius).

Cyril of Jerusalem

In the power of the same Holy Spirit, Peter, both the chief of the apostles and the keeper of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, in the name of Christ healed Aeneas the paralytic at Lydda, which is now called Diospolis [Acts 9 ;3 2-3 4] (*Catechetical Lectures* 17;27 **[A.D. 350]**).

Optatus

In the city of Rome the Episcopal chair was given first to Peter, the chair in which Peter sat, the same who was head — that is why he is also called Cephas — of all the apostles, the one chair in which unity is maintained by all. Neither do the apostles proceed individually on their own, and anyone who would [presume to] set up another chair in opposition to that single chair would, by that very fact, be a schismatic and a sinner (*The Schism of the Donatists* 2:2 **[circa A.D. 367]**).

Ephraim

Simon, my follower, I have made you the foundation of the holy Church. I betimes called you Peter, because you will support all its tall buildings. You are the inspector of those who will build on earth a Church for Me. If they should wish to build what is false, you, the foundation, will condemn them. You are the head of the fountain from which my teaching flows, you are the chief of my disciples (*Homilies* 4:1 **[inter A.D. 338-373]**).

Ambrose of Milan

[Christ] made answer: "You are Peter, and upon this rock will I build my Church . . ." Could he not, then, strengthen the faith of the man to whom, acting on his own authority, he gave the kingdom, whom he called the rock, thereby declaring him to be the foundation of the Church [Matt. 16:18]? (*The Faith* 4:5 **[A.D. 379]**).

Tyrannius Rufinus

and further how he speaks of the city of Rome, which now through the grace of God is reckoned by Christians as their capital (*Apology* 2:23 **[A.D. 400]**).

Augustine

Among these [apostles] Peter alone almost everywhere deserved to represent the whole Church. Because of that representation of the Church, which only he bore, he deserved to hear "I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (*Sermons* 295:2 **[A.D. 411]**).