

# Rock Solid:<sup>1</sup>

## The Salvation History of the Catholic Church

**ISSUE:** Is the Catholic Church a man-made, post-resurrection invention or the fulfillment of God's saving plan for mankind?

**RESPONSE:** The Catholic Church is the universal family of God through which all men may be saved and have communion with their heavenly Father, fulfilling what God promised Abraham (Gen. 22:9-18) and David (2 Sam. 7:12-19; Amos 9:11-12).

**DISCUSSION:** "Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham" (Mt. 1:1). Mt. 1:1 is not only a summary of salvation history, but also a summary of how the Catholic Church came to be, through her founder and bridegroom, Jesus Christ.

As the "son of Abraham," Jesus is the "universal" or Catholic blessing promised by the Father (Gen. 22:9-18). It is through the Son's death and resurrection that all the "nations" or Gentiles are able to become adopted sons and daughters in the family of God (Rom. 8:14-17). Effecting our salvation through Christ has been God's plan since the Fall.

As the "son of David," Jesus is the Messiah-King of the house of David and Israel. It is through the Church, the restored house of David (cf. Amos 9:11-12; Acts 15:15-18), that men and women are to become disciples and thereby sons and daughters of God (Mt. 16:13-20; 28:18-20). God said He founded His "Church," not "churches" (Mt. 16:18-19) on Peter the "Rock," to whom He gave special powers as the earthly head of His restored Davidic house. The Bible refers to the Church as Christ's bride. And Christ, as a faithful Groom, is the husband of **only one** bride or Church, for whom He gave His life (Eph. 5:21-33). St. Paul affirms elsewhere that Christ's Church has "*one* faith" and "*one* baptism" (Eph. 4:5; emphases added), providing further biblical evidence that Our Lord founded one clearly recognizable Church, not many with conflicting doctrines.

Gen. 12:1-3 is called the "acorn of salvation history" because it provides that God will make a great nation of Abram's descendants and that his descendants will ultimately be a blessing to all nations. God fleshes out his plan in Gen. 15, 17, and 22, saying He will make of his descendants a great nation (ch. 15), fulfilled in the formation of the nation Israel; a kingdom (ch. 17), fulfilled in the Davidic kingdom of Israel; and finally a blessing to all the nations (ch. 22). What is seen from the beginning is that God is going to use a visible structure, a people, to effect His saving plan, and that it will be a universal or "catholic" blessing because His plan will encompass all nations.

Gen. 22:9-18 describes Mt. Moriah as the mount on which "the Lord will provide," indicating that God will make a sacrifice similar to Abraham's offering of his only begotten son, Isaac, to bring about a blessing for all people. Interestingly, Mt. Moriah was located in Salem, which is another name for Zion or Jerusalem (Ps. 76:2; cf. 2 Chron. 3:1). In fact, Mt. Moriah is named as the site of Solomon's temple, Jerusalem, the city in which Christ's sacrificial death also took place. And on more than one occasion, Jesus Himself speaks of His own forthcoming suffering (Mt. 20:21), and specifically notes that He, as the Son of Man, will "give His own life for the many" (Mt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45; cf. Is. 53).

It is interesting to discover how David's house or kingdom is connected to this "universal" blessing in Genesis. In 2 Sam. 7:12-19, God tells David, a descendant of Abraham, that after David dies, He, God, will establish His throne forever (cf. Is. 55:3), a prophecy fulfilled initially and imperfectly in Solomon (cf. 2 Sam. 7:13-15) and ultimately and perfectly in Christ.

The prophet Amos affirms that the restored house of David will be the means through which all the nations, the Gentiles, will be blessed. In ch. 9:11-12, he speaks of David's house being restored. He makes reference to Edom, the eldest son of Jacob Israel's wayward brother Esau, and all the nations or Gentiles. These represented all non-Israelites, who were then separated from the family of God but who were reunited upon the restoration of the house of David. At the Council of Jerusalem, St. James quotes Amos 9, noting that Jesus has restored the house of David, the Church, thereby allowing Edom and the Gentiles to come into the Kingdom of God or new Israel (Acts 15:13-18).

One would expect that the Jews of Jesus' time would understand and expect David's house to be restored, given the various prophecies. In the first verse of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is described as the son of David who, in turn, is the son of Abraham. Jesus is of the house of Judah, and He is also from Bethlehem, fulfilling the words of Mic. 5:2 that such a one would rule Israel. Gabriel foretells Jesus as reestablishing David's throne (Lk. 1:31-33) and Zechariah praises God for sending Jesus, whom he describes as a horn of salvation in the house of David (Lk. 1:69) and the fulfillment of "His holy covenant" made with Abraham (Lk. 1:72-73). Simeon recognizes the infant Jesus as the light of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel (Lk. 2:29-32).

After His resurrection and just prior to His Ascension, Christ's disciples asked when He would restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6-9), whereupon Jesus makes mention again of their ministry extending to all the nations on earth.

But the king is not the only governing official in this prophesied restored kingdom. The house of David also had a master of the palace, or prime minister, Eliakim, as Is. 22:15-25 and others, like 1 Kings 4:6, affirm (cf. Mt. 16:13-20). In Is. 22, we see that Eliakim replaces the corrupt Shebna, thereby showing that the prime minister's position was an office of succession. Verse 21 explicitly says there is a transfer of authority between the two. And what is the nature of the prime minister's authority? He has the keys to David's house or kingdom, and whatever he opens, none shall shut; and whatever he shuts, none shall open. The prime minister had wide-ranging authority. This is further affirmed by verse 21's saying Eliakim will be a father to Jerusalem, Israel, and the house of Judah, which was David's house, one of the 12 tribes of Israel.

How does the hierarchical or governing structure of the original house of David relate to the Church of today? Even if Jesus' Jewish disciples did not completely understand the nature of the kingdom of heaven, it is clear they understood that the restoration of the house of David somehow figured in the establishment of His heavenly kingdom. That is why Peter and the other apostles didn't question Jesus about the words He uttered in Mt. 16:18-19. They understood He was reestablishing the house of David and that Peter would have governing primacy in carrying out the mission of the new King, Christ, as the prime ministers of the former house of David did for their kings. Just as the former was a father to Israel and the house of Judah, so Peter would be a "pope" or Holy Father to the new Israel, the Church.

The crucial difference is that the former prime ministers oversaw an earthly kingdom whereas the Popes administer a heavenly kingdom. Consequently, Is. 22:25 says the prime minister and David's kingdom would fall, Christ tells Peter in Mt. 16:18 that the gates of hell would not prevail against the restored Davidic house, His Church. Jesus promised that He would be with His disciples until the end of time (Mt. 28:20).

Where do we see this house being restored? Acts 2 provides a compelling answer. In Acts 2:1-6, the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit and begin to preach to Jews "from every nation under heaven"—a universal blessing that will eventually encompass the whole world (cf. Acts 10).

In Acts 2:29-33, Peter makes the connection between David and Jesus:

Brethren, I may say to you confidently of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon his throne [Ps. 132:11; cf. 2 Sam. 7:16 and Heb. 11:17-19], he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of Christ, that He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus, God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses [Ps. 16:10]. *Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured out this which you see and hear* (emphasis added).

In saying this, Peter alludes to the prophet Joel, who himself makes a connection between the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the restoration of Jerusalem (Israel) through the house of Judah, and that this would involve gathering all the nations together (Joel 2:28-3:1-3). This is especially appropriate because the place of David's tomb and the place where David's house is restored is the same: Mt. Zion (or Moriah) in Jerusalem (cf. 1 Chron. 21-22; 2 Chron. 3:1). In fact, David's tomb, known as the City of David, is believed to be directly below (and certainly very close to) the Upper Room, in which the disciples were praying when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost! Indeed, the City of David is not just Bethlehem, but, more to the point, the first Israelite settlement in Jerusalem, where David is buried!

As Jesus fulfills the sacrifice prefigured on Mt. Moriah by Isaac, so too the house of David is restored adjacent to the place where David is buried. What better place to restore the house of David than near David's tomb, to show the difference between an earthly kingdom that expired and a heavenly kingdom that is everlasting?

And so we see the Church made manifest on Pentecost (Catechism, nos. 1076; 830-31), transformed from the old Israel to the new Israel, the new family of God in which salvation comes via forgiveness in baptism by receiving the Holy Spirit, which is made possible by Christ's dying and rising (Acts 2:37-41; Jn. 1:29-34). Logically, Pentecost is also the day when, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the apostles began to make disciples of all the nations through baptism (Catechism, nos. 830-31). St. Paul affirms that the Church is built on the foundation of the apostles (Eph. 2:19-20), that there is an order of authority in this Church (Eph. 4:11-16), and that the Church, not simply the Bible on its own, is the pillar and foundation of all truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

There was no dispute in the early Church about Peter's authority. It was affirmed by extra-biblical sources like Clement of Rome, the fourth pope, and Bishop Ignatius of Antioch, both around the turn of the second century. Later Church observers like Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons (circa 140 A.D. to 202 A.D) also affirmed the pope's primacy. They understood that Jesus founded the Church on Peter, thereby restoring the house of David.

Christ said He would be with His disciples until the end of the world (Mt. 28:20), and He continues to build His Church (Mt. 16:18) through all kinds of trials, internal and external. In the tradition of St. Peter, the first Pope, we should confidently share Christ's salvific plan with everyone we encounter: "Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:15).

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