

# On This Rock I Will Build My Church: Reshaping African Evangelical Ecclesiology through a Philological Rereading of Matthew 16:16–19

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to offer a philological rereading of Matt 16:16–19 to reshape African Christology. Largely, African ecclesiology emphasizes tasks that disconnect denominations rather than creating a borderless community which shares mutual faith. Moreover, it highlights church structure, economic and human resources as well as nature, universality, content, and the mandate of mission. It should, therefore, be reshaped to appreciate *ekklēsia* as a borderless community which God initiated, called and designated to belong to, and gives loyalty to Christ. Remarkably, the link between Christology and ecclesiology in the text discloses that Christology nurtures and shapes ecclesiology. Yet missiology has perpetually nurtured and shaped ecclesiology, but the conversation between Jesus and Peter insinuates that ecclesiology grows from Christology. While Peter's confession is Christological, Jesus's riposte is not only ecclesiological, but it also demonstrates that God initiates missiological tasks of the *ekklēsia*. Besides, the interpretations and translation of the text's key terms

are contentious, and the misreading of their referents may have engendered weak ecclesiology. Philological criticism, which analyses the original languages with which a text was written, was used to analyse its key terms. Their translation and reinterpretation establish that God through Christ initiates the *ekklēsia*'s missiological tasks, while the Holy Spirit empowers her to execute them. So, if African *ekklēsia* shall revive her missiological tasks, Christology must nurture and shape African evangelical ecclesiology.

### Key Words

Peter's confession, philological criticism, *Petra*, *Ekklēsia*, bind/loose, Christology, African evangelical ecclesiology

### Introduction

Peter's confession appears in all the Synoptic Gospels, though some scholars see a probable parallel in John 6:67–71. However, its Matthean version has stimulated an exegetical and theological debate,<sup>1</sup> which ranges from its authenticity to the meaning of its key terms. Besides, some scholars regard Matt 16:17–19 as an

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<sup>1</sup> Ian S. Kemp, "The Blessing, Power and Authority of the Church: A Study in Matthew 16:17–19," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 40, no. 2 (2016): 128–139; Patrick Schreiner, "Peter, the Rock: Matthew 16 in Light of Daniel 2," *Criswell Theological Review* 13, no. 2 (2016): 99–117.

interpolation,<sup>2</sup> yet due to the limited space and focus, this article does not offer a detailed analysis of the debate. However, it first seeks to explain the methodology it used and to recap the text's varied patristic readings. Thereafter, it summarizes the views of Roman Catholic church (RCC) and Protestant church (PC). Besides, it provides a philological rereading of the text's key nouns and verbs. Finally, it delineates and evaluates African evangelical ecclesiology, which according to some scholars, is not well armed to confront the multifaceted challenges and has terribly failed to influence African societies, which is credited to her unproductive ecclesiology. Since the text connects Christology and ecclesiology and it reveals that Christology nurtures and shapes ecclesiology, then Christology should nurture and shape African evangelical ecclesiology.

## Methodology

Several scholars maintain that Matt 16:13–20 refers to the post-Easter church, which functioned institutionally.<sup>3</sup> Yet, its words are the authentic voice of Jesus, which his original hearers comprehended.<sup>4</sup> To

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<sup>2</sup> James A. Brookes and Beverly C. Brooks, "Images of the Church in the Synoptic Gospels," in *The People of God: Essays on the Believers' Church*, ed. Paul Basden, David S. Dockery, and James L. Garrett (Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 109.

<sup>3</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *The Continuing Voice of Jesus: Christian Prophecy and the Gospel Tradition* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 252.

<sup>4</sup> John Lightfoot, *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae: Hebrew and Talmudical Exercitations upon the Gospels, the Acts, Some Chapters of St. Paul's Epistle to*

reread its key terms, philological criticism – which is the study of original biblical languages in respect to grammar, vocabulary, and style – was used. It seeks to ensure that original terms are translated as faithfully as possible. Besides, it seeks to establish the authenticity and original form of texts and to determine their meaning.

As Friedrich Nietzsche avers, philology teaches how to read well, slowly, deeply, intuitively, wisely, with inner thoughts, delicate fingers and eyes, and with mental doors ajar.<sup>5</sup> Yet, its legality has not only been interrogated but also criticized for failing the so-called modern test of disciplinarity and for being a practice without theory. However, it has stood firm, it has frequently been used, and perhaps shall always be used to authenticate if a translated text accords appropriately with its version in original language. Precisely, it cannot and shall not be disengaged from biblical studies due to its effort to retell the history of the text's lost world, which it recreates and restores, so as to illuminate the text's meaning to the present world. It inspires self-understanding and gives purpose to human existence, hence useful to biblical studies.<sup>6</sup>

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*the Romans, and the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New edition by Robert Gandell. (Oxford: University Press, 1859), 240.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Dawn of Day*, Dover Philosophical Classics (Dover: Dover Publications, 2012), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Robar, "Linguistics, Philology and the Biblical Text," *Journal for Semitics* 29, no. 2 (2020): 3–4, 7, 13–14, 17; Sheldon Pollock, "Philology and Freedom," *Philological Encounters* 1, no. 1–4 (2016): 4–30.

## Patristic readings

The patristic readings of this text were varied. Origen maintained that *petra* (rock) referred to every disciple of Christ, and it signified the source from which *ekklēsia* got her strength. Eusebius held it referred to Peter, but the disciples' obedience to the Great Commission shaped an invisible and dignified *ekklēsia* which is settled and rooted on the power of Jesus. She is thus unshaken, and death cannot conquer her. Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, Asterius, Ambrosiaster, Epiphanius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil the Great concurred it referred to Peter. Yet, Basil of Seleucia maintained that it referred to Peter's confession, while John Cassian and Hilary of Poitiers asserted that it meant Peter's faith. Theodoret, Cassiodorus, Jerome, and John of Damascus held that to link *petra* with Peter's confession is to relate it to Jesus. Cyril of Jerusalem and Augustine maintained that it corresponded to Jesus, the unmoved rock on which Peter and the church were built.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> St. Augustine, *Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John – Tractate CXXIII.5, Homilies on the Gospel of John; Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies*, ed. Anthony Uyl (Woodstock, Ontario: Devoted, 2017), 405; *The Sacred Writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, Extended Annotated Edition* (Altenmünster: Jazzybee Verlag, 2012); Eusebius, "Ecclesiastical History," in *Fathers of the Church*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, vol. 19 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1965), 142–143.

## The Roman Catholic church and Protestant church's readings

Matt 16:16–19 is an exegetical and theological battlefield for the RCC and PC which arises from their contradictory views as to what *petra* refers. The RCC hold that it refers to Peter as his Greek and Aramaic names mean rock.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the RCC's understanding follows a 14<sup>th</sup> century CE (1380–1385) Hebrew text of Matthew which personalizes *petra* to mean Peter. Its version of Matt 16:17–19 depicts Jesus as speaking directly to Peter.

*Jesus said to him: Blessed are you Simon bar Jonah because flesh and blood has not revealed [this] to you but my Father who is in heaven. I say to you: you are a stone and I will build upon you my house of prayer. The gates of Gehenna will not prevail against you because I will give to you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*<sup>9</sup>

Yet, the manuscript's dating, its resolve to modify and fuse itself to current Greek morphology and syntax, undercuts its dependability. It is a hypothetical document, which appeared long after first century CE, because of its

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<sup>8</sup> Kenneth B. Steinhauser, "Leo I," in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Church History: Volume One; The Early, Medieval and Reformation Eras*, ed. Robert Benedetto (Louisville, Ky. & London: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2008), 385.

<sup>9</sup> George Howard, *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1995), xi, 80–81.

use of the term *Christos* (Christ). Moreover, it is a Middle Age Jewish anti-Christian missionary treatise and a textual base for their dispute with Christians.<sup>10</sup>

The PC indict the RCC of altering the teaching that Jesus Christ is the authentic foundation on which the church is built (1 Cor 3:11), that he is over all things, and is the head of the church (Col 1:15–20). They hold that the dispute, on who was greatest among the disciples and Jesus’s response that the greatest was their servant (Luke 22:24–26), shows that the other disciples did not regard Peter as the greatest among them, hence he was not the rock. Although he was the first to preach and convert Jews and Gentiles, he never laid the church’s foundation. Jesus was the first to call, convert, and to transform the disciples’ lives. Therefore, if the *ekklēsia* began by conversion, Jesus is the foundation upon which the apostles built (Eph 2:19–22; cf. Rev 21:14). Besides, he is the cornerstone which gives stability to the whole structure wherein God dwells (Eph 2:20–22).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John K. McKee, “Is the Hebrew Matthew an Authentic Document?,” in *Messianic Torah Helper*, ed. Margaret McKee and John K. McKee (Scotts Valley, CA: Createspace Independent, 2013), 261, 278; George Howard, “The Textual Nature of Shem-Tob’s Hebrew Matthew,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108, no. 2 (1989): 239–57.

<sup>11</sup> Ernest Renan, *History of the Origins of Christianity: Book II, the Apostles*. (Woodstock, Ontario: Devoted, 2017), 4; Gary Gromacki, “The Foundational Gifts of Apostle and Prophet in Ephesians,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 17, no. 2 (n.d.): 1–18; M. M. Ninan, *The Apostles* (San Jose, CA: Global, 2013), 55–58; S. T. Bloomfield, *Hē kainē diathekē: The Greek Testament with English Notes, Critical, Philological, and Explanatory Volume* (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longman, 1965), 95.

## Philological analysis of key terminologies

### *Ekklēsia*

The meaning of *ekklēsia* in Matthew's Gospel has been given deficient analysis, perhaps due to its imprecise English translation as "church" which may refer to worshippers. Besides, it may refer to official and legalized buildings designed for public worship or hierarchically led religious institution that show social, political, and/or economic power.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE to the Roman imperial era (27 BCE–284 CE), it referred to civic assembly which set policies and defined how a Greek city-state was ruled.<sup>13</sup> In the New Testament, it indicates the universal body, to which local *ekklēsia* belong. It is overwhelmingly probable that Jesus never used it to refer to worshippers, place of worship, status of people, and/or a social, political, and/or economic force. He used it to typify a borderless, undying, and multi-ethnic group, without partisan political subtext that underlies and suffocates the English word church.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jan M. de Beer, "Implications of Ecclesiology's Understanding of Church and Ekklēsia for the Current Missiology," *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Missiology* 46, no. 1 (2018): 72–84; Ralph J. Korner, "Ekklēsia as a Jewish Synagogue Term: Some Implications for Paul's Socio-Religious Location," *Journal of the Jesus Movement in Its Jewish Setting* n.v., no. 2 (2015): 54; religious Location, No. 2, 2015, 54.

<sup>13</sup> See Andrew Lintott, "Aristotle and Democracy," *The Classical Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1992): 114–28.

<sup>14</sup> Gabriele Boccaccini, *Middle Judaism: Jewish Thought, 300 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 17; Alan F. Segal, *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 181.



Did Jesus expected the *ekklēsia* to be apolitical or detached from politics? Jesus's message was inevitably political, since he criticized real and self-appointed rulers and preached good news for the poor. His ministry was misinterpreted as political and seen as a seditious effort to overthrow the Roman Empire, substituting it with God's Kingdom. Jewish religious leaders accused him of blasphemy, because he criticised their hypocritical character, saw the temple – which they held signified the presence of God – as temporal, and predicted its ruin. Political and religious leaders, therefore, networked to crucify him as a rebellious criminal, although he was a Jew and a member of Jewish community. He, basically, participated in Jewish social and religious activities. Moreover, he was a rabbi, who not only linked his people with the Torah, but he also taught, with his own life, how they should faithfully live according to its teachings. However, as the gospel accounts reveal, he never belonged to any of the Jewish religious groups which were largely political.<sup>15</sup> While his call for repentance was articulated in a religious and political context, it was not derived from any Jewish religious group. He was not involved in partisan political disputes, yet he highlighted that absolute authority belongs to God and not to any political or religious organisation or leader.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Catholic Church Pontificia Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, Vatican Documents (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), 152.

<sup>16</sup> Kabiro wa Gatumu, "The Gospel and the Public Sphere: Mimicking the Teachings of Jesus and His Disciples in the Roman Empire as Stimuli for Resisting Postmodern Pluralistic World's Challenges to Christian Witness"

Perhaps *ekklēsia* exactly meant what early believers understood themselves to be. They were the holy ones (Acts 9:13; 1 Cor 6:2) who were sanctified and called to belong to Christ (Rom 1:6–7; 1 Cor 1:2). Since *ekklēsia* is a combination of *ek* (from) and *kalew* (called), it refers to the community of saints, which God has called from varied ethnic groups, gender, class, and status (Gal 3:28). They share one faith and belong to one body and destiny. This insight is decisive for African ecclesiology, because as Susan Rakoczy notes:

*An ecclesiology which is shaped by the image of the ‘communion of saints’ offers distinct advantages to any hierarchical notions of sanctity and authority in the church. This ecclesiology focuses on the unity of community.<sup>17</sup>*

Besides, it implies that the *ekklēsia* Jesus promised to build on *petra* is different from what “church” means. It refers to a community bestowed with the authority to

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(University of Arad, Romania; International Fellowship of Mission Theologian Stott-Bediako Forum, 2022); Kabiro wa Gatumu, “The Interface between Gospel and Culture in the New Testament Era and Its Import to African Christianity,” in *Seeing New Facets of the Diamond; Christianity as a Universal Faith: Essays in Honour of Kwame Bediako*, ed. Akropong-Akuapem et al., Regnum Studies in Global Christianity (Oxford: Regnum Studies in Mission, 2014), 249–60; Nicholas T. Wright, “The New Testament and the State,” *Themelios* 165, no. 1 (1990): 12.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Rakoczy, “The Theological Vision of Elizabeth A Johnson,” *Scriptura: International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa* 98, no. 1 (2008): 148.

extend God's kingdom and to transform the world.<sup>18</sup> So, translating *ekklēsia* as “church” is anachronistic and confusing, since it confers upon her a wrong identity. Furthermore, “church” is awash with partisan political shades that circumvent transformation. For instance, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Church of England was distinctly a state church and a pillar of political establishment that rejuvenated old corrupt practices.<sup>19</sup> Besides, African denominations' involvement with partisan politics greatly contributed to the loss of African *ekklēsia*'s identity and missional focus which leads to defective ecclesiology.<sup>20</sup>

### Petra

The debate among scholars is on *whether petra* refers to Peter, his confession, or to Christ.<sup>21</sup> That it refers to Peter is based on the view that Jesus was speaking to

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<sup>18</sup> Wilhelmus J. C. Weren, *Studies in Matthew's Gospel: Literary Design, Intertextuality, and Social Setting*, Biblical Interpretation Series 130 (Boston: Brill, 2014), 223; William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 240.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Harling, *The Waning of “Old Corruption”: The Politics of Economical Reform in Britain, 1779-1846* (Oxford [England], New York: Clarendon Press & Oxford University Press, 1996), 143-162, 195-212, 221-237.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Magezi and Tagwirei, Kimion, “A Critical Assessment of Church and Political Engagement in Zimbabwe under the New Dispensation,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43, no. 1 (2022): 1-12; Innocent Gwizo, Elisha Kwabena Marfo, and Tabua Kotobalavu, “Party Politics Involvement: A Case for Church Identity and Mission in Africa, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2017, 1-20,” *Journal of AIIAS African Theological Association* 7, no. 1 (2017): 1-20.

<sup>21</sup> Craig D. Saunders, *A Mediator in Matthew: An Analysis of the Son of Man's Function in the First Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2021), 97-98, fn. 4.

him directly and that his Aramaic and Greek names mean rock.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the *Petros/Petra* wordplay (v. 18) is divisive. While some hold that it refers to Peter, others maintain that such wordplays during the first century CE differentiated the two names.<sup>23</sup> Most scholars agree that no first century Jew would have acquiesced if it referred to Peter due to the Hebrew Bible's rock motif which referred to God or Jesus. Besides, *Petros* and *Petra* do not refer to the same thing due to the gender contrast and the shift from second to the third person.<sup>24</sup> While the former refers to unmoveable rock, the latter refers to a moveable or throwable stone (2 Macc 1:16; 4:41; 1 Pet 2:8). Occasionally, Peter showed reliable and rock-like integrity, yet he exhibited indecisive and unpredictable character (Matt 26:30–35, 76; Mark 14:26–31; Luke 22:31–34; John 13:1–10; Acts 1–5, 9–10). Perhaps, his unreliable character was similar to *tēn ammon* (the sand), which could not resist rain and winds (Matt 7:26), hence he is most likely not the unmoveable rock.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Susanna Asikainen, *Jesus and Other Men: Ideal Masculinities in the Synoptic Gospels*, Biblical Interpretation Series 159 (Boston: Brill, 2018), 80–81.

<sup>23</sup> Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Baker's Greek New Testament Library (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford, 2005), 311.

<sup>24</sup> Milton Spenser Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (Cambridge, Ohio: Christian Publishing House, 2021), 120–122; Robert H. Gundry, *Peter: False Disciple and Apostate According to Saint Matthew*, Second edition with responses to reviews (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 20, 25–26.

<sup>25</sup> Chrys C. Caragounis, *Peter and the Rock*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der Älteren Kirche 58 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 90.

According to Greek grammar rules, the definite article always agrees with the noun or adjective it describes in case, gender, and number. So, *tē* (the) plays a vital role in determining the noun to which an adjective is linked. Besides, demonstratives agree with their antecedent in gender and number, and the clause on which they stand governs their case. So, the indirect object of the feminine *tautē* (this) is not the masculine *Petros* but the feminine *petra* with which it agrees in gender, case, and number. The transition from the nominative masculine singular *Petros* to dative feminine singular *petra* implies that they do not refer to the same thing.<sup>26</sup> Further, the conversation between Peter and Jesus (vv. 15–17) suggests that *Petros* is not the antecedent of *tautē* (this). Jesus’s promise to build the *ekklēsia* is a response to Peter’s faith that Jesus is the Son of the Living God (Matt 16:16). Yet again, the aorist passive participle, *apokritheis* (he answered) (Matt 16:16–17), shows that God was the source of Peter’s confession. Therefore, while it excludes Peter as *petra*, it reinforces his confession as a revelation from God.

The central point of the dialogue and the subject of Peter’s confession is on who is Christ, hence *petra* may relate to the explicit faith rooted in the confession.<sup>27</sup> It is

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<sup>26</sup> Donald Fairbairn, *Understanding Language: A Guide for Beginning Students of Greek and Latin* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 95.

<sup>27</sup> John Cassian, “On the Incarnation of the Lord against Nestorians, 3.1–16 and 5: 1–4,” in *Christ: Through the Nestorian Controversy*, ed. Mark DelCogliano, The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 610; D. Jeffrey Bingham,

comparable to the faith in the foundation stone of Isa 28:16–18 which gives victory on death and salvation for those who trust Yahweh.<sup>28</sup> Peter and Paul read Isaiah's foundation as Christ, the only source of faith and guarantee of salvation (Rom 9:32–10:1–13; 1 Pet 2:4–7). So, *ekklēsia*, which is built on a solid rock-like foundation, stands on the faith Isaiah prophesied and is rooted in Peter's confession. Such faith revokes the accord with Sheol (Isaiah) and hinders the powers of death from reigning against her (16:18). Besides, since *autēs* (her) is used for emphasis and contrast, it probably contrasts *ekklēsia* with *petra*, the latter being the source from which the former gets strength to annul the powers of death.<sup>29</sup> Peter's erratic character could not have given the *ekklēsia* the ability to withstand them.

However, this article does not claim to end the debate on the *Petros/Petra* wordplay. For instance, D. A. Carson opines that while the two Greek words epitomize a small stone and a large stone respectively, their discrepancy is essentially confined to poetry. He assumes that the underlying Aramaic most likely used *Kephas* in the two clauses to refer to "rock." He makes this assumption because as he notes that the Peshitta – which is written in Syriac, a language cognate with Aramaic – uses the

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Irenaeus' Use of Matthew's Gospel in *Adversus Haereses*, *Traditio Exegetica Graeca* (Lovanii [Louvain, Belgium]: In aedibus Peters, 1998), 129.

<sup>28</sup> John F. A. Sawyer, *Isaiah through the Centuries*, Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2018), 168.

<sup>29</sup> See *The Pillars and the Cornerstone Jesus Tradition Parallels in the Catholic Epistles* (Delft: Uitgeverij Eburon, 2018).

same terminology in the two clauses. He, therefore, suggests,

*“The Greek makes the distinction between petros and petra simply because it is trying to preserve the pun, and in Greek the feminine petra could not very well serve as a masculine name.”<sup>30</sup>*

This, however, opens debate on the initial language with which Matthew’s Gospel was written, but which is beyond the scope of this study, though important. Yet, despite the view that an earlier version in Aramaic existed, it is overwhelmingly probable that Matthew’s Gospel was initially written in Greek.<sup>31</sup> As Stanley E. Porter persuasively asserts, Jesus spoke with Pilate in Greek during his trial, and that Matt 16:17–19 could have been originally delivered in Greek.<sup>32</sup>

## Verbs and verbal participles

Turning to the future indicative active *dōsō* (will give), aorist active subjunctive *dēsēs* (bind) and *lusēs* (loose), and the perfect passive participles *dedemenon* (having been bound) and *lelumēnon* (having been loosed), it is critical to ask whether they refer to a privilege given to Peter. S. T. Bloomfield maintains that a key is used for

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<sup>30</sup> D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, Revised edition, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995), 368.

<sup>31</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, Texas: Waco Books, 1993), lxxv.

<sup>32</sup> Stanley E. Porter, “Did Jesus Ever Teach in Greek?,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44, no. 2 (1993): 225, 229–235.

locking or unlocking, hence, to have it is to possess the authority to lock or unlock. So, *tas kleidas* (the key) figuratively refers to the power and authority given to Peter and explains what it means to build the *ekklēsia* on *petra*. Moreover, since Peter first opened the gospel to Jews and Gentiles, it refers to him, while vv. 18–19 discloses the privileges given to him.<sup>33</sup> However, since the subjunctive is an indefinite mood of doubtful assertion, it relates to the future.<sup>34</sup>

The above stimulates doubt if Peter was to be given the keys in future, which was conceivably after the resurrection, especially during Pentecost. Furthermore, as a sign of opening and locking, *the keys* metaphorically refer to ushering people into the knowledge of God's kingdom (cf. Luke 11:52) rather than barring them. Peter never barred or allowed people to enter the kingdom of heaven; he only preached repentance and forgiveness of sin. The people who believed were added to the *ekklēsia* (Acts 2:38–41) and, by extension, to God's kingdom.<sup>35</sup> So, it is extremely probable that *the keys* refer to preaching repentance and forgiveness of sin, which elicit faith in

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<sup>33</sup> Bloomfield, *Hē kainē diathekē*, 96.

<sup>34</sup> William W. Goodwin, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses of the Greek Verb*, Cambridge Library Collection - Classics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2–12; C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge [Eng]: University Press, 1953), 121–123.

<sup>35</sup> Maximilian Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, Subsidia Biblica (Roma: Gregorian University Press, 2016), 52–53; D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, First edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 55.



Christ, the Son of the living God, and the means by which the *ekklēsia* exists.<sup>36</sup>

The inexact translation of the aorist subjunctives, *dēsēs* (bind) and *lusēs* (loose), and the perfect passive participles, *dedemenon* (having been bound) and *lelumenon* (having been loosed), may have caused ecclesiology to get its direction and purpose from missiology.<sup>37</sup> So, little attention has been given to the view that Christology nurtures and shapes ecclesiology, as implied by the affinity between the body and the head (Eph 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18).<sup>38</sup> The New American Standard Bible's translation of verse 19 reads, "Whatever you shall bind (*ean dēsēs*) on earth shall have been bound (*estai dedemenon*) in heaven, and whatever you shall loose (*ean lusēs*) on earth shall have been loosed (*estai lelumenon*) in heaven."

Fittingly, when *ean* (if, any time or whenever) is linked to both *dēsēs* (bind) and *lusēs* (loose) and is used with the Greek relative pronoun *ó* (whoever or whatever), it depicts a conditional indefinite future. So, binding and loosing on earth occurs since they were first decided in

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<sup>36</sup> See Donald Werner, *Repentance is the Key That Unlocks the Kingdom of Heaven* (Morrisville, NC: Lulu Com, 2021).

<sup>37</sup> Jan M. de Beer, *The Implications of Ecclesiology's Understanding*, 70–72.

<sup>38</sup> J. David Moser, "Totus Christus: A Proposal for Protestant Christology and Ecclesiology," *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 29, no. 1 (2020): 3–30; Nicholas M. Healey, "Ordinary Theology, Theological Method and Constructive Ecclesiology," in *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, ed. Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis, *Explorations in Practical, Pastoral, and Empirical Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 17–20.

heaven. Furthermore, given that *dedemenon* and *lelumenon* are aorist subjunctives, they refer to a present state resulting from a past action.<sup>39</sup> Though God is not directly cited, they are divine passives, showing that he is the agent, hence they reveal his specific action on earth. Believers only validate what God has done already, because no person can forgive sin, bind, and loose. Besides, the use of the future before the perfect shows that events in heaven precede events on earth. God, thus, originates and executes binding and loosening and then reveals what must be bound and loosed to the *ekklēsia*. Furthermore, God bequeaths to her the authority to convey God's acts and will to the world.<sup>40</sup>

### **Reshaping African evangelical ecclesiology**

The definition of evangelical ecclesiology is problematic, owing to divisions and differences which often incites the rise of new denominations. Yet, while doctrinal or personal views on church government lead to countless images of evangelical ecclesiology, some shared traits among diverse evangelical groups may illumine it. These include the notion of *ekklēsia* as a borderless community, which God initiated, called, and to give loyalty

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<sup>39</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *The Gospel According to John: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2004), 383; Paul A. Beals, *A People for His Name: A Church Based Missions Strategy*, Revised edition (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1995), 64–65.

<sup>40</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2018), 474.

to Christ. Besides, she is the body and bride of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and her members are God's people regardless of their ethnicity, gender, or status. She exists to worship God, to build the body of believers, and to participate in God's mission by sharing the gospel of Christ to the world by word and deed. So, despite the absence of a fixed definition, the nature of evangelical ecclesiology and its contribution to the global dialogue on ecclesiology are obvious.<sup>41</sup> However, some scholars aver that African evangelical ecclesiology emphasises church structure, economic and human resources, and issues related to universality, as well as the nature, content, and mandate of mission. As a result, it is profoundly missiological, since mission is mainly seen as the church's ingenuity.<sup>42</sup> Yet, as Desmond Henry accentuates, "mission is not 'ecclesiocentric' (centred on the church) as has been historically promulgated, but, rather, mission is 'Theocentric' (centred on God)."<sup>43</sup>

Several scholars have lamented that African *ekklēsia* is not well armed to confront the multifaceted challenges due to her leaders' poor theological training.<sup>44</sup> Others insist that despite having been defined as evangelical and

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<sup>41</sup> Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2009), 12–17.

<sup>42</sup> Solomon Andria and Willem Saayman, "Missiology and Ecclesiology: A Perspective from Africa," *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* 31, no. 3 (2003): 503, 506, 509.

<sup>43</sup> Desmond Henry, "A Vision for the Sending of the Church in Botswana," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32, no. 1 (March 4, 2011): 2.

<sup>44</sup> Detlef Kapteina, "The Formation of African Evangelical Theology," *Journal of Evangelical Theology* 25, no. 1 (2006): 61.

socially involved, she has failed to influence African societies due to her fruitless ecclesiology. Besides, she lacks relevant theological reflections, objective ideas, values, and practices. Her hierarchical and denominational structure oblige Christians to give loyalty to denominations and their prejudiced doctrines, which impede them from working together.<sup>45</sup> Yet the people of God form a community of believers and sharing one faith, despite belonging to varied denominations and coming from different ethnic groups. Besides, African evangelical ecclesiology frequently focuses on tasks that make denominations different rather than what unites them. So, a clear gap exists, perhaps due to paying insignificant attention to the link between ecclesiology and Christology. Yet as Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch declare, “Christology is the singularly most important factor in shaping our mission in the world and the forms of *ecclesia* and ministry that result from that engagement.”<sup>46</sup>

Whereas the aim is not to refute the undeniable relationship between missiology and ecclesiology, Christology should nurture and shape ecclesiology. As it were, God not only reveals Godself in and through Christ but also imparts mission to the *ekklēsia* via Christ and the

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<sup>45</sup> Andria and Saayman, *Missiology and Ecclesiology*, 503–517; Willem Saayman, “‘Missionary by Its Very Nature ...’ A Time to Take Stock,” *Missionalia* 28, no. 1 (2000): 15–16; Tite Tienou, “The Theological Task of the Church in Africa: Where Are We Now and Where Should We Be Going?,” *East Africa Journal for Evangelical Theology* 6, no. 1 (1987): 3.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church* (Peabody, Mass., Sydney: Hendrickson Publishers and Strand Publishers, 2009), 41–43.

Holy Spirit. The authority of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit enables her to participate in the *Missio Dei*.<sup>47</sup> Besides, God initiates binding and loosing and then discloses what must be bound or loosed. Relatedly, the visible actions of *ekklēsia* verify God's presence and activity in the world.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, since evangelical ecclesiology accepts the Bible as the normative and authoritative source of life and functions of the church,<sup>49</sup> its faithful translation and interpretation should nurture and shape African evangelical ecclesiology. As it were, it is widely accepted that translation, interpretation, and doctrinal formation are inseparable. Yet, inaccurate translations and interpretations lead to inconsistent doctrines.<sup>50</sup>

It scarcely requires elaboration that Matt 16:16–19 is a decisive ecclesiological text which creates concrete and

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<sup>47</sup> Timothy A. Van Aarde, "The Relation of God's Mission and the Mission of the Church in Ephesians," *Missionalia* 44, no. 3 (2017): 296; Gailyn van Rheen, *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014), 70.

<sup>48</sup> Theodore J. Hopkins, "How Christology Shapes Ecclesiology and Missiology," *Concordia Theological Journal* 4, no. 1 (2016): 34–45; John Webster, *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T & T Clark, 2016), 153.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Lee Ochieng Oduor, "Christological Reflections: A Biblical Perspective," *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion* 5, no. 1 (2022): 16; Paul Adomako-Mensah, "Christology, Pneumatology and Ecclesiology – 'Theology Proper,'" *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 4, no. 1 (2018): 228.

<sup>50</sup> Origen, *Origen on First Principles: Being Koetschau's Text of the De Principiis*, ed. Paul Koetschau, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), 6; Julius R. Mantey, "Evidence That the Perfect Tense in John 20: 23 and Matthew 16: 19 is Mistranslated," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 16, no. 3 (1973): 133–134.

deep relationship between Jesus and *ekklēsia*. As such, several interpreters have given insightful hints that Christology is the base of ecclesiology.<sup>51</sup> Noticeably, Peter's confession is Christological (v. 16) and Jesus's rejoinder is not only ecclesiological, but also it discloses that God initiates the missiological tasks of the *ekklēsia* (vv. 17–19). There is, thus, a clear link between Christology and ecclesiology, since Jesus added ecclesiological hints and signs to Peter's confession.<sup>52</sup> Yet, as Michael J. Berry avers, a mistranslation or deliberate politically propelled translation of *ekklēsia* has stimulated an ecclesiology which impedes denominations from working together. Rather than emphasising what it means to be a gathering of the people of God, it places more emphasis on buildings. This disconnects the church from the people she is called to serve.

Besides, the Emmanuel motif in Matthew's Gospel discloses that God lives in and reveals Godself to the community that Christ has gathered. The same community conveys the divine presence in the world. Christology must, thus, nurture and reshape African evangelical ecclesiology. This would facilitate and empower the African *ekklēsia* to reshape itself into a borderless community. It would rekindle her to include all the people that God has called and chosen to belong to Christ regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, class, or

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<sup>51</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew in History: Interpretation, Influence, and Effects* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 60.

<sup>52</sup> John Yueh-Han Yieh, *One Teacher: Jesus' Teaching Role in Matthew's Gospel Report* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2004), 240–241.

status. An enduring alertness that the African *ekklēsia* should always exist for Christ and witness of Christ would be created.<sup>53</sup> The aim of African evangelical ecclesiology should, thus, focus on reviving faith in the Messiah and to expedite the implementation of missiological tasks given to the Messianic community (Matt 28:16–20).

In reading the Acts of the Apostles, it is clear that the missiological activities of *tēn ekklēsia* were expedited through the authority of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>54</sup> If Christology is to nurture and reshape African evangelical ecclesiology, it must be underlined that God, through Christ and the Holy Spirit, empowers *tēn ekklēsia* to transmit divine truth, which speeds deconstruction and reconstruction of current world orders. Besides, this christology empowers her to confront African realities so as to rebuild and renew the structures of human existence. It also generates the ability of the Church to embrace biblical values that enable transformation and purposely facilitate the development of ethical and transformative servant-leaders. African ecclesiology must be empowered in order to revive missiological tasks of effectively ushering and keeping people in God's kingdom and rebuilding African societies.

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<sup>53</sup> Jon S. Birch, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Disciple's Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2022), 65.

<sup>54</sup> A. Boyd Luter and Nicholas Dodson, "Matthean Theological Priority: Making Sense of Matthew's Proto-Ecclesiology in Acts 1–14," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 61, no. 1 (2018): 63–74.

## Conclusion

The interpretation of key terms in Matt 16:18–19 has been controversial, yet philological criticism has shown that *ekklēsia* refers to a borderless community of believers. In African contexts ecclesiology must stimulate all denominations to work together for the common good. It should motivate the African *ekklēsia* to give her loyalty to Christ and not to denominational leaders and/or doctrines. As noted, *petra* refers to Peter's confession and the faith ingrained in it, as the terms in v. 19 refer to privileges given to the followers of Christ, not just Peter. African evangelical ecclesiology must, therefore, be built on the faith entrenched in Peter's confession. If Christology is prioritized to nurture and shape African evangelical ecclesiology, this shall empower the African *ekklēsia* to execute her missiological task of transforming society. However, she can only do this through the authority Jesus gave her to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18–20) by preaching repentance and forgiveness of sin, which are *the keys* of the kingdom.

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