

**SIXTY PEOPLE  
WHO SHAPED  
THE CHURCH**

---

**LEARNING FROM SINNERS, SAINTS,  
ROGUES, AND HEROES**

**ALTON GANSKY**



**BakerBooks**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2014 by Alton Gansky

Published by Baker Books  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-0-8010-1539-7

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible®, copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations labeled HCSB are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible, copyright 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations labeled KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

The author is represented by MacGregor Literary, Inc.

14 15 16 17 18 19 20 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



Alton Gansky, *Sixty People Who Shaped the Church*  
Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

To Dr. George Hare and Dr. Gary Coombs,  
chancellor and president  
of Southern California Seminary, respectively,  
for showing me the joys of theology.



# CONTENTS

- Acknowledgments 11  
Introduction 13
- 1. Peter** (*c. 1 BC–64 AD*) 15  
Cowardly disciple who became a bold preacher. The first church's first pastor. Brought heart to the faith.
  - 2. Paul** (*5–67*) 25  
Apostle to the world, author of over half of the New Testament. The church's first theologian. Brought intellect to the faith.
  - 3. Josephus** (*37–100*) 33  
Secularist who provided a historical backdrop to Christ and the church.
  - 4. Polycarp** (*69–155*) 37  
Bishop who embraced martyrdom for the right to reject the gods of Rome.
  - 5. Justin Martyr** (*100–165*) 42  
Philosopher turned apologist who refused to make an offering to the gods to secure his freedom.
  - 6. Clement of Alexandria** (*150–215*) 47  
Theologian who defended the faith against the Gnostics, the original New Age movement.
  - 7. Origen** (*185–254*) 52  
Brilliant scholar who lived in the wealth of faith and knowledge while depriving himself of shoes and food.
  - 8. Diocletian** (*244–311*) 56  
Emperor who persecuted the church and in doing so helped spread the gospel.
  - 9. Eusebius of Caesarea** (*c. 264–c. 340*) 61  
Church historian whose groundbreaking work is still quoted today.
  - 10. Constantine** (*285–337*) 65  
First Christian emperor—or maybe not. Either way, he made Christianity acceptable.
  - 11. Athanasius** (*295–373*) 71  
Intellectual bishop who served the church even though exiled five times.
  - 12. Ambrose of Milan** (*337–397*) 75  
Renaissance man ten centuries before the Renaissance. Biblical scholar, musician, teacher, and defender of orthodoxy.
  - 13. Jerome** (*342–420*) 81  
Bible translator whose translation was used for a millennium.

## CONTENTS

- 14. John Chrysostom**  
(347–407) 85  
Orator and archbishop of Constantinople. A preacher who elevated the preaching arts.
- 15. Augustine of Hippo**  
(354–430) 90  
Pagan turned Christian who became a theologian for the ages.
- 16. Pope Leo I** (c. 400–461) 99  
First to declare the supremacy of the pope in all church matters.
- 17. The Venerable Bede**  
(c. 673–735) 104  
Linguist, translator, and important church historian.
- 18. Anselm** (1033–1109) 108  
Bishop who didn't want to be, and who argued for the existence of God and refused a king's request.
- 19. Francis of Assisi**  
(1183–1226) 112  
Friar and gentle founder of the Franciscans. Believed the best sermon was the Christian life. Set up the first manger scene.
- 20. Thomas Aquinas**  
(1225–1274) 120  
Odd-looking man whom fellow students called "the dumb ox." The dumb ox went on to be called "the doctor of angels." Brilliant thinker.
- 21. John Wycliffe**  
(c. 1320–1384) 126  
Theologian, translator, and reformer who gave the world the first Bible in English.
- 22. Nicolaus Copernicus**  
(1473–1543) 130  
Quiet, unassuming Polish astronomer who showed that the earth need not be the center of the solar system to be the center of God's love.
- 23. Martin Luther**  
(1483–1546) 133  
Former monk, Reformer, and writer who started a movement that split from the Catholic Church. Unintentional founder of the Lutheran church.
- 24. Ulrich Zwingli**  
(1484–1531) 141  
Radical Reformer whose love for the Bible (in an age when priests were often unfamiliar with Scripture) led him to break with Catholic tradition. It was a break he was willing to die for.
- 25. King Henry VIII**  
(1491–1547) 146  
Ruler who separated church from state and started the Anglican church.
- 26. Ignatius of Loyola**  
(1492–1556) 150  
Founder of the Jesuits who blended intellectual and theological principles.
- 27. William Tyndale**  
(c. 1494–1536) 153  
Priest who spoke seven languages and was excommunicated and executed for making an English translation of the Bible.
- 28. Menno Simons**  
(1496–1561) 158  
Former Catholic priest who became a leader among the Anabaptists. His dedication led to the establishment of the Mennonite order.
- 29. John Calvin**  
(1509–1564) 164  
Influential theologian and founder of Calvinism. His theological works are the basis for denominations like the Presbyterians.
- 30. John Foxe** (1516–1587) 171  
Author of *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, a centuries-old reminder that faith grew from the deaths of courageous men and women.
- 31. Jacob Arminius**  
(1560–1609) 175  
Theologian and the other half of the Calvin/Arminius debate. His doctrine is held by many Protestant churches.

## CONTENTS

- 32. Francis Bacon**  
(1561–1626) 181  
Man of science and advocate of the scientific method; lawyer and statesman. In all these things, a man of faith.
- 33. Galileo Galilei**  
(1564–1642) 184  
Astronomer and imperfect man of faith. Often misunderstood by history.
- 34. Brother Lawrence**  
(1611–1691) 190  
Simple monk whose brief writings continue to promote an inward path to God's love.
- 35. Blaise Pascal**  
(1623–1662) 193  
Mathematician of deep faith who formulated Pascal's Wager. An apologist for the faith from the ranks of science.
- 36. John Bunyan**  
(1628–1688) 198  
Lay preacher who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* while in jail for not conforming to the Church of England. The book remains an inspiration to Christians worldwide.
- 37. Isaac Watts** (1674–1748) 203  
Writer of some of the most enduring hymns, and also a genius in other areas including languages such as Latin, Greek, French, and Hebrew.
- 38. George Frideric Handel**  
(1685–1759) 206  
Failure who was bankrupt, ill, depressed, and surrounded by people who called him "that German nincompoop." In less than a month he composed 260 pages of fully orchestrated music called the *Messiah*.
- 39. Jonathan Edwards**  
(1703–1758) 210  
Preacher whom history has painted as a judgmental sermonizer for his message, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."
- 40. John Wesley**  
(1703–1791) 214  
Anglican minister intent on saving others who found his own salvation after a mission trip. He laid the foundation of Methodism.
- 41. Charles Wesley**  
(1707–1788) 221  
Often called the "forgotten Wesley," he wrote some of the best-known hymns in history.
- 42. George Whitefield**  
(1714–1770) 225  
Orator in an age of orators whose sermons were so powerful that worshipers on two continents went out of their way to hear him.
- 43. John Newton**  
(1725–1807) 232  
Slave trader who became a living example of the power of repentance.
- 44. William Wilberforce**  
(1759–1833) 236  
Dogged enemy of slavery who found his strength for the fight in his faith, and saw the plight of others and made it his public duty to change a nation's thinking.
- 45. William Carey**  
(1761–1834) 240  
Persistent missionary and self-admitted plodder who spent over forty years in India with only a small number of converts.
- 46. Charles Finney**  
(1792–1875) 245  
Lawyer who gave up pleading cases for men to pleading the case for Christ, and in the process, became the father of revivalism in America.
- 47. William Gladstone**  
(1809–1898) 249  
Englishman who showed that faith and politics are not enemies; that political life can be a way of serving Jesus.

## CONTENTS

- 48. Fanny Crosby**  
(1820–1915) 252  
Writer of eight thousand hymns, four books of poetry, and hundreds of secular poems. A significant accomplishment for any able-bodied person, but astounding for a woman living with blindness.
- 49. Fyodor Dostoyevsky**  
(1821–1881) 257  
Famous Russian novelist and former prisoner who wrote with a spiritual insight, dealing with the harsh reality of life, not diminishing reality but still portraying hope.
- 50. William Booth**  
(1829–1912) 261  
Englishman who set his sights on the poor and the overlooked, ministering to the forgotten, the lost, the drunken, and the homeless, and founded the Salvation Army, an organization as persistent as it is unique.
- 51. Hudson Taylor**  
(1832–1905) 264  
Dedicated missionary who at age twenty-one was already on his way to China to share the gospel with a nation few knew much about.
- 52. Charles Spurgeon**  
(1834–1892) 269  
British Baptist preacher who left a mark so bold and bright that none but Billy Graham could match him.
- 53. Dwight L. Moody**  
(1837–1899) 274  
Chicago native with the equivalent of a fifth-grade education who turned his enthusiasm from business to evangelism.
- 54. Billy Sunday**  
(1862–1935) 280  
Former Pittsburgh Pirates center fielder who left the field as an athlete and returned an evangelist, a prancing preacher to millions over the course of his ministry.
- 55. Oswald Chambers**  
(1874–1917) 284  
Artist turned pastor whose ministry lasted only fifteen years before his death at age forty-three. His book *My Utmost for His Highest* is still found on countless bookshelves in Christian homes.
- 56. G. K. Chesterton**  
(1874–1936) 288  
Poet, essayist, humorist, and more, this four-hundred-pound man produced a legacy.
- 57. T. S. Eliot** (1888–1965) 291  
Author well-known for his poetry and plays who is less well-known for his faith, yet Christian principles permeated his work and he argued against the humanists of his day, including Bertrand Russell, who believed a free man worshiped only other men.
- 58. C. S. Lewis** (1898–1963) 294  
Professor of medieval literature who came to faith in an intellectual way, and his work continued in that vein.
- 59. Henry Morris**  
(1918–2006) 299  
Father of the Creation Science movement and a scientist turned writer who spoke against evolution and for the creation event as recorded in the Bible.
- 60. Billy Graham** (1918–) 303  
Young aspiring athlete who went on to preach to eighty million people and make use of movies, radio, television, and print media.
- Notes 309

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the scholars of history who have made a difficult subject understandable. These often unheralded researchers have provided a great service to everyone who understands that history is the light that illuminates the future.

I also wish to thank my agent, Dr. Jerry “Chip” MacGregor, for conceiving the concept for this book and for his constant support. Happy is the writer who has a good agent; blessed is the writer who has an agent who is also a friend.

For every book there is a team of editors, people who believe in the dream enough to invest time and talent. The good people at Baker Books are great teammates, and their talent and experience are boundless. Special thanks goes to Jon Wilcox, my editor, for his patience and editorial prodding.

Heartfelt thanks goes to longtime friend and fellow writer Jack Cavanaugh, who made his training as a historian and his massive library available to me, and who also endured scores of questions.

I would be remiss if I did not thank my wife, Becky, for her undying encouragement and patience during the writing of this book (and all the others).



## INTRODUCTION

For about a decade, I made my living in architecture, drawing plans ranging from small room additions to mid-rise, steel-frame office buildings. Every building starts with the foundation, then comes the framing, plumbing, electrical, and interior and exterior coverings. Christianity has a lot in common with buildings. The church, as we see it today, did not spring forth fully formed. Doctrines that we take for granted were debated, researched, and fought over before they were accepted. Even then, not all denominations agree. We, as a church, are still in the process of becoming.

In school, I learned there were two ways to teach history. There are those who teach it as a string of events from the days of the ancients to the present. That's fine, but I better enjoyed those classes that taught me about the people behind the events. I found it far more interesting to know about how Ben Franklin lived than about what he achieved as ambassador to France. Most people I know are the same. History intimidates us; historical characters intrigue us.

One of my favorite television programs is *History Detectives* on PBS. In the show, a team with wide-ranging backgrounds track down the history of arcane objects and the people who owned them. The objects can be anything from a flag used at a women's suffrage campaign to a business card used by a gambler with ties to the mob. People, not historical dates, remain the center of the program.

I have undertaken a similar approach in what you're about to read. I wanted to focus on the people who shaped the church. Of course,

## INTRODUCTION

by doing so, we will see the events that molded the contemporary church, but we will study the flesh-and-blood folk.

Is this important? I think so. Church historian Bruce L. Shelley said, “Many Christians today suffer from historical amnesia.”<sup>1</sup> He goes on to note that the time immediately after the apostles up to the present day is a blank in the modern Christian mind. This is a shame. The churches we attend today exist and have been shaped by remarkable and fascinating people. Some sacrificed dearly, like the Anabaptist minister who was executed for baptizing his children, and the misunderstood scientists who not only changed science but changed the way we look at ourselves. And some of these people who shaped the church weren’t even Christians.

This book is a collection of sixty people who shaped the church: sinners, saints, rogues, and heroes. I began with a much longer list and agonized over each personality I crossed off. I felt as if I should apologize to each one. Still, a book must have parameters.

In these pages you’ll discover the intriguing lives of people you may or may not have heard of, and in each case see how their lives changed the way we live our Christianity in the twenty-first century. This book is not a dusty tome of historical facts but rather a book about ordinary Christians who made extraordinary contributions to the church—*your* church.

So sit back, and let me introduce you to some remarkable people.

Alton Gansky, Litt.D.

---

---

# PETER

## *Blue-Collar Businessman*

(c. 1 BC–64 AD)

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Simon Peter (Matt. 16:16)

Visit a dozen churches, each preaching a sermon about the disciple Peter, and you're likely to leave with a dozen different views of the man. Was Peter the big, verbally clumsy man so often depicted? Was he a boastful man needing attention who ultimately folded under pressure from an unrelenting servant girl? Or is he the foundation stone for the church and the first pope? Peter has a bit of an image problem. No one doubts his importance to the early church and no one questions his role as a disciple; many, however, focus on just one or two aspects of the man and so miss the giant of faith who forever changed the church.

Peter was part of Jesus' ministry from the beginning. He was brash and exuberant, so much so that he often made statements he would have to backpedal from moments later. He was a blue-collar businessman, a man who worked long and hard.

## **A Workingman**

Jesus came as a commoner, and he chose commoners to lead his church. Every Christmas season we celebrate the incarnation of Jesus—the coming of God in the flesh. We set up manger scenes to show the humble, harsh environment that served as the backdrop of Jesus’ entrance. Preachers remind us that Jesus wasn’t born in a palace or a mansion; his parents were people of humble means living their lives under Roman oppression and the religious scrutiny that marked the day. Jesus never departed from these humble roots. He even informed an eager follower that he had no place to rest his head (Luke 9:57–58), meaning he claimed no home of his own. Jesus depended on the support of others. It seems natural that he would pull his disciples from the ranks of those with calloused hands or who were social outcasts such as Matthew the tax collector.

Peter was one of the former. He was a fisherman, part of a family business. His days were spent mending and casting nets along with directing his brothers and probably other workers. The best we can tell, the business was a good one based in Capernaum (Mark 1:21, 29), a town situated on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Commercial fishing was difficult work, but it was practical, oftentimes profitable, and the kind of occupation a man could invest his life in, support his family with, and leave to his sons when the time came.

Then Jesus came on the scene with an offer to make Peter and his brother Andrew “fishers of men.”

Peter’s calling came in stages, the first while he and others were plying their trade (Mark 1:16–20). Jesus must have been known to the people of Capernaum, for Peter, Andrew, James, and John all seemed to respond to Jesus without hesitation. They simply stopped their work and followed Jesus, leaving behind their nets. This is significant; few laborers would leave the tools of their trade behind. Perhaps Peter had employees or other family with whom he left the business. Either way, Peter appeared decisive in his acceptance of Jesus’ offer.

Why choose Peter? Why the other fishermen? What did Jesus see in them that he didn’t see in others? The answers to these questions

aren't fully revealed until three years later. Peter's light would not shine until the darkness was impossibly thick.

Peter has given us an important but often overlooked gift: he was flawed. He spoke out of turn, he challenged Jesus, and he was often slow to understand his Master's teaching. In other words, we can relate to him. Movies and books often offer plastic heroes, those who are free of faults and mistakes. The Bible shows its heroes in a realistic fashion. Peter is one of the most important people in New Testament times, yet is shown with warts and all. We see his courage and cowardice; we see him in moments of great insight despite his sluggish grasp of Jesus' message; we see him hiding, fearful of facing the same people who crucified Jesus, and yet later hear his bold proclamation of faith.

Peter. Cephas. Simon. Simeon. It was not unusual for someone like Peter to be known by several names. His home of Galilee, the northern part of the Holy Land, was a cosmopolitan area and most Jews went by three names based on language: Aramaic, spoken by first-century Jews; Latin, the language of the Roman occupiers; and Greek, still widely used in Peter's day (the New Testament was written in Greek). It was common for people in Peter's day to have a working knowledge of all of these languages.

The man we call Peter was named Simeon bar-Jonah (Matt. 16:17). Simeon is the Hebrew name that becomes Simon in Greek (hence, "Simon Bar-Jonah" in the Matthew account). His Aramaic name was Cephas, which means "rock," hence Petros in Greek, which becomes Peter in English. Four versions of his name, but one person. It is none other than Jesus who first calls Peter "Cephas."

"You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas" (John 1:42).

### **Chairman of the Board—Peter as Leader**

Jesus had many followers. At the beginning of the church, about 120 of them met for prayer (Acts 1:15). There was a closer circle of disciples referred to as "the Seventy" who went out in pairs with the message of Jesus. The most familiar circle, however, was "the Twelve," the hand-selected disciples who accompanied Jesus throughout his

ministry. This is the group we normally think of when we hear the term “the disciples.” There was also one smaller ring of men around Jesus. Of the twelve disciples, there was an inner circle comprised of three: Peter, James, and John. These three saw and experienced things the others did not. They saw the resurrection of the synagogue official’s daughter (Mark 5:35–43), the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28–45), and were with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–46).

In ancient texts like those of the New Testament, prominent individuals were listed first. In every mention of this inner circle, Peter’s name comes first. Every time. This is also true for each list of disciples (Matt. 10:2). When representatives from the temple came to collect the temple tax (all Jews paid a tax to meet the needs of the temple in Jerusalem), they came to Peter. At the greatest event in history, the resurrection, angels told the women who had come to the tomb to take the news to Peter and the disciples.

He was also the spokesman for the group, speaking to Jesus on their behalf. He was, by nature, a leader of men and the others deferred to him. Still, he was far from perfect.

## **Flubs and All**

There’s a tendency to portray Peter as a big, slow-thinking lug. This is a mistake. It wasn’t ignorance that tripped up Peter but rather enthusiasm. Even his greatest fault, denying Christ on that crucial night, didn’t arise from ignorance or even self-preservation but rather confusion. Several events show his unbridled enthusiasm.

### *Peter Walks on Water*

The Gospel of Matthew records a strange event (14:22–36). The disciples were taking a boat across the Sea of Galilee while Jesus stayed ashore for a time of private prayer. As sometimes happens with large inland seas, a storm arose quickly, battering the boat and the disciples in it. Although Peter and some of the others were seasoned sailors, the storm was proving too much for them. Through the darkness they saw the dim figure of Jesus walking on the water, untroubled by the gale. At first they assumed the figure to be a ghost.

What could make things worse? Darkness *and* ghosts. Then Jesus called to them, telling them not to fear.

Peter makes a strange request: “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water!”

Jesus simply said, “Come.”

For a brief time, Peter did what only Jesus has done: walk on water in a storm. Then he took his eyes from Jesus, focusing on the stinging winds and threatening waves. As Peter began to sink into the storm-tossed sea, Jesus reached out and rescued him. Although it wasn’t a perfect example of faith, it was nonetheless bold and showed great courage. Peter, if for only a moment, displayed a belief that Jesus could enable him to do the impossible.

### *Jesus Washes Peter’s Feet*

During Jesus’ most difficult day, those hours before his betrayal, arrest, torture, and execution, he gathered with his disciples in the upper room where he instituted the Lord’s Supper. He also did something that stunned the disciples, especially Peter: Jesus washed their feet (see John 13:5–11). To the twenty-first-century mind, this may not seem like much, but washing someone else’s feet was considered demeaning in Jesus’ day. While it was customary to provide water so guests could clean the dust from their feet, it could not be required that the host do the job for his guests. Not even Jewish slaves could be required to wash the feet of another. Yet Jesus chose to do this humbling task.

It was too much for Peter. Seeing Jesus on his knees, water bowl nearby and towel in hand, unsettled him. “Never shall You wash my feet!” he exclaimed. Jesus’ response was pointed: “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.”

That brought an immediate change. “Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head.”

### *The List Is Longer*

Matthew 16:21–23 records Jesus’ harshest correction of Peter. Jesus had been once again teaching the disciples about his pending suffering and death in Jerusalem and the resurrection that would

follow. Peter, focused only on Jesus' words about his death, proclaimed, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You." It was beyond imagination that his Lord would go through such affliction. Peter's words come across as a reprimand and Jesus returns it with intensity. "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." What makes this interesting is Jesus had, moments before, called Peter and his confession of faith the rock upon which the church would be founded. Again, Peter's unrestrained enthusiasm brought him grief.

Peter would do other things that he would regret, but none more devastating than making a promise he couldn't keep. In the same upper room where Jesus had washed his feet, there unfolded a brief dialogue that haunted Peter the rest of his life.

Jesus: "You will all fall away because of me this night, for it is written, 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.' But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee."

Peter: "Even though all may fall away because of you, I will not."

Jesus: "Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny me three times."

Peter: "Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny you." (see Matt. 26:31-35)

It is difficult to understand the depth of sorrow percolating in Jesus. Before him were the eleven remaining disciples, Judas having already left to become history's most famous traitor, each staring back at him and attempting a courage they surely felt but couldn't maintain.

They left the upper room and walked from the city, across the Kidron valley to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus would begin an inward suffering that few can imagine. Peter, James, and John slept nearby while he agonized.

Then came the hour of arrest. A mob consisting of Roman soldiers, temple guards, religious leaders, and their servants, perhaps numbering in the hundreds, came for Jesus. At the front of the pack was Judas.

## PETER

Peter, in defense of Jesus, courageously attacked with his sword, cutting off the ear of a servant. We can be certain Peter wasn't aiming for the man's ear. Peter was ready to die to protect Jesus—just as he said.

Before further violence occurred, Jesus stopped Peter, told him to put the sword away, and healed the wounded servant. Jesus left with the mob willingly, leaving Peter and the others to follow at a distance.

After enduring much persecution, Jesus was led to the home of the high priest Caiaphas. Peter and others waited in the courtyard of the house.

A servant girl approached Peter, and said, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean."

Peter responded, "I do not know what you are talking about." He let the lie hang in the air and moved to the gate.

Another servant girl spoke up. "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth."

Peter denied the accusation, adding an oath most likely calling God's judgment on himself if he were lying. "I do not know the man." He had come a long way from confessing Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Now he just referred to Jesus as "the man."

Then someone made the third accusation. "Surely you too are one of them; for even the way you talk gives you away." The last comment may have been a reference to Peter's Galilean accent.

Peter swore. Peter cursed. "I do not know the man!"

And then the rooster crowed. Peter fled in tears, a wreck (see Matt. 26:69–75).

Was this cowardice? Maybe, but he had been willing to take on a large crowd single-handedly, so something else must also have been at work. His world was collapsing. He had failed to protect Jesus in the garden; his Lord was bound and enduring abuse. In the maelstrom of emotion and confusion, Peter folded. It is doubtful anyone would have done better.

The memory would never leave him. It dogged his steps and haunted the halls of his mind. It also forged him into the greatest leader the church has seen. And all of this was just the first act.

## **From Darkness to Light**

The New Testament records twelve resurrection appearances of Christ. He appeared to key women such as Mary Magdalene, to the disciples in the upper room, and to as many as five hundred on a hillside in Galilee.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he records "He appeared to Cephas" (1 Cor. 15:5). *Cephas*, Peter's Aramaic name and the one Jesus gave him. We have no details of that meeting, just a reference to its occurrence. It was a private meeting between the denied and the denier. We have no idea what Jesus said, but whatever words passed restored Peter's faith and enlivened his mission.

A month later came Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples and other followers of Jesus. Scholars believe this to be the birth of the church. Prior to this event in Jerusalem, the church was nothing more than a huddle of frightened disciples and about 120 followers who feared they would suffer as Jesus had.

Preaching a message that still echoes through time, Peter, once the man backed down by a servant girl, called thousands of eyewitnesses at Pentecost to turn to God through faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2). Not only was the message of Christ's resurrection made clear, so was Peter's leadership role. Where once was a boastful man who descended into a nervous breakdown, there now stood a champion, fearless and outspoken. It was a finger-wagging sermon, one that not only exalted Jesus but laid the responsibility of a crucified Christ at the feet of religious leaders, political leaders, Romans, and all of those in the crowd who had chanted, "Crucify him!"

No one could back Peter down that day, or any day thereafter. A group numbering around 120 followers had, by day's end, grown to over three thousand.

## **On the Job Adjustments—Learning to Love the Gentiles**

Peter led the church in Jerusalem and its outreach for years after. He had to make several adjustments to his own thinking. Jews of the day had little respect for Gentiles. It would take a vision from

God for Peter to accept the idea that Gentiles could be Christians too (Acts 10:1–33). Peter had become teachable.

After years of leading the church in Jerusalem, Peter was called to leave Jerusalem and begin a mission to the Gentiles. Many think Paul was the first to take the message of Jesus to the Gentiles, but it was Peter who first charted that course. When it became Paul's primary mission, Peter had already been preaching to Gentiles for some time.

## **Pope?**

Peter remained faithful throughout his life. Unlike Paul, he did very little writing. The New Testament has only two of his books, 1 and 2 Peter. In them, we can sense his dedication to and love for the church. Peter was the first pastor/bishop and, along with the other disciples, one of the first missionaries. He was a transitional man who took a fledgling church and guided it into something great.

Jesus made two predictions about Peter. The first, Matthew 16:13–19, is the most debated:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.”

The debate centers on the supremacy of Peter over the other disciples. Roman Catholics and others see this as the setting apart of Peter to be the first pope. Protestants believe Jesus is talking about the confession of faith Peter makes but not about Peter himself. Certainly, Jesus bestowed a great deal of authority and responsibility on Peter, more than any other disciple. No matter what view we take on the

controversy, we can agree that Peter, from the day he was called by Jesus, was the leader of the disciples, and eventually was leader of the first church. Others would follow and do marvelous things, but there must always be a first—and Peter was it.

### **The Upside-Down Cross**

Peter was also one of the first to suffer under persecution, landing in jail several times for preaching about the resurrected Jesus. Persecution would spread throughout Jerusalem to the rest of the world. The New Testament doesn't reveal how Peter died, but tradition tells us that he was martyred in Rome and, at his request, crucified upside down.<sup>1</sup> There is also a tradition, an account also not found in the New Testament, that Peter's wife was also martyred, something he was forced to witness.<sup>2</sup>

Peter's life continues to inspire the church through the honest portrayal of his courage and his faults. He is the apostle behind the Gospel of Mark, most likely the first Gospel written. With the aid of John Mark, he became the first to spread the story of Jesus in written form. Through that Gospel and his two letters, he continues to guide the church that was born on Pentecost, the same day Peter was transformed into an unstoppable force.

An entire book would not be enough to analyze this great shaper of the church. One chapter scarcely does the job. Still, we see a complicated man who lost then regained his courage, a man who became the catalyst in the rise of Christianity. His contribution to the early church is matched only by one other man . . . Paul.