Thank you, Bob. I’ve been warned that responding to a paper on biblical literature by Bob Gundry is not a home game for me. Someone today said to me “Good luck tonight. You should have about as much chance tangling with Bob as the Angels do in Game 4 of their series with the Royals.”

But I have rushed in where Angels fear to tread as a form of homage. Bob, I assume you will appreciate engagement with your thesis rather than simply conventional platitudes. And I will count on others in the room—many biblical scholars themselves—to offer their own questions and fill in my gaps.

However, I can start with one platitude or two. Bob, in hosting this lecture let me salute your ongoing scholarly energy, your mentorship of so many scholars, and your faithful presence as a Westmont colleague. Congratulations on this festschrift and tribute from your very accomplished students.

And now, on to my response.

Your paper did rekindle my enjoyment of close textual analysis, for I do have a bit of the New Critic in me—that is, in the literary field, an interpretive impulse to trace the tapestry of symbolic patterns and linguistic threads within a self-contained work. I think your argument succeeds best in demonstrating that Matthew amplifies the false discipleship theme in his own self-contained narrative. Your argument also rests a good case on silence—pointing to moments when Peter might well have appeared but has conspicuously been pushed off stage. In fact, your paper made me wonder if Peter’s good press in Luke and John is, in part, a deliberate effort to rebuild his good name after Matthew got done with him. If you are right, then perhaps we can see some pro-Peter texture in Luke 24:12, a verse that does not appear in the earliest manuscripts. This belated brushstroke places Peter as a witness of Christ’s empty tomb, one who is “marveling” at the resurrection. Did it get added as part of an ongoing endeavor by Luke or other early Christians to rehabilitate Peter? (Of course, there are other possible reasons for Luke’s positive spin on Peter, including the primary influence of Mark as well as the full thematic arc of Peter’s story in Luke-Acts.)

I am much less persuaded, however, that Peter’s denial of Christ in Matthew brands him once and for all as a false disciple destined for eternal damnation—a tare in the wheat fields choking the harvest of the young church. No doubt, Peter’s denial here, as in the other gospels, is an act of cowardice and shame. But is there not other evidence in Matthew that counterbalances that side of Peter and leaves open the possibility for his restoration?
Let me build my case with four questions.

My first point is really a shout out to Moises Silva and his concerns that you are standing alone with your thesis. If you are right that Matthew portrays Peter as a false disciple and an eternally damned apostate in order to make a teaching or pastoral point (rather than a historical one), then doesn’t it seem that he has been a poor teacher? He has largely failed if it has taken two thousand years for someone in Santa Barbara to grasp that core lesson with much fervor. I do appreciate your reader-response appraisal as to why some groups (even many Christians) might be predisposed to ignore Peter’s ignominy in Matthew. But, as you know far better than I do, the scope of biblical criticism is wider and more varied than the three groups cited in the paper. It would take a DaVinci Code-like conspiracy theory to argue that the Catholic Church, the gospel harmonizers, or other evangelical sentimentalists could suppress Matthew’s critique of Peter and keep everyone in the Society of Biblical Literature under their sway. So, if Matthew was out to teach us something, why isn’t Peter’s damnation a more robust theme in the scholarly and pastoral discourse on Matthew?

Second, your case that Peter is eternally damned is more implicit than explicit. Isn’t that implicit case offset by some other explicit affirmations of Peter in Matthew’s text? I will leave it to better Greek scholars than me to debate the “rock” image with you, but just before that Jesus does declare Peter “blessed” for recognizing his messiahship. In Matthew 19, while responding directly to Peter about his future reward, Jesus tells him and the disciples about the twelve thrones that they will sit upon when the Son of Man is glorified in the “regeneration” or “the renewal of things.” In this same speech Jesus does observe that “many of the first will be last, and the last first,” which you relate to listing of disciples in Matthew 10. Admittedly, that list in Matthew 10 starts with Peter clearly identified as the “first,” though the last in the list is Judas Iscariot, identified early here in the position of shame reserved for the “one who betrayed him.” Judas’s moral fall, in order words, is forecast right from the get-go. But why not Peter also if Matthew is intent on the parallel? There is no similar allusion to Peter as the “one who denied him.” So I think we need to be careful how rigidly to apply the first-will-be-last, last-will-be-first formula to Matthew 10. I am not sure that the list in Matthew 10 is set up to be eventually inverted.

Third, I wonder if you place too much weight on the words “outside” and “bitterly” in the scene of Peter’s weeping to confirm eternal despair and damnation. True, Jesus does give many earlier warnings about “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” but from what I have read from scholars on these passages the “gnashing” indicates defiance, anger, and rage in the midst of eternal punishment. I miss the “gnashing of teeth” allusion (and the rage) in the scene with Peter. I’m not convinced that the language here is so obviously a variation on Mark’s text that it implies eternal despair and punishment rather than underscoring Mark’s theme of grief and remorse. The parallel with Judas’s weeping makes for a fine thematic motif, but does that thematic parallel establish moral equivalency, especially since later in the text
Peter appears re-established with the other disciples while Judas succumbs to suicide? Not all weeping is a signature of damnation. There is other “weeping” in the gospel—such as mothers’ weeping for their children after Herod’s slaughter of innocents. A similar point might be made about Peter’s movement outside, something that can clearly be understood as an effort to get away from the crowd and to be alone with his shame. There are other references to “outside” in Matthew; for instance, Jesus’s mother and brothers are even kept outside of his home while Jesus calls on his disciples to leave family behind. I can see how Peter, in his act of desertion and denial just after Jesus’s arrest, has separated himself from his master, but is that separation and shame once and for all beyond the mercy of God? Is Peter’s personal escape outside equal to God’s “casting out” of an unrepentant sinner into eternal darkness?

That leads me to my fourth and main question—which is a blend of psychology, audience analysis, and narrative denouement. If Peter’s weeping after the denial is not a sign of repentance—but rather an indication that he recognizes that he, like Judas, is eternally outside the grace of God—then why does he show up for duty in Matthew 28? Why is he among the “eleven” who are summoned by the risen Christ to the mountain in Galilee, where their doubts are confronted and they are given the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations and to baptize others in name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? If Peter is present there despite the fact that the Lord will deny him at the final judgment, then his loyalty to Jesus at that moment is self-delusion. Or we have to move toward theories that his future service and martyrdom in building the church as a “false disciple and apostate” assumes almost a Machiavellian capacity. Put in the theology of John Le Carré, is Peter really like the mole in British intelligence? Does Matthew really want us to see Peter as the tare that is choking the wheat of the growing church? When discussing “false prophets” in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does say that we will know them by their fruit, and I think there is little reason to believe that Peter’s labors in the thirty years after the Resurrection have been disingenuous.

Peter’s implicit presence at the final commissioning in Matthew’s text (Matt 28:16-20) seems especially relevant for our discussion about Matthew’s unique interpretation because it appears to be Matthew’s addition to the narrative. Indeed, a similar commissioning does occur in the so-called “long ending of Mark” (Mark 16:9-20). But many scholars—you are among them, I believe—do not acknowledge the authenticity of this long ending, or they see it as a later addition to Mark’s text. The story of Christ’s final charge to build his church first appears in the traditional canon with Matthew’s gospel.

So I am compelled to step beyond the narrow confines of my New Critical lens to underscore the importance of the historical context and the importance of considering a writer’s audience in the act of interpretation. Matthew’s audience understood that the followers of Jesus had grown, suffered persecution, and provided ongoing witness to the teaching and resurrection of Christ. Certainly Peter’s role in nurturing that movement was known, by his words (including the
epistles attributed to him) and by his reported martyrdom, roughly 7 years or so before Matthew’s gospel. The final chapter of Matthew seems keenly alert to recent history. His final allusion to the “name of the Holy Spirit” reflects the Trinitarian theology that was articulated by the early church in the decades following Christ’s death. Matthew’s concluding verses assure the reader that the spread of the message was not simply the deviant actions of a wayward set of disciples, but rather the mandate of the risen Jesus himself.

So, for your thesis to be more compelling, I would want to hear your thoughts about the historical and extra-textual context. I would need to understand why the writer of the gospel had a strong reason to suggest that one of the leaders in this final commission was already consigned to damnation even before the work of evangelism truly began. What contemporary issues might have pressed Matthew to dress up a clear church leader as an apostate in order to make a theological point? Isn’t there something of false discipleship in that act of revision against an apostle?

That draws me toward a tempered appreciation of the thesis. I see the subtle amendments in Matthew to underscore the severity and shame of Peter’s denial—the emphasis on oaths, on possible alienation from Christ, etc. True, there is Jesus’s statement that those who deny him before others will be denied before the Father, and yet the first half of that teaching emphasizes that Jesus will also confess before the Father those who have affirmed him before humanity. Isn’t Peter both? It is interesting that Matthew records Jesus stating that those who speak against the Son of Man can be forgiven, but not those who speak against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:32). Despite Peter’s failure by denying the Son of Man, he remains one who carried on the work of the Holy Spirit after his great shame. Peter’s rehabilitation after his denial may be implicit rather than explicit at the end of Matthew. But, for me, it is far more logical to extract this implicit tale of restoration from the text than to draw another implicit conclusion—that Peter is the model of an apostate and destined for eternal punishment.

So I wonder if Matthew’s chiseling of the denial story into a lesson about cowardice or even apostasy that culminates in Matthew 26 can co-exist with the transformational denouement of Matthew 28 and its aftermath—when the community of disciples, with Peter among them, overcome their own doubts and failures to become the entrusted witnesses of Jesus in Jerusalem and throughout the Mediterranean world. Rather than see the growth of the church as the product, in large part, of a self-deluded apostate, or a false disciple still conniving within their midst until snatched up at the final judgment, see it as evidence of the power of the risen Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the disciples, frayed and fallen as they are. Just like us all.