

DO WE NEED A POPE?

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On March 13, 2013, the Roman Catholic Church elected a new Pope, Francis I. The election of a new pope raises the question, “What is the origin of the papacy?” The Roman Catholics claim that Jesus appointed Peter as the first pope and there has been a succession of popes from Peter to the present. Is that true? Protestants say, “No.” If the Catholics are wrong and the Protestants are right, what is the origin of the papacy? Perhaps the most important question of all is, “Do we need a pope?”

Peter was not the First Pope

The Catholic Explanation According to Roman Catholicism, Peter was the first pope. They say their proof is a passage in the Gospel of Matthew, which says, “When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, ‘Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?’ So they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. ‘He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered and said, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood have not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt. 16:13-19).

The Catholic explanation of this passage is that the Greek word translated “Peter” means “rock” and Jesus said He would build His church on “this rock.” Therefore, they say, the church is built on Peter.

The Correct Explanation The Catholic explanation of this passage is not correct. It is true that the Greek word translated “Peter” means “rock,” but it is not the same word that is translated “rock” when Jesus says “on this rock.” The Greek word translated “Peter” means “a small stone.” The Greek word translated “rock” means “boulder.” (Jesus also used this word for “boulder” in His story of the man who built his house on the rock and not the sand, recorded in Mt. 7:24.) Furthermore, in the Greek text, “Peter” is masculine while “rock” is feminine.

Therefore, the rock (boulder) cannot refer to Peter (or Christ). The rock is *Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.*

Also, the “keys of the kingdom” are not the ability to forgive sins. Only Jesus has the power to forgive sins (Mt. 9:6; Acts 8:20-22). To the Jews, “keys” represented the authority that belongs to the scribes, that is, those who taught the Law. “Binding” and “loosing” were technical terms for the verdict of a teacher of the oral Law who declared some actions “bound,” that is, forbidden and others “loosed,” that is, permitted. Based on the tense of the Greek verbs translated “bound” and “loosed,” they should be translated

“shall have been bound” and “shall have been loosed.” In other words, Jesus is not saying that decisions on earth would be endorsed “in heaven,” that is, by God. He is saying that Peter will pass on decisions already made in heaven. The Apostles used these keys in Acts 15. They bound and loosed regarding eating things sacrificed to idols. If the Lord had spoken on this subject, they would have simply quoted Him. Since He did not, they exercised their authority.

The Conclusion Peter was not a pope. The church is not built on him. Peter did not have a superior position. Other apostles had the same power as Peter (Mt. 18:18; Jn. 20:19-23). The Apostle Paul did not think Peter had a superior position; he publicly rebuked him (Gal. 2)! When there was a doctrinal question at Antioch, the church did not write a letter to Peter to ask him what to do; the Jerusalem Council made the decision (Acts 15). Peter did not claim a superior position. In his two epistles, he claimed to be nothing more than an apostle (1 Pet. 1:1), an elder (1 Pet. 5:1), and a servant of Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:1). Peter was the Prince of the apostles, but he was not a pope.

Besides, Peter was married (Mt. 8:14) and he told a sinning saint to pray to see if God would forgive him of his sins (Acts 8:22). In other words, Peter didn't say, “I pronounce you forgiven.”

A Roman Catholic scholar counted the interpretations of Matthew 16:18 in the writings of the early church Fathers (church leaders) and discovered that 17 of them believed Peter was the rock, eight believed the apostles were meant, 16 believed that Jesus was the rock, and 44 believed Peter's statement was the rock. The explanation that the rock is Peter's confession is not a recent interpretation or a Protestant interpretation; it is an ancient interpretation.

The church is not built on Pope Martin Luther, Pope John Calvin, Pope John Wesley, Pope Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Pope Billy Graham, or Pope Pastor So-and-So! To make any person a pope is to miss the point.

Karl Barth, a famous theologian, was on a streetcar one day in Basel, Switzerland, where he lectured. A tourist to the city sat down next to Barth. The two men started chatting with each other. “Are you new to the city?” Barth inquired. “Yes,” said the tourist. “Is there anything you would particularly like to see in this city?” asked Barth. “Yes,” he said, “I'd love to meet the famous theologian Karl Barth. Do you know him?” Barth replied, “Well, as a matter of fact, I do. I give him a shave every morning.” The tourist got off the streetcar quite delighted. He went back to his hotel, saying to himself, “I met Karl Barth's barber today.” That tourist missed the point!

The Idea of the Pope Evolved

Establishment of Elders If Peter was not the first pope, where did the idea of a pope come from? To answer that question, we need to start with what the New Testament says about the organization and governance of the church. In the New Testament, each local church had bishops (plural) and deacons (Phil. 1:1). Another name for a bishop was elder (Titus 1:5, 7). The title “elder” indicated that the people who held this office were older men, and the title “bishop” refers to the fact that these older men had the oversight of the church. In fact, the Scripture speaks of these older men ruling the church (1 Thess. 5:12-13; 1 Tim. 3:4; Heb. 13:7).

Note carefully: in the New Testament, each church had a plurality of elders who exercised oversight (see “bishop”) over the church. The bishop was not over the elders; the bishop was one of the elders.

The last book of the New Testament to be written was the book of Revelation. It was written in 95 AD. Shortly after the close of the New Testament, a man named Clement in Rome wrote to the church at Corinth (97). That letter, called 1 Clement, indicates that the church at Corinth had elders. This plurality of elders in each congregation is also mentioned in the Didache (ca. 80-90) and by Polycarp (110).

Elevation of Bishops Sometime later, about 116, the organization and governance of the church changed slightly. Ignatius indicates that a bishop (singular) was over the elders within each church. In other words, instead of elder and bishop referring to the same position, those two words now referred to two different positions. At this point, *a bishop from within a local church presided over that one church*. The structure was something similar to a church today, where there is a pastor over the deacons. The fact that this change took place so close to the time of the New Testament should not surprise you. It also happened during New Testament times (3 Jn. 9).

Election of Metropolitans During the early part of the third century, the bishops in a Roman province met in local councils. At this stage, this was like having a pastor’s meeting. Imagine the state of California representing the Roman Empire and the 58 counties within the state representing the 54 provinces of the Roman Empire. These local councils were like all the pastors in the various counties of California gathering for a pastor’s meeting. There would be a pastor’s meeting in Los Angeles County, another in San Bernardo County, and still another in Riverside County, only instead of having the title “pastor,” these church leaders would be called bishops.

Somewhere along the line, the bishops of several Roman provinces got together in one regional meeting. They tended to meet in the chief cities of the Roman Empire. The chief bishops of the chief cities were called metropolitans, or archbishops. That would be like saying that all the pastors in the counties of Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Riverside got together for a meeting and they met in Los Angeles. The head of that meeting was the metropolitan, the archbishop.

As a result of the organization of the Roman Empire arranged by Emperor Diocletian (244-311), Alexandria and Antioch were chief cities in the East. So the Bishop of Alexandria became the chief bishop of all the bishops in Egypt. The Bishop of Antioch became the chief bishop of the rest of the bishops in the East (Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece). The Bishop of Rome was the chief bishop of the West. At this point, there were three archbishops: Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. Those bishops had the most prestige.

In the California illustration, this would be like saying that Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego had the most prestige.

Emphasis on the Bishop of Rome In his book, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus (185) said that every church must agree with the church in Rome. About 255, the Bishop of Rome was a man named Cyprian. Cyprian held that each bishop was equal of every other bishop; no one bishop had administrative authority over any other bishop. He insisted that no bishop should “set himself up as a bishop of bishops,” but he also gave the earliest formation of the doctrines of apostolic succession and the primacy of honor for the Roman bishop.

The city of Rome was a contributing factor in the rise of the papacy. It was the capital of the Roman Empire, which made it a place of utmost importance. Moreover, for Christians, a number of significant things happened in Rome that put the focus on it. Paul wrote his longest and most important book to the church at Rome. The earliest persecution by the Roman state occurred in Rome (64 AD). Both Peter and Paul were martyred there. After the close of the New Testament, the church at Rome wrote a letter to the church at Corinth, urging them to maintain unity (1 Clement).

In 325, the Council of Nicaea officially prioritized bishops. It decided that the three great centers were Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. Also, it declared that the see (jurisdiction) of Jerusalem would be given the next place in honor after the other three, but would be subject to the Metropolitan of Caesarea.

In 330, Constantine made Constantinople the capital of the Roman Empire. The Council of Constantinople (381) made Constantinople second after Rome and above Alexandria: "The Bishop of Constantinople shall have the prerogatives of honor after the Bishop of Rome because Constantinople is the New Rome." Damascus (366-388) and later Gregory the Great (590-604), Bishops of Rome, refused to confirm this canon. Nevertheless, Constantinople grew by favor of the emperor, whose centralizing policy found help in the authority of his own court bishop.

Endorsement of Patriarchs In 451, the Council of Chalcedon established Patriarchs, who exercised authority over a wider area than the metropolitans. Five sees (jurisdictions) were held in particular honor and an order of precedence was established among them. In order of rank, they were Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. The bishop in each of these cities received the title of Patriarch. Between them, the five Patriarchs had jurisdiction over the known world, except for Cyprus, which was granted independence and has remained self-governing ever since. All five bishops shared equally in the apostolic succession.

Using the California illustration, this is like saying Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Sacramento, and Oakland have the highest-ranking bishops.

Exultation of Rome Until about 450, the Bishop of Rome was acknowledged as the first among equals, but beginning with Leo I (440-61), the Bishop of Rome began to claim supremacy over other bishops. Leo I used Matthew 16:19 as being a reference to Peter and even claimed that Peter spoke through him.

Leo I was not only a Bishop of Rome, he also got involved in politics. In 452, Leo persuaded Attila the Hun to turn back from Rome. In 455, when Genseric and his Vandals (an East Germanic tribe) came to sack Rome, Leo persuaded them to save the city from fire and pillage, but he did agree to allow the city to be sacked by the Vandals for two weeks. The Romans credited Leo with saving their city from complete destruction. This was the beginning of the bishop of Rome acting as a civil ruler.

Establishment of a Pope In 604, the Bishop of Constantinople excommunicated the Bishop of Rome, Gregory I. To spite the Bishop of Constantinople, the Roman Emperor Phocas gave Gregory I, the Bishop of Rome, the title of "Pope" (Latin for "father"), the universal bishop. Gregory refused the title, but in 607 his successor, Boniface III, assumed it.

In the California illustration, this is like saying the Bishop of Sacramento is the universal bishop.

To summarize: The idea of a pope evolved. At first, there were elders. Then there were bishops, archbishops, patriarchs, and finally a pope.

God the Father is our Father

Jesus When Jesus taught the disciples to pray, He told them to say, “Our Father, Who art in heaven” (Mt. 6:9). Christian believers have a heavenly Father. This was a new revelation. God being the Father of individuals was not revealed in the Old Testament. Having God as our Father means we have direct access to Him when we pray! We do not have to go through a priest, a saint, a pope, or Mary.

Paul In Galatians, Paul says, “And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Gal. 4:6). “Abba” is the Aramaic word for “daddy,” the name a little child would use for his father. It has been called a term of intimacy and respect. We have direct access to a Father Who is our daddy. He is not a standoffish, unconcerned, uninvolved, uninterested father. He is our daddy. He listens to us and He cares for us.

Summary: Believers do not need a human pope because we have a heavenly Father.

Is God your Father? You can become a child of God by trusting Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:12).

If God is your Father, do you think of Him as a loving Father? The former pastor of The Church of the Open Door in Southern California, J. Vernon McGee, once concluded a service with a special prayer. In this prayer, McGee spoke of “the mother love of the Father God.” That says it all. Those who have trusted Christ have direct access to a heavenly Father, Who has a mother’s love.