

IS THE PAPACY BIBLICAL?

The death of the pope and the election of his successor has been given unprecedented media coverage recently. On the surface such attention to a mere *man*, rather than to Jesus Christ, ought to make us think twice. It is claimed by the Roman Catholic Church that the pope “is the successor of Peter, prince of the Apostles, and the true vicar of Christ, the head of the whole church, the father of all Christians.” There are many reasons why this cannot be true.

1. When **Paul** the apostle wrote to the church in Rome (Romans, written about 57 A.D.), and from his imprisonments in Rome, he **makes no mention at all of Peter**. By this time the church was already well established. Yet it is claimed by Catholics that Peter was bishop/pope in Rome from 42-67 A.D. If Peter was there as its ‘bishop’ then →

- Why did Paul not send greetings to him, as he did to 27 individuals who he names (Romans 16:3-15)? It is impossible that the church leader not be greeted.
- Why did Paul want to go there to “strengthen” them (Romans 1:11) if Peter himself was there, especially as it was his principle not to “build on someone else’s foundation” (Romans 15:20)?
- Why does Paul never mention Peter during his first imprisonment in Rome about 60-62 A.D. (Acts 28:11-31)? There is *not* even one mention of Peter in the letters Paul wrote from Rome during this first imprisonment (see Ephesians 6:21, Philippians 1:1, 4:21-22, Colossians 1:1, 4:10-14, Philemon 23-24, for those who are). Or during his second imprisonment about 63 A.D. (2 Timothy 4:10-16,21). Why did not Peter give the help that Paul needed? The sure conclusion is that Peter was not there.

2. **There is no sure historical evidence that Peter was ever in Rome.** What we do know is that he was in Jerusalem about 35-36 A.D. (Galatians 1:18, “Cephas” = Peter), and again about 49 A.D. (Acts 15:7-11). Peter’s work was primarily among the Jews (Galatians 2:9), whereas Rome was the centre of the Gentile world! Sometime later Peter came to Antioch (Galatians 2:11). Peter wrote his first letter from “Babylon” (5:13), and there is no good reason to doubt this is the literal Babylon where there were many Jews. Peter went east not west. It is not until hundreds of years later that the first support is given to the belief that Peter was a bishop in Rome. The Bible knows nothing of a ‘bishop’ over one church, or over a diocese. There were many ‘bishops’ in Philippi (Philippians 1:1) and Ephesus (Acts 20:28) because bishop = elder = pastor. The development of the ‘episcopate’ was a development long after the apostolic church.

3. The bishop of Rome was only proclaimed as the universal bishop in 607 A.D. But **there is no evidence in the Bible that Peter was ever the chief of the apostles or that others were to succeed him**. This is reading back from history to make the Bible say something it does not.

- Christ is the Head of the church, not any man (Ephesians 5:23, Colossians 1:18). The ‘vicar’ (= in the place of) is the Holy Spirit, not any man (John 14:16, 16:7). It is nothing less than blasphemous to give to man what belongs to God alone.

- Matthew 16:18 need not be interpreted to mean that Peter is the one apostle upon whom Christ would build His church. Many, especially in the church of the first few centuries interpreted the rock to be Peter's faith, Peter's confession, even Christ of whom Peter spoke. Augustine said, "On this rock which you have confessed I will build my church, since Christ was the rock." If Peter was the rock, and so the chief apostle, then he was immediately a very bad one for actually began to rebuke the Lord and had to be severely rebuked himself (verses 22-23). If Peter is the foundation rock on which Christ is building His church then why does Paul write that the church has as its foundation "the apostles and prophets" (Ephesians 2:20)? And why was Peter only one contributor at the meeting in Jerusalem (Acts 15:7-11), and not the one presiding, as James appears to have been (verses 13-21)? Nor were the decisions made in the name of Peter but of "the apostles and the elders" (verse 23). It should be noted that Peter describes himself as a "fellow elder" (5:1) and certainly not as a bishop or pope.
- There is no indication in the Bible of an 'apostolic succession' for no one living afterwards can fulfil the qualifications (in Acts 1:21-22); Paul acknowledges himself to be an exception but he was a witness to the resurrection (1 Corinthians 9:1-2, 15:8). We walk in the footsteps of the apostles only by receiving and obeying their teaching in the Bible.
- So the Bible presents leadership in the church as follows. Jesus Christ alone is the spiritual head; apostles and New Testament prophets are the foundation as those to whom the infallible word of God was revealed; pastors and teachers (more commonly called elders or bishops) are rulers in each *local* church by teaching and administering in accordance with that word (1 Timothy 5:17). The Bible knows nothing at all about any other rulers in Christ's church.

4. The history of the papacy shows it to be of purely human origin.

Doctrinal errors by various leaders who it is claimed were popes – Liberius (358) denied the deity of Christ and excommunicated the orthodox Athanasius. Honorius (625-638) was condemned as a heretic by later popes. John XXII (1319) denied the immortality of the soul and was deposed. Pius VII (1800-1823) reversed the decision of an earlier pope that civil marriages are valid. Galileo was condemned by the church for teaching the Copernican theory of the universe. Even in 1704 "all books that teach the mobility of the earth or the immobility of the sun" were condemned. It was only in 1870 A.D. that the Catholic Church formally adopted the teaching of the Infallibility of the pope, but at that Council one of the Catholic bishops (Strossmayer) gave example upon example of how they have erred, even quoting the very pope who sat before him. No, infallibility only belongs to the words of the apostles recorded in Scripture (Peter himself is declared to have been in error in Galatians 2:11-14)

Immoral lives were characteristic of some who are supposedly in the line of apostolic succession from Peter as popes. John XI (931-936) was the illegitimate son of pope Sergius III. John XII (956-964) was deposed having been charged with murder, perjury, sacrilege, adultery and incest. Alexander VI (1492-1503) had 6 illegitimate children, two being born after he became pope. If it is objected that most of these were centuries ago, each person called a pope is a necessary link in the chain from Peter for apostolic succession to work. If just one link is broken then there is no chain. And if such persons were truly popes in no way can they be called the Vicar of Christ.

All this is written, not to stir up hatred, but to set the truth of the Bible and history before you.

If we believe and follow what is not true then we will perish. If you say how can so many Catholics be wrong, then I remind you that almost all the Jews were wrong about Jesus Christ. It is not the number or the influence of people who believe in something that is proof of its correctness, but whether it is according to the Bible. Jesus Christ is the only head of the church, because He alone died for the church and is its Saviour (Ephesians 5:23). Salvation is not in the church, whether Protestant or Catholic, nor in any man, pope, apostle, priest, but only in Christ the one mediator God has appointed (1 Timothy 2:5-6). May the Lord enable you to trust your soul eternally to Him who died once upon the cross.