

The Papacy

Now that the recent dramatic events are over, we do well to calmly examine the lofty claims of the papacy in the light of Scripture and history. The Catholic bishop of Rome claims universal jurisdiction over the entire church as well as an infallible teaching authority. Therefore the Pope asserts that all churches worldwide should submit to his rule and believe his doctrines. Is this teaching biblical? Were the bishops of Rome in the first centuries Popes?

As you study the New Testament, keep the main issue in mind. Showing that the apostle Peter was prominent among the apostles does not prove the papacy. He was undoubtedly the most prominent, at least until the apostle Paul came along. But prominence is not the same as primacy! The bishop of New York may be more prominent than the bishop of Malta, yet the former does not exercise authority over the latter. The first step in the Catholic argument for the papacy must show that Peter had authority *over* the apostles.

Well, did not Christ tell him, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church"? Yes He did, but "this rock" is more likely a reference to the confession of Peter, namely, that Jesus is the Son of God, rather than to Peter personally. Many Church Fathers interpreted "this rock" as Peter's confession of faith; but even those who thought it referred to Peter did not imply papal primacy.

Jesus also said to the apostle Peter. "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" (Matthew 16:19). Remember that at issue is whether this authority was unique to Peter. Evidently it was not, for soon afterwards Jesus gave exactly the same authority to all the apostles, "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18). Hence Peter had an authority similar to the other apostles, not an authority over them.

Again, Jesus said to Peter to feed the sheep (John 21:15-17). Once again we notice that this was not a unique office committed to Peter alone. The apostle Paul tells the elders of Ephesus, "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). All elders, not just the apostle Peter, are called to feed and tend the sheep.

I encourage you to study this important question further to see for yourself that there is no convincing biblical support for the papacy. It is also interesting to investigate the historical origins of the papal institution. The early bishops of Rome did not exert universal and infallible authority, and of course, the Eastern churches never accepted the claims of later Popes. There was no papacy in the early church.

Finally, and most importantly, we should ask whether the modern Catholic Church headed by the Pope is teaching the true gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. A teacher is known by his teaching just as a tree is known by its fruit. A crucial doctrine is Justification (how a sinner could become right with God): it is vitally important to compare the Catholic message with the biblical doctrine of justification by faith in Christ.

The sad truth is that the modern Catholic Church teaches another gospel that is unable to save. The claims of the papacy are unbiblical; the roots of papal power are found in the departure from apostolic practice, ambition, political intrigue and forged documents.