

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 33

The Papacy – Part 1

As we go through church history, we will spend a good bit of time looking at the Catholic Church and the papacy. We will devote several lessons to papal history itself, beginning with this one. Our goal in this lesson is to trace the historical development of the office of the pope, looking at the biblical passages both supporters and detractors of the office used, as well as the historical writings and people involved in understanding the early papacy through the time of Pope Leo I.

What exactly is a “pope?” Our English word “pope” comes from the Latin *papa*, which itself comes from the Greek word *pappas* (παππας). In both Latin and Greek, the words were the everyday expression a child would have for his/her father. In the 200’s, there is Christian literature where bishops are referred to with that title out of deference to the way the bishops functioned as a spiritual father. This ascription continued for bishops generally through the 400’s. After that time, the traditional Roman Catholic label was used almost exclusively for the bishop of Rome.¹ In the Coptic tradition, the bishop of Alexandria continued to have the title also.

Today, the concept of “Pope” is more than a reference to a spiritual father. The Roman Catholic official directory of the Holy See (the “*Annuario pontificio*”) describes the Pope as the holder of many titles:

1. Bishop of Rome
2. Vicar of Jesus Christ
3. Successor of the Chief of the Apostles
4. Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church
5. Patriarch of the West
6. Primate of Italy
7. Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman Province, and
8. Sovereign of the State of Vatican City.

These titles are ones that have historically accrued to the Pope. By the time of Pope Leo I, a number of these titles have taken shape, even if they were not fully named yet!

¹The Catholic Encyclopedia adds that the first one to consistently refer to only the bishop of Rome as the pope was Magnus Felix, who died in 521. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, (2d Edition Thomson Gale 2003) Vol. 11, p. 495.

The foundation for all the titles really stems from the third title, “Successor of the Chief of Apostles.” So, our first class on the Pope really needs to go back to Peter and our New Testaments.

PETER AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament needs to be examined with an eye toward two areas. First, what authority did Peter have in the early church? Was he truly a “pope” in the sense that he had authority over the entire church? Second, did Peter have successors in his role? Was his position something permanent in the church that would have others take the same role?

This is a two-part lesson. We will start our examination of these questions in scripture. Next week, we will consider those lessons we can draw from church history on the questions.

The Roman Catholic tradition uses a number of New Testament passages to explain the role of Peter and the role of his successors in the church. The core passages are found in Matthew 16, and John 21, but there are also other passages that are used to fill out the picture of Peter’s role in the church.

MATTHEW 16

Matthew 16:13-19 is the account of Jesus asking his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of man is?” The disciples give various answers, and Jesus follows up by asking, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” Matthew records that Peter spoke up and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Hearing this, Jesus proclaimed:

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Books could be written on this passage. We will give an abbreviated understanding. A key to understanding the passage, from either a Catholic or a protestant perspective, is realizing the pun that Jesus uses. Peter (“*Petros*” in the Greek) literally means rock.

The Catholic understanding of this passage is that Jesus verbally confirmed his authority on Peter as the rock upon which Christ would build his church. Peter would hold the keys of the church, a symbolic reference to the authority Peter would hold.² Peter would have authority to bind and loose on earth and in heaven.

The protestant positions vary. Some point out that Jesus uses a different word for Peter “*Petros*” than for the rock (“*petra*”) on which the church will be built. The objective for this perspective is that Jesus calls Peter a rock (“*Petros*” in the Greek) but says he will build his church on a rocky ledge or cliff (“*petra*” in the Greek). So, the theory is that Jesus uses a pun off Peter’s name to state that the church will be built on the Peter’s profession of faith as opposed to being built upon Peter himself.

This theory fails to take into account that Jesus most likely spoke to his apostles in Aramaic, the language of the day, rather than Greek, the international language Matthew used in his gospel. In Aramaic, Jesus would have likely used the word *kepha* for both Peter’s name and for the rock on which he would build the church. Hence, there is no real difference in the words used by Christ, even though we read a difference in the Greek of Matthew. Matthew makes the change because using the same word would have put a feminine ending on Peter’s name in the Greek. In other words, Matthew must change the word for rock from “*petra*” when referring to Christ building his church to “*Petros*” because “*petra*” is feminine and Jesus is not calling Peter a girl!³

Other Protestants acknowledge that Jesus is stating he will build his church upon Peter. But, that reference is merely to the fact that Peter was God’s main instrument for the church’s growth in the beginning. It was Peter who preached the original sermon in Acts 2 that “opened the door” to the church. In fact, in the first 12 chapters of Acts, we read Peter’s name over 50 times. Peter was God’s tool for much of the early growth of the church. This Protestant view is quick to

² See passages like Is. 22:20-25 and Rev 1:18, where keys are images of authority.

³ The difference between Jesus speaking Aramaic and Matthew writing in Greek also explains another aspect of this passage that some find challenging. Namely here, Jesus speaks of the “church” when, in fact, the church did not yet exist. Some see this as an anachronism showing that the discourse never really took place. That viewpoint is not fair to either the passage or to biblical study in general. While Matthew uses the term “church” (“*ekklesia*”) in translating Jesus’ instructions to his disciples, that would not have been the word or language used by Jesus! Most likely, Jesus was using the Aramaic word *kenyshtha* or the Hebrew word *qahal*. These words referred to a branch of a synagogue or an assembly of people. The Hebrew word was used repeatedly in the Old Testament for the people of Israel, and contemporary rabbis repeatedly used the Aramaic word to reference the synagogue. The Greek version of the Old Testament (the “Septuagint”) also used the same Greek word Matthew uses (*ekklesia*) to translate the Hebrew.

point out that such acts by Peter are different than the idea that Peter got full authority over the church from Christ.

Protestants also point out that two chapters later in Matthew 18:18, Jesus gives to all the apostles the same charge that, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” The Protestant position is that Peter had no special authority in this regard than any of the Apostles. The Catholic response accedes that point, but adds that Jesus still does not confer the special status on others that the church would be built upon them as the rock.

JOHN 21:15-17

At the end of his gospel, John reports an encounter between Jesus and Peter that happened after the resurrection of Christ. Jesus, Peter, and several other disciples (including John) had just finished eating a breakfast of fish. Jesus asked Peter if he (Peter) truly loved Jesus more than the other disciples love Jesus.⁴ Peter acknowledged his love, and Jesus instructed Peter to “feed my lambs.” Jesus then re-asked the question twice more. Each time after Peter’s affirmation, Jesus instructs Peter both to feed and to take care of Jesus’ sheep.

From this passage, many Roman Catholic scholars see Jesus here ordaining Peter in a special way as the supreme minister in teaching and doctrine of the church, the sheep of Jesus. Special significance is given to the fact that Jesus instructs Peter to feed the sheep three times, signifying a forceful confirmation of the commission.

Protestants view this passage as Jesus setting Peter back on the path of service in light of Peter’s denials of Christ right before the crucifixion. Peter had indeed boasted in Matthew 26:33 and Mark 14:29 that even if all others should fall from Christ, Peter would not. Yet before the cock crowed three times, Peter denied Jesus. Jesus used the time after breakfast to set Peter’s mind back on the job at hand. Peter needed to have the courage and awareness that his ministry calling was still full, even though Peter himself was a frail man subject to sin’s temptations.

OTHER PASSAGES

There are a number of other passages that the Roman Catholic tradition has used to explain the role Peter took in the early church. In Luke 22:31, for example, Jesus tells Peter that, “Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for

⁴ See Peter’s earlier boasts in this regard recorded in Matt. 26:33 and Mk 14:29.

you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” This passage is seen as one that not only prophesies Peter’s rejection of Christ, but also one that notes Peter’s position once he returns as one of strengthening the other apostles.

The Roman Catholic tradition often will cite Luke 5:10 where Christ refers only to Peter as a “fisher of men.” Similarly, the many times that the apostles are listed in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), Peter is always listed first, or sometimes the apostles are listed simply as “Peter and his companions” (Mk 1:36; 16:7; Lk 9:32).

Protestants look at these same passages, but come to a very different conclusion. They acknowledge that in certain ways, Peter was certainly a leader, even among the apostles. Jesus saw this, and charged Peter accordingly. As a leader, we see Peter fulfilling much of his charge delivering the Pentecost sermon, giving major speeches throughout Acts (3:12-26; 4:8-12; 5:3-9, 29-32; 8:20-23; 10:34-43; 11:4-18; and 15:7-11). Peter readily heals many in Jesus name (Acts 3:6-7; 9:34, 38-41; 5:15). Yet, Peter was not the only one with these leadership skills in the early church. Paul also takes center stage in the book of Acts starting in chapter 13 and Peter gathers little more attention in the book after that. Paul started innumerable churches, gave countless sermons, and performed many miracles in the name of Christ.

Protestants also point out that Paul actually confronted Peter and cited him for his wrong actions in Antioch. As Paul told the Galatians:

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy, even Barnabas was led astray. (Gal. 2:11-13)

Paul then goes on to detail his statements to Peter in this corrective measure.

The Roman Catholic position on this issue is to point out that being “pope” did not make Peter perfect. Only Jesus was perfect. There have certainly been popes in history that have brought disrepute to their office and charge. The Roman Catholic position is the charge still belonged to Peter and his successors, whether they discharged it in a godly manner or not.

In this regard, the Roman Catholic view of Peter is similar to the Old Testament view of the High Priest. Aaron was appointed the first High Priest. After him, successors were chosen. Some discharged their office in godly ways; others did not. Yet, the office remained with its responsibilities.

The High Priest analogy is a good lead into the second question: Did Peter have successors who held the same place and position in the church as he did? Alan Schreck puts it this way, “Peter may have had a leading role in the early Church, but it is another matter to show that others were authorized to take over his role after he died.”⁵

Protestants point out that there is no passage of scripture where Jesus mentions the Apostles having successors. In fact, the earliest church never really contemplated this issue, believing that Christ would return in their lifetime. Only as time wore on and the Apostles began dying do we see any idea of successors in the church. As Paul approached the end of his life, he instructed Timothy to take the things learned from Paul, and “entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim. 2:2).

We also have Paul teaching Timothy and Titus about selecting overseers (Bishops) for the churches. Paul says the Bishop is to be “above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money,” etc., 1 Tim. 3:2-7. Paul tells Titus that he was to appoint elders in every town, giving then a list of qualifications for the elders (Tit. 1:5-9).

Every major division of orthodoxy, Catholic or Protestant, recognizes that some measure of church leadership must perpetuate. There is nothing to indicate that the first generation church was to have leadership, but after that, all churches were merely “members only” with no leadership. The crux of the question is whether apostolic roles continued, whether Peter had a special role that also continued, and whether the early church structure itself was one of a hierarchy of deacons, and bishops with an eye toward expanded roles as time and the church grew.

Much of this information we have to consider in light of history. History begins, of course, with the Bible itself. The earliest church history is there. But, we can fill out a good bit of history with reliable information we get from other historical sources. For example, we gather from 1 and 2 Peter that the apostle Peter went to

⁵ *Catholic & Christian, An Explanation of Commonly Misunderstood Catholic Beliefs* (Servant Books 2004) p. 93.

Rome and wrote from there.⁶ This same data we get from history also. It was in Rome that Peter met his martyr's death at the hands of Nero (See earlier lesson in this class to that effect).

So, our historical survey begins with the fact that Peter was in Rome. To the Catholic tradition, this places Peter's successor in Rome as well. Many others argue that scripture shows us that Peter (and Paul) also spent time in leadership roles at the church in Antioch. Similarly, Peter clearly had his leadership role in Jerusalem. It was the Jerusalem church that asserted its authority over other churches in Acts 15. So many protestant scholars, and some early church fathers, use these biblical facts as a challenge to the idea that Rome received a special designation from Peter as opposed to one of the other churches where Peter led and served. The Roman response to this is that Peter died in Rome, so his "last appointed successor," if you will, would have been in that city. Further, the Roman Catholic Church believes that when Peter moved churches, the seat of his authority moved with him as well. So at the time of his demise, that seat would have been Rome.

Next week, we will look at the historical data we have on the role of the Bishop of Rome from the end of the New Testament up to and including Pope Leo I, who we have followed in the Council of Chalcedon saga last week. In that historical survey, we will consider how the pope grew into a number of the titles given for him in the Roman Catholic Church directory today (referenced earlier in this lesson). We will also consider how the church interprets the roles of the pope as both magisterial (the final definer of doctrine and teaching) and jurisdictional (the final decider of governmental issues). We will also consider the arguments offered on the basis of the Holy Spirit guiding the church and how that interplayed with the growing roles of the Bishop of Rome.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless." (Eph. 5:25b-26).
2. Jesus cares about the unity of his church. It was his consuming prayer before his death (John 17).

⁶ Peter says he is writing from Babylon, but scholars recognize that "Babylon" was a common label for Rome itself. Most readily agree that the ancient city of Babylon was non-existent for purposes of the church at that time.

3. “The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation (2 Samuel 22:2-3).