

Papal Primacy: A Historical Perspective **By Jim Seghers**

Jesus changed Simon's name to Peter and announced that he would make him his prime minister in Mt 16:18-19. This fact creates a major difficulty for Protestants who not only deny papal authority, but they also deny any infallible authority other than the Bible alone as the ultimate norm in matters of faith and practice. This is not the place to refute this unbiblical principle. Rather the focus of this essay is to examine papal primacy from a historical perspective.

Initially, Protestant apologists attempted to distort the clear meaning of Mt 16:18-19 with the bogus argument that Jesus declared he would build his Church on faith not the man Peter. However, this approach collapsed within Protestant circles when Oscar Cullmann in his famous book *Peter, Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* convincingly demonstrated that Christ meant Peter himself and not Peter's faith or profession. Subsequently, numerous Protestant scholars conceded Peter's primacy.¹

As a result, recent attempts to deny papal primacy have shifted from biblical to historical arguments. Even if Peter was appointed head of the apostles and the apostolic Church, it is claimed, there is no evidence that the bishops of Rome understood that this authority was transmitted to them until the 5th century when this idea began to be developed by power grabbing bishops of Rome. What, then, does the historical evidence show?

It is clear that the early Church accepted Bishop of Rome as the head of the Church, so did the Roman emperors. In the first 200 years of Christianity, every Pope but one was martyred. After executing Pope Fabian in 250 A.D., the Emperor Decius declared: "I would far rather receive news of a rival to the throne than of another bishop of Rome." The historian H. W. Crocker wrote: "Every non-schismatic Christian church - even the rigorist churches of Africa and the old churches of the East, at Antioch and elsewhere - accepted the bishop of Rome as, at a minimum, *primus inter pares* (first among equals), to be consulted and often deferred to in the establishment of Christian unity."²

What follows is a brief summary of papal primacy prior to Christianity being legalized by the Emperor Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313. Interspersed are statements Christian authors who supported the universal authority of the Bishop of Rome.

Pope Clement I (92-101)

Peter himself ordained Clement. He was elected after Pope Cletus died in 92. Around the year 96, when St. John the Apostle was still alive, St. Clement sent a letter to the Corinthian church to end a revolt against the leaders of that church. His letter

¹ D. A. Carson *The Expositor's Bible Commentary on Matthew*; Craig L Blomberg, *New American Commentary*; R. T. Franc, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, W.F. Albright and C. S. Man, Howard Clark Kee, *Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible*; H. N. Ribberbos, *Bible Student's Commentary*; *The Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. III, p. 386; W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann, *Matthew: The Anchor Bible*; William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*.

² Triumph, *The Power and the Glory of the Catholic Church: A 2,000-Year History*, p.46.

commanded obedience. “Its explicit assumption of authority over a distant church speaking another language (Greek), while the last of the Apostles still lived, stated in a manner clearly indicating that no challenge to the authority of its writer is anticipated or would be entertained, is the most striking of all the historical proofs of the general acceptance by Christians, from the beginning of the Church, of the bishop of Rome as the successor of Peter and the head of the whole Church.”³ Clement’s letter was so revered in the early Church that many Christians thought it was divinely inspired and should be included in the New Testament.

Ignatius of Antioch

Peter appointed Ignatius, who was instructed of St. John the Evangelist, as the third bishop of Antioch. He was condemned to die by devouring beasts in the arena of Rome during the persecution of Trajan (96-117). On the journey to his death he wrote seven letters, six to churches and one to his friend Polycarp. These letters are remarkable because they attest to the hierarchical structure of the apostolic church, the belief in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, and the primacy of the Roman Church, which Ignatius called “presiding in love.”⁴

Pope Pius I (140-155)

Pius had been a Greek slave. He condemned Marcion who attempted to bring Gnosticism into Christianity. The ex-slave was the Rock that stood against the proud and skillful organizer who distorted the Scriptures. In July 144 Marcion established his own church in defiance of the Pope, but Christians stood with “Peter,” not with Marcion.

Pope Anicetus (155 to 166)

It is significant that the revered Eastern bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, who later became a glorious martyr, came to Rome to personally meet with the Pope to urge Anicetus to set a uniform date for the celebration of Easter. Polycarp recognized that the Pope spoke with the authority of Peter as head of the Church. Polycarp was the last great living link to the Apostles. He vividly remembered the Apostle John’s eyewitness accounts of Jesus’ miracles and teaching.

Pope Eleutherus (175-189)

During the pontificate of St. Eleutherus the Apostles’ Creed was promulgated in Rome and throughout the Christian world. The clergy of Phrygia in Asia Minor sent the priest Irenaeus to Rome (177 or 178) with a letter to Pope Eleutherus concerning the new heresy of Montanism. This event highlights the primacy of Peter’s successors.

Irenaeus

The great theologian of orthodoxy in the last second century was Irenaeus, who became the bishop of Lyons in 180. Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, who brought his pupil to Rome during his visit with Pope Anicetus. His work, *Against Heresies*, was the first great general defense of orthodox Christianity. In particular he refuted the errors of

³ Warren H. Carroll, *A History of Christendom*, Vol. I, *The Founding of Christendom*, p. 450.

⁴ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. I, pp. 69-70.

Gnosticism. Irenaeus demonstrated that the Bishop of Rome was the supreme authority on doctrinal issues.

Pope Victor (189-199)

Pope Victor exhibited the primacy of the bishop of Rome by compelling conformity by the threat of labeling dissidents as schismatics. He condemned Theodotus of Byzantium who denied the divinity of Christ, claiming Jesus was only the Father's adopted son. Pope Victor also condemned Praxeas who taught the error of Modalism (Monarchianism), which claimed that the Son and the Holy Spirit are "modes" of the divine being. As a result of Pope Victor's intervention Praxeas repented and repudiated his errors.

Clement of Alexandria

During the pontificate of Pope Victor, Clement of Alexandria wrote: "The blessed Peter was the chosen, the preeminent, the first of the disciples for whom alone and himself the Savior paid tribute."⁵

Pope Zephyrinus (199-217)

Pope Zephyrinus issued a general condemnation of Montanism. After much controversy this Pope also condemned Sabellius and his version of Modalism. These actions demonstrate that the Pope believed he was exercising universal authority in the Church.

Tertullian

Near the time when Pope Zephyrinus was elected Pope Tertullian wrote: "What man of sound mind can possibly suppose that these men were ignorant of anything, whom the Lord ordained to be teachers?... Was anything withheld from the knowledge of Peter, who is called the rock on which the church should be built, who also obtained 'the keys of the kingdom of heaven' with the power of loosing and binding in heaven and on earth?"⁶

Subsequently, he wrote: "From what source do *you* usurp this right to "the church"? Is it because the Lord has said to Peter, 'Upon this rock I will build My church' and 'to you have I given the keys of the heavenly kingdom'? Or 'Whatever you will have bound or loosed in earth will be bound or loosed in the heavens'? You presume that the power of binding and loosing has come down to you—that is, to every church of Peter. What sort of man are you! You subvert and completely change the clear intention of the Lord. For He conferred this power personally upon Peter... This would mean that in Peter himself the church was reared."⁷

Pope Callistus (217-222)

⁵ David W. Bercot, Editor, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs: A Reference Guide to More Than 700 Topics Discussed by the Early Church Fathers*, Hendrickson, c. 1998, p. 516.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Pope Callistus clashed with Tertullian over the readmittance of adulterers, fornicators, and other fallen-away Christians to the universal Church after a suitable penance. It was the Pope not the brilliant theologian who won the day.

Origen

During the pontificate of Pope Urban I (222-230) Origen wrote: “Peter, on whom the church of Christ is built—against which the gates of Hades will not prevail—left one epistle of acknowledged authenticity. Suppose we allow that he left a second; yet, this is doubtful.”⁸

Pope Fabian (236-250)

Pope Fabian denounced the Bishop of Lambesa in Africa for heresy. Origen, the greatest biblical scholar of his age, recognized the pope’s supremacy. He wrote to Pope Fabian defending himself against charges of unorthodoxy. Pope Fabian also evangelized Gaul by sending missionaries to this pagan land. This gentle pope was the first Christian martyred in the virulent persecution of the Emperor Decius.

Pope Cornelius (251-253)

When the humble Cornelius was overwhelmingly elected to succeed Pope Fabian, Novatian set himself up as antipope. Novatian attempted to take full control of the Church by appointing bishops in sees all over the empire. His action gives clear historical proof of the general acceptance of the authority of the bishop of Rome, as head of the Church, to appoint and approve bishops anywhere in the world. However, bishop Cyprian of Carthage, Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria and others rallied to the legitimate Pope. In the year 251 a synod of sixty bishops convened at Rome under Pope Cornelius. Novatian and his followers were excommunicated. Pope Cornelius was sent into exile by the Emperor Gallus where he died in June 253.

Pope Stephen I (254-257) strongly defended papal primacy citing Matthew 16:18-19 as the source of his preeminent authority. He also rejected rebaptism of repentant Novatians as was the practice of some rigorist African bishops. He threatened noncompliant churches with excommunication. He specifically called for obedience by his authority as the successor of Peter.

Pope Dionysius (259-268)

Dionysius of Alexandria presented Christ as a lesser divinity, created by the Father. Pope Dionysius clarified this important issue with a brilliant exposition of orthodox Trinitarian theology. Bishop Dionysius humbly accepted the Pope’s correction and affirmed the orthodox Trinitarian doctrine.

Cyprian

During the pontificates of three Popes (Fabian, Cornelius and Stephen I) the African bishop St. Cyprian repeatedly affirmed papal primacy.

⁸ Bercot, *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, p. 516. This citation also indicates the confusion regarding the canon of the New Testament, which was not settled for another 160 years.

“Peter, upon whom by the same Lord the church had been built, speaking one for all, and answering with the voice of the church, says, ‘Lord, to whom will we go?’”⁹

“Peter, on whom the church was to be built, taught...that the church will not depart from Christ.”¹⁰

“The Lord spoke to Peter, saying, ‘I say unto you, “You are Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church’.”¹¹

“And again He says to him [Peter] after His resurrection: ‘Feed my sheep.’ On him He builds the Church, and to him he given the command to feed the sheep; and although He assigns a like power to all the Apostles, yet He founded a single chair, and He established by His own authority a source and an intrinsic reason for that unity. Indeed, the others were that also which Peter was [Apostles]; but a primacy is given to Peter, whereby it is made clear that there is but one Church and one chair.”¹²

“Our Lord, whose commands we ought to fear and observe, says in the Gospel, by way of assigning the episcopal dignity and settling the plan of His Church: “I say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it. And to you I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatever things you bind on earth will be bound also in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, they will be loosed also in heaven.”¹³

“There is one God and one Christ, and one Church, and one Chair founded on Peter by the word of the Lord.”¹⁴

Peter of Alexandria (c. 310)

“Peter, the first of the apostles, was often arrested, thrown into prison, and treated with dishonor. He was finally crucified at Rome.”¹⁵

Juvenius (c. 326 *History of the Gospel in Matthew*)

“Then the Lord thus answers to Peter: ‘Thou shalt be blessed.’ Thou supportest the name of Peter with worthy fortitude; and upon this foundation and upon the strength of this rock I will place My edifice that shall stand for ever with everlasting walls.”¹⁶

Aphraates the Persian Sage (c. 336-345 *Treatises*)

“And Jesus handed over the keys to Simon, and ascended and returned to Him who had sent Him.”¹⁷

⁹ Ibid., p. 517.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. 1, # 555-556.

¹³ Ibid., # 571.

¹⁴ Ibid., # 573.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Scott Butler, Norman Dahlgren and David Hess, *Jesus, Peter and the Keys: A Scriptural Handbook on the Papacy, Queenship*, p. 225.

James of Nisibis (c. 340 *Oration*)

“And Simon, the Head of the Apostles, he who denied Christ, saying “I saw Him not,” and cursed and swore that he knew him not, as soon as he offered to God contrition and penitence, and washed his sins in the tears of his grief, our Lord received him, and made him the Foundation, and called him the Rock of the edifice of the Church.”¹⁸

“Peter, who was called Cephas, he who was captured on the sea-shore, and who received a testimony from the great Pastor, that ‘Upon this rock I will build my church,’ by means of the priesthood received also the keys of heaven, as worthy (of them).”¹⁹

“He was the prince of the Apostles, and had received the keys and was accounted the shepherd of the flock.”²⁰

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¹⁷ Jurgens, *Father of the Early Fathers*, Vol. 1, # 693a.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 229.