

17 Things You Didn't Know About the Papacy



Pope Honorius I

Popes over the centuries have enjoyed great power and privilege as “the Vicars of Christ”. It has been claimed by Pope Boniface VIII “that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff.” And the Vatican I council declared that the pope is infallible when speaking about faith and morals in an *ex cathedra* capacity.

In this pamphlet we will be making our case in an abbreviated format that the papacy is neither based on Scripture nor an accurate understanding of history. The papacy is not necessary to find Christ’s church, because it is not an office Christ founded.

Our purpose is not to insult or offend. Our purpose is to display the truth of Scripture and history, so you can look to Christ directly as the head of His church.

We fully encourage you to challenge and look into what we present. We are confident that if you look into the facts of history and Scripture you will not see a basis for the papacy. Unexpectedly, even Catholic scholars will undermine key claims that undergird the papacy. We ask that you prayerfully look into these matters, since the institution of the papacy demands that it be listened to as the voice of Christ Himself on Earth.

Furthermore, this document will make the claim that the papacy as an institution is a later add-on to Christianity, an institution that

evolved by making claims for its own authority based on illegitimate criteria – these were criteria that earlier writers understood to be fraudulent, but which later history (aided by the wealth of the Roman emperors and the later fall of Rome) could not easily argue against or resist.

The words “papal” and “papacy” are not used at all in the “Catechism of the Catholic Church”, despite its history of claiming both worldly and spiritual power. Today, we hear of “the successor of Peter” or “the Petrine ministry”.

In fact, concepts like “Roman primacy”, “the Papacy”, and “the Petrine ministry” were concepts “developed” long after the Apostles lived, and they were superimposed back upon history as a way of consolidating papal power in the middle ages:

“It is clear that Roman Primacy was not given from the outset; it underwent a long process of development whose initial phases extended well into the fifth century” (Klaus Schatz, “Papal Primacy”, 1996, pg 36).

First of all, to gain an understanding of a historical development, you don’t want to superimpose later meanings back onto a development or event. That’s “anachronism”, and it’s one of the worst kinds of historical fallacies.

If you want to understand a historical development, you’ll want to understand “what they knew, when they knew it”. When you approach history for the purpose of gaining an understanding of it, you’ll want to understand what the parties involved – actors, speakers, writers – had in mind, within the cultural context when they spoke, acted, and wrote.

That’s a way to gain a good Biblical understanding as well. What did the parties understand and intend when they lived through the events that are being recorded?

Doctrinally, the Roman Catholic Church claims that a “primacy of jurisdiction” was given immediately to Peter upon his “confession of faith” at Caesarea Philippi (citing the documents of Vatican I). But the history of the Roman church, as we know it today, betrays that “interpretation”.

Keep in mind that Schatz is a Roman Catholic writer, and many other writers cited here are Roman Catholic scholars. Schatz’s follow-up question is important:

Can we reasonably say of this historically developed papacy that it was instituted by Christ and therefore is an essential for determining what constitutes the Church?

Historically, Protestants say “no”, and here are some of the many reasons they give. This list is getting longer over time:

Here are 17 things that you may not know about the history of the papacy, the "successors of Peter".

1. "The Papacy" is not mentioned in the Bible.

Roman Catholicism uses three after-the-fact "proof texts", relying on the fact that Peter was important. But none of these speaks of a "papacy", or a "Vicar of Christ", or a special "Petrine ministry". Look at [Matthew 16:11-19](#), [Luke 22:32](#), and [John 21:15-19](#).

2. A Jew of the first century would have understood "the Rock" of [Matthew 16:18](#) to have been God: ("you are Peter, and on *this Rock* I will build my church").

God himself was "the Rock" of the Old Testament, and this was affirmed in many places. When Jesus said "this rock", he did so fully aware that "the rock" spoken of in the Old Testament was God himself:

([Deuteronomy 32:3-4](#))

**For I will proclaim the name of the Lord;
ascribe greatness to our God!
"The Rock, his work is perfect,
for all his ways are justice.
A God of faithfulness and without iniquity,
just and upright is he.**

([Isaiah 51:1](#))

**"Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness,
you who seek the Lord:
look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.**

([1 Corinthians 10:4](#))

For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.

There are two kinds of rocks: there are the kinds of rocks upon which whole houses are built ([Matthew 7:24](#)); and there are smaller "foundation stones" ([Ephesians 2:20](#)) and "living stones" built into the wall of a building. For example, "the household of God", the temple of the Living God, is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" ([Ephesians 2:20](#)).

And Peter himself referred to Christ as "the stone that the builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone" and to believers in general, he says "you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house" ([1 Peter 2:5](#)). It's important to understand how the Biblical writers thought of "rocks" and "stones".

In fact, Biblical theologians now hold that in the church age, the "Kingdom of God" is actually the re-building of the Temple of the living God. This "rock" and "stone" metaphor was highly important to the New Testament writers.

3. Peter was an important apostle in the early church. But he never had "primacy" over the church during his lifetime.

James, the "brother of the Lord", was the leader at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15, 21), where Peter was present. In Apostolic days, Jerusalem was the only church and it was the focal point, the "home base" of all the churches in the world.

And it was James who spoke last and gave his "judgment" at the Jerusalem council. In fact, Peter was not the one who "sends", but was one among several "to be sent" (Acts 8:14).

Consider the importance of Paul's on-going project: a collection for the saints in Jerusalem, which he had to undertake before traveling to Rome, Romans 15:23-24. In fact, visiting Rome is an afterthought:

... since I have been longing for many years to visit you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there...

4. Peter was not the "founder" of the church at Rome (as Rome had claimed for centuries).

We know with a high degree of historical accuracy that Paul wrote his letter "to the Church at Rome" in the years 56-58 AD. He wrote an extensive set of greetings to Christians who were known at Rome, and Peter was not one of them.

In fact, Paul's letter to the Romans indicates a network of "house churches" in Rome, each with its own group of leaders – and Peter was not among them.

5. There was not a hint of "succession" in the New Testament or the ancient church.

Citing Oscar Cullmann, "the principle of succession cannot be justified either from Scripture or from the history of the ancient Church" (from "Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr", Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 2nd Edition, © 1962, pg 242).

In fact, in the Roman Catholic-Anglican dialogue, the Vatican acknowledged both that "the New Testament texts offer no sufficient basis for papal primacy" and that the New Testament contains "no explicit record of a transmission of Peter's leadership." (Unity Faith and Order – Dialogues – Anglican Roman Catholic Authority in the Church II (Anglican/Roman Catholic Joint Preparatory Commission), paragraph

2, 6)

6. There is no trace of “primacy” in one of Rome’s strongest “proof texts”, the first-century letter of “First Clement” (96 AD).

In that letter, “Pope Clement”, traditionally held to be the writer, is never mentioned. The address is “from the church of God at Rome” to “the church of God at Corinth”, implying equal status between the two.

Further, the letter is written in the style, common in that culture, of a persuasion letter between churches that are equals, not in a “commanding” tone, as some Roman Catholics have represented it.

The next point reinforces this assessment of “First Clement”:

7. There was no “bishop of Rome” until well beyond the year 150 AD.

In 150 AD, a contemporary writer, in “The Shepherd of Hermas”, confirms that the Roman church is still overseen by a plurality of “elders”, not a head (or monarchical) bishop. Moreover, these “elders” fought among themselves and brought scandal to the church. (St. Jerome elsewhere informs us that “elders” and “bishops” are two words for the same office.)

Hermas, wrote: “But you yourself will read [my book] to this city

[Rome], along with the elders (“*presbuteroi*” in the original Greek) who preside (*proistameno*i – plural leadership) over the church.” (Vis 2.4). Hermas could not be more clear. There is a plurality of presbyters who “preside over” the church at Rome. There is no one person in charge.

But more, he urged them,

“I say to you [*tois* – plural] who lead the church and occupy the seats of honor: do not be like the sorcerers ... You carry your drug and poison in your heart. You are calloused and do not want to cleanse your hearts and to mix your wisdom together in a clean heart, in order that you may have mercy from the great King.

Watch out, therefore, children, lest these divisions of yours [among you elders] deprive you of your life. How is it that you desire to instruct God’s elect, while you yourselves have no instruction? Instruct one another, therefore, and have peace among yourselves,”

We’ve seen Jesus admonish this behavior when the disciples themselves “argued among themselves as to who was greatest”. Nor does Hermas attribute any gift of “infallibility” to these elders, who themselves “have no instruction”.

8. There was no “papacy” for the first three centuries, and when Roman “bishops” tried to exert “authority” based on some

connection to Peter, they were severely reprimanded by other bishops.

Cyprian, in his Letter 73, he wrote of Stephen, who was claiming to be a "successor of Peter", that "more and more observe his error". Further, Cyprian accused Stephen of "bitter obstinacy" (letter 73).

His fellow bishop Firmilian said of Stephen (Letter 74) that he "has not done anything deserving of kindness and thanks" In the next sentence he compares Stephen with Judas, guilty of "perfidy" and "treachery" having "wickedly dealt concerning the Saviour" – as Stephen himself claimed that he "had been the cause of such great advantages, that through him the world and the people of the Gentiles were delivered by the Lord's passion". Those were bold claims, and they were swiftly rebuked.

9. A Regional Council openly stated that there was "no bishop of bishops": This is from **The Seventh Council of Carthage under Cyprian:**

"For neither does any of us set himself up as a bishop of bishops, nor by tyrannical terror does any compel his colleague to the necessity of obedience; since every bishop, according to the allowance of his liberty and power, has his own proper right of judgment, and can no more be judged by another than he himself can judge another."

10. The Council of Nicaea (325 AD) ascribed only regional "oversight" to the Roman church – and that because of "custom", not "divine institution".

11. Later councils, both Constantinople (381 AD) and Chalcedon (451 AD) held that the Roman church should be honored not because of a "divine institution" but because it was "the old Capital" of the empire.

12. The second ecumenical council, Constantinople I, was called in 381. The bishops of this council met, decided the issues, and adjourned without the "pope" at the time, Damasus I (366-384), ever having been notified that a council was being held.

13. It wasn't until the 4th and 5th centuries that Roman "primacy" began to take shape, as early bishops modeled themselves after Roman senators.

In short, while these Roman bishops wanted to emphasize their own importance, no one else in the world wanted to recognize it.

Other churches throughout the world were kind and deferential in the face of Roman bishops asserting their own importance. But up through the

5th and 6th centuries, no one believed them. Only with the backing of Roman Imperial power and money could the claims stick.

14. Ultimately, "Pope Leo I" made the claims stick by relying on Roman adoption law to affirm that he had all "the same rights, authority and obligations as the one he replaced". 400 years after the death of Peter.

There are, in fact, Biblical guidelines as to who may be a "bishop" ("overseer") and what the lives of those individuals ought to be like.

Further, the metaphor "Roman adoption law" was not used in early centuries to justify "the papacy". In fact, the second century writer Irenaeus uses "adoption law" to characterize the relationships between Christ and humans:

"the Son of God was made a son of a human that through him we might receive adoption—humanity bearing and receiving and embracing the Son of God" (Irenaeus, "Against Heresies", 3.16.3).

15. The "Papacy" was Built on Myths and Legends

What are the beginnings of the myths? Despite his status as one of the early Orthodox theologians of the church, the late 2nd century writer Irenaeus made numerous factual and historical mistakes. While not

mentioning a "Petrine" ministry, he was an early source for the "Simon-Magus-as-father-of-all-heresies" myth, for example, a myth which persisted in "the infallible Church" for many centuries.

How did this occur? There were many apocryphal – openly fictitious works, known as various "Acts" of various Apostles. And some of these "Acts" of Peter were reported by the 2nd century writer Irenaeus, as well as Origen, Julian Africanus, and the church historian Eusebius.

These early writers passed along these myths as history.

One of the most noticeable of these fictions was that the sorcerer Simon Magus from Acts 8 became "the father of all heresies" – that he traveled to Rome and Peter followed him there, and that the two clashed in a mighty struggle.

During those clashes, it is reported that Peter brought a smoked fish back to life and that a tall walking, talking cross followed Jesus out of the grave at the resurrection. But it was also reported that Peter founded the church at Rome (he didn't), and that he ruled as bishop there for the next 25 years.

Over the last century, scholars have sifted through these stories to find shreds of truth, but there are none. Nevertheless, as the Roman Catholic historian Eamon Duffy relates:

"These stories were to be accepted

as sober history by some of the greatest minds of the early church – Origen, Ambrose, Augustine – But they are pious romance, not history, and the fact is that we have no reliable accounts either of Peter’s later life or of the manner or place of his death.

Neither Peter nor Paul founded the Church at Rome, for there were Christians in the city before either of the Apostles set foot there. Nor can we assume, as Irenaeus did, that the Apostles established there a succession of bishops to carry on their work in the city, for all the indications are that there was no single bishop at Rome for almost a century after the deaths of the Apostles. In fact, wherever we turn, the solid outlines of the Petrine succession at Rome seem to blur and dissolve.” (from “Saints and Sinners”, 2nd Edition, pg 2)

Stories to the effect that Peter “founded” the church of Rome and reigned as its first bishop for 25 years are among these myths. But these myths, in the hands of rich and powerful leaders of the Roman church, made wealthy by a converted Roman emperor (Constantine), had the power to re-write history and persuade European churches of their own importance.

But this came at a great cost. At the same time as “Pope Leo” was making his claims that he had “the same rights as Peter”, the churches of Persia and Egypt were breaking apart from the Roman and Greek

spheres over doctrinal issues.

They contested certain Christological issues, but they had no illusions about Roman claims of “authority”. These were the greatest schisms in the history of the church, and the weakening of these churches through schism – their separation from other churches – made possible the Islamic conquests a century later.

Similarly, it was Roman claims of authority that caused the great East-West Schism of 1054.

Further blatant forgeries like the “Donation of Constantine” and the “Pseudo-Isidorean Decretals” found their way not only into church doctrine but canon law – the same “Code of Canon Law” that the Roman Catholic Church adheres to today – and unopposed by churches that were more ancient than Rome, the popes of the Middle Ages could claim to largely uneducated masses that they alone held “the keys”, and that the Roman church was “the Church that Christ Founded”.

16. Even the Roman Catholic Church Concedes the Papacy Developed Over Time

The Roman Catholic Church will acknowledge these facts; in fact, they have, in more recent doctrinal statements, re-positioned “the papacy” in a much looser way. In fact, here is how the Catechism of the Catholic Church” now describes

the "Petrine succession":

881 The Lord made Simon alone, whom he named Peter, the "rock" of his Church. He gave him the keys of his Church and instituted him shepherd of the whole flock. "The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of apostles united to its head." **This pastoral office of Peter and the other apostles belongs to the Church's very foundation and is continued by the bishops under the primacy of the Pope.**

882 The Pope, Bishop of Rome and Peter's successor, "is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful." "For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered."

883 "The college or body of bishops has no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor, as its head." As such, this college has "supreme and full authority over the universal Church; but this power cannot be exercised without the agreement of the Roman Pontiff."

As well, Roman Catholics will also say that the late emergence of "the Papacy" is due to a process of "development" – that is, the doctrine was given in "seed" form, only to be "realized" later.

Gone are claims of an "unbroken succession" of individuals passing on a kind of succession from hand-to-hand, one individual to another; now there is a generalized "succession" of this "college of bishops". There are open "compartments" or "offices" that were set up "ontologically" at the moment that Jesus spoke to Peter; now these open slots may or may not be (or need not be) filled in order to keep the "succession" going. They simply exist.

But gone are the claims of Peter as "founder" of the church at Rome, and his 25 years as "bishop" there. Gone are the claims of Roman adoption rights.

But if that's the case, God enabled the earliest church, the persecuted church of the first three centuries to undergo the severest persecutions in its history, without the benefit of what's now called "the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity" in the church.

17. While History Shows Papal Claims to be False, it Reinforces that the Scriptures are True

The papacy was founded on a number of principles that we now know to be false. Today, the "Petrine ministry" is claimed to be a focal point of "church unity". But should we, today, rally around principles that we know to be false? Or should we look for the true focal point of Christian unity?

Historical Christianity is true Christianity. We have more evidence today that Jesus lived, died, and was resurrected “according to the Scriptures”, than at any time in history, and that Jesus is the one who was, who is, and who is to come.

We also have more evidence today that the papacy is the result not of Christ’s intention that there be a perpetual “successor of Peter” or “Petrine ministry”, but centuries’-worth of myths and deceit.

**“Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness,
you who seek the Lord:
look to the Rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
(Isaiah 51:1)**

**“The Rock was Christ. ”
(1 Corinthians 10:4)**

If you’re here to see some kind of world leader – some sort of “vicar of Christ” – why not turn instead to the one true Christ – who makes himself available to you immediately:

“The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet:

**“Go to this people and say,
“You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.”**

**For this people’s heart has become calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts
and turn, and I would heal them.’
(Acts 28:25-27)**

And:

**Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.
(Hebrews 4:14-16)**

If you wish to discuss this or other spiritual matters further, please contact us.