

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 34

The Papacy – Part 2

Last week, we considered the major Biblical passages used in support of the claims that the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, presides over the universal church. We will not repeat that material here beyond referencing when church leaders used certain passages to substantiate or dispute claims of authority.

This week, the lesson focuses on the data we find in the annals of church history on the issue and development of the papal office and its authority. Obviously, one's interpretation of these historical documents can differ 180 degrees. The events and writings we have, of course, are the same for all churches – Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox. Yet, the interpretation of these events and documents leads the Roman Catholic Church to the conclusion that the Pope is the universal leader of the church. Other churches, however, interpret these events and come to the opposite conclusion.

Our goal in this class is two-fold: first, to present the major historical events relevant to the papacy's development; and second, to consider the general interpretations Roman and non-Roman churches offered.¹

Much of the historical data we will consider comes from the very same sources we have studied in this class so far. The older lessons are useful to put into context some of the points we will consider today.

PETER AND HIS SUCCESSORS

If we went to the Vatican today, we would find on the wall a listing of each leader of the Roman church from the time of Peter up to Benedict today. Since the 400–500's, the men in this line of succession of the Bishops of Rome from the New Testament to now have been called "Popes." As we discussed last week, they draw their title as Pope from the root word in Latin for Father. These men are seen as the spiritual fathers of the church.

¹ Of course, these interpretations vary significantly, even within the groups themselves. Time (and our approach to church history *literacy*) does not allow a more detailed discussion that investigates minority views on these issues. Upon investigation, however, one can find a handful of Roman theologians who dispute the common Catholic view of the Pope's supremacy over the church. Similarly, one can find non-Roman theologians who concur with much of Rome's teaching on the supremacy of Peter and successors in the church.

Their role, however, goes deeper for the Roman Catholic Church than simply “spiritual father.” These men are seen to have two kinds of primacy (read that “comes in first ahead of others in authority”) in the church. First, the Pope has “magisterial primacy,” meaning that the Pope has the “final definition of doctrine and teaching” in the church. The second area of primacy is “jurisdictional.” This means the Pope has the “final decision” in areas of church government.²

As we discussed last week, the Roman view of this office stems from several scriptures found in the New Testament. We need to keep in our minds the Matthew 16 passage where Jesus calls Peter the “rock” and tells Peter that his church will be built on the rock, along with Peter having the keys to the church. The second passage is John 21 where Christ tells Peter to feed Jesus’ sheep. These are the two core passages giving Peter fullness of power in the church.

Another aspect of the Roman view important to the historical development of the papacy is the overall view of the church. To many Protestants, the church is a spiritual body made up of the saved wherever they may worship and regardless of denominational affiliation. The Roman view is different. The Roman church never considered the church merely a spiritual body. Rather, the church is seen as an “organized, visible, juristic, and corporate society.”³ As such, the church has set up a government by Christ, just as any other society might have. Over time, as the church grew from a small community of believers in Jerusalem, the government has grown as well. The Roman perspective considers that the governmental growth has continued under the auspices of the Roman Bishop as Peter’s designated successor. It is this growth that we now chart.

1 CLEMENT

The earliest church writing we have outside the New Testament that bears on this matter is 1 Clement. You might recall our earlier class lesson where this “Apostolic Father’s” letter was covered. Written around 95 or 96 A.D., 1 Clement is a letter from the Roman church to the church at Corinth. The letter confronts the Corinthian church with rebuke and instruction over the Corinthian’s divisions. The Corinthians are told to restore their leaders and cease the destructive schisms.

² *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, (2d Edition Thomson Gale 2003) “Papacy,” p. 830.

³ *Ibid.*

From a Roman perspective, this letter demonstrates an early exercise of papal authority. Clement is seen as the Bishop of Rome in succession from Peter.⁴ The letter is considered early proof that the church at Rome, more specifically Clement himself, readily takes authority over other churches (here the one at Corinth) instructing them in church matters.

The Protestant perspective differs. Protestants point out that the letter is not from Clement as the Bishop of Rome or Pope. Instead, the letter is from the church at Rome,⁵ and Clement is not even mentioned by name or office in the letter. All agree that the letter itself does give very pointed instruction on proper Christian and church behavior. But, Protestants consider this no different than the New Testament practice seen in the writings of Paul and John where they write churches in a similar instructive manner. Protestants also quickly point to where the church at Jerusalem in Acts 15, with James at the helm, not Peter, writes to other churches with specific instructions on what is proper and holy.

IGNATIUS

A decade after Clement, we have the writings of Ignatius. You might recall from our class on Ignatius that he was on his way to Rome as a prisoner set for martyrdom. While traveling to his death, Ignatius wrote letters to seven churches. Those letters contain some insight on the issue of church government.

Before we look at those letters, we should go back and consider the New Testament's references to church government. As we partially discussed last week, the New Testament church had apostles, but individual church leadership seemed to reside with a plurality of elders or bishops.⁶ Paul saw the elders as those who would "direct the affairs of the church" (1 Tim. 5:17).

⁴ The church considers "Linus" as the immediate successor to Peter. After Linus (67-76) came Anacletus and Cletus (scholars differ whether they were one in the same or two different bishops) who are dated as bishop(s) from 76-88. The third (fourth) bishop in line of succession from Peter is Clement (88-97).

⁵ The letter begins, "The church of God which sojourns in Rome to the church of God which sojourns in Corinth."

⁶ New Testament churches also seemed to have a role for deacons. For example, when Paul writes to the Philippians, he addressed his letter to "the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers [bishops] and deacons" (Phil. 1:1). Deacons (and deaconesses—see Rom. 16:1, 3, 12; Phil. 4:2, 3; 1 Tim. 3:11; 5:9, 10; Titus 2:3, 4) had a service role in the early churches. The word itself comes from the Greek *diakonos* meaning a "servant" or a "messenger." The office seems to have started in Acts 6 where seven were chosen to distribute to the widows in need so the apostles might continue their apostolic calling.

In the New Testament sense of governing in the churches, “elder” appears to be synonymous with “bishop.” So, when Paul wrote to Titus urging him to finish setting up overseers⁷ in the churches, we see in Titus 1:7 that Paul used the word “bishop” interchangeably with the word elder.

Similarly, in Acts 20, Paul sends for the Ephesian “elders of the church” (20:17) to say good-bye to them. When the elders arrive, Paul tells them to “keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [“bishops”].

Peter also uses the word “elder” interchangeably with “bishop” or “overseer.” In 1 Peter 5, Peter writes “to the elders among you.” He tells them to serve as “overseers” in 5:2.

Now, we consider the writings of Ignatius. Just 10 years from the time John wrote his Revelation, Ignatius writes of church government in ways that indicate that the New Testament examples of a plurality of elders/bishops in the various churches is already different. For Ignatius, the role of “bishop” is different than the role of “elder” (also translated “presbyter”).

In the letter to the Magnesians, for example, Ignatius references the church’s “godly bishop” and “worthy presbyters” (2:1). Ignatius also writes to the Trallians, speaking of their bishop Polybius (1:1). Here, the church is urged to be “subject to the bishop as to Jesus Christ” (2:1). The Trallians are told to do “nothing without the bishop.” We have a clear distinction in Ignatius’s letters between the office of “bishop” which seems to have been held by one individual in each church and the office of “elder” or “presbyter” which seems to have had a number of men assigned to it.

At this point, we have the development of three different roles in the church: Bishop, elders, and deacons. The Trallians are told to “respect the deacons as Jesus Christ,” to “respect the bishop, who is a model of the Father,” and to respect “the presbyters [“elders”] as God’s counsel and as the band of the apostles.” Ignatius then adds, “Without these, no group can be called a church” (3:1).

The Protestant position asserts that this shows a gradual changing from the early governing structures of the church as a hierarchy starts to develop. This development sets up a bishop in a preeminent role not seen in New Testament writings.

⁷ The New International Version translates the word that is traditionally “bishop” as “overseer” because that is the core meaning of the word.

IRENÆUS

Thinking back through earlier classes, you might remember our class on Irenaeus of Lyon. He was the church father who wrote against the Gnostic heresies of his day. To combat the heresies, Irenaeus linked orthodox faith to Jesus through an unbroken chain. Jesus taught the apostles truth. The apostles taught that same truth to the bishops who succeeded them. Those bishops, each in their own turn, taught the following bishops up through Irenaeus' day. So, any teaching contrary to that of the properly designated bishop from a line of succession from the apostles themselves was heresy.

In making this argument, Irenaeus set out the list of uninterrupted bishops at Rome from the time of Peter and Paul to his current day. Many Catholics see here an intrinsic recognition of the preeminence of the Roman Bishopric. Especially noteworthy in this regard is where Irenaeus makes his point that with Rome, "because of its superior origin, all churches must agree."

Most Protestants see the use of Rome as a handy tool to chart succession of apostolic teaching. The Protestants quickly point out that Irenaeus indicates that, given time and space, he would be able to similarly give an unbroken list of all bishops in the churches. As for the statement of all churches agreeing with Rome, protestants believe that Irenaeus faults those heretics who disagree with the Roman orthodoxy because the orthodoxy came from Peter and Paul (the "superior origin" rather than some unknowns).

POLYCARP

On the issue of papal primacy, some reference the acts of Polycarp, an early Christian martyr also discussed in an earlier class. As bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp came and visited Anicetus, who was Roman bishop from approximately 155-166. Polycarp came to discuss the proper way to establish the date of Easter. Should the church celebrate Easter based on the Jewish calendar, or should adjustments be made to keep the celebrations on a Sunday? As Catholic scholar Joseph McSorley quotes Eusebius, the church historian, "Polycarp could not persuade the Pope, nor could the Pope, Polycarp!"⁸

Roman Catholics see here the inherent value the church imparted to the Bishop of Rome in that Polycarp sought and discussed this position above all others. The Protestant responds that this ultimately shows that Polycarp did not find himself bound by the Pope's position or pronouncement on this theological issue.

⁸ *An Outline of Church History of the Church by Centuries* (B. Herder Book Co. 1945) at 32.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SYNODS

Over the centuries from Polycarp up through the 400's, we find numerous examples of various church leaders writing to the Bishop of Rome for advice, for support of their positions, and for recognition. From a Roman Catholic perspective, these letters and requests are seen as tacit admission in the daily practice of the church that the Bishop of Rome had recognized authority over the universal church.

From a Protestant perspective, the same time period shows a number of churches receiving similar petitions of support. The Protestants view this time as one of no ultimate governing authority beyond the confines of each church, at least in terms of individuals or individual offices.

A larger development was occurring at this time in the church. The church was confronting a number of difficult theological issues that divided many of the church's teachers and leaders. Out of this time grew a technique for resolution that drew its authority from the church's council in Acts 15 over the Jewish/Christian issues of behavior. Starting in the 200's, the churches began meeting in synods or councils to discuss and vote on various issues. The churches saw this as a way to maintain unity and establish orthodoxy.

Various leaders from the invited churches would attend these synods or meetings. These meetings would not only distinguish orthodoxy from heresy, but they would also frequently label heretics and excommunicate them. For example, in the 250's, St. Cyprian summoned several such meetings to make decisions on those in his African area. Cyprian believed as bishop, he had the authority to settle the disciplinary questions for those who were in his jurisdiction. At times, Cyprian took positions opposite that of Stephen, the current bishop of Rome. At other times, Cyprian found support from Rome in his positions and more readily gave authority to the Roman bishop.

A significant synod was held in Antioch in 268 to consider the heresy of Paul of Samosota. Bishops, presbyters, and deacons from the adjacent cities and provinces attended the council. The decisions of the synods were then announced to the "fellow-ministers throughout the world and the whole catholic church under heaven."

These synods rapidly became political plays within themselves. As the gatherings occurred, it was clearly important to all players to get their views supported by as many as possible. The major players became those who had the votes and the leverage at these meetings.

THE ROMAN BISHOP WEIGHS IN

As these synods developed, and especially as larger councils were called, headcounts for votes were important. People, positions, and authority were leveraged for vindication of people and their views. It was not uncommon for letters to be written to any number of bishops seeking their support before and during the conferences. Especially noticeable were the letters seeking support from the bishop of Rome.

When the Roman Bishop aided one's position, the Roman Bishop was lauded for his use of his holy see in support of a position. When the Roman Bishop would disagree with the one's position, the bishop was then discarded as wrong or irrelevant to the issue

The Roman church had never been the site of great debates over the theological issues of the 200-400's. Most of those debates were found in the East (with a couple in Africa). This allowed the Roman Bishop to give his support only when sought. This would change with Leo and the councils dealing with the humanity of Christ. Without question, Leo was the major theological force behind Chalcedon's resolution of the humanity of Christ. It can easily be said that Leo's tome secured the orthodoxy of Jesus, fully human and fully divine. Before that time, any number of elders would seek the Roman Bishop's support for their position.

THE POWER OF THE CHURCH

As we make it into the 300's, we see a major change wherein the church was no longer the minority and often persecuted religion of the Empire. Instead, Constantine made Christianity in vogue! Once Constantine declared Christianity his faith, he pointed the entire empire itself that direction. Now, we see the rise of the Eastern portion of Christendom in significance. Constantinople became the center point of the Roman Empire rather than Rome. The church began to assert that its governing power coincided with that of the empire. Constantine himself presided over the Nicene Council (held outside Constantinople).

Still, the Roman church was not without power and prestige with Constantine. Constantine gave the Roman church a number of impressive properties as well as building key church structures, including the first basilica of St. Peter. With these types of gifts, the Roman church grew quite wealthy. This wealth was used not only to pay the clergy, but also in support of innumerable widows, poor, sick, and orphans. The more money the Roman church had, the more people it supported and the further its influence reached. The money was dispensed under the

oversight of the bishop. The growth in economic power was commensurate to the growth of bishopric power and authority.

As the 400's started, the empire started crumbling in the West. The East continued fairly strongly with an Emperor that held the reins on the church as well as the state. In the west, the Church was the one stabilizing force as the empire began to crumble. So, we see the Bishop of Rome actually beginning to take on the functions of government in addition to the affairs of the church. As we referenced in an earlier class, it was Leo who persuaded Attila the Hun not to attack and plunder Rome. Leo also had clear oversight for the lands and cities of Italy.

More and more, the people in the West saw the Bishop of Rome as the source for their sustenance and their day-to-day stability. The Roman Pope was seen not only as a spiritual leader, but also as the societal provider of security and continuity. Leo was able to get a legal recognition of his primacy over the western churches from Emperor Valentinian III. Leo used the Roman laws of inheritance as his basis for his claim on Peter's authority. Under Roman law, one could pass on their titles and responsibilities. Of course, one could never bequeath their personality. Leo explained that Peter's position was in a sense inherited by his successors. Peter's personality was not, and that explained why some pope's faithfully discharged their duties, while others did not.

Leo used Roman inheritance law to explain not only papal authority, but also papal inadequacies. Leo explained that one who had honors, responsibilities, and possessions could bequeath those upon his death. That is what Peter did. One could never, however, bequeath one's personalities, convictions, etc. That is why Popes subsequent to Peter always had Peter's duties, powers, and responsibilities, but might not discharge those as well as Peter did.

MEANWHILE...BACK IN THE EAST

All of these events were running parallel to the theological understandings offered for the Pope's pre-eminence. In the mid 200's in the West, we see the usage of the Matthew passage for the first time as an indication that Peter was the one who held the seat of first authority over the church. In the East, most people simply did not see this as true. Origen and his successors saw the Matthew passage in a much different light. Origen wrote that the rock upon which Christ built his church was "every imitator of Christ from whom they drank, who drank from the spiritual rock that followed them." He saw the passage referring to the apostles as a whole

rather than just Peter. Similarly, the keys were given to all who believed in Peter's confession of faith, rather than just to Peter.⁹

For some Easterners, if there were to be any authority of pre-eminence for the church, then it would belong to Jerusalem not Rome. They viewed Jerusalem as the source of the church. It was Jerusalem where Peter started the church. In Jerusalem, James, the brother of Christ, was the pre-eminent bishop. Eusebius showed that the line of apostolic succession in Jerusalem was unbroken as was Rome's.

In fact, there was not only Jerusalem, but also several power centers for the church built up during these times. Antioch and Alexandria also had strong early bible ties. Antioch, like Rome, could boast both Peter and Paul as its early teachers. Alexandria claimed authority as the church set up by Mark, author of Peter's gospel (our book of Mark). Of course, once the government moved from Rome to Constantinople, the church there also had great claim to authority as the headquarters of government and the "new Rome."

These churches would jostle with each other for authority in the 300's and 400's. The Nicene council divided up Roman Christendom into areas for administration. The administrative/authority centers were Alexandria, Antioch, and Rome, but Rome was not given any status above that of the other sees. Ultimately, during the Council of Chalcedon, provision was made in Canon 28 that the Sees of Constantinople and Rome were jointly the pre-eminent jurisdictions of the church. Pope Leo, however, would have nothing to do with that! That canon would continue to be disputed in the church for many years to come.

As we go through more of church history, we will see that Rome continues to grow in the Western world in its significance as not only a church government, but also as a property holder and a secular governing authority. The Eastern portion would continue to assert its independence from Rome and ultimately made a formal break from the Roman church. Now, we are getting ahead of ourselves!

⁹ *The Rise of Christianity*, W.H. C. Frend (Fortress Press 1984) at 401.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. God does set out authority in the church but not for authority's sake. Rather, authority is set out for the sake of the church. As Peter writes, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:2).
2. Church leaders are to "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28).
3. We are to honor that authority, but always remember that the real overseer is Christ himself. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (1 Pet. 2:24-25).