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Is the Papacy Biblical?

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Cardinals attend the Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice Mass at St Peter's Basilica, before they enter the conclave to decide who the next pope will be, on March 12, 2013 in Vatican City, Vatican. Cardinals are set to enter the conclave to elect a successor to Pope Benedict XVI after he became the first pope in 600 years to resign from the role. The conclave is scheduled to start on March 12 inside the Sistine Chapel and will be attended by 115 cardinals as they vote to select the 266th Pope of the Catholic Church.

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In a matter of days, 135 eligible cardinals from around the world will gather in Rome for a papal conclave in order to choose the next pope for the Roman Catholic Church. Meeting beneath the artistic scenery of the Sistine Chapel, these electors will vote as many as four times per day until their chosen leader receives a two-thirds majority. Cut off from the outside world, participants pledge an oath of secrecy and objectivity before the proceedings begin. The burning of ballots signals the conclave's progress, or lack thereof, to the world.

Black smoke from the chapel's chimney indicates a failure to reach consensus and continued voting. Once a new pontiff is chosen, white smoke created by added chemicals is the first declaration of the transition to the world. Upon his election, Rome's new bishop must immediately offer his consent by answering the question, "Do you accept your canonical election as Supreme Pontiff?" Next, he will choose a new name for himself, often a means of honoring predecessors or identifying his leadership vision.

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With these clerical matters completed, the new pope assumes complete authority over the worldwide church immediately. After a formal announcement in Latin, he emerges at St. Peter's Basilica in order to offer an apostolic blessing, heralded as the new vicar of Christ.

If all of this seems a bit medieval, it's because it is. Roman Catholics are quick to tell us that the Apostle Peter functioned as the first pope because he is the rock upon which Jesus promised to build His church (Matt. 16:18). Though I do not doubt the sincerity of their claim, both Scripture and history tell a different story. The first recognized pope did not emerge until the 5th century when Leo I became bishop of Rome.

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The word "pope" simply means "father." Early on, the endearing term described important bishops in numerous places. As late as the fourth century, Alexandria and Carthage celebrated popes Athanasius and Cyprian in Northern Africa. Throughout the eastern Roman empire, many others donned the title as bishops, with no consensus around the primacy of a Roman pope. Furthermore, cities like Antioch and Alexandria were much more important to the early development of the Church than anything happening in Italy.

The fall of the western Roman empire brought barbarian invasions which threatened all that was left of ancient civilization, particularly in the city of Rome. Though the Roman Empire continued to thrive in the east (the Byzantine period), western cities like Rome were left vulnerable to total destruction. In this climate, Rome's bishop, the aforementioned Leo I, broadened his power and influence by negotiating for the peace and preservation of the city multiple times.

Though the church in the east did not recognize his unique authority, Leo believed that God blessed his efforts because he was a successor to Saint Peter. Thus began the evolution of Rome's primacy and the pope's increased authority. As the Italian seat of authority grew and the strength of Constantinople began to wane over the next few centuries, papal consensus began to grow. It was not, however, until after the Great Western Schism of the 15th century that a more unified papacy began to emerge.

I realize that this history is foreign to many, but it is illustrative of the false claim that the papal office goes all the way back to Peter. Nothing in the biblical record even hints at the papacy as we know it today. How, then, should we understand Jesus' recorded statement to His beloved apostle? The exegetical nuances of Matthew 16:18 are impossible to discuss here, but the point of confusion centers on whether *Peter himself* or *the confession he made* serves as the foundational stone for the true Church. [NOTE: The foundation stone is actually Jesus Himself! - editor].

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Simply allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture makes it obvious that Peter's confession is the rock upon which the church has been built. Clearly, Peter did not claim to be the first pope, nor did anyone treat him as such. Such an understanding in no way detracts from Peter's leadership in the early church.

His name is mentioned first wherever we find a record of the early apostles and disciples (see Matt. 10:2; Mark 3:16; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13). Furthermore, he was part of the inner circle of three that Jesus privileged to witness the resurrection of Jarius' daughter (Mark 5:35-43), the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-3), the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13), and the Gethsemane prayer time (Mark 14:32-42).

Yet, Peter himself claimed to be a "fellow elder" in the early church without special privilege (1 Pe. 5:1-5). Call him the first among equals if you will, but his authority was *equal to* and *not greater than* his fellow apostles. The deliberations of the Jerusalem Council make this plain, demonstrating that Peter spoke with conviction, but no more so than James, Paul, or Barnabas (Acts 15:1-29). Additionally, Paul's public rebuke of Peter for misrepresenting the Gospel before the Judaizers reveals that he was *under* authority even as he *exercised* authority (Gal. 2:1-14). Peter was no pope.

For these reasons, we ought to reject the practice of papal authority as unbiblical, even as we pray for God's mercy in a broken system. There is no earthly vicar of Christ precisely because there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5). Yet, whoever Rome designates as its new leader will articulate and advance the faith for many Christians around the world.

To date, the official positions of the Vatican have stood firm on the sanctity of all human life and the biblical definition of marriage. Christians everywhere should applaud these commitments even as we should pray that the next pope will not deviate from them. I do not have to recognize papal authority in order to recognize the value of historical moral positions and human flourishing.

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