

Sunday, January 23, 2011—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—  
Lesson 19 The “Christian” Middle Ages: The Emergence of Papal Power

### **Leo Forges the Papacy**

- Last week, at the end of our study on the fall of the Western Roman Empire, I introduced you to Leo the bishop of Rome who perused Attila the Hun not to sack Rome.
- Leo is almost universally viewed as the one who solidified the power of the Papacy. “Leo laid great stress upon the primacy of Peter (which he claimed) and insisted that Peter’s apostolic power (which he claimed) had been passed on to the Roman bishops and Roman popes only (which he professed to be).” (Ruckman, 355)
- “The term ‘pope’ itself has a long history. The Greek word *papas* was originally applied to high ecclesiastical officials of all kinds; for example, the bishop of Alexandria was called *papas* around the middle of the third century. In the West, the Latin *papa* was likewise a term of respect for a variety of church authorities. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records that as late as 640 the term was applied to Desiderius, bishop of Cahors (in southern France). Centuries before then, however, the use of the term *papa* had begun to be reserved for the bishop of Rome. That stricter usage, prevailed at least from the pontificate of Leo the Great (440-61). After the eleventh century, the title *papa* was used exclusively for the bishop of Rome.” (Noll, 110-111)
- Mark A. Noll, author of *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* tells his readers that Leo took several steps that clarified the nature of Papal authority. Noll writes:
  - “Extending the earlier efforts of Pope Stephen, Leo further articulated Matthew 16:18 as a foundation undergirding the authority of the Roman bishops as the successors of St. Peter. In addition, early in his pontificate Leo obtained from the emperor, Valentinian III, an edict that defined the superiority of the pope over all other Western bishops in matters related to civil law. In other words, Leo increased the power of the papacy both by capably exercising and by explicitly defending papal authority.” (Noll, 113)
- Chapter 14 of Bruce Shelley’s book *Church History in Plain Language* bears the title “Peter as Pontifex Maximus.” When discussing the polarizing views of the papacy amongst Christians Shelley concedes the following point, “all sides agree, however, that Leo represents an important stage in the history of this unique institution. He demonstrates the papacy’s capacity to adapt to different environments in its long history. . .” (Shelley, 133)
- Andrew Miller author of *Miller’s Church History* states that Leo “raised the claims of the Roman bishop, as the representative of St. Peter to a height before unknown.” (Miller, 298)
- “In the sermon Leo preached on the day of his entrance into office he extolled the ‘glory of the blessed Apostle Peter . . . in whose chair his power lives on and his authority shines forth’ . . . Leo made his entrance into world history as the Supreme Head of all Christendom. Appealing to

the three-fold Gospel testimony (Matt. 16:13-19, Luke 22:31, John 21:15-17) the new pope laid the theoretical foundation for papal primacy: Christ promised to build his church on Peter, the rock for all ages, and the bishops of Rome are his successors in that authority.” (Shelley, 137)

- “This was a complete reversal of the policy of Constantine, who used Christianity as a tool. He had put political and religious pressure on the bishops at the Council of Nicea to preserve the unity of the church, which he considered the cement of the Empire. A century later Leo raised the status of the bishop’s office in Rome once and for all. He carried the papacy as far theoretically as it could go. The dynasty of Peter, Prince of the Church, was established, solemnly, and decisively.” (Shelley, 137)

### **From Peter to Leo**

- “Actions from Rome that exerted broad influence appear early in the church’s history. According to the Catholic Church’s official list of popes, Peter was succeeded by Linus (perhaps II Timothy 4:21), then Anacletus (or Cletus), then Clement.” (Noll, 111)
- In 96 AD Clement wrote an epistle to the Corinthians addressing some problems within the church there.
- Over the next several centuries, a number of events, personalities, and circumstances contributed to the growing authority of the Roman bishop:
  - In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Roman bishops were called upon to write rebuttals to various heresies.
  - Late in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Pope Victor exerted considerable influence in fixing a common date for Easter.
  - 255 AD Bishop Stephen used Matthew 16:18 to defend his own views in a dispute with Cyprian.
  - 343 AD the Council of Sardica ruled formally that all the decision of local counsels may be appealed to the bishop of Rome.
  - Pope Damasus I (366-384) drafted a formal definition of the Roman bishop’s superiority over all other bishops. In addition, Damasus was the Pope who commissioned Jerome to translate the Latin Vulgate which became the standard text of the Roman church.
  - 385 AD the first official ruling of a Pope was written by Pope Siricius in response to a query from another bishop. (Noll, 111-112)
- “Already by the fourth century it had become apparent that the ecclesiastical centrality of the Roman bishop had much to do with the political centrality of Rome.” (Noll, 112)
- Henry T. Hudson reports that Emperor Valentinian enacted a law in 372, empowering the Bishop of Rome to examine and judge other bishops, that religious disputes might be decided by profane or secular judges. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Bishops of Rome, armed with the prestige of double apostolicity and with the position of appellate authority, should become imbued with the belief that their authority was supreme over the whole church. (Hudson, 26)

- “The expression ‘the apostolic see’ was applied to the bishopric of Rome by Pope Damasus in 378.” (Hudson, 26)
- “All that was now needed was for someone to join together ‘primary’ and ‘apostolic see.’ This was done by Boniface I in 422, and was given permanent fixation by Leo I. Leo reasoned that since Christ commissioned Peter, and since he alone was the vicar of St. Peter, that same jurisdictional power which was given to Peter must be his also.” (Hudson, 26)
- “As has been noted, the first five centuries of Christianity knew little or nothing about an actual supreme rulership of the Roman pope over all churches. What then, from a historical point of view, could make such an unprecedented claim possible?” (Hudson, 16)
  - Correlation between the power vacuum created by the demise of the ancient Roman civilization and the growth and development of papal power at Rome. (Hudson, 16)
  - Francesco Guiccidarin in his classic history of the Italian Renaissance claims that the transfer of the imperial seat to Constantinople was the first origin of papal power. As a result of the transfer, the Roman pontiffs were left free of imperial control and they themselves began to assume temporal power. (Hudson, 16)
  - In his *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes described that papacy as “no other than the ghost of the deceased Roman Empire, sitting crowned upon the grave thereof. For so did the papacy start up on a sudden out of the ruins of that heathen power.” (Hudson, 16)
- The transition is not hard to understand, for the church was the only institution strong enough to proved necessary leadership and some degree of unity. “It was not, therefore, unusual that the bishop of the largest city of the empire should be thrust into a position of prominence. He had no rival to speak of in the West. His see was complete free of strife and heresy. He was also at various times called upon to mediate in theological disputes which were even outside his own jurisdictional limits.” (Hudson, 20)
- The historical circumstances of the first five centuries of Christian history provided the soil in which a complex mixture of Biblical, philosophical, theological, and legal seeds took root which culminated in the authoritarian reign of the Popes.

### **Catholic Arguments for Papal Power**

- Matthew 16:18-19 is the most prevalent passage used by Catholics to support the authority of the popes. The verse appears around the base of Michelangelo’s dome in St. Peter’s Basilica. From these words the papacy was born.
- Matthew 16:18-19 is used as support for the two fundamental assertions of the papacy:

- “Peter as the rock upon whom the church would be built, was granted authoritative jurisdiction over all the followers of Jesus Christ.”
- “by what is known as apostolic succession, those who succeed Peter become the inheritors of his universal authority.” (Hudson, 11)
- While the word Rome nowhere appears in Matthew 16 it does not need to because Catholic Church tradition maintains that Peter was the bishop of Rome until his death. Therefore, those who succeed the bishopric of Rome are the rightful heirs of Peter and therefore inherit the universal jurisdiction over the whole church. (Hudson, 11)
- R. Dawson Barlow reports, that Orthodox churches both Roman and Greek maintain the belief in an unbroken succession of popes dating all the way back to lifetime of Simon Peter, even though there is not enough information in the first four hundred years to substantiate such a claim. (Barlow, 86)
- Henry Hudson, author of *Papal Power* discusses the work of a French Rome Catholic who surveyed the writings of the patristic fathers regarding their identification of the “rock” in Matthew 16.
  - “Seventeen of the patristic writers said that Peter was the rock, forty-four were of the opinion that it was Peter’s faith, sixteen favored the view that the rock was Christ and eight said that it referred to all the apostles.” (Hudson, 11)
- “It has long been the claim of Rome that Simon Peter, the first pope moved to live in that city in AD 42 and served as the Primate of Rome until AD 64, when he was crucified upside down. The location of that cemetery supposedly became the building site for the basilica of St. Peter, now know as the Vatican.” (Barlow, 87)

### **Scriptural Evaluation of Papal Claims**

- Is there any Scriptural support that Peter was ever at Rome?
- I Peter 5:13—clearly states that Peter was in Babylon. Why would Peter be in Babylon?
- Galatians 2:7-9—“at the council which met at Jerusalem, a full twenty-four years after Pentecost, it was agreed that Peter and the eleven disciples would go to the Jewish population and that Paul would go to the Gentiles, each with their respective messages.” (Barlow, 90)
- “One of the heaviest Jewish populations at that time in history was concentrated in Babylon, and that is what Peter was doing there. There are three good reasons for believing that Simon Peter was in Babylon:
  - He said he was at Babylon. That ought to be good enough for us all.

- We know from the record of the New Testament that he could not have been in Rome and therefore had to be someplace else.
- One of Paul’s reasons for wanting to go to Rome was that he might have the privilege to build a work for Christ and that he might not have to build upon another man’s work. In other words Peter was not in Rome. If he was then Paul would have been building on “another man’s foundation.””(Barlow, 90-91)
- I am not simply saying that the Scriptures do not teach that Peter went to Rome and served as the head of the Church from 42-64 AD. I am saying that the Bible actually contradicts this papal claim.
- “It is universally conceded that Paul was converted approximately AD 36 or 37. We have not encountered one responsible authority who will argue against that historical fact. In the first chapter of Galatians, Paul states that three years after his conversion he went to Jerusalem to see Peter. That places us at an approximate date of AD 40. So according to the New Testament record, Peter is in Jerusalem in AD 40, no problem with tradition, yet!” (Barlow, 95)
- Peter made a missionary journey to Lydia, Joppa, and Caesarea (Acts 9-11), which were all located in Western Judea. When he returned to Jerusalem he was then imprisoned under Herod Agrippa’s orders. Josephus records that Agrippa died in the fourth year of the reign of Claudius. Therefore, as late as 45 AD Peter is still in Jerusalem resulting in a three year discrepancy with tradition. (Barlow, 95)
- Paul states in Galatians 2:1 that he went up to Jerusalem to see Peter 14 years after his first visit. This brings us up to 62 AD. At this point according to church tradition, Peter should have been serving as the bishop of Rome for at least 20 years. (Barlow, 96)
- “In 58 AD Paul wrote the book of Romans. In the last chapter of that great book Paul greets twenty seven people by name but there is no mention of Simon Peter.” (Barlow, 96)
- Romans 15:20—explains why Paul desired to go to Rome, he did not want to build upon another man’s foundation. But according to the Roman church, Peter had been there longer than 16 years establishing Christianity.

### **Concluding Remarks**

- Philip Schaff the great church historian states the following regarding the papacy, “. . . the presence of Peter in Rome. This may be admitted as a historical fact, and I, for my part, cannot believe it possible that such a rock-firm and world-wide structure as the papacy could rest on the sand of mere fraud and error.” (Schaff quoted in Barlow, 99)
- Unfortunately, most of church history is the study of the Roman hierarchy. If a historian were Biblical in his approach to history—that is, if he interpreted the sold facts of history in the light of

the superior revelations given by the God of history—he would have to call the history Roman Catholicism ANTI-church history. By the same token the Reformers would fall sometimes under the heading of SEMI-church history. (Ruckman, 273)

- “The history of Catholicism is therefore ANTI-church history, for Roman Catholicism is Anit-biblical Christianity.” (Ruckman, 275)
- The Roman church is an ecclesiastical dictatorship whose primary objective is to maintain power and unity. A survey of the history of this institution reveals that any anit-Biblical teaching or practice was adopted and promoted as long as it did not cause disunity or impotence in the political and hierarchal structure of Holy Mother Church.
- Genuine church history must deal with a body of saved Bible believing saints and the local churches they established.

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