

Grace Evangelical Free Church
Issues & Answers: Roman Catholic Papacy

The Roman Catholic Church's teaching regarding the office of pope ("pope" means "father") is built upon and involves the following Roman Catholic teachings:

- 1) Christ made Peter the leader of the apostles and of the church (**Matthew 16:18-19**). In giving Peter the "**keys of the kingdom**," Christ not only made him leader, but also made him infallible when he acted or spoke as Christ's representative on earth (speaking from the seat of authority, or "ex cathedra"). This ability to act on behalf of the church in an infallible way when speaking "ex cathedra" was passed on to Peter's successors, thus giving the church an infallible guide on earth. In short, the purpose of the papacy is to lead the church unerringly.
- 2) Peter later became the first bishop of Rome. As bishop of Rome, he exercised authority over all other bishops and church leaders. The teaching that the bishop of Rome is above all other bishops in authority is referred to as the "primacy" of the Roman bishop hence the title "Vicar of Christ" from the Latin word 'vicarius' which means "instead of." Calling the pope the "Vicar of Christ" implies that he has the same power and authority that Christ had over the church. The title is derived from Jesus' words in **John 21:16-17** to Peter, "**Feed my lambs . . . Take care of my sheep.**" This, according to Catholic reasoning, defines Peter as the Prince of the Apostles, the first pope, and fulfills the words of Jesus in **Matthew 16:18-19** (calling Peter the rock upon which Jesus will build His church).
- 3) Peter passed on his apostolic authority to the next bishop of Rome, along with the other apostles who passed on their apostolic authority to the bishops that they ordained. These new bishops, in turn, passed on that apostolic authority to those bishops that they later ordained, and so on. This "passing on of apostolic authority" is referred to as "apostolic succession."
- 4) Based upon the claim of an unbroken chain of Roman bishops, Roman Catholics teach that the Roman Catholic Church is the true church, and that all churches that do not accept the primacy of the pope have broken away from them, the original and one true church.

Having briefly reviewed some of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church concerning the papacy, the question is whether those teachings are in agreement with Scripture, or history for that matter. The Roman Catholic Church sees the papacy and the infallible teaching authority of "Mother Church" as being necessary to guide the church and uses that as logical reasoning for God's provision of the office. But by examining Scripture and history, we find the following:

- 1) While Peter was central in the early spread of the gospel (part of the meaning behind **Matthew 16:18-19**), the teaching of Scripture, taken in context, nowhere declares that he was in authority over the other apostles or over the church (see **Acts 15:1-23**; **Galatians 2:1-14**; **1 Peter 5:1-5**) but, in context, Jesus is referring to Peter's confession in **Matthew**

16:16: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” and upon this reality the church will be built. Linguistically, “Peter” in the Greek means “little stone,” while Jesus uses the term “rock” or “petra” indicating a massive rock formation. The context is Peter’s confession, not a superior, personal designation. From this context, neither Peter nor any subsequent bishop was to have primacy over the church. Rome, as the seat of a godless empire as opposed to Christ’s kingdom which was spiritual as opposed to material, was referred to only once by Peter himself as **“Babylon,”** found in **1 Peter 5:13**. The historical rise of the influence of the bishop of Rome came years later due to the support of Constantine and subsequent Roman emperors leading to the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching of the primacy of the bishop of Rome. However, Scripture shows that Peter’s authority was shared by the other apostles (**Ephesians 2:19-20**) and that the **“loosing and binding”** authority attributed to him was likewise shared by the local churches, not just their church leaders (see **Matthew 18:15-19; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Corinthians 13:10; Titus 2:15; 3:10-11**).

2) Nowhere does Scripture state that in order to keep the church from error, the authority of the apostles was passed on to those they ordained (the idea behind apostolic succession). Apostolic succession is “read into” those verses that the Roman Catholic Church uses to support this doctrine (**2 Timothy 2:2; 4:2-5; Titus 1:5; 2:1; 2:15; 1 Timothy 5:19-22**). In historical fact, the first recognized pope did not emerge until the 5th century when Leo I became bishop of Rome. It was not until after the Great Western Schism of the 15th century that a more unified papacy began to emerge, historically denying apostolic succession. What Scripture DOES teach is that false teachings would arise even from among church leaders and that Christians were to compare the teachings of these later church leaders with Scripture, Scripture which alone is cited in the Bible as infallible. The Bible does not teach that the apostles were infallible, apart from what was written by them as Scripture. Paul, in talking to the church leaders in the large city of Ephesus, makes note of coming false teachers. Paul does not commend them to “the apostles and those who would carry on their authority,” but rather to **“God and to the word of His grace”** (**Acts 20:28-32**).

3) Jesus does indeed predict a “vicar” in the sense of a “replacement” for His physical presence here on earth. However, this “vicar of Christ” is not a priest, high priest, bishop, or pope. The only biblical “Vicar of Christ” is the Holy Spirit. **John 14:26** declares, **“But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”** **John 14:16-18** proclaims, **“And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor to be with you forever — the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”** The Holy Spirit is Christ’s “replacement” on the earth. The Holy Spirit is our Counselor, Teacher (**John 14:26**), and guide into all truth (**John 16:13**). In claiming that the pope is the “Vicar of Christ,” the Catholic Church rejects the sufficiency and supremacy of Christ’s priesthood, and grants to the pope roles that Christ Himself declared would belong to the Holy Spirit. It is therefore blasphemy to ascribe to the pope the title “Vicar of Christ.”

4) Peter was not the first pope. Peter nowhere claims supremacy over the other apostles, and the New Testament does not demonstrate that he held primacy. Nowhere in Peter's writings does he claim any special role, authority, or power over the body of Christ. Nowhere in Scripture does Peter or any other apostle state that his apostolic authority would be passed on to successors. Yes, the apostle Peter was often the spokesman for the disciples. Yes, Peter played a crucial role in the early spread of the gospel (**Acts 1—10**). However, these truths in no way support the idea that Peter was the first pope, that he was a "father" to all believers, or that his authority would be passed on to the bishops of Rome. Peter was not a pontiff, but he does point us to the true Shepherd and Overseer of the church, the Lord Jesus Christ (**1 Peter 2:25**). 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 (**Galatians 2:1-14**). Peter was no pope.

5) The 'infallibility' of a pope has been repeatedly called into question through the ages. In relation to Pope Francis, he watered down Roman Catholic teaching on marriage, sexuality and confession. He claimed that all religions were equal and welcomed in the eyes of God contrary to Roman Catholic dogma as well as clear Scriptural convictions. These heretical positions, causing confusion within and without the Roman Church, clearly demonstrate the fallibility of the infallible claim.

Again, the Bible teaches that it is Scripture that is to be used as measuring stick to determine truth from error. In **Galatians 1:8-9**, Paul states that it is not WHO teaches but WHAT is being taught that is to be used to determine truth from error. While the Roman Catholic Church continues to pronounce a curse to hell, or "anathema," upon those who would reject the authority of the pope, Scripture reserves that curse for those who would teach a different gospel (**Galatians 1:8-9**).

3) While the Roman Catholic Church sees apostolic succession as logically necessary in order for God to unerringly guide the church, Scripture states that God has provided for His church through the following:

(a) Infallible Scripture, (**Acts 20:32; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Matthew 5:18; John 10:35; Acts 17:10-12; Isaiah 8:20; 40:8**; etc.) Note: Peter speaks of Paul's writings in the same category as other Scripture (**2 Peter 3:16**)

(b) Christ's unending high-priesthood in heaven (**Hebrews 7:22-28**)

(c) The provision of the Holy Spirit who guided the apostles into truth after Christ's death (**John 16:12-14**), who gifts believers for the work of the ministry, including teaching (**Romans 12:3-8; Ephesians 4:11-16**), and who uses the written Word as His chief tool (**Hebrews 4:12; Ephesians 6:17**)

While there have seemingly been good (humanly speaking) and moral men who have served as pope of the Roman Catholic Church, the Roman Catholic teaching about the office of the pope should be rejected because it is not in agreement with the teachings of the New Testament. This comparison of any church's teaching is essential, lest we miss the New Testament's teaching

concerning the gospel and not only miss ever lasting life in heaven ourselves but unwittingly lead others down the wrong path (**Galatians 1:8-9**).