

# The Pope, the Papacy, and the Bible

by Moisés Pinedo

George Bush said of him: "When you are in his presence you say to yourself: 'Here is a great man, a great leader.' He is a man of liberty, of faith, who suffers every time the Church, or man, is oppressed. He will occupy, with all authority, a privileged position in the history of our time. I am not Catholic, but towards him I feel a deeply profound respect and a sincere affection" (as quoted in Mirás, n.d.).

Of whom was the former president of the United States speaking? His commentary was in reference to the late Karol Wojtyła, more commonly recognized as Pope John Paul II. Having been considered for 26 years as the "successor of the apostle Peter," and having been the heir of an endless hierarchical legacy, John Paul II was a **man** who influenced the hearts of many Catholics, as well as many other religious people. At his death, thousands of followers gathered in or near St. Peter's Plaza in Rome to pay tribute to the pope, while the bells of the Catholic Church buildings rang throughout the city (see BBC News, 2005). Since April 2, 2005, the eulogies of many close associates and supporters have been heard, and it is certain that this situation will continue for some time after his burial. Even the current president of the United States has raised his voice to declare:

[T]he world has lost a champion of human freedom, and a **good and faithful servant of God** has been called home. Pope John Paul II left the **throne of St. Peter** in the same way he ascended to it—as a witness to the dignity of human life (Bush, 2005, emp. added).

John Paul II was, for more than a quarter of a century, a representative of the monopolized throne of the Catholic Church—the **papacy**. But, what is the papacy? Is there a scriptural basis for this Catholic institution? Did God designate a legacy of "ecclesiastical leaders" on Earth?

Apart from what people may think concerning this institution or its members, and apart from any eulogies, blessings, insults, or condemnations that religious people may offer concerning this ecclesiastical order, it is my desire to open the pages of the Bible, as well as the pages of history, to analyze whether the papacy (with its large list of members) is a divine institution, or whether it simply should be classified as a human invention that is unworthy of the type of honor bestowed upon it.

## THE ALLEGED BIBLICAL BASIS FOR THE PAPACY

And I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).

This is the biblical verse to which the Catholic apologist inevitably turns in order to defend the establishment of the papacy. Through an arbitrary interpretation of this verse—an interpretation which suggests that God constituted Peter (and ultimately his successors) as the "rock" of the church—the Catholic Church has built a grand structure with only one man as the head.

But in order to be consistent with biblical truth, we must understand the difference between the two words used in Matthew 16:18. In reference to Peter, the Holy Spirit recorded the Greek word *petros*—a proper noun which denotes a stone that can be easily moved. In contrast, in reference to the "**rock**," the Holy Spirit recorded the Greek word *petra*, which denotes a solid mass of rock (see Vine, 1999, p. 663). While the word used for Peter corresponds to the Aramaic name that Jesus had given him (*Kepha*, John 1:42), the word used for "rock" refers to the foundation of the church—i.e., Peter's confession that pointed to Christ as God and the Messiah (cf. Matthew 16:16).

The biblical truth that the word "rock" was used in reference to Christ Himself is derived not only from the etymology and context of Matthew 16:16-19, but this is also a truth taught and recognized throughout the entire Bible. Peter, who received the words of Jesus first hand, used the same Greek word *petra* in reference to Christ (1 Peter 2:8; cf. Acts 4:11). Without a doubt, Peter, more than any religious person of our modern time, would convey the true meaning of the word used by our Lord.

The inspired apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "...and did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of a spiritual rock that followed them:**and the rock was Christ**" (1 Corinthians 10:4, emp. added). The truth is that, ever since the Old Testament, the rock was always Christ, not Peter. In Ephesians 2:20, Paul exhorted: "...being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, **Christ Jesus himself being the chief corner stone**" (emp. added). In Luke 20:17-18 Jesus remarked: "What, then, is this that is written, 'The stone which the builders rejected, The same was made the head of the corner? Everyone that falleth on that stone shall be broken to

pieces, but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will scatter him as dust' " (cf. Matthew 21:42,44 and Mark 12:10). In effect, Jesus used the rejection of the rock by the builders to show the rejection of the religious leaders of His time concerning His person. Without a doubt, the One Who could tell us with total veracity what the word "rock" refers to is Jesus Himself—Who used it and applied it to Himself.

Another aspect to consider is the fulfillment of the prophecies given by Jesus. He said that "upon this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). If the "rock" is referring to the confession made by Peter (Matthew 16:16)—which revealed the truth that Jesus was God and the anticipated Messiah—it would be upon this truth that the church would be established. In effect, this prophecy realizes fulfillment when we learn that in Acts 2:36, the truth that Jesus was God and the Messiah is presented once again as a prologue to the birth of Christianity, and ultimately, of the church. The truth of the matter is that nothing exists in this biblical text to authorize the establishment of the papacy.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the idea (borne of tradition) that Peter was exalted over the other apostles—and thereby was transformed into the pioneer for the papal throne—is biblically unsustainable. Jesus imbued each of His apostles with the same authority (Matthew 28:19-20). When the apostles disputed among themselves over who was the greatest, Jesus sent them a clear message: "The kings of the Gentiles have lordship over them... **But ye shall not be so**" (Luke 22:24-26, emp. added; cf. Matthew 18:1-5; Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48). On another occasion, Jesus told them: "Ye know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them... **Not so shall it be among you**" (Matthew 20:25-26, emp. added). Unfortunately there are those today who place themselves in opposition to this biblical sentiment so that an existing hierarchy **should be** evident among the first-century apostles, even when Jesus said it **should not be!**

The truth is that Peter was an apostle just like the other apostles (2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11), and was a **man** just like other men (with the word "man" bearing many serious implications). As a **man**, Peter never demanded special treatment or demanded displays of adoration for himself. When Cornelius lay prostrate before Peter (cf. Acts 10:25), he told him: "Stand up; **I myself also am a man**" (Acts 10:26, emp. added). With this statement Peter set forth three very important points: (a) that he was **also** a man—that is to say, a man just like Cornelius; (b) that he was **a** man—that is to say, just like all men; and (c) that he was a **man**—that is to say that he was not God, and ultimately was not worthy of worship. [Note the position of the emphasis in the three points just made.]

Peter understood with all humility the implications of being **only** a man. But popes, being only **men** like Peter, allow multitudes to bow their knees before them, kiss their feet, and reverence them—thereby receiving worship that does not rightfully belong to them. What a tremendous difference between Peter and his supposed successors! Not even an angel of God would permit John to show him adoration by kneeling before him (Revelation 22:8-9). One can only be astonished when considering what tremendous audacity it takes to try to usurp the place where God belongs!

## THE ORIGIN OF THE PAPACY

If Peter was not a pope, and the Bible does not record a papal hierarchy, the question arises: When and how did the papacy originate?

When Christ established His church, "he gave some to be apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors [i.e., bishops—MP] and teachers" (Ephesians 4:11). Jesus **never** established a single bishop over a multiplicity of others; rather, He established an impartial order of service. However, men departed from the original pattern of the Bible in search of power, honor, and deification. The first indication of this desertion was when the distinction between the words, bishops, elders, and pastors was made—titles that are used interchangeably in the Bible (e.g., Acts 20:17,28; Titus 1:5,7; 1 Peter 5:1-2; etc.)—thereby giving preeminence to the position of bishop. Quickly, the "bishop" came to take prominence over not only a congregation, but over a "diocese"—congregations of a district or a complete city (see Miller, 1976, par. 42).

One of the characters that clung to a hierarchy of the church by only one man (i.e., "the bishop") was Ignatius of Antioch. In his letter to the Ephesians, he wrote:

For if I in a short time had such converse with your bishop, which was not after the manner of men but in the Spirit, how much more do I congratulate you who are closely joined with him as the Church is with Jesus Christ and as Jesus Christ is with the Father, that all things may be harmonious in unity.... Let us therefore be careful not to resist the bishop, that by our submission we may give ourselves to God (*Ignatius to the Ephesians*, 5:1,3, n.d.).

Later, when Emperor Constantine made Christianity a religion of "power," the bishops strengthened and increased their prerogatives. Many new bishops (e.g., Damasus, Siricio) fought to affirm their hierarchical position in the church at Rome, appealing to their inherent "authority" in their cathedra (see Encuentra, 2000-2004). In A.D. 440, the pontificate of Leo I arrived. He became an ardent defender of the supremacy of the Roman bishop over all of the other bishops of the West. In his declaration to the Bishop of Constantinople, he wrote:

Constantinople has its own glory and by the mercy of God has become the seat of the empire. But secular matters are based on one thing, and ecclesiastical matters on another. Nothing will stand which is not built on the Rock which the Lord laid in the foundation...your city is royal but you cannot make it Apostolic (Mattox, 1961, pp. 139-140).

In mid-September of 590, Gregory the Great was designated as the bishop of Rome. He proclaimed himself as pope, and head of the “universal church.” He did his best to uphold the so-called Petrine Tradition; and towards the end of his pontificate, “the theory of the primacy of Peter and the Roman bishop as his successor and the universal head of the church was definitively established” (Mattox, p. 140). Finally, with the ascension of Boniface III to the papal throne on February 19, 607, it was established (by his own declaration!) that the only “universal bishop” would be that of Rome—ultimately, the one and only pope. Boniface III, who lived less than a year after his election, left the world of Catholic religion with many other bishops who energetically competed in the “endless race for supremacy” known as the papacy.

## THE ALLEGED INFALLIBILITY OF THE PAPACY

One of the most treasured doctrines of the Roman papacy is that of infallibility. Catholicism argues that when the pope speaks as the head of the universal church, and thereby exercises his “supreme” authority, he cannot make a mistake. Pope Pio IX established the doctrine of papal infallibility in 1870. In light of this relatively recent doctrine, the question begs to be asked: What about the other popes who exercised their power before 1870? The answer can be presented as follows:

...a dogma is an eternal truth that the Church did not invent but rather “discovered,” which, however, **all of the other popes have been subject to it without knowing it** (Infallibilidad, n.d., emp. added).

Nevertheless, history speaks strongly against this doctrine. For example, Pope Honorius I (625) bore (after his death) the title of “heretic” for having stood in agreement with the doctrine of monotheletism (the doctrine that acknowledged two distinct natures within Christ, but only one divine will). He **was censured** by the sixth ecumenical council, and later even by the seventh and the eighth (Constantinople III, 680; Nicea II, 787; and Constantinople IV, 869). Pope Leo II **recognized the doctrinal error** of Honorius, and for many centuries, the popes, in their enthronement, were required to swear that “they rejected the heresy whose ferment was introduced by Honorius” (see Hermosillo, n.d.). Another pope, Eugenius IV (1431), condemned Joan of Arc to be burned at the stake for considering her to be a participant of witchcraft, though Benedict XV canonized her as a “saint” on May 16, 1920 (see Infallibilidad Papal, n.d.). Other popes, like Paul III, Paul IV, Sixtus IV, Pio IX, et al., authorized, promoted, incited, and reinforced the “Holy” Inquisition for which the late Pope John Paul II had to apologize worldwide.

The same John Paul II (1978-2005) gave a fatal blow to the doctrine of infallibility. In opposition to the declarations of other popes and of Catholic doctrine itself, this pope declared:

- The Spirit of Christ uses other churches and ecclesial communities as means of salvation (1979, 4.32).
- People outside the Catholic Church and the Gospel can attain salvation by grace of Christ (1990, 1.10).
- People can be saved by living a moral life, without knowing anything about Christ and the Catholic Church (1993, 3).
- There is sanctification outside the boundaries of the Catholic Church (1995, 1.12).
- The martyrs of any religious community can find the extraordinary grace of the Holy Spirit (1995, 3.84).

Furthermore, concerning the erroneous concept of organic evolution, on October 22, 1996, Pope John Paul II declared that “new knowledge has led to the recognition of the theory of evolution as more than a hypothesis” (see “John Paul II,” 1996). But if evolution is to be considered more than merely a hypothesis, **Adam disappears!** Ultimately, then, how can it be, as Catholics allege, that humanity carries the sin of the first man? Should we not say, instead, that humanity carries the “sin” of the last primate from which we “descended” (as if primates could sin!)? Many other examples could be given, but surely the few points mentioned in this brief study provide sufficient evidence to warrant us discarding Roman Catholic doctrine. Certainly the doctrine of papal infallibility has caused, and continues to cause, many people to accept false doctrines such as original sin, the assumption of Mary, the canonization of saints, the “factuality” of evolution, and even papal infallibility itself—doctrines that are completely lacking in any biblical foundation.

What is certain is that when Pio IX declared that the pope was infallible, with the same “infallibility” that he pretended to have, he gave his final “infallible” stamp of approval for his declaration of the infallibility. Though this seems to be a jumble of words, this is exactly what happened. However, while Pio IX declared that the Pope was infallible, Adriano VI (another presumably infallible pope), declared in 1523:

It remains above all doubt that **a Pope can err even in subjects touching the faith**. He does this when he teaches heresy by his own judgment and decree. In truth, **many roman pontiffs were heretics** (as quoted in Sapia, 2000, emp. added).

So, then, Catholicism arrives at a problem in that two popes, allegedly both possessors of the same “infallibility,” affirm self-contradictory positions. How could one pope, who is supposedly infallible, condemn his own infallibility and that of others? If Pio IX was correct, Adriano VI made a mistake; and if one makes a mistake, then **none** of the popes can be infallible since the doctrine of infallibility supposedly involves **all** of the popes. Therefore, the only conclusion at which we can arrive from the history of the popes and their evident contradictions is that the doctrine of papal infallibility is unmistakably **false**.

## CONCLUSION

The pages of the life of another member of the papacy have been written, finished, and closed. His faithful followers may weep, but soon a new pope will arise. A group of “select cardinals” who lack “infallibility” will convene in a room (conclave) and cast their secret votes (see Conclave, 1908). If all happens as planned, a new, “infallible” pope will be the result of the **vote of fallible men**. “Who will be the new Pope?,” many will ask. Sadly, in this moment of media racket, Catholic grief, and international suspense, many people will never hear the intense scream of the Bible to abandon the human hierarchy that apostasy has established.

The truth is that there is only one Head of the church—Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23). Also, there is only one rock that serves as the foundation of the church (i.e. Christ, 1 Corinthians 3:11). To adopt another rock (i.e., another foundation) instead of that which was already laid, is to build on an unstable foundation. To place another rock instead of that which is already placed is to build upon a foundation of men. To place another rock instead of that which is already placed is to usurp the revered place of Christ.

We have no choice but to say that there is no biblical foundation or authorization for the existence of the papacy. The rock—Christ—should not be rejected in order to place human foundations in His position. Those who do so build upon an unstable foundation that one day will collapse. With Paul, faithful Christians can confidently declare: “For **other foundation can no man lay** than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11, emp. added).

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