

The Word of Righteousness

The Overcomers in the Seven Churches (4)

In this article we will continue to consider the epistles to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. The One who speaks to the messengers of the seven churches is Christ, the Son of Man, as the heavenly High Priest clothed with the fullness of His divine attributes and human virtues (1:12-13). On the one hand, He is girded about at the breasts with a golden girdle to care for the golden lampstands—the churches—in love, in His humanity, and with His divine strength. On the other hand, His eyes are like a flame of fire and His feet are like shining bronze for the exercise of divine judgment (vv. 14-15; Dan 10:6; Exo. 27:1-6). Revelation is a book of God's judgment, and the seven epistles all bear this characteristic. In His sevenfold intensified heavenly ministry Christ is observing, searching, and judging the churches to produce, purify, and build up the testimony of Jesus as His spotless bride and victorious army for the consummation of the New Jerusalem (1:9; 19:7, 14; 21:2).

In their heavenly standing, the seven churches as the lampstands are bright, shining, and of pure gold, but in actual practice and condition on the earth, they have suffered much degradation, as prophetically foretold by the seven epistles. In each epistle, therefore, Christ issues a call for the overcomers to rise up to bear His testimony in the present dark age, so that He can return to execute His judgment on the world and establish His kingdom in its full manifestation. He called for overcomers in Ephesus to love Him with their first love, enjoy Him as the tree of life, and maintain the shining of the lampstand (2:4-5, 7). He called for overcomers in Smyrna to be faithful unto death in suffering poverty, persecution, and trial (vv. 9-11). And He called for overcomers in Pergamos to overcome the worldliness of the degraded church, enjoy Him as their hidden portion, and be transformed in the divine life to be white stones for His building (v. 17).

The Seeds of Degradation

The parables of the kingdom of the heavens spoken by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 13 parallel the seven epistles in Revelation. The parable of the mustard seed is a picture of the condition of the church prophesied in the epistle to Pergamos, the church after the cessation of persecution under the Roman Empire. Matthew 13:31 and 32 say,

Another parable He set before them, saying, The kingdom of the heavens is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, and which is smaller than all the seeds; but when it has grown, it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of heaven come and roost in its branches.

The church, which is the embodiment of the kingdom in the present age, is compared to a mustard seed, signifying a crop that produces food for the satisfaction of God and man (vv. 3, 8, 23). According to the principle of God's creation, "herbs yielding seed" must be "according to their kind" (Gen. 1:11-12). Thus, a mustard seed should develop into a small, low herb, yielding further seeds that can be ground into a spice. In Matthew 13, however, the seed grows abnormally into a great tree, being transmuted in nature and function. This unlawful, unnatural development provides a lodging place for birds, which in this chapter signify the evil one, Satan (vv. 4, 19), and in Revelation 18:2 are associated with unclean spirits. This parable depicts the abnormal development of the church in the fourth century after being embraced by Constantine the Great and mixed with the world. Witness Lee notes,

The mustard is an annual herb, whereas the tree is a perennial plant. The church, according to its heavenly and spiritual nature, should be like the mustard, sojourning on the earth. But with its nature changed, the church became deeply rooted and settled as a tree in the earth, flourishing with its enterprises as the branches in which many evil persons and things are lodged. This resulted in the formation of the outward organization of the outward appearance of the kingdom of the heavens. (Recovery Version, Matt. 13:32, note 1)

Under Constantine, the rejected church became accepted, the persecuted church became popular, the sojourning church became rooted in the world, the pure church became polluted, and the small, humble church became great. Lee again notes,

The Lord did not make a display of His greatness. On the contrary, He preferred to be small in the eyes of man...The corruption in Christianity has always come in through the door of greatness. If we would close this

door, no element of corruption could enter into the church. (*Exodus* 435-436)

If a person strays from a straight path, even at only a small angle, after a short time he will be far off his course, and the farther he travels, the more he will diverge. This principle is borne out in the history of the decline and degradation of the church. All the errors and excesses of the degraded, apostate church of the Middle Ages were already present in seed form by the fourth century. In the elation of their new prosperity and favored status, most of the believers of that day did not recognize these seminal evils for the actual species that they were. Only the Lord's faithful overcomers, signified by "Antipas" (Rev. 2:13), discerned the wayward trend for what it was and stood against it as anti-witnesses bearing an anti-testimony, a testimony against anything that deviated from the testimony of Jesus.

The Epistle to the Church in Thyatira

Verses 18 through 20 say,

To the messenger of the church in Thyatira write: These things says the Son of God, He who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like shining bronze: I know your works and love and faith and service and your endurance and that your last works are more than the first. But I have something against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, she who calls herself a prophetess and teaches and leads My slaves astray to commit fornication and to eat idol sacrifices.

The Lord appears to this church as the Son of God in the particular countenance of judgment, which is manifest here more than in the other epistles. To properly identify Thyatira, it is necessary to consider the closing word of each of the seven epistles. To the first three churches—Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamos—the Lord concludes with the exhortation to hear what the Spirit says to the churches, followed by a call for overcomers and His promise of reward for them (vv. 7, 11, 17). In the last four, however, those to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, He concludes first with the call and promise for the overcomers and then with the command to hear what the Spirit says to the churches (vv. 26-29; 3:5-6, 12-13, 21-22). This reversal of order distinguishes the seven epistles as two groups of three and four. In addition, the Lord tells the overcomers in Thyatira, "What you have hold fast until I come" (2:25). It is in this epistle that the Lord first mentions His second coming, which He refers to again twice after this (3:3, 11). This indicates that the periods of history foretold by the first three epistles have passed away, but the span of the last four extends to the Lord's coming at the end of this age. Watchman Nee concludes,

The church during the apostles' time has passed, the age of Ephesus has passed, the age of sufferings has passed, and the period of Pergamos has also passed...Not only Thyatira, but also Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea will continue until the Lord Jesus returns. (43)

The stage of the church signified by Pergamos does not remain as such until the Lord's coming. Rather, it was a time of transition in which the seeds of the medieval church were planted. The state and condition of the church that followed this period is denoted by Thyatira, which embodies the full growth of the principles begun by Pergamos: the seduction of the world, the alliance with human government, the growth of the clerical hierarchy, and the assimilation of heretical teachings and pagan practices. As a sign, therefore, the church in Thyatira prefigures the Roman Catholic Church from the early Middle Ages to the end of this age. Andrew Miller writes of the downward progression to this stage:

We saw...in Pergamos Balaam seducing the church and uniting her to the world; but things are even worse in Thyatira. Here we have the sad but natural consequences of this unhallowed union. How could it be otherwise, when all who merely submitted to the outward rite of baptism were regarded as born of God? The door was thus thrown open for the spoiler and the corrupter to enter the sacred enclosure of the church of God. All testimony was now gone as to her heavenly character and her place of separation from the world. She had falsified the word of the Lord which says of His disciples, "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." True, in appearance, Christianity had gained a victory. The cross was now arrayed in gold and precious stones; but this was the glory of the world, not of a crucified Christ. It was the world really that gained the victory, and the humiliation of the church was completed. (291-292)

Christ, the Unique Foundation of the Church

Several matters stand out as being the most characteristic of the degraded church of the Middle Ages. Chief among these are the full growth of the clergy-laity system into a monstrous hierarchy surmounted by a papal monarchy and the rise of the church in Rome to the lofty and pretentious position of master of all churches. (We will consider other major aspects of the medieval church in a subsequent installment of this department.) As a consequence of these factors, the Roman Catholic Church has rejected, usurped, and replaced Christ as the Head, life, center, and reality of the church.

The pretensions of Rome take several basic assertions as axiomatic. The first of these is that Peter was the first among the apostles of the Lord Jesus, being conspicuously singled out by Him, and that the Lord's word to

Peter in Matthew 16:13-19 established him as the foundation of the church. This passage says,

Now when Jesus came into the parts of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, Who do men say that the Son of Man is? And they said, Some, John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. He said to them, But you, who do you say that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said to him, Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in the heavens. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of the heavens, and whatever you bind on the earth shall have been bound in the heavens, and whatever you loose on the earth shall have been loosed in the heavens.

The context of this exchange is the revelation of Christ and the church. The first aspect of this revelation is the person of Jesus as the Christ, the anointed One of God, who was prophesied in the Old Testament and came to accomplish the will of God, and as the Son of the living God, the second of the Triune God, who is the embodiment of the Father. Flesh and blood, that is, the natural, created, and fallen man, did not reveal this to the disciples. Rather, this revelation was given by the Father, who fully knows the Son (11:27). The second half of this revelation is the building up of the church, which is mentioned here for the first time in relation to the kingdom of the heavens, which is the subject of the Gospel of Matthew.

This rock in 16:18 refers both to Christ Himself and to the revelation of Christ given by the Father. Isaiah 28:16 says, “Thus says / The Lord Jehovah: / Indeed I lay a stone in Zion as a foundation, / A tested stone, / A precious cornerstone as a foundation firmly established; / He who believes will not hasten away.” Psalm 118:22 refers to the same stone for the building of God: “The stone which the builders rejected / Has become the head of the corner.” The Lord Jesus quoted this verse to the chief priests and elders of the Jews as a clear reference to their rejection of Him and to His acceptance by God as the One who would build up the church as the New Testament temple (Matt. 21:42). In Acts 4:10 and 11 Peter likewise said,

Let it be known to you all and to all the people of Israel

that in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified and whom God has raised from the dead...This is the stone which was considered as nothing by you, the builders, which has become the head of the corner.

In proclaiming the unique name of Jesus Christ, Peter emphasized, “This is the stone.” From the words of the Lord Jesus Himself and from Peter’s preaching, it is abundantly clear that the stone upon which the church as the house of God is built is the crucified and resurrected Christ. Paul emphasizes this truth again, in very plain words:

According to the grace of God given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid a foundation, and another builds upon it. But let each man take heed how he builds upon it. For another foundation no one is able to lay besides that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 3:10-11)

Paul declares emphatically that the foundation of the church laid by the apostles is unique. Upon it all the building takes place, and there is no other. In Ephesians he tells us that the saints are “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (2:20). Paul is not saying here that the apostles and prophets themselves are the foundation of the church. Rather, the apostles and prophets received in their spirit the revelation of the mystery of Christ (3:4-5), and it is this revelation, ministered by the apostles and prophets, that is the foundation upon which the church is built. Moreover, in 2:20 and 3:5 both *apostles* and *prophets* are plural, contradicting any notion that one apostle—Peter—is or provides the unique foundation of the church. As the Christ and the Son of the living God, the Lord Jesus is the unique foundation laid by God, through the apostles, for the building of the church, and no man can lay another. Moreover, Christ is also the cornerstone and the topstone (Zech. 4:7) of God’s building. What then is Peter? The elderly apostle writes,

Coming to Him, a living stone, rejected by men but with God chosen and precious, you yourselves also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it is contained in Scripture: “Behold, I lay in Zion a cornerstone, chosen and precious; and he who believes on Him shall by no means be put to shame.” To you therefore who believe is the preciousness; but to the unbelieving, “The stone which the builders rejected, this has become the head of the corner.” (1 Pet. 2:4-7)

The degraded church of the Middle Ages is characterized by the growth of the clergy-laity system into a hierarchy surmounted by a papal monarchy and the rise of the church in Rome to the pretentious position of master of all churches.

Peter is a living stone, as all the believers are. The believers are the precious and transformed materials built upon Christ as the unique foundation. Neither Peter, nor Paul, nor any man can lay a foundation other than Christ. Christ as the foundation stone, cornerstone, and topstone of God's building is precious to God, and He is "the preciousness" to the believers. The psalmist and Zechariah did not prophesy of Peter and Paul, and Peter himself did not proclaim himself. They all spoke of Jesus Christ, the unique foundation of the church. However, the Roman Church raised a man—Peter—to the position of "foundation of the church," and its cultish adherents worship at the statue of Peter in the basilica of his name in Rome, at the top of which the Lord's words in Matthew 16 are carved, in the Roman language, in six foot letters. This is a great blasphemy and an utter rejection of Christ.

The Development of the Hierarchical Clergy

The nature, history, and pattern of the churches established by the apostles is consistent throughout the New Testament. One church was established in each city and was always designated by the name of that city (Acts 8:1; 13:1; Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 1:2). Hence, the seven golden lampstands in Revelation, signifying seven representative local churches, are called by the name of seven cities in Asia Minor (1:11-12). Elders were ordained in every church, that is, in every city (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). This unique presbytery preserved the oneness of each local church for the unique oneness of the universal Body of Christ. In addition to the elders, deacons were appointed for oversight of the practical service of the church. Thus, Paul addresses the church in Philippi, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and deacons" (Phil. 1:1). *Elder* (πρεσβύτερος, "presbyter") denotes the person; *overseer* (ἐπίσκοπος, anglicized as "bishop") designates the function. They are the same person in two aspects. Besides the two categories of overseers (elders) and deacons, no other offices in a local church are mentioned in the holy Word. At no time did the churches ever have an administrative center. While the apostles worked in and among the churches, each church met and functioned as the saints with the overseers and deacons. This is the consistent and incontestable pattern of the New Testament.

By the second century, however, unique, prominent leaders among the overseers began to be recognized as bishops over subordinate presbyters, and as church practice devolved even further from the New Testament pattern, the bishops in larger cities took on the oversight of a collection of neighboring churches, called a "diocese," a term taken directly from secular Roman administration. A bishop's "throne" (Latin *cathedra*, "Constitutions" 421), marked out the bishop's "cathedral" as ranking higher than a common "church." From among these, the bishops of

the larger, more conspicuous cities were raised to the higher position of "metropolitan," and superior metropolitans rose even higher, based on the size, importance, and opulence of their city. By the time of the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) three superior metropolitans were recognized in Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria, formally establishing this extra-canonical, unscriptural hierarchy as the codified rule of church governance. After Constantine moved his capital to Constantinople, another superior metropolitan was established there, and later one was added in Jerusalem, forming an ecclesiastical pentarchy—a rule of five metropolitans. The emperor Justinian (r. 527–565) gave this office the title of "Patriarch."

Two additional, significant criteria were applied in the selection of metropolitans. Edward Gibbon records that certain churches enjoyed superior status based on "the saints and martyrs who had arisen among them" and the purity with which a church preserved "the tradition of the faith as it had been transmitted through a series of orthodox bishops from the apostle or apostolic disciple to whom the foundation of their church was ascribed" (539). This "series" of bishops is significant, giving rise to the notion of an "apostolic pedigree" (Duffy 2), the ability to trace a succession of bishops back to either an apostle or the close disciple of one.

The Ministry and Journeys of Peter in Asia

The presence and dignity of the emperor in Constantinople overshadowed the office of the metropolitan there, but in fourth century Rome there was no such hindrance to the development of ecclesiastical power. The preeminence of Rome in the Empire, the alleged ability of the church there to claim the apostles as its founder, and the succession of bishops from the time of the apostles became the chief criteria for Rome's claim of supremacy over the churches in the West and the basis of the entire papal structure of the Roman Catholic Church. Professors James T. Shotwell and Louise Ropes Loomis identify the fundamental teachings that form this basis. They are,

first, that Peter was appointed by Christ to be his chief representative and successor and the head of his Church; second, that Peter went to Rome and founded the bishopric there; third, that his successors succeeded to his prerogatives, and to all the authority implied thereby. (xxiii)¹

We have already touched on the first item. The second is that Peter, with Paul, established the church in Rome and remained there not as an apostle but as its first bishop. The third states that the superior prerogatives of Peter are passed down as an automatic and indisputable inheritance to the subsequent bishops of Rome. Although this

is necessarily a retrospective view of a dogma that took centuries to develop, the spurious traditions that it evolved from were already popular in the early church. In fact, by at least the beginning of the fifth century, the tradition that the supremacy of Rome derived not merely from its place in the Empire but from its lineal descent from Peter was generally accepted, establishing the right of the bishop of Rome to govern the universal church.

The church of God was first established in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, and from there it spread throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. Then, primarily through the labor of Paul and his companions, the churches spread to the north, to the west, into Galatia and Asia Minor, and eventually to Greece, Macedonia, Cyprus, Crete, and Rome. The New Testament mentions over thirty local churches by name. However, the divine record is mostly silent concerning the journeys of the other apostles, and of Peter's career almost nothing is revealed. His record in Acts ends in chapter 15, and after this the New Testament has little else on the subject.

Although the journeys of Paul are documented in Acts and the Epistles, less is known as certainty about Peter's work. We know that he was in Jerusalem for some time after Pentecost (Acts 2—5), in Samaria to confirm the new believers (8:14-25), in the regions of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria (9:31-43), in Caesarea to open the door of the gospel to the Gentiles (ch. 10), and in Jerusalem for the conference there (ch. 15). The record of his work ends here, although we also know that at some point he came as far as Antioch (Gal. 2:11). Peter's Epistles, though, are important in this regard. The first is addressed, "To the sojourners of the dispersion of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (1 Pet. 1:1), which are all provinces in Asia Minor. His second Epistle addresses the same audience (2 Pet. 3:1). This indicates that Peter ministered to the Jews of the dispersion in these regions.

Peter concludes his first Epistle with, "The co-chosen in Babylon and Mark my son greet you" (1 Pet. 5:13). Some have interpreted *Babylon* to signify Rome and thus establish the latter as the place of his writing. However, Peter had no reason to use a figurative name to hide the name of the city from which he wrote. In Acts 19:21 Paul expressed his desire to see Rome for the furtherance of the Lord's testimony, which was fulfilled by the Lord when He brought Paul to Rome through his appeal to Caesar (23:11; 28:14, 16). In his Epistles Paul again uses the name of Rome without fear, even up to the time of

his martyrdom (Rom. 1:7, 15; 2 Tim. 1:17). It is not until the last decade of the first century that John uses the name of Babylon to signify Rome (Rev. 17:5; 18:2), but this is in fitting with the nature of the book of Revelation, which is a book of signs (1:1). In contrast, all the place names that Peter mentions in the opening of his first Epistle are literal and not symbolic.

For all these reasons, it is much more reasonable and straightforward to take the name of *Babylon* in 1 Peter 5:13 to indicate the literal city on the Euphrates. Josephus records that there were many Jews in Babylon at that time (478, 480). After the return from captivity in the Old Testament time, the greater number of Jews remained in Babylon, which later became the center from which the Asiatic dispersion, whom Peter addresses, was derived. Moreover, Acts 2:9 records that "Parthians and Medes and Elamites and those dwelling in Mesopotamia" were present at Peter's preaching on Pentecost. Parthia was the seat of the empire that included Babylon. Therefore, it is consistent with Peter's ministry to the

Jews that he visited, preached in, and wrote from Babylon, not Rome.²

The Legend of Peter in Rome

Paul was imprisoned in Rome for a second time in around A.D. 67 as part of Nero's persecution, and it was there that he expected his imminent

martyrdom (2 Tim. 4:6). According to tradition, this was carried out on the Ostian Way outside of Rome. That Peter also suffered martyrdom in Rome was a generally accepted belief in the second century. Around A.D. 165 a small shrine was placed on Vatican Hill, which was alleged to be the site of Peter's death, and it is on this site that Constantine later built the original basilica named for the apostle.³ The fourth century church historian Eusebius reports,

Peter appears to have preached in Pontus, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia to the Jews of the dispersion. And at last, having come to Rome, he was crucified head-downwards; for he had requested that he might suffer in this way. (132)

Eusebius also writes,

It is, therefore, recorded that Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and that Peter likewise was crucified under Nero. This account of Peter and Paul is substantiated by the fact that their names are preserved in the cemeteries of that place even to the present day... "For if you will go to the

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Vatican or to the Ostian way, you will find the trophies of those who laid the foundations of this church.” (129-130)

Eusebius records this on the authority of a certain Caius, about whom little else is known. His account, therefore, is simply a record of that which had already attained the status of tradition. The exact location of the apostles’ “trophies”—tombs, or cenotaphs—is even more obscure, because it is tradition tainted with cult. Nevertheless, it does appear likely that both apostles were martyred somewhere in or near Rome.

What is not at all likely is that they founded the church there. Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans from Corinth in approximately A.D. 60, on his third ministry journey, before he had ever visited Rome. In Acts 19:21 he speaks of his yet-unfulfilled desire to see Rome. Then to the Romans he says, “Often I purposed to come to you (yet was hindered until the present),” and “I have been hindered these many times from coming to you” (Rom. 1:13; 15:22). Clearly then, the church in Rome was in existence before Paul arrived there. Moreover, Paul never mentions Peter in his Epistle to the Romans. In chapter 16 he commends Phoebe as a deaconess and Prisca and Aquila as his fellow workers, and he mentions Epaenetus, Andronicus, Junia, Ampliatus, Urbanus, and others who are named nowhere else in the New Testament (vv. 1-15), but he makes no mention of the apostle to the Jews. When Paul wrote his second Epistle to Timothy from Rome shortly before his martyrdom, he again makes no mention of Peter. All this strongly indicates that Peter had little or no direct relation to the church in Rome, not to mention a foundational relationship. If Peter indeed met his death in Rome, he could not have been there very long.

Moreover, there is no concrete, historical evidence that Peter, for however long he actually was in Rome, was an elder, or presbyter, there, and it is unthinkable that this apostle would violate the New Testament pattern of church rule by taking the name of “bishop” in the sense that it came to carry in medieval times. In the succession of bishops provided by Irenaeus, it is significant that he does not explicitly name Peter as an *episcopus*. He simply tells us, “The blessed apostles...committed into the hands of Linus the office of the episcopate” (416). (Linus is alleged to have succeeded Peter as bishop of Rome.) The appointment of Linus was the function of an apostle or one under his direction—not of a local elder—as indicated by the practice of appointing elders in Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5. If Peter did indeed appoint Linus, he did so as an apostle, not as a “bishop,” and he need not have remained for long in Rome to perform this function. Furthermore, Irenaeus tells us that it was the “apostles” (plural) that committed the office to Linus, not Peter alone. All this casts doubt on the assertion that Peter served as an elder, or presbyter, in Rome.

The first clear claim that Peter held the office of bishop in Rome is in the *Liberian Catalogue*, composed long after the legend of Peter had taken on the weight of tradition. Referring to the *Catalogue*, Shotwell concludes, “It was probably not much before [A.D.] 354 that Peter himself was given the title of bishop and set definitely in the position of head of the episcopal line” (710). In the debate over the length of Peter’s stay in Rome we must keep in mind that his presence there would have been as an apostle and ultimately a martyr. There is no rule or precedent, either in the New Testament or in first century practice, that an apostle automatically becomes a local elder wherever he ministers.

The Meager and Vague Evidence for the Petrine Legend

The ancient attestations for the tradition of Peter in Rome are scarce and, with few exceptions, obscure. The starting point for the legend is the first epistle of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians, written about A.D. 96.⁴ Clement states, “Peter,...when he had at length suffered martyrdom, departed to the place of glory due to him... Paul also obtained the reward of patient endurance” (6). The usefulness of this passage for placing Peter in Rome is simply in the fact that the next sentence describes the death of Paul, which is believed to have been in Rome. Thus Peter, by identification with Paul, is alleged to have died in the same city. Shotwell concedes,

The reference is utterly vague. The place and manner of their deaths are not specified. More is made of Paul’s life and sufferings than of Peter’s. The writer evidently supposed that the Corinthians understood all the circumstances and that a bare reminder would be enough. (67)

However, nothing in the epistle clarifies what the Corinthians were being reminded of. It is remarkable that such an “utterly vague” reference to Peter’s death should be so universally cited as proof for the Roman legend of Peter.

Eusebius claims that the Gospel of Mark was inspired by Peter’s preaching in Rome, quoting Clement of Alexandria (not the above Clement), who in turn relies on “the tradition of the earliest presbyters” (261). This is a third-hand report, however, and comes through Clement, who at times is unreliable.⁵

On his journey to his death in Rome, around A.D. 116, Ignatius wrote letters to various churches. To the Romans he writes, “I do not, as Peter and Paul, issue commandments unto you. They were apostles; I am but a condemned man: they were free, while I am, even until now, a servant” (75). Here Ignatius implies that Peter and Paul issued commandments to the believers in Rome, but he does not specify whether they were given

in person or by communication. Around A.D. 170 Dionysius of Corinth writes to the Romans,

You have thus by such an admonition bound together the planting of Peter and of Paul at Rome and Corinth. For both of them planted and likewise taught us in our Corinth. And they taught together in like manner in Italy, and suffered martyrdom at the same time. (qtd. in Eusebius 130)

However, there is no record in the New Testament that Peter assisted Paul in the founding of the church in Corinth, particularly in Acts 18, which recounts the coming of Paul to Corinth, his work there with Silas and Timothy, and his remaining there for a year and six months. Moreover, Paul plainly tells the Corinthians, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6). The church in Corinth was Paul's planting, not Peter's. As for the two apostles suffering martyrdom at the same time, Shotwell notes, "It is now usually recognized as impossible to adjust the chronology to fit such a hypothesis" (75).⁶ Dionysius's history, or Eusebius's retelling of it, is almost certainly in error and lends no credence to the legend of Peter's founding of the church in Rome.

The foregoing witnesses are weak and undependable. In Irenaeus and Tertullian, however, we have sources that are usually more reliable. In dealing with heresies in the late second century, Irenaeus appeals for confirmation to the churches that faithfully maintained the truth of the apostles' teaching. In this regard he states that a church was "founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul" (415). Shortly afterward, Tertullian likewise appeals to the faithful churches in his opposition to heresies. He speaks of "registers," lists of bishops in the churches that were traceable to apostolic origins:

For this is the manner in which the apostolic churches transmit their registers: as the church of Smyrna, which records that Polycarp was placed therein by John; as also the church of Rome, which makes Clement to have been ordained in like manner by Peter.⁷ ("Prescription" 258)

He commends his readers to learn "what utterance also the Romans give, so very near (to the apostles), to whom Peter and Paul conjointly bequeathed the gospel even sealed with their own blood" ("Marcion" 350). Concerning baptism he writes, "It makes no difference whether a man be washed in a sea or a pool...; nor is there

any distinction between those whom John baptized in the Jordan and those whom Peter baptized in the Tiber" ("Baptism" 670-671). Tertullian fully accepted the tradition of Peter's sojourn in Rome. However, Irenaeus and Tertullian had no way of knowing that this tradition would become the bedrock of the papal system, and even their opinion cannot add enough weight to the Petrine legend to transform it into the foundational dogma for a greatly unscriptural institution that replaces Christ, usurps His headship, and annuls His Body.

Apocryphal Fiction and Its False Result

Eusebius, the sycophantic biographer of Constantine, is less reliable and more prone to embrace miraculous and sensational hearsay, which is found throughout his *History*. He records the coming to Rome of Simon the magician (Acts 8:9-13, 18-24), "the author of all heresy," and his great works of evil there (114). In response, Eusebius claims, God sent Peter, "that strongest and greatest of the apostles" (115), to destroy him. This account is apocryphal fiction fraught with errors and controversy, and Eusebius is the first major author to treat any part of it seriously.⁸ Nevertheless, his chronology of the legend was still able to strengthen the argument for Peter's bishopric in Rome. Eusebius tells us that the apostle's coming to Rome to confront Simon was in the reign of Claudius (A.D. 41-54), and elsewhere he claims that it was even earlier, in the third year of Caligula (A.D. 39). If, as was commonly thought, Peter died in the reign of Nero, his stay in Rome would have been over two decades. This is the version of history that is codified in the *Liberian Catalogue* of A.D. 354, which states that Peter was in Rome for twenty-five years.⁹ Thus, as the apocryphal legend goes, he had adequate opportunity to become not only the founder but also the first bishop of the church there. Shotwell notes concerning this story,

*It is unthinkable
that Peter would violate
the New Testament pattern of church
rule by taking the name of "bishop"
in the sense that it came to
carry in medieval times.*

Conceptions founded upon it and incidents borrowed from it were in time accepted by most of the influential writers of Roman Christendom, even by those who like Eusebius and Jerome fully realized that the literature as a whole was a web of falsehood...Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine and others...could none of them rid themselves altogether of the impression it made upon them. It did not contradict the "accepted" tradition but, rather, supplemented and illumined it. It lit up splendidly the obscurity of Peter's last days and raised him to a magnificent position as deliverer as well as teacher of the Church. (122-123)

There is little use in tracing Christian writings on the subject after the time of Eusebius. At this point the true history of Peter was obscured by the passing of centuries, and the legend about him had gained the strength of tradition and prescription. In fact, the Rome-centered mindset requires no real truth. The tradition that Peter established the first bishopric in Rome is what is termed in Catholic theology as a “dogmatic fact.” As an eminent Catholic theologian states, it is “historical fact so intimately connected with some great Catholic truths that it would be believed even if time and accident had destroyed *all* the original evidence” (qtd. in Shotwell xxiii-xxiv). In other words, it is an item of belief so fundamental for the justification of the papal system that its mere importance precludes the necessity of historical proof. This, of course, is shamefully flawed and circular logic. Therefore, from the fourth century on we find only repetitions and confirmations of the established legend and no further accurate and objective reports. Even from the beginning, however, the accounts of Peter’s dwelling in Rome and of his founding the church there and sitting as bishop are based on meager and controversial claims.

Shotwell concludes, “The impression, therefore, was growing up that Peter had lived and labored in Rome for many years. The allusions in the New Testament to Peter’s later life, which might have discouraged such an impression, seem to have been totally overlooked” (98). The ancient records, therefore, reveal not so much the evidence of Peter’s relationship with Rome as the growing tradition that took form over the course of two centuries. To overlook the New Testament in favor of mere traditions, regardless of the parties that subscribed to them, is a dangerous stance. Historian Eamon Duffy states,

These stories were to be accepted as sober history by some of the greatest minds of the early Church—Origen, Ambrose, Augustine. But they are pious romance, not history, and the fact is that we have no reliable accounts either of Peter’s later life or of the manner or place of his death.

Neither Paul, Acts nor any of the Gospels tells us anything direct about Peter’s death, and none of them even hints that the special role of Peter could be passed on to any single ‘successor.’ There is, therefore, nothing directly approaching a papal theory in the pages of the New Testament. (2, 6)

John Julius Norwich says similarly,

There are still too many question marks for any confident deductions to be made. What Peter most certainly did not do was found the Roman Church. He seems to have

been in the city for only a very short time before his martyrdom, and he could not possibly have been a diocesan bishop as we understand the term and as the pope is Bishop of Rome today. The obvious reason for his subsequent elevation is that when, in the course of the second century, the Church of Rome acquired an effective primacy over its fellow churches—largely owing to the prestige of the imperial capital—it sought justification for its position; and there, lying ready to hand, was Matthew 16:18. It looked no further. (9)

The Rise of the Church in Rome

The development of the office of the pope naturally parallels the rise of the church in Rome to the position of supremacy. The first and oldest churches were in the Holy Land, beginning from Jerusalem, and it was to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem that Paul appealed concerning the dissension over circumcision (Acts 15). After Jerusalem, Antioch became the next major center of work (13:1-4). There is no suggestion in the New Testament that another major center of work was established by the apostles. The reasons for Rome’s ascent to preeminence among the churches are entirely unscriptural. The first and obvious reason is that it was the capital not only of the empire but of the civilized world. Athanasius marvels at those who persecuted Liberius, the bishop of Rome: “They respected not his bishopric, because it was an Apostolical throne; they felt no reverence for Rome, because she is the Metropolis of Romania [i.e., the Roman Empire]” (282). His complaint indicates that among the reasons for the primacy of the church in Rome, the imperial status of the metropolis ranked equally with the church’s alleged apostolic origin.

The central position of Rome attracted Christians, Jews, and practitioners of every kind of doctrine. By the third century the number of believers there numbered in the tens of thousands. After Constantine moved his capital to Constantinople, that city also enjoyed its high place, but it was still not greater than that of Rome. Canon 3 of the First Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381) decrees, “The Bishop of Constantinople, however, shall have the prerogative of honour after the Bishop of Rome; because Constantinople is New Rome” (178). According to this official decree, the church in the new Rome was still subservient to that in the ancient Rome.

The wealth and economic influence of the church in Rome also promoted its position. Even in time of persecution, the church there was wealthy, and after the persecutions ceased, Constantine enriched the church with lavish gifts, offerings, basilicas, land grants, and property. He even donated the Lateran Palace for the residence of the bishop. Moreover, certain of the aristocracy of the city became Christians, augmenting the financial position of the

church. As a result, the church was known throughout the empire for its generosity and charity.

As Christianity spread throughout the empire, the framework of ecclesiastical administration patterned itself after the civil government. The churches in local capitals and seats of provincial government were assigned metropolitans, or archbishops, as distributions of ecclesiastical governance. Italy at large, however, lacked these tiers of civic rule. It was governed as a whole directly from Rome, and its citizens were accustomed to looking to Rome. It was natural, then, for the church in Rome to reflect the same kind of oversight over the whole Italian peninsula. No other city in the West rivaled the honor and grandeur of Rome. Concerning the aristocratic place of the church in Rome, Shotwell states,

Throughout the West it seemed quite natural to turn to the source of political authority for religious leadership also...A consciousness of owning both material and moral forces, an ability to wield the weapons of power and to justify them by spiritual sanctions are traits perceptible even in the earliest Roman bishops. They soon became fixed characteristics of the office, endowing the incumbents one after another with extraordinary positiveness and assurance. (219).

The presumptions of Rome were also on a spiritual basis. A special place was claimed for Rome by virtue of its being established, as was thought, by two apostles. In the East a number of churches could make similar claims, such as Antioch, Smyrna, Ephesus, and Alexandria. (Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, and the community of Aelia that replaced it did not match its prestige.) In the West, however, only Rome could make such a claim. As heresies arose in the early church and it became necessary to discern who maintained the truth delivered by the apostles, it was assumed that those churches that traced their origin to the apostles had a stronger, more faithful, heritage of truth. Consequently, the churches looked to these cities, the chief of which seemed to be Rome, for tests and judgments of orthodoxy. In this way Irenaeus refutes the teachers of heterodoxy:

Indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul; as also [by pointing out] the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by means of the succession of the bishops. For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with

this Church, on account of its preeminent authority, that is, the faithful everywhere, inasmuch as the apostolical tradition has been preserved continuously by those [faithful men] who exist everywhere.¹⁰ (415-416)

At this early stage of history we begin to see prescriptions and admonitions addressed to the churches not in the name of an apostle but in the name of a church, specifically the one in Rome. Whereas the New Testament Epistle to Corinth begins, “Paul, a called apostle of Christ Jesus...to the church of God which is in Corinth” (1 Cor. 1:1-2), the epistle of Clement begins, “The Church of God which sojourns at Rome, to the Church of God sojourning at Corinth” (5). This phrase is very significant. To Clement, a bishop of Rome, the church there filled the role of the now absent apostles as the mouthpiece of orthodoxy. The rule was no longer “Paul...to the church”; it was “Rome...to the church.”

In the early centuries the churches in the East of the empire were plagued by a succession of various heresies.

The churches in the West, for the most part spared from these major controversies, may indeed have remained more faithful to the teaching of the apostles and as such became harbors for orthodoxy. It may also be the case that, of these, Rome was able to provide able spokesmen. However, the preeminence of the church in Rome rested not only on

its orthodoxy but equally upon the fable of its apostolic origin and on the presumption that such an origin ensured continued faithfulness generation after generation for centuries to come. This is much too thin a foundation on which to build the weighty and extensive claims of a universal papacy. What we see, even early in the history of the church, is the presumptuous self-exaltation of a single church through a system that would eventually become “the woman Jezebel,” a self-proclaimed prophetess usurping the place of Christ and the apostles to set herself up as a teacher of the church (Rev. 2:20).

The Ascent of the Bishop of Rome

Little is recorded about the leaders of the church in Rome in the first two centuries. They seem to have been entirely ignorant that their position would be exalted in later centuries. To be sure, they did, spoke, and wrote nothing worthy of a “pope,” a Holy See or Vicar of Christ. Norwich states,

Despite the fact that Greek was, even in Rome itself, the

The reasons for Rome's ascent to preeminence among the churches are entirely unscriptural. The first and obvious reason is that it was the capital not only of the empire but of the civilized world.

first language of Christianity...and that the first- and second-century popes in Rome were nearly all Greeks, none of them proved to be thinkers or theologians—or even administrators—of any real distinction. Certainly they were not in the same intellectual league as the bishops of Antioch and Smyrna. (12)

Had they been “vicars” of Christ, they should not have been so insignificant. Duffy notes that, except for lists compiled many years after the fact, there is no real evidence that the church in Rome had only a single bishop for the first century after the death of the apostles. He concludes, “Wherever we turn, the solid outlines of the Petrine succession at Rome seem to blur and dissolve” (2).

The church in Rome was the first to refine a formal system of graded clergy. Eusebius tells us that in the time of Cornelius (A.D. 251) the church had forty-six presbyters, seven deacons, seven sub-deacons, forty-two acolytes, and fifty-two exorcists, readers, and janitors (288).¹¹ Above all these, however, was the unique bishop. At the time of Stephen, bishop of Rome (A.D. 254-257), the churches still mostly considered themselves as a common fellowship under the rule of their own bishops, each of whom held an equal status. Stephen, however, attempted to advance the theory that all the bishops were subject to the superior authority of the one bishop who sat upon the “throne” of Peter, the alleged prince of apostles. This made the church for all practical purposes a monarchy. His claim was that

the Roman See [i.e., seat of authority], as distinct from the Roman church, was and ought to be predominant, not for its situation or other worldly advantages, not even for its treasure of doctrine, bequeathed by its two founders, but, primarily and fundamentally, because its bishop was heir in his own person to the unique prerogative conferred upon Peter. To Peter had been granted a primacy among the apostles, so to the Roman bishop was assigned a leadership over the bishops. (Shotwell 224)

This is the first known claim to supremacy by a bishop of Rome based solely on this interpretation of Matthew 16. This was in essence the new papal theory. From Stephen’s time until the reign of Constantine we have little information regarding the bishops, but during this time of persecution, the accepted traditions and legends of Peter in Rome were established more deeply in order to fit the new theory. In the decades to follow, the churches in the East were disturbed by controversies arising from the Council at Nicaea (A.D. 325), while those in the West enjoyed rest. By the end of that century the eastern churches were so divided and without a clear leadership that the Emperor Theodosius issued the edict *De Fide Catholica*, stating,

It is our will that all the peoples subject to the government of our clemency shall follow that religion which the holy Peter delivered to the Romans, as pious tradition from him to the present times declares it, and as the pontiff Damasus manifestly observes it. (qtd. in Shotwell 675).

In the second half of the fourth century the bishops of Rome began to assert themselves as monarchs and potentates. Both Damasus and Siricius, his successor, sent letters of instruction to bishops abroad concerning church governance. These letters, patterned after imperial rescripts, are significant in that they are early samples of what came to be papal decretals, executive regulations for the guidance of metropolitans and bishops by the bishop of Rome. Siricius writes,

In view of our office we have no right to dissemble and none to keep silence, since it is our duty more than anyone’s to be zealous for the Christian faith. We bear the burdens of all who are heavy laden; nay, rather, the blessed apostle Peter bears them in us and protects and watches over us, his heirs, as we trust, in all the care of his ministry...Therefore we here by general announcement decree what must henceforth be observed by all the churches and what must be avoided. (qtd. in Shotwell 699, 705)

It is clear that Siricius, bishop of Rome, regarded his office and ministry to be identical to those of the apostle Peter, who, he supposed, mystically acted for him and through him. Lest there be any doubt as to his presumption, he adds, “Let all your priests observe the rule here given, unless they wish to be plucked from the solid, apostolic rock upon which Christ built the universal Church” (701). In issuing this warning, Siricius asserts that conformity to Rome was a prerequisite for continued fellowship in the church, even of salvation itself, because “no priest of the Lord is free to be ignorant of the statutes of the Apostolic See” (707). Innocent, bishop of Rome at the beginning of the fifth century, confirms this legalistic, monarchical stance:

It has been decreed by a divine, not a human authority, that whatever action is taken in any of the provinces, however distant or remote, it should not be brought to a conclusion before it comes to the knowledge of this see, so that every decision may be affirmed by our authority. (qtd. in Duffy 40)

By the second and third centuries the belief that began as a tradition had become a test for orthodoxy. Now in the fifth century it was developing into a monarchical system not only unheard of in the New Testament but against every spiritual and ecclesiastical principle in it. The teachings of the self-proclaimed prophetess Jezebel were coming to an evil maturity.

The Full Development of the Papacy

Leo, who is called “the Great,” did much to contribute to the doctrine of Roman supremacy and the universal authority of its bishop. He presents his vision of church hierarchy, which inevitably finds its “head” at Rome:

Although the priests enjoy a common dignity, they are not all on the same footing, since even among the blessed apostles, who were alike in honor, there was a certain distinction in authority. All were alike chosen, but it was given to one that he should be preeminent among the others. Upon this model the distinction among the bishops is based...In each province there should be one who should have the first word among his brethren. Again, in the greater cities others are appointed to greater responsibilities. Through these the oversight of the whole Church is concentrated in one see, that of Peter, and from this head there should never be any dissent. (qtd. in Robinson, *Readings* 71-72)

In A.D. 444 Leo disputed with Hilary of Arles over the office of metropolitan in southern Gaul. Leo wished to assert his own authority there by annulling the post that Hilary held. To strengthen his stance, he appealed to Emperor Valentinian III, who responded with an imperial decree. It reads, in part,

In the second half of the fourth century the bishops of Rome began to assert themselves as monarchs and potentates, sending letters of instruction to bishops abroad concerning church governance.

Since, then, the primacy of the Apostolic See is established by the merit of St. Peter (who is chief among the bishops), by the majesty of the city of Rome, and finally by the authority of a holy council, no one, without inexcusable presumption, may attempt anything against the authority of that see. Peace will be secured among the churches if every one recognize his ruler...We herewith permanently decree that not only the bishops of Gaul, but those of the other provinces, shall attempt nothing counter to ancient custom without the authority of the venerable father [*papa*] of the Eternal City. (72)

The decree asserts three bases for the superiority of the Roman See: the merit of Peter, the majesty of the “Eternal City,” and the decrees of a previous council at Sardica. In Leo’s mind, the merit of Peter was embodied in the bishop of Rome, who enjoyed a mystical identity with Peter. Leo writes,

A single person, Peter, is appointed from the whole world as a leader in the calling of all peoples, and is placed above all the other apostles and the fathers of the Church. Although there are many priests among the people of

God, and many pastors, Peter should of right rule all of those whom Christ himself rules in the first instance. (69)

By “Peter” he means himself, the bishop of Rome. Again he says,

The apostle was called *Petra*, the rock, by which denomination he is constituted the foundation...In his chair dwelleth the ever living, the superabounding, authority. Let the brethren therefore acknowledge that he is the primate of all bishops, and that Christ, who denieth His gifts to none, yet giveth unto none except through him. (qtd. in Miller 298)

The “Peter” who up to that time still dwelt in his chair is none other than Leo himself as Peter’s successor. It is Peter, that is Leo, who maintains the super-abounding authority and through whom gifts, that is, offices in the church, are given. Duffy notes, “Leo’s sense of this identity was almost mystical. Peter was eternally present in Peter’s see, and Leo, though an ‘unworthy heir,’ was the inheritor of all Peter’s prerogatives. Indeed, Peter himself spoke and acted in all that Leo did” (43).

Leo gave a distinct form to what would become the medieval papacy, but its full development was still to come. After A.D. 476, when the Germanic king Odoacer

deposed the last emperor of the West, the fall of the empire left a vacuum of power and a breakdown of structure in its former lands. In the following century, Rome suffered a series of sieges and plunders, and most of the remaining aristocratic families migrated to Constantinople. This meant that the only aristocratic presence remaining in Rome was in the church, which began to fill the vacuum and grow in its dominance of life in the West. It was in this stage of history, in A.D. 590, that Gregory, the secular prefect of Rome, was elected as bishop. Despite his preference for a monastic life, Gregory was a brilliant and skilled administrator, and he rose to the overwhelming task of ruling the devastated capital, taking on every duty of the civic executive. He watched over elections, conducted foreign relations, negotiated truces, ordered generals, paid the wages of soldiers, and ransomed refugees. He drew up a detailed register of all the poor in Rome and apportioned rations for them. He expanded the church’s chancery by creating new ranks of subdeacons, notaries, treasurers, and senior executive officers, forming an unprecedented civil service. Gregory funded his efforts by administrating the vast properties that had made the church the largest single landowner in the West and by exploiting the

patrimonial organization of civic and church administrations. In all practicality, Gregory served not only as bishop of the church but as the civil and military governor of central Italy.

Gregory also extended the reach of the church into new lands by sending missionaries into Visigothic Spain and Frankish Gaul—parts of today’s France, Belgium, Switzerland, Northern Italy, Netherlands, and Germany. His acquisition of Anglo-Saxon Britain was particularly successful, preempting Celtic Christianity by bringing the Christians already there under papal control. Historian James Harvey Robinson notes, “With Gregory we leave behind us the Rome of Caesar and Trajan and enter upon that of the popes” (*Middle* 51). He also says, “It is impossible to conceive what had been the confusion, the lawlessness, the chaotic state of the middle ages, without the medieval Papacy; and of the medieval Papacy the real father is Gregory the Great” (*Readings* 74). John Julius Norwich concludes,

As the greatest pope of the early Middle Ages, Gregory’s most important achievement was to implant ineradicably in men’s minds the idea that the Roman Catholic Church was the most important institution in the world and that the Papacy was the supreme authority within it. (49)

It is at this point in history that the age commonly called “Antiquity” passes into that called the “Middle Ages.” It is at this time also, with the reign of Gregory the Great at the end of the sixth century, that the great presumption of the bishop of Rome fully develops into the medieval papacy. After the rise and wane of the apostolic church, the centuries of persecution, and the worldly corruption of the Roman Empire, the church passes from the Pergamos stage to that of Thyatira, the age of “Jezebel, she who calls herself a prophetess,” and purports to teach God’s people with supreme authority (Rev. 2:20).

Early Witnesses against the Roman Presumption

The thought advanced, at least by the time of Stephen (A.D. 254-257), that the allegedly special place of Peter among the apostles translated into the preeminence of the bishop of Rome, and of all his successors, was not universally received. Cyprian had no lack of respect for Rome, but in opposition to the intrusions of Stephen he asserts,

Neither does any of us set himself up as a bishop of bishops, nor by tyrannical terror does any compel his colleague to the necessity of obedience; since every bishop, according to the allowance of his liberty and power, has his own proper right of judgment, and can no more be judged by another than he himself can judge another. (565)

Cyprian was the strongest voice of his time to advocate the position and importance of the bishop. Nevertheless, A. Cleveland Coxe writes concerning Cyprian’s writing,

It embodies no hierarchical assumption, no “lordship over God’s heritage”...Nothing can be more delusive than the idea that the mediaeval system derives any support from Cyprian’s theory of the episcopate or of Church organization. His was the system of the universal parity and community of bishops...Cyprian’s maxims had to be practically destroyed in the West before it was possible to raise the portentous figure of a supreme pontiff. (263)

Tertullian is likewise indignant against the presumptions of Rome. He employs his characteristic irony to declare, “I hear that there has even been an edict set forth, and a preemptory one too. The *Pontifex Maximus*—that is, the bishop of bishops—issues an edict” (“Modesty” 74). Here he calls the bishop of Rome by the title of the supreme head of the pagan religion, which at this development of history was still derogatory. Both he and Cyprian clearly deny the legitimacy of a “bishop of bishops.” Moreover, both of these outstanding church fathers assert that the blessing and promise bestowed on Peter in Matthew 16 belong to every Christian who makes Peter’s confession.

To these testimonies we add the voice of another notable forefather, Origen, who strongly rejected the Roman claim of authority. He develops and elaborates Tertullian’s belief:

If we make like Peter the answer that Simon Peter made: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,” not through revelation of flesh and blood to us but by a light from the Father in heaven illuminating our hearts, we too become like Peter and are blessed as he was, because the reason for his blessing has become ours...We become a Peter and to us the Word might say: “Thou art Peter,” etc. For every disciple of Christ, from whom those drank who drank of the spiritual rock that followed them, is also himself a rock. And upon all these rocks is built every word of the Church and its harmonious polity, for upon each of the perfect, who combine words and deeds and thoughts to fill up the blessedness, is the Church built by God.

But if you imagine that the whole Church is built by God upon that one Peter alone, what will you do with John, the son of thunder, or any other of the apostles? Or shall we go yet further and dare to say that against Peter alone the gates of hell shall not prevail but that they shall prevail against the other apostles and the perfect? Does not the promise: “The gates of hell shall not prevail against it,” hold with regard to everyone and to each of them? As also the saying: “Upon this rock I will build my Church”? Are the keys of the kingdom of heaven given by the Lord

to Peter only and shall no other of the blessed receive them? But if the promise: “I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven,” belongs also to the rest, why do not all the promises just mentioned and the words that are subjoined as addressed to Peter, belong to them?...

And if anyone says this to [Christ], not through revelation of flesh and blood but through the Father in heaven, he will obtain the promises that were spoken in the letter of the gospel to Peter only, but in the spirit of the gospel to everyone who becomes what Peter was...They have the surname of “rock,” as Christ has. Furthermore, as members of Christ, they derive a surname from him and are called Christians, while from the rock they are called Peters...

And if anyone who is not a Peter and does not possess what we have here described imagines that, as Peter, he will so bind on earth that whatever he binds is bound in heaven and so loose on earth that whatever he looses is loosed in heaven, he is puffed up, not understanding the meaning of the Scriptures, and being puffed up, has fallen into the destruction of the devil. (qtd. in Shotwell 317-319, 321-322)

This extraordinary word of Origen teaches that whoever drinks of Christ as the living rock becomes a rock, that is, a living stone for the building of God (1 Cor. 10:4; 1 Pet. 2:4-5), thus enjoying all the blessings of Peter, short only of his historical apostolic function, as the common portion of all believers. This is a strong denial of the posterous pretenses of the bishop of Rome.

About a century later, Jerome also expressed great respect for the church in Rome. Nevertheless, he clearly did not recognize the preeminence of that church or the supremacy of its bishop. He writes,

The church at Rome is not to be considered as one thing and the rest of the churches throughout the world as another. Those of Gaul and Britain, Africa, Persia, and India, as well as the various barbarous nations, adore one Christ and observe a single rule of truth. If you are looking for authority, the world is surely greater than the city of Rome. Wherever there is a bishop, whether at Rome or Eugubium, at Constantinople, Rhegium, or Alexandria, his rank and priesthood are the same. Neither the power that riches bring nor the humility of poverty makes a bishop higher or lower in rank. All are successors of the apostles...Why urge the custom of a single city? (qtd. in Robinson, *Readings* 69)

Already by the middle of the third century, the growing assertion of Rome was that the word of Christ in Matthew 16 created the office of a perpetual bishop of bishops and supreme authority over the churches of God. Moreover, it asserts, that bishop is to be found in Rome and Rome alone. In the following century Rome strengthened its claims even more, and by the end of the sixth century this presumption came to full fruition in the medieval papacy. However, the foregoing testimonies of Cyprian, Tertullian, Origen, and Jerome—the most notable church men of their time—reveal, without any room for doubt, that this fable was by no means universally accepted. These church fathers clearly indicate that there is no superior church and even the more, no such office as “pope” in the fellowship of the churches. All the churches are on an equal standing, and all take their authority from Christ the Head, the Word of God, and the living Spirit.

The Blasphemy of the Papacy

By the time of Gregory, the bishop of Rome was established as the final judge in all matters of doctrine, and he was acknowledged as the supreme governor of the church in assembling councils.

By the time of Gregory, the bishop of Rome was established as the final judge in all matters of doctrine, and he was acknowledged as the supreme governor of the church in assembling councils, in presiding over them, and in making and reviewing ecclesiastical appointments. Such was the power of his office that any disagreement with it

or disobedience to it meant separation from the church and from salvation itself. The subsequent centuries of the Middle Ages served to strengthen, manifest, prove, and expand the power and esteem of the Roman bishop, or “pope,” as he was later to be called.¹²

The *Catholic Encyclopedia*, in an entry by G. H. Joyce, elucidates the accepted definition of the pope—in accordance with “Pastor Aeternus,” the Dogmatic Constitution issued by the First Vatican Council of 1870; the pope is “the Bishop of Rome, who, in virtue of his position as successor of St. Peter, is the chief pastor of the whole Church, the Vicar of Christ upon earth.” He is the Archbishop of the Roman Province, Primate of Italy and the adjacent islands, sole Patriarch of the Western Church, *Summus Pontifex*, and *Pontifex Maximus*. In recognition of his supreme and monarchical place, the kissing of the pope’s foot is attested as early as the eighth century.

Most notably, the pope holds the office of Supreme Head—conferred on Peter—and it is only in dependence on this head that all subordinate authorities hold their

power. Concerning Peter, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* continues,

Peter is to be to the Church what the foundation is in regard to a house. He is to be the principle of unity, of stability, and of increase. He is the principle of unity, since what is not joined to that foundation is no part of the Church; of stability, since it is the firmness of this foundation in virtue of which the Church remains unshaken by the storms which buffet her; of increase, since, if she grows, it is because new stones are laid on this foundation.

In the above definition of the foundation and underlying principle of the church, *Peter* refers not only to the historic apostle but to his office, which is held in turn by the popes of Rome. The office of “head” entitles the pope to jurisdiction over the faithful and supreme authority to define in all questions of faith and morals. Moreover, as the continuation of Peter, the pope is the vicegerent of Christ “to rule in His place,” which is the “grant of legislative and judicial authority” that is granted in its fullest measure. Concerning the office of Peter, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* tells us clearly,

The position of St. Peter after the Ascension, as shown in the Acts of the Apostles, realizes to the full the great commission bestowed upon him. He is from the first the chief of the Apostolic band—not *primus inter pares* [first among equals], but the undisputed head of the Church...If then Christ, as we have seen, established His Church as a society subordinated to a single supreme head, it follows from the very nature of the case that this office is perpetual, and cannot have been a mere transitory feature of ecclesiastical life...Hence, throughout the centuries the office of Peter must be realized in the Church, in order that she may prevail in her age-long struggle...The permanence of that office is essential to the very being of the Church.

“Pastor Aeternus” declares that if anyone denies these statuses and rights to the Roman pontiff, “let him be anathema.” That is, the alternative to recognition of and obedience to the pope is curse and damnation.

Christ, the Son of God, says to the church in Thyatira, “I have something against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, she who calls herself a prophetess and teaches and leads my slaves astray” (Rev. 2:20). The Lord used Jezebel as a type to denote an evil and blasphemous system that came into the church. Jezebel, whom Ahab took as wife, was the daughter of Ethbaal, the king of the Sidonians. Under her seductive influence Ahab built a temple for Baal, raised up an altar to him, and “did more to provoke Jehovah the God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who had been before him...because

Jezebel his wife urged him on” (1 Kings 16:30-33; 21:25). Jezebel slew the true prophets of Jehovah and hosted four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and four hundred prophets of the Asherah at her table (18:19).

In the epistle to the church in Thyatira the Lord calls Jezebel a prophetess. A prophet is one who speaks for God with God’s authority. Jezebel is a self-appointed prophetess who presumes to be authorized by God to speak for God. The foregoing historical account and the clear speaking of the *Catholic Encyclopedia* indicate that the type of Jezebel has met its full fulfillment in the papal system of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Preeminence of Christ as the Head of the Church

In the economy of God, Christ has the place of the man; He is the Husband of a universal divine-human couple. As the woman, the church as the bride of Christ is subject to Christ and takes Him, and Him alone, as her Head (Eph. 5:22-25). Paul says, “A husband is head of the wife as also Christ is Head of the church” (v. 23). The teaching of the apostles is very clear concerning the place of women in the church. Paul says, “Let a woman learn in quietness in all subjection; but I do not permit a woman to teach or to assert authority over a man, but to be in quietness” (1 Tim. 2:11-12). Witness Lee writes,

For sisters to learn in silence and to be in subjection is for them to realize their position as women. This safeguards the sisters from the presumption of overstepping their position in the local church...In God’s creation man was ordained to be the head, and woman to be in subjection to man (1 Cor. 11:3). In the church this ordination should be kept. (Recovery Version, 1 Tim. 2:11, note 1; v. 12, note 1)

Thus, for a “prophetess,” a self-assuming woman, to teach authoritatively in the church is against God’s ordination in both the old and new creations. This is the presumption of Jezebel, a system that found its way into the church of God and of Christ. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* states,

The Church has authority to define not merely those truths which form part of the original deposit of revelation, but also such as are necessarily connected with this deposit. The former are held *fide divina*, the latter *fide infallibili*.

An example of the latter is the dogma that the Roman pontiff is at all times the supreme head of the church. Although it is not found in the Scriptures as an item of “divine faith,” it is nonetheless a matter of “infallible faith,” as defined by the pontiff himself, which for all practical purposes bears the same weight. To

announce, “The Church has the authority to define” is the speaking of a presumptuous female, a self-appointed prophetess, who has no such right in the economy and ordination of God.

Catholic dogma defines the pope as the Vicar of Christ. *Vicar*, from the Latin *vicarius*, means “substitute.” Thus, the pope acts as the substitute of Christ, speaking and acting presumptuously in His place, as if Christ were absent from the church. In the church there is no substitute for Christ. Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End (Rev. 21:6). As the first letter and the last letter in the divine alphabet, Christ is also all the letters, the One who fills all in all (Eph. 1:23). He is the Firstborn of all creation and the Firstborn from the dead that He Himself might have the first place in all things (Col. 1:15, 18). Christ has His representatives, but He is not absent, and it is He—not Peter, nor any man, nor any office—that speaks, acts, and operates in and through His ambassadors. To replace Christ with a “vicar” is to deny His rightful place in the church; this is the spirit of antichrist.

According to the New Testament, there is no “supreme” office or function in the Body of Christ. Christ Himself is supreme, and He alone holds the supreme place. He is the unique—the one and only—Head. In the divine government Christ is the head of man, and for this reason a woman prays with her head covered as a sign of submission to authority (1 Cor. 11:3-6, 10). Christ is the Head of the Body, the church (Eph. 5:23; Col. 1:18), and He is the Head of each believer individually and directly. In His ascension Christ is the Head of all rule and authority, that is, of the fallen angels occupying positions of power in subordination to Satan (2:10). God subjected all things under Christ’s feet and gave Him to be Head over all things to the church (Eph. 1:22), and it is God’s economy to head up all things in Christ (v. 10). The believers grow up into Christ the Head in all things, and the growth of the Body is out from the Head (4:15-16). Therefore, the believers must hold the Head rather than any substitute for Him (Col. 2:19). The papal system, the Jezebel within the church in Thyatira, proclaims the bishop of Rome to be the perpetual and supreme head of the church, and as Leo says, “From this head there should never be any dissent” (qtd. in Robinson, *Readings* 72). This is a blasphemy to Christ. To name any office or man as the head of the church is rebellion to God’s order and an offense to the preeminence of Christ in His unique, God-given, and God-exalted position.

The Overcomers in Thyatira

In the early centuries of the church, and particularly in the decades before and after the Council at Nicaea, the church was troubled by a series of challenges to the truth

concerning the Divine Trinity, the person of Christ, the nature of man, and the nature of salvation. These “long and disgraceful controversies,” as Miller calls them (298), were most pronounced in the Greek-speaking churches in the East of the Roman Empire, to the extent that some Eastern churches fell altogether into Arianism. At the same time, though, the Latin-speaking churches in the West adhered more faithfully to the Nicene Creed. Of these, the most prominent church, for a variety of reasons, was the one in Rome. This meant that in those troubled centuries the churches naturally appealed to the West, and to Rome in particular, for an anchor of orthodoxy. However, this faithfulness gradually yielded to the presumptuous claim by Rome to universal ecclesiastical supremacy and the authority that comes with it—precepts not found in the truth of the New Testament. At the same time a superstitious zeal for miracles and the fantastic became the breeding ground for fables concerning the apostles, Peter in particular. Together with the ambition, rivalries, and lust for power that are always present in the flesh, the reputation of Rome with the fables to support it degraded into the unscriptural, unholy exaltation of that church and of its bishop that would, by the end of the sixth century, fully develop into the papal hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church.

In the epistle to the church in Thyatira this system is called “Jezebel” (Rev. 2:20). Concerning Balaam (v. 14) and Jezebel, Miller writes,

Balaam and Jezebel are symbolic names—a prophet and a prophetess. The former acted as a seducer among the saints: the latter established herself within the professing church, and pretended to have absolute authority there. This was going much farther than even the wickedness of Balaam. But we all know what Jezebel was when she sat as queen in Israel. Her name has come down to us as swathed in cruelties and blood. She hated and persecuted the witnesses of God; she encouraged and patronised the idolatrous priests and prophets of Baal; she added violence to corruption: all was ruin and confusion. And this is the name which the Lord has chosen to symbolise the general state of the professing church during the middle ages. (293-294)

Christ says to the church in Thyatira,

I know your works and love and faith and service and your endurance and that your last works are more than the first. But I have something against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, she who calls herself a prophetess...Behold, I cast her into a bed, and those who commit adultery with her, into great tribulation, unless they repent of their works; and her children I will kill with death; and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the inward parts and the hearts; and I will give

to each one of you according to your works...And he who overcomes and he who keeps My works until the end... (Rev. 2:19-26)

In this epistle the Lord refers to several distinct classes of people. The first is the church in Thyatira with its believers, addressed in the second person. The second is the woman Jezebel, referred to in the third person. The third group is those who commit adultery with her, and the fourth is her children, also mentioned in the third person. "All the churches" form the fifth group. Finally, the overcomers in the church are the sixth group. It is crucial to distinguish these. The Lord is speaking to the church in Thyatira, a genuine church as the local expression of His universal Body, and He is calling for the overcomers—those in the church in Thyatira who will rise up to take Him as their unique Head, give Him the preeminence in all things, and have no part in the system of error propounded by Jezebel the false prophetess.

Jezebel, a separate party, is not in the church genuinely and organically. She stands metaphorically for a system advocated by unenlightened and evil persons under the instigation of Satan. Christ speaks severely of her and promises tribulation and destruction to her, her children, and those who receive and propagate her teachings for base gain and worldly advantage. Of the genuine believers, however, He says only, "I have something against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel." The Lord's only critique for the real and true believers in the medieval church, which is the Roman Catholic Church, is that they tolerate the teachings and leadings of the papal hierarchy and dogma. Therefore, to be an overcomer in Thyatira, the believers there simply must not tolerate that system, regardless of the cost to themselves. Christ assures them,

But I say to you—the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they say—I put no other burden upon you; nevertheless what you have hold fast until I come. (vv. 24-25)

The Lord demands that the true believers in the midst of that system regard it as intolerable, as Christ regards it, deny its presumption, and have no part of it. In principle He calls to them, "Come out of her, My people, that you do not participate in her sins and that you do not receive her plagues" (18:4). God's people—His true, genuine, and regenerated believers—must come out of religious Babylon. If any do come out, the Lord requires only that they hold fast what they have until He comes. Then they, the overcomers, can hold Christ as their unique Head, grow up into Him, and out from Him build up the church as the genuine, organic Body of Christ. However, if any true believers do not come out of her but

continue to participate in her evils, they will partake of her plagues when she is destroyed, although they will not lose their salvation. This is the Lord's word of righteousness concerning the believers in the Roman Catholic Church (Heb. 5:13).

by John Campbell

Notes

¹The survey of ancient documents in *The See of Peter* by James T. Shotwell and Louise Ropes Loomis is a valuable resource for the study of the rise of the papacy in the first four centuries of the church and helped greatly to guide this research.

²The Jews in Babylonia considered themselves a kind of aristocracy, claiming a more pure bloodline from pre-captivity Israel. The Babylonian Talmud, composed in that region, is the more authoritative of the two Talmuds, and the Babylonian exilarchate, the ruling family of Jews in Babylonia, continued there until A.D. 1040.

³The alleged shrine, which is a small niched wall, sits among a complex of mausoleums dating from around A.D. 130-300. Although the bone fragments found at the wall were moved and mishandled by excavators, Pope Paul VI announced in 1968 that they were identified as those of Peter. However, this identification was made on mystical, not scientific, grounds and aptly suits the purposes of the Roman papacy.

⁴The first epistle to the Corinthians (not that of Paul) is unsigned, but it is written in the name of the church in Rome. Eighty-five years after its writing, Dionysius, a bishop from Corinth, ascribes it to Clement of Rome.

⁵In his *Stromata* Clement of Alexander reports that the apostle Paul had a wife (Eusebius 162). He is the only ancient writer to do so; all others disagree.

⁶Augustine attempted to solve the chronology of Paul's and Peter's deaths by proposing that they died on the same day but in different years. Near the end of the fifth century, however, Pope Gelasius I condemned as heretical any suggestion that they did not die at the same time.

⁷Elsewhere we are told that Linus was appointed in Rome by the apostles. After him came Anacletus, who was followed by Clement. We have no explanation of how Clement also came to be appointed by the apostles, especially since he served so late in the first century. The tradition quoted by Tertullian may be in error.

⁸There may have been a Samaritan heretic in Rome by the name of Simon, whom Justin Martyr reports as coming in the time of Claudius. Justin speaks of a statue erected for his worship on an island in the Tiber River, but later archeology showed it to be of the Sabine divinity Semo Sancus. Irenaeus claimed that it was this Simon that introduced a Hellenistic theosophy to Rome, but that particular school did not arrive until the end

of the first century. Yet another magician was said to have died while attempting to fly over Nero's amphitheater. All these characters were conflated to be the Simon of Acts 8, whom Peter allegedly confronted for a second time in Rome.

⁹The *Liberian Catalogue* provides a list of Roman bishops from the first century through Liberius in A.D. 354. For its earlier entries it draws from the third-century records of Hippolytus of Rome. Concerning these records, historian George Edmundson writes, "An examination of the character of this source may well make one distrustful of its strict accuracy as regards names and dates. The 'Liberian Catalogue' contains a number of strange errors" (210). Among these are errors directly related to Peter, Paul, Clement, and Anacletus.

¹⁰The Greek text of this passage from Irenaeus is lost. In a crucial phrase, the Latin reads, "*necesse...convenire.*" Thus, "Every church should agree with this church" should read, "Every church should resort to [come together with, consult with] this church." However, Catholic scholars ordinarily adopt the sense of "must be in agreement" (Shotwell 267).

¹¹The limit of only seven deacons was an attempt at following Acts 6:3.

¹²For the first few centuries of the Western church the affectionate name of *papa*, "father," was commonly used for all bishops, but at least by the eleventh century the title was prescribed strictly for the bishop of Rome. When consulting lists or histories of the "popes" prior to the Middle Ages, one must bear in mind that this title is merely retrofitted to persons who had no concept of the title according to its later meaning.

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