

Is the Office of 'Pope' a Biblical Institution?

All Catholics are taught to revere the pope as the sole Vicar of Christ (God's chief representative in this world). The official stance is that all popes through the centuries have inherited their position from Peter, who is considered the first pope and the first Bishop of Rome (though it cannot be proven historically that Peter was ever in Rome—it is certainly possible, but not verifiable).

The Bible passage normally used to prove the legitimacy of the office of pope, and the tradition of papal succession, is Matthew 16:13-19 (MEV). In a conversation at Caesarea Philippi, Peter boldly confessed Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of the living God." In response, Jesus declared:

"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

When Jesus announced Simon's name would be Peter, the Greek word used is petros, meaning "a rock" or "a stone." So Catholic theologians insist that Peter was "the rock" on which the church would be built. However, that's the masculine form. When the Lord said, "Upon this rock I will build My church," the feminine form of the Greek word, petra, was used by the Gospel writer. So, the masculine word was used for Peter, but the feminine form was used for the rock-foundation of the church. If the Messiah had truly been referring to Peter, it seems logical that the masculine form of the word would have been used both times. That would make more sense. Could it be

that the *petra* foundation of the church refers to something altogether different?

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Let's revisit important lines from the passage again. When Simon confessed Jesus was the Messiah, He responded:

"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven."

Then, after conferring on him the name Peter (petros), Jesus added, "On this rock (petra) I will build My church . . ."
(Matt. 16:17-18).

Look closely at the construction of the sentence. Jesus did not say, "I've given you this name that means 'a rock,' Peter, because I am going to build My church on you." Instead, the implication seems to be more like the following:

People have not convinced you of My identity, Peter; My Father in heaven has revealed My divinity to you. On this rock of divine revelation, I will build My church. No one will become one of My followers merely by religious indoctrination or mental persuasion. They will be inspired by divine revelation. Because of that, they will never be shaken.

Doesn't that sound more logical? I believe it encapsulates Jesus' intentions perfectly. However, if the Messiah actually was referring to Peter (petros) as the rock (petra) of the church, He never foretold there would be a continuation of such an office. Nor did He ever command that a college of no more than 120 bishops and Vatican officials called cardinals convene when necessary to elect a new pope by a two-thirds majority. These are merely manmade, religious traditions that have evolved through the centuries.

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The New Covenant Shift

The establishment of the office of pope and an exclusive ministerial priesthood in Catholicism are evidently an overflow from the Old Covenant. During that former era, God commanded that there be a high priest in Israel, beginning with Aaron, and an all-male priesthood comprised of his offspring. The Law required Israelites to go through the mediatorial ministry of the priests to offer their sacrifices that they might be reconciled to God. However, all of that was rendered obsolete in the New Covenant. Now, every true believer is a priest with “access by one Spirit to the Father” (1 Pet. 2:5-9; Eph. 2:18). There is no more powerful confirmation of this supernatural shift than the following passage:

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Therefore, brothers, we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way that He has opened for us through the veil, that is to say, His flesh, and since we have a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith . . . (Heb, 10:19-22).

Traditionally, the pope has borne the title “Pontifex Maximus” meaning the greatest priest or chief priest. Prior to the birth of Christianity, this title rested on the head of the college of pontiffs (priests) in the ancient pagan religion of Rome. Later, it was bestowed on leaders in the Roman government, beginning with Augustus. Eventually, it was adopted into Catholicism. However, no human should ever claim being the “Pontifex Maximus” or “the Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church” (another papal title). Such superior positions belong to Jesus alone.

A Serious Matter—Eternally

According to the Catholic Catechism (paragraphs 846-847), those who knowledgeably reject the Catholic Church as the true church lose any hope for salvation—even if they claim to be genuine Christians. Because the office of pope is so ingrained in Catholic doctrine, to reject the papacy is to reject the Church—and to reject the Church is to reject eternal life. Need proof?

In an encyclical entitled *Mortalium Animos*, released on Jan. 6, 1928, Pope Pius XI, referring to the Catholic Church and the papacy, insisted, “In this one Church of Christ no man can be or remain who does not accept, recognize and obey the authority and supremacy of Peter and his legitimate successors.” So, determining the legitimacy of the office of pope has eternal consequences.

My conclusion? Give me Jesus.

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Mike Shreve *has traveled as a Bible teacher revivalist throughout the U.S. and 14 other countries for over 50 years. A prolific writer, he has authored 18 books, including three #1 best-sellers on Amazon. He has two different podcasts on the Charisma Podcast Network.*