

Is the Pope Infallible?

Is the pope infallible? Is he divinely protected from error in his official duties? Pope Francis' visit to the United States is serving as a reminder of the profound doctrinal differences that separate Catholics from Protestants and, indeed, from the rest of Christendom.

No issue has been more historically divisive than the claims of the Roman bishop (the pope) of having authority over all Christendom. These historic claims of papal preeminence are based on the idea of Peter's primacy among the apostles, and the popes being Peter's successors and inheriting Peter's preeminence and authority.

These papal claims of power culminated with the dogma of papal infallibility being declared in 1870 by the Vatican I Council. According to this council, the pope is preserved from the possibility of error, "when, in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Church."

In challenging the dogma of papal infallibility it is important that we separate the person from the office. Pope Francis seems like a good, decent man and I have been impressed with how he has reached out to Christians outside the Catholic Church, including those of my own Pentecostal/charismatic persuasion. I have read his book, *The Church of Mercy*, and was impressed by the tone of compassion and humility that I sensed throughout.

Francis, however, occupies an office that has a long and problematic history, too often characterized by scandal, deceit, and love for power. This is why Hans Kung, the most widely read Catholic theologian in the world today, states that the long road leading to Vatican I "was built with an

unflagging Roman concern for power, which did not hesitate even over the use of forgeries” (Kung, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future*, 319).

Not only Protestants and Eastern Orthodox, but many Catholics today are questioning the Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility. I like Pope Francis as a person, but I cannot accept the doctrine of papal infallibility for the following reasons.

It Has No Basis in Scripture

Jesus warned the Twelve, including Peter, against adopting honorific titles that would set them apart from one another. Referring to titles used by the Jewish leaders of that day, He admonished:

“But do not be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brothers. And call no man on earth your father, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Nor be called teachers, for you have one Teacher, the Christ. He who is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matt. 23:8-11).

This is why, in the New Testament, we find no sign of a hierarchy in the leadership of the church. Words that carried connotations of authority such as *archon* (ruler), *timē* (rank), and *despot* (master) are used of Jewish and secular rulers but are glaringly missing in regards to Christian leaders.

A Servant Model of Leadership

Instead, *diakonos*, a word meaning “servant,” with no connotations of power, status or rank, is used of leaders in the church. *Diakonos* is the word Jesus used when He rebuked the Twelve when they were arguing over who would be the greatest. He said to them, “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:43).

Paul often used the word *diakonos* to describe himself and his

coworkers. To the Corinthian believers who were putting apostles and preachers on pedestals and building cliques around them, Paul asked who Paul and Apollos were besides servants (or *diakonoι*) through whom they believed. Unfortunately, in many cases, *diakonoι* has been translated as “minister,” thus losing the force of its original meaning of a “servant” with no status or privilege.

Contrary to the *diakonos* model laid out by Jesus, those advocating papal infallibility emphasize the primacy of Peter among the apostles and his preeminence and authority over the church. They also insist that this authority of Peter has been passed along to the popes through a mechanical, religious rite called apostolic succession. These beliefs led to the bishop of Rome adopting titles such as “Successor of the Prince of the Apostles” and “Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church,” which are so out of character with Jesus and the New Testament.

The Church Is Built on Jesus Christ

Matthew 16:18-19 is used by papal advocates to claim that Jesus said He would build His church on Peter and that He gave Peter the keys of authority over the church. It is clear, however, from even a cursory examination of this passage that the church is not built on Peter, but on Peter’s revelation of who Jesus is, or in other words, on Jesus Himself. Also, the word “you” in this passage concerning the keys of the kingdom is plural, indicating that the keys are given to the church, not solely to Peter.

That the church is built on Christ Himself is affirmed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:11. Commenting on his founding of the church in Corinth, Paul declared that no other foundation could be laid other than that which was already laid, which is Jesus Christ. Interestingly, this was also confirmed by Pope Benedict XVI, who as the young Joseph Ratzinger, wrote in his doctoral dissertation, “If the church is founded on Peter, it

is not founded on his person, but on his faith ... the foundation of the church is Christ."

No Primacy of Peter in the New Testament

Other passages of Scripture make it clear that Peter held no special primacy among the apostles. Consider, for example, that when Peter went to Antioch and waffled concerning the equal acceptance of the Gentiles in Christ, Paul publicly rebuked him in front of the church because, as Paul said, he was to be blamed (Gal. 2:11).

That there was no primacy of Peter is also borne out in Peter's conversation with the Lord after His resurrection as recorded in John 21:15-25. In the midst of Jesus instructing Peter to feed His sheep, Peter turned around to John and said to Jesus, "What about this man?" With a stern rebuke, Jesus replied, "If it is My will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow Me!" (John 21:22).

In other words, there were things about the church that did not concern Peter—that were none of his business. Jesus had a relationship with John that was of no concern to Peter. There were things that would occur in the church that did not have to pass through Peter. They were of no concern to him. Peter must give himself to his own task and not intrude into the affairs of others. When he would involve himself with matters that were of no concern to him, he could expect to hear the voice of the Master saying, "What is that to you? You follow Me."

The doctrine of a primacy of Peter that is passed down to the popes by an apostolic succession is a development of later history that papal advocates seek to impose back on Scripture. It has no basis in either Scripture or early Christianity. Professor Burnett Streeter was correct when he wrote:

"Whatever else is disputable, there is, I submit, one result from which there is no escape. In the primitive church there

was no single system of church order laid down by the apostles. During the first 100 years of Christianity, the church was an organism alive and growing—changing its organization to meet changing needs. Uniformity was a later development” (Eddie Hyatt, *Pursuing Power*, 43).

It Has No Basis in History

The development of the papal office, which is not found in either Scripture or early Christianity, has been a long and problematic process that encountered much opposition along the way and was never accepted by all of Christendom. In fact, the ancient churches of the East (now known as the Eastern Orthodox) never accepted the authoritative claims of the bishop of Rome (the pope) in the West.

Just like small, independent charismatic churches today will often align themselves with a big-city, megachurch and its charismatic pastor, churches after the second century were willing to offer a certain honor and respect to the church in Rome because of its size and location in the capital of the Empire. But when attempts were made by Roman bishops to exercise authority over other churches, they were met with outright opposition.

To note just one example: When Cyprian (195-258), bishop of Carthage, had a dispute with Stephanas, the bishop of Rome, he accused Stephanas of introducing innovations into the church and thereby disrupting the church’s unity. The innovations Cyprian referred to were the Roman bishop’s claim of authority over churches in other regions.

Cyprian claimed equal dignity with Stephanas and addressed him as “dearest brother.” He also reproved Stephanas for the pursuit of power by the Roman bishops, saying, “No one should make himself a bishop of bishops.” He also admonished Stephanas to be teachable, saying, “It is no more beneath the dignity of a Roman bishop than any other man, to suffer

himself to be corrected when he is in the wrong" (Eddie Hyatt, *Pursuing Power*, 65-66).

The Use of Forgeries to Gain Power

When Kung referred to the use of forgeries to buttress papal power, he was referring, in particular, to the Donation of Constantine, which was used, beginning in the eighth century, to further establish the preeminence of the Roman bishop. According to this fable, Constantine, the persecutor of Christians, was smitten with leprosy and then healed by Pope Silvester, who also converted him and baptized him.

According to this legend, when Constantine later decided to move the capital to Constantinople on his own initiative, realizing his sin, he came and prostrated himself before Silvester, and when his sin was forgiven, he moved the capital to Constantinople with the pope's consent. According to this myth, before departing, Constantine then bestowed on Silvester the right to wear the Roman imperial insignia and robes, and bequeathed to him Rome and all the provinces and cities in Italy and the western regions.

In effect, Constantine had bestowed on the Roman bishop a kingly royalty and authority like that of an emperor over all the cities and churches of the West. In addition, the story implied that Constantine had received his authority for establishing the Byzantine empire of the East from the bishop of Rome. This was used by later popes to claim universal authority over all churches everywhere, even those of Byzantine.

It was not until the 15th century that this story was challenged by the Catholic official and historian Lorenzo Valla. The Donation of Constantine is now widely recognized, even by Catholic historians, as fictitious. Nonetheless, it served its purpose in providing a powerful argument for the medieval popes to further their claims of preeminence.

These facts, uncovered by Catholic historians, serve to demonstrate how the pomp and pageantry of the modern papacy is rooted, not in Jesus and the New Testament, but in ancient, imperial Rome.

The Historical Origin of Papal Infallibility

Although the bishops of Rome consistently expanded their claims of priority and authority from the 3rd century on, the idea of papal infallibility did not surface until the 13th century. Interestingly, it was rejected by the pope and the Catholic Church at that time.

We are indebted to the Catholic historian, Brian Tierney, who has demonstrated the origins of the doctrine of papal infallibility in his book, appropriately titled, *Origins of Papal Infallibility*. Tierney demonstrates that the doctrine was first proposed in the 13th century and rejected. He notes that the doctrine is not orthodox, and may even be considered "heterodox," which is a polite way of saying "heretical."

Tierney, who is an expert in medieval church history, documents that the idea of papal infallibility was first introduced around 1280 by an eccentric Franciscan by the name of Peter Olivi. Olivi had a particular reason for formulating this doctrine. Pope Nicholas III had issued a very favorable decree in regards to the Franciscans and Olivi wanted all subsequent popes to be bound to that decree.

This novel idea of popes being infallible was not taken seriously and when, 40 years later, the Franciscans tried to use it to force Pope John XXII to act favorably on their behalf, he issued a bull (official document) in which he condemned the doctrine of papal infallibility as "a work of the devil, the father of all lies" (Brian Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility*, 186-96).

The idea of papal infallibility was then dropped except for a few dissident Franciscans who tried to use it to prove that

John XXII was a heretic for not affirming the favorable ruling of his predecessor.

This means that there was no widespread acceptance of papal infallibility in the Middle Ages, nor during the time leading up to Vatican I, as its proponents have claimed. Tierney says,

There is no convincing evidence that papal infallibility formed any part of the theological or canonical tradition of the church before the 13th century; the doctrine was invented in the first place by a few dissident Franciscans because it suited their convenience to invent it; it was accepted by the papacy because it suited the convenience of the popes to accept it" (Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility*, 281).

What About 3 Popes at One Time?

The above scenario was followed shortly thereafter by the papal schism, when there were two and then three popes at the same time.

In 1305 a Frenchman, Clement V, was elected pope but refused to move his residency to Rome. Instead, he established the papal residence and apparatus in the French city of Avignon. As a result, a total of seven popes reigned in Avignon from 1309-1377.

In 1377 Pope Gregory XI moved the papacy back to Rome, but died shortly thereafter. His successor, Urban VI, showed such mental disturbance that a group of cardinals elected another pope, Clement VII, who took up residence back in Avignon.

Urban VI, however, refused to give up his papal office and so the Catholic Church had two popes, one in Rome and one in Avignon. Each pope excommunicated the other and each condemned the other to hell. As a result, there were then two colleges of cardinals, two curias and two financial systems that, according to Kung, "duplicated the financial abuses of the

papacy.”

In seeking to resolve the matter, the cardinals of both sides met together in Pisa in 1409 and elected a new pope, Alexander V. The former two popes, however, refused to vacate their office and the Catholic Church suddenly had three popes. This, of course, was scandalous and led to loud calls for a reform of the Catholic Church.

The problem was finally dealt with by the Council of Constance (1414-1418), which deposed all three popes and installed a new one, Martin V. In the process of dealing with this papal scandal, this Council subordinated the pope's authority to its own. It declared, “Everyone of whatever estate or dignity, even if this be papal, is bound to obey it in matters related to the faith.”

So great was the scandal and shame surrounding the papal office at this time that no one would have dared even suggest that the pope was infallible.

Heretical Popes in History

The opponents of papal infallibility at Vatican I marshaled impressive arguments against the doctrine, including the fact that at least two popes were declared heretics by later popes and councils.

Pope Vigilius (500-555) adopted conflicting positions about Monophysitism, which was a controversy concerning the nature of Christ. At the beginning of his reign as pope, Vigilius supported the Monophysite position, which purported that Christ had only one divine nature, thereby denying His real humanity. This was heresy.

Many believe that he took this position because it was politically advantageous for him since the Empress Theodora of Constantinople was favorable to the Monophysites. But when the political situation changed, his position on the matter

changed and he opposed the Monophysites. Kung says, "He lost all credibility because of his fickleness, so that later he was not even buried at St. Peter's, and down through the centuries continued to be despised even in the West" (Kung, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future*, 318).

Pope Honorius I (d. 638) was condemned by the Sixth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 681 because he promoted the heresy of the Monothelites. The Monothelites taught that there is only one will in Christ, which was opposed by the orthodox who taught that Christ, because He is both God and human, had separate wills in his human and divine natures. The condemnation of Honorius as a heretic was confirmed by the Seventh and Eighth Ecumenical Councils and by subsequent popes.

Against History and Logic

The question presented at Vatican I was: How could they declare papal infallibility when their own popes and councils had declared former popes as heretical? But in spite of such rational barriers to the doctrine, the papal advocates were able to push through their goal of insulating the Roman bishop and the Roman Church from judgment and criticism with their dogma of papal infallibility.

Where do We Go from Here?

The historic attempt to gather all of Christendom under the authority of the bishop of Rome has proved counter-productive. The major divisions that exist in Christendom today—between East and West, Catholic and Protestant—are a result of the authoritative claims of preeminence by the bishop of Rome, or in other words, the pope. This is why Kung says:

"No one can overlook the fact that with time the absolutist papacy has become the ecumenical problem No. 1. Paul VI was the first to concede this himself with ecumenical openness; instead of being a rock of unity, the papacy is a block on the

way to ecumenical understanding" (Eddie Hyatt, *Pursuing Power*, 72).

Love for power, however, is not just a Catholic sin. I will never forget sitting with other leaders on the platform of a well-known Pentecostal/charismatic ministry and hearing in my heart, "It is time to come down off your thrones." To see a dynamic spiritual awakening that will impact both Catholic and Protestant, we must all learn that, in the words of Sir John Acton, "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Hyatt, *Pursuing Power*, 6).

In the Charismatic Renewal of the 1970s, Catholics and Protestants worshipped together under the banner of "Jesus is Lord" and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Love for Jesus transcended church and denominational loyalties.

We must all lift up Jesus Christ and make Him the basis of our unity, rather than a particular doctrine, church or denomination. We must all realize that we have a perfect Savior, but we are all, including the pope, frail and fallible human beings in need of God's mercy and grace. With that understanding, we can then pray, "Come Holy Spirit and renew Your church again!"

Dr. Eddie Hyatt is an author, historian and ordained minister. This article was derived primarily from his book, *Pursuing Power: How the Historic Quest for Apostolic Authority and Control Has Divided and Damaged the Church*, available from Amazon in both paperback and Kindle. He has produced a small book in Kindle for this occasion entitled *Is the Pope Infallible?* Check out his website at .