

Was Peter the First Pope? by Phil Sanders

The media has constantly reported on the death John Paul II and the selection of a new pope. Roman Catholics regard Peter as the first pope. They believe Jesus gave the care of the entire church to him and that he, as bishop of Rome, passed down that authority to the succeeding bishops of Rome.

If Roman Catholics can establish the primacy of Peter and apostolic succession through the bishop of Rome, they have a foundation for their beliefs. But if Scripture does not regard Peter as a pope, then Roman Catholicism has no place to stand. Its authority is human and self-assumed, and one day it will be uprooted (Matt. 15:14).

What is the Pope?

The word pope literally means “papa.” This is just one of several titles for the bishop of Rome. He is also known as *Summus Pontifex*, *Pontifex Maximus*, *Servus servorum Dei*, Vicar of Christ, Vicar of God, prince of the apostles, and King of kings. A vicar is a person who is authorized to perform the functions of another, a substitute. Catholics believe the pope can perform the functions of Jesus Christ and is the supreme headship of the Church on earth. Pope Boniface VIII in 1302 AD decreed in the *Unam Sanctam* “that for salvation it is necessary that every human creature be subject to the authority of the Roman pontiff” (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, “*Unam Sanctam*”).

The Lord taught against religious titles, “But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ” (Matt. 23:8-10, NASB). If Jesus condemned religious titles, how much more will He condemn those who presume authority?

To claim that Peter and succeeding bishops of Rome become in turn the “head of the church” is to claim more than can be proved. Paul clearly said that God put Jesus “above all rule and authority and ... gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:21-23).

Seven Reasons to Reject Peter as the First Pope

1. Peter was a married man.

The gospels speak of Peter’s mother-in-law (Matt. 8:14; Mark 1:30; Luke 4: 38). Paul asked in 1 Cor. 9:5, “Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?” Paul said in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Tit. 1:6, 7 that an overseer [*episcopus* or bishop] must be “the husband of one wife.”

The Spanish Council of Elvira (295-302 AD), canon 33, imposed celibacy upon bishops, priests, and deacons. “If they continue to live with their wives and beget children after their ordination, they are to be deposed” (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, “*Celibacy of Clergy*”). The Council of Lateran imposed celibacy on all clergy was imposed in 1123 AD. Once more, men have forbidden precisely what God commands.

2. Peter did not regard himself as the Rock

Catholics point to Matthew 16 for proof that Jesus founded the church on Peter himself. Jesus said to Peter, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:17-19).

Catholics argue that Jesus in this passage said He would build his church upon Peter and gave the keys (authority) of the kingdom uniquely to him. The original Greek, however, distinguishes Peter from the rock. While Jesus gives Simon the name “Peter” (*petros*, masculine), He speaks of the rock (*petra*) with a feminine word. *Petros* refers to a stone that a man might carry, whereas *petra* refers to a huge rock, cliff or ledge. The distinctions between masculine and feminine and between large and small are obvious.

Catholic scholars say Jesus did not speak Greek here but Aramaic, and the word “Cephas” is the same whether masculine or feminine. The Scriptures we have, however, are only in Greek; and Matthew, an apostle and eyewitness to this event, made the distinction. Jesus had already noted that wise men build upon the rock (*petra*) of His word (Matt. 7:24-27). Jesus built His church on Peter’s revealed confession that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God, not on Peter.

If Peter himself were the rock upon which the church is founded, he did not know it. He pointed to Jesus as the chief corner stone; there is salvation in no one else (Acts 4:10-12). Peter said, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” Jesus was “A stone of stumbling, and a rock (*petra*) of offense” (1 Pet. 2: 4-8).

Peter introduced himself as “an apostle of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:1) but never the “prince of the apostles” or the rock on which the church is built. In 1 Pet. 5:1 Peter says, “I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder.” In 5:4, he speaks of Jesus as the Chief Shepherd. Nowhere does he argue for supremacy, claim to be Christ’s vicar, or exalt himself above his fellow elders.

Paul points to Jesus as the foundation of the church. In Eph. 2:19-22, Paul says of God’s household is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.”

3. Peter did not render the decision at the Jerusalem council.

While Peter helped introduce the problem at the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, James actually rendered the decision. James said, “Therefore it is my judgment...” (Acts 15:19-20) and attributed his authority to the Holy Spirit (15:28). If Peter were pope, he would have had the final word.

4. Paul rebuked Peter for hypocrisy.

“But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he *began* to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision” (Gal. 2:11-12). If the pope indeed stands as a substitute for Christ, how is it that he could be rebuked for his behavior?

Paul argued that he ranked equally with Peter. Never once does he indicate he is subject to Peter in any way. Paul never reported to Peter about his mission trips. Paul said those of “high reputation” (James, Cephas and John), “pillars” (not the foundation), contributed nothing to me (Gal. 2:6-9). The impartial God assigned Peter to be the apostle to the circumcised, while Paul would be the apostle to the Gentiles. The idea that Peter was responsible for “all” churches is a myth.

Paul mentioned 26 people in his personal greetings to the Romans but not Peter. If Peter had been the bishop of Rome for 25 years prior to his death, as the tradition claims, why did Paul not even mention Peter in his epistle? If Peter is *Pontifex Maximus* and “prince of the apostles,” why does Paul neglect to greet him or acknowledge him?

5. *There was to be equality among the apostles.*

In Matthew 20:20-28, James and John with their mother requested, “Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left.” This is an odd request if Peter is supreme. If the Lord had given the chief place to Peter in Matthew 16:18-19, why would James and John ask this question in chapter 20? Upon hearing the brothers’ request, the other ten became indignant with the two brothers. Jesus did not want create “supreme pontiffs” but rather servants. Jesus said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and *their* great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:25-28).

6. *Peter did not accept worship*

When Peter entered his house, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter raised him up, saying, “Stand up; I too am *just* a man” (Acts 10:25-26). Peter had no pretensions of divinity. Catholics require bowing before and displaying acts of worship to a man, the Pope. In presumption Popes have proclaimed themselves “God on earth” for all Catholics to adore. “The Pope is not only the representative of Jesus Christ, he is Jesus Christ himself” (*Catholic National* July, 1895). Leo XIII said, “We [popes] hold upon this earth the place of God Almighty.” The title “*Lord God the Pope*” is found within a gloss of *Extravagantes of Pope John XXII*, title 14, chapter 4. The difference between the Peter of the Bible and the arrogance of popes is astonishing.

7. *No apostle or inspired writer ever hinted that Peter was supreme.*

If Peter were pope, the Scripture would have revealed it. Inspired men were obligated to reveal the truth—the whole truth and the whole counsel of God (John 16:13; Acts 20:27). One finds no evidence that Peter regarded himself as supreme or that others taught he was supreme. One finds no evidence of Peter being treated like a god or being the final answer to questions. In the absence of any Scriptural evidence, surely one must admit that Peter was never a pope.

If Peter were a pope, one would expect him to act like popes do. Peter never celebrated Mass; prayed to Mary or to “Saints”; used beads to pray; used “holy water”; practiced celibacy; or presented his ring or foot to be kissed. If he doesn’t look like a pope, walk like a pope, or talk like a pope, he isn’t a pope.