

The Papacy



An Interactive Biblical Exploration

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This is a fictional dialogue between a Catholic and a non-denominational Christian, which explores the New Testament evidence for the primacy of Peter and what this means with regard to Catholic claims about the role of Peter's successors.

Introduction

[We're at work. Every week some of the Christians at work get together for prayer and Bible study. Now it just so happens that the place where you work is predominantly Catholic. One of the prayers is this (and this is a serious prayer):]

Catholic: Dear Lord Jesus, I pray for our Holy Father Pope John Paul and for his prayer intentions. Please keep him in good health, and bless and strengthen him in his ministry. Amen.

[After the prayer time is over, the non-Catholic starts to speak:]

The Dialogue

Non-Catholic: Hey, you know that prayer for the intentions of the pope? Well, I think he's a great guy and everything, but you guys need to know that this whole papacy thing is really unbiblical. I don't need a pope to tell me what to believe. It's all right here in the Word of God! And you shouldn't call him "Holy Father", either - the Bible says "Call no man 'Father'". Look at all the wealth and power he has - the pope takes glory that belongs to Christ alone. It's no wonder some people think that the pope is the anti-Christ, the way popes have behaved in the past and the way they stand between the believer and the Lord Jesus! And how can you guys think the pope is infallible - there have been tons of bad popes, even Peter got told off by Paul for getting things wrong!

C: Hey, stop being so subtle Brendan - tell us what you really think.

NC: I am telling you - it's unbiblical. That's all, plain and simple. There's no papacy in the Bible.

C: Sure there is.

NC: No there isn't.

C: Sure there is.

NC: Nope, sorry.

C: Look, you must know where we're gonna take you.

Yeah, we're gonna take you to Matthew 16. Check this out:

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" ¹⁴ And they said,

"Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ 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."

Peter and the Rock

NC: That passage doesn't prove anything! I know you guys think that Peter is the rock, but he's not. Jesus is the rock.

C: You know that Peter means rock, don't you?

NC: I know that's what you think. But if you look at the Greek, you'll see that there are two different words there. The Greek of the passage says "you are Petros, and on this petra I will build my church". Petros means "small stone". That's the name Jesus gave to Peter. But Petra means "big rock", and that's what Jesus said he'd build his Church on. Bet you didn't know that! Jesus is the big rock.

C: Come on Brendan, every Catholic worth his salt has heard that objection before, and it just doesn't fly. There's a reason for that difference in the Greek: in Greek, names of things have gender, like they do in French and Spanish and lots of other languages. So Peter can't be called "Petra" because that's a feminine noun and it would be like giving him a girl's name, like that chick on TV. To translate into Greek the best Matthew can do is say "Petros" which is a masculine word, and is suitable to apply to a man. Otherwise it'd be like me calling you "Brenda".

NC: They're still different words: petros is Peter the little pebble, and Jesus is petra, the big rock.

C: Actually, they don't have a different meaning. There was once a distinction between them, in ancient Greek poetry, but by the time of the Gospels, the words meant the same thing. So your argument just doesn't work. And I'm not making this up, this is what Protestant Greek scholars are saying. They may not believe in the Papacy, but they know that the Petra/Petros distinction is only a grammar thing and not a difference in meaning. There's a whole other word for small stone in Greek: lithos.

NC: Hey, even if petros and petra mean the same thing, Jesus must have made things clear with his gestures or tone of voice or something, like "you [pointing to Peter] are Peter, and on this rock [pointing to himself] I will build my Church".

C: I thought you were big on the Bible alone? Doesn't this wishful thinking and pantomime and stuff about how Jesus might have been waving his arms around go against your principle of the Bible by itself being all you need?

Besides, Jesus probably wasn't even speaking in Greek, he was speaking Aramaic, the local language. And in Aramaic the word is the same: "kepha". So Jesus said "You are kepha and on this kepha I will build my church". Even Protestant scholars say it's unquestionable that Aramaic is the language underlying this passage. That's why in John's Gospel, chapter 1, Jesus calls Peter "Cephas", which is how you'd say "kepha" in Greek if you just took the word straight across from Aramaic instead of translating it like Matthew does.

And what about the keys? In verse 19, Jesus says to Peter "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."

Jesus, Peter and the Keys

NC: Yeah, well, that's obviously talking about how Peter can preach the Gospel, which is the key to eternal life.

C: No-one else is given the keys though, are they? But there's a lot more here than just a nice metaphor. Are you up with the Old Testament background to what Jesus was saying?

NC: Uh, I can't say I've ever actually checked it out for myself...

C: Well, Jesus was referring to Isaiah 22. There we have Isaiah making a prophecy about a man who is to take over the job of prime minister in the kingdom of Judah. Here's what it says, starting at verse 20:

²⁰ In that day I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, ²¹ and I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your girdle on him, and will commit your authority to his hand; and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. ²² And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.

See, the role that Jesus was giving Peter was like the role that was given to Eliakim a few hundred years before. Eliakim was the Prime Minister over the Davidic kingdom, the kingdom promised by God to David and his descendants. Jesus was a descendent of King David, and he appointed Peter as the Prime Minister over his kingdom, the Church. The job of Prime Minister had already been around for several hundred years when Isaiah made this prophecy. It had been set up by King Solomon, and was a lot like the job that Joseph had in the book of Genesis when the Pharaoh put him in charge of Egypt.

Anyway, in this passage from Isaiah, the king delegates his authority, so the Prime Minister is able to speak with the authority of the king. And Jesus is setting up Peter to do the same thing. It's interesting how it says "he will be a

father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah". This is just like how we call the Pope our Holy Father.

The Prime Minister is given the key of the house of David, just like Peter is given the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And the person with these keys can open and shut, just like Peter can bind and loose.

NC: Hey, Jesus is the one with the keys. Look in Revelation 3 verse 7, where it says that Jesus "has the key of David, who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens".

C: Yeah, but that just reinforces the fact that it is Jesus who is watching over and protecting what is being done with those keys. And that's just Matthew 16. There's a bunch of other Scriptures that we ought to talk about. Have a look at Luke 22:31-32.

"Strengthen Your Brethren"

NC: OK, Jesus is at the Last Supper, and he says:

³¹ "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, ³² but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren."

That's hardly a proof text for the papacy, saying Satan demanded to have your first pope.

C: Well, the interesting thing here is that when Jesus says "Satan demanded to have you", the "you" is in the plural, so he's talking about all the apostles. But when Jesus says "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail", that's in the singular, which means that it's just Peter he's praying for. And then he says "when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren". So what we see is that Peter is protected by Jesus' prayer, so he will be able to display the rock-like qualities that the church will need; Jesus will support him so that he'll always strengthen his brethren and not lead them into error.

Another passage along the same lines is John 21:15-17. This is where Jesus says to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" three times, and Peter says "You know I love you", and Jesus says "Feed my lambs... tend my sheep... feed my sheep".

"Feed My Sheep"

NC: Yeah, but that's just Jesus letting Peter know that he's forgiven after denying him three times.

C: Well, it is that, but it's also a commissioning to be a shepherd of the flock of Jesus, which is the Church. I mean, who's the Good Shepherd?

NC: Jesus is.

C: Yep, and here he's clearly delegating some sort of shepherdly authority to Peter, isn't he?

Succession

NC: OK, look, I can agree that Peter was fairly important figure in the Gospels and so on. He was obviously a leader of the Church. But that doesn't mean that any special job he had was passed on to the people who came after him, does it?

C: Well, do you think there was a need for leadership in the Church after Peter died? Was everything plain sailing for the Church after the first century?

NC: Well, no, there were heresies and persecutions...

C: Exactly. The Church has always needed a strong leadership, and there have been times in history when the Bishop of Rome has been almost alone in standing firm against heresy. Remember, Jesus is the son of David and the new King of Israel, and he reestablished the office of "prime minister", like the Davidic kings used to have. He gives that office to Peter. And in the Old Covenant, that job had successors - it was passed on - and it's the same in the New Covenant.

I mean, if you think about it, Jesus' Kingdom is gonna last till the end of time, right?

NC: Yeah...

C: So there is no good reason to think that the office of prime minister won't last till the end of time as well. And you want to be part of a "New Testament" kind of Church, don't you?

NC: Well, yeah...

C: Well, God's people have always had some sort of hierarchical leadership, right through the Old and New Testaments, so if we're gonna be a real New Testament Church, it's perfectly reasonable to expect a similar sort of leadership. Peter was obviously the head of the Church after Christ's ascension, and there's no good reason to think that the fundamental structure of the Church should change after he died.

NC: Well, that's all very interesting, and there is quite a lot to think about there, but you haven't really talked about infallibility - I mean, Peter was told off by Paul for not acting in accordance with the Gospel - doesn't sound very infallible to me! And I know for a fact that lots of popes have been very fallible sinful men. Plus you've got the problem that Peter never even went to Rome anyway, which makes it strange that you think he'd be Pope there. I mean, Paul wrote a big long letter to the Romans and never greeted Peter once! Bit of an oversight, forgetting the Pope like that, don't you think? And Peter was married, but not your Pope! And you call him "Holy Father" when Jesus says "call no man 'father'". And... [cue bells - back to work.]

C: Hey, hang on, just wait a second. Every one of those points has a reasonable Catholic response. But we're out of time now, we've gotta get back to work. Maybe next week?

NC: Yeah, maybe next week. See you then.

Recommended Readings and Resources

Recommended Links

The Catholic Faith

www.thecatholicfaith.info

The home of The Catholic Faith booklets.

Biblia Clerus

www.clerus.org/bibliaclerus/index_eng.html

The Holy See offers Sacred Scripture in the light of Sacred Tradition and Magisterial teachings, cross-referenced to commentaries, catechisms, council pronouncements, etc. Available for online use and as a downloadable program.

Catechism of the Catholic Church; Compendium of the Catechism

www.scborromeo.org/ccm.htm and;

www.vatican.va/archive

The Catechism is *the* reference text for authentic Catholic teachings.

Catholic Education Resource Center

www.catholiceducation.org

Authentic Catholic education resource, invaluable for all Catholics, to engage the secular, relativist and at times anti-Catholic culture and media. It makes available the best in Catholic faith and culture – “the latest, the best, the brightest from outstanding writers, authors and journalists around the globe”

Catholic Answers

www.catholic.com

One of the most comprehensive and indispensable websites for Catholic apologetics (defence of Catholic doctrines). Have a browse, and try the “Quick Search” box on the top left of the page to look up any topic.

Radio Replies

www.icatholicism.net/apologetics/radio-replies.html

The famed anthology of questions and answers about virtually any topic on the faith.

New Advent

www.newadvent.org

A giant resource website which includes the Catholic Encyclopedia, Early Church Fathers’ writings, the Bible, and St. Thomas Aquinas’ theological masterpiece, Summa Theologica.

Catholic Culture Site Reviews

www.catholicculture.org/reviews

Find more links and check how any Catholic website is rated on fidelity, resources and useability.

Recommended Books¹

A Biblical Defence of Catholicism by Dave Armstrong

A “rigorous, Scripture-packed analysis” of the Catholic faith by a former Protestant campus missionary turned Catholic apologist.

Early Christian Writings translated by Maxwell Staniforth

Writings of the Fathers known to the Apostles, including Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp.

How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization by Thomas E. Woods

An eye-opening book outlining how the Church had an indispensable role in every facet of Western civilization, including science, economics, morality, law, and fine arts.

Introduction to the Devout Life by St Francis de Sales

A guide to devout life while in the world. Written by the Saint at a dangerous time & place, where saying Mass was punishable by death, it has never gone out of print in 400 years.²

The Imitation of Christ by Thomas á Kempis

One of the greatest Catholic spiritual works, it has been cherished by all Christians. It is said to be second only to the bible in publication, and has been available in over fifty languages.²

True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin by St Louis Marie de Montfort

Praised by popes, theologians and mystics, this is perhaps the most celebrated book ever written about devotion to Mary.²



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¹ Some of these are available for preview at books.google.com. For purchases, see amazon.com and, in New Zealand, thenile.co.nz, and jeromes.co.nz. See also your local library catalogue, which can be found from nzlibraries.com.

² Also available to read online at www.catholictreasury.info