

“Why Do Protestants Oppose the Concept of a Pope?”

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Prompted by a few questions fielded after the announcement of Pope Leo XIV in early May 2025 and by the increasing need for evangelicals to know the theological and historical roots of their Christian faith, I wanted to give an overview of the basic reasons Protestants oppose the Papal office.

Note:

- Because the focus here is the papal office, there is little space given—apart from a few footnotes—to the many practical doctrinal effects of the Pope’s leadership in terms of Protestant concerns. I.e., this booklet is focused on the papacy, not all doctrinal matters.
- Except for a few places where it is the intended focus, in order to save space, much of the Scriptural and theological grounding and argumentation is left to the parenthetical cross references and/or documented in the footnotes.
- While many of us have Catholic friends, family, background, etc., and this booklet’s contents are naturally polemical—focused on doctrinal controversy—I try to avoid *ad hominem* and argue about ideas *per se*.
- Links worked at time of publication, June 27, 2025.

Introduction

For those of us who trace our history to the Protestant Reformation, at its most basic, we have a fundamental disagreement with Roman Catholics about the validity of the papal office and what it signifies about how authority works in the church. We believe that Jesus Christ established His church—not upon a continuing chain of human rulers—but the foundation of Scripture and the apostles’ teaching. We’ll survey these five key factors:

- the preeminent authority of Scripture alone,
- the exclusive headship of Christ over the church,
- the New Testament pattern for church leadership,
- an evaluation of papal claims, and
- a few concluding pastoral applications.

Sola Scriptura: Scripture vs. Papal Authority

At the core of the disagreement is the Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, the idea that—while tradition, reason, and experience are valid sources of truth¹—Scripture alone is the final supreme and infallible authority for faith and practice. This is not *solo Scriptura*—Scripture to the exclusion of all other sources—but the acknowledgement that the Bible, as God’s special revelation, is the preeminent ground of authority to which all other sources are ultimately subservient. Unlike general revelation in nature or conscience,² Scripture is uniquely inspired,³ sufficient,⁴ and clear in its saving message.⁵ The canon of Scripture records God’s progressive self-disclosure, culminating in Christ,⁶ and is now complete—so no later traditions or authorities can add to or override what God has revealed in

¹ “Tradition” here includes church history, polity, confessions, creeds, councils, writings of the church fathers, interpretive methods, and liturgical practices; “reason” includes logic, philosophical reflection, nature, science, and what has traditionally been called “the book of nature” (or natural/general revelation); and “experience” includes personal practical history, conscience, spiritual encounters, moral awareness, transformative life events, subjective awareness of God’s presence, assurance of salvation, and the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, etc. FWIW, contrary to today’s self-centered illusion of control which upends this order of priority, one of the marks of every single Christian tradition throughout history has been the conviction that, in most basic terms, the order of priority of sources of truth is Scripture, tradition, reason, and, at some great distance, experience. While the differences between Christian traditions are in the details, anyone who places experience at a level anywhere remotely close to the others, intentionally or not, as part of a group or alone, is in a cult—often of one. Even though there is no record of it coming from him and scholars doubt it came from him, Martin Luther was once quoted as saying something apropos: “I am more afraid of my own heart than of the pope and all his cardinals. I have within me the great pope, self.”

² Romans 1:19-20; Psalm 19:1-4

³ 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21

⁴ 2 Timothy 3:15-17

⁵ Psalm 119:105, 130; Deuteronomy 30:11-14

⁶ Hebrews 1:1-2; Luke 24:27, 44-47; John 1:14-18

His Word.⁷

However, coequal with Scripture, the Roman Catholic view of authority adds “Sacred Tradition” and the “Magisterium”—which exclusively holds doctrinal authority, with the Pope as the “Vicar of Christ”⁸ being its supreme voice—to form “a single sacred deposit of the Word of God.” In 1965, the Second Vatican Council declared:

“[I]t is not from sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred Tradition⁹ and sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence. ... Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church... But the task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church [Magisterium], whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰

⁷ Jude 3; Revelation 22:18-19; Galatians 1:8-9

⁸ In the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), the Pope is “vicar,” not merely in the generic clerical sense, but with the additional idea of being a “substitute” (Latin *vicārius*) of/for Christ, a claim no other Christian religious group makes for any clerical office. In fact, they all explicitly deny that any one person holds such an office: [Orthodox](#), [Anglicanism](#), [Lutheranism](#), [Presbyterian](#), [Reformed Baptists](#), [Southern Baptists](#), and [Methodists](#) (pp. 29-31, 57, 61, 155, 162, and 322–324). These links, without specifically citing every instance of them, contain statements that contradict Catholic teaching on the Pope.

⁹ The “T” is capitalized in the original, which I take to mean here that, along with the capitalized “S” in “Scripture,” the RCC believes church tradition to be as authoritative as the Bible in matters of faith and practice. I am certainly not alone in understanding the RCC’s own statements in this way. This is not a novel nor unkind interpretation; rather, this critique of RCC authority is fundamental for what it means to be a Protestant—the Scriptures are the highest and final authority compared to all other sources. It’s why it is called “special revelation” from God that is full and final.

¹⁰ [Dei Verbum](#) (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*), Second Vatican Council (1965), nn. 9-10.

In fact, not only does Catholicism add “Sacred Tradition” to the Scriptures, but it teaches that the Pope and church councils are infallible interpreters of Scripture. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, after quoting the aforementioned section from *Dei Verbum*, clarifies, “This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome.”¹¹ In *Lumen Gentium*, it declares that the Pope and Magisterium are able to “proclaim Christ’s doctrine infallibly.”¹² In *Pastor Aeternus*, a conciliar statement holding the highest authority, the power of the Pope is made explicit: “The Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church, has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered.”¹³ In one of the most striking expressions of unilateral Catholic authority, the papal bull¹⁴ *Unam Sanctam* makes this shocking claim: “We declare, say, define, and pronounce that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff.”¹⁵ This absolute necessity of salvation through submission to the Pope, even when not speaking *ex cathedra*, is confirmed in *Lumen Gentium*: “This religious submission of mind and will must be shown in a special way to the authentic magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex*

¹¹ [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2nd Edition, Paragraphs 80, 81, 85.

¹² [*Lumen Gentium*](#), Paragraph 25.

¹³ [*Pastor Aeternus*](#), Chapter 3, Paragraph 1.

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papal_bull – A papal bull is the second highest level of authority, of the 3 basic levels, listed here in order of highest to lowest—conciliar document (Pope plus council), papal bull (no council, but can carry infallible authority when speaking *ex cathedra*), and encyclical (no council, not necessarily infallible (but can be), rarely define new dogmas, but may restate or clarify existing ones, often addresses contemporary issues or clarifies Church teaching, level of binding force depends on the content).

¹⁵ [*Unam Sanctam*](#) (1302). Even though this statement—because of its wider context within *Unam Sanctam*—is sometimes interpreted and softened as more generally saying that “outside the Church, there is no salvation” (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*), it nonetheless emphasizes that the Pope’s role—as the Vicar of Christ—is essential for spiritual governance and salvation.

cathedra.”¹⁶ Therefore, at its most basic, Protestants oppose the Catholic

¹⁶ *Lumen Gentium* (LG), §25, 1. While Roman Catholic Church (RCC) apologists are quick to clarify that the Pope only speaks for the entire church when doing so *ex cathedra* (“from the chair”)—under certain conditions and only rarely—Protestants point to the problem as a fundamental problem of human authority despite the particular conditions and rare occurrences. Also consider, as if the aforementioned quote from LG weren’t problematic enough, that the RCC’s own definitions and Magisterial complex are functionally unable to retain the theological clarity it claims. For example, though the RCC has formally recognized ‘only two’ cases of the Pope speaking *ex cathedra* since the process was defined—“The Immaculate Conception,” where Pope Pius IX, in *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854), said Mary was conceived without original sin, and “The Assumption of Mary,” where Pope Pius XII, in the *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), said Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven—they are both unbiblical errors of doctrine, the only two about which Catholic theologians agree, and there is great internecine debate about what qualifies as official church doctrine far beyond just these two. Though the First Vatican Council’s *Pastor Aeternus* (Ch 4, 9) defines a papal statement as *ex cathedra* (infallible) only when (1) the Pope speaks as supreme pastor and teacher of all Christians, (2) defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals, (3) the definition is intended to be held by the universal Church, and (4) the statement is a definitive act, typically signaled by explicit language like “we define” or “we declare,” their Magisterium is untenable under its own weight. I.e., given: (a) how the RCC elsewhere defines the papal office, (b) what the RCC defines as “in” or “out,” (i.e., only those submitting to the Pope are in), (c) that they believe the Pope speaks for all Christians—Catholic and non-Catholic, (d) that the Pope uses *ex cathedra* language of “we declare,” “we define,” and “we decree” in numerous non-*ex cathedra* documents supposedly carrying less authoritative weight (encyclicals: *Humanae Vitae*; apostolic exhortations: *Evangelii Gaudium*; *motu proprio*: *Summorum Pontificum*; disciplinary bulls: *Exsurge Domine*), and (e) that, despite the magisterial complex meant to build consensus, there is great internecine debate as to what is official RCC teaching and no official list clarifying when the Pope has ever actually spoken *ex cathedra*, one wonders if the Pope ever actually speaks in a manner outside the 4 criteria of *Pastor Aeternus*?! For example, in *Humanae Vitae* (1968), Pope Paul VI addresses the morality of contraception using authoritative language: “We now intend... to declare that the direct interruption of the generative process already begun... is to be absolutely excluded as a licit means of regulating birth” (14). Though Catholic theologians agree this is not an *ex cathedra* act because it lacks the explicit intent to define dogma for all time, they nonetheless debate whether its teaching is “infallible” (their word) via the ordinary and universal Magisterium. The RCC cannot help but make distinctions without a difference. Everything the Pope says—*ex cathedra* or otherwise—holds undue weight that is unbiblical and should never be condensed into one fallible-according-to-Scripture human (Romans 3:23). Such a

claim that the unified papacy and Magisterium is an infallible earthly head because it has no basis in Scripture, is developed *a posteriori* as a church tradition, and functionally replaces the more biblical roles of local pastors/elders, the Holy Spirit as teacher, and Christ as Head.¹⁷

As Protestant Christians, we hold to *sola scriptura*, insisting that no papal doctrine or office like it is binding unless proven from Scripture, which alone is the infallible rule of faith (1 Corinthians 4:6; Acts 17:11). While church traditions, creeds, and councils can be helpful, they are not infallible and are only authoritative insofar as they are submitted to God's Word (Matthew 15:3, 6).

concentration of human power like this flies in the face of the biblical roles of Holy Spirit as teacher and Christ as Head. (See next footnote for more re the basics of the Protestant doctrinal alternative to the Pope and Magisterium.)

¹⁷ Albeit here stated in somewhat more Reformed/Covenantal terms than some Protestants would like, the Protestant alternative to the RCC is the effectual New Covenant church: The New Covenant church, composed solely of the elect (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:26-27; Hebrews 8:8-12; John 10:27-29), inherently ensures the perseverance and preservation of every regenerate believer by the Holy Spirit's internal work of regeneration and sanctification (John 3:3-8; Romans 8:29-30; Ephesians 1:13-14). This eliminates the necessity for an infallible earthly hierarchy. The apostles, uniquely commissioned by Christ, laid the once-for-all theological foundation (Ephesians 2:20; Jude 3), resulting in a closed canon (2 Timothy 3:16-17; Revelation 22:18-19). Christ alone is the ultimate and authoritative Head of His church (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22-23). While local elders/pastors bear immediate oversight and teaching responsibilities in subsidiarity under Christ (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; Acts 20:28), their authority remains ministerial and derived, never absolute or infallible (1 Peter 5:1-4). Additionally, the ongoing teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 16:13; 1 Corinthians 2:10-16) precludes any need for an authoritative magisterium. Thus, any hierarchical ecclesiastical body claiming supreme earthly authority subverts the biblically sufficient governance of the local congregation, the personal illumination by the Holy Spirit, and the sole headship of Christ, effectively replacing rather than serving God's design for His New Covenant community. (For more, cf 1689 London Baptist Confession 26.4-9; Sam Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession*; James Renihan, *Edification and Beauty: The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists*).

This insistence that ultimate authority rests in the Bible comes from the Bible's claims for itself as the standard of truth (Isaiah 8:20; Psalm 19:7-11; Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 3:16-17), with no mandate for a supreme bishop (1 Peter 5:1-4). Christ promised the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles into all truth (John 16:13), resulting in the completed biblical canon (Ephesians 2:20; 2 Peter 1:20-21; Jude 1:3), which warns against adding to God's Word (Deuteronomy 4:2; Revelation 22:18). Elevating the Pope as an infallible authority introduces unbiblical doctrines¹⁸ akin to the Pharisees' human traditions condemned by Christ (Mark 7:7-8). But as the Reformers argued, Scripture is clear enough for salvation and needs no papal interpreter. The papacy's complex decrees often obscure rather than clarify, while Scripture remains a sufficient light (Psalm 119:105). Martin Luther's famous stand at the Diet of Worms (1521) exemplifies this: "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God."¹⁹

In summary, the papacy lacks clear biblical support and undermines *solā Scriptura*. Bound by conscience to God's Word, we reject submission to popes and councils, which have contradicted Scripture and each other. Our loyalty is to Christ's inscripturated voice, not a human claiming His authority.

¹⁸ E.g., indulgences and Marian dogmas. Indulgences are official acts of the Roman Catholic Church that claim to reduce temporal punishment for sins, usually through prescribed prayers, actions, or financial offerings. The sale and abuse of indulgences were a catalyst for the Protestant Reformation, as Scripture teaches that forgiveness and justification come by grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 3:24-28), not by human works or payments. Marian dogmas refer to doctrines such as the Immaculate Conception (Mary conceived without original sin), her Perpetual Virginity, and the Assumption (Mary taken bodily into heaven). Protestants reject these as they are not grounded in Scripture, often contradicting biblical teaching on the universality of sin (Romans 3:23) and the uniqueness of Christ as mediator (1 Timothy 2:5), and because such dogmas were developed through tradition rather than apostolic revelation. Officially, the RCC still holds to indulgences and the Marian doctrines.

¹⁹ <https://www.luther.de/en/worms>

Christ's Headship: Christ Alone as Head of the Church

Because Scripture alone holds supreme authority, any office claiming an equivalent or superior authority directly challenges Christ's unique headship. Therefore, the second major reason we oppose the concept of a pope is Christ's exclusive authority over His church. The New Testament teaches that the risen Jesus is the only supreme ruler and authority over His people. God the Father has "put all things under [Christ's] feet and gave Him as head over all things to the church" (Ephesians 1:22). Because "He [Christ] is the head of the body, the church" (Colossians 1:18),²⁰ there cannot be two heads. If Jesus is the head of the universal church by virtue of God's decree, and His own holiness and mediatorial work,²¹ then by definition no other person can claim to be the universal head. Yet the Roman pontiff holds the titles of "the Holy Father" and "Vicar of Christ",²² and Vatican teaching calls him the visible head of the church on earth.²³ In effect, Catholicism posits an earthly head alongside Christ—a concept we find both unscriptural and dishonoring to the one Almighty Lord.²⁴

This conviction about Christ's unique headship fits with how the New Testament describes church leadership. In Protestant understanding, the church is not a corporate organization with a CEO; it is a spiritual body

²⁰ For the sake of space, most of the rest of the Scriptural argumentation in this heading is cited in parentheses throughout.

²¹ God the Father decreed Christ as the one Head of the church, exalting Him above all other rulers and giving Him all authority (Ephesians 1:20-23; Philipppians 2:9-11). Christ's unique fitness for this role is grounded in His deity, sinless holiness, and mediatorial work—He alone is "the head of the body, the church" because "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" in Him (Colossians 1:18-19; Hebrews 1:8-9). His perfect holiness and sacrificial work set Him apart from all others (Hebrews 7:26-28), making any rival headship impossible by both divine decree and qualification.

²² [https://www.vatican.va \(§882\)](https://www.vatican.va (§882))

²³ [https://www.vatican.va \(§936\)](https://www.vatican.va (§936))

²⁴ [https://1689.com \(26.4\)](https://1689.com (26.4)); cf. [https://apuritansmind.org \(WCF 25.6\)](https://apuritansmind.org (WCF 25.6))

united to Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27), as Jesus Himself declared, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18-19). Notice that Jesus did not say ‘given to me, and I delegate it to Peter and his successors,’ for He retains all authority and it cannot be given to anyone else. Nowhere does the New Testament teach that Jesus would appoint a single earthly successor as His governor. Instead, Christ leads His church through the Scriptures (John 17:17; Romans 15:4; Colossians 3:15-16; 2 Timothy 3:14-17), the service of pastors/elders who minister under Him (1 Peter 5:1-4; Titus 1:5-9), and the Holy Spirit Himself—sent by Jesus to guide and indwell His people forever (John 14:16; 16:13; Romans 8:14-17). The Holy Spirit, not an earthly pontiff, is the true “Vicar of Christ” present in the church (John 16:13; Romans 8:14-17). This is why Christ promised His own ongoing presence with the church—“I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20)—that He might retain all authority over heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18), governing His body by His Word, Elders/Pastors, and the Holy Spirit, but pointedly not through a single earthly substitute or successor.

Our 17th-century Protestant forebears were so zealous to guard Christ’s unique honor as Head of the church that they explicitly renounced the Pope. The 1689 London Baptist Confession (echoing the earlier Westminster Confession) asserts: “The Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the church, in whom... all power for the calling, institution, order or government of the church, is invested in a supreme and sovereign manner; neither can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof, but is that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the church against Christ.”²⁵ Because the Greek prefix *anti-* means “in place of,” in traditional Protestant usage “antichrist” isn’t an *ad hominem* slur; it’s a theological term describing one who arrogates to himself the titles and prerogatives belonging to Christ alone (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4). So when the Pope calls himself “Vicar of Christ” (*vicarious Christi*, meaning Christ’s representative or substitute), we hear an alarming and unbiblical

²⁵ [https://1689.com \(26.4\);](https://1689.com (26.4);) cf. [https://apuritansmind.org \(WCF 25.6\)](https://apuritansmind.org (WCF 25.6))

claim to stand in the place of Jesus as the church's head.²⁶ Reformers like John Knox did not hesitate to label the Pope Antichrist for this very reason.²⁷ Martin Luther wrote that the Pope “has exalted himself above, and opposed himself against Christ”²⁸ by demanding that no Christian can be saved without being subject to him. John Calvin said that “the Roman pontiff has shamelessly transferred to himself what belonged to God alone and especially to Christ.”²⁹ In other words, when a sinful human man claims that obedience to him is requisite for salvation—effectively inserting himself as a mediator between God and man—Protestants see the spirit of antichrist at work (2 Thessalonians 2:4; 1 John 2:18). For there is only “one mediator” between God and men, Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5), and likewise, only one Head and Shepherd of the sheep (John 10:16; 1 Peter 5:4). To give those roles to another—in any form or fashion—is an affront to Christ's glory.

Yet, historically, the papacy has indeed made such astonishing claims. Pope Boniface VIII (1302) in *Unam Sanctam* declared, “It is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff.”³⁰ Such assertions validate the Reformers' concerns, for they are not confined to Roman Catholic believers nor were they intended to be. If someone insists that Christ's saving work and shepherding care will not avail you unless you also submit to an earthly priest-king, then that person has insisted on the worship of a rival savior—an “antichrist” figure who has functionally opposed the sufficiency of Christ's reign.³¹ We Protestants

²⁶ [https://www.vatican.va \(§882\)](https://www.vatican.va (§882))

²⁷ [Knox, The First Blast of the Trumpet \(https://www.gutenberg.org\)](https://www.gutenberg.org)

²⁸ [Luther, Smalcald Articles \(https://bookofconcord.org\)](https://bookofconcord.org)

²⁹ [Calvin, Institutes, 4.7.25](#). [Quote above taken from the Battles translation: Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.7.25, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1189.]

³⁰ [https://www.papalencyclicals.net \(§1302\)](https://www.papalencyclicals.net (§1302))

³¹ [https://www.vatican.va \(Lumen Gentium §14\)](https://www.vatican.va (Lumen Gentium §14)); Please note that I have here called the Pope “an antichrist” as herein defined, as any given opponent or counterfeit of Christ (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3). Also, in this booklet I have not once called the Pope “the Antichrist,” as some Christians would understand that to be

shudder at this out of a deep zeal that Christ alone must have the preeminence (Colossians 1:18). The church already has a Head, Husband, and Chief Shepherd, and He has not left nor abdicated His post. Christ's Lordship knows no earthly nor heavenly rivals (Ephesians 1:21-22; Philippians 2:9-11). Thus any mortal who claims to be the universal head of Christ's church is, at best, gravely deceived and, at worst, an agent of the Enemy to draw hearts away from single-hearted devotion to Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2-3). As Luther and the Reformers said, we "can endure neither the devil nor his apostle the Pope in this role as head," for the church is best governed when we all live under one Head, Christ, with all ministers equal under Him.³²

In sum, Protestants oppose the papacy because it usurps Christ's unique headship. Our loyalty is to our reigning King in heaven. The Pope's titles and honors—Holy Father, Supreme Pontiff, Head of the Church, Vicar of Christ, His Holiness, etc.—have no warrant in Scripture and collide with how it speaks of the Lord Jesus (Ephesians 1:22-23). Out of love for Christ's honor and the safety of Christ's flock, we reject any would-be "supreme pastor" on earth and point instead to the true Shepherd and Overseer of our souls (1 Peter 2:25) who needs no vicar nor replacement.

the final end-of-days "beast" of Revelation 13:1-10 who leads the Enemy's army in a final battle against God at Armageddon (Revelation 16:16; 19:19). An additional consideration, for those automatically offended by me calling the Pope an antichrist, let alone anyone at all: Everyone trying to work out what the Scriptures mean by "antichrist"—even those who are "idealists" (symbolic/spiritual hermeneutic)—believe that evil systems or institutions necessarily manifest in concrete ways through humans (Ephesians 2:2). This means there is no safe place of pretending the antichrist is merely an invisible and disembodied idea.

³² Quote from [Luther, *Smalcald Articles, Part 2, Article 4*](#); Similar sentiments are found in [Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.7.23](#) and [Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol 4, p 327](#).

New Testament Ecclesiology: No Papal Office in the Early Church

A third reason we reject the concept of a pope is that the pattern of leadership given in the New Testament church simply leaves no room for a monarchical pope. When we study the New Testament, we find a clear picture of a decentralized church polity under Christ's authority (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). There is no hint that one man would rule over all congregations as a universal bishop.³³ Instead, the apostolic churches were led by a plurality of elders and served by deacons on a local level, with the apostles themselves providing foundational teaching and occasional oversight in the earliest years (Acts 20:17, 28; Philippians 1:1), i.e., while the elders-deacons pattern was being established.³⁴

Here are several key features of New Testament ecclesiology that underscore this point:

No Elite Clergy Caste: It's Not a "Magisterium" but a "Ministerium"

The New Testament does not institute a separate class of clergy elevated above the laity in spiritual status. Yes, there are officers (pastors/elders and deacons) with specific functions, but all believers constitute a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6).³⁵ There is no priestly class of men who stand as gatekeepers of grace between God and the common

³³ [https://1689.com \(26.8\)](https://1689.com (26.8))

³⁴ The New Testament demonstrates that apostolic leadership was unique to the original, eyewitness apostles—personally chosen and commissioned by Christ (Acts 1:21-22; 1 Corinthians 9:1). After their foundational ministry (Ephesians 2:20), there is no record in later New Testament writings of new apostles being installed, nor of the apostolic office continuing beyond those first witnesses. Instead, the post-apostolic pattern is local oversight by elders and deacons (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). This transition is completed by the time the last New Testament books are written, indicating that ongoing apostolic leadership was never intended, and authority shifted to scripturally qualified elders, not new apostles or a single universal leader. (See Acts 1:21-22; 1 Corinthians 9:1; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9.)

³⁵ [https://1689.com \(26.6-7\)](https://1689.com (26.6-7))

Christian. In contrast to the later Roman Catholic system, where “clergy” became a special spiritual caste set apart by ritual consecration,³⁶ the apostolic church taught the priesthood of all believers, where all have direct access to God through Christ (Hebrews 4:14-16). Pastors are shepherds who lead by teaching and example, not priests offering sacrifices or lords ruling over the flock (1 Peter 5:1-3). Indeed, New Testament terminology reflects this servant-hearted model: the very word “minister” means ‘servant’ (Mark 10:42-45). Therefore, office in Christ’s church, as the saying goes, “is not a magisterium, but a ministerium”—not power to rule as masters, but a calling to serve the flock by God’s Word.³⁷ This undercuts the notion of a supreme magister (master/teacher) such as claimed for the Pope.

Not a Single Bishop Over All, But a Plurality of Elders

In the New Testament, each local congregation was typically served by multiple elders/pastors, also called overseers or bishops—the terms are used interchangeably (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-7). There was no pyramid of ascending hierarchy (bishop > archbishop > pope) as developed later.³⁸ In fact, the New Testament knows no episcopacy different from the presbyterate³⁹—the apostolic churches did not distinguish a higher office of bishop over presbyters; every episkopos (overseer) was essentially a

³⁶ [Catechism of the Catholic Church \(§1538\)](#)

³⁷ The phrase “not a magisterium but a ministerium” is not a direct quotation from any one Reformer but is a slogan that crystallizes the classic Protestant teaching on church office. Calvin repeatedly insists that ministers are not lords, but ministers; not masters, but servants (*Institutes* 4.3.4; see also 4.8.4). Luther similarly argued that church office is for service, not dominion, citing Jesus’s words, “I am among you as one who serves” (*On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in Luther’s Works, Vol. 36, p. 129; Luke 22:25–27). The slogan summarizes a central Reformation point: ecclesiastical office is about service, not lordship.

³⁸ [Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol 2, p 140.](#)

³⁹ Jerome famously argued that “with the exception of ordination, all else is held in common between bishop and presbyter” and that, in the earliest church, bishops were chosen from among the presbyters (*Letter 146, To Evangelus*, [New Advent](#)). For scholarly summaries of Jerome’s position, see J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome*, p. 210; Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 2, p. 142.

presbyteros (elder) tasked with shepherding God's flock. Even the Apostle Peter, who Roman Catholics claim as the first pope, identified himself as "a fellow elder" among others (1 Peter 5:1). Early historical evidence confirms this biblical pattern: 1st-century congregations, including Rome, were led by a council of presbyters rather than a single ruling bishop.⁴⁰ Church father Jerome notes that originally churches were governed "by the common consultation of the elders," and that the elevation of one bishop above the rest was a later development "more from custom than from the Lord's arrangement."⁴¹ In other words, the earliest structure was collegial leadership, not monarchical. Even a 20th-century Pope (Benedict XVI) acknowledged that in the New Testament "presbyter and episkopos" were the same office⁴²—a tacit admission that the apostolic church had no separate high bishop like the papacy.

Apostles: Unique and Not Successive

The only individuals in the New Testament who had authority beyond a single local church were the apostles. But the apostles were a temporary, foundational office in the first-generation church—eyewitnesses of the risen Christ and personally commissioned by Him (Acts 1:21-22, 1 Corinthians 9:1)—and they had no successors once the foundation was laid (Ephesians 2:20).⁴³ The apostles' role was unique: they received and proclaimed God's revelation in person and in writing, and together with the Old Testament prophets, they form "the foundation" of the church, "Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20). This metaphor is telling: by its very nature a foundation is laid once; afterward the building is built upon it. Thus, Scripture itself is the preserved apostolic deposit (2 Timothy 1:13-14, Jude 1:3), and after the apostolic era, no new infallible revelation or authority continues—only the ongoing succession of apostolic teaching through Scripture (2 Timothy 2:2). While Catholicism

⁴⁰ [Clement of Rome, 1 Clement 44:1-6.](#)

⁴¹ [Jerome, Commentary on Titus 1:5.](#)

⁴² [Benedict XVI, General Audience, 7 May 2008.](#) Bear in mind that, if "sacred Tradition" is on par with "sacred Scripture," this incoherence needn't matter.

⁴³ [Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 4, p 329.](#)

argues for apostolic succession (a chain of bishops inheriting the apostles' authority), we observe that in the strict sense "the apostles have no successors."⁴⁴ Those who followed were not new apostles but ordinary ministers (elders-pastors, teachers, evangelists, etc.) who built on the apostolic foundation (2 Timothy 2:2). Even when the eleven appointed Matthias as a replacement for Judas, notably, when John's brother James was later martyred (Acts 12:2), there was no mention of appointing a new apostle in his place. The apostolic office was not an ongoing revolving chair.⁴⁵ Thus, any notion that there is a chief apostle (Pope) who continues to receive the keys of authority passed down from Peter and the others is foreign to the New Testament. As theologian Herman Bavinck puts it, the apostles "hold an office that is nontransferable and nonrenewable."⁴⁶

Church Councils and Accountability

The New Testament does describe instances of the apostles and elders coming together in council (e.g., the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15) to resolve doctrinal disputes (Acts 15:6, 22-29). But importantly, even in Acts 15, and contrary to Catholic claims about Peter as the first Pope, he is not depicted as the singular decision-maker. He contributes testimony, but James (the Lord's brother) and the assembled elders jointly consider the matter and issue a letter in the name of "the apostles and elders with the whole church" (Acts 15:13-22).⁴⁷ The decision was local, not a papal decree. Moreover, the Apostle Paul did not act as though he needed Peter's authorization in his missionary work; on the contrary, he received his gospel and commission directly from Christ and pointed out that he did not confer with any man immediately (Galatians 1:1, 1:11-12, 1:15-18). When Paul finally did visit the Jerusalem leadership, he was not summoned there to submit to Peter, but went by revelation to ensure the apostles were in unity (Galatians 2:2). In Galatians 2, Paul even

⁴⁴ [Bavinck, p. 362.](#)

⁴⁵ [Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 1, p. 461.](#)

⁴⁶ [Bavinck, p. 362.](#)

⁴⁷ Note that "with the whole church" may speak to congregational affirmation/presence and not necessarily to a democratic process/voting.

records how he rebuked Peter publicly for acting hypocritically, because Peter “stood condemned” by the truth of the gospel (Gal. 2:11-14). This incident is very revealing: Paul did not treat Peter as an infallible superior, but as a brother who could fall into error and needed correction by Scripture. There was no sense of Peter holding unchecked authority over Paul or the churches—a fact acknowledged by honest Catholic historians.⁴⁸ In Paul’s letters, he names Peter (Cephas) alongside James and John as reputed “pillars” of the Jerusalem church, yet says “God shows no partiality” and those leaders “added nothing to me” (Galatians 2:6-9). Such language would be unthinkable if Paul recognized Peter as a supreme pontiff. Instead, the tone is one of equality among apostles under Christ.⁴⁹ All this confirms that the early church, as portrayed in the New Testament, had a plural, collegial leadership.⁵⁰ There was variety of gifts and roles (Ephesians 4:11-12, 1 Corinthians 12:28), but no single human monarch over the whole Christian world.

To summarize, the New Testament model of the church is incompatible with the later Catholic model of papal monarchy.⁵¹ 19th-century Reformed Baptist John Gill aptly stated, “The church can never be better governed than by Christ its only Head, with all bishops/elders equal in office under Him.”⁵² The introduction of a pope represents a radical departure from the

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Raymond E. Brown, *Peter in the New Testament* (Augsburg/Paulist, 1973), pp. 97–98; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Vol. 1 (Yale, 1991), p. 239; cf. Oscar Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* (Westminster, 1962), p. 234. Such acknowledgments largely rely on Cardinal John Henry Newman’s famous ‘Development Thesis,’ (found in Newman, John Henry. [*Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*](#). 6th ed. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989). Newman answered Protestant critiques by claiming that “new” or “later” RCC dogmas are authentic and Spirit-guided unfoldings of what was present in “germ” or “seed” form in apostolic teaching. Thus, all RCC dogmas can be called legitimate post-biblical developments. We Protestants call these “accretions” (unnecessary/corrupting additions) not “developments.”

⁴⁹ [J. N. D. Kelly, Oxford Dictionary of Popes, p 8.](#)

⁵⁰ Bruce Shelley, [Church History in Plain Language](#), p 105.

⁵¹ Schaff, [History of the Christian Church, Vol. 3, p 16.](#)

⁵² John Gill, [A Body of Doctrinal Divinity](#), Book 5, Ch. 5.

apostolic blueprint.⁵³ It imposes a top-down hierarchy foreign to the Scripture's emphasis on Christ's direct governance and the shared leadership of humble pastors. For a Protestant committed to biblical church order, the papacy is a human innovation that arose gradually in post-apostolic times—not a divine institution established by Christ.

Examining the Papacy's Claims in Light of Scripture and History

Thus far we have established that Scripture doesn't teach the need for a pope, and in fact teaches principles contrary to the papal system. But what about the specific claims Catholics make to justify the papacy? They argue that Christ founded the papal office through the Apostle Peter, and that by historical succession the bishops of Rome inherit Peter's unique authority. As Protestants, we must address these claims directly—always testing them against the Bible (Acts 17:11) and credible history.⁵⁴ Here we will briefly examine the key pillars of the papal claim:

- Peter as “the rock” of Matthew 16:18,
- Peter's role in the New Testament,
- the idea of an unbroken succession in Rome, and
- the development of papal authority over time.

“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...” (Matthew 16:18)

This is the classic proof-text for the papacy. Jesus spoke these words after Peter confessed Him as the Christ, saying also, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven...” (Matthew 16:19). Catholic interpretation holds that Christ was establishing Peter as the “rock”⁵⁵ and foundation of

⁵³ [https://1689.com \(26.8\)](https://1689.com (26.8))

⁵⁴ [*Shelley, Church History in Plain Language*, p. 105.](#)

⁵⁵ In koine Greek, Peter (“Cephas”) means “rock.”

the church and giving him supreme authority (the “keys”), which then passes on to his successors (the popes).⁵⁶ How do we respond? First, it’s important to note that Protestant interpreters are not uniform on the exact meaning of “rock” in this passage—some believe “this rock” refers to Peter’s confession of Christ (thus the church is built on the gospel truth that Jesus is the Son of God),⁵⁷ while others allow that Peter himself is in view (as the first foundational leader in the early church, but without granting any concept of a perpetual Petrine or papal office.)⁵⁸ No interpretation that we find plausible, however, leads to the Rome-exclusive, one-man succession that Rome claims. Thus, the text cannot bear the weight of later papal claims, which is why we must interpret Scripture with Scripture. Indeed, when we follow Matthew’s account further, we see that just two chapters later, Jesus speaks of all the disciples having authority to “bind and loose” in matters of church discipline (Matthew 18:18)—language very similar to the “keys” given to Peter. After His resurrection, Christ again confers authority broadly, breathing on all the gathered apostles and saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven...” (John 20:22-23). Thus, whatever special honor Peter had in Matthew 16—and we do see he was a prominent leader—the fuller New Testament picture shows that all the apostles share in the authority of the keys. In fact, Ephesians 2:20 says the church is built on the foundation of all “the apostles and prophets” (plural), with Christ as the foundational cornerstone, not Peter (1 Corinthians 3:11; 1 Peter 2:6-7).

It’s also telling that Jesus only directly calls Peter the “rock” once and then immediately rebukes him as “Satan” a few verses later when Peter misunderstands Christ’s mission (Matthew 16:23). Nowhere else in the New Testament is Peter called a rock. Rather, Jesus Himself is the chief Rock or cornerstone (1 Corinthians 3:11, 10:4; 1 Peter 2:6-7). Even if we grant that Peter was the rock in Matthew 16, it was in view of his confession of Christ, and was not a blank check for unlimited supremacy.

⁵⁶ [*Catholic Catechism*, §881-882.](#)

⁵⁷ [*Carson, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Matthew 16:18.*](#)

⁵⁸ [*Bavinck*, p. 322.](#)

As Herman Bavinck observes, “Jesus makes such a promise [to Peter] only in view of Peter’s confession.”⁵⁹ The focus is on Peter’s faith in Christ, which would be foundational in the early church—a role Peter certainly fulfilled in the opening chapters of Acts. But nothing in Matthew 16—or anywhere in the New Testament—says that this honor would pass to a successor of Peter after his death. The keys of the kingdom, representing authority to admit or exclude through gospel proclamation and church discipline, were later extended to all apostles (Matthew 18:18) and indeed belong to the whole church in a general sense. All who preach the gospel faithfully open the kingdom (use the keys) to those who believe, and shut it to those who refuse (cf. Acts 14:27). Thus, Protestants see Matthew 16:18 not as the charter of an ongoing papacy, but as a specific promise to Peter (and by extension to the apostolic group) that Christ would build His church on the apostolic testimony.⁶⁰

Peter’s Status Among the Apostles

Catholics often argue that Peter was singularly appointed by Christ as the chief shepherd—pointing to Jesus’ words in Luke 22:32, “strengthen your brothers,” and John 21:17, “feed My sheep.” We acknowledge Peter had a leadership role: he was often the spokesperson for the Twelve, the one who first preached to the Jews at Pentecost (Acts 2) and later to the Gentiles at Cornelius’ house (Acts 10). In a sense, Peter used the “keys” to open the door of faith to different groups. However, a leadership role is not the same as the Roman Catholic’s view of the Pope as the supreme, universal, unilateral, and unchecked authority.⁶¹ The New Testament

⁵⁹ [Bavinck, p. 322.](#)

⁶⁰ [Carson, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Matthew 16:18.](#)

⁶¹ Though these adjectives sound extreme, they fit with the Roman Catholic Church’s (RCC) own claims about the Pope. Re “supreme” and “universal,” they claim that the Pope has “full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church,” which, in their ecclesiology, includes not only Roman Catholics but all baptized Christians who are seen as separated brethren (see *Lumen Gentium* 22, 23; *Catechism* §§816, 836-838). While “unilateral” is not a technical RCC term, it accurately describes how papal infallibility works: the Pope’s *ex cathedra* statements do not require the assent or ratification of others (see [Pastor Aeternus, Ch. 4](#); *Lumen Gentium* 25). Re “unchecked,” according to official Roman Catholic

evidence discussed earlier—such as Peter being rebuked by Paul, sent by the apostles, and not the final decision-maker in Acts 15—shows that Peter was, at most, first among equals or a respected elder brother, but certainly not a prince over his brethren.⁶² For instance, when the issue of Gentile circumcision arose (Acts 15), after much debate Peter gives an important testimony (Acts 15:7-11), but then James speaks and provides the final formulation (Acts 15:13-21). If Peter were universally supreme, we would expect Scripture to consistently portray him making unilateral decisions for the whole church—but it doesn't. Instead, as noted, he humbly calls himself "a fellow-elder" (1 Peter 5:1-3) and warns against any shepherd "lording it over" the flock. Simply put, the Catholic claim that Peter was the first pope is an interpretation born of reading later papal ideals back into the New Testament, something even some Catholic scholars caution against. Indeed, a joint Roman Catholic-Anglican commission famously admitted that "the New Testament texts offer no sufficient basis" for papal primacy and contain "no explicit record of a transmission of Peter's leadership."⁶³ This is a remarkable concession: the Bible itself doesn't plainly teach what the papacy requires it to teach. It must be read into the text via later tradition.

Succession and the Bishop of Rome

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that Peter did possess a form of primacy among the apostles. Even so, one must ask: did Peter then

teaching, the Pope's *ex cathedra* authority in matters of faith and morals is both unilateral and unchecked. *Pastor Aeternus* (First Vatican Council, 1870) declares that "the definitions of the Roman Pontiff are of themselves, and not by the consent of the Church, irreformable," and that no appeal or correction is allowed from council or magisterium (*Pastor Aeternus*, Ch. 4). *Lumen Gentium* further clarifies that papal definitions "do not require the approval of others, nor do they allow an appeal to any other judgment" (*Lumen Gentium* 25).

⁶² [Shelley, Church History in Plain Language](#), p. 105; [Kelly, Oxford Dictionary of Popes](#), p. 8.

⁶³ <https://whitehorseinn.org>, quoting from *Unity Faith and Order – Dialogues – Anglican Roman Catholic Authority in the Church II* (Anglican/Roman Catholic Joint Preparatory Commission), 2, 6. See also [ARCIC, Final Report, Authority in the Church, 1976](#).

transfer this primacy to an office of “Bishop of Rome,” to be passed down generation after generation? The burden of proof is heavy—and the evidence isn’t there. Scripture is silent about Peter ever being bishop of Rome (Acts 28; Romans 16). This silence is especially problematic given Scripture’s explicit instructions on church governance, apostolic succession (2 Timothy 2:2), and the roles of elders and bishops (Titus 1:5-9). Had Peter’s episcopacy in Rome and transfer of authority been foundational, Scripture’s complete silence on these matters is nonsensical—especially given that they teach a wholly different model of governance. Thus, any historical attempt to place Peter as Rome’s first bishop and originator of a perpetual papal office relies on post-apostolic tradition rather than biblical revelation—precisely the kind of “tradition of men” against which Jesus warned (Mark 7:8-9).

This scriptural silence is reinforced historically, from the New Testament onward. Consider how little evidence there is from the earliest Christian writings to support the idea of Peter as Rome’s bishop. The Book of Acts follows Peter’s ministry only until chapter 12, then focuses on Paul. In Paul’s letter to the Romans (written around AD 57), he greets many believers but never mentions Peter—a strange omission if Peter had been laboring as Rome’s leading pastor for decades (Romans 16:1-16). Likewise, Paul’s prison epistles and 2 Timothy (written from Rome) make no mention of anything remotely like a ‘Pope Peter.’ The earliest post-biblical evidence indicates that the church in Rome was led collegially. For example, Clement of Rome (c. AD 95) wrote an epistle to the Corinthians without any claim of supreme authority;⁶⁴ in other words, he speaks as one church leader to another, collegially, and not as a universal father. Early lists of bishops in Rome—given by Irenaeus and

⁶⁴ [Clement, Letter to the Corinthians](#)

other church fathers⁶⁵—do place Peter and Paul at the origin, but these are later constructions, and they don't suggest a monarchic bishop until sometime in the second century. Herman Bavinck summarized the historical research well: "According to the oldest documents, the church in Rome was led by a college of presbyters, not by a monarchical episcopate. It wasn't until the middle of the second century that the legend of Peter's twenty-five-year Roman episcopate began to circulate, a legend that Eusebius and Jerome later made part of the definitive Roman tradition."⁶⁶ In other words, the notion that Peter was the first bishop of Rome and handed off his office to Linus (and then Anacletus, Clement, etc.) rests on later church tradition, not contemporaneous evidence. Even Catholic historians acknowledge gaps and "unfounded assumptions" in the traditional narrative.⁶⁷ This silence is not accidental: as Bavinck observes, "Christ never said a word about Peter's episcopacy at Rome nor about his successor."⁶⁸ The entire link between Peter and the later papacy is an exercise in post-apostolic historical conjecture. We are being asked to believe that although the New Testament is silent on it, Peter supposedly spent the last 20+ years of his life in Rome as its bishop and consciously bequeathed his supreme authority to the next bishop of Rome—all without one line of Scripture to record any of this and without first-century

⁶⁵ "Church father" isn't just a Catholic thing. Irenaeus (c. 130-202) is an example of one such 'father' recognized by Protestants as valuable for early articulations of doctrines foundational to the Reformation. Notably, his "recapitulation" theology—Christ as the second Adam who redeems by undoing Adam's failure (see [Against Heresies 3.22.1, New Advent](#))—helped shape Protestant views of substitution and federal headship (Stephen Holmes, *Listening to the Past*, pp. 48-51; Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, pp. 45-47). Other fathers, such as Athanasius (on the deity of Christ) and Augustine (on original sin and grace), are also pre-Reformation witnesses to central gospel truths, often in ways more consistent with Reformed than Roman Catholic theology. For a good example of scholarship confirming that much of Reformation theology wasn't "brand new" or "discovered" during the Reformation, see Dr. Ligon Duncan's important Ph.D. dissertation called ["The Covenant Idea in Ante-Nicene Theology"](#).

⁶⁶ Bavinck, p. 333; Kelly, *Oxford Dictionary of Popes*, p. 6.

⁶⁷ Duffy, *Saints & Sinners: A History of the Popes*, p. 13.

⁶⁸ Bavinck, p. 334.

Christians knowing it. Because this strains credulity, the Catholic Church leans on later writings and retroactive claims to fill this gap. Yet, as Protestants we see this as precisely the kind of “tradition of men” that Jesus warned against because it nullifies the pattern of God’s command (Mark 7:8-9).

In summary, what the Roman Catholic Church calls an apostolic succession of supreme papal authority is, at best, an understandably expected and legitimate attempt to provide an apostolic pedigree of faithful teaching in order to fight heretical doctrine. As Pastor Tom Wenger says, “Even though the early church exerted a good deal of effort to record and trace apostolic succession, they did not do so to defend a notion of the supremacy of the Roman bishop, but rather to demonstrate that the teachings of the Church had an undeniable apostolic pedigree.”⁶⁹ To corroborate his claims, Wenger cites a well known quote from Irenaeus (c. 130-200 AD) which helps us understand that the early church listed its leaders not for reasons of papal supremacy but for the purpose of maintaining doctrinal purity amidst heresy: “It is within the power of all, therefore, in every church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the churches and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times.... For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church (Rome) on account of its preeminent authority ... inasmuch as the apostolical tradition has been preserved continuously by those [faithful men] who exist everywhere.”⁷⁰ As Irenaeus demonstrates, these early lists of church leaders were not meant to establish an unbroken line of papal authority but to protect the apostolic message from distortion.

⁶⁹ Tom Wenger, [*“A Brief History of the Papacy”*](#), Modern Reformation Magazine, Sep/Oct 2005, accessed May 22, 2025.

⁷⁰ Wenger, [*“A Brief History of the Papacy”*](#).

The Development of Papal Power

History shows that the idea of a single, universal bishop developed gradually.⁷¹ We will now explicitly trace how papal authority historically progressed—from initial claims of primacy, through assertions of supremacy, to the ultimate declaration of papal infallibility.

In the first few centuries, the bishop of Rome was respected and often appealed to—Rome was the capital of the empire and had a famous church—but bishops of other major cities (Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, etc.) also held significant sway.⁷² There were early hints of Roman primacy claims (e.g. a letter by Pope Stephen I in the 3rd century asserting some authority), but also resistance to any one bishop's supremacy. Notably, the Eastern Church never accepted the Bishop of Rome as having jurisdiction over them; that dispute eventually led to the East-West schism in 1054.⁷³ Even in the West, one of Rome's own bishops—Gregory the Great (540-604)—strongly opposed the idea of anyone being “universal bishop.” When the Patriarch of Constantinople from the Eastern Orthodox Church used that title, Gregory rebuked it as a “profane,” writing, “Whoever calls himself universal bishop, or desires to be called so, is the precursor of Antichrist.”⁷⁴ Ironically, later popes did take the very title “Universal Pontiff”—for example, at the Council of Reims in 1049, where the papal legate claimed the title *pontifex universalis* for the

⁷¹ [Duffy, *Saints & Sinners*, pp. 8-17.](#)

⁷² [Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 3, p 300.](#)

⁷³ [Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 68.](#) As early as c. 190 AD, in the Quartodeciman Controversy, when Bishop Victor of Rome attempted to excommunicate the churches of Asia (modern Turkey) over the date of Easter, the Eastern bishops rejected his authority. In his reply, Polycrates of Ephesus called upon the authority of the apostles in rejecting Rome's authority, “For those greater than I have said, ‘We must obey God rather than men’” (Acts 5:29). Likewise, the Councils of Nicea (325 AD) and Ephesus (431) both implied in writing that the Eastern churches rejected Roman universal jurisdiction. Also worthy of note here is that all major church councils through Nicea (325 AD) were called by emperors, not by the Bishop of Rome, and the presiding roles were often given to Eastern bishops.

⁷⁴ [Gregory I, *Epistle to John of Constantinople*, Book V, Letter 18.](#)

pope—thereby fulfilling what Gregory had warned against.⁷⁵ This shows that even into the 6th century, the idea of a singular head was controversial and far from established. It was only in the medieval period, especially under powerful figures like Pope Leo I (5th century) and Pope Gregory VII (11th century), that the full doctrine of papal supremacy and infallibility took shape.⁷⁶ The culmination was the First Vatican Council in 1870 which defined that the Pope, when speaking *ex cathedra* on faith or morals, is infallible⁷⁷—a claim utterly rejected by Protestants as blasphemous, since no sinner can claim to speak with unfailing truth apart from doing so from God’s Word.⁷⁸

To sum up the Catholic claims: they assert a chain linking Peter to today’s pope, backed by Matthew 16:18 and church tradition. But biblically, that chain is absent, and historically, it is questionable at best.⁷⁹ Even if one grants Peter a certain leadership in the first century, the leap from that to the vast institution of the papacy—with its political power, temporal dominions, and sweeping doctrines unknown to Peter—strains credulity.⁸⁰ As one contemporary Reformed writer quipped, “Eternity, here, hangs on a cobweb”—meaning the entire Catholic system places tremendous weight on a flimsy thread of unproven succession.⁸¹ We Protestants are not willing to hang our obedience and faith on that thread. Instead, we rest on the solid ground of Scripture’s clear teaching alone. Practically, adhering to Scripture alone preserves believers from dependence upon fallible human authorities, protects the church from doctrinal confusion, and ensures

⁷⁵ [Duffy, *Saints & Sinners*, p. 83.](#)

⁷⁶ [Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 4, pp. 265-67.](#)

⁷⁷ [Pastor Aeternus, 1870. ch 4.](#)

⁷⁸ <https://1689.com> (26.4); <https://www.apuritansmind.com> (WCF 25.6).

⁷⁹ [Duffy, *Saints & Sinners*, p. 17](#); [Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, pp. 105-06.](#)

⁸⁰ [Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 4, p. 266.](#)

⁸¹ [Bavinck](#), p. 366. Also see [Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 4, §37](#); [James White, *Roman Catholic Controversy*, p. 103](#); [J. N. D. Kelly, *Oxford Dictionary of Popes*, Intro](#); [William Webster, *Matthew 16 Controversy*, p. 84.](#)

ultimate allegiance and obedience are given solely to Christ. This biblical foundation thus safeguards the church's health and the spiritual freedom of its members. In short, the entire Protestant position comes down to these sufficiencies: Christ alone as Head of His church, Scripture alone as the infallible rule of faith, and the apostolic pattern alone as sufficient for church order (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 1 Timothy 3:14-15). The papacy, we believe, stands outside and against these sufficiencies.

Conclusion: "We Must Obey God Rather Than Men"

In conclusion, Protestants oppose the concept of a pope out of fidelity to biblical truth and the lordship of Christ.⁸² Our opposition is theological and principled, not personal animus toward Catholics. We earnestly pray for Catholics to know the fullness of joy in Christ alone as Savior and Head, without the burden of submitting to an earthly master who can bind their conscience beyond Scripture (Matthew 11:28-30; John 8:31-36). We also acknowledge that many Roman Catholics sincerely believe the papal system is God's will. But we must gently point out that zeal for God is not enough if it's not according to knowledge (Romans 10:2-3). True unity and catholicity (universality) of the church come from common faith in Christ as made known in His Word, not from a "Sacred Tradition" that demands allegiance to one bishop (Ephesians 4:3-6; John 17:17-23).

The Protestant stance can be summarized thus: No book but the Bible, no king but Christ, no priest but Jesus, and no father but God (Matthew 23:8-10; Hebrews 4:14-16). On this foundation, we rest our faith, our unity, and our hope. We respect pastors and elders, and some Protestants even have church councils and the like, but we do not acknowledge any of them as infallible or as the voice of God on earth (1 Peter 5:1-4).⁸³ That role is already filled by the Holy Spirit speaking through Scripture (John 16:13; 2

⁸² [https://1689.com \(26.4\);](https://1689.com (26.4);) [https://www.apuritansmind.com \(WCF 25.6\).](https://www.apuritansmind.com (WCF 25.6).)

⁸³ <1 Peter 5:1-4;> [https://1689.com \(26.7\).](https://1689.com (26.7).)

Timothy 3:16). When forced to choose between obedience to God's Word and obedience to men's decrees (Acts 5:29), we choose God's Word—and it is on that basis that we say “no” to Rome's pope (Acts 5:29).

Finally, our tone is not detached triumphalism but pastoral concern. The papal system, in our view, endangers the church by obscuring the gospel of grace with human doctrines⁸⁴ and by interposing a human head in place of the divine (Galatians 1:6-9; Mark 7:6-8). We oppose the error, as shepherds guarding Christ's sheep, while desiring the salvation of those who are caught in it (Titus 1:9). As the apostle Paul wrote, “we tear down arguments and every proud thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). The concept of a pope is, we believe, one such proud idea to be lovingly yet firmly torn down—so that every believer's heart and mind may rest only in Christ's perfect and sufficient reign. The King of Kings needs no vicar, and His Bride needs no other husband. He has not left us orphaned; He is with us always by His Spirit and Word (Matthew 28:20; John 14:16-18). To Him be the glory in the church forever—*solī Deo gloria* (Ephesians 3:20-21)!

⁸⁴ Here are approximately 30 examples of a list that could reasonably be 2-3 times as many, depending on how broadly or narrowly a “doctrine” is defined: papal infallibility; papal supremacy; immaculate conception of Mary; assumption of Mary; perpetual virginity of Mary; Mary as mediatrix and co-redemptrix; veneration of saints; veneration and invocation of Mary; prayers for the dead; purgatory; indulgences; the treasury of merit; transubstantiation; sacrifice of the mass; real presence in the eucharist (transubstantiation); seven sacraments; auricular confession to a priest; absolution by priests; extreme unction (last rites); baptismal regeneration; confirmation as a sacrament; necessity of the sacraments for salvation; clerical celibacy; use of relics; use of images and statues in worship; canonization of saints; novenas and special prayers to saints; the rosary; the magisterium as infallible interpreter. For a comprehensive and trustworthy treatment, see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol. 3, Part 18, “Controversies Concerning the Church,” trans. G.M. Giger, ed. J.T. Dennison Jr. (P&R, 1997), esp. pp. 7-15, 137-155, 227-249; cf. pp. 1-482 for all major “Roman errors” addressed.

Some Good Resources

- Allison, Gregg R. *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014, 496 pp. – A thorough, systematic, and fair but critical evaluation of Catholic theology according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, measuring each doctrine against evangelical and Reformed standards. Now a standard seminary text for understanding and critiquing Rome.
- Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 4: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), §474, pp. 292-333. – Bavinck provides a thorough and critical analysis of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the papacy. He traces the historical development of papal authority, examining the claims to apostolic succession, infallibility, and universal jurisdiction. Bavinck contrasts the Roman view of a monarchical papacy with the Reformed model of church government, arguing that the New Testament teaches a collegial, elder-led polity rather than a singular head. He concludes that the papal office is a post-apostolic innovation lacking clear biblical warrant, and asserts that its claims of supremacy and infallibility undermine the sufficiency and authority of Scripture and the unique headship of Christ over his church.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960, 380 pp. – Calvin's magisterial work, especially Book IV, offers a devastating critique of papal primacy, Rome's sacramental theology, and its distortion of the gospel. Remains foundational for Reformed engagement with Catholicism.
- Ortland, Gavin – Ortland has many extensive, well researched, and very fair and irenic videos on his YouTube page ("Truth Unites") that cover

all manner of topics regarding Protestant-Catholic doctrine. Worth a listen/watch. Here a few good examples:

- Start Here: [▶ Why I Don't Accept The Papacy \(28:51\)](#)
 - [▶ Response to Criticism of my Case Against the Papacy](#)
 - [▶ Apostolic Succession: Framing the Options \(Protestant View\)](#)
 - [▶ Is Apostolic Succession an Accretion?](#)
 - [▶ Was There a Bishop of Rome in the First Century? Protestant...](#)
 - [▶ A MAJOR Problem With "Doctrinal Development"](#)
 - [▶ Augustine on the "Rock" of Matthew 16 \(This Will Surprise Y...](#)
-
- Reymond, Robert L. *The Reformation's Conflict with Rome: Why It Must Continue*. Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2001, 144 pp. – A concise and pointed defense of ongoing Protestant objections to Roman Catholic theology, highlighting irreconcilable differences over authority, salvation, and the gospel. Reymond brings systematic and historical clarity to the core issues.
 - Sproul, R.C. *Are We Together? A Protestant Analyzes Roman Catholicism*. Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2012, 144 pp. – An accessible, pastorally sensitive, and firmly Reformed analysis of Catholic doctrine and practice. Sproul addresses differences in authority, justification, sacraments, and the papacy with clarity and charity.
 - Turretin, Francis. *Institutes of Elenctic Theology. Vol. 3, "Controversies with the Romanists."* Translated by George Musgrave Giger. Edited by James T. Dennison, Jr. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1997, 682 pp. – A classic systematic theology and the gold standard of post-Reformation Reformed polemics. Turretin's Vol. 3 meticulously critiques Roman Catholic doctrine on Scripture, justification, the church, sacraments, and especially the papacy, grounding all argumentation in exegesis and patristics.

- White, James R. *The Roman Catholic Controversy*. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996, 288 pp. – A clear and contemporary critique of key Catholic teachings—especially authority, justification, tradition, and papal claims. White’s book is widely used in evangelical circles for its readability and careful documentation.
- Webster, William. *The Matthew 16 Controversy: Peter and the Rock*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996, 136 pp. – A historical and exegetical examination of Matthew 16 and the papal claims built on it. Webster surveys patristic, medieval, and Reformation views, exposing the weaknesses in Rome’s reading and defending the Reformed perspective.

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PURSUE GENEROSITY
IDENTIFY WITH CHRIST
TELL THE STORY

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