

The Roman Catholic Claims

Tested by
Scripture and History

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The Roman Catholic Claims as Tested by Scripture & History

The Roman Catholic claims may be stated in a series of propositions after this manner:—

(1) The Lord Jesus Christ "set blessed Peter over the rest of the Apostles."

(2) Our Lord thereby made Peter the ruler of the whole Church of Christ.

(3) Peter became Bishop of Rome, and thereby established Rome as the centre of sovereignty in the true Church of Christ.

(4) Peter bequeathed his supremacy to his successors in the bishopric of Rome.

(5) The Pope, being Peter's successor, is supreme ruler of the Christian Church throughout the world. Hence the Pope claims:—

i "Superiority of ordinary power over all other churches."

ii To be "the supreme judge of the faithful!"

iii "The supreme power of teaching."

(6) "The Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when in discharge of the office of pastor and doctor of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme Apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine regarding faith and morals to be held by the universal Church, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, is possessed of that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed His Church should be endowed for defining doctrine regarding faith or morals; and that, therefore, such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are irreformable of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church."

"But if any one—whom may God avert—presume contradict this our definition: let him be anathema."

(The quotations are taken from "The Dogmatic Decrees of the Vatican Council concerning the Catholic Faith and the Church of Christ" (1870). The English translation used is that of Archbishop Manning's "Petri Privilegium" (London 1871), as printed in Schaff's "Creeds of the Greek and Latin Churches").

Thus the assertion that our Lord Jesus Christ "set blessed Peter over the rest of the Apostles" is made the starting point of a series of claims that are pushed further and further, until they reach an assertion of absolute supremacy and infallibility as inherent in the Papal position and office.

The very audacity of so tremendous a claim makes it compellingly attractive to several types of men and women. It is essentially an appeal to morbid psychology, and it exerts a strong fascination over those who are

too lazy or ignorant to think for themselves. A crowd is always more easily persuaded than a separate individual. The lazy and ignorant tend to act like a mob. Individuals in a mob will do and say things of which they would be ashamed even to think of by themselves, and they are ashamed to think of them afterwards.

But the assertion of an absolute authority, while it appeals mainly to the lazy and ignorant, also exerts an attraction over a few who are neither lazy nor ignorant, but who really are perplexed. They are so anxious to find security that they will pay any price for it. Any port seems safe in a storm.

Thus, so long as there are people in this world who are afraid, or unable, or unwilling to think for themselves, so long also will any claim to infallible authority find men and women ready to submit themselves to it. Many patent medicines enjoy a large sale simply because they are advertised with an air of assurance. Advertisements, an appeal to morbid psychology. Somebody's pills are sold by the ten million at a shilling for two dozen, because such claims are made for them by posters and placards and every other device of publicity. Exactly the same kind of pill, and of a better quality, can be bought at a shilling a gross under another name which is not advertised so conspicuously, but which can easily be obtained by those who will take the trouble to find it out.

The point of the illustration is twofold, namely:—(1) That so many people take an assertion of authority on its face value without really testing its validity. (2) That they pay too big a price for what they get from it.

Let us then examine the Roman claims in the light of Scripture and history.

THE TEST OF SCRIPTURE.

First of all there is the assertion that the Lord Jesus Christ "set blessed Peter over the rest of the Apostles," and thereby made Peter the ruler of the whole Church of Christ. It will be convenient to take these two propositions together.

Three passages of Scripture are quoted in support thereof:—

- (a) John 1:42, "Thou art Simon, the son of Jona; thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A Stone."
- (b) Matthew 16: 18, 19, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell ("Hades") shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."
- (c) John 21:15 to 17, "Feed my lambs"; "Feed my sheep"; "Feed my sheep," being the threefold charge given to Peter by our Lord after His resurrection.
- (d) Luke 21:32 is sometimes adduced in addition to these, namely, our Lord's words to Simon just after the Last Supper, "I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not; and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren."

The Roman Catholic Church, in basing its claims upon these passages has made at least two serious mistakes. In the first place it has ignored

the circumstances and context of these utterances of our Lord, and secondly, it has ignored those other passages of Scripture which tell strongly against its claims.

The key passages Matthew 16:18, 19, for if the Roman interpretation and application of these verses is wrong, then the other passages cited need not occupy your attention. Let us then examine the famous declaration of our Lord to Peter.

What were the circumstances? Jesus had not yet declared Himself to be what He was. He had not even said that He was the Messiah. He had said and done things which implied a claim to exercise Divine authority, but had hitherto refrained from a specific description of Himself as the Son of God, even to His disciples. He preferred to let them form their own opinions from the impression which He had made by their personal contact with Him. When the time was ripe He asked them what men said about Him. They replied that some said that He was John the Baptist; some Elijah, and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. Then He put the challenge to them direct, "But who say ye that I am?" Impulsive Peter answers, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Our Lord commended Peter for his confession of faith, and goes on to say the words which we are trying to elucidate. He concludes by charging the disciples to tell no man that He was the Christ.

Having elicited this confession, Our Lord began to speak to His disciples about the trials in store for Him, which would end in His death and resurrection. This was a great shock to His disciples, and impulsive Peter exclaims, "Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee." But Jesus turned and said unto Peter, "Get thee behind me, Satan; thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men."

When the whole passage is thus carefully studied in close relation to the context and circumstances, it conveys an altogether different impression and suggestion from the Roman interpretation. This different impression is strengthened and confirmed by a study of the other passages of Scripture in which Peter is mentioned. It would take too long to study them all in detail, but they do not indicate that Peter was given or that he exercised any official authority over the other disciples. He is "impulsive Peter," the one who was first to speak. He is certainly the most prominent figure in the group around our Lord, but that is not to say that he was given an absolute sovereignty over them. In fact, there is an incident recorded in Matthew 20, verses 20 to 28, which clearly contradicts the assertion that our Lord "set blessed Peter over the rest of the apostles." James and John asked Jesus for the very position that Peter is said to occupy. Our Lord does not grant their request, but He also says nothing about Peter. In fact, He uses the incident to dissuade any of the disciples from claiming or exercising authority over each other. The whole passage is a direct negation of the claims of Rome.

Again there are the passages which refer to the "power of the keys." There is the passage, already quoted, in Matt. 16:19, which is addressed to Peter; there is the passage in Matt. 18:18, which is addressed to the disciples as a body, and there is the charge, again addressed to the disciples as a body, after our Lord's resurrection, recorded in John 20:23.

These three passages must be taken together, and they clearly imply that in addressing Peter on the first occasion our Lord was regarding him as

a representative of the body rather than as one who was apart from them or over them. Else why did our Lord repeat the statement to them as a group? Peter was the first of them to confess faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and to Peter, therefore, Christ speaks first of the authority which His Church is to exercise over its members. But on two later occasions He commits that authority Himself direct to the disciples as a body, and not through Peter. It would seem, from a comparison of all the passages before us that our Lord was careful to avoid giving His Church the form of an absolute monarchy. In fact, He solemnly warned His disciples against entertaining any such idea. He did so when James and John approached Him with their ambitious request. He did so again at the Last Supper. St. Luke tells us (20:24-27), when at that most inopportune moment there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest. "If Christ had already promised the primacy to Peter, why should this strife have occurred in His very presence on such a serious occasion? Our Lord settled the dispute, not by saying that Peter was set over them, but by telling them that no one of them was to claim or exercise authority over the others.

We have, therefore, reached this conclusion that the Lord Jesus Christ did not "set blessed Peter over the rest of the Apostles," nor did He make Peter the ruler of the whole Church of Christ. He was careful, in fact, to avoid giving any one disciple authority over the rest.

This conclusion we have drawn from a study of the Gospels, and it is borne out and fully confirmed by a study of the Acts and the Epistles. Peter seems to take the lead in the assembly of the disciples after the Ascension (Acts 1:15-26), but no official position is ascribed to him. He simply stands up and makes a proposition to the hundred and twenty who are present that they should choose one to fill up the gap in the twelve that was left by the defection of Judas Iscariot. The appointment was made not by Peter, but by the assembly. Verse 23 says, "and they appointed two, Joseph, called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias." Of these two Matthias was chosen by lot.

Peter is undoubtedly the most conspicuous figure in the first twelve chapters of the Acts, but he acts as spokesman not as ruler or sovereign. He goes to Samaria (Acts 8:14), not on his own authority, but as the agent and representative, together with John, of the Church at Jerusalem. Peter and John were sent to Samaria by the Apostles which were at Jerusalem. In Acts 11 Peter is called to account by those "that were of the circumcision" at Jerusalem, for his actions at Caesarea. He replies to the charge, not by asserting his authority, but by explaining the circumstances. In the greater part of the Acts, the last sixteen chapters, Paul is the dominant figure. Peter appears only once, namely, at the conference in Jerusalem described in chapter 15. It is James, the brother of the Lord, who acts as the president of the conference, and declares its decision (verse 19). Peter makes his contribution to the discussion, an important contribution, but the decision is the work of the conference as a whole, as verses 25 and 28 make clear. "It seemed good to us," and the meaning of "us" is decided by verse 23, namely, "The apostles and elders and brethren" who send the letters conveying the decision of the conference to "the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia."

When Paul arrived at Rome (Chapter 28), he is met and welcomed by the brethren, but no mention is made of Peter.

Paul mentions Peter several times in his Epistles, but on no occasion does he even hint at any supremacy of Peter. In the Epistle to the Galatians, Paul emphatically asserts his independence as clearly as he acknowledges his fellowship with Peter, and gives him credit for his work. Each of them has his own special sphere of work. On one occasion Paul takes Peter severely to task for inconsistent behaviour at Antioch (Gal. 2:14-16).

In his Epistle to the Romans Paul (15:20), when he is announcing his intention of visiting Rome, says that he is careful to avoid intruding into another man's sphere of work, and he makes no mention whatsoever of Peter, although he sends greetings to a large number of persons by name.

Again and again in his Epistles Paul asserts his own authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ, but he knows nothing of any Primacy of Peter.

Neither does Peter in the letters ascribed to him claim any such primacy for himself, or speak as one possessing authority of that kind. Peter's name does not appear in any of the other Catholic Epistles, nor in the "Book of the Revelation."

THE TEST OF HISTORY.

Thus examined by the test of Scripture, the Roman claim that Peter was set over the rest of the Apostles and made the ruler of the whole Church of Christ is seen to be without foundation. Perhaps this is one reason why the Roman Church has always been shy of the open Bible for its members.

Thus the first two propositions which form the basis of the Roman claims are shown to be untenable in the face of those very statements of Scripture which have been alleged as their main support. The New Testament is our only documentary authority for the teaching of Jesus Christ and his Apostles, and that authority is against the primacy of Peter, upon which the claims of Rome are supposed to rest.

The witness of history is as clear as the witness of Scripture against the claims of Rome to rule Christendom. The growth of the Papacy can be fully accounted for by the course of events in Western Europe. As the authority of the Roman Empire waned in the West, the influence of the Bishop of Rome found new scope, and in many respects the Pope took the place of the Emperor as the centre of such unity as remained after the barbarian invaders had established their kingdoms within the boundaries of the ancient empire. We can fully recognise the debt that Christian civilisation owes to the Papacy without endorsing the theories and traditions upon which the Papacy based its claims to the authority which it undoubtedly exercised. The service rendered to mankind by an institution is one thing; the claim put forward by that institution is quite another thing. Taken at its best, the Papacy was trying to do something that was absolutely necessary for the welfare of Western Europe. It claimed authority to do its work effectively, and based its claim on grounds that would appeal to the people who were tried to keep in the right path. We might even go so far as to say that the Popes (in the eleventh or any century), who made extravagant claims, were sincere in their belief that they had a right to make such claims. But it is one thing to make claims, however sincerely, it is quite another thing to justify them. Good work done may, and does,

constitute a claim to regard and respect. But even good work done cannot justify claims that are put forth upon grounds that will not bear candid investigation. And when these claims are used to justify a policy and actions that are bad, then there is the strongest of all reasons for rejecting them.

Now the course of history reveals two sides to the history of the Church of Rome. On one side there are the services which it has undoubtedly performed for the Church and the world at large, and on the other there are events that show that Church in a most unfavourable light, and are a complete negation of its claim to infallibility.

Hence the test of history can be applied first of all to the grounds upon which the claims of the Roman Church have been asserted, and secondly, to the actual history of that Church as it bears upon these claims.

The claims of Rome centre in the authority alleged to have been entrusted to Peter by our Lord Himself. That point has already been dealt with. The next point concerns the connection between Peter and Rome. It is asserted that Peter was the first Bishop of Rome. In the first place it has yet to be proved that there was a Bishop of Rome at all during the first century. Paul wrote an Epistle to the Church at Rome and also wrote several Epistles during his long sojourn at Rome. Many names are given in those letters, and greetings are exchanged but nothing whatever is said about Peter being at Rome and nothing also is said about any Bishop of Rome. The New Testament does not in any way connect Peter with Rome. It is absolutely silent on the subject, where it might easily have mentioned it.

When we come to the earliest Christian literature, we find rare references to Peter in the Apostolic Fathers, but nothing in which we can do more than conjecture that Peter was at Rome and suffered martyrdom there. The Epistle credited to Clement, and dated about A.D. 95 alludes in a rhetorical manner to the martyrdom of Peter. Ignatius, of Antioch, in his letter to the Roman Church addresses his letter, not to the Bishop, who is not even mentioned, but to the Church as a whole, and says that the Roman had been enjoined by Peter and Paul, but has nothing beyond that to say about Peter. He says nothing about an alleged primacy of Peter, nor does he say anything about Peter being Bishop of Rome. In fact, the tradition that Peter was Bishop of Rome is not clearly expressed until a century and a half after the period to which his episcopate is assigned. The story of Peter's episcopate at Rome is obviously a legend of a type familiar to the historical student. The earliest and best evidence that we have suggests that Peter visited Rome and probably suffered martyrdom there, and that evidence is by no means conclusive.

Without going into further detail we can sum up the historical evidence thus: It is not certain that Peter was ever at Rome. It is even more uncertain that he was Bishop of Rome. There is not a scrap of evidence that Peter established Rome as the centre of sovereignty in the true Church of Christ. The Roman claims are based upon a supposition resting upon another supposition that is suggested by an unprovable tradition. When we get to the assertions that Peter bequeathed his alleged supremacy to his successors in the see of Rome we reach the region of simple fiction, and need go no further.

Thus the claims of the Roman Church that are based on its supposed connection with Peter, when they are examined in the light of Scripture and history, vanish into thin air. They fail to pass the test of Scriptural authority and historic witness.

HISTORICAL EXPLANATION OF ROME'S POWER.

If we are challenged to show how otherwise the Roman Church could have grown to what it is to-day, we are able to answer the challenge. We freely admit that the Roman Catholic Church is a world-wide institution that wields an immense influence. That is a plain and obvious fact, and there must be an explanation of it. Of course there is, but we have failed to find that explanation in the assertions which that Church makes about Peter.

We can find an adequate explanation in the historical circumstances that marked the gradual dissolution of the Roman Empire during the transition from ancient to mediæval Europe. These circumstances may be briefly described as the confusions caused by the barbarian incursions and final settlements in Western Europe. The Imperial power had lost its grip, but the magic of the Roman name still remained as a persistent idea, even among the barbarian tribes who worked their will in the ancient empire. The Pope took the place of the Emperor as the embodiment of the Roman imperial idea, and the Roman Catholic claims are in essence the assertion of an ecclesiastical Caesarism. The Roman Church was more to Caesar than to Peter.