

Did Jesus leave us with a blueprint for the Church?

By Graham Osborne

To many Christians, the “church” or denomination you belong to is of minimal importance, and many will change their affiliations multiple times in the course of their lifetime. Rather than a clearly defined, hierarchical, authoritative structure, the “church” is often considered to be essentially invisible – just a loosely bound collection of believers that follows the authority of the Bible alone, and admits to a dizzying array of important, but often contradictory, doctrines.

But how different this view is from the picture painted in the New Testament! Over and over in Scripture, we see Jesus and the Apostles laying down a blueprint for the hierarchy (“holy rule” or “holy order”) of the Christian Church. Let’s take a closer look at seven different aspects of this blueprint.

The first thing to consider is that *Jesus* founded this church. *HIS* Church. One Church. Not hundreds, or even tens of thousands, of denominations like we see today. And he founded it on the Apostles: “the household of God, *built upon the foundation of the Apostles*” (Ephesians 2:19-20).

Secondly, this Church had authority. *His* authority: “he who hears you hears Me” (Luke 10:16). Speaking first to Peter in Matthew 16:16-19, and then again to all the Apostles in Matthew 18:18, Jesus would declare, “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven”. “As the Father has sent Me, so I send you”, Jesus would confirm to His Apostles in John 20:21. Incredible authority!

Jesus also gave the Apostles authority to cast out demons, heal (Mark 6:7-13), baptize (Matthew 28), and forgive sins (John 20:21). And in 1 Timothy 3:15, St Paul would declare that, “the church”, “the household of God”, is “the pillar and foundation of truth.” Similarly, in Ephesians 3:9-10, St Paul would also attest that, “the plan ... the wisdom of God” would be “made known through the Church.” Certainly, the Church is infinitely more than an invisible collection of believers as some suggest.

This third point is a showstopper. The Church had an authoritative leader – appointed by Jesus himself: “thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in Heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose upon earth, it shall be loosed also in Heaven” (Matthew 16:16-19). Incredible authority: the “keys to the kingdom of Heaven”... to bind and loose on earth as in Heaven.

As desperately as most Protestants want to oppose this truth, most theologians have finally conceded the point: Peter was the head of the New Testament (NT) Church. And one simply needs to consider the long list of firsts that Peter heads to see that this is true: he gives the first sermon and 3000 convert, performs the first healing, the first ecclesial punishment, the first raising from the dead, he admits the first Gentiles, silences the first

council with an authoritative doctrinal decision (Acts 15), heads virtually all the NT lists of Apostles, and his name is mentioned 191 times, with St John a distant second at 39.

The writings of the early Church also clearly confirm this primacy. An exceptional example comes to us from St Cyprian (250 AD), the martyred Bishop of Carthage: "It is on him [Peter] that He [Jesus] builds the church ... a primacy is given to Peter ... there is but one church and one chair ... If a man does not hold fast to this oneness of Peter, does he imagine that he still holds the faith? If he deserts the Chair of Peter upon whom the church was built, has he still confidence that he is in the church?" Powerful!

Fourthly, the New Testament (NT) clearly demonstrates Apostolic Succession, with the Apostles and their successors ordaining Bishops, Priests and Deacons. In Acts 14:23, we read that Paul and Barnabas "appointed presbyters (the Greek root for English word, "priest") for them in each church". Similarly, St Paul exhorts Titus: "I left you in Crete so that you might appoint presbyters (Priests) in every town, as I directed you."

In 1 Timothy 3:1-7, St Paul addresses the office of Bishop, instructing that, "If any one aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task." A chapter later, he would remind the young Bishop Timothy of his own ordination, and to "not neglect the gift ... conferred on you through the prophetic word with the imposition of hands of the presbyterate (priests)."

St. Clement of Rome (80 AD, 4th Pope, and ordained to the priesthood by St. Peter) illustrates this need for Apostolic Succession: "Our Apostles also knew... there would be contention over the bishop's office. So... they appointed the above mentioned men, and gave them a permanent character, so that, as they died, other approved men should succeed to their ministry."

Clement's quote leads nicely into our fifth point: the Apostles had perpetual offices that would extend past their deaths. Of particular interest is the office of the Papacy. While many Protestants now acknowledge Peter as the head of the NT Church, few will admit that he held a perpetual office.

But when Jesus appoints Peter as the head of his Church in Matthew 16, he parallels several verses from Isaiah 22:19-22 that document the removal of a corrupt official holding the Davidic office of Vizier [a sort of "prime minister", second in command to the king], but hundreds of years *after* the death of King David himself. The implication is that this was a perpetual office, continuing on since the time of David, and Jesus is referring to it here to indicate that, as the new Son of David, He is now appointing Peter to this *same* office. The New Testament fulfillment of this Old Testament Davidic office would be the Papacy.

Similarly, in Acts 1:16-26, Peter, again as the head of the church, would direct the Apostles to choose a successor to Judas: "May another take his office." If Judas' office needed to be filled, how much more Peter's! Or any of the other Apostles' offices for that matter.

The writings from the early Church also confirm the perpetual nature of the Papacy. St Augustine (≈ 400 AD), hailed as one of the greatest saint/scholars of the Christian Church by Protestants and Catholics alike would confirm: “if the succession of bishops is to be considered, how much more surely, truly and safely do we number them from Peter, to whom, as representing the whole Church, the Lord said: `Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. For, to Peter succeeded Linus, Linus to Anacletus ... to Anastasius” (Augustine lists ALL the Popes in an unbroken line, from St. Peter to the Pope of his time, Anastasius).

Again, consider in more detail St Cyprian’s stunning confirmation of Peter’s office and its primacy: *“It is on him [Peter] that He [Jesus] builds the church, and to him that He entrusts the sheep to feed. And although He assigns power to all the apostles, yet he founded a single chair, thus establishing by His own authority the source and hallmark of the churches’ oneness. No doubt the others were all that Peter was, but a primacy is given to Peter and it is thus made clear that **there is but one church and one chair**. ...If a man does not hold fast to this oneness of Peter, does he imagine that he still holds the faith? If he deserts the Chair of Peter upon whom the church was built, has he still confidence that **he is in the church**?”* He would then add, *“Would the heretics dare to come to the very seat of Peter whence apostolic faith is derived and whither no errors can come?”*

And demonstrating this succession of Peter’s office in the very first decades of the Church (Catholics call this Papal Succession), we have St Clement of Rome (80 AD, 4th Bishop of Rome and 4th Pope) writing a strongly authoritative letter of direction to the Church in Corinth: “You, therefore, who laid the foundation of the rebellion, submit to the presbyters and be chastened to repentance, bending your knees in a spirit of humility” and “If anyone disobey the things which have been said by Him through us, let them know that they will involve themselves in transgressions and in no small danger... being obedient to the things we have written through the Holy Spirit”. Here, the Church at Corinth writes to Clement to decide a serious problem for them, even though St. John the Apostle was still alive – and living just down the road in Ephesus! Why did they appeal to Clement and not St John? And what business would the Bishop of Rome have in authoritatively commanding the Church at Corinth, who would also have their own Bishop? Because Clement was the Pope!

Similarly, our sixth consideration points out that the NT blueprint for this Apostolic, authoritative, hierarchical Church unquestionably carried on into the first centuries of Christianity as well.

St. Clement of Rome (≈ 80 AD) confirms that, “The Apostles... appointed their first-fruits, after testing them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who should believe.” Similarly, St. Irenaeus (190 AD) distinctly outlines the test of a valid Christian Church in his day: “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.”

In 200 AD, the great Christian theologian, Tertullian wrote: “if there be any heresies... let them make known the origins of their Churches; let them unfold the roll of their bishops so coming down in succession from the beginning, that their first bishop had for his ordainer ... one of the Apostles, or of apostolic men, so he were one that continued steadfast with the Apostles. For in this manner do the Apostolic Churches reckon their origin: as the Church of Smyrna recounts that Polycarp was placed there by John; as that of Rome does that Clement was in like manner ordained by Peter. Just so can the rest also show those whom, being appointed by the Apostles to the Episcopate [office of bishop], they have as transmitters of the Apostolic seed.”

Every Bishop, Priest and Deacon in the Catholic Church can trace his ordination back, in an unbroken line, to one of the Apostles. This Apostolic succession is one of the clear marks of the Church Jesus founded, and sets it apart from all others who might try to claim validity as a legitimate Christian church. Clearly, a person does not just get a theology degree, and then have others with theology degrees, but no succession from the Apostles, lay their hands on them and ordain them, as many Protestant denominations do today. Recall again how St Paul reminds the young Bishop, Timothy, to “not neglect the gift” of his ordination that has come about through the “imposition of hands of the presbyterate”, all of whom could trace their ordination back to St Paul or another Apostle.

Our final point is one that should give any Christian who is not Catholic serious pause. The historic Church Jesus founded, the Catholic Church, will never fall. Again, as the wisest of builders, Jesus builds his house – His Church – on rock (c.f. Matthew 7). Built on rock, the storms will never cause it to fall, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (c.f. Matthew 16:16-19). Scripture does speak of individuals falling away from the Church, even of heretics, wolves and scoundrels within the Church, but it *never* speaks of a *total* apostasy of the Church itself.

I think St. Irenaeus captures our current situation succinctly: “it is necessary to obey the presbyters [Greek root for the English word, “priest”] who are in the Church, those who... possess the succession from the Apostles; those who ... have received the certain gift of truth ... But to hold in suspicion others *who depart from the primitive succession*, and assemble themselves together in any place whatsoever.”

But my favorite quote comes from St Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch and disciple and friend of St. John the Apostle: “all should respect the deacons... [and the] bishop as representing the Father and the priests as the council of God and the college of the Apostles. Apart from these there is *nothing that can be called a Church*.”

If Jesus founded a church on rock, promised the gates of Hell would not prevail against it, and left it's leader [Peter] with the keys to the kingdom of Heaven, and appointed him as head of that Church in a perpetual office, and that Church is still here today (the Catholic Church), shouldn't every Christian be a member of this Church? And if your church/ denomination does not have a successor to Peter, and validly ordained Bishops, Priests and Deacons succeeding in an unbroken line from the Apostles, you have to ask yourself: why not???