

### Part 3: Do we see the Office of Pope in the Early Church?

In Part 1 of this series we looked at the Biblical evidence that clearly points to Jesus appointing Peter as head of His Church. In Part 2, we examined the Biblical context of **Matthew 16:13-20** (“*you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven...*”), and saw that Jesus not only appointed Peter as leader of His Church, but that Peter’s position was also an actual office that would carry on after his death, with successors to our present day.

But perhaps the best evidence for the office of Pope, the leader of Jesus’ Church on earth (recall that “pope” is simply a Latin word for father or daddy), comes from the testimony of the Early Church itself.

The key question here is, in the first centuries of the Church, do we see an authoritative, perpetual office of a single man leading the early Church or not? And the answer is a resounding, “YES!”

The examples are numerous, but one of the earliest example is a stunner. Around 80 AD, the Church at Corinth had been in the midst of a significant controversy, with many members attempting to remove some of their legitimate leaders. Corinth wrote a letter to Clement [ordained to the priesthood by St Peter himself, and now the fourth Bishop of Rome, and fourth Pope], asking him to settle the issue, and Pope Clement wrote back with a strongly authoritative reply, firmly directing them to reinstate their rightful leaders: “*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... 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*”

For starters, what business would the Bishop of Rome have telling the Bishop of Corinth what to do, unless he had some existing authority over him? And why would Corinth even ask in the first place if the Bishop of Rome didn’t have a primacy in the matter? Additionally, St John the Apostle was still alive and living just down the road in Ephesus. Why wouldn’t they appeal to him, he being an Apostle and living so close by? Because Clement was Pope and had a legitimate authority over the whole Church!

St. Irenaeus (≈ 190 AD), a disciple of St Polycarp who was taught by St John himself, summarized Clement’s response around 190 AD, writing: “*The blessed apostles, then having founded and built up the Church, committed into the hands of Linus the office of the episcopate. Of this Linus, Paul makes mention in the Epistles to Timothy. To him succeeded Anacletus; and after him, in the third place from the apostles, Clement was allotted the bishopric [of Rome]. This man, as he had seen the blessed apostles, and had been conversant with them, might be said to have the preaching of the apostles still echoing (in his ears) and their traditions before his eyes.... In the time of this Clement, no small dissension having occurred among the brethren at Corinth, the Church in Rome dispatched a most powerful letter to the Corinthians, exhorting them to peace, renewing their faith, and declaring the tradition which it had lately received from*”

*the apostles.*” Note that only the Bishop of Rome is spoken of here, though there were many more Bishops in the Church by this time –because the Bishop of Rome was the Pope and held authority over the Church and all other Bishops.

Focusing back on **Matthew 16** now, because this verse is so critical to determining the rightful leadership in the Christian Church today, many have tried to contend that Jesus was not placing Peter in a perpetual office here. Some even try to appeal to the original Greek text through flawed applications of Greek word usage and grammar. Let this put all that to rest: without exception, every single Greek-speaking Early Church Father that ever wrote on **Matthew 16** unanimously understood the “rock” Jesus was building His church on to be Peter!

Now let us take a look at what some of the greatest theologians of the early Church had to say about all this in their writings. Perhaps one of the clearest accounts comes from **St Cyprian**, the martyred Bishop of Carthage, writing in about 250 AD: *“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?”*

A stunning testimony! What people seem to have lost a sense of today is that in the first one thousand years of the Church and more, everyone was Catholic and the Church was lead by the successor of St. Peter –the Pope. It may be difficult for some to hear this, but it is an unchangeable fact of history. The Church was “apostolic”. It descended directly from the Apostles, and every bishop, priest and deacon -right to the present day -can trace their ordination back to an Apostle. And we can trace Pope Benedict 16 right back to St. Peter!

**St Ignatius**, martyred Bishop of Antioch and disciple of St John the Apostle himself, no less, put it perfectly as early as 110 AD: *“In the same way all should respect the deacons as they would Jesus Christ, just as they respect 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.**”* Wow! If you are in a church at present, that does not have validly ordained Bishops, Priests and Deacons, you have to ask yourself –why doesn’t it? The early Church did –without exception.

Carrying on, lets look at another great theologian and Doctor of the Church, **St. Augustine**, a man highly revered by most of the Protestant reformers incidentally. Addressing **Matthew 16** around 400 AD, he wrote: *“For, if the order of 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` (Mt. 16:18). For, to Peter succeeded Linus, Linus to Anacletus, Anacletus to Clement (of Rome) etc....Siricius to Anastasius.”* Need anymore be said? Here he lists all the popes, starting from Peter right up to the Pope of his day, Anastasius.

And if you still had doubts about the proper interpretation of **Matthew 16**, and whether or not Jesus was instituting a perpetual office here or not, who better to turn to than **St. Jerome**, one of the greatest Biblical scholars to ever live. Writing to Pope Damassus in 375, he said: *"I follow no one as leader except Christ alone, and therefore I want to remain in union in the church with you, that is, with the chair of Peter. I know that on this rock the church is founded... He that is joined to the chair of Peter is accepted by me"*.

If all this was not enough, let us turn to two of the great Popes of the early Church. Around 433 AD, Pope Sixtus III would write: *"all know that to assent to [the Bishop of Rome's] decision is to assent to St. Peter, who lives in his successors and whose faith fails not."* And when **Leo I** (the Great), pope from **440-461 A.D.**, provided decisive teaching about Jesus Christ that guided the bishops at Council of Chalcedon in 451, the bishops exclaimed in unison: *"Peter has spoken through Leo!"* If only Christians today had that sort of conviction!

But let us close with a final, powerful note from St. Irenaeus (≈190 AD) that really says it all: *"...pointing out here the successions of the bishops of the greatest and most ancient Church known to all, founded and organized at Rome ...that Church which has the tradition and the faith which comes down to us after having been announced to men by the Apostles. For with this Church, because of its superior origin, all the Churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world; and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the Apostolic tradition."* Perfect!