

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON PETRINE MINISTRY AND PAPAL PRIMACY

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Interest in the papacy and its role in Christianity is increasing. Two recent bestsellers have raised some contentious issues regarding the integrity of the ministry of the successor of Peter. The publication of John Cornwell's *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* caused a stirring of opinions regarding Pius XII's alleged complicity with the Nazi's "final solution."¹ Garry Wills's *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit* also raised controversy in his surprising portrait of the modern papacy and its unwillingness to face the truth about itself, its past, and its relations with others.²

Notwithstanding these criticisms, there is no longer any doubt concerning the papacy's political power since John Paul II and Ronald Reagan "agreed [1982] to undertake a clandestine campaign to hasten the dissolution of the communist Empire."³ The pope and Reagan were convinced that the fall of communism in Poland would bring about the same result in other Eastern European countries. Yet, aside from political activities and worldwide travels, John Paul's ailing health is feeding numerous rumors about who will be his successor. Will the next pope be as conservative, or will he be more open-minded to change?

Apart from contentious historical interpretations, rumors, and speculation, the halls of academia are also pondering the future of the papacy, and this at the express invitation of John Paul himself. The purpose of this article is to survey some of the current ideas regarding Petrine ministry and papal primacy in the context of the ecumenical movement and to provide one brief response to these ideas.

Invitation to Dialogue

Toward the end of his 1995 Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, John Paul II invited Christians of all persuasions to enter into "a patient and fraternal dialogue"

¹John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (New York: Viking, 1999). Just as contentious for many is the pope's desire to canonize Pius XII. A recent decision on the part of the Vatican to open archival documents of Pius XII's pontificate to the public has brought to light documents that suggest Pius XII helped Italian Jews during World War II (see Antonio Gaspari, "Uncovered: Correspondence of Pius XII," *Inside the Vatican*, February 2003, 14-16; and "Pacelli denounces the Nazis," *Inside the Vatican*, March 2003, 30-31).

²Garry Wills, *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit* (New York: Doubleday, 2000). Wills's sequel, *Why I Am a Catholic* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002) is, in part, an excursus on the history of the papacy. He explains in the introduction that in *Papal Sin* he intends to treat "the papacy's dishonesty in its recent (anti-modern) era" and "the way dishonesty was used, in recent times, to defend whatever papal position was involved" (1).

³Carl Bernstein, "The Holy Alliance," *Time*, February 24, 1992, 28.

with him regarding the ministry of the modern papacy.⁴ Certainly he had in mind the words of his predecessor, Paul VI, who acknowledged that the papacy is the greatest obstacle for Christian unity.⁵ "Whatever relates to the unity of all Christian communities clearly forms part of the concerns of the primacy," John Paul explains.

I am convinced that I have a particular responsibility in this regard, above all in acknowledging the ecumenical aspirations of the majority of the Christian Communities and in heeding the request made of me to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation. . . . I insistently pray the Holy Spirit to shine his light upon us, enlightening all the Pastors and theologians of our Churches, that we may seek—together, of course—the forms in which this ministry may accomplish a service of love recognized by all concerned.⁶

Since the publication of this encyclical, a number of books and articles have been written and symposiums or conferences held in response to this invitation to dialogue. The responses have expressed a variety of viewpoints which are more or less compatible with Roman Catholic ecclesiology and with the important role the papacy plays in its structure. Both Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians have welcomed this invitation and have called for change. Yet change will be difficult because papal primacy is intrinsically connected to Roman Catholic self-identity and ecclesiology.

Relations with Non-Catholic Communities

Of prime importance to John Paul are the good relations entertained between Roman Catholics and other Christian churches, for it is in this context that he hopes for a genuine and cordial dialogue on the modern role of the papacy. However, such goodwill has at times been shaken, particularly with the release of the controversial Declaration *Dominus Iesus* in September 2000 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Written as an attempt to stem the postmodern tide of religious pluralism, relativism, and indifferentism, this declaration reaffirmed the centrality of salvation in Christ and maintained the unique role of the Roman Church in bringing this salvation to the world. Many Protestants readily agreed with its earnest intent to uplift Jesus as the only salvific way to the Father, but they disagreed with *Dominus Iesus* in the assertion that since Protestant churches have not preserved a valid apostolic succession and episcopate, which is found alone in the papacy, they "are not Churches in the proper sense."⁷ What shocked many Protestant denominations, particularly

⁴John Paul II, *On Commitment to Ecumenism Ut Unum Sint*, May 25, 1995, §96 (hereafter cited as *Ut Unum Sint*).

⁵"Le Pape, nous le savons bien, est sans doute l'obstacle le plus grave sur la route de l'œcuménisme" (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 59/4 [1967]: 498).

⁶*Ut Unum Sint*, §95.

⁷Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dominus Iesus* on the Unity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, September 5, 2000, §17.

those which have been part of the ecumenical movement, is that the reference to this incompleteness is coupled with the insistence that the fullness of the universal Church of Christ is to be found only in the Roman Catholic Church.

It is important to remember, however, how much Roman Catholicism has evolved in its understanding of other Christian communities. As the modern ecumenical movement began to take shape in the 1920s, Roman Catholics were advised not to participate in any meetings or conferences with other Christian denominations. When, in 1919, Episcopal and Anglican leaders invited Pope Benedict XV to send representatives to a preparatory conference on Faith and Order, the Roman Catholic leadership made it clear that it would not be possible to acquiesce to their request. Benedict's successor, Pius XI, reiterated the same position in 1927, a few days before the first world conference on Faith and Order began in Lausanne, in the 1928 encyclical *Mortalium Animos*, in which Pius XI decreed that no Catholics were to take part in ecumenical activities.⁸ His reason for this position was quite simple: Because of their refusal to accept the authority of the papacy, Protestants are not true Christians. He states:

For since the mystical body of Christ, like His physical body, is one (I Cor. xii.12), compactly and fitly joined together (Eph. iv. 15), it would be foolish to say that the mystical body is composed of disjointed and scattered members. Whosoever therefore is not united with the body is no member thereof, neither is he in communion with Christ its head. Furthermore, in this one Church of Christ no man can be or remain who does not accept, recognize, and obey the authority and supremacy of Peter and his legitimate successors.⁹

If Catholics participated in such ecumenical conferences, "they would be giving countenance to a false Christianity quite alien to the one Church of Christ."¹⁰

Yet in spite of such a firm position, attitudes gradually began to change as the Catholic Church saw how other Christians cared deeply for unity in the church. The greatest changes occurred during the Second Vatican Council. John XXIII's calling of the Council had a significant ecumenical impact. Since the proclamation of the infallibility of the pope at the First Vatican Council in 1870,¹¹ many Protestants had felt that there would be no further need of councils of the Roman Catholic Church since an infallible pope could make all decisions.¹²

In preparation for the Council, John XXIII created the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity, which was given the responsibility of drafting a decree "On Ecumenism," *Unitatis Redintegratio*. This decree and the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, changed the Roman Catholic

⁸See Oliver Stratford Tomkins, "The Roman Catholic Church and the Ecumenical Movement, 1910-1948," in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948*, 3d ed., ed. Ruth Rouse and Stephen C. Neill (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), 680-684.

⁹Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Mortalium Animos*, January 6, 1928.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹First Vatican Council, Constitution *Pastor Aeternus*, July 18, 1870.

¹²Robert McAfee Brown, *The Ecumenical Revolution: An Interpretation of the Catholic-Protestant Dialogue* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1967), 62.

perception of itself and of Protestant denominations. While prior to Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church viewed itself as the only true visible church of Christ,¹³ Vatican II made room for the recognition of an ecclesial reality in non-Catholic faith communities. This change of attitude, however, did not change the role of papal primacy. Rather, it focused its meaning and significance on Christian unity.

Lumen Gentium states that “the one Church of Christ which in the Creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic[,] . . . constituted and organized in the world as a society, *subsists in* the Catholic Church, which is governed by the Successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure.”¹⁴ The key words here are “subsists in.” By this expression,

the Second Vatican Council sought to harmonize two doctrinal statements: on the one hand, that the Church of Christ, despite the divisions which exist among Christians, continues to exist fully *only* in the Catholic Church, and on the other hand, that “outside of her structure, many elements can be found of sanctification and truth”, that is, in those Churches and ecclesial communities which are not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church. But with respect to these, it needs to be stated that “they derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church” (emphasis supplied).¹⁵

The Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* also establishes this conviction:

It follows that the separated Churches and Communities as such, though we believe them to be deficient in some respects, have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation.

Nevertheless, our separated brethren, whether considered as individuals or as Communities and Churches, are not blessed with that unity which Jesus Christ wished to bestow on all those who through Him were born again into one body, and with Him quickened to newness of life. . . . We believe that Our Lord entrusted *all* the blessings of the New Covenant to the apostolic college *alone*, of which Peter is the head, in order to establish the one Body of Christ on earth to which *all* should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the people of God” (emphasis supplied).¹⁶

The Role of the Papacy in Catholic Ecclesiology

It is evident in the documents referred to so far that the papacy plays a central function in Catholic ecclesiology. In fact, without the papacy there would be no Catholic Church. Based on the three classical Petrine texts of Matt 16:13-19, Luke 22:31-34, and John 21:15-17 and Paul’s understanding of Peter as first

¹³Lactantius, in *Mortalium Animas*, reaffirms that “the Catholic Church is alone in keeping the true worship.”

¹⁴Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, §8. These elements of grace, truth, and sanctification are found in all Christian communities because all of them are somehow historically connected to the Catholic Church.

¹⁵*Dominus Iesus*, §16.

¹⁶Second Vatican Council, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, §3.

witness to the resurrection in 1 Cor 15:5, Roman Catholics believe Jesus conferred on Peter the primacy of a Petrine ministry of unity in the church.

Although the Catholic understanding of other Christian communities has changed from an exclusive to a more inclusive position, its self-perception of being the only church of Christ with the fullness of the gospel has not changed, neither has the role of the pope changed as the successor of Peter. It is perhaps in *Ut Unum Sint* that the current Roman Catholic understanding of primacy is best explained. The implications of this teaching should be noticed:

The Catholic Church, both in her *praxis* and in her solemn documents, holds that the communion of the particular Churches with the Church of Rome, and of their Bishops with the Bishop of Rome, is—in God’s plan—an essential requisite of full and visible communion. Indeed full communion, of which the Eucharist is the highest sacramental manifestation, needs to be visibly expressed in a ministry in which all the Bishops recognize that they are united in Christ and all the faithful find confirmation for their faith.¹⁷

For John Paul II, the Petrine ministry of the papacy is the principle of unity for all Christians (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant), who are all united in the papacy, whether they realize it or not. Given this self-understanding and its implications for Christianity, the pope views himself as the divinely appointed agent to establish the true visible unity of the church. From being an unresponsive and indifferent observer in the early years of the ecumenical movement, the papacy now sees its role as central to the future of any real church unity.

In the midst of these conversations and dialogues, the pope expresses his wish to exercise a ministry of love among all Christians as the servant of the servants of God.¹⁸ “The mission of the Bishop of Rome within the College of all the Pastors consists precisely in ‘keeping watch’ . . . over the handing down of the Word, the celebration of the Liturgy and the Sacraments, the Church’s mission, discipline and the Christian life. . . . He has the duty to admonish, to caution and to declare at times that this or that opinion being circulated is irreconcilable with the unity of faith . . . [and to] declare that a certain doctrine belongs to the deposit of faith.”¹⁹

Responses to John Paul II's Invitation

Will John Paul’s invitation to engage in “patient and fraternal dialogue” on this subject produce any tangible and lasting results? Is there a need for a modern understanding of Petrine ministry and papal primacy among all Christian churches and communities? Are non-Catholic churches willing to take a positive look at the papacy and to welcome its universal ministry? The answers given to these questions by representatives of various churches and denominations over the last few years are, in fact, quite surprising. While some

¹⁷*Ut Unum Sint*, §97.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, §88.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, §94.

evangelical spokespersons have historical and theological difficulties in even seeing the need for a papacy, other churches, which have historically been closer to the apostolic succession, are more willing to consider the potential benefits of a renewed primacy if it were to be understood and exercised in different terms. Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, states: "Today many churches see that in this increasingly globalized world it could be helpful to have such a center of reference as the pope offers—a voice that can speak on behalf of the church."²⁰

Since the pope issued his invitation for dialogue, numerous churches and theologians have offered their responses. In spite of many historical and theological disputes between Rome and other churches, the irenic responses demonstrate an unprecedented openness.²¹

For many theologians, the difficulty with papal primacy is not centered on its existence, for most will admit that it can play a vital role in reunifying Christians. The real difficulty resides in its role and exercise of authority, with the greatest points of dispute relating to the pope's infallible, dogmatic teachings and his universal jurisdiction over the whole church. Many theologians and church representatives, however, could envision a Petrine ministry exercised within a conciliar context.

A tentative acceptance of some forms of Petrine ministry exercised by the pope is evident from many responses to John Paul's invitation to dialogue. For Orthodox Christians, the primacy of the bishop of Rome was historically in the first centuries a primacy of honor, not of juridical authority. "The mandate to feed the flock that was entrusted to Peter, is shared by all the bishops. The Church is not a monarchy; she is a communion whose life is guided, not by the judgement of a single person, *unius arbitrium*, but by the common law of the Catholic Church." Hence, Orthodox churches could, perhaps, accept a primacy of honor for the bishop of Rome, who, as first among equals, exercises within a conciliar context pastoral concern, leadership, and love over the church.²² Likewise, an Apostolic Armenian viewpoint sees the "primacy as a *service of unity* whose aim and duty is to *admonish and caution*, [and] hardly can be rejected by anybody, if it is practiced in conciliarity and collegiality together with bishops

²⁰ "That all may be one: An Interview with Cardinal Walter Kasper," *U. S. Catholic* 67/10, October 2002, 19.

²¹ These papers, presented at a symposium in Rome in December 1997, were published in *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church: Toward a Patient and Fraternal Dialogue*, ed. James F. Puglisi (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999). Of interest also is the publication of the papers read at a conference held at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, June 6-8, 1999 (*Church Unity and the Papal Office: An Ecumenical Dialogue on John Paul II's Encyclical Ut Unum Sint (That All May Be One)*), ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). In response to numerous papers sent to Rome, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity distributed a document titled "Petrine Ministry: A Working Paper" in June 2002.

²² See John H. Erickson, "First Among Equals: Papal Primacy in an Orthodox Perspective," *Ecumenical Trends* 27/2 (February 1998): 1-9.

or patriarchs of other Churches” (emphasis original).²³

Along the same lines, Anglican bishops, in response to *Ut Unum Sint*, expressed the thought that “Anglicans are . . . by no means opposed to the principle and practice of a ministry at the world level in the service of unity.”²⁴ Hence, if papal primacy were to function within the collegiality of other bishops and not be seen as an intrinsically superior form of *episcopate*, such a ministry would serve the integrity of the church at both regional and universal levels.²⁵

The Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues have offered a new way of approaching the conversation on the role of the modern papacy by separating the Petrine function of Christian ministry from the Petrine primacy claimed by the pope. Along with Lutherans, many Christian denominations generally agree with Catholics that Christian ministry does have a Petrine function of unity and oversight defined as a particular form of ministry exercised by a person, officeholder, or local church with reference to the church as a whole.²⁶ This distinction suggests that Peter has indeed a successor in all Christian communities and for the Roman Catholic Church to say it has such a Petrine ministry in its midst should not create, after all, that much controversy. David Yeago remarks that “the central theological achievement of the U.S. [Lutheran-Roman Catholic] dialogues was to relocate the issue of primacy in a teleological context, within which we can ask what good the primacy of Rome might serve, in what ways, and under what conditions.”²⁷ For some Lutherans, the question to ask in these dialogues is “whether it would be legitimate and helpful for the Petrine function of the ministry to receive a special concentration of this sort [in the papacy]. One can ask what reasons there are for locating such a Petrine ministry precisely in the local church of Rome and its bishop.”²⁸

²³Mesrob K. Krikorian, “The Primacy of the Successor of the Apostle St. Peter from the Point of View of the Oriental Orthodox Churches,” in *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church: Toward a Patient and Fraternal Dialogue*, ed. James F. Puglisi (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 93.

²⁴House of Bishops of the Church of England, *May They All Be One: A Response of the House of Bishops of the Church of England to Ut Unum Sint* (London: Church House, 1997), §44, cited in John Hind, “Primacy and Unity: An Anglican Contribution to a Patient and Fraternal Dialogue,” in *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church: Toward a Patient and Fraternal Dialogue*, ed. James F. Puglisi (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 38.

²⁵Hind, 49.

²⁶David Yeago, “The Papal Office and the Burden of History: A Lutheran View,” in *Church Unity and the Papal Office: An Ecumenical Dialogue on John Paul II’s Encyclical Ut Unum Sint (That All May Be One)*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 102-103.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 103.

²⁸*Ibid.* Lutheran theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg is even more open to the universal ministry of the papacy when he states: “It is a fact of Christian history that with the end of the primitive Jerusalem church the church of Rome became the historical center of Christianity. If any Christian bishop can speak for the whole church in situations when this may be needed, it will be primarily the bishop of Rome. In spite of all the bitter controversies resulting from chronic misuse of the authority of Rome in power politics, there is here no realistic alternative. . . . We ought freely to admit the fact of the primacy of the Roman Church and its bishop in Christianity” (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 3:420-421).

Given these qualified responses of Orthodox and Protestant theologians, John Quinn, former archbishop of San Francisco, is correct in saying that "it is immensely significant that in Orthodox, Anglican, or Protestant dialogues about Christian unity there is no mention of abolishing the papacy as a condition for unity. There is, in fact, a growing realization of the true service the Petrine ministry offers the whole Church, how truly providential the primacy is."²⁹ Such an assessment of the ecumenical landscape on dialogues regarding the future role of the papacy reveals that much work has been done in theological thinking during the last fifty years. Opinions have certainly changed since the times when the papacy was commonly equated with the Antichrist or the beast of the apocalypse.

A Response

Historically, the theological contestation of the papal primacy involved essentially the preparation of studies "in which Scripture and the Fathers were combed for arguments for and against" the Roman Catholic claims. "Long before the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement, every shred of possible evidence on the development of the papacy . . . [was] gathered and organized into mutually contradictory systems of interpretation and argument."³⁰ But now, however, according to Quinn's assessment, increasing numbers of Protestant theologians regard papal primacy as a "providential" exercise of Petrine ministry that may play an important role in achieving church unity.³¹

I wish to offer a few reasons why I believe the biblical witness and the historical evidence do not support some of the current thinking on Petrine ministry and papal primacy. Even if the next few pages may resemble earlier studies "in which Scripture and the Fathers are combed for arguments" against the Roman claims, I still believe that genuine theological reflection on this subject must be enlightened by biblical and historical evidence. Furthermore, current Roman Catholic scholarship supports the assertion that it is biblically and historically inaccurate to link the current system of papal government with what happened in Rome between 34 and 150 A.D. While many scholars agree with this biblical and historical assessment, there are fundamental differences regarding how the historical facts are interpreted. My survey of biblical and historical evidences will necessarily be brief. After considering the lack of biblical evidence to support the institution of the papacy based on the ministry of Peter in Rome, we will consider the witness of the Apostolic Fathers on the development of church government and the steps taken in the development of the concept of apostolic tradition and succession in the second century. I will end this article with a brief look at the impact of theological methodology on this discussion.

²⁹John R. Quinn, *The Reform of the Papacy: The Costly Call to Christian Unity* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 181. See also idem, "The Exercise of the Primacy" in *Commonweal* 123/13, July 12, 1996, 11-20.

³⁰Yeago, 101.

³¹Quinn, *The Reform of the Papacy*, 181.

The Biblical Evidence

However disputable the interpretation of Matt 16:13-19 and other Petrine texts may be, there is no obvious support in Scripture for the institution of the papacy.³² In fact, both Peter and Paul taught that Jesus is the rock on which the church has been founded.³³ Nowhere do we find in the NT that Jesus or the apostles instituted a sacramental episcopacy or papal primacy based on Peter's apostleship to promote, foster, or maintain the unity of early Christians. Rather, unity is defined in terms of Christians being in Christ through their acceptance of Jesus as Savior and Lord and through baptism (John 11:51, 52; Gal 3:26-28). Their unity is rooted in their common relationship with a heavenly Father, expressed in loving service for one another, and in devotion to the truth of God's word (John 17). Unity is experienced in faithfulness and devotion to the apostles' teachings and in service to the same Lord (Acts 2:42-47). As the apostles established new churches throughout Asia Minor, they established a presbyteral system of church government (Acts 14:23). When issues arose that threatened to divide the early church, a council of representatives from local churches met with the apostles to discuss, resolve the issues, and preserve Christian unity (Acts 15).

Also significant is the silence of Scripture on the historical role played by Peter in many aspects of early church organization and his relationship with the church of Rome. Nowhere does Scripture reference Peter as the founder of the church of Rome. Later, when Church Fathers began to make references to the church of Rome, they referred to Peter *and* Paul together.³⁴ The earliest reason offered to give some preeminence to Rome was not that Peter had founded the church in Rome, nor that he had been its first bishop, but rather that both Peter *and* Paul had suffered martyrdom in Rome and there had witnessed for their faith.³⁵ When Irenaeus of Lyons made a list of the bishops of Rome as an example of a church which could trace its origin and teaching to the apostles in his argument against the Gnostics, he named neither Peter nor Paul, but Linus as the first bishop of Rome.³⁶

³²This conclusion is readily accepted by Catholic scholars. Wills comments: "The papacy did not come into existence at the same time as the church. In the words of John Henry Newman, 'While Apostles were on earth, there was the display neither of Bishop nor Pope.' Peter was not a bishop in Rome. There were not bishops in Rome for at least a hundred years after the death of Christ. . . . Newman thought the papacy could not, at the earliest, arise until after the fourth century, when the Nicene Council exercised the power that the popes would later claim: 'I say then the Pope is the heir of the Ecumenical Hierarchy of the fourth century, as being, what I may call, heir by default'" (*Why I Am a Catholic*, 55).

³³Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:4-8; 1 Cor 10:4; Eph 2:19-22; and Rom 9:33.

³⁴1 Clement 5; Ignatius, *Romans* 4; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I.25.2, III.1.1, III.3.2, IV.35.2; Tertullian, *Prescriptions against the Heretics* 36. Cyprian of Carthage seems to be the first to associate only Peter with the preeminence of the church of Rome in *The Unity of the Catholic Church*, 4.

³⁵1 Clement 5. Tertullian followed the same line of argument in *Prescriptions against the Heretics* 36.

³⁶Irenaeus *Against Heresies* III.3.3. Although in this passage Irenaeus refers to the blessed apostles Peter and Paul as the joint founders of Rome, it is more accurate to say that the church

Early Church Government

Scripture gives a number of indications that the apostles instituted a presbyteral system of church government in the early church (e.g., Acts 14:23, 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5; 1 Pet 5:1-4). Likewise, the writings of the Apostolic Fathers contain numerous indications that early churches were led by a collegial group of presbyters (elders) or overseers (bishops).³⁷ Where the office of bishop existed, as in some churches of Asia Minor, the leadership of the bishop is clearly exercised within a council of presbyters.³⁸

The epistle of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians (*1 Clement*, ca. 95 A.D.) sheds some crucial light on the forms of church government in the early church. The occasion that prompted this letter was a schism among the presbyters in Corinth, some of whom seem to have been dismissed unfairly (44.3). Clement wrote on behalf of the church of Rome to exhort the Corinthians to end the strife and restore the unity and harmony they had lost.³⁹ Of interest is Clement's discussion of ministry in Corinth and the vocabulary he used. As Clement discusses the office of overseer, he indicates that the apostles provided for an orderly succession in the ministry they established (44.1-3) and that this function of oversight is held by a group of presbyters-overseers. From this, Francis Sullivan concludes that "there is general agreement among scholars that the structure of ministry in the church of Rome at this time would have resembled that in Corinth: with a group of presbyters sharing leadership, perhaps with a differentiation of roles among them, but with no one bishop in charge."⁴⁰ He adds:

of Rome was already established before their first arrival in Rome. This is certainly the case with Paul, who wrote his letter to the Christians living in Rome long before he arrived in Rome (Francis Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* [New York: Newman, 2001], 149).

³⁷In agreement with many other scholars, Brian E. Daley states that in the Pastoral Letters, *1 Clement*, and *The Shepherd of Hermas*, "the terms ἐπίσκοπος ('bishop,' 'overseer,' 'supervisor') and πρεσβύτερος ('elder') are used interchangeably, and so suggest government by a body of elders rather than a single bishop" ("The Ministry of Primacy and the Communion of Churches" in *Church Unity and the Papal Office: An Ecumenical Dialogue on John Paul II's Encyclical Ut Unum Sint [That All May Be One]*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 39).

³⁸Scholars argue that the use of the plural forms of *presbyteros* (presbyter) and *episkopos* (overseer) in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers (e.g., *Didache* 15; *1 Clement* 42, 44, 57) is an indication that church authority was under the responsibility of a council of elders or overseers. Sullivan, 90, comments: "The *Didache* does not mention presbyters, but it has *episkopous* in the plural. For that reason the word is best translated as 'overseers,' as there is no indication that the local church of the *Didache* was led by a single bishop." See also Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1969), 76-85.

³⁹Sullivan, 91, remarks: "In the past, Catholic writers have interpreted this intervention as an early exercise of Roman primacy, but now it is generally recognized as the kind of exhortation one church could address to another without any claim to authority over it."

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 100.

I Clement certainly does not support the theory that before the apostles died, they appointed one man as bishop in each of the churches they had founded. This letter witnesses rather to the fact that in the last decade of the first century, the collegial ministry of a group of presbyters, like that seen in the later writings of the New Testament, was still maintained in the Pauline church of Corinth. This was most likely the case also in the church of Rome at this period.⁴¹

The letters of Ignatius of Antioch, written about 115 A.D., have greatly influenced theological reflection on ecclesiology and continue to be a focus of scholarly contention and discussion.⁴² While many scholars argue that Ignatius's approach to church unity may be colored by his own experience with the church of Antioch and the apparent schism it experienced just before he left for Rome, his concerns for church unity and the role he ascribes to the bishop of a local church are an important part of any discussion on the development of episcopacy in the early church. In his opposition to false teachers, Ignatius stresses the importance of the local bishops in preserving the unity of the church. Not only is the bishop to be regarded as the Lord himself (*Ephesians* 6.1), but, in his hierarchical structure, the office of bishop becomes constitutive of the whole congregation; the congregation exists because there is a bishop (*Trallians* 1.1; *Ephesians* 1.1). However, Ignatius saw the bishop as working in harmony with his presbyters; in fact, "the harmony of the presbytery with the bishop is clearly a key to the unity of the whole community [*Ephesians* 4.1]."⁴³ What is not clear in Ignatius's letters (and is a focus of ongoing discussions) is whether the people Ignatius identifies as bishops in the various churches he writes to had been elected as bishops, or whether he is the one who considers them to be the bishops of these churches from among a group of presbyters. A case in point is Polycarp's letter to the Philippians written a short time after Ignatius's letters. Polycarp, who is identified by Ignatius as the bishop of Smyrna (*Polycarp* 1.1), speaks of the presbyters at Philippi, but makes no mention of a bishop there, nor does he refer to himself as a bishop. Other documents from the same period (the *Didache*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and Justin Martyr's *First Apology*) do not speak of a single bishop having oversight in Christian churches. These historical evidences seem to point in one direction: early Christian churches, up to about the middle of the second century, were led by a group of presbyters, and few churches had appointed a single bishop within a group of presbyters to oversee their communities. This is also true of the church of Rome. The primacy of the bishop of Rome emerged much later as a result of a synergy between various ecclesiological, historical, and political factors.⁴⁴

⁴¹Ibid., 101. William La Due agrees: "The situation in Rome was no doubt similar. The Roman church was governed by a college of presbyters or presbyters-bishops until roughly the middle of the second century" (*The Chair of Saint Peter: A History of the Papacy* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999], 21).

⁴²J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 79.

⁴³Sullivan, 107. Interestingly, in his letter to the Romans, Ignatius makes no mention of a bishop in Rome. He likely knew that the Roman church was not presided over by a single bishop.

⁴⁴Kasper, 19, comments: "Everybody knows there has been a long history of its [the

The Concept of Apostolic Tradition and Succession

When Gnosticism began to threaten the unity of the church in the second century, church leaders appealed to the concept of apostolic tradition and succession to support their claim to historic Christianity. Interestingly, however, the origin of the concept of apostolic tradition rests with Gnosticism. It was the Gnostics who first claimed to have received their special teachings from the apostles and to possess the true historical, apostolic tradition. These teachings were not accessible to everyone, but only to initiated witnesses of the apostles or their disciples.⁴⁵ While Christianity was at first hesitant with the concept of tradition,⁴⁶ it adopted this concept in response to the Gnostics. For the early church, apostolic tradition and succession referred to the joint testimony of the early Christian communities and to the apostolic teachings they agreed on. As such, the church was a community of communities, opposed to the private revelations and charismatic individualism of the Gnostics, and their joint authority was the basis of their opposition to Gnosticism. The Church's appeal to the apostolic teachings and their references to chains of witnesses or teachers, extending back to the apostles, confirmed in their minds that their apostolic tradition was more reliable than that of the Gnostics.⁴⁷

Hegesippus (ca. 180) seems to be the first author to refer to this concept by compiling a list of the bishops of Rome.⁴⁸ "Hegesippus apparently felt that by compiling a continuous list of bishops who handed the revelation of Jesus down—one to the other from generation to generation in each of the major apostolic churches—he could most effectively guarantee the authenticity of the Church's doctrine." Hegesippus's contribution was apparently his appeal that there was an uninterrupted "handing down" of the authentic message of Jesus in the Roman church from the time of the apostles.⁴⁹ Irenaeus of Lyons perfected Hegesippus's list in his *Against Heresies* (III.3.3), with the same intent to appeal "to the tradition handed down by the apostles and transmitted in the Christian churches by the bishops who succeeded one another as teachers down to his own day."⁵⁰

papacy's] evolution. The Petrine ministry in the first century was not exercised in the same way the bishop of Rome exercises it today."

⁴⁵Von Campenhausen, 158-159.

⁴⁶The teachings of Jesus and Paul were critical of the concept of tradition: Mark 7:1-13; Col 2:8; 1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:12-14.

⁴⁷Von Campenhausen, 162-163; Wills, *Why I am a Catholic*, 63.

⁴⁸Hegesippus's list has been preserved in part in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* IV.22.

⁴⁹La Due, 26. Eusebius does not give Hegesippus's complete list of the bishops of Rome from the time of Peter but acknowledges that Hegesippus made such a list while he was in Rome.

⁵⁰Sullivan, 145. See also von Campenhausen, 170. Irenaeus's list of bishops in Rome is given as an example of what could be done with many other churches founded by the apostles or their coworkers. His list includes the following twelve names up to his time: Linus, Anacletus, Clement, Evaristus, Alexander, Sixtus, Telesphorus, Hyginus, Pius, Anicetus, Soter, Eleutherus.

However attractive these two lists may be, scholars have raised some issues regarding their validity. La Due remarks that

the historical validity of the Roman list [in Hegesippus] is questionable because it is now quite generally accepted that the monarchical episcopate in Rome did not originate much before 140-150 A.D. The notion of apostolic succession, however, was clearly shifting from emphasis on the authentic teaching, which was handed down from generation to generation, to the list of teachers—one succeeding the other in an unbroken chain. The names prior to Anicetus that Hegesippus enumerated—people such as Linus, Clement, Evaristus, Telesphorus, etc.—were in all probability historical figures who were in one way or another prominent presbyters or presbyter-bishops in the Roman congregation. However, to position them in a continuous line of monarchical heads from Peter to Anicetus is not historically justifiable.⁵¹

In his *Prescriptions Against the Heretics* (ca. 200), Tertullian also challenged the right of Gnostics to claim their teachings were given to them by the apostles or their coworkers. Tertullian's objections asserted that the heretics have no right to argue their case from Scripture since the Scriptures are the exclusive property of the apostolic churches, in which the teaching of the apostles has been faithfully handed on.⁵² Faithfulness to the apostles' teachings and doctrines is the real qualification for apostolicity. His argument is based on the harmony of teaching existing between churches founded by the apostles and newer churches and, hence, communion exists between older and newer churches because there is harmony and faithfulness to the same apostolic teaching. Sullivan comments: "It is noteworthy that Tertullian emphasizes the apostolic churches as reliable witnesses to what the apostles taught, rather than bishops as successors to the apostles. His proof that the Catholic churches of his day remained faithful to apostolic doctrine consisted of the assertion that they were in communion with churches known to have been founded by the apostles."⁵³ The authoritative point of reference is the

⁵¹La Due, 26. Sullivan, 149, agrees with this analysis: "What I said there [in the previous chapter] about Hegesippus's list would also apply to that of Irenaeus, namely, given the fact that toward the end of the second century the clergy of Rome could provide the names of the men who *at that time were thought of* as having been the past bishops of their church, we can conclude that they remembered these men as the principal leaders and teachers among the Roman presbyters. At what point in time the leading presbyters in Rome began to be called 'bishops' remains unknown."

⁵²Tertullian *Prescriptions against the Heretics* 15, 20.

⁵³Sullivan, 156. He, 157, adds: "Tertullian's argument took for granted that the apostles and 'apostolic men' [i.e., coworkers] who founded churches had left bishops in charge of them and that the bishops of his day were the successors of those original bishops. It seems evident that he did not consider this a matter of controversy. . . . [H]is argument focused on the apostolicity of the Catholic churches, proven by the fact that they could provide a list of their bishops going back from the present incumbent to one appointed by an apostle or by an 'apostolic man.'" Catholic churches which could not trace their list of bishops back to apostolic times simply because they had been founded more recently also had a valid claim to apostolicity: they shared the same faith with the churches founded by apostles and were in full communion with them.

teaching of the apostles, not the successors to the apostles.⁵⁴

A Matter of Methodology

Another and greater issue regarding the primacy of the successor of Peter is the clear acknowledgment by theologians and church historians that references to the NT and early church history will not resolve the issue, but that a lack of NT and historical evidence is no longer an obstacle. This thought is presented by James Puglisi in his summary of the outcome of a symposium in Rome on the subject of Petrine ministry and papal primacy: "In spite of the fact that we would like to find the solution in our queries of today on such issues as the primacy and the papacy in the New Testament, the fact is that the New Testament alone cannot provide the answer to many of the issues which touch upon the papacy and the primacy of the Petrine ministry."⁵⁵ Such a clear admission among ecumenical scholars is, I believe, a matter of concern for biblical theologians, who should voice uneasiness with such an open departure from biblical theology and the acceptance of a nonbiblical ecclesiology. This claim that the NT cannot provide all the answers regarding the ministry of the successor of Peter is predicated by the acceptance of a higher-critical hermeneutical approach to Scripture and history. For instance, Catholic church historian Klaus Schatz asks three penetrating questions at the beginning of his book *Papal Primacy: From Its Origins to the Present*:

The further question whether there was any notion of an enduring office beyond Peter's lifetime, if posed in purely historical terms, should probably be answered in the negative. That is, if we ask whether the historical Jesus, in commissioning Peter, expected him to have successors, or whether the author of the Gospel of Matthew, writing after Peter's death, was aware that Peter and his commission survived in the leaders of the Roman community who succeeded him, the answer to both cases is probably 'no.' . . . If we ask in addition whether the primitive Church was aware, after Peter's death, that his authority had passed to the next bishop of Rome, or in other words that the

⁵⁴I believe Christ's discussion of the concept of Jewish succession can enlighten us to some extent. When he and some Jewish leaders argued over the validity of his testimony in John 8, the leaders claimed to know better than Jesus since they were descendants of Abraham. Jesus questioned this claim: "If you were Abraham's children, then you would do the things Abraham did" (John 8:39). In plotting to kill Jesus, they were not doing the works of Abraham. Rather, for Jesus a mere lineal descent from Abraham without a spiritual connection with him is of no value. I deduce from this discussion that apostolic succession is not to be defined as a succession of ordinations from one bishop to another; it does not rest upon the transmission of ecclesiastical authority, but upon a spiritual relation and faithfulness to the teachings of the apostles.

⁵⁵James Puglisi, "Afterword," in *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church: Toward a Patient and Fraternal Dialogue*, ed. James F. Puglisi (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 198. Metropolitan John of Pergamon made a similar assessment in his presentation "Primacy in the Church: An Orthodox Approach": "The historical method . . . has been used in the past extensively and . . . has led to no fruitful result. The question whether the primacy of the Bishop of Rome in the Church can be justified on the ground of biblical and Patristic evidence cannot decide the issue" (ibid., 117). "The primacy of the Bishop of Rome has to be theologically justified or else be ignored altogether" (ibid., 123).

head of the community at Rome was now the successor of Peter, the Church's rock and hence the subject of the promise in Matthew 16:18-19, the question, put in those terms, must certainly be given a negative answer. . . . If one had asked a Christian in the year 100, 200, or even 300 whether the bishop of Rome was the head of all Christians, or whether there was a supreme bishop over all the other bishops and having the last word in questions affecting the whole Church, he or she would certainly have said no.⁵⁶

Yet, having said this, Schatz concludes that these are not the right questions to ask. He believes these negative answers are inevitable because we approach the first centuries with the yardstick of our modern standards. He admits that a study of historical documents with such a frame of mind will inevitably bring these conclusions; and he believes the primacy is an institution that arose over many centuries, shaped by various historical contexts, in reaction to and as an answer to particular historical and political needs and concerns within the church. Reading and analyzing historical documents, whether they be Scripture or early Church Fathers, will lead to a proper understanding of the development of the papacy, its merits, value, and role, only if Scripture, tradition, and history are studied within a proper historical and theological hermeneutic.⁵⁷ Schatz's hermeneutical approach outlines the development of papal primacy within the contingency of history, culture, and politics:⁵⁸ "It is certainly clear that the primacy did not develop only as a result of theological factors and ecclesiastical necessities, but also *through political factors and interests*, these moreover being closely inter-related in pre-modern times" (emphasis original).⁵⁹ What seems obvious in Schatz's approach to Scripture and history is an interest in finding a proper theological and historical justification for the current ministry of the successor of Peter.

⁵⁶Klaus Schatz, *Papal Primacy: From Its Origins to the Present* (Colleville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 1-3.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 3. Sullivan, viii, also recognizes that "the question that divides Catholics and Protestants is not whether, or how rapidly, the development from the local leadership of a college of presbyters to that of a single bishop took place, but whether the result of that development is rightly judged an element of the divinely willed structure of the church. This question asks about the theological significance of a post-New Testament development, which history alone cannot answer."

⁵⁸Klaus Schatz adds: "The historical problem of the primacy consists in the constant amalgamation—from the beginning and throughout all its further development—of these two factors that can never be clearly separated: concern for Christian unity and, at the same time, a conception of this unity in contingent forms of cultural unity, of better self-defense against ideologies or political systems, and even an expression of the primacy in political or quasi-political forms. . . . [T]he problem of *continuity or rupture* arises whenever the primacy, in response to new historical challenges, takes on a new historical form. As a general rule we can say that a right or a new idea is never invented without roots in the earlier tradition" ("Historical Considerations Concerning the Problem of the Primacy," in *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church: Toward a Patient and Fraternal Dialogue*, ed. James Puglisi [Colleville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999], 2).

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 9. Schatz, 4-7, identifies five steps in the development of papal primacy after the fourth century.

Conclusion

With reference to Petrine ministry, there is no clear indication in Scripture that Jesus intended to give to Peter a primacy of ministry among his disciples, or that he appointed him to become the head of the church. Scripture and early church history indicate that Peter was not the founder of the church of Rome, that he was not its first bishop and that Rome did not have a bishop until about the middle of the second century. As admitted by many scholars, neither Jesus nor the apostles had in mind the institution of a universal Petrine ministry or papal primacy when the NT church was founded. Furthermore, both Scripture and early church history confirm that the system of church governance instituted by the apostles was a presbyteral system, not a monarchical episcopacy. When the concept of apostolic tradition and succession began to be used among Christians in their opposition to Gnosticism, their intent was to safeguard the teachings of the apostles as found in their writings and not to institute a new form of church government. What mattered in their argumentation was that a church's teaching was in harmony with that of other churches, even if it could not trace its origin to an apostle or one of the apostles' coworkers. Christians instituted the concept of apostolic tradition and succession to uphold the teachings and testimony of Scripture, not to replace them.

The hermeneutical approach and analysis espoused by many to support the modern Petrine ministry of the papacy are not new; this is an example of the persistent conflict between Scripture and tradition. The classic Protestant position is still valid: the teachings of Scripture should serve as the only infallible and reliable guide to doctrinal and theological developments in ecclesiology. The biblical witness and historical evidences from the early church do not support a universal Petrine ministry exercised by the primacy of the bishop of Rome.