

Is the Roman Catholic Church the Only Church of Christ?

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The Vatican's recently published response to questions about its doctrine on the Church puzzled many Christians. The document, dated June 29, 2007 (released July 10, 2007), said nothing new, yet it reminded the world that Churches not in communion with Rome are considered defective in the eyes of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). Parts of a previous declaration, *Dominus Iesus* (2000), were restated; namely, that Orthodox Churches are defective for not recognizing the primacy of the Pope, and that Protestant "ecclesial communities ... cannot be called 'Churches' in the proper sense." The reason given for the latter assertion was that "these Communities do not enjoy apostolic succession in the sacrament of Orders, and are, therefore, deprived of a constitutive element [the Eucharist] of the Church." These clear statements of the RCC are an invitation for non-Catholics to speak the truth in love.

It is important to understand the theological context that prompted the recent Vatican release and *Dominus Iesus* (DI), from which it was derived. In both documents, the Vatican expressed concern about the diversity of interpretations of Vatican II, specifically in the area of ecclesiology, the doctrine of the Church. The Vatican wants to protect the Church from relativism wherein "*what is true for some would not be true for others*" (DI, 4), so it restated the definition of the RCC and clarified its position regarding Orthodox and Protestant Churches. By addressing some fundamental differences between the three major branches of Christianity, the Vatican has provided an excellent opportunity for the other two to compare and contrast their own views *vis-a-vis* the RCC.

Key questions prompted by the Vatican's statement will be evaluated in this paper based on consistency with Christian truth, as suggested in DI. The primary witness of this truth is God-inspired Scripture, which presents the teaching and practices of the founding fathers of the Church. Indeed, as Vatican II declared: "*Sacred Scriptures provide for the work of dialogue an instrument of the highest value in the mighty hand of God for the attainment of that unity which the Saviour holds out to all*" (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 21, 1964). Additional helpful insights will be gleaned from occasional references to subsequent church fathers.¹ The topics to be addressed include: What does the Bible teach about the Church? What is required for a valid Eucharist? Is "apostolic succession in the sacrament of Orders" necessary? What is the role of the Pope in the Church?

What Does the Bible Teach about the Church?

"*For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.*" Mt 18:20 (NASB)

According to the Vatican, a "Church" cannot exist without apostolic succession in the sacrament of Orders (ordination), which in turn is required for the Eucharist (communion). On face value, this view

¹ Unless otherwise stated, references cited can be found on the internet with a good search engine. Most of the early church fathers' writings are available online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/>.

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seems to contradict New Testament (NT) references to “churches” that met in the homes of individuals who undoubtedly were not ordained in a manner recognized by the RCC. What does Christian truth as revealed in the NT and affirmed by the early church fathers profess about the Church?

The Greek NT word for church is *ekklesia*, meaning an “assembly duly summoned.”² Clement of Alexandria wrote, “*For it is not now the place, but the assemblage of the elect, that I call the Church*” (*Stromata*, 7.5, ca. AD 220). For Clement, the “assemblage of the elect” meant those “summoned” or called by God in Christ (cf. 1 Pet 1:1-2). In the NT, *ekklesia* also is associated with a congregation (cf. Acts 7:38, applied to Israel) and the “household of God” (1 Tim 3:15).³ More specifically, a Christian church (*ekklesia*) is a gathering of “*those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours*” (1 Cor 1:2).

The NT uses the word, *ekklesia*, over one hundred times. Sometimes it refers to churches in private homes (cf. Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Philem 1:2), at other times, to city-wide assemblies. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul mentions both the church at Rome that met in Prisca and Aquila’s house (16:5) and “*the whole church*” in Rome (16:23). Paul and Barnabas “*gathered the church together*” at Antioch after their first missionary journey (Acts 14:27). Churches are often identified by the city in which they meet; e.g., Jerusalem (Acts 8:1), Antioch (Acts 13:1), Cenchrea (Rom 16:1), Thessalonica (2 Th 1:1), and the seven churches in “Asia” (cf. Rev ch.2-3). These churches are examples of local assemblies that are part of the greater entity, the “house (or household) of God,” the whole Body of Christ (Eph 1:22-23).

The larger Body of Christ includes and transcends all local assemblies. For example, the Church can be viewed at a regional level, e.g., “*the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria*” (cf. Act 9:31); but in its entirety, it is “*His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all*” (cf. Eph 1:22-23). This Church consists of all the members who are “*holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God*” (Col 2:19). It is also likened to a spiritual building, “*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit*” (Eph 2:20-22). The writer of Hebrews offers a glimpse of the Church beyond space and time: “*But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect*” (Heb 12:22-23). Finally, Scripture describes

² Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon (LSJ, 1940), *ekklesia*.

³ Acts 19:32ff is an exception, where *ekklesia* refers to a civic gathering in Ephesus.

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the Church as the bride of Christ and tells of the wedding in which He will “*present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless*” (Eph 5:27ff; cf. Rev 19:7). As presented in Scripture, then, the Church is a multi-faceted entity, manifested in local assemblies that are joined together spiritually as a holy temple and a living “body” connected to its head, Jesus Christ. The Church in its fullness transcends geography, time and space.

In its most elemental form, “Church” is defined by Jesus’ words, “*For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst*” (Mt 18:20). A church is people meeting in Jesus’ name, with the expectation that He, who has called them to be His disciples, is indeed in their midst. Ignatius of Antioch wrote (ca. AD 105), “*where Christ is, there is the Catholic Church*” (Letter to the Smyrnaeans, 8). Tertullian, early in the third century, said: “*But where three are, a church is, albeit they be laymen*” (Exhortation to Chastity, 7). In other words, the body (two or more people) together with the head (Jesus) is the Church. In light of the above testimonies, the RCC’s sectarian view of the term, “Church,” appears to be inconsistent with God’s Word and early Church belief and practice. One can conclude that Protestant Churches are part of God’s household, and thus deserve to be called Churches in both a biblical and historical sense.⁴

What is Required for a Valid Eucharist?

“*This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.*” Lk 22:19

According to the RCC, only a priest or bishop ordained in apostolic succession is qualified to administer the Eucharist. Yet, based on the previous discussion, one might infer from Matthew 18:20 that any group of believers who gather together in Jesus’ name should be able to obey His command, “*do this in remembrance of Me.*” The daily celebrations of the Eucharist among the thousands of Christian converts “from house to house” following Pentecost (Acts 2:42, 46) most assuredly did not rely on “consecrated” presbyters and bishops.⁵ After all, even the first deacons of the Church weren’t selected until some time

⁴ This paper cannot adequately cover the subject of ecclesiology; however, a few additional comments may be helpful. Jesus’ instructions for the Church include: making disciples, baptizing and teaching them (Mt 28:19-20); loving God and one another (Mt 22:37-40; Jn 13:34-35); cultivating discipline, prayer and worship (Mt 18:15-20; Jn 4:23-24); and sharing the Lord’s Table (Lk 22:17-20). Scripture also teaches that the Church is one (one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father; cf. Eph 4:4-6), holy (called to be holy as a temple of the Holy Spirit; cf. 1 Cor 6:19-20; 1 Pet 1:15-16), catholic (from every tribe and tongue and people and nation; cf. Rev 5:9-10), and apostolic (built on the foundation of the apostles and devoted to the apostles’ teaching; cf. Eph 2:20; Acts 2:42). These criteria apply equally to all Churches.

⁵ The sacrament of Orders, as defined by the RCC, cannot be found in Scripture. Ordination through the laying on of hands was originally a function of the local church “presbytery” (cf. 1 Tim 4:14; 5:22; *Didache*, 15). The NT defines Church offices for overseeing, shepherding and providing administrative care. These offices include *episkopos* (bishop or overseer), *presbyteros* (elder or presbyter, translated “priest” in the Douay-Rheims [D-R] Bible), and *diakonos* (deacon); cf. Acts 20:17-28; 1 Tim 3:1-7; Tit 1:5-9; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:1-5. According to the

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had elapsed after Pentecost (Acts 6). Even centuries after the New Testament was written, the Church Father, Basil of Caesarea, made allowances for communion “*without the presence of a priest or minister*” (cf. Letter 93, ca. AD 370). Thus, consistent with the practice of the NT Church (including house churches), Basil affirmed that the Eucharist does not depend on the sacrament of Orders.

The RCC also asserts that a valid Eucharist requires a literal interpretation of Jesus’ words, “*This is My body ... this is My blood*” (Mt 26:26,28) and “*unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in yourselves,*” (Jn 6:53, cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC] 1384-1400). Why single out these two sayings from the many other figurative sayings in the New Testament? Jesus didn’t change into a vine when He said, “*I am the vine;*” yet the RCC insists that the bread changed into His flesh when He said, “*This is My body,*” at the Last Supper. The RCC also claims that the communion bread, under the invocation of its priests, is changed into the physical body of Christ, in spite of its unchanged physical properties (the doctrine of transubstantiation). In view of the interpretive difficulties inherent in the above quotations, it would be helpful to consider what the Apostle Paul and some of the church fathers taught.

The earliest interpretation of Jesus’ words at the Last Supper is found in 1 Cor 11:26-31. Paul’s support for a figurative interpretation begins with his triple repetition of the phrases, “*eat the bread*” and “*drink the cup,*” instead of “*eat the body*” and “*drink the blood.*” But some Christians are confused by the phrase, “*judge [or discern] the body rightly,*” in verse 29. To understand what Paul means, one must study the larger context in verses 27-31. Paul is saying that eating the bread and drinking the cup “*in an unworthy manner*” (v. 27a) can be avoided when a person “*examine[s] himself*” (v. 28), for “*if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged*” (v.31). Being “*guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord*” (v. 27b), then, is about failing to properly examine *ourselves*, not about perceiving an unseen reality in the bread and the cup. Therefore, the phrase, “*judge the body rightly*” (v. 29), refers to examination of the assembled body of Christ (*ourselves*), not the bread of the Eucharist.⁶ This is consistent with the early

NT, Church offices are to be filled by faithful men and women (with the exception of the office of bishop/overseer that is limited to mature men of high character, cf. 1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:6).

Holy Orders in the RCC differ from the NT Church offices described above. A “priest” does not function as an elder did in the early church; NT elders (plural) shepherded their church as a “presbytery” or board of elders. Also, the offices of *presbyteros* (elder) and *episkopos* (bishop/overseer) were interchangeable in the early Church; cf. Acts 20:17-28, 1 Tim 5:17; 1 Clement 1:3; 44:4. Lastly, no bishop had jurisdiction over the bishops or presbyters of other churches (cf. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to Polycarp); that function was reserved for apostles, a foundational office of the Church (cf. Eph 2:20; 4:11; 1 Cor 12:28; 2 Cor 11:28).

⁶ The Greek verb for “judge” in both 1 Cor 11:29 and 31 is *diakrino*, which may be translated “discern.” The D-R Bible translates v. 29 “discerning the body of the Lord,” [“of the Lord” is not in either the Greek or the Latin Vulgate]; and v. 31, “but if we would judge ourselves.” The D-R translation appears to be biased.

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second century description of the Eucharist in the *Didache* (9), in which the broken bread is likened to the Body of Christ (the Church) scattered and gathered. Augustine also reflected this view in his fifth century work: *On Baptism, Against the Donatists* (7.50.98).

Although most church fathers accepted a literal interpretation of the Eucharist, Eusebius, a famous participant at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicea (AD 325), wrote the following: “[W]e have received **a memorial** of this offering... which we celebrate on **a table** by means of **symbols** of His Body and saving Blood according to the laws of the new covenant” (*Demonstratio Evangelica*, 1.10, emphasis added).

Other church fathers who used figurative language to describe the Eucharist included Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Cyril of Jerusalem (more than a thousand years before the Protestant Reformation!). Different interpretations never prevented early Christians from taking communion. Indeed, Augustine strongly endorsed “judging no man, nor removing any from the right of communion if he entertain a different opinion” (*On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, 7.2.3). For Augustine, the requirements for communion were simply baptism “consecrated with the words of the gospel” and love for one’s Christian brethren (cf. *ibid.* 7.47.93; 1.18.28). These examples demonstrate that differences of opinion and personal conscience were not barriers to communion in the early Church.

Interestingly, although Augustine believed the bread and wine were transformed into Christ’s body and blood at the Last Supper, nevertheless, he interpreted Jesus’ previous words, “*unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood*” (John 6:53), figuratively.⁷ Jesus himself implied that these words should be interpreted symbolically when he said: “*the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life*” (John 6:63). Indeed, the context in John 6 provides the intended symbolic meaning: “*I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst... For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life*” (Jn 6:35, 40). To behold Jesus and believe in Him is to see Him with the eyes of faith and thereby inherit eternal life (cf. Jn 20:29). The literal interpretation of Jn 6:53 by the RCC (cf. CCC 1384) thus appears to contradict both Jesus and Augustine, a “Doctor of the Church.”

1 Cor 10:16-17 says that the cup of blessing is a *koinonia* (fellowship/sharing/participation) in the blood of Christ and “the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ.” The RCC interprets this literally and links it to 1 Cor 11:29 (“discerning the body”). But as explained above, 1 Cor 11:29 is about the Church. In 1 Cor 10:21, the “cup of the Lord” is compared to the “cup of demons.” Since demons lack blood, both cups must be symbolic.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully exegete 1 Cor 11:26-31; however, the phrase, “guilty of the body and blood of the Lord,” is worthy of comment. Guilt is incurred when a person takes lightly what Christ did for him on the cross, particularly when participating in the rite dedicated to remembering His death. Failure to do so may result in impairment of one’s health (verse 30), but Paul doesn’t prescribe excommunication in this context.

⁷ Cf. *On Christian Doctrine*, 3.16.24. The RCC believes that Jn 6:53 refers to the Last Supper; Augustine apparently didn’t, nor does this author. The “Bread of Life” discourse in John 6 followed the feeding of the five thousand.

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A number of other legitimate questions about transubstantiation must also be considered. For example, the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon in AD 451 declared that Christ's flesh was completely human, "unchanged and unmixed," yet united with His divine nature in one person. This means that Christ's flesh could not be separated from its physical properties (its "accidents," as Aquinas called them); in other words, Jesus' body could not transmute into bread. So, when Jesus held the bread in His hands and said, "*This is My body*," either the Council of Chalcedon was wrong or Jesus was speaking figuratively. The RCC claims that its priests duplicate what Jesus did at the Last Supper. If nothing happened to the bread at the Last Supper, then nothing happens to it today in the celebration of the Eucharist. Furthermore, the Roman Catholic belief that Christ's flesh appears simultaneously all over the world wherever the Eucharist is celebrated also contradicts the Council's description of Christ's human nature.⁸ Likewise, teaching that the priest's sacramental offering of the Eucharistic elements to God "makes present" the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ's body and blood is problematic (cf. Heb 9:25). Lastly, the RCC lacks a satisfying explanation for how communicants are able to receive both the body and the blood of Christ when the priest only gives them the bread. The many questions raised by the doctrine of transubstantiation cannot be easily dismissed.

The above points validate the Protestant celebrations of the Eucharist and call attention to inconsistencies in the Roman Catholic position *vis-à-vis* early Church teaching and practices. Historically, the Lord's Table has always been a symbol of the unity of the Body of Christ. The refusal of the RCC and other Churches to admit certain people to communion because of their Church affiliation has deeply hurt some of Christ's disciples. Making the Eucharist a point of division is a sad commentary on the Church today.

Is Apostolic Succession in the Sacrament of Orders Necessary?

"God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets..." Eph 2:19-20

It has been argued (above) that apostolic succession in the sacrament of Orders is not required for the Eucharist. Scripture also indicates that this rite is unnecessary for other functions of the Church. For example, baptism, by which a person formally enters the Church, was administered for the Apostle Paul by Ananias, a simple disciple in Damascus (cf. Acts 9:10-19).⁹ The NT also teaches that a person can receive the Holy Spirit by hearing and receiving the gospel by faith without the imposition of a bishop's hands (cf. Acts 10:38-48). In addition, the Scriptures defend the validity of confessing sins to God or to one another and receiving the assurance of forgiveness without requiring a priest to define penance and pronounce absolution (cf. Ps 32:5; Mt 18:15-18; Ja 5:16; 1 Jn 1:9-2:2; contrasted with CCC 1450-1470).

⁸ Roman Catholics who argue for "multi-location" resort to Eastern religion, not Christian truth.

⁹ The RCC recognizes that baptism can be performed by anyone using the Trinitarian formula (cf. CCC 1284).

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Even the authority to “bind and loose”¹⁰ granted by Jesus to the Church in Mt 18:18 does not depend on apostolic succession any more than does baptism, receiving the Holy Spirit or confession. Scripture provides many examples that illustrate that God’s work is not confined by institutional regulations.

Likewise, the testimony of the early Church refutes the arguments for apostolic succession. The *Didache* (“Teaching of the Twelve Apostles”), one of the earliest documents of the Church after the New Testament was written, says: “Appoint, therefore, for yourselves, bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men meek, and not lovers of money, and truthful and proved; for they also render to you the service of prophets and teachers” (15, emphasis added, ca. AD 110-130). The *Didache* never mentions apostolic succession; instead it directs the early churches to appoint their own bishops and deacons! Moreover, Augustine (in the context of discussing schismatics and heretics) wrote, “*God is present in His sacraments to confirm His words by whomsoever the sacraments may be administered*” (On Baptism, Against the Donatists, 5.20.27). For Augustine, the validity of the sacraments depended on the faith of the recipient, not on the status of the person administering them.

Some Christians still argue that apostolic succession is necessary in order to continually guard the original “deposit” of truth handed down by the apostles. Irenaeus, in the second century, a strong advocate of apostolic succession *at the beginning* of the Church, contradicts that argument as follows: “*We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith*” (Against Heresies, 3.1, emphasis added). One can conclude that Irenaeus believed that apostolic succession was only necessary until the Scriptures were made available as the bedrock of our faith.¹¹

Furthermore, history has shown that apostolic succession did not protect the Church from heresy. Most of the heresies in the early Church were either initiated or propagated by clergy who were “consecrated” by the Church. The Arian heresy is a case in point. It almost overwhelmed the Church before the AD 325

¹⁰ The context of Mt 18:15-18 implies that “bind and loose” refers to the Church expelling or excommunicating (“binding” the sin) sinners who refuse to repent, and reconciling (“loosing” from sin) with sinners who repent.

¹¹ Irenaeus understood tradition to be synonymous with the teaching of the apostles: that which was preserved, without addition or loss, in the Scriptures. The Scriptures, then, ensured that the Church would lose nothing handed down by the apostles. For Irenaeus, “catholic” tradition would never introduce new beliefs. He also wrote that the truth is “*clearly and unambiguously in express terms set forth in the Sacred Scriptures*” (i.e., the perspicacity of Scripture, cf. Against Heresies 2.27.1). Yet, Irenaeus insisted that interpretation of Scripture must be tested in the community of faith; isolated “private interpretation” can lead to false doctrine (evangelical Protestants agree). Thus, the principles of *sola Scriptura* were articulated from the earliest days of the Church. For a partial list of early church fathers who attested to the final authority of the Scriptures see, “Does Early Church History Favor Roman Catholicism? An Answer to Cardinal Newman’s Claim,” in *Christian Apologetics Journal* (Fall 2007) by this author [in press].

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Council of Nicea. There can be no doubt that many consecrated presbyters and bishops spread that heresy. One must conclude that no institutional rite of succession can compensate for ignorance or mishandling of the Scriptures.¹²

If apostolic succession is no longer necessary, in what sense, then can the Church be called Apostolic? Consider what Tertullian wrote ca. AD 200. *“And by this very Rule [a precursor of the Nicene Creed] they will be approved of other churches also, which are every day planted, and which though they do not derive immediately from the Apostles, or Apostolic Men, as being much later in time to them, do yet agree with them in the very same Faith, and by virtue of that harmony and agreement, have no less a right and title (than the Churches planted by the Apostles) to be called Apostolic”* (The Prescription against Heretics, 32, emphasis added). To be an “Apostolic Church” is to teach the faith of the apostles; merely keeping a long list of the names of those who passed on the faith through the centuries is not enough.¹³ Protestant Churches that teach the same faith as the apostles, therefore, are rightly called “Apostolic.”

What is the Role of the Pope in the Church?

“You are Peter and upon this rock [petra, in Greek] I will build My church.” Mt 16:18

The RCC interprets everything about the Church through the lens of the above verse. The Vatican’s recent statement reiterated that the RCC is the “only Church” of Christ: *“This Church, constituted and organised in this world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the successor of Peter and the Bishops in communion with him”* (cf. *DI*, 16; CCC 816). Since not all Christians agree with this definition, it is reasonable to enquire further about what the Scriptures teach and about how the early Church understood the role of Peter’s successors.

It is important to observe that Christ did not say to Peter, *“upon you I will build My church.”* This is key, because if the rock in Mt 16:18 does not refer to Peter, the case for the RCC definition of the Church is considerably weakened. The early church fathers were split between three positions: that the rock in Mt 16:18 referred to Peter’s confession or to Christ Himself or that Peter was the rock.¹⁴ Because the interpretation of this verse has always been disputed, clearer parallel passages of Scripture must be

¹² The Scriptures, particularly the Gospel of John, easily refute the Arian heresy that Jesus was created and not co-eternal with God the Father. The Arian heresy, rather than proving the need for apostolic succession, is a clear example of the importance of rightly teaching the whole counsel of God as revealed in the Scriptures. Apostolic succession also failed at the Seventh Ecumenical Council (cf. the author’s paper cited in the preceding footnote).

¹³ Tertullian’s argument about apostolic faith parallels Paul’s argument about Abrahamic faith (cf. Gal 3:7).

¹⁴ Examples of church fathers who associated Peter’s confession with Mt 16:18-19 include Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, Epiphanius and Chrysostom; those who associated the rock with Christ include Jerome and Augustine. Some recognized both Christ and Peter’s confession as the foundation of the Church, e.g., Cyril of Alexandria and Theodoret. On the other hand, Tertullian and Origen wrote that the Church was built on Peter.

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consulted, such as Eph 2:20, which explicitly says that the church has been “*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone*” (cf. 1 Pet 2:4-8). The early church fathers recognized this truth, which is compatible with 1 Cor 3:11, “*no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*” What, then, is the meaning of Christ’s play on words between “Peter” and the rock (*petra*)? The historical consensus seems to be that by virtue of Simon bar Jonah’s confession, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God*” (Mt 16:16), Jesus honored Simon with a new name that identified him in some sense with Himself, the eternal Rock, the cornerstone of the Church. Peter, indeed, was highly honored by Christ; he was the first of many to receive the “keys of the kingdom” (see below). The Church was built on the foundation of all the apostles; Christ alone is both the cornerstone and head of the Church. To claim otherwise is to contradict divine revelation.

What, then, is the Scriptural basis for the Vatican’s belief that the Pope, as the “successor of Peter,” is the visible head of the whole Church on earth? Unlike God’s promises that David would never lack a successor to his throne (cf. 1 Ki 9:5), Christ never promised Peter an unbroken line of successors to perpetually govern His Church. Jesus’ promise that the “gates of Hell” will not prevail against the Church is not based on Peter and his successors, but on Christ himself, the living head of the Church. As previously mentioned, Peter did not retain exclusive rights to “bind and loose” (i.e., “the power of the keys,” cf. Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23). Roman Catholics look for implied promises about Peter’s successors in passages like Jn 21:15-17, “*feed my sheep,*” and Lk 22:32, “*I have prayed ... that your faith may not fail; ... when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.*” Yet the apostles themselves didn’t view Peter as their earthly head (cf. Lk 22:24ff); and Peter addressed the presbyters who came after the apostles as equals (cf. 1 Pet 5:1-4). Peter himself identified Christ as the rock (“the living stone”) upon which the Church was built (cf. 1 Pet 2:4-8). The only possible Scriptural support for the papacy is based on speculation and arguments from silence.

Neither does Scripture suggest that the Church must maintain a physical presence at a particular location, unlike Judaism. The Church has a spiritual (not a geographical) base, being “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets ...” (Eph 2:20). Christ’s letters to the seven churches in Revelation never mention Rome (implying its irrelevance to those churches), and the later oblique references in Revelation to Rome are all negative (cf. “Babylon” in Rev 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2,10,21). Neither does Paul’s letter to the church at Rome mention or imply its authority over other Churches.

What support, then, does history lend to the claim that the Popes in Rome have functioned as an unbroken chain of bishops who have governed the whole Church since its inception? Ignatius of Antioch, an early Church Father often quoted by Roman Catholic apologists, considered God as the sole “bishop” over each

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local bishop (cf. Letter to Polycarp, ca. AD 105). Also, three of the first four Ecumenical Councils of the Church defined regional jurisdiction under four or five “Apostolic Sees” (cf. Canons 6, 2, and 28 from the first, second and fourth Councils, respectively, AD 325-451). Rome was just one of these “Apostolic Sees.”¹⁵ Sadly the “Great Schism” of AD 1054 irreparably split the Eastern Church from the West, but the historical fact remains that the “Roman Pontiffs” never exercised jurisdiction (“supreme power,” according to Vatican I, session 3, 1870) over the whole Church. If the Church has survived and thrived without universal papal jurisdiction for so many centuries, what makes it necessary today?

Because Jesus declared Himself to be the door of the sheep-fold (cf. Jn 10:9), Christians should recognize the error in statements such as, “*Into this fold of Jesus Christ no man may enter unless he be led by the Sovereign Pontiff, and only if they be united to him can men be saved*” (Pope John XXIII, Nov. 4, 1958). Indeed, non-Catholic Christians should help their Roman Catholic brothers and sisters understand that the Pope does not take Christ’s place as the door, neither does Peter “continue to govern” through the Pope. Unless the RCC can provide convincing arguments from both Scripture and Church history to the contrary, it is time for the Vatican to abandon its claims to the Pope’s universal primacy. A serious student of both Scripture and history cannot ignore the many inconsistencies surrounding the papacy.

Christ alone is “head over all things to the Church” and His Word of Truth, together with His Spirit of Truth, guides the Church “into all the truth” (cf. Eph 1:22; Jn 17:17; 16:13). Churches that cling to the true head of the Church need not fret over claims that they are “defective” for not submitting to the Pope. Protestants and Orthodox are both vindicated by Scripture and history in retaining their respective Church rights *vis-à-vis* Rome. The Pope may govern the institution he heads, but he has no rightful claim to supreme authority over Christ’s whole Church. Nevertheless, all Christians should grant the Pope the respect he deserves, love him as a brother in Christ, and insofar as possible be at peace with him and with those who are in his care.

¹⁵ Early church fathers often praised the Church at Rome for its faithfulness, and honored it because both Paul and Peter were martyred there. The RCC concept of perpetual papal sovereignty appears to be an anachronistic appeal to the historic honor of the Church at Rome combined with sporadic statements (many focused on Peter, rather than his successors) by various popes and church fathers through the centuries. No consistent historical support for a universal papacy can be found in the records of the church fathers. *Jesus, Peter & the Keys: A Scriptural Handbook on the Papacy*, by Scott Butler, Norman Dahlgren, and Rev. Mr. David Hess (Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship Publishing, 1996) makes a valiant attempt to defend the papacy from Scripture and tradition, but it fails to convince that 1) Jesus promised unique powers and privileges to Peter’s successors, and 2) that those successors consistently exercised such powers in Church history. The Orthodox more accurately acknowledge that there was a time in history that the Church and Bishop of Rome were granted a “primacy of honor.”

Is the Roman Catholic Church the Only Church of Christ?

Conclusions

The Vatican's recent answers to questions about the Church, based on *Dominus Iesus*, opened the door for respectful and honest ecumenical dialog. Clear statements by the Vatican have prompted clear answers. This paper has offered a rebuttal to the Vatican's arguments that Orthodox Churches are defective and that Protestant Churches lack the necessary elements to be called Churches. It is right and proper to call Protestant Churches by the name Jesus gave them. Protestant Churches are indeed part of the "household [house] of God" which the Apostle Paul identifies as the Church. As Jesus said, "there are many rooms in My Father's house" (Jn 14:2, NIV).

Although there are no perfect Churches, no Church should be denigrated for naming Christ as its head.¹⁶ The many Churches make up one Body precisely because they have one head, the Lord Jesus. The unity Christ most desires is that of the Spirit in the bond of peace, manifested by the members of His Body loving one another as He has loved them. In lieu of visible institutional union, Churches everywhere should share the Lord's Supper with Christians of all affiliations as a tangible expression of the spiritual unity of the Body of Christ.

There are strong arguments against the necessity of apostolic succession and a universal papacy. Teaching of the RCC to the contrary is inconsistent with Christian truth both as revealed in God's Word and as understood and demonstrated by the early Church. The inconsistencies identified in this paper suggest that the RCC may have succumbed to the very relativism that the Vatican denounced in *DI*: i.e., what is true for Rome was not true for the early Church nor is it true for many Christians today. How the RCC will address these inconsistencies could have a greater impact on ecumenical dialog than the Vatican statements that prompted this paper.

Walk "in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all." (Eph 4:1-6)

¹⁶ Early responses to *Dominus Iesus* from representatives of several ecclesiastical traditions can be found in *Pro Ecclesia*, Volume X, No. 1 (2001), 5-16. For additional insights on ecclesiology, see Timothy George, "Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology," in *Catholics and Evangelicals: Do They Share a Common Future?* (Thomas P. Raush, ed., Mahwah, NJ: California Province of the Society of Jesus, 2000), 122-144.