

Upon this Sand: Misrepresenting Papal Roots

I have about a thirty minute commute to and from my office each weekday, and I usually listen to a book on tape or talk radio. Some time ago, I started checking out CD sets in [The Modern Scholar](#) series of college-level lectures from my local library. I have found the lectures in this series to be informative and entertaining, but the one I listened to recently, "Upon this Rock: The History of the Papacy from Peter to John Paul II" by Professor Thomas F. Madden, was very disappointing and prompted this installment of *Ekklesia Then & Now* because the first lecture ("The See of Peter") in the series is laced with misrepresentations, circular arguments, convenient omissions, and outright errors.



Professor Thomas F. Madden

Professor Madden is Chair of the Department of History at St. Louis University, a Jesuit School, so perhaps I should have expected his bias, but *The Modern Scholar* series purports to present outstanding scholarship, not sectarian apologetics. He is apparently an acknowledged expert in the Crusades, but this lecture displays his ignorance of biblical teaching and the history of the early church.

Those of you who are regular readers of *ET&N* may have recognized that a particular concern of mine lies in the structure (see [ET&N 10](#)) and [nature](#) (see [ET&N 76](#)) of leadership in the church. In this issue, I want to address Professor Madden's claims in the first lesson of "Upon this Rock," the limits of human authority within the church, and specifically the horribly misguided concept of the papacy.

Then

Upon this Rock

From a biblical perspective, the proof-text related to papal claims is Matthew 16:13-19. Madden opens his lecture by claiming that the "very beginning of the papacy" comes from "the very beginning of Christianity...Jesus Christ and His apostles" and the notion that Peter is the rock on which the church is built.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell 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 whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

There are three elements of Jesus' comments to Peter after the apostle's confession: (1) building the church, (2) keys of the kingdom, and (3) binding and loosing. The last of these (binding and loosing) is outside the scope of this issue of ET&N, but I recommend an article on this topic by my friend Al Maxey (*Reflections #237*) available at www.zianet.com/maxey/reflx237.htm. The keys are straightforward enough, since a key was then a universal symbol of authority. Hence, the keys to the kingdom give someone authority to open and close access, binding and loosing based on human authority. The crucial question is just who that someone is. On the surface, Jesus appears to be giving this authority to Peter, as the Roman Catholic Church claims, but this only reveals once again the dangers of considering verses in isolation (proof-texting).

Later in Matthew, Jesus extends this authority to all of the apostles: "*Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven*" (Matthew 18:18-19). Clearly, authority is not limited to Peter.

Furthermore, there is an element of the original language in Matthew 16:13-19 which bears on this discussion. First, much is made of Jesus' word play in verse 18: "You are Peter (Greek, **Petros**) and on this rock (**petra**) I will build my church..." In the Greek, two different words are used, *Petros* (always used in reference to Peter, meaning a small stone) and *petra* (a large stone or mountain). Madden and other papal apologists claim that the original Aramaic would have used the same word, **Cephas**, but there is no original Aramaic document in existence, so this is an unfounded assumption. The fact that the Greek uses two different words, when there is no grammatical imperative to do so, suggests strongly that Jesus used different terms or modifiers in this statement.

If Peter is not the rock on which Jesus will build His church, what is? If Jesus gave Peter universal, singular authority over the church at this time, you would expect that teaching to be echoed throughout the New Testament and in the writings of the early post-apostolic period. But it is not for centuries that anyone makes a papal claim from Matthew 16! In fact, Origen, writing about 245, emphatically denies any unique commission for Peter:

"But if you suppose that upon that one Peter only the whole church is built by God, what would you say about John the son of thunder or each one of the Apostles? Shall we otherwise dare to say, that against Peter in particular the gates of Hades shall not prevail, but that they shall prevail against the other Apostles and the perfect? Does not the saying previously made, "The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it," hold in regard to all and in the case of each of them? And also the saying, "Upon this rock I will build My church"? Are the keys of the kingdom of heaven given by the Lord to Peter only, and will no other of the blessed receive them? But if this promise, "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven," be common to the others, how shall not all the things previously spoken of, and the things which are subjoined as having been addressed to Peter, be common to them? For in this place these words seem to be addressed as to Peter only, "Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven," etc; but in the Gospel of John the Saviour having given the Holy Spirit unto the disciples by breathing upon them said, "Receive ye the Holy

Spirit," etc. Many then will say to the Saviour, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God;" but not all who say this will say it to Him, as not at all having learned it by the revelation of flesh and blood but by the Father in heaven Himself taking away the veil that lay upon their heart, in order that after this "with unveiled face reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord" they may speak through the Spirit of God saying concerning Him, "Lord Jesus," and to Him, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." And if any one says this to Him, not by flesh and blood revealing it unto Him but through the Father in heaven, he will obtain the things that were spoken according to the letter of the Gospel to that Peter, but, as the spirit of the Gospel teaches, to every one who becomes such as that Peter was. For all bear the surname of "rock" who are the imitators of Christ, that is, of the spiritual rock which followed those who are being saved, that they may drink from it the spiritual draught. But these bear the surname of the rock just as Christ does. But also as members of Christ deriving their surname from Him they are called Christians, and from the rock, Peters" (*Commentary on Matthew XII.11*, Roberts-Donaldson translation available at www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/origen-matthew.html).

Origen had some odd allegorical notions when it came to Scripture, but on this point at least, he got it right! Peter is not the rock on which Jesus built His church. The rock is Jesus Himself, as Paul writes: "I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock [**petra**] that followed them, and the Rock [**petra**] was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:1-4).

Peter himself referred to Jesus as the rock on which the church is built, although he is careful to use a different word, acknowledging that he is not the foundation of the church: "*As you come to him, a living stone [Greek, **lithos**] rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones [**lithos**] are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*" (1 Peter 2:4-5).

Jesus used a parable to illustrate the importance of the rock on which the church is built: "*Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock [**petra**]. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock [**petra**]. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand [**ammos**]. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it*" (Matthew 7:24-27, see also Luke 6:47-49).

Therefore, a full understanding of Matthew 16:18 is something like this: you are Peter, a small piece of the rock, and on the whole - my identity as the Son of God, which you have acknowledged - I will build my church." The church is constructed with Christ Jesus as the sole and sufficient cornerstone with twelve foundations bearing the names of the Disciples (Revelation 21:14) built up with individual confessing Christians as the building blocks (living stones, 1 Peter 2:4-5).

The writer of the Shepherd of Hermas (ca 100-160) understood individual members as the building blocks of the church. One of the visions in the book distinguishes between the kinds of stones employed in the construction with those set aside or

destroyed, but what may be most important for this discussion is that this writer, a member of the church in Rome, fails to mention Peter at all.

The contention that Jesus turned over His role as cornerstone to a human being is nothing short of ludicrous. As great a leader as Peter was, he was made of the same stuff all of us are. Shortly after his great confession, Peter denied Jesus under fire. Later, he bowed to pressure and refused to eat with Gentile Christians (Galatians 2:11-14), even though Peter had been specifically taught about God's acceptance of Gentiles and had acknowledged that at the Jerusalem council (Acts 10:9;28; 15:7-11). With all due respect to Peter, his character often showed more characteristics of sand than rock.

To me, the most offensive implication of papal claims is that they render the coming and indwelling of the Holy Spirit pointless. If all authority were wrapped up in Peter and his successors, what purpose would an individual spiritual guide be? Jesus promised the Counselor would be available to every Christian: "*When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you*" (John 16:13-14). If the deposit of faith rests exclusively with Peter and his successors, the Spirit is not necessarily. To obtain spiritual guidance, one must merely consult with a bishop or his designee. The tradition of popes, monoepiscopates, and priests as clergy is a classic latter-day example of Jesus' condemnation of some Pharisees: "*...for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God*" (Matthew 15:16b).

Papal Premises

Even if Peter were given supreme ecclesiastical authority, there would still be a number of very specific conditions (some of which are rejected above) for the papacy to have legitimacy:

1. God must intend for the church to be divided between clergy (ordained leaders) and laity (common Christians).
2. Jesus must have authority to delegate God's will to specific human beings.
3. Jesus must have delegated to a single individual the authority to lead His church.
4. Such authority must be unlimited.
5. Peter must have been unequivocally designated the chief apostle.
6. God must give Rome supremacy over other churches.
7. The chain of such authority must be unbroken.
8. The fruits of such authority must be evident.

1. Clergy and Laity

Of all the misbegotten concepts that emerged early in church history (but clearly after the apostolic age) perhaps the most damaging is the one that created two classes of Christians. Clergy were attributed with intercessory prerogatives and sacramental exclusivity. The Greek root of the word "clergy" (*kleros*), means "a portion or inheritance." Scripture makes it clear that the inheritance of eternal life is a gift of God promised to all believers. For example:

"Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance (kleros). It is the Lord Christ whom you serve" (Colossian 3:23-24)

*"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an **inheritance (kleros)** which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:3-5).*

The word "laity" comes from the Greek **laos**, meaning "people." Most often it is used simply to mean a group, but it is also used for God's people, as in 1 Peter 2:9: "A **people (laos)** for God's own possession". The inheritance (**kleros**) is for **all** of God's people (**laos**). For a specialized class to rhetorically claim some unique right to this inheritance by usurping the word is biblically unsupportable. The biblical model for the church, most notably portrayed by Paul in [1 Corinthians 12](#), is an organism. In a functional body, every part has its role but none can be deemed more important than another except the head (see below).

2. Christ's Authority

Of the eight premises that underlie papal legitimacy, only this one has any claim to validity, although even there one might suggest some limitations based on Christ's own words. Jesus told His disciples that "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18), but He also frequently cited the overriding authority of His Father (see, for example, [Matthew 24:35-36](#); [Mark 14:36](#); [John 5:19](#); [12:49-50](#); [14:8-10](#)). Jesus could not delegate his authority unless the Father had already willed it so. Nevertheless, with this equivocation, it is certainly reasonable to agree that Jesus, through the Father, could have delegated His leadership of the church.

3. The Head of the Church

Scripture asserts that there is one, and only one, head of the church as Paul asserts in Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23 and [Colossians 1:18](#).

- "And (God) put all things under (Christ's) feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:22-23).
- "For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior" (Ephesians 5:23).
- "And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent" (Colossians 1:18).

Certainly, Scripture is unequivocal about the unique headship of Christ over the universal church, but is there a case for single human leadership of local churches or groups of churches? Many churches today organize themselves around a hierarchical leadership system that ultimately reports to a single individual (bishop), but Scripture teaches something quite different.

In the Bible, bishops (Greek, **episkopos**), elders (**presbuteros**), and pastors (**poimen**) are synonymous. Even a cursory examination of Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders ([Acts 20:17-38](#)) makes that abundantly clear. Paul lands in Miletus and summons the Ephesian elders (presbuteros, verse 17). He refers to them as overseers (bishops, episkopos, v. 28) and calls on them to tend (shepherd, pastor, poimen) the flock. Note, too, that he called for the Ephesian elders (plural). The church in Ephesus and throughout the early churches were shepherded and

overseen by a plurality of elders. There is not even the vaguest hint of a separate position of bishop in the early church; hence, there was initially no individual "bishop of Rome" - not Peter or anyone else.

Early in the second century, we can begin to see the seeds of hierarchicalism when [Ignatius](#) of Antioch writes that Christians are to "not do anything without the bishop and the presbyters," even denying ordinary Christians the right to baptize or celebrate Communion without a presiding bishop. While Ignatius' view was not widely held at the time, it wasn't long before the monoepiscopate (single bishop) dominated the church. Whether this development was based on (1) expediency in the face of perceived heresies, (2) simple human error, or (3) a conspiracy to establish hegemony over the emerging religion is a matter of conjecture, but there is no evidence that it was God's intention for His church.

Professor Madden's contention that "Christians...in the first days of the church were organized into larger communities with elders and then an overseer who would eventually become the bishop" is a misrepresentation of the facts. In its earliest days, Christians met almost exclusively as small groups in homes, and elders were appointed from within these groups. There were no overseers/bishops distinct from the elders. This is even clear from some of the references Madden quotes. For example, he cites Clement's letter (see [ET&N 70](#)) to the church in Corinth as evidence of early papal oversight. Clement, however, never claims to be pope, nor even bishop, and he refers to the bishops and elders of Corinth interchangeably. Madden implies that Clement's primary focus was on the legitimacy of the Corinthian leaders based on their apostolic succession, but this is only one of several points Clement makes. Others include the youth of the dissenting faction in Corinth, the entire church's approval of the deposed leaders, and their faithful service. Clement makes no claim of authority over the Corinthian church. Because of Paul, there was a connection between the churches, and Clement's letter makes sense only as an appeal to their common heritage.

4. The Limits of Human Authority (Binding and Loosing)

English language translations of Matthew 16:19 and 18:18 are sadly misleading. The English rendering - "*Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven*" - certainly seems to give unlimited authority to Peter (16:19) and the disciples (18:18). The church declares something and God makes it so in heaven...God bowing to the will of sinful Man. But the true sense is precisely the opposite - "Whatever you bind on earth has already been declared in heaven..." In other words, the church can only bind and loose in concert with what God has already established. Any other reading creates an impotent, go-fer God.

5. Peter, Bishop of Rome

In the apostolic church, there was no individual bishop (overseer, **episkopos**) of *any* church; hence, Peter was never "bishop of Rome." There isn't a shred of biblical evidence for this claim even though the traditions linking him to Rome are well within the period covered in the book of Acts. Surely Luke, having detailed Peter's career in Jerusalem and, to a lesser extent, Antioch, would have mentioned Peter's triumphant entry into Rome. The traditions placing Peter in Rome come exclusively from legends claimed in [apocryphal](#) works, such as the *Acts of Peter and Paul*, and later writings. The circumstantial evidence for a Petrine visit to Rome is strong, but for the Roman Catholic Church to base its claim of supremacy on it requires something more than

legends. Whether Peter visited Rome, however, is really a moot point because he never would have assumed a position (a monoepiscopate, bishop) that did not exist!

Peter never even claimed to be an elder, much less a bishop. In fact, NO Disciple of Christ (the Twelve minus Judas Iscariot plus Mathias) EVER claimed such a role. They were clearly charged with being worldwide messengers of the Gospel (evangelists). Serving as an elder might be viewed as an abdication of the apostolic role. Settling down in a city to shepherd a local church does not really serve an apostolic/evangelistic role. Note: there is an elder John who apparently resided in Ephesus after the destruction of Jerusalem. This John was almost certainly a student of John, the apostle, and perhaps the writer of the Johannine letters.

Professor Madden claims, "It is clear throughout the New Testament that Peter was considered in some way to be the leader of the Twelve." Certainly, this is true, but Madden glosses over the "in some way," even though he makes the same equivocation several times, calling Peter's leadership "ad hoc." Madden even goes so far as to suggest that Jesus "relied on (Peter) a fair amount"! In an example of a *non sequitur*, Madden says "Jesus Himself frequently singles Peter out in a way that He does not single out the other apostles" and the examples he offers are the Transfiguration and the Agony in the Garden, where Peter is **not** singled out! Rather, in these events he is "tripled out" along with John and James.

One of the evidences that Peter was not recognized as Christ's sole representative on earth lies in Paul's chastisement of Peter regarding his refusal to eat with Gentile Christians in Antioch (Galatians 2:11-14), but Madden actually tries to use this incident to prove Peter's authority, claiming that Paul's admission that he "even dared to oppose Peter" shows that Paul acknowledged Peter's authority. But Madden's claim doesn't wash - if Peter were the sole possessor of the keys of the kingdom, with the authority to bind and loose whatever he chose, even Paul would have to think twice before challenging him.

It is not until at least a century after Peter's death that anyone makes the claim that Peter was bishop of Rome and another two centuries or so until anyone claims that the bishop of Rome has authority over all the churches. It is Irenaeus who first verbalizes this claim, writing (in *Against Heresies*) "the great and illustrious church, founded and organized at Rome by the two glorious apostles, Peter and Paul, and to the faith declared to mankind and handed down to our own time through its bishops and their succession. For unto this church, on account of its commanding position, every church...must needs resort." Madden uses the quote, but even though he acknowledged that the Roman church was not founded by Peter and Paul earlier in the lecture, he conveniently ignores that. But it is a law of logical argument that if a premise is false (founded by Peter and Paul in this case) is false, an entire statement is false.

Catholic doctrine insists that there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church (outside the authority of the pope), but Peter himself contradicts this misrepresentation: "*This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:11-12).

6. The Supremacy of Rome

Consider: God sent His Son to a backwater province of the Roman Empire, yet intended for the church He established through His ministry, death, burial and resurrection to be based in the most secular, pagan, hedonistic city in the world. Jesus' ministry was primarily to Jews, but God wanted Rome, site of a very small Jewish community that was expelled from the city just a few years after the Resurrection to be the center of His people. Jesus was most sympathetic to the underclasses in Jewish society ([women](#), prostitutes, tax-collectors, [lepers](#)), yet His church is supposed to be based among the wealthy and elite of the Empire. Admittedly, God sometimes does some very surprising things, but not downright silly!

When Professor Madden comes to the supremacy of the Roman church, his primary evidence comes from late in the second century, when Victor I (papal reign claimed to be 189-198) threatened to excommunicate Asian churches over the date of Easter. The Roman tradition was to celebrate Christ's Resurrection on the Sunday following Passover, while the Asian churches, claiming a tradition from John, celebrated on Passover itself. Victor surveyed churches across the Empire and found that the majority favored the Roman tradition, so he ordered the Asian to conform.

Madden admits that "we don't know precisely what happened next with regards to this dispute," adding, "it's not really that important." What Madden failed to mention, however, is something we do know because it is preserved by Eusebius. Irenaeus of Lyons - the same person Madden employs as evidence of papal authority - wrote to Victor and challenged him, stating that the Asians should be allowed to continue their tradition because the important apostolic principle was unity on the essentials! In another example of circular thinking, Madden claims that "the fact that this is a threat at all that the bishop of Asia would react to...suggest again the importance of the Roman See." Again Madden ignores Irenaeus' challenge. It is entirely plausible that bishops in Asia would react to Rome's presumption because of either (1) their own claim of apostolic authority and succession and/or (2) their interest in maintaining unity.

[As an aside, perhaps those of us who reject the papal claims should join with our ancient Asian ancestors and celebrate the Lord's death, burial and resurrection on Passover as a protest over Victor's attitude and the Roman Catholic demands. Just a thought...]

In Madden's most egregious error, he writes, "so according to Irenaeus, writing about 116, Peter and Paul established the church in Rome. He writes, 'The blessed apostles then founded and reared up this church (Rome) and afterwards committed unto Linus the office of bishop.' So clearly there's an understanding by 116 AD of Rome being the successor of Peter and of having this special authority and of the bishop of Rome being the successor of Peter."

Again, Madden knows that Peter and Paul did not found the church in Rome. There is absolutely no evidence before Irenaeus that Linus served as a "bishop" or that he was appointed by Peter or Paul. Most importantly, Irenaeus did not write this anywhere near the year 116 because he was almost certainly not even born yet! According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, "He was born...in the first half of the second century; the exact date is controverted, between the years 115 and 125, according to some, or, according to others, between 130 and 142" ("St. Irenaeus, *Catholic Encyclopedia* article at www.newadvent.org/cathen/08130b.htm). In fact, the quote Madden cites is from Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*, written sometime around 177 A.D. - sixty years after Madden's claim.

A sixty-year discrepancy in a document more than 1800 years old may not seem like much, but it is very significant. In 116, there were still people alive who had heard the apostles themselves, particularly John, who lived to about 100. These are people who have firsthand knowledge of the legitimacy of Irenaeus' claims. Sixty years later, however, two more generations have passed, and there would be very few who even heard students of the apostles. Madden's revisionist date - repeated twice - may simply be shoddy scholarship, but it smacks of a blatant attempt to falsely place Irenaeus' writing within the sub-apostolic period.

Something that did happen in about 116 or before was Ignatius's ("bishop" of Antioch, see [ET&N 80](#)) journey to Rome, where he executed. During the trip, he wrote letters to six churches through which he passed. Madden cites a comment in Ignatius' letter to the church in Rome: "I do not, as Peter and Paul, issue commandments unto you" (Chapter IV), but he neglects to include the next sentence. Madden uses the comment as alleged evidence of some sort of official position in Rome, but Ignatius supplies a simpler explanation: "They were apostles of Jesus Christ." Of greater significance for this discussion is the fact that while Ignatius specifically mentions the alleged bishops of the other churches he wrote (Onesimus in Ephesus, Damas in Magnesia, Polybius in Tralles, Polycarp in Smyrna, and an unnamed bishop in Philadelphia), he inexplicably neglects any mention whatsoever of a bishop in Rome. Ignatius had not yet arrived in Rome, but much of his writing advanced the authority of bishops. If the papacy was emerging, as Madden suggests, early in the second century, one would assume Ignatius would at least know the name of the bishop of Rome (either Alexander I, 105-115, or Sixtus I, 115-125, according to Catholic tradition) or at least mention the office. That he did not strongly suggests no genuine bishopric had emerged in Rome by that time, a suggestion echoed by some scholars.

Madden also fails to mention the writings of Tertullian from the early third century. Tertullian was initially a strong supporter of Roman supremacy, but he later became disenchanted with church leadership - particularly that in Rome - and joined the severe Montanist movement, considered a heresy. In other words, he left the Catholic church supposedly headed by the pope.

Placing the supreme church in Rome would likely lead to a church that would be more a reflection of Roman institutions and culture than God's Kingdom, and that's precisely what happened. It rapidly became an **institution** (albeit an outlaw one until Constantine) with a structure identical to that of the Empire, rather than the **organism** God intends. Just as a body can have but one head to function properly, so too the church (the body of Christ) can have only one head, and that is Christ Jesus Himself. Not Peter or any of his so-called successors who claim absolute authority over the faithful and their salvation through the sacraments held hostage by an unbiblical clergy and the redemptive works mandated by the Roman Catholic Church. I won't claim, as some do, that the Roman Catholic Church is the tool of the devil but if not, it is unwittingly doing his work!

7. An Unbroken Chain

It may have been Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, who first championed the concept of apostolic succession, and because Irenaeus is the subject of the next installment in the [ET&N Church Fathers series](#), I'm going to gloss over this topic until then, but it is ironic that most of Madden's lecture series demonstrates how corruptly secular the papacy became and remained for centuries. Listening to his later lectures provides prima facie evidence of a thoroughly broken chain.

8. The Fruits of the Papacy

Mass; Transubstantiation; Mary-worship (immaculate conception and assumption); a priestly caste; celibacy; catechism; infant baptism; a rigid hierarchy consisting of bishops, archbishops, deacons, archdeacons, priests, etc.; purgatory; penance and rosary beads; Saints; Bingo nights; obligatory feasts and fasts; vestments; concubines and illegitimate children; cathedrals; crusaders; indulgences; feudal lords; charlatans and aristocrats. The list of Roman Catholic errors, inventions, corruption, and abuses is almost endless.

There are wonderful people who are Catholics, and some do great works for the sake of Christ. At the same time, Catholicism appears to be the religion of choice for the Mafia. We all fall short, of course, and there are reprobates in every corner of Christianity. We cannot really judge any Christian group entirely by its members. Instead, we need to look at the doctrinal fruits. Is the church we attend teaching the eternal truths revealed in the Bible or is it teaching its own traditions or the expedencies of culture?

There are also some admirable men who have served as Pope, but they're in the minority. It is impossible to identify the first real Pope - it certainly wasn't Peter or Linus, Anicetus or Clement. One might identify Victor I as the first because he was the first to presume the right to excommunicate a whole region of churches over something not even mentioned in Scripture. Historically, Gregory VI was the first to assume the title. It was not really until the papacy lost its feudal lands in the nineteenth century that the papacy emerged from total corruption to move closer to its spiritual roots.

Summary

- (1) The distinction between clergy and laity is anathema to God's design for an organic church where each member is intended to be equally important.
- (2) Jesus never transferred His authority to any human being.
- (3) The only head of the church is Christ Jesus. A plurality of elders (aka pastors, bishops, overseers, shepherds) is charged with [shepherding each local flock](#).
- (4) Human authority within the church is limited to...
- (5) There was no genuine "pecking order" among the apostles.
- (6) The church of Rome has no claim whatsoever over any other local church.
- (7) There is no evident unbroken chain of episcopal authority anywhere in the world, and certainly not in Rome.
- (8) The equivocal (at best) fruits of the Roman church belie its claims.

Hence, while there are certainly devout, pious Catholics, the Roman Catholic Church itself is perhaps the most destructive force ever created under the banner of Christ. I thank God that it has largely lost its tyrannical hold on those who put their faith in Christ.



Even though an increasing percentage of the Christian world reject the papacy (including, in practice, many Catholics), the institution remains. Professor Madden's claims that the parade of world leaders to John Paul II's funeral and the media's obsession with the selection of his successor are proofs of the re-emerging influence of the papacy, but the historic base of Catholicism in Europe has crumbled, and I

suspect the Pope is viewed in much the same light as the Dalai Lama - a curious vestige of a superstitious past when religion suffused every aspect of life. The media loves celebrity and that is what the papacy became with John Paul II, who traveled more than all other popes before him. As a voice for peace, the papacy is respected. As a voice for Christ, albeit misguided, it is largely ignored. As a voice for conservative Christian values (Catholicism is to be praised for often holding the line against secular liberalism), it is often vilified.

Yes, the institution of the papacy has endured through centuries of cultural change, but it has done so too often by itself becoming a secular authority. More importantly, it is an institution, whereas the Bible calls for the church to be an organism. As an institution, it will probably continue to exist but because of its disconnection to biblical truth, it will continue to become more irrelevant.

In the meantime, it is unfortunate that Professor Madden's series exists in *The Modern Scholar*. His initial lecture might have an appropriate home in a catechism class, but it has no place in a presentation purporting to be a scholarly examination of the papacy. In a summary remark, he claims, "By the third century...certainly by the time we go into the 200s, the papacy was pretty universally recognized among the Catholic Christians...which is the vast majority, as the center or the hub or the capstone of the church." He adds, without further explanation, "Now precisely what that meant was up to debate." There was no such widespread debate because Madden's claim is without historic legitimacy. To begin with, "Catholic" Christians were not the vast majority unless one totally discounts the so-called heretics. At the dawn of the second century, [Marcionite](#) churches (see ET&N 92), which rejected Roman supremacy, rivaled "Catholic" churches in number and membership.

Madden displayed an enormous grasp of later history, but his apparent ignorance of the Bible and early church history laid a fatally flawed foundation for the series, mirroring the papacy he defended.

The papacy is not founded on the rock, but on the slippery sand of human tradition. The floods have eroded its presumptuous authority, but it has yet to be thoroughly swept away. When it is, we can only hope that the millions who love Christ yet offer allegiance to Rome will not be swept away with it.

For my part, I echo Edward Mote's great 1834 Hymn:

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly trust in Jesus' Name.

On Christ the solid Rock I stand,
All other ground is sinking sand;
All other ground is sinking sand.



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NEXT ISSUE: Apocryphal Apocalypses (March 6)

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