



The Power and Primacy of the Pope

*A study of the papacy, church government, and the public ministry
from the history of the Lutheran Church*

Historical Background

Philip Melachthon, a coworker of Martin Luther, wrote the tract *The Power and Primacy of the Pope*. This document is often considered an appendix to Luther's *Smalcald Articles*, but actually it is not. The *Smalcald Articles* were written by Martin Luther for a gathering of Lutherans in 1537 in the city of Smalcald. The Smalcaldic League was preparing a defense of Lutheran teachings for an upcoming general church council scheduled to meet in Mantua, Italy. While most Lutheran leaders signed the *Smalcald Articles*, not all did. They were not formally adopted in Smalcald. However, when the Book of Concord was adopted in 1577, the *Smalcald Articles* were so highly regarded that they were included in the Lutheran Confessions.

Delays prevented the Council at Mantua from taking place until 1545 at which point it was moved to Trent, Italy. Philip Melachthon wrote *The Power and Primacy of the Pope* for the Smalcaldic League. In it, he took Luther's position on the papacy as outlined in the *Smalcald Articles* Part II, article IV.

The Catholic Position Regarding the Pope

From *The Power and Primacy of the Pope*:

The Roman pontiff claims for himself that he is supreme above all bishops and pastors by divine right.

Second, he adds that by divine right he has both swords, that is, the authority also to enthrone and depose kings, regulate secular dominions, and such.

Third, he says that to believe this is necessary for salvation. For these reasons, the Roman bishop calls himself and boasts that he is the vicar of Christ on earth.

These three articles we hold to be false, godless, tyrannical, and destructive to the Church.

paragraphs 1-4

From *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

(copied from http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p123a9p4.htm)

880 When Christ instituted the Twelve, "he constituted [them] in the form of a college or permanent assembly, at the head of which he placed Peter, chosen from among them." Just as "by the Lord's institution, St. Peter and the rest of the apostles constitute a single apostolic college, so in like fashion the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor, and the bishops, the successors of the apostles, are related with and united to one another."

881 The Lord made Simon alone, whom he named Peter, the "rock" of his Church. He gave him the keys of his Church and instituted him shepherd of the whole flock. "The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of apostles united to its head." This pastoral office of Peter and the other apostles belongs to the Church's very foundation and is continued by the bishops under the primacy of the Pope.

882 The Pope, Bishop of Rome and Peter's successor, "is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful." "For the



Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered.”

883 “The college or body of bishops has no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor, as its head.” As such, this college has “supreme and full authority over the universal Church; but this power cannot be exercised without the agreement of the Roman Pontiff.”

884 “The college of bishops exercises power over the universal Church in a solemn manner in an ecumenical council.” But “there never is an ecumenical council which is not confirmed or at least recognized as such by Peter's successor.”

From the 1870 “Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith” from the First Vatican Council:

(copied from <http://www.dailycatholic.org/history/20ecume3.htm>)

To this absolutely manifest teaching of the sacred scriptures, as it has always been understood by the catholic church, are clearly opposed the distorted opinions of those who misrepresent the form of government which Christ the Lord established in his church and deny that Peter, in preference to the rest of the apostles, taken singly or collectively, was endowed by Christ with a true and proper primacy of jurisdiction.

The same may be said of those who assert that this primacy was not conferred immediately and directly on blessed Peter himself, but rather on the church, and that it was through the church that it was transmitted to him in his capacity as her minister.

Therefore, if anyone says that blessed Peter the apostle was not appointed by Christ the Lord as prince of all the apostles and visible head of the whole church militant; or that it was a primacy of honour only and not one of true and proper jurisdiction that he directly and immediately received from our Lord Jesus Christ himself: let him be anathema.

Therefore whoever succeeds to the chair of Peter obtains by the institution of Christ himself, the primacy of Peter over the whole church. So what the truth has ordained stands firm, and blessed Peter perseveres in the rock-like strength he was granted, and does not abandon that guidance of the church which he once received.

For this reason it has always been necessary for every church—that is to say the faithful throughout the world—to be in agreement with the Roman church because of its more effective leadership. In consequence of being joined, as members to head, with that see, from which the rights of sacred communion flow to all, they will grow together into the structure of a single body.

Therefore, if anyone says that it is not by the institution of Christ the Lord himself (that is to say, by divine law) that blessed Peter should have perpetual successors in the primacy over the whole church; or that the Roman pontiff is not the successor of blessed Peter in this primacy: let him be anathema.

Wherefore we teach and declare that, by divine ordinance, the Roman church possesses a pre-eminence of ordinary power over every other church, and that this jurisdictional power of the Roman pontiff is both episcopal and immediate. Both clergy and faithful, of whatever rite and dignity, both singly and collectively, are bound to submit to this power by the duty of hierarchical subordination and true obedience, and this not only in matters concerning faith and morals, but also in those which regard the discipline and government of the church throughout the world.



So, then, if anyone says that the Roman pontiff has merely an office of supervision and guidance, and not the full and supreme power of jurisdiction over the whole church, and this not only in matters of faith and morals, but also in those which concern the discipline and government of the church dispersed throughout the whole world; or that he has only the principal part, but not the absolute fullness, of this supreme power; or that this power of his is not ordinary and immediate both over all and each of the churches and over all and each of the pastors and faithful: let him be anathema.

The Testimony of Scripture

The Power and Primacy of the Pope lists five passages to refute the claims that the pope is supreme.

Luke 22:24-27

Matthew 18:2

John 20:21

Galatians 2:7-10

1 Corinthians 3

The Testimony of History

VI. The Council of Nicaea resolved that the bishop of Alexandria should administer the churches in the East and the Roman bishop the suburban churches, that is, those in the Roman provinces in the West. From this start by a human law (i.e., the resolution of the council), the authority of the Roman bishop first arose. If the Roman bishop already had the superiority by divine law, it would not have been lawful for the council to take away any right from him and transfer it to the bishop of Alexandria. No, all the bishops of the East should always have sought ordination and confirmation from the bishop of Rome.

VII. The Council of Nicaea also determined that bishops should be elected by their own churches, in the presence of one or more neighboring bishops. This was observed also in the West in the Latin churches, as Cyprian and Augustine testify. For Cyprian says in his fourth letter to Cornelius:

So as for the divine observance and apostolic practice, you must carefully keep and practice what is also observed among us and in almost all the provinces. To celebrate ordination properly, whatever bishops of the same province live near by should come together with the people for whom a pastor is being appointed. The bishop should be chosen in the presence of the people, who most fully know the life of each candidate. We have seen this done among us at the ordination of our colleague Sabinus. By the vote of the entire brotherhood and by the judgment of the bishops who had assembled in their presence, the bishop's office was conferred and hands were laid on him.



Cyprian calls this custom “a divine tradition and an apostolic observance.” He affirms that it is observed in almost all the provinces.

In the greater part of the world, in the Latin and Greek Churches, neither ordination nor confirmation was sought from a bishop of Rome. Therefore, it is clear enough that the churches did not then grant superiority and domination to the bishop of Rome.

Such superiority is impossible. It is just not possible for one bishop to be the overseer of the churches of the whole world. Churches in the most distant lands cannot seek ordination from only one person. It is clear that Christ’s kingdom is scattered throughout the whole world. Today there are many churches in the East that do not seek ordination or confirmation from the Roman bishop. Since the superiority the pope claims for himself is impossible and has not been acknowledged by churches in the greater part of the world, it is clear enough that it was not instituted <by Christ and does not spring from divine law>.

VIII. Many ancient councils have been proclaimed and held in which the bishop of Rome did not preside, such as that of Nicaea and most others. This, too, testifies that the Church did not then acknowledge the primacy or superiority of the bishop of Rome.

IX. Jerome says:

If there is a question about authority, the world is greater than the city. Wherever there has been a bishop, whether at Rome, or Eugubium, or Constantinople, or Rhegium, or Alexandria, he has the same dignity and priesthood.

X. Pope Gregory, writing to the patriarch at Alexandria, forbids that he be called universal bishop. In the records he says that in the Council of Chalcedon the primacy was offered to the bishop of Rome, but it was not accepted.

XI. Last, how can the pope be over the entire Church by divine right when the Church elects him? And what of the custom that gradually prevailed of bishops of Rome being confirmed by the emperors? When for a long time there had been conflicts over the primacy between the bishops of Rome and Constantinople, the Emperor Phocas finally determined that the primacy should be assigned to the bishop of Rome. But if the ancient Church had acknowledged the primacy of the Roman pontiff, this conflict could not have occurred. Nor would the emperor have needed to make the decree.

What general observation does Melancthon make regarding Church history that refute the teaching that the pope is supreme? List some of the specific incidents that he lists that refute papal authority.

Quotes from *The Power and Primacy of the Pope* taken from:

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