

## Why Don't We Have a Pope?

2 Kings 2:1–15, Matthew 23:1–12

Probably most of you heard this past week that Pope Francis died. He had been pope of the Roman Catholic Church for twelve years. His death was extensively covered by all the media, where he was sometimes styled as the head of the world's Christians. Perhaps some of you might have wondered why we don't have a pope. Is the lack of a pope a defect in Protestant Christianity? Is it something for which Protestant Christians ought to be ashamed?

Francis was remembered for his professed care for the poor, and for being very left-leaning politically. He was controversial. Some Roman Catholics have a very positive opinion of him, others criticized him for undercutting Roman Catholic doctrine. There is keen interest in the process of choosing his replacement—the conclave that will be called, the cardinals that will have a voice in picking his successor. The Roman Church is divided. Perhaps half want his replacement to be left-leaning; others want a conservative who will move the church back on course.

Perhaps some of you will remember that during our congregational prayer time a number of weeks back, when he was hospitalized for double pneumonia, that prayer for the pope was requested. This church prayed for his healing, but also for his salvation. Some may have been surprised at that. Is not the pope considered a holy man and man of prayer? Do we really need to pray for his salvation? The answer, of course, is yes. The teaching of the Bible is that all of us—every man, woman and child on the face of the earth—are sinners. We have fallen short of the glory of God. We do not measure up to his standard of absolute perfection. The only one who does is the Lord Jesus Christ—not Mary, not the pope, not the saints. “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” “The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” “God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. . . . For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

That is what the Bible calls the Gospel. “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.” “Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand . . . how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day

according to the scriptures.” “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. . . . Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.”

The Gospel is very clear in the writings of the Apostle Paul. But, sad to say, it never came from the lips of Pope Francis. If he had preached it, the Roman Catholic Church would have been scandalized. Pope Francis never preached that sinners cannot earn their own salvation, that the only way for sinners to be saved is to put their full confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of those who look to him in faith. “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” This is the testimony of the Word of God: if you believe in the only begotten Son, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, you will not perish eternally in the Lake of Fire with the devil and his angels; rather, at death you will be taken to heaven to live forever in the presence of Christ, with his saints. Salvation is not something a sinner can *earn* but a free gift that must be *received*.

I have three points this morning: (1) God is our Father; (2) Our true spiritual fathers; (3) When not to call someone a father; first,

### **1. God is our Father**

Matthew 23 begins with the words, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat.” This was a special seat, called “Moses’ chair,” assigned to the most famous scribe of the town or village where the synagogue was located.<sup>1</sup> What Jesus meant was that whenever the scribes and Pharisees faithfully interpreted Moses, their instructions should be obeyed.<sup>2</sup>

The faithful preaching of the Word of God *is* the word of God. Whenever a man, lawfully ordained, faithfully explains and applies the written Word, it is God’s message to the people, and is to be obeyed. It is the Word of the living Christ which must richly dwell in us with all wisdom. The Word of God is not just to be words on a page only, it is to be in our mouths, in our hearts and practiced with our lives. The minister is to “rightly divide,” or faithfully exposit, the Word of truth, applying it to the people’s present situation for their growth in grace. The ascended Christ stands before his people, teaches them from his word, leads them in green pastures, and readies them to go forth and live out his word in the world.

In his discourse to the multitudes and disciples in Matthew 23 Jesus pronounces woes—seven in all—upon his bitter opponents who were planning to kill him. The word *woe* is a natural expression of lament, pain or displeasure found in Old English and several Germanic languages, which goes back to Latin and Greek (ὠαί). Jesus begins to pronounce his woes in verse 13 of our chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 821

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Not all the scribes and Pharisees were hostile to Jesus. Hendriksen points out that Simon invited him to dinner; certain Pharisees notified him to get out of Jerusalem because Herod wanted to kill him (Luke 13:31). There was a certain scribe who approved of Jesus' summary of the law and was praised by him (Matt. 22:35). After his resurrection the distinguished Pharisee Gamaliel (Paul's teacher), prevented the Jewish authorities from carrying out their plan to kill the apostles (Acts 5:33–40). But sadly, many of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day were hostile to him and plotted to kill him.

The teaching of Scripture is that all men are duty-bound to receive Christ: "As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John 1:12). Note that to *receive* him is to *believe* on his name; that is, to trust on him for salvation and to crown him as your Lord. Here is the basic claim of the gospel. Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior? Have you sworn allegiance to him? Do you claim the identity *Christian*? There can be no neutrality. He who is not with him is against him.

Members of this congregation take the vow: "Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord and promise that you will serve him . . . and lead a godly life?" If you have taken this vow, are you following through on it? Do you live every day, conscious that Christ is your Lord, that you belong to him, that you are intentionally living your life in his service, as his hands and fingers ministering to others around you? Can you honestly say, "For me to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21)?

For hundreds of years God's people had been expecting the Messiah. He was first promised in Genesis 3:15 as the Seed of the woman who would crush the serpent. The prophet Isaiah had foretold: "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever." But when Jesus "came unto his own," his own did not receive him. The scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day came to see him as a threat, and they plotted to kill him. The common people heard him gladly, but the religious leaders would incite them to cry out, "Crucify him!" Jesus understood this and exposes their true character: they do all their works to be seen by men. They wear clothes that draw attention to themselves. "They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven."

Look particularly at the last statement, "Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven."

Here, Jesus is using hyperbole, deliberate exaggeration to prove a point. He does this from time to time to make a point. For instance: “If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out.” He does not mean that if we see something and lust after it, we should immediately pluck out our eye; rather, we should take decisive steps to deal with our sin. We should confess it to God and use all the powers of our being to put that sin to death and not make our members to be instruments of unrighteousness.

So it is with our present text: “Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven.” This is hyperbole. What it means is: do not let anyone on earth take the place of our Father in heaven. God is Lord of all, and his place is not to be taken by any man. Second, consider

## **2. Our true spiritual fathers**

Clearly, we are to show honor to those whom God has put over us. This is the meaning of the fifth commandment, “Honor thy father and thy mother.” As our Shorter Catechism explains, the fifth commandment requires “preserving the honor, and performing the duties” that belong to our superiors, whether in the family, the church, or the state.

In our Old Testament text this morning we read that when Elijah was taken up by a whirlwind into heaven, Elisha cried out, “My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen!” (2 Kgs. 2:12). Elisha was showing due respect to Elijah as his father in the faith. A few chapters later Joash the king of Israel used the same language in reference to Elisha as he lay dying: “O my father, my father, the chariots of Israel and their horsemen!” (2 Kings 13:14). When Elisha and Joash used this language they were not sinning; rather, they were showing due respect to a spiritual father.

The apostle Paul was a spiritual father to his disciple Timothy. He writes, “Unto Timothy, my own son in the faith” (1 Tim. 1:2). The relation between Paul and Timothy was not idolatrous but wholly appropriate.

It is lawful to call men on earth fathers; after all, it was God himself who gave men this title (the first use of the word is spoken by God himself in Genesis 2:24, “Therefore shall a man leave his *father* and his mother”).

So what did Jesus mean when he said, “Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven”? Calvin explains: “It is not only lawful to call men on earth FATHERS, but it would be wicked to deprive them of that honor. . . . The true meaning therefore is, that the honor of a father is falsely ascribed to men, when it obscures the glory of God.”<sup>3</sup>

The church prays, “Our Father, who art in heaven.” When we pray this, we are showing proper respect to God. He is our Father. He made us. He cares for us as a

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<sup>3</sup> Calvin, Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists [Logos Bible Software]

natural father cares for his children. “As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him” (Ps. 103:13).

Those who profess Christ show wholesome respect to faithful pastors and elders by voluntarily putting themselves under their proper spiritual oversight. As it says in the book of Hebrews, “Obey them that have the oversight of you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give accounts” (Heb. 13:17, Geneva Bible, following Tyndale). Here is our duty: to submit ourselves to those faithful pastors and elders who minister on behalf of Christ, submitting ourselves to them as to the Lord.

The Christian faith was never meant to be lived alone but in community, in the true church of Jesus Christ. There is only one people of God in both testaments: Israel under the Old Testament and the church under the New. The people of God in both testaments consists of those who profess the true religion and their covenant children who receive the sign of the covenant—circumcision under the Old Testament, baptism under the New. The God of heaven himself promises to be God to us and to our seed—that is, to enter into a special covenant relationship with his people, promising them the blessings of the covenant: salvation and life—the abundant life in the here and now, and eternal life in the age to come. As our spiritual Father, he promises never to leave us nor forsake us. If we confess him before men in the here and now, our Savior will confess us before our Father in heaven. We will be received into his eternal kingdom on the basis that our sins were laid on the sinless Son of God when he went to the cross, and his perfect righteousness is credited to us. When the Father sees us, he does not see our sin but rather the perfect righteousness of Christ which alone qualifies a man or woman to enter heaven.

If we live in fellowship with Christ and his church, then we can we can respect those who faithfully represent Christ as true spiritual fathers. As the writer to the Hebrews expresses in another place, “We have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live?” (Heb. 12:9).

So it is true that God is our Father. It is also true that those godly servants who represent him in his church are our true spiritual fathers. But we must also see, thirdly,

### **3. When not to call someone a father**

It does not give me any special pleasure to have to warn you that not all who style themselves spiritual fathers are worthy of the title. Such is the case of the Pope of Rome. It may surprise you to learn that the word *pope* means *father*. *Pope* is defined as the “prelate who as bishop of Rome is the head of the Roman Catholic Church.” The word *pope* derives from the Old English *pāpa*, from Late Latin *papa*, from Greek *pappas*, *papas*, title of bishops, literally, *papa*. There is no

question that the word *pope* means *papa* or *father*. In Romanism the pope is called “Holy Father,” a blatant usurpation of scriptural language. Jesus in his high-priestly prayer (John 17), said, “Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are.” This is the *only* use of the term in Holy Scripture: God the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, calls God the Father “Holy Father.” And such he is!

According to Catholic Answers, “the Pope is called ‘Holy Father’ as a sign of respect for his role as the head of the Catholic Church and a successor to Saint Peter. This title reflects the holiness of his office rather than his personal state of soul.” With all due respect I submit that to call the Pope of Rome “Holy Father” is rank blasphemy, usurping a biblical term applied to the first Person of the Holy Trinity to a mere man. I warn you *never* to call the Pope of Rome “Holy Father,” even if you are pressured to use that language. To do so is to call a mere man on earth by a title that belongs to God alone. It is to give honor to the creature rather than to the Creator who is blessed forever.

When I was a little boy I called my father “Daddy.” Perhaps some of you called your father “Papa” or “Poppa.” We used such language to designate respect to the man that God sovereignly chose for us to be our biological or adoptive father. Every single human has a physical father—everybody except one, our Lord Jesus Christ, who was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had a physical mother, Mary, from whom he received his humanity, and a *legal* father, Joseph, who was *not* his biological father. He received his deity from Mary’s supernatural conception. The gospels are very clear about this: “When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, *before they came together*, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost” (Matt. 1:18). “And the angel . . . said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and *the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee*: therefore also *that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God*” (Luke 1:35).

According to Roman Catholic teaching (I use the term “Roman Catholic” to differentiate the Roman church from the true church, which is catholic, meaning *universal*), the pope of Rome is considered the *vicar* of Christ—that is, the personal representative of Christ on earth. The word *vicar* is defined as *one serving as a substitute or agent*. An official prayer for a deceased pope from the Roman missal reads: “O God, who in your wondrous providence chose your servant Pope Francis to preside over your Church, grant, we pray, that, having served as the Vicar of your Son on earth, he may be welcomed by him into eternal glory.”<sup>4</sup> It is blasphemous to call the Pope the Vicar of Christ, and it is laughable to try to inform God that he chose Pope Francis to preside over his church, when the Word

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<sup>4</sup> <https://ucatholic.com/catholicprayers/these-are-the-official-prayers-for-a-deceased-pope-from-the-roman-missal/>  
accessed 4-24-25

of God says nothing of the kind. A faithful church has pastors and ruling elders—overseers (ἐπίσκοποι *bishops*, Phil. 1:1). The Bible says nothing about Cardinals and Popes—nothing! They are not biblical offices, and to assert such is to blaspheme and try to be wiser than God.

As I said a few moments ago, commenting on the words of our text, “Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven,” Calvin explained that “the honor of a father is falsely ascribed to men, when it obscures the glory of God.” I submit that calling the Pope of Rome “Holy Father” does in fact obscure the glory of God, giving glory to a mere mortal who cannot save.

Do you know that you are a sinner with no hope of eternal life apart from Jesus Christ? Then confess him before men as your righteousness and your only hope of heaven. Do good works, not to try to earn your way to heaven, which is utterly impossible, but out of a heart of gratitude for his great salvation. Look to Jesus! Amen!