

# The Relevance of *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* for Today's Lutheran Pastor

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By Paul Jenkins

This new pope is so different! He is not like the other popes. For one thing, he is a lot more humble. He checked himself out of his own hotel room!<sup>1</sup> He moved himself out of the papal mansions of his predecessors into some of the Vatican's most modest quarters. He rode the bus! He converted a used car into the popemobile! The man lives like a regular person! He is so humble, mind you, that he loves to associate with those regular people. This pope does not mind when a little boy runs up and pulls off the pope's little white *zucchetto* (which, by the way, is a much more humble hat than his predecessors wore). This pope picks up the phone every week and calls regular, everyday Roman Catholics to ask them their thoughts, and to ask for their prayers. This pope is not like the ones before him. He is so much more humble. Yes, this pope is different.

This new pope is so different! He comes from the New World, and he brings a breath of fresh air to his office. No dragging two thousand years of European history and all the baggage that comes with it into the Vatican. No, this pope is different. He comes from a different part of the world, and what could be better for the Catholic Church he leads, if it wants to be a truly world-wide church? This pope is so non-European that he accidentally cussed while saying a Mass in Italian. This pope is not like the ones before him. He comes from the outside, and he can appeal to the whole world. Yes, this pope is different.

This new pope is so different! He is not sternly dogmatic like those popes who came before him, especially not that old bald eagle Benedict. This pope is ready to smile wide for the cameras and say, "Who am I to judge?"

"The fact is that previous popes in talking about homosexuality had always mentioned

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that a man can make international news by checking himself out of a hotel room should say a lot about the office he holds.

the word 'disordered' and when you use that term, it immediately alienates," said [Thomas] Thavis, author of "The Vatican Diaries."

"Not only did Francis not use that word. He avoided the whole concept." The fact that the pope — the infallible leader of the world's 1 billion Roman Catholics — refused to sit in judgement of gay priests (who were banned by his predecessor) was hailed as remarkable, even revolutionary.

It's an approach he has taken on any number of subjects — atheists, unwed mothers, divorcees. Scolding is out in Rome; hand-holding is in.

"This comes after Pope John Paul II spent 15 years rewriting the catechism of the Catholic Church and eight years of Benedict reinforcing that: 'How do you measure up to our teachings? Are you qualified to call yourself Catholic?'" Thavis said.

"Francis is saying the church is a big tent and he has to be welcoming. It's an incredible change." For Thomas Reese, a Jesuit priest like Francis, the most important words from Francis this year were written, not spoken.

"Look at the title of his latest apostolic exhortation. It's 'the joy of the Gospel,' not 'the truth of the Gospel,'" he said.

"He has rebranded the church as welcoming, compassionate, a church for the poor as opposed to a church that nags people and is worried about rules and regulations," said Reese, author of "Inside the Vatican."<sup>2</sup>

Yes, this pope is not like the ones before. He is welcoming people into the Roman Catholic Church, not shutting them out with uncompromising dogmatism. "Who am I to judge?" is the hallmark question of his world, and he is ready to echo it in order to welcome his world. Yes, this pope is different.

This new pope is so different! He will not stand for all the extravagances that have given the Roman Catholic Church a bad name, the extravagances that many Roman Catholics still maintain were the real cause of the Reformation. Not only has he moved himself into smaller quarters and done away with the elaborate vestments, he has taken it on himself to seek and destroy the waste and excess within his church. Earlier this year Francis fired the German bishop Franz-Peter Tebartz van Elst, a/k/a Bishop of Bling, for spending thirty-one million euros<sup>3</sup> remodeling his residence. The new pope also fired Slovak bishop Robert Bezak for mismanaging funds, and demoted a number of other bishops for spending more than the pope thinks is appropriate. This pope is not like the ones who came before him. He will not

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<sup>2</sup> Tracy Connor, "'Who am I to judge?': The Pope's Most Powerful Phrase in 2013," NBC News Online, December 22, 2013, accessed August 7, 2014, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/other/who-am-i-judge-popes-most-powerful-phrase-2013-f2D11791260>.

<sup>3</sup> The bishop maintains he only spent twenty-six million euros.

participate in blatant excess, and he will not stand for it in others who rule in his church. No, this pope is different.

And this new pope could be just what his Roman Catholic Church needs to appeal to the world. He could be just what the Roman Catholic Church needs to grow its size, power, and influence in a world teetering on a post-Christian age. The refreshing humility, international appeal, tolerance, and financial modesty that he brings to the *Cathedra Romana* could be just the thing to draw new souls into the fold, and draw lapsed souls back to the fold.

It may be too early to tell, but it seems the new pope might be having that effect, at least in our country. According to the Vatican's official statistical report, last year the number of Roman Catholic parishes in the United States increased by over one hundred. The number of parish-connected Roman Catholics rose for the first time since 2009, by over one million, while the number of self-identifying Roman Catholics rose by over two million. Adult baptisms in American parishes saw their first rise since 2010. Mass attendance increased by over one percent, which was the first rise in that category since 2008.<sup>4</sup>

Attributing this increased involvement and presence to Pope Francis requires some *post hoc* reasoning, because no extensive research has been done on exactly why these increases are taking place. But seeing no connection between Pope Francis's election and these positive statistical trends requires some intellectual denial. The fact is that Roman Catholicism in America is making a comeback. And the comeback started when Pope Francis took the helm.

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The Augsburg Confession contained no statement about the pope or his authority. This was probably to avoid offending the Roman Catholic Emperor Charles V, who easily could have ended all discussion in a huff if his pope had suffered insult.

By 1536, however, the time for an official Lutheran statement on the papacy and its power had become a necessity. Pope Paul III was planning a church council, and the princes of the Smalcald League wanted an official treatise explaining why they would reject the pope's decrees adopted at this council. Their first choice to write this treatise was Dr. Martin Luther, but he was recovering from a kidney stone attack at the time. So the work fell on Dr. Philip Melancthon instead. On February 24, 1537, thirty-two Lutheran theologians subscribed to Melancthon's treatise, and *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* became a confession of the Lutheran Church.

In the very first sentence of the treatise, Melancthon, writing much more polemically than usual, attacks papal authority for three reasons: the pope's false claim of superiority; the pope's confusion of

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<sup>4</sup> Central Office for Statistics of the Church, *2014 Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae* (Rome: Vatican City Publishing House, 2014) pp. 22-25.

the kingdoms; the pope's claim that there is no salvation apart from him. These were the main issues the Lutherans raised against the papacy nearly five hundred years ago.

A brief examination of these three complaints in the treatise will allow us to see what the pope looked like during the Reformation, five centuries ago. We will then be able to compare the popes of history to the pope of the present, and see that the new pope is really not so different after all. This is what makes *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* relevant for today's Lutheran pastor: it allows us to cut through the rhetorical hype about Pope Francis and see that nothing has really changed when it comes to the papacy. What was wrong with the papacy then is still wrong today. It allows us to meet the new pope and know that, despite what everyone is saying about him, he is the same as the old popes.

Once we understand that, we will be able to ask ourselves what impact this should have on the instruction we offer the members of our Lutheran congregations. How is this treatise relevant when it comes to what we say, teach and preach to our people about the new pope? What does this treatise teach today's Lutheran pastor about how to say it, teach it, and preach it?

### *The Papacy's False Claim of Superiority*

By the time of the Reformation, the papacy had consolidated supreme power and influence over the Roman Catholic Church. Melancthon observes that the Roman Catholic Church

takes the pope to be the universal, or, as they say, ecumenical bishop, that is, the one from whom all bishops and pastors throughout the world are bound to seek ordination and confirmation...moreover, he claims authority to make laws concerning worship, alterations in the sacraments, and teaching. He wants his decrees and laws to be regarded as articles of faith or commandments of God...Because he claims to exercise this power by divine right, he means it to take precedence even over God's commandments.<sup>5</sup>

By citing and explaining passages from Luke 22, John 20, Galatians 2, and 1 Corinthians 3, Melancthon unravels any Scriptural claim to papal superiority within the Christian Church. Later on, Melancthon confronts the most commonly referenced Scripture passage that supposedly supports superiority for the pope: [Jesus said], "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 18:16 NIV84). A diligent exegesis of the passage makes it clear that Christ builds his Christian Church not on the individual person of St. Peter, but on the ministry carried out by Christ's entire church, a ministry that proclaims the truth that Jesus is the chosen Savior and the Son of God.

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<sup>5</sup> Kolb, Robert and Timothy Wengert, eds, *The Book of Concord: Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), pp. 330-331.

Besides the Scriptural evidence against papal superiority, Melanchthon offers a series of convincing historical arguments. He notes that the power of the Roman bishop did not originate with a divine proclamation, but with the Council of Nicaea in 325.<sup>6</sup> The authority of the Roman bishop came from the church in the first place; so, Melanchthon argues, it is nonsense for the Roman bishop to claim superiority over the Christian Church that gave him his power to begin with. To this very day, in fact, the Roman Catholic Church is still choosing and electing the pope. It is the church that made, and still makes, the bishop of Rome – not the other way around. The church, then, must be superior to the pope.

To debunk the myth of the Roman bishop's primacy in the church, Melanchthon also quotes prominent fathers from the early Christian Church, including Cyprian and Jerome. He also makes a common sense argument against Roman primacy: how can a bishop confined to one geographical location possibly oversee and direct the affairs of an entire, world-wide organization? How could he ever possibly ordain bishops in all those places? For better than a millennium and a half already, Melanchthon argues, Christian congregations had been functioning without Rome's oversight and approval. Finally, Melanchthon makes this fascinating argument: Gregory I (pope from 590-604), wrote letters in which he objected to being called "universal bishop," and insisted that he rejected the offer of primacy that the Council of Chalcedon had made him.<sup>7</sup> So, Melanchthon concludes, not even all the popes agreed that they were superior to the rest of the church.

So, in 1537 Melanchthon and the rest of the Lutherans objected to the fact that the bishop of Rome claimed superiority over the rest of the church. The Scriptural and historical evidence did not support it. But the popes made the claim anyway. They excommunicated people, regions, and the occasional country to maintain their power, because they could. They practiced nepotism and simony when appointing bishops, because they could. They dictated how and when and where the Roman Catholic Church spent its resources. They held the strings of every limb of the Roman Catholic Church. Through the centuries, the popes had full control, based on their false claims of superiority. They used that superiority, and often abused it.

That is what the old popes did. But now let's meet the new pope. He is so very different in so many ways, so surely he will not make such brash claims about being the head of the entire Christian Church, or abuse that authority in any way.

The media and members of the Roman Catholic Church have been applauding Pope Francis for dismissing wasteful and opulent bishops. And it is no wonder. Almost no one likes waste or unnecessary extravagance, no matter what organization it happens in. But lost in the stories of the pope's firing of

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<sup>6</sup> Various authors, *Canons of the Council of Nicaea*, (accessed <http://www.christian-history.org/council-of-nicaea-canons.html>, 325), Canon 6.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory I, *Epistles*, book VIII, no. 30, to Eulogius, bishop of Alexandria (*MPL* 77:933; *NPNF*, ser. 2, 12:241).

Bishop Bling and his ilk is the fact that the pope is still able to single-handedly dismiss his bishops. It is still an action taken by the pope alone, and not by his church as a whole.

Not only is Pope Francis dismissing bishops on his own, he is also appointing them on his own – just like the popes of the past. In mid-September the Chicago diocese announced the replacement of its current archbishop with Blase Cupich. Where did this appointment come from? “The Vatican...” and “Pope Francis.”<sup>8</sup> The new pope is still breaking and making the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church, just like the old popes.

Not only that, he is also still using excommunication at his pleasure, and for his own purposes:

Using his strongest language to date, Pope Francis told Italian Mafia members on Saturday that they are excommunicated from the Catholic Church.

"Those who in their life have gone along the evil ways, as in the case of the mafia, they are not with God, they are excommunicated," Francis said in an outdoor Mass in Piana di Sibari, Calabria.

It is the first time a Pope has spoken of excommunication for the Mafia.

Excommunication, which excludes Catholics from the church, can be imposed by church authorities or incurred automatically for certain grave offenses.

The Pope's remarks will resonate strongly in this part of southern Italy, where the Mafia are known to attempt to portray themselves as upstanding religious men in good rapport with the Catholic Church, in order to maintain local credibility.<sup>9</sup>

Pope Francis single-handedly excommunicated over five thousand people in one swoop, announcing the decision to a crowd in a region of Italy that the Italian mafia has exploited for centuries. It makes one wonder if Pope Francis has met and dealt with each of these gangsters individually, and evaluated the spiritual state of each man. It also makes one wonder if his intention is to win them back to Christ, or to score political points with locals. Either way, his action of single-handedly excommunicating an entire group of people smacks of the attitudes and actions of the popes before him: the power to lock the kingdom of heaven to unrepentant sinners, and to excommunicate the serially unrepentant belongs to Rome's bishop, not to the whole of the church. And it can be done by Rome's bishop alone, because he holds superiority in the church.

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<sup>8</sup> Francine Knowles, “Chicago’s Next Archbishop,” Chicago Sun-Times, September 20, 2014, accessed September 22, 2014, <http://www.suntimes.com/news/metro/29999930-418/pope-francis-names-blase-cupich-as-chicago-archbishop.html#.VDvX8D90xIY>. The article describes Cupich as “moderate” and “non-dogmatic.” Sound familiar?

<sup>9</sup> Delia Gallagher, “Pope Excommunicates Mafia Members,” CNN Online, June 23, 2014, accessed September 17, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/06/21/world/pope-mafia-excommunication/>.

Meet the new pope. He is the same as the old popes. He makes and breaks bishops as he pleases. He excommunicates whom he pleases, when he pleases, for whatever reasons he pleases. And he does it all unilaterally. He has the same attitude of ecclesiastical superiority as the popes who came before.

### *The Papacy's Confusing of the Kingdoms*

As Melanchthon transitions to his second argument against papal authority, he says this “second article is even clearer than the first, for Christ gave to his apostles only spiritual authority, that is, the command to preach the gospel...he did not give the power of the sword or the right to establish, take possession, or dispose of the kingdoms of the world.”<sup>10</sup> Melanchthon goes on to reference passages from Matthew 28, John 18 and 20, and 2 Corinthians 1 and 10 to prove that the Christian Church exists not to establish, dispose, or influence the kingdoms of this world, but rather to promote the spiritual kingdom of Christ through the proclamation of the gospel.

Yet, throughout its history, the papacy has stood with one foot in each kingdom. While proclaiming the Word of God, the popes of the past also threw tremendous weight around in the world of politics and worldly kingdoms. Melanchthon refers to the papal bull *Unam Sanctam*, written by Pope Boniface VIII in 1302, in which Boniface claims political and worldly power for himself and all popes. Melanchthon argues that all such statements which “contend that the pope is lord of the kingdoms of the world by divine right, are false and impious.”<sup>11</sup>

Historical examples of popes intruding into the kingdom of civil government are too abundant to list. From Henry IV freezing his feet off in the snow waiting for a papal audience to interdicts used as a political weapon to military alliances to invasions to crowning worldly emperors, the popes of the past have spent at least as much time and energy in the kingdom of the left as the kingdom of the right. Melanchthon offers this brief summary of papal trespassing into civil kingdoms:

Then the popes began grabbing an empire for themselves. They transferred kingships. They harassed the rulers of almost all the nations of Europe, but especially the emperors of Germany, with unjust excommunications and wars; sometimes to occupy Italian cities and other times to bring German bishops into subjection and to deprive the emperors of the right to appoint bishops.<sup>12</sup>

Melanchthon also keenly points out the greatest danger of the pope standing in both kingdoms: the more time and effort the church spends meddling in the worldly kingdoms, the less time and effort it spends on the work Christ has given his church to carry out, which is the proclamation of the gospel through Word and sacrament. When the church occupies itself in the kingdom of the left, the kingdom of the right – the church’s rightful domain – suffers neglect. Not only that, but the people under the church’s care draw the conclusion that eternal salvation comes not through the church’s proclamation

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<sup>10</sup> Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, p. 335.

<sup>11</sup> Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, p. 335.

<sup>12</sup> Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, p. 336.

of the gospel, but through obedience to the church's political authority. Melancthon puts it this way: "For the ministry of the gospel was neglected [while the popes worked in the civil sphere]. Knowledge of faith and of the spiritual realm was destroyed. Christian righteousness was equated with that external government which the pope had created."<sup>13</sup>

But now let's meet the new pope. Since conventional wisdom tells us that the new pope is so much different from the old popes, perhaps we can expect to find him restricting himself to the proper work of Christ's Church, without stepping into the kingdom of civil government. Unfortunately, before his installation as pope, Francis already started meeting with world leaders, offering them his advice and council on how to govern. It began two days before he was officially made the pontiff, as Francis met with Argentinian president Christina Kirchner to discuss social and economic justice in the pope's native land. It has continued over the last eighteen months, as Pope Francis has held court for twelve different world leaders, including President Obama. This is not the schedule of a man who has stepped back from the political sphere.

Furthermore, Vatican City still simultaneously serves as the seat of the Roman Catholic Church and a sovereign state. The pope still commands an army of the Swiss Guard. Yes, the state of Vatican City is small. Yes, the Swiss Guard is strictly ceremonial, and does not threaten to invade foreign lands. But it all still says that the Christian Church is more than just church, it is also a state. It is still a confusion of the kingdoms.

Also, the new pope has not shied away from chiming in on almost every world crisis. From wars to terrorist threats to territorial tensions, Pope Francis has stood at the microphone like a leader of the civil kingdoms. He has commented on economic justice especially, instructing secular governments how to make and distribute wealth in society:

Francis is classically Catholic in his social concerns. He stresses that the social doctrine of the Church "maintains that one can live authentically human relations of friendship and sociability, of solidarity and reciprocity within economic activity" (*Encountering Christ*, p. 147). Business is a proper activity of man. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he calls it "a noble vocation, provided that those engaged in it see themselves challenged by a greater meaning in life ... striving to increase the goods of this world and to make them more accessible to all" (203). He does place "the social function of property and the universal destination of goods" before private property. We're given private ownership of goods because they need to be protected and increased, so the goods we have will better serve the common good.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps this is also the place to mention Pope Francis's handling of the sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church. For decades, all around the world, the Roman Catholic Church dealt with the

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<sup>13</sup> Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, p. 335.

<sup>14</sup> Bishop Charles Chaput, "Pope Francis and Economic Justice," North Carolina Register, September 21, 2014, accessed September 28, 2014, <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/pope-francis-and-economic-justice#ixzz3EMANi1UQ>.



issue of sexual abuse as if they were above the secular law. They failed to report incidents to the secular authorities. They failed to turn offending parties over to civil law enforcement and court systems. Instead, all around the world, the Roman Catholic Church decided to handle the cases of abuse internally. They quietly reassigned priests to new parishes, covered up evidence, and denied the claims of the abused.

At first, it may be difficult to understand how the Roman Catholic Church could have possibly engaged in such behavior. But when we remember that the Roman Catholic Church considers itself a governmental entity, it becomes much easier to understand. Why report abuse to the secular authority when you are a secular authority? Why let the police and courts of a secular state handle offending priests when you are your own state? The Roman Catholic Church handled clergy abuse the way it did because of their confusion of the two kingdoms. They refused – for decades – to uncover the matter and allow secular authorities to carry out justice because they did not feel the need to do so. They are their own state, and their own government. No one in the Roman Catholic Church has ever explicitly admitted this, but it is the only logical reason for their behavior during decades of abuse.

On July 6, 2014, Pope Francis met with six victims of clergy abuse from three different European countries. He begged for their forgiveness, and called clergy abuse within his church “satanic.”<sup>15</sup> At first, multiple international media outlets hailed the meeting as historic, and a big step in the right direction. But Barbara Blaine, the executive director of The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) quickly published an article of fourteen things the pope could do – besides just apologizing – if he were truly interested in stopping pedophilia in the Roman Catholic Church. Among them are three articles that stress the fact that the Roman Catholic Church is still not fully cooperating with secular authorities to punish and prevent sexual abuse. The SNAP response says the pope still is not communicating all cases worldwide to secular authorities; he is still complicit in protecting accused bishops; he is still blocking secular officials in several countries from receiving all evidence to prosecute cases of clergy abuse.<sup>16</sup>

According to SNAP, which represents over 18,000 clergy abuse victims, the pope is still not doing everything possible to cooperate with secular authorities. And why would he, when he is still the leader of a secular state? The Roman Catholic Church is still acting like its own governmental entity, and proves it by refusing to cooperate fully with outside, secular law enforcement.

Meet the new pope. He is the same as the old popes. He is still standing with one foot firmly planted in both kingdoms. And it is still detracting from the true work of the Christian Church, which is the proclamation of the gospel. The new pope busies himself meeting with world leaders and making statements about economic justice, while the true gospel goes unspoken. As a state unto himself, he still refuses to give the kingdom of the left the cooperation it deserves, and harms the name of the Christian Church in the process.

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<sup>15</sup> Barbara Blaine, “Just Stop the Abuse,” *The Daily Beast*, July 7, 2014, accessed September 2, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/07/07/sex-abuse-victims-to-pope-stop-begging-for-forgiveness-and-just-stop-the-abuse.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Blaine, Barbara, *SNAP's Demands*, (Printed in various news publications, 2014) items 2, 7, 13.

### *No Salvation outside the Roman Catholic Church*

“Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.”<sup>17</sup> These words from Vatican II seem to express an almost universalist view of salvation. Even those who do not know Christ can be saved, if they truly follow their conscience and avoid mortal sin.

The current edition of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains further:

All salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is his Body, and is also aimed at those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his Church...In ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please him. The Church still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize all men...She [the Roman Catholic Church] is joined in many ways to the baptized who are honored by the name of Christian, but do not profess the Catholic faith in its entirety or have not preserved unity or communion under the successor of Peter...Those who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the People of God in various ways.<sup>18</sup>

But Pope Francis seems to be taking this broader concept of salvation to another level. He is offering eternal life not only to “anonymous Catholics” who closely follow their consciences. He is offering eternal life not only to other Christians who are not under the papacy’s leadership. He is even offering it to those who have had the opportunity to hear the Christian gospel and have consciously rejected the message.

The Pope has struck a surprisingly conciliatory tone towards atheists and agnostics, saying that God will “forgive” them as long as they behave morally and live according to their consciences.

Francis, who has won praise for spontaneous and unusual moves during his six month papacy, wrote a lengthy letter to a newspaper, *La Repubblica*, which the Italian daily printed over four pages, including page one, under the simple byline “Francesco”.

“God forgives those who obey their conscience,” he wrote in the unprecedented letter, the latest example of the markedly different tone and style from his predecessors that he has set since being elected in March.

The 76-year-old pontiff was responding to editorials written in July and August by Eugenio Scalfari, an agnostic and the paper's founder, in which he was asked whether “the Christian God forgives those who do not believe and do not seek faith”.

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<sup>17</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Rome: Vatican City Press, 1964) pp.73-73.

<sup>18</sup> Various authors, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Rome: Vatican City Press, 1995), pp. 846-849.

Mr. Scalfari said he had not expected the South American pope to respond "so extensively and so affectionately, with such fraternal spirit".<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps, then, Melancthon's third objection to papal authority – that the papacy insists there is no salvation outside the Roman Catholic Church – is no longer a problem with today's pope. It is more than likely we will never hear anything along these lines come from kind-hearted, inclusive Francis: "Furthermore, we declare, we proclaim, we define that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff."<sup>20</sup> Nor are we likely to hear anything like this, which came from the pen of Pope Leo X just one year before Luther nailed The Ninety-Five Theses: "It is necessary for the salvation of souls that all Christian believers be subject to the pope at Rome. The Holy Scriptures and the Holy Fathers testify to this."<sup>21</sup>

When it comes to eternal salvation, the position of the popes before and during the Reformation appears to be the polar opposite from Francis's position today. The popes of the past insisted that only those who submit to the papacy and hold membership in the Roman Catholic Church can be saved. The new pope insists that even those who reject Christ can be saved, if they live according to their consciences.

But in the most important way, these two positions are identical. Both of these positions attack and reject the one, true, Biblical path of salvation. Both turn human hearts away from Christ as their hope of eternal life and toward something that cannot save. Membership in an external institution and submission to earthly power cannot save a soul. But neither can being a good person and following one's conscience. Both of these positions are equally evil and dangerous because they teach salvation apart from faith in the atoning work of Christ Jesus. They both teach salvation apart from Christ's one true universal church, the communion of saints who trust in him alone for salvation.

Pope Francis's attack on the salvation of Christ launches itself from the opposite direction as the attacks of the Reformation popes. Francis attacks from the side of universalism; the popes of the Reformation (and before) attacked from the side of unbiblical exclusivism. But both attacks damage souls with a barrage on the Biblical doctrine of salvation through faith alone in the grace of Christ alone. So, in the final analysis, this pope is really the same as the old popes. He also has salvation all wrong, and does souls harm. The only difference is that he does it with a more friendly-looking error.

### *Opposing "The Vicar of Christ" Then*

Melancthon has argued that the pope is not superior by divine right. The pope also confuses the kingdoms, to the harm of the Christian Church. And the pope detracts from the divine teaching of salvation. Beyond these three main objections, Melancthon now cites a number of Scripture passages, identifies the papacy as the fulfillment of the Biblical Antichrist, and then adds a final objection to papal power: "the pope arrogates to himself divine authority in three ways."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Nick Squires, "Pope Francis Reaches Out to Atheists and Agnostics," *The Telegraph*, September 11, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Pope Boniface VIII: *Unam Sanctum*, 1308.

<sup>21</sup> Pope Leo X: *Pastor Aeternus*, 1516.

<sup>22</sup> Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, p. 337.

Although Melanchthon never uses the phrase “The Vicar of Christ” when characterizing the pope’s claims, he does address the attitude when he writes:

First, [the pope] assumes the right to alter Christ’s teaching and the worship instituted by God, and he wants his own doctrine and worship regarded as divine. Second, he claims not only the power to loose and bind in this life but also authority over souls after this life. Third, the pope is not willing to be judged by the church or by anyone else and places his authority above the judgment of councils and of the whole church. To refuse to be judged by the church or by anyone is to make himself God. Finally, he defends these dreadful errors and this wickedness with the greatest savagery, killing those who dissent.<sup>23</sup>

Here Melanchthon concludes that Christians have a duty regarding the papacy. Based on Matthew 7:15, Melanchthon says all Christians must “beware” of the pope and his teachings. If Christians are not on their guard against the pope’s false teaching, they are unfaithful to this command of Scripture. Next, based on 2 Corinthians 6:14, he says all Christians must “dissent” of papal teaching, even if it means being labeled “schismatic.” Fear of labels or living in the minority is not a reason to let false papal teaching stand. Finally, after again summarizing the papacy’s errors, Melanchthon concludes that all Christians must “reject” papal teaching.

Beware, dissent, and reject. This is the Lutheran guidance offered to Christians during the time of the Reformation. The treatise does not go into great detail on exactly how Christians were to beware, dissent, and reject at that time. He does encourage kings and princes to work to remove errors from the church.<sup>24</sup> In the closing section of the treatise, he encourages all called workers in the church to maintain for themselves the right to appoint bishops, to excommunicate, and to administer the church’s affairs without interference from the pope.

In the end, Melanchthon’s encouragement to beware, dissent, and reject is heavy on Biblical and doctrinal proof, but light on specific direction and application.

And here we are, almost five hundred years later. The pope in power today is supposed to be different. But as we have seen, he is not. He just looks different. He is still claiming divine right where there is none, still confusing the kingdoms, still harming the proper teaching of salvation, and still claiming to stand in the place of Christ, able to overrule the Son of God if he sees fit. Francis is still standing as “The Vicar of Christ,” ruling under this doctrine:

It is a dogma divinely revealed: that the Roman Pontiff when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when acting in the office of shepherd and teacher of all Christians, he defines, by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, doctrine concerning faith and morals to be held by the Universal Church, possesses through the divine assistance promised to him

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<sup>23</sup> Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, p. 337.

<sup>24</sup> It is a little ironic that Melanchthon makes this application after accusing the pope of confusing the two kingdoms. It should work both ways, but Melanchthon does not seem to have the strongest grasp on that as he tells the civil kingdom to work to clean up the ecclesiastical kingdom. On the other hand, Melanchthon’s closing sentence of the paragraph, “It would, therefore, be most shameful for them to use their authority and power to encourage idolatry and countless other disgraceful acts and to slaughter the saints” seems to encourage kings and princes simply to resist Roman Catholicism when the pope attempts to spread it by force.

in the person of St. Peter, the infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to be endowed in defining doctrine concerning faith and morals; and that such definitions are therefore irreformable of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church.<sup>25</sup>

We have met a new pope who is the same as the old popes. Therefore, we have to conclude that Melancthon's charge to "beware" of his teaching, "dissent" of it, and "reject" it, still stands for us today. The question is, how? For the people of his own day, Melancthon offered little specific advice on that front, and none to Midwestern American pastors who were still twenty generations down the pike. So we will have to suggest some methods ourselves. How do Lutheran pastors like you and me beware, dissent, and reject a pope who is really just like all the ones before him, when on the surface he seems so much kinder, gentler, more welcoming, tolerant, and humble?

### *Opposing "The Vicar of Christ" Now: Our Purpose*

As Lutheran pastors, we have a specific goal as we "beware, dissent and reject" papal authority and teaching. Our goal is not merely to win an argument, and prove that we Confessional Lutherans have it right, while the Roman Catholics (still!) have it wrong. This is not about winning a grudge match.

Our goal is also not to prove how smart we are compared to the rest of the present-day Christendom. "Ah, yes, everyone else might be getting taken by this pope's supposed humility and non-judgmental spirit – but not me! I can see he is the same old product in new packaging!" If these are ever even partly our purpose as we beware, dissent and reject, then we are forgetting our overall purpose as Lutheran pastors: to lead souls to heaven with the truth of God's Word.

Our purpose in opposing papal authority and false teaching is the salvation of souls. The papacy has always been dangerous – and it is no less dangerous in the person of Francis – because it detracts from the gospel of salvation in Christ. It detracts from the Word of God as the sole source of truth. It pulls eyes away from the kingdom of heaven to the kingdoms of this world. We oppose papal teaching and authority for the sake of the souls under our care. We want to protect them and keep them secure in the promises of Christ, to rest their hearts solely on the Word of God, and to fix their eyes on the kingdom of heaven. Papal authority and teaching detracts from those goals. This is why we must beware, dissent and reject: not for the sake of winning an argument or satisfying our egos, but for the sake of the souls (including our own) that God has placed under our care.

We would have to be naïve to think that the current pope's siren song of tolerance, humility, and universalistic acceptance will have no appeal to the people sitting in our pews and our Bible classes. The people under our care live in this world, a world that values non-judgmental acceptance and blind tolerance above all else. Our people will hear the praises of a man who fits that bill. Some – perhaps

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<sup>25</sup> First Vatican Council: *Dogmatic Constitution I on the Church of Christ*, IV. Rome, 1870.

many – of our people will feel a pull toward this pope’s teachings and attitudes, perhaps even toward the Roman Catholic Church itself.

So if we fail to instruct the people under our care about the danger of this pope’s attitudes, we are not showing the care for their souls that we should. If we fail to show what we have already seen, that this pope is the same as the old popes, and just as dangerous, we are asking for our own people to be taken in by the attractive lie that this pope is different, and to be pulled toward the same false teaching of all the popes before.

We exist to protect the souls under our care from false teaching as we guide them home to heaven. If we do not beware, dissent and reject, we are doing a disservice to those souls, and placing them in danger. That is our reason for doing it.

#### *Opposing “The Vicar of Christ” Now: Our Tactics*

We have to beware, dissent and reject. But how to do it is the trickier question. We should be aware that we are living in a hyper-sensitive, non-polemical religious climate. People in our culture recoil at the first sign of any infighting among Christians. They instantly assign any disagreement to petty bickering rather than concern for maintaining the truth and protecting souls from danger. Philip Melanchthon used a much harsher tone than usual when writing *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*. Luther, we know, pulled no punches when attacking papal authority and teaching. But we should be much more careful with the language we use when instructing our people, because many in our culture will interpret any kind of blunt language as petty fighting rather than strong concern. Therefore, sermon themes along the line of “Don’t Be Fooled – The Pope is Still the Very Antichrist” and Bible class themes along the lines of “The Whore of Babylon Still Rides” are unwise. People will stop listening. And we will undermine our own worthy cause of guarding them from the dangers of the papacy.

On the other hand, we cannot use our culture’s sensitivity to religious debate as an excuse never to address the issue at all. We should take to heart Melanchthon’s warning not to ignore the issue out of fear of being labeled schismatic, or out of fear of existing in a small minority. A pastor who finishes a forty year ministry without ever discussing the dangers of the papacy with his people – and especially a pope like this – can hardly claim to have faithfully taught the full counsel of God. And he can hardly claim to have protected the souls under his care from every spiritual danger. The work needs to be done. It just needs to be done deftly, depending on whom we address.

Some Christians under our Lutheran care are ready for solid food. They can handle an in-depth discussion of how this pope is still seizing Christ’s authority, confusing the kingdoms, and attacking the Scriptural teaching of salvation in Christ alone. They can handle a more blunt analysis of how this pope is

still pushing the same false teachings as the ones before. They can handle it. And they will probably appreciate it. But the sad fact is, such doctrinally strong saints are probably few and far between in most of our congregations.

Most of the people under our care will be confused, and probably put off, by that kind of instruction. These people, the ones who are still on spiritual milk, will need a gentler and more basic approach. We should start by firmly grounding them in the teachings of Scripture. Scripture teaches one way of salvation: by the grace of God, through faith in Christ. Scripture teaches one head of the Christian Church: Jesus Christ himself. Scripture teaches that the Christian Church's work is to spread God's kingdom with the gospel, not the sword. We need to teach these truths first, before we can take any opening to show how the papacy opposes them. Teach the truth first and foremost. Then, when people are ready for spiritual meat, be ready to serve it. Be ready to discuss what makes this pope like all the rest, even if he looks so different.

This may be especially important for former Roman Catholics in our congregations. Those who have recently crossed over to Lutheranism may be super-hyper-sensitive to any perceived attack on the pope. In this matter, our Lutheran fathers may have set us a good example. In the Augsburg Confession, they avoided the issue of the papacy. Most scholars believe this was to avoid immediately offending the emperor. With former Roman Catholics or others new to the Lutheran faith, an even more patient and gentle approach will be needed for those who are feeding on spiritual milk. First the milk of basic truth, so they are ready for spiritual meat.

Then, when the time comes, take the opportunity. Gently show how this pope, despite the popular narrative, goes against the Word of God. It will probably take some active thinking and planning to raise the issue of the papacy in a way that does not seem forced or confrontational. Sometimes people will come out and ask about it. Other times, the pope will make headlines that people have heard about, and we can use those as a diving board into the topic. But once we have laid the foundation of truth, we also need to warn against what is false. We need to do it deftly and gently, but we need to do it. We need to "beware, dissent and reject" for the sake of the souls under our care.

*Soli Deo Gloria*