

BEYOND TODAY

Envisioning a Better World Tomorrow



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The Greatest Comeback Ever!

In our March-April issue, we examined the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and its implications for all humankind.

I am writing to cancel my subscription. I saw the cover, which said “The Greatest Comeback Ever!” is regarding the return of the person elected to the highest office in the U.S. While I appreciate that as a “Christian” magazine you gave the honor of greatest comeback to our Lord Jesus, the fact that you are lifting up the return of a convicted felon who is a narcissist and a known liar is extremely disappointing to me. How can your magazine stand with someone who clearly does not love neighbor as himself? What offering of care do you give families ripped apart? Your publication is no longer one that I want in my home.

Former subscriber in Canada

The cover title was not about the U.S. presidential reelection. The empty tomb image and article itself make clear the greatest comeback ever is the return of Jesus Christ from the dead—leading to His future return. The reelection in the introduction was drawing attention to people calling that the greatest comeback—wrongly.

There is not space to address accusations against the president, but we caution against reviling and note that much of the country considered the legal outcomes partisan. We were not promoting a political figure, just noting his comeback as remarkable—the accusations making it more so. But again, the point was that it paled next to the ultimate comeback. It's not our place to defend how national leaders love others. The political arena is not often characterized by selflessness. It's unclear what's intended about families ripped apart. In any case, the most help we can give anyone is the truth of God's Word. Of course, we should be helping in various circumstances as we are able—and encouraging all to do the same.

7 Ways to Love Your Enemies

Hello, my so very dear special friends. Next month I will be 70 years old. My first job was a butcher's boy. The owner was a Christian,

but every day he would shout at me, several times a day, as I was left-handed [affecting use of right-handed tools]—including in front of customers. I later worked for a chain store as a grade-1 butcher. Being left-handed, I was verbally and physically abused, and even locked in fridges. The people who damaged me I could never forgive! I have read your article “7 Ways to Love Your Enemies” several times. I am now seeking for our God to forgive me, and for His help and guidance through His Holy Scriptures to learn forgiveness and how to love those who caused me such pain!

Reader in the U.K.

I wonder If the article's author has ever had any real enemies. Not somebody who may have cut in line in front of her or said something bad to her, but somebody who may have caused harm in an evil, heinous manner—like a daughter brutally raped and murdered. The seven suggestions are very difficult in facing a *true* enemy. She says we need to be like Jesus in being patient, loving and forgiving. But when Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers in Matthew 21:12–13, He did not pray for his enemies. He did not forgive them. He did not speak well of them. He didn't try to understand their perspectives. He retaliated, and he was not patient. I actually agree with what Jesus did as an example for dealing with my true enemies.

Subscriber in New Jersey

From author Becky Sweat: My intent was not to cover every aspect of the topic in one article. I wasn't even attempting to address “extreme enemies” or attackers but rather more “everyday” or routine situations where others may agitate, betray or emotionally hurt us. Those who've suffered severe harm or are in fear for their lives may need in-depth help through counseling to cope with such trauma.

Editor's note: It should be added that the

conclusions about Jesus are mistaken. There is no reason to assume He did not pray for the moneychangers or that He was unforgiving and had no patience. The account is brief with much not stated. Jesus was angry, but we also know He was full of mercy, even to the point of praying for the forgiveness of the soldiers who crucified Him. Jesus was not retaliating. Likewise, parents properly disciplining children are not “getting back at them.” Further, Jesus was denouncing a national outrage and provoking confrontation with the religious authorities, who were abusing the common people for their own gain. This was not facing personal antagonism, as the article was addressing.

Other comments from our readers

I just wanted you folks to know that I have learned more in the last several months from your literature about my faith in Jesus Christ and God the Father than I have in the past 50 years from any other church or denomination I'd belonged to. I just wanted to thank you that I feel closer to God now than I ever have before and also closer to Jesus Christ.

From the Internet

I have been studying from your site for about a year if not longer and am currently in the Acts study [available at ucg.org/acts]. I would just like to take the time to thank Darris McNeely and the *Beyond Today* team for making it so interesting. My husband and I live in Quebec and tune into the United Church of God webcast for Sabbath services each week. Thanks also for making us feel a part of your congregation.

Reader in Quebec, Canada

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Back to Nicaea

The Church-State Beast Arises

It was 1,700 years ago this summer that the famous Council of Nicaea was held in an attempt to unify the Christian religion as cultural glue for the empire of Roman Emperor Constantine the Great. We look in this issue at what came out of that and succeeding meetings and the broader implications—as the leaders of Christendom return there in commemoration to promote unity.

While Constantine professed Christianity, he remained a pagan sun devotee until his deathbed conversion—which was followed by his burial in the Church of the Holy Apostles as the supposed “Thirteenth Apostle”! The sudden exaltation during his reign of the religion labeled as Christianity, following a long period of state persecution, was a strange development. Author Adrian Hilton wrote in his 1997 U.K. bestseller *The Principality and Power of Europe*:

“Many believers puzzled over this new order. For nearly three centuries they had waited for the return of Jesus Christ as king and deliverer, the fall of Rome, and the triumph of the Kingdom of God. Curiously, no prophecy had foretold a popular growth and universal acceptance of the Church. They saw prophecies of persecution and suffering, but nowhere was the Church of Christ prophesied to become great and powerful in this world . . .

“It was not until Constantine began [or formally promoted] a process of syncretism that Christians began to understand the nature of *the beast which was evolving*. The Saturday Sabbath was replaced by Constantine’s edict forbidding work on ‘the venerable day of the sun’ (Sunday), and the celebration of the Passover was declared illegal—on pain of death. It was replaced by [what was later known in English as] ‘Easter,’ celebrated on a Sunday and inherited from a Babylonian cult to the goddess Ishtar. The Roman pseudo-Christianity caused many faithful believers to flee into the mountains of Europe and Asia Minor to escape persecution and death, and there they continued, away from the world’s view, as the true Church of Christ.

“The majority of Christians, however, were awed by the universal influence of the new unity . . . Many believers began to wonder if they had not misunderstood the concept of the kingdom of God—it might have been the Church itself, or even the christianised Empire. Thus the fateful union of Church and State was ratified—a union that was to shape the evolution of Europe for centuries to come” (pp. 25-26, emphasis added throughout).

Indeed, after Rome’s fall came a series of revivals of what history calls the Holy Roman Empire—led by a powerful

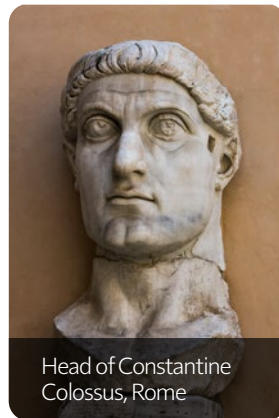
political ruler and a great religious ruler. Hilton was right to call this system an evolving beast—for the system was in direct fulfillment of prophecies God gave in the books of Daniel and Revelation about an emerging Beast power in partnership with a false Christian religious system. Yet the greatest fulfillment of these prophecies, their culmination, will come in the years soon ahead of us.

Our last issue of *Beyond Today* dealt with a shift in European politics, which will ultimately bend in this direction. We are not there yet, but the time will come when a new political strongman and great religious leader will arise to lead the world into the final events of this age. This Beast system, as we explore in this issue, is described in Revelation as imposing a mark on people’s right hands or foreheads denoting allegiance and

compliance. Many have wondered over the nature of this mark, especially now with the increase of electronic surveillance, including through artificial intelligence. But is that what the mark is? As we lay out in our cover story, it’s not what many envision—though its final implementation could involve some kind of technological enforcement. In fact, it has a great deal to do with the church-state relationship that emerged from the imperial church councils—a political and religious tyranny that has dominated Europe and much of the world so often through the centuries.

And such tyranny will return amid desperate times. The early formation in the late 1940s of what eventually became the European Union recognized the need for strong leadership. Paul-Henri Spaak, former Belgian prime minister and president of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, expressed that need in ominous terms: “We do not want another committee. We have too many already. What we want is a man of sufficient stature to hold the allegiance of all people, and to lift us out of the economic morass in which we are sinking. Send us such a man and, *be he god or the devil, we will receive him*” (quoted by Hilton, p. 22).

Yes, at some point they will. The question is: Will *you*? God warns against receiving the mark of this system, and He commands that we come out of it (Revelation 14:9-12; 18:4). While we watch events unfold in the world around us, let’s be sure to keep watch on ourselves—to make sure we remain in line with the ways of God through Jesus Christ in all we believe and practice.



Head of Constantine Colossus, Rome

Tom Robinson, Managing Editor
Beyond Today Magazine

THE MYSTERIOUS MARK OF THE BEAST



Part 1

Identifying the Beast and Its Image

As the electronic surveillance society grows along with calls to implement digital currency, so too does concern about what Bible prophecy calls the mark of the Beast. To understand, we begin with what the Bible says about the Beast and its partnership with a false worship system.

by Tom Robinson

Many have had rising concerns of late over the infamous “mark of the Beast” mentioned in the book of Revelation. This mark, with its associated number 666, is regarded as a sign of the devil to be received in the hand or forehead—Revelation 13:17 stating that no one may buy or sell without it.

Various explanations have been proposed. Some imagine a supernatural demonic branding. Others have claimed the mark is a tattooed or stamped barcode, a microchip embedded under the skin or an access code for money transactions in a cashless society. A few years ago some connected the

mark with new smartphone apps or wristbands for contact tracing in monitoring Covid-19 transmission. Others related it to Covid vaccines or proof of vaccination passports, some even claiming the vaccines included injectable data technology.

Today, the idea that the mark concerns a shift from cash has gained ground with proposals for governments issuing Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC), with all accounts and transactions trackable and able to be locked. It’s recalled that Canadian authorities froze accounts of truck drivers involved in political protest in 2022, and that financial tyranny would

be even easier to impose through state-controlled digital currency.

But just what is this mark of the Beast? Should we be concerned with it? To start, we begin with first asking, What is the Beast? And how is it linked to religious belief and practice?

Identifying the Beast

Both the Beast and its mark are presented in Revelation 13. Here the apostle John in vision saw a beast rising out of the sea with seven heads and ten horns, these heads bearing blasphemous names (verse 1). In the previous chapter he had seen a red dragon with seven heads and ten horns representing Satan the devil (verses 3, 9). So is the Beast of chapter 13 Satan? No, but they're related. The dragon gives the Beast power and authority (verse 2), so the heads and horns in that sense spring from Satan.

The Beast is described as having parts of a leopard, a bear and a lion. This points us to another prophecy of beasts arising from the sea with a total of seven heads and ten horns in Daniel 7. Daniel 2 and 7 both foretell, in different imagery, a sequence of four great empires from the time of the prophet Daniel to the end-time establishment of the Kingdom of God at the return of Christ. In chapter 7, Daniel saw a series of four beasts—the first like a lion, the second like a bear, the third like a leopard with four heads, and the last terrible beyond any beast and with ten horns. These represent, in order, the ancient empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome—the latter continuing through a series of 10 revivals up through the end time, with the final revival still ahead. (Learn more in our study guide *The Final Superpower*.)

John sees these beasts combined

into one, as succeeding empires swallowed up the former ones. The heads and horns represent both the kingdoms and their rulers. Indeed, the Beast John sees is both the Roman Empire and its ruler—from the ancient emperors to a final end-time dictator also referred to later in Revelation. The sea from which it arises represents churning chaotic forces and, as in Revelation 17:15, “peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues.”

In Revelation 13:3-4, the Beast



Artist depiction of the Beast vision in Revelation 13.

appears mortally wounded but then is healed, with all the world following and worshiping or submitting to the Beast as a great power. The deadly wound and healing occurred in the ancient fall of Rome and subsequent restoration of the empire under the Roman Emperor Justinian. And there is evidently a parallel with a final revival after the empire has apparently ceased to exist.

Verses 5-10 present the Beast making war against God's saints or set-apart people—true Christians—for 42 months. This period parallels prophetic mentions elsewhere of 1,260

days and “time and times and half a time” (3½ years)—one of these specifying the period in which a blasphemous “little horn” among the horns of the Roman beast persecutes God's people (Daniel 7:25).

In Revelation 12 we see a mention of both 1,260 days and 3½ years as denoting times of persecution against God's people—the former before Satan's final assault on heaven and the latter after Satan is cast down. But the former, the

1,260 days of Revelation 12:6, evidently refers to 1,260 years of persecution during the Middle Ages, following a prophetic day-for-a-year interpretive principle (compare Numbers 14:34; Ezekiel 4:6; Isaiah 34:8). The latter, the 3½ years of Revelation 12:14, are the 1,260 literal days ahead that end with Christ's return.

With this in mind, the 42 months of Revelation 13:5 appear on one level to refer to the 1,260 years from the time of Justinian's imperial restoration in A.D. 554 to the abdication of Napoleon in 1814—a time of five successive revivals of the empire later pointed to in Revelation 17:9-10. Yet, on another level, the 42 months refer to the final persecution of the saints by the end-time

Beast power for the 3½ years prior to Christ's second coming—paralleling 42 months of Jerusalem being under its dominion in Revelation 11:2. (The Beast revival itself will have come on the world scene a while before this final 3½ years.)

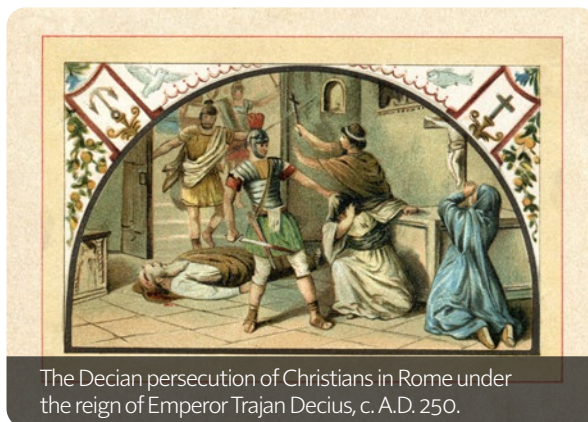
A powerful church-state system—before and yet to come

The persecution described in Revelation 13 and other passages is something God's people will have to endure when it comes on the world. Yet in many ways it *already did* come

on the world—through the domination of Rome when it was first a great power persecuting the early Christian Church, and later through the Middle Ages when the Roman church-state system continued to persecute God’s people. That was all precursor, a forerunner, to the final fulfillment yet to come. Let’s note more about the false church described here.

Revelation 13:11 introduces another beast, this one from the earth—not in contrast to the sea but to heaven, where this power claims to be from. It has two horns like a lamb, presenting itself as of Christ, but speaks as a dragon, the devil—the two horns signifying two-pronged authority, both civil and religious. It exercises all the authority of the initial Beast, the

Roman Empire an ecclesiastical state [church government], which in its constitution and its administrative system was shaping itself upon the imperial model”—a “spiritual empire” ruling over regions, with primacy eventually going to the bishops of Rome (1904, sec. 607). And this system continued beyond Rome’s fall.



The Decian persecution of Christians in Rome under the reign of Emperor Trajan Decius, c. A.D. 250.

government, which, as secular authority failed, became the structure of ecclesiastical rule. Soon the bishops, rather than the Roman prefects, would be the source of order and the seat of power in the cities; the metropolitans, or archbishops, would support, if not supplant, the provincial governors; and the synod of bishops would succeed the provincial

assembly. *The Roman Church followed in the footsteps of the Roman state*” (Vol. 3, pp. 575, 618-619, emphasis added).

This church was polluted by doctrines from pagan mystery religions originating in ancient Babylon. We see another representation of this church as a corrupt woman called “Mystery, Babylon the Great,” sitting astride the revivals of the scarlet Roman beast in Revelation 17.

God’s people will have to endure the persecution when it comes on the world.
Yet in many ways it already did come on the world—when Rome was
first a great power persecuting the early Christian Church.

Roman power, and causes all to bow to this power after it’s revived (verse 12). This second beast performs false miracles and deceives people into making “an image to the beast” and rendering homage to it.

What is this image? There are various theories. The original Greek word *eikon* here meant a likeness, whether a statue or some other kind of representation. The explanation that seems to best fit the facts of history concerns what happened in the late Roman Empire. Philip Myers’ *Ancient History* says that “there had begun to grow up within the

Famed historian Will Durant explains: “The survival of ecclesiastical organization appeared even to the emperors as the salvation of the state. In 554 Justinian promulgated a decree requiring that ‘fit and proper persons, able to administer the local government, be chosen as governors of the provinces *by the bishops and chief persons* of each province”’ (*The Story of Civilization*, Vol. 4, pp. 519-520, emphasis in original).

The system of Roman church governance was thus set up as a model, an image or copy, of the empire for all to submit to. As Durant further explains of this imperial church: “It became a triumphant Church *by inheriting the organizing patterns and genius of Rome* . . . As Judea had given Christianity ethics, and Greece had given it theology, so now *Rome gave it organization* . . . The Roman gift was above all a vast framework of

The apostle Paul referred to this false system that was emerging in his day as the “mystery of lawlessness,” and the one who would lead it as “the man of sin,” who would perform lying wonders (2 Thessalonians 2). The head of this corrupt religious power is referred to in Revelation as the False Prophet, shown to be in partnership with the Beast dictator (see Revelation 16:13; 19:20). These would promulgate the persecution of those holding to the true teachings of the Bible.

Such an arrangement characterized the Holy Roman Empire through the Middle Ages and will return again in the end time. Europe today is very secular, but we will yet see an increase of false miracles to help drive it back to its religious underpinnings.

Be sure to read part 2 about the mark and number of the Beast beginning on the next page. [BT](#)

DIVE DEEPER



To better understand the mysterious symbolism in the last book of the Bible and the future it reveals, request or download our free study guide *The Book of Revelation Unveiled*. Scan the code or visit ucg.org/ja25 to find it.



THE MYSTERIOUS MARK OF THE BEAST



Part 2

The Mark and Number of the Beast

In this second of two parts, we examine the meaning of the mark of the Beast in Revelation along with the number 666. Is it some branded QR code or license for digital transactions? And just what relevance does this have to your life?

by Tom Robinson

The preceding article identified the prophesied Beast in the book of Revelation as the Roman Empire and its tyrannical ruler, with a succession of revivals over the centuries culminating in one still to come. This political, economic and military system emerging in Europe will act in partnership with a false religious power centered at Rome, as occurred during a series of revivals in the past. (It's recommended that the preceding article be read before this one.)

Now we turn to the specific matter of the actual *mark* of the Beast along with the number 666. As previously noted, many ideas have been bandied about regarding these. But what does the Bible

say? Does history shed further light? And why should we concern ourselves with these questions?

The mark and number an important matter

In Revelation 13:16-17 we see the introduction of the infamous mark, as the religious power causes all “to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, and that no one may buy or sell [transact business] except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.” Verse 18 continues: “Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate [or count] the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: His number is 666.”

So this is ultimately a very important matter—one of spiritual wisdom that is also mentioned in several other passages of the book. Those who receive it will drink of God's wrath, while the resurrected saints are those who are victorious over the Beast, the image, the mark and the number of the Beast (Revelation 14:9; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4).

Do you want to live and reign with Christ? Then don't receive this mark. That doesn't mean you can't receive it and then repent. That's part of the message of this book too. Revelation 18:4 tells people to come out of the false Babylonian system to avoid suffering her plagues of divine judgment. That means people who are part of this

system can and must leave it behind.

That brings us back to the question of what this mark is. It's true that we're seeing a rise of technology and data to surveil society, giving governments much more control over people's lives. They can categorize us, knowing what we believe in and support. Eventually this will probably become even more systematized—so that what employment we're able to hold or what business we are able to do is contingent on whether we are flagged as a problem person who does not go along with the system.

There may be an aspect of this in the mark described here—in how the Beast system is able to monitor all this and enforce control over what people do. But is that really what the mark itself is? Is it a barcode on your hand or forehead or an implanted microchip? Based on broader evidence from Scripture, that does not seem to be the case. Perhaps that will be how authorities are able to keep tabs on people to impose their controlling system.

But, as we'll see, something that well fits the description of the mark of the Beast has existed in the past before there was electronic surveillance. Before going to that, though, let's consider what the Bible itself says elsewhere about receiving a mark in your hand and forehead.

God's laws in our hand and forehead as a sign

In Deuteronomy 6:6-8 God said of His commandments, "You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes." The Jewish people later took this in a literal sense, tying phylacteries—small boxes containing the verses here—to their hands and forehead. But this was never meant to be done literally. We can see that from Exodus 13, where the observance of the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the practice of dedicating all firstborn to God were to likewise be signs on the people's hands and between their eyes (verses 7-9, 11-16). You don't tie unleavened bread or the

firstborn to your hand and head. This was meant in a figurative sense.

The fact that you *do* what's commanded is what's in your hand, symbolizing your actions. And between your eyes refers to your brain, your mind, what you think with, the source of your actions. So it really means in your thoughts and in your deeds—your allegiance and the way you live. It's speaking of keeping these festivals—and in Deuteronomy 6 all that God commands us to do. And note that it's to be in your forehead and hands, your thoughts and actions, *as an identifying sign*—like a mark—declaring our worship of the true God alone. (See also Deuteronomy 11:13-23.)

Some matters of obedience will distinguish us more than others. God particularly declared His Sabbath rest days to be such a sign—the seventh-day

forbids bearing some kind of scannable data stamp or microchip—or vaccine markers or a digital currency key.

Choosing between right and wrong is a matter of *obedience to God's commands*. And we have all these examples of the matter of obedience in our thoughts and actions as constituting an *identifying sign*. Clearly, that is also the issue with the mark of the Beast.

In contrast to the Beast and religious power having blasphemous names on their foreheads (Revelation 13:1; 17:3, 5), God's people are shown to be sealed in their foreheads with the name of God (7:2-3; 14:1; 22:4). Angels holding back destruction until God's servants are sealed (7:1-4) parallels a vision in Ezekiel 9 of God's faithful people who are upset with the evil society around them receiving a mark in their foreheads for their protection when the

In contrast to the Beast and religious power having blasphemous names on their foreheads, God's people are shown to be sealed in their foreheads with the name of God.

weekly Sabbath (from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset) along with the annual Holy Days among His festivals—showing that He is our God and we are His people (Exodus 31:12-17).

Regarding the more literal interpretation many give to the mark of the Beast, we should ask: Is it wrong to have a credit card? Is it wrong to use digital currency? Is it wrong to have some form of identification issued by the government? Not of itself. A permanent tattoo would be another matter. And there could well be an issue with ceding personal sovereignty to and displaying participation in what is believed to be an evil system. If someone believes something is wrong and still does it, that would be a sin in terms of intent. But there's nothing that specifically

society's destruction comes (verses 4-7).

Other passages show God's people to be sealed with the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 1:21-22; Ephesians 1:13-14; 4:30). There has to be an obedient mind-frame from repentance to receive the Spirit (Acts 2:38). And then that Spirit helps us to continue to obey (compare Romans 5:5; 1 John 5:3), with God writing His laws in our hearts and minds (Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10; 10:16). Again, this all comes down to keeping God's laws—following God and obeying Him.

False church decrees dissenters unfit to participate in society

As we saw, the false Christian system promotes lawlessness or disobedience to God's commands, although it upholds



This is identifying the powerful Roman system of rule and worship, which is all about sun worship and emperor worship and denying people from obeying the true God, from walking in what's right.

some and mandates others different from those found in the Bible. The false church and its leader are synonymous with the blasphemous “little horn” that springs up among the Roman civil powers in Daniel 7. It would bring terrible persecution on God’s people, having determined “to change times and law” (verse 25).

This is a very big key. It would seek to change the laws of God—and not just in general but specifically laws relating to time, with the saints not going along with this and suffering as a consequence. And indeed the false system has made many major changes in the times God has commanded us to observe and the manner of observance. The observance of God’s Sabbaths and festivals commanded in the Bible is quite different from the observances of this worldly system.

The whole foundation of the false religious system is paganism, especially that coming from ancient sun worship. By the power of the Roman state, the false church outlawed resting on the seventh-day Sabbath and the biblical festivals, scorning them as Jewish, and imposed the weekly observance of “the day of the unconquered sun,” Sunday, and other pagan festivals throughout the year, chief being what became Christmas and Easter. This was a rejection of what God had given as an identifying sign between Him and His followers.

Now consider the false system’s treatment of dissenters, including God’s true followers, especially beginning with Roman Emperor Theodosius II

declaring Roman Catholicism the official religion of the empire and the reiteration that came under Justinian’s imperial restoration.

Will Durant wrote regarding the Code of Justinian: “This Code, like the Theodosian, enacted orthodox Christianity into law. It began by declaring for the Trinity . . . It acknowledged the ecclesiastical leadership of the Roman Church, and ordered all Christian groups to submit to her authority . . . Relapsed heretics were to be put to death; Donatists, Montanists, Monophysites, *and other dissenters* were to suffer confiscation of their goods, and *were declared incompetent to buy or sell*, to inherit or bequeath; they were excluded from public office, forbidden to meet, and disqualified from suing orthodox Christians for debt” (Vol. 4, p. 112, emphasis added throughout).

Such treatment persisted throughout the Middle Ages under the Holy Roman Empire. Note these words of an edict from Pope Alexander in 1163 at the Council of Tours concerning those labeled heretics:

“Whereas a damnable heresy has for some time lifted its head in the parts about Toulouse, and has already spread its infection through Gascony and other provinces, concealing itself like a serpent within its own folds; as soon as its followers shall have been discovered, let no man afford them a refuge on his estates; *neither let there be any communication with them in buying or selling*; so that, being deprived of the solace of human conversation [or interaction],

they may be compelled to return from error to wisdom” (quoted by George Waddington, *A History of the Church*, Vol. 2, 1833, p. 356).

In both cases those who don’t go along with the false system are not allowed to buy and sell—as was directly foretold of the enforcement of the mark of the Beast.

Consider that this was decreed long before there was any conception of implanted microchips, barcodes or other modern surveillance technologies. An effective marking of people to regulate participation of societal commerce was already there—a form of “cancel culture”—though obviously not on the technological level to accomplish it effectively on the scale we are able to have today and in the biggest way it will be manifested yet ahead. To what extent such technological surveillance is required to fulfill Revelation 13 is not totally clear, given that the Roman system was enforcing its mark to an extent for centuries before there was such technology.

Rejecting the Roman system and its rebellion against God

As to the number of the Beast, 666, it has been interpreted in various ways, and there may be layers to the meaning. But the directive we are given in Revelation 13:18 is to “count” like pebbles (Greek *psephisato*) the number of the name. This seems to refer to adding up the number values of letters in a name or other word, which was a common practice at the time John

wrote. Numbers were represented by letters in Hebrew and Greek, as in the Roman numeral system where “I”=1, “V”=5, “X”=10, etc. Giving sum total values of words was part of the Hebrew practice of gematria and the Greek equivalent called isopsephy. Some Greek graffiti found at Pompeii reads, “I love her whose number is 545.”

Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers, says that Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John, explained that 666 was the total in adding up the number values of the letters in the Greek word *Lateinos*, meaning “Latin man,” the Greek term for Roman (Revelation and the rest of the New Testament being written in Greek). Revelation calls it the number of the Beast and the number of a man and says the number is of the name. Here we have the Greek name of the empire and of every man in the empire, including its leader and its powerful church. These all bear the name Roman. This is very telling. (Other summations associated with the Roman system have been noted as well, but limited space prevents discussing them here.)

Clearly this is identifying the powerful Roman system of rule and worship, which is all about sun worship and emperor worship and denying people from obeying the true God, from walking in what’s right. This is what the mark of the Beast comes down to.

Concerning the transfer of the weekly Christian worship day from the biblical seventh-day Sabbath to the day of the sun, Sunday, the Roman church has in the past claimed this as having been done by its own authority superseding the Bible—and has argued that Protestants, having accepted Sunday observance begun by Rome, are simply continuing under Roman church authority. At the end of the 19th century, H.F. Thomas, chancellor of Cardinal Gibbons, wrote in reply to a letter about the switch to Sunday: “Of course the Catholic Church claims that the change was her act . . . And the act is a *mark* of her ecclesiastical authority in religious things” (Nov. 11, 1895). Note this change of times and law as a *mark* of her authority!

Much of Europe today is very secular, but in Germany, the most powerful European Union nation, Sundays remain sacred, especially in smaller towns. Many Sunday laws are still in effect in Europe. A papal encyclical in 2000 called for Sunday as a unifying day of rest to help save the environment—popular motivation in the secular world. On the other hand, we have not seen any push to require people to work on the Saturday Sabbath. Of course, there is often conflict with employment, school and other societal activities, Sabbath observance being regarded as a fringe position, with legal protections lacking or ignored.

Eventually signs and wonders in the false church and likely a backlash against Islamic ingress and terrorism will drive Europeans back to a more traditionalist position. This need not mean that other churches besides the Roman church will not be allowed to operate.

There has been a major push for ecumenism among various churches, with the Roman church leading the way, trying to bring everyone back into what’s seen as the one universal church (the word *Catholic* actually meaning “universal”). This would seem to require that some differences in teaching be allowed, but on some things everyone would have to agree. There already exists today among various churches a “Lord’s Day Alliance,” which says that Sunday is the mark of unity of Christian churches.

Those who observe the biblical seventh-day Sabbath and reject Sunday and the pagan-rooted holidays of Christmas and Easter will likely be people labeled as cult members who

are outside the accepted mainstream and, worse, dangerous people who must be guarded against and dealt with. We’re already seeing this kind of thing with the spreading of cancel culture.

What we’re really talking about in terms of the mark of the Beast is not just the Sabbath vs. Sunday. That’s an identifiable part of it—something that could put true Christians more visibly in conflict with the state in union with the false church. But receiving God’s sign and rejecting the mark of the Beast involve *all* of God’s laws. Are we following God? Are we obeying Him? Are we keeping what we’re told to do?

If we’re doing that, we will not receive the mark of the Beast—the mark of disobeying God under the tyranny of Satan.

The main and ultimate enforcement of the mark of the Beast will not come until the final 3½ years leading up to Christ’s return has begun. We are not there yet. But there may be precursors leading up to that—just as there have been in the Roman system in past centuries. And we must remain vigilant.

The coming Great Tribulation will be worse than any time we’ve seen before. But in the end, God’s people will be granted victory over the Beast and its mark, having instead *God’s* name on their foreheads, with His laws as a sign in their minds and actions.

Reject the mark. Come out of Babylon. Obey God’s commandments. And bear *His* name forever! **BT**

In the end, God’s people will be granted victory over the Beast and its mark, having instead *God’s* name on their foreheads, with His laws as a sign in their minds and actions.

DIVE DEEPER



To understand more about the end-time Roman tyranny and the false religious system that will accompany it, be sure to send for our free study guides *The Final Superpower* and *Who Is the Antichrist?* Scan the code or visit ucg.org/jaz5 to find them both.



The Council of Nicaea

Unraveling the Myths and Truths

This summer marks the 1,700th anniversary of the Nicene Council, which helped to define mainstream Christianity. What emerged from the fourth century was a church of unbiblical teachings with controlling sway over society, including everyday people and their rulers. It was a different church from that founded by Christ through His apostles.

by Darris McNeely

Following up on ecumenical efforts under the late Pope Francis to help heal the thousand-year-old rift between Roman Catholicism and Greek Orthodoxy, the new pope Leo XIV met with the Orthodox patriarch Bartholomew in Rome, and they agreed to meet later this year at the site of ancient Nicaea in western Turkey to jointly observe the 1,700th anniversary of the famous church council there, a major part of their common tradition (see “Pope Leo XIV: A Man to Watch” beginning on page 18).

For the Christian world, the Council of Nicaea, held from May through August of A.D. 325, is seen as a pivotal moment in the history of the church. Convened by Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, it began the formulation of the Nicene Creed, the establishment of Trinitarian doctrine and the supposed unification of Christianity. For professing Christendom, the Nicene Creed, along with its expansion at Constantinople to follow, is the litmus test for being considered a Christian. Deny this creed and you are labeled anathema from Christ.

Ironically, most do not understand the full historical and biblical implications of what truly took place at this influential gathering. Indeed, most who profess to be Christian could not repeat the adopted creed nor explain the key theological tenets covered. Its historic importance cannot be denied. Arguments over the rules of faith espoused in the creed and its later enhancement resulted in more

deaths than Rome ever martyred in the Colosseum.

Many believe that the Council of Nicaea was a divinely inspired meeting that solidified the correct understanding of God, Jesus Christ, and Christian doctrine and practice. Others argue that it marked the beginning of a shift away from biblical teachings toward human traditions and theological speculation. What was the true purpose of the council? What role did Emperor Constantine play? And most importantly, does this event and the subsequent teaching align with biblical truth?

On this significant anniversary, let's consider the historical context, theological debates and long-term impact of the Council of Nicaea and compare its conclusions with what the Bible actually teaches.

The historical context of Nicaea

To understand the Council of Nicaea, we must first look at the Roman world of the fourth century A.D. Prior to Emperor Constantine's rise to power, Christianity had been a persecuted minority religion. Roman emperors such as Nero, Domitian and Diocletian suppressed Christian beliefs through violent means. While the Christian church at the turn of the fourth century differed from the Church founded by Christ and His apostles, it was a growing force within the empire. It had a unity that made it attractive to Constantine. His empire was showing fault lines.

In 313, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan,

When read and confessed in churches by traditionalist believers, the Nicene Creed is a unifier where much theological division exists. But does the Bible support the Trinity as defined at Nicaea and Constantinople?

granting Christians the right to worship freely. As the first Roman emperor to embrace Christianity—although arguably for political reasons rather than personal conviction—Constantine sought to unite his empire under one religious system. The Christian church had a system of bishops and structure that could aid in that.

There was, however, a growing problem that if left unresolved threatened to split the church. There was significant dispute over the nature of Jesus Christ. Was He fully divine and eternal, or was He a created being? This dispute led to one of the most significant theological conflicts in early Christianity—the Arian controversy.

The Arian controversy and the purpose of Nicaea

The Council of Nicaea was convened primarily to settle the dispute concerning the teaching of Arius, a presbyter or elder from Alexandria in Egypt who argued that Jesus Christ was not divine in the same way as God the Father. According to Arius:

- Jesus was not coeternal with the Father but was created at some point.
- Jesus was greater than human beings but lesser than God the Father.
- The Father alone was the true Almighty God.

This heretical teaching denied the fundamental truth of the Bible regarding the divine nature. God is a family composed of two coeternal spirit beings who together initiated a plan to expand Their family through the creation of mankind in Their image (Genesis 1:27). This truth was understood by the apostles and formed the foundation of the gospel they took to the world.

The apostle Paul explained that this nature of the divine family was the means by which all things in heaven and earth would be brought together as one (Ephesians 1:9-10).

The teaching that Christ was not divine before His human birth would render null the good news of humanity's salvation through Christ, the One through whom God created everything (see Colossians 1:16-17). Denying this truth discounts the Bible, hollowing it out as only a book of men instead of the revelation of a divine mind that has given it life and meaning.

This fourth-century argument over the nature of Christ set the stage for discussions that would lead the church further into heresy. The debate was heated and divisive, prompting Constantine to intervene and call for a council to resolve the issue. He needed the church to be united. In his mind the future of the empire depended on the stability of the church.

What happened at the council?

The Council of Nicaea was attended by around 300 bishops from various parts of the Roman Empire. It was not the first gathering of church leaders in this era, but it's considered the first of importance, given the issues under discussion.

In addition to the divinity of Christ, the Council discussed other matters about the relationship of Christ and the Father. It tried, but failed to establish a uniform date for Easter, which had supplanted the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread, which the early Church faithfully observed. Constantine's invective against the Jews and banning of Christians from following perceived Jewish practice inflamed antisemitism and persecution against those who persisted in the earlier observance (see "The Quartodeciman Issue: God's Church Driven Underground" on page 16.)

Ultimately, the council rejected Arius' teachings and formulated what is now known as the Nicene Creed, which stated:

- Jesus Christ is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God."
- He was "begotten, not made, of one substance [Greek *homoousios*], with the Father" (wording understood by many to mean these divine persons constitute a single being).
- Those who did not accept this doctrine were to be anathematized (cut off or excommunicated).

This version of the creed ended with a brief stated belief in the Holy Spirit but did not directly identify the Holy Spirit as a third person of the Trinity, that issue awaiting further development. Nicaea's work was not finished. Arius would be exiled and die without recanting his ideas. Scholars would debate the teaching and eventually devise terminology to explain the nature of God.

Arianism was so pervasive and divisive as to find co-emperors of the empire each holding divergent views. In 376, at the Battle of Adrianople in northwestern Turkey, the co-emperor Valens, who was Arian by belief, was killed along with his legion of soldiers by invading Germanic tribes. The death of an Arian emperor shook the faith of many and is thought to be a factor leading to the calling of another council, this time in Constantinople and presided over by the emperor Theodosius.

This famous council of A.D. 381 formalized the teaching, in what is called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, that not only is Christ God, but so is the Holy Spirit. It states belief in the Holy Spirit as "the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is adored [or worshiped] and glorified."

Yet it is crucial to recognize that the developing doctrine



of the Trinity was not based on direct biblical statements. Greek philosophical ideas and theological interpretation were the basis of the teachings emanating from these two critical councils of the fourth century. It was not God's Spirit that was guiding these meetings laying the heretical theological foundation for the Trinity doctrine, the central tenet of Christendom.

The Nicene Creed, as further formulated at Constantinople, unifies post-Nicene Christianity. When read and confessed in churches by traditionalist believers, it is a unifier where much theological division exists. To not accept the creed and its teaching of a triune God is to be branded a heretic and even a non-Christian.

What the Bible actually teaches

Does the Bible support the Trinity as defined at Nicaea and Constantinople? The answer is *no*. Nowhere does the Bible teach that God is a trinity of three coequal divine persons existing as a singular triune being. The Bible reveals that before there was anything, there were two Beings who were God—identified as God the Father and the Word who was with God and was also God, the One who became flesh and dwelt among men (John 1:1-3, 14).

In putting all the various passages

together, we discover that there is one God comprising two distinct divine Beings. These two, the Father and the Son, are two self-conscious individuals, each with free will, though unified as one in spirit and purpose (John 10:30). The one God is the divine family. (To better understand, be sure to read our free study guide *Is God a Trinity?*)

The Holy Spirit is God's power and projected presence, not a separate person. As Mary was told of the conception of Jesus, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35). Upon repentance, a complete change of life, one can be baptized and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit as the indwelling life essence of God (Acts 2:38). (Again, see our study guide for much more detail.)

Clearly, the biblical description of God differs significantly from the philosophical doctrine formulated in the fourth-century councils.

The long-term impact of Nicaea and the Trinity doctrine

The Council of Nicaea, and to an even greater degree the Council of Constantinople, set in motion events leading to the rise of the great "Christian" church of history. A church with a recognized hierarchy with the pope at the top. A church recognized by the Roman Empire, both in the West and the East, and whose teaching could be enforced by the power of the state.

Those continuing to teach and practice according to the Bible as taught by the early apostolic church were summarily pushed aside, becoming viewed as fringe and dangerous to Christian harmony. The observance of the biblical feasts was essentially banned.

In A.D. 380, Theodosius issued an edict declaring the new Nicene orthodoxy as supreme in the eastern church. The state was declaring spiritual law. Theodosius decreed that true Christians were those who believed in "the single divinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit within an equal majesty and an orthodox Trinity." For all intents this

remains the accepted standard. In the eyes of today's Christian world, you are not "Christian" if you do not believe in the statement of the Trinity formulated at Nicaea and Constantinople.

Here's what this meant in the fourth century: As a bishop, to hold a variant view would cause you to lose your role in the church. As a member, you could not enter the church and worship God. The door of the church was barred to you. You could not receive the sacraments of baptism, communion or funeral rites. You were "anathema from Christ." Substantial blocs of Christians were denied access and association with the church.

After the 381 Council of Constantinople, a decree from the emperor, with the assent of the bishops, declared: "We now order that all churches are to be handed over to the bishops who profess Father, Son and Holy Spirit of a single majesty, of the same glory, of one splendor, who establish no difference by sacrilegious separation, but [who affirm] the order of the Trinity by recognizing the Persons and uniting the Godhead."

To believe or even be in possession of writings teaching contrary to this could be punishable by death. While difficult for our modern minds to grasp, that is what happened then and later—and will happen again. Your Bible shows a time is coming when to hold views contrary to what's taught by a tyrannical church-state union will again result in people having to make a choice between obeying the truth of God or that of the false power. Choices made at that time are matters of spiritual life and death. It is serious! Which leads to why this is important.

The great Christian church that rose from this period came to dominate the lives of adherents. Salvation itself was tied to obedience to teaching and participation in the rituals of what was declared the true faith. With question of Christ's divinity resolved, the focus was now on how could fallen man be redeemed. How could one's "immortal

The Quartodeciman Issue: God's Church Driven Underground

The Council of Nicaea, convened by the Emperor Constantine in A.D. 325, was a pivotal development in church history, often celebrated for unifying Christian doctrine. Yet, from a biblical perspective, this council marked a tragic turning point—a widening apostasy away from the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3). At the heart of this departure was errant teaching over the nature of God (see the main article), as well as the rejection of the biblical Passover in favor of the man-made tradition of Easter and condemnation of those who continued in biblical observance.

Faithful Christians in the first few centuries after Christ were sometimes called *Quartodecimans*, from the Latin for “fourteen,” as they continued to observe Passover on the 14th of the Hebrew month of Nisan, exactly as Jesus and the apostles did and as Scripture instructs. They understood the annual Passover to be a memorial of Christ’s death (1 Corinthians 5:7; 11:26), not a moveable feast based on Roman or pagan traditions. These Christians, both Jew and gentile, held fast to the example of Christ and the apostles in observing God’s commanded Holy Days (Leviticus 23).

The Council of Nicaea, under Constantine’s authority, sought to stamp out this faithful remnant. Constantine, whose own conversion was political rather than spiritual, wrote with vitriol: “It appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin . . . Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd.” This was not simply a calendar decision—it was a spiritual attack on the very people who were striving to remain obedient to the Word of God.

Calling the Jews “polluted” and “blind,” his ruling institutionalized antisemitism and laid the groundwork for future persecution of both Jews and of Christians branded as “Judaizers” and heretics for upholding biblical law. While the Roman church increasingly aligned itself with pagan customs and human traditions, abandoning the commandments of God for the doctrines of men (see Mark 7:7–9), Christians who continued in true biblical practices were pressured to conform or forced underground.

True Christianity survived—not in the halls of imperial councils, but among those who quietly kept the Passover, honored God’s Sabbaths and refused to compromise with the world. The Council of Nicaea did not unify Christianity. *It formalized a great falling away.* Yet even amid persecution, a faithful remnant endured, keeping the truth alive.

To learn more about the Quartodeciman controversy and the replacement of God’s festivals with unbiblical traditions, see our free study guide *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?*

—Tom Robinson

soul” be guaranteed entrance into heaven, avoiding the ravaging fires of eternal damnation? This became very real. The church was perceived as the “City of God” on earth. The ecclesiastical hierarchy held power to absolve one of sin. Access to the communion, the body of Christ, was through the priest and the church.

People began to worship and pray to dead saints in heaven. In time the cult of worshiping the virgin Mary as Mother of God came to its critical role in theology. What emerged from the fourth century councils and debates was the foundation of a church whose teachings founded in tradition and not the Bible held controlling sway over the lives of everyday people and those who dwelt in the castles and palaces of power. It was a different church from that founded by Christ through His apostles.

Why this matters for Christians today

Understanding the Council of Nicaea of 1,700 years ago is critical for those who seek to base their faith on Scripture rather than human traditions. Many mainstream Christian beliefs today stem from church councils rather than clear biblical teachings. As believers, we must examine what the Bible actually teaches rather than accepting historical creeds. Be aware of how doctrine developed and how political forces shaped Christianity. Seek a personal relationship with God based on His revealed truth, not inherited theological traditions.

The Council of Nicaea was a defining moment in Christian history, but it was not a moment of biblical revelation. Rather, it was a political and theological event that shaped mainstream Christianity. While it established doctrines that many follow today, it is essential to compare these teachings with the Bible itself. Each of us must test all things and hold fast what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

As truth-seekers, let us be diligent in studying God’s Word and ensure that our beliefs align with Scripture, not false tradition! **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



The world religion known as Christianity is far removed from the faith and practice of Jesus Christ and His early followers.

To learn more about the early Church and what happened to it as a false Christian system became

dominant—and how to identify Christ’s Church today—request or download *The Church Jesus Built*. And to better understand the true nature of God as understood in the early Church, also obtain *Is God a Trinity?* Both study guides are available free.

Scan the code or visit ucg.org/jaz5 to find them both.





Why Did Jesus Christ Establish His Church?

Although many tend to think of the Church as a building, the Bible actually defines it as an assembly or group of people. But why did Jesus begin His Church and what was to be its vital purpose?

by John Labissoniere

Jesus said, “I will build My church” (Matthew 16:18). The word for “build” in the Greek language means to found, establish or construct, and the word commonly translated “church” in the New Testament refers to “a called-out assembly” of people. The Church is the Body of Christ’s chosen, repentant, baptized believers who are energized by the Holy Spirit within them (2 Timothy 1:6-7).

This summoned gathering is described by Jesus not as a large, prominent organization, but as a cherished “little flock” (Luke 12:32). Its members zealously follow Christ’s example and teachings, faithfully obeying His Father’s commandments as He did (John 15:10; 1 John 5:3). In addition, they endeavor to “shine as lights” of righteousness in society while rejecting its lawless, corrupt and perverse ways (Ephesians 5:9; John 15:19; Philippians 2:15).

Furthermore, the members highly esteem Christ’s vibrant message of “the gospel [or good news] of the Kingdom of God,” which includes two related components (Mark 1:14-15). First, it announces the coming reign of God through Christ, when Jesus will replace all human rule with His perfect government, which will result in enduring peace, joy and prosperity for all humanity (John 14:3; Luke 11:2). Second, a vital addition to the message after Christ rose from the dead was the truth about how He paid the penalty of humanity’s sins and empowers change by means of His flawless life, sacrificial death and resurrection. The Savior’s selfless, loving actions make it possible for people to ultimately enter God’s divine family through a resurrection from death and receive the priceless gift of salvation and eternal life (Ephesians 3:15; Romans 1:16).

Preaching the gospel and preparing a people

When considering this, we may ask: *Why* did Jesus establish His Church? What was its purpose, and what were His disciples to accomplish? In unveiling their vital commission, He instructed them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). He also told them to “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17). Christ further emphasized this crucial assignment by directing them, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). These central responsibilities were to be performed faithfully from generation to generation.

To accomplish this dynamic mission, the leaders and

general membership of the Church must be excellent examples of love and uprightness to provide trustworthy, biblically grounded guidance and instruction to the people God chooses to call into His Church (John 21:17). It is His desire that every member continues to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18) while demonstrating heartfelt love for others through the power of God’s Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5; Zechariah 4:6).

Included in its commission to preach the gospel and prepare a people for the Lord is the Church’s obligation to deliver a warning message to the world regarding the consequences of disobedience to God’s commandments—meaning the turmoil and suffering that wrongdoing generates in people’s lives (Colossians 1:28; Romans 1:18-32; Isaiah 58:1). This responsibility includes making known Bible prophecies about the distressful period that lies ahead for humanity apart from widespread genuine repentance (Ezekiel 33:6; 2 Peter 1:19; Amos 3:7).

In addition, the Church must educate people about the magnificent age that will begin at Jesus’ second coming. At that awesome time, He will put a stop to the confused, violent and hopeless human condition resulting from immorality, warfare, crime, poverty, disease and other forms of lawlessness and injustice. In their place Christ will set up the Kingdom of God on earth which will produce wonderful peace, happiness and abundance for everyone. Plus, He will help all people to fully comprehend how they can personally enter God’s spiritual family to serve with Him in His magnificent reign over all nations. Those in God’s Church are being prepared to serve as kings and priests with Christ in the coming Kingdom (Revelation 5:10; 20:4, 6).

God may be calling you today

Finally, the purpose and focus of the Church plainly emerges from Holy Scripture as it manifests the reason Jesus Christ established it and why He assigned its people their dynamic commission. Today, His “little flock” is keenly dedicated to accomplishing its spiritual responsibilities. Perhaps He is calling you to participate in this vitally important mission. If so, how will you respond? **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



This article only scratches the surface in understanding God’s purposes in establishing His Church. For more, be sure to download or request our free study guide *The Church Jesus Built*. Scan the code or visit ucg.org/jaz5 to find it.





Leo XIV
8 maggio 2025

Pope Leo XIV

A Man to Watch

With the selection of a new pope, the world is waiting to see the direction he will take. In any case, as the spiritual leader of around 1.4 billion people, his positions and actions are consequential on a global scale.

by Rex Sexton

During World War II, following the Teheran Conference in Iran between Allied leaders, *Time* magazine published a famous anecdote about a question asked by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, as relayed by the South African prime minister Jan Smuts: “Winston Churchill suggested to Stalin the possibility of the Pope’s being associated with some of the decisions taken. ‘The Pope,’ said Stalin thoughtfully. ‘The Pope. How many divisions has he?’” (Dec. 27, 1943). Decades later in 1991, Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev found out the answer, in part due to the efforts of Pope John Paul II in helping to bring down communist rule in Europe.

Cardinal Robert Prevost made his first speech as Pope Leo XIV on the balcony of St. Peter’s Basilica, shortly after being elected pontiff on May 8, 2025. The native of the Chicago area became the first American in history to be chosen for the papal chair. The speech was given in Spanish and Italian, with a few mandatory phrases in Latin.

It’s early yet, but do we have any indications as to the course he will chart?

Following his predecessor, or returning to roots?

Pope Leo thrilled many in the audience as he praised his predecessor, Pope Francis, saying: “This is the peace of the Risen Christ, an unarmed peace and a disarming peace, humble

and persevering. It comes from God, God who loves us all unconditionally. We still have in our ears that weak, but always courageous voice of Pope Francis as he blessed Rome!” The words “God who loves us all unconditionally” were interpreted as a signal that this new pope would be supportive of homosexuality and transgenderism being accepted in the Roman Catholic Church. Progressive church members, priests and others who supported these nontraditional teachings were beside themselves with joy! The liberation of Francis would continue!

But not so fast. On May 16 Pope Leo XIV delivered his first address to the Vatican’s diplomatic corps, and it was a shocker to many. In his first official address as pontiff, Pope Leo XIV offered a vision of peace and dialogue—but also delivered a strong reaffirmation of Catholic teachings on marriage and abortion. “Governments must invest in the family, founded upon the stable union between a man and a woman,” he said, calling the family “the foundation of peaceful societies.”

He also highlighted “respect for the dignity of every person, especially the most frail and vulnerable, from the unborn to the elderly,” echoing the Church’s opposition to abortion and euthanasia—positions Francis had also held, though often without strong commitment.

Francis was known for his repeated statement, “Who am I to judge?” Pope Leo seemed to be saying he would judge matters. His focus on “the unborn,” traditional family structures, and moral responsibility has already raised eyebrows among more progressive Catholics and many in the governments of Europe.

Ten days after his election, on May 18, Pope Leo XIV delivered the homily at the “Mass for the Initiation of the Petrine Ministry” in St. Peter’s Square. He astounded the audience by delivering it entirely in English, considered a nod to the United States. European Union leaders were not pleased, according to some reports.

His Francis-like dialogue was much reduced. The European Conservative posted an article titled, “Is Pope Leo XIV a Secret Conservative?” stating: “Prevost has a history of strongly criticizing the so-called LGBTQ+ movement, and much indicates that he’s not going to exercise much patience towards the gay ascendancy in the Catholic Church. He has said in the past: ‘Western mass media is extraordinarily effective in fostering within the general public enormous sympathy for beliefs and practices that are at odds with the Gospel—for example abortion, homosexual lifestyle, euthanasia’” (Sebastian Morello, May 9).

In various ways he seems to be more of a traditionalist, choosing traditional

vestments that Francis refused to wear following his election and seeming to support a return to the traditional Latin mass. His papal name also points in that direction (see “Leo a Significant Name in Papal History” at right).

Political involvement

The new pope is already jumping into politics. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said that European and U.S. leaders welcomed U.S. President Donald Trump’s statement that Pope Leo XIV was interested in hosting Russia-Ukraine talks at the Vatican. The pope hosting a peace treaty conference would be historic in modern times. Yet things have since further escalated in that conflict.

Some have pointed out a history of social media posts over the past several years slamming President Trump’s positions on restricting immigration and deporting those in the country illegally—Prevost’s latest before becoming pope decrying Trump’s partnership with El Salvador’s President Bukele in deporting and incarcerating illegal aliens who’ve committed major crimes. And many are waiting to see what the pope will do in terms of the compromise with the Chinese government that gives that government say over who the Catholic church leaders in China are.

The world will see in future months the political will and goals of the new pope. How many divisions does Leo XIV have? We know that there is a world government coming on the scene. Daniel 8:23-24 tells us: “And in the latter time of their kingdom, when the transgressors have reached their fullness, a king shall arise, having fierce features, who understands sinister schemes. His power shall be mighty, but not by his own power; he shall destroy fearfully, and shall prosper and thrive; he shall destroy the mighty, and also the holy people.”

That world government will be aligned with a religious power in Europe (see our cover story in this issue). What part might Leo play in it with his divisions? He is a man to watch. [BT](#)

Leo a Significant Name in Papal History

There hasn’t been a pope named Leo in more than a century. “In his address to the College of Cardinals on May 10, Pope Leo XIV explained that he had ‘different reasons’ for choosing the name but he was mainly inspired by the most recent of his namesakes—Pope Leo XIII, who spent much of his papacy advocating for the rights of workers during the first industrial revolution” (Melissa Sartore, “Why Did the Pope Pick Leo? Here’s Why the Name Is So Important in the Catholic Church,” *National Geographic*, May 16, 2025).

A Vatican spokesperson said the choice involved applying the former Leo’s introduction of modern social doctrine to “workers in an age of artificial intelligence,” comparing the pace of change today with the earlier period (Christian Edwards, “What’s in a Name? The History of the Papal Name Leo,” CNN, May 8.)

But note that the new pope had other reasons too. The name Leo itself means “lion,” and perhaps there was the sense of restored strength, courage, regality, dignity and leadership. There is a storied chain of Pope Leos through history.

That began with Leo I in the fifth century, the first of three popes in history called “the Great.” Author Adrian Hilton noted: “Pope Leo’s intervention to persuade Attila the Hun not to invade Rome was crucial in augmenting the power of the Roman Church and laying the foundation of the temporal power of the popes. It was thus that the primacy of Rome’s bishop was asserted over all other bishops” (*The Principality and Power of Europe*, 1997, p. 27). Indeed, Leo I invoked the primacy of the apostle Peter supposedly laid out in Matthew 16 (see our Q&A on page 30 for more on this) along with Roman hereditary law to elevate the Bishop of Rome to the legal heir of Peter. Hilton continued: “As the Council of Chalcedon stated in 451: ‘Peter has spoken by Leo; let him be anathema who believes otherwise.’ From this, the doctrine that papal power was granted by Christ to Peter, and that power was passed on by Peter to his successors, began to take firm root.”

A later important figure, Leo III, led during a formative period, being the pope who crowned Charlemagne in 800 as the first Holy Roman emperor, producing a church-state union that persisted through medieval times and beyond. (Be sure to read our cover story.)

Pope Leo IX presided over what led to the Great Schism of 1054 between western, Latin Catholics and the eastern, Greek Orthodox. The patriarch of Constantinople saw himself equal to the bishop of Rome, bringing tension. The pope sent a delegation to settle the dispute, but the patriarch was excommunicated (the pope died just before his delegate carried out the excommunication).

Centuries later, Pope Leo X, of Italy’s Medici family, presided over another great split, as he excommunicated the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther in the 16th century when Luther refused to recant his positions.

There have been efforts over the last few decades to heal these past divisions, and Leo XIV has stated that Christian unity is a priority for him. He will be meeting with the Orthodox patriarch Bartholomew later this year at Nicaea in honor of the 1,700th anniversary of the famed church council there. Yet ecumenical work to restore ecclesiastical unity evidently won’t include compromising on papal leadership.

—Tom Robinson

Radical Islam's long game in Europe

In 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna with the aim of promoting Islamic law as the foundation of society. In the 1960s, Said Ramadan and other members of the Brotherhood moved into Europe, laying down ideological roots. Their mission was not just religious, but political—creating a long-term plan to reshape the West from within.

A recent French government report has exposed a concerning effort by the Muslim Brotherhood to create a covert “fifth column” in Europe. This initiative includes infiltrating political institutions, radicalizing Muslim communities, and disguising political motives behind causes such as anti-Islamophobia campaigns. The Brotherhood presents itself as a moderate voice, but its long-term vision is an Islamic Europe.

The Hoover Institution at Stanford University has

echoed these concerns, pointing to a surge in both violent and non-violent Islamism over the past two decades. France has suffered over 30 terror attacks in the past 10 years.

Europe is also witnessing a surge in so-called “non-violent Islamism.” Banned symbols of terrorist groups—like Hamas and Hezbollah—have appeared at rallies and protests. Anti-Israel demonstrations have often crossed the line into open antisemitism, with slogans glorifying violence. Jewish communities now live in fear, and emigration of Jews to Israel from France and the U.K. has hit record highs.

Germany warns of “parallel societies”—entire communities resisting integration, governed informally by Sharia law. Some French neighborhoods have become effectively “no-go zones” for police.

Prophecy warns that tensions between what is



A mosque in Stockholm, Sweden

likely a Muslim power bloc (the end-time “king of the South”) and a European power bloc (the “king of the North,” and the “Beast” power of our cover story) will explode in the end times (Daniel 11:40–42). The stage is being set for these events. Will the West awaken in time? To see where events are headed, request or download a copy of our free study guide *The Middle East in Bible Prophecy*.

Eighty years after Hiroshima, the nuclear threat looms large

August 2025 marks the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II in 1945 with the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, which ushered the world into the nuclear age. Today, the threat of nuclear catastrophe looms larger than ever—only now the weapons are more powerful, more nations are armed, and global conflict feels dangerously close.

U.S. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard released a video noting a recent sober-



ing visit to Hiroshima and presenting a terrifying scenario of a nuclear attack on San Francisco. She “delivers a menacing verdict: ‘We are closer to the brink of nuclear annihilation than ever before’” (*Daily Mail*, June 10, 2025).

In May, Pakistan’s defense chief warned that “nuclear war could break out at any time” if India persisted in its strikes during the conflict there (“On the Edge . . .” *The U.S. Sun*, May 6.) A ceasefire averted the immediate crisis, but the danger remains (“The Current Nuclear State of Affairs,” *RealClear Wire*, May 30).

The same month a report by the U.S. Congressional Research Service warned that North Korea now has enough fissile material for up to 90 nuclear warheads—more than double previous estimates. The IAEA’s Rafael Grossi described North Korea’s program as “off the charts,” pointing to multiple enrichment sites and an ongoing reprocessing campaign. Concern was expressed over Russia aiding Pyongyang’s missile program in exchange for its support in Ukraine.

In the Middle East, tensions between Israel and Iran continue to escalate. A recent war game simulation showed how even a limited strike could spiral into global nuclear war. In Europe, Russia has fired a nuclear-capable missile into Ukraine, and in Asia, China is projected to double its arsenal by 2030.

With so many flashpoints, public anxiety is rising. A YouGov poll found that majorities in the U.S. and Europe believe a world war is likely within the next 5 to 10 years—and most expect it would involve nuclear weapons. Many fear such a conflict would exceed even World War II in casualties (“World War III Imminent, Many Americans and Europeans Fear: Poll,” *Global News*, May 6).

Experts are equally alarmed. One Western official told *The Telegraph* that the world has only survived through “dumb luck” (“Nuclear War Has Never Been More Likely. Here’s What It Would Look Like Now,” May 10). But luck has nothing to do with it. God is working out a purpose on earth, and prophecy shows that these dangers are not random.

Jesus warned of a time when conditions would

grow so dire that unless God intervened, “no flesh would be saved” (Matthew 24:22). That time has not yet fully arrived, but it draws near.

God’s Word also foretells the downfall of modern nations descended from ancient Israel, stating, “In all your dwelling places the cities shall be laid waste” (Ezekiel 6:6). These sobering words are not ancient history—they speak to the judgment that will come on nations that have turned away from God.

Over 12,000 nuclear weapons now exist. A large-scale exchange between superpowers could trigger what scientists call a “nuclear winter”—a collapse of global agriculture leading to famine and mass death. Some researchers estimate billions could die in such a scenario. Yet God promises intervention. He will not allow humanity to annihilate itself. But that should not lead to complacency. It should drive us to turn to God.

Now is the time to draw near to Him, to turn from sin and to seek understanding in His Word. We are warned to “watch therefore, and pray always” (Luke 21:36), and to live righteously in anticipation of what lies ahead.

The growing nuclear threat is real, and prophecy confirms it will not simply disappear. But God’s plan offers hope beyond the destruction—a future ruled by His righteousness and peace. We must be spiritually awake, sober about the times and ready for the return of Jesus Christ, who alone can save this world from itself. To better understand the age we’re living in, be sure to request or download our free study guide *Are We Living in the Time of the End?*

Vatican probing 'mystical phenomena'

Just one day after the May 8 election of Pope Leo XIV, the Vatican, following a 12-year investigation, officially recognized a 2013 "Eucharistic miracle," wherein the face of Jesus reportedly appeared on a consecrated wafer during a Mass in Kerala, India. This followed an announcement last year of new guidelines for accepting supernatural events. People are not required to accept these events as genuine, yet many have.



Reports of weeping statues are being investigated by the Vatican.

The year prior, as reported in the *Daily Mail*, a Vatican academy was "set to investigate 'mystical phenomena' around the world including 'weeping' statues of the Virgin Mary, stigmata [bodily marks and pains supposedly corresponding to Christ's crucifixion wounds] and ghost sightings . . . The

Pontifical Mariana International Academy (PAMI), which describes itself as a scientific institution of the Holy See [the papal office] . . . hope[d] to uncover 'around a hundred ongoing phenomena' in Italy alone," with plans to evaluate more across the globe ("Vatican Academy Will Probe 'Mystical Phenomena' Around the World . . ." April 14, 2023).

Some cases turn out to be hoaxes, such as an Italian woman's Mary statue supposedly weeping blood and multiplying gnocchi and pizza in Trevignano near Rome, with people believing her a messenger of Mary and donating tens of thousands of euros to her. Church investigators discovered the blood actually came from a pig. Other events are not able to be explained away so readily.

The Bible warns of a great false Christian system, growing in influence in the end time, in which there would be "power, signs, and lying wonders" (2 Thessalonians 2:9)—or wonders that would be lies. On one level these might well be hoaxes perpetrated by people to deceive others. There has been a great deal of that, and there will no doubt be more. But some of the power and signs may truly be supernatural and yet still be lies or false miracles. That is because they are done not, as purported, by God and His angels—or His saints who are unconscious in death and awaiting a resurrection (compare Ecclesiastes 9:10)—but by demons impersonating these to encourage people to follow their falsehoods. These phenomena are "according to the working of Satan," the same verse in 2 Thessalonians states. Revelation 16:13-14 mentions demons going out from Satan and the chief political and religious leaders and performing signs.

Revelation 13:13 speaks of the false religious leader and the system he represents performing the



sign of bringing fire down from heaven to the earth. Such a sign already happened in the supposed miracle of the sun in 1917, where a large crowd in Fatima, Portugal saw the sun zig-zag in the sky and careen to the earth. Pope Pius XII reportedly witnessed the miracle, which is thought to validate messages from an apparition of Mary to three shepherd children living near Fatima.

The article further mentioned a rise in requests for exorcisms during the pandemic, as many suffered from anxiety and depression. Again, some of these are likely fraudulent or mistaken cases. But the New Testament shows plainly that demons are real and that they do possess others. Yet while casting out demons is a sign of Jesus' followers (Mark 16:17), He made it clear that false ministers could do wonders and seemingly cast out demons, yet be people He never knew who practiced lawlessness (Matthew 7:21-23). The demons could even be deceiving the exorcist in that case.

Don't be fooled by the appearance of religiosity. To learn more about Satan's deceptions, request or download our free study guide *Is There Really a Devil?* In answer, there certainly is—and with God's help we must resist his efforts to steer us astray.

Church attendance skyrockets in the United Kingdom

Britain has seen a staggering increase in regular church attendance over the past several years. As CBN News reported April 15, 2025 regarding a survey commissioned by the Bible Society and conducted by YouGov, the percentage of people who describe themselves as Christian and go to church at least once a month rose from 8 percent in 2018 to 12 percent in 2024. That's a 50 percent increase! This is heavily driven by young people, the 18-24 age group rising from 4 to 16 percent, and the 25-34 age group rising from 4 to 13 percent—while those 45 to 64 actually saw a small drop ("The Quiet Revival: Gen Z Leads Rise

in Church Attendance," biblesociety.org.uk).

While these numbers are relatively small compared to total population, they nevertheless represent a marked increase and run counter to the assumption of British faith in terminal decline. Something has changed. Perhaps the pandemic and its restrictions prompted younger people to look more to spiritual meaning in life. One can hope that more will be driven to look for God and find Him in His inspired Scriptures. As He says in Jeremiah 29:13, "You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart."





Understanding Real Faith

More Than Just Belief

There's more to biblical faith than believing. We must learn to live by it and rely on it—and continue to grow in it.

by Ken Loucks

Many assume that faith is simply believing strongly enough in something. When Jesus' disciples asked Him to increase their faith, He responded with what seems like an extraordinary example—that faith as small as a mustard seed could command a mulberry tree to uproot itself and plant itself in the sea (Luke 17:5-6). But was Jesus suggesting walking around performing overt miracles by concentrating really hard to prod God to act as we desire? Or was He teaching us something deeper about what real faith entails?

To grasp what genuine faith looks like in practice, we need to understand that faith is more complex than just believing. The book of James tells us that even demons believe in God—and tremble—yet we wouldn't say they have faith (James 2:19). Real, living faith requires three essential elements working together—*belief, action and trust*.

Belief is the beginning

First, let's consider *belief*. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines belief as a state of mind where trust or confidence is placed in someone or something. For Christians, this means accepting that God exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him (Hebrews 11:6). But our beliefs aren't static. They're choices we make and can change over time as we grow in understanding.

Modern science has even begun to understand how our brains process and modify beliefs. When we encounter new information or experiences that challenge our existing beliefs, we experience what psychologists call cognitive dissonance—mental tension that occurs when two beliefs conflict. We see this played out dramatically in Peter's experience of walking on water (Matthew 14:22-31). Peter

believed Jesus could enable him to walk on water, yet he also knew from lifetime experience that people can't do that. When faced with raging wind and waves, the cognitive dissonance forced him to choose what to accept.

The example of Thomas also shows us how belief requires choosing between our physical understanding and God's reality. When told about Jesus's resurrection, Thomas declared, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails . . . I will not believe" (John 20:25). Like Peter's thinking that human beings can't walk on water, Thomas reasoned that dead men don't rise. When confronted with the risen Christ, he had to choose between what his experience told him was possible and what God was revealing. His response—"My Lord and my God!" (verse 28)—shows his resolution of this conflict by accepting God's reality over his human understanding.

Demonstrated through actions

This brings us to the second element of faith—*action*. James explains this crucial component: "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?" (James 2:14). He goes on to use the practical example of seeing a brother or sister without food or clothing. Simply wishing them well without taking action to help profits nothing, as does a faith that is mere belief without righteous deeds—it's a dead faith (verses 15-17).

Consider Abraham, often called the father of the faithful. When God commanded him to leave his homeland for an unknown destination, "by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8). Abraham's faith wasn't just mental agreement with God's promises—it was demonstrated

Like Abraham, we may stumble in our trust at times, but God is patient with our growth.

through *decisive action* in the face of uncertainty.

Daniel also demonstrated his faith by action. When faced with a royal decree to eat food that violated God's laws, he didn't just believe God's ways were right—he acted on that belief. Daniel “purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself” (Daniel 1:8) and proposed a test of eating only vegetables and water, even though this stand could have cost him his position or life. His faith wasn't just mental agreement with God's laws—it required *concrete action* that put him at risk.

Developing abiding trust

The third essential element of faith is *trust*—and this is where many stumble, even after believing and taking action. We see this illustrated dramatically in the life of Elijah. Here was a prophet who had called down fire from heaven, outran a chariot, and saw God provide miraculously through ravens and an endless supply of flour and oil (1 Kings 17-18). Yet when threatened by Queen Jezebel, his trust faltered and he fled in fear, even asking God to take his life (1 Kings 19:1-4). His belief in God's existence hadn't changed, but his trust in God's protection wavered under pressure.

We see the trust dynamic in King Hezekiah's story with a different outcome. When Jerusalem was surrounded by the mighty Assyrian army, he responded by laying the enemy's threatening letter before God in prayer, saying, “O LORD our God, save us” (Isaiah 37:20). Unlike Elijah's moment of fear, Hezekiah demonstrated trust in God even when facing imminent destruction, choosing to rely on God's protection rather than give in to fear.

Trust means relying on God's character and promises even when circumstances seem to contradict them. When Abraham was asked to sacrifice Isaac, he faced an apparent contradiction between God's promise (that Isaac would continue his lineage) and God's command. His trust in God's character led him to conclude that God could raise Isaac from the dead if necessary to keep His word (Hebrews 11:19).

The examples recorded in Hebrews 11, often called the faith chapter, show us that real faith isn't about performing spectacular miracles on a whim. Rather, it's about ordinary people who choose to believe God and act on that belief even if doing so seems illogical by human standards. Noah built an ark before any rain had fallen. Moses chose to suffer with God's people rather than enjoy the privileged life of Pharaoh's household. Gideon made massive troop cuts to face an army that was already many times the size of his own. All these weren't necessarily dramatic moments; they were choices to trust God's way over human reasoning.

Practicing our faith—and growing in it

This understanding of faith has practical implications for us today. If we were put on trial for being

Christians, would there be enough evidence in our daily actions to convict us? Real faith isn't measured by our ability to perform miracles or make trees uproot and replant themselves in the sea. Instead, it's demonstrated in how we live each day—in our choices to obey God's commands even when it's difficult, in our decisions to trust His promises even when circumstances look bleak, and in our actions that show we believe His way is best.

When we face decisions at work about honesty in our business dealings, when we choose how to treat someone who has wronged us, when we decide how to use our resources—these are the moments that reveal whether we have living faith. Do we merely believe in God's existence, or do we trust His way enough to act on it?

The good news is that *faith can grow*. Like Abraham, we may stumble in our trust at times, but God is patient with our growth. The father who brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus expressed this journey honestly when he cried out, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). This man recognized both his faith and his need for it to grow stronger.

As we face our own trials and challenges, we should remember that real faith isn't about never having doubts. It's about choosing to trust God despite those doubts. It's not about never failing. It's about getting back up and continuing to follow God's way even after we've failed. And it's not about performing spectacular signs. It's about living each day in a way that demonstrates we believe God's promises and trust His guidance.

The ultimate example of faith is Jesus Christ Himself, “the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). Even when facing death, He demonstrated perfect trust in His Father's will and purpose. As we follow His example and keep our eyes fixed on Him, our own faith can grow stronger—not just in belief, but in the actions and trust that make faith complete.

Real faith, then, is not merely intellectual assent to God's existence or even just belief in His power. It's a living, active trust that shapes how we live each day. When we understand this, we realize that increasing our faith isn't about gaining power to perform obvious miracles. It's about growing in our trust in God and our willingness to follow His way in every aspect of our lives. This deep transformation is the greater miracle from God! **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



To learn much more about living a life of faith, be sure to read our informative study guide *You Can Have Living Faith*.

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The Hearing Ear Has Something to Say



The more we discover about biological systems, the more we learn that they are not random developments. Features of the ear attest to the fact that they were designed.

We look here at two examples.

by Mario Seiglie

The Bible boldly affirms, “The hearing ear and the seeing eye, *the LORD has made them both*” (Proverbs 20:12, emphasis added throughout). These remarkable sensory organs take in the surrounding world, but they also declare something to us: They were clearly *designed*, the handiwork of a Master Designer. Besides the intricate mechanism of the inner ear, let’s consider the form of the outer ear and the substance protecting the entryway.

The outer ear—shaped for sound reception

In presenting his evolutionary theory, Charles Darwin regarded the human outer ear as lacking development since it did not move like those of many other mammals and did not seem to help in hearing. He wrote in his book *The Descent of Man*: “The extrinsic muscles which serve to move the whole external ear, and the intrinsic muscles which move the different parts . . . are in a *rudimentary condition* in man; they are also variable in development, or at least *in function* . . . The whole external shell of the ear may be considered a *rudiment*, together with the various folds and prominences” (1871, Vol. 1, pp. 20–21).

Yet it’s now known that the external ear is vital to good hearing. During the Afghanistan War, Taliban

forces engaged in extreme punishment of those suspected of collaborating with Western troops, including gruesomely chopping off their ears and noses. Journalist Christopher Beam wrote: “Can the victims still hear and smell? Yes, but with *more difficulty*. The outer part of your ear, known as the pinna, funnels sound into your ear canal, like a *megaphone in reverse*. If someone cut it off, everything would sound quieter . . .

“The pinnae also tell you where sounds are coming from: The ridges and grooves shape sound waves differently depending on where the sound originates. As a result, the brain learns to associate certain amplification patterns with certain directions. So, if you lost your ears, you might be able to tell what music you’re hearing, but not where the speakers are” (“Can You Hear Without Ears?” *Slate*, March 21, 2007).

So Darwin was wrong. The outer ear helps substantially in sound amplification and localization. Dr. Geoffrey Simmons has pointed out: “Our ears act like *satellite dishes*, capturing and focusing sound waves centrally down the ear canal. Although they cannot move to better capture the sounds, our heads will *automatically turn* to improve reception. Notice how a hard-of-hearing person might cup a hand behind an ear. The irregular shape of our outer ears, with

a *broader, curled back half*, acts like a cupped hand” (*What Darwin Didn’t Know*, 2004, p. 120).

From the outside in—a protective coating

And then there’s the passage from the outer to the inner ear—the ear canal with its special coating. As Simmons further noted: “*Earwax* seems to protect us from mites, and tiny hairs keep out small debris.”

Now, for most people, earwax is rarely thought about or is regarded as a minor nuisance—something to be cleaned out with a swab. Yet scientists have discovered that earwax is crucial to the health of our inner ears and essential to good hearing.

Also known as cerumen, earwax is an oily substance produced by specialized glands in the ear canal. Made up of a precise blend of fatty acids and cholesterol, it acts like a powerful yet gentle push broom, sweeping out harmful elements that enter our ear canal.

More specifically, here are four features we should be thankful for, as they keep our inner ear healthy:

1. It protects the inner ear from dust, microorganisms and water. Due to its oily nature, it repels water from getting further inside the ear canal and possibly damaging it. At the

same time, it still permits air and sound to enter the inner ear.

2. Earwax mixes with hair fibers to provide a natural filter that traps dust and other harmful particles. When it combines with dust, its chemistry changes and the viscous liquid becomes crumbly, allowing the wax to separate and fall out of the ear.
3. It contains antibacterial and antifungal properties which kill germs and fungus.
4. Its oily nature helps lubricate the ear canal as the earwax moves toward the outer ear, made possible by motions of the jaw, allowing it to exit with all its debris.

While evolutionists would insist that earwax

Intelligent Design," *Reasons to Believe*, Feb. 22, 2017).

The engineers have been encouraged by the fact that cerumen is not limited to human ears, the GIT team noting: "The properties of earwax are *extremely consistent across different mammals*, which have a variety of ear shapes and sizes. The thickness, the way it flows, and even the appearance is *highly similar*. This indicates that those properties of earwax seem to be a solution *that works well across species*" ("The Technological Potential of Earwax," *Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology*, Jan. 6, 2017, p. 1).

The GIT researchers were so impressed with the effectiveness of earwax that they want to use it as a template for "some sort of *biomimetic earwax adhesive*

unguided, historically contingent process that co-opts preexisting systems to cobble together new ones. Evolutionary mechanisms can optimize these systems, but *they are still kludges* [clunky and inept], in essence."

Hear the message loud and clear

As it turns out, then, these features of our ears are not rudimentary but vital elements to hearing and health. Without the biological reception dish of our outer ear, sound would be insufficiently directed to the inner mechanisms. And without earwax as a debris filter and cleansing lubricant, our ear canals would constantly clog and get infected, and eventually we could lose our hearing and suffer other



As it turns out, these features of our ears are not rudimentary but vital elements to hearing and health. The testimony of God's careful design of life can be seen even in its tiniest details.

is just another accidental and unplanned feature that evolved over time, the idea that this remarkable substance with just the right properties suddenly appeared to protect mammalian ears is not truly rational.

An optimal design engineers want to mimic

Furthermore, Dr. Fazale Rana points out: "Earwax is worth thinking about, because it is *a remarkable substance with extraordinary properties*, as recent work by engineers from the Georgia Institute of Technology (GIT) attests. In fact, the GIT researchers think that they can use *their new insight about earwax to develop specialized filters* for electronic devices that must perform in dusty environments.

"By using earwax as *an inspiration* for new technology, these researchers have unwittingly provided *more evidence for intelligent design*, while at the same time raising a *powerful challenge* to the evolutionary explanation for the history and design of life" ("Earwax Discovery Gives New Hearing to the Case for

surface that can be used in a *ventilation system* for robotics or for other kinds of machinery" (ibid.).

As Dr. Rana summarizes: "It has become rather commonplace for engineers to employ insights from biology to solve engineering problems and to inspire the invention of new technologies. This activity falls under the domain of two relatively new and exciting areas of engineering known as *biomimetics* and *bioinspiration*. As the names imply, biomimetics involves direct copying (or mimicry) of *designs from biology*, whereas bioinspiration relies on insights from biology to guide the engineering enterprise."

"From my perspective," he adds, "the use of biological designs to guide engineering efforts seems *fundamentally at odds with evolutionary theory*. Generally, evolutionary biologists view biological systems as the products of an

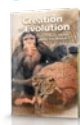
ailments. No wonder our Creator made sure all mammals had this essential feature as a protector against harmful elements.

Sadly, we live in an increasingly unbelieving world. Yet the testimony of God's careful design of life can be seen even in its tiniest details.

God gives reprimand to vain men who deny Him in these terms: "He *who planted the ear*, shall He not hear? He who formed the eye, shall He not see? He who instructs the nations, shall He not correct, He who teaches man knowledge? The LORD knows the thoughts of man, that they are futile. Blessed is the man whom You instruct, O LORD, and teach out of Your law" (Psalm 94:9-12).


Be instructed by the miraculous creation of God. As Jesus Christ said on multiple occasions, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" BT

DIVE DEEPER



There is so much evidence in nature that tells us it did not arise by chance but was designed and made by a divine Creator. To see more of this evidence, request or download our free study guide *Creation or Evolution: Does It Really Matter What You Believe?* Scan the code or visit ucg.org/ja25 to find it.





The Spiritual Glow of Joy

Faithful people of God, Jesus Christ above all, set us an example in weathering the storms of life and persevering through a quality that illuminated their life toward God's purposes.

by Robin Webber

Nearly 3,000 years ago a person referred to in Scripture as a man after God's own heart (see 1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22) cried out to the Lord after he was confronted over his terrible sin in the matter of Bathsheba and Uriah. His former fountain of hope had come to a standstill. The well of that same heart that once faced Goliath had run dry. He earnestly pleaded:

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take your Holy Spirit from me. *Restore to me the joy of your salvation*, and uphold me by your generous Spirit" (Psalm 51:10-12, emphasis added throughout).

What was King David requesting in terms of this joy of salvation?

Hebrews 12:2 later declared the focus of Jesus Christ through His terrible suffering: "... who *for the joy that was set before Him* endured the cross, despising [or disregarding] the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Humanly, "cross-filled joy" sounds like an oxymoron if ever there was one!

The same joy is to be ours. As the returning lord in parable, who represents Christ, proclaims to His faithful servants, "Enter into the joy of your lord" (Matthew 25:21-23).

In reading these passages, it's incumbent on us to understand just what joy is. Is it only a future destination, or is it also a means of traveling, day by day and heartbeat by heartbeat, towards the Kingdom of God? Understanding how Scripture defines joy and realizing what it truly portrays are essential for disciples of Jesus Christ to understand, embrace and internalize that we might fully heed His call of "Follow Me" (see John 21:19).

The difference between enjoyment and joy

For starters, we need to understand the difference between enjoyment and joy. Enjoyment is based on external pleasant things coming our way that plant a smile on our face, make us laugh, maybe even jump up and down. Should Christians experience enjoyment? Absolutely! However, let's go deeper.

Joy is something planted in us by God's Spirit that creates a knowing smile on our hearts and stays there even when immediate tidings or long-term scenarios are humanly challenging. It is experiencing the *beating pulse of God's Spirit residing in you*.

The spiritual glow of joy is generated not by impactful exterior stimuli, but radiates from the inside out, burning so brightly that neither man nor Satan can take it away unless we allow them. It is more than a nightlight left on in the dark. It is the spiritually illuminating 24/7 presence of God's indwelling Spirit—the same by which He brought light amidst darkness in Genesis 1.

So how does that knowing smile on our hearts grow, stay put and mature as we heed Jesus' invitation of "Follow Me"? In all of this we need to remember that our Heavenly Father through Christ is calling us to relationship—with Him as our God and we as His people (2 Corinthians 6:16). God does His part in that, as only He can, but we also have a role. That's why it's called a relationship! God grants us the "gift of

the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38), seeding us with joy that ultimately bears fruit (see Galatians 5:22). As we all know fruit from a cultivated tree does not come to fruition overnight. It

needs light, water, nutritive soil and fertilizer supervised by an attentive caretaker. It must bear up with all the variable elements of each season of the year.

When God tells us to “walk in the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16), that means we will need to get up and move forward with Him, experiencing the pressure points of what stresses us in our humanity—all the while recognizing that *we do not walk alone!* That, my friends, is what widens the smile in our hearts, which cannot be robbed from us because it is sealed by the Spirit of God (see 2 Corinthians 1:21-22).

Let us remind ourselves of Jesus’ initial calling card in Luke 14 to the “great multitudes” accompanying Him (verse 25). He told them: “. . . Whoever does not bear his cross [his own life burden] and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (verse 27). The metaphor is clearly speaking of the weightiness of crucifixion that the immediate audience knew so well. Let us ask ourselves: Is this any way to start a movement? Humanly, no! Divinely, yes! Bottom line: Before you bear a crown, you will bear a cross—in some ways of your own making and in some ways by others. Here, Jesus is so incredibly honest in His messaging. He never said it would be easy. But He did say that it would be *worth it*—for the joy set before Him and all of us, as highlighted in Hebrews 12:1-2.

Sharing joy and persevering

Returning to King David’s plea in Psalm 51, consider how his request to have the joy of salvation restored to him was not merely self-focused but intended to radiate outward to others. Let’s finish the story, his story, our story together, in the next verse: “*Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners*

In whatever we go through, we should always focus on the ultimate purpose God is working toward.

shall be converted to You” (verse 13). His heart and thoughts moved beyond himself. He envisioned how his story in God’s hands might positively impact others not by what he would merely say, but what he could express by existing in an ongoing state of surrender and molding in the hands of the living God. And that impact has continued to you and me.

In whatever we go through, we should always focus on the ultimate purpose God is working toward. The opening of the epistle of James can be a bit surprising: “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials [Huh? Really?], knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (verses 2-4).

How does that work in real time, our time, when the spiritual glow of the smile on our heart, which has withstood so many exterior jabs, begins to dim?

Philippians 4:4-8 gives us the prescription, as it systematically supplies the spiritual cure:

“Rejoice [joy on steroids!] in the Lord always [not ourselves—how is that working?]. Again I will say, rejoice! [just in case you missed it the first time!] . . . Be anxious for nothing [what is still on our man-made list?], but in everything by prayer and supplication [talking to God and not ourselves], with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace [‘shalom’] of God, which surpasses all understanding [better than the facts as they appear on the ground],

will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

When a Jew offers a “Hebraic aloha” of hello and goodbye in saying “*Shalom*,” something special is being shared.

The essence is not that God would grant you a trouble-free existence, but rather that He supply you the wherewithal to master what lies before you. Psalm 23 says that with the Lord as our Shepherd our needs will be met (verse 1). We still go through the valley of shadow, yet with God’s presence and help (verse 4).

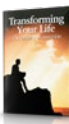
The ultimate key to joy

The epistle of James concludes where it began in chapter 1 on enduring trials, stating, “You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful” (James 5:11).

What was the key to Job maintaining the spiritual glow of joy as he suffered terrible pain and the loss of so much in his physical life? We see it in Job 19:25, as he declares, “*For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth.*” Job’s key is ours too. The storms of life will most assuredly come our way, pressing to erode the embedded inward smile on our hearts manifested by God’s grace. We endure through active faith in our Redeemer’s promise, “*Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*” (Mathew 28:20).

As we part until next time, let us remember the rhythmic revelation of Psalm 30:4-5: “Sing praise to the LORD, you saints of His, and give thanks at the remembrance of His holy name. For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.” BT

DIVE DEEPER



Joy is listed as a fruit of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5. To learn more about it and the other qualities that come through this wonderful gift, be sure to read the article series “The Fruit of the Spirit,” available at our website. And to learn more about receiving that Spirit and growing in God’s way of life, request or download our free study guide *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*. Scan the code or visit ucg.org/jaz5 to find it.





HOW TO STOP WORRYING ABOUT THE END OF THE WORLD

by Kevin Greer

Literature throughout the ages explores what the end of the world might be like. Blockbuster movies paint pictures of destruction from earthquakes, alien invasions, nuclear warfare and asteroid collisions. While there might be much to say about it, the end of the world is an unknown quantity to many people.

In God's Church, we are blessed with significant and uncommon understanding of what "the end of the world" will actually be like. The Bible even comments on the end of the age within its opening pages, a passage we will turn to shortly.

Biblical prophecies about the end times do speak of dire and horrifying events in the future. In Leviticus 26:16, God vows He will bring "sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever" to the nation which does not obey Him (New International Version). As another example, God discusses a soon-coming beast power in Revelation 13. It will have vast control over the world's economies and brutally murder those who oppose or refuse to worship it, especially the Church of God (verses 15-18).

These and other end-time events are disturbing and

troubling to many. What can you do to grow in courage and not be so afraid? How can you stop worrying about the end of the world?

REMEMBER WHO IS IN CONTROL

Perhaps the most important thing to remember regarding the end times and prophecy in general is that God is sovereign and in control of all things. God inspired the words of the Bible, and prophecies are only going to be fulfilled as part of *His* schedule and *His* plan.

"LORD, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you" (2 Chronicles 20:6, NIV). Ultimately, God reigns over all the nations we see today. Nothing happens without Him either (1) making it happen or (2) allowing it to happen. Even in humanity's darkest hours, God is working behind the scenes.

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, even though the earth be

THE END OF THIS AGE IS COMING; THE BIBLE LEAVES NO DOUBT ABOUT THAT. BUT GOD DOES NOT WANT US TO WORRY ABOUT THIS TREACHEROUS TIME. HE WANTS US TO REMEMBER THAT IN THE GOOD TIMES AND THE BAD, HE IS STILL IN CONTROL.

removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling” (Psalm 46:1-3). When intense natural disasters strike, like those in the end times, God is a sure protector and source of strength.

Our sovereign God is guaranteed to win and, incredibly, He is inviting you and me to join Him. We can be confident of the fact that Jesus Christ will return and that God’s faithful will get to be like Him as He is (1 John 1:1-3). As astounding as it sounds, this was God’s plan from the very beginning!

On the Bible’s opening pages, God says this about Satan and foretells an end to his worldwide deception: “I will put enmity between you [speaking to Satan] and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel” (Genesis 3:15).

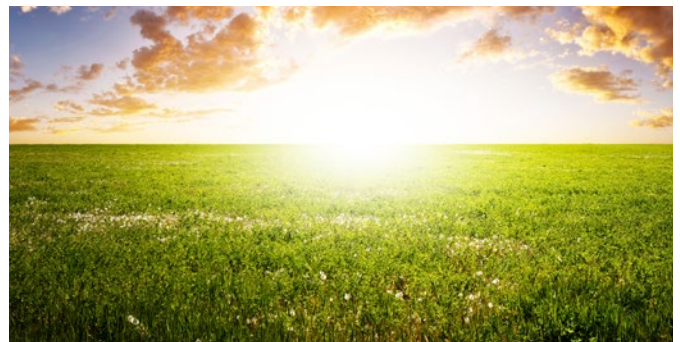
That “Seed” is Jesus Christ. He is returning to stamp out Satan’s evil from the earth and establish truth and justice. The Messiah will put an end to the violence, destruction and suffering of the end times and usher in an age of joy and peace. “Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (1 Corinthians 15:54). This present, evil age will be replaced by the glorious Kingdom of God (Galatians 1:3-5). We can be absolutely sure that this will happen because this is God’s plan, and He is in control.

You and I also have a role to play in this. God expects us to persevere in His truth to the end, no matter what. Note what God says about those who do so in Revelation 3:10: “I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world.” God, who is in control of everything, is certainly able to protect His Church in a time of crisis. He extends an offer of end-time protection to those who faithfully and wholeheartedly follow Him (Zephaniah 2:3).

TAKE ACTION IN PRAYER AND STUDY

We should take action as a result of our belief that God is in control. Let’s look at just two important ways that you can take action and strengthen yourself as you persevere to the end.

Pray to develop a trusting relationship with God (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Prayer is one way that you can get to know God and more deeply understand His will for your life. Navigating life’s ups and downs can be difficult. Turn to Him on both the



good days and the bad, talking to Him both when it’s easy and when it’s hard.

“Do not despise prophecies” (verse 20). Another important action we can take is to not neglect but instead become familiar with the prophetic insight God provides. Prophecies of historical events demonstrate God’s control and influence over human affairs, which can really help build our faith. Likewise, we can look to the Bible’s end-time prophecies with comfort and confidence that they will proceed just as God has planned because He is in control. Furnishing a good understanding of prophecies about “the end of the world” can help stop you from worrying or being afraid of it. If you aren’t sure where to begin or what to look for, the United Church of God has many different resources to help guide your studies. God wants us to live by His every word, and prophecy is no exception (Matthew 4:4).

The end of this age is coming; the Bible leaves no doubt about that. But God does not want us to worry about this treacherous time. He wants us to remember that in the good times and the bad, He is still in control. God is willing to protect and comfort His people, even in the despair of the end times. We must draw near to Him in spite of these trying circumstances, with prayer and with confidence in His Word, looking forward to the time when God will establish a new age of goodness, peace and joy on earth. In that day, the entire world will recognize God’s sovereignty and take comfort in the fact that He is in control.

Keep in mind what Jesus said in Matthew 6:31-34 (NIV): “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



To learn more about what lies ahead in the years to come, request or download our free study guide *The Book of Revelation Unveiled*. And for more help in such study, be sure to also read *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy*. Scan the code or visit ucg.org/jaz5 to find them.



Q: Did Jesus giving Peter “the keys of the kingdom” exalt him over all the apostles as the first pope, with infallible authority?

A: No. Let’s look at Matthew 16:13-19. Jesus asked His disciples whom they thought He was, and Peter declared, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (verses 15-16). Jesus called this a divine revelation (verse 17) and said: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church . . . And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (verses 18-19). The terms “binding and loosing” were commonly used in Jewish teaching of making decisions to prohibit or permit.

Some interpret this to mean Peter was the rock the Church was founded on. However, the Greek word for “rock” here, *petra*, concerns a mass of rock, whereas the name Peter in Greek, *Petros*, refers to a smaller stone or boulder. Others argue *Petros* is simply the masculine name form of *petra*. Which is it?

The context of what Peter declared here is important—Jesus’ identity as the Christ (or Messiah) and Son of God. The God of Israel was called the Rock (Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 42:9). And the apostle Paul referred to Christ as that Rock (1 Corinthians 10:4). Various prophecies referred to the Messiah as a stone and rock becoming the chief cornerstone (1 Peter 2:6-8).

So it’s reasonable to conclude Jesus was referring to Peter as a small stone and then pointing to Himself as the rock on which He would build His Church—the foundation (see 1 Corinthians 3:11). Another view is that Peter’s declaration of Jesus’ identity was the foundation to build on. In Matthew 7:24-27, Jesus compared building a house on the rock with hearing and obeying His teachings. Both overlapping concepts may apply.

If there is any sense of Peter, a stone, as part of the foundation, it would only be through his connection to Christ. Yet that would not apply to him exclusively. Paul wrote that the Church is “built on the foundation of the apostles [plural] and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20).

Christ’s focus in Matthew 16 was not on His own sole authority but on delegating responsibility. He gave the “keys of the kingdom of heaven.” This language contrasts with His condemnation of religious teachers removing the key of knowledge to shut themselves and others out of entering God’s Kingdom (compare Luke 11:52; Matthew 23:13).

What is the “key of knowledge” to entering the Kingdom? Paul told Timothy that the Holy Scriptures make us wise for salvation (2 Timothy 3:15). Jesus also said, “If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17). So the key is following God’s Word—through the living Word, Jesus Christ!

The binding and loosing authority was part of using the keys of the Kingdom. The key of knowledge, from the truth of God’s Word, would be used to make these decisions. Where Jesus is recorded as saying what is bound on earth “will be bound” in heaven, it should say “will

have been bound,” as various translations note. Same with loosing. Thus, He was talking about applying principles that already exist in God’s Word. The keys, then, refer to understanding and applying God’s truth—and teaching this to others.

This authority wasn’t exclusive to Peter. Though Jesus spoke directly to Peter in the singular in Matthew 16, He did not establish Peter as a singular authority. Indeed, he was quite fallible. Just after this passage, in verses 21-23, Peter rebukes Jesus, and Jesus calls him “Satan” and an “offense” for thinking like men rather than God. Hardly an endorsement of papal supremacy!

In Matthew 18:15-20, in the context of resolving offenses, Jesus gives the same binding and loosing authority in the plural to all the apostles, not just Peter, noting that where two or more are gathered He would be with them—that is, in their judgment. This shared authority would, by extension, pass on to their successors in the ministry through the centuries.

So why was Peter singled out in Matthew 16? Jesus was responding to his forthright declaration and noting his significant role. Peter being first to proclaim Jesus’ identity was characteristic of his bold, charging-ahead personality, a natural leadership quality. Peter is always listed first among the apostles. He had a clear leading role, but he was not over the other apostles, able to overrule them. He was not the chief apostle, that distinction belonging to Christ (Hebrews 3:1).

Yet Peter had a special role, and Christ’s statement to him about the keys of the Kingdom may have hinted at the inaugural work Peter would do in advancing the Church’s mission. In Acts 2, Peter gave the first sermon,

resulting in the conversion of many Jews. Later, in Acts 10, Peter was used to open the door for the gentiles by baptizing Cornelius’ household—then making the case to the Judean Church members in chapter 11. (Note he needed to convince them, not just rule on it.) So Peter played a crucial role in opening the way for the Jews and gentiles to come into the Church and ultimately the Kingdom.

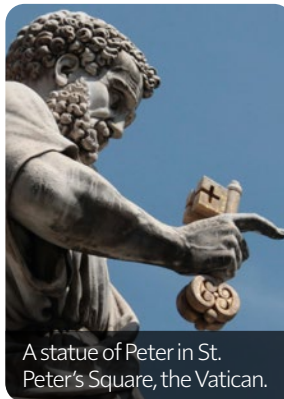
While Peter did have a leading role in preaching to the Jewish people (Galatians 2:7-9), he was not some supreme infallible pontiff. Paul even publicly confronted him for error and hypocrisy at one point (verses 11-14).

We can appreciate the special leadership and inaugural role Peter was given without imagining him some prince of the apostles. The papacy is not a continuation of the true apostolic office. Why would it have passed from Peter when he died to another elder in Rome if John, another of the original 12 apostles, was still alive then? It didn’t. The papacy represents the succession of rule in a false religious tradition. Let’s not be swayed to make a faithful servant of Christ into something he wasn’t. **BT**

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A statue of Peter in St. Peter’s Square, the Vatican.

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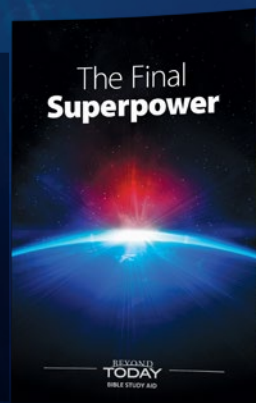
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