

PETER'S PRIMACY IN QUESTION: A STUDY OF JOHANNINE AND PETRINE COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

It is not out of place to note that most practices, doctrines and traditions guiding Christianity as a religion today have their foundation in one or two claims found in the Christian Bible. This is primarily due to the quality of inerrancy and authenticity which Christians attach to the Bible. It is apparent that the Bible right from the ancient Christian Church tradition has been held as the infallible word of God with virtually every written word inside it believed to have been inspired by God himself. But be that as it may, critical biblical and extra-biblical researches have gone a long way to prove that the Holy Bible contains some claims which are not wholesomely true. Hence founding some Church practices and doctrines on such biblical claims makes such doctrines erroneous to some degree. One of these claims is however seen in the gospel of Matthew 16:18 as well as in John 21:15-22 where Christ's conversation with one of his disciples, Peter appears to suggest and present Peter as the head and leader amongst all of the apostles. The Roman Catholic Church based on this has taken Peter to be the first Pope of the Church. Meanwhile, with the consultation of well researched works by renowned biblical and extra-biblical scholars, this work attempts to question Peter's primacy in some Christian doctrines with a careful study of the Johannine and Petrine communities as seen in the Fourth Gospel (John), the Synoptics and other possible biblical accounts. The aim however, is to ascertain that to some extent, this claim as many others like it may not be wholesomely true even as they may not be wholesomely false.

Key Words: Primacy, Johannine and Petrine, Communities

Introduction

The Roman Catholic Church, like all other Christian Church denominations bases most of her doctrines upon certain foundational claims that are very important to her ecclesiastical existence. In other words, if these fundamental dogmas upon which the entire Catholic Church superstructure is founded suffer destruction or damage, the Church may suffer collapse. Virtually, as most religious claims, these claims are seen to be true and Roman Catholicism must be judged as right from all and every standpoint in maintaining belief in them as well as in practicing them.

Apparently, one of these claims is what has been commonly termed "The Primacy of Peter". This is the maintained belief that Peter is the leader amongst the other apostles of Jesus Christ. It is the position of pre-eminence that is attributed to Saint Peter among the Twelve Apostles. Durel (1999) asserts that sometimes, Peter is referred to as the "Prince" of the apostles. However, from his observations, he further opines that this claim has no strong basis in the

scripture. He goes on to state that this view is contradicted in at least three (3) places in the New Testament. This would be revealed subsequently in the course of this study. But then it must be borne in mind that Peter was a very remarkable and important figure who equally occupied a place of prominence in the New Testament and the early Church.

However, a careful comparative study between the Johannine community as presented in the gospel of John and the Petrine community as seen in John and the Synoptics would go a long way in answering the question of this paper. Meanwhile, in order to ensure a very coherent and comprehensive work, a brief clarification on the words Primacy, Johannine and Petrine would be undertaken as follows.

Clarification of Concepts

Here, the key terms Primacy, Johannine, and Petrine would be briefly explained.

Primacy

As mentioned earlier, primacy as a term denotes pre-eminence. Hornby (2010) explains it as “The fact of being the most important person or thing” (p.1162). In other words, he presents it as the position of an Archbishop. The term simply put is the topmost rank especially in a religious leadership circle.

Johannine

The word Johannine had been used by various scholars as an adjective to modify whatever they believe is related to John as one of the twelve (12) apostles of Jesus Christ. Thus, in the work of Lamb (2014), he makes mention of the Johannine community. This simply refers to a community or group of people for whom John's Gospel was written although Lamb expresses some doubts as to whether John or whoever wrote had any community in mind when the Fourth Gospel was written. Thus, the writings of John are equally referred to as Johannine Writings/Texts or Corpus. This work however, would attempt a more detailed discussion on the Johannine community since some other scholars like Brown (1979) in his research establishes the Johannine community hypothesis as a generally accepted starting point for historical research on the Johannine texts or writings.

Petrine

Miffin (2016) notes that the term “Petrine” is of or relating to Saint Peter. It is therefore adjectival in function. He specifically hints that the term is of the New Testament Bible relating to St. Peter, his position of leadership, or the epistles etc. attributed to him. Collins (2014) connects the word to the Roman Catholic Church, relating to the supremacy in the Church that the pope is regarded as having inherited from Saint Peter; the Petrine claims. In a nutshell, the word “Petrine” once mentioned always points to Peter one of the twelve (12) apostles of Jesus Christ. Hence this work would equally undertake a more detailed research into the Petrine community; the community of Peter the Apostle.

The Johannine Community: An Excursus

Popular views by scholars of antiquity indicate that the writing of John designated as the Fourth Gospel has a particular group which it addresses. This group has for long in scholarly

researches been identified as the Johannine community. Brown (1978) in his work poses a critical question: “was the Johannine Community a sect?” (p.5). He opines that this has become a very burning issue with huge implications for both the studies of the Fourth Gospel and the understanding of Christian origin. But then to see the Johannine community as a sect depends largely on the acceptable scholarly understanding of the word “sect”.

However, Scroggs (cited by Brown, 1978) while working on the functional definition of “sect” as a religious body which maintains stance over against another religious body or over against society at large, argues that the whole Christian movement of the early times was sectarian because each of them possesses the following basic characteristics of a sect:

- i. It emerged out of an agrarian protest movement;
- ii. It rejected many of the realities claimed by other establishments like claims of family, of religious institution, of wealth, and of theological intellectuals;
- iii. It was egalitarian;
- iv. It offered special love and acceptance within;
- v. It was a voluntary organization;
- vi. It demanded a total commitment of its members; and
- vii. It was apocalyptic.

Hence with this understanding of “sect”, Scroggs maintains that the Christian community known to us in the fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles was a sect, as part of the larger Christian sectarian movement.

Furthermore, Brown (1979) notes that with a careful study of the story of Jesus’ ministry in the Fourth Gospel, one can deduce much information about the Johannine community. Martyn (cited by Brown, 1978) brought this method of investigation into prominence by using the dialogues between Jesus and “the Jews” to determine the relationship between the Johannine community and the synagogue. Brown therefore argues that “the Johannine community originated among Jews who believed that Jesus has fulfilled well-known Jewish expectations, e.g., of a messiah or a prophet-like Moses” (p.7). He thereby observes that at a later stage, there developed within the Johannine community a higher Christology that went beyond Jewish expectation by describing Jesus as a pre-existent divine saviour who had lived with God in heaven before he became man. It is however apparent that it was this high Christology that brought the friction one sees between the Johannine community and the synagogue and ultimately led to its expulsion as suggested in John 9:22; 10:31-33; and 16:22. Thus, in Johannine community, one finds a community that is increasingly conformed to its own image of Jesus, since he too was presented as having been rejected by “his own” (John 1:11). It became a community which found itself in the world like Jesus but is not of the world (John 17:16).

Nevertheless, Martyn (cited by Brown, 1978) after his study of the pre-gospel history, concludes that “when the Fourth Gospel was written, there were at least four groups in the Johannine purview” (p.8). According to him, these include;

- i. The synagogue of “the Jews”.
- ii. Crypto-Christians (Christian Jews) within the synagogue.
- iii. Various communities of Jewish Christians who had been expelled from the synagogue.
- iv. The Johannine community of Jewish Christians, in particular.

Brown even suggests that the condition is so complicated that if we are to include the witness of the Johannine Epistles, we can detect no less than six groups. Thus, he includes 'Christians of Apostolic Churches' which he argues should come under Martyn's third (iii) group, 'Johannine Christians' and finally what he called 'Secessionist Johannine Christians' whose evidence of existence as he claims is found in the Johannine Epistles.

However, the focus of this paper is on the Johannine Christians as witnessed in the Fourth Gospel in relation and comparison to the Christians of Apostolic Churches who maintain strong link to Peter. Studying the two would help substantiate the age long notion of Peter's Primacy amongst present day Christians.

More explicably, Brown (1978) argues that the Johannine Christians were not the only Christians hostile to the Synagogue and its leaders, even though the bitterness presented in John may be more severe than in other New Testament works. He therefore notes that more than other groups, John's community may have moved toward excluding their opponents from Christian fellowship. This they did by "counting the Crypto-Christians as aligned with 'the Jews' (John 12:42-43) and by charging that the Jewish Christians who were associated with the brothers of the Lord followed Jesus no longer and did not really believe in him (John 6:66; 7:5)" (p.19). Hence to the Johannine community, Jesus is a stranger who is not understood by his own people and is not even of this world. Therefore John the beloved disciple, the hero of the community, is singled out as the peculiar object of Jesus' love and is the only male disciple never to have abandoned Jesus. In the words of Brown (1978):

The Johannine Christians are those who understand Jesus best, for like him, they are rejected, persecuted, and not of this world. Their Christology is more profound, and they can be sure that they have the truth because they are guided by the Paraclete. (p.19)

The above assertion may have contributed immensely to their strain relationship to other religious sects/groups in their environment.

Ashton (2007) suggests that the Johannine community experienced an expulsion from their religious home in the synagogue for at least two reasons. He points out the first to be their increasing successful missionary efforts among their colleagues in the synagogue which began to pose a threat to the leadership of the synagogue and secondly, the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in A.D.70 which resulted in crisis of faith and finally led to the purging of sympathizers of Jesus of Nazareth from some synagogues. Ashton therefore opines that it was in the subsequent and perhaps violent debate with the members of the synagogue that the Fourth Gospel found its setting.

The Petrine Community: An Excursus

Accruing from various scholarly researches, the closest religious group linked to Peter the apostle is the group Brown (1978) identifies as the Apostolic Christians or probably the 'larger Church'. Brown notes that there are two groups of Jesus' disciples which were sharply contrasted in John 6:60-69. The first is the group who left the synagogue with him and later drew back. The second are those who remained as seen among the Twelve who through Peter acknowledge that Jesus has the words of eternal life. In other words, speaking of the Christians of Apostolic Churches, Brown (1978) asserts that:

If we speak of a group of late first-century Christians represented in the Fourth Gospel by Peter and the other members of the twelve (Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Judas-not-Ischriot, Nathaniel), the very choice of symbolic representatives suggests that they were Jewish Christians in origin. (p.14).

He therefore holds that there is possibility of no ethnic difference between Christians of this group and the Johannine Christians since both groups consisted of Jews and Gentiles.

It is therefore reasonable to deduce that from the name Peter emerges the word 'Petrine'. The Petrine community is made up of those groups of Christians who are clearly distinct from Jewish Christians who no longer follow Jesus. Thus John's attitude toward these Apostolic Christians as Brown (1979) avers is fundamentally favourable. Their presence at the last supper means that they are included in Jesus' own whom he loves to the very end (John 13:1). They are among those who have kept Jesus' word (John 17:6); and he prays for them (John 17:9), since they are hated by the world (John 17:14). They see the risen Lord (John 20:24); and their most prominent spokesman, Peter, glorifies God by his death in following Jesus. (John 21:19).

Nevertheless, Brown (1978) did not fail like some other biblical scholars to point out the weaknesses of the Petrine group as witnessed in the Fourth Gospel. This could be seen when the disciples are compared in general, Simon Peter in particular, to the beloved disciple, the symbolic representative of the Johannine community. This also brings the idea of Peter's primacy into a more serious scrutiny.

Furthermore, Brown (1978) is of the opinion that the Johannine prayer for unity carried a price tag. In his words:

Those other Christians would have to accept the exalted Johannine Christology of pre-existence if there was to be one sheep herd, one flock. If this did not happen, one may argue, the Johannine Christians would reject the Apostolic Christians from *Koinonia* even as they had previously rejected the Jewish Christians. (p.20).

From this, one can easily see the clear distinction between the Johannine community and the Petrine community identified as the Apostolic Christian group. The Johannine Christians represented by the beloved disciple, clearly saw themselves closer to Jesus and more perceptive than the Christians of the Apostolic Churches; the Petrine community. Thus if the witnesses one sees in the Fourth Gospel are to be taken into consideration, Peter's primacy ideology would certainly have to be revisited.

Peter's Primacy: A Questioning Approach

A careful study like the one undertaken thus far exposes a lot about the history of Jesus' ministry with his disciples/apostles as the case may be. Since there has been an age long belief that Peter had primacy over the other apostles, this study equally brings an enlightenment which prompts the challenging of such belief. Meanwhile, Durel (1999) begins his scrutiny from what could be termed the 'occurrence of nomenclature'. He argues that Peter's name appears 153 times in the New Testament as well as that of Paul. He is therefore of the view that if Peter actually had primacy, if he was the 'Chief Apostle', certainly his name would appear more than that of the Apostle Paul. He further notes that Peter's name appears only seven (7) times in the Epistles.

Again, from the Fourth Gospel's witnesses, Brown (1978) points out fact which actually bring into doubt the primacy of Peter. For instance, he observes that during the Passion of Christ, the other disciples scattered leaving him alone (John 16:32), while the beloved disciple remains with Jesus even to the foot of the cross (John 19:26-27). Simon Peter denies that he is a disciple of Jesus (John 18:17-25), a particularly serious denial which granted the Johannine emphasis on discipleship as the primary Christian category. Hence the presentation of Peter as one who needs to be rehabilitated by Jesus who three times asks whether Peter loves him (John 21:15-17). If Peter were to be a disciple par excellence, such questioning and rehabilitation would not be necessary. Such was never the case with the disciple whom Jesus loved. In the Fourth Gospel, as Brown notes, John is ever close to Jesus both in life (John 13:23) and in death (John 19:26-27). In fact, John sees the significance of the garments left behind in the empty tomb when Peter does not (John 20:8-10); he also recognizes the risen Jesus when Peter does not (John 26:7).

Furthermore, Brown asserts that in the Fourth Gospel, the idea of ecclesiastical offices is not clear though it cannot be categorically denied. He is of the view that the category of discipleship in John is based on love which makes any other distinction in the community "relatively unimportant, so that even the well-known Petrine and Presbyteral image of the shepherd is not introduced without the conditioning question, "Do you love me?" (John 21:15-17)" (p.18). Thus, there is no clear evidence here to suggest that authority lies in the hand of any man or person; neither did the Fourth Gospel condemn apostolic foundation. Rather emphasis is laid on the 'Paraclete' who remains forever within everyone who loves Jesus and keeps his commandment (John 14:15-17); he is the guide to all truth (John 16:13).

Durel (1999) stretches his argument further by calling attention to some of the statements of Peter in the Epistles attributed to him. In doing so, he made reference to 1Peter 5:1 which serves as an introductory salutation where Peter states; "The elders which are among you I exhort, I whom am a fellow elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed". Durel claims that this was written in 63 A.D., thirty year after the ascension of the saviour, and therefore questions why and how Peter who walked with Christ for three years could not after three decades, understand that he is a pope, a primate, a chief or anything except an elder in the Church. He equally points to the first Church Council in Jerusalem as seen in Acts 15 where the Apostles were present. All the apostles present including Peter, Barnabas, and Paul spoke but then, it was clearly stated here that it was James who presided over the council and not Peter and it is also clear in verse 19 that James, not Peter renders the decision at this council. Another text Durel presents to back up his claim is seen in Acts 8:14; "Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John". This text is actually indicating that someone else higher in authority is doing the sending. In other words, Peter, instead of doing the sending as the supposed primate of the apostles, was sent with John. In his summary, Durel (1999) observes again that Paul's name appears thirty times in the Epistles, more than four times to one over Peter's. He thus insists that when looking for the practical application of the Christian life, the "Chief Apostle" would be the one to turn to, but then the reality is that we must look to Paul over Peter more than four to one for that application.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Evidently, the works of scholars such as Brown (1979), Durel (1999) and others like them have refused to accept wholesomely the claim of Peter's primacy as authentic. Again,

considering what one discovers from the Fourth Gospel, it is quite apparent that Christ did not choose Peter over any other of his disciples. If Peter is presented in John's gospel as to have left Christ during his passion, denied him three times, unable to recognize and believe the resurrection reality, have turned back to his fishing business (John 21:1ff) after the resurrection, while John the beloved disciple never failed in any of these areas, then claiming that Peter is the prime head among the disciples is still very open to debate. This paper at this point is agreeing with Durel (1999) who still insists that while some denominations of the Church might claim to trace the papacy to Peter, he in no way had primacy over other apostles of Jesus Christ. It is simply a suggestive notion. If at all Christ is to have ranks amongst his disciples, John the beloved disciple, far more than Peter, fits into that position since he was even the one into whose care Christ left his mother Mary (John 19:26-27) and also the same person he made reference to his remaining alive till he returns (John 21:21-23). It could scarcely be Peter. Yet again, Peter's general role in laying the foundation of Christianity cannot go unnoticed and cannot even be taken for granted and is even one of the major reasons why this argument is sustained.

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