

# Pope Gregory the Great and the "Universal Bishop" Controversy

## Was the Pope denying his own Papal Authority?

### Debunking a popular Protestant myth

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There are comments made by Pope Gregory the Great (or Pope Gregory I, who reigned from 590-604) in letters to John the Faster (Bishop or Patriarch of Constantinople at the time) that are seized upon often by Evangelical Protestant apologists in an attempt to argue against the Papacy of the Catholic Church. The objection or charge made is that Pope Gregory was denying his own papal authority as visible head of the Church in rejecting the term "universal bishop." This is a reply to that common charge from three sources: *Radio Replies* by Fathers Rumble/Carty (from the 1930s), *This Rock* magazine (Dec 1992), and an older book on Gregory the Great by F. Homes Dudden (originally 1905). These sources show this particular charge has been around a while, and it is indeed a Protestant myth with no validity. It can even be found in the classic Protestant work of John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Book IV, chapter 7:4).

To show examples of prominent Evangelicals today who still make the objection, I'll quote from **Norm Geisler/Ralph MacKenzie** in *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals* (Baker Books, 1995), quoting another prominent Evangelical **Harold O.J. Brown** :

"In every age there have been those who considered the claims of a single bishop to supreme authority to be a sure identification of the corruption of the church, and perhaps even the work of the Antichrist. Pope Gregory I (A.D. 590-604) indignantly reproached Patriarch John the Faster of Constantinople for calling himself the universal bishop; Gregory did so to defend the rights of all the bishops, himself included, and not because he wanted the title for himself." (Geisler/MacKenzie, page 206 citing Brown, *Protest of a Troubled Protestant*)

The main question that should be asked in considering what I'll call the "universal bishop" controversy is: What did Gregory the Great precisely **mean** by the terms "universal" and "universal bishop" in his letters to the Patriarch of Constantinople? Evangelical apologists do not stop to ask that question, nor have they done much research into Pope Gregory's actual writings which are full of his claims to papal authority and universal jurisdiction. If he really was

denying his own papal authority (as asserted above by Geisler/MacKenzie and Brown), why would such an eminent Protestant (Anglican) scholar as J.N.D. Kelly write that Gregory I

"was indefatigable...in upholding the Roman primacy, and successfully maintained Rome's appellate jurisdiction in the east....Gregory argued that St. Peter's commission [e.g. in Matthew 16:18f] made all churches, Constantinople included, subject to Rome" (*The Oxford Dictionary of Popes*, page 67).

Indeed, most Protestant (and Orthodox) scholars concede that Pope Gregory was one of the first real Popes, and believed himself to have universal jurisdiction and authority over the Catholic Church.

Was Gregory then directly contradicting himself in rejecting the title "universal bishop" ? A careful examination of his writings and his use of the term "universal bishop" answers the question: No, Pope Gregory knew that he was Pope and said so explicitly and constantly in his writings. The source by Dudden below will examine the term "universal bishop" and provide further explanation.

**Here are a few more examples of the objection as stated by Protestants:**

From an anti-Catholic Baptist of FidoNet, Mick James (from OpenBible 6/12/95)

MJ> I want to add one more quote that deals with the office of the pope. This one you would expect to forever silence anyone from claiming that the church always had a universal head but nonetheless I am sure it won't but here goes. Gregory I in words to the Patriarch of Constantinople:

"None of my predecessors has consented to bear this profane title, for when a Patriarch adopts for himself the title of '**universal**' the title of Patriarch suffers discredit. No Christian, then, has the desire to adopt a title that would cause discredit to his brethren."

In a letter to the Emperor he says : "I confidently affirm that whoever calls himself **Universal Bishop** is the precursor of Antichrist". This unequivocally proves that there was no universal head over all the church before this.

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From a Presbyterian (Reformed), Richard Bacon (FidoNet OpenBible 12/5/94) in a debate on the Papacy:

RB> With respect to Leo the Great: first, you have strayed well into the fifth century -- a far cry from either Scripture or even the first few centuries of the church. I rather suspect that most Protestant historians would count the modern papacy as having its roots in Leo the Great. Yet, even so, consider the words of Gregory the Great written about 150 years \*after\* Leo: Gregory the Great, writing to John, the bishop of Constantinople, claimed....

"Was it not the case, as your Fraternity knows, that the prelates of this Apostolic See, which by the providence of God I serve, had the honour offered them of being called **Universal** by the venerable Council of Chalcedon. But yet not one of them has ever wished to be called by such a title, or seized upon this ill-advised name, lest if, in virtue of the rank of pontificate, he took to himself the glory of singularity, he might seem to have denied it to all his brethren." \_Epistles\_: Lib. V, Ep. XVIII

Gregory was writing in the late sixth and early seventh centuries. He was a successor to Leo, yet defended both himself \*and Leo\* against the charge that they should be known as "**Universal Papa**."

Phil, these are the sorts of things that compel me and other Protestants to insist that your Roman doctrine of the papacy is both late and spurious. Even Gregory claimed that none of his predecessors would accept the title -- including, we suppose, even Leo the Great.

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**James R. White** in his defense of sola scriptura *Answers to Catholic Claims* (Crowne Publications, 1990) says:

"Gregory likens anyone who would claim to be '**universal bishop**' to Lucifer himself who attempted to raise his throne above the throne of God Himself (Isaiah 14). Would the modern claims of the papacy qualify for Gregory's ridicule? This author believes that they would." (page 122)

**Robert Godfrey** in the "What Still Divides Us?" debate and in his chapter in the book *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position on the Bible* edited by Don Kistler (Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1995) says:

"The Reformers also discovered that tradition contradicted tradition. For example, the tradition of the Roman church teaches that the pope is the head of the church, a bishop over all bishops. But Gregory the Great, pope and saint at the end of the ancient church period, said that such a teaching came from the spirit of Antichrist ('I confidently affirm that whosoever calls himself -**sacerdos universalis**- [universal priest or bishop], or desires to be so called by others is in his pride a forerunner of Antichrist')." (page 14)

It is repeated by **Norm Geisler/Ralph MacKenzie** in *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals* (Baker Books, 1995), page 206 as I have quoted above, and mentioned by **Lorraine Boettner** in his *Roman Catholicism* (1962), page 125.

And it is repeated by former Catholic turned Evangelical **William Webster** in a book by prominent Evangelicals:

"The attitudes and practices of the Fathers and councils reveal that the church never viewed the bishops of Rome as being endowed with supreme authority to rule the church universal. And there never has been a supreme human ruler in the church. This whole concept was repudiated by Pope Gregory the Great (A.D. 590-604) when he rebuked the bishop of Constantinople for attempting to arrogate to himself the title of '**universal bishop**'. He insisted that such a position and title are unlawful in the church of Jesus Christ.... [followed by the same quote above on 'precursor of Antichrist']. " (***Roman Catholicism*** [Moody Press, 1994] edited by John Armstrong, page 280)

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**The following is the answer to this common (and reckless) charge. These posts originally appeared in the FidoNet OpenBible conference in the Summer of 1995.**

*Radio Replies* by Fathers Rumble and Carty

**1-349.** Gregory the Great, Bishop of Rome, refused the title of universal Bishop himself, and blamed John the Faster of Constantinople of this presumption in claiming such a title!

**REPLY:** Gregory was Pope, and knew that he was Pope. Far from refusing the title, he showed that he was universal Bishop by excommunicating John the Faster, over whom he could not have had such jurisdiction had he not the privilege of being universal Bishop. In his 21st Epistle Gregory writes, "As to what they say of the Church of Christ, who doubts that it is subject to the Apostolic See [i.e. Rome] ?"

**3-364.** Was Pope Gregory I in error when he protested against the title of "Universal Bishop," saying that it was sacrilegious for any man to so call himself?

**REPLY:** In so protesting Gregory exercised his universal jurisdiction as Bishop of Bishops, not hesitating to condemn John the Faster, Patriarch of Constantinople.

**3-365.** Was he unaware of his own universal jurisdiction?

**REPLY:** He could not have been, since he exercised it. In many of his letters, also, he insists that the bishop of Rome holds the place of Peter, that he is the head of the "Faith," and "of all the Churches." And he declares that all the bishops are subject to the Apostolic See.

To understand the sense in which Pope Gregory condemned the expression "universal Bishop," you must understand the sense in which John the Faster intended it. It has

always been Catholic teaching that the bishops are not mere agents of the Pope, but true successors of the Apostles. The supreme authority of Peter is perpetuated in the Popes; but the power and authority of the other Apostles is perpetuated in the other bishops in the true sense of the word.

The Pope is **not** the "**only**" Bishop; and, although his power is supreme, his is **not** the "**only**" power. But John the Faster, Patriarch of Constantinople, wanted to be bishop even of the dioceses of subordinate bishops, reducing them to mere agents, and making himself the universal **or only real bishop**. Pope Gregory condemned this intention, and wrote to John the Faster telling him that he had no right to claim to be universal bishop or "**sole**" bishop in his Patriarchate.

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From ***THIS ROCK*** (December 1992) -- the magazine of Catholic apologetics

**CATHOLIC ANSWERS**, P.O. Box 17490, San Diego, CA 92177

**QUESTION:** Is it true that Pope Gregory I denied that the pope is the "universal bishop" and taught that the Bishop of Rome has no authority over any other bishop?

**ANSWER:** No. Gregory the Great (540 - 604), saint, pope, and doctor of the Church, never taught any such thing. He would have denied that the title "universal bishop" could be applied to anyone, himself included, **if by that term one meant there was only one bishop** for the whole world and that all other "bishops" were bishops **in name only**, with no real authority of their own. Such a distorted version of the biblical model of bishops is incompatible with Catholic teaching.

But that isn't to say that the title didn't -- and doesn't -- have a proper sense of which Gregory approved. If meant in the sense that the Bishop of Rome is the leader of all the bishops, the title is correct. **If it means he is the only bishop** and all the other "bishops" are not really successors to the apostles, it's false.

What Gregory condemned was the expropriation of the title Universal Bishop by Bishop John the Faster, the patriarch of Constantinople, who proclaimed himself Universal Bishop at the Synod of Constantinople in 588. Gregory condemned the patriarch's act because universal jurisdiction applies solely to the pope.

Some anti-Catholics cite the following quotations to give the false impression that Gregory was rejecting his **own** universal authority:

"I confidently say that whosoever calls himself, or desires to be called **Universal Priest**, is in his elation the precursor of the Antichrist, because he proudly puts himself above all others" (Epistles 7:33).

"If then he shunned the subjecting of the members of Christ partially to certain heads, as if besides Christ, though this were to the apostles themselves, what wilt thou say to Christ, who is the head of the universal Church, in the scrutiny of the last judgment, having attempted to put all his members under thyself by the appellation of universal? Who, I ask, is proposed for imitation in this wrongful title but he who, despising the legions of angels constituted socially with himself, attempted to start up to an eminence of singularity, that he might seem to be under none and to be alone above all?" (Epistles 5:18)

Predictably, anti-Catholics neglect to inform their audiences that the context of these statements makes it clear that Gregory was not making these statements in regard to himself or to any other pope. He believed the bishop of Rome has primacy of jurisdiction over all other bishops.

Like his predecessors and successors, Gregory promulgated numerous laws, binding on all other bishops, on issues such as clerical celibacy (1:42,50; 4:5,26,34; 7:1; 9:110,218; 10:19; 11:56), the deprivation of priests and bishops guilty of criminal offenses (1:18,32; 3:49; 4:26; 5:5,17,18), and the proper disposition of church revenues (1:10,64; 2:20-22; 3:22; 4:11)

Gregory's writings show that he regarded and conducted himself as the universal bishop of the Church. He calls the diocese of Rome **"the Apostolic See, which is the head of all other churches"** (13:1).

He said, **"I, albeit unworthy, have been set up in command of the Church"** (5:44). He taught that the pope, as successor to Peter, was granted by God **a primacy over all other bishops** (2:44; 3:30; 5:37; 7:37).

He claimed that it was necessary for councils and synods to have the pope's approval to be binding and that only the pope had the authority to annul their decrees (9:56; 5:39,41,44).

He enforced his authority to settle disputes between bishops, even between patriarchs, and rebuked lax and erring bishops (2:50; 3:52,63; 9:26,27).

When Gregory denounced John the Faster's attempt to lay claim to the title Universal Bishop, his words were in accord with his actions and with his teachings. He was unequivocal in his teaching that **all** other bishops are subject to the pope:

**"As regards the Church of Constantinople, who can doubt that it is subject to the Apostolic See? Why, both our most religious Lord the Emperor and our brother the Bishop of Constantinople continually acknowledge it"** (Epistles 9:26).

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**Pedro Vega, an Orthodox Christian, did attempt a reply to the above. My response (7/23/95) from FidoNet OpenBible is found below.**

PP> Was Pope Gregory I in error when he protested against the title of "Universal Bishop," saying that it was sacrilegious for any man to so call himself?

PP> **REPLY:** In so protesting Gregory exercised his universal jurisdiction as Bishop of Bishops, not hesitating to condemn John the Faster, Patriarch of Constantinople.

PV> If you could only quote the whole letter to us, instead of cutting and pasting and imposing modern notions of the papacy upon Christian antiquity, you could be honest with yourself, and then with the rest of us. But this is also typical of Roman apologists, this cut and paste approach.

The whole "Universal Bishop" controversy is discussed in much detail in the two volume work *Gregory the Great: His Place in History and Thought* by F. Homes Dudden, B.D. fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford originally published in 1905 by Longman's Green and Co and reissued in 1967 by Russell and Russell/New York. The following is from volume 2 of that work, pages 209-227 --

The epistle [**Epp v:44**], which is far too long to give in detail, may be summarized as follows -- [**Pope Gregory the Great to John the Faster**]

"You pretended to be anxious to avoid the patriarchate, but now you have got it you act as though you had canvassed for it. Having confessed yourself unworthy to be called a bishop, you now seek to be **called the only bishop**. You disregarded the admonitions of Pope Pelagius, you neglected my own. Though your office is to teach humility to others, you have not yet learnt yourself the elements of this lesson.

"My brother, love humility, and do not try to raise yourself by abasing your brethren. Abandon this rash name, this word of pride and folly, which is disturbing the peace of the whole Church. How will you face Christ at the judgment, when by this sinful title you have tried to subject His members to yourself? '**Universal Bishop**,' indeed! Why, you imitate Lucifer, who said: 'I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will be like the Most High' [Isa 14]."

"By this unspeakable title the Church is rent asunder and the hearts of all the faithful are offended. It is written 'Charity seeketh not her own'; but your Fraternity seeks far more than your own. Again, it is written: 'In honour preferring one another'; but you strive to **take away** the honour of **all** when you unlawfully seek to usurp it for yourself alone. Already more than once I have reproofed your sin through my representative, and now I write myself. If you despise this reproof, I must have recourse to the Church, as the precept of the Gospel commands (Matt 18:15-17)."

[**Pope Gregory also appealed to the Emperor Maurice -- Epp v:37**]

"It is clear to every one who knows the Gospel that the **CARE** of the **WHOLE CHURCH** has been committed to the blessed **PETER, CHIEF** of the Apostles. For him it is said: [quotes from John 21:15-17; Luke 22:31-32; and Matt 16:18-19]. Behold, he receives the keys of the kingdom of heaven; to him is given the power of binding and loosing; to him the **CARE** and **PRIMACY** of the **WHOLE CHURCH** is committed; and yet he is never called the Universal Apostle. But that most holy man, my fellow-bishop John, wishes to be called the Universal Bishop. I am compelled to exclaim, O tempora! O mores!"

"Most Religious Lord, am I defending my own cause, am I vindicating a wrong done to myself alone? **NO**; it is the cause of Almighty God, the cause of the **UNIVERSAL CHURCH**. We know of a truth that many bishops of the Church of Constantinople have fallen into the whirlpool of heresy, and have become not only heretics, but heresiarchs." [Gregory quotes as instances Nestorius and Macedonius]

"If, then, any bishop of that Church assumes the title Universal, the Universal Church must be **overthrown** with the **fall** of the Universal Bishop. God forbid! Far from all Christian hearts be that blasphemous name, by which **one** bishop madly arrogates **all** honour to himself, **taking it away** from the rest of his brethren!"

### **Now what is the precise meaning of "universal bishop?"**

PP> To understand the sense in which Pope Gregory condemned the expression "universal Bishop," you must understand the sense in which John the Faster intended it.

PV> Actually, it was Emperor Maurice the one who granted the title. In fact, the title was intended as quite inoffensive: the Ecumenical Patriarch was called that because his see was at the "ecumenical city," the capital of the Roman Empire, Constantinople. Incidentally, the chief city librarian was also called "Ecumenical," yet he did not possess any "universal jurisdiction" over the rest of the librarians in the Empire, nor the Ecumenical Archivist had any power over all other archivist throughout the Empire.

(more from *Gregory the Great* by F. Homes Dudden, volume 2, page 218-219)

It is evident from all the above letters that Gregory believed that very serious issues were involved in the concession or refusal of the title claimed by John, and it may be well, before going further, to inquire what was the **precise meaning** which he attached to the word "Universal" or "Ecumenical." Now, in the first place, the phrase "Ecumenical Bishop" might, as the later Greeks pointed out to Anastasius the Librarian, signify nothing more than a bishop who "rules a certain portion of the world inhabited by Christians. For the Greek word -oikoumene- may mean in Latin not merely the world, from the universality of which the word comes to mean 'universal,' but also a habitation or habitable place" [Anastasius Praef in Septimam Synodum (Labbe, vii pp. 30,31)].

In this sense the title is merely an honorary appellation to which any patriarch, metropolitan, or bishop might rightfully lay claim.



In the second place, it might signify a bishop who "held the primacy of the whole world" (-universi orbis praesulatum-), as chief of all bishops. If such is taken to be the meaning, then the assumption of the title by John amounted to claiming for the See of Constantinople the primacy hitherto enjoyed by Rome. Such a claim could not, of course, be tolerated by the Pope. But to Gregory the title meant **even more** than this.

For, in the third place, it might be argued that the word "Universalis" was equivalent in meaning to the word "UNICUS," and the designation "**universal** Bishop" might thus be interpreted as **sole** or **only** true bishop in the world. It must not be thought that John himself ever really professed to be in this way the sole bishop, the source of the episcopate. Nothing was further from his intentions. But Gregory believed that his claim was capable of this interpretation, and this accounts for much of the violence of his language respecting it.

Had the Patriarch of Constantinople been indeed acknowledged as the **sole** bishop, then it would have been **true** to say that the rest were not **really** bishops --

[Epp ix:156 -- "Nam si UNUS, ut putat, UNIVERSALIS est, restat ut vos episcopi non sitis."];

that the members of Christ were being subjected to an alien head; that the fall of the Church would coincide with the fall of the **only** bishop; that the title was blasphemous, and signaled the coming of Antichrist.

Such was Gregory's interpretation of the title -- no doubt in itself ambiguous -- claimed by the Patriarch.

PP> The Pope is **not** the "**only**" Bishop; and, although his power is supreme, his is **not** the "**only**" power. But John the Faster, Patriarch of Constantinople, wanted to be bishop even of the dioceses of subordinate bishops, reducing them to mere agents, and making himself the universal **or only real bishop**. Pope Gregory condemned this intention, and wrote to John the Faster telling him that he had no right to claim to be universal bishop or "**sole**" bishop in his Patriarchate.

PV> Behold, Roman revisionism at its best.

No, that is how Gregory the Great interpreted the title. But the article I quoted written by Catholic Answers perhaps was wrong to say that is precisely how John the Faster meant it. Nevertheless, Pope Gregory did claim universal jurisdiction and both the Emperor and the Bishop of Constantinople "**continually acknowledge it**" (Epp ix:26).

PV> The Lord used the occasion to promulgate through the mouth of humble Gregory the fact that no Bishop had universal jurisdiction over the Church.

Here is where you are wrong, Pedro. Gregory **CERTAINLY** claimed universal jurisdiction and that is not denied by him in the "universal bishop" controversy with John the Faster. See the excerpts from his letters I originally gave to Mick James.

More from the above work *Gregory the Great* (volume 2, page 224-225) --

The controversy thus oddly terminated leads us to inquire -- What exactly was Gregory's view respecting his own position? What, in his opinion, was the relation of the Papacy towards the Churches? Now, Gregory has been accused of insincerity, in that while disclaiming the title *Universalis*, he yet claimed all the title implied. This charge, however, is misleading and is not true. As has been already pointed out, Gregory interpreted "universalis" in the sense of "**unus**"; and he certainly never pretended to be the **sole** bishop in Christendom.

On the other hand (though abhorring the title which might mean "**sole bishop**"), he **NEVER FOR AN INSTANT** denied, or made any pretence of denying, that the Pope was the **PRIMATE** and **CHIEF** of Christian bishops. There can be **NO DOUBT** that Gregory claimed a **PRIMACY**, not of honour **MERELY**, but of **AUTHORITY**, in the Church Universal. To him the Apostolic See was "**THE HEAD OF ALL THE CHURCHES,**"

[Epp xiii:50 -- "Sede apostolica, quae omnium ecclesiarum caput est."

cf. xiii:40 -- "Illud autem ammonemus, ut apostolicae sedis reverentia nullius praesumptione turbetur. Tunc enim membrorum status integer manet, si caput fidei nulla pulset iniuria."]

and its bishop was called to undertake "**the government**" of the Church.

[v:44 -- "Indignus ego ad ecclesiae regimen adductus sum."]

The reason alleged for this preeminence was that the Roman Bishop was the **successor** and **vicar** of St. Peter, **CHIEF** of the Apostles [ii:46] to whom had been committed the "cura et principatus" of the whole Church, and on the stability of whom, as on a **ROCK**, the Church had been firmly established [Epp v:37; vii:37].

"Wherefore, although there were many Apostles, yet in respect of the principate the See of the **PRINCE** of the Apostles **ALONE** has grown strong in authority" [vii:37].

As the **successor**, then, of the **CHIEF** of the Apostles [Peter], the Pope claimed a **DIVINE RIGHT OF PRIMACY** [iii:30 -- "Apostolica sedes Deo auctore cunctis praelata constat ecclesiis"].

The decrees of councils would have **NO FORCE** "**WITHOUT** the authority and consent of the Apostolic See" [ix:156; cf. v:39,41,44].

Appeals might be made to the Pope against the decisions even of the Patriarch of Constantinople, and such decisions might be reversed by sentence of the Papal court [see pg 203ff in this volume].

All bishops, moreover, even the patriarchs, were subject to correction and punishment by the Pope, if guilty of heresy or uncanonical proceedings. "If any of the four patriarchs had done such a thing," he wrote again to a bishop who had disobeyed his orders [ii:50], "such contumacy could not have been passed over without the gravest scandal."

"As regards the Church of Constantinople," he said once more [ix:26], "**WHO CAN DOUBT THAT IT IS SUBJECT TO THE APOSTOLIC SEE?** Why, both our Most Religious Lord the Emperor, and our brother the Bishop of Constantinople, **continually acknowledge it.**"

*Gregory the Great: His Place in History and Thought* by F. Homes Dudden, B.D.  
(volume 2, page 224-225)

PHIL PORVAZNIK (July 1995)