

So What About the Pope?

Pope Francis definitely has our attention.

Bible prophecy said that would be the case (Revelation 13:3).

But why?

What is the significance of his influence and why does he have such massive influence in the first place?

Even avowed atheists have jumped on the Internet to post their awe of the pleasant Argentina pope:

"I'm an atheist, and even I have respect for this guy. If he can get Christians to actually act like Christians, maybe I won't have such an issue with 'organized' religion." — John S

"I'm an atheist and do not believe, but I love this new pope, pope's are put on a pedestal and seem untouchable, this pope, from the get go, has been a people person. You can almost feel the love radiating from him. So from one human to another, he shows such compassion and humility. Love him." — Sarah, Britain

"I don't even believe in God. But, this guy, as a human being, just rocks." — Ironhand43

I just read the entire speech Pope Francis gave before Congress on Sept. 24 and I can see why everybody likes the guy. He advocated for "personal and social responsibility" and "the transcendent dignity of the human being," followed by an impressive outline of excellent objectives and aspirations:

to satisfy common needs ... especially those in situations of greater vulnerability or risk"

to "combat violence perpetrated in the name of a religion, an ideology or an economic system, while also safeguarding religious freedom, intellectual freedom and individual freedoms"

to spread "hope and healing ... peace and justice"

to "aim at restoring hope, righting wrongs, maintaining commitments, and thus promoting the well-being of individuals and of peoples"

to maintain "respect for our differences and our convictions of conscience"

to engage in "the battle to eliminate new global forms of slavery, born of grave injustices which can be overcome only through new policies and new forms of social consensus"

"to live as nobly and as justly as possible, as we educate new generations not to turn their back on our 'neighbours'"

to respond to the current "refugee crisis" with the Golden Rule: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you'"

"to raise people out of extreme poverty"

to pursue "the right use of natural resources, the proper application of technology and the harnessing of the spirit of enterprise" which "are essential elements of an economy which seeks to be modern, inclusive and sustainable"

to stop the sales of “deadly weapons ... to those who plan to inflict untold suffering on individuals and society,” which he said is done “simply for money: money that is drenched in blood, often innocent blood.”

What’s not to like?

Well, there was something hinted at in his speech that poses a potential problem. Four times he said that the way forward in our chaotic world is by means of “legislative activity” or “by means of the law.”

This is partly true and partly not. Legislation has its limits. Just what kinds of things are acceptable to enforce by law? Pope Francis does not offer us any clear insight regarding where he would draw the legislation line. But when a pope talks about legislation, we Protestants understandably take a deep, apprehensive breath and watch for what’s coming next, because the Roman Catholic Church has a really bad history when it comes to exercising civil power.

For now, not only is the pope speaking in favor of good and worthy causes, the fella is downright charming. Seems like he’d be a fun person to spend the day with just chillin’, laughin’ and shootin’ the breeze on a big friendly porch eating pie and ice cream. Thing is, though, he’s the pope of Rome, and that position equates to something of historical and ideological substance that precludes easy enjoyment of the pie and ice cream.

So, let’s pan out for the aerial view.

When dealing with huge subjects that encompass large swaths of history and intersecting world dynamics, it is helpful to back up and consider the big picture. Sometimes it is vital that we back up from examining the bark on the trees and take a look at the forest as a whole. So here’s a brief recap of the history that has brought us to where we are right now as Pope Francis stands before us with his delightful, smiling face.

One: Jesus and His Church

Jesus came to our world and founded His church upon the principle of non-coercive love. In the popular language of His time, He called this core relational dynamic “agape.” Describing the ultimate outworking of this principle, Jesus said, “For God so loved (agapaō) the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Giving defines God’s total mode of existence.

At the cross God gave Himself to the point of suffering and death in order to demonstrate His love for us, and that love is the power — the one and only power — He exerts for our salvation. The cross reveals that God is only interested in drawing human beings to Himself by the attractive power of His love. Conversely, He is not interested in outward compliance under coercive pressure. Applying the principle of non-coercive love to human relations in general and to church relations in particular, Jesus said: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28).

This is what Jesus intended His church to look like, how He meant for it to operate, and therefore how He wanted the world to see His character through His corporate body.

Jesus is decidedly pro-freedom and anti-force. His life, death, and teachings set in motion a relational system characterized by a power-under relational dynamic rather than power-over manner of relating. His kingdom stands diametrically opposed to imposing theological, emotional, or civil coercion upon human beings in matters pertaining to one's individual relationship with God.

After Jesus departed from the world, having established His church on the premise of what we might call the love-freedom relational dynamic, His disciples advanced His peculiar upside-down kingdom in two ways: (a) by preaching the gospel, or the good news of God's non-coercive love as the only legitimate basis for human relationship with God and (b) by living out His love within the church as a covenant community, meaning that men and women only joined the church on the premise of voluntary response to God's love. The church was not to be a civil system imposing its beliefs by means of law, but rather a covenantal system setting forth the attractive beauty of God's character as an invitation to which all were free to say yes or no.

Two: The Pagan Roman Empire

As the New Testament church was being established, there was a prevailing power structure in operation that stood in stark contrast: the pagan Roman Empire. The core principle on display within this system was that of coercion in the form of civil law, economic pressure, and military force. Individual conscience was irrelevant. All that mattered was submission to the prevailing power structure under the threat of harm.

Religion in the pagan system simply served the empire as one more form of coercion, manipulating the people on the emotional level. God was a scare tactic, portrayed in terms of a supreme ruling power to which all must submit or suffer.

According to the book of Daniel, the Roman Empire came into existence as the religiopolitical culmination of Babylon, Media-Persia, and Greece (Daniel 7). Within the historical trajectory of these three empires, Rome emerged as the paragon of the pagan picture of God. Rome was simply a colossal manifestation of what a governmental structure looks like when formed on the premise that God rules by means of coercive power rather than love, justifying human governance of the same character. Within that system, the Roman emperor was presented to the people as the visible manifestation of God ruling in human affairs — Pontifex Maximus. Thus, in Rome, the civil power and the religious power were one office.

Three: Paul Foretells the Great Falling Away

While Jesus established His church on a love-based foundation, the apostle Paul warned that the Roman system, with its power-based picture of God, would invade the church.

In 2 Thessalonians 2, the apostle described this coming historical shift as, "the falling away" — apostasia (apostasy), in the Greek. Within the Christian church, there would be a falling away from the high principle of love upon which Christ had founded His church. A fundamental shift would occur in the church's perception and exercise of power.

Then Paul transitioned from employing the general language of corporate apostasy and described a singular figure at the head of the apostasy — “the man of sin ... the son of perdition ... the lawless one.”

In Paul’s thinking, in keeping with the whole of Scripture, the “law” of God is “love” (Romans 13:10). The lawless one is, therefore, a religious leader who subverts loyalty to God’s law of love and governs with forms of power that are contrary to love (which I address in detail in the article “The Romanism Within”).

The specific configuration the apostasy would take was clear to Paul’s mind, as well. “The lawless one,” he explained, will be an imposing figure “who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.” The apostasy would center in a man putting himself in the place of God on earth, in a “temple” setting, or a religious system.

With enlightened prophetic eyes, Paul saw that the apostasy was coming, but he also discerned that the core principle of the system was “already at work” in the then-existing pagan Roman Empire with its dominating caesars. And while Paul saw that the apostasy of the church was coming as a historical development future to his time, he described the pagan Roman Empire as “the one who now holds it back” and would “continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed.” In other words, Paul saw that the Great Christian Apostasy would essentially involve the establishment of a fallen form of Christianity taking the place of the Roman Empire, exercising pagan-type power in the name of Christ.

Paul then summarizes his prophecy with these insightful words: “The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing” (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10, NIV).

“How Satan works” is an encapsulating term that includes the two primary ways in which the devil operates to further his kingdom: deception and coercion. While the kingdom of Jesus is only advanced by means of truth and love, Paul says that Satan’s system is revealed in “all sorts of displays of power” and “all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing.”

And this is precisely what happened. Once the apostles had passed off the scene, a gradual process of compromise took place that eventually succeeded in Romanizing the Christian church.

Four: Papal Supremacy

By the fourth century after Christ, the covenant community of agape love was morphing into “Christendom,” the official religion of the state. In 312, the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, professed conversion to Christ. Approaching the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine saw a cross of light above the midday sun with the blazing Greek words, Ἐν Τούτῳ Νίκα — In this sign, conquer!

Here was a supernatural message, clearly not from the Jesus who hung with self-sacrificing love on Calvary’s cross, commanding the Roman Emperor to henceforth engage in all of his violent military exploits in the name of Christ. Civil power was now made the realm of Christianity. Rather than adopt the self-sacrificing spirit and principles of the kingdom of Christ, Constantine essentially baptized his military with their weapons in

hand, leaving the coercive pagan picture of God intact, but now bearing the name of Jesus.

The popular Jesus was now, in fact, not Jesus at all, but a false god masquerading in His place. The name of Jesus had been hijacked for political and military ends.

During the sixth century, the Roman Empire was crumbling and a massive power vacancy was being created. By this time, Romanized Christianity was the prevailing religion of the Empire. The official church was little more than a thin veneer of Christian language covering the inner substance of paganism. The name of Jesus was on the church's lips, while a dark theological image of God as a power-mongering Roman Emperor was enthroned in the church's heart.

Justinian, the Roman Emperor, issued a decree in 529 AD making the pope supreme ruler in all religious matters. The pope was thus granted the use of civil power to enforce the church's teachings. By the rule of law and under the threat of punishment, all must comply with the dictates of the pope as the infallible Vicar of Christ on Earth.

And with that single political maneuver, thus began the long, dark, bloody reign of papal supremacy!

With a crucifix in one hand and a sword in the other, Jesus was now represented by a ruthless killing machine with a geographic reach and an historic longevity unsurpassed by any other power in history. Through the Middle Ages the church tortured and slaughtered multiplied millions upon millions of human beings who dared to think for themselves and imagine a better picture of God. In the world's corporate psyche, the name of Christ became synonymous with enslavement, greed, cruelty, and murder.

Daniel foretold that the papal system would exercise its power with two main characteristics: "He shall speak great words against the most High, and shall wear out (persecute) the saints of the most High" (Daniel 7:25, KJV).

The papacy would speak "great words against the Most High," not as an open opponent of God, but rather as a covert enemy of God claiming to be His one true representative on Earth. The papacy would defame the character of God by constructing a false doctrinal system that would portray God as a coercive monster whose wrath must be appeased by whatever deeds the church might dictate, not the least of which was paying the church cash money in exchange for God's forgiveness or to pay off minutes, hours, days, or years of torture in purgatory for deceased loved ones.

In addition to the "great words" of theological distortion "against" the character of "the Most High" — which essentially equated to a powerful doctrinal system of emotional coercion — the church enforced its theology by means of civil legislation. This meant that the church could legally punish all those it deemed as dissenters and heretics — anyone who believed that God was better than the picture the papacy was painting. And the punishments ran the full gamut from excommunication and financial penalties to torture and execution.

As long as the church possessed civil and legislative power, there was no stopping her cruel criminal career of coercion in the name of Christ. But history was destined to turn a corner in the direction of liberty.

Five: Gospel in the Form of a Governing Document

As foretold in Bible prophecy, the long dark reign of papal supremacy came to a screeching halt during the French Revolution. In 1798, the French general, Louis Alexandre Berthier, under the authority of Napoléon, dethroned and imprisoned Pope Pius VI. After 1,260 years of wielding absolute political power, the papacy's civil and legislative authority was finally at an end. The apostle John, in Revelation 13, foretold this event as the inflicting of a "deadly wound" upon the papacy.

Preceding the French Revolution (1789–1799) was the American Revolution (1765-1783). The world was in violent upheaval, driven by a determination to cast off all coercive power structures and by an insatiable hunger for religious and political freedom. The American Revolution was essentially the messy but inevitable outworking of the theological revolution set in motion by Jesus. The principle of non-coercive love embodied in Christ was now taking on the form of a political system. Here was a new nation that dared to enshrine the truth of mankind's innate liberty in its governing documents:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness" (Declaration of Independence).

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances" (First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution).

The revolutionary genius of the bold new venture was simply this: the law of the land was that there was no law of the land to control the conscience!

The U.S. Constitution declared as law that the government exists for the purpose of insuring that all its citizens remain ungoverned at the level of their conscience. The human being was to be left completely un-coerced in matters pertaining to God. No king or pope would be allowed to exert control over any person's belief system. Each human being was to be regarded as a self-governing free agent capable of individual relationship with God.

Thus, with the interference of a state dictated religion out of the way, men and women could examine the claims of Christ purely on the merits of His good character. Religious conviction could now gain access to the conscience by appealing to the rational, emotional, relational nature of mankind.

Six: Pope Francis

What, then, do we do with the current pope?

Two things, as I see it:

Smile and say Amen in response to all the good things he's advancing.

And understand that beneath the surface, the historical, political, and theological substance of the office he occupies remains unchanged to any significant degree. Papal doctrine still holds that the Catholic Church is the only door to salvation and that the pope is the supreme, infallible Vicar of Christ on Earth.

Yes, Pope Francis is a charming and likable person. But the question should never be whether or not the pope has a pleasant personality. Rather, the question should always be, what does he represent as the man that occupies the papal throne and what is the ultimate end to which the papal power structure reaches? It is the papal office and its underlying theology of power that we need to be concerned with. And on that level, nothing of substance has changed.

The doctrines of penance, indulgences, transubstantiation, the veneration of saints, purgatory, eternal torment, and salvation within the Catholic Church alone, all capped off with the doctrine of papal infallibility, still compose the dark theological core of the system. Papal theology is fundamentally an appeasement construct of the character of God, which means that it is pagan, or coercion-based, in its basic substance.

The pope is not merely a religious leader, he occupies a political throne as a religious leader. And the union of these two realms of power in the papal office — church and state — renders the system inherently incompatible with the gospel of Christ and at odds with the Constitution of the United States of America.

And. That. Is. The. Point.

The personality of the man is beside the point. He, like each of us, is a human being for whom Jesus died. If the ancient ruler of Babylon, King Nebuchadnezzar, could come to know and love the one true God of heaven, certainly the pope can, too.

As to what's going on in the heart of Pope Francis, we can't possibly know. May God open his eyes to see that no man can legitimately occupy a political-religious throne in the name of Jesus.

To what degree the pope is consciously working out the objectives that lie embedded within Catholic doctrine is beyond our judgment. What we can know with absolute certainty is that all forms of power that encroach upon the conscience — wherever manifested — are anti-Christ by definition, because they are anti-love by definition and “God is love” (1 John 4:16).

Which brings us to the real point we need to grasp if any of this is to be truly meaningful at all.

Seven: You and Me

The deeper issue for you and me isn't what's going on in the heart of Pope Francis but what's going on in our own hearts.

In the final events of human history, all of us will act out our picture of God. That's the gist of the warning communicated in the end-time prophecies of Daniel and Revelation.

Even now, in our manner of relating to others, we can read the tangible indicators of the picture of God we hold in our hearts. Each of us is actuated in our daily relationships by either the power-over or the power-under relational dynamic. In the way we treat others,

each of us is either acting out the principle of God's non-coercive love or the principle of papal supremacy.

How do I relate to my spouse, to my children, to my colleagues at work, to my fellow church members, to my next-door neighbor, to those who disagree with me, cross me, or violate me? It is in the realm of my daily relationships that I can best discern what I really believe about God. Regardless of what I say I believe about God, the way I treat people reveals what I really believe.

According to Revelation 13, a centralized power structure is going to be set up in the world that will unite church and state. Those who engineer the system will perceive themselves as having God-given power over others. And here's the thing: everyone who subscribes to a coercion-based picture of God will find themselves rationalizing their alignment with the persecution machine that will inevitably overtake the world. When "no man can buy or sell" except those who go along with the system — when the pressure of survival is leveraged against us by means of legislation — each of us will simply reveal ourselves to be who we really are at heart.

And in that day the pope will be the least of our concerns.

Read more at: <https://adventistreview.org/news/so-what-about-the-pope/>