

# The Coming Home JOURNAL



Volume 1 Issue 2 • The Authority of the Church

## Searching for Authority

By Christopher Dixon

For nine years I served the Lord Jesus Christ as a United Methodist pastor in New Jersey; for five of those years I had no thought of being anything else. I had a growing church,

I was happy in my denomination and pleased with my prospects, and I was satisfied.



I believed that denominations were not only inevitable but good. Since Christians would always disagree about their beliefs and practices, having different denominations kept them from fighting. I didn't believe that visible unity was necessary for the Church, nor doctrinal unity. At the same time I insisted strongly on my own beliefs, which were defined largely by Wesleyan orthodoxy, and believed strongly that churches needed to teach doctrinal truth (which I still believe). The Christian faith was what it was, and the big things were not up for grabs.

I had been a lifelong Protestant, but

I didn't grow up with a strongly defined religious identity. Until I was seven my parents were active Methodists, but when we moved to Schenectady, New York, my mother (a nurse) worked every weekend and my father was never again involved with any church. I think the infighting common to Protestant congregations gave him a distaste for church life. But my brothers and I were sent to Sunday School at the nearest church, Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian, where I received an excellent grounding in the bible and a Christian faith that I never lost (although my practice of it

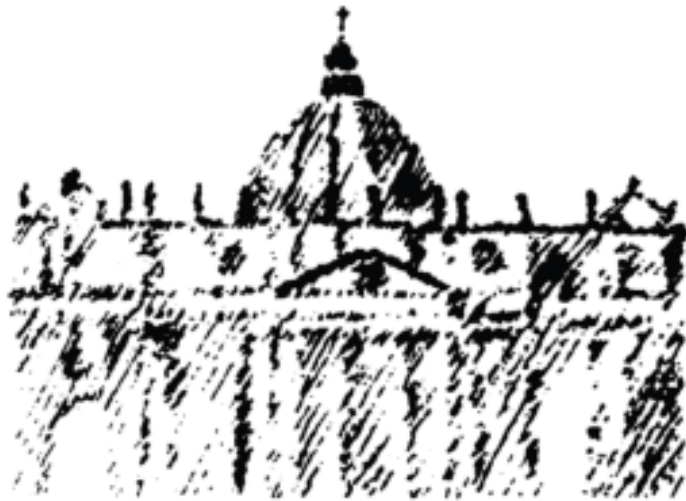
was inconsistent until I met my wife, Pat, in college).

From my days at Princeton Theological Seminary I had believed in the authority of the early church to speak definitively on the content of the Christian faith. I had no doubt that the councils of Nicea

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## From the Editor

Whenever Christians of different traditions, denominations, sects, or ilks gather over a friendly cup of coffee or other beverage of choice to discuss differences in theology or doctrine, observers can either be graced by the brotherly love and patience shown or disgraced by the flying fur. And since the later has too often been the case, the politically correct thing for most modern Christians to do is avoid these confrontations like the plague. As a result, all across America Christian neighbors of one tradition are able to live somewhat peaceably across the street or next door to Christian neighbors of other traditions by not talking religion. In other parts of the world this hasn't proven so successful. First, let me pose the question: is this what Jesus intended in his great priestly prayer when he prayed,

“Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that THEY MAY BE ONE, EVEN AS WE ARE ONE...I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that THEY MAY ALL BE ONE; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that THEY MAY BE ONE EVEN AS WE ARE ONE, I in them and thou in me, that THEY MAY BECOME PERFECTLY ONE, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.”  
John 17.11b, 20-23

Four times Jesus prayed that his followers would always remain one so that their united witness would convince the world of who he is and how much our heavenly Father loves them. Now nearly 2000 years later our world is still pretty much unconvinced or at least terribly complacent. But, secondly, whenever Christians of different traditions do get together to discuss or debate, the discussion rarely gets down to the issue at the core of our divisions. Arguments over whether salvation can be lost or who can be baptized or which form of church government is most biblical or whether women can be ordained all skirt the true, undergirding issue: how will one finally determine which opinion is true? The most number of votes? The most number of bible verses? The longest standing tradition? The loudest and fiercest voice? The key issue behind all of our divisions is the issue of authority: who has the authority to speak for

God to declare what is true? Recognizing the importance of this theme, we decided to focus this second issue of the Coming Home Journal on this important issue.

With my thoughts on the overwhelming implications of this theme—how the abandonment of authority has brought intellectual and moral chaos into our modern world—I had an unanticipated experience that drove this point disconcertingly home. Every week I fly from Ohio to Alabama to host a live television program on EWTN called *The Journey Home*. As I was driving to the airport, I decided to check out the library at a local university in a small central Ohio town that I normally pass quickly by.

As I entered the front gate, the marquee described this 155 year old academic institution as a Christian college of Liberal Arts. Driving around the campus looking for the library, I noticed that there were no signs or symbols that gave a clue to what Christian tradition this school was affiliated. The large New England style chapel had no specifically Christian artwork, and the billboard listed only a chapel service on Thursday evenings and a Catholic Mass on Sunday afternoons. In the library, I browsed through the religious section and was appalled that the overwhelming majority of the selections were by liberal Protestant, Eastern Oriental, pagan or New Age writers. When I found the bookstore and glanced through the lists for upcoming classes, again the books and topics reflected the same theological imbalance found in the library. My first thought was for the poor naive parents who thought they were safely sending their children to a Christian, nurturing environment. I then wondered how any student at that school who might be searching could possibly discover the truth of Christianity? And then the thought crossed my mind, in the nearly 2000 years of Christian history, when had it become possible for schools like this to exist, to unashamedly proclaim themselves Christian without any identifiable connection to any specific Christian tradition? I presume only in this century.

But maybe more relevant to the theme of this issue, how are the students of that small “Christian” college going to determine what is true? The stacks upon stacks of books at that liberal arts library reek of relativism, and do nothing but encourage these young minds to believe that the only authority they need is themselves. Is it possible that what one finds here is in essence the unavoidable trajectory of the idea that all one needs to determine truth is the Bible, the Holy Spirit and one's self? The articles in this issue of the Coming



Home Journal have been written by men and women whose love for Jesus Christ and whose conviction that God's truth is not relative led them out of their Protestant traditions into the Catholic Church. They are writing not to argue nor to proselytize but to winsomely clear away confusion and ignorance so that others might discover the joyful, trustworthy and Spirit led authority that still exists in the Church in union with Peter. We in the Coming Home Network International are anything but anti-Protestants. Those of us who are converts are very thankful for the faithful witness of our Protestant families, friends, congregations and pastors who led us to Jesus Christ and nurtured us in the Christian faith. It is now our desire to help them discover the fullness and power of the Faith, as taught by the Early Church Fathers and throughout history in Sacred Tradition. We pray that this collection of conversion stories and articles on authority will strengthen your faith in Jesus Christ, and enkindle in your heart a desire to know more about the Church that has weathered all the storms of the last 2000 years, not without faults or blunders, but which by God's grace still seeks to protect and proclaim the gospel message faithfully. May the Father richly bless you as you seek to follow Jesus his Son, our loving Lord and Savior.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "M. J. ...". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid and somewhat stylized.

Dixon, continued from page 1...

and Chalcedon, for instance, spoke with the authority of the Holy Spirit. What I had not thought about much was what happened to that authority in the centuries since. I suppose I had the idea that it stayed in the Catholic Church (having nowhere else to go) until the Reformation and then made a lateral move to the Protestants. Nor was I concerned that the bishops at Nicea who insisted on the divinity of Christ also insisted on His bodily presence in the Eucharist. The apostolic faith is all of a piece, but I did not know that yet.

Another important experience at seminary was reading John Henry Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, his story of how he converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism by searching for the "Catholic tradition" in the Church of England. I had never thought much about tradition and authority before; I took it for granted that different churches have different beliefs and that it was just a matter of preference which church one belonged to. Newman, however, described a church that commanded assent, whose beliefs and visible form were both grounded in the teaching of the apostles. I longed for such a church, I was transfixed, and as Newman discovered that the Catholic tradition was found in the Catholic Church, I couldn't find any flaws in his argument. I wondered whether I ought to become Catholic.

Pat's response to this was, "I don't want to hear that! You came here to become a Protestant minister, I want to have children, and I don't want any more changes!" At that point I wasn't prepared to pursue the issue myself, either, and the matter dropped, not resolved but put aside, though I brought a rather High Church approach to Methodism.

After my graduation and into my pastorate I began to have questions about the basis of my denomination. John Wesley intended Methodism to be a spiritual renewal movement within the Church of England, not a separate church. He had an Anglican view of the Church, sacraments, and ordination (though he was not always consistent), but his successors did not, and though they kept many of the externals there was nothing with which to replace Wesley's view. The result was a church with a somewhat sacramental appearance but little sacramental theology, with strong central authority and no doctrinal authority, with an ecumenical emphasis (at least with other liberal Protestant denominations) but suspicion of any attempt to define what Christians must

believe.

For years Pat had felt something missing in her relationships with the Churches we'd been part of without knowing what she wanted. She thought it came from wanting children, and then the isolation of a new mother and my being gone so much as a pastor. This came to a head in 1992 and 1993, when tensions with some of the congregation left her feeling totally cut off from the Church and wishing desperately that she could belong to some other church. I didn't want to consider that—"You can't do that! I'm the minister!"—not a helpful response, but then it's hard to cope with the fact that the minister's job is tied to his wife's spiritual community.

I was right in believing we ought to be one religiously, but I asked myself: just what was it that we needed to be one in? Was there any reason for Pat to be Methodist except that I was the minister? If there wasn't, why was it so important to me? What is the Church, anyway? What holds it together? What reason could I give anyone for belonging to my church? I realized that I couldn't give any reason except preference. There was no relationship between our church and our Faith.

Practically speaking we didn't define the Church theologically; people belonged to a church because their family went there, or they liked the worship service, or each other, or the pastor. That was not enough. We both realized that we wanted (actually Pat had wanted for a long time) a church that had a claim on us even if it didn't make us happy, whether we liked it or not, where the Church was more than a preference. We wanted a church with authority, a church that was necessary. Part of the historic faith of the Church was that the Church didn't create itself, and that its authority came from God, not men.

No denomination can claim that, because none can claim to be more than an association of like-minded Christians. Wherever the lines are drawn, it's a purely human creation; a group of people get together and say, "We are the Church." If a denomination has a strong theological foundation (for example the Orthodox Presbyterian Church where I attended Sunday School as a boy), it at least has a reason for being separate: teaching the truth according to its beliefs. But where there is no strong theological foundation the denomination becomes nothing more than an administrative body and the congregation becomes an ingrained social habit.

My convictions about the Church crystal-

ized more than they ever had. The Church was meant to have unity in structure and Faith, and both were necessary. Unless it was united in Faith there was no reason to be united in structure. If the Church couldn't claim to tell me what is true, why should I give it my loyalty? If I had to figure it all out for myself, why would I need the Church? (Which, indeed, is the situation of many Protestant denominations; since they don't claim to be necessary, people don't believe they're necessary.) I realized that the nature of the Church went along with its beliefs. If the Church was to teach with authority, it had to have authority in its being. That couldn't be given by a denomination. Either it existed in the whole Body of Christ together, with visible unity giving shape to spiritual unity, or else it couldn't be found at all.

It struck me quickly that only two options avoided drawing arbitrary lines: congregationalism (in which each gathering of Christians could decide its own beliefs) or Catholicism, which claimed a principle of unity that brought everyone in. Congregationalism, however, seemed both unscriptural and unhistorical. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of them," but that didn't define the whole nature of the Church. If it did there would have been no great disputes, no councils, and no commonly held faith. The Council of Nicea meant more than the National Council of Churches.

Only the Catholic Church truly represented visible and doctrinal unity. The alternative to Catholicism was doctrinal chaos and no unity. The Reformers had decided according to their own judgement which parts of the Catholic faith to keep and which to reject; their followers continued the process of revising, and then the results were codified as revealed truth. The authority of the Catholic Church was simply replaced by the authority of Luther or Calvin. In the liberal denominations the fall was even worse; the principle of revealed truth was replaced by theological pluralism, the absolute belief that there are no absolute truths. Yet in both, the Church's authority was replaced by the individual's, and the visible church became nothing more than a collection of individuals.

The result was worse than each church believing something different; it was a milieu in which it didn't matter what a church believed, in which no teaching needed to be definitive, and in which the idea of necessary belief seemed offensive.

Some Catholic friends who knew what

was going on with us came back from a conference at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, and gave us a tape of Scott Hahn's conversion story. Its effect on us was electric: he addressed the issues we were wrestling with rationally and biblically. Our beliefs were rapidly becoming more Catholic. We read *Humanae Vitae*, found it thoroughly convincing, and began Natural Family Planning. We were attracted by the Catholic Church's pro-life stand; our denomination was incapable of taking any strong position on this basic moral issue. We considered marriage indissoluble. We recognized the Pope as the earthly head of the Church; indeed we soon found events in the Catholic Church more relevant than events in Methodism. We now had no doubt that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist in the Catholic Church, but I knew it wasn't the same thing in Protestantism (indeed for a period I found it difficult presiding at Communion in my church; I felt I was pretending).

To Pat and me it now seemed essential that we belong to a church that was really founded on religious belief, and wasn't afraid to teach it. When the Catechism of the Catholic Church appeared in 1993, we thought, "Wouldn't it be great to belong to a church that can teach the truth like that!"

It would take a while, however, for near the beginning of this time of change, more change happened. I was sent to another Methodist church in July of 1993 and we were expecting our third child. I had to support my family and in any event I knew I needed clearer convictions than I had at that point. But I also knew that I would never find the solidity or consistency of belief in Methodism that I wanted.

There were also doctrinal issues that needed to be resolved: the Virgin Mary was the most difficult, but there were others. At the heart of them all was the infallibility of the Church, for if the Catholic Church was really what it believed itself to be, then its teachings had to be true. I had to learn to subordinate the sovereignty of my judgement to the voice of Christ in the Church.

I investigated all these things but as long as I was in the ministry I didn't feel that I could do more. Pat had more freedom and with my encouragement (for spiritually she was left high and dry, and I would have urged any parishioner to go where her faith led her) she went to a wise and sympathetic priest, Fr. Joseph, for instruction. For Pat, it was like water in a thirsty land. Within months she had no doubts

at all. I was delighted; she would be there to welcome me into the Catholic fold herself. In December of 1995 she became a Catholic. Our daughter Lisa received her First Communion the next fall.

I knew I couldn't stay in the Methodist church forever; my beliefs wouldn't allow it. I was feeling the strain of not being able to act on my beliefs. By now I had found others in the same path. Jeff, another Methodist minis-

ter whom I hadn't seen in years, heard of my interest in Catholicism from a Presbyterian pastor we both knew. "I hear you're thinking of swimming the Tiber," he said when he called, and we began meeting for lunch. Jeff was even closer to conversion than I was, and became Catholic in the summer of 1995. I found encouragement in meeting others who had converted, and in cradle Catholics. Brian, the local Baptist minister and his wife Phylis, had become good friends of ours. Phylis became Catholic shortly before Pat. Then Brian did. People in town were getting suspicious.

In March of 1996 I attended a Catholic men's retreat at Arnold Hall in Massachusetts, where I realized that nothing further needed to happen before I could convert. I fully believed the Catholic faith already. I didn't need any clearer light than I had—indeed, it couldn't be clearer.

With another baby due in July, a conversion, career change (to what, I didn't know), and relocation were not an option that summer; but I knew I couldn't delay much longer. In the meantime Fr. Joseph introduced me to his friend Monsignor James McGovern, who was seeking someone to work in adult education, Confirmation training, visitation, and various other responsibilities at the Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel in Moorestown, New Jersey. Pat and I discussed this possibility

and reached an agreement: in June of 1997 I delivered the last sermon from my pulpit.

A month later, when Bishop John M. Smith of Trenton, a successor of the apostles, received me into the Catholic Church, I became fully united to the only church that I believed could teach with complete authority. To this day, ten months later, in the voice of the Church I (still) hear the voice of Her Lord.



# A Hop, Skip and a Great Leap

By Doug Trout

The Roman Catholic Church makes great claims of itself. By these, it distinguishes itself from any other Christian denomination in the world. As a matter of fact, many of these denominations consider these claims nothing short of audacious and a direct attack on orthodoxy. While some denominations may not be this aggressive in their denunciation of Rome, there is unanimous consent among Protestants and Evangelicals that the Catholic Church could not possibly be all that she claims to be.

I am thoroughly convinced that the reason for much of this dissent is ignorance, rather than a true understanding of what the Catholic Church actually teaches.

I speak with experience in this matter. Even though I was raised in a Roman Catholic home, I didn't see religion as anything other than Sunday attendance at Mass. My neighborhood was predominantly Catholic, and yet I don't remember meeting anyone that seemed to be enthusiastic about the faith. As sad as it may sound, I don't recall hearing any Catholic outside the clergy even speak of God. Not only this, but they seemed rather uncomfortable to speak about their faith at all, as though it was a subject better left within the confines of church walls. Later in life, after having left the Catholic Church to become an Evangelical, I would often lament how terribly sad it was to see so many people apparently just going through the motions of Catholicism, without having a living, vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ.

Now before I get a nasty phone call from one of my sisters, who will be upset with me because they don't understand how I can say this, let me qualify my comments. Yes, my family did pray before dinner and ask God to bless our home, relatives and friends. We were also encouraged to say our prayers at night before going to bed, at least when I was very young. My mother also had a Crucifix on her bedroom wall. Beyond this I don't remember any other religious discussion or influence in my home or among my Catholic friends. In a nut shell, every Catholic I knew seemed to be ignorant of his or her faith and indifferent toward the Church.

Now some of you may think I am being a bit harsh and unfair, but I can tell you that I have spoken with literally hundreds of Catholics who have had a very similar experi-

ence as mine. Many of them, unfortunately, have either abandoned Christianity altogether, or have joined other denominations and sects whose theology and philosophy are in direct opposition to the Catholic Church. Still others remain Catholic and are practicing the ever popular "cafeteria" style Catholicism—a faith where they pick and choose the doctrines they wish to believe and submit to, while others are discarded as being irrelevant, out of touch, and impossible to live up to; a faith not in communion with The Roman Catholic Church. This is a tragic situation that demands our attention.

I was a spiritually precocious child. Later on, when I entered high school, even though I was a lousy student, I had great interests in philosophy, psychology, and spirituality. I instinctively knew there was more to the meaning of life than what my experience as a Catholic had been. These were the only classes in school that I excelled in. By the time I had gotten into my senior year in high school, I fancied myself a "free thinker" and loved to get into philosophical discussions of any kind. Without any strong Christian foundation it was easy to divorce myself from organized religion of any kind and instead pursue "what was right in my own eyes".

In the mid to late seventies drugs were easily accessible, and I soon fell in love with all of them. Most of my time was spent getting high and playing my guitar, preparing myself for what I thought would surely be my destiny; rock-n-roll stardom. Eventually, drug abuse started taking its toll and soon I was having a difficult time concentrating on anything. I became paranoid, and felt hopelessly alone. Even though I was only 16 years old I had already burned myself out on dope. It was at this time that I recall becoming aware that someone, or something was trying to com-

municate with me. Somehow, I knew it was God. I soon started to hear the name Jesus in my head on a regular basis. This was very disturbing. I had stopped attending Mass a long time prior and had distanced myself from any Christian influence. But, deep in my heart, I felt Him calling me, and I knew He wouldn't stop. I can't explain the feeling very well, but I knew I belonged with Him. Sometimes I would cry, feeling like I was just incapable of responding. Instead, I kept avoiding Him, plunging myself headlong into a hedonistic lifestyle that wound up leaving me both morally and spiritually bankrupt. Yet, the void in my soul longed to be filled.

After graduating from High School I joined the Marine Corps. While in the Marines I ran into a good number of Christians. They seemed so peaceful and confident. I was jealous. I knew they were with the One who wanted me, and yet I still would not heed His call. Many of these people challenged me to rethink Christianity, and I started reading tracts and books on Bible prophesy that I found laying around the barracks. As I became more exposed to the Bible, the louder the voice in my head became, pleading with my heart to embrace Christ. The modernist and pop psychology arguments that I had once appealed to in forming my world view were beginning to appear more and more like feeble, vindictive attempts to discredit religion and morality altogether, and I could no longer find solace in them. But the temporal pleasures in life to which I had become captive seemed way too much at the time to give up, so I proceeded on without Christ even as the voice kept calling.

After getting out of the Marine Corps, I joined a rock-n-roll band and soon found myself back in the same burned out condition. Knowing that much of my behavior was way out of sync with how God wanted me to live,

I daily wrestled with my conscience, but the tugging in my heart only became stronger. I finally felt that I could not fight anymore, and at the age of 25, decided to surrender my life to Christ.

I began attending an Evangelical fellowship where I met people who were excited about their faith. They loved God and wanted to please him in all areas of their life. They were moral and upright, encouraging me to seek and serve God with all my heart. Their example of holiness and piety prodded me into wanting that same kind of relationship with God in my own life. For this I am forever grateful.

I remained an Evangelical for 10 years and was enrolled in seminary, pursuing my dream of becoming a pastor, when I met an old high school friend of mine. Mark, a lifelong Catholic who I hadn't seen in years, had gone through a tremendous renewal experience. I, the Evangelical, was impressed with Mark's knowledge of the Bible, but could not understand how anyone who had a "born again" experience could remain in the Catholic Church. I had never met a Catholic who knew much about the Bible, let alone defend what I and the rest of Protestantism considered to be an un-Biblical, and indefensible theology.

I am forever indebted to Mark, who patiently listened to my arguments against Catholicism. His approach and attitude in refuting my arguments was gentle and thoughtful. I could tell that he was genuinely sincere about serving God with his whole heart, and that he loved God. He was not out to win an argument; he was instead concerned with my very soul. I was impressed that not only did he have strong Biblical arguments to defend Catholicism, but that he loved God's Word, and was a true student of it. He didn't pretend to have all the answers to my questions, but pointed me in the direction of people who did, eager to help in any way he could.

Through many long nights of study and prayer I returned home to the Catholic Church in March, 1997. Upon reentering, I made a commitment to forever defend the Catholic Faith, to do what ever I could to help others understand the glory of the Church, and to encourage others to do the same. It is in this spirit that I wish to present an explanation of what to me is the most convincing proof that the Catholic Church is everything she claims to be.

### How Firm A Foundation

The Protestant Reformers, in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, staked their claims on what they

called the two foundations upon which the Reformation would stand or fall. These are "Sola Scriptura", the Latin term for Scripture alone, and "Sola Fide", another Latin term for faith alone.

In this article we will be primarily concerned with the idea of "Scripture alone" theology.

This "doctrine", if you will, has some slightly different definitions depending on who you're talking with, but all definitions will share it's primary premise, that the Bible alone is to be authoritative. In other words the Bible alone is to be the sole rule of faith and practice for Christians and that no one person or institution has the authority to bind the conscience of the believer.

As an Evangelical I never really questioned the validity of this doctrine. I had not spent much effort examining the far-reaching implications of the idea. It was taught to me as a matter of fact, and without any air of controversy about it. Therefore I had no reason or need to defend it. The thought of even entertaining Catholic thinking on this was so far from my mind that I never saw it as a viable option. The Evangelical view of history, the way I understood it, was that the true Church of Christ had always held to this principle and that it was not until the Catholic Church had become corrupt and apostate that we see anything different. I was told the Protestant Reformers recognized this and restored the lost truths of the faith, rescuing humanity from hundreds of years of censorship and darkness.

This is not to say that I didn't struggle in looking for answers to the division among Bible believing Christians. As a matter of fact, this was the one thing I was most perplexed by when first becoming an Evangelical. My enthusiasm for wanting to know everything I could about Christ and the Bible was all consuming. At the time, I was single and my social life revolved around the singles ministry at the church I attended. Here I met a great number of people who attended other churches but were coming to socialize. I can remember asking some of those people why they chose to attend other churches and not ours. I wondered what the differences were. How, I thought, could the Bible place such a premium on unity within the Body of Christ (Rom 12:4-5, Eph 4:4-6, 1Cor 1:10, 12:12-13), and at the same time allow for so many differing interpretations of Scripture. I was told that the appeals the Bible makes for unity were not meant to be taken as though all Christians had to agree on all points of doctrine, but

that they share a basic understanding of the Christian faith. Often the person giving the answer would agree that the division among Bible believing Christians was certainly a black mark upon the Church. However this was easily explained away as a by product of man's fallen nature. Sometimes this diversity was expressed as a strength, rather than a weakness, because this kept man from being puffed up with knowledge. These matters were seen as "non-essentials", and allowed for freedom of conscience.

Over time I grew to accept this line of thinking, feeling like Peter when he said to Jesus, "Where else can we go, you have the words of eternal life." (Jn 6:68). Even though I was never completely comfortable with this answer, I tried to shrug off the question as one of God's ways that my finite mind was incapable of understanding.

This question was reintroduced in my discussions with Mark. He asked me to explain how the Scriptures could claim the Church to be the pillar and foundation of the truth and yet have so many opposing positions on a wide variety of doctrinal issues. Remember, the dominant Protestant position is that the Body of Christ is made up of the true believers in Christ who are scattered throughout the world in various denominations. His argument was a strong one: how could Paul claim the Church to be "the very foundation of truth" and yet have within it so many different interpretations of the what is true?

As an Evangelical I was taught that sincerity does not equal truth, that a person could be very sincere and devout in their beliefs and still miss the boat because they were sincerely wrong. Yet all of a sudden this seemed to be the very thing I was to accept if I was to continue in Evangelicalism. No post-reformation denomination claims infallibility. Instead they believe that the dissension and division so prevalent within their ranks somehow forms a homogeneous gathering called the Church. This just didn't square with 1Tim 3:15.

This led me to a study on the issue of authority: who had the authority to proclaim what the Bible taught and upon what foundation is this authority based? How could I know that the Gospel I had received was the same Gospel of the Apostles? (Gal 1:8). The Reformer's opinion was that the Catholic Church was wrong in its interpretation of the Bible. The battle cry was "Scripture alone", but as was evident from the outset and glaring in their posterity, no consensus was to be found. As I looked at the Reformer's claims, it seemed the height of hypocrisy for any one Reformer to tell

people that all they needed was the Bible alone to give them understanding, and yet proclaim from his pulpit how terribly mistaken others were when disagreeing with his interpretation. The numerous splits that occurred among the Reformers themselves, continuing to this day, suddenly made it clear to me that the single mindedness the scriptures speak of is impossible to maintain without a proper mechanism in place to provide the correct interpretation. (1 Cor 1:10, Phil 1:27-30)

I started again to look at all the verses of Scripture that had troubled me on this issue. In Matthew 18, Jesus tells the disciples that if someone won't listen to the Church after repeated attempts to reconcile the matter, treat him as an outsider. My experience as an Evangelical was quite different than this. Often I would hear of people "church hopping" because they had had a dispute with the leadership where they used to attend. I also knew of people who left churches over squabbles with fellow parishioners. Instead of following the suggestions in Matthew 18, they would just go off and find another place to fellowship until the next controversy occurred. This problem frustrates many pastors, but those who attempt to abide by the scriptural mandate to execute Church discipline are often accused of being dictatorial and harsh. They also risk incurring the wrath of other leaders within their congregation who might disagree and cause

a greater split. I have seen this occur many times. Many of my friends who are pastors have related how impotent they feel in solving major disturbances authoritatively.

Jesus also told the Apostles in Matthew 18, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt 18:18). I studied this phrase in great detail and realized that the Apostles had been commissioned with authority to legislate and regulate activity within the Church. This is literally what binding and loosing refers to in Matthew 18 (also Matt 16:19). Jesus also told

them that "he who hears you, hears me, and he who rejects you, rejects me" (Matt 10:40, Lk 10:16). Jesus made it perfectly clear that their word is final, because their word is His word. The Kingdom of God is everlasting. In these passages Jesus is commissioning the Apostles to administer the government of the kingdom. It only makes sense that since the kingdom is everlasting, than the governing of that kingdom is also everlasting. The Evangelical and Protestant model of the Kingdom of God cannot stand, because no kingdom divided against itself can (Matt 12:25)!

The mandate Jesus gave to His Apostles to govern the kingdom is without a doubt the most awesome responsibility given to the Church. And since it is a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb 12:28), it came with a promise. In Matt 16:18, Christ tells the Apostles that "the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church". Hell could only prevail if it was successful in convincing the Church to implement and teach untruth, in effect taking a wrecking ball to the pillar and foundation of truth. Also Jesus promises that when the Holy Spirit comes He will guide them into "all the truth" (Jn 16:12-15), and that He would never leave them desolate (Jn 14:15-18). The Bible and the Catholic Church both teach that it is not the integrity of men that keeps the Church from error, but the promise of Christ.

The Apostle Paul demonstrates, in very

practical ways, the understanding of the early church in relation to this. One place he does this is in what I had considered the best proof text for the doctrine of Sola Scriptura. In 2 Tim 3:15-16, Paul tells Timothy that, "all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work". Evangelical theologians, and friends of mine will point to this and say "see Doug, it's all right here, this passage shows that we can rely on nothing but the Bible for our faith". The Bible often can say things we want it to

say when we come to it with pre-conceived notions. Nowhere in this passage does it say that the Scriptures alone are authoritative. Looking at the text again this time reading the two verses prior to 16-17, in context of what Paul is saying, we can see the fallacy in thinking this a proof text for Sola Scriptura. Verse 14 begins, "But as for you continue in what you have learned, knowing from whom you learned it". Paul goes on in verse 15 to remind Timothy of his familiarity with the Old Testament Scriptures, (at the time of course, the New Testament does not exist) and their ability to corroborate his teaching. Yes, that's right, corroborate the Apostolic message of salvation in Christ. For it is clear in the New Testament that the message of salvation was hidden until the Apostles were charged to reveal it (Matt 28:20, Col 1:25-28, Gal 2:7-8). The New Testament teaches that indeed the message of salvation is taught in the Old Testament, but hidden, and never revealed without the authority of Christ and the Apostles (Matt 11:27, Col 1:26, Eph 2:20-21, 3:5, Acts 10:34-43, 1Pet 1:10-12, 1Cor 2:6-12). Look again at 2 Timothy 3:14. It is not an appeal for Timothy to look to the scriptures alone for instruction, but to regard them in light of his instructor, namely, Paul himself (cf. 2Tim 2:1-2). The Jews were using the Scriptures to try and refute Christianity. If the Apostles could not appeal to their God given authority in proclaiming the Gospel then their teachings are nothing more than opinions, and we would be free to disagree with them today. This of course is ridiculous.

In the same way it would have been ridiculous to regard Timothy's teachings as mere opinion, as well as that of those he was charged by the Apostle Paul to appoint as leaders after him.

Other passages that speak of authority are impossible to reconcile with Sola Scriptura. Heb 13:17 says to "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as men who will have to give account, let them do this joyfully and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you". In the passage one can see the writer being sympathetic to those struggling to submit. He's letting them know that if they have trouble agreeing with leadership, that these leaders will be held accountable, as if to say, don't worry, do your part, submit. But at what point in the history of the Church did this command become optional?

The emphasis inherent in Protestant thinking is that individual fellowships and churches, even within many denominations,

still maintain a great degree of autonomy from one another, and therefore have the right to govern themselves. The concept of a familial authoritative hierarchy is one that is impossible to reconcile with Bible only theology, and for this reason is carelessly overlooked. What is important to realize is that individual Churches were never meant to be autonomous from one another, nor were they to govern themselves on their own. Again this is clearly seen in the New Testament. When Paul appoints leaders in the Churches he established, he didn't divorce himself from responsibility to lead them. On the contrary, he writes to them, telling them to hold fast to the things he taught, he visits them and appoints others to lead in his absence (2 Thess 2:15, 2 Tim 2:1-2, Titus 1:5-9). Not only this but Paul himself submits to leadership (Gal 2:1-3). The pattern for hierarchical authority is clearly established in the New Testament.

This pattern is also clearly seen in the Old Testament as well. In spite of the fact that at times God's appointed leaders were way off the mark both morally and spiritually, God never ordains anyone to start a reformed Judaism under the banner of Sola Torah. (for example see 1 Sam chapters 1,2,19-31)

Jude also drives this point home. In Jude 11, Jude warns the reader not to error in the same way that Korah and his band of rebellious followers did. Jude is referring to Numbers, the 16<sup>th</sup> Chapter. If you read the story you'll find that Korah said nothing that would suggest his disapproval of Moses in regards to orthodoxy. Korah's beef was that he wanted to know who put Moses in charge, and why Moses thought he was so much better than everybody else, bossing them around the desert and so on. Hadn't God already made it clear that all the Israelites were a "kingdom of priests, a holy nation"? (Ex. 19:6). Who did Moses think he was to impose his will upon them. It didn't turn out well for Korah and his followers. Jude is giving a stern warning to New Covenant believers: Don't rebel against leadership.

Of course, all of these new insights were not very well received by my Evangelical friends.

Even in the face of the Biblical evidence, they would tell me that the idea of a church hierarchy was contrived by the Catholic Church in order to maintain their political status, somewhere in the fourth or fifth century. They told me that the early church knew nothing of a Pope, or a Magisterium. Again, this is clearly not the case.

The patristic evidence supporting the

Churches teachings on this is simply overwhelming.

I was amazed to find throughout the writings of the early church fathers, their recognition of the Bishop of Rome as the supreme Bishop of the Church. Ignatius, the first Bishop of Antioch, ordained by John the Apostle, says that this Church holds the presidency over all the Churches. (Letter to the Romans, A.D. 110). Many such statements are written throughout the first centuries of the Church. (A good source to look these up in is, The Faith of the Early Fathers, 3 volume set, by William A. Jurgens.)

As I studied the early writings of the Fathers, it also became clear that other doctrines like the Eucharist, Communion of Saints, Purgatory, Mary, and so on were not things invented by the Catholic Church in latter centuries, but were evident from the beginning. Part of the Deposit of Faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 3)

I am secure in my Fathers house. I am daily filled with joy in knowing that the promise of Christ to lead his people into all the truth is being fulfilled in the Roman Catholic Church.

I will close with one of my favorite quotes from the great G.K. Chesterton, writing of the Catholic faith. "He has come too near to the truth, and has forgotten that truth is a magnet, with the powers of attraction and repulsion.... The moment men cease to pull against it [The Catholic Church] they feel a tug towards it. The moment they cease to shout it down they begin to listen to it with pleasure. The moment they try to be fair to it they begin to be fond of it. But when that affection has passed a certain point it begins to take on the tragic and menacing grandeur of a great love affair.... When he has entered the Church, he finds that the Church is much larger inside than it is outside".

My journey home to the Catholic Church reflects the sentiments expressed by Chesterton. Coming home to the Catholic faith has not been easy. My wife still remains Evangelical and vigorously opposes my being Catholic. It has put a great strain on our marriage and our future is unclear. Truth has been my desire from the time I first committed my life to the teachings of Christianity. As terrible as my circumstances may be, nothing can take away the gift I have received by the incredible grace of Jesus, the gift of the Church, made available to all who hunger for truth.



# The Crisis of Authority in the Reformation

By Kenneth J. Howell, Ph. D.

When I was a young man, I used to hear stories of the courage of Great Protestant Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin. In my reformation heritage, the emphasis on the sole authority of the Bible generated examples of lonely figures who stood up against the tyranny of the Roman Church in the sixteenth century.

None was presented braver than Martin Luther who, confronted with the command to obey the Pope at the Diet of Worms, boldly proclaimed that he must be shown to be wrong on the basis of Scripture and not some self-appointed authority of the Pope. When asked to recant his teachings, he insisted, “Here I stand. I can do none other. God help me.” This and many other examples appealed to something in me that I did not recognize at the time. As an American, I treasured independence and freedom from tyranny. Wasn’t our country itself founded on the same self-determination of government that Luther insisted on in the sixteenth century? In both religion and politics, I valued independence and self-determination.

My theological education in the Reformed (Calvinist) heritage reinforced these childhood images of the Reformers. Details were filled in, and honest problems with the Reformation heritage were faced, but there was never a question that the alternative, Roman Catholicism, was a substitute for biblical freedom. I was convinced that the apostle who sought to save the Galatians from the slavery of legalistic teachers (cf. Gal 5:1), would also condemn, were he alive in Luther’s day, the yoke of Roman subjugation. So, even in my more sophisticated knowledge of theology, I believed that the Reformation represented a return to the biblical freedom from which the Roman Catholic Church had slipped into bondage.

Only later, when I began to investigate the history of the Reformation in greater depth, did I understand how the Protestant insistence on individual freedom in religion was both a product of and a vehicle for the crisis of authority that we have in the Western world today. Luther’s stand against the authority of Rome

did not sprout up in a vacuum. The turbulent changes in thinking, which had begun already in the Renaissance of the fifteenth century, shaped not only Luther’s thinking; they also prepared an audience to receive Luther’s message. That audience, the leaders and people of various Protestant groups, became the instruments of an ever-widening independence from Church authority that still affects the world today. Out of this complicated history, I want to sketch two developments that have deeply affected Christianity in our world: the crisis of interpretation and the crisis of unity. But first, let’s explore why the Reformation happened.

## The Crises That Shaped the Reformation

The early modern period from ca. 1500 to 1700 brought momentous changes in Europe, so much so that the face of Christendom in the Western world was forever altered. Few Americans today realize that much of our modern understandings and assumptions stem from this period. The changes that swept Europe began much earlier in the fifteenth century, but few had greater impact than the discovery of the new world. The voyages of discovery brought various European cultures and the Christian faith to the new world, but the discoveries of the new world also had a profound effect on Europeans as they expanded their horizons to include peoples they never knew existed. Many European Christians were fired with a new enthusiasm to preach the gospel to every creature.

What exactly is the gospel? Scholars and churchmen in early modern Europe debated this important question vigorously because it affected three essential aspects of their lives: their vision of the world, education and the Church itself. They needed to be clear on what

should be preached to the newly found peoples across the seas. And with growing disagreements between Protestants and Catholics, their respective churches felt very keenly the drive to rescue the new world from the clutches of the other’s teachings. Yet, there was also widespread agreement on the need for reforming education and the Church. Changes in one area would inevitably bring transformations in the other.

In education, changes were already underway. The fifteenth century witnessed an even greater flood of ancient sources than the ninth and tenth centuries had seen. New texts revived old philosophies. Aristotle—or simply the philosopher as St. Thomas called him—was waning in influence as figures like Marsilio Ficino founded the Platonic academy in Florence. More and more scholars were learning Ancient Greek and translating Greek philosophy into the standard Latin of their day. With Platonism came a renewed emphasis on St. Augustine, whose writings would become as much a battleground between Protestants and Catholics as the Bible itself. Over the next two centuries, ancient philosophies as different as Epicureanism and Stoicism would be revived by scholars as diverse as the priest Pierre Gassendi and the Parisian scholar Jean Pena.

Emerging transformations in science would also leave a permanent change on the European landscape. As scholars translated treatises of ancient science such as Ptolemy’s *Geography* and Greek medical texts, new assessments of old doctrines were coming into play. Nicholas Copernicus intended no astronomical revolution, but his treatise *On the Heavenly Spheres*, together with numerous other new scientific theories, brought about a transformed view of nature. Nor did the advocates of scientific reform fail to seize on the reforms in religion as

a weapon in their armamentarium. The most famous English methodologist of the seventeenth century, Francis Bacon, explicitly called for revolution in science as a fulfillment of the reformation in religion which his native England had adopted. By the time of the founding of the Royal Society during the reign of Charles II (1660s), almost every Protestant agreed with Thomas Sprat's analogy between religion and science. Just as a great Reformation had occurred by returning directly to the Scriptures, so we needed a great reformation in science by returning directly to nature. Catholics were as prominent (though not as numerous) in the science of this period as Protestants were, but it was the Protestants who used the rhetoric of religious reform to argue for the liberation of science from the shackles of medievalism.

These new developments coincided with the Protestant Reformation which resulted from this search for new authorities. At the end of the fifteenth century, one of John Calvin's own teachers, Jacques Lefebvre, called Europe back to the gospel which the Church had lost sight of in his opinion. The Church had grown lax, morally and doctrinally. Nor was his voice the only one calling for reform. Desiderius Erasmus, the great Catholic humanist, argued for a stringent moral reform of the clergy while condemning the departures of the Protestants. England especially was a hotbed for revolutionary ideas, as the first century of the Church of England was to demonstrate. How could the same King Henry who wrote a scathing critique of Luther (*A Defense of the Seven Sacraments* 1521) suddenly turn against the Pope less than fifteen years later? Was He simply a power hungry tyrant who wanted to ensure his offspring on England's throne? Whatever Henry's personal ambitions, his behavior cannot explain how the majority of the bishops in the English Church could so quickly abandon Papal and Catholic authority. It is disingenuous to suppose that the English bishops had no more backbone than what history generally records. More likely their support of Henry against Rome must be seen as a result of the crisis of authority that Luther both inherited and promoted.

### The Crisis in Interpretation

From the very beginning of the Protestant Reformation, the issue of the authority of the Scriptures stood in a central place. When Luther was asked how he knew his interpretations of the Bible were right, and how he could stand against the interpretations of the Church Fathers and the Church prior to him,

he replied that the message of salvation in the Bible was so clear that even a farm boy behind the plow could understand their message as correctly as the most learned theologians in the universities. The people of God did not need some imposed authority to interpret the Bible for them.

The issue of clarity of the Scriptures was so important that it affected virtually every aspect of Christian teaching in the Reformation. One such controversy concerned free will, and took place between Erasmus, the humanist of Rotterdam, and Luther in 1524 and 1525. Erasmus the Catholic challenged Luther thus:

I believe that it is equally true that the authority of the Scriptures alone surpasses the united opinions of all men. But the controversy here does not concern the value of the Scriptures: both parties accept and venerate the same books. The conflict concerns the meaning of the Scriptures. Now I hear the objection: "What need is there for interpretation when the Scripture is entirely clear?" But if it is so clear, why have such eminent men groped so blindly and for so many centuries in such an important matter, as our adversaries claim?

Erasmus, a master of rhetorical skill, saw an implicit contradiction in the Protestant claim that previous teachers in the Church

had blindly missed the doctrine of justification by faith in Scripture while at the same time claiming that the Scriptures were as clear as crystal. By what assurance could we know that the Scriptures were clear? By the gift of the Holy Spirit, said the Protestants! Erasmus considered the next question. Who possesses the Spirit so as to give us an authoritative interpretation? Everyone? Of course, in baptism every Christian is given the Holy Spirit, but that didn't mean the Spirit had given the same gifts to everyone equally. Whom did the Spirit give the task of authoritatively interpreting the Scriptures? Since there are multiple interpretations, how do we know which ones are certain since all have the Spirit? Are there no

authoritative interpretations? If not, we are left without the Spirit's certain guidance. Does it not make more sense that God would give the authoritative interpretation of the Holy Spirit through those to whom He committed His mission of preaching the Gospel, the Apostles and their successors?

Luther's answer to Erasmus focused mainly on the issue under debate, i.e. free will. What about the other point as to who would interpret Scripture authoritatively? Luther and later Protestants appealed to two sources of authority. Scripture would become clear by comparing one text with another, as St. Augustine had taught in *De doctrina christiana*. The believers could also depend on the internal witness of the Holy Spirit to lead him into all truth. This became the standard Protestant answer to the Catholic challenge, but a problem remained. How does one judge whether a particular believer is teaching what the Spirit is teaching? By comparing Scripture with Scripture. Yes, of course, but both Catholics and Protestants compared Scripture with Scripture. Who judged which comparisons were correct or acceptable? Wasn't an authoritative interpreter still needed to decide unresolved issues? Luther never really answered Erasmus' challenge, but only asserted that his opponent had missed the clear teaching of Scripture.

Catholics and Protestants were at an impasse. Protestants insisted on the authority of the Bible alone and depended on the internal witness of the Spirit and textual comparisons to

arrive at proper interpretations. The Catholics insisted that as good as these reasons were, they still left open the question as to how to resolve doctrinal and moral disputes. God gave the hierarchical Church to resolve such issues. Catholics said that the Protestant method was a recipe for disaster because it allowed every person to follow his own lights, rather than be obedient to Scripture as interpreted by the Church.

### The Crisis of Unity

Martin Luther had no intention of leaving the Catholic Church. He wanted to reform its abuses, both in morals and in doctrine. But in

the 1520s, Luther and other Reformers began attacking some very central doctrines previously defined by the Church that led to some irreconcilable differences. Different interpretations of the Bible led to different churches. Still, the Protestants hoped to find some unity among their disparate movements.

On several occasions, leaders of the Reformation tried to come together to agree on some fundamental tenets, but in the end they could not agree. Only twelve years after nailing his nine-fifty theses to the Wittenburg church door

the proper meaning of our Lord's words, "This is my body." When Zwingli argued that the is means signifies, Luther responded that Zwingli was trying to rationalize Christ's words according to human reason and judgment. If that were true, what need would there be for faith in Christ as the Son of God. No, Luther insisted, Christ's is means is, and he can be present on all the altars in the world because his omnipresence in heaven is communicated to his human nature. Luther and Zwingli wanted very badly to agree. Melancthon warned Luther against

in 1517, Luther and his cohort Philip Melancthon met with the Reformer of Zürich, Ulrich Zwingli. Zwingli had already developed a symbolist interpretation of the Eucharist under the influence of a Dutch physician, Cornelis Hoen. Hoen convinced Zwingli that Christ's words, "This is my body" had to mean "This signifies my body." For Luther, this was unacceptable. Luther had completely rejected the notion of transubstantiation and the sacrificial character of the Mass, but he still wanted to affirm that Christ was bodily present in the Lord's Supper. With this growing tension between the reform movements of various cities, some civil leaders wanted to find common ground. So Philip, the Landgrave of Hesse, called a colloquy for many of the Protestant leaders in his capital of Marburg.

In the first three days of October 1529, Zwingli, Luther and several other theologians tried to reach agreement. And agreement they did reach on many doctrinal points. But they knew what anyone raised the Catholic culture of the sixteenth century knew, that the preeminent sacrament and rite of the Church was the Eucharist. It did not matter what else they agreed on. If they could not agree on the Eucharist, they could not be united. This fact is incomprehensible to present-day Protestants because the Eucharist simply does not enjoy such an exalted place in their thinking. But for Christians of early modern Europe, the Eucharist held the place of preeminence it had among the Fathers and medieval teachers of the Church.

Luther and Zwingli tried hard to agree on

agreeing too easily because agreement with Zwingli would mean no hope of reunion with the Catholics. So, on one day in early October, 1529, the Protestant movement in German speaking lands lost any hope of mounting a united front against Rome.

What happened in Marburg that October was repeated again and again in the Protestant movement. Philip Melancthon tried several times to engage John Calvin in hopes that some unity between them might be found. Yet no united front could be established for the same reason that Zwingli and Luther could not agree. All the Reformers had been shaped and molded in an essential Christian truth inherited from the Catholic culture in which they had grown up, namely, that unity had to be founded on truth. Since they could not agree on doctrine, they all knew they could not have unity. And they could not agree on doctrine because they could not agree on how the Scriptures should be interpreted. The task of finding unity in truth plagued the relations between Protestant leaders thereafter.

It was England which manifested the greatest divisions, differences that were transferred wholesale to America. A century after King Henry's break with Rome, the religious landscape in the British isles resembled a patchwork quilt of conflicting beliefs. Charles I, a staunch catholic in his doctrine, lost the support of his subjects, and dearly paid the price with his life. In 1649, Charles was executed by the Puritans.

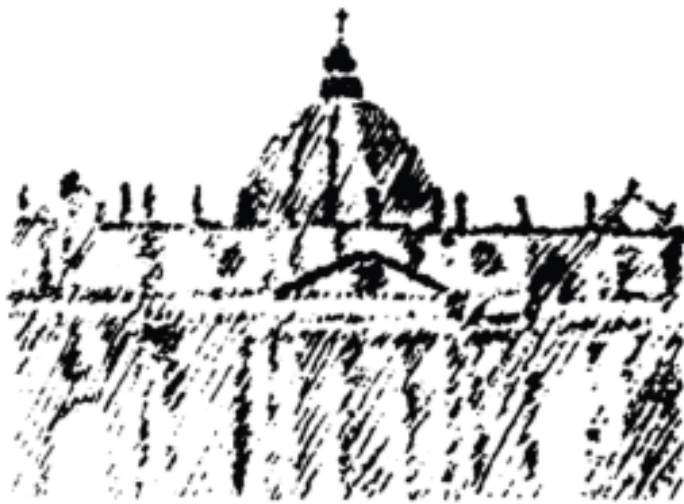
England was never the same. During and after the commonwealth in the 1650s,

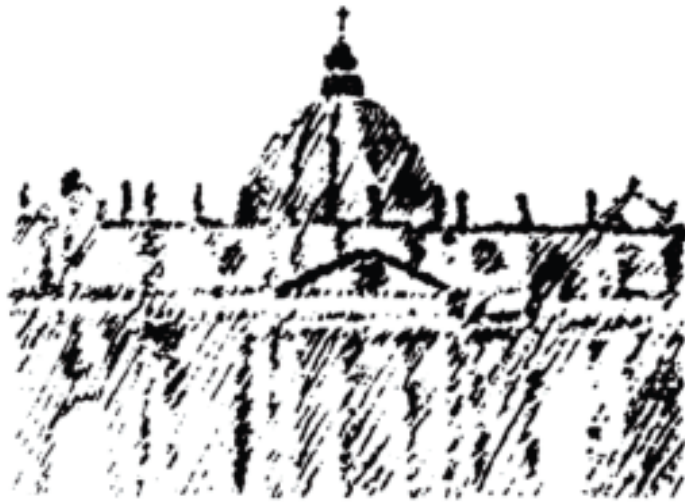
England was home to a bewildering diversity of sects, all of which claimed to adhere to the true religion. England had High Church Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Catholics in the Lake District, Quakers, and dozens of others that have since passed from the scene. Some still hoped for the reunion of Christendom. Many catholic-oriented clerics in the Church of England saw what these divisions had wrought. Even the Puritan pastor Richard Baxter thought the Reformation emphasis on forensic justification had divided the Church of Christ unnecessarily. But these hopes for reunion were whistling in the dark. England and Europe were religiously divided and they would never be the same.

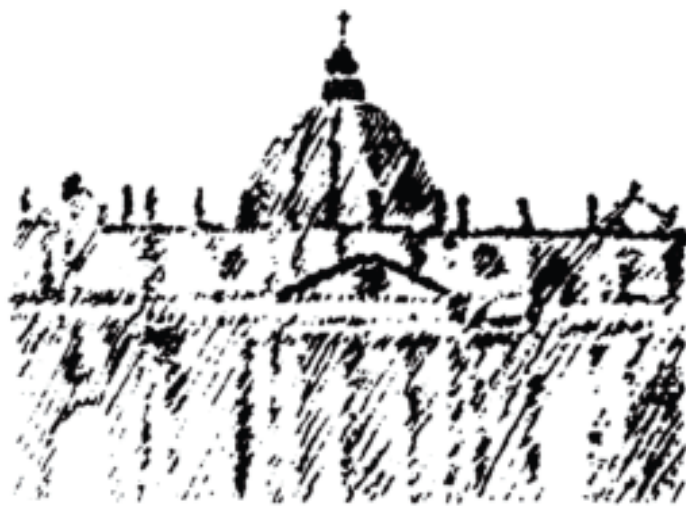
The notion of religious freedom held up by the founders of the American Republic was not so much a well-thought out ideal as it was a reaction to the sectarianism that now plagued Europe. Two solutions to the animosity and religious conflict were possible. One would be to establish a country on a religious faith that all professed. That ideal was what had governed Europe for centuries. The other was to make the State neutral with respect to religious commitments. Some on the American continent wanted the first, i.e. to retain the ideal of unity taught by Christ and the Apostles. The early Puritans of Massachusetts hoped to create such a new world. In the end, however, the founding documents opted for the second, i.e. government neutrality. This began one of the most delicate balancing acts the world has ever seen. Could any government really be neutral? Was it possible to treat all religious groups the same? Almost all of the sects transferred from Europe found a home in America. But one Christian faith experienced the kind of severe persecution that had been in Europe, Roman Catholicism. But they too eventually found freedom of religion. Catholicism in America was always in a precarious position. The notion of individual freedom of religion permitted the practice of the Catholic Faith but their faith told them that truth was not founded on individual choice. The Protestant principle of private interpretation was transferred to the political sphere. It assured Catholics a place in the diversity of conflicting beliefs while their own beliefs in the unity of truth and the Church required them to reject the principle of private interpretation. The crisis of unity that the Reformation had planted in Europe grew into full flower in a land where Catholic unity was deemed unacceptable.

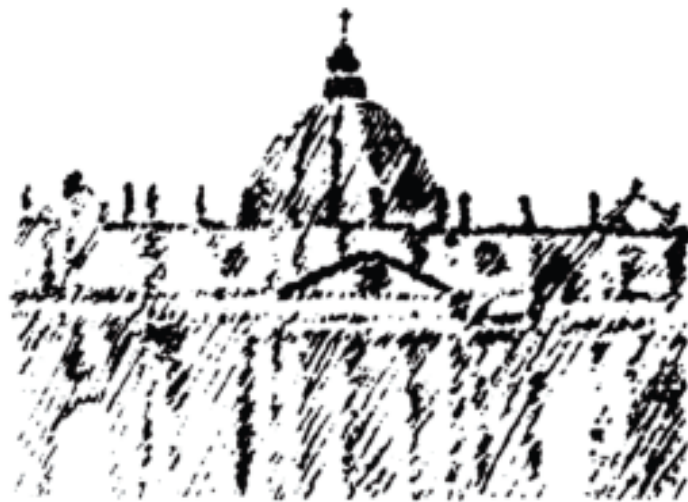
The Protestant Reformation denied the

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# The Rule of Faith in Patristic Thought

By J. A. Gallegos

‘Remove not the ancient landmark which your fathers have set’ (Prov. 22:28 RSV).

Regarding the authorities of Scripture, Tradition and a teaching Church, there are a number of recurring themes throughout the writings of the Church Fathers. The Church Fathers consisted of those men who exhibited these four marks: (1) orthodoxy in teaching, (2) holiness in life, (3) Church approval and (4) antiquity. Some partially fulfilled these marks such as Tertullian, Origen and Eusebius of Caesarea. They have been included in this article due to their invaluable contribution to the Church.

## Sufficiency of the Scriptures

First, the Fathers found that the most perfect expression of the apostolic heritage is to be found within the pages of Holy Writ. Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 140-ca. A.D. 202) writes: ‘[B]eing most properly assured that the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit.’ (Against Heresies 2,28:2). Athanasius (ca. A.D. 295-A.D. ca. 373), the great Patriarch of Alexandria, writes: ‘[T]he tokens of truth are more exact as drawn from Scripture, than from other sources.’ (Nicene Definition 32).

It is clear that the Fathers affirmed that all of the doctrines of the Catholic faith are to be found within the Bible. If the doctrine is not found within its covers, then the doctrine is clearly not apostolic. Tertullian of Carthage (ca. A.D. 155/160-ca. A.D. 240/250) writes: ‘If it is nowhere written, then let it fear the woe which impends on all who add or to take away from the written word.’ (Against Hermogenes 22). Ambrose (ca. A.D. 533-ca. A.D. 397), the bishop of Milan, writes: ‘For how can we adopt those things which we do not find in the holy Scriptures?’ (Duties of the Clergy I,23:102). Augustine, the bishop of Hippo (ca. A.D. 354-ca. A.D. 430), writes: ‘[W]hat more can I teach you, than what we read in the Apostle? For holy Scripture setteth a rule to our teaching, that we dare not ‘be wise more than behoveth to be wise;’ ... Be it not therefore for me to teach you any other thing, save to you the words of the Teacher.’ (Widowhood 2). Cyril of Alexandria (died A.D. 444) writes: ‘Not all

that the Lord did was written down, but only what was deemed sufficient, either from the point of view of morals, or from the point of view of dogmas.’ (Comm. John 12).

The Fathers often appealed to Scripture for justifying and proving the apostolicity of Catholic doctrines. Origen of Alexandria (ca. A.D. 185-ca. A.D. 253/254) writes: ‘In proof of all words which we advance in matters of doctrine, we ought to set forth the sense of Scripture as confirming the meaning which we are proposing.... Therefore we should not take our own ideas for the confirmation of doctrine, unless someone shows that they are holy because they are contained in the divine Scriptures as in the temples of God’ (Comm on Matthew 25). Hippolytus of Rome (died A.D. 235) writes: ‘There is, brethren, one God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures and no other source.’ (Against Noetus 9). Likewise, Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. A.D. 315-ca. A.D. 386) writes: ‘For concerning the divine and holy mysteries of the Faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere plausibility and artifices of speech. Even to me, who tell thee these things, give not absolute credence, unless thou receive the proof of the things which I announce from the Divine Scriptures. For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on the demonstration of the Holy Scriptures.’ (Catechetical Lectures 4:17).

Passages similar to these on behalf of the authority of Scripture can be culled from the Fathers without end. The Church Fathers clearly affirmed the material sufficiency of the Scriptures. In fact, one may be tempted to present these passages in support of the novel idea that the Church Fathers embraced sola scriptura. However, when one examines the faith of these very same Fathers one can find equally forceful and authoritative testimony on behalf of Tradition and a teaching Church. Therefore, when the Church Fathers speak on sufficiency and authority of Scripture they do so not in a vacuum but within the context of the Church and her inerrant Tradition. The Fathers never separated Scripture from the

Church and her Tradition.

## Sacred Tradition

The second recurring theme throughout the writings of the Church Fathers is that these very same Scriptures are to be understood and interpreted only within the milieu of the Church’s Tradition. A private understanding of Scripture is the fatal flaw of the heretic. According to the Church Fathers, Tradition was simply the entire apostolic deposit that was transmitted to the Church along with Scripture. Irenaeus writes: ‘For how should it be of the apostles themselves had not left us writings? Would it not be necessary, [in that case] to follow the course of tradition which was handed down to those whom they did commit the Churches?’ (Against Heresies 3,4:1). In other words, the substance of Tradition is materially coincident with Scripture.

Both Scripture and Tradition were essentially the same in substance differing primarily in their degree of explicitness and mode of transmission. The substance of Tradition was transmitted to subsequent generations of the Church through various monuments. These traditional monuments include such things as the texts of the magisterium, liturgy, the writings of the Church Fathers, catechesis, art, creeds, and the faith of the Church.

The Fathers understood Tradition and Scripture as complementary authorities. The Fathers never pitted Scripture against Tradition or asked the question which authority was greater. Tradition was utilized not so much in providing material truths not contained in Scripture, but rather as the surest guide in interpreting the Sacred text. This theme was so entrenched in the faith of the Church Fathers that it became one of their favorite charges against the heretics of the early Church. Athanasius refuting the Arians private understanding of Scripture writes: ‘[I]f we now consider the scope of that faith which we Christians hold, and using it as a rule, apply ourselves, as the Apostle teaches to the reading of inspired Scripture. For Christ’s enemies, being ignorant of this scope, have wandered

from the way of truth, and have stumbled on a stone of stumbling, thinking otherwise than they should think...[L]et us, retaining the general scope of the faith, acknowledge that what they interpret ill, has a right interpretation.' (Against the Arians 3:28,35). Gregory of Nyssa (ca. A.D. 335-ca. A.D. 394) in his refutation against Eunomius contrasts the ecclesiastical understanding of Scripture with the heretics private judgement: '[I]f they were about to bring over to their views, not men light as dust, and unstable, but men of weight and steadiness: but so long as their statement is advanced without being established, and without being proved, who is so foolish and so brutish as to account the teaching of the evangelists and apostles, and of those who successively shone like lights in the churches, of less force than this undemonstrated nonsense?' (Against Eunomius 4:6).

As a result of abandoning the Church and her Tradition, heretics have divided and dissented among themselves. Athanasius writes: 'For they dissent from each other, and, whereas they have revolted from their fathers, are not of one and the same mind, but float about with various discordant changes.' (Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia 14). Similarly, Ephraem of Syria (ca. A.D. 306-ca. A.D. 373) observes the same: 'For all heresies delight in division; on the other hand, the true mother, and the alone church of Christ, avoids dissension and schisms.' (Comm. on Sacred Scripture).

Materially, the rule of faith of the early Church consisted of both Scripture and Tradition. The Fathers often brought together in their writings the normative authorities of Scripture and Tradition. Athanasius in this magisterial passage writes: 'But beyond these [Scriptural] sayings, let us look at the very tradition, teaching, and faith of the Catholic Church from the beginning which the Lord gave, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers kept. Upon this the Church is founded, and he who should fall away from it would not be a Christian, and should no longer be so called.' (To Serapion 1:28). Basil (ca. A.D. 330-ca. A.D. 374) in his defense of the deity of the Holy Spirit writes: 'Of the dogmas and kerymas preserved in the Church, some we possess from written teaching and others we receive from the tradition of the Apostles, handed on to us in mystery. In respect to piety both are of the same force. No one will contradict any of these, no one, at any rate, who is even moderately versed in matters ecclesiastical. Indeed, were we to try to reject unwritten customs as having no great authority, we would

unwittingly injure the Gospel in its vitals; or rather, we would reduce kerygma to a mere term.' (Holy Spirit 27:66). Cyril of Alexandria writes: '[W]e give thanks to God, the Saviour of the world, rejoicing with one another that our Churches, both ours and yours, hold a faith in accordance with the divinely inspired Scriptures and with the tradition of our holy Fathers.' (To John of Antioch 39).

Many of the Church Fathers bring forth the very same passages that Catholic apologists today use in support of the Catholic rule of faith. John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 344/354-ca. A.D. 407) writes: 'So then, brethren, stand fast, and hold to the traditions which ye were taught, whether by word, or by Epistle of ours.' [2 Thess 2:15] Hence it is manifest, that they did not deliver all things by Epistle, but many things also unwritten, and in like manner both the one and the other are worthy of credit. Therefore let us think the tradition of the Church also worthy of credit. It is a tradition, seek no farther.' (Homily 2nd Epistle to the Thess.). Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis (ca. A.D. 315-ca. A.D. 403), writes in his work against various heresies: 'However, none of the sacred words need an allegorical interpretation of their meaning; they need examination, and the perception to understand each proposition's force. But tradition must be used too, for not everything is available from the sacred scripture. Thus the holy apostles handed some things down in scripture but some in traditions, as St. Paul says, 'As I delivered the

tradition to you,' [1 Cor 11:2] and elsewhere, 'So I teach, and so I have delivered the tradition in the churches,' [1 Cor 4:17] and, 'If ye keep the tradition in memory, unless ye believed in vain.' [1 Cor 15:2]' (Panarion 61). The Fathers realized that Tradition as well as her Scriptures could be twisted and misinterpreted. The Fathers affirmed the Church alone, through her authentic succession from the Apostles, possessed the authority to interpret and transmit the entire apostolic deposit.

#### Teaching Church

The final persistent theme in the faith

of the early Church Fathers is that Christ entrusted the entire deposit of faith to the Church and the responsibility for interpreting it in an orthodox and authoritative manner. Irenaeus affirms that the truth is to be found nowhere else but within the Church writes: 'Since therefore we have such proofs, it is not necessary to seek the truth among others which it is easy to obtain from the Church; since the apostles, like a rich man [depositing his money] in a bank, lodged in her hands most copiously all things pertaining to the truth: so that every man, whosoever will, can draw from her the water of life. For she is the entrance to life; all others are thieves and robbers.' (Against Heresies 3,4:1). Athanasius writes: '[W]e are content with the fact that this is not the teaching of the Catholic Church, nor did the Fathers hold this.' (Epistle 59:3). Ambrose, in sharp contrast, compares the authority of the Catholic Church and the wayward path of heretics: 'Wherefore all other generations are strangers to truth; all the generations of heretics hold not the truth: the church alone, with pious affection, is in possession of the truth.' (Psalm 118:19).

Augustine in this classic passage against Manichaeus writes: 'The epistle begins thus:—'Manichaeus, an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the providence of God the Father. These are the wholesome words from the perennial and living fountain.' Now, if you please, patiently give heed to my inquiry. I do not believe Manichaeus to be an apostle of Christ. Do not, I beg you, be enraged and begin to curse. For you

know that it is my rule to believe none of your statements without consideration. Therefore I ask, who is this Manichaeus? You will reply, An Apostle of Christ. I do not believe it. Now you are at a loss what to say or do; for you promised to give knowledge of truth, and here you are forcing me to believe what I have no knowledge of. Perhaps you will read the gospel to me, and will attempt to find there a testimony to Manichaeus. But should you meet with a person not yet believing in the gospel, how would you reply to him were he to say, I do not believe? For my part, I should not believe the gospel except moved by the authority of the Catholic Church. So when those on whose authority

I have consented to believe in the gospel tell me not to believe in Manichaeus, how can I but consent?’ (Against Ep. Mani 5:6).

Irenaeus of Lyons refuting the Gnostics writes: ‘True knowledge is [that which consists in] the doctrine of the apostles, and the ancient constitution of the Church throughout all the world, and the distinctive manifestation of the body of Christ according to the successions of the bishops, by which they have handed down that Church which exists in every place, and has come even unto us, being guarded and preserved without any forging of Scriptures, by a very complete system of doctrine, and neither receiving addition nor [suffering] curtailment [in the truths which she believes]; and [it consists in] reading [the word of God] without falsification, and a lawful and diligent exposition in harmony with the Scriptures, both without danger and without blasphemy; and [above all, it consists in] the pre-eminent gift of love, which is more precious than knowledge, more glorious than prophecy, and which excels all the other gifts [of God].’ (Against Heresies 4,33:8). In other words, the Scriptures are the property of the Church not the play toy of the individual.

Likewise, Tertullian offers this classic passage: ‘Since this is the case, in order that the truth may be adjudged to belong to us, ‘as many as walk according to the rule, ‘ which the church has handed down from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, and Christ from God, the reason of our position is clear, when it determines that heretics ought not to be allowed to challenge an appeal to the Scriptures, since we, without the Scriptures, prove that they have nothing to do with the Scriptures. For as they are heretics, they cannot be true Christians, because it is not from Christ that they get that which they pursue of their own mere choice, and from the pursuit incur and admit the name of heretics. Thus, not being Christians, they have acquired no right to the Christian Scriptures; and it may be very fairly said to them, ‘Who are you?’ (Prescription 37). In other words, in order to obtain the authentic and orthodox sense of Scripture one must do so only within the Church.

During the patristic period, the ecumenical council was an example of the Church acting in an infallible and authoritative manner. The creeds, definitions and canons of the ecumenical councils were binding on the consciences of all Christians. The Church Fathers had a singular question in mind in transmitting the faith, was this the faith that was given to me by my spiritual forefathers in the Church? The Church Fathers did not care

to give their own understanding of Scripture or synthesize doctrines on the basis of the apostolic data. The Church Fathers did not want to be considered innovators rather they wanted to be known as faithful transmitters of the faith. This faithful transmission of the gospel is the purpose of an ecumenical council. Athanasius commenting on the unimpeachable authority of the Council of Nicea writes: ‘As to the Nicene Council, it was not a com-

mon meeting, but convened upon a pressing necessity, and for a reasonable object....’ Thus believes the Catholic Church;’ and thereupon they confessed how they believed, in order to shew that their own sentiments were not novel, but Apostolical; and what they wrote down was no discovery of theirs, but is the same as was taught by the Apostles.’ (Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia 5).

Vincent of Lerins (died A.D. 450) echoes the same idea: ‘Next we expressed our admiration of the humility and sanctity of that Council, such that, though the number of priests was so great, almost the more part of them metropolitans, so erudite, so learned, that almost all were capable of taking part in doctrinal discussions, whom the very circumstance of their being assembled for the purpose, might seem to embolden to make some determination on their own authority, yet they innovated nothing, presumed nothing, arrogated to themselves absolutely nothing, but used all possible care to hand down nothing to posterity but what they had themselves received from their Fathers. And not only did they dispose satisfactorily of the matter presently in hand, but they also set an example to those who should come after them, how they also should adhere to the determinations of sacred antiquity, and condemn the devices of profane novelty.’ (Commonitory 31:82). According to the Fathers, the Church was given sole authority and responsibility to preserve, transmit and

interpret the apostolic faith.

Lastly, during this patristic period, there was a growing recognition of the authority of the See of Rome. Rome viewed herself, as did the Church Fathers, as the primary mouthpiece and expositor of the Catholic faith. Irenaeus provides us with this classic shortcut to the Church’s Tradition: ‘Since, however, it would be very tedious, in such a volume as this, to reckon up the successions of all the

Churches, we do put to confusion all those who, in whatever manner, whether by an evil self-pleasing, by vainglory, or by blindness and perverse opinion, assemble in unauthorized meetings; [we do this, I say,] by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul; as also [by pointing out] the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by means of the successions of the bishops. For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its preeminent authority, that is, the faithful everywhere, inasmuch as the apostolical tradition has been preserved continuously by those [faithful men] who exist everywhere.’ (Against Heresies 3,3:2). Athanasius in communion with the bishops at Sardica write: ‘So it seems to us right and altogether fitting that priests of the Lord from each and every province should report to their head, that is, to the See of Peter, the Apostle.’ (Council of Sardica to Pope Julius).

Augustine writes: ‘[T]o the Roman Church, in which the supremacy of an apostolic chair has always flourished’ (Ep. 43). Optatus of Milevis (ca. A.D. 330-ca. A.D. 385) lists all the Popes from Peter to Sircius writes: ‘[W]ith whom we, and all the world, are united in communion. Now you Donatists show us your genealogy of your episcopal

ministry' (Against Parmen.). The Fathers at Ephesus (A.D. 431) write: 'There is no doubt...that the holy and most blessed Peter, prince and head of the apostles, pillar of the faith and foundation of the Catholic Church, received the keys of the kingdom ... Our holy and most blessed Pope Celestine the bishop is according to due order his successor and holds his place' (Ephesus Session III). The Fathers at Chalcedon (A.D. 451) write: 'Peter has spoken through Leo.' (Chalcedon Session II). According to the Fathers, the exercise of the authority of the teaching Church included the everyday teaching of the bishops throughout the world, the teachings proclaimed by the bishops meeting in an ecumenical Council and the particular authority vested in the See of Rome.

#### Toward Synthesis

Vincent of Lerins' Commonitory is considered a pinnacle in the development of the Church's understanding of authority during the patristic period. Vincent, in this classic passage, brings together the Fathers' understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture, Sacred Tradition and a teaching Church. Vincent writes: 'But here some one perhaps will ask, 'Since the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient, what need is there to join with it the authority of the Church's interpretation?' For this reason,—because, owing to the depth of Holy Scripture, all do not accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands its words in one way, another in another; so that it seems to be capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters. For Novatian expounds it one way, Sabellius another, Donatus another, Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, another, Photinus, Apollinaris, Priscillian, another, Iovinian, Pelagius, Celestius, another, lastly, Nestorius another. Therefore, it is very necessary, on account of so great intricacies of such various error, that the rule for the right understanding of the prophets and apostles should be framed in accordance with the standard of Ecclesiastical and Catholic interpretation.' (Commonitory 2:5).

The testimony of Vincent of Lerins, which represents the faith of the Fathers, is crystal clear. A private understanding of Scripture apart from Tradition breeds division, dissension and heresy. Scripture is put on its highest pedestal only when it is understood by the Church. According to the Fathers, Scripture is sufficient only within the milieu of the Church and Tradition.

The Fathers regarded Scripture and Tradition as complementary authorities. Scripture

and Tradition were less considered independent sources as they were simply two different mediums in transmitting the single deposit of faith. That is why one can readily find cries from the Fathers such as 'all teachings must be in accordance with Scripture' as frequent as cries that say 'all teachings must be in accordance with Tradition' or 'this teaching must be in accordance with the ecclesiastical faith.'

The title 'Church Father' by itself refutes the notion of sola scriptura. First, as a Church Father, they were first and foremost men of the Church, as such, they cared only to transmit the Church's understanding of the apostolic faith. Second, as a Church Father, they cared only to transmit to their spiritual children what was taught to them by their spiritual forefathers in the church. Augustine writes: '[T]he sentiments of the bishops who have gone before us, men who treated these divine words faithfully and memorably... what they found in the church, they held; what they had learned, they taught; what they had received from the fathers, this they delivered to the children.' (Against Julian 2, 19:34). This is the faith of the Church Fathers and the Catholic Church. The Fathers at Vatican II write: 'Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And Holy Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit... Thus it comes about that the Church does not draw truths from the holy Scripture alone' (Dei verbum 9). 'Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church... But the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God... has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone.' (Dei verbum 10).

The Church Fathers never separated Scripture, Tradition and Church. If one separated Scripture or Tradition or the Church they all become crippled. Once apart, Scripture becomes mere letters and Tradition becomes a lifeless traditionalism. Similarly, Ambrose and Augustine write: 'The traditions of the Scripture are his body; the Church is his body.' (Comm on Luke). 'We learn about Christ in the Scriptures, we learn about the Church in the Scriptures. If you accept Christ, why do you not accept the Church?' (Ep. 105)



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# The Teaching of the Catechism of the Catholic Church on Authority

by Gayle Somers

It was in reading the Catechism of the Catholic Church on the topic of its authority that I first realized something that gave me a jolt.

I had been an active evangelical for 28 years, of which included seminary training, professional work on the staff of a church for several years, countless hours of Sunday School teaching and church committee meetings. I spoke regularly and devotedly about “the church,” and I thought I had a solid notion of what it meant.

In my years as a member of various churches, I had confidently stated that “I believe in the holy, catholic Church” whenever we recited the Apostles’ Creed. Yet when I got to the section of the Catechism that began with that quote, I was in for quite a surprise. I had never been exposed to what the Catholic Church teaches about its nature, its mission, and, most especially, its authority...and the jolt came when I discovered that as I followed its thread of biblical teaching on its authority, which was so reasonably and beautifully laid out, I could not match or refute it from anything I knew about the Church.

Try as I might, I could not escape the conviction that as an evangelical Protestant, I had only a passive, descriptive notion of “the church” as “the body of believers” and that my background and experience had somehow blurred the distinction between the authority of the Church and my authority as a believer. I found the Catholic teaching to be extremely compelling, and I trace my conversion to the Catholic Church back to that electrifying jolt.

As with everything in Catholic belief, the Church’s teaching about its authority has its beginnings in God’s great love for men. This seems like such a simple statement, but centuries of misunderstanding and flawed examples have given many people (even some Catholics) the idea that the authority of the Church has a human, institutional stranglehold on wayward members, keeping everyone in line and perpetuating itself out of reluctance to relinquish

power. Yet this is not at all the tone of the Catechism’s teaching on the Church:

Christ is the light of humanity; and it is, accordingly, the heart-felt desire of this sacred Council, being gathered together in the Holy Spirit, that, by proclaiming his Gospel to every creature, it may bring to all men that light of Christ which shines out visibly from the Church... The Church has no other light than Christ’s; according to a favorite image of the Church Fathers, the Church is like the moon, all its light reflected from the sun... Having shown that the Spirit is the source and giver of all holiness, we now confess that it is he who has endowed the Church with holiness. The Church is, in a phrase used by the Fathers, the place “where the Spirit flourishes.” (CCC, 748-749)

Contrary to what I had anticipated, the teaching of the Church about itself doesn’t begin with an institutional description or with issues of order. As the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council wrote in *Lumen Gentium*:

The eternal Father, by a free and hidden plan of His own wisdom and goodness, created the whole world. His plan was to raise men to a participation of the divine life. Fallen in Adam, God the Father did not leave men to themselves, but ceaselessly offered helps to salvation, in view of Christ, the Redeemer “who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature.” All the elect, before time began, the Father “foreknew and predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that he should be the firstborn among many brethren.” He planned to assemble in the holy Church all those who

would believe in Christ. Already from the beginning of the world the foreshadowing of the Church took place. It was prepared in a remarkable way throughout the history of the people of Israel and by means of the Old Covenant. In the present era of time the Church was constituted and, by the outpouring of the Spirit, was made manifest. At the end of time it will gloriously achieve completion... (LG, 2)

Catholic thought about the Church is focused through a very wide lens. “The gathering together of the People of God began at the moment when sin destroyed the communion of men with God, and that of men among themselves. The gathering of the Church is, as it were, God’s reaction to the chaos provoked by sin.” (CCC, 761) Made necessary in the Garden of Eden, prepared for by God’s gathering together a nation of His own who would be the sign and the source of His blessing on all mankind, the Church in the Catechism takes shape as the Kingdom of God on earth, the new Israel:

It was the Son’s task to accomplish the Father’s plan of salvation in the fullness of time. Its accomplishment was the reason for his being sent. The Lord Jesus inaugurated his Church by preaching the Good News, that is, the coming of the Reign of God, promised over the ages in the Scriptures. To fulfill the Father’s will, Christ ushered in the Kingdom of heaven on earth. The Church is the Reign of Christ already present in mystery. (CCC, 763)

It looks ahead to the perfection of the Church in the life of the world to come:

The Church will... receive its perfection

only in the glory of heaven, at the time of Christ's glorious return. Until that day, the Church progresses on her pilgrimage amidst this world's persecutions and God's consolations. Here below she knows that she is in exile far from the Lord, and longs for the full coming of the kingdom, when she will be united in glory with her king. The Church, and through her the world, will not be perfected in glory without great trials. Only then will all the just

from the time of Adam... be gathered together in the universal Church in the Father's presence. (CCC, 769)

I must say that as I read this description and explanation of the Church, my heart was pounding with the sheer thrill and glory of it. It was completely consonant with everything I ever imagined (and much that I hadn't) about the Church. For example, the Catechism quotes Sacrosanctum Concilium, another Vatican II document:

The Church is essentially both human and divine, visible but endowed with invisible realities, zealous in action and dedicated to contemplation, present in the world, but as a pilgrim, so constituted that in her the human is directed toward and subordinated to the divine, the visible to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, the object of our quest. (CCC 771, SC 2; cf. Heb. 13:14)

Where could there be any criticism of this? I had none.

Perhaps that's why, as I moved on through the unfamiliar and startling teachings of the Catechism about the Church's authority, I did not find myself antagonistic. Instead, I wanted to see how all this got developed, how the love story turned out, so to speak. Because by then it didn't feel like theology anymore. It felt like an account of a courtship, of all things. How

does Jesus care for and sustain and prepare His Bride?

Christ the Lord, in whom the entire Revelation of the most high God is summed up, commanded the apostles to preach the Gospel, which had been promised beforehand by the prophets, and which he fulfilled in his own person and promulgated with his own lips. In preaching the Gospel, they were to communicate the

gifts of God to all men. This Gospel was to be the source of all saving truth and moral discipline. (CCC, 75)

This is surely a statement to gladden the heart of any evangelical, especially one who might be predisposed to think of the Church as a detractor from the Gospel.

God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth: that is, of Christ Jesus. Christ must be proclaimed to all nations and individuals, so that this revelation may reach to the ends of the earth. God graciously arranged that the things he had once revealed for the salvation of all peoples should remain in their entirety, throughout the ages, and be transmitted to all generations. (CCC, 74)

This is precisely what one would expect a loving God and a faithful Church to do. Yet within this statement is the preview of where Catholics and Protestants part company. "God graciously arranged that the things he had once revealed... should remain in their entirety" looks innocent enough, but the curious evangelical needs to get ready for the jolt it will deliver.

In keeping with the Lord's command, the Gospel was handed on in two ways:

- orally by the apostles who handed on, by the spoken word of their preaching, by

the example they gave, by the institutions they established, what they themselves had received—whether from the lips of Christ, from his way of life and his works, or whether they had learned it at the prompting of the Holy Spirit; - in writing by those apostles and other men associated with the apostles who, under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit, committed the message of salvation to writing. (CCC, 76)

This suggestion of an oral apostolic tradition as a means of preserving gospel teaching was a completely new thought for me. I had always assumed that the Catholic word "tradition" simply meant "the way things have always been done." I had no idea that it was so organically connected to the apostles themselves.

Having to pause and think about this was a real turning point for me, because the fact that I had only the dimmest notion of how we got from the preaching of the apostles on the day of Pentecost to the modern evangelical church exposed my lack of knowledge of church history before the Reformation. If the Church really is the human/divine organization described in the pages of the Catechism, how could I justify knowing so little of her history, especially about the time right after the apostles? I knew the Scriptures of the apostles very, well. But what did I know of this oral tradition? It made solid sense to me to imagine the apostles teaching people truths that had not been written down by one of them. After all, very few of the Twelve wrote anything. None of the gospels claim to teach all there was to say about what Jesus said and did. In fact, John seems to indicate that would be impossible (John 21:25). None of the epistles make a claim to full revelation, either. Usually they were written for a specific purpose in a particular church. Often they were written hurriedly, because a personal visit, which was always preferred, had to be delayed (I Tim. 3:14-15; I Cor. 11:33-34). The writers of the New Testament never direct the believers to accept and obey only what got written down (2 Thess. 2:15; I Cor. 11:2); indeed, in the entire New Testament there is no orientation to a singular importance of written testimony. There is strong and unequivocal importance laid upon obedience to apostolic teaching (I Thess. 4:1; Heb. 13:7).

When I began to reflect on the fact that the original preaching of the gospel was entirely oral and that the Church existed, spread, and turned the world upside down for nearly 400 years without a New Testament as we know it,

I knew I had to at least give the Catechism a chance to make its case for this suggestion.

Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal. Each of them makes present and fruitful in the Church the mystery of Christ, who promised to remain with his own “always, to the close of the age.”

Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And [Holy] Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound, and spread it abroad by their preaching.

As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the Holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence. (CCC, 80-82)

This appeared to me as eminently reasonable. In fact, it was so appealing and so biblically satisfying that I was curious to know more, especially about how we can know today what this “apostolic tradition” actually was.

This living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit, is called Tradition, since it is distinct from Sacred Scripture, though closely connected to it. Through Tradition, the Church, in her doctrine, life, and worship perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes. The sayings of the holy Fathers are a witness to the life-giving presence of this Tradition, showing how its riches are poured out in the practice and life of the Church, in her belief and her prayer. (CCC, 78)

So, with a minimum amount of pain (none at all, really) after the initial jolt of seeing the Catholic claim to having two modes of divine revelation, not just one, I had traveled pretty far into the Catechism’s teaching on its authority. To follow its development required

no great leaps, no blind acquiescence, nothing sinister at all. It looked as if we had stayed very close to Scripture and to history. A quick look at the Catechism’s footnotes verifies the historicity of this Catholic Church (i.e., “Where there is Christ Jesus, there is the Catholic Church”—St. Ignatius of Antioch: ca. A.D. 110). Although quite different from what I was used to, nothing here seemed strained or sub-Christian (which is what I expected).

Feeling relaxed, I pressed on to the final piece of the Catechism’s teaching on authority in the Catholic Church:

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome. (CCC, 85)

The New Testament gives much support to the idea of apostolic succession, from Peter’s announcement that the “office” left empty by Judas needed to be filled (Acts 1:20-21) to the Council of Jerusalem’s inclusion of the “elders” in making its decision in the circumcision controversy to Paul’s directive to Titus to appoint “elders” in every town (Titus 1:5). This is certainly not an idea intruded into the New Testament picture of the Early Church. As for Peter being in some way the head of this Church, what else would make sense of that conversation Jesus had with him in Matthew 16?

Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication, and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief

as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith.

Mindful of Christ’s words to his apostles: “He who hears you, hears me,” the faithful receive with docility the teachings and directives that their pastors give them in different forms. (CCC, 86-87)

Had I lifted this out of context, I might have just scoffed and dismissed it. But because the Catechism so clearly presents this teaching

as being just what one would expect a loving God to do—arrange for an apostolic structure in His Church that will always know, preserve, develop, and teach the absolute truth (“infallibility”)—for the first time in my Christian life, I actually was willing to at least think about it. Thinking led to more reading, studying the Scripture, examining church history, and reflecting as dispassionately as possible on my Protestant heritage. I had always assumed that defining truth is left up to the individual believer, led by the Holy Spirit. But there was no denying that this method led to chaos as far as theological absolutes were concerned. “Chaos,” after all, was what happened in the Garden when our first parents thought the decision between two competing claims to “truth” was left up to them. That’s what precipitated the necessity for the Church in the first place!

I discovered that the ability to believe that the Magisterium had this kind of authority took no more effort than I already expended on believing in the authority of Scripture. That is, could I believe that the Holy Spirit could write the perfect Word of God through fallible, even sinful men (David, who wrote the Psalms, was a murderer and an adulterer)? If I could imagine that kind of human/divine cooperation for the production of written truth, why

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# Papal Infallibility

By David Palm

“How can Catholics believe that a mere man can never be wrong?”

“You mean to tell me that the same guys who authorized the Inquisition and kept mistresses are God’s infallible oracles to the world?”

“The Church is collegial and the highest authority in the Church is an ecumenical council. Papal infallibility is just a late fabrication to solidify the tyranny of the pope over the Church.”

“Papal infallibility—are you kidding? Just look at Pope Honorius; he was condemned as a heretic by the sixth Ecumenical Council. And how about Pope Liberius? He signed an Arian creed.”

You may have heard some or all of these objections to the Catholic teaching on Papal Infallibility. This dogma tends to be one of the most criticized and yet least understood facets of the Catholic faith. And yet, I am convinced that the doctrine is more easily grasped—indeed, can be seen as logically necessary—when seen in its proper context.

We should note at the outset that infallibility per se should present no problem to non-Catholic Christians. All Christians who seek to remain faithful to the earliest historical expressions of the Christian faith—such as the Nicene and Athanasian creeds—believe in the principle of infallibility. All believe that God uses fallible and sinful men to communicate His truth infallibly. Evangelical Protestants staunchly defend the notion that God used fallible men to speak His truth in the written Word. So the all-too-common jibes about the impossibility of mere men speaking infallibly or objections that sinful popes cannot possibly be the bearers of God’s infallible truth show a lack of reflection and fairness. Evangelicals routinely acknowledge that men guilty of terrible sins—murder, adultery, hypocrisy, and betrayal of the Lord—were nonetheless capable of conveying infallible truth. Thus many ob-

jections to papal infallibility are clearly based on a doctrinal double standard.

There are several necessary building blocks that need to be in place before papal infallibility can be seen as logical and even necessary. Without this prior preparation it is difficult to understand where papal infallibility fits in God’s grand scheme for His Church. Here they are:

- † The Church is visible.
- † The visible Church has a “prime minister.”
- † The Church is infallible.
- † The holder of the highest office in the Church, the “prime minister,” by necessity shares the infallibility of the Church in the exercise of that office.

## The Church is Visible

By a visible Church we mean one that has a distinctive, defined, and unchanging structure. A visible Church also has a continuity through time; that is, it can be located throughout all of Christian history. Historically, the marks of the visible Church have been four: the Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The Eastern Orthodox agree with Catholics that the Church is visible. But the vast majority of Protestants subscribe instead, in varying degrees, to the “invisible church” theory. For them, the Church consists of all believers in Christ and has no necessary visible, historical manifestation.<sup>1</sup>

Many non-Catholic Christians divide themselves into more or less autonomous local congregations or denominational groups and announce that in so doing they are simply

patterning themselves after the New Testament Church. And yet, strangely, we find no such Church in the pages of the New Testament. The Church of the New Testament most definitely had a visible hierarchy. There are no independent local congregations in the New Testament. The apostles, who served as the prototypical bishops for the Church, had binding “jurisdiction” over multiple congregations (e.g. St. Paul); it appears that their successors bore the same kind of authority (Titus 1:5). The hierarchy of the New Testament Church could meet in solemn council and promulgate doctrinal decisions that were binding on the whole Church (Acts 15:1-29); one could not “dissent” from the ruling of the Jerusalem Council and still remain in the Church. And there is no evidence that an individual congregation could decide that they didn’t agree with others on doctrinal issues. Rather, the apostles exercised their authority to insist on uniformity in doctrine (e.g. Phil 2:1-2), morals (e.g. 1 Cor 7:17), worship (e.g. 1 Cor 7:18ff.), and church government (e.g. Titus 1:5).

A Protestant Christian might object that this system only held good during the time of the apostles, after which the Scriptures alone would guide leadership in local congregations or larger denominational affiliations. But again, there is no such command or instruction from the apostles giving the Bible this role for the future Church. Rather, the apostles pass their authority on to men to guard the deposit of faith. The Pastoral Epistles record at least in outline the kind of authority to be wielded by the apostolic successors. Titus and Timothy have all the functions of a modern Catholic bishop: St. Paul orders them to ordain (Titus 1:5), to guard the deposit of faith against heresy (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14), to discipline (2 Tim

2:14, 24-26; 4:12), and to teach authoritatively (1 Tim 4:11; 6:2, 20; 2 Tim 1:13; 4:1-2). There is never any hint that congregations should simply “consult the Book” if they run into trouble.

This biblical witness is confirmed by the witness of those who immediately followed the apostles. St. Clement of Rome wrote in A.D. 96 that, “Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, and there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate. For this reason, therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect fore-knowledge of this, they appointed those [ministers] already mentioned, and afterwards gave instructions, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry” (1 Clem 44:1-2).<sup>2</sup> And St. Ignatius of Antioch (A.D. 106) speaks of “bishops, settled everywhere to the utmost bounds [of the earth], [who] are so by the will of Jesus Christ” (Ad Eph 3). “Do ye, beloved, be careful to be subject to the bishop, and the presbyters and the deacons” (Ad Eph 5). Thus, by the first years of the second century this three-fold ministry of bishop, presbyter/priest, and deacon was the norm in the entire Church.

So the majority of standard evangelical Protestant interpretations have to contend with a massive discontinuity between what they believe the apostles taught concerning Church government and the reality of the Church as it appears in the immediate post-apostolic era—and continually on until the time of Martin Luther. The Catholic argues much more solidly that the biblical and continuous post-apostolic witnesses combine to form a solid confirmation that a visible and continuous hierarchy of apostolic successor-bishops is indeed the model intended by the Lord for his Church.

The Church has a Prime Minister:

We have seen that the Church established by Jesus Christ has an essential visible component and continuity throughout history. We see too in Scripture that the appointed leaders of the Church met in council to decide doctrinal issues and from their decree there was no dissent. The Eastern Orthodox point to this action by the New Testament Church and argue that the Church is, by nature, exclusively collegial. Thus the official voice of the Church

is sounded through the shepherds of the Church, the bishops, meeting in ecumenical council. But Scripture shows another aspect of the Church’s visible nature.

The kingdom that Jesus Christ came to set up was a continuation of the monarchy that God had established in Israel. Our Lord is the son of David and he comes to sit eternally on David’s throne. In the kingdom of Israel, as in all kingdoms, there are lesser nobles who assist the king. One of these, the steward or “one who is over the house”—in modern

parlance the prime minister—held a special place of prominence in the hierarchy; the man holding that place was second only to the king in authority. In ancient Israel this office was represented by keys of the kingdom:

On that day I will call my servant Eliakim son of Hilkiyah, and will clothe him with your robe and bind your sash on him. I will commit your authority to his hand, and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open. I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place, and he will become a throne of honor to his ancestral house (Isa 22:20-23).

In the context, a steward by the name of Shebna is being deposed by God and another, Eliakim son of Hilkiyah, is being put into his place. We notice that this appointment to the office of steward includes being given a key of the kingdom.

In establishing the kingdom of heaven the Lord also reestablishes this office of steward or prime minister and he gives this office to St. Peter, as signified by the promise of the keys of the kingdom:

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates

of Hades will not prevail against it. 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 (Matt 16:18-19).

There is no real doubt, even among evangelical Protestant scholars, that the Lord had Isa 22 in mind when he spoke these words to St. Peter. There can be no real doubt either that His words indicate a transfer of special author-

ity. As Protestant scholar F. F. Bruce says,

And what about the “keys of the kingdom”? The keys of a royal or noble establishment were entrusted to the chief steward or major domo; he carried them on his shoulder in earlier times, and there they served as a badge of the authority entrusted to him. . . . So in the new community which Jesus was to build, Peter would be, so to speak, chief steward.”<sup>3</sup>

This special office devolved on St. Peter is confirmed by other passages such as John 21:15ff., Luke 22:31-32, and even Acts 15:1-29 in which it is Peter who pronounces the doctrinal decision at the Jerusalem Council, silencing the discussion, after which St. James adds some strictly pastoral provisions.

Nor can this newly reestablished office in the Church reasonably be limited exclusively to St. Peter. Succession of this office, while not explicit in Scripture, becomes altogether reasonable given that (1) the office was a successive one in the Old Testament economy, (2) the promise of the Lord to “build my Church” did not pertain only to the New Testament Church, so there is a future thrust right in the text—this text then appears more as a prophecy than as an exclusive promise to Peter, (3) if the Kingdom would last till the end of time, and the King would certainly be enthroned until the end of time, then there is no good reason to suppose that the newly established office of prime minister would cease after the

death of Peter, (4) the Lord in parables speaks of stewards who are placed “over the house” until His Parousia (see e.g. Matt 24:45ff.), (5) the papacy represents the logical “historical embodiment of Christ’s promise” to Peter, (6) the covenant people of God have always had this kind of earthly, patriarchal headship and there is no good reason to suppose that will end in the New Covenant, (7) if the leadership of the New Testament Church was constituted

Orthodox agree with Evangelicals on the infallibility of the Scriptures and with us extend infallibility also to the Church. Ironically, the Protestant propensity to limit infallibility to the Scriptures alone cannot be supported from Scripture. Rather, the Scriptures themselves indicate that the universal Church can never be led into error.

It is well to notice the contrary position before looking at the biblical and traditional

if the promise of the Spirit of Truth pertains exclusively to the apostles this would mean that our Lord had left us orphans. For these reasons it seems better to see His words as a promise to the Church at large, as represented by the “college” of the apostles, a promise that the Church will never be led into error but will instead be illuminated by the Spirit of Truth “forever.”

The Lord also promised that the “gates of hell” will not prevail against the Church (Matt 16:19). This occurs immediately in the context of St. Peter’s investiture with the office of prime minister in the kingdom of God. Again, it seems difficult to reconcile the notion that the visible Church can officially err in a fundamental doctrinal or moral area with the promise of the Lord that the forces of evil will never prevail against His Church.

And His solemn decree that “I will be with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20) guarantees his abiding presence with the Church in her mission of evangelism and discipleship. Other Scripture references in which God declares that “I will be with you” indicate that this is a solemn promise of divine guidance and deliverance; the results of the promise will infallibly take place (cf. Gen 26:24; 28:15; Isa 41:10; Jer 1:8; 15:20; 42:11; Acts 18:10; et al.). This promise in the Great Commission is different in that it is the only time that the divine presence is promised to abide always or perpetually with God’s people. Again, it is helpful to contrast this with the notion, espoused by so many non-Catholic Christians, that the Church had become so corrupt over time that she had literally ceased to preach the true Gospel, to the detriment of millions of souls. It cannot be reconciled, I think, with such a solemn promise of the Lord’s abiding presence in her great mission of evangelism.

#### The Pope Shares the Infallibility of the Church:

When we combine the previous points we reach what I think is a logically necessary conclusion. If there is a visible Church established by our Lord, whose official action is guarded by God from error, and the Lord established in this Church an office of “prime minister” then the official exercise of that office would necessarily be protected from error, lest God’s people be led astray in a matter pertaining to

this way then there is no good reason to suppose that the Church’s fundamental structure would change radically when the apostles died, (8) the early Church had a lively understanding of the direct succession of its leadership from the apostles in general, (9) in the aggregate the Church, in its belief and practice, early and continuously, ascribed to the bishops of Rome as the successors of Peter the same sort of overseeing authority that was indeed promised in the New Testament itself, (10) the need for such an office certainly did not cease in the first century with the death of Peter.

Thus the Church is visible in her hierarchy and historical succession and a necessary part of that ongoing succession is a successor from St. Peter who functions as the steward or prime minister of the King, Jesus Christ. This is the real biblical pattern of Church government and there is only one contender for the position of historical successor to the infant Church, namely the Catholic Church.

#### The Church is Infallible:

From the idea of a visible Church, established by our Lord Jesus Christ to remain until He comes again, it is but a short step—backed by many indications in Scripture and Tradition—that this Church is infallible. Eastern

evidence for an infallible Church. Protestants have historically argued that the visible Church, the hierarchy that exists in continuity throughout history, not only can err but has erred in numerous and grievous ways, to the detriment of literally millions of souls.

But the Scriptures have something quite different to say about the Church and the possibility of falling wholesale into error. For example, St. Paul calls the Church the “pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). If this verse said that the Bible is the pillar and foundation of the truth it would be the classic proof text for Evangelicals to prove the inerrancy (and sole sufficiency) of Scripture. They would certainly argue that it is impossible for something that God’s Word calls the very pillar and foundation of the truth to teach fundamental doctrinal or moral error to God’s people. And I agree—this line of reasoning should receive its due force as applied to the Church.

Elsewhere the Lord promises that the Spirit of Truth would abide with the Church “forever” and would lead her into all truth (John 14:16-18; 15:26; 16:13). It is the qualification that the Spirit of Truth will abide “forever” that obviates application of these promises only to the apostles. The Lord also says that the coming of the Holy Spirit means that Christians will no longer be orphans. But


their salvation.

Here is how the Catholic Church officially defined papal infallibility at Vatican I:

When the Roman pontiff speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when, in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole church, he possesses, by the divine assistance promised to him in the blessed Peter, that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals.

Notice that the boundaries of papal infallibility are carefully delineated. And on reflection the limitations make perfect sense. Infallibility does not adhere to the man, else he would be infallible in everything he says. Nor does infallibility adhere to the office, for the same reason. Rather, the gift of infallibility must adhere to the exercise of the office. Note, for example, that a king may write letters to his various officials discussing possible legislation and even give public statements concerning his intentions, but it is only his official promulgations that actually become the law of the land. Similarly, the pope may carry on private correspondence, speak or write as a private teacher, or even make certain public pronouncements without invoking the authority of his office. No one, for example, looks to a book like *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* by Pope John Paul II as an infallible dogmatic pronouncement. It is a product of the pope in his capacity as a private Catholic theologian, not as the Vicar of Christ. And infallibility is not impeccability. It does not render the successor of Peter sinless. As I have pointed out above, God used fallible and sinful men to give us infallible Scripture, and He is certainly able to do the same with his prime minister on earth. But when the pope does speak on a matter pertaining to salvation in his official capacity as the “one who is over the house”, the prime minister of the King of Kings, then he is guarded by the Holy Spirit from leading God’s people into error.

Only after having laid out this foundational case for the doctrine of papal infallibility is it reasonable to move on to address the objections quoted at the beginning of this

article. And once one understands the reasons why the Catholic believes the exercise of the office of the papacy to be divinely protected from error, the objections are easily discounted. The fact is that papal infallibility flows from a proper understanding of salvation history, is eminently defensible from Scripture, is expressed in the ongoing Tradition of the Church, and represents a tremendous gift that God has given to  the people.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Protestants frequently profess to subscribe to the ancient creeds, in which the Church is portrayed as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” And yet it is easy to show that the Protestant theory of the Church invests that phrase with a meaning far removed from that intended by its authors, the bishops of the Catholic Church meeting in council at Nicea. This is an historical fact beyond all reasonable question. The necessary importation of such a foreign notion as an “invisible church” into the words of the Nicene Creed is strange indeed coming from those who so jealously uphold adherence to the original intention of the authors of sacred Scripture.

<sup>2</sup> It has sometimes been argued that for St. Clement the offices of bishop and presbyter are identical. This is unlikely, however, since in one passage he draws a parallel between the three-fold hierarchy of the Old Covenant—high priest, priest, Levite—and the three-fold hierarchy in the Church—which would correspond to bishop, presbyter/priest, and deacon (see 1 Clem 40).

<sup>3</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 143-44.

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position of the Church to interpret the Scriptures with binding authority, and resulted in a religious landscape that led to as many conflicts with one another as the original Reformers had with Rome. The Protestant appeal to the clarity of Scripture failed to unify its diverse and disparate interpretations. In fact, there was no one Protestant Reformation; there were many. And the many conflicting visions of reformation resulted from an insistence on private interpretation of Scripture—a principle that the Bible itself rejects (II Peter 1:20).



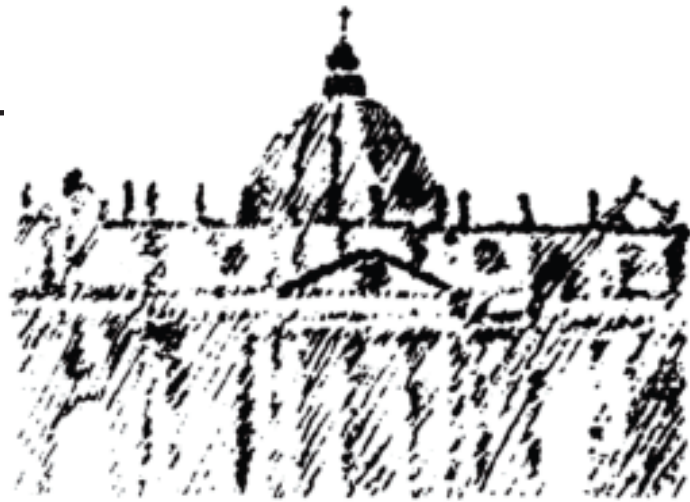
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couldn't I imagine it for the preservation of oral truth or, most importantly, for the interpretation of those truths?

I could. I did. My experience in submitting to the Church's authority has been much like how G. K. Chesterton described conversion into the Church:

Nothing is more amusing to the convert...than to hear the speculations about when or whether he will repent of the conversion... The outsiders...think they see the convert entering with bowed head a sort of small temple which they are convinced is fitted up inside like a prison, if not a torture-chamber... They do not know that he has not gone into the inner darkness, but out into the broad daylight.

From beginning to end the Catechism's teaching about the Church and its authority plants one's feet firmly in the wide open space of God's great love and man's true freedom. Is there any other place to be?



# What is the Relationship Between Scripture and Tradition?

By Mark P. Shea

While Catholics are worrying about what will happen if you subtract from Tradition handed down in both written and unwritten form, Christians who are committed to Sola Scriptura, or Scripture-alone, are worrying about what will happen if you add to it.

The big question for them is “What if essentially human things get muddled with essentially divine things? As the Pharisees with their rules and regulations (and their cancerous religious pride) make clear, when such muddling happens it is quite possible for human beings to become so obsessed with observing their own traditions that they set aside the commands of God.”

The truth is at the bottom, both the Scripture-only Christian and the Catholic Christian have the same concern: the corruption of revelation. And that is precisely the core of the biblical denunciation of certain traditions: they are “traditions of men” (Mark 7:8), “rules taught by men” (Mark 7:7), not the commands of God but “your tradition” (Matthew 15:3). In a word, “human traditions” (Colossians 2:8) masquerading as revelation from God. It is this, and only this, which the Bible, like Catholic teaching, condemns.

But the Catholic faith, in its wariness of human tradition usurping divine revelation, sees a bit further. For it knows the ironic truth that fear of human tradition can itself become a human tradition and set aside the commands of God. How? By ignoring the rest of what Scripture has to say about Tradition and assuming that all Tradition, simply because it is Tradition, must therefore be merely human—a claim the Bible never makes. Thus, some people feel justified in adopting the Scripture-only perspective that revelation can only be in the form of written Scripture.

But is this what Scripture itself says? Does Scripture condemn all Tradition as necessarily human tradition? To answer this, let us begin by looking at two passages from 2 Thessalonians. Paul tells the Thessalonians:

So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by

us, either by word of mouth or by letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:15—RSV)

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. (2 Thessalonians 3:6—RSV)

If all tradition without exception is the nemesis of Scripture, Paul does not seem to be aware of it here, despite what he has said elsewhere. For he specifically commands the Thessalonians to “hold to the traditions” (Greek: *paradosis*) they were given “by word of mouth”. Indeed, he specifically warns them to steer clear of those who don’t hold to the Traditions they have received from him. If the formula is Scripture=Revelation; Tradition=Human Corruption, what are we to make of this command and this warning?

Many believers propose the following solution to the problem: “The New Testament,” they say, “had not yet been written when Paul said this (the letters to the Thessalonians being two of the earliest Christian documents). Therefore, it was necessary for the Church to rely on the oral teaching of the apostles until the Bible was complete. Once the Bible was complete, however, it said everything that had constituted the *paradosis* Paul mentions. So apostolic ‘tradition’ means, for us, Scripture and only Scripture.” The Evangelical New Bible Dictionary puts it this way:

Apostolic tradition was at one time oral, but for us it is crystallized in the apostolic writing containing the Spirit-guided witness to the Christ of God. Other teaching, while it may be instructive and useful and worthy of serious consideration,

cannot claim to be placed alongside the Old Testament and New Testament as authoritative without manifesting the same defect as condemned Jewish tradition in the eyes of our Lord.

So, the argument goes, when perfection comes, the imperfect will disappear (1 Corinthians 13:10). When Scripture came, it swallowed up the *paradosis* of which Paul spoke so that there is no revelation passed on to us anywhere but in Scripture.

This seems, at first glance, to be a reasonable theory for reconciling Scripture’s endorsement of Tradition with current denial of it in Scripture-only Christianity. But upon closer examination the theory reveals some very significant flaws.

First, where in the biblical text is the basis for the Scripture-only belief that Scripture swallows Tradition? Certainly it is not in 2 Thessalonians or 1 Corinthians 13. Nor is it made clear anywhere else that the *paradosis* of which Paul spoke would someday be “crystallized” in Scripture alone. On the contrary, Paul’s command in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 gives no sign whatsoever that he regards the Tradition he had given them as being in any special need of “crystallization.” Granted, Paul clearly regards his writings as invested with apostolic authority and therefore as the word of God (1 Thessalonians 2:13), but he nonetheless speaks, not of some future complete New Testament, but of “the teaching you received from us” as the one and only source of revelation—a teaching which was almost entirely oral and which 1 and 2 Thessalonians are written to underscore, not replace. Thus, in contrast to the New Bible Dictionary, Paul refers the Thessalonians to the oral *paradosis* of the past, not to the completed canon of the future; to what they have already heard, not merely to what he is writing or will someday

be written by him and others. He does not think of the Tradition as “imperfect” and of the written as “perfect”. Rather he thinks of the whole thing, both spoken and written, as apostolic and therefore as authoritative.

And Paul is not alone. Luke also writes to underscore, not replace, the apostolic Tradition Theophilus has already received. Thus, he begins by saying, “It seemed good to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught [that is, the paradosis ‘by word of mouth’]” (Luke 1:3-4). In other words, Luke also offers his writing in union with, not in replacement of, the paradosis. He too thinks Theophilus should hold fast to the Traditions that he was taught, either by word of mouth or by letter.

Likewise, John twice acknowledges that his written record of Jesus does not deny other extrabiblical traditions (John 20:30; 21:25), so long as these traditions do not oppose his teaching and that of the other apostles (cf. 1 John 2:18-19; 4:1-3; 2 John 7-9). For John, as well as Luke, the test for authentic Christian teaching is not “Is this written?” but “Is this apostolic?”

In short, there is no New Testament evidence that the apostolic paradosis was an “imperfection” designed to be “crystallized” in writing. Neither Jesus (who never wrote any Scripture) nor the Twelve (who were never commanded to commit anything—much less everything—to writing, except for the book of Revelation (Revelation 1:19)), nor any other New Testament author, provide an ounce of support for the idea that the biblical writings swallowed apostolic Tradition and completely “crystallized” or “perfected” the entirety of the paradosis once handed on by word of mouth.

That is the first problem with the Scripture-only theory. The second is this: Exactly how, on the basis of the Bible alone, do we know that the content of the paradosis handed on by letter and the paradosis handed on by word of mouth are absolutely identical? Paul does not tell us what he said to the Thessalonians “by word of mouth.” Therefore, any claim to know that the content of his oral paradosis is identical to the content of his written paradosis is just whistling in the dark. The fact is, we can’t know, based on the text of Scripture alone. The theory is simply a bold guess, and thus a very weak support for Scripture-only revelation.

The third and most glaring problem with the Scripture-only theory lies hidden in the five little words “once the Bible was complete.” For, of course, the question which eternally

dogs sola scriptura is the question of how, based on Scripture alone, we know what books constitute a complete Bible. Apart from Sacred Tradition and the authority of the Church as the basis for knowing what a complete Bible looks like (the validity of which are denied in Scripture-only circles), we find ourselves simply arguing in a circle, saying, “We know Scripture is the totality of revelation because we know the totality of revelation is Scripture.”

Thus, rather than explaining away this problem of Paul’s endorsement of Tradition, we have simply lost sight of it momentarily

in a bit of fog. But when the fog clears, the question remains, if Scripture condemns all Tradition as merely human, why does Paul commend and even command our faith in it? To find out, the best thing to do is begin by placing Paul’s comments about Tradition (both the positive and the negative) in the context of the rest of Scripture. Let’s begin with the Old Testament.

#### Extrabiblical Tradition in the Old Testament

When we begin to examine the Old Testament with a view to its treatment of Tradition, we discover a curious thing. The Old Testament seems to have the same odd view of Tradition that the New Testament does. Sometimes the Old Testament fiercely condemns tradition (for example, from false prophets in Jeremiah 28). It is not for nothing that Jesus’ condemnation of tradition is borrowed from the words of Isaiah (Isaiah 29:13). The prophets, like our Lord, are quite ferocious in their opposition to those who “call evil good and good evil” (Isaiah 5:20) and who replace the word of God with the words of men (cf. Isaiah 13:10; Jeremiah 14:14; Micah 2:6-11). In this, they are also like Moses, who opposed Korah and his merely human assertions of authority (cf. Numbers 16; Jude). For the Old Testament writers, like the New, vehemently oppose substituting the word of God with the traditions of men.

Like Paul, however, they do not therefore conclude that all Tradition is, ipso facto, human tradition. How do we know? Because the Old

Testament writers received enormous amounts of extrabiblical (or more precisely prebiblical) Tradition as revelation.

How, after all, does the author of Genesis know about the Adamic, Noahic and Abrahamic Covenants if not from Sacred Tradition? All these events occur centuries before the birth of Moses and none of them are written down till the book of Genesis is composed. Similarly when God reveals himself in the Burning Bush, Moses knows who God is talking about when the Voice declares, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac,

and the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3:6). How do Moses and all the rest of the children of Israel know about these figures from Israel’s remote past? Because the stories preserved in Genesis were quite obviously passed down in Tradition, and neither Moses nor the children of Israel saw anything inherently unsatisfactory or evil about this. In short, they recognized that tradition can be a vehicle not only of human opinion, but of divine revelation as well.

The same applies to much of the Old Testament. The writer of Joshua makes it clear that the events he relates are stories separated from his own day by a long period of time (Joshua 4:9; 6:25). Likewise, whole books such as Judges, 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles are clearly composed many years (sometimes centuries) after the events they describe. How then do the authors know of the things they are recording? The same way Moses knows of events hundreds of years before his birth: Sacred Tradition. And again, we have no hint that the Tradition recorded by the authors of Scripture is somehow dubious.

A Scripture-only advocate may declare “No, but then neither are they still traditions. For as we have just noted, the traditions were preserved in Scripture alone, not in Scripture and Sacred Tradition. That is why Christ and the apostles never say ‘it is said’ or ‘it is in our tradition...’ Rather, they always say ‘it is written.’ For whatever may be the case with the Old Testament, the fact remains that the New Covenant is superior to it. And under that New Covenant, there is no revelation handed down in Sacred Tradition along with the books of the Old Testament. Christ and the apostles

refer their hearers exclusively to Scripture as the authoritative source of revelation.”

But is this claim substantiated by the New Testament writers?

#### Extrabiblical Tradition in the New Testament

It is, of course, quite true that the New Covenant is superior to the Old. Paul makes this clear in, among other places, the epistle to the Galatians when he describes the provisional and temporary nature of the Old Covenant, saying, “What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.” (Galatians 3:18). The Seed, of course, is the Messiah, the Seed of Abraham, the Incarnate Word. And one of the signs that his covenant is superior is that it is a covenant made through the Son of God himself and not merely through a creature as the law of Moses was. For as Paul points out, the law was put into effect, not by God directly, but “through angels” (Galatians 3:19). The author of Hebrews concurs with Paul and warns, “For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?” (Heb 2:2). Likewise Stephen, the first martyr, makes precisely the same claim just minutes before he is martyred. Speaking to the Jews of Jerusalem, he cries out “and now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it” (Acts 7:53).

So it is quite clear: the New Testament does indeed teach the New Covenant to be greater than the Old. And one of the principal signs of this superiority is that the Old Covenant was put into effect through angels while the New Covenant was put into effect by the Incarnate God himself. However, this faces the advocate of Scripture-only revelation with a serious problem. For there is no place in the entire Old Testament which teaches the Mosaic Covenant was given through angels.

Where then do these New Testament figures get this teaching? From extrabiblical Tradition known, not only to these writers, but to other Jews as well.

Nor is this New Testament citation of Tradition an isolated incident. Paul, for instance, also writes to Timothy this warning concerning deceivers in the Church:

Justas Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth—men

of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone. (2 Timothy 3:8-9)

Who are Jannes and Jambres? Well, the Old Testament doesn’t mention them, but if you consult a handy Bible reference work, you find they are the Egyptian magicians who opposed Moses. So... if these gentlemen are not in the Old Testament, how do Paul (and Timothy) know their names? The same way thousands of their contemporaries knew. For, in fact, Paul is again drawing on (and assuming Timothy will draw on) a widely known extrabiblical Tradition, and treating it as authoritative revelation.

Jude does the same thing—twice! First, he speaks of the time the Archangel Michael disputed with Satan over the body of Moses (v. 8-9). His Old Testament reference? There is none. For it is a Tradition found only in the non-canonical book, the Assumption of Moses. Evidently both Jude and the author of the Assumption of Moses regard this extrabiblical Tradition as important. Then, a few verses later, Jude again draws on extrabiblical Tradition and refers (v. 14-15) to a prophecy of Enoch recorded, not in the Old Testament, but in the book of Enoch, another non-canonical book. The book of Enoch was composed about a century or two before Christ. However, according to Genesis 5:18-24, Enoch himself lived long before Noah. Thus for Jude to quote a prophecy of Enoch’s as inspired revelation is Jude’s acknowledgment that Tradition—in this case the Tradition of Enoch’s prophecy—is revelation.

Then there is the epistle to the Hebrews. The author writes of the suffering Old Testament prophets:

Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. (Heb 11:36)

Again the advocate of Scripture-only revelation is faced with a problem. For nowhere in the Old Testament is any hero or prophet martyred by being sawed in two. What, then, is the author of Hebrews talking about? He is talking about a Tradition preserved, not in the Old Testament, but in the Ascension of Isaiah 5:1-14, another piece of late Old Testament-era literature which was never canonized. For it was a well-known Tradition that Isaiah met

his end this way—a Tradition preserved both by the author of Hebrews and by the author of the Ascension of Isaiah.

But most striking of all (for the Scripture-only advocate) is our Lord himself. For like the apostles, he too, turns out to be perfectly willing to accept Tradition as a vehicle of revelation. For he tells his disciples:

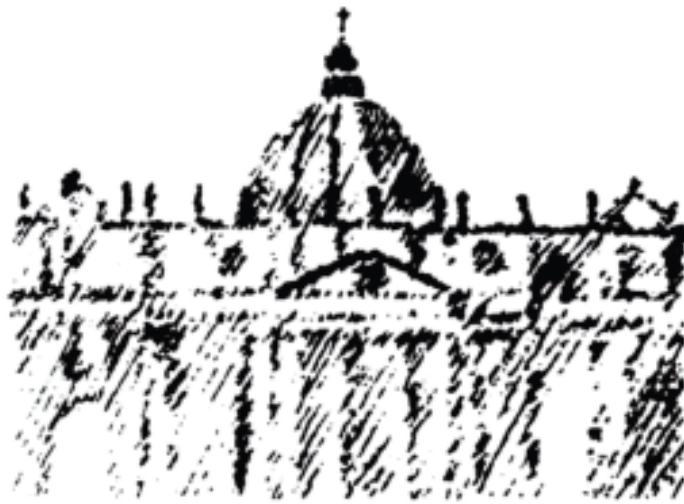
The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. (Matthew 23:2-3)

As with all the other aspects of Tradition cited above, nowhere in the Old Testament do we find reference to “Moses’ seat” as the title for the teaching authority in Israel. Like all the other facets of New Testament teaching we have seen above, it too is found only in Tradition! Yet Jesus honors and even exalts such a position of authority and its traditional name, and even binds his followers to honor it. In short, our Lord, too, acts just the way Paul says we should: he condemns only human tradition, but honors authentic divine paradosis whether it comes by word of mouth or by Scripture. It is not the Tradition of God, but the tradition of men, that is condemned.

Very well then, the Tradition of God is handed down “both by word of mouth and by letter” all through the Christian revelation. And there is no indication that the reliance on that Tradition which characterizes huge stretches of the Old Testament, is abrogated in the New. On the contrary, in book after New Testament book, and author after New Testament author (not to mention our Lord himself), there remains a very clear awareness that revelation is sometimes handed down in writing, but is also sometimes handed down by the Tradition of God preserved in the life of the Old Israel and then in the life of the New Israel.



The preceding was an excerpt from Mark P. Shea’s essay “What is the Relationship Between Scripture and Tradition?” from *Not By Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura* (Robert Sungenis, ed., [Queenship: Santa Barbara] 1997). Shea is also the author of *By What Authority?: An Evangelical Discovers Catholic Tradition* (Our Sunday Visitor: Huntington, 1996) and *This Is My Body: An Evangelical Discovers the Real Presence* (Christendom: Front Royal, 1993).



# By What Authority do you Preach?

By Marcus C. Grodi

One Sunday nearly eight years ago I was standing in my pulpit preparing to preach. I had done my homework, spending nearly ten hours in prayer, study and exegesis, consulting all the best books on my shelf, so that what I would proclaim to this flock to which I had been ordained to shepherd would be true. My flock trusted me for this.

And I knew that I was expected both by them and by God to proclaim truth: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea." (Mk 9.42) I knew that as their pastor I was eternally responsible for what I preached.

As I stood there in my black academic gown covering my otherwise business attire of white shirt and tie ready to read the Scripture text from the recently approved Common Lectionary, it struck me that within a fifteen-mile radius of my pulpit were literally 20-30 other churches with similar pulpits manned by similarly ordained men and women all ready to read the same text. What paralyzed me was the realization that though we all believed that the Bible was sufficient for leading us into all truth and that we were each responsible before God for what we preached, we were each teaching different, even contradictory things. Which of us was right? Which of us if any would one day hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Mt 25.21a)

One of the many questions that crossed my mind that morning and in the weeks to follow was, by what authority did I or the rest of my neighboring preachers have to stand before our congregations and preach anyway? This is a very valid question for all ministers to ponder for even our Lord was challenged by this question by the rightly ordained religious leaders of His day: "By what authority are you doing these things?" (Mk 11.28) Can just anyone declare that they have a calling from God, set up a pulpit, start a Church, and preach? This happens today all the time especially here in America. By what authority do these self-proclaimed preachers preach? And to what extent do they truly represent Christ?

Originally ordained a Congregationalist

minister, I pointed with great self-assurance to the following words of Christ to justify my independence and freedom to start churches without any permission from any earthly authority: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Mt 18.20) But is this what Jesus truly meant? Does this fit with the context of the rest of His instructions to his hand-chosen core of apostles who were to establish the Church once He was gone?

In Romans 10.13-15, the Apostle Paul gives a clear description of the preaching office and the authority behind it:

For, "every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved."

But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed?

And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?

And how are they to hear without a preacher?

And how can men preach unless they are sent?

Paul emphasizes very clearly the necessity of being sent for the authenticity of the preacher and his preaching. This was a critical warning because already within the lives of these first generation Christians there were false teachers spreading half-truths, misleading the brethren. Paul exclaims: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. . . . If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed." (Gal 1.6-9)

Where did Paul get his authority to preach

and to declare that His gospel was the true one? Paul claimed later in Galatians that he had not received the gospel he preached from men but directly by revelation (1.12). But how was he or his followers to know that what he was preaching was true?! Can just anyone claim that he has had a revelation from God, that he has finally after all these centuries received from the Holy Spirit the Truth, and therefore begin preaching and start his own church? This has been done over and over again throughout the history of the Church, especially in the last 200 years.

Paul confirmed the authority and authenticity behind his preaching by pointing to the fact that he had visited with Cephas (Peter) alone for fifteen days and then later received the right hand of fellowship (spiritual unity) from the rest of the apostles, confirming his calling to preach the gospel to the uncircumcised. (Gal 1.18-2.10)

How can one know today whether the gospel he is preaching is the true gospel? I came to realize through personal experience how easy it is for a busy Protestant pastor to become deluded into thinking that he is preaching and teaching the truth. In seminary I was taught a method for preparing sermons. Before I consulted with the commentaries, I was to first do my own exegesis and language studies. Then once I had determined for myself what I thought the text was teaching, I was to check my

conclusions with other commentators. But then one day as I was perusing my wall of commentaries I realized that my collection was very selective, hand picked by moi. They consisted of all the best evangelical writers with whom I already agreed. In essence, when I checked my commentaries I was really only checking my conclusions against my own presuppositions. And even when I took the time to consult commentators of other persuasions, I generally rejected out-of-hand any comments that differed from the consensus of the authors residing in majority on my shelves. There was little chance in my busy schedule that I might discover that my limited evangelical North American Presbyterian presuppositions were in fact only a mere whisper in the great cacophony of opinions that exist in modern Christendom.

Many claim they are preaching what the Bible says, yet are blind to the fact that what they are preaching contradicts what others are preaching right across the street with the same self-assurance of Biblical accuracy. Others know this very well but somehow think it doesn't matter. Paul warned of confused days ahead, which sound very much like the day in which we live. He instructed Timothy, his hand chosen apostle, ordained to carry on the preaching of the gospel:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itchy ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry." (2 Timothy 4.1-5)

Where did Timothy get his authority to preach? How was he to know that what he preached was true? In both letters, Paul reminded Timothy of the source of his authority and assurance:

Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the council of elders laid their hands upon you. (1 Tim 4.14)

Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands... (2 Tim 1.6)

Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. (2 Tim 1.13-14)

Lest anyone presume that with merely

the Holy Spirit and the Bible they have the authority to preach, this is no where found here. First of all, Paul and Timothy had no written New Testament—only the Old Testament Scriptures and the Apostolic deposit of faith passed orally from Jesus to his Apostles and then on to their hand chosen successors. This is clearly seen in Paul's instructions to those under him. What they were to preach was to be in line with what they had been taught by Paul:

So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter. (2 Thess 2.15)

He then instructed the men under him, whom he had personally chosen and ordained, to continue this practice to ensure the accurate proclamation of the gospel into the future:

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. (2 Timothy 2.2)

This understanding of the necessary authority to preach through the apostolic succession of laying on of hands was well understood and accepted in the Early Church.

It took about four years after my reception into the Catholic Church to fully realize the personal implications of this. I was at-

tending the ordination of a close friend to the permanent diaconate. While our bishop was preaching, explaining the origins of the diaconate, he explained that during the first few centuries of the Church, especially during the days of intense persecution, the differences between bishops and local parish priests were sometimes indiscernible. This was the result of being scattered and at times hidden for fear of detection. However, there was always one clear distinction which set bishops apart from priests and deacons: only the bishop had the

authority to ordain. Only the bishop had the authority to lay hands on a man to give him the authority to preach.

I was struck to the quick. By whose authority did the men who laid their hands on me ordain me? By whom were they sent to then send me? I realized that they had no more authority to ordain me than the man in the moon.

When the Reformers took it upon themselves to throw out the 15-century-old tradition of the priesthood, which in fact was only the continuation of the Levitical priesthood as redefined by Christ, they threw havoc into the Church. For this reason, when St. Francis de Sales began his work of trying to bring home those in Geneva who had been enticed away from the Catholic Church into Calvinism, he began by distributing a pamphlet door-to-door pointing out that the Reformers and the preachers they had ordained had no authority to preach their new gospel. Hear his words in this first pamphlet, written with love around the year 1594:

First, then your ministers had not the conditions required for the position which they sought to maintain, and the enterprise which they undertook. Wherefore they are inexcusable; and you yourselves also, who knew and still know or ought to know, this defect in them, have done very wrong in receiving them under such colours. The office they claimed was that of ambassadors of Jesus Christ Our Lord;

the affair they undertook was to declare a formal divorce between Our Lord and the ancient Church his Spouse; to arrange and conclude by words of present consent, as lawful procurators, a second and new marriage with this young madam, of better grace, said they, and more seemly than the other. For in effect, to stand up as preacher of God's Word and pastor of souls,—what is it but to call oneself ambassador and legate of Our Lord, according to that of the Apostle: We are therefore ambassadors for Christ? And to say that the whole of Christendom has failed, that the whole Church has erred, and all truth disappeared,—what is this but to say that Our Lord has abandoned his Church, has broken the sacred tie of marriage he had contracted with her? And to put forward a new Church,—is it not to attempt to thrust upon this sacred and holy Husband a second wife? This is what the ministers of the pretended

nor commandment of the Master. Tell me, what business had you to hear them and believe them without having any assurance of their commission and of the approval of Our Lord, whose legates they called themselves? In a word, you have no justification for having quitted the ancient Church in which you were baptized, on the faith of preachers who had no legitimate mission from the Master.

Now you cannot be ignorant that they neither had, nor have, in any way at all, this mission. For if Our Lord had sent them, it would have been either mediately or immediately. We say mission is given mediately when we are sent by one who has from God the power of sending, according to the order which he has appointed in his Church; and such was the mission of St. Denis into France by Clement and of Timothy by St. Paul. Immediate mission is when God himself

dination. Have you presumed something you shouldn't have? Have you taken upon yourself an unwarranted responsibility for which you will be eternally responsible? I am one who found himself in this position and recognized that, although God had faithfully blessed and used my meager efforts, I had no authority to consider myself an ordained ambassador of Christ. I had misused those passages from 2 Corinthians 5 to claim something for myself which I had no right to claim. I pray that God will forgive me for this presumption and that He will lead those of you still caught in this presumption to hear the fullness of the truth and come home to His Church.



church have undertaken; this is what they boast of having done; this has been the aim of their discourses, their designs, their writings. But what an injustice have you not committed in believing them? How did you come to take their word so simply? How did you so lightly give them credit?

To be legates and ambassadors they should have been sent, they should have had letters of credit from him whom they boasted of being sent by. The affairs were of the greatest importance, for there was question of disturbing the whole Church. The persons who undertook them were extraordinaries, of mean quality, and private persons; while the ordinary pastors were men of mark, and of most ancient and acknowledged reputation, who contradicted them and protested that these extraordinaries had no charge

commands and gives a charge, without the interposition of the ordinary authority which he has placed in the prelates and pastors of the Church: as St. Peter and the Apostles were sent, receiving from Our Lord's own mouth this commandment: Go ye into the whole world, and preach the Gospel to every creature; (Mark 16.15) and as Moses received his mission to Pharaoh and to the people of Israel. But neither in the one nor in the other way have your ministers any mission. How then have they undertaken to preach? How shall they preach, says the Apostle, unless they be sent. (The Catholic Controversy, TAN Books, 1989; pg. 11-13)

I, too, write this in love. Not to merely disclaim the authority of non-Catholic ministers to preach, but to challenge them to examine the authority behind their preaching and or-

# Before you object...

By Kenneth J. Howell, Ph. D.

As we compiled the articles for this journal, we tried to consider continuously how these topics and their presentations would be heard and received by non-Catholics.

We thank you for the time you are taking to read the articles in this issue of our journal. We, the writers, are all adult converts to the Catholic Faith who have made joyful but arduous journeys in faith to the Church we believe was founded by Jesus Christ himself. Our intention is never to appear, or to be, arrogant or triumphal as we relate to our Protestant brothers and sisters in Christ. All of us in the Coming Home Network are keenly aware of how traumatic it can be for a Christian who is considering the claims of the Catholic Church. For that reason, this journal hopes to provide information to clarify the teachings of the Catholic Church and to encourage those who need support in their journeys.

The articles in this issue on authority raise some thorny issues which may be difficult for our readers to grapple with, but we also know that Jesus our Lord promised, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:32). Truth is not easy to embrace, but its power to liberate from falsehood and tyranny is astounding. Church history, both Protestant and Catholic, is full of courageous men and women who have been moved by commitment to truth, a commitment that fortified their hearts in the fight against evil. St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest theologians of the Catholic Church, once said that the human mind has great difficulty in grasping the truths of revelation. We find it much easier to accept the dogmas of earthly truth such as mathematics, science or history than when we are confronted with the supernatural truths of Christ and his salvation. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons why both Catholics and Protestants

have taught that we cannot embrace Christ apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Our hesitancy to embrace truth is a common human malady; no one has a corner on it. Becoming a Catholic does not solve this problem, but it does help us to confront it head on because it reveals to us our desire to be the arbiters of truth. And I think Americans are especially afflicted with the desire — one might call it a compulsion — to retain the right to decide what is true or not true. I see this everyday of my life because I have been involved in higher education in one way or another most of my adult life. And despite our current rhetoric of diversity and multiculturalism, the one uniform assumption of American university campuses is my right to decide for myself.

Deciding what is true and not true even-

tually leads us to realize that we are not arbiters of truth. God is the final authority. We must listen to him. And something beautiful happens in a person’s life when he or she comes to that realization. It is a release, a letting go of the need to prove, of the need to be right. The Christian heart knows this freedom deep down. Though we may be ignorant and stumbling, we know in the depths of our hearts that Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life. The Christian heart wants to say, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” Being a Catholic is more than agreeing with the teachings of the

Catholic Church. It involves a belief that the Church itself is Christ’s gift of authority to you and to me as the children of the Father. I still remember the day when I was completely flabbergasted by the statement in I Timothy 3:15 that the Church is “the pillar and foundation of the truth.” Surely I had read this verse before! Of course, but the impact of this teaching of Scripture on my sense of my own authority had only begun. Bit by bit, I grew in the realization that Christ had deposited with his apostles the fullness of his revelation that alone could rescue us from perdition (Eph. 2:20; II Tim. 1:13).

Our spiritual journeys, no matter what church we belong to, require a open heart that is searching for the fullness of Christ’s truth. And that is why our journey to God will never be complete in this life. I know this in a person-

al way because often I bring to Jesus through confession to my priest my own reluctance to embrace Christ’s authority in my own life. But even though I fail again, I am constantly reminded that he who is the Truth also promised that “the Truth will

set you free.”

