"That They May All Be One":
The Difference the Church Makes
By Thomas J. Nash

ISSUE: In the 1500s, Protestant Reformers claimed to have divine guidance in attempting to restore the order, truth and unity of the early Christian Church. Does the Bible and other historical evidence support their claim?

RESPONSE: No. As the Bible and other historical evidence testify, Jesus Christ founded the Catholic Church. While some of the Church's leaders and practices (not doctrines) were in need of reform in the 1500s, the Protestant Reformation erred in rejecting the visible papal authority that God provided to establish and maintain order, truth and unity in His Church (cf. Jn. 17:20-23). In seeking Christ without His Church, the Reformation created a vacuum of Church authority that has generated more than 20,000 Protestant denominations (listed in the Oxford University Press's World Christian Encyclopedia).

DISCUSSION: From the beginning of salvation history, God has used visible, centralized human authority to communicate His will, convey His blessings, and foster unity among His people. For example, there was Noah, the righteous head of a family (cf. Gen. 6:8, 7:1) and Abraham, the righteous head of a tribe (cf. Jas. 2:21-24). God made covenants with Abraham to make of him a great nation (cf. Gen. 12:1-3, 15), a great kingdom (cf. Gen. 17) and a universal blessing (cf. Gen. 22:15-18). He confirmed these covenants in the persons of Moses and David, and fulfilled them in Jesus, who established the Catholic Church.

God understood that simply communicating His truth—whether in written or oral fashion—would not be sufficient to safeguard truth and associated unity among His people. Given our fallen human nature, self-righteous anarchy is bound to occur in the absence of clearly established, God-given authority. So He appointed visible leaders throughout salvation history to protect His people when truth and unity were threatened.

This God-given authority proved crucial in dealing with the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. As recorded in Numbers 16, these three men led an uprising that threatened to undermine the authority of Moses (cf. Num. 12:7-8) and therefore the unity of the Israelite people. In seeking to bring "reform" to the people of God, the trio took advantage of the ecclesiastical crisis of their day: the trials and tribulations of wandering in the wilderness. Listen to the words of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, for they are eerily similar to the protests of the Protestant Reformers:

> [T]hey rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, 250 leaders of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men; and they assembled themselves against Moses and against Aaron, and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them; why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?" (Num. 16:2-3).

> "Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you must also make yourself a prince over us? Moreover you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us [an] inheritance of fields and vineyards" (Num. 16:13-14).

In asserting the governing equality of all the faithful and rejecting the "princely" primacy of Moses, Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and their associates threatened anarchy within the nation of Israel. They paid a heavy price—their very lives—for their rebellion against God (cf. Num. 16:25-33).

These men of the Old Testament and the Protestant Reformers made similar mistakes. Both rebellions denied that God had appointed human leaders to govern and intercede for His people. Consequently, both invoked the equality of all believers as a means to reject divinely established human leaders of God's people.

Both sought communion with God without the "encumbrance" of God's governance through His chosen human instruments. The rebellion of both disrupted communion with God and caused disunity among believers.

Nothing Succeeds Like Succession: Passing on Authority among God's People

Moses' teaching authority in the Old Covenant did not die with him. To maintain order and authority among His people, God arranged that this authority would be passed on to others, as Jesus Himself notes: "Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice" (Mt. 23:2).

Similarly, God arranged for the kings of Israel to succeed Moses in governing authority. To restore the kingdom of Israel, Jesus established the Church. But both the kings of ancient Israel and Jesus delegated their authority. In ancient Israel, we see that the righteous Eliakim *succeeds* the corrupt Shebna as the kingly or royal "steward" over the house of David (cf. Is. 22:15-25; cf. 1 Kings 4:6; 18:3). This steward's primacy of authority is illustrated by his possessing the key of the king's house and having the power to open and shut in the king's name. This Old Covenant Davidic kingdom was destined to fall (cf. Is. 22:25), yet Jesus, the Son of David, prophetically restored and perfected it (cf. Amos 9:11-12; Acts 15:15-18). In so doing, Jesus also restored and perfected the royal steward's role, with Peter and his papal successors wielding multiple keys of a much superior "kingdom of heaven," a kingdom against which not even the gates of hell will prevail (cf. Mt. 16:18-19; cf. Jn. 14:16, 16:13; 1 Tim. 3:15).

Peter would eventually reside in Rome, clearly taking on the preeminent leadership role associated with the restored office of royal steward (cf. Lk. 22:28-32; Jn. 21:15-17). His royal descendants became known as the Successors of Peter or "Popes," i.e., father figures like their Old Covenant predecessors (cf. Is. 22:21). Peter established Rome as the center of this divinely prescribed papal authority, which combines both general governance and teaching authority. "With that church, because of its superior origin," wrote St. Irenaeus about Rome in the late 2nd century, "all the churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world, and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the Apostolic tradition."[1]

St. Paul also affirms the New Covenant structure of authority, noting that the Church is founded on the Apostles (cf. Eph. 2:19-22; cf. 4:11-14), who were also known as bishops. In Colossians 1:18, St. Paul speaks of Christ as the "head of the Church," adding that Christ is "the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent." Christ is preeminent in the Church's government through papal primacy. St. Jude warns against threats to the Church's authority from New Covenant Korahs (cf. Jude 1:11), who effectively deny Jesus (cf. Jude 1:4-5) by opposing the Church's God-ordained structure of authority: "'In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.' It is these who set up *divisions*, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit" (Jude 1:18-19, emphasis added).

Great Apostasy in the Early Church?

Who were these Korahs of the early Church? Their number included Arius, who denied the divinity of Christ; Nestorius, who denied that Mary was truly the Mother of God; and Pelagius, who denied Original Sin and its effects, and discounted the need for grace in living the life of Christ and gaining heaven. Despite the efforts of these and other dissenters, Jesus has maintained His covenantal oath to preserve His Church from the gates of hell. Those who argue otherwise, saying that there was a Great Apostasy or massive defection of the faithful sometime in the Church's early centuries, effectively deny Christ's professed fidelity to preserve the Church. Further, there is no early Church evidence of a "Roman Catholic" exodus from the Church, neither from Christian leaders, nor from the anti-Christian Roman Empire, which one would expect to record and exploit so great an apostasy among Christians.

Many heresies are well-documented in the early Church, but not a "Great Apostasy" that generated the Catholic Church. To legitimize the Great Apostasy theory, distinctive Protestant doctrines emerge. *Sola scriptura* (the Bible alone) is a claim that there was never a governing papacy over God's word and the Church's life. *Sola fide* (faith alone) arguments assert that salvation is a onetime, irreversible event, rendering the Church and her sacraments useless as means through which God provides ongoing forgiveness and sanctification (e.g., Jn. 20:21-23). Finally, the Great Apostasy is conveniently posited to explain why there is no extra-biblical

evidence for distinctive, systematic Protestant teaching before the Reformation.

If Protestantism were true and Christ kept His covenantal oath of Matthew 16:19, one would expect a Protestant structure of authority and belief system that *preceded* and *endured* the Great Apostasy, providing a persistent protest against the misguided and fledgling Catholic Church. No such evidence exists. In addition, those who argue for the Great Apostasy have the unenviable task of explaining how and why God would basically abandon His people in the first centuries of the Church—pick any date for the Great Apostasy—until the time of the Reformation. The historical record illustrates that the Early Church, including the Fathers and ecumenical councils, understood and accepted papal primacy as the authoritative means that God established to combat heresy and maintain unity.

Rooting Out Dissent and Disunity Among the Reformers: Who has the Authority to Decide?

The *sola scriptura* or "Bible-only" model of Church authority proved to be the early undoing of the Reformation, as Martin Luther, Martin Bucer, and Ulrich Zwingli first learned. In a measure of Providential, poetic justice, these men's attempts to collectively reform Christendom fell apart over various teachings, including the Eucharist, the very source of unity that St. Paul preached (cf. 1 Cor. 10:16-17; Catechism, nos. 1369, 1396). Luther and Bucer affirmed the Real Presence in slightly varying non-orthodox ways, while Zwingli argued that the Eucharist is merely symbolic.

Indeed, how do you resolve disputes when everyone agrees that the Bible is the only God-given authority to judge them, but church leaders can't agree on everything the Bible allegedly teaches? Because of its rejection of authentic Church authority (cf. Mt. 16:18-19; 18:15-18; cf. 1 Tim. 3:15) Protestantism was doomed from the start as a truly effective means of restoring order in the Church (cf. Catechism, nos. 811-12). Indeed, denominationalism was the logical outcome of the Reformation. In 1981, Protestant demographer David B. Barrett chronicled the impact of the Reformation on Christianity. Drawing on more than 12 years of monumental, worldwide research, Barrett reported there were an astounding 20,800 Protestant denominations, "four times as numerous as the estimates made in 1968."[2] Some Christian leaders estimate that denominational figure to be 25,000 or 30,000 today.

While Barrett should be lauded for his scholarly precision in gathering denominational data, he falters in his interpretation. While, 20,800 denominations might seem like "sectarianism run riot," Barrett says, "it is what we would expect when Christianity is being spread among some 8,990 peoples speaking 7,010 languages in the modern world."[3] Yet, the Catholic Church, in achieving its ongoing mission to make "disciples of all the nations" (Mt. 28:18-20), has maintained unity for 2,000 years, uniting today thousands of peoples who speak thousands of languages, more than a billion people in all. The Catholic experience resonates with biblical provisions and expectations, for St. Paul speaks profoundly of the intimate unity of the Church, which is the Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-26). In addition, Jesus prayed that the Church would become "perfectly one" as He and the Father are one, "so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and has loved them even as thou hast love me" (Jn. 17:23). The Church teaches that her foundation and unity were achieved via Jesus' death and Resurrection and then manifested on Pentecost (Catechism, no. 1076). In contrast, the disunity of the Reformation contradicts Christ's prayer for Church unity in John 17. In fact, if the tenets of Protestantism were true, Christ's prayer for unity failed long before the 1500s, because contrary to the "biblical tradition" His Father established with Israel, Jesus founded a Church without establishing a human authority to rule upon inevitable disputes about God's Word.

Restoring All Things in Christ (Eph. 1:9-10)

In everyday life, *sola scriptura* protests notwithstanding, Protestant Christians act as if they believe in a pope or valid interpreter of Scripture, be it themselves, their pastor, etc. As soon as there is a dispute regarding the Bible's meaning concerning a particular issue like salvation, one person or group asserts its "authoritative" interpretation as *the* one the Holy Spirit intended (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16). Obviously, souls are at stake with such issues, and only the Catholic Church has the real, God-given Pope to maintain truth and unity. Some Protestants argue that the Catholic Church also suffers from disunity, citing public dissent among the Catholic faithful. Yet,

one must make a crucial distinction between disrespect of clearly established, God-given authority in the Church and the absence of any authority to adjudicate ongoing *sola scriptura* disputes among Protestants. As in the days of Korah, God provides visible, *unifying* authority for those who have "eyes to see and ears to hear" truth vs. error in Church disputes (cf. Mt. 13:16-17; Rom. 11:7-8; Catechism, nos. 84-87).

As the Council of Trent indicated, one should not deny the problems among Church leaders that served as an occasion of sin for—but not a justification of—the Protestant Reformation. But as the adulterous and murderous sins of King David (cf. 2 Sam. 11:2-11) could not abrogate the Father's covenantal commitment to the kingdom of Israel, so too the sins of Popes and other leaders cannot abrogate Christ's commitment to His Catholic Church, against which Jesus reminds us the gates of hell will not prevail (cf. Mt. 16:19).

In founding the Church, Jesus sent the Apostles as the Father sent Him (cf. Jn. 20:21-23), with God-given authority to govern His kingdom and mediate His salvation worldwide (cf. Mt. 28:18-20). Let us join Christ and His Church in that unifying mission, working for the restoration of unity among all Christians and the fruitful evangelization of all peoples worldwide. May His Kingdom come (cf. Mt. 6:10).

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[1] St. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies* 3:3:2 (A.D. 180-99), emphasis added; as cited in Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Church Fathers, Vol. I*, p. 90 (no. 210).

[2] David B. Barrett, ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia*: *A comparative study of churches and religions in the modern world AD 1900-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), preface.

[3] *Ibid.*

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