

There were many gospels current besides the four we now acknowledge, and a few other works like the epistles of Clement and Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas. Of these, several were regarded by certain of the fathers as parts of Scripture, and were publicly read in local churches. On the other hand, the Epistle to the Hebrews, Revelation, James, Jude, second Peter, second and third John, were called in question in some parts of the Church. It required much discussion to arrive at a final conclusion. But when the synods of Hippo and Carthage, A.D. 393-397, a list of authentic books was agreed upon and Pope Innocent I, and later Pope Gelasius (A.D. 494) confirmed this list, the discussion was closed; and for the first time the New Testament was capable of being bound up into one book as we have it now.

But how was this question settled after so long a discussion? Purely and simply by an appeal to the traditions existing in local churches where each document had been preserved, and by the authoritative verdict of the Church judging according to those traditions. Other historic evidence deciding the question in all its details, we do not possess. So that Protestants, in accepting the New Testament as it stands, are implicitly reposing the highest confidence in the authority of the Catholic Church in the fifth century; and some of them have candidly acknowledged this (cf. preface to the Revised Version). These facts seem fatal to the idea that Scripture was intended by Christ as His apostles to be the sole rule of faith; since our very assurance as to what the New Testament contains rests historically on the teaching authority of the bishops of the fifth century, the successors of the apostles commissioned and guaranteed by Christ.

The Apostolic Teaching Continues Down to the Present Day

Passing on through the ages, we find the same system at work. Down to the sixteenth century there existed in Christendom no other idea than this. The bishops were looked upon as successors of the apostles, and their unanimous teaching was regarded

as absolutely trustworthy — as truly representing the doctrine of Christ. The Church, as a whole, could not possibly fall into error; for this was guaranteed by the promises of Christ. And those who claimed Scripture in support of their new doctrine, and against the prevailing doctrine of the Church, were regarded as heretics and rebels against Christ, and against His authority delegated to the Church.

It was not until the 16th century that this state of things received a rude shock. The radical principle of the Protestant Reformation lay in the rejection of the living authority of the Catholic Church, and the substitution of the bible, interpreted by each individual, in its place.

Reviewing the consequences of this experiment, and the absence of all warrant for it in Scripture itself, and considering that it runs counter to the unanimous conviction of Christendom for 1500 years, it can only be prudent for Protestants to reconsider their position; and to ask themselves whether after all, the conviction of Christendom for 1500 years may not be right. If at length they come to this conclusion, their plain course will be submission to the authority of the Catholic Church.

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Pamphlet 298

The Bible or the Church

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This pamphlet has been written with a view of enabling non-Catholics to obtain concise and correct information regarding Catholic teaching. Those interested in its contents will have no difficulty in obtaining references to larger works by which to continue their inquiries.

How Catholics regard the Bible

Catholics cherish the Bible as the word of God. Still, they consider that the Bible was never intended for the sole and adequate Rule of Faith; partly because it is not a sufficiently exhaustive account of all of Christ's teaching, partly because its expressions of doctrine are often unclear and require authoritative interpretation. At the same time they believe that the New Testament itself points to another means provided by Christ for the preservation of His full teachings through all ages, and that means the authority of the Catholic Church. The facts alleged to show this will be frankly admitted by Protestants themselves, even if they are reluctant to agree with the conclusions drawn from them.

Christ Founded an Apostolic Teaching Body

We find that Jesus Christ, without saying a single recorded word about a written creed or code, appointed twelve apostles to carry on the work He had begun. Invoking the power, which had been given Him in heaven and on earth, he instructed them to go and teach all nations, baptizing those who believed, and teaching them to observe what ever He commanded. The apostles were sent, not as mere messengers, but as ambassadors bearing Christ's authority and power, and teaching and ministering in His name and person; so that in hearing them, men were hearing Him, and in rejecting them, they were rejecting Him (Mt. 28:18-29; Mk. 16:15; Lk. 10:16). Besides the office of teaching and baptizing, they were entrusted with the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and received a special power of the Holy

Spirit to remit and retain sins (Lk. 22:19; Jn. 20:21). In order that they might infallibly carry out this commission, Christ promised them the spirit of truth, which should lead them into all truth, and bring to their minds whatever He had said to them (Jn. 14:17-26; 16:13). Finally He promised to be with them in person, not for a few years or a generation, but for the indeterminate future; thereby seeming to imply that the apostolic order should last beyond the lives of its present members (Mt. 28:20).

In thus constituting the apostolic body, Christ was in reality constituting His Church. The Church was not mere collection of individual believers, but a definite organization, which was to be the pillar and ground of truth (1 Tim. 3:15). It was to be founded on a rock, and the gates of hell should not prevail against it (Mt. 16:18). The Church, taken as a whole, comprised the teaching body and a body of lay believers; but its essential constitution lay in the existence of that teaching body, authorized and guaranteed by Christ. Such was the original constitution of the Church; and as the Church was to last all ages, it is natural to suppose that it should always continue to exist according to its original constitution — that is to say, as an apostolic teaching body. The burden of proof lies on those who deny so obvious an inference. There are no signs that this organization was a temporary expedient, to die out after a few years, and leave a totally different system in its place.

How the Apostles regarded the New Testament

Following the career of the apostles as they carry out their work, we find these conclusions confirmed. There occurs no mention of any scheme for producing a written code to dispense with the authority of apostolic preaching. The apostles show no signs of regarding it as a duty to leave behind them a full written legacy of their teaching. They write to meet incidental occasions and local needs. The evangelists seem to think in an important matter to leave us, in outline, their recollections of Christ's life and character, but they make no pretense of giving us a complete scheme of His dogmatic

teaching. St. John himself declares the impossibility of writing anything like an exhaustive account of all that Christ did. There appears nowhere in the New Testament a consciousness that its writers were thereby supplying Christendom with the one sole and adequate rule of faith, which should supersede the need to appeal to their oral teachings. As far as we can gather, nearly all of the apostles were dead or dispersed before half of the New Testament was written. According to the verdict of history, neither St. Peter nor St. Paul were alive when Mark and Luke wrote. There is no clear evidence to prove that any of the apostles saw each other's writings, with one or two exceptions. None of them except the author himself ever saw the Gospel of John. Only St. John lived long enough to see the whole series, which make up the New Testament; but there is no evidence to show what he actually did see. The only clear allusion made by one apostle to another apostle's writings is that of St. Peter, who tells us how hard St. Paul's epistles were to understand, and how some people wrested them to their own destruction.

On the other hand, we find many illusions to Christian doctrine as derived from oral teachings. The Thessalonians are told to "hold fast to the traditions which they had been taught. Whether by word of or by epistle" (2 Thess. 2:15). Timothy, who had been ordained Bishop of Ephesus by St. Paul (cf. note at the end of 2nd Epistle, Authorized Version), is instructed to: hold fast the form of sound words which he had heard from his teacher among many witnesses"; "to continue in the things learned" (viz., "the gospel which was committed to his trust), "knowing from whom he had learned them," "and to commit the same to faithful men who shall be able to teach others," (1 Tim. 1:2; 4:11-16; 20; 2 Tim. 1:6, 13; 2:2; 3:10, 14; 4:2, etc.) all of which certainly stands in favor of the Catholic idea of apostolic authority transmitted to a line of successors. And against the Protestant idea of substituting the Bible as the sole and adequate rule of faith.

The Early Church Carries on the Apostolic System of Teaching

Still following the course of history, the Catholic view receives further confirmation. The various parts, which now make up the New Testament, were carefully treasured and read in the local churches where they were received, and it was only by degrees that copies were spread to other places, and the whole series came to be circulated throughout Christendom. Though held in the highest authority, we find no signs of the Scriptures being substituted for traditional teaching as a sole rule of faith. The bishops were regarded as the authoritative successors of the apostles, responsible for the preservation of Christian doctrine; and the people looked to them for the true interpretation of Scripture. Belief did not follow interpretation of Scripture, but interpretation of Scripture followed belief. When heretics cited Scripture in support of novel views, the fathers denied them the right to do so, reserving the interpretation of Scripture to the Church. On the other hand, the Church quoted Scripture against the heretics, not as the sole basis of its teaching, but as an inspired witness to its correctness. Moreover, it is remarkable how clear the Church was in its traditional teaching even before the evidence of Scripture had been fully discussed — I refer to such questions as the nature and person of Christ. What the heretics regarded as disputable on Scriptural grounds, the Church regarded as indisputable on grounds of tradition. In short, the general impression given by the history of the third and fourth centuries shows us still in operation the idea of an apostolic teaching body, authorized and guaranteed by Jesus Christ, to provide the rule of faith, while Scripture is still regarded as a witness to the correctness of the Church's teaching, but not as a sole and adequate rule of faith to be put in its place.

How the Contents of the New Testament were Determined

Moreover, during the first four centuries of the Church, it remained an unsettled question what belonged in the sacred Scripture and what did not.