

INFALLIBILITY

-- The Reverend D. B. Knox

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Religion is a subject in which everyone is interested because religion is a fundamental part and ingredient of our human nature. This is shown by the fact that there is no nation, nor tribe, known to history which does not have a religion; and the religions of the world at the present time are innumerable. It is not unimportant that in this jungle of conflicting religious beliefs we should arrive if possible, at the right one, because so much depends for our happiness now and hereafter, on our having a right view of God and of our relationship to Him. Now, of course, it is only God Who can tell us about Himself, and of how He regards us. If God is silent on these matters then we are left to our own human guesses which, as I say, have produced such an innumerable number of competing and contradicting religions.

But has God been silent? The Bible claims that He has not, but that in its pages He has spoken and that the Bible is the Word of God. How frequently we come across this phrase as we read the Bible, "Thus saith the Lord". And not only did the Word of God come to prophets and apostles, but Jesus Christ Himself is God's word to us. Jesus taught that He was the Son of God come into the world, not only to teach us the truth of God but also to be the One Who reconciles us sinners to His Father through His cross. Christians are those who believe that our Lord Jesus Christ spoke the truth about Himself and about Scripture, when He taught that both His words and the words of the Bible were the words of God.

Since the days of the first disciples, the Bible has been regarded by all Christians as being the Word of God written, of supreme and final authority in all matters which deal with what we should believe, or how we should live. There is no dispute amongst the Christian denominations on this point. Thus the Church of England in the first of its official Homilies states that it is God Who is the only Author of these Scriptures. The Presbyterian Church in the Westminster Confession states that the "authority of the Holy Scripture depended not upon the testimony of any man or Church but wholly upon God Who is Truth itself, the Author thereof, and therefore it is to be received because it is the word of God." The Roman Catholic Church, in the Vatican Council, has declared that the Scriptures are without error because God is their Author.

It is to Scripture then that we must go for our knowledge of God and of His relationship with the world. It is our infallible guide in what we should believe and how we should act, for the Scripture has been given to us by God for that very purpose. It is clear in its teaching, being, as the Psalmist says, a guide to our feet and a light to our paths, giving understanding to the simple. The Scripture itself teaches that it is sufficient, and needs no addition from Church tradition, or elsewhere, to make the man of God complete, completely equipped for every good work. However, as is wellknown, the Church of Rome has added alongside the Scriptures a second infallible authority, that is to say the Pope. The decision of the Vatican Council with regard to the infallibility of the Pope is as follows: "The Roman Pontiff when he speaks ex cathedra, that is when he defines a doctrine regarding faith or morals to be held by the universal church, speaks with that infallibility with which our Divine Redeemer intended that His Church should be endowed with for defining doctrine concerning faith or morals, and consequently such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are of themselves irreformable". The Roman Catholic Church makes a good deal of this theory of the infallibility of the Pope, and it is basic to its whole system nowadays. But you will notice that the doctrine is a novel one. For example, the Vatican Council from which I have quoted and which defined the doctrine for the first time, met only 90 years ago, in 1870. Up till then the infallibility of the Pope was not part of the Roman Catholic faith, and there were a great number of Roman Catholic bishops at the Vatican Council itself who were opposed to making it part of the faith then. A more important consideration is that this doctrine of papal infallibility is not taught in Scripture, which, as we have seen, is God's Word and is complete; so that what is not to be found in Scripture is not to be regarded as a truth of the religion in which God wants us to believe.

Nowadays Roman Catholics seek to establish a Bible basis for the doctrine of the infallibility of the Pope by referring to Jesus' words to Peter in Matthew 16. You will remember that our Lord asked His disciples what they believed about Him, and Peter replied "Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God". In response, our Lord said "thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church". Now as you know the name Peter means stone, and Roman Catholics

these days insist that Jesus meant Peter himself, rather than his confession of faith in Christ, when he said 'upon this rock I will build my church'. Now as you know the name Peter means stone, and Roman Catholics these days insist that Jesus meant Peter himself, rather than his confession of faith in Christ, when he said 'upon this rock I will build my church'; but there is no suggestion in the rest of Scripture that in this verse Jesus meant that Peter was to be the foundation of the Christian Church. Indeed we find that only a little later the apostles were quarrelling amongst themselves as to who was to be chief, which could hardly have happened if our Lord had indicated that Peter was to occupy this position. If we examine the evidence outside Scripture in the early Church we find little to support the modern Roman Catholic claim that Peter is the one meant by the "rock" on which the Church is built. Research shows that in the first 400 years of the church's life, 68 Christian writers referred to this text in Matthew. Only 18 of them thought our Lord meant St. Peter by the statement "upon this rock will I build my church"; the other 50 were of the opinion either that the rock was Christ or that it was the confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ, that would be the foundation of the Church. Interestingly enough, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent itself agrees with this last mentioned interpretation. In Session 3 the Council quoted this saying about the rock and applied it, not to Peter, but to faith in the doctrine of Christ as expressed in the Apostle's Creed.

A clear indication of the novelty of the concept of the infallibility of the Pope is given in the wellknown incident of Pope Honorius. This pope was excommunicated and anathematized by the 6th General Council in 681 A.D. for teaching heresy, and for three centuries thereafter all the popes at their election officially anathematized Honorius as a heretic. This surely illustrates the fact that the concept of the infallibility of the pope was unknown to the 6th General Council or the popes who succeeded Honorius. For whether or not Honorius was guilty of the heresy he was charged with, the fact that he was anathematized century after century for teaching heresy is a clear indication that the church of those days was quite unaware of the idea that the Pope was infallible and so could not err. Otherwise it would not so consistently have anathematized him for erring!

Not only is the idea of the Pope's infallibility a novel one, having been made part of the Roman Catholic faith only as late as 1870, and not only has it no foundation in Scripture, and not only was it unknown for many centuries in the Church; but it is also a plainly mistaken one, for it is not hard to point to popes who plainly have erred, not only Pope Honorius which the 6th General Council regarded as having erred in his teaching of the faith, but also for example Pope Eugenius IV who instructed the Armenians with regard to the sacrament of Holy Order in a way that is now plainly recognised to be wrong, and Pope Eugenius' teaching appended to the Council of Florence and incorporated in the Catechism of the Council of Trent and held in the Roman Catholic Church for many centuries, has now been abandoned and contradicted by that church. Or again there is the case of Galileo, whom the Inquisition, with the authority of the Pope, imprisoned, and compelled to deny what we all now know to be true, namely that the earth goes round the sun, yet Galileo was punished for teaching this, and the Church declared it to be heresy. Or again, the declaration of Pope Clement XIV who stated that "with certain knowledge and by the plenitude of apostolic power, we extinguish and suppress the Society of the Jesuits; and we declare to be for ever void and utterly extinct all and every authority of the said Society". This papal declaration has, as we all know, been falsified by history.

Thus the doctrine of the infallibility of the Pope is both a novel and a plainly false doctrine. Yet it is an error which has some very unfortunate consequences. Firstly, it discourages Roman Catholics from examining and testing papal utterances by the judgment of their own consciences, or by the testimony of Scripture. Persons who submit to this infallible authority will find that the judgment of their own consciences and of their own intellects will be paralysed and will atrophy. Moreover a very serious consequence is that the idea of papal infallibility distracts attention from the true infallible guide, namely the Word of God given to us in Christ, and in the prophets and the apostles, and written down for us by the power of the Holy Spirit in the Bible. This is the pure Word of God, the only infallible guide, which speaks with authority to our minds and consciences if only we will read it, and listen to it. Do not turn aside from the Bible, nor listen to any secondary authority that would claim infallibility. May we all read the Bible regularly and submit willingly to its plain teachings.