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THE CHURCH

by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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It must be admitted that the Christian Church is a remarkable body but it is only too easy to have erroneous views with regard to its character and nature and even apparently small errors may result in very profound divergences. It is rather like on the top of the Dividing Range, where, if a bucket of water is poured on one side it makes its way to the Hawkesbury and the Pacific, while a yard or two further West it flows towards the Murray and South Australia. So with regard to the Church, the error may seem small, but the results are profound.

There is the Humanist error of regarding the Church as merely an association amongst many other similar associations, and so overlooking its most characteristic feature, that it is essentially a divine and heavenly gathering in which the Lord of all, Jesus Christ, has promised Himself to be present. An error of this sort may lead us to regard church membership

lightly; but the fact is we cannot separate ourselves from the gathering of God's people in which Christ has promised to be present through His Spirit, without separating ourselves from God's blessing and His heavenly kingdom.

Another error equally prevalent to-day is to confuse the Church with the denomination. The word 'church' means 'a gathering'. We often speak of a building as a church and most of us recognise that this is not really a correct description because the Church is the assembling of Christians within the building and they would be just as true a Church if there was no building for them to assemble in but they met in the open air. However, it is not always so clearly seen that the denomination, to which we also give the designation church, such as the Church of England, or the Roman Catholic Church, or the Presbyterian Church, is no more the Church than the building is the Church.

private Roman Catholics to prefer to receive their doctrine from the profession of the Church, rather than through their own personal apprehension of the Word of God given to us in the Scripture. But the truth is that Church authority is not absolute, but relative; that is to say, the authority of the Church depends on the Church's relation to the Word of God which alone makes it possible for the Church to exist.

The relationship may be compared to the relationship of husband and wife, which is a favourite metaphor in the New Testament for the relationship of Christ and His Church. A true wife does not wish to be independent of her husband, but rather listens to and follows his word, while he as a true husband loves his wife, and gives himself for her. So, too, of the Church. Christ is its loving Lord, she is dependent on His Word and receives her authority from her communion and fellowship with Him. The life of the Church is not

one of identity with Christ, as though her authority were absolute; but it is one of communion with Christ, a communion based on faith. "I am with you always" said Jesus, and again "Where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst". He is with the Church, in the Church. But the Church is not Christ. It is her fellowship with Christ which gives the Church her authority. But this fellowship is a fellowship which depends on and is according to faith, expressed in obedience to the Lord of the Church and accompanied by ceaseless prayer and listening to His Word. The Roman Catholic error is that the authority of the Church is abstracted from this co-relation of faith and the Word of God, and is ascribed to the Church as though it were a static a priori gift.

In Roman Catholicism the promise to the Church of the leading of the Holy Ghost is regarded as falling essentially outside the relationship of faith, as though it were an

doctrinal decisions contradict each other, so at least one of them must have been wrong. Similarly, Pope Honorius in the seventh century was condemned by the Sixth General Council as a heretic in his teaching about the Person of Jesus Christ. .

If we turn to the texts of the Bible, with which Roman Catholics support the infallibility of the Pope, the most quoted one is in Matthew 16 where, in answer to Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God, our Lord replied that Peter was blessed because of this faith which God had revealed to him, and added "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church". Modern Roman Catholics regard Peter as the rock to which Jesus was referring, but this is not the majority view of the Fathers or ancient Christian writers, most of whom believed that the rock on which the Church was built was either Jesus Himself whom Peter had just confessed, or Peter's faith in Jesus, which comes to

much the same thing. Only a minority took the word to refer to Peter directly. It is interesting that the Council of Trent in Session III interpreted the rock, not of Peter, but rather of faith in Christ, which is also the protestant view. We must remember that the church's authority is dependent on its relation to the unshakeable rock, namely its faith in Christ. In any case the verse does not promise to the church infallibility in every detail of doctrine. There is no reference to this at all.

A second verse often quoted to support the infallibility of the Church is Jesus' promise to His disciples immediately before His ascension in Matthew 28: "All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo,

I am with you always, even unto the end of the world". This verse assures us of Christ's continuing presence. It does not speak of any infallible guidance, nor is the promise to the Church considered as an abstract whole, but rather it is a promise to every individual Christian, "I am with you always". It is a great comfort to know that Christ has promised to be always with us in every situation, yet we know from our own experience that this constant presence of Christ is not in itself a guarantee of our infallibility, nor is it any guarantee of the infallibility of the group or Church. There are no words in the verse to suggest such an infallibility. But note further that in this verse Christ has restricted the teaching task of the Church to what He has commanded: He said "Teach them to observe all the things that I have commanded you, and lo I am with you always". We cannot claim Christ's presence and power and assistance if we go one syllable beyond what He Himself has

taught. The authority of the Church rests in the Word of God which it ministers. Its ministry is to teach the Word of God, not to act independently of it, as though infallibility were promised through the teaching of a Church which did not have Holy Scripture as its basis. Once again, the authority of the Church is dependent on its relationship of obedience to Christ.

It follows therefore that the Church must be a listening Church, listening to the Word of God, before it can be a teaching Church. A fundamental mistake in Roman Catholicism is that it minimises the duty of the Church to listen and submit to the Word of God, and confers on the Church an independence over against the Word of God, so that it is thought that when the Church teaches, it has an independent infallibility which is not derived from the infallibility of God's Word written in Scripture. This view of the independent function of the teaching Church encourages

The denominational structure, insofar as it is distinguished from a congregation, never assembles, and the ministry of God's Word, which is the means which God uses for purifying and building up His church, is never exercised towards the office bearers of the denominational structure, in their capacity as office bearers. The church is controlled by the Word of God speaking to the consciences of the members of the Church as they are assembled to hear the Word. But the denomination is controlled by constitutions, synods and directives. Buildings and denominations are designed to assist the Church in its essential task of meeting or gathering together, in the name of Christ. But if the denomination with its efficient central organisation and its high ranking officers, whether called bishops, moderators, cardinals, presidents or archdeacons, is confused with the Church, the error is not slight. This confusion of Church and denomination is common to all the denominations; but it is

characteristic of the Roman Catholic denomination and has led Roman Catholics into the further error of conferring upon the Church (by which they mean the denomination) the gift of infallibility and, since the Vatican Council of 1870, this infallibility has been declared to find its expression in the head of that denomination, the Pope, so that Roman Catholics nowadays believe that when the Pope speaks in his capacity of teacher of all Christians, God does not allow him to fall into any error.

This view of papal infallibility is a new one, dating explicitly only from 1870. Before that it was hotly controverted by leading members of the Roman Catholic Church. Nor can it be held without falsifying history, for there are many examples in history of popes who have taught doctrines which are now heretical. For example, Pope Zosimus I in the fifth century declared the teaching of Pelagius to be orthodox and then later declared it to be heretical. These two

independent prior gift to the Church; but in Reformation theology the promise of the leading of the Holy Spirit is within this relation of faith and the Word of God. Thus the Reformation may be described simply as leaving the Bible open in the Church, that is amongst God's people, where it can be read, listened to and preached so that the Holy Spirit might guide through it. The true Church is always a listening Church and it becomes a teaching Church as a result of being a listening Church, listening to the Word of God. It has no independent authority, for it needs none; for the Word of God, if wielded by the Church, is more than sufficient. Indeed, God's Word is of absolute and infinite authority. The Word of God, of which the Church is the minister, is described by St. Paul in Ephesians 6 as the 'Sword of the Spirit'. It is a sword to defend the Church that uses it, and so is called by St. Paul the 'armour of God'; but it is also a sword for assaulting the

citadels of Satan. Jesus said "Upon this rock", that is upon faith in God's revealed Word, "I will build my church and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it". The gates of hell will yield when the Church wields the sword of God's Word for then it acts with an irresistible authority. The Church's authority is always related to the Word of God, of which it is the minister. When the Church acts or teaches apart from that Word, she has no authority whatever, but when she wields the sword of God's Word her authority is invincible; for in the Word of God is the authority of God. St. Paul added that prayer must go with this sword of God's Word. So the life of the Church should not only be a submission to the Word of God and teaching the Word of God, but it should also be characterised "with all prayer and supplication, praying at all seasons in the Spirit, and watching thereunto in all perseverance and supplication for all the saints" (Eph. 6:17,18).

Thus the Church, that is, the assembly of God's people, is entirely dependent upon its Lord, Jesus Christ, through faith. It has communion with Him, through faith in His Word and through prayer in His Holy Spirit. And what is true of the Church as a gathering of Christians is true of every individual Christian. We are dependent upon our Lord, Jesus Christ; our life must be nourished through ceaseless prayer and faith in His Word which we should hear and read for ourselves, for that Word, received by faith, will protect us from our spiritual enemies and will strengthen us and give us that divine authority by which we are able to break down in Christ's name all the strongholds of Satan in our environment.

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