

## Does the Church have to be Perfect to be Infallible?

By Steve Ray

Hello Scott:

I only have a few moments, but I will try to interact with your comments.

You wrote: >>As to your question of whether Jesus intended his people to be guided by a book alone or to leave a more substantial means of knowing the truth: I think that Jesus left the truth in the hands of the apostles.<<

And do you acknowledge that the Apostles left the truth and the authority in the hands of their successors, the bishops?

You wrote: >> Obviously there was no book at that time. I think that the Bible is the inspired work of the Holy Spirit and that all the truth you need to know for salvation is in the bible. I don't think you need to believe that Mary was immaculately conceived to obtain salvation.<<

Was there any indication given by Jesus or the Apostles that there *would* be a book? How long was it before such an idea was devised? And who decided that there should be a book and that it would be considered to be "inspired" by the Holy Spirit? Are you aware do the fact that the same Council of Catholic Bishops that made this determination, also made the determinations on the initial doctrines regarding Mary. Both were to be believed.

What must one do to obtain salvation? They must believe the word of God, which is bigger than just the Bible. I know this is true because the Bible does not make the claims for itself that have been attributed to it by the Church! Therefore, one must believe the word of God for salvation. Who determines what that word is? The Church has always taught that the Scriptures are true, that the Church is the pillar and foundation of the truth" and that we are to "listen to the Church". The Scriptures themselves never substitute the book for the Church. If we fail to believe the Apostles and those who succeeded them, the Bishops, can we obtain salvation?

St. Cyprian, one of the early ones you mention later in your response. In 251 A.D. he wrote, "The Lord says to Peter: 'I say to you,' He says, 'that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it. And to you I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatever things you bind on earth shall be bound also in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, they shall be loosed also in heaven.' And again He says to him after His resurrection: 'Feed my sheep.' On him He builds the Church, and to him He gives the command to feed the sheep; and although He assigns a like power to all the Apostles, yet He founded a single chair, and He established by His own authority a source and an intrinsic reason for that unity. Indeed, the others were that also which Peter was; but a primacy is given to Peter, whereby it is made clear that there is but one Church and one chair. So too, all are shepherds, and the flock is

shown to be one, fed by all the Apostles in single-minded accord. If someone does not hold fast to this unity of Peter, can he imagine that he still holds the faith? If he desert the chair of Peter upon whom the Church was built, can he still be confident that he is in the Church?"

We see nothing with the early Christians about finding the "truth in the Bible", rather it was truth in the Church through the apostolic succession. One needs only read Eusebius' History of the Church (325 ad) to see this loud and clear. The Church of today, with all its warts, is the same organic organism which Jesus told us to obey and heed.

Remember, there was never a golden age. Peter wrote and taught the inspired word of God, yet was flawed in many ways; Paul did the same and was also flawed in many ways. Their actions did not negate their authority or their inspired words.

You wrote: >>I think that it was Jesus' intent that the apostles preach the good news. He wanted them to do what they did, set up churches for those that believed in Christ and to administer to others.<<

Agreed.

You wrote: >>I believe that Jesus knew that the Bible would be written and that the letters contained in it, with the guidance of the holy spirit and of the early apostles, the church would grow in believers.<<

This is a big assumption based on the tradition you've received from the Church. You have no objective criteria for such an assumption other than tradition.

You wrote: >> But I believe that the earliest teachings of the earliest apostles are our best guides as to any other teachings not contained in the Bible. I think that as we have gone in time, that we can stray from the earliest teachings - what was most important theologically about salvation and redemption.<<

How many years should we allow for proper development of doctrine? Is there a deadline on such development? After what year would this doctrinal development cease or become invalid? What gave the early Christians authority to develop doctrine which is denied later generations? And frankly, who are you to make such a determination? I don't mean that sarcastically. I mean it honestly, and as an inquisitive man yourself, you will know what I mean by that question.

Remember that the "doctrine" of the NT canon was not "invented" until the late fourth century. The deity of Christ wasn't clearly defined until the fourth century and the Trinity not until the fifth century. Doctrine develops. It is not invented--it is unpacked. Nothing the Church teaches is contrary to Scripture and all of it is either explicit or implicit in Scripture. We believe in the Trinity, but such is never clearly taught in the Bible. It is developed by a deep study of the book within the Tradition it is meant to thrive in. Others, the Arians, Mormons, Jesus-only Pentecostals, JW's deny the Trinity because it is

NOT clearly taught in the Bible. You believe it because the Bishops of the Catholic Church hammered it out and developed that doctrine in the middle of the first millennium. You trust the Church for the Bible, etc., yet none of those things were done by the Apostles or their immediate successors.

You wrote: >>I also think that Jesus gave the first apostles the authority to teach and to perform miracles. With that authority, Jesus gave his apostles a great responsibility to treat all humans equally with dignity. That is why he told the apostles to go out to the whole world and not just minister to the Jews.<<

Really? Wasn't it Jesus who said in Matthew 15: 22-26, "And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and *began* to cry out, saying,

"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed." But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, "Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us." But He answered and said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and *began* to bow down before Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" And He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

Yes, he commanded them in Matthew 28 to go to the world, which I will comment on in a minute.

You wrote: >>Jesus was always ministering to those outside the mainstream of life: the lepers, the poor, the unwanted, the sick. You cannot have authority without responsibility, and you cannot have responsibility without authority.<<

It is ONLY the Catholic Church that has the history and reputation for caring for the poor. Only the Catholic Church produces a Mother Theresa. In many countries, even today, the Catholic Church is the ONLY source of medical and social care. She has always obeyed her Lord in this. Evangelicals have failed miserably, not only because they think getting saved is more important than caring for the poor, but because they can never get together with competing denominations to provide such service. The Church has been doing this for 2,000 years and even in Cairo she was the only voice in defense of Life. James Dobson asked, "Where were the Protestants?"

You wrote: >> The first apostles were responsible in carrying out their authority in caring for the same people, and even dying to carry out their responsibilities.<<

And they did so with varying degrees of success. Paul split off from Barnabas because of a great dissention. He offered Jewish sacrifices for cleansing after he wrote Romans and Galatians. I could go on, but the point should be obvious. You hold the successors of the apostles to a higher standard than you hold the apostles themselves. You hold the Church today to a higher standard than you hold the Church of the first centuries. Look at Corinth. Look at the churches in Revelation 2-3.

You wrote: >>Authority is not just making pronouncements about what you believe or what the truth is. It must be followed through with responsible actions or else you lose your authority.<<

Not so. Authority is invested in an office, not a person. And the authority of the office prevails even if the office holder fails to perform as expected. On a secular level Bill Clinton is an example. He is still Commander and Chief with more political authority than any man in the world, and yet you and I both know that he himself has failed to live up to the office. Yet, his signature is still the Law of the Land.

You wrote: >> I believe that the Catholic church over the years has lost its authority because it did not act responsibly: (inquisition, holy wars, missions, etc.). Had the popes and cardinals and bishops during these times laid down their lives, or at least made a physical attempt, in order to stop some of the atrocities that took place in the name of the church, then they would have shown responsibility associated with their authority. Mere letters and words dictated from on high does not show authority to me.<<

I disagree. And, I would suggest you read about these issues from the Catholic side of the story. If I am commissioned to find the truth about the country of Israel, as you are now commissioned to find the truth about the Catholic Church, it is good to interview all the various parties. If I go to Israel and only interview Palestinians, how object are my findings, how honest is my research? If you read biased Protestant and secular sources about the history of the Church and ignore her side of the story, you are not only disingenuous, but you will end up being deceived. I challenge you to get some good Church history books by Catholics. I can recommend some if you are interested.

You wrote: >>I feel that the Catholic church has become very legalistic with pronouncing which doctrines are “infallible.” <<

I would describe it not as legalistic but as careful. Peter was very legalistic when he overthrew the Jewish Law in Acts 15! He gave no room for dissent or a biblical investigation into the matter. He simply said, “No to the Jewish Law on circumcision, yes to my new determination.” My goodness, how authoritative can you get, especially for a man who acted hypocritically in Galatians 2? (Read my book on this passage). The apostles and their successors have been placed “in charge” and it requires a legal, even a legalistic aspect. Should we be legalistic about the definition of the Trinity?

You wrote: >>I may be incorrect, but the Catholic church says there are just a few doctrine of which the Pope has determined as infallible. This is very legalistic and opportune, in that the church can say that other pronouncements did not meet such and such legalistic requirements in order to be infallible. Hind sight is 20/20. I think that Jesus was fighting the very legalistic Jewish law that permeates from the Catholic church.<<

The fact of the matter is, since the definition of ex cathedra, there have been two official “ex cathedra” statements. There is a hierarchy of truth. We have gone over this ground before. A President discusses a baseball score (very low in authority); the President give a strong professional opinion to a local official (higher on the authority sliding scale); the President tells his staff they must do something (higher still); he puts in a legislative proposal with his weight of authority (higher still); he signs a law into the books or exercises his right to Executive Order (the highest). Is there not an obvious hierarchy of truth here? Should the Pope only be given an “on-off” switch and not allowed to have such a hierarchy within his office?

The Church has a divine and a human component to it. Just as Jesus was both divine and human, so is his Body, the Church. However, we are not without sin and infirmity as was he. The Church has been given the authority of teaching office. This authority of truth does not mean that Jesus will guard their every action. The Pope today goes to Mass weekly because he knows his sin and frailty. However, he also knows his authority to speak for God within the bounds of his office. He has the authority to bind and to lose, to forgive or to retain. Someone or thing must have this authority or we have the scandalous confusion in Christendom we see today. Luther would cringe and weep if he saw the result of his schism!

Luther wrote to Pope Leo X, ?I never approved of a schism, nor will I approve of it for all eternity, . . . That the Roman Church is more honored by God than all others is not to be doubted, . . . Though nowadays everything is in a wretched state, it is no ground for separating from the Church. On the contrary, the worse things are going, the more should we hold close to her, for it is not by separating from the Church that we can make her better. . . . There is no sin, no amount of evil, which should be permitted to dissolve the bond of charity or break the bond of unity of the body? (letter of Martin Luther to Pope Leo X, January 6, 1519, more than a year after the *Ninety-Five Theses*; quoted in *The Facts about Luther*, 356).

You wrote: >>On your question of how do we know what God expects us on contemporary issues: I believe that you would get a much better understanding of this by reading the Bible and possibly some early, early church pronouncements. Some of these topics are not mentioned specifically, but by reading the bible, you know what Jesus and God expect of you by reading subjects of a similar matter.<<

I would suggest you read a book entitled [By What Authority](#) by Mark Shea . It is a fallacy that we can go to the Bible to understand how to deal with contemporary issues. The proof is in the pudding. Can we go to the Bible to prove the NT is inspired? No. Is the Bible clear on masturbation and contraceptives? No. Does it give us any guidance on eugenics or cloning? No. There are passages in the Bible that seem to undermine the current Church teaching on Life. The Psalmist prays to smash babies’ heads against the rocks, a woman suspected of adultery is give a potion by the priest that may cause a miscarriage, a child in the womb is paid for with money if killed but the mother’s life

demands a life for a life. Where can we come up with a non-negotiable pro-life stance from the Bible alone.

And why do you attribute to the first Christians some sort of infallible charism? There was no golden age. Corinth was a mess, and “all those in Asia have left me”, Paul laments. What makes these first Christians trustworthy apart from an infallible magisterium (Latin: teaching office)?

And the proof is in the pudding. Look around you at your fellow Evangelicals (not to mention all of Protestantism). They are reading the Bible, writing commentaries and the bookstores are full of their books on every topic. Do they agree on what the Bible says? Can we lose our salvation? Good men disagree, both using the Bible! Is abortion, masturbation, contraceptives, cloning, divorce and remarriage, etc. acceptable? No agreement. Mass confusion. Each Christian ends up becoming their own infallible authority, determining for themselves what is true and biblical.

How did the Jews solve this problem in the OT? The Chair of Moses! His continuing authority successive and represented by the chair of Moses. I go into great detail with this issue in Appendix B of my book UPON THIS ROCK. In Deut. 17, is moral or theological questions were brought to Moses, he had the final word! even though the People had the Law and could read it for themselves.

You wrote: >>On your question of how did the individual Jew know what God required of them in their daily lives: I think that that is pretty clear in the old testament. “To love thy God and no other God.” I think that any Jew that lived by the ten commandments was going to do all right. It was only when they got bogged down into the Jewish law that they encountered problems. Was lifting your foot on the sofa considered work on the Sabbath. The Jews needed to get back to the core message from God, and that’s what Jesus was up against. Same thing has happened with the Catholic church, they have become bogged down with Marian theology, that they are leaving people out of the church who might otherwise join.<<

When God says “No work on the Sabbath”, what does he mean? Is that up to every individual to decide for themselves? To one it may mean staying in bed all day, to another it means no eating or changing diapers. What does it mean? How do the people of God know how to apply it to daily life? They have a teacher. You said it was easy to understand from the OT. I agree and here is what was done in the OT:

Deut. 18:13 “It came about the next day that Moses sat (or, took his seat) to judge the people, and the people stood about Moses from the morning until the evening.

14 Now when Moses’ father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, “What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as *judge* and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?”

15 Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire of God.

16 “When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor and make known the statutes of God and His laws.”

17 Moses’ father-in-law said to him, “The thing that you are doing is not good.

18 “You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.

19 “Now listen to me: I will give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people’s representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God,

20 then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do.

21 “Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place *these* over them *as* leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens.

22 “Let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear *the burden* with you.

23 “If you do this thing and God *so* commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place in peace.”

24 So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said.

25 Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens.

26 They judged the people at all times; the difficult dispute they would bring to Moses, but every minor dispute they themselves would judge.”

And after the death of Moses, any Jewish rabbi will tell you, as is demonstrated in the OT, the successors of Moses’ authority carried on the “magisterium” so that the people of God always knew. And when Jesus came to His people, who did he come to? The Jews who continued to honor the teaching office of Moses as demonstrated in the “seat of Moses”.

The Catholic Church is really very Jewish!! :-)

You wrote: >>On your question of how people would learn about the trinity with the Bible alone, as I said, the early teachings of the church would have merit with me. As you go out in history, though, I believe the church has been corrupted not only in its responsibility to itself (to keep the church above rebuke), but to the truth of what a Christian needs to believe for salvation and church participation (not Marian theology), and has therefore lost its authority.<<

The early Christians you have placed on a pedestal were themselves flawed and erroneous in many ways. They were no more to be trusted, from your standpoint, than those who followed them. This is a very weak argument against the magisterium and we have covered this in some detail above.

You wrote: >>As to John 10:16, seems to me that Jesus is implying that the sheepfold will include all people, not just Jews but gentiles. He will be “the good

shepherd” whom through salvation will be attained. Through Jesus, not through the church. One flock, one shepherd, means that all Christians, whether former Jew or Gentile, will listen to the good news of Jesus in order to attain salvation. Jesus states over and over in John 10 that “he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out,” “his sheep follow him because they know his voice,” “they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” Calling sheep by name: isn’t this the grace of Jesus Christ calling us to know him. It seems clear to me from these passages, that salvation is through knowing our good shepherd, Jesus Christ, not believing the Mary ascended directly to heaven or not. We can listen to Jesus through prayer with him and reading his word.<<

Quite true that Jesus is the shepherd, but who did he appoint as a visible shepherd when he left for heaven? He appointed Peter in John 21. And how would that “one flock” remain one flock? Today it is scattered to the four winds. A visible unity? Hardly. The world says, “Why should we believe you. You say you have truth but you can’t even agree among yourselves!” Jesus said the world would be able to acknowledge that the Father sent the Son based on this visible unity. Where is it outside the Catholic Church? It isn’t. And that is one of the main reasons I am a Catholic. For all the Church’s warts, she is the only visible manifestation of the teaching, unity, and witness of Christ in a visible way to a watching world. The unity must be visible or it is worthless.

And listening to Jesus ... let’s think about that. Outside the tradition in which we each function, how do we know we are interpreting the book correctly and how do we know we are hearing him correctly. Many people hear many things, and many are “led by the Lord” in divergent and contradictory ways. How do we know without a living family and shepherd to guide us? Jesus did not leave his Book and Spirit alone. He left the Church which is the pillar and foundation of the truth, with the authority to bind and loose, to excommunicate, to legislate and adjudicate. That is the meaning of “bind and loose” in the contemporary terminology of the Jewish rabbis of Jesus’ time.

If your brother offends you (Mt 18) who do you take him to? The Bible? To the Lord in our prayer closet? If I go to the Baptist church and he goes to the Assemblies of God, which church do we take it to--his or mine? And if we decide to take it to his, what if they censure him. Can’t he just go to the local Nazarene church instead. With your “spiritual” perception of the flock and sheep, where is the Church that we must listen to or be considered excommunicated?

You wrote: >>John 17:21 says “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” This is precisely the “responsibility” that Jesus gave to the early church. It was Jesus’ prayer that the behavior of the church would mirror him. In not carrying out this important responsibility, the church has alienated people from God because they think the Catholic church, among other churches, mirrors God. And this is where the authority of the church has been lost.<<



No. Jesus nor the Church have claimed to mirror God in everything. Do you function impeccably as a father? Will your kids say that you perfectly reflect God? Are some good Christian dads so weak that they actually lose their kids? I know many such fathers. You have a flawed view of what the Church should be. The Church is a hospital for sinners, only secondarily a sanctuary of saints. You may be infallible as a father, but does that mean you are perfectly reflecting the Heavenly Father. Our kids grow up understanding you are the authority, but you are imperfectly so in your actions. Christians are taught the same thing about the Church and they can refuse to understand or perceive the teaching and if they leave it is to their own peril, just as it will be if your children do the same with you.

You wrote: >>Sometimes you sound like what Jesus put into place is exactly how it's supposed to look today. From John 17:21, it sounds like this is his wish and prayer. But just as Adam and Eve spoiled a beautiful plan, so has the Catholic church and other churches in spoiling Jesus' plan. I believe that Jesus' plan of the church here on earth is alive and well, but the unity of one church has been disintegrated by sin and the devil.

I disagree. The Church has fulfilled His plan and is the only one that has held strong to the teaching of the apostles, the morality of the apostles (against abortion, divorce and remarriage, etc.). Adam and Eve spoiled a beautiful plan, but the Church has not because she has a divine promise that the gates of hell would not prevail against her and that he would be with the Church (actually with the apostles, the hierarchy) until the end of time.

In Matthew 28 we find the Church described: "Notice first the threefold "all"--all nations, all things, all days. There has been plenty of disputation over the word "Catholic". But this one phrase of Our Lord's should have prevented most of it. Catholic, we say, means universal; but that is merely to exchange a Greek word for a Latin one. Examining the word universal, we see that it contains two ideas, the idea of all, the idea of one: universal is some sort of unity embracing all, some way of having all in one. But all what? All nations, all teachings, all times. So Our Lord says. It is not an exaggerated description of the Catholic Church. Not by the wildest exaggeration could it be advanced as a description of any other (Theology and Sanity, pg. 284).

You wrote: >>As to whether I think the apostles were perfect. Of course not. From reading Paul, it seems he still didn't know whether he had attained salvation.<<

And if Paul didn't, can we claim we do? We have a moral certainty, but can we have an absolute certainty. Colossians 1:21-23 says, "21 And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, *engaged* in evil deeds, 22 yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach— 23 *if* indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

This is one of those sticky issues that good Evangelicals cannot agree upon. The Church has always stayed on track with this issue. It is a beautiful thing.

Paul was not perfect, he poorly reflected God. In Acts 13 he and Barnabas were called by the Holy Spirit with the words, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

Yet, not long hence we read in Acts 15: 39 And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. 40 But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.” What God has joined together in ministry, let disagreement divide :-)

Yet Paul was speaking infallible for God while setting a bad example. He taught that we are no longer under the sacrificial system of the Jews, yet, in Acts 21 we read, “Then Paul took the men, and the next day, purifying himself along with them, went into the temple giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them.”

Why do you believe Paul and his infallible teaching when he has shown himself to be such a bad example in various ways? Why do you hold his successors to a higher standard?

You wrote: >>Thanks for you interest in me. I really appreciate the time you have given of yourself. I really am an objective person, but these types of issues are a real stumbling block for me.<<

Scott, I take an interest in you because I liked you from the start. You like to think about these things and I know that you will make a marvelous Catholic someday. We need guys like you and I invite you to join us! Plus, a united family, both at home and in the Christian world is something worth fighting for and investing time in. God bless you and your lovely wife and may His eyes continue to shine upon you!

I am leaving tomorrow for four talks at a conference in Alberta Canada so I will be away from my computer for awhile.