

# Do We Hear God Through A Man or a Message?

We differ with the Catholic Church on many issues, but the crux of these differences is authority. Should believers rely on the Bible as the only and final rule of faith and behavior, or a Church which Jesus imbued with the authority to teach? Here is a brief examination of these two approaches.

## **The Authority of Peter**

Some read Matthew 16:18-19 to suggest that Jesus established Peter as the head of His church. The implication is that Jesus elevated Peter to be "The Vicar of Christ," that is, a stand-in for Jesus Himself upon this earth.

Another doctrine, called "Apostolic Succession," teaches that this authority is passed down from one bishop of Rome to another throughout history.

The Catholic Church does not teach that Scripture is unimportant; rather, it teaches that Scripture is only one part of God's revelation to mankind through Peter and his successors. The Catholic Church does not admit that Church doctrine ever contradicts Scripture; only supports it.

"Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal... As a result the Church ... does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, sections 80-82).

The Catholic Church points to the advantage of having an earthly representative of Christ; unlike the confusion among the Protestant denominations, one voice declares doctrine. The Catholic Church also argues that since the Church preceded the Bible, it enjoys preeminence.

## **The Authority of the Bible**

Many call this view sola scriptura, a Latin phrase which means "by Scripture alone." This is a fairly accurate phrase, but many use it in a negative way, to suggest that its proponents are, in effect, worshiping an inanimate book. Those who accept sola scriptura insist that the eternal God revealed His truth at a finite point in history, through men whom He chose to be eyewitnesses of His glory; and that God caused them to record their inspired words for all

generations. They reject all teachings, from any source, which conflict with the Bible.

Many suggest that it's unnecessarily stifling to follow a document that is almost 2,000 years old. But God claims that His word is equally applicable in all cultures and times (Isaiah 40:8), and will not be changed until the return of Jesus. Despite the minor errors that have crept into the text over the centuries, the Bible is entirely trustworthy, and represents the complete revelation of God.

### **So, Which is the Correct Source of Authority?**

1.) Matthew 16:18-19 can be read in a very different way. It is much more likely that Jesus was indicating Peter's confession of the true nature of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, to be the foundation upon which He would build His church; not Peter the man. Now, this discussion eventually leads to a study of the word "stone" in Greek (and even Aramaic), and the specific tenses of the Greek verbs in verse 19. But even without scholarly information, the passage does not place Peter in such a lofty position. Neither does the rest of the Bible. Peter never holds himself up as the source of such authority or primacy (Acts 10:26, Gal. 2:11, 2 Peter 3:15). One would think that if the Bible is the product of the Popes (as is alleged), they would have packed the book with clear and convincing statements!

2.) On the other hand, the Bible is packed with claims of its own inspiration (Eph. 3:1-5, 1 Thess. 2:13, 2 Tim. 3:16-17). Furthermore, the Bible says that authority resides in established truth, and never in a person, not even the same person who delivered that truth (Gal. 1:6-9).

3.) No passage in the Bible teaches or even hints at Apostolic Succession. The Catholic Church must argue that there is an unbroken line of succession from one Bishop of Rome to another, from Pope Francis today all the way back to "Pope Peter" in the first century. But the record is spotty before the sixth century. Also, there's little evidence that Peter spent time in Rome (unless "Babylon" in 1 Peter 5:13 is a code word for Rome), much less served as a bishop there, much less the only bishop there. Many ancient writers suggest he was brought there to be crucified. The Catholic Church overlooks questions about the legitimate line of Popes, such as the Avignon Papacy (1309-77) and the "Antipopes" of the Western Schism (1377-1417).

4.) Catholic Tradition really does contradict Scripture, not just supplement Scripture. Doctrines such as transubstantiation, infant baptism, celibate shepherds, and a New Testament sacramental priesthood, are in direct conflict with the teachings of the Bible.

5.) The Pope, in practice, has been involved in all sorts of anti-Christian behavior. Now, the Catholic Church never suggests that the successors of Peter have to be perfect to be authoritative. But the Church claims that these men are miraculously chosen as the Vicar of Christ, the Shepherd of God's Church, and are given the authority to issue infallible

pronouncements. At the very least, this claim is made suspect by the behavior of some of the Popes, such as Alexander VI (1431-1503), who, by all accounts, purchased the papacy, murdered his opponents, sold positions for gain, and sired seven illegitimate children.

6.) It may be true in one sense that the church predates the Bible. But only if we think of the Bible as a way of packaging the revelation of God. The proclaiming of the gospel certainly preceded the church, and serves as the basis of the church. The Apostles and prophets declared the truth of the gospel verbally, through the Spirit (John 14:25-26, 15:26-27, 16:12-13). They began that work early (Luke 24:47) and people were added to the church (Acts 2:41) on the basis of hearing.

7.) We have an example of the sola scriptura approach in the way God expected His people to treat the Old Testament (Deut. 4:2). Treatment of the New Testament is the same (Rev. 22:18-19). Whenever Jesus had to settle a religious dispute, He appealed to the authority of the written word, saying things like, “have you not read?” (Matt. 19:4) and “it is written” (Matt. 4:4). So did the Apostles (Acts 17:11-12, 18:28). Jesus condemned tradition which competed with the word of God, even though it was from religionists (Matt. 15:3).

8.) The word is a seed (1 Peter 1:23). One is a member of the church which Jesus established not because he has an unbroken genetic relation to that church, but because he has heard and obeyed the same gospel.

It's pretty easy to see which argument I find more persuasive. Let us look to the message preached, never the man preaching. —J. Guzzetta