

The Burden of Proof



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March 26, 2007 - Feast of the Annunciation

Dedicated to Saint Michael the Archangel, my patron saint. May he continue to defend the Church and those who search for the fullness of Truth that abides in Her.

I often hear Protestants, especially pastors, rail against the Catholic Church and the other traditional Churches. They say that the Catholics have “erred from the Truth” or that they have “forsaken the Gospel”. Although it is a common accusation, it is rarely supported with any kind of evidence. If Protestants want to be taken seriously, they must support their claims. As is the case in law, those who bring charges against the Catholic Church must satisfy the burden of proof.

The ball lies in the court of the accusers. It is their job to prove what they claim, and not just make thoughtless assertions. When did the Catholics go wrong? Were the first believers Catholic, or was the Church a later invention of man? If Catholicism was an invention, what did the early Church believe, and where are the records of what they believed? Protestants and Evangelicals must answer these questions if they want to establish any sort of history in the first millennium. The answers, however, must be more than responses in the affirmative or negative. The burden of proof lies on their shoulders. They must prove that what they believe is what the Apostles believed. Otherwise, they had no reason for breaking with the traditional Church.

Protestants and Evangelicals, however, will never be able to demonstrate that they are the keepers of the faith of the early Church. In fact, several factors would obstruct them from accomplishing this goal. These hindrances include factors of both an internal and external nature. The internal issues, such as the disgusting state of disunity among the Protestant sects, can be resolved. Although that will be a difficult task, it can be accomplished. On the other hand, they would have a lot of explaining to do regarding people, groups, and beliefs that are far beyond their limited history of existence. They must account for the lack of Protestant theology in the early Church Fathers, as well as explain away the Catholic theology that so dominates the writings of those first millennium Christians: Catholics, schismatics, and even those who succumbed to heresy included.

The first obstacle Protestants and Evangelicals face in establishing themselves as the true Church is the disunity among the various denominations. In the sixteenth century, there were only a handful of Protestant sects that were united only in their opposition to Rome. From the beginning, there were disagreements over fundamental doctrines. Protestants and Evangelicals will say that they agree on the ‘fundamentals’. The truth, however, is that the differences between one denomination and another are

extremely important. The result is that Protestantism will leave you believing that there are several ‘truths.’ For example, Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli fought over the nature of Christ’s presence in Holy Communion. Luther taught that the bread and wine was not “mere bread and wine, [but] the true body and blood”¹ of the Lord. Zwingli, on the other hand, said that the Lord’s Supper is only a memorial meal. These two views are extremely opposed to each other. Another fundamental difference between various denominations is the issue of baptism. What are the effects of baptism? Is it necessary for salvation or is it just a proclamation of faith? Can it be administered to infants or is it a ‘believer’s baptism’?

Why would Christ leave us such a variety of "truths"? Why would He make things so confusing that we cannot tell which is the real Truth? He didn't. He founded the Church - the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church - to guide us, and teach us His Truth.²

The lack of unity in the Protestant denominations means that they cannot be the continuation of the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church. There can only be one Church and one truth. Jesus himself has said that He is the Way, the **Truth**, and the Life. As there is only one Christ, there is only one truth. Jesus’ prayer as recorded in Saint John’s gospel demonstrates how

¹ Luther, Martin. *The Large Catechism*: XIV, On the Sacrament of the Altar. Available through Project Wittenberg at <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/catechism/web/cat-14.html>

² Jerge, Jessica. “Disunity Among Christian Sects.” *Catholic Girl*. Available online at: <http://catholicgirl06.blogspot.com>

there must be unity in the Church. We find this unity in the truth, and through the truth, we are sanctified. In Christ's prayer for the Church, he first prays for the apostles. "Holy Father, keep them in thy name which thou has given me; that they may be one, even as we are one."³ The following verses show that Our Lord was praying first for His apostles. The apostles were to preach the truth, and in that preaching of the truth they would be kept as one. They would be kept as one even as the Father and Son are one. The unity of the Trinity is the most profound unity, even beyond description.⁴ Jesus continues in His prayer, praying also for those who would believe in Him through the preaching of the apostles, "that they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee"⁵ Again, Jesus expresses this idea of a Trinitarian unity in the Church. The Protestant denominations are not in full union with one another and therefore cannot claim to be the Church.⁶

³ St. John 17:11, The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version

⁴ The unity described here can properly be called a Trinitarian unity, although the third Person is not explicitly mentioned. The Holy Spirit is included, because Jesus mentions three times the love the Father has for Him and that He has for the Father. Saint Augustine's *De Trinitate* says that the Holy Spirit "intimates to us a mutual love, wherewith the Father and the Son reciprocally love one another." (*De Trinitate*, XV:17:27) The *Catholic Encyclopedia* clarifies this, saying, "He proceeds from the Father and the Son as Their mutual love"

⁵ St. John 17:21

⁶ The Protestant denominations are not Churches. Baptized Protestants, however, are "incorporated in Christ and thus are in a certain communion, albeit imperfect, with the Church" (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Dominus Iesus*)

*“The Christianity of history is not Protestantism. If ever there were a safe truth, it is this ... To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant.”*⁷

A convert to the Catholic Church from Anglicanism, the Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman was convinced by his studies that Protestantism did not extend into the early history of the Church. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find traces of any Protestant thinking in the Church prior to the second millennium. Protestants will argue *sola scriptura* all day long, but if no Christians believed in *sola scriptura* before the Reformers, there is not much of a point to argue. If Protestants fail to establish a record of their beliefs in first millennium Christianity, they will end up with the following trilemma:

- 1) The records of belief in Protestant/Evangelical theologies in the period between AD 100 and the 16th century are either missing or destroyed.
- 2) The Protestant/Evangelical Christians that made up the Acts 2 Church were suppressed before they could record their beliefs, the ‘doctrines of devils prevailed’, and nobody saw the light until the Reformation.
- 3) The Protestant/Evangelical theologies did not exist until the Reformation and those few pre-Reformation rebels.

A fourth possible option could be put forward: that there was a minority, a remnant of true believers that did not record their beliefs, yet kept the Faith

⁷ Newman, John Henry. *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. “Introduction, 5” Available online at <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/development/introduction.htm>

alive while the Pope was leading the rest of Christendom to hell. The remnant was a very reclusive lot, and kept to themselves while the Catholics fought against Arianism, Nestorianism, Monophysitism, the Muslims, and set out evangelizing the world with their wrong doctrine.

The first option, that there is no extant documentation of what would be considered modern Protestant or Evangelical beliefs from the first millennium, is highly unlikely. We have today the extensive writings of orthodox Catholics: from the Didache in the late 1st century, through the Ante-Nicene period in St. Ignatius, St. Irenaeus, St. Polycarp, St. Justin Martyr, St. Clement, St. Athanasius, and the obviously Catholic ecumenical councils. There also exists, however, the writings of men like Tertullian and Origen, who started off as orthodox Catholics, but eventually fell into some type of heresy. Though even in these cases, one would have to find specifically Protestant/Evangelical theology.

If option one is not the case, there is the second case which is just as unlikely. The idea that the Catholics suppressed the true believers and continued unchallenged by the truth until the sixteenth century is severely flawed. Scripture, history, and the Reformers themselves will expose this choice as impossible.

First of all, Christ promised that His Church would never be overcome. “Thou art Peter, and upon this Rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”⁸ Christ promised Peter that Satan would never defeat the Church. Jesus also promised that He would send the Holy Spirit to “abide with [the Church] for ever.”⁹ These promises mean that there is no way that the Church would be able to be conquered by anybody, at any moment in time and for any period in time. On the contrary, after Jesus left, the Holy Spirit would “teach [the Church] all truth.”¹⁰

Even if Christ had not promised that the Church could not be destroyed, and the Christian Church was consumed by Catholicism, there would be no return possible for the Christian Church. Our Lord founded the Church; man did not. He built Her on a firm rock, the “pillar and ground of the truth.”¹¹ Saint Peter was that rock, who was firm in Christ, the cornerstone. Putting aside the ridiculous idea that that Rock could be destroyed, it would be impossible to rebuild it. Many Protestants and Evangelicals claim that they are “going back to the roots” of the Early Church. Therefore, if they claim that the Early Church was replaced with Catholicism, they must also claim to be rebuilding the Church that was

⁸ St. Matthew 16:18

⁹ St. John 14:16

¹⁰ St. John 16:13

¹¹ 1 Timothy 3:15

intended by Christ. They, however, are not building the Church. The Church is Christ's Mystical Body, and She cannot be replaced by the invention of mere humans. Protestants and Evangelicals who make this claim of going back to the 'roots' of a 'more simple' 'Acts 2 Church' should especially consider this point, and ask themselves if they really know what they are trying to do.

Furthermore, a shift in Christianity from the 'true Church' to the Catholic Church entails a precise moment in which the transition occurred. A gradual period of time over which the Church lost Her doctrine is impossible. One would have to look at the time of Constantine and before, because the Christianity supported by Rome was definitely Catholic.¹² So once again, it falls on the shoulders of the Protestants to show when Christianity separated itself from its historical roots and became the Catholic Church. There would have to be a single, short period of time in which the Church lost its original teaching. This is because from the Church's foundation in AD 33 to Constantine's Edict of Milan and the Council of Nicaea, less than 300 years pass. There was no time for a gradual chipping

¹² Not to say that every bishop and Christian was in perfect ecclesial union with the Bishop of Rome (how we can define a Catholic in the modern sense of the term), but that the majority of their theology (hierarchical Church, sacraments, devotions to saints) was of the Catholic Church. Indeed, there were multitudinous heresies and schisms that wrought the Church in the Ante-Nicene period. None of them, however, addressed the same contentions as modern Protestants or Evangelicals address.

away of the truth. It took the Anglican Communion 400 years to change its position on contraception, so imagine how long it would take to invent a sacramental system, devotion to saints, purgatory, and a hierarchical leadership system with a supreme pontiff at the head.

The problem is, there does not exist such a moment in the early history of Christianity. In this 300 year period, Catholic writers such as Saints Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Clement, and Hippolytus wrote about and defended many of the teachings of the Catholic Church. Their witness to the Catholic Church will be talked about later, but it bears noting that these men believed in and some died for a Christianity that had a priesthood and episcopate, a sacrificial Mass, devotion to the saints and Mary, and most certainly did not reflect Protestant theology. The fact that some of these men, known as the Apostolic Fathers, were disciples of the apostles themselves shows their close connection to the teachings of Jesus. Since these men continually wrote throughout the 300 year Ante-Nicene period, it is evident that there never was a certain point in that time when a ‘Great Apostasy’ occurred.

Thirdly, the problem of disunity once again rears its ugly head: which set of Protestant beliefs belongs to the early Church? That question would

have to be resolved first, because there is no way that Jesus and the apostles held all the various and contradicting beliefs as true. Only one distinct set of beliefs could be held by the apostles, as the Holy Spirit “taught [them] all things, and [brought] to [their] remembrance” all that Christ taught them.¹³ But there is not only an issue of one denomination’s beliefs against each other. Throughout the past 500 years, overall Protestantism has seen many changes in its own doctrine. Prior to the 1930’s, the vast majority of the denominations taught that birth control was immoral. When it comes to the Virgin Mary, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Wesley all defended her perpetual virginity- well into their Reformation careers.¹⁴ Some even called her “ever Virgin Mary, Mother of our salvation... pure and unsullied” (Zwingli) and “mother of God” (Luther). As Protestants cannot even keep their own doctrine straight throughout their short history, it is clear that the movement is built not on the Rock, but on sand.

Ignoring the ‘fourth choice’, which some extremely unreasonable people actually do believe, there is only one other choice: in the first millennium, the Church never resembled any of the modern day Protestant or Evangelical groups. For this reason, Protestants rarely study the history of

¹³ St. John 14:26

¹⁴ See here: <http://ic.net/~erasmus/RAZ460.HTM>

the Church prior to the late Middle Ages. It is stupid to think that only the writings of Catholics and near Catholics survived, or that the Holy Spirit withdrew His protection over the Church for some 1,500 years. As will soon be seen in some of the writings of the time, the early Church began Catholic and the true Church has stayed Catholic. Protestants and Evangelicals already have two strikes against them: their disunity and the lack of a theological record of their own. Protestants will never be able to successfully paint the Catholic Church as the denomination-gone-astray, as their own reason for existence outside of the Catholic Church, the historical Church, will be called into question. The extensive Catholicity of the Early Church will provide the third and final strike.

Protestants will say that the Catholic Church added false doctrines to the Truth or that they paganized Christianity. As I said before, they rarely give a point in history when this happened, what happened to the Christian believers who refused these additions, or how true Christianity returned hundreds of years later. A close examination of the Early Church Fathers, however, will show that the Christians of the Early Church believed in the

Real Presence, a sacramental system with a priesthood, devotion to saints, and the primacy of the Bishop of Rome.¹⁵

Very few Protestants believe in a physical presence of Christ in the elements of a communion service. Instead, some believe in a spiritual presence, while others view the celebration as a memorial meal. As this is such a relatively universal belief in Protestant and Evangelical circles, it is amazing to see the universality of the belief in a real presence in the Ante-Nicene Church. Saint Ignatius of Antioch, who was a student of the Apostle John, wrote about some people who held heterodox opinions, including those who “do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ.”¹⁶ Saint Ignatius' proximity to the apostles adds much to the worth of his testimony. He was not alone, however. Saint Justin mentions food being turned into the body and blood of Jesus by a Eucharistic prayer.¹⁷

Linked to the Real Presence in the Eucharist is a sacramental system with a sacramental priesthood. By the second century, the roles of bishop, priest, and deacon were well defined and in use throughout the Church.

Again, Saint Ignatius gives proof to the existence of a key Catholic doctrine:

¹⁵ Although I have made a close examination of these issues in the writings of the Early Church Fathers, I do not aim to show **extensive** proof of their existence here. Instead, I will offer some excerpts from various writers of the first few century of Christianity showing that the Church believed them. Other articles on my site will provide more proof and further discussion on these issues.

¹⁶ St. Ignatius of Antioch. *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 6:2. (Written in the year 110- 80 years after the ascension!)

¹⁷ St. Justin Martyr. *First Apology*, 66.

“Take care to do all things in harmony with God, with the bishop presiding in the place of God, and with the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles, and with the deacons, who are most dear to me, entrusted with the business of Jesus Christ.”¹⁸

Saint Clement of Alexandria, who lived in the late 2nd century and early 3rd century, wrote:

Even here in the Church the gradations of bishops, presbyters, and deacons happen to be imitations, in my opinion, of the angelic glory and of that arrangement which, the scriptures say, awaits those who have followed in the footsteps of the apostles and who have lived in complete righteousness according to the gospel.¹⁹

In addition to the priesthood, the Early Church Fathers wrote about baptismal grace, confirmation (the laying on of hands), and confession of sins to the Church.

Even though Luther and other Reformers held Mary and the saints in high esteem, Protestants have neglected the great opportunity given to us that is the intercession of saints. Of course they ask their fellow Christians on earth to pray for them, but they seem to think that God cannot allow those in heaven to continue praying for the Church Militant. Saint Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, says that in the Mass the priest mentions the saints so that

¹⁸ St. Ignatius of Antioch. *Letter to the Magnesians*, 2.

¹⁹ St. Clement of Alexandria. *Miscellanies* 6:13:107:2.

“through their prayers and supplications, God would receive our petition.”²⁰

Saint Methodius, a bishop of Olympus (in modern day Turkey), begins a most beautiful prayer to the Virgin Mary with: “Hail to you forever, Virgin Mother of God, our unceasing joy, for to you do I turn again.”²¹ Most certainly, the Early Church believed that they could pray to the angels and saints without being idolatrous pagans.

As much as the Protestant reformers and even the Orthodox would want to argue the point, it is clear that the early Christians believed that the Bishop of Rome had great authority. The first extra-biblical proof that the Bishop of Rome was to lead the Church comes in fact from the fourth pope, Clement I. To the Corinthians he wrote, “But if certain persons should be disobedient unto the words spoken by Him through us, let them understand that they will entangle themselves in no slight transgression and danger.”²² Clement wrote to the Corinthians, even though he was not bishop in that city. Also, the epistle was written around A.D. 80, while the Apostle John was still alive. This, along with the fact that the Corinthians gladly accepted this instruction and even read it in their churches years later shows that both the Pope and the Church in Corinth knew the extent of his authority.

²⁰ St. Cyril of Jerusalem. *Catechetical Lectures* 23:9.

²¹ St. Methodius. *Oration on Simeon and Anna*, 14.

²² Pope St. Clement I. *Epistle to the Corinthians* 59:1

Protestants and Evangelicals have a hard time explaining away the overwhelming evidence of the Catholicity of the Early Church. Because of this and because they cannot find much of their own theology in the Early Church, it is rare to find one of them interested in Patristics. As shown above, though, they must choose one of the other options in the trilemma, or they will have no justification for breaking with the established Church. But I have stated my case. The ball now lies in the court of the accusers. They must satisfy the burden of proof. They must now answer these objections and explain why they should follow a 500 year old set of beliefs, why they should ignore 1500 years of already established tradition. They must answer the question: why have *they* forsaken the fullness of the Gospel?