

## THE SOURCE OF TRUTH AND UNITY IN THE CHURCH - PART I

"Remind them of this, and warn them before God, that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:14 & 15 NRSV).

### Introduction

"When he (Jesus) entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Today, there are over 20,000 different, separate, and separated Christian groups in the world, with a new group starting every five days (*Encyclopedia of Christianity*). All of these groups claim to preach and teach the truth of Jesus Christ, all supposedly based on the Word of God. The Lord spoke to my spirit sometime back, "You could shut down 95% of the churches in the United States, and it wouldn't make any difference." What an indictment! I have shared this with church leaders and others, and it didn't elicit anything except a knowing nod at best. Evidently, those think they are in the 5%! People rightly ask each of these 20,000 groups, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Every fellowship or faith community needs to honestly confront these questions if it is to do the work of Christ as he commanded it to be done. If they are doing what Jesus wants, why aren't they doing it in unity with the others? If truth and unity are from Christ, why isn't it evident in his Church? Part I of this series will look at what Jesus and the Apostles have to say about the Church that Jesus founded. We must get rid of the man-made and self-established churches!

### The Word And Intention Of Jesus

When Jesus was about to ascend to the Father, he said to the eleven, "*All* authority in heaven and on earth has been given to *me*. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey *everything* that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you *always*, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

In these instructions, we find the passing of visible authority from Jesus to his handpicked Apostles. They were to go forth to teach, not on their own authority, but on the authority of the one who had it and who would always be with them, Jesus. They were to teach *everything* that he had taught them, making and baptizing new disciples who would then carry on his work.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus promised that, after he was gone, he would send the Holy Spirit, who would bring to remembrance *all* that he had taught them and who would guide them into *all truth*. Thus, after Jesus ascended, the Apostles and their first disciples knew what was true because they had the Old Testament along with what the Apostles said Jesus taught them. Later believers, who had not seen or heard Jesus in person, learned about him through the testimony of the original Apostles and disciples. They knew something was trustworthy because it was written in a letter from an Apostle or from someone who had been taught by an Apostle.

The first Apostle to whom Jesus gave his authority was Peter. When Jesus asked them who they said he was, Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For, flesh and blood has not revealed this

to you, but my Father in heaven. And, I tell you, you are Peter (Greek *Petros*), and on this rock (Greek *petra*) I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give *you* the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever *you* bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever *you* loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:16-19). This is a personal delegation of authority to Peter by Jesus, different from the later delegation of authority to the other Apostles. Because these verses have been the source of much controversy in the Church, (it may be appropriate to ask why this has been so unless it is a matter of jealousy), it is important to take a very close look at them.

Simon Peter was the first in authority over the Apostles. He is always the first one mentioned when they are together, or the first one addressed, so he was evidently perceived in this way by the other Apostles and the gospel writers. In Scripture, God often gave a person a new name to indicate a new status or position. Abram's name was changed to Abraham; Jacob to Israel; later Saul became Paul. In the Old Testament, the name "rock" was used only as a name for God, and never for a human being. Now, Jesus is calling Peter the Rock.

Did Jesus mean what he said, that he was delegating God's authority to Peter, or was he only speaking symbolically? A key lies in understanding the language that Jesus used. It is important to note, here, that, while the New Testament was mostly written in Greek, Christ certainly would have spoken in Aramaic, the common language of Palestine in his time. In that language, the word for "rock" is *kepha*. Several times in Scripture, Simon Peter is referred to as "Cephas". What Jesus most likely said, then, was, "You are *Kepha*, and on this *kepha* I will build my Church." As a result, there is no distinction between the two references to "rock" as there seems to be in Greek. In Aramaic, the word *kepha* has the same ending whether it refers to a rock or is used as a man's name. In Greek, however, the word for rock, *petra*, is feminine in gender. It would have been inappropriate to give a man a feminine name, so the translator puts a masculine ending on it, and there is *Petros*. This probably is the underlying cause of the misunderstanding of this passage as Jesus intended it to be understood. One cannot argue effectively from the Greek.

The next thing Jesus promised is that "the gates of Hades (or Hell) will not prevail against this Church, established on the faith and the person of Simon Peter. What does Jesus mean by Church? Does he mean only a nebulous, invisible, worldwide spiritual fellowship of those who are truly born again, regardless of institution, tradition, or creed? Millions of Christians and their leaders, of drastically different traditions and beliefs, are convinced that their particular fellowship or denomination is, in fact, the "New Testament" Church, the truest expression of the Church established by Jesus and that, by implication, all others must be impersonators, or at least disillusioned. Yet, none of these agrees on what the Church is other than somehow it is the "Body of Christ". Is this confusion what Jesus intended when he said that *he* would establish *his* Church?

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus led his Apostles in prayer: "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me so that *they may be one as we are one*...I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will believe in me *through their word*, that *they all may be one*. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, *may they also be one so that the world may believe that you have sent me*...I in them, and you in me, that they may become

*completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:11, 20 & 21, 23 italics mine).*

Given the shameful, contradictory disunity in the Church today, have the gates of Hades prevailed against the Church? Is Satan successfully destroying the Church of Christ through disunity? No! What Jesus asked in his prayer must be true. Therefore, *his* Church must have been established on Simon Peter, must *be* unified, and must *be still* standing strong against the onslaught of the gates of Hell even at the present time.

Finally, Jesus said to Peter, "I will give *you* the *keys of the kingdom of heaven*, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). Here, Peter was singled out for the authority, later given to the Apostles as a whole (John 20:23), that provides for the forgiveness of sins. Only God can forgive sins. Jesus forgave sins by divine authority, and his authority was challenged. Jesus passed this authority on to Peter and the Apostles, and on to their successors, and this authority has been challenged. Peter alone received this authority in a special sense, and he *alone* was promised something else, "I will give you *the keys to the kingdom of heaven.*" Was Jesus out of his mind? What did he mean?

In ancient times, the keys were the hallmark of authority. To be given the keys to the city, whose main gate was locked at night and unlocked in the morning by the one who had the keys, means to be given free access to and authority over the city. Mayors still do this symbolically, even today, though the meaning of this seems to have been lost since our cities don't have gates. Peter was given the keys to the *heavenly kingdom itself!*

This symbolism for authority is found elsewhere in Scripture. Isaiah says, "On that day, I will call my servant Eliakim, son of Hilkiyah,...I will place on his shoulders the *key of the house of David*: he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open" (Isaiah 22:20, 22). Who was Eliakim? And, why was he important? Second Kings 18:18 says, "When they called for the king, there came out to them Eliakim, son of Hilkiyah, *who was in charge of, or master of, the palace.* Isaiah prophesied that the keys of the kingdom of Judah would pass from the king, David's descendant, to Eliakim, the *overseer of his household.* This points forward to Jesus, the Messiah, the *overseer of God's household.* Then, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus the King, the son of David, gives the *keys he possesses* to Simon Peter, designating him as *master or overseer of his household, the Church.* According to Revelation 1:18, these keys are also the *keys of Death and Hades*, which is why the gates of Hades, or Hell, can never prevail against the Church.

The bottom line of this, then, is the same question that Jesus posed to his disciples at the beginning of these verses, "Who do you say I am?" (Matthew 16:15). Did he *say* the above, or was the writer of the Gospel lying and putting words in his mouth? If Jesus did say it, did he *mean* what he said, or was he just trying to make Peter feel good? If he *meant* what he said, do we *believe him or not?* Or, do we prefer *our own interpretation* of what he said?

### **The Testimony Of Paul**

The Apostles knew what was true because they had walked with Jesus, and he had taught them.

But, what about Paul's authority? He hadn't seen or heard Jesus like the Apostles had. His authority as Apostle is based on his powerful conversion experience on the road to Damascus, where he heard and saw the risen Christ. But, why did the Christians, who once knew Saul as their enemy and persecutor, eventually accept his authority to teach truth and to write epistles that expected his obedience?

In Galatians 1:18, Paul reminds his readers of the reason his gospel is to be trusted as opposed to those preaching a "different gospel". "After three years, I went up to see Cephas (or Kepha) and remained with him fifteen days. But, I did not see any other Apostle except James, the brother of the Lord. After fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas...I went up in response to a revelation. I laid out before them (though only in a private meeting with the *acknowledged leaders*) the gospel I proclaim among the Gentiles in order to make sure I was not running, or had not run, in vain. When (those leaders) saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised, (for he who worked through Peter making him an Apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas (or Kepha) and John, who were *acknowledged pillars*, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised" (Galatians 1:18 & 19, 2:1-10).

Paul is here establishing to his readers that his gospel is to be accepted because his authority had been confirmed and established by the original Apostles. And, this chain of authority went on. In Paul's Second Letter to Timothy, he tells Timothy, "What you have heard from me through many witnesses, entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others well" (2 Timothy 2:2).

Jesus passed his authority to the Apostles, who passed it on to men like Matthias and Paul, who passed it on to men like Timothy, who then ordained others by the laying on of hands, who could then ordain others. This is what the Catholic Church has always called "apostolic succession". A man could not just *decide* that Jesus was calling him to preach and then go off and start his own Church. He had to be tested over time, authorized, and sent by the Apostles or by one of their representatives. Paul proclaims, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. But, how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And, how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And, how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And, how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent" (Romans 10:13 & 14).

Belief was based on what was *heard*, nor read, since the epistles and gospels hadn't been written yet. People heard the gospel proclaimed by preachers, but not just any preachers. There were many self-proclaimed apostles, preachers, and teachers. Preachers were *sent* by those who had the authority to send them. A man was not authorized to preach unless he had been disciplined and sent with the Apostolic authority of the Church.

Paul and Barnabas continued teaching and preaching the word of the Lord. Some of Paul's teaching was included in his letters, which were read in all the churches he founded and which later became New Testament Scriptures. But, the written letter did not supplant his spreading of the Apostolic deposit of faith through oral tradition. Paul tells the Thessalonians to "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our

letter" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). The gospel message and Apostolic traditions were spread *primarily* through *the spoken* word and only secondarily through the *written* word. The Apostles reminded the early Christians of "the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you the good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven" (1 Peter 1:12).

Paul wrote to Timothy, "I am writing these instructions to you so that you may know how one ought to behave in the *household of God, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth*" (1 Timothy 3:14 & 15). Later, he wrote to Timothy again, "All Scripture is inspired of God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness so that *everyone who belongs to God* may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16 & 17). When Paul wrote this, the New Testament, as we know it, had not been collected. Probably most of the Gospels had not been written yet. Therefore, the only Scripture to which Paul could be referring here was the Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets. When the New Testament writers quoted the Old Testament, they used the Greek translation, called the Septuagint. So, Scripture here must literally mean the Greek Old Testament.

### **Conclusions**

"So, then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold on to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). According to this, the Christian faith was passed on from Jesus to the Apostles to local preachers approved, ordained, and sent by the Apostles or one of their representatives, such as Timothy and Titus, who preached or taught the people by word of mouth and by writing. Paul asserts here that more was communicated in his sermons and public teaching than he was able to record in his few letters that now make up a major part of the New Testament.

Therefore, it is inaccurate to conclude that only what is in Scripture, as we now know it, is essential and sufficient. Paul said we should hold to the traditions taught orally as well as written. Paul says again, in First Corinthians 11:2, "Maintain the traditions, just as I handed them on to you." Earlier, in the same letter (4:17), he wrote, "I sent you Timothy...to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church." It was to this Timothy that Paul also said, "What you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2).

Thus, in context, Paul teaches, "Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it (for Timothy, this meant Paul, or his parents, or others, but not from some as yet uncollected New Testament letters or gospels) and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (which had to be the Old Testament Scriptures). All Scripture (for Paul, the Old Testament; for us also the New Testament writings) is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

"We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For, he received honor and glory from God the Father when that unique declaration came to him from the majestic

glory, 'This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven when we were with him on the only mountain. Moreover, we possess the prophetic message that is altogether reliable. You will do well to be attentive to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until day dawns and the morning star takes rise in your hearts. Know this, first of all: there is no prophecy of scripture that is a matter of *personal interpretation*, for no prophecy ever came through human will, but rather human beings *moved by the Holy Spirit* spoke under the influence of God" (2 Peter 1:16-21).

It is the duly appointed and ordained representatives of Christ in the Church who gave us both the traditions and the Scriptures. It is the Church, through her duly appointed and ordained representatives, that gave, and continue to give us, the sure and trustworthy interpretation of the traditions and the Scriptures so that we can be kept from errors that so often arise from private interpretation. It is these private misinterpretations and opinions that have so often led to heresies and false doctrines, both in the Apostolic church and even to the present day. We still see a multiplicity of opinions and interpretations, even of the same Scriptures and doctrines, among the various fellowships and Christian faith communities today, not to mention the various cults and sects. And yet, in our pride and self-righteousness, we point fingers at one another for being the ones who are teaching the false doctrines.

The same writer warns us: "false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them--bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Even so, many will follow their licentious ways, and because of them, the way of truth will be maligned" (2 Peter 2:1 & 2). So, to prevent this, the writer tells us, "I exhort the presbyters among you, as a fellow presbyter and witness to the suffering of Christ and one who has a share in the glory to be revealed. Tend the flock of God in your midst, overseeing not by constraint but willingly, as God would have it, not for shameful profit but eagerly. Do not lord it over those assigned to you but be examples to the flock. And, when the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you younger members, be subject to the presbyters. And, all of you, clothe yourselves *with humility* in your dealings with one another, for 'God opposes the proud but bestows favor on the humble.'" (1 Peter 5:1-5).

The Church that Jesus founded is still one, united by the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit who was given at Pentecost. After the first years of the Church, after the Apostles and their immediate disciples were dead, after their letters had been read, copied, and passed around from church to church, how did Christians dispersed throughout the Mediterranean, Europe, and Asia determine what was true? The New Testament as we now have it was not finally completed until late in the 4th. Century. We will take a look at this in Part II.

--Patrick J. Hession