

Authority of the Church

(by Bob Pulliam)

Where does the church get authority for anything said or done? Some say that the church is the final authority on earth. God has authorized it to make His decisions. In fact, many people have this concept of the church in their minds. But this is not what the Bible reveals. In the struggle for "who has the true religion", some have decided that it must reside with the oldest church. For them, it is kind of like an inheritance thing. They can trace their family (church) tree all the way back to the apostles, and that makes them the original. Reminds me of the old fellow with an ax chopping wood out in the grove. A young man walked up and noted how old his ax was and commented on it. The old man said, "I've had this ax for sixty years... Chopped a lot of wood with it." The young man was astonished, and said, "My, but it's held up beautifully!" "Yup!" said the wood cutter. "I've only had to replace the head twice and the handle four times."

These religions have replaced the head and handle of truth and proceed to tell us that all is the same. They would have us believe that some authority resides in them because they can trace their "roots" back to the beginning. Well, let's take a look at this claim...

Modern Claims to Authority Vested Within the Church...

The Catholic Claim...

The Catholic Church makes the claim that their Pope is actually successor to the apostle Peter. This claim is based on the wording of Matthew 16:18 & 19, where Peter is given the keys of the kingdom. Their claim is that Peter was the first Pope, and that the church was built on Him, and thus built on the Pope. Each Pope, then, is an unbreakable lineage of successors from Peter to the present time. The actual lineage of Popes is drawn out by Catholic theologians from Peter to the present, offering dates for each. But here lies a problem. Saint Urban (222 - 230) is doubted to have ever existed (Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. XV, p209). There is no pope listed from 304 to 308. "A great many of the biographies of the predecessors of Anastasius II are full of errors and historically untenable" (Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. IX, p224). Anastasius II was Pope from 496 - 498. So for the previous 430 years, we cannot trust the Catholic's list!

Then the next problem is the activities of these "Vicars of Christ on Earth". The Catholic Encyclopedia tells us that Callistus "obtained great influence over the ignorant, illiterate and grasping Zephyrinus by bribes" (V III, p184). The following Popes were declared to be heretics after their deaths: Saint Liberius (352 - 366); Honorius (625 - 638); John XXII (1316 - 1334); Gregory XII (1406 - 1416) was guilty of lying and committing perjury (Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. VII, p1); Paul V (1605 - 1621) was infamous for his condemnation of Galileo for his Heliocentric theory (which is now accepted as fact, even by Catholics). (Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. VI, p544). If Galileo was a heretic then, but is considered right now; then Paul V was "right" then, and a heretic now!

We can clearly see that the unbroken succession of popes was continually broken, if not by blank spaces, then by "heretics" who couldn't have possibly been thirty-second cousins to Christ's representative on earth.

The Baptist Claim...

Some Baptists make the claim of succession for the authority of the Baptist church. Where the Catholics use the Papal line of succession, the Baptists use a congregational line of succession. It is their claim that the Baptist Church can be traced back, from congregation

to congregation, to the first century. Looking back through history, one clearly sees this to be patently false. The term "Baptist" cannot be found attached to any people prior to 1641. All attempts to do such are futile struggles to twist history into a hole much too small.

The Truth About Matthew 16:18 & 19...

We mentioned the use of Matthew 16:18f above. Let us look at what Jesus truly said. Both the Catholic and Baptist Church err in their assumption that Matthew 16 is teaching an uninterrupted procession (either of Popes or churches). What did Jesus mean when He said that the gates of hell would not prevail against it? First, what are the gates of hell? The word translated "hell" (hades) in this passage is also found in Acts 2:27 & 31. The word here actually means, "the place of departed souls". It is a totally different word than that used at Mark 9:45 & 47, referring to eternal torment. The doctrine that Jesus went to hell for three days is a fanciful invention of theologians. In addition, Hell (as the place of eternal torment) is nowhere spoken of as a kingdom having gates (as some would represent it). It is actually a place created for the punishment of the devil and his angels (Mt 25:41). However, the word at Matthew 16:18 refers to the place we know of as "Hades". It is the receptacle of the dead, and lends itself well to this idea of gates in it's holding the dead within it's confines. The point that Jesus was making is not that the church would be established and never vanish from the earth for a short time. Jesus was saying that death could not prevail over His establishment of it, for He would rise from the dead. He would go to the hadean realm (realm of the dead), but it's gates would not hold Him.

The New Testament on Authority and the Church...

The Head of the Church...

The sectarian's view of the church places it's head on earth (Pope; council; convention; synod; etc). The Bible places the Head of the church in heaven, and divides no power away from that Head. "And He is the head of the body, the church..." (Col 1:18) "And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all." (Eph 1:22f)

So how does Jesus exercise His authority upon the earth, over the church? The very way ignored, denied, and perverted by religions today: The Bible. It is attacked, not only by the atheist, but by the "clergy" alike. They cannot accept it because it vies for their power.

The Apostles' Place in Jesus' Church...

Was Peter placed preeminently above the other apostles? After all, Jesus did give him the keys of the kingdom! But the same promise is made to the other apostles in Matthew 18:18. In addition, there was not to be one apostle above the others (Lk 22:25f). And if Peter was Pope, where did Paul get off rebuking him in Galatians 2:11ff? The apostle's message was not the word of men backed by God. It was the word of God preached by men (I Th 2:13). Then there is the one time when Peter is given the chance to exercise his authority as Pope, because a problem has arisen in the church. Does he do it? No, because he has no more authority than the other apostles who were present on that occasion (Acts 15). All that Peter did say was in relating what God had done through him in the conversion of the Gentiles. God had already decided the whole matter; and we will find that such is true concerning the organization and work of the church today.

Conclusion...

The first century church itself possessed no authority, but rather existed and operated by the authority laid down in Christ Jesus. There were no governing bodies; no councils; no synods. Jesus was the only head of the church that He had built.

For the church of Jesus Christ to exist today, it must have Jesus as its only head. The revealed word of God provides His will concerning its work and organization. A church belongs to Jesus only when it follows the will of Jesus. Some would fall away from the truth (Acts 20:28ff; I Tim 4:1-4). They would be able to trace their existence back to the true church of the first century; but such would not make them legitimate. The same is true today. Even if a church could trace a lineage all the way back to the beginning; it would not validate their claim to any authority. It also would not validate them as the church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Such can only be determined by a loyalty to the word of Christ as revealed in scripture.