

A Treatise on Institutional Authority in Christianity

Christian Theology

Number 301

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The Roman Catholic Church has for centuries claimed exclusive and absolute authority over Christian Doctrine, the forgiveness of sins, and the transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. The Church taught that the authority was granted when Christ commissioned Peter:

“So now I say to you: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven.” Matthew 16:18-20, The Jerusalem Bible

The long standing interpretation was that the authority invested in Peter was personally transmitted to succeeding bishops through the act of consecration. The doctrine was called “Apostolic Succession” and the intent was that every Catholic Bishop, of every age, would be able to trace his authority through such acts of consecration to Peter, hence to Jesus.

The word *church* was the traditional translation of the Greek word *ek-klesia*, however, *church* and *ek-klesia* communicated very different concepts of organization. *Church* was a formal word which denoted a formal institution. *Ek-klesia* communicated an informal assembly of people, more like a gathering. A better rendition of the passage would have been, “. . . you are Peter and around this rock I will gather my people.” The language was clearly informal and unlike language that would constitute a formal investiture of authority. *Ek-klesia* appeared nowhere else in the Synoptic Gospels, and, most notably, was absent from 1 & 2 Peter. Wouldn't Peter have made some reference to such an important event? . . . and why was there no record of Peter demonstrating that formal authority in Acts, or any Epistle? The Church steadfastly insisted on literal acceptance of the traditional Biblical language in that important passage, but then took exactly the opposite position on the issue of Jesus's brothers. Jesus was said to have brothers in Matthew 12:46, Mark 3:31-35, and Luke 8:19-21. The brothers of Jesus are identified as James, Joseph, Simon and Judas in Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3. Paul specifically refers to, “. . . James, the Lord's brother.” in Galatians 1:19. Yet the Church was adamant in its insistence that *brothers* could not possibly have meant brothers as in sons of the same mother. For Jesus' Mother, Mary, was without sin and could not have engaged in ordinary human intercourse.

Regardless of the debate over the precise meaning of *ek-klesia*, Jesus himself showed no regard for such a commitment to Peter when he confronted Saul on the road to Damascus, well after the purported commissioning, and a few years after his resurrection. (Acts 9:1ff) Saul, later to become the Apostle Paul, had murdered Christians and was intent on murdering more Christians in Damascus when he was knocked off his donkey by Christ. Yet Christ forgave those sins instantly without asking Peter's permission, informing Peter of his action, or showing any concern at all for Peter's opinion on the matter. Further, there was no evidence Peter recruited, baptized, or consecrated any of the great leaders of early Christianity, nor was there any evidence that any of those leaders cleared their teaching and/or theology with Peter, or any other Bishop of Rome. Yet from the vantage point of the High Middle Ages such scholarly nit-picking was trivial. The *ek-klesia* had become the imperial Church with the practical authority to declare whatever doctrine it chose. It chose the imperial model, and left it to others to ask exactly how the ragtag gathering of men that followed Jesus mutated into the golden crowns, long robes, and basilicas of a later age.

The transformation didn't happen during the period of the Apostolic Fathers. That first 300 years of Christianity was characterized by explosive growth, and religious gatherings almost exclusively in homes. Authority derived from individuals raised up in the manner of the Apostle Paul, and infused with intelligence and charisma. They proclaimed their vision and/or theology directly to an unstructured Christian culture. To say the least, there were arguments over doctrine and struggles with heresy, yet there was no single authority to which they deferred. The bishops of Constantinople, Antioch, Damascus, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Rome were comparable in stature, and Alexandria, not Rome, was the intellectual center of Christianity.

Christianity changed considerably after Constantine established universal religious toleration with the Edict of Milan in 313 AD. In 318 AD he gave Christian bishops the authority to render legal judgements in his name, and that judgement was made official by the application of the "emperor's seal," with a ring made especially for that purpose.¹ Constantine also turned over to the Church the buildings constructed throughout the empire for the specific use of the emperor for an audience with the local citizens when visiting that particular area. Such buildings were rectangular in shape with a raised platform and throne at one end for the emperor. The throne was replaced by an altar, and that configuration became standard for Christendom. In 325 AD he convened the Church Council at Nicaea, and acted as mediator during the proceedings. The Nicaean Creed was the product of that council and became a permanent part of the Catholic Mass. Yet the Bishop of Rome did not play a significant role in the Council at Nicaea, nor did any of the actions of Constantine elevate the Bishop of Rome or in any way acknowledge any special authority resident in that office. Indeed, Constantine moved the administration of the Empire to Constantinople which diminished Rome, and increased the stature of the Bishop of Constantinople. The Bishops of Constantinople subsequently bickered with the Bishops of Rome for 700 years until the respective bishops excommunicated each other in 1057 AD.

The collapse of the Roman Empire meant the collapse of trade relations with the entire Mediterranean Basin, and the collapse of the means and methods of communication. The culture of early Christianity was never restored, economic recovery took many centuries, and though a semblance of communication returned during the Crusades, it was only for the purpose of war. The focus of Christianity shifted in a direction, and in a manner that was wholly unexpected. Young Christian men throughout Italy had begun living together out of economic necessity. At first with the expectation that the arrangement was temporary, but economic hardship and social chaos worsened, and that generated a steady increase in their numbers. The informal living arrangements of young Christian men evolved into formal, permanent religious orders. It was the pressure of their growing numbers that motivated those orders to dispatch small groups of brothers to the barbarian kingdoms in what later became Europe. Their plan was simple . . . tell

¹ That was the origin of the "bishop's ring," a staple in Catholicism to this day.

the barbarian king Christianity taught that kings were ordained by the Christian god and served his purposes . . . and then offer to pray for him. Such offers were rarely refused. The brothers were allowed to take up residence in a remote location within the king's domain in exchange for their prayers. The effort achieved stunning results. One king after another accepted baptism and declared his kingdom Christian. The most important achievement of Christian brothers, however, was the communication "backbone" they created that linked those kings and kingdoms to Rome and to each other. The resulting communication spawned the shared values and common world view that spread throughout Europe, reached its quintessential achievement with the coronation of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor (circa 800 AD), and established the foundation of Western Civilization. Developments in Europe guaranteed the pre-eminence of the Bishop of Rome. Missionary success alone, however, did not create the imperial church of the High Middle Ages. Rather, it resulted from the interplay of two systemic problems never adequately resolved by the Church.

The declaration to the barbarian kings that their rule was ordained by Christ and served his purposes initially seemed simple and entirely consistent with Holy Scripture. It was certainly easy to believe Charlemagne was chosen by Christ to rule. He was brilliant, strong, and devout. Subsequent kings were not so devout, and though they may not have had Charlemagne's personal strength and genius, their kingdoms were richer and more powerful. The divine right of kings generated a simple, yet ominous logic . . . "I was chosen by Christ to rule and the fact that I have so much power and wealth means Christ wanted me to have that power and wealth to expand and enrich his chosen kingdom." The Church had created a monster by catering to the kings when soliciting their conversion, and was consequently forced into a desperate scramble to enhance the stature and authority of the Bishop of Rome in order to maintain the pre-eminence of the sacred over the profane. In other words, the Pope had to become more kingly than the kings, and more clearly chosen by God than the kings. It was an understandable objective. Certainly the sacred was closer to the heart of Christ than the profane, and most certainly the powerful kings of the High Middle Ages greatly exaggerated their divine right and abused their power. The force of their existence transformed the Church into the imperial church, and yet did little to preserve the primacy of the Church in Western Civilization.

The success of the Christian brothers in proselytizing the barbarian kings was greatly magnified by the king's subsequent declaration that his kingdom was Christian. Wonderful from the perspective of the brothers and the Church, but not so wonderful from the perspective of common culture. Ordinary people were suddenly declared Christian without a personal explanation or understanding of the Christian message, or any personal appeal for acceptance of Christ. The consequence was a huge gulf between the formal proclamation of the Church and the experience of the people. The typical question on the mind and in the hearts of those common people was . . . "Why for all the talk about salvation and the love of God do I experience nothing? . . . why do I continue to feel worthless and insignificant?" The Church responded with, "Sin . . . you must repent of your sins and do penance until you appease Christ," and went on to capitalize on the pervasive alienation from God to finance its transformation into the imperial Church. Did the Church have the authority to forgive sin if the penitent continued to feel hatred of self? "No," was the response of the Reformation.

Luther relied on the Pauline Epistles to develop the doctrine of salvation by faith, but the Reformation that followed relied little on his theology and more on his right to propose his own interpretation of Scripture. Other reformers seized on that right and declared their own Biblical Theology and the Reformation rapidly became a fragmenting force. By the Modern Age there were over 20,000 Protestant denominations, and a multitude of individual churches within the denominations that resisted any kind of central control or leadership.

Were the Protestant churches any more effective at resisting domination by secular kings and governments? In a word . . . no. The challenge to Catholicism and to Papal authority rested on Holy Scripture, and all reformers declared Holy Scripture to be the sole Christian authority. But that ideal alone was insufficient because Scripture was not self-interpreting, and even the earliest

Reformers could not agree on its meaning. Since no institutional church, Catholic or Protestant, could be allowed the right to interpret Scripture for others, the right of the individual had to be elevated above the right of all institutions. The absolute authority of Holy Scripture required the accompanying ideal of the “divine right of the individual,” and there after the two ideals coexisted in symbiotic relationship. That symbiotic relationship accounted for the profusion of Protestant denominations and reform and rebellion within churches. The “divine right of the individual” was essential to the success of the Reformation, but like the Church of an earlier period that experienced the initial success of the “divine right of kings,” it had created a monster. In the secular domain the “divine right of the individual” was not dependent upon Holy Scripture and soon proved its independence as the essential ideology of the French and American Revolutions. In the America “cultural diversity” was really the elevation of the divine right of the individual above the claim of any and all gods, accompanied by the ever persistent claim that an individual ought to be able to do anything they desired that did not directly harm another. Thus the Reformation generated an unsolvable dilemma almost exactly like the divine right of kings . . . how could the authority of Jesus Christ and Holy Scripture be made superior to the divine right of the individual without placing another individual or institution between Holy Scripture and the individual. There was a two fold consequence for Protestantism. Either the Christian values of the church diminished until the church espoused values indistinguishable from the ideals of the secular culture within which it existed, or the pastor of individual churches demanded the exclusive authority to interpret Scripture for the congregation. The role of pastor in those hierarchical, fundamentalist churches became indistinguishable from its secular counterpart, the role of chief executive officer in secular corporations. Tyranny or apostasy, and no different nor more successful then the solution attempted by the Catholic Church of the High Middle Ages in its struggle with the divine right of kings.

Catholicism and Protestantism developed similar structural problems because the secular order with which they were in symbiotic relationship was gradually empowered to the point where the relationship with the divine was rendered unnecessary. That rise in power was enabled by both Catholicism and Protestantism because both abdicated authority over the secular domain by teaching that Christ’s kingdom was not of the World. The organic transformation of the “divine right of kings” and the “divine right of the individual” into absolute truths that eclipsed their religious counterparts proved that order in the secular domain was only possible in so far as it derived from an absolute truth. And it proved that if Christianity declined to provide that absolute truth essential to humanity, Christianity was irrelevant and unnecessary.

When Christ bestowed the great commission on Peter he used the word *ek-klesia* which, as stated before, was judged by Biblical scholars an informal word with the literal meaning of “assembly” or “gathering.” The adjective that best captured the intended meaning of the word was “relational.” By choosing a relational word, Christ was saying in effect, “. . . upon this rock called Peter I will build the relationships that will knit together the assembly, or gathering of believers that will become the body of Christ and the infrastructure of the kingdom of God. Such a relational concept of the great commission was consistent with Christ’s response to the Pharisee’s challenge:

“Master, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?’ Jesus said, ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and will all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang the whole Law, and the Prophets also.” (Matthew 22:34-40, Jerusalem Bible)

Christ thus declared that relationship with God, and with each other was the most important requirement of a Christian. In making Peter the rock around which the “body of Christ” was assembled instead of Paul, Christ declared that relationship transcended knowledge. Further, Peter demonstrated that relational, integrative authority in his response to Paul, who first insulted Peter by confronting him in front of everyone while both were in Antioch, “*In spite of being a Jew,*

you live like the pagans and not like the Jews, so you have no right to make pagans copy Jewish ways."(Galatians 2:14) Peter surely recognized that Paul was passionate and brilliant and he responded with the humility of a truly great man of God, ". . . our brother Paul, who is so dear to us, told you this when he wrote to you with the wisdom that is his special gift . . ." (2 Peter 3:15, Jerusalem Bible) In exercising his integrative, relational authority Peter ensured one Christianity. Though there was little information on Peter's activities after the period covered by The Acts of the Apostles, evidence of the integrative, relational authority was everywhere evident during the early centuries for many charismatic, gifted people were called into, and greatly impacted, Christianity. The authority granted Peter was not just a charge to recognize and include the gifted, but to exclude heresy. The Arian Heresy and the Donatist Heresy were two major examples, along with many other lesser heretical teachings. Gregory the Great, Bishop of Rome from 590 AD to 604 AD demonstrated that integrative, relational authority by recognizing the accomplishments of the Christian brothers in the barbarian kingdoms, and using his office and resources to support and encourage similar missionary ventures.

There were several important elements in the type of authority that was operative, and most effective in building Christianity during the period of the early church:

1. In declaring that which was bound on earth would be bound in heaven, and what was loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven, Christ did not say that every decision Peter or his successors made would be perfect and absolute, but that his work to integrate and the develop the body of believers would be respected on heaven and earth. The intent was support of the work of integration with the understanding that something, person, or theology that could not be integrated in one age or period, could still be integrated in another age or as a result of more developed understanding. The execution of Joan of Arc, and her subsequent elevation to saint, was an example of that corrective process.
2. Just as Peter's commissioning was not a formal investiture of imperial authority, neither were Peter's successors invested with formal, imperial authority. It was the relational, collegial authority demonstrated with astounding effectiveness at Nicaea, Chalcedon, and against the Donatists, and Pelagians that maintained one Church in an environment of broad and diffuse inspiration. That authority contrasted dramatically with the imperial authority of the Reformation that was self-absorbed, ineffective, and responsible for the fragmentation of Christianity.
3. Christ made it clear by this call to Paul that he had no intention of remaining distant from the church, nor uninvolved in the affairs of the church. Rather he made it clear he would raise up people of his choosing, and at times of his choosing, to reveal and declare the knowledge or gift necessary to further the Kingdom of God. It was the responsibility of the relational, integrative authority vested in the church to recognize and include the person and the gift raised up by Christ.
4. Integrative, relational authority was most effective when not in the public eye. Peter modeled the wisdom of that kind of authority with a quiet humility that let the passionate, inspired Pauls of Christianity have the press, and public attention.
5. Despite the heresies, trauma, dead-end roads traveled, bad theology, and sinful clergy, hell did not prevail against the *ek-klesia* in either its Protestant or Catholic expression.

6. The inspiration and vision necessary to achieve the integration required by Christ, and necessary to save the World, did not emanate from the hierarchy of the churches, but from individuals raised up and gifted by Christ independent of church opinion, expectation, or authority.
7. The Second Vatican Council was a move from within Catholicism to rid itself of its imperial legacy, and return it to the model of early Christianity. Though the Catholic hierarchy appeared to have successfully repudiated the changes caused or proposed, that Council nevertheless created a diaspora which spread throughout all of Christendom and the World, and which was called to be yeast . . . *“What shall I compare the kingdom of God with? It is like the yeast a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour till it was leavened all through.”* (Luke 13:20-21, Jerusalem Bible)

The bread is leavened and ready for the reintegration of Christendom. The “divine right of kings,” which once dominated the World, self-destructed from its own delusion of power. Likewise, the “divine right of the individual,” which currently dominates the World, is self-destructing from its own delusion of power. Will Christianity understand the World’s need for Christ? Will Christianity exercise the relational, integrative authority modeled by Peter? . . . and recognize those raised up by Christ?