

## Heresies about Scriptural Authority: Romanism and Christian Liberalism

Uptown Church Sunday School: Heresy Class

April 24, 2011

*“You are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone”*

*“Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”*

### **Introduction**

- **Prayer**
- Final class of the Heresy series is appropriately focused on the issue of scriptural authority.
- Recall our definition of “heresy” from the first class
  - *Q: Who can recall some of the main aspects of heresy in general?*
  - It is not just unbelief—a rejection of the core truths of Christianity
  - It is not just a false belief—we all have things we believe that are incorrect
  - *Q: Where does heresy arise?*
  - Heresy arises internally, not externally—it is a version of Christianity
  - Heresy often comes from good intentions—heretics think they are helping the church
  - Heresy strikes at the heart of the Christian faith—it destroys the very faith it intends to help
- Thus, in a very real way, getting scripture wrong is the root cause of *all* heresies
- **Outline for today's class**
  - Discuss one aspect of Roman Catholicism: their view of the infallible church as the authoritative judge of life and doctrine, not the Bible alone
  - Discuss the history and key points of Christian Liberalism and focus in on their doctrine of scripture

### **A. Roman Catholic View: Ultimate Authority = Church**

While there are undoubtedly many Roman Catholics who are genuinely regenerate believers in Christ, as an institution the Church holds a view of scripture and authority that cuts at the very heart of the biblical teaching.

- **Summary statement**
  - The church is infallible due to the ongoing apostolic authority and divine inspiration of the church, chiefly through the pope
  - The infallible church determines (a) the makeup of the canon of scripture and (b) the right, authoritative interpretation of scripture

- **Point 1: Papal infallibility and the Apostolic see**
  - All Christians would agree that the original apostles of Christ were authoritative representatives of Christ, and most (but not all) would agree their official writings as apostles are infallible
    - Does not mean that everything they said (e.g., grocery lists!) was authoritative or inspired
  - *Q: Does anyone know how the Roman Catholic church officially views the Pope? What is the Pope?*
  - Roman Catholic church holds the following:
    - The Pope is the heir to the throne of Peter as the chief apostle
    - The Pope is preserved by the Holy Spirit from the possibility of erring when he is promulgating universal church dogma *ex cathedra*
      - *Ex cathedra*: must be from the Pope, must come from him as an official teaching from the “throne,” must be stated as a formal decree, must be accompanied by an anathema on those who disagree, and must be a binding universal doctrine applying to the whole church
      - In other words, the Pope's infallible words are only those he speaks with the intention of invoking them as infallible (not just anything he says)
      - *Q: Note anything circular about this?*
    - Thus, he continues to speak authoritatively for God
  - Excerpts from the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:
    - The Apostolic See is the seat of authority in the Roman Church, continuing the Apostolic functions of Peter, the chief of the Apostles.
    - Heresy and barbarian violence swept away all the particular Churches which could lay claim to an Apostolic see, until Rome alone remained; to Rome, therefore, the term applies as a proper name.
    - Others in the early church (Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem) had authority as well, but the Apostolic See was always Rome, because its occupant perpetuates the Apostolate of Blessed Peter extending over the whole Church.
    - The authoritative acts of the popes, inasmuch as they are the exercise of their Apostolical power, are styled acts of the Holy or Apostolic See. The See is thus personified as the representative of the Prince of the Apostles.
  - History of the dogma
    - Middle ages: Gregory VII asserted in 1075 that the Roman church has never nor ever will err in all its teachings; several theologians assumed this doctrine in their teachings
    - First Vatican Council in 1868 (Pope Pius IX) first made it an official dogma
    - Today: the Roman Catholic “Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith” is the ruling body to determine whether the Pope has spoken *ex cathedra* or not
      - *Q: Does anyone note anything odd about this?*
  - To be fair, a few things must be noted:
    - Number of infallible / *ex cathedra* declarations is fairly small
    - Number of infallible declarations by ecumenical councils greatly outnumbers those by popes

- **Point 2: the church is the infallible authority over scripture**
  - On the basis of apostolic succession and papal infallibility, it is held that the Roman Catholic Church – and no other – is the true, infallible, and authoritative church
  - RCC role in defining canon
    - It is the role of the infallible church to decide what is canon and what is not
    - The church defines what the Bible is, not the Bible itself
  - Their thought process:
    - We want to say that the Bible is the authority of faith and doctrine
    - Problem: how do you know you have the right books? “You Protestants are out there stumbling over yourselves trying to figure out the canon, but we already have the answer.”
    - Answer: the church tells you which books are the “right books.” The church has declared it so via its authority (apostolic see)
  - Council of Trent (1563): declared acceptance of the apocrypha, Vulgate as the official version, and church tradition as on par with Scripture as the rule of faith
  - Deeper issue: what is the ultimate authority?
    - Roman Catholic view: *church* is the ultimate authority. Church defines scripture, and thus church teachings and traditions are equal with Scripture.
      - *Q: Is this really what they're saying? Can they really state that church tradition is on par with the Bible? Is there a contradiction here?*
      - Implication: If only the church can define what the Bible is, not the Bible itself, then by definition the church is higher than the Bible.
      - Practically, church tradition is much more important than what the Bible says about any given topic. We see this all the time in their decisions.
    - *Q: What is the ultimate stopping point in this scheme? What is the self-authenticating reference point?*
    - Sola ecclesia or sola scriptura: you must choose
      - One or the other must be true. You either must have a self-attesting Bible or a self-attesting church.
      - Example: speed limit (city → count → state → federal → constitution)
      - Example: How do we know these books are the right books? Either (a) some other book (the “inspired Table of Contents”) tells us, or (b) the church tells us. How do you know (a) is also the right book? How do you know (b) is the right church?
      - Infinite regress: At some point you must have an ultimate authority.
      - For the RCC, only the church, not scripture, is self-attesting and self-authenticating
  - *Q: What do you think are some implications of this on the individual Roman Catholic person in the pew?*
    - Low view of the Bible
    - Who has the final say on scripture interpretation?
    - Historical discouragement about the Popes / priests
    - Confusion about what the Pope actually says (e.g., controversy over John Paul II's decree “On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone”)

- **Evaluation: orthodox response to the issues**
  - *Q: What are some issues with the RCC's view of (a) the pope / church infallibility and (b) scripture?*
  - ***The Bible creates the church, not the church creates the Bible***
    - The church is a creature of the word; it stands “downstream”
    - The Word is used by the Spirit to regenerate hearts and create the church body itself, not the other way around
    - Church didn't create the message or decide the books, but rather received the prophetic and apostolic teachings
  - ***No biblical evidence for papal infallibility, apostolic succession, or church infallibility***
    - No biblical evidence of the supremacy of Peter; their analysis of Jesus' statement (Mt 16:18) about the “rock” of Peter is simply bad exegesis. 1 Peter: “an apostle.” Peter never claimed to be the chief apostle
    - The Apostles laid the foundation of the church. Foundations by definition are one-time events. You don't keep laying the foundation. Thus, the apostolic office has terminated with the passing of the Apostle John.
    - Moreover, why just 1 Pope? There were 12 / 14 apostles (maybe more) – so why not have 12 Popes?
    - Apostles had to be eyewitnesses of Jesus (cf. Paul's statements about his calling). Popes obviously cannot claim this.
    - Does the Bible support any notion of the church being infallible in itself? Consider all the epistles written to address problems in the churches.
  - ***No historical evidence either***
    - The notion of papal infallibility / apostolic see / etc. did not show up until a few centuries after the death of Peter. If the pope's infallibility was self-attesting, wouldn't it have shown up immediately?
    - There was no time when men sat around and said, "we declare these books to be canonical and to have authority." There never was a final papal bull about canon (only the decision about the apocrypha).
    - Church councils came at the end of the canonical process not the beginning.
      - All the evidence of the early church suggests that the canon was recognized by the church, not created by the church. The books were already authoritative and received as such before any church council
    - Moreover, how did the early church and Jews accept the OT canon? It was already set centuries before the apostolic church – but was there an infallible church back then to tell them which books were correct? Of course not.
  - ***Reformed view of scripture***
    - *Q: What is the Reformed view of ultimate authority and scripture?*
    - General Evangelical model: historical evidence establishes canon
      - Establish a set of scientific criteria by which to judge the NT books
      - Manuscript evidence, date of authorship, apostolic authorship, usage in the early church (how many other writings cite it), orthodoxy (does it have right doctrine)
      - e.g., Josh McDowell and numerous other scholars

- Not bad in itself – it is important to do these types of studies, and the findings are helpful in apologetics
  - *Q: But what is the flaw in this approach? In this scheme, what is the source of ultimate authority?*
  - This is another instance of replacing God or the Bible with another absolute authority: scientific / historical research. Human methods become the arbiter.
  - This type of research cannot be done neutrally, and it changes with the times. Thus, how do you actually know the findings are right? Don't you need another authority to confirm it?
  - In other words, this approach does not solve the problem of seeking an ultimate authority external to the Word. Who decides the right criteria? Who decides how to do the research? Etc.
  - This is a widespread perspective in the Evangelical world.
- Reformed view: Scripture is self-attesting and self-authenticating
    - The canon chose itself – it is self-attesting
    - Not: the canon chose itself because it claimed it was so
    - But: the canon bears within itself the marks of divine authorship: divine qualities. Scripture bears the attributes of God.
      - Beauty and excellency – in how it points to Christ and God's glory
      - Power and efficacy – convict, encourage, illumine, sanctify, etc.
      - Unity and harmony – consider how the numerous authors over multiple millennia bear witness to the same core orthodox doctrines
    - Anyone with spiritual “sight” can see these marks: the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit confirms our recognition of these divine qualities
    - The unregenerate man's inability to recognize these marks does not make them untrue. The Bible as inspired word of God is an objective fact that does not depend on our opinion of it; we simply recognize it or we don't.
    - *Q: Is this circular?*
    - Authenticating an ultimate authority by definition requires you to use the ultimate authority, rather than an outside standard.

## **B. Christian Liberal View: Ultimate Authority = You**

Classical Christian Liberalism has been accused of “speaking of God by simply speaking of man in a loud voice.”

- Historical background
  - Liberalism was a reaction within the church to the implications of the Enlightenment (18<sup>th</sup> century) and the Industrial / Scientific Revolution.
    - *Q: What were some of the key features of the Enlightenment?*
    - Ascendancy of Reason as the ultimate judge of all things
    - Darwinianism on the rise – eventually gaining canonical status in science and society
    - Divine revelation no longer accepted – skepticism is the basic posture

- Theism gives way to Deism, and Deism gives way to Atheism – if God is not involved, then why have him at all?
- Denial of the doctrine of the fall – man is basically good and, through modern means of science and reason, humanity can achieve anything
- Cultural outlook: individualism, skepticism (of traditional sources of authority), and optimism (technology has no limits)
- Three figures who shaped the Christian Liberal response
  - Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)
    - Father of Modern / Liberal Theology – he started it all
    - Goal: make Christianity credible again
    - Key points: (a) Christianity is not about doctrine or practice, but intuition and feeling. (b) Proper focus of Christianity is not God but our subjective experience of God.
  - Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889)
    - Schleiermacher's biggest successor
    - Goal: defend Christianity against secular science.
    - Key points: (a) Religion is not about making metaphysical claims about God. (b) Rather, religion is about making moral claims about what is man's highest good. (c) Our highest good is the “kingdom of God,” which is essentially brotherly love of all people.
  - Adolf Harnack (1851-1930)
    - Key points: (a) Christianity has been polluted. (b) Must separate the real Christianity from the false, the real “Christ” from the Christ as portrayed in the Gospels (sympathetic with the historical Jesus quest).
- **Major tenets: brief overview of Classical Liberalism**
  - *Q: Who can provide a few characteristics of Christian liberalism?*
  - Christian beliefs need to be reconstructed in light of modern science and culture (reaction to the Enlightenment)
    - Orthodox Christianity no longer acceptable due to its supernaturalism
    - Need to bring it into the modern day
    - Still the guiding impulse today
  - Christians are always free to reconstruct theology with the times
    - Anything is up for grabs, and this is a good thing
    - General opposition to doctrine
  - Emphasis on the practical dimensions of Christianity versus doctrines
    - “Deeds over dogma”
    - Church is about the “brotherhood of all men”
  - Emphasis on divine immanence over divine transcendence
    - My experience of God is more important than my doctrine of God
  - Jesus is not literally divine, but was a very good man and a superior moral example
    - The cross was not about atonement...
    - ...But was about how we are to live sacrificial lives of faith
    - Not an object of faith but an example of faith
    - Not a divine savior but a moral teacher

- Scripture no longer considered the infallible authority for faith and practice
  - More below
- *Q: Where do we see these ideas in today's church?*
- **View of Scripture: it is all about you**
  - Scripture is not infallible – there are errors, contradictions, etc. Canon was a human construction.
    - Must accept the claims of critical scholarship, even though “scholarly consensus” often moves around
    - The new priesthood is the academy – science is authority over the church
  - True gospel and true Jesus are somewhere “behind” the canonical gospel
    - Must use tools of modern text criticism to access the real Jesus (“strip away the husk to arrive at the kernel”)
  - Ultimate authority is not scripture, but your religious experience
    - Bible is not really God's word, but a record of a certain people group's religious experience
    - It is not unique; other religious texts could have been equally valid. What's to say the Quran is not a valid expression of religious experience?
    - It is special because it reveals Jesus as our supreme example, but so do other texts
    - Religious doctrines (justification, sanctification) are simply accounts of one's personal religious affections set forth in speech / words
    - How we personally experience God is determinative for all things – Christian doctrine is accommodated to your religious encounter with God
- **Evaluation: orthodox response to the issues**
  - *Q: What are some issues with these views (across the board)?*
  - *Q: Is Christian Liberalism really Christianity at all?*
  - Christian Liberalism is not Christianity but a separate religion using similar words
    - Most Liberal theologians will not deny orthodox sayings such as “Jesus is the son of God,” because that would clearly make them not Christians
    - Instead, they redefine what “Jesus” (historical vs. biblical), “son” (best creation of God, showed his sonship by his faithful living) and “God” (moralistic therapeutic deistic God) actually mean
  - Doctrine of scripture is unbiblical and destroys the foundation it is trying to build
    - Scripture testifies that it is a witness to Christ himself (2 Pet 1:16)
    - Scripture claims authority, infallibility, and inspiration (2 Tim 3:16, 1 Pet 1:10-12)
    - *Q: What issue does this come back to, as with RCC?*
    - Again, it comes back to the issue of ultimate authority:
      - How does the Liberal know God is love and Jesus is a moral teacher, etc.?
      - From the Bible.
      - But how can they accept the Bible's statements about these things if they believe the Bible is fallible (not just capable of erring but actually has errors) and is simply a religious expression?
      - They pick and choose the canon within the canon.
      - How do they know what parts they should keep?
      - Whatever corroborates their religious experience.

- How do they know they can trust their religious experience?
- Eventually the person himself is the final authority.
- Thus, in trying to make Christianity more relevant to modern society, they have simply cut off all its limbs and gutted out its internal organs.
- *Q: What can we learn from Christian Liberalism?*
- *Q: How can we know Liberal theology when we see signs of it?*
- Some implications on their theology
  - Denial of God's transcendence is unbiblical and leads to numerous problems
    - Express disavowal of God's holiness, wrath, election, self-existence
    - Only emphasize his love
    - They make God in the image of Man, not the other way around
    - “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross”
  - Denial of Jesus as atoning savior completely destroys his work
    - Nowhere is he presented simply as a moral teacher. In fact, his claims about his suffering death and Messiahship would, if false, make him quite an immoral teacher!

### **C. Conclusion**

- Ultimately this entire class and series is about who your ultimate authority is for faith, doctrine, and practice
- *Q: What do the two examples of Roman Catholicism and Christian Liberalism have in common?*
  - When approaching the Bible, something has to be the self-attesting starting point to tell you whether to trust the Bible, and if so, what should be included – which books, which parts of books, what the books are actually intending to communicate, etc.
  - Putting something else in the position of the ultimate authority (church, self) results in an outright denial of orthodox Christian teaching at numerous points