

# INFALLIBILITY

According to Roman Catholic dogma the teaching magisterium is infallible when officially defining faith and morals for believers. One manifestation of this doctrine is popularly known as the “infallibility of the Pope,” which was pronounced a dogma in A.D. 1870 at Vatican I. This is a major bone of contention between Catholics and Protestants and thus merits attention here.

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## THE DOCTRINE OF INFALLIBILITY EXPLAINED

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Roman Catholic authorities define infallibility as “immunity from error, i.e., protection against either passive or active deception. Persons or agencies are infallible to the extent that they can neither deceive nor be deceived.”<sup>1</sup>

### THE STATEMENT OF THE DOCTRINE OF INFALLIBILITY

Vatican I pronounced that all the faithful of Christ must believe

that the Apostolic See and the Roman Pontiff hold primacy over the whole world, and that the Pontiff of Rome himself is the successor of the blessed Peter, the chief of the apostles, and is the true vicar of Christ and head of the whole Church and faith, and teacher of all Christians; and that to him was handed down in blessed Peter, by our Lord Jesus Christ, full power to feed, rule, and guide the universal Church, just as is also contained in the records of the ecumenical Councils and in the sacred canons.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Avery Dulles, “Infallibility: The Terminology,” in *Teaching Authority*, ed. by Empie, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Also see Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, pp. 455–56.

Furthermore, the Council went on to speak of “the Infallible ‘Magisterium’ of the Roman Pontiff,” declaring that:

the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when carrying out the duty of the pastor and teacher of all Christians in accord with his *supreme apostolic authority* he explains a doctrine of faith or morals to be held by the Universal Church, through the divine assistance promised him in blessed Peter, *operates with that infallibility* with which the divine Redeemer wished that His church be instructed in defining doctrine on faith and morals; and so such definitions of the Roman Pontiff from himself, but not from the consensus of the Church, *are unalterable*.<sup>3</sup>

This declaration is followed by the traditional condemnation of any who reject papal infallibility: “But if anyone presumes to contradict this definition of Ours, which may God forbid: let him be anathema” [i.e., excommunicated].<sup>4</sup>

## QUALIFICATIONS ON THE DOCTRINE OF INFALLIBILITY

Roman Catholic scholars have expounded significant qualifications on the doctrine of papal infallibility. First, they acknowledge that the pope is not infallible in everything he teaches but only when he speaks *ex cathedra*, as the official interpreter of faith and morals. Avery Dulles, an authority on Catholic dogma, states that, for a pronouncement to be *ex cathedra*, it must:

1. fulfill his office as supreme pastor and teacher of all Christians;
2. accord with his supreme apostolic authority, i.e., as a successor of Peter;
3. determine a doctrine of faith and morals, i.e., a doctrine expressing divine revelation;
4. impose a doctrine to be held definitively by all.<sup>5</sup>

Dulles notes that “Vatican I firmly rejected one condition . . . as necessary for infallibility, namely, the consent of the whole church.”<sup>6</sup>

Second, the pope is not infallible when pronouncing on matters that do not pertain to “faith and morals.” On these matters he may be as fallible as the next person.

Third, the pope is infallible but not absolute. As Dulles observes, “Absolute infallibility (in all respects, without dependence on another) is proper to God. . . . All other infallibility is derivative and limited in scope.”<sup>7</sup>

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3 Ibid., 1839, p. 457, emphasis added.

4 Ibid., 1840

5 Dulles, “Infallibility,” pp. 79–80.

6 Ibid., p. 79.

Fourth, infallibility entails irrevocability. A pope cannot, for example, declare void previous infallible pronouncements of the church.

Finally, in contrast to Vatican I, many (usually liberal or progressive) Catholic theologians believe that the pope is not infallible independently of the bishops but only as he speaks in one voice with and for them in collegiality. As Dulles noted, infallibility “is often attributed to the bishops as a group, to ecumenical councils, and to popes.”<sup>8</sup> Conservatives argue that Vatican I condemned this view.<sup>9</sup>

## ARGUMENTS FOR PAPAL INFALLIBILITY

In his widely used work, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, Ludwig Ott offers the two standard arguments for the infallibility of the bishop of Rome: the proof from Scripture and the proof from tradition.

*Argument from Scripture.* Ott argues that “Christ made Peter the foundation of His Church, that is, the guarantor of her unity and unshakable strength, and promised her a duration that will not pass away ( Mt. 16 , 18 ). . . . However, the unity and solidarity of the Church is not possible without the right Faith. Peter is, therefore, also the supreme teacher of the Faith. As such he must be infallible in the official promulgation of Faith, in his own person and in his successors.”<sup>10</sup>

Ott appeals to John 21:15–17 to prove that “Christ installed Peter (and his successors) as the supreme pastor over the whole flock.” He argues that “the task of teaching Christian truth and of protecting it from error is part of the function of the supreme pastor. But he could not fulfill this task if, in the exercise of his supreme teaching office, he himself were subject to error.”<sup>11</sup> For further support, he appeals to Luke 22:31 where Christ said to Peter, “I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not,” insisting that “the reason for Christ’s praying for Peter especially was that Peter, after his own conversion, should confirm his brethren in their faith, which clearly indicates Peter’s position as head of the Apostles.”<sup>12</sup>

John 11:49–52 also is used to defend the infallibility of the pope. Caiaphas the high priest, in his official capacity as high priest, unwittingly prophesied about Christ dying for the nation of Israel so that they would not perish. They argue that, just as in the Old Testament the high priest had an official revelatory function connected with his office, the same would be expected in the New Testament. This, they say, is manifest in the bishop of Rome.

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7 Ibid., p. 72.

8 Ibid.

9 They appeal to Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, 1839, to support their view.

10 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 287.

11 Ibid., pp. 287–88.

12 Ibid., p. 288.

*Argument for Infallibility from Tradition.* Catholics also base their belief in papal infallibility in the early church fathers, who “attest the decisive teaching authority of the Roman Church and its Pontiff.” Irenaeus said, “with this Church on account of its special eminence, every other Church must agree . . . in her apostolic traditions has always been kept pure.”<sup>13</sup> Ott further argues that “the teaching Primacy of the Pope from the earliest times was expressed in practice in the condemnation of heretical opinions.”<sup>14</sup> He then supports his view by citing the great medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas, who argued that it was the official power of the papal office “finally to decide questions of faith, so that they may be held with unshakable faith by all.”<sup>15</sup> Of course, Ott and all Catholic theologians admit that papal infallibility was not officially proclaimed as dogma by the Roman church until A.D. 1870. And, as we shall see, even then it was done under questionable circumstances and with significant opposition.

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## A RESPONSE TO THE ARGUMENTS FOR INFALLIBILITY

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Not only Protestants but the rest of Christendom, Anglicans and Eastern Orthodox included, reject the doctrine of papal infallibility.<sup>16</sup>

In every age there have been those who considered the claims of a single bishop to supreme authority to be a sure identification of the corruption of the church, and perhaps even the work of the Antichrist. Pope Gregory I ( A.D. 590–604) indignantly reproached Patriarch John the Faster of Constantinople for calling himself the universal bishop; Gregory did so to defend the rights of all the bishops, himself included, and not because he wanted the title for himself.<sup>17</sup>

Protestants accept the infallibility of Scripture but deny that any human being or institution is the infallible interpreter of Scripture. The classic refutation of papal infallibility was written by George Salmon, *The Infallibility of the Church* (1914). It has never really been answered by the Catholic church.

The doctrine of papal infallibility has opponents even within the modern Roman Catholic Church. Hans Küng wrote a pointed critique of it in his work, *Infallible? An Inquiry*,<sup>18</sup> for which he was censured and forbidden to teach under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church. First, let us point out the flaws in the arguments given in favor of papal infallibility.

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13 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3, 3, 2.

14 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 288.

15 Ibid., p. 289.

16 Eastern Orthodoxy is willing to accept the bishop of Rome as “first among equals,” i.e., a place of honor coming short of the total superiority of the pope.

17 Statement by Gregory the Great, in Brown, *Protest of a Troubled Protestant*, p. 122.

18 Hans Küng, *Infallible? An Inquiry*, trans. by Edward Quinn (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1971).

## A RESPONSE TO THE BIBLICAL ARGUMENTS FOR INFALLIBILITY

There are several texts used by Catholics to defend the infallibility of the pope. In response, Protestants note several things.

*Matthew 16:18f.* Roman Catholics use Jesus' statement to Peter in Matthew 16:18 that "upon this rock I will build my church" to support papal infallibility. When properly understood, however, this verse falls far short of support for papal infallibility.

First, many Protestants insist that Christ was not referring to Peter being the foundation of the church when he spoke of "this rock." (1) Whenever Peter is referred to in this passage it is in the second person ("you"), but "this rock" is in the third person. (2) "Peter" (Gk: *petros*) is a masculine singular term but "rock" (*petra*) is feminine singular, hence they do not have the same referent, and even if Jesus did speak these words in Aramaic (which does not distinguish genders), the inspired Greek original does make such distinctions. (3) What is more, the same authority Jesus gave to Peter (Matt. 16:18) is given later to all the apostles (Matt. 18:18). (4) No Catholic commentator gives Peter primacy in evil simply because he was singled out in Jesus' rebuke a few verses later: "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do" (v. 23). Why then should Peter be given primacy in authority because of Jesus' affirmation? Jesus replied to Peter because only Peter spoke, even though he represented the group. (5) Great authorities, some Catholic, agree with this interpretation, including John Chrysostom and Augustine. Augustine wrote: "On this rock, therefore, He said, which thou hast confessed. I will build my Church. For the Rock (*petra*) is Christ; and on this foundation was Peter himself built."<sup>19</sup>

Second, even if Peter is the rock referred to by Christ, as some Protestant scholars believe, he was not the *only* rock in the foundation of the church, as many early church fathers point out. Whatever this may mean, Jesus gave all the apostles the same power ("keys") to "bind" and "loose" that he gave to Peter (cf. Matt. 18:18). Some argue that these were common rabbinic phrases used of "forbidding" and "allowing." These "keys" were not some mysterious power given to Peter alone but the power granted by Christ to his church by which, when they proclaim the gospel, they can proclaim God's forgiveness of sin to all who believe. As John Calvin noted, "Since heaven is opened to us by the doctrine of the gospel, the word "keys" affords an appropriate metaphor. Now men are bound and loosed in no other way than when faith reconciles some to God, while their own unbelief constrains others the more."<sup>20</sup> Others believe Jesus was speaking of non-salvific binding of a brother in probable sin (cf. Matt. 18:18). Whatever the case, all the apostles, not just Peter, possessed this power.

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<sup>19</sup> Augustine, "On the Gospel of John," Tractate 12435; quoted in White, *Answers to Catholic Claims*, p. 106.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:6, 4, p. 1105.

Further, Scripture affirms that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone” ( Eph. 2:20 ). Two things are clear from this: all the apostles—not just Peter—are the foundation of the church, and the only one who was given a place of uniqueness or prominence was Christ, the capstone. Indeed, Peter himself referred to Christ as “the cornerstone” of the church ( 1 Pet. 2:7 ) and the rest of believers as “living stones” ( v. 4 ) in the superstructure of the church. Peter gives no indication that he was given a special place of prominence in the foundation of the church above the rest of the apostles and below Christ. He is just one “stone” along with the other eleven apostles ( Eph. 2:20 ).

Third, Peter’s role in the New Testament falls far short of the Catholic claim that he was given unique authority among the apostles.<sup>21</sup> (1) While Peter did preach the initial sermon on Pentecost, his role in the rest of Acts is scarcely that of the chief apostle but at best *one* of the “most eminent apostles” (plural, 2 Cor. 21:11 NKJV ). (2) In fact, by God’s inspiration the apostle Paul taught that no apostle was really superior: “I was in no way inferior to these [so-called] ‘superapostles’ ”( 2 Cor. 12:11 ).<sup>22</sup> (3) No one reading Galatians carefully can come away with the impression that any apostle, including Peter, was inferior to the apostle Paul. For Paul claimed to get his revelation independently of the other apostles ( Gal. 1:12 ; 2:2 ), to be on the same level as Peter ( Gal. 2:8 ) and even used his revelation to rebuke Peter ( Gal. 2:11–14 )! (4) Likewise, the fact that both Peter and John were sent by the apostles on a mission to Samaria reveals that Peter was not *the* superior apostle ( Acts 8:4–13 ), otherwise he would have been doing the sending. (5) Indeed, if Peter was the God-ordained superior apostle it is strange that Acts gives more attention to Paul’s ministry than to Peter’s. Peter is the focus only in chapters 1–12 , but Paul is the dominant figure in 13–28 .<sup>23</sup> (6) Furthermore, though Peter addressed the first council ( Acts 15 ), he exercised no primacy over the others. The decision came from “the apostles and presbyters, in agreement with the whole church” ( Acts 15:22 ; cf. v. 23 ). Many scholars believe that James, not Peter, presided over the council, since he was the one who gave the final words (cf. vv. 13–21 ).<sup>24</sup> (7) By Peter’s own admission he was not *the* pastor of the church but only a “*fellow* presbyter [elder]” ( 1 Pet. 5:1–2 , emphasis added). And while he did claim to be “*an* apostle” ( 1 Pet. 1:1 ), he nowhere claimed to be “*the* apostle” or the chief apostle. He certainly was a leading apostle, but

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21 Many of the following critiques are found in White’s helpful book, *Answers to Catholic Claims*, pp. 101–2.

22 Paul was referring here in 2 Cor. 12:11 to true apostles like Peter, not to false ones as earlier ( 11:13–14 ), since he implies that they could do genuine miracles which confirmed their apostleship such as he did ( 2 Cor. 12:12 ; cf. Heb. 2:3–4 ).

23 One cannot, as some Catholic scholars do, dismiss this dominant focus on Paul rather than Peter on the circumstantial fact that Luke wrote more about Paul because he was his travel companion or that he was defending Christianity against Roman accusations so he focused on Paul. After all, it was the Holy Spirit who inspired what Luke wrote here! And if Peter has supreme authority, then surely Acts would have made this clear by stressing Peter’s unique role. But it does not.

24 See F. F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James and John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 86ff.

even then he was only one of the “pillars” (plural, Gal. 2:9 ) of the church along with James and John, not *the* pillar.

Fourth, however the early church understood Peter’s role, *there is absolutely no reference to any alleged infallibility he possessed*. Indeed, the word “infallible” never occurs in the New Testament. When parallel words or phrases do occur they refer to Scripture alone, not to any person’s ability to interpret it. Jesus said, for example, “scripture cannot be set aside” ( John 10:35 ), and “until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law” ( Matt. 5:18 ).

This is not to say that Peter did not have a significant role in the early church; he did. He even seems to have been the initial leader of the apostolic band. As already noted, along with James and John he was one of the “pillars” of the early church ( Gal. 2:9 ). It was Peter who preached the great sermon at Pentecost when the gift of the Holy Spirit was given, welcoming many Jews into the Christian fold. And it was Peter who spoke when the Spirit of God fell on the Gentiles ( Acts 10 ). However, from this point on, Peter fades into the background and Paul becomes the dominant figure, carrying the gospel to the ends of the earth ( Acts 13–28 ), writing approximately half of the New Testament (as compared to Peter’s two Epistles), and even rebuking Peter for his hypocrisy ( Gal. 2:11–14 ). In short, there is no evidence in Matthew 16 or any other text for the Roman Catholic dogma of the superiority or infallibility of Peter.

Finally, and most importantly, whatever apostolic powers Peter and the others possessed, it is clear that they were not passed on to anyone after their death. The repeated criterion for being an apostle was that one had to be a first-century eyewitness of the resurrected Christ (cf. Acts 1:22 ; 1 Cor. 9:1 ; 15:5–8 ). Therefore, there could be no true apostolic succession in the pope or anyone else.

Further, these select individuals known as apostles were given certain unmistakable “signs of an apostle” ( 2 Cor. 12:12 ). These sign-gifts included the ability to raise the dead ( Matt. 10:8 ), heal diseases ( Matt. 10:8 ; John 9:1–7 ), perform exorcisms ( Matt. 10:8 ; Acts 16:16–18 ), speak messages in languages they had never studied ( Acts 2:1–8 ; cf. 10:44–46 ), and pass on supernatural gifts to others so that they could be assisted in their apostolic mission of founding the church ( Acts 6:6 ; cf. 8:5–6 ; 2 Tim. 1:6 ). On one occasion Peter pronounced a supernatural death sentence on two people who had “lied to the Holy Spirit,” and they immediately dropped dead ( Acts 5:1–11 )!

These miraculous powers ceased during the apostles’ lifetime. The writer of Hebrews (c. A.D. 69) referred to the special sign-gifts of an apostle as having already past when he spoke of the message “announced originally through our Lord, it *was confirmed* [past event<sup>25</sup> ] for us by those who had heard him [namely, the apostles]. God added his

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25 While the use of the aorist tense here does not in itself prove this was a past event it does strongly indicate it. This is especially so in view of the fact that the writer puts himself in a class that is not one of the twelve apostles and is writing after Paul, Peter, and most apostles were martyred and/or scattered (viz., c. A.D. 69).

testimony by signs, wonders, various acts of power, and distributing of the gifts of the Holy Spirit according to his will” ( Heb. 2:3–4 , emphasis added). Jude, writing late in the first century (after A.D. 70), spoke of “the faith that was *once for all handed down* to the holy ones” ( v. 3 ), and exhorted his hearers to “remember the words spoken *beforehand* by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ” ( v. 17 , emphasis added). In contrast to the profusion of apostolic miracles (cf. Acts 28:1–10 ) up to the end of the Book of Acts (c. A.D. 60–61), there is no record of any apostolic miracle in Paul’s later Epistles after this time.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, some of his trusted helpers were sick and Paul apparently was not able to heal them ( Phil. 2:26 ; 2 Tim. 4:20 ),<sup>27</sup> asking for prayer for them or recommending that they take medicine ( 1 Tim. 5:23 ). The special apostle-confirming miracles apparently ceased even before some apostles had died.

In addition, these special miraculous signs were given to the apostles to establish their authority as the representatives of Christ in founding his church. Jesus had promised them special “power” to be his witnesses ( Acts 1:8 ). Paul pointed to “the signs of an apostle” to confirm his authority to the Corinthians, some of whom had challenged it ( 2 Cor. 12:12 ). Hebrews 2:3–4 speaks of the special apostolic miracles as being given to confirm their witnesses to Christ. Indeed, from the time of Moses to the apostles, God gave special miracles to his servants to confirm that their revelations were from him ( Exod. 4 ; 1 Kings 18 ; John 3:2 ; Acts 2:22 ).

In summation, since to be an apostle one had to be an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ, and since these select individuals known as apostles were given certain unmistakable “signs of an apostle” to establish their authority—which ceased during their lifetime—it follows that no one since the first century has possessed apostolic authority. In brief, the absence of these special apostolic gifts proves the absence of the special apostolic authority. What remains today is the *teaching* of the apostles (in the New Testament), not the *office* of an apostle or its authority. The authority of *living* apostles has been replaced by the authority of the *writings* of the apostles.

*John 21:15–17* . In this passage Jesus says to Peter, “Feed my lambs” and “Tend my sheep” and “Feed my sheep” (vv. 15–17 ). Roman Catholic scholars believe this shows

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26 This argument from the later and sudden *absence* of miracles after their earlier abundance is not to be confused with the fallacious “argument from *silence*.” The Bible is not silent on the nature, purpose, and function of these special apostolic miracles (cf. 2 Cor. 12:12 ; Heb. 2:3–4 ), and this function (of confirming apostolic revelation) fits with their cessation, since they were not needed once the revelation was confirmed.

27 The fact that Paul was inflicted with a “physical infirmity” ( Gal. 4:13 ) during the time God was still doing miracles (cf. 3:5 ) does not disprove this thesis. If Galatians was written early, this could have been the divinely inflicted infirmity resulting from his being blinded by God ( Acts 9:17–18 ; cf. Gal. 6:11 ) or, if Galatians was written later, the infliction God sent to humble him ( 2 Cor. 12 ). Further, there is no indication in the New Testament that those with the gift of healing exercised it on themselves. These special gifts were given to confirm the truth of revelation to others ( Heb. 2:3–4 ), not to benefit one’s personal needs.

that Peter, and Peter alone, was given infallible authority to be *the* pastor of the whole Christian church. A careful examination of the text reveals that this is a serious overclaim for the passage.

First, whether the passage is taken of Peter alone or of all the disciples, there is absolutely no reference here to any infallible authority. It is simply a matter of pastoral care that concerns Jesus here. “Feeding” is a God-given pastoral function that even non-apostles had in the New Testament (cf. Acts 20:28 ; Eph. 4:11–12 ; 1 Pet. 5:1–2 ). One does not have to be an infallible shepherd in order to feed his flock properly. The suggestion that one does really undermines the Catholic argument for the need to have infallible guidance.

Second, if Peter had infallibility (i.e., the ability to not mislead in faith and practice), then why did he mislead believers and have to be rebuked by the apostle Paul ( Gal. 2:11 )? The infallible Scriptures, accepted by Roman Catholics, declare that Peter “clearly was wrong” and “stood condemned.”<sup>28</sup> Peter “acted hypocritically . . . with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy,” hypocrisy here being defined as “pretense, play-acting; moral insincerity” ( 2:11–13 ). It is difficult to exonerate Peter from the charge that he led believers astray— something the infallible pastor of the church would never do! The Catholic response that Peter was only infallible in his *ex cathedra* words and not his actions, rings hollow when we remember that “actions speak louder than words.” Actions are the domain of morals, and the pope is alleged to be infallible in faith *and* morals. In view of this, even Roman Catholic admission of the despicable behavior of some of its popes is revealing.<sup>29</sup> The fact is that Peter could not be both an infallible guide for faith and morals and at the same time mislead believers on the important matter of faith and morals of which Galatians speaks.

Third, contrary to the Catholic claim, the overall import of the passage in John speaks more to Peter’s weakness and need for restoration than to his unique authority. The reason Peter is singled out for restoration, being asked three times by Jesus “Do you love me more than these [other disciples]?” was that *only Peter denied the Lord three times and so only Peter needed to be restored*. Thus Jesus was not exalting Peter above the other apostles here but bringing him back up to their level!<sup>30</sup>

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28 This is the literal rendering of Gal. 2:11 given in the *New American Bible*.

29 To appeal to David’s sin is not helpful, since (1) he did not claim to be infallible, (2) he confessed his sin ( Ps. 51 ), and (3) God forgave and restored him ( Ps. 32 ) to his fallible position as king. And, unlike the Catholic view of Peter, both Moses’ and Paul’s great sins were before God called them and neither of them claimed infallibility.

30 The fact that Peter was asked whether he loved Jesus “more” than the others does not prove Jesus gave him more authority than they were given. For this would imply that the amount of Peter’s love is the basis for the amount of authority God graciously gave to him. God’s grace is not conditioned on the amount of our works of love ( Rom. 4:4–5 ). Furthermore, even Roman Catholics admit that God gave infallible authority to popes who were more evil than others who they say do not have this authority.

Finally, in view of the New Testament titles used of Peter it is clear that he would never have accepted the terms used of the pope today: “Holy Father” (cf. Matt. 23:9 ) or “Supreme Pontiff” and “Vicar of Christ.” The only vicar of Christ on earth is the blessed Holy Spirit ( John 14:16 , 26 ). Jesus said this of the Holy Spirit of God, not of Peter ( John 16:13–14 ). As noted earlier, Peter referred to himself in much more humble terms as “an apostle” ( 1 Pet. 1:1 ) not the apostle and “fellow-presbyter [elder]” ( 1 Pet. 5:1 ), not the supreme Bishop, the Pope, or the Holy Father.

*John 11:49–52* . The argument that, since in the Old Testament the high priest had an official revelatory function connected with his office it is therefore to be expected that there be an equivalent New Testament figure (namely, the pope), is seriously flawed. First, this is merely an argument from analogy and is not based on any New Testament affirmation that this is so. And it is a weak or extrinsic analogy since unlike the analogy between God and creatures ( Acts 14:15–17 ; Rom. 1:19–20 ) there is no intrinsic connection between cause and effect. Second, the New Testament affirmations made about the Old Testament priesthood would reject the analogy, for they say explicitly that the Old Testament priesthood has been abolished! The writer to the Hebrews declared that “there is a change of priesthood” from that of Aaron ( Heb. 7:12 ). The Aaronic priesthood has been fulfilled in Christ who is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek ( Heb. 7:15–17 ). Third, even Catholics acknowledge that there is no new revelation after the time of the New Testament. So no one (popes included) after the first century can have a revelatory function in the sense of giving new revelations. Finally, there is a New Testament revelatory function like that of the Old, but it is in the New Testament “apostles and prophets” (cf. Eph. 2:20 ; 3:5 ) and it ceased when they died. To assume a revelatory (or even infallible defining) function was passed on after them and is resident in the bishop of Rome is to beg the question.

In addition to the total lack of support from the Scriptures and equivocal support from tradition there are many other arguments against papal infallibility. We will divide them into theological, philosophical, and historical arguments.

## THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS WITH INFALLIBILITY

There are serious theological problems with papal infallibility. One is the question of heresy being taught by an infallible pope.

*The Problem of Heretical Popes.* Pope Honorius I ( A.D. 625–638) was condemned by the Sixth General Council for teaching the monothelite heresy (that there was only one will in Christ).<sup>31</sup> Even Roman Catholic expert Ludwig Ott admits that “Pope Leo II (682–683) confirmed his anathematization.”<sup>32</sup> This being the case, we are left with the incredible situation of an infallible pope teaching a fallible, yea, heretical, doctrine. If the papal teaching office is infallible, that is, if it cannot mislead on doctrine and ethics, then

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31 Bernhard Lohse, *A Short History of Christian Doctrine* , trans. F. Ernest Stoeffler (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 208.

32 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 150.

how could a papal teaching be heretical? What is more, this was a serious heresy—one relating to the nature of Christ. To claim that the pope was not infallible on this occasion is only to further undermine the doctrine of infallibility. How can one know when his doctrinal pronouncements are infallible and when they are not? There is no infallible test.<sup>33</sup> And without such a test, how can the Roman Catholic Church provide infallible guidance on doctrine and morals? If the pope can be fallible on one doctrine, then why not others?

Further, the contention that Pope Leo did not condemn Pope Honorius with heresy “but with negligence in the suppression of error” is ineffective as a defense.<sup>34</sup> It still raises serious questions as to how Pope Honorius could be an infallible guide in faith and morals, since he taught heresy. And the Catholic response that he was not speaking *ex cathedra* when he taught this heresy is convenient but inadequate. Indeed, invoking such a distinction only tends to undermine the authority of the far more numerous occasions when the pope is speaking with authority but not with infallibility. Also, it does not explain how the Sixth General Council could condemn Honorius as a heretic, as even Ott admits.<sup>35</sup> Finally, by disclaiming the infallibility of the pope on this and like situations the number of occasions such pronouncements actually were made is relatively rare. For example, the pope has spoken *ex cathedra* only one time this whole century (on the bodily assumption of Mary)! If infallibility is exercised this rarely then its value for all practical purposes is nil. This being the case, since the pope speaks with only fallible authority on most occasions, the Catholic is bound to accept his authority on faith and morals when he may be (and sometimes has been) wrong. In short, the alleged infallible guidance of the papacy is negligible at best. Indeed, on the vast majority of occasions there is no infallible guidance at all.

*The Problem of Revelational Insufficiency.* One of the chief reasons Catholic authorities offer to argue the need for an infallible teaching magisterium is that we need infallible guidance to understand God’s infallible revelation. Otherwise it is misinterpreted as the many Protestant sects do.

There are two problems with this rationale. For one thing, how is an infallible interpretation any better than the infallible revelation? Divine revelation is a disclosure or unveiling by God. To claim that God’s infallible unveiling in the Bible needs further infallible unveiling by God says that it was not unveiled properly to begin with. To be sure, there is a difference between objective disclosure (revelation) and subjective discovery (understanding). But the central problem in this regard is not in the *perception*

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33 Catholic apologists claim that there are objective tests, such as asking, was the pope speaking (1) to all believers, (2) on faith and morals, and (3) in his official capacity as pope (see *ibid.*, p. 287)? However, this is not definite as to which pronouncements are infallible. First, there is no infallible statement on just what are the criteria. Second, there is not universal agreement on the criteria. Third, there is no universal agreement on how to apply these or any criteria to all cases.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

of God's truth. Even his general revelation is "evident" and "able to be understood" ( Rom. 1:19–20 ). Our most significant problem with regard to the truth of God's revelation is *reception*. Paul declared that "the natural [unregenerate] person does not accept [Gk: *dekomai*, welcome, receive] what pertains to the Spirit of God" ( 1 Cor. 2:14 ). He cannot "know" (Gk: *ginosko*, know by experience) them because he does not receive them into his life, even though he understands them in his mind. Indeed, what he clearly perceives ( Rom. 1:19–20 ) he does not openly receive but suppresses ( Rom. 1:18 ). This is why there are atheists in their minds because they have rejected the truth about God in their hearts ( Ps. 14:1 ). So even though there is a difference between objective disclosure and subjective understanding people are "without excuse" for failing to understand the objective revelation of God, whether in nature or in Scripture (cf. Rom. 1:20 ).

It is interesting to note here that Catholic theology maintains that unbelievers should and can understand the truth of natural law apart from the teaching magisterium. Why then should they need an infallible teaching magisterium in order to understand properly divine law? Furthermore, it seems singularly inconsistent for Catholic scholars to claim they need another mind to help them interpret Scripture correctly for them when the mind God gave them is sufficient to interpret everything else, including some things much more difficult than Scripture. Many Catholic scholars, for example, are experts in interpreting classical literature, involving both the moral and religious meaning of those texts. Yet these same educated minds are said to be inadequate to obtain a reliable religious and moral interpretation of the texts of their own Scriptures.

The Catholic response that Protestants have their own teaching magisterium of modern scholarship misses the mark. First, the Catholic magisterium depends on scholarship just as much as Protestants do. Otherwise, they would not be able to translate the texts and understand them in their proper cultural context. Second, Protestants do not claim that it is necessary to have infallible scholarship in order to interpret the Bible. Further, the kind of scholarship necessary to understand the Bible does not provide a theological framework to *interpret* the Bible, as does the teaching magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, it provides merely the necessary linguistic tools to *translate* the Bible. Finally, the skills of interpretation are the same as those for any other document, namely, to understand the meaning the author expressed in the text. For example, Catholic attorneys and judges are experts at interpreting the Constitution, and yet these same experts are told that their skills in understanding the Constitution are not adequate to obtain a reliable interpretation of the Scriptures. Why is the Roman Catholic teaching magisterium necessary for the latter while their own ability is adequate for the former?

Furthermore, it does not take an expert to interpret the essential teachings of the Bible. The New Testament was written in the vernacular of the times, the trade language of the first century, known as koine Greek. It was a book written in the common, everyday language for the common, everyday person. Likewise, the vast majority of English translations of the Bible are also written in plain English, including Catholic versions. The essential truths of the Bible can be understood by any literate person. In

fact, it is an insult to the intelligence of the common person to suggest that he or she can read and understand the daily newspaper but needs an infallible teaching magisterium in order to understand God's good news in the New Testament.

*Problem of Indecisiveness of the Teaching Magisterium.* If an infallible teaching magisterium is needed to overcome the conflicting interpretations of Scripture, why is it that even these supposedly infallibly decisive declarations of the magisterium are also subject to conflicting interpretations? There are many hotly disputed differences among Catholic scholars on just what *ex cathedra* statements mean, including those on Scripture, tradition, Mary, and justification. Even though there may be future clarifications on some of these, the problem remains for two reasons. It shows the indecisive nature of supposedly infallible pronouncements, and, judging by past experience, even these future declarations will not settle all matters completely. Pronouncements on the inerrancy of Scripture are a case in point. In spite of infallible statements on the nature and origin of Scripture there is strong disagreement on whether the Bible is really infallible in all matters or only on matters of salvation (see Appendix D).

## PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS WITH INFALLIBILITY

Philosophical problems emerge from the Catholic claim of the need for an infallible teaching magisterium. Both are in the realm of epistemology, that is, how we know.

*The Epistemic Problem.* The supposed need for an infallible magisterium is an epistemically (Fr: *episteme*, to know) insufficient basis for rising above the level of probable knowledge. Catholic scholars admit, as they must, that they do not have infallible evidence that there is an infallible teaching magisterium. They have merely what even they believe to be only probable arguments. But if this is the case, then epistemically or apologetically there is no more than a probable basis for Catholics to believe that a supposedly infallible pronouncement of their church is true. The bottom line, then, is that they are in no better position to be certain about matters of faith and morals than are Protestants who accept only the infallibility of the Scriptures on the basis of probable arguments.

So the Catholic claim to have an infallible interpretation of the infallible Scriptures, in contrast to the Protestant claim to have only a fallible but reliable interpretation of the infallible Scriptures, only *sounds* more certain. In actuality, their basis for believing what is truly from God is no better than the Protestant, since both are based only on probable evidence, not on absolute certainty.<sup>36</sup>

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36 Claiming moral certainty or the guidance of the Holy Spirit will not help either position here, since both can claim it, in which case they are mutually self-canceling claims. Further, the claim is subjective, without objective evidence to support it. Or, if objective evidence is claimed in association with it, then it is only probable evidence, and we are back to square one.

*The Problem of Death by Qualification.* Once all the qualifications are placed on infallibility, both in theory and in practice, it is defrocked of its glory. For example, the pope is infallible only when:

1. speaking in fulfillment of his office as supreme pastor and teacher of all Christians;
2. speaking in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority (i.e., as successor of Peter);
3. determining a doctrine of faith and morals (i.e., a doctrine expressing divine revelation);
4. imposing a doctrine to be held definitively by all;<sup>37</sup>
5. he is the real pope (as opposed to rival popes); and
6. his decision is ratified by an ecumenical council.<sup>38</sup>

Not only are all these criteria not infallibly pronounced but all are not universally accepted among Catholics. What is more, when one tries to apply these criteria to the doctrine of papal infallibility it begins to suffer “death by a thousand qualifications.” For example, if the pope was not infallible when excommunicating Galileo or when teaching heresy (see examples below), then how can we be sure when he really acts infallibly? And if we cannot ever be sure, then what good is the doctrine of infallibility? Once all the qualifications are placed on it, the aura of infallibility has been stripped of its glory and stands as nakedly fallible as any other human teaching.

## HISTORICAL PROBLEMS WITH INFALLIBILITY

In addition to biblical and philosophical problems, there are serious historical problems with the Catholic claim for infallibility. Two are of special note here.

*The Problem of the Anti-Popes.* Another riddle of Roman Catholicism is the scandalous specter of having more than one infallible pope at the same time—a pope and an anti-pope. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* says “there have been about thirty-five anti-popes in the history of the Church.”<sup>39</sup> How can there be two infallible and opposing popes at the same time? Which is the true pope? Since there is no infallible list of popes or even an infallible way to determine who is the infallible pope, the system

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37 Dulles, “Infallibility,” pp. 79–80.

38 Many Catholic scholars believe the pope speaks infallibly only in concert with all the bishops (with collegiality).

39 Cross, *Oxford Dictionary*, p. 66; A. Mercati, “The New List of the Popes,” *Medieval Studies*, 9 (1947): 71–80.

has a serious logical problem. Further, this difficulty has had several actual historical manifestations which bring into focus the whole question of an infallible pope.<sup>40</sup>

Catholic apologists claim that there were not really two popes, since only one can be infallible. This is at best only a theoretical solution, not an actual one, since the faithful have no way to know for sure which one is the right one. Which one should they look to for guidance, since each pope can ex communicate the other— and sometimes has? Claiming that only one is the real pope does not solve the practical problem of which pope should actually be followed as the infallible guide in faith and morals.

*The Problem of Galileo.* Perhaps the greatest embarrassment to the self-claimed infallible church is its fallible judgment about Galileo Galilei ( A.D. 1564– 1642). Threatened by the implications of Galileo’s discovery, the Catholic church sided with the scientifically outdated Ptolemaic geocentric universe. The church’s condemnation and banishment of Galileo has caused pause for any subsequent infallible pronouncements on scientific matters. Perhaps this explains the reluctance of Rome to condemn macroevolutionary theory, allowing belief in it for fear it might prove to be true.

Galileo, using his telescope to view the heavens, adopted the Copernican view that the sun, not the earth, was the center of the solar system. This, of course, was opposed to the prevailing theological position of an earth-centered system held by the Roman Catholic Church. Trouble arose when Galileo wrote his *Letters on Sunspots* in A.D. 1613. Attention shifted from discussions of science to scriptural difficulties: “People wanted to know why Josue [Joshua] would command the sun to stand still if it never moved anyway. (See Josh. 10:12–13 .) They wondered how a moving earth could be reconciled with the statement that God ‘fixed the earth upon its foundation, not to be moved forever’ ( Ps 103:5 ).”<sup>41</sup>

In A.D. 1616, the Copernican theory was condemned at Rome.<sup>42</sup> The drama unfolded with Galileo writing tracts and lobbying for his cause. Aristotelian scientists, Jesuits, Dominicans, and three popes (Paul V, Gregory XV, and Urban VIII) played key roles in the conflict. Galileo was summoned by the Inquisition in 1632, tried, and on June 21, 1633, pronounced “vehemently suspected of heresy.” By way of punishment, he was ordered to repeat once a week the seven penitential psalms for three years. After five

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40 See Pelikan, *Riddle of Roman Catholicism*, p. 40.

41 *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 6:252.

42 It should be noted that although the Protestant Reformers were not directly involved in this controversy, “Luther and Melancthon condemned the work of Copernicus in unmeasured terms” (Herbermann et al., *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 6:344). Also, “Calvin and Luther accepted the Ptolemaic system, as did most astronomers in the decades following Copernicus” (Charles E. Hummel, *The Galileo Connection: Resolving Conflicts between Science and the Bible* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986], p. 161). The problem, however, is more acute for Catholics since, unlike Protestants, they claim infallibility for the teaching magisterium.

months, Pope Urban VIII allowed Galileo to return to Florence, where he remained under house arrest until his death in 1642.<sup>43</sup>

After suffering many centuries of embarrassment for the church's condemnation of Galileo, in 1979 Pope John Paul II spoke to the Pontifical Academy of Science. In the address titled "Faith, Science and the Galileo Case" the pope called for a reexamination of the whole episode.<sup>44</sup> In 1983, while addressing the subject of the church and science, John Paul II conceded that "Galileo had 'suffered from departments of the church.'"<sup>45</sup> This, of course, is not a clear retraction of the condemnation, nor does it solve the problem of how an infallible pronouncement of the Catholic church could be in error.

Roman Catholic responses to this question leave something to be desired. One Catholic authority claims that, while both Paul V and Urban VIII were committed anti-Copernicans, their pronouncements were not *ex cathedra*. The decree of A.D. 1616 "was issued by the Congregation of the Index, which can raise no difficulty in regard of infallibility, this tribunal being absolutely incompetent to make a dogmatic decree."<sup>46</sup> As to the second trial in 1633, which also resulted in a condemnation of Galileo, this sentence is said to be of lesser importance because it "did not receive the Pope's signature."<sup>47</sup> Another Catholic authority states that although the theologian's treatment of Galileo was inappropriate, "the condemnation was the act of a Roman Congregation and in no way involved infallible teaching authority."<sup>48</sup> Still another source observes that "the condemnation of Galileo by the Inquisition had nothing to do with the question of papal infallibility, since no question of faith or morals was papally condemned *ex cathedra*."<sup>49</sup> Still another Catholic apologist suggests that, although the decision was a "regrettable" case of "imprudence," there was no error made by the pope, since he was not really condemned of heresy but only strongly suspected of it.

None of these ingenious solutions is very convincing, having all the earmarks of after-the-fact tinkering with the pronouncements that resulted from this episode. Galileo and his opponents would be non-plussed to discover that the serious charges leveled

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43 It should be observed that Galileo was a believing Christian who had high regard for sacred Scripture. He believed that "the Holy Bible can never speak untruth—whenever its true meaning is understood" (Hummel, *Galileo Connection*, p. 105). However, he did tend to undermine the inerrancy of Scripture by focusing on its salvific purpose: "the Bible is written for 'the primary purpose of the salvation of souls and the service of God' and not to teach science" (p. 106). A similar tack is taken by contemporary liberal Catholics to deny that the Bible is inerrant in scientific matters.

44 Colin Brown, p. 177 n. 4.

45 Ibid. See also "Discourse to Scientists on the 350th Anniversary of the Publication of Galileo's 'Dialoghi,' " in Neuner and Dupuis, *Christian Faith*, p. 68.

46 Herbermann et al., *Catholic Encyclopedia*, p. 345.

47 Ibid., p. 346.

48 *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 6:254.

49 John J. Delaney and James E. Tobin, "Galileo Galilei," *Dictionary of Catholic Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 456.

against him were not “*ex cathedra*” in force. And in view of the strong nature of both the condemnation and the punishment, he would certainly be surprised to hear Catholic apologists claim that he was not really being condemned for false teaching but only that “his ‘proof’ did not impress even astronomers of that day—nor would they impress astronomers today”!<sup>50</sup> At any rate, the pope’s condemnation of Galileo only undermines the alleged infallibility of the Catholic church. Catholic apologists can always invoke their apologetic warehouse—that the pope was not really speaking infallibly on that occasion—but constant appeal to this non-verifiable distinction only weakens their case for infallibility. For it leaves us with the question of just how we can know when the church is speaking infallibly.

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## CONCLUSION

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Despite the common creedal and doctrinal heritage of Catholics and Protestants, there are some serious differences.<sup>51</sup> None of these is more basic than the question of authority. Catholics affirm *de fide*, as an unchangeable part of their faith, the infallible teaching authority of the Roman church as manifested in the pope. But what Catholics affirm infallibly Protestants deny emphatically. This is an unresolvable roadblock to any ecclesiastical unity between Roman Catholicism and orthodox Protestantism. No talk about “first among equals” or “collegiality” will solve the problem. For the very concept of an infallible teaching magisterium, however composed, is contrary to the basic Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, the Bible alone (see chap. 10 ). Here we must agree to disagree. For while both sides believe the Bible is infallible, Protestants deny that the church or the pope has an infallible interpretation of it.

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50 See William G. Most, *Catholic Apologetics Today: Answers to Modern Critics* (Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books, 1986), pp. 168–69.

51 Interestingly, the problem areas for evangelicals have also been addressed by some well-known Roman Catholic authorities, such as Athanasius, Jerome, and Aquinas. The evangelical case could be made from these writers on a number of issues. For example, Jerome did not accept the Catholic apocryphal (deuterocanonical) books (see chap. 9 ) and Aquinas rejected the doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary.