

ECCLESIOLOGY

Some of the greatest differences between Catholics and evangelicals concern the doctrine of the church, or ecclesiology. Of course, here too there are areas of common agreement, such as the foundation of the church by Christ, Christ being the head of the church (which has a visible as well as invisible dimension to it), that the sacraments (ordinances) include baptism and communion, that the purpose of the church is redemptive and evangelistic, and others (see Part One).¹ Our purpose here, however, is to explore some of the significant differences. In chapter 11 we discussed such differences as the primacy of Peter, apostolic succession, and the infallibility of the church of Rome. The main areas of dispute left for discussion here are the visibility, unity, priestly authority, and constituency of the church.

THE VISIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

According to Catholic doctrine, the church is not merely an invisible mystical body but also a visible organization on earth whose headquarters is in Rome. This they attempt to support by arguments from both Scripture and sacred tradition.

CATHOLIC DEFENSE OF THE VISIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

Pope Leo XIII declared that “When one visualizes the ultimate purpose of the Church and the proximate causes of effecting sanctity, she is, in fact, spiritual. But when one considers the members of the Church and the means which lead to the spiritual gifts, then she is externally and necessarily visible.”² Pope Pius XII confirmed this teaching that the church is visible in his encyclical “*Mystici Corporis*,” where he rejected the view that the church is “a mere spiritual entity, joining together by an invisible link a number of

¹ See Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, pp. 270–76, 292.

² Cited by Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 301.

communities of Christians, in spite of their difference in Faith.”³ The Council of Trent declared that, “Since in the New Testament the Catholic Church has received from the institution of the Lord the holy, visible sacrifice of the Eucharist, it must also be confessed that there is in this Church a new visible and external priesthood [can. 1], into which the old has been translated [Heb. 7:12].”⁴ Thus, “If anyone says that there is not in the New Testament a visible and external priesthood, or that there is no power of consecrating and offering the true body and blood of the Lord, and of forgiving and retaining sins, but only the office and bare ministry of preaching the Gospel, or that those who do not preach are not priests at all: let him be anathema.”⁵

Roman Catholics explicitly reject another view of the Reformers, insisting that “without an authoritative teaching office there is no certain norm for the purity of doctrine or for the administration of the Sacraments. The rejection of the hierarchy inevitably led to the doctrine of the invisible Church.”⁶ Catholics believe that the doctrine of the visibility of the church is based in both Scripture and tradition.

ARGUMENT FROM SCRIPTURE

A widely used source on Catholic dogma argues that “The biblical proof of the visibility of the Church springs from the Divine institution of the hierarchy.” And “The teaching office demands from its incumbents the duty of obedience to the faith (Rom. 1 , 5) and the confession of faith (Mt. 10 , 32 et seq.; Rom. 10:10).” Further, “To the sacerdotal office corresponds, on the part of the faithful, the duty of using the means of grace dispensed by it (John 3 , 5 ; 6:54).” Also, “To the pastoral office corresponds, on the part of those shepherded, the duty of being subject to the Church Authority (Mt. 18:17 et seq.; Luke 10 , 16).” In addition, it is argued that “The Prophets of the Old Covenant depict the Messianic Kingdom symbolically by the simile of a high mountain visible from afar, which overtowers all other mountains, and to which all people converge (Is. 2:2 et seq.; Micah 4:1 et seq.).” And “According to the parables of Jesus, the Church is like an earthly kingdom, a flock, a building, a vine, a city on a mountain. St. Paul compares the Church to the human body.”⁷

Some contemporary Catholic scholars argue that in Matthew 16 Jesus made Peter the head of a visible universal church, not just a visible local church or an invisible universal one.⁸ They affirm that: (1) Jesus was not making Peter the head of an invisible church, which was his prerogative (Eph. 5:23), but of a visible earthly church; (2) the fact that Jesus gave the keys to exercise governmental authority over the church indicates it must have been a visible church; (3) the fact that the power of binding and loosing (Matt.

3 Ibid.

4 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, no. 957, p. 293.

5 Ibid., no. 961, pp. 294–95.

6 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 301.

7 Ibid., pp. 301–2.

8 Permission was granted to cite the material here which appears in an unpublished manuscript by James Akin titled *A Defense of Catholic Theology* (San Diego, 1994).

18:18) was to be exercised on earth shows that a visible earthly church was in view; (4) the power given to the disciples in Matthew 18:18 involves excommunication from a visible earthly church; and (5) the fact that the gates of hell would not prevail against it reveals that it would not pass out of existence, which would be superfluous to say of a heavenly church.

ARGUMENT FROM TRADITION

Catholic theologians note that even early Fathers like Irenaeus (2nd century) held to the visibility of the church, since “He compares the Church . . . to a seven-branched candlestick, which, visible to all, bears the light of Christ.”⁹ Further, “St. Augustine compares the Church to a city on a mountain (Mt. 5 , 14): ‘The Church stands clear and visible before all men; for she is the city on the mountain which cannot be hidden.’ ”¹⁰ Some Catholic theologians believe, however, that “The final reason for the visibility of the Church lies in the Incarnation of the Divine Word.”¹¹ That is, just as Christ was visible in incarnation, even so his body, the church, is visible in his absence. J. N. D. Kelly adds, “What these early Fathers were envisioning was almost always the empirical, visible society: they had little or no inkling of the distinction between a visible and invisible Church.”¹²

PROTESTANT RESPONSE TO CATHOLIC ARGUMENT FOR THE VISIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

Evangelical Protestants reject the Roman Catholic insistence that the church which Christ and the apostles spoke of must be manifested in a visible organization, namely, the Roman Catholic Church. They reject both the Catholic interpretation of Scripture and their use of tradition on this matter.

RESPONSE TO ARGUMENT FROM SCRIPTURE

A careful examination of the context of the text used to support the Catholic insistence on a visible earthly organization that is Christ’s true church reveals a misuse of these passages. A brief examination of the crucial texts will reveal the invalidity of their conclusions.

Romans 1:5 . Based on this text, Catholics claim that “The teaching office [of the Roman Catholic Church] demands from its incumbents the duty of obedience to the faith.” This is not, however, supported by this text which states: “Through him [Christ]

9 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V, 20, 1, as summarized by Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 302.

10 Augustine, *Contra Cresconium* II, 36, 45; cited in Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 302.

11 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 302.

12 Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrine*, pp. 190f.

we have received the grace of apostleship, to bring about the obedience of faith.” First, Paul is speaking here about his apostleship (v. 1), not that of Peter, to say nothing of Peter’s alleged successors, Roman Catholic popes. Further, to be an apostle one had to be an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:22 ; 1 Cor. 9:1 ; 15:5–7), which clearly disqualifies anyone after the first century, and thus negates the claim that the teaching office of the Roman Catholic Church is somehow implied here. It should be noted that the added requirement of being a witnesses of Jesus’ earthly ministry (Acts 1:22) was only to be one of the twelve apostles who have a special place in the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20), their very names being written on the foundation (Rev. 21:14) and their reigning with Christ on twelve thrones when he returns (Matt. 19:28). Paul was not one of the twelve and, hence, need not fulfill this requirement. However, he was an apostle (Gal. 1:1) who received direct revelation from God (Gal. 1:12), who compared his apostolic authority with that of the other apostles (Gal. 1:17 ; 2:5–9) and who manifested the “signs of an apostle” (2 Cor. 12:12). Further, Paul explicitly listed the appearance of the resurrected Christ to him as qualifying him for being an apostle. He wrote: “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” (1 Cor. 9:1). Likewise, he listed Jesus’ resurrection appearance to him along with that of the other apostles, saying, “After that he [Jesus] appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all . . . he appeared to me” (1 Cor. 15:7–8).

What is more, it is evident from several texts there were no more appearances of Christ to confirm apostolic authority after Paul. First, there are no other appearances listed in the 1 Corinthians 15 list after that of Paul, which he describes as “last of all.” Second, the miraculous signs which confirmed an apostle are referred to as past events by A.D. 69 when the book of Hebrews was written (Heb. 2:3–4). Third, Jude, who wrote his book after Paul’s death, refers to the apostles as having lived in the past (Jude 17) and speaks of the faith as having been “once for all” handed down to the church by them (v. 3).

Finally, Paul and the other apostles manifested the “signs of an apostle” (2 Cor. 12:12), which included the ability to heal *all diseases*,¹³ *even naturally incurable ones*, *immediately* (cf. Acts 3:7), to exorcise demons on command (Matt. 10:8 ; cf. Acts 16:16–18), strike dead some who lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1–11), and even

13 Scripture clearly says that Jesus gave the apostles the ability “to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness” (Matt. 10:1). Indeed, it is written that after the apostle Paul performed a healing, “the rest of the sick on the island came to Paul and were cured” (Acts 28:9). The fact that Paul at a later time (1 Tim. 5:23 ; 2 Tim. 4:20) did not heal some companions does not prove that the apostolic sign gifts failed but merely that they had ceased to exist by that time or that it was not “according to his [God’s] will” to exercise healing on that occasion (cf. Heb. 2:4). Since their function was only a temporary one to confirm the apostolic message (Heb. 2:3–4), thus laying the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20), it is understandable that once the new revelation had been confirmed and the foundation laid there would be no more need for these sign gifts. And this is what Hebrews 2:3–4 says happened, since by then (A.D. 69) these gifts had already passed (see Geisler, *Signs and Wonders*, chap. 9 and appendixes 2 and 8).

perform resurrections from the dead (Matt. 10:7 ; cf. Acts 20). This automatically excludes anyone alive today, including the pope, since no one possesses the power to perform these kinds of apostolic signs. Without these kinds of apostolic signs there is no proof of apostolic authority. Of course, the authority of the New Testament apostles existed after their miracles had ceased, but only because these apostolic signs had confirmed their authority expressed in the abiding apostolic writings. Once these confirmed apostles died, however, there was no living apostolic authority. The only apostolic authority present today is that of the apostolic writings (namely, the New Testament) that were confirmed by apostolic signs. Since we possess no traditions that can be evidentially and documentarily traced to the apostles, as can the New Testament, it follows that only the New Testament contains this apostolic authority (see chap. 11).

Matthew 10:32 (and Rom. 10:10) . According to these passages it is the obligation of believers to confess Christ openly before humanity, but neither of them speaks of the necessity of doing it in connection with the visible organization known as the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, in the first century, when this was written, even baptism was performed in public, not in churches (cf. Acts 2:38 ; 10:46–48 ; 16:31–33). It is a big leap in logic to argue that from the practice of public testimony and baptism one must accept the visible hierarchy of the church of Rome.

John 3:5 (and 6:54) . Catholics argue that these texts speak of baptism and the Eucharist. To argue, however, that they prove that participation in the sacraments supports the Catholic doctrine that the church is a visible earthly organization is unwarranted for several reasons. First, even Catholic theology acknowledges that baptism done by lay persons and even heretics (including Protestant ministers)¹⁴ is valid. It does not have to be done in connection with the visible church of Rome. Second, as we show elsewhere (see Appendix E), baptism is not essential to salvation. If it is not necessary for salvation, then it is not an essential sacrament in the visible church. Indeed, even Catholic theology (in its “baptism of blood” [martyrs] and “baptism of desire” doctrines)¹⁵ acknowledges that baptism is not absolutely essential for salvation. Namely, that those who are not baptized but would have been (had they known and could have) can be saved without it. So here again the necessity of an outward sign done in connection with the visible church has not been proven from these texts.

Matthew 16:16–18 . Contrary to Catholic dogma, this passage does not prove that the Roman Catholic Church is the one true visible church of Christ on earth. First, the argument wrongly assumes that Christ is not the head over the earthly church as he is the heavenly one. The Bible, however, clearly teaches that even though Christ is not visibly

14 Catholic scholars note that not all Protestant ministers are formally heretical but only materially heretical, since their error is not culpable, unless they are fully informed and obstinate.

15 See Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, pp. 114, 311, and especially where he says, “Baptism of desire works *ex opere operantis*. It bestows Sanctifying Grace, which remits original sin, all actual sins, and the eternal punishment for sin.” The repentant thief on the cross was saved by the baptism of desire.

present today he is still head over all things to the church (his body) part of which is still on earth. After reminding the Ephesian Christians that Christ is “head over all things to the church, which is his body” (Eph. 1:22–23), Paul goes on to say that the apostles (who were alive then) were part of the “foundation” of the church (2:19–20) of which the Ephesians were a part (see “you,” v. 19). Paul is saying that Christ was the head of the church at Ephesus as well as the head of the invisible church. There is no need for an earthly head of the church.

Second, the Catholic argument that Christ made Peter the head of a visible earthly church begs the question. As we have already shown (in chap. 11), Jesus did not make Peter the unique head of anything. Jesus gave the same powers to bind and loose to all the apostles (Matt. 18:18). The church is “built upon the foundation of the apostles [plural] and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone” (Eph. 2:20). Whatever role Peter had in the foundation he shared with the other apostles. Christ alone is unique in being the cornerstone.

Third, it is true that when the body of Christ began it was all visible since no believers had died and gone to heaven, so of course it was a visible church when Christ founded it. The invisible church only grew as Christians died and went to heaven. Protestants do not deny that there was a visible Christian church on earth that traces back to the apostles who exercised authority over it, including excommunication. What Protestants object to (and Catholics have not proven) is that Roman Catholic jurisdiction is the sole heir to this original visible church that began with the apostles and will continue until Christ comes without the gates of hell destroying it.

Matthew 18:17. Jesus said, “If he [the offender] refuses to listen to them [the offended and his witnesses], tell the church.” This statement cannot be used to support the Roman Catholic claim that this text proves the divine authority of the Roman See. First, “the church” referred to was a local assembly of believers, such as they were no doubt accustomed to having in their local synagogue. There is no reference here to a universal (catholic) church.

Second, the New Testament church, as a united, gifted, and empowered body of believers, did not come into existence until the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:8 ; 2:1–4 , 42–47). So, whatever “church” means in the context of Matthew 18 , it does not refer to what Roman Catholics mean by a visible church that administers the sacraments and infallibly teaches and disciplines the faithful.

Third, this passage does not speak of any universal apostolic authority to settle all disputes of faith and practice. It refers only to cases involving “sins” and “faults” by which one “brother” has offended another (18:15). This falls short of what Catholics claim for the divine authority of the visible Roman church.

Finally, even if this text did speak about the need for submission to God-ordained authority in all matters of doctrine and conduct, it would not support the Catholic argument for a visible church. For clearly this passage does not show that this authority is

to be found in the visible Roman Catholic Church, as opposed to other visible churches, some of which, like the Eastern Orthodox, are as old or even older.

Luke 10:16 . Jesus said to his apostles, “Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me.” This does not, however, prove the duty to be subject to the Catholic church’s authority—at least not in the sense that Catholics believe. The passage is not speaking about any authority limited to Peter or the apostles but about “seventy” disciples (Luke 10:1–3) sent on a mission to preach the kingdom of God. Also, the passage says nothing about exercising ecclesiastical authority such as binding and loosing (cf. Matt. 18:18) but simply about pronouncing God’s judgment on those who reject Christ’s evangel of his kingdom (Luke 10:10–11). Neither does the phrase “whoever listens to you listens to me” refer to any organizational structure of the visible church but to the authority given to every pair of evangelists sent out to proclaim Christ’s message in his name. Finally, whatever else this passage entails it certainly does not refer to the authority of a visible church over which Peter has primacy, even in the first century. For the “you” (Gk: *humas*) is plural not singular, referring to all the disciples. The same is true, as we have seen, with Jesus’ statement to Peter in Matthew 16 , since he gave the same authority to bind and loose to all the disciples (Matt. 18:18).

Isaiah 2:2 (Mic. 4:1) . The fact that the Old Testament prophets spoke of Israel’s future kingdom in terms of a mountain is significantly different from the Roman Catholic doctrine of the visibility of the church. For one thing, according to Catholic authority Ludwig Ott, the prophet is speaking only “symbolically.” Further, even if the passage is taken to depict a literal outward kingdom, it is not the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, it is the literal Davidic kingdom promised to the nation of Israel wherein they will dwell with their Messiah (Jesus) in the land of Palestine promised to their father Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3 ; 13:14–17 ; 15:1–16). During this time “the Son of Man [Jesus] is seated on his throne . . . judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28). This will occur, as Jesus indicated, when he returns “to restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6) at which time “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26) when they are “grafted back into their own olive tree” (Rom. 11:24).

Finally, even if there were some anticipation of a visible manifestation of the Christian church in these Old Testament passages, as even some Protestants believe, it does not imply that this would be manifested in the organizational Roman Catholic Church. So in no way can the claims of Roman Catholicism be justified from these passages.

The Parables of Jesus . Jesus does depict his future believers on earth as a flock, a building, a vine, a human body, and a city on a mountain, but none of these either anticipates or necessitates what Catholic scholars infer from them. They are simply depictions of the manifestation of Jesus’ followers in a corporate way. Some passages may not even be speaking of Christ’s universal church but only of a local church (e.g., 1 Cor. 14:1–4). Others refer to the invisible church, not the visible church (Eph. 1:22–23

). None of them speak of the visible church being manifest in what we know as the Roman Catholic church.¹⁶

RESPONSE TO ARGUMENT FROM TRADITION

The argument from the Fathers is less than convincing for many reasons. Even Catholic scholars acknowledge that the church fathers were not unanimous on this topic. As Kelly noted, not all the Fathers clearly envisioned a visible organizational unity in the church. Some recognized, as did the New Testament (cf. Eph. 1–4), an invisible church as well. Furthermore, even those who believed in a visible unity did not do so in the same way Roman Catholics envision it, namely, as centered in the hierarchy of the Catholic church, with its apex in the primacy of the bishop of Rome. Eastern church fathers, to which Eastern Orthodoxy traces its lineage and who are as early as any in the Western church, clearly did not think it would or should be. Finally, the papacy as it is known today is a relatively late institution, having assumed its shape under Pope Leo I (d. A.D. 461). The visible unity stressed by the early Fathers is not identical to the organizational unity under the headship of an infallible pope in Rome. Roman Catholicism's conclusion goes well beyond even a consensus view of the early Fathers, to say nothing of the "unanimous" one they claim.

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

In addition to a visible unity of Christians in the Roman Catholic Church, Catholics also believe there is a God-ordained unity to the church. This unity is manifested in two ways: a unity of faith and a unity of communion.

CATHOLIC DEFENSE OF THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

Roman Catholicism teaches that "The unity both of faith and communion is guaranteed by the Primacy of the Pope, the Supreme Teacher and Pastor of the Church. One is cut off from the unity of Faith by heresy and from the unity of communion by schism."¹⁷ In his 1896 encyclical (*Satis cognitum*) Pope Leo XIII declared: "Surely it is well established among all according to clear and manifold testimony that *the true Church of Jesus Christ is one*, that no Christian dare contradict it."¹⁸ The nature of this unity was clearly specified by the pope: "Jesus did not arrange and organize such a Church as would embrace several communities similar in kind, but distinct, and not bound together by those bonds that make the Church indivisible and unique after the manner clearly in which we profess the symbols of faith, 'I believe in one Church.'" He continued, "*The Church of Christ, therefore, is one and perpetual*; whoever go apart [from it] wander

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 301–2.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 303.

¹⁸ Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, no. 1954, p. 494, emphasis added.

away from the will and prescription of Christ the Lord and, leaving the way of salvation, digress to destruction.” Consequently, “Jesus Christ instituted in the Church a living, authentic, and likewise permanent *Magisterium*, which He strengthened by His own power, taught by the Spirit of Truth, and confirmed by miracles.” In addition, “When the divine Founder decreed that the Church be one in faith, and in government, and in communion, *He chose Peter and his successors in whom should be the principle and as it were the center of unity.*”¹⁹

In defending the visible unity of the church under the Roman jurisdiction Catholic theologians appeal to both Scripture and church tradition. The argument from Scripture is based in a variety of texts, some of which are directed at the unity of faith and others at the unity of communion. Catholic scholars believe that the unity of faith “consists in the fact that all members of the Church inwardly believe the truths of faith proposed by the teaching office of the Church, at least implicitly and outwardly confess them.” Of course, “Unity of Faith leaves room for various opinions in those controversial questions which the Church has not finally decided.”²⁰ The unity of communion “consists, on the one hand, in the subjection of the members of the Church to the authority of the bishops and of the Pope (unity of government or hierarchical unity); on the other hand, in the binding of the members among themselves to a social unity by participation in the same cult and in the same means of grace (unity of cult or liturgical unity).”²¹

ARGUMENT FROM SCRIPTURE

Scriptural evidence offered by Catholic scholars can be summarized as follows: “Christ gives the Apostles the mandate to promulgate His teaching to all peoples, and demands unconditional assent to its promulgation (Mt. 28 , 19 et seq.; Mk. 16 , 15 et seq.).” Also, “In the prayer of the High Priest He insistently asks the Father for the unity of the Apostles and of the future faithful [John 17:20].” Further, “Paul symbolically represents the unity of the Church by picturing it as a house (I Tim. 3:15) and again as a human body (Rom. 12:4 . . .). He expressly enjoins internal and outward unity . . . (Eph. 4:3–6). He warns insistently against schism and heresy . . . (I Cor. 1:10 . . . Tit. 3:10).”²²

ARGUMENT FROM TRADITION

Catholic theology depends heavily on tradition to support its concept of the ecclesiastical unity of communion. They appeal especially to the early Fathers’ struggle against heresy, particularly to Irenaeus and Tertullian. “St. Cyprian, impelled by the secession from the Church in Carthage and in Rome, wrote the first monograph on the unity of the Catholic Church.”²³ Later, Augustine, in his *Anti-Donatist Writings*, took a strong stand against

19 Ibid., nos. 1955–57, 1960, emphasis added.

20 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 303.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., p. 304.

23 Ibid.

schism, arguing that the Catholic church has the right to force conformity to its essential doctrines.²⁴

PROTESTANT RESPONSE TO CATHOLIC ARGUMENT FOR THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

Protestants confess the Apostles' Creed which affirms one "Catholic [universal] Church" but they do not mean the same thing by it that Roman Catholics do. The common denominator of the Protestant concept of unity is doctrinal and spiritual, not organizational.

RESPONSE TO ARGUMENT FROM SCRIPTURE

Evangelicals reject the Catholic interpretation of Scripture to support their doctrine of a visible, organizational, ecclesiastical unity. They insist that the basis of true unity is found in the spiritual (mystical) body of Christ, the invisible church, not in a visible church.

Matthew 28:19 (Mark 16:15). While Christ did give the disciples a mandate to proclaim the gospel to all people, they were not instructed to demand an "unconditional assent to its promulgation," at least not in the sense in which Rome has interpreted this.²⁵ Rather, they were told simply to "teach them to observe" Christ's teaching (Matt. 28:20). But their willingness to be taught is a necessary condition made clear by the fact that they were asked to "believe" (Mark 16:16). As Augustine acknowledged, you cannot force people in matters of faith, for "God judged that men would serve him better if they served him freely. That could not be if they served him by necessity and not by free will."²⁶

Furthermore, even if in some qualified sense the "demand for unconditional assent" is required for discipleship, this does not mean that Christ intended here that it must be given to any earthly organization. Clearly, the "commands" to be "observed" were those of Christ (Matt. 28:20), not those of any alleged representative of Christ on earth (like Peter). This is to say nothing of the extra-biblical doctrines the Catholic church has added to them since that time, such as the infallibility of the pope (see chap. 11), the bodily assumption of Mary (chap. 15), and the Apocrypha (chap. 9).

Finally, the unity envisioned here is not organizational but doctrinal and spiritual. It is a unity in Christ's "teaching" and of his presence (Matt. 28:20), not in an earthly

24 See Augustine, *Correction of the Donatists* 6.22–24.

25 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 303.

26 Augustine, *Of True Religion* 14. See also Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, no. 1875. Augustine, however, seemed to be inconsistent with his own principle when he argued that the Donatist heretics should be coerced into conformity with the Catholic church (see his *Anti-Donatist Writings*).

institution. Institutional unity is not envisioned in this passage, at least not in the explicit or monolithic sense in which Roman Catholics hold it.

John 17:20–21 . Jesus did pray for his followers, “that they may all be one,” but evangelicals insist that he was not speaking about *organizational* unity but *organic* unity. He was not referring to an *external uniformity* but to the visible manifestation of our *spiritual unity*, for example, in our love for one another which Jesus said unbelievers can detect (John 13:35). After all, Jesus only prayed that all *believers* be one, not that all *churches* belong to one. Certainly the unity should be *visible*, but it need not be *organizational*. In this regard the recent statement by “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” has been criticized for not making the historic Protestant view more clear, sometimes blurring the distinction between the visible and invisible dimensions of the church crucial to the Protestant view.²⁷ That the unity was truly spiritual is evident in what was said of early Christians, “Behold, how they love one another!” Christ’s true followers are one in faith, hope, and love, not in denomination, synod, or jurisdiction.

Furthermore, even though the immediate discussion concerns a visible unity of the church, it is clear that Jesus did not envision this organizational unity, such as that claimed by the Roman See from the facts that: (1) no such governmental unity is mentioned anywhere in the passage; (2) Jesus is speaking of “all those who will believe” in him in the future too, which includes those who couldn’t be seen (v. 20)—a description of the whole spiritual body of believers, not simply the organized believers on earth; (3) the unity for which he prayed is compared to that among the persons of the Godhead (“as you, Father, are in me and I in you”), a unity that is clearly spiritual and invisible, not visible and organizational; (4) the primary sense in which the world was to observe the manifestation of this unity was by “love” (v. 23), a spiritual tie, not an organizational one. Indeed, Jesus said, “This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). The kind of unity envisioned here clearly is not a visible organization, as Catholics claim, but a true spiritual unity.

Ephesians 4:3–6 . Paul speaks here of “striving to preserve the unity of the spirit” in “one body.” It is evident, however, that he does not have an organizational unity of the Christian church in mind, certainly not the kind claimed by the Roman Catholic church. For one thing, according to the New American Bible it is not an organizational unity, since he spoke of “unity of the spirit” (v. 3). Even if it is rendered “the unity of the [Holy] Spirit” (NIV , RSV), there is no indication that it is more than a spiritual unity wrought by the source of all true spiritual unity, the Holy Spirit. Further, the spiritual unity is made by God, not people. Christians are merely urged to strive to *maintain* this unity that God has *made* in the body. What is more, the “one body” is the body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13) into which believers are baptized by “one Spirit” (v. 4). This must be the spiritual body of Christ that is the only body to which all believers belong, since many believers belonging to that body (namely, those who are dead) are not part of the visible church. Further, this is clearly baptism by the Spirit, which unites one with the invisible

27 See “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” final draft (29 March 1994). See Appendix F.

(spiritual) body of Christ, and not water baptism (which is different, cf. Acts 1:5 ; 10:47), which unites one with part of the visible body of Christ on earth. So the unity here is a unity of faith, not of communion, since Paul refers to “one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” all of which are a matter of confession. There is nothing in this text about unity of government or organization, certainly not on the universal scale that Roman Catholics believe.

Romans 12:4 . The “body” referenced in these texts is not necessarily the visible organization of a universal Church, such as is claimed by Catholicism. In context it is the spiritual unity to be found in the local congregation. This is evident from the fact that Paul is addressing “all the beloved of God *in Rome* ” (Rom. 1:7 , emphasis added), not the whole visible Christian church. True, he gives truths that are applicable to the whole church, but this does not mean that when he speaks of “body” (in 12:4) that he necessarily has visible, organizational unity in mind. Further, the context in which he speaks of “one body” is the exercise of the individual members’ gifts to edify this local congregation (vv. 6–8). Although what is true for one local body of believers will be true for others, there is no reference here to any visible authority that governs all these churches.²⁸ The context indicates that the one body is not the universal church but the local church in the city of Rome. Finally, to whatever degree it is legitimate to apply this text beyond the local church addressed here, it certainly does not prove the Roman Catholic claim that there is a God-ordained unity in one visible church. The New Testament often refers to “churches” (Acts 16:5 ; Rev. 1:4) each having their own governing authorities (Acts 20:17 ; Phil. 1:1 ; Titus 1:5).²⁹

1 Timothy 3:15 . Catholic scholars claim this is a reference to the visible universal church, embracing the whole family on earth because of references to “the church” and phrases like “household of God” and “pillar and foundation of truth.” In response, several observations are in order. First, as cosmic sounding as these phrases may be, we must keep in mind that Paul is writing to Timothy about “how to *behave* ” in the church while he was “delayed” from being there personally (v. 15), which is an obvious reference to his coming to a specific local church.

Second, since the letters to Timothy are pastoral in nature it is understandable that what Paul taught would be applicable to other local churches as well. The reference to public reading of the Bible (4:13) and other things not true of the universal church (5:4–16) supports this claim. Hence, the phrase “household of God” may be a collective term encompassing the various individual “churches” of which the Bible speaks elsewhere (cf.

28 Except, of course, there was the authority of living apostles (in the first century) and there is the authority of apostolic writings in the New Testament for succeeding centuries. This is precisely what Protestants believe.

29 The authority of these individual churches was, of course, subject to apostolic authority which was exercised by them personally when they were alive (2 Thess. 2:15 ; Titus 1:5) and which exists since their time in the apostolic writings of the New Testament (see chap. 10).

Acts 20:17 ; Rev. 1:4). So rather than being a reference to a universal visible church it may be only a generalization for all the individual churches collectively.

Further, even if this is a reference to a universal visible church, it in no way specifies that it is to be understood in a monolithic way, as with Roman Catholicism. It may mean no more than the collective manifestation of all believers on earth.

Finally, as already noted, there are several other important (and we believe unprovable) steps from a universal visible church in the first century to the Roman Catholic doctrine that it is the true God-ordained successor of that apostolic church on earth today.

Titus 3:5 (1 Cor. 1:10). It is true that the New Testament urges believers to deal with serious false doctrine and, “after a first and second warning, break off contact with a heretic” (Titus 3:10). However, the false teacher was in a local congregation and the action to cut off relations with them was to be taken by a local body of believers, not by a visible universal organization such as the Roman Catholic Church claims to be. Likewise, in Corinth, when church discipline was necessary in moral matters, it was the congregation that took action. Speaking to the local church “in Corinth” (1 Cor. 1:2), the apostle Paul exhorted: “in the name of [our] Lord Jesus: *when you have gathered together . . . with the power of the Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan*” (1 Cor. 5:4–5 , emphasis added). To be sure, apostolic authority (Paul) was behind this decision, but it was accomplished by a local body of believers. Protestants do not deny that there was living apostolic authority in the first century that was binding on all the churches. This was part of their foundational role in establishing the church (Eph. 2:20), but it in no way supports the Roman Catholic claim that there was an authoritative visible organization in place in the New Testament that was divinely authorized to exercise this authority.

Acts 15 . Only once did an issue in the churches draw general interest and consultation (Acts 15), and even then the Jerusalem conference was only confirmatory of the revelation Paul had previously received directly from God. There was no new infallible declaration from God.

There are several things about the decision which indicate that it was only confirmatory of the revelation already given by and confirmed by God to an apostle (Gal. 1:11–12). First, the inquiry into the issue was a voluntary one, coming from the church in Antioch (Acts 15:2–3). Second, the nature of the event was more of a conference than a church council, since it was not only apostles and elders but also the other “brethren” who made the decision (Acts 15:22–23). Third, contrary to the Catholic claim, if anyone dominated the conference it was not Peter but James, giving as he did the last word in the discussion (15:13–21). Fourth, the language of the statement is moderate, using phrases like “it seemed good to us.” Indeed, the result of the conference was only a “letter” (15:30), not a papal encyclical with the typical language of anathema. Finally, the conference recognized the supernatural confirmation of God on

the message of Paul (Acts 15:12), which was the divinely appointed sign that he spoke by revelation from God (2 Cor. 12:12 ; Heb. 2:3–4).

RESPONSE TO ARGUMENT FROM TRADITION

The Roman Catholic argument for an organizational unity of the Christian church on the basis of tradition fails for a number of reasons. First, there was no such unity in the first few centuries. On one occasion (in the late 2nd century) the bishop of Rome, in a pompous display of power, cut Western Christians off from all of Asia Minor by assuming the right to excommunicate them from Christendom. There obviously was no organizational unity manifest here. Further, the Roman Catholic Church as we know it did not begin to develop until after the time of Constantine and Augustine (4th century). References to unity before this time are either purely confessional (e.g., the *Apostles' Creed*) or doctrinal deviations dealt with in some localized area. The first ecumenical council was not until Nicea (A.D. 325). And even here we do not see an organizational unity such as the Roman Catholic Church claims exists in its hierarchy.³⁰ Most orthodox Protestants accept the validity of the creeds and councils of the first five centuries but reject the Roman Catholic claim to be the one true church of Christ on earth.³¹

THE PRIESTLY AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

As discussed earlier (chap. 13), Catholics believe the church is an institution of salvation which dispenses grace a portion at a time by the seven sacraments from birth to death through the priesthood. Thus, the function of the priesthood is the heart of the Roman Catholic system.

THE NATURE OF PRIESTLY AUTHORITY

Priestly power is permanent. It “can neither be effaced nor taken away.”³² The Catholic church proclaimed “that the holy Synod [of Trent] condemned the opinion of those who assert that the priests of the New Testament have only a temporary power, and that those at one time rightly ordained can again become laymen, if they do not exercise the

³⁰ This is not to say that Nicea did not conceive of a doctrinal unity under which umbrella it envisioned all the true Christian churches on earth to be expected to abide. But there is nothing uniquely Roman Catholic about this, since most Protestants agree as well.

³¹ This is not to say that there is no disagreement among Protestants over how to interpret certain phrases of the Nicene Creed like “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church” and “baptism for the remission of sins.” Some Protestants even quibble (we believe wrongly) over the “eternally begotten” Son phrase. But these are only questions of interpretation, not questions about the acceptance of this creed.

³² Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, nos. 960–61, pp. 294–95.

ministry of the word of God [can. 1].”³³ In other words, priestly power is permanent. Further, sacramental priestly function is unique only to those rightly ordained, such as the priests in the Roman Catholic Church.³⁴ The Council of Trent declared, “But if anyone should affirm that all Christians without distinction are priests of the New Testament . . . , or that they are all endowed among themselves with an equal spiritual power, he seems to do nothing else than disarrange [can. 6] the ecclesiastical hierarchy.”³⁵

THE SUCCESSION OF PRIESTLY AUTHORITY

Finally, there is a succession of priestly power under the bishop of Rome. Roman Catholic infallible dogma proclaims that “Jesus Christ instituted in the Church a living, authentic, and likewise permanent *magisterium*, which He strengthened by His own power, taught by the Spirit of Truth, and confirmed by miracles.”³⁶ Likewise, “When the divine Founder decreed that the Church be one in faith, and in government, and in communion, *He chose Peter and his successors in whom should be the principle and as it were the center of unity.*”³⁷

THE ADMINISTRATION OF PRIESTLY AUTHORITY

The function of the priestly hierarchy (of priests and bishops) is to administer the seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, ex treme unction, holy order, and matrimony.³⁸ “Except for Baptism and Matrimony,³⁹ a special priestly or episcopal power conferred by Holy Orders, is necessary for the valid ministrations of the

33 Ibid., no. 960, p. 294.

34 Roman Catholics also accept the validity of ordination in Eastern Orthodox, Old Catholics, some Anglicans, namely, the ones who have been ordained by those with valid orders.

35 Ibid. Protestants acknowledge that there are different spiritual gifts in the body of Christ but they do not believe that any of them have special priestly powers that others do not have, since we all have the same access by prayer to our one great High Priest, Christ (Heb. 4–7).

36 No alleged miracles performed by popes or priests today are of the kind the apostles performed. The apostles’ miraculous healings were: (1) immediate; (2) always successful, even on incurable diseases; (3) without known relapse into the disease; and (4) confirming of the new revelation given through them (cf. Heb. 2:3–4), which even Catholic scholars admit does not exist since the days of the apostles. But if new revelation does not exist, then there is no need for supernatural confirmation; the sign and sermon go together. The new message for God was accompanied by a new miracle from God (cf. John 3:2 ; Acts 2:22). For further discussion, see Geisler, *Signs and Wonders*, appendix 2.

37 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, nos. 1957, 1960, emphasis added.

38 Ibid., no. 844, p. 262.

39 Some scholars argue that technically the spouses administer the sacrament of marriage to each other, but the priest must be present as the church’s official witness to the event.

Sacraments.”⁴⁰ Lay persons (e.g., nurses or doctors) and even Protestants may administer baptism in the name of the Trinity. However, the Council of Trent soundly condemned the belief that “all Christians have the power to administer all the sacraments.”⁴¹

CATHOLIC DEFENSE OF THE PRIESTLY AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

Roman Catholicism is hierarchically structured. The pope, as successor to Peter, is the final and infallible authority (see chap. 11). Under him are the bishops who receive their power directly from the pope.⁴² The bishops rule over all priests in their diocese and ordain new ones to the priesthood. The exercise of this priestly power includes not only the ability to administer all sacraments but, along with this, the power under God to transform the bread and wine into the actual physical body and blood of Christ and the power to forgive and retain sins. These powers are unique to the Catholic priesthood and are a serious source of conflict with Protestant belief.⁴³

ARGUMENT FROM SCRIPTURE

We will concentrate here on the Catholic defense of the special priestly power to forgive sins. Several verses are crucial to the discussion. We have already discussed the verses used to support the authority of Peter as the head of the church (see chap. 11), so here we will comment on the verses used to support priestly authority.

John 20:22–23 . Biblically, Catholicism stands or falls on its interpretation of certain key texts like this one. Since it holds that “The Church has received from Christ the power of remitting sins committed after Baptism,”⁴⁴ this text assumes great significance. Jesus said to his apostles after his resurrection, “Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” Catholic theology teaches that “With these words Jesus transferred to the Apostles the mission which He Himself had received from the Father. . . . As He Himself had forgiven sins on earth (Mt. 9:2 et seq.; Mark. 2:5 . . .), He now invested the Apostles also with the power to forgive sins.”⁴⁵

40 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 341.

41 Ibid.

42 See *ibid.*, p. 290, and Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, nos. 1500, 2287.

43 Roman Catholicism teaches that there is a sense in which all believers are priests. In 1928 Pope Pius XI declared that “The entire Christian family . . . the prince of the apostles rightly calls ‘a chosen race, a kingdom of priests’ ” (*Miserentissimus Redemptor*). Also, Vatican II stated that “Christ the Lord . . . made the new people [all Christians] a kingdom of priests to God, his Father” (Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II*, vol. 1, rev. [Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1992], p. 360).

44 See Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 417.

45 Ibid., p. 419.

Matthew 16:19 . After Peter’s confession that Jesus was the son of God, Jesus said: “I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” According to Catholic teaching, “ ‘The keys of the Kingdom of Heaven’ mean supreme authority on earth over the earthly Empire of God. The person who possesses the power of the keys has the full power of allowing a person to enter the Empire of God or to exclude him from it [and] . . . the power to forgive sins must also be included in the power of the keys.”⁴⁶

ARGUMENT FROM TRADITION

An early Christian writing known as the *Didache* (late 1st century A.D.) refers to “the confession of sins and the forgiveness of sins without specifying that they refer specifically to the Sacrament of Penance administered by the Church.”⁴⁷ But Catholic authors refer to the late-first-century (c. A.D. 96) writing of Clement of Rome⁴⁸ as an early example of ecclesiastical penance. Early-second-century Ignatius of Antioch announced that “The Lord forgives those who do penance when they return to unity with God and to the communion with the bishop.”⁴⁹ Many other early Fathers, including Justin, Eusebius, Tertullian, and Clement, also spoke of penance and forgiveness. After surveying the Fathers, Ott concludes: “From the testimony cited it is evident that Christian antiquity bears witness to the existence of an unlimited power to forgive sins conferred by Christ on His Church.”⁵⁰

PROTESTANT RESPONSE TO CATHOLIC ARGUMENT FOR THE PRIESTLY AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

Evangelical Protestants do not accept the inferences Catholic scholars draw from the above verses. In each case Roman Catholic scholars take the text out of its proper context and extrapolations are made that are not justified by a careful examination of the entire passage.

RESPONSE TO ARGUMENT FROM SCRIPTURE

John 20:22–23 . Here the disciples are given the power to forgive and retain sin. Catholics and Protestants do not dispute this. However, the Catholic claim that this is a special power possessed only by those who are ordained under true apostolic authority, such as the Roman Catholic Church, and are true successors of the apostles, is not supported by this text for many reasons. First, no such claim is made anywhere in the text

46 Ibid., p. 418.

47 Ibid., p. 419.

48 *Epistle to the Corinthians* 57, 1.

49 *Philad.* 8, 1; cf. 3, 2. Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, pp. 419–20.

50 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 421.

that only validly ordained priests, such as Roman Catholic priests,⁵¹ were to possess this power.

Second, all early believers, including lay persons, proclaimed the gospel by which sins are forgiven (Rom. 1:16 ; 1 Cor. 15:1–4). This ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation was not limited to any special class known as “priests” or “clergy” (2 Cor. 3–5).

Third, even Philip, who was only a deacon (Acts 6:5) and not an elder or priest in the Roman Catholic sense,⁵² preached the gospel to the Samaritans. This resulted in the conversion of many of them (Acts 8:1–12), which involves the forgiveness of their sins (Acts 13:38).⁵³

Fourth, this passage is John’s inner circle parallel to the Great Commission Jesus gave all his disciples: to take the gospel into all the world and make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20 ; Mark 16:15–16 ; Luke 24:46–49). In this mandate to evangelize Jesus promised, as he did in John, that as they “proclaimed the gospel” the result would be “the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 24:47) for those who believe and that by his Spirit he would “be with” them until the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). All three of these aspects find a parallel in Jesus giving them the Holy Spirit (John 20:22), charging them to proclaim the forgiveness of sins (John 20:23), and commissioning them to go on the authority of the Father: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). So there is no greater power given here than that which all the disciples possessed as a result of the Great Commission, which even Vatican II⁵⁴ acknowledged all Christians are obligated to help fulfill.

The documents of Vatican II make it clear that current Catholicism understands that the whole church, not just the priests, are responsible to proclaim the gospel. It declared that “The Church’s mission is concerned with the salvation of men; and men win salvation through the grace of Christ and faith in him. Therefore, the apostolate of the church *and of each of its members* aim primarily at announcing to the world by word and action the message of Christ and communicating to it the grace of Christ. . . . *Laymen have countless opportunities for exercising the apostolate of evangelization and sanctification.*” It particularly specifies that lay persons can do this in more ways than through their life and good words. For “the true apostle is on the lookout for occasions of announcing Christ by word, either to unbelievers to draw them toward the faith, or to the

51 See n. 36.

52 Roman Catholics believe the New Testament equivalent of the term “priest” is “elder,” which is a different office than “deacon” (see Phil. 1:1 ; 1 Tim. 3:1 , 8 ; Titus 1:5 , 7).

53 The apostles later came to Samaria, not to convert the people, but to give them the special “gift of the Holy Spirit” (cf. Acts 2:38 and 8:14–17) and an outward (“Simon saw,” 8:18) manifestations (i.e., tongues, cf. Acts 2:1–4) that accompanied this special gift (cf. Acts 1:5 ; 10:44–46).

54 See “Evangelization in the Modern World,” *The Documents of Vatican II*, Sect. 120.

faithful to instruct them . . . and in the hearts of all should the apostle's words find echo: 'Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel' (1 Cor. 9:16)."⁵⁵

In short, contrary to Roman Catholic claims, there is nothing in John 20:21–23 to support either the primacy or infallibility of the bishop of Rome, nor any special priestly power. It is simply an affirmation about Jesus giving to his disciples the ability to forgive sins for all who believe the message that the apostles were commissioned to proclaim.

Matthew 16:19 . Here again, Protestants do not dispute that Jesus gave his disciples the power to forgive or retain sins. What they do dispute is whether this is a power that is uniquely possessed by those with proper ordination, such as Roman Catholic priests. There is absolutely nothing in this text to indicate that it is. First, it is worth noting that Jesus gave this same power to *all* the disciples (Matt. 18:18), not just to Peter.

Second, everyone who proclaims the gospel has the same power, for the gospel “is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). Indeed, Paul defined the gospel in terms of Christ dying and rising “for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:1–4). So every preacher of the gospel, clergy or laity, has the power to, on the basis of a person accepting Christ's death and resurrection for them, forgive sins. Likewise, all who evangelize can say to those who reject the gospel that their sins are retained. For, as Paul said, messengers of Christ are “the aroma of Christ for God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to the latter an odor of death that leads to death” (2 Cor. 2:15–16).

Third, the Catholic claim that the Old Testament priesthood is somehow “translated” into a New Testament priesthood on the basis of Hebrews 7:12 misses the whole point of this passage. The writer of Hebrews actually is arguing that both the law and the Old Testament priesthood are done away with by Christ, our great High Priest, for he writes: “When there is a *change* of priesthood, there is necessarily a change of law as well” (Heb. 7:12 , emphasis added). He then goes on to say that “a former commandment is *annulled*” (v. 18 , emphasis added). Christ did not translate Aaron's Old Testament priesthood into a new one for priests in the New Testament. The whole point of this section of Hebrews is to show that Christ, by perfectly fulfilling what the Old Testament priesthood prefigured (cf. 7:11 , 18–19), did away with it and replaced it with his own high priestly office, after the order of Melchizedek, not after Aaron (7:17–28). Indeed, such a vivid contrast is made here between the repeated offerings of the Aaronic priests and the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ our high priest that it should cause serious pause for Roman Catholics, who believe that the priest offers up continually the (unbloody) sacrifice of the mass. Hebrews declares: “Every priest stands daily at his ministry, *offering frequently those same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But this one [Christ] offered one sacrifice for sins, and took his seat forever at the right hand of God. . . . For by one offering he has made perfect forever those who are being consecrated*” (Heb. 10:11–12 , 14 , emphasis added). Catholics teach the opposite of what Hebrews

55 Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 1:772–73, emphasis added.

emphatically states, namely, that the mass is a sacrifice that is repeated over and over. Contrary to the Catholic claim that Hebrews is only speaking of a once-for-all *unbloody* sacrifice, no such qualifying word is found in the text.

Finally, while Roman Catholicism acknowledges that “the entire Christian family” is “a kingdom of priests,”⁵⁶ nevertheless in practice it denies what the New Testament clearly affirms, namely, that all believers are priests. By making such a strong distinction between the common or universal priesthood and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood they render ineffective Peter’s teaching that all believers are “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own” (1 Pet. 2:9). In fact, there is only one priest necessary in the new covenant, our great high priest Jesus Christ (cf. Heb. 7–8). The task left for all other priests (namely, all believers) is to minister the gospel (2 Cor. 3–4). Appeal to the Old Testament to show that all Israelites were called priests (Exod. 19:6–7) even when God had established the Aaronic priesthood as a special ministerial class misses the whole point of the Book of Hebrews.⁵⁷ The Aaronic priesthood has been done away with, and every believer has direct access to the one high priest, Jesus Christ, who intercedes for us!

The fact is that nowhere in the New Testament are church leaders called “priests.” They are called “elders” or “bishops” (overseers) who were exhorted by Peter himself to “Tend the flock of God in your midst, [overseeing] not by constraint but willingly, as God would have it. . . . *Do not lord it over those assigned to you*, but be examples to the flock. *And when the chief Shepherd is revealed*, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1 Pet. 5:2–3 , emphasis added). The whole hierarchical institution of the Roman Catholic priesthood as a special class of men endowed with special priestly powers to forgive sins and to transform the communion elements into the actual body and blood of Christ is contrary to the spirit of these passages. In 1 Peter 5 : (1) no one is described as a priest or as having priestly powers except “the chief Shepherd” Christ himself; (2) Peter describes himself as “a fellow presbyter” (v. 1); (3) the leaders of the flock are called “elders,” not priests; (4) they are depicted as undershepherds, not overlords of the church (v. 3); and (5) they have no special binding power, but are to lead by “example,” not by “constraint” (vv. 2–3). The whole spirit of this passage is contrary to the priestly powers claimed by the Roman Catholic Church.

RESPONSE TO ARGUMENT FROM TRADITION

Catholic scholars go to great lengths to demonstrate a chain of succession from Peter to the present pope. This is crucial to their claim that priests today possess the same apostolic authority to forgive sins that Jesus gave to his disciples. There are, however, many good reasons for rejecting this claim.

First, even if it could be demonstrated that there was a chain from the first century to the present it would be in vain, since the crucial link is missing—the first one. For, as we

⁵⁶ See n. 43 above.

⁵⁷ See “Quick Questions,” *This Rock* (September 1993): 30.

demonstrated in chapter 11 , there is absolutely no proof that apostolic authority was passed on to anyone after the time of the apostles. The proof that the office and authority ceased is that the gifts that confirmed the apostles ceased (cf. Heb. 2:3–4). The apostles, like Christ, could not only say “your sins are forgiven,” they could also say to a man born lame, “[rise and] walk” (Acts 3:6). And when they did, “immediately” he was healed (v. 7). Like Jesus, they could and did heal *all* kinds of sickness (cf. John 9:1), exorcise demons immediately on command (Acts 16:16–18), and even raise the dead (Acts 20:7–12). No priest in his right mind claims to be able to perform “the signs of an apostle” (2 Cor. 12:12), let alone is actually able to do them. But if the signs of the apostles died with the apostles, then so did the office and its powers. What is left is a church (in fact, many churches) gifted with teachers and evangelists (Eph. 4:11–12) and in many other ways to proclaim the gospel and build up believers in the most holy faith. That is all that is necessary to accomplish God’s purposes through his redeemed followers on earth.

Second, the earliest testimony is not to ecclesiastical penance but simply the need to confess sins. This falls far short of the Roman Catholic claim that this testimony “bears witness to the existence of an unlimited power to forgive sins conferred by Christ on His Church.”⁵⁸

Third, it is worth noting that simply because a teaching existed early in church history that does not make it true any more than a later teaching is necessarily false. It is a chronological fallacy to assume the time of a teaching’s appearance proves its truth. Otherwise, recent scientific discoveries would automatically be eliminated, at least until they became very old. Many false doctrines and traditions appeared early in the history of Christianity—some even in New Testament times. Paul condemned false teaching and heresy in his day (1 Tim. 4 ; 2 Tim. 2), as did John (1 John 4), Jude (16–19), and Peter (2 Pet. 2). John even debunks a false tradition (which claimed that he would not die) that was current during the days of the apostles (John 21:23).

Finally, in the last analysis it is not a question of how early or how many Fathers taught something but whether it is based on the infallible written Word of God. And, as we have seen above, there is no basis in the Holy Scriptures for sacramental penance. This is not to say that Christians should not confess their sins; they should. All sins should be confessed to God (1 John 1:9) from whom alone we receive forgiveness (Mark 2:7 , 10). Sins against others should be confessed to them. James exhorted: “Confess your sins *to one another* [not to a priest] and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (5:16 , emphasis added). There is absolutely no evidence in the New Testament that believers should confess their sins to the priesthood (i.e., the Roman Catholic priesthood) in order to receive forgiveness.

THE CONSTITUENCY OF THE CHURCH

⁵⁸ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 421.

Historically, at least before Vatican II, there were few Catholic beliefs that caused more agitation with Protestants than the belief that the Roman Catholic Church is necessary for salvation. This doctrine has taken different forms, some more extreme than others. Some even went so far as to pronounce all non-Catholics lost. More recently, Protestants have been elevated to the status of “separated brethren.” First, let us look at the traditional view.

CATHOLIC DEFENSE OF THE CONSTITUENCY OF THE CHURCH

“*The Church of Christ, therefore, is one and perpetual; whoever go apart (from it) wander away from the will and prescription of Christ the Lord and, leaving the way of salvation, digress to destruction.*”⁵⁹ In short, membership in the Roman Catholic Church is necessary for salvation.

CONDITIONS FOR CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

In his encyclical “*Mystici Corporis*” Pope Pius XII declared: “Actually only those are to be numbered among the members of the Church who have received the laver of regenerating [baptism] and profess the true faith, and have not, to their misfortune, separated themselves from the structure of the body, or for very serious sins have not been excluded by lawful authority.”⁶⁰ Commenting on this, Ott says, “According to this declaration three conditions are to be demanded for membership of the Church: a) The valid reception of the Sacrament of Baptism. b) The profession of the true Faith. c) Participation in the Communion of the Church.” He adds, “By the fulfillment of these three conditions one subjects oneself to the threefold office of the Church, the sacerdotal office (Baptism), the teaching office (Confession of Faith), and the pastoral office (obedience to the Church authority).”⁶¹

CLASSIFICATION OF THOSE EXCLUDED FROM CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

A consequence of the traditional Catholic teaching on conditions for church membership is that certain classes of people, including all orthodox Protestants, were automatically excluded from being members of the true church of Christ on earth. These included: “a) The unbaptized.⁶² . . . b) Open [public or material] apostates and heretics.⁶³ . . . c)

59 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, nos. 1955–57, 1960, emphasis added.

60 Ibid., no. 2286, pp. 615–16.

61 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 309.

62 Those who desired to be baptized and were not are not excluded from grace (i.e., salvation), but they are excluded from church membership. See *ibid.*, p. 311.

63 Again, material (vs. formal) heresy (that is, an error in good faith) does not disqualify one from membership in the mystical body of Christ (= salvation) but merely from membership in the church on earth.

Schismatics, as well as those who, in good faith, fundamentally reject the Church authority. . . . d) *Excommunicati vitandi*”⁶⁴ According to many Catholic authorities, those who have been excommunicated from the church do not retain membership in it unless or until they are restored.

THE NECESSITY OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

For the reasons just noted, many conservative Catholic theologians believe that “Membership of the Church is necessary for all men for salvation.”⁶⁵ They cite the Fourth Lateran Council (A.D. 1215), which declared that “the universal Church of the faithful is one outside of which none is saved.”⁶⁶ Thus, Ott contends that “This was the teaching also of the Union Council of Florence (D 714), and of Popes Innocent III (D 423) and Boniface VIII in the bull ‘unam sanctam’ (D 468), Clement

VI (D 570b), Benedict XIV (D 1473), Pius IX (D 1647, 1677), Leo XIII (D 1955). Pius XII in the Encyclical “*Mystici Corporis*” (D 2286, 2288).”⁶⁷ Pope Pius IX declared that, “outside the Apostolic Roman Church, no one can be saved; that this is the only ark of salvation; that he who shall not have entered therein will perish in the flood.”⁶⁸ He went on to say, however, that “it is necessary to hold for certain that they who labor in ignorance of the true religion, if this ignorance is invincible, are not stained by any guilt in this matter in the eyes of God.”⁶⁹

Over against this traditional conservative view many modern Catholics argue that membership in the Catholic church is not necessary for salvation. Indeed, Vatican II concluded that non-Catholics, even non-Christians, can be saved. Protestants are even called “brethren,” albeit “separated brethren.” Vatican II admits that “The Church knows that she is joined in many ways to the baptized who are honored by the name of Christian, but who do not however profess the Catholic faith in its entirety or have not preserved unity or communion under the successor of Peter.” These “are sealed by baptism which unites them to Christ . . . [and] these Christians are indeed in some real way joined to us in the Holy spirit for they, by his gifts and graces, his sanctifying power

64 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 311.

65 Ibid., p. 312.

66 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, no. 430, p. 169.

67 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 312.

68 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, no. 1647, p. 416.

69 Ibid. In 1949, Fr. Leonard Feeney, S.J., caused a serious disruption in American Roman Catholicism. Feeney, a professor at the Jesuit seminary in Weston, Massachusetts, publicly declared Archbishop of Boston Richard J. Cushing to be guilty of heresy. Cushing’s theological indiscretion—according to Feeney—was to hold that Jews and Protestants, outside of Roman Catholic jurisdiction, could be saved. Fr. Feeney demurred, holding that Cardinal Cushing was going against traditional Roman Catholic teaching.

is also active in them and he has strengthened some of them even to the shedding of their blood.”⁷⁰

According to Vatican II, even non-Christians and pagans can be saved. “Finally, those who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the people of God in various ways.” This includes Jews, “the people to which the covenants and promises were made and from which Christ was born according to the flesh.”⁷¹ Furthermore, “the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Moslems. . . . Nor is God remote from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God . . . since the Savior wills all men to be saved (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4).” That is, “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.”⁷²

PROTESTANT RESPONSE TO CATHOLIC ARGUMENT FOR THE CONSTITUENCY OF THE CHURCH

Needless to say, the traditional and contemporary Catholic views on the salvation of non-Catholics are at odds. To borrow the title from Jaroslav Pelikan’s excellent book, this is part of “the riddle of Roman Catholicism.” Catholic scholars are quick to point out that none of these conflicting teachings are infallible, since none were pronounced *ex cathedra* by the church, even though some were in papal encyclicals and others in statements of councils they consider ecumenical. Add to this the fact that there is no infallible list of which statements by popes or councils are infallible, and one can easily see why one can question just how effective the alleged infallible guidance the church of Rome really is.

In response to the traditional conservative view, it is only necessary to point out that neither baptism (see Appendix E) nor membership in the Catholic church is necessary to be saved. All that is necessary is to “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you . . . will be saved” (Acts 16:31). Indeed, Jesus said simply, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” (John 3:36). Paul declared: “when one does not work, yet believes in the one who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5). Even the oft quoted passage from Mark 16 says that only “those who do not *believe*” will be condemned, not those who are not baptized.

As to the modern liberal Catholic belief that even sincere and good Jews and heathens can be saved, the words of Jesus are relevant: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Peter affirms, “There is no

70 Flannery, “The People of God,” in *Documents of Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, vol. 1, pp. 367–68.

71 Ibid., sect. 16.

72 Ibid.

salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved” (Acts 4:12).⁷³

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The doctrine of the church is a significant dividing line between Catholics and evangelicals. In spite of the phrase “separated brethren,” which is how Roman Catholics describe Protestants, evangelicals remain wary. In an address to the World Council of Churches (June 1984), Pope John Paul II said, “to be in communion with the Bishop of Rome is to give visible evidence that one is in communion with all who confess that same faith. . . . That is our Catholic conviction and our fidelity to Christ forbids us to give it up.” Indeed, “The negative inference to be drawn from these words is that if one is not in communion with the bishop of Rome one is not giving (any? the best?) visible evidence of catholicity. Such a charge the Reformed, from the depths and reality of their ecclesial life, can only deny.”⁷⁴ Of particular concern to orthodox Protestants are the Catholic claims to be the one true visible church united under the pope and the matter of the priestly power to transform the eucharistic bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ and the special power to forgive sins. As we have seen, there is no real support for these doctrines in Holy Scripture and there is far from unanimous consent among the Fathers. Verses used by Catholic scholars are wrenched from their context, offering no real support for the doctrine they are used to defend. Nevertheless, many of these doctrines have been proclaimed as infallible and, therefore, are irrevocable tenets of the Roman Catholic faith. As long as this is the case—and one cannot envision how it could change without Roman Catholicism losing its very essence— there is no hope for ecclesiastical unity between evangelicals and Catholics. This, of course, does not mean there cannot be personal fellowship with or social cooperation between believers in both communions (see Part Three) or even social cooperation on areas of common interest. It means that ecclesiastical separation is necessary for all evangelical Protestants who desire to be true to the Scriptures.

The words of Carl F. H. Henry, a respected evangelical theologian, sums up the authors’ position nicely: “The church is not reducible to a hierarchy in Rome, Istanbul, Geneva, or Colorado Springs; its ruling head transcends all geographic location and its

⁷³ God justly condemns those who have not heard the gospel because they have rejected the light of conscience (Rom. 2:12–15) and creation so that they have “no excuse” (Rom. 1:19–20). If they seek God, however, he will provide them with the light of the gospel by which they can be saved (2 Cor. 4:3–6). For God “rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6 ; cf. Acts 10:35).

⁷⁴ Alan P. E. Sell, *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology: The Contribution of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 1875–1982* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 133.

genuine components are not only multi-racial and multi-cultural but even superhistorical.”⁷⁵

⁷⁵ “Thirteen Theological Endnotes,” no. 2, *World* (24 December 1994): 28.