

## The Church: Guardian of the Truth (Part 4)

Lord Acton once declared; "Just as the loss of memory in an individual is a psychiatric defect calling for a medical treatment, so too any community which has no social memory is suffering from an illness."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately many modern Americans in general and evangelical Christians in particular are plagued with this lack of knowledge of history as well as a lack of desire to learn from the past. As a result, they are in danger of fulfilling the old saying that "those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it." Furthermore, what one may find both interesting and disturbing is the observation that coinciding with this lack of knowledge is an attitude of superiority over the previous generations.

David Hall examined this attitude in the aptly titled book, *The Arrogance of the Modern*. In essence, he stated that we as Americans are prone to glory in our recent accomplishments and trust that the future will provide the answer to the problems and difficulties that we can't yet seem to be able to overcome. In the words of Rev. Hall, we tend to treat the past "like a dead, therefore irrelevant, ancestor."<sup>2</sup> Yet we must remember that history is ultimately "His Story," the unfolding of Almighty God's sovereign decrees<sup>3</sup> In other words, contrary to the thinking of many Christians, the Holy Spirit has not recently awakened from an extended nap, but has been actively involved with the church and the world since their creation. In this article, we will focus our attention on the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit of promoting and guarding the truth through the means of the organized, visible church.

### THE TRUTH IS VICTORIOUS

"Thou hast conquered, O Galilean!" Referring to Jesus Christ, this dying admission of defeat by the Emperor Julian the Apostate<sup>4</sup> in 363 AD marked the culmination of over three centuries of warfare and the ultimate victory of Christianity over the reigning belief systems of Rome. When you stop and consider the weak and insignificant beginnings of the church in a backwater province on the very edge of the great Roman Empire, this victory is an astonishing testimony to the powerful working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the early church. The gospel had not only permeated those lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, but was impacting the lives of peoples such as the Gauls (France), Persians, and even those living as far east as India.

How was this great conquest achieved? In short, it was through the proclamation and defense of the truth of the gospel by the church. God raised up many witnesses including gifted pastors and teachers who proclaimed and defended the truth. Some even sealed their testimony with their blood (execution at the hands of the civil magistrates).<sup>5</sup> It was the time of the great apologists (defenders of the faith) such as Quadratus, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, whom the Lord raised up to defend the truth against attacks from within (heretics such as Marcion, Simon Magus (Gnosticism), Arius, etc.) and from without (Jews, Roman authorities, and pagan intellectuals such as Celsus). For example, Irenaeus of Lyon, against the great errors of Gnosticism, emphasized the apostolic foundations of the church and the delegated authority of Jesus Christ to those who succeeded the apostles. According to Professor Williston Walker, Irenaeus argued, "In these churches of apostolic foundation the apostolic teaching had been fully preserved, and its transmission had been guaranteed by the orderly succession of their

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by David W. Hall in *The Arrogance of the Modern: Historical Theology Held in Contempt* by David W. Hall (Oak Ridge, TN: The Calvin Institute, 1997), p. 5

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 5

<sup>3</sup> C. S. Lewis once wrote "No doubt all history in the last resort must be held by Christians to be a story with a divine plot." from *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 176

<sup>4</sup> Julian has been designated "the Apostate" because although in his early life he embraced Christianity, he later repudiated it and attempted to overpower it by aggressively promoting paganism.

<sup>5</sup> And thus arose the saying that "the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church."

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bishops. Go therefore to Rome, or to Smyrna, or Ephesus, and learn what is there taught, and nothing Gnostic will be found."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Irenaeus declared, "Since the Apostles, like a rich man in a bank, lodged in her hands most copiously all things pertaining to the truth."<sup>7</sup> This deposit was especially entrusted to "those who, together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the certain gift of truth."<sup>8</sup> Although others would later distort this point in order to elevate the bishop as superior to local pastors and elders or further to elevate the bishop of Rome (later referred to as the Pope) as the supreme authority over the church, Irenaeus was nevertheless correct in identifying that Christ had appointed and continues to provide official representatives to promote and guard the truth that He entrusted to the church. The officers of the church do exercise real God-given authority in matters of faith and life.

The Holy Spirit used not only individual church officers, however, but also the gathering of pastors and elders in what are called the early church councils. These councils developed concise statements concerning the cardinal doctrines of the Scriptures.<sup>9</sup> These statements were called creeds (derived from the Latin word CREDO or "I believe"). For what purpose were they written? The late Professor Paul Wooley succinctly answered this question thus: "The purpose of a creed is so to state truth that it will be useful in living."<sup>10</sup> In his article titled "What Is A Creed For?" he maintained that their primary purpose was "a positive creation designed to express the essence of the believer's faith. This was the basic origin of the creeds of both the East and West up to the fourth century."<sup>11</sup> Later in the article he acknowledged that during the fourth century, due to the heresies such as that of Arius, "the church was promulgating a creed that had as one of its major ends the defense of the church against error."<sup>12</sup> Thus, these creeds were developed over time to serve as both a positive affirmation of the truth as well as a means of defending the truth from false doctrine. They assisted and continue to assist the church in her God-given task of proclaiming and defending the truth.

### THE TRUTH IS COMPROMISED

When we observe the early church and the great advances that she accomplished in so many areas and then consider her state just prior to the great Reformation in the sixteenth century, we might be tempted to ask, what went wrong? Or in the words of the Apostle Paul: "*You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth*" (Gal. 5:7). The short answer is simply that on the heels of victory came substantial compromise. For example, after the Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity and his Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. that granted full freedom to Christianity, the church was overwhelmed by an influx of pagan converts. Still recovering from the effects of persecution, she failed to properly disciple these new adherents of the faith. Over time, this resulted in a compromise of the truth by the addition of pagan beliefs and practices. The church became increasingly Roman in its organization, doctrine, and practice as she continued to absorb rather than confront the Roman religious beliefs and culture. The exaltation of the pope as the supreme ruler of the church (emulating the Roman Emperor), the addition and veneration of patron saints and Mary (remarkably similar in function to the Roman gods and

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<sup>6</sup> *A History of the Christian Church* by Williston Walker (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1970), p. 58.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> The great Ecumenical Creeds besides the Apostles Creed (which was in use for centuries) were the Nicene Creed (325/381 A.D.), Athanasian Creed, and the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.).

<sup>10</sup> *Scripture and Confession*, ed. John Skilton (Presbyterian and Reformed Pub., Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1972), p. 97.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.99. Earlier he wrote "J.N.D. Kelly has pointed out how imperfect a conception it is to hold that the early declaratory creeds were directed solely to counter the claims of heresy. Their primary aim was to state the wonderful truths of the new-found faith, even though antiheretical considerations entered more powerfully into the picture as the years passed. These creeds were a part of the liturgy. They were statements of people gladly confessing their faith."

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

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goddesses) and various Roman liturgical practices are examples of this synergism. Even to this day, the Roman Catholic Church continues this practice of absorbing the culture and religious beliefs of the indigenous peoples they attempt to reach.

The most disturbing of these compromises occurred with regards to the essential elements of the faith. For example, following the teaching of the Apostles, the early church recognized not only the Old Testament as Holy Scripture that exercises binding authority upon the doctrine and practices of the church (2 Tim. 3:15-17), but the books of the New Testament as well.<sup>13</sup> But unfortunately, as time progressed, other oral and written traditions came to be considered of equal or even greater authority than sacred Scripture. Other compromises included the sacrifice of the Mass and the multiplication of mediators in addition to Christ, the works of man in addition to the grace of God, justification by love in addition to faith, and ultimately the glory of man as well as the glory of God. As we will discuss shortly, the Reformers of the sixteenth century were well aware of these errors and formulated what would later be termed the "Five Solas" in their attempt to restore the church to the purity that existed in her minority. Yet even in the midst of compromise, the Holy Spirit was active in keeping the church from straying too far from the truth by continually raising up shepherds to guard the flock of Christ from the ravaging jaws of the evil One.

### THE TRUTH IS RECOVERED/REDISCOVERED

How does one best describe the extraordinary restoration of biblical truth that occurred in the sixteenth century? William Cunningham, in his book *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* went so far as to assert: "The Reformation from Popery in the sixteenth century was the greatest event, or series of events, that has occurred since the close of the Canon of Scripture; and the men who are really entitled to be called the `Leaders of the Reformation have a claim to more respect and gratitude than any other body of uninspired men that have ever influenced or adorned the church."<sup>14</sup> However, when these `Leaders' contemplated what had taken place, they directed the praise and glory to God. For example, John Calvin, while discussing the reformation in Geneva, spoke thus: "Antichrist complains that we have fallen away from him; but we are compelled to groan that too many of the pollutions with which he has infected the whole world remain amongst us. *God has graciously restored to us uncontaminated purity of doctrine, religion in its primitive state, the unadulterated worship of God, and a faithful administration of the Sacraments, as they were delivered to us by Christ.*"<sup>15</sup> They practiced in life what they emphasized in their teaching, that to God alone belongs the glory (*Soli Deo Gloria*).<sup>16</sup> In many ways, the Reformation was perceived by the Roman church as radical, invasive surgery. Therefore they confronted the Reformers with questions that interestingly were asked many years before by other religious leaders who felt threatened: "*By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?*" (Matt. 21:23)." In answer to their question, the Reformers pointed to the absolute authority of Holy Scripture. As we noted earlier, due to the addition of oral and written tradition, the authority of Scripture was diluted and in the end set aside in favor of more recent pronouncements from the Roman church. Although the Reformers were students of the early church fathers and greatly

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<sup>13</sup> Consider two examples. First in 1 Tim. 5:18, Paul quotes as Scripture both Deuteronomy and the Gospel of Luke. Second, in 2 Pet. 3:15-16 Peter declares that Paul's Epistles are part of Holy Scripture.

<sup>14</sup> *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, by William Cunningham (Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, Penn., 1989), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Commentary on the Gospel According to John, Volume I* by John Calvin (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996), p. 17-8.

<sup>16</sup> The catechism that Calvin prepared for the church in Geneva begins by asking "What is the chief end of human life?" To the answer "To know God by whom men were created" he added "Because he created us and placed us in this world *to be glorified in us*. And it is indeed right that our life, of which himself is the beginning, *should be devoted to his glory.*" Later, the Westminster Divines would echo this principle in the first question and answer of the Shorter Catechism "What is the chief end of man? *Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.*"

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appreciated and quoted them in their writings, the Reformation was ultimately a "back to the Bible" movement, not only concerning content but also concerning its authority as the final determiner of truth and error. Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone) was their watch cry heard throughout the world and in the confessions and catechisms that the Reformers and their disciples prepared in order to instruct the people, we find this principle clearly affirmed. For example, in the Belgic Confession, article 7 we read:

"We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein. For since the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large, it is unlawful for any one, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures: nay, though it were an angel from heaven, as the apostle Paul says. *For since it is forbidden to add unto or take away anything from the Word of God*, it does thereby evidently appear that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects. *Neither may we consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with those divine Scriptures, nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, since the truth is above all;* for all men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself. Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever does not agree with this infallible rule, as the apostles have taught us, saying, Prove the spirits, whether they are of God . Likewise: If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house."<sup>17</sup>

It must be noted that contrary to the erroneous teaching of some, these confessions and catechisms were never intended to be held as equal or superior to Scripture. This line of reasoning is refuted simply by an honest perusal of these documents. When we consider the great doctrinal discussions of the early church that resulted in the formation of the Ecumenical Creeds, the primary concern was a correct understanding of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. During the Reformation, however, the primary areas of concern were the work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit in the salvation of lost sinners. Thus the phrases Solus Christus (Christ alone), Sola Gratia (grace alone) and Sola Fide (faith alone) were utilized by the Reformers to draw attention to the biblical foundations of these truths. The Reformers sought, through their preaching and teaching, as well as through their writings, such as the Reformed confessions and catechisms, to clearly proclaim and protect these essential doctrines of the faith.

To close this section on the Reformation, it is interesting to note that William Cunningham, in his overall evaluation of the achievements of the Reformers, also understood that the church was charged by God with a dual responsibility of promoting and guarding the truth. He wrote: "There are two leading aspects in which the Reformation, viewed as a whole, may be regarded; the one more external and negative, and the other more intrinsic and positive. In the first aspect it was a great revolt against the see of Rome, ... combined with an assertion of the exclusive authority of the Bible, and of the right of all men to examine and interpret it for themselves. In the second and more important and positive aspect, the Reformation was the proclamation and inculcation, upon the alleged authority of Scripture, of certain views in regard to the substance of Christianity or the way of salvation, and in regard to the organization and ordinances of the Christian church."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Consider also The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter I, section 6, as well as the Larger Catechism, Question #3.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

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### CONCLUSION

To summarize, we have sought through this series of articles to demonstrate that God was and still is greatly concerned with truth and has ordained the visible, corporate church in general, and His commissioned and gifted representatives specifically, to proclaim and live the truth and to confront and reprove error in its many forms. As we surveyed the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, we found abundant evidence that supported this thesis. Further, when we turned to the history of the church subsequent to the closing of the canon of Scripture, we also found that the Holy Spirit has guided the church "through many dangers, toils, and snares" for almost 2,000 years. The burden of proof, and it is a heavy burden, is upon the one who argues to the contrary. What the Apostle Paul wrote concerning the visible church at Philippi also applies to the visible church as a whole, namely "*being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ* (Phil. 1:6)."

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