

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

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Three Onlys

By J. H. Merle D'Aubigné

The following was delivered at the opening of the session of the Theological Seminary in October 1842, and is aimed principally against the innovations of Oxford and Rome. Its very great length, as originally delivered, has made it necessary to drop some of its more local allusions and extended citations; but the train of remark is carefully kept unbroken.

“To the law and to the testimony.” — “By grace ye are saved.” — “Born of the Spirit.” — *Isaiah 8:20; Ephesians 2:5; John 3:6*

There are three principles which form the essence of Christianity. The first is what we may call its *formal* principle, because it is the means by which this system is formed or constituted; the second is what may be called the *material* principle, because it is the very doctrine which constitutes this religious system; the third I call the *personal* or *moral* principle, because it concerns the application of Christianity to the soul of each individual.

The *formal* principle of Christianity is expressed in few words: THE WORD OF GOD ONLY.

That is to say, the Christian receives the knowledge of the truth only by the Word of God and admits of no other source of religious knowledge.

The *material* principle of Christianity is expressed with equal brevity: THE GRACE OF CHRIST ONLY.

That is to say, the Christian receives salvation only by the grace of Christ and recognizes no other meritorious cause of eternal life.

The *personal* principle of Christianity may be expressed in the most simple terms: THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT ONLY,

That is to say, there must be in each soul that is saved, a moral and individual work of regeneration wrought by the Spirit of God, and not by the simple concurrence of the church,¹ and the magic influence of certain ceremonies.

Recall constantly to your minds these three simple truths: *The Word of God* ONLY. *The grace of Christ* ONLY. *The work of the Spirit* ONLY; and they will truly be “a lamp to your feet and a light to your paths.”

These are the three great beacons which the Holy Spirit has erected in the church. Their effulgence should spread from one end of the world to the other. So long as they shine, the church walks in the light; as soon as they shall become extinct, or even obscured, darkness, like that of Egypt, will settle upon Christendom. As Luther said, “With them the church stands, and without them the church falls.” Let us consider them.

I. The *formal* principle of evangelical Christianity is this: THE WORD OF GOD ONLY.

He who would know and possess the truth, in order to be saved, ought to study that revelation of God, which is contained in the sacred Scriptures, and

concurrent influence which the church is believed by the Puseyites to exert in regeneration by her ministrations.

¹ The words which are used in the French are *adjunction de l'Eglise*; and are employed to express that additional or

to reject everything, which is a mere human addition everything which, as the work of man, may be justly suspected of being impressed with a deplorable mixture of error. There is only one source at which the Christian quenches his thirst; it is that stream, clear, limpid, perfectly pure, which flows from the throne of God. He turns away from every other fountain which flows parallel with it, or which would fain mingle itself with it; for he knows that on account of the source whence these streams issue, they all contain troubled, unwholesome, perhaps deadly waters. The sole, the ancient, the eternal stream, is God; the new, ephemeral, failing stream, is Man; and we will quench our thirst but in God alone. God is, in our view, so full of sovereign majesty, that we would regard as an outrage, and even as impiety, the attempt to put anything by the side of his word.

But this is what the authors of the novelties of Oxford are doing. "The Scriptures," say they, in the *Tracts for the Times*, "are evidently not, according to the principles of the Church of England, the rule of faith. The doctrine or message of the [G]ospel is but indirectly presented in the Scriptures, and in an obscure and concealed manner." "[Roman]Catholic tradition," says one of the two principal chiefs of the school, "is a divine informer in religious things; it is the unwritten word. These two things (the Bible and Catholic traditions) together form a united rule of faith. [Roman] Catholic tradition is a divine source of knowledge in all things relating to faith. The Scriptures are only the document of ultimate appeal; Catholic tradition is the authoritative teacher." "Tradition is infallible," says another divine; "the unwritten word of God, of necessity demands of us the same respect which his written word does, and precisely for the same reason, because it is his word." "We demand that the whole of the Catholic traditions should be taught," says a third.

Such is one of the most pestiferous errors which can be disseminated in the church. Whence have Rome and Oxford derived it? Certainly, the respect which we entertain for the incontestable learning of these divines shall not prevent our saying that this error can come from no other source than the natural aversion of the heart of fallen man for everything that the Scriptures teach. It can be nothing else than a depraved will which leads man to put the sacred Scriptures aside. Men first abandon the fountain of

living waters, and then hew for themselves, here and there, cisterns which will hold no water. This is a truth which the history of every church teaches in its successive falls and errors, as well as that of every soul in particular. The theologians of Oxford only follow in the way of all flesh.

Behold, then, two established authorities by the side of each other the Bible and tradition. We do not hesitate as to what we have to do.

"TO THE LAW AND TO THE TESTIMONY!" we cry with the prophet; "if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them; and behold trouble and darkness, dimness of anguish; and they shall be driven to darkness." We reject tradition, as it is a species of rationalism which introduces for a rule in Christian doctrine, not the human reason of the present time, but the human reason of times past. We declare, with the churches of the Reformation in their symbolical writings (confessions of faith), that "the sacred Scriptures are the only judge, the only rule of faith; that it is to them, as to a touchstone, that all dogmas ought to be brought; that it is by them that the question should be decided, whether they are pious or impious, true or false."

Without doubt there was originally an oral tradition which was pure; it was the instructions given by the apostles themselves, before the sacred writings of the New Testament existed. However, even then, the apostle and the evangelist, Peter and Barnabas, could not walk uprightly, and, consequently, stumbled in their words. The divinely inspired Scriptures alone are infallible; the Word of the Lord endureth forever. But, however pure oral instruction may have been at the time that the apostles quitted the Earth, that tradition was necessarily exposed in this world of sin, to be gradually defaced, polluted and corrupted. It is for this cause that the Evangelical church honors and adores, with gratitude and humility, the gracious good pleasure of the Saviour, in virtue of which, that pure, primitive type, that first, apostolic tradition, in all its purity, has been rendered permanent by being written, by the Spirit of God himself, in our sacred books, for all coming time. And now it finds in those writings, as we have just heard, the divine touchstone which it employs for the purpose of trying all the traditions of men.

Nor does it establish, concurrently, as do the doctors of Oxford, and the Council of Trent, the tradition which is *written* and the tradition which is *oral*; but it decidedly renders the latter subordinate to the former, because one cannot be sure that this oral tradition is only and truly the apostolical tradition, such as it was in its primitive purity. The knowledge of true Christianity, says the Protestant church, flows only from one source, namely, from the holy Scriptures, or, if you will, from the *apostolic tradition*, such as we find it contained in the writings of the New Testament. The apostles of Jesus Christ—Peter, Paul, John, Matthew, James—perform their functions in the church today; no one has the need nor the power to take their place. They perform their functions at Jerusalem, at Geneva, at Corinth, at Berlin, at Paris; they bear testimony in Oxford and in Rome itself. They preach, even to the ends of the world, the remission of sins and the conversion of the soul in the name of the Saviour; they announce the resurrection of the crucified to every creature; they loose and they retain sins; they lay the foundation of the house of God, and they build it; they teach the missionaries and the ministers of the Gospel; they regulate the order of the church, and preside in synods which would be Christian. They do all this by the *written word* which they have left us; or, rather, Christ—Christ himself—does it by that word, since it is the word of Christ, rather than the word of Paul, of Peter, or of James. “Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations: lo! I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”

Without doubt, as to the number of their words, the apostles spoke more than they wrote: but as to the substance, they said nothing more than what they have left us in their divine books. And if they had, in substance, taught otherwise, or more explicitly than they did by their writings, no one could at this day be able to report to us, with assurance, even one syllable of these instructions. If God did not choose to preserve them in his Bible, no one could come to his aid, and do what God himself would not wish to do, and what he would not have done. If, in the writings, of more or less doubtful authenticity, of the companions of the apostles, or of those fathers who are called apostolical, one should find any doctrine of the apostles, it would be necessary, first of all, to put it to the test, in comparing it with the certain

instructions of the apostles, that is, with the canon of the Scriptures.

So much for the tradition of the apostles. Let us pass on from the times when they lived to those which succeeded. Let us come to the tradition of the divines of the first centuries. That tradition is, without doubt, of great value to us; but by the very fact of its being Presbyterian, Episcopal, or Synodical, it is no longer apostolical. And let us suppose (what is not true), that it does not contradict itself; and let us suppose that one father does not overthrow what another father has established (as is often the case, and Abelard has proved it in his famous work entitled the *Sic et Non*); let us suppose, for a moment, that one might reduce the tradition of the fathers of the church to a harmony similar to that which the apostolical tradition presents: the canon which might be obtained thus, could in no manner be placed on an equality with the canon of the apostles.

Without doubt, we acknowledge that the declarations of Christian divines merit our attention, if it be the Holy Spirit which speaks in them—that Spirit which is ever living and ever acting in the church. But we will not—we absolutely will not—allow ourselves to be bound by that which, in this tradition, and in these divines, is only the work of man. And how shall we distinguish that which is of God from that which is of men, if not by the holy Scriptures? “It remains,” says Augustine, “that I judge myself according to this only Master, from whose judgment I desire not to escape.” The declarations of the doctors of the church are only the testimonies of the faith which these eminent men had in the doctrines of the Scriptures. They show how these divines received these doctrines. They may, without doubt, be instructive and edifying for us; but there is no authority in them which binds us. All the divines—Greek, Latin, French, Swiss, German, English, American—placed in the presence of the Word of God, are only disciples who are receiving instruction. Men of primitive days, and men of modern times we are all alike scholars in that divine school; and in the chair of instruction, around which we are humbly assembled, nothing appears, nothing exalts itself but the infallible Word of God. I perceive in that vast auditory, Calvin, Luther, Cranmer, Augustine, Chrysostom, Athanasius, Cyprian, by the side of our contemporaries. We are not “disciples of

Cyprian and Ignatius,” as the doctors of Oxford call themselves, but of Jesus Christ. “We do not despise the writings of the fathers,” we say, with Calvin; “but in making use of them, we remember always, that ‘all things are ours’; that they ought to serve, not govern us, and that ‘we, we are Christ’s,’ whom in all things, and without exception, it behooves us to obey.”

This, the divines of the first centuries are themselves the first to say. They claim for themselves no authority, and only wish that the word which has taught them may teach us also. “Now that I am old,” says Augustine, in his *Retractions*, “I do not expect not to be mistaken in word, or to be perfect in word; how much less when, being young, I commenced writing.” “Beware,” says he again, “of submitting to my writings, as if they were canonical Scriptures.” “Do not esteem as canonical Scriptures the works of catholic and justly honored men,” says he elsewhere. “It is allowed for us, without impeaching the honor which is due to them, to reject those things in their writings, should we find such in them, which are contrary to the truth. I regard the writings of others as I would have others regard mine.” “All that has been said since the times of the apostles, ought to be disregarded,” says Jerome, “and can possess no authority. However holy, however learned, a man may be, who comes after the apostles, let him have no authority.”

“Neither antiquity, nor custom,” says the *Confession* of the Reformed Church of France, “ought to be arrayed in opposition to the holy Scriptures; on the contrary, all things ought to be examined, regulated, and reformed according to them.” And the *Confession* of the English Church even says, the doctors of Oxford to the contrary notwithstanding: “The holy Scriptures contain all that is necessary to salvation; so that all that is not found in them, all that cannot be proved by them, cannot be required of any one as an article of faith, or as necessary to salvation.”

Thus the evangelical divines of our times give the hand to the reformers, the reformers to the fathers, the fathers to the apostles; and thus, forming, as it were, a golden chain, the whole church of all ages, and of all people, sings as with one voice to the *God of Truth*, that hymn of one of our greatest poets:

Speak thou unto my heart; and let no sage’s word,
No teacher, thee beside, explain to me thy law;
Let every soul, before thy holy presence, Lord,
Bow down in silent awe,
And let thy voice be heard!

What, then, is tradition? It is the testimony of history.

There is a historical testimony for the facts of Christian history, as well as for those of any other history. We admit that testimony; only we would discuss it and examine it, as we would all other testimony. The heresy of Rome and of Oxford—and it is that which distinguishes them from us—consists in the fact that they attribute the same infallibility to this testimony as to Scripture itself.

Although we receive the testimony of history as far as it is true, as for example, when it relates to the collection of the writings of the apostles; it by no means results from this, that we should receive this testimony on subjects which are false, as, for instance, on the adoration of Mary, or the celibacy of the priests. The Bible is the faith—holy, authoritative, and truly ancient of the child of God. Human tradition springs from the love of novelties, and is the faith of ignorance, of superstition, and of credulous puerility. How deplorable, yet instructive, to see the doctors of a church, which is called to the glorious liberty of the children of God, and which reposes only on God and his Word, place themselves under the bondage of human ordinances! And how loudly does that example cry to us: “Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.”

All those errors which we are combating come from a misunderstanding of truths. We, too, believe in the attributes of the church of which they speak so much; but we believe in them according to the meaning which God attaches to it, and our opponents believe in them according to that which men attach to it. Yes, there is *one holy* Catholic church; but it is, as the apostle says, “the general assembly and church of the first-born, whose names are written in heaven.” *Unity*, as well as holiness, appertains to the invisible church. It behooves us, without doubt, to pray that the visible church should advance daily in the possession of these heavenly attributes; but neither rigorous unity nor universal holiness is a

perfection essential to its existence, or a *sine qua non*. To say that the visible church must absolutely be composed of saints only, is the error of the Donatists and fanatics of all ages. So, also, to say that the visible church must of necessity be externally one, is the corresponding error of Rome, of Oxford, and of formalists of all times. Let us guard against preferring the external hierarchy, which consists in certain human forms, to that internal hierarchy which is the kingdom of God itself. Let us not suffer the form, which passes away, to determine the essence of the church; but let us, on the contrary, make the essence of the church, to wit, the Christian life, which emanates from the Word and Spirit of God, change and renew the form. *The form has killed the substance*. Here is the whole history of the Papacy and of false Catholicism. *The substance verifies the form*. Here is the whole history of evangelical Christianity and of the true Catholic church of Jesus Christ.

Yes, I admit it; the church is the judge of controversies—*judex controversiarum*. But what is the church? It is not the clergy; it is not the councils; still less is it the Pope. It is the Christian people; it is the faithful. “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good,” is said to the children of God, and not to some assembly, or to a certain bishop; and it is they who are constituted, on the part of God, *judges of controversies*. If animals have the instinct which leads them not to eat that which is injurious to them, we cannot do less than allow to the Christian this instinct, or, rather, this intelligence, which emanates from the virtue of the Holy Spirit. Every Christian (the Word of God declares it) is called upon to reject “every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh.” And this is what is essentially meant when it is said that the church is the *judge of controversies*.

Yes, I believe and confess that there is an authority in the church, and that without that authority the church cannot stand. But where is it to be found? Is it with him, whoever he may be, who has the external consecration, whether he possess theological gifts or not, whether he has received grace and justification or not? Rome herself does not yet pretend that orders save and sanctify. Must, then, the children of God go, in many cases, to ask a decision, in things relating to faith, of the children of

this world? What! a bishop, from the moment he is seated in his chair, although he may be, perhaps, destitute of science, destitute of the Spirit of God, and although he may, perhaps, have the world and Hell in his heart, as had Borgia and so many other bishops, shall he have authority in the assembly of the saints, and do his lips possess always the wisdom and the truth necessary for the church? No. The idea of a knowledge of God, true, but at the same time destitute of holiness, is a gross supernaturalism. “Sanctify them through the truth,” says Jesus. There is an authority in the church, but that authority is wholly in the Word of God. It is not a man, nor a minister, nor a bishop, descended from Gregory, from Chrysostom, from Augustine, or from Irenæus, who has authority over the soul. It is not with a power so contemptible as that which comes from those men that we, the ministers of God, go forth into the world. It is elsewhere than in that episcopal succession, that we seek that which gives authority to our ministry and validity to our sacraments.

Rejecting these deplorable innovations, we appeal from them to the ancient, sovereign, and divine authority of the Word of the Lord. The question which we would ask of the man who would inform himself concerning eternal things, is that which we receive from Jesus himself: “What is written in the law, and how readest thou?”

What we say to rebellious spirits is what Abraham said from heaven to the rich man: “You have Moses and the prophets; hear them.” That which we ask of all is to imitate the Bereans, who “searched the Scriptures daily, whether these things were so.” “We ought to obey God rather than men,” even the most excellent of men. Behold the true authority, the true hierarchy, the true polity! The churches which are made by men possess human authority—this is natural—but the church of God possesses the authority of God, and she will not receive it from others. Such is the *formal* principle of Christianity.

The conclusion (Part II and III) will appear in the next Trinity Review.