

# Does The Church Have Authority?

By Greg Witherow

The Catholic Church shepherds her flock with Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium, each vested to her by Christ. In pastoring their flocks' Catholic priests bring sacramental graces to the laity starting at birth (baptism) until death (Last Rites) and all of life in between (Confession, Eucharist, Marriage, Confirmation, Ordination). From the pulpit laypersons are taught **infallible dogma**. So for example arguments about infant baptism, the charismatic gifts or the male only priesthood are settled matters for the laity; they are defined dogmas that cannot change. Additionally, at times the Church requires **disciplines** such as periodic fasts. These are imposed for the good of the laity, helping to foster true devotion to God during our earthly pilgrimage. Church dogmas and disciplines are defined by the Magisterium. The Magisterium is the teaching office of the bishops acting in union with the Bishop of Rome. Our question in this essay is this. Is the Church Magisterium authoritative in the life of the believer?

A central tenant of the Protestant Reformation is that Scripture is the sole **binding** authority for the Christian. Tightly coupled with this belief is that each Christian has the right of private interpretation. So for example, a Christian may choose to fast on a certain day but it is unthinkable (for a Protestant) that a church would require it to remain in good standing. And as such, the role of Protestant clergy is to pastor their flocks, teach the scripture and to lead the laity into "sound doctrine", duties similar to those of the Catholic clergy but lacking an authoritative (binding) teaching office. Here we will review Biblical sources and examples that demonstrate Catholic teaching on the Magisterium.

## **Authority Other Than Scripture**

Two familiar passages in Matthew's gospel are foundational to our topic. In the gospel account Peter states Christ is the Son of God. Christ then turns to Peter and decrees the following,

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever **you bind** on earth **will be bound in heaven**, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.<sup>1</sup>”

This binding authority was later given to all the Apostles.

“Truly I say to you, whatever **you bind** on earth **shall be bound in heaven** and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.<sup>2</sup>”

The following can be drawn from these passages. First, they both speak of a binding authority. Second, the authority is distinct from Scripture. Additionally, the context was the definition of a dogma (Peter's confession) and a discipline (in the second case). Here the Catholic Church sees Christ vesting the bishops (more on this in a moment) with an authority distinct from, but not

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 16:17-19. All quotes in this essay are taken from the RSV 2<sup>nd</sup> Catholic Edition. The context of the text is on defining dogma.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 18:15-18. Disciplines deal with behavior while dogmas define belief. Disciplines can change with circumstances, dogmas cannot.

divorced from Scripture. The New Testament supports such an interpretation as demonstrated at the Jerusalem Council. There the Church authoritatively proclaimed a dogma and a discipline<sup>3</sup>.

### **The Council of Jerusalem**

A dispute broke out in the early Church on the matter of circumcision. Many Christians believed this Old Testament Rite was binding on the post-Pentecost Church. Others said not. The Church convened a council to settle the matter as recorded in Acts chapter 15. While the laity and presbyters (elders) were present, the decision makers were Peter, Paul, Barnabas and James<sup>4</sup>. Peter rendered a verdict ending the debate. Paul and Barnabas offered supporting evidence. James rendered the application. While the laity may have had input during the proceeding, **they were not given a vote in the matter.**

The Council ruled circumcision was not a Rite of the New Testament Church. This continues to be a binding dogma of the Church today. But the Council mandated additional instructions. Specifically, Christians had to abstain from eating anything with blood in it<sup>5</sup>. This is important.

Before the Council every Christian had the right to eat as they pleased. It was a freedom specifically laid out by Christ. If asked, most everybody at the Council would have concurred. Peter learned this through a vision<sup>6</sup> while Paul wrote extensively on this freedom in his epistles.

“One believes he may eat anything, while the weak man eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who abstains and let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats; for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand.”<sup>7</sup>

As mentioned, Christ himself weighed in on the topic of eating.

“Do you not see that whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach and so passes on? (Thus he declared all foods clean.)”<sup>8</sup>

But the Council *seemingly* usurped Christ’s teaching and bound the conscious of the believer in the matter. A mandatory fast! Foul, foul cries the Beroens<sup>9</sup> (as an evangelical might claim they would state), “The Council’s teaching violates the written word of God; the gospel itself! The

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<sup>3</sup> Protestants understanding of the keys and binding are varied, but virtually every Protestant interpretation claims the Matthew passages apply to the laity. Some believe the keys/binding is a promise of powerful prayers. Others see the keys/binding as the ability to proclaim the gospel. While these interpretations have some validity, they improperly exclude the authority of the Church to define doctrine and discipline

<sup>4</sup> Peter and Paul were Apostles. Barnabas was a small “a” apostle (he was not called to be an Apostle in the same manner as Paul or the Twelve). Historians have vacillated on who James was. The current consensus is that he was Christ’s brother (spoken of in Galatians 1:19 and 1 Corinthians 15:7). He was considered one of the 3 pillars of the Church (Galatians 2:9) and in Acts 15 he is presiding as the Bishop of Jerusalem.

<sup>5</sup> This author loves a good meal of liver and onions. As liver is a very bloody organ (go and buy one in the supermarket and you will see what I mean), I would have been deprived of eating such a meal.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 10:9-19 Peter had a vision of unclean animals and was told to eat when God said, “what God has cleansed no longer consider unholy”

<sup>7</sup> Romans 14:2-4 Also see 1 Corinthians chapter 8

<sup>8</sup> Mark 7:19

<sup>9</sup> Acts 17:10, 11 When the Beroens heard Paul’s message they “examined the scriptures daily to see if these things were so”. Protestants often site this as a passage of sola scriptura in action. But Acts 15 shows that the evangelical use of the Beroens is misguided.

Council nullified *the plain meaning of Scripture* with a tradition of man. This can only be the work of the Anti-Christ!” (Such rhetoric is sometimes heard in fundamentalist churches when speaking of the Catholic Church; especially when she behaves like the Council of Jerusalem.)

But the Council believed it had the right to impose an eating ban, taking away a Christian freedom. We are told the Holy Spirit guided their decision<sup>10</sup>. Note that the ruling on food was not a dogma (an unchanging truth), but it was discipline. In fact, the Council’s decision is no longer binding on Catholics<sup>11</sup>. While the Council of Jerusalem bound the consciences of Christians, the Council of Florence loosed them. Evangelicals who do not adhere to the eating ban do by so exercising private judgment. In effect the evangelical is his own Magisterium.

### **The Wearing of Veils**

Paul tells the Corinthian Church, “Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head...a woman ought to wear a veil on her head.<sup>12</sup>” Paul is clear his teaching is binding and as it applies to all Christians.

“If anyone is disposed to be contentious, we recognize no other practice, nor do the churches of God.<sup>13</sup>”

The requirement of veils is an example of a discipline, not a dogma. It was a temporary (yet binding) requirement imposed by the Church on the laity. Christ never spoke of the veil in the gospels nor is it found anywhere else in Scripture. Apparently it was imposed by the Apostles before the Corinthian letter was written. The Catholic Church no longer requires women to wear the veil<sup>14</sup>. While the Church claims only the Magisterium has the right to loose such obligations, evangelicals who ignore the veil act on their own authority. They are their own Magisterium.

### **Objections**

Some argue the Council of Jerusalem cannot be replicated as it required the participation of the Apostles<sup>15</sup>. As the office of the Apostle no longer exists, the Council’s example cannot apply in our current day. But while the Apostles vanished, **the keys to the kingdom have not.**

Apostles were also bishops. This can be seen in Acts chapter 1 where after the death of Judas it is said that another was chosen to fill his “office” (episkope)<sup>16</sup>. We get the English word bishop from episkope. This bleeds through in the King James Version where it states, “and his bishopric let another take”. So while Judas was an Apostle, **he also sat in the office of bishop** as did all the Apostles. Upon death, a successor took the Apostle’s seat in the episkope<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Acts 15:28. The Catholic Church claims the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Magisterium.

<sup>11</sup> This was clarified in the Ecumenical Council of Florence, session 11 in 1442.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:5,10

<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:16

<sup>14</sup> The requirement was lifted with the 1983 Code of Canon Law.

<sup>15</sup> Current Protestant scholarship holds that James of the Council of Jerusalem was not an Apostle, but merely the presiding bishop of Jerusalem. That being the case, it is further proof demonstrating the authority of the episkope.

<sup>16</sup> Acts 1:20

<sup>17</sup> Requirements for the episkope changed over time, just as they changed for Apostles. For example, a requirement for an Apostle was to have witnessed the resurrection, but Paul never did. Likewise the requirements for the episkope are different between Acts 1 and 1 Timothy.

In the first century the Apostles<sup>18</sup> built the foundation of the Church. Their bishop successors continue to guard the deposit of faith with the help of the Holy Spirit. The Church continues to bind and loose when she defines dogma (i.e. the canon of Scripture in the 4<sup>th</sup> century) and disciplines (i.e. fasts) as modeled by the Council of Jerusalem. **It is undeniable the early Church took this view.** It explains the many Church Councils, complete with canon laws and anathemas against those who dissented from the Councils decrees<sup>19</sup>.

Two final thoughts.

“You know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is **the Church** of the living God, **the pillar and bulwark of truth.**<sup>20</sup>”

“But know this first of all, **that no prophesy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation,** for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.<sup>21</sup>”

### **Saint Augustine**

"If you should find someone who does not yet believe in the gospel, what would you [Mani] answer him when he says, 'I do not believe'? Indeed, **I would not believe in the gospel myself if the authority of the Catholic Church did not move me to do so**" (Against the Letter of Mani Called 'The Foundation' 5:6)

### **The Catechism of the Catholic Church**

**Paragraph 85:** The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome.

**Paragraph 86:** Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith.

### **Summary**

It is not a question of if there is a Magisterium; it is only a question of which one. Should a Christian regard himself as the **final** arbiter on the **meaning** of Scripture or did Christ give this role to the Apostles and their successors (episkope)? Or is the canon of Scripture (a ruling pronounced by the Magisterium) a mere opinion or a “point of view”? Write your answer here.

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<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that an Apostle and bishop are identical in nature. The differences are as follows. First, the role of Apostle ended in the first century while the office of bishop did not. This is not stated in Scripture (demonstrating a short coming of sola fide), but it is historical Church teaching. Second, individual Apostles had the gift of infallibility while only the college bishops in union with the Pope are. Third, the Apostle had universal jurisdiction while the bishop’s jurisdiction is local. Fourth, the Apostles were given the gift of healing.

<sup>19</sup> The Council of Nicaea was in 325 A.D. It produced the Nicene Creed **and 20 canon laws.** **It anathematized any dissenters of her decrees.**

<sup>20</sup> 1 Timothy 3:15

<sup>21</sup> 2 Peter 1:20 Here I use the Protestant NASB version. It is regarded as the most conservative and precise modern translation.