

THE PROTESTANT'S DILEMMA

How the Reformation's
Shocking Consequences Point
to the Truth of Catholicism

DEVIN ROSE



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OF CATHOLICISM

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SAN DIEGO
2014

The Protestant's Dilemma

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FOREWORD

Dialogue That Seeks Truth

Among the many profound teachings we have been blessed with from the Second Vatican Council, there is one that is particularly profound—though it was not really so much an individual teaching as a theme. That theme could be summed up by the word “dialogue.”

The term was introduced in Pope Paul VI’s 1964 encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, and from there the term found its way into the documents of Vatican II and into the very life of the Church.

By “dialogue,” our Holy Father, and the Council, did not mean to reduce the Catholic Church to the level of “one voice among many equals” with regard to the possession of truth. *Lumen Gentium* 14 declared:

This Sacred Council... teaches that the Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is necessary for salvation. Christ, present to us in His Body, which is the Church, is the one Mediator and the unique way of salvation. In explicit terms He Himself affirmed the necessity of faith and baptism and thereby affirmed also the necessity of the Church, for through baptism as through a door men enter the Church. Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved.

“Dialogue” is a dynamic term calling all of us as Catholics to enter into a real back-and-forth with all of humanity, grounded in Jesus Christ as God’s “dialogue” with the world in the Incarnation. In Christ, God reveals the truth of who he is and who we are, but he also invites a response . . . a *dialogue*.

Liturgically, we Catholics understand this notion of dialogue well, even if not by that appellation. In the liturgy, God both speaks to us and we speak back to God. And we do not do so as mere puppets on a heavenly string. The many rites and churches within our Catholic communion speak back to God in many different languages and with differing nuances while never diminishing in the least the essential truths of the Faith—our Catholic identity.

The Council fathers, following Pope Paul VI’s lead, invited us to expand our understanding of dialogue. and to invite the entire world into that dialogue as Christ’s ambassadors. That means first to engage our own members in full communion with the Catholic Church. But it does not stop there, any more than Christ’s communication of himself ceases at the doors of our churches. It continues in our relationships with our separated brethren who do not enjoy full communion with the Church, with those of non-Christian sects, and even with those who have no faith at all.

In this book, Devin Rose makes a valuable contribution to that dialogue, and specifically to our continuing dialogue with members of the thousands of Protestant sects. He also brings to the fore what can happen when we engage in the dialogue well. So many Catholics do not heed the Council’s call because we just don’t know how to do it. We don’t know what to say. Devin Rose lays out for us a game plan. His book is structured as talking points that help us to be able to lead a Protestant in a dialogue to consider what he probably has never considered before. He leads the Protestant to see the

untenable conclusions that necessarily follow from the theology he has, very often anyway, taken for granted.

From the four marks of the Church, *sola scriptura*, and the issue of authority, to baptism, marriage and much, much more, *The Protestant's Dilemma* presents both the Protestant position, pulling no punches in revealing the manifold theological holes in Protestant theology, and the Catholic position that alone can fill in those holes. The success of the text lies in the back-and-forth—in *the dialogue*. But it is not dialogue for dialogue's sake. It is dialogue with an end in mind of bringing all involved in the dialogue to the fullness of truth that the Catholic Church *alone* possesses in fullness.

That is what authentic *dialogue* in the conciliar sense is all about.

INTRODUCTION

Protestant Premises and the Road to Rome

I had been a baptized Christian for only a few months, after growing up “unchurched” and then giving my life to Jesus during my senior year in college, when I began to grow uneasy about why we Christians were so divided from each other. The Southern Baptist beliefs I espoused were different, on matters both big and small, from those of other denominations, and we certainly didn’t worship with them. They had their church, and we had ours.

So began my period of inquiry about the lack of Christian unity and whether it was a problem. How had I, a newly minted Christian, come so quickly to a conclusion about which denomination taught the real truth?

I realized then that all I had learned about Christianity came from an Evangelical Protestant perspective. My friends had bought me a large, well-annotated New International Version of the Bible; I read it from cover to cover and then read it again. When I didn’t understand something, which was often, I would look down to see if there was an explanatory note about it, and I usually found one—given through an Evangelical Protestant filter. When I had questions about Christianity, I would ask my Evangelical friends, and they would answer me according to what they believed was true. Meanwhile I prayed that Jesus would guide me into the denomination that was truest. Having discovered him, I wanted to be as close to him as possible.

I assumed that the Bible had to be the sure basis for truth,

because I believed it was the inerrant word of God. That sounded pretty good, but two problems occurred to me: First, other Protestant denominations claimed the same thing, and yet we were divided from them in our beliefs; and secondly, the Catholic Church claimed there were seven more books, not included in our Bible, that were also inspired by God.

The first problem, it seemed to me, forced us to conclude that it was possible for different Christians—all claiming to be “led by the Holy Spirit” and all basing their beliefs on “the Bible alone”—to veer off in different, mutually exclusive directions. Throughout history, I discovered, some person or group within a Protestant church came to believe differently than the others and broke off to form his own, new denomination. Since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth and would never lead people to believe something untrue, at least some of the Christians who thought they were listening accurately to the Spirit’s promptings, in reality were not.

The second problem was of a different sort, because it struck at the root of my faith: We believed in the “Bible alone,” which meant we had to know with confidence which books made up the Bible. Yet here we had the Catholic Church claiming that my Bible was missing seven books that God had inspired and therefore desired to be included. How did I know who was right?

I finally concluded that one of two things must be true: Either the Holy Spirit had *tried* to guide Christians to know which books belonged in the Bible and we still got some of the books wrong; or the Holy Spirit succeeded, making sure the Bible was made up of the exact books that God himself inspired.

In other words, God either preserved his Church throughout history from errors that would corrupt its teachings, or he did not, in which case we could only be *somewhat* confident

that *most* of our beliefs were *hopefully* true.

Hoping that the former was true, I wondered: Which denominations had the boldness to claim that they were that Church that held the fullness of the truth? (My Baptist church certainly didn't claim that.) It turned out that Catholics, Orthodox, and Mormons did. Of these, only Catholics and Orthodox had credible historical and theological claims—but both were a long way from my Evangelical Protestantism.

I was dumbfounded and unsettled. The Catholic Church taught things about Mary, purgatory, the saints, the sacraments, and priests that I thought were completely bogus. But I tried to set this bias aside and be objective. With a sense of dread, I began investigating the Catholic Church in earnest, looking and hoping for something that would let me off the hook to return to Protestantism in peace.

Alas, I failed to find it.

I challenged my Evangelical friends to prove my arguments wrong and explain where I was going off course. They tried to do so, but could not explain, for example, why I should accept the Protestant canon of Scripture—or *any* canon, for that matter. I studied books, took part in Internet discussions, and read stories of faithful and intelligent Protestants converting to the Catholic Faith. Finally I was received into the Catholic Church at Easter, 2001. Two of my Evangelical friends came to the four-hour-long vigil Mass. (I greatly respect and love all my Protestant friends; I would not be the new man that I am today without them.)

My road to Rome began with taking the risk that God might be real, with the discovery that he loved me and was worth trusting. As I trusted him, I felt confident enough to question myself—including my Protestant perspective.

It was never a question in my mind that God is a reasonable being. I assumed it to be true, because even as an atheist

I observed that the world functioned in a logical manner: Scientific laws were provable, mathematics could produce correct answers to problems, and deductive and inductive reasoning were demonstrably useful for understanding reality. The Christian faith, therefore, must also be supported by sound reasons, even if its truths also exceeded the limits of what reason could prove.

I brought such an analysis with me into my newfound faith, and I discovered that Protestantism's tenets led to untenable conclusions. It simply was not possible to maintain a reasonable basis for my Christian faith while remaining Protestant. At least one *ad hoc* leap was required—accepting a given set of books as inspired Scripture—but once I chose to endorse such a leap, I had no basis to criticize someone who made a different leap (say, for instance, that the Book of Mormon or the Koran was also inspired by God).

Twelve years later, I've had a lot of time to reflect on these and other Protestant premises and how they result in logical absurdities. (It's not that Protestants are absurd—far from it—but at the foundation of their beliefs is a hole that, for most, remains unexamined.) As time passed, I collected these premises, and the absurdities they led to, and put them together into this book.

Each section begins with a hypothetical statement, that if some premise of Protestantism were true, something else should logically follow. I then provide evidence that supports my claim that Protestantism does indeed accept the premise, and that the resulting logical conclusion is inevitable. Because Catholicism is true, the conclusion forced by the Protestant premise is absurd, and in each section I explain why that is so, giving the evidence (historical, theological, and rational) that supports the Catholic position. I conclude each section with a brief recap of the absurdity that Protestantism forces one to accept.

My ultimate goal, of course, is to demonstrate that the Catholic Faith is more plausible than Protestantism; that the Catholic Church is what it claims to be. In so doing I hope to clear away obstacles to believing in everything that Christ's Church teaches and proclaims to be revealed by God.

But what do I mean by *Protestantism*? Many Christians object to being classified as Protestants, because the term signifies a protest or *rejection* of something—namely the Catholic Church—rather than something positive. I understand this; however, we are often stuck with the semantics that history has produced, and Protestantism is the broad name given to the movements (and their descendants) that broke from the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century.

Therefore in this book I have chosen to use the term as it has been historically used, which means that Anglicans, Anabaptists, Lutherans, Calvinists, Evangelicals, and non-denominationalists are all Protestant. They are not Catholic, or Orthodox, or Coptic. They all trace their origin to the 1500s and they all believe in the core principles of the Reformation: *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*, the sixty-six book canon of Scripture, the rejection of apostolic succession, and so on. Even though there are many differences among Protestants, and even though some point in this book will more closely apply to, say, Calvinists over Methodists or Pentecostals, these common beliefs enable us to speak and to reason about Protestantism as a whole.

Arguments alone cannot a Catholic make; faith is required, and God is ready to give it. But the assent of faith is usually not a blind jump that hopes to land on solid ground by happenstance. Rather, it is supported by motives of credibility.

I can only plod along with you to help you reach that

point of decision. From there, it is up to you to accept the wings the Holy Spirit gives you so that you can launch and fly. So put on your thinking cap, say a prayer, and join me in this exploration of our Christian faith: the history, the people, the theology. Let's see what we discover!

PART I

**THE
CHURCH
OF
CHRIST**

DIVINE AUTHORITY

IF PROTESTANTISM IS TRUE,

Christ revoked the authority that he gave to the Church when he founded it.

We know that Christ established a Church, visible and unified, to which he gave his divine authority. In Matthew's Gospel we read that "he called to him his twelve apostles and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity" (Matt. 10:1). But according to Protestantism, this authority must have been lost when that visible Church became morally and doctrinally corrupt.

The Fall of the Church

The vast majority of Protestants believe that the visible Church did in fact *lose* God's authority at some point in time; that Christ *revoked* it when *corruption* entered into its teachings. Many fundamentalist Protestants believe that the date when the Church became corrupted and lost God's divine authorization was the year 313, when Constantine proclaimed the Edict of Milan, which ended the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire and began (they say) the mixture of pagan corruption with the true gospel.

But Protestants in general are usually not so exact in their dating estimates, and instead claim that corruption entered into the Church somewhere between the second and sixth centuries. The dates vary according to when a particular Protestant, in studying the historical evidence, discovers a doctrine or practice of the Church that he believes is heretical. John Calvin describes the pervasive nature of the Church's corruption:

The light of divine truth had been extinguished, the word of God buried, the virtue of Christ left in profound oblivion, and the pastoral office subverted. Meanwhile, impiety so stalked abroad, that almost no doctrine of religion was pure from admixture, no ceremony free from error, no part, however minute, of divine worship untarnished by superstition.¹

The notion that "the Church" became corrupt nonetheless does not sit well with Protestants, since they also believe the Bible passages that speak in exalted terms about the Church. Their solution is to separate the historical institution originally known as "the Church"—which fell into corruption—from the true Church of Christ, which continued undefiled. At the time of its corruption, whenever that was, the visible institution became the Roman Catholic Church, while Christ's true Church became invisible and purely spiritual. Hence, the promises Christ made in the Bible still apply to all "true believers" in the world, who make up this invisible Church: the one that quietly endured through all the apostate centuries until the Reformation unearthed it.

No matter the particular date given for the corruption, it is common Protestant wisdom that by the fifteenth century, the Catholic Church had devolved into such a disaster of human traditions and theological errors that the only solution was

a clean break: to make clear the difference between the true Church of the Bible and the corrupted impostor.

BECAUSE CATHOLICISM IS TRUE,

The Church has never lost the divine authority that Christ gave it, and corruption has never polluted its teachings.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples: "Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me" (10:16). Notice the direct line of authority: The Father sends the Son, and the Son sends the apostles with his authority, such that listening to them (and the men whom they in turn authorize) is equivalent to listening to Jesus and the Father. We see how closely Christ associates himself with his Church when he knocks Saul (who later becomes Paul) off his horse:

Now Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, that, if he should find any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them back to Jerusalem in chains. On his journey, as he was nearing Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" He said, "Who are you, sir?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:1-5).

Notice that Jesus didn't say, "Saul, why are you persecuting *my followers*," but rather, "Why are you persecuting *me*?" For in

murdering the leaders of Christ's Church, Saul was rejecting not only them but Christ himself.

From history, we see the apostles and then their successors, the bishops, exercising this authority in the Church, and the Church thriving under their divinely authorized leadership—even in the midst of horrific persecutions. From the Bible and early Christian writings, we understand that the authority Christ gave to the apostles as the leaders of his Church was transmitted to their successors. Paul speaks of this authority in his first letter to his disciple, Timothy: “[D]o not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders” (1 Tim. 4:14). In the next chapter, he enjoins Timothy to “not be hasty in the laying on of hands” to avoid ordaining an unworthy man to lead the church (1 Tim. 5:22). Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch, in the late first and early second centuries, testify to the authority given bishops as successors to the apostles.

Likewise, in order to make sense, the promises that Christ made to the Church must be understood as permanent; nowhere does Jesus say that at some point he would abandon his Church to let the gates of hell prevail against it (indeed he says the opposite) or that the authority he had given its leaders would be revoked.

The claim that the Emperor Constantine founded the (corrupted, visible) Catholic Church is an old myth with no evidence to recommend it. The Edict of Milan did not make Christianity the state religion of the empire; it merely provided for official toleration of Christianity within Roman borders, so that Christians could worship God without being persecuted for it. It's true that Constantine ceremonially opened the first ecumenical council of Nicaea in 325, but he did so as a temporal leader concerned with political stability,

since the Arian heretics had caused such conflict in his realm. In any event, the council he summoned confirmed Christ's true divinity and produced the first part of the Nicene Creed (both of which Protestants accept)—hardly something a corrupt and heretical Church would do.

Since most Protestants do not give a specific event and date for how and when corruption entered the Church but instead mention a vague span of centuries, it is best to consider the plausibility of the assertion in general. Interestingly, it differs from the theology of the Mormons (Latter-Day Saints) only in the date given, for Mormons believe that the Church lost the authority Christ gave it sometime around A.D. 70 or 100 (either at the death of Peter or of the last apostle). At that time, they assert, the "Great Apostasy" began, which lasted for around 1,700 years before Christ *reestablished* his authority in the Mormon Church through Joseph Smith.

Does the Mormon claim seem plausible? The Word became flesh, pouring his life and wisdom into his disciples, inaugurating the era of the Church, the New People of God. Then, Christ gave us the Holy Spirit, the spirit "of power, of love, and of self-control" (2 Tim. 1:7), whom he promised would lead the apostles (and thus the Church) into all truth (see John 16:13). But the Mormon assertion means that the Holy Spirit *utterly failed* to lead the Church into all truth. Indeed, as soon as the last apostle died, the Church went belly-up for longer than 1,700 years! The gates of hell indeed prevailed against the Church, necessitating its reestablishment through a new revelation. Christ failed to keep his Church together and protected from adulterated teachings for even *one generation* beyond his life on Earth.

This key claim of Mormonism is not credible, even to most Protestants, yet the Protestant corollary is substantially similar, differing only in the number of years it took for corruption

to taint the Church and its teachings and in the manner of the “true” Church’s re-constitution.

Even as a Baptist, I rejected the Mormon claim of the Church losing its authority at the death of the apostles, but as I pondered this question, I had to admit that my Protestant beliefs *were not so very different*. When did *I*, as a Baptist, think that corruption had entered into the Church’s teachings? The truth was that I had never given it much thought. “It happened in the first four or five centuries perhaps,” I mused vaguely. And, like most Protestants, I thought that the Reformers had more or less corrected the corrupted teachings and set things right again. What did I think had happened to the Church for the thousand years between the corruption and the Reformation? To be honest, I didn’t really think about it—nor do most Protestants.

Since Christ established a visible Church in the first century and gave it rightful authority, the burden of proof falls on Protestants to demonstrate that he revoked this authority universally from the Church at some point in time. What event can they point to that caused Christ to take away his authority, and which Church leaders were involved in it? Where is the historical evidence for the claim? I have asked this question to many knowledgeable Protestant apologists and pastors and have yet to receive a definite answer. The fact is, no event or even century can be pinpointed that can carry the weight of such a momentous claim, so the fallback is the idea that false teachings crept slowly into the Church and eventually tainted the gospel beyond recognition.

There is another problem with the Protestant version of events. Realizing the problematic nature of asserting that Christ’s Church became corrupted, most Protestants will fall back to the claim that the *true* Church remained pure but was simply invisible. We know from history, however, that Christ

founded a visible Church, and the members of his Church were unified together as his mystical Body, of which he is the head.² A body is both visible and alive; if you found a severed hand, a foot, an arm, and a toe on the ground, you would not say, “Here is a body,” but rather, “Here are parts that were severed from a body.”

Similarly, the Church is a visible unity that can be seen acting in history, with Christ’s authority, to exclude from the Mystical Body those members who persisted in teaching false doctrines. Vincent of Lerins demonstrated the visibility of the Church when he wrote in the year 434:

What then will a Catholic Christian do if a small portion of the Church has cut itself off from the communion of the universal faith? What, surely, but prefer the soundness of the whole body to the unsoundness of a pestilent and corrupt member.³

If the true Church is invisible, it becomes impossible to determine who has authority to excommunicate another. Christ directed the apostles on how and when to excommunicate someone from the Church (see Matt. 18:17), but what does this mean when the Church is invisible and spread out across numerous denominations? A Christian “excommunicated” from one church just goes to another down the street, both a part of the “invisible Church,” rendering these biblical passages meaningless. Being excommunicated from the Church makes sense only if the Church is a visible unity that one can be cut off from.

THE PROTESTANT'S DILEMMA

If Protestantism is true, then either Christ revoked the authority he had given his Church or the Church changed in its essentials from being a unified, visible, and hierarchically organized body to an invisible and purely spiritual association. There is no scriptural evidence for the former and much against it, and in the latter case it becomes impossible to know to whom God has given the rightful authority to lead the Church. Protestants may like to speak of "the Church," but in truth all they can point to are individual believers who may or may not meet in some local congregation.