

## **Study Guide #14: Scriptures or Tradition?**

### **Introduction**

If the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, how should Christians relate to the body of religious tradition that developed over the centuries in the Church? The *real* issue associated with that question is whether the Church is above the Bible, or the Bible is above the Church. This Study Guide explores that issue.

### **Question #1: How are Christians divided on the issue of Church-Bible relations?**

**Answer:** The 16<sup>th</sup>-century Protestant Reformation insisted that the Bible is the only standard by which to judge a believer's faith and practice. This is called *Sola Scriptura*, which is Latin for "Scripture Alone," apart from Church Tradition. By contrast, the Roman Catholic Church—and all non-Protestants—have



Council of Trent

adopted the view that Church Tradition is equally as valid as Scripture. This latter view is based on two primary ideas. *First*, that the Church created the Bible, so it must logically have the last word on interpreting its meaning. In fact, the Catholic Council of Trent, which met off and on from 1545-1563 in Trent (a city then in Austria, but now in Italy) to counteract the Protestant Reformation, officially stated that Church Tradition is actually above the Bible. *Second*, this view is also based on the concept of apostolic succession, the idea that the bishops of the Church are the official successors of the apostles and thus have the same teaching authority that the apostles had; this apostolic authority is the teaching authority of Jesus Himself.

### **Question #2: Did the Church create the Bible, or the Bible create the Church?**

**Answer:** Review Explorer I, Study Guide #13. There we discovered the fact that (a) *no* Jewish council officially said anything about the Jewish Scriptures (the Christian Old Testament) until several centuries after the canon had been accepted; and that (b) *no* ecumenical Church council ever pronounced a canon of the New Testament until after the issue had been settled by common usage. In other words, both groups adopted their canons of Scripture by their people as a whole accepting them as authoritative. This means that the Church *recognized* the authority and canon of Scripture; it did *not* create it. Therefore, since the Church did not create the Bible, it cannot have the last word on what it means.

### Question #3: Does that mean that every Christian can interpret the Bible for himself?

**Answer:** Most non-Protestant churches interpret II Peter 1:20 to mean that the Church leadership as a whole must interpret the Scriptures for the individual believer: **“no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation”** (NKJV). But the very next verse explains what Peter meant: **“for [because] prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit”** (NKJV). In other words, this passage is speaking about the fact that prophecy was not invented by the writer, but that the writer was influenced by the Holy Spirit to convey God’s message. Therefore, the passage does *not* say that an individual believer cannot interpret Scripture for himself. Indeed, the apostle Paul commended the Bereans for their searching **“the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things [what Paul was saying] were so”** (Acts 17:10-11, NKJV).

### Question #4: How and when was the concept of apostolic succession developed?

**Answer:** Apostolic succession began to arise slowly in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century in response to numerous heresies threatening to divide the Church. The original Church structure had multiple bishops (or elders) in each local church. But in either the very late 1<sup>st</sup> century or the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century, a single bishop was placed in charge of each local church. About the same time, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, Syria, wrote about the 3-fold ministry in each local church: (1) 1 bishop; (2) the presbytery (from the same Greek word for “elders”; see I Timothy 4:14); and (3) the deacons—with the bishop being the most important. In other words, a clear hierarchical structure was developing at that early time. About the year 180, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (in France), appears to be the first to advocate for the explicit idea that the succession of bishops guaranteed they would teach the truth. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage in North Africa from 248-258, elaborated further on this concept. By the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, apostolic succession had been firmly established in the Church. With this growing hierarchical structure and supremacy of the 1 bishop per local church, Church leaders could keep members in line by telling them to obey their bishop. [NOTE: A careful reading of the New Testament reveals that several terms were used interchangeably for the same Church position: (a) *bishop*; (b) *elder*; (c) *shepherd*; (d) *pastor*; and (e) *overseer*.]



Irenaeus

### Question #5: Is apostolic succession a Biblical concept or not?

**Answer:** We agree with Protestant Christians in rejecting apostolic succession for several reasons. Perhaps the most important reason is that apostolic authority cannot be passed down to anyone else, because an apostle of Jesus must have met 3 criteria: (a) he must have spent time with Jesus personally; (b) he must have been called to be an apostle by Jesus personally; and (c) he must have seen the resurrected Jesus. These 3 criteria are identified in Acts 1:21-26, when the 11 apostles discussed choosing someone to take Judas Iscariot’s place:

<sup>21</sup>Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, <sup>22</sup>beginning from the baptism of John to the day when He was taken up from us; one of these men must become a witness with us of His resurrection. <sup>23</sup>And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. <sup>24</sup>And they prayed and said, ‘You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen <sup>25</sup>to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place. <sup>26</sup>And they cast lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles. (NKJV)

Note that criteria (a) and (c) are listed in verses 21-22. Criterion (b) is listed in verse 24. Even the bishops in the 1<sup>st</sup> century were not apostles. Moreover, none of the subsequent generations of bishops could have apostolic authority either because they could not have met any of the 3 qualifications for being an apostle. [NOTE: The New Testament *does* speak of apostles of the *Church*, who were apostles (“sent out ones”) as missionaries. But for having apostolic authority like Jesus Himself, one must have been an apostle of *Jesus*, not merely the Church itself.]

### **Question #6: How do advocates of apostolic succession respond to the facts raised under the previous question?**

**Answer:** In response to the clear facts that an apostle of Jesus must have met the 3 qualifications discussed under Question #5, those who support apostolic succession usually assert that when a bishop is ordained, the Holy Spirit is given to him in a special way so as to guarantee his teaching authority. Of course, the New Testament plainly teaches that the Holy Spirit is given to *all* believers (Acts 2:38; Ephesians 4:30). More significantly, nowhere in the New Testament does it teach that the Holy Spirit is given in a unique way to those ordained as bishops.

### **Question #7: How is the New Testament interpreted to support apostolic succession?**

**Answer:** At least 3 texts are employed on behalf of apostolic succession. *First*, II Thessalonians 2:15 and 3:6 are often cited because they teach that believers need to follow the **“tradition”** they received from the



The Apostle Paul

apostle Paul, whether in oral or written form. Then in II Timothy 2:2, Paul tells Timothy the following: **“And the things you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also”** (NKJV). This text is understood by advocates of apostolic succession as a reference to Paul’s generation, Timothy’s generation, and to the generation following Timothy—thus, apostolic tradition is to be handed down from one successive generation to another. However, the key word here is **“faithful.”** In other words, the men to whom Timothy was to instruct must have loyalty to the truth.

Unless one argues that Timothy was an infallible judge of character, Timothy’s selection of men does not guarantee that they will always be loyal to the truth. Therefore, these texts cannot be properly used to defend the concept of apostolic succession.

## Question #8: Are there any additional reasons for rejecting apostolic succession?

**Answer:** Yes. Our last reason for rejecting apostolic succession is that bishops have historically differed with each other, sometimes on matters of theological importance. This is usually explained by supporters of apostolic succession stating that it works through the collective group of bishops as a whole rather than through one single bishop. However, that doesn't work as a defense because *if* a bishop supposedly has the guarantee of teaching truth through the act of his having been *ordained*, then *each individual* bishop should have apostolic authority. Therefore, the fact that bishops, even within the same church, have differed on important theological matters demonstrates that apostolic succession is not a valid theory.

## Question #9: How is it that the Pope is the head of the Roman Catholic Church? And is that consistent with the Bible?

**Answer:** The word "Pope" comes from the Latin word "papa" and means "father," just as the English word "papa" also does. The Pope is first the bishop of the Church at Rome. A strong tradition exists that the apostle Peter founded or co-founded the Church in the city of Rome and was its first bishop. Matthew 16:18-19 is interpreted to mean that Jesus named Peter the human head of the Church on earth. That passage reads as follows:



Pope Francis

**And I also say to you, that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And 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 will be loosed in heaven. (NKJV)**

The idea that Peter is the human head of the Church on earth is called the Primacy of Peter, or the Petrine Doctrine. Like the apostolic succession teaching, the Petrine Doctrine *gradually* developed. Its first clearer definition seems to have come from Augustine (d. 430), the bishop of Hippo in North Africa. But it was Pope Innocent I (402-417) who completed the theology of the Petrine Doctrine, which became widespread in the Western Church. It was always rejected by bishops in the East, however. The Petrine Doctrine is based on the theory of apostolic succession, because every bishop of Rome has been considered by the Roman Catholic Church only as *Peter's* successor—and thus the human head of the Church on earth. Without apostolic succession, no bishop of Rome could possibly be his official successor and head of the Church.

[NOTE: We reject the Petrine Doctrine because (1) we reject apostolic succession; (2) there is some fairly good evidence that Peter was not part of the founding of the Church at Rome or its first bishop; (3) Peter himself never exercised a dominant role in Church governance; and (4) the *gradual* development and acceptance of the Petrine Doctrine, and the failure of the early bishops of Rome to claim their headship, strongly suggests that it was not known in the century of the original apostles—especially since it came into prominence as the Western Roman Empire was failing and the Roman Church was picking up the slack in political prominence.]

## Question #10: What then is the interpretation of Matthew 16:18-19?

**Answer:** In verse 18, the Greek word for “**Peter**” is “petros,” which refers to “a small stone” that can be moved easily. In the same verse, the Greek word for “**rock**” is “petra,” which means a “massive rock” that either cannot be moved or cannot be moved easily. In this way, Jesus made a clear distinction between



Key to the Kingdom

“**Peter**” and the “**rock**” on which He would build His Church. As for the keys of the kingdom, the context in Matthew 18 tells us that they are given to the *entire* Church. Moreover, although most English Bibles mistranslate it, the binding and loosing in both Matthew 16:19 and 18:18 should literally read, “**whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven**” (NASB). In other words, Jesus used the metaphor of the keys that a steward might have; he is to use his

master’s keys to the estate only to implement what the master has already decreed (cf. Isaiah 22:20-22). The Holy Scriptures are the keys that authorize the Church to bind and loose on earth only what heaven has already decreed in those Scriptures.