

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

that is attainable, under existing circumstances, is to give a few hours' warning of the approach of any great storm, and to frame probable forecasts of the general character of the weather from day to day.

G. T. RYVES,  
(F. R. Met. Soc.).



#### ART. IV.—INFALLIBILITY.

IT is a subject for deep thankfulness that the Protestant world is now bestirring itself, and is making an organized attempt to uphold the principles of the Reformation. Of course, such an effort is sure to call out a corresponding one on the part of the Romish Church, but believing (as we do) that the truth is on our side, we need not fear opposition so long as it is open and above-board. What gives peculiar life to the present movement is, that it circulates round a given individual, Martin Luther, the great Reformer; and as he is thus our centre-piece, it is well for our cause that his character and conduct can bear close inspection. When we say this, we do not mean to imply that Luther was free from marked and decided defects; but admitting these, we must also admit that his moral conduct was unimpeachable (whatever Rome may allege to the contrary), and that his sincerity is unquestionable. Indeed, so strongly is this latter quality exhibited in those severe mental struggles which he underwent before quitting the Church of Rome, that the study of his life ought to lead every candid mind to the conclusion, that if the peculiar doctrines of that Church were really of divine origin, Luther would have found rest, peace, and satisfaction there. For *he* certainly (if ever man did) gave them a fair trial. But being weighed in the balance, they were found wanting.

The tribute to this great man's memory on the four hundredth anniversary of his birth, and still more to the great revolution which was brought about through his instrumentality, is now being paid in various forms, by sermons, by speeches, and by publications, all bearing directly or indirectly on the great Romish controversy; and we would fain contribute our mite to this vast mass of thought and information, which we trust will prove effective in strengthening our Protestant brethren, checking the advances of the enemy, and perhaps winning over some stray sheep into the right paths. As our space is limited, we thought we could not do better than take the subject of infallibility, because this doctrine lies at the thres-

hold of Romanism, and when once thoroughly believed, involves the reception of *every* other doctrine which she may choose to communicate; and also because we suspect that this is a dogma against which Protestants are not so well armed as they might be. How vulnerable even the clergy were on this point in former years, the following anecdote (which was told us by the late Archbishop of Dublin) will show. The Archbishop was once in company with a party of Irish clergymen who were talking of a recent controversy, which had created a great sensation, between Dr. Pope (a Protestant clergyman) and Dr. Maguire (a Roman Catholic Bishop). On *some* points, they said, Dr. Pope had the best of the argument; but on the subject of infallibility, the advantage was on Dr. Maguire's side. "I see," said the Archbishop; "Dr. Pope took some of Dr. Maguire's pawns, and received checkmate." By which, of course, he meant, that if the existence of an infallible Church could once be proved, there would be comparatively little need to prove anything else; for in that case, the more apparently absurd were the doctrines which that Church enunciated as articles of belief, the more praiseworthy would be the faith which accepted them. "But the fact is," said the Archbishop, "the Roman Catholics know more about our religion than we do about theirs. And now," he added, "I will take the part of a Roman Catholic priest, and see if you can answer my arguments on the subject of infallibility." He tried them, and drove them all into a corner, so that they were obliged to ask him to help them out of the difficulty! On a subsequent occasion he related this story to a party of English clergymen; and on their expressing astonishment at the ignorance of the Irish clergy, he challenged them to a similar controversy, and found them equally unable to answer his arguments. This incident occurred, as far as we recollect, more than forty years ago; had it been of recent date, we should not have related it. But it is to be hoped that our clergy are now better instructed in the Romish controversy. In any case, however, the story has its moral, for it shows how liable we are, for want of a little thought and circumspection, to leave the citadel of truth unguarded at the very door where it most needs defence. The Archbishop's arguments on the occasion referred to, were the same that Roman Catholic priests, we believe, use now. In substance they were pretty nearly as follows:—"You Protestants hold that the Scriptures are an infallible guide. But what is the use of such a guide without an infallible interpreter who can explain its true meaning? Now you do not even *pretend* that your Church is infallible. Your guide is your own individual private judgment; and yet you see in what different directions it leads you. It causes

you to split up into different sects, each of them holding divergent opinions. Now it is manifest that they cannot *all* be right." Some one then suggested that the Holy Spirit was their infallible guide. What the Archbishop said to this we do not distinctively recollect, but he might very well have answered, "Yes, you all profess to be guided by that Spirit; but as it does not lead you to anything like unanimity of sentiment, *some* of you must be self-deceived: and how can you be sure that you are not *all* in like manner deluded, as we think you are? Now the existence of an infallible Church, secures us from such self-deception." These are some of the *à priori* arguments by which Romanists have endeavoured to support the reasonableness of the Church's claim to infallibility.

We must dispose of these before noticing the passages of Scripture on which they ground their claim. In the first place it is to be observed, that the very act of deciding (*à priori*) that God must adopt a certain course, is, in itself, an act of private judgment, and a most presumptuous one, for it presupposes that God's "thoughts" must be as *our* thoughts, and His "ways" our ways, a notion which is contradicted both by His Word, as just quoted, and by our experience of His dealings. Which of us is there, who, if he had the ordering of the world and of the circumstances of his own life, would not order them differently from God? Thus it is evident that on the very borders of Romanism there lies a Rubicon of the most *presumptuous* private judgment, which must be crossed before we reach that land where we are supposed to part company for ever from such a guide. It may perhaps be answered to this, that it is safer to make *one* act of private judgment than *many* acts. But is it really safer, when the act makes up in *quality* for what it wants in quantity? which it certainly does in this case. For, in the first place, it is a peculiarly *audacious* act; and in the next place, it is like consolidating a number of small debts into one great one. It causes us to stake our whole spiritual life, and perhaps also the salvation of our souls, on a single throw. Of course, if the Church of Rome were able to prove satisfactorily from Scripture that God required of us this one effort of private judgment and no other, then it would be our duty to act accordingly. And *she* will tell us that she *has* proved it; but let her not also say that we are *never* to use this faculty (in spiritual things), for on her own hypothesis we are *obliged* to employ it in deciding the most important of all questions. And we may go further than this, and affirm that she cannot honestly say that only *one* act of private judgment is required of us before we accept her guidance. For we must first believe that there is a God; then, that He has given us a revelation; then, that He has given us a Church to be

an infallible interpretation of that revelation. And lastly, as there are several churches *all* claiming infallibility, *i.e.*, the Church of Rome, the Greek Church, the Mormonite Church, and the Irvingite Church, it is necessary to decide between their conflicting claims.

Moreover, it must be remembered that the Church of Rome herself has left her children to their private judgment on several important questions connected with religion. She has never (except, perhaps, in certain cases) authoritatively declared what sins are venial and what deadly, and writers on the Confessional have differed on these points. And the distinction must be even more important in her eyes than in ours, for *she* holds that one deadly sin, unconfessed, involves the certain loss of a soul. Again, in spite of what is said on the subject in the Council of Trent, Romanists differ as to the degree or kind of adoration which should be paid to images.<sup>1</sup> Again, it is well known that there have been rival Popes, each professing to be the successor of St. Peter, and supported by rival parties in the Church, who of course had to use their private judgment in order to decide who was the rightful claimant. Again, had we space we could show that there have been differences as to how far the limits of infallibility extend.

But let us now look at the question from another point of view. Let us consider how God deals with us in the ordinary affairs of life. Does He not oblige us, to exercise our private judgment in order to decide, not only what is the *expedient*, but what is the *right* course to take, in affairs of great moment? And it has been truly remarked that the matters in which it is possible for us to arrive at the most absolute certainty, are precisely those over which we have no control, as, *e.g.*, the motions of the heavenly bodies, etc. Judging, therefore, from analogy, we might reasonably expect that God, though He gave us a revelation, and offered us His own Spirit as the interpreter of it, would not give either in such a manner as to preclude the

<sup>1</sup> As to the opinions held by Roman Catholics on the subject of the adoration due to images, the most extraordinary variations may be quoted. The Council of Elvira, which sat in the reign of Constantine, strictly enjoined that neither paintings nor images should be introduced into churches. Gregory expressly condemns the adoration of images. The Council of Constantinople, A.D. 754, decreed the abolition of image worship. The second Council of Nice, A.D. 787, reversed the Decree of the Council of Constantinople, and stated, "Those precious and venerable images, as is aforesaid, we honour and salute; and honouring, *we adore* them." The Council assembled by Charlemagne, at Frankfort, A.D. 794, and the Council assembled at Constantinople by the Emperor, A.D. 814, each rescinded the Decrees of the Council of Nice, and condemned image-worship. But, in the year 842, a Council assembled by the Empress Theodora, at Constantinople, reinstated the Decree of the Council of Nice.

use of private judgment. Therefore, even the *antecedent* probability lies on our side, and not on the side of the Church of Rome. Besides, though we cannot pretend always to account for the ways of the Almighty, yet in this case we may, to a certain extent, see His reasons for dealing with us as He does. If His highest gifts—pardon, eternal life, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the gift of heavenly wisdom, which is imparted through that Spirit, were obtained without labour on our part (not, of course, by way of payment, for they are free gifts, but by way of discipline)—if, we say, such were *not* the case, our life would not be so much one of probation and of growth, as of indolent reception, which would hinder us from profiting by what we received. Now, to apply this to the subject before us, what would be the result of a revelation which was so given as to enable us to dispense with the use of our reason? In that case we should probably embrace a *dead* instead of a *living* truth—the outward form, without the spirit. As it is, we have good reason to fear that many Protestants thus embrace the truths they have been brought up in. They lie on their minds like lumps of marl in a field. They cannot fertilize them. Now the tendency to receive truths in this indolent manner exists among Protestants because it is part of human nature; but, with the earnest-minded among us, the spirit of inquiry keeps it in check. But there is no such check to prevent even a *devout* Romanist from swallowing whole, without digesting, whatever his Church teaches him; and even wholesome doctrine, when thus received, cannot really profit. Of course there is a danger on the other side. We may *abuse* our private judgment by making a god of it, and rejecting the guidance of the Spirit of Truth. But God saw—to speak with deepest reverence—that the danger in the other quarter was still greater, and more universally pernicious in its consequences.

So much, then, for the *à priori* arguments for and against the existence of an infallible Church. Though we do not pretend to have stated them all, we have mentioned the most important. Now as to the passages in Scripture upon which Rome bases her claims to infallibility. These are (as most people know) those in which our Saviour tells His Apostles that He gives them the power to bind and to loose, etc. But it is evident that even if those passages imply the conferring of the gift of infallibility, it does not follow that every power with which the Apostles were endowed was to be continued to their so-called successors. Our Saviour's promise, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world," whatever it means, *cannot* mean *this*. For instance, we know that the power of working miracles (whatever Romish legends may say to the contrary) is not continued in the Church. But, after all,

the Apostles certainly did *not* either *claim* or *possess* infallibility in the sense in which the Church of Rome claims it for the Pope, whose official decisions it affirms to be valid, even if he be a bad man and an infidel. They must, indeed, have *known* the truth; but they were not miraculously guarded from teaching error. The Apostles Peter and Barnabas were led by false shame to disguise the truth; and St. Paul expressly tells the Galatians that if he, or an angel from heaven, were to preach another gospel than that which they had already received, he should be accursed.<sup>1</sup> In his farewell charge to the Church at Miletus, he not only warns the members of that Church that false teachers will come among them, and will even arise out of their own body, but he points them to no Church, Apostle, or General Council for guidance and direction. Had he known of any such infallible guide, he would certainly have pointed it out, and had God provided such, he *must* have known of it, for the Saviour promised His Apostles that the Spirit should teach them all things.

We never heard of any adequate answer to these arguments. Certain dignitaries in the Church of Rome once published a sort of reply in which they objected that the doctrine deduced from them was a *dreary* one. But this is, in reality, no answer at all; for our Saviour never led His disciples to suppose that their Christian life would be a bed of roses. On the contrary, He expressly says, "In the world ye shall have tribulation." It is true He also says that in Him they should have peace; but the peace which the Saviour promised was not the sort of peace which Roman Catholics derive from the surrender of their private judgment. We knew, indeed, a pervert to the Church of Rome, who professed to have found in the bosom of that Church the peace which passeth all understanding; and we doubt not that many others, if questioned on the subject, would affirm the same thing, and some of them in sincerity. But such persons are probably deceiving themselves. They feel a sort of rest, the rest of those who have been long tossed about with doubts and difficulties, and who have at last thrown all these aside. But the peace which is thus purchased is a superficial one, more smooth, perhaps, on the surface, and maybe more unvarying, than that which many a true Christian enjoys in this life, but only skin-deep, not penetrating into the inmost recesses of the heart. And this state of mind is generally pictured in their faces. There is, in the eye of almost every devout Roman Catholic, an expression

---

<sup>1</sup> They certainly were miraculously kept from *writing* error, or the Word of God would not be a safe guide. But, thank God, "*all* Scripture is given by inspiration."

which gives the idea that he is suppressing something—that a veil is over his mind and heart.

But now, it may be asked, in spite of all that has been said against it, Has not this doctrine of infallibility some foundation of truth in it? The answer to this is—as a doctrine it is undoubtedly erroneous, but, like most other errors, it is the perversion and exaggeration of a truth. It cannot be denied that the opinion of the wise and good, and, to a certain extent, that of a large majority, ought to influence us; and so, when we thus defer to their judgment, we sometimes make our own give way to it, or at least to a certain degree build our opinions upon it. And such deference to authority is undoubtedly right and proper. But this germ of truth has been often expanded into error, and it has sometimes been made a vehicle through which the doctrine of infallibility has been introduced into our Church, a doctrine which our Reformers would most vehemently have repudiated. It has been called presumptuous to set up our judgment against that of wiser and better men than ourselves, and those who have given theological subjects more attention. But then, of course, the difficulty suggests itself, whose opinion are we bound implicitly to defer to? There are so many conflicting opinions. The Church of Rome answers this question decisively, if not satisfactorily; but those Anglicans who try to make out that our Church is either wholly or partly infallible, cannot so easily define their position. They have sometimes professed to be guided by the old test, "*Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus;*" and any recorded opinion where these requisites were supposed to be fulfilled, they called the voice of the Church. But where is this unanimity of sentiment to be found? and, if found, who is to prove for certain that it is found, where we have to examine the opinions of so many hundreds of writers? No wonder that many who thus sought for infallibility, feeling the unsatisfactoriness of their position, have taken refuge in the Church of Rome. Indeed, an appeal to numbers, and numbers alone, is an unsatisfactory way of settling a question, even if we could form a correct estimate on this point. For, in order to know the relative value of the united testimony of two parties holding opposite opinions, it is necessary to weigh, as well as to number them; and when this test is applied, sometimes the minority kicks the scale. And such a test ought to be applied to the Church of Rome, when her members appeal, as they sometimes do, to their numerical superiority. A Roman Catholic once used this argument to one of our Protestant parishioners in Ireland. The latter might have answered that the numbers of the Buddhists and Mahometans far exceeded that of the Roman Catholics. But

perhaps the other would have repudiated a reference to any but professing Christians. What he did answer was this: "I read in my Bible that 'broad is the way which leadeth to destruction, and many there be that go therein!'" To which the other replied: "Oh! if you come to the Bible, I can't argue with you!" The answer, which might have been most within his comprehension would have been this: The belief of one sincere and sensible Protestant is, in point of testimony, worth that of many Romanists, because the latter, being for the most part brought up to believe in the infallibility of their Church, have never thought of questioning it, and therefore never question anything else which their Church teaches. In point of testimony, therefore, their opinion is of no weight.

In what we have now said, most true Protestants would go along with us, for we are pretty generally agreed that the right of private judgment is the privilege which we ought especially to claim and to contend for. But there are exceptions even to this rule. We once heard a decided Protestant and devout Christian man strongly deprecate the use of private judgment in spiritual matters. Now, as hardly any opinion, whether right or wrong, is held only by a single individual, we cannot but think that the view which we are speaking of must be shared by others, and is therefore worth noting. Of course, those who hold it do not hold it in the Romish sense: what they dread is a man's leaning to his own understanding and not following the guidance of God's Spirit. But they do not see that they propose a wrong, and indeed an impracticable way of avoiding this danger. If all men were to act on this principle there would be no converts from Rome, or, indeed, from any false religion. The Jews of Berea, upon this principle, ought not to have investigated into the truth of St. Paul's teaching, and we should be left to believe any spirits without trying them. But in point of fact God does not throw away as useless any of those faculties or feelings which He has implanted in us; He gives them a right direction. It is true, indeed, that "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God." But the understanding, like the affections, may be sanctified. And many a man who has undergone this spiritual baptism could tell us that the very things which he before rejected as foolishness, now commend themselves to his reason. Undoubtedly, what leads many of us to dread the use of reason in spiritual things is, that great intellectual power is often a snare to its possessor, and is a hindrance, rather than a help, to his acceptance of the simple truth as it is in Jesus. But the same may be said of riches, and, indeed, is said by our Lord Himself. And yet we know that material riches may be consecrated to the service of God, and why not mental riches?

It cannot, indeed, be denied that reasoning and trusting imply two different states of mind, and therefore seem to pull us in opposite directions ; but they are not really antagonistic, unless we make reason a substitute for faith. The office of reason, when under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is to direct our faith, which otherwise might stray into forbidden paths, and lead us, as it does with some, into the wildest extravagances, under the impression that we are guided by the Spirit of God. In spiritual matters, and to a great extent in earthly ones also, the Christian's decision should be confirmed by two witnesses, the outward and the inward witness, each of which, in turn, should be endorsed by the Spirit of God. This is the safest way of arriving at the truth. But, in spite of all our precautions, we must, while we are upon earth, be liable to make mistakes. If we say that we have no error, we deceive ourselves just as much as "if we say that we have no sin." And yet it is both natural and right that we should desire to be free from both these evils. And not only so, but the very existence of such a craving is a proof that it will ultimately find its gratification if we go the right way to seek it. But some are not contented to wait for the fulfilment of this desire. They want to be able in this life to say, "I have attained." And in this, as in many other cases, the wish is father to the thought. Accordingly, some are found who hold that sinless perfection is attainable in our present condition, while others hope to find an infallible guide, which is the same thing as hoping to become infallible ourselves, that is if we expect always to be able to follow such a guide. Now certainly we Protestants believe that we have an infallible guide in the Holy Spirit ; but the humble and right-minded among us know that they will never in this world yield themselves so entirely to His influence and guidance as to be quite free from error. The clouds which sin interposes between us and the truth, and especially the sin of faithlessness, straitens us in ourselves. But in Him we are not straitened. The promises of the gift of the Spirit to all who seek Him, and of wisdom to those who ask it, are full and free (see James i. 5, and other passages). And these promises will one day find their perfect fulfilment in the case of every true Christian. For such an one has within him that Spirit Who is the real fountain of truth ; and if he presses on towards the light, seeking in patience and humility and faith for direction and guidance, all his mistakes will be cleared away in that day when he will no longer see through a glass darkly, but face to face. "In Thy light shall we see light."

E. WHATELY.