

The Location of Infallibility

by

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Infallibility is essentially a speculative notion about persons (or about institutions acting in a quasi-personal way) in present or future situations. Thus, though a present claim to infallibility ("X cannot be wrong") is in principle falsifiable by statements about the past ("X said y, and it was untrue"), it is only with reference to the present or the future that X's untrue statement is of any interest; "X was wrong" and "X was not infallible" are virtually tautological.

Infallibility must thus be distinguished from inerrancy on the one hand, and from indefectibility on the other. It is not correct usage, even for a fundamentalist, to speak of the Bible as infallible. It is, from his point of view, inerrant, and its inerrancy derives from the inspiration of an infallible Spirit; but the very fact of its having been set down in writing gives it a determinate character and thus excludes the speculative aspect. Comparable conclusions may be drawn about the statements attributed by Roman Catholic theologians to the infallible magisterium of past popes; these are (from their own point of view) inerrant, but it is the authority on which they rest, and its continuing exercise, which is regarded as infallible. Indefectibility, on the other hand, shares with infallibility its speculative character, concerned with what may happen now or in the future; it differs from it in carrying no direct reference to the enunciation of truth. The promise that the gates of Hades will not prevail against the Church founded on Peter (Mt. 16.18), the characteristic biblical paradigm of what is meant by indefectibility, obviously does not exclude the possibility of safeguard from final and total departure from the truth, but it is not, so far as the language goes, an explicit promise of protection from error at all times.

Now, of these three, inerrancy is used, as we have seen, of determinate statements, the Bible and the ecumenical creeds and definitions, and so on; indefectibility is something claimed for the Church, in virtue of God's promise and his own faithfulness; but infallibility is something predicated of God himself. It therefore belongs not to the Church as such but to the Church's divine guide, the Holy Spirit, whose function it is to take of the things of Jesus and show them to us (Jn. 16.14), that is, not to be for ever revealing new truths, but to interpret the truth as it was in Christ, the once-for-all revealer of God to man, to his Church in every age. Infallibility, in this sense, strictly needs no location; the infallible Spirit blows where it will. But this does not quite dispose of the problem. We are not concerned with an infallible Spirit confronting a totally fallible Church, but with a Church that is indwelt by the Spirit and derives the authority it has from that fact. Granted that the infallible Spirit can speak to the Church by any means that he chooses, are there

any continuing channels or vehicles which he has chosen, and have these any share in his infallibility? The following suggest themselves.

(1) There is no question that there was in the Church from the first an authoritative teaching charisma (apostles, prophets, teachers; 1 Cor. 12.18), that it settled into the regular ministry of the Church (and especially of the episcopate), and that it is promised the assistance of the Holy Spirit; witness the petition for the Spirit in the early ordination prayers, and the ancient and basically scriptural salutation "the Lord is with you" and its response (explained in the terms of the Spirit indwelling the congregation and the charisma of the celebrant/prophet by W.C. van Unnik. "Dominus Vobiscum" in A.J.B. Higgins (ed.), N.T. essays: Studies in Memory of T.W. Higginson 270 ff.). It has nevertheless been a commonplace of Christian experience that neither the recognition of teaching authority nor the promise of divine assistance has been any guarantee against conflict of belief in the Church, and an ecclesiology framed in terms of the worshipping local church had early to be supplemented by other provisions for agreement with the Great Church about the fundamentals of the faith.

(2) The earliest of these distinguished between discordant voices on the basis of originality: the apostolic foundation of a church was held to be a guarantee of the soundness of the faith taught in it. In the mind of its first great exponent, St. Irenaeus, the appeal to this neither duplicates nor conflicts with the authority of scripture, by now fully canonized; but the Gnostic innovators against whom he is using it have access to scripture too, and which interpretation is to be listened to? We have here the beginning of the idea of a skopos from which the Bible, the Church's book, is to be read, and of an authoritative interpreter of it to situations different from those which produced it.

Now it is justly observed that (whatever the true interpretation of Adversus Haereses III, 3.2) Rome is the only apostolic see in the west, and indeed the only one in the whole Church which in any real sense functions as such; and moreover the idea that by the fact of its connexion with the apostles Peter and Paul (difficult now to dispute) it became heir to the position originally occupied by the church of Jerusalem as the seat of the "apostolic college", though long disputed in the early Church, receives some support in the NT, at least from the Lucan writings. And it was long the infallibility of the Roman Church rather than of its bishop that the Roman tradition asserted. But it must still be asked: is this still a viable function of the local church, even the most venerable, in an age in which its part in the living stream of the Church's life is so different, the nature of continuity so much more complex, and communications so much easier? And does Rome still speak as the Mother and Mistress of local churches, and not rather as the heir to western theological thinking? Certainly all the undisputed cases of the exercise of the infallible magisterium in the 19th and 20th centuries have been to resolve disputed questions of western and Latin theology.

(3) The 'vertical' appeal to apostolic origins came later to be balanced by a 'horizontal' appeal to the mind of the present Church over against the heretic; this involved the assembling of an (in principle) representative gathering of bishops (representing both the faith of their churches and the teaching authority in them) and their arrival at a common mind. The general council became a necessary link between the local church as understood by a eucharistic ecclesiology and the mind of ^{the} Una Sancta, and it is crucial to the present discussion. Nevertheless it was soon a fact of experience that not all councils agree, or arrive at the truth; it is necessary to enquire further, what makes a council ecumenical?

There have been three types of answer to this question, and they will be found to correspond to the distinction already made between inerrancy, infallibility and indefectibility.

(a) The 'inerrancy' position is that occupied by the Reformers, for whom the definitions of councils were to be judged by the degree of their conformity to an inerrant scripture; thus Article XXI of the Church of England declares that "things ordained by [General Council] as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they were taken out of Holy Scripture". This in itself says no more than would have been taken for granted by the fathers of Nicaea or Chalcedon. But it was because they stood in the tradition of Christian interpretation of scripture that the Reformers could see the definitions of the first four general councils as borne out by scripture. If scripture were in fact as perspicuous as they supposed, there would have been no need for councils in the first place. And they assumed not only the inerrancy of scripture but a settled unanimity of view within it, which biblical criticism has largely eroded.

(b) Rome accounts as ecumenical those councils which satisfy certain norms of procedure, in particular that they have been summoned by, or their proceedings subsequently ratified by, the Holy See, and treats the definitions of these as proceeding from the infallible magisterium. It thus combines the process of a council with the preference accorded to an apostolic see (see above). The definition of 1870 essentially endorsed this procedure, and then proposed an equivalent alternative- ex cathedra definition by the Pope. The Roman approach thus looks to councils (and, under certain limited conditions, popes), as the source of pronouncements infallible ex sese, non ex consensu ecclesiae.

(c) The approach of the Orthodox position is significantly different. To quote John Meyendorff (The Orthodox Church, 31): "An ecumenical council truly representative of the Church and gathered together in the name of Christ will certainly be inspired by the Holy Spirit and will therefore be infallible. However it belongs to the Spirit and to the Church guided by him to judge whether a gathering which declares itself or is declared to be ecumenical is actually so or not. The council is not an organ external to the body of the Church. The Church's infallibility is ultimately always the infallibility of the Spirit of Truth alone, who resides in the whole organism of the Church."

This distinction between the infallibility of the Spirit alone and that recognition of his voice which belongs to the whole Church (which commends itself also to that tradition in Anglicanism for which position (a) above is unsatisfactory) would appear to leave no room for an organ of ecclesia docens which is not identified with the Spirit (nor therefore immune from human limitation and sinfulness) but whose pronouncements are infallible ex sese, non ex consensu ecclesiae. The redressing by Vatican II of the unbalance between papacy and episcopate left by Vatican I does not in itself resolve this; nor yet the considerations adumbrated by Newman ("On consulting the faithful in matters of doctrine"), let alone the procedures actually adopted in preparation for the definition of the Assumption in 1950. And in an age which takes for granted the criticism of the Church's title-deeds, the scriptures, and in which Roman Catholic scholars have increasingly recognised that any conciliar or magisterial definition is addressed to the situation and to the intellectual background of its own age, we cannot be other than suspicious of the tendency to treat the authority of these definitions as cumulative, and of the method which, even in the hands of such a theological master as Rahner, seems to abandon biblical fundamentalism yet retain what can only be called Denzinger-fundamentalism.