

Letters on Certain Points in Romanism

by John Nelson Darby

John Nelson Darby's sermon critiques the reliance on tradition and church authority in Romanism, emphasizing the primacy of scripture and the Holy Ghost in guiding faith.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:12

Topics: "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Authority of Scripture"

Description

John Nelson Darby addresses the rule of faith in the church, emphasizing that true power comes from the Holy Spirit rather than human authority or tradition. He argues that the Scriptures serve as the ultimate authority for faith, and that any reliance on church authority undermines the direct relationship believers have with God. Darby critiques Romanism for its reliance on tradition and the inadequacy of its authority, asserting that the church must remain subject to the truth of Scripture. He also discusses the concept of transubstantiation, arguing that it contradicts the essence of Christ's sacrifice and the nature of faith. Ultimately, Darby calls for a return to the Scriptures as the sole rule of faith and the means of true unity among believers.

Transcript

1. Rule of Faith.

Power in the church is neither more nor less than that of the Holy Ghost. There may be added at the beginning the apostles, as constituted of the Lord Jesus and having directions from Him. But now this is simply the working of the Holy Ghost in the church. This may be in an individual according to measure of power given to him, or it maybe in the body; but it will always recognise the Holy Ghost in the body and in all the members. This is most marked in the Epistles. They speak as to wise men, who have an unction from the Holy One. This is the whole matter: which once departed from, some mere arrangement takes its place, and the Holy Ghost is in principle - namely in faith - set aside, and weakness is soon apparent. The kingdom of God is in power; but this power is known only to faith.

As to "tradition," no one who has read the Greek Testament can a moment doubt that the word in the N. T. means a doctrine delivered, not handed down; though this might sometimes be the character of what was delivered. "Form of teaching into which ye were instructed, lit. delivered" (ἀλά. ἀλά. ἡ. ἡ. ἡ. of Rom. 6:17) makes this plain. So tradition in the popular sense is in contrast with scripture; but in the passage you refer to (2 Thess. 2:15) it is either the direct word of prophecy in the church there, or the apostle's epistle. No thing handed down in the church is secured by subsequent authority. The saints were to keep

the doctrine they had been taught - the body of saints. Suppose I were to write to the body of saints in - to hold fast what they had been taught, whether viva voce, or what I had written to them by letter, what would this have to say to the authority of the church or tradition of a subsequent era? Yet this is exactly the case, save that that teaching was divine and inspired, and therefore the exhortation had its peculiar place and weight: "the instructions [traditions] which ye were taught, whether by word or by epistle of ours." It clearly shows tradition just to be a doctrine delivered.

Nor do I see what the communication of what he had learned to faithful men (2 Tim. 2:2), so as to form teachers, has to do with tradition. Nobody, unless they deny ministry, could gainsay this; and as far as a man could be trusted as receiving it from St. Paul, it would of course have weight; but that is just the question. It was not authority, but a means of communicating truth. The confounding these two things is generally the unperceived sophism of Milner's End of Controversy: "A rule of faith, he says, or means of communicating Christ's religion. It must be plain, etc." But these things are not the same. A mother does it to her babe, but she is not a rule of faith; she does it perhaps perfectly well, but this alters nothing. Now here the apostle is directing the means of communicating truth to others (of course as surely as he can), but not setting up either authority or a rule of faith. When I had a dozen young men reading with me at Lausanne, I was doing this according to my ability. Was I dreaming of setting up authority or a rule of faith in them? Certainly not. The written word is clearly such the moment we own it inspired.

The real question is, Is it (scripture) addressed to all saints as possessing the Spirit so as to use it? They are the church. Ministry maybe a means of communicating, and a very precious one, as in Eph. 4; but ministers are never a rule nor an authority. A rule must be an existing quantum of doctrine; but this no men are. This as an authority must be infallible, which none is but God. Infallible is more than perfectly right. I may say what is absolutely right, but I am not infallible. Whenever the apostles spoke by inspiration, they uttered in revelation what was absolutely right from God; but this did not make them infallible. God is so, because in His nature He never can say anything but what is right. When God spoke by them, as every true Christian believes he did, they were absolutely right; but God remained the alone Infallible, Who never could of Himself say anything wrong. This was not communicated to an apostle since; if he did not speak by inspiration, he was as another man - more experienced perhaps, but a man. Inspiration comes from the infallible One, but does not render the inspired one infallible, but only perfectly right and divine in what he utters as inspired.

Further, I believe God will secure by His power that the truth shall not be lost in the church to the end. It may be only in an upright godly few, as when almost all the professing church and Pope Liberius among them turned Arian. But this does not make the church infallible; yet it does prove that God will keep His elect in vital essential truth to the end. But being kept is not authority. I am persuaded I shall be kept in the truth for the end - sure of it through grace; but this is not making me an infallible authority. It is just the opposite: I am subject to the truth. So the church, the elect saints, are subject to the truth always. They may have accompanying obscurities on many points; but they will never deny saving truth to the church. Many foolish things may be brought in and added; but they will not deny saving truth.

This the Council of Trent, and hence the Roman Catholic body (I do not say every individual), have pretty much done. Hence the difference of the Establishment. The Prayer-book has added a mass of destructive, false, and superstitious errors; but the Articles in general, though obscurely, do not deny but proclaim saving truth. Hence of the Galatians Paul was afraid: they were on the point of denying really the saving truth, though recovered. The Colossians were introducing superstitions which led to this; but they were not met exactly in the same way, as they were not denying justification by faith (for example, - as the

Galatians were well nigh doing). But this is saving subjection to the truth, not authority; and it is the real point of difference.

They say, With a law we must have an interpreting judge. God says, with His word we must have saving faith mixed. The heart must bow to His word itself: another cannot do this. Nobody denies that one can help another according to the measure of the Spirit - that is, help spiritually the soul in reception. But this is not authority, it is ministry. The truth received has God's authority; and by receiving the truth we are subject to Him. The word of God can have no authority outside to apply it, nor power either, but God Himself. Its whole object is to bring the soul and conscience into direct and immediate relationship with Himself. Interposed authority as to conscience sets aside God. There cannot be a judge with God's word, because Christ is; there may be discipline, and, in this sense, judgment in which the whole assembly acts: but this is another question. The whole point is the authority of God's word itself on the conscience. And mark, because God has said it, discerning it such, we set to our seal that God is true - not that the church is. The church it is that believes His word; and thereby it is the church. So "ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe." The church does not judge about the word of God The word of God judges the church, first as sinners, then as saints. Whoever gets above this gets into sin - is not a doer of the law but a judge.

I do not enter here on the external part of the question - that the tradition, or even the authority, is not to be found, though de facto many things are surely believed. It is clear that the local priest is not that authority or rule, though he may be a means of communicating. It is quite clear that the, ponderous tomes of the Councils are not a more clear or accessible or intelligible rule of faith than the living word. But the truth is, they are not agreed where it resides, in a Pope or a Council; and this is serious. It will be said, Certainly in both. But the Council of Constance deposed the Pope, and that of Basle set itself above the Pope and ended without him. Also, there were two; and neither was owned by the former. And yet more: Romanism cannot pronounce with unanimity which are the general Councils. There are (I trust my memory) nineteen; but they dispute as to the enumeration of them. What a difference from the pure word of God? [These letters were written in 1846, two Councils having been held since.]

2. Romanism Infidel.

It is very important to observe that Romanism does take infidel ground, and to press this on

their consciences: I have often done so in Ireland. God is competent 'to make men responsible by speaking Himself - this is a most important proposition and this is the one thing they have to defend - by His own testimony, that is. In their arguments there is a grand *ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς πίστεως*, namely, that the means of communicating Christ's religion is the rule of faith. This is a fundamental fallacy in Milner's "End of Controversy." A mother, a child, may be the means of communicating Christ's religion; but they are not a rule of faith. These two things may be united [as in the scriptures], but they are in no way the same things. I suppose the book you have, however, is Wiseman's.

Now I would take the bull by the horns, and say that there is no living saving faith whatever, but that which is wrought by the operation of the word of God, received on His direct authority without any other warrant whatever. If it is received on the authority of the church, it is not believing GOD. The word of God proves itself to the conscience, and puts man by itself under the responsibility of it; because God cannot speak without man's being bound to hear and know Him, for none speaks like Him. He may in grace use proofs and confirmations and witnesses; but man is bound to bear Him. God will prove that in the day of

judgment. Nay, the very heathen are without excuse on much lower ground.

The reason too is plain practically. The word of God judges and is not judged. Man is "convinced of all, he is judged of all;" and, the secrets of his heart being revealed, he falls down and confesses, that "God is in you of a truth." This is not authority; but it is the only saving thing. A man does not want authority to know that a two-edged sword is sharp. A faith founded on miracles, though God vouchsafed this confirmation, is no saving faith at all: Jesus did not commit Himself to it (John 2). He knew what was in man. But then in the corruption of the church and its prevalent power, it may be a reason why none but those who receive the love of the truth should ever escape. But this power of the word by the Spirit acting on, not judged by, man supposes the unbeliever: all else is no living faith at all. Whereas the church has the Spirit and the word; and the spiritual man judges all things.

Hence then I first take the ground that if the word of God be received on another's authority, it is the rejection of God's testimony. If I receive an account of another, because you put your name to it, it is because I do not believe the person who gives the account. God may providentially make it to be received where this genuine faith is not; but then it is not saving. To be saving it must be faith in God; and "He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true;" he who demands the church's authority to receive it has not.

God may have used all manner of means for preserving or even authenticating the testimony, and so He has in many, as we might expect. And I believe the scriptures were committed to the church to keep - not to authorise but to keep; as I keep a document safe, but give it no authority: it has its own; but I keep it safe. Now God, I believe, providentially has done this. But then the Roman body has decidedly failed in this; because, at the Council of Trent which is with them of divine authority, it has declared that to be scripture which declares itself not to be. That is, for example, the second book of Maccabees, which concludes by saying, If I have done well, it is as befits the subject; if ill, it is according to my ability. Now it is profane to suppose for an instant that this is the Holy Ghost's inditing. The Prologus Galeatus indeed of Jerome, generally prefixed to the Vulgate, declares the Apocryphal books are not scripture. Many other passages from the Apocrypha could be adduced: such as that the offerings for the dead were for those dead in mortal sin; and that there are three contrary accounts of the death of Antiochus. But I prefer the fact, that one book of the Maccabees declares it is not scripture, as above.

Moreover, it is well known that Sixtus V., acting under the authority of the Council of Trent, promulgated as the only authentic word of God an edition of the Vulgate which was suppressed; and his successor Clement altered it in 2,000 places. Five copies only of the Sixtine are known to be in existence; and Clement's bears in appearance its name. Rome has been in no sense, what the church ought to be, a faithful keeper of the "oracles of God committed" to it.

But after all, clever as Doctor Wiseman is, it is a vicious circle he is in. He takes the scripture as an authentic book. This itself then he supposes may be done. But if authentic, in the first place it is inspired, as anyone who reads it may see. That is, it gives us (to say the very least, for I think it goes farther) an authentic account of the actual authoritative teaching of Paul, Peter, James, John, Jude, and of the Lord, Himself. If this be so, I have no need of the church to receive its doctrine as divine. The authentic record of Christ's words and the apostles' teaching gives me a divine instruction directly, which no reference to a derivative authority can set aside; because the body, which would set aside or call in question the authority of that from which it derives, is not derivative at all. If it be then authentic, I have the original divine instructions, which founded, formed, and guided the church itself at first. If it be not authentic, then

to find that the church was founded proves nothing; for if not authentic, I do not know it is true. If I am to receive the church from scripture, I certainly can receive Christ's and the apostles' word directly.

But I may go farther. If it be not inspired as well as authentic, and if I do not know it to be so, I have no inspired warrant, that is, no divine warrant for hearing the church at all. So that, on this ground, you cannot set up the authority of the church without setting up previously the authority of scripture itself. The authenticity proves inspiration, or it gives. no inspired authority for the church, and I hear in scripture all Christ's and the apostles' inspired words, as well as that as to the church. For if I receive something a person says and not the rest, I receive none of it on his authority.

But examining the point farther, I find the authority of this authentic book showing me plainly a church indeed established, that is, an assembly, but quite the contrary to the conclusion drawn from it. I find the test of being of God as to doctrine to be hearing the apostles themselves; "He that is of God heareth us." Now I have their authentic words in this book; and I am not of God if I do not hear them themselves, as the guard against error. When I turn to hearing the church, I find not a word about doctrine at all, but a case of discipline (any rules of which, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, are not binding unless where received, though decreed by a Council, while they allege decrees on faith are: the discipline of the Council of Trent was not everywhere received). It is a question of wrong done, carried to two or three, and at last before the assembly; and if the wronging party will not mind the assembly, he is to be avoided by the offended one as a heathen. Whereas I find the scriptures referred to as the security in perilous times, and the certainty of having received the doctrines from the apostles personally - "Knowing, of whom." I find the Lord (Whose words all of us would bow to as divine) preferring, as to the medium of communication, the written word: "If they believe not his writings, how shall they believe my words?" "They have Moses and the prophets: let them hear them."

Now if we separate the rule of faith from the means of communicating Christ's religion (which last all admit may be and is now fallible - consequently the individual priest), where is their accessible rule? Is it in the acts of nineteen Councils (and which are they? For you are aware that Romanists are not agreed which the nineteen are) - acts in Latin moreover, or in Greek? Where is this accessible rule of faith? And now, farther, Romanists are not agreed what the rule is. Ultramontanes hold the Pope infallible, Cismontanes hold he is not. Many, as the Councils of Constance and Basle, hold that they had authority to act independently of and superior to the Pope. At the time of the former there were two Popes. The Council deposed them and chose another (Martin V.) who dissolved the Council. Is the Council of Constance a general council? If so, it has given an authority in matters of faith quite different from the Papal advocates; and it acted on that and deposed the Popes. If it had not that authority, the whole succession of the popedom since is founded on a schismatical act. However this may be, the authority on matters of faith Romanists are not agreed on. Not only so, but their Councils have decreed things against the Pope's authority, and he against theirs. The acts at Basle the Pope declared void after the departure of his legate, having transferred the Council elsewhere, though only a part left. But further, the Council of Chalcedon declared the equality of the Sees of Constantinople and Rome, which Pope Leo rejected.

Now if a Roman Catholic say, I am not learned enough for all this, then I reply, Where is the simplicity, the accessibleness, of their rule of faith? For this is it. If you say, But I trust my priest, then you are on confessedly fallible ground. I had much rather trust, with God's help by the Spirit, the writings of Paul and Peter and John, etc., addressed to all saints and expressly so addressed, How fallible the Romanist rule you way suppose, when I tell you that, in the four standard catechisms published by the authority of different Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland, there are not the same lists of the seven deadly sins; but this

is by the bye.

Is it not a fearfully upsetting thing that the moment I turn to the Bible - take the Roman translation - it sets aside all the cardinal points of Romanism, for instance the Mass? I read, there is no more oblation for sin. I am told by the highest authority of the Roman system, that the Mass is a propitiatory sacrifice for the sins of the living and the dead. Take away this; and all Romanism falls. Again, there is one Mediator. Now Romanism makes many, and in fact more referred to than Christ. And it is in vain to say that it is only as praying. Their merits are positively acted on in the Missal, and the Virgin Mary is called upon to save us now and at the hour of death. Nay, so far is this carried that the Confiteor, on which absolution is received, leaves out Christ altogether.

The inadequacy of the scriptures to give unity is a mere claptrap. Has Rome produced it? Clearly not, unless by blood. Look at it from without. Authority, they say, was in the church from the beginning; if not, it is new and good for nothing. Well, did it preserve unity? Witness the Greeks, Nestorians, Jacobites; earlier the Novatian system, the Paulicians; later the Protestants. Half professing Christendom at this moment is outside their unity. But, their authority being alleged to be the original effectual thing, it is clear that it has failed to preserve unity. They tried by fire and blood when Protestantism arose, but in half Europe in vain. Present facts then prove its inadequacy to this end. To say that it promotes unity among those subject to it is merely what the smallest sect in Christendom would say too. I remember a poor Romanist telling me nine-and-thirty religions rose out of the Bible. I told him I suppose his did, or it was good for nothing (which he admitted); and I told him then there were forty. And really the argument is worth no more. Nothing can produce true unity, but the teaching power of the Spirit of God.

3. Transubstantiation.

I have generally found that, in sincere Roman Catholics where there was a value for Christ (though in some respects natural), transubstantiation remained the thought in their mind. It connects itself with a sensible apprehension of Him like a picture, and seems to be borne out by scripture respects it, though not rightly dividing or understanding it.

Yet the scriptural reasons seem to me most strong and plain on the point, though a person may be a true saint and hold it, if the mass or sacrificial part is given up. This touches the knowledge by faith of the completeness of the one sacrifice and our known forgiveness by it.

There is no need of Syrian or Protestant commentators to know that words are used for designating things they represent. It is the universal language of man. I say of a portrait, That is my father; this is my uncle. No one doubts an instant what it means. "It is Jehovah's passover." "I am the true vine." "I am the door" is the converse. And it is as much and as surely said of "The cup" as of the elements: "this cup is the new testament in my blood" - thereby demonstrating the mode of speaking. As soon as the sense attached by the church to it is got rid of, our ordinary use of language would not convey the Roman sense to the mind. It is really an imposed one.

Further, St. Paul positively calls it "bread" we break: why is this not literal? In what follows we have those figures, which no language can be spoken without - "the cup which we bless." Was it the cup he blessed? Proper literality in the strict sense would make nonsense of all language - is not its known sense. I drink a glass of wine: who ever doubted what this meant. It is not, as men speak, the literal sense to give the physical one. He drew a picture of vice in his sermon: who thinks he drew a picture? So, in a nearer case, a man brings his sin (chattath) to Jehovah. Christ was made sin. These bones are the whole house of

Israel: does any one doubt what, it means? There are many such in Ezekiel: only here we have no verb at all.

And now as to the scriptural meaning of the doctrine. First, if the Roman Catholic one were true, it would be a sacrament, not, of redemption, but of non-redemption. That doctrine holds that the body, blood, soul, and divinity of the Lord Jesus are all contained in each of the elements. But if the blood be thus united to the body, there is no redemption at all. It is the blood "shed" which is redemption; and therefore we are called to "drink" it as a separate thing. It is body given we are told of, and shed blood. If the blood be in the body, there is no redemption. Christ has not a life of blood now: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom. If I take it shed, I own the great and blessed redemption. Take it otherwise than separate and shed, and it is a sign that there is none.

And this leads me farther. There is no such Christ in existence as that signified by the sacramental institution. There is a glorified Christ with a body in heaven, but this is a given body and shed blood. That is, it is a dead Christ we, in the power of resurrection, recognise and feed on - that by which we were brought in, that all-precious sacrifice. But there is no dead Christ now. There cannot be a given body and shed blood now. There is no such thing in existence, while faith knows all its value in the one blessed act of the cross. Hence also it cannot be literally, or rather physically, true. "This is my body that is given;" but it was not given then, nor was the Lord dead. The living Christ did not hold actually and literally the dead Christ in His own hand. And this is absolutely necessary to the literal or rather (without meaning to offend the feelings of those who have learned to reverence it) the gross carnal sense. The given body and shed blood clearly represent a dead Christ. We know the unspeakable preciousness of that wondrous fact such as none is like. It is all our hope, the death of the Son of God. But there is no dead Christ in existence: hence it cannot be a physical reality. It is shed blood I need for my soul: where is that literally? And farther it was not literally true then. Christ was not given and His blood shed when He spoke to His beloved disciples.

Yet this feeding on death is the very thing that is precious. A Jew dared not: it was death to him. But, now Christ is dead, death is life and gain to us. Hence too we must "drink" His blood - that is, take it as shed out: "he that drinketh my blood." The doctrine of concomitancy (that is, a whole Christ in each element) fails here; because the very point of power is "drinking" the blood, or receiving it as shed," taking it as such.

Hence while we see that the literal is only an imposed sense, contrary to the plain meaning of the words according to all habits of language, I find that it is on spiritual grounds, as to the eternal truth of Christ's doctrine and person, an impossible thing; that is, it contradicts the truth. There is no dead Christ, now; but [in the Eucharist] it is clearly a dead Christ. And, further, it subverts the sense and spiritual power attached by Christ to it - His given body and shed blood, and makes it really, though unwittingly, a sacrament of non-redemption. Such is Satan's craft. Further, it cannot be literally true that Christ held Himself dead in His own hand; nor, as the breaking [of the bread] really represents His suffering and death, did He in any sense do this indeed at any time, though after it He gave up His spirit to His Father.

Hence I lose all by this pseudo-literal sense; my soul wants, my soul enjoys, a suffering Christ, a dead victim. It is my salvation. I adore the grace in it; my soul feeds on it; I need it; I worship and joy in it, though humbled at what called for it; and my heart goes out to these sufferings and to Him Who endured them. But there is no such Christ now, no dead Christ to be literally true. If it is not a dead Christ, it is nothing at all to my faith. If it is a dead Christ, it is clearly not a literal one; for we all together, who love Him, rejoice in

His exaltation.

The fact is that it is a very modern doctrine. It was never established till Innocent the Third's time in the Council of Lateran, and was written against by esteemed doctors just before. And while you find many magniloquent though unintelligent expressions in the Fathers, one of the earliest - if the Roman doctrine be maintained - is a heretic, Irenaeus. I remember that he says that after the *ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ ἵσταται*, two things were there, bread and Christ. I attach no importance to this as an authority, and think him wrong - imperfectly taught by the Holy Ghost in it. But it is a proof, not of truth - I never would use it as the smallest authority for it - but that the Roman doctrine was not held by an early saint. Consubstantiation, I think, was more the common thought of doctors who took a real presence. To me one is as unsound as the other. It mistakes the real object of faith, a Christ dead and shed blood.

I do not add the common argument, "Whom the heavens must receive," and therefore not here; nor the ubiquity of Christ's body being unsound as to its reality: you will be familiar with them. To a faithful soul, though these be true, the meaning of the Holy Ghost will have more power. I agree with you as to "in remembrance of me."*

*In this there are a few verbal changes, as the writer formally allowed, after first publishing it *literatim*. Ed. B.T.

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