

Doubting James and Paul

By Graham Osborne

In recent columns, we have answered challenges to the Papacy: whether Peter was the first Pope, whether his office was supposed to continue to present time, and in last month's article, whether Peter was even at Rome at all.

But to be sure, whether Peter was in Rome or not takes absolutely nothing away from his indisputable role as the clear leader of the New Testament Church – the first Pope. But it is precisely this point that some still reject, despite the unequivocal testimony from Scripture, history, and the writings of the early Church, some still take issue with the idea of singling Peter out as authoritatively leading the Church, even to the point of insisting that it was actually St James the Greater that initially led the Church.

In Acts 15, the Church meets to discuss whether Gentile converts must keep the Old Testament ceremonial Mosaic Law to be saved [613 laws, including circumcision]. There was great debate until Peter stands up and authoritatively proclaims: “God made his choice among you that through my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe ... He made no distinction between us and them, for by faith he purified their hearts. Why ... are you now ... placing on the shoulders of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear ... we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they. The whole assembly fell silent” (Acts 15:6-12).

But “*after* they had fallen silent”, St. James adds: “my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from ... idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood.”

While James does speak authoritatively here, and well he should, as he is an Apostle and the Bishop of Jerusalem where this council is being held, even a cursory reading of his directives shows that he has not addressed the main doctrinal issue of the council at all: how are the Gentiles saved? James simply adds four directives on lesser matters. Unquestionably, Peter leads the council and settles the main doctrinal question, silencing the council in the process – because he is the Pope!

A final effort to reject Peter's leadership of the early Church rests in Galatians 2:11-14, where St. Paul accuses Peter of hypocrisy: withdrawing from eating with the Gentiles because he was afraid of what the Jewish converts from Jerusalem might think.

Should Peter have kept eating with the Gentiles? Probably. But even St. Paul would write, "To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some" (1 Corinthians 9:19-22). He even circumcised Timothy in Acts 16:1-5, and purified himself at the temple in Acts 21:26 in order not to scandalize or offend the Jews, especially those who had recently converted to the Christian faith.

At worst, Peter's actions constituted only venial sin, imprudence or poor example here. Perhaps he felt this was not the place to stir up Gentile/Jewish contentions, or that greater diplomacy was needed. But whatever the case, this was a matter of discipline, and not of doctrinal error on Peter's part. Nor was it a case of superior authority on Paul's part, but simply of fraternal correction of another's behaviour – something we are all called to.

And while the Pope *is* protected by the charism of infallibility – a gift of the Holy Spirit that protects him from error when he teaches officially on clearly defined matters of faith and morals for all the faithful to believe – this certainly does not mean he will be without sin in his personal life. Even the great St John Paul II went to Confession every week! That doesn't mean he wasn't the successor of Peter!

Now some may reply to all this: what does it matter whether Peter had a successor – whether there is a pope or not? If we all love Jesus and follow what he teaches, isn't that good enough?

But this is the key point. How can we know with certainty what Jesus taught? Some will say we need only follow the Bible. But it is precisely this unscriptural doctrine that has led to the fracturing of Christianity into thousands of different sects in the first place, all teaching contradictory things on some very important issues: abortion, contraception, divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, the Eucharist, baptism, baptism of infants, Confession, assurance of salvation, and much more.

How can we know the truth in all these critical areas? We follow the blueprint Jesus left us for His Church: an authoritative leader filling the perpetual office Jesus appointed Peter to in Matthew 16:16-20, protected from error by the Holy Spirit, "*the Spirit of truth ... will guide you into all the truth*" (John 16:13, also John 14: 26, John 15:15-17, John 16:13, 2 Tim 1:13-14, 2:2).

In 2000 years, the Catholic Church has never contradicted itself in its doctrinally defined teachings on faith and morals. Not once! That is worth considering ...