

By What Authority?

The Authority Christ Entrusted to His Church

by Richard Whiting

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I. By What Authority?

When Jesus entered the temple and began to teach, the chief priests and elders confronted him with a single, pointed question: “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” (Matt. 21:23). It is the right question—not only to ask of Jesus, but to ask of anyone who claims to speak for God. Every religious body that teaches, that binds consciences, that tells men what they must believe and how they must worship, is making an implicit claim to authority. And the honest inquirer is entitled to ask: by what authority? And who gave it?

This essay sets out the Catholic answer to that question: that Christ entrusted a real and enduring teaching authority to his Church, and that this authority has been handed on in an unbroken succession from the apostles to the present day. The aim is positive—to show what the authority of the Church is, where it comes from, and what it does and does not claim. But because the same question presses upon every claimant, the essay closes by setting the Catholic answer beside the very different claim advanced by the Governing Body of Jehovah’s Witnesses, who hold that Christ appointed them, in the year 1919, as his sole channel of direction on earth. The two answers cannot both be right, and the question of authority is exactly the ground on which they are to be tested.

II. Authority Is Given, Not Taken

Begin with a principle that runs through the whole of Scripture: genuine authority is always *given*, never simply assumed. When Pilate boasts of his power, Jesus answers, “You would have no authority over me unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11). Paul lays down the rule plainly: “there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1). Even of the Son it is said that the Father “has given him authority to execute judgment” (John 5:27). Wherever authority appears in the New Testament, it is conferred from above, received from a higher power—never seized from below.¹

This is why the decisive text about Christ’s own authority is a text about *receiving* it. After the resurrection he declares, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matt. 28:18–20). The sequence is the heart of the matter. Christ *has* all authority; on the strength of it he *sends*; and he promises to remain with those he sends until the end. The authority to teach in his name is not something the disciples generate; it is something he hands to them.²

III. The Chain of Delegation: Father, Son, Apostles, Successors

The handing-on does not stop with the first generation. Jesus frames the apostles' commission as an exact extension of his own: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (John 20:21). The parallel is deliberate. The Father authorized the Son; the Son now authorizes the apostles, with the same kind of delegated authority. He can therefore say of them, "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16). To hear the authorized representative is to hear the One who sent him.³

And the apostles, in turn, handed the authority on. This is not a later Catholic embellishment but the practice of the apostolic age itself, attested within living memory of the apostles. Clement of Rome, writing about A.D. 95, describes the apostles preaching, appointing bishops and deacons, and then making provision "that if they should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry." Irenaeus, around A.D. 180, draws the conclusion: one must "obey those who are the presbyters in the Church, those who ... have the succession from the apostles," for they "have received the certain gift of truth." The authority Christ gave was not meant to expire with the apostles; it was meant to be transmitted—what the Church calls apostolic succession. Irenaeus could also produce the register itself: naming the Roman bishops from Linus to Eleutherius, "in the twelfth place from the apostles," he concludes, "In this order, and by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles, and the preaching of the truth, have come down to us."⁴

IV. The Keys and the Power to Bind and Loose

The form this authority takes is set out most fully in Matthew's Gospel. To Peter, individually, Jesus says: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:18–19). Two images carry the weight. The "keys" recall Isaiah 22, where God confers on the royal steward Eliakim "the key of the house of David," the authority to open and shut on the king's behalf. It is the language of a delegated office in a kingdom—a stewardship exercised in the king's name, and passed on, not a personal favor that dies with the man.⁵

"Binding and loosing," likewise, was the rabbinic vocabulary for authoritative decision making: to declare a thing permitted or forbidden, to impose or remit. What is striking is that Jesus extends this same power to the apostles as a body: "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven" (Matt. 18:18, where the "you" is plural). And he makes the Church the final court of appeal: the one who "refuses to listen even to the

church” is to be treated “as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17). Note the singular—“the church,” not “the churches.” There is one body that holds final authority on earth over the disciples, and its decisions are ratified in heaven.⁶

V. A Church That Decides: The Council of Jerusalem

This is not theory only; we are shown the authority in action. The first great doctrinal crisis of the Church—whether Gentile converts had to be circumcised and to keep the whole Mosaic Law—was not resolved by each believer searching the Scriptures privately; there was as yet no New Testament to search. It was resolved by a council. “The apostles and the elders were gathered together” at Jerusalem (Acts 15:6), they debated, and they issued a binding decree, prefaced by the most remarkable formula in the New Testament: “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28).⁷ Scripture was not absent from that chamber—James cited the prophets. But mark the order: Peter relates what God has done, and James then shows that “with this the words of the prophets agree” (Acts 15:15). The text confirms the council’s judgment; it does not replace it.

Notice how the chapter itself frames the question of authority. The trouble began, the council says, with men who had gone out and unsettled the churches “although we gave them no instructions” (Acts 15:24)—that is, men acting without authorization. It was settled by men “sent” with the proper commission of the Church (Acts 15:25–27). And Paul, who had himself received a direct revelation from the risen Christ, did not strike out on his own: he submitted the question to the council and then “delivered to them for observance the decisions which had been reached by the apostles and elders” (Acts 16:4). If that is not the exercise of a strong, living Church authority, it is hard to say what would be. The pattern—leaders gathered in council, deciding under the guidance of the Spirit, and promulgating a decree to be obeyed—is exactly the pattern the Church has followed ever since, from Nicaea to the Second Vatican Council.

The Watchtower reads this chapter differently—as the portrait of a first-century Governing Body, with James rather than Peter pronouncing the judgment, and claims it as the pattern its own Governing Body inherits. Both halves of that reading deserve an answer. On James: the objection confuses chairing a meeting with settling its question. Peter gives the testimony that ends the debate over the doctrinal question—must Gentile converts take the Mosaic yoke to be saved?—and it ends when he speaks: he rises after “much debate,” recalls that God chose “that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel,” and when he finishes, “all the assembly kept silence” (Acts 15:7–12). The debate ends when Peter speaks. What James then does is formulate the decree from the principle so settled—the terms on which Jewish and Gentile believers could live together—and he proposes it as the local bishop of Jerusalem, which the tradition has always named him. Rome has never claimed that the pope must chair every council; most

of the ecumenical councils were not presided over by the pope in person. And on the pattern: what Acts 15 actually portrays is a council of apostles and elders issuing a binding decree with the Holy Spirit's named backing—a living Magisterium, which is exactly the thing the Watchtower denies existed beyond the first century. A body that claims this chapter as its precedent inherits the claim the chapter makes, and with it the burden of showing the same commission.

VI. The Pillar and Bulwark of the Truth

Paul gives the Church a title that settles a great deal: he calls it “the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). The phrase repays attention. A pillar holds something up; a bulwark defends it. To call the Church the pillar and bulwark of *the truth* is to assign her the role of upholding and safeguarding the truth itself.⁸

There is a simple logic here. A foundation cannot be weaker than what is built upon it, or the structure collapses. Truth, by its nature, contains no error. If the Church is the pillar that upholds the truth, then in what she definitively teaches and hands on, the Church cannot be a fountain of error—for a stream does not rise above its source. This does not make the Church's members impeccable, nor her every utterance a dogma; it means that in her settled, definitive teaching of the faith, Christ's promise holds: the Spirit of truth abides with her and guides her into all the truth (John 14:16–17; 16:13). A Church that is the bulwark of truth, indwelt by the Spirit of truth, is not a Church that quietly hands on falsehood as the faith of the apostles.

VII. The Bible Came from the Church

Here we reach the point on which a great deal turns. Where did the Bible come from? The Christian revelation was not, at first, a book. It was a Person, and then a preached message, and then a set of living memories carried by the apostles and those who had heard them. The Church was teaching with authority for two decades before a line of the New Testament was written, and for more than three centuries before its contents were finally settled. It was the Church—weighing the candidate writings against the apostolic Tradition handed down through her bishops—that recognized which books were inspired and which were not, distinguishing, as Ronald Knox put it, the genuine epistle of Jude from the spurious epistle ascribed to Barnabas.⁹

This does not mean the Bible's authority *depends* on the Church, as though the Church made it inspired; Scripture's authority springs from its divine origin. But it does mean, in Knox's precise formulation, that “in the order of our knowledge, belief in the Church is antecedent to belief in Scripture, and is the condition of it.” The Fathers said it before

him. Augustine, answering a sect that claimed the gospel while rejecting the Church that carried it, put the point in a sentence: “For my part, I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the Catholic Church” (Against the Fundamental Epistle of Manichaeus 5). And he pressed the consequence that still presses today: it was on the Church’s authority that his hearer had believed the gospel at all, so the sect could not wield the gospel against the Church without sawing through its own proof. The Church did not come from the Bible; the Bible came from the Church. And this reverses a common assumption. The Bible was not produced and circulated so that each believer might become his own teaching authority—an impossibility in any case in an age when most could not read and there was no printing press. It was produced *by* the Church and *for* the Church: to be proclaimed in her liturgy and to instruct the faithful in sound doctrine through her teaching office.¹⁰

It follows that the slogan “the Bible alone” (*sola scriptura*) describes something that never existed in the early Church and cannot, in fact, function as a rule of faith. The favorite proof-text, that Scripture is “inspired by God and profitable for teaching” and equips the man of God “for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17), says nothing of the sort the slogan needs: that Scripture is the *only* infallible authority. That further claim has to be imported into the text from outside—which is itself an act of interpretation by some authority other than the verse. The practical result of private judgment as a rule of faith is visible everywhere: not one faith but a thousand competing readings, each appealing to a Bible its holder calls “clear,” divided over baptism, the Eucharist, the ministry, marriage, even the Trinity. Scripture is not, in the Catholic understanding, a puzzle handed to each person to solve alone; it is the Church’s own book, read within the apostolic faith and expounded by the authority Christ established to teach. As Paul tells the Thessalonians, “stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thess. 2:15).¹¹

VIII. Guided, Not Inspired: What the Church Claims and Does Not Claim

It is easy to misunderstand the Church’s claim by making it too large. The Church does not claim ongoing *inspiration*. She does not profess to receive fresh revelations to add to the faith, nor that her councils and popes are given new information about the unseen world. Public revelation closed with the apostolic age; the Church guards a *deposit*—“the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3)—and her task is to keep it, expound it, and apply it, not to enlarge it. As the Catechism puts it, “the Magisterium is not above the Word of God, but serves it.”¹²

The right word for what the Church claims is therefore *guidance*, not inspiration. Ronald Knox drew the distinction exactly: the difference between inspiration and guidance is “the

difference between a schoolmaster who should control the hand of a pupil while he wrote, and that of a schoolmaster who should stand by, ready to intervene if he saw him about to go wrong.” The charism of infallibility is, in this sense, negative: not a divine dictation of new truths, but a divine guarantee that when the Church definitively teaches the faith, she will not bind the faithful to error. She acts, in Knox’s phrase, “not as Legislator but as Judge”—interpreting the law she has received, not inventing it. Most of Christian life proceeds without any such solemn definition at all; the Church defines rarely, and only to settle what would otherwise divide the faithful.¹³

Catholics often picture the result as a three-legged stool: Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium (the living teaching office). Scripture is the written Word; Tradition is the same apostolic teaching handed on, in part, by other means; and the Magisterium is the office charged with guarding and authentically interpreting both. The three are not three rival authorities but one settlement: Scripture and Tradition “flow from the same divine wellspring,” and neither can “stand without” the Magisterium that serves them. Remove any leg and the stool falls—which is precisely what the history of private interpretation since the sixteenth century illustrates.

IX. The Reformers’ Dilemma: By Whose Commission?

The question “by what authority?” can be turned, with great force, upon every movement that has broken from the historic Church. St. Francis de Sales pressed it upon the first Protestant Reformers, and the dilemma he posed has never been answered. From whom, he asked, did Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli receive the authority to do what they did? There are only two possible answers, and both are fatal.¹⁴

Either they received their authority *from the Church*—in which case, in leaving her, dividing her, and setting up rival communions, they rebelled against the very authority that had commissioned them. Or they received it *directly from God*, by an extraordinary mission like that of the apostles or the prophets—in which case, de Sales asks, where were the signs that authenticated such a mission? The apostles’ commission was sealed by miracles; what sealed theirs? And if the bare claim of an extraordinary mission, without proof, is to be accepted, then (he observes) the same plea was available to Arius, Marcion, and Montanus, and to anyone since who cares to swear the same oath. A key that opens every door secures none. De Sales was not inventing the challenge; he was repeating it. Fourteen centuries earlier Tertullian had met the sects of his day with the same demand for standing, cast as a legal prescription—not being heirs, they had no title to the estate: “Who are you? ... Indeed, Marcion, by what right do you hew my wood? By whose permission, Valentinus, are you diverting the streams of my fountain? ... This is my property. I have long possessed it; I possessed it before you. I hold sure title-deeds from the original owners themselves ... I am the heir of the apostles” (Prescription Against

Heretics 37). The Scriptures belong to the community that received, preserved, and canonized them; a movement that rejects that community while quoting its book is arguing from borrowed deeds.

The deeper point is that the true reformers of the Church—and there have been many—reformed her from *within*, without rejecting her authority. The prophets of Israel, de Sales notes, rebuked kings and priests fiercely, yet never set up an altar against the altar or abolished the priesthood of Aaron. When Saul sinned and David was anointed in his place, David still would not raise his hand against “the Lord’s anointed,” but waited on God. Paul, called by a direct revelation, did not found a sect; he went up to Jerusalem, “lest somehow I should be running ... in vain” (Gal. 2:2), and worked in concert with Peter and the others. To judge the Church corrupt and therefore to depart from her and start afresh is not the pattern of the reformer; it is the pattern of Absalom, who declared “Oh that I were judge in the land!” and “stole the hearts of the men of Israel” (2 Sam. 15:4–6). This matters here because it is exactly the pattern the modern restorationist movements would later repeat—on a far larger scale, and with a far more radical claim.

X. The Watchtower’s Governing Body

The Governing Body of Jehovah’s Witnesses makes a claim to authority that is, in its structure, strikingly modern. They teach that Jehovah is the source of all authority, that he delegated it to Christ, and that Christ in turn appointed “the faithful and discreet slave” of Matthew 24:45–47 to “give ... food at the proper time” to his household. So far a Catholic can agree that authority descends by delegation. The decisive claims come next. The Watchtower identifies this “faithful and discreet slave” with the Governing Body—“a small, composite group of anointed brothers” at world headquarters—and dates its appointment to a specific year: 1919, three years after the death of the movement’s founder, Charles Taze Russell, and five years after the invisible “presence” of Christ they believe began in 1914.¹⁵

Two features of this claim deserve careful notice, because they distinguish it sharply from the Catholic understanding. First, the Governing Body explicitly disclaims both inspiration and infallibility: in their own words, “the Governing Body is neither inspired nor infallible,” and “can err in doctrinal matters.” Yet at the same time the faithful are taught that they must obey it “to have Jehovah’s approval,” and that one cannot claim to trust in Jehovah while declining to follow “his earthly representatives.” This is a striking combination—an authority that may be mistaken in what it teaches, but must nonetheless be obeyed as the voice of God. It is worth asking how those two claims hold together: if the channel may transmit error, on what ground is unqualified submission owed to it?

Second, and more fundamentally, the basis of the claim is a private chronological scheme, not a succession. The Governing Body does not claim—indeed could not plausibly claim—any continuous line of ordination or office reaching back to the apostles; the laying on of hands in unbroken succession forms no part of its credentials. Its warrant rests entirely on the interpretation of a parable, read through a calendar (1914, 1919) that was itself worked out by Russell and his associates in the late nineteenth century and unknown to every prior Christian age. The narrower step of identifying the “slave” with the Governing Body specifically, rather than with the whole class of the “anointed,” was made official only in 2012. Where the Catholic claim is one of *continuity*—an office handed on without break from the apostles—the Watchtower claim is one of *restoration*: that the true channel of authority, lost or absent for centuries, was newly constituted in the twentieth century.¹⁶ I do not raise this as an outsider. These were among the questions I could not finally answer from within, in the months after I left Bethel; I have set down that part of my own story at richwhiting.com/about/post_bethel.

The timetable has shifted no less than the identity. Until 2013 the Society taught that the slave had been appointed over the domestics at Pentecost of 33 C.E. and “over all his belongings” in 1919. The July 15, 2013 *Watchtower* re-parsed the verse in both directions at once: the appointment over the domestics now happened in 1919, and the appointment over the belongings has not happened yet—it awaits the great tribulation, when the slave receives its heavenly reward. The same sentence of Scripture, read by the same channel, has thus carried more than one date for each of its clauses, and the current reading assigns half the verse to an event ninety-four years before the reading and half to an event that has never occurred. Interpretations may develop. But a verse whose fulfillment dates migrate with each revision is not functioning as evidence for the institution; the institution is functioning as the editor of the verse.¹⁷

There is a further difficulty, and it is chronological: the body said to have been appointed in 1919 did not exist in 1919. The Watch Tower Society first applied the phrase “governing body” to itself in 1943; the Governing Body as an entity distinct from the corporation’s board of directors dates from December 1971; and effective authority passed from the Society’s president to the Governing Body’s committees only on January 1, 1976—a reorganization the Society’s own 1977 *Yearbook* recounts. In 1919 the organization was governed by one man, Joseph F. Rutherford, who had consolidated control of the corporation two years earlier over the objection of half its board. An appointment conferred in 1919 on a body that would not exist for another half century is not history remembered; it is history retrofitted.¹⁸

The claim faces a second test, and it is one the Watchtower built for itself. Don Cameron, a former Witness elder, pressed it in *Captives of a Concept*. By the Society’s own explanation—given in *God’s Kingdom of a Thousand Years Has Approached*, a book

Cameron notes was written by Frederick Franz—Christ’s decision in 1919 turned on the quality of the spiritual “food” the organization had been serving down till 1919: “Could they, by even their latest record down till 1919 prove that they themselves were the composite ‘faithful and discreet slave’ class of Jesus Christ?... The quality of the food itself was to be considered.” Whatever the Society teaches today formed no part of that inspection. The appointment stands or falls on what was on the table between 1876 and 1919.¹⁹

And what was on the table? That Christ’s invisible presence had begun in 1874—a date the magazine’s own masthead proclaimed (“Herald of Christ’s Presence”) and the Society did not move to 1914 until 1943, so that Russell and Rutherford both died believing the old date. That the Great Pyramid of Giza was God’s stone witness confirming the chronology. That 1925 would see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob raised to life. Every one of these teachings the Society itself has since discarded as error.²⁰

The conclusion is not a critic’s; it follows from the Society’s own premises. If the master’s decision turned on the quality of the food served down till 1919, and the food served down till 1919 has since been swept from the table by the very organization that served it, then by the Watchtower’s own standard the inspection could only have gone one way. The 1919 appointment certifies, as “food at the proper time,” a body of teaching its own publisher now repudiates. A credential that fails its own test is not weakened; it is finished.

One artifact of the period deserves the last word. In April 1920—one year, on the Society’s account, after Christ had appointed it his sole channel—*The Watch Tower* itself wrote: “We would not refuse to treat one as a brother because he did not believe the Society is the Lord’s channel... There should be full liberty of conscience.” The organization that today makes obedience to the channel a condition of Jehovah’s approval began by conceding that belief in the channel was optional. An appointment of cosmic finality that its own recipients treated, the following spring, as an open question is an appointment that exists only in retrospect.²¹

XI. An Authority That Forbids the Question

There is a final mark of the difference, and the organization has printed it in its own magazine across four decades. An authority confident of its commission can afford to invite scrutiny: “test everything; hold fast what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21) is apostolic counsel, and Luke calls the Bereans “more noble” for examining even Paul’s preaching against the Scriptures (Acts 17:11). The Watchtower’s counsel runs the other way. In January 1983, under the printed heading “Avoid Independent Thinking,” *The Watchtower* told its readers: “How is such independent thinking manifested? A common way is by questioning the counsel that is provided by God’s visible organization.” A

companion article in the same issue, under the heading “Fight Against Independent Thinking,” answered those who reason that the organization’s record of adjustments means “we have to make up our own mind on what to believe”: “This is independent thinking. Why is it so dangerous?... Such thinking is an evidence of pride.”

The counsel did not soften with time. In 2001 the magazine defined spiritual maturity as the surrender of private judgment: a mature Christian “does not advocate or insist on personal opinions or harbor private ideas when it comes to Bible understanding. Rather, he has complete confidence in the truth as it is revealed by Jehovah God through his Son, Jesus Christ, and ‘the faithful and discreet slave.’” And in 2013 came the sharpest form yet: “All of us must be ready to obey any instructions we may receive, whether these appear sound from a strategic or human standpoint or not,” while any “putting their trust in secular education, material things, or human institutions” were told “to adjust their thinking.”²²

I can add a private chapter to that public record, because I put the question to the Society myself. In February 1979, fifteen months after leaving Bethel, I wrote to the Writing Department about Matthew 24:45–47—asking, among other things, why an illustration that Luke’s Gospel presents as Jesus’ answer to Peter’s question, “Lord, are you saying this illustration to us or also to all?”, should be read as a prophecy of a governing class rather than an exhortation to every Christian entrusted with responsibility. I quoted the Society’s own *Aid to Bible Understanding*, which conceded that “commentators often view this as a general exhortation to any and all who have individual positions of responsibility in the Christian congregation.” And I asked the question underneath: “Could it be that the ‘Society’ has outstretched its purpose as a ‘tool’ and become, instead, the ‘authority’?”²³

The reply came a month later, over the Society’s stamp. On the doctrinal question: “With regard to Jesus’ words at Matthew 24:45–47, at present, we have nothing to add beyond what has already been printed.” On the fact that I had copied my letter to my own body of elders: “you are not keeping your viewpoint to yourself. Such a thing is unwise, for it frequently spreads dissatisfaction among others whose personal reading of the Bible has not led them to the same conclusions that you have drawn.” Two weeks after that, a circuit overseer closed the door of a Kingdom Hall library and warned me that I was near apostasy.²⁴ The printed heading “Avoid Independent Thinking” was still four years away; the doctrine reached me by mail first. As for what had “already been printed”: the Society has since revised nearly every element of it—who the slave is, when he was appointed, and over what. The letter that had nothing to add was defending a reading its own publisher no longer holds.

Notice what the 1983 article concedes in the act of condemning it. The reasoning it forbids—the organization has had to change before, therefore I must weigh its teachings for myself—is not a temptation from Satan. It is sound inference, the same inference every reader applies to every other human institution, and the article’s only answer to it is a proverb about pride. This closes the circle this essay has been drawing: a teaching office whose credentials rest on its own claim, whose capacity for error is conceded in print, whose direction must nevertheless be obeyed whether it appears sound or not—and whose final protection is a rule against the very thought that would test it. Truth has nothing to fear from examination. A ‘truth’ that must forbid examination has already told you what it fears.

XII. Two Claims Compared

Set side by side, the two answers to “by what authority?” could hardly be more different—and the differences are exactly the points on which the question is decided.

The Catholic Church claims an authority that is *continuous*: handed on from the apostles by the laying on of hands, in a visible succession that can be traced. The Governing Body claims an authority that is *discontinuous*: newly established in 1919, with no succession behind it. But Daniel had foretold a kingdom set up “in the days of those kings”—the Roman era of Christ’s first coming—that “shall never be destroyed, nor shall its sovereignty be left to another people” (Dan. 2:44). A sovereignty handed to a new people in the twentieth century is the precise opposite of a sovereignty that is never left to another. And Christ had promised to be with his Church “always, to the close of the age” (Matt. 28:20) and that “the powers of death shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). An authority that had to be re-established in 1919 is an authority that had first lapsed—which is the one thing Christ said would never happen.

The Catholic Church grounds her authority in a promise of *indefectibility*—the guarantee that she will not definitively teach error—while making the comparatively modest claim that she is *guided*, not inspired. The Governing Body makes the opposite pairing: it disclaims infallibility, conceding that it can and does err, yet demands the obedience owed to God’s appointed channel. The Catholic asks the faithful to assent to what the Church has always and everywhere held; the Governing Body asks the faithful to assent to the current understanding of a leadership that has repeatedly revised its teaching, and to do so as a condition of divine approval.²⁵

And here the ancient test of Vincent of Lérins is decisive. Authentic Christian authority is marked by what has been believed “everywhere, always, and by all”—universality, antiquity, and consent. An office handed down in unbroken succession from the apostles meets that test by its very nature. An authority resting on a chronological scheme devised

in the nineteenth century and an appointment dated to 1919—known to no Christian of any earlier century—is the textbook case of the novelty Vincent’s rule is designed to expose. The same Peter to whom Christ said “strengthen your brethren” (Luke 22:32) was, from the first, the Church’s point of unity; it was to Peter’s successor at Rome, not to the living apostle John, that the Corinthians appealed when their own church was in crisis around A.D. 95. The continuity was there from the beginning.²⁶

XIII. Conclusion

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” The Catholic answer is clear and can be traced. The authority by which the Church teaches is the authority of Christ himself, who received “all authority in heaven and on earth” from the Father, gave it to his apostles as the Father had given it to him, and provided that it be handed on to their successors until the close of the age. It is exercised in the keys given to Peter, in the power to bind and loose given to the apostles, in the councils that decide “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us,” and in the Church that Paul calls the pillar and bulwark of the truth. It is the same authority that gave us the Scriptures and that alone can authoritatively expound them. It claims not to be inspired but to be guided—kept by Christ’s promise from binding his people to error.²⁷

The Watchtower’s Governing Body offers a different answer: an authority appointed in 1919, resting on a private reading of prophecy, disclaiming infallibility yet requiring obedience, and standing in no succession from the apostles. The reader must judge which answer better fits both the Scriptures and the history. But the question itself is the right one, and it cuts in a single direction: authority over Christ’s Church is Christ’s to give, and the only authority worth having is the authority he actually conferred—and promised never to withdraw. Jesus and his Church, head and body, are not to be put asunder; he can no more relinquish the authority of his Body than he can relinquish his own headship over it.²⁸

Endnotes

1. The principle is stated repeatedly: John 19:11 (“You would have no authority over me unless it had been given you from above”); Romans 13:1 (“there is no authority except from God”); John 5:27 (the Father “has given him authority to execute judgment”); cf. Revelation 13:7, where even the beast’s authority is “given.” Throughout the New Testament authority is something *conferred*, never seized.
2. Matthew 28:18–20. On the conferral of universal authority on the risen Christ, cf. Daniel 7:13–14 and Philippians 2:9–11; Paul writes that God “has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body” (Eph. 1:22–23).
3. John 20:21 (“As the Father has sent me, even so I send you”); Luke 10:16 (“He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me”). The pattern is a chain of delegation: the Father authorizes the Son; the Son authorizes the apostles; the apostles, as we shall see, authorize their successors.
4. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.26.2; c. A.D. 180: “It is necessary to obey those who are the presbyters in the Church, those who ... have the succession from the apostles, and who ... have received the certain gift of truth.” Clement of Rome had already, c. A.D. 95, described the apostles appointing bishops and deacons and providing that “if they should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry” (1 *Clement* 42, 44). Texts in *The Apostolic Fathers* and *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1. The Roman list and the “In this order” conclusion are *Against Heresies* 3.3.3, quoted exactly from the Ante-Nicene Fathers copy in the site’s reference library.
5. Matthew 16:18–19. The grant of “the keys of the kingdom” echoes Isaiah 22:20–22, where the key of the house of David—the authority to open and shut—is conferred on Eliakim as royal steward. The imagery is of a delegated, dynastic office, not a personal honor that dies with the holder. On “binding and loosing” as the rabbinic vocabulary of authoritative juridical and doctrinal decision (declaring permitted or forbidden), see W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), on 16:19.
6. Matthew 18:18 extends “binding and loosing” to the apostles as a body (the “you” is plural), and 18:17 makes the Church—not the individual conscience—the final court of appeal: “if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” The singular “church” (Greek *ekklēsia*), not “churches,” is significant: there is one body with final authority on earth.

7. Acts 15:1–35; the decree is promulgated and obeyed at Acts 16:4. The council’s formula—“it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (15:28)—expresses precisely the conviction that a corporate decision of the Church’s leaders, gathered in council, carries the authority of God himself (cf. John 16:13). Note the contrast the text itself draws: the trouble began with men who taught “although we gave them no instructions” (15:24), i.e., without authorization; it was resolved by men “sent” with proper ecclesial commission (15:25–27).

8. 1 Timothy 3:15: the Church is “the household of God ... the pillar and bulwark of the truth.” The logic is straightforward: a foundation cannot be weaker than what is built upon it; if the Church is the pillar that upholds the truth, the Church’s teaching office cannot itself be a source of error in what it definitively hands on. See the argument in Dave Armstrong, *Proving the Catholic Faith Is Biblical* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2015).

9. The contents of the New Testament were settled by the Church, by the criterion of conformity to the apostolic Tradition handed down through the bishops; the canon is reflected in the Festal Letter of Athanasius (367) and ratified at the regional councils of Rome (382), Hippo (393), and Carthage (397). See *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990), and on the priority of the Church’s teaching to the reader’s recognition of Scripture, Knox, “Teaching Authority”: “In the order of our knowledge, belief in the Church is antecedent to belief in Scripture, and is the condition of it.” Augustine’s sentence is from *Contra epistolam Manichaei quam vocant fundamenti* 5 (NPNF translation), checked against the copy in the site’s reference library.

10. On the relationship of Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium—“so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others”—see the Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (1965), 9–10, and *Catechism*, §§80–82, 95. Tradition and Scripture “flow from the same divine wellspring, come together in some fashion to form one thing, and move towards the same goal.”

11. 2 Timothy 3:16–17 affirms that Scripture is “inspired by God and profitable,” which Catholics affirm wholeheartedly; it does not state that Scripture is the *only* infallible authority, a further proposition that must be supplied from outside the text. On the practical incoherence of private judgment as a *rule* of faith—evidenced by the multiplication of mutually contradictory interpretations—see the discussion in this essay and the sources cited there. Scripture itself commands adherence to apostolic tradition transmitted “by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thess. 2:15; cf. 2 Thess. 3:6).

12. On the “deposit of faith” (Latin *depositum fidei*; cf. 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14) and the distinction between divine revelation, which closed with the apostolic age, and its ongoing

authentic interpretation, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), §§84–86, especially §86: “The Magisterium is not above the Word of God, but serves it.”

13. The distinction is drawn sharply by Ronald A. Knox, “The Teaching Authority of the Church”: the Church in defining doctrine is *guided*, not *inspired*—“the difference between a schoolmaster who should control the hand of a pupil while he wrote, and that of a schoolmaster who should stand by, ready to intervene if he saw him about to go wrong.” The charism of infallibility is thus negative: a divine guarantee that the Church will not *define* error, not a positive inspiration of new revelation. Cf. *Catechism*, §§888–892.

14. St. Francis de Sales, *The Catholic Controversy (Les Controverses)*, trans. Henry B. Mackey (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1989). De Sales presses the question of *mission*: by what authority did the Reformers undertake to act? If from the Church, then in leaving and dividing her they acted against the very authority that sent them; if directly from God, in the manner of the apostles, then (de Sales asks) where were the miracles that authenticated such an extraordinary mission? He observes that the plea of an “extraordinary mission” without proof would equally have justified Arius, Marcion, or Montanus. Tertullian’s prescription is from *The Prescription Against Heretics* 37 (Ante-Nicene Fathers translation), likewise checked against the library copy.

15. For the Watchtower’s own statements, see “Who Really Is the Faithful and Discreet Slave?,” *The Watchtower*, July 15, 2013, and “Who Is Leading God’s People Today?,” *The Watchtower* (study edition), February 2017, which state that “‘the faithful and discreet slave’ was appointed over Jesus’ domestics in 1919,” that this “slave” is “a small, composite group of anointed brothers” who “make up the Governing Body,” and that “the Governing Body is neither inspired nor infallible.” On the requirement of obedience, see *The Watchtower*, July 15, 2011, p. 24, and February 2022, p. 4.

16. The 1919 appointment is derived from the Watchtower’s chronology of an invisible “presence” of Christ beginning in 1914; the “faithful and discreet slave” of Matthew 24:45–47 is read as a prophecy of a modern leadership class. The narrower identification of the “slave” with the Governing Body specifically (rather than with all of the “anointed”) was made official only in 2012. The contrast with apostolic succession is stark: there is no claimed chain of laying-on of hands, no continuity of office, and no claim of the doctrinal indefectibility that the historic understanding attaches to the Church’s definitive teaching.

17. The article’s own summary of the former teaching: “In the past, our publications have said the following: At Pentecost 33 C.E., Jesus appointed the faithful slave over his domestics ... In 1919, Jesus appointed the faithful slave ‘over all his belongings’” (“Who Really Is the Faithful and Discreet Slave?,” *The Watchtower*, July 15, 2013, par. 3). The revised view in the same article: Jesus’s “arriving” to make the appointment over all his

belongings “takes place during the great tribulation,” and those who make up the slave receive it “when they receive their heavenly reward” (pars. 16, 18). The article remains posted on jw.org.

18. The phrase “governing body” first applied to the Society: *The Watchtower*, July 15, 1943. The Governing Body as an entity distinct from the board of directors: *The Watchtower*, December 15, 1971. The transfer of authority to the Governing Body’s committees effective January 1, 1976 is recounted in the *1977 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses*. On the 1917 board crisis and Rutherford’s consolidation of control, see Raymond Franz, *Crisis of Conscience*, and the Society’s own account in *Jehovah’s Witnesses—Proclaimers of God’s Kingdom* (1993).

19. *God’s Kingdom of a Thousand Years Has Approached* (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1973), pp. 349–355, quoted in Don Cameron, *Captives of a Concept* (2nd ed., 2004), pp. 19–20, from the copy in the site’s reference library; the attribution of the book’s writing to Frederick Franz is Cameron’s. Cameron’s argument—that the 1919 appointment can be tested only against what was taught down till 1919—is developed in his chapters 2–3.

20. On the 1874 date and its retention until 1943, see *Jehovah’s Witnesses—Proclaimers of God’s Kingdom* (1993), pp. 46–47 and 133 with its footnote on *The Truth Shall Make You Free* (1943); the magazine’s masthead carried “Herald of Christ’s Presence” from 1879. On the Great Pyramid and the 1925 expectation (*Millions Now Living Will Never Die*, 1920), see Cameron, *Captives of a Concept*, ch. 2, and “Faithful and Wise Servant? Examining the Watch Tower’s 1919 Appointment,” Christian Research Institute (equip.org).

21. *The Watch Tower*, April 1, 1920, “Let Us Dwell in Peace,” pp. 100–101. Free online at <https://archive.org/details/magazines-the-watchtower-and-herald-christ-presence-1920>.

22. *The Watchtower*, January 15, 1983: “Exposing the Devil’s Subtle Designs,” pp. 17–22 (section heading “Avoid Independent Thinking”; the quoted sentences are paragraphs 20–21), and “Armed for the Fight Against Wicked Spirits,” pp. 22–27 (heading “Fight Against Independent Thinking”; paragraphs 19–20). *The Watchtower*, August 1, 2001, “Make Your Advancement Manifest,” p. 14, paragraph 8. *The Watchtower* (study edition), November 15, 2013, “Seven Shepherds, Eight Dukes—What They Mean for Us Today,” p. 20, paragraph 17. All four articles remain posted on the Watchtower Online Library (wol.jw.org), where every quotation above may be checked word for word.

23. Richard Whiting to the Watch Tower Society, Writing Department, February 19, 1979 (three pages). The *Aid to Bible Understanding* passage is quoted in the letter from the

1971 edition. The letter is reproduced in facsimile in the References panel of the *By What Authority?* page and at richwhiting.com/about/post_bethel.

24. Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of New York (EJ:ESE) to Richard Whiting, March 19, 1979 (two pages), reproduced in facsimile alongside the letter. Both quotations are transcribed from the original.

25. On the Church as the Body of Christ, of which he is the Head (1 Cor. 12:12–27; Eph. 1:22–23; 5:23; Col. 1:18), and the patristic theme of the *totus Christus*, the “whole Christ, head and members,” see Augustine, e.g., *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 90.2.1, and *Catechism*, §§792–795. The point in context is modest and biblical: Christ does not relinquish his living union with, and headship of, his Body.

26. 1 Clement (c. A.D. 95–96). When presbyters were unjustly deposed at Corinth, the Corinthians appealed not to the apostle John—then still living and far nearer, at Ephesus—but to Clement, bishop of Rome, whose letter intervenes with notable authority and was read publicly in the Corinthian church for generations. On its significance as early evidence of the Roman primacy, see the discussion in J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978).

27. Luke 22:31–32. Christ prays specifically for Peter (“I have prayed for *you*”—singular—“that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren”), making Peter the instrument by which the others are confirmed. The juxtaposition with Satan’s desire to “sift” the disciples is suggestive: it is through a unifying, Spirit-protected office that the Church is preserved from being scattered.

28. Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium* 2.6 (c. A.D. 434), naming the threefold test of catholic truth—universality, antiquity, and consent: *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*. An authority claimed in the twentieth century, resting on a private chronological scheme unknown to all previous Christian ages, is the textbook case of the novelty Vincent’s rule is designed to detect.

For Further Reading

Correspondence with the Watch Tower Society, February–March 1979, by the author—his three-page letter and the Society’s two-page reply, in facsimile. Free online in the References panel at richwhiting.com/warp/authority.

Proving the Catholic Faith Is Biblical, by Dave Armstrong.

The Catholic Controversy, by St. Francis de Sales.

Early Christian Doctrines, by J. N. D. Kelly.

By What Authority?

Upon This Rock: St. Peter and the Primacy of Rome in Scripture and the Early Church, by Stephen K. Ray.

The Faith of the Early Fathers—Volumes 1, 2, and 3, by William A. Jurgens.

Jesus, the Apostles, and the Early Church, by Pope Benedict XVI.

The Teaching Authority of the Church, by Msgr. Ronald A. Knox. Free online at <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/the-teaching-authority-of-the-church>.

Crisis of Conscience, by Raymond Franz.

Captives of a Concept, by Don Cameron—the 1919 appointment claim.

An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine, by St. John Henry Newman. Free online at <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/development/>.

By What Authority?—An Evangelical Discovers Catholic Tradition, by Mark Shea.

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*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of the Catholic understanding of the authority Christ entrusted to his Church, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the broader theological tradition. It is offered as a personal presentation, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where it aligns with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it; where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.