

Tertullian

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Very early in Church history there arose great controversies as heresies sprung up and attempted to invade the Church. Typically, someone in one of the local churches would come up with a new doctrine, and gain a following. Many such people arose, and were rapidly ejected from the Apostolic churches. But, having gained a following, the heretics formed cults and established Gnostic churches that competed with the churches founded by the Apostles.

The Apostles warned that this would occur (Acts 20:28-31). The plethora of heresies and several Gnostic cults which developed from them proved to be a great burden on the early Church after the Apostles passed away. Yet, their struggle to maintain the pristine Faith has proven to be a great benefit to the Church today. Orthodox bishops and elders trained by the Apostles and their disciples were forced to deal with many heresies in extreme detail and refute them with both Scripture and Apostolic oral tradition. In doing so, the primitive Christian apologists left a written record of their struggle. They articulated the oral tradition of their mentors, the Apostles and those personally trained by the Apostles. This preserved oral tradition is quite helpful in our search for the truth when studying many doctrinal issues. But, there is another benefit that is even more important for Christians living two thousand years removed from the Apostles. The early Church left behind a rule for distinguishing the true Pristine Apostolic Faith from the heresies that attempted to infiltrate Christian theology. We have coined the term, the "Pristine Faith Rule" (PFR), for the theory espoused by the early orthodox Christian apologists.

Tertullian was a Latin Christian writer from the second century. Like Irenaeus his contemporary, he wrote against the heresies and defended the true Apostolic Faith entrusted to the many local churches founded by the Apostles. Tertullian's and Irenaeus' defense of the Faith against Gnostic heresies clearly establishes the "Pristine Faith Rule" (PFR) for determining truth from error in the second century. This early Christian philosophical rule is precisely what underlies the philosophy of PFRS. It is the reason we reject Roman Catholic "Apostolic Succession," and why we also reject the idea of accumulated truth propagated by many in the Reformed and Evangelical Church. The Pristine Faith Rule, which is the basis of our methodology, can be summed up as follows according to Tertullian.

1. Christ first delivered the pure Faith to the Apostles prior to sending them out.
2. Whatever He was not able to teach them in person He promised the Holy Spirit would teach them. Therefore, the Apostles of Jesus Christ possessed the pure and complete body of Christian teaching.
3. The Apostles were commissioned by Jesus to take the true Christian Faith to all the nations. They were to reproduce in the new converts all of Jesus' teaching. That is, they were to deliver the entire body of Christian doctrine unaltered.
4. The Apostles founded many autonomous local (city-wide) churches. They imparted the responsibility to the elders of these churches to preserve the pure Christian Faith in its entirety, and to teach it to succeeding generations. Individual local churches were also entrusted with the New Testament Epistles written to them, and well as copies of the Gospels left with them.
5. Tertullian wrote a few generations after the Apostles. Yet, one hundred years after the Apostles founded these local churches scattered over the eastern and western Roman Empire, they each had independently preserved and held the same body of Christian doctrine.
6. If these local churches had strayed from Apostolic teaching, their testimony would not be in agreement with each other. Each variation from the Pristine Faith would move that one church away from the rest of the churches on that issue. The result would be a wide variety of conflicting doctrines among the local churches.
7. Therefore, the united testimony of all of the local churches founded by the Apostles is absolute proof that their teachings were pure, and proceeded from the same source, The original Apostles of Jesus Christ.
8. All doctrines that deviate from those taught by the consensus of local churches founded by the Apostles are false doctrines. Such doctrines have no direct link to the Apostles and must be rejected. The true Apostolic Faith predates all more recent interpretations, and can be established historically. Therefore, the oldest doctrinal position is always the correct position.

Tertullian's logic here is impeccable. The careful reader will notice that his reasoning absolutely depends on all the local apostolic churches in the second century being completely autonomous. This soundly refutes the Roman Catholic theory of a single guardian of the Apostolic Faith - the Church of Rome. If the early Roman church was the sole guardian of the Faith and the other local churches were under the authority of the Roman church, Tertullian's argument has no force at all. If Rome was in error on something, this error would necessarily be passed on to the other local churches. The built-in apostolic safeguard, of personally delivering the Pristine Faith to many independent local churches, is meaningless unless this complete independence is maintained. Tertullian's and

Irenaeus' argument against the Gnostic cults using this rule would be completely without merit and easily refuted. Therefore, the Roman Catholic claim to supreme authority for the church in Rome is untenable. Likewise, any claim to further development and refinement of theology beyond that taught by the Apostles and "once for all delivered to the saints," is also shown to be futile and profoundly arrogant.

We have provided ten sequential chapters from Tertullian's writings so you can see how Tertullian developed this rule in his refutation of the Gnostic cults. The following are chapters 20-29 of Tertullian's "Prescription Against the Heretics."

CHAPTER XX

CHRIST FIRST DELIVERED THE FAITH. THE APOSTLES SPREAD IT; THEY FOUNDED CHURCHES AS THE DEPOSITORIES THEREOF. THAT FAITH, THEREFORE, IS APOSTOLIC, WHICH DESCENDED FROM THE APOSTLES, THROUGH APOSTOLIC CHURCHES

"Christ Jesus our Lord (may He bear with me a moment in thus expressing myself!), whosoever He is, of what God soever He is the Son, of what substance soever He is man and God, of what faith soever He is the teacher, of what reward soever He is the Promiser, did, whilst He lived on earth, Himself declare what He was, what He had been, what the Father's will was which He was administering, what the duty of man was which He was prescribing; (and this declaration He made,) either openly to the people, or privately to His disciples, of whom He had chosen the twelve chief ones to be at His side, and whom He destined to be the teachers of the nations. Accordingly, after one of these had been struck off, He commanded the eleven others, on His departure to the Father, to "go and teach all nations, who were to be baptized into the Father, and into the Son, and into the Holy Ghost." Immediately, therefore, so did the apostles, whom this designation indicates as "the sent." Having, on the authority of a prophecy, which occurs in a psalm of David, chosen Matthias by lot as the twelfth, into the place of Judas, they obtained the promised power of the Holy Ghost for the gift of miracles and of utterance; and after first bearing witness to the faith in Jesus Christ throughout Judaea, and founding churches (there), they next went forth into the world and preached the same doctrine of the same faith to the nations. They then in like manner founded churches in every city, from which all the other churches, one after another, derived the tradition of the faith, and the seeds of doctrine, and are every day deriving them, that they may become churches. Indeed, it is on this account only that they will be able to deem themselves apostolic, as being the offspring of apostolic churches. Every sort of thing must necessarily revert to its original for its classification. Therefore the churches, although they are so many and so great, comprise but the one primitive church, (founded) by the apostles, from which they all (spring). In this way all are primitive, and all are apostolic, whilst they are all proved to be

one, in (unbroken) unity, by their peaceful communion, and title of brotherhood, and bond of hospitality, — privileges which no other rule directs than the one tradition of the selfsame mystery."

CHAPTER XXI

ALL DOCTRINE TRUE WHICH COMES THROUGH THE CHURCH FROM THE APOSTLES, WHO WERE TAUGHT BY GOD THROUGH CHRIST. ALL OPINION WHICH HAS NO SUCH DIVINE ORIGIN AND APOSTOLIC TRADITION TO SHOW, IS IPSO FACTO FALSE

"From this, therefore, do we draw up our rule. Since the Lord Jesus Christ sent the apostles to preach, (our rule is) that no others ought to be received as preachers than those whom Christ appointed; for "no man knoweth the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him." Nor does the Son seem to have revealed Him to any other than the apostles, whom He sent forth to preach — that, of course, which He revealed to them. Now, what that was which they preached — in other words, what it was which Christ revealed to them — can, as I must here likewise prescribe, properly be proved in no other way than by those very churches which the apostles founded in person, by declaring the gospel to them directly themselves, both *via voce* [voice], as the phrase is, and subsequently by their epistles. If, then, these things are so, it is in the same degree manifest that all doctrine which agrees with the apostolic churches — those molds and original sources of the faith must be reckoned for truth, as undoubtedly containing that which the (said) churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, Christ from God. Whereas all doctrine must be prejudged as false which savors of contrariety to the truth of the churches and apostles of Christ and God. It remains, then, that we demonstrate whether this doctrine of ours, of which we have now given the rule, has its origin in the tradition of the apostles, and whether all other doctrines do not *ipso facto* proceed from falsehood. We hold communion with the apostolic churches because our doctrine is in no respect different from theirs. This is our witness of truth."

CHAPTER XXII

ATTEMPT TO INVALIDATE THIS RULE OF FAITH REBUTTED. THE APOSTLES SAFE TRANSMITTERS OF THE TRUTH. SUFFICIENTLY TAUGHT AT FIRST, AND FAITHFUL IN THE TRANSMISSION

"But inasmuch as the proof is so near at hand, that if it were at once produced there would be nothing left to be dealt with, let us give way for a while to the opposite side, if they think that they can find some means of invalidating this rule, just as if no proof were forthcoming from us. They usually tell us that the apostles did not know all things: (but herein) they are impelled by the same madness, whereby they turn round to the very opposite point, and declare that the apostles certainly knew all things, but did not deliver all things to all persons,

— in either case exposing Christ to blame for having sent forth apostles who had either too much ignorance, or too little simplicity. What man, then, of sound mind can possibly suppose that they were ignorant of anything, whom the Lord ordained to be masters (or teachers), keeping them, as He did, inseparable (from Himself) in their attendance, in their discipleship, in their society, to whom, “when they were alone, He used to expound” all things which were obscure, telling them that “to them it was given to know those mysteries,” which it was not permitted the people to understand? Was anything withheld from the knowledge of Peter, who is called “the rock on which the church should be built,” who also obtained “the keys of the kingdom of heaven,” with the power of “loosing and binding in heaven and on earth?” Was anything, again, concealed from John, the Lord’s most beloved disciple, who used to lean on His breast to whom alone the Lord pointed Judas out as the traitor, whom He commended to Mary as a son in His own stead? Of what could He have meant those to be ignorant, to whom He even exhibited His own glory with Moses and Elias, and the Father’s voice moreover, from heaven? Not as if He thus disapproved of all the rest, but because “by three witnesses must every word be established.” After the same fashion, too, (I suppose,) were they ignorant to whom, after His resurrection also, He vouchsafed, as they were journeying together, “to expound all the Scriptures.” No doubt He had once said, “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot hear them now;” but even then He added, “When He, the Spirit of truth, shall come, He will lead you into all truth.” He (thus) shows that there was nothing of which they were ignorant, to whom He had promised the future attainment of all truth by help of the Spirit of truth. And assuredly He fulfilled His promise, since it is proved in the Acts of the Apostles that the Holy Ghost did come down. Now they who reject that Scripture can neither belong to the Holy Spirit, seeing that they cannot acknowledge that the Holy Ghost has been sent as yet to the disciples, nor can they presume to claim to be a church themselves who positively have no means of proving when, and with what swaddling-clothes this body was established. Of so much importance is it to them not to have any proofs for the things which they maintain, lest along with them there be introduced damaging exposures of those things which they mendaciously devise.”

CHAPTER XXIII

THE APOSTLES NOT IGNORANT. THE HERETICAL PRETENSE OF ST. PETER’S IMPERFECTION BECAUSE HE WAS REBUKED BY ST. PAUL. ST. PETER NOT REBUKED FOR ERROR IN TEACHING

“Now, with the view of branding the apostles with some mark of ignorance, they put forth the case of Peter and them that were with him having been rebuked by Paul. “Something therefore,” they say, “was wanting in them.” (This they allege,) in order that they may from this construct that other position of theirs, that a fuller knowledge may possibly have afterwards come over (the apostles,)

such as fell to the share of Paul when he rebuked those who preceded him. I may here say to those who reject The Acts of the Apostles: "It is first necessary that you shows us who this Paul was, — both what he was before he was an apostle, and how he became an apostle," — so very great is the use which they make of him in respect of other questions also. It is true that he tells us himself that he was a persecutor before he became an apostle, still this is not enough for any man who examines before he believes, since even the Lord Himself did not bear witness of Himself. But let them believe without the Scriptures, if their object is to believe contrary to the Scriptures. Still they should show, from the circumstance which they allege of Peter's being rebuked by Paul, that Paul added yet another form of the gospel besides that which Peter and the rest had previously set forth. But the fact is, having been converted from a persecutor to a preacher, he is introduced as one of the brethren to brethren, by brethren — to them, indeed, by men who had put on faith from the apostles' hands. Afterwards, as he himself narrates, he "went up to Jerusalem for the purpose of seeing Peter," because of his office, no doubt, and by right of a common belief and preaching. Now they certainly would not have been surprised at his having become a preacher instead of a persecutor, if his preaching were of something contrary; nor, moreover, would they have "glorified the Lord," because Paul had presented himself as an adversary to Him They accordingly even gave him "the right hand of fellowship," as a sign of their agreement with him, and arranged amongst themselves a distribution of office, not a diversity of gospel, so that they should severally preach not a different gospel, but (the same), to different persons, Peter to the circumcision, Paul to the Gentiles. Forasmuch, then, as Peter was rebuked because, after he had lived with the Gentiles, he proceeded to separate himself from their company out of respect for persons, the fault surely was one of conversation, not of preaching. For it does not appear from this, that any other God than the Creator, or any other Christ than (the son) of Mary, or any other hope than the resurrection, was (by him) announced."

CHAPTER XXIV

ST. PETER'S FURTHER VINDICATION. ST. PAUL NOT SUPERIOR TO ST. PETER IN TEACHING. NOTHING IMPARTED TO THE FORMER IN THE THIRD HEAVEN ENABLED HIM TO ADD TO THE FAITH. HERETICS BOAST AS IF FAVORED WITH SOME OF THE SECRETS IMPARTED TO HIM

"I have not the good fortune, or, as I must rather say, I have not the unenviable task, of setting apostles by the ears. But, inasmuch as our very perverse cavilers obtrude the rebuke in question for the set purpose of bringing the earlier doctrine into suspicion, I will put in a defense, as it were, for Peter, to the effect that even Paul said that he was "made all things to all men — to the Jews a Jew," to those who were not Jews as one who was not a Jew — "that he might gain all." Therefore it was according to times and persons and causes that they

used to censure certain practices, which they would not hesitate themselves to pursue, in like conformity to times and persons and causes. Just (e.g.) as if Peter too had censured Paul, because, whilst for-bidding circumcision, he actually circumcised Timothy himself. Never mind those who pass sentence on apostles! It is a happy fact that Peter is on the same level with Paul in the very glory of martyrdom. Now, although Paul was carried away even to the third heaven, and was caught up to paradise, and heard certain revelations there, yet these cannot possibly seem to have qualified him for (teaching) another doctrine, seeing that their very nature was such as to render them communicable to no human being. If, however, that unspeakable mystery did leak out, and become known to any man, and if any heresy affirms that it does itself follow the same, (then) either Paul must be charged with having betrayed the secret, or some other man must actually be shown to have been afterwards "caught up into paradise," who had permission to speak out plainly what Paul was not allowed (even) to mutter."

CHAPTER XXV

THE APOSTLES DID NOT KEEP BACK ANY OF THE DEPOSIT OF DOCTRINE WHICH CHRIST HAD ENTRUSTED TO THEM. ST. PAUL OPENLY COMMITTED HIS WHOLE DOCTRINE TO TIMOTHY

"But here is, as we have said, the same madness, in their allowing indeed that the apostles were ignorant of nothing, and preached not any (doctrines) which contradicted one another, but at the same time insisting that they did not reveal all to all men, for that they proclaimed some openly and to all the world, whilst they disclosed others (only) in secret and to a few, because Paul addressed even this expression to Timothy: "O Timothy, guard that which is entrusted to thee;" and again: "That good thing which was committed unto thee keep." What is this deposit? Is it so secret as to be supposed to characterize a new doctrine? or is it a part of that charge of which he says, "This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy?" and also of that precept of which he says, "I charge thee in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Jesus Christ who witnessed a good confession under Pontius Pilate, that thou keep this commandment?" Now, what is (this) commandment and what is (this) charge? From the preceding and the succeeding contexts, it will be manifest that there is no mysterious hint darkly suggested in this expression about (some) far-fetched doctrine, but that a warning is rather given against receiving any other (doctrine) than that which Timothy had heard from himself, as I take it publicly: "Before many witnesses" is his phrase. Now, if they refuse to allow that the church is meant by these "many witnesses," it matters nothing, since nothing could have been secret which was produced "before many witnesses." Nor, again, must the circumstance of his having wished him to "commit these things to faithful men, who should be able to teach others also," be construed into a proof of there being some occult gospel. For, when he says "these things," he

refers to the things of which he is writing at the moment. In reference, however, to occult subjects, he would have called them, as being absent, those things, not these things, to one who had a joint knowledge of them with himself."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE APOSTLES DID IN ALL CASES TEACH THE WHOLE TRUTH TO THE WHOLE CHURCH. NO RESERVATION, NOR PARTIAL COMMUNICATION TO FAVORITE FRIENDS

"Besides which, it must have followed, that, for the man to whom he committed the ministration of the gospel, he would add the injunction that it be not ministered in all places, and without respect to persons, in accordance with the Lord's saying, "Not to cast one's pearls before swine, nor that which is holy unto dogs." Openly did the Lord speak, without any intimation of a hidden mystery. He had Himself commanded that, "whatsoever they had heard in darkness" and in secret, they should "declare in the light and on the house-tops." He had Himself fore-shown, by means of a parable, that they should not keep back in secret, fruitless of interest, a single pound, that is, one word of His. He used Himself to tell them that a candle was not usually "pushed away under a bushel, but placed on a candlestick," in order to "give light to all who are in the house." These things the apostles either neglected, or failed to understand, if they fulfilled them not, by concealing any portion of the light, that is, of the word of God and the mystery of Christ. Of no man, I am quite sure, were they afraid, — neither of Jews nor of Gentiles in their violence; with all the greater freedom, then, would they certainly preach in the church, who held not their tongue in synagogues and public places. Indeed they would have found it impossible either to convert Jews or to bring in Gentiles, unless they "set forth in order" that which they would have them believe. Much less, when churches were advanced in the faith, would they have withdrawn from them anything for the purpose of committing it separately to some few others. Although, even supposing that among intimate friends, so to speak, they did hold certain discussions, yet it is incredible that these could have been such as to bring in some other rule of faith, differing from and contrary to that which they were proclaiming through the Catholic churches, — as if they spoke of one God in the Church, (and) another at home, and described one substance of Christ, publicly, (and) another secretly, and announced one hope of the resurrection before all men, (and) another before the few; although they themselves, in their epistles, besought men that they would all speak one and the same thing, and that there should be no divisions and dissensions in the church, seeing that they, whether Paul or others, preached the same things. Moreover, they remembered the words): "Let your communication be yea, yea; nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than this cometh of evil;" so that they were not to handle the gospel in a diversity of treatment."

CHAPTER XXVII

GRANTED THAT THE APOSTLES TRANSMITTED THE WHOLE DOCTRINE OF TRUTH, MAY NOT THE CHURCHES HAVE BEEN UNFAITHFUL IN HANDING IT ON? INCONCEIVABLE THAT THIS CAN HAVE BEEN THE CASE

"Since, therefore, it is incredible that the apostles were either ignorant of the whole scope of the message which they had to declare, or failed to make known to all men the entire rule of faith, let us see whether, while the apostles proclaimed it, perhaps, simply and fully, the churches, through their own fault, set it forth otherwise than the apostles had done. All these suggestions of distrust you may find put forward by the heretics. They bear in mind how the churches were rebuked by the apostle: "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you?" and, "Ye did run so well; who hath hindered you?" and how the epistle actually begins: "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from Him, who hath called you as His own in grace, to another gospel." That they likewise (remember), what was written to the Corinthians, that they "were yet carnal," who "required to be fed with milk," being as yet "unable to bear strong meat;" who also "thought that they knew somewhat, whereas they knew not yet anything, as they ought to know." When they raise the objection that the churches were rebuked, let them suppose that they were also corrected; let them also remember those (churches), concerning whose faith and knowledge and conversation the apostle "rejoices and gives thanks to God," which nevertheless even at this day, unite with those which were rebuked in the privileges of one and the same institution."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE ONE TRADITION OF THE FAITH, WHICH IS SUBSTANTIALLY ALIKE IN THE CHURCHES EVERYWHERE, A GOOD PROOF THAT THE TRANSMISSION HAS BEEN TRUE AND HONEST IN THE MAIN

"Grant, then, that all have erred; that the apostle was mistaken in giving his testimony; that the Holy Ghost had no such respect to any one (church) as to lead it into truth, although sent with this view by Christ, and for this asked of the Father that He might be the teacher of truth; grant, also, that He, the Steward of God, the Vicar of Christ¹, neglected His office, permitting the churches for a time to understand differently, (and) to believe differently, what He Himself was preaching by the apostles, — is it likely that so many churches, and they so great, should have gone astray into one and the same faith? No casualty distributed among many men issues in one and the same result. Error of doctrine in the churches must necessarily have produced various issues. When, however, that which is deposited among many is found to be one and the same, it is not the result of error, but of tradition. Can any one, then, be reckless enough to say that they were in error who handed on the tradition?"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE TRUTH NOT INDEBTED TO THE CARE OF THE HERETICS; IT HAD FREE COURSE BEFORE THEY APPEARED. PRIORITY OF THE CHURCH'S DOCTRINE A MARK OF ITS TRUTH

"In whatever manner error came, it reigned of course only as long as there was an absence of heresies? Truth had to wait for certain Marcionites and Valentinians to set it free. During the interval the gospel was wrongly preached; men wrongly believed; so many thousands were wrongly baptized; so many works of faith were wrongly wrought; so many miraculous gifts, so many spiritual endowments, were wrongly set in operation; so many priestly functions, so many ministries, were wrongly executed; and, to sum up the whole, so many martyrs wrongly received their crowns! Else, if not wrongly done, and to no purpose, how comes it to pass that the things of God were on their course before it was known to what God they belonged? that there were Christians before Christ was found? that there were heresies before true doctrine? Not so; for in all cases truth precedes its copy, the likeness succeeds the reality. Absurd enough, however, is it, that heresy should be deemed to have preceded its own prior doctrine, even on this account, because it is that (doctrine) itself which foretold that there should be heresies against which men would have to guard! To a church which possessed this doctrine, it was written — yea, the doctrine itself writes to its own church — "Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel than that which we have preached, let him be accursed.""

Notes:

1. It is significant that Tertullian referred to the Holy Spirit (not the pope) as the "Vicar of Christ." The Roman Catholic Church has usurped this ancient title for the Holy Spirit. Tertullian again referred to the Spirit as the "Vicar of Christ" with the following words: "For what kind of (supposition) is it, that, while the devil is always operating and adding daily to the ingenuities of iniquity, the work of God should either have ceased, or else have desisted from advancing? whereas the reason why the Lord sent the Paraclete was, that, since human mediocrity was unable to take in all things at once, discipline should, little by little, be directed, and ordained, and carried on to perfection, by that Vicar of the Lord, the Holy Spirit." (Tertullian, On the Veiling of Virgins, I)