

Without A WITNESS

How does God insure that He will never be without a witness? Does He only work through one man, one work at a time? Does God make His witness infallible, or does He protect against their failure another way? The answer may surprise you.

The sun was like brass. Heat like the heat of a furnace beat upon a man from above and below. It was the sort of place a man might well wish himself dead, and Elijah did. Thoroughly depressed, miserable, and physically exhausted, he stumbled into the meager shade of a broom tree and collapsed. Claspng his knees with his hands and bowing his head, he resembled nothing more than one of the desert rocks. He sat motionless for a long time. Only his lips moved.

"It is enough," he prayed hoarsely. "Now, Oh Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers."

As the sun declined and the shimmering heat gave way to the cool of desert night, he slept. He slept the sleep of an exhausted man, a man whose physical and emotional reserves were totally drained.

In the early dawn, someone touched him. He came awake reluctantly at first. Then, when he saw his visitor had set out a cake of bread and a cruse of water, his hunger and thirst overcame every thought of sleep. He drank thirstily, allowing the water to drain down his beard and onto his chest. The water was followed by several fistfuls of bread followed by more water.

As his hunger and thirst left, his depression returned. How had he come to this place?

This was the man who, only days before, had called down fire from heaven! This was the man who had led the people to proclaim, "The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God!" This was the man who was responsible for leading the people to slay four hundred fifty prophets of Baal. At that moment

they would have done anything he asked. Now, he was fleeing for his life. When Jezebel had proclaimed her threat to murder Elijah, all his support vanished like the morning mists.

He was afraid to stop in Israel, and had fled south by the way of the sea to avoid going through Judah. Things were not much better there, and he fully expected that the king of Judah would have turned him over to Jezebel.

He slept again. But before the heat drove away the last chill of night, he was awakened again. "Eat some more," said the visitor. "You will need it!"

He did indeed. For the next forty days he walked deeper into the Negev. The terrain became more and more rugged and forbidding until he finally saw the mountain. He had never seen this place before but he knew exactly where he was.

It was Horeb.

Slowly, laboriously, he picked his way up the side of the mountain until he found a small cave. Inside, the coolness drove away any thought of climbing further in the heat.

It was here that he heard the Voice. "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Eternal," it said. But before he could move, the Lord passed by the mount leaving an effect not unlike a volcanic eruption with wind, earthquake, and fire.

Then there was a sound of gentle stillness as though the mountain itself waited.

When it became quiet, Elijah wrapped his face in a mantle—no man could look on God and live—and felt his way to the cave opening.

The Voice spoke once again. "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah answered, "I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

Was this true? *Could* it have been true?

Standing in the mouth of the cave, face covered, Elijah is a tragic, almost pathetic, figure. He seems to have sincerely believed that he was the last man alive who still worshiped the true God.

In this desolate, barren wilderness, he might easily have felt that he was at the end of the world. The forbidding landscape intensified his own hopeless outlook. There seemed little to live for. Perhaps God was ready to put an end to it all.

But the Voice spoke, "Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you come, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria; And Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel: and Elisha the son of Shaphat shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room. And it shall come to pass, that him that escapeth the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay: and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay."

The world, then, was not at an end. There was still much work to be done.

Then the Voice continued with the most shocking revelation of all: "Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him."

So Elijah was not alone after all!

But how could this be? Elijah knew *nothing* of these people!

The chances are, each of the seven thousand may have felt himself just as alone as Elijah did, for it was worth your life in that region to worship the true God and reject Baal. Seven thousand had remained faithful, but they were *closet* worshipers of the true God—they kept their devotions *private*, out of sight.

These people were not the result of some coordinated campaign by an evangelist or a prophet. They were the result of God's own work. He claimed the

credit for their faithfulness Himself: "I have left *me* seven thousand in Israel..."

This is a most revealing encounter. God has indeed chosen to work through human instruments in revealing Himself to mankind, and Elijah was one of those instruments. But was he the *only* instrument God used in that age? Elijah obviously believed that if he had died there on Mount Horeb, God would have been left *without a witness!* The last prophet would have been gone.

Of course, Elijah was mistaken. God had no intention of being left without a witness. He had left Himself seven thousand witnesses upon whom he could call if necessary.

One Man, One Work?

There are those who believe that God only works through one man at a time. According to their belief, Jesus' promise that the gates of hell would not prevail against the church, required that there *always be one man carrying on the Work of God*. This would necessitate an *unbroken line of succession* of chief prophets, chief apostles, or chief bishops. Each apostle or prophet succeeds another and is the fruit of the first apostle's work as well as the one who carries it on.

But when God calls a man, be he prophet or apostle, and sends him forth with a message to the world, how does God protect

against *failure* of that prophet to carry out his mission? What if Jonah had *refused* to carry on to Nineveh? What if Elijah had fallen and been killed climbing down Mount Horeb? What if some early apostle had corrupted himself and turned aside from carrying on God's Work? How does God insure that there will always be a witness faithfully proclaiming His Word?

There are at least two ways this could be done.

On the one hand, God could *interfere* to protect His servant against error, against accident, against corruption, against sin. If this were God's way, the prophet *would not be allowed to make an error* in matters of faith and doctrine.

This idea may be appealing, but it just isn't biblical. The Bible teaches with absolute certainty that

What if Jonah had *refused* to carry on to Nineveh? What if some early apostle had corrupted himself and turned aside from carrying on God's Work? How does God insure that there will always be a witness faithfully proclaiming His Word? There are at least two ways this could be done.

every human being who has ever lived has, at any and all times, the freedom to choose between alternate decisions—between right and wrong, between truth and error, between sin and righteousness. This includes prophets, apostles, bishops, elders, deacons, and every other person whom God uses or doesn't use.

God can and does intervene in *circumstances*, but He does not ordinarily rearrange men's minds. Jonah, after having been vomited up by the great fish, could have still decided not to go to Nineveh. Elijah, after his experience on Mount Carmel and Mount Horeb, could have refused to go on to Syria.

There is no suggestion in the Bible that God would ever make any of His servants infallible. In fact, we have examples of God's servants making abominable errors. Peter had to be rebuked for setting a bad example before the Gentile Christians in Antioch (Galatians 2:11–16). Paul and Barnabas got into such a serious argument that they split up and went their separate ways (Acts 15:36–41).

With all the biblical evidence of the weakness and fallibility of God's human servants, why do so many people cling to a doctrine of infallibility? We don't have to look very far for the answer. Are you comfortable when you're making a decision that's going to affect your eternal life, if any doubt or uncertainty exists on things that affect that decision? It's not unreasonable that human

beings, in decisions that important, would want an *infallible guide* to those decisions. But is it possible to have that infallible guide? Where do we look for it? Can we make it into God's Kingdom without it?

An Irish theologian named George Salmon, nearly a hundred years ago, pointed out that, "It is in the nature of things impossible to give men absolute security against error in any other way than by being themselves made infallible." His thesis was that our belief must, in the end, rest on an act of our own judgment, and he argued that our belief can never attain any higher certainty than whatever our own judgment may be able to give us.

But how could that be true? Surely the certainty of our faith must rest on something outside of ourselves.

An Irish theologian named George Salmon, nearly a hundred years ago, pointed out that, "It is in the nature of things impossible to give men absolute security against error in any other way than by being themselves made infallible." Surely the certainty of our faith must rest on something outside of ourselves.

Salmon was arguing the question of papal infallibility, but his argument is fundamental. Consider the position of a Roman Catholic. On what basis has he made his decision to submit unreservedly to the teaching of the Pope rather than the teaching of, say, the Korean prophet Sun Myung Moon? Obviously, it's his own decision based upon the application of his own judgment to the facts available to him.

Is it not an act of private judgment to *change* one's religion? Even if the Holy Spirit is leading the man to make the change, the man himself must exercise judgment and make a decision. No one else makes the decision for him.

Then if it is an exercise of private judgment for one to *change* his religion, it is also an exercise of private judgment to *continue* in what your religious teachers are telling you. It is your own judgment that tells you to go or not to go.

From these premises, Salmon argues that "an act of our judgment must be the ultimate foundation of all our beliefs." Therefore, he concludes, any infallibility that exists must rest in the individual, not the prophet, *for the individual must choose the right prophet!* And, having chosen the right prophet, he must *continually evaluate whether* or not the prophet is remaining true to the faith.

Salmon's argument is logical, but does it agree with Scripture?

The apostle John wrote, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but *try the spirits* whether they are of God; because *many false prophets* are gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). Who was to do the *trying*? Where did the responsibility lay? With the *individual*, of course!

The apostle Paul warned of the danger that he himself could fall away from the truth, and warned the Galatians, "But though *we*, or an angel from heaven, preach any other Gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:8). Who was to examine the gospel and determine whether it was the same as had been preached to them before? Why the individual Galatian, of course!

Jesus Himself ordered John to write a letter to the

Ephesian church commending them, because "Thou hast *tried* them which *say* they are apostles and *are not*, and hast found them liars" (Revelation 2:2). And who was exercising the judgment? The individual!

There is another peculiar aspect to this question. Everyone makes mistakes. Even the best and most noble prophet or apostle is bound to fall into appalling error at one time or another in his life. Therefore the argument that a prophet or apostle is infallible must eventually resolve itself into a question of infallibility *only in certain areas*. Catholics, for example, argue that the Pope is infallible only when speaking *ex cathedra* in matters of faith and doctrine. If he makes glaring errors in other aspects of his teaching, one can only argue that it wasn't a matter of faith or doctrine or that the Pope was not actually speaking *ex cathedra*. Often it is left to succeeding generations to determine that a Pope *must* not have been speaking *ex cathedra* because he was wrong! The Pope, for example, *could not* have been speaking *ex cathedra* when he punished Galileo for postulating that the earth moved around the sun. The *judgment* of subsequent generations has made it clear.

It appears Salmon was right when he argued that our belief *must*, in the end, rest on an act of our own judgment, and can never attain any higher certainty than whatever our own judgment may be able to give us.

A man's only infallible guide is the Bible, and he must struggle with his own fallibility in understanding that guide, or *trust his own judgment* of someone else's capacity to interpret that book to him.

There is yet one more problem connected with any doctrine of infallibility. Even the most infallible of God's servants have one major failing. They grow old and die. If God only works through one man at a time, at the moment of a prophet's death, God's people are without leadership and the world without a witness. Then the problem of succession arises. If the succession takes one week, one month, one year, or several years, as it has with the Roman Catholic Church on occasion, is God left without a witness?

An Alternative to the Doctrine of Infallibility

Of course, there is an alternative to the doctrine of infallibility. Suppose for a moment that, rather than making one servant infallible, *God decided not to put all His eggs in one basket!* Suppose He decided to work with one man here and another prophet there and thus insure that He would never be *left without a witness* in the event of the death or failure of one of His servants.

This makes sense, but is that what God has done? Can we prove it in the Bible?

If we had difficulty finding biblical support for the doctrine of infallibility, we shall encounter no such difficulty on this subject. We have already seen that, in Elijah's day, God had seven thousand disciples of whom that great prophet was painfully ignorant. Hosea and Isaiah were contemporaries, but neither betrays any knowledge of the other. Hosea prophesied in the north, while Isaiah preached in the south. The two probably never met. Micah came along later, still contemporary with Isaiah, but again there is no suggestion of any relationship between the two.

And then there is the old prophet at Bethel. When Jeroboam had separated Israel from Judah, one of the first things he did was change the dates of the holy days and establish altars in the north where people could come and sacrifice. God responded by sending a prophet from Judah to prophesy against Jeroboam and his altar. The prophet was warned to carry out his work, eat no bread, nor drink any water, nor to turn again by the way he came to Israel (1 Kings 13:1-10). As it happened, there was an old prophet in Bethel whom God had not chosen to use on this occasion. He heard what the man of God had done, intercepted him, and begged him to come to his home and eat bread. The prophet from Judah replied that he was not allowed to do so. But the old prophet said, "I am a prophet also as you are; and an angel spoke to me by the word of the Lord saying, Bring him back with you into your house, that he may eat bread and drink water." The Judean prophet went with him. But the old prophet had lied. While they sat at table, the word of the Lord *really* came to the old prophet and he condemned the Judean because he had not followed God's instructions to

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Several things are worth noting in this account. First, for one reason or another, God had not used the old prophet to prophesy against Jeroboam. He had bypassed him and brought a man up from Judah. Second, neither of these men had previously known one another (verse 14). Third, *God spoke to each of them independently*.

In truth, the idea that God only works through one man at a time takes quite a beating in the Old Testament. But, of course, we shouldn't be surprised. The Law was quite specific about requiring *more than one witness* for judgment (Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 19:15). If God's Law requires two or three witnesses, why would He leave Himself with only one?

Jesus Himself seems to acknowledge the need for more than one witness, offering as witnesses His Father and His works.

But the strongest statement Jesus made is recorded in the sixth chapter of Luke. After spending all night in prayer, Jesus called His disciples to Him and He chose, not one, but twelve whom He named apostles (verse 13). Jesus determined to send forth not two or three witnesses, but initially twelve.

After Jesus' ascension, on the day of Pentecost, Peter stood among the eleven and reminded them of the loss of Judas. He cited Scripture to show that another should take Judas' office and continued, "Wherefore of these men who have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that He was taken up from us, *must one be ordained to be a witness with us of His resurrection*" (Acts 2:21-22).

There were then twelve *official* witnesses of Jesus' ministry to begin the New Testament Work.

But, some may argue, one of these men was in charge and God worked with the others through this one man. Unfortunately, there is no scripture that tells us this. Those who advance this theory try to infer their argument from Scripture, but there are other perfectly valid interpretations of the same scriptures.

But there is one passage of Scripture that leaves little room for interpretation. When a dispute had arisen among the disciples about who was the great-

est, Jesus called them unto Him and said, "You know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But *it shall not be so among you*; but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant" (Matthew 20:25-28).

That one or more of the apostles should exercise leadership before the others is inevitable. That one should exercise dominion or authority over the rest is expressly forbidden.

But at least, one might argue, they still formed one organization and God was only working through that one organization.

It seems disquieting to think that God might reveal Himself to an individual utterly unconnected to the church. It is disturbing to think that someone totally unknown to the church might appear claiming divine revelation.

But could it happen? Could God choose some unlikely person, utterly unrelated to any other

disciple, and reveal Himself to him, open his mind, grant him truth, knowledge, and forgiveness? Could God take such an individual and give him a commission independent of the church?

It not only could happen, it did happen! In an irony of staggering proportions, Jesus Christ chose His chief persecutor to be the thirteenth apostle, and He did so without any involvement of His existing leadership.

The story of Saul's experience on the Damascus road is well known and need not be recounted here. But consider for a moment what *did not* happen to Paul. He was not stricken down in the streets of Jerusalem, but on the road to Damascus—well away from the twelve apostles. He did *not see Peter* in vision coming to him and laying hands on him that he might receive his sight. He saw an obscure disciple named Ananias. He was *not* sent back to Jerusalem to be trained and ordained by Peter. He was taken into the wilderness and taught by Jesus Christ Himself!

It was three full years before he returned to Jerusalem to spend fifteen days with Peter. He only briefly met James, and did not see any other apostles for fourteen years! (Galatians 1:15-24; 2:1).

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In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul is at some pains to demonstrate the fact that he was in no way subordinate to the other apostles. His very first statement sets the tone: "Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by men, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead)."

Beginning in verse 11 he drives the point home by saying, "But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is *not after man*. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ."

For some reason, it is extremely important that Paul make this clear to the Galatians. He emphasized his calling: "But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood; neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia and returned again unto Damascus. Then *after three years* I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:15-19).

And during that three-year period, Paul had preached the gospel so effectively that the Jews in Damascus were ready to kill him (Acts 9:18-25).

It is in the epistle to the Galatians that Paul makes perhaps the clearest statement of his relationship to Peter. "But of these who seemed to be somewhat, (whatsoever they were, it makes no matter to me: God accepteth no man's person:) for they who seemed to be somewhat in conference added nothing to me: but contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as the gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter ... they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go to the heathen, and they to the circumcision" (Galatians 2:6-9).

Paul, then, was to the Gentiles what Peter was to the Jews. Their offices were coordinate, not subordinate—they were equals.

Only with this simple truth in hand can we make sense out of the incident that followed in Antioch. Paul continues, "But when Peter was come to

Antioch, *I withstood him to the face*, because he was to be blamed" (Galatians 2:11). Peter had been inconsistent, even racist in his orientation, and Paul felt that a public rebuke was called for if this thing wasn't to get out of hand.

It is interesting that Peter never mentions this conflict. He betrays no rancor or jealousy of Paul in his epistles, nor does Luke indicate any problem in his history. Apparently, Peter took this rebuke humbly and didn't argue back. Later he would refer to Paul as, "Our beloved brother," and would equate Paul's epistles with Scripture (2 Peter 3:15-16).

In calling Paul the way He did, Jesus taught the apostles an important lesson—that He was still the active head of the church, that He could select, call, train, and commission a thirteenth apostle without the able assistance of Peter, James, or John.

Was it a point that *needed* to be made? Yes, in subsequent years some very strange things would happen as the leadership of Christian churches jockeyed for control of the body of Christ.

Make no mistake about it. God does call individual ministers, commissions them personally, and carries on a work through them as individuals. Each minister's work is uniquely his own. Paul, for example, was given a unique mission. Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles; Peter was not. No one else would ever

claim that title even though others would preach to the Gentiles. No one but Paul would ever have Paul's unique commission any more than they would have his unique set of gifts. So when Paul died, his work was finished. When Timothy died, his work was finished. When John died, his work was over.

But when was Jesus Christ's work over?

How did Jesus see to it that His work would go on through all generations? How did He insure that He would never be without a witness? Did He do it by making one witness infallible, or by insuring that there would always be ample witnesses to His glory, honor, and power?

The biblical answer is plain. God can reveal Himself anew in every generation to any man, anywhere, anytime. We would like to think of an unbroken line of succession of apostles, or minis-

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ters. But the truth is, there have always been Christians, ministers, deacons, prophets, evangelists, scattered here and there, often totally unaware of one another.

The fact that the gates of hell have never prevailed against the church is a credit, not to the church, but to the fact that Jesus Christ Himself,

personally, has never ceased to carry on His Work.

“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Matthew 28:19–20).

For further reading...

The Church That Jesus Built (CJB)

The Church of God In Prophecy (CGP)

The Seven Churches of the Apocalypse (SCA)

Did Peter Have the Primacy? (PHP)



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