

On "Infallible?" (Hans Küng, 1970)

First published (in German) as "Unfehlbar?", 1970; transl. E.Mosbacher, Collins, 1971

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Infallibility: a question for all Christians

Küng is a prominent German theologian of the Roman Church. He is notorious for attacking Roman doctrines, and, in particular in this book, *Infallible?*, he attacks the Roman doctrine of Papal infallibility. It was for this book that his licence to *teach* Roman theology was revoked by the Roman authorities. He remains as emeritus Professor of ecumenical theology at the University of Tübingen.

Let me parenthetically comment here that in this review I systematically refer to the "Roman" Church, not the "Roman Catholic" Church, since the question of what is really "catholic" ("universal") is at the heart of this book.¹ For example, I would say that Luther was the catholic where the then Pope was the heretic. I would say that any Christian with acceptable doctrine is "catholic" since he or she thereby belongs to the body of believers, the "cloud of witnesses" (Heb.12:1). But is the Roman Church "catholic"?

But why should we be interested in such apparently arcane matters of Roman theology? It turns out that we² have a similar doctrine, of *inerrancy*:

We believe the Bible to be the only inspired, infallible, authoritative Word of God, inerrant in its original manuscripts. <http://epsomcf.org.uk/about-us/what-we-believe/> (downloaded 14th May 2012)

This statement follows recent conservative theological positions, and in particular the "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy"³ (1978) which was signed by nearly 300 scholars including J.I. Packer and Francis Schaeffer⁴ both of whom I respect and the latter of whom was very influential for me. I should say that the Chicago Statement is careful and fair, and it correctly treats the issues it addresses. But it is not so easy to summarise helpfully since these issues are complex.

This complexity is well represented by the *form* of the Chicago Statement itself: it has 19 Articles which are all presented as pairs of *affirmations* and *denials*. The affirmations are intended to be read in the context of the denials, which serve to define each issue being addressed, and each Article is intended to be read in the light of the preceding ones. And the issues addressed were all to do with the state of theology at the time : it was then common for churchmen to (for example) deny the Resurrection and claim very late dates

¹ I draw the same distinction as Jan Hus between the "Church Militant" (that is, the Church as it appears here on earth, with all its failures and including those people who falsely claim the Spirit of Christ) and the "Church Triumphant" (that is, the Body of Christ that Jesus will acknowledge on the Day of Judgement). The former I label "Church", and the latter "church". So "Church" is an organisational thing, where "church" is the real thing.

² "We" being "Epsom Christian Fellowship".

³ available in various places including <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/creeds/chicago.htm> with original documents archived on the Dallas Theological Seminary site http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf, both downloaded 15th April 2012.

⁴ who signed himself "Franky Schaeffer V"!

for the Gospels; "postmodernism" was in full swing and the classical view of truth itself was under attack. The Statement has a very well-drafted Exposition section, which confirms my summary here in an interesting way. It concludes :-

We are conscious too that great and grave confusion results from ceasing to maintain the total truth of the Bible whose authority one professes to acknowledge. The result of taking this step is that the Bible that God gave loses its authority, and what has authority instead is a Bible reduced in content according to the demands of one's critical reasoning and in principle reducible still further once one has started. This means that at bottom independent reason now has authority, as opposed to Scriptural teaching. If this is not seen and if for the time being basic evangelical doctrines are still held, persons denying the full truth of Scripture may claim an evangelical identity while methodologically they have moved away from the evangelical principle of knowledge to an unstable subjectivism, and will find it hard not to move further.

Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, *Exposition: Inerrancy & Authority* (1978)

It seems to me that this summary is entirely correct, bearing in mind the sub-text that "independent reason" does not really exist. No-one is entirely autonomous: everyone has some sort of basis in faith for their epistemology, whether implicitly or explicitly. Where Christians explicitly acknowledge authority, others tacitly presuppose it. And authority always necessarily rests on *faith*, not *reason*. This is because a reasoned argument must always start from axioms. And how are axioms chosen? It is a matter of *mathematical* necessity that the choice of axioms is always free. Mathematically, the correctness of an axiom is *unprovable in principle*.⁵

Infallibility for the Romans

However, the doctrine of inerrancy or infallibility itself has severe problems: I shall show in the course of this Review how this doctrine arose, why it is objectionable, and what the correct doctrine should be. In his book, Küng attacks the Roman doctrine of Papal infallibility, formally introduced by the First Vatican Council (1870) and affirmed by the Second (1962-1965). At first sight this doctrine is an entirely different matter from the "inerrancy" of Scripture, but his treatment is at a fundamental level and it will become clear that in fact the two doctrines are rather closely related.

The *casus belli* for Küng was the Papal Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968), which presented the use of the contraceptive Pill as a mortal sin forbidden by the Church. This Encyclical has been comprehensively ignored by the people – use of the Pill even among Roman Catholics has increased, not declined! But Küng shows that *Humanae Vitae* was a logical and correct extension of existing established Roman doctrine. He asserts nevertheless that the Encyclical (and therefore the Pope) was wrong in this case, and therefore that the existing established doctrine of infallibility must be revised. This is a very big issue, and he addresses it in a principled and thorough way. Many of his arguments are relevant *mutatis mutandis* to the Reformed doctrine of inerrancy, which is why I shall explain them at some length.

⁵ This is a consequence of Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems, 1931, which demonstrate that in a consistent axiomatic system there must exist *true* theorems *without proofs* in that system. This means that strictly speaking, the only things that can be demonstrated to be *necessarily* true are mathematical tautologies. The knowledge of the truth of anything else rests ultimately on faith! To ask for a certain proof of the existence of God is mathematically as silly as to ask for a certain proof of the love of your spouse. Knowledge of real things can never be absolutely certain.

Küng shows that the Pope cannot be considered infallible, a conclusion not hard for us to accept! But his demonstration is rather complete and interesting, resting on historical and theological analyses including an extended discussion of Roman dogmatics (which we will happily avoid). We here sketch his argument under six headings :-

1: The context of the Vatican Councils. The crucial thing to understand is that the doctrine of Papal infallibility rests on the doctrine of ecclesial infallibility, that is, the (true!) assertion that the church as a whole can be confident that the Holy Spirit will reveal the mind of Christ to her. "Feed my sheep", Jesus said to Peter, emphatically (John 21:15ff). Will the Shepherd not give means and substance to his under-shepherds (1Pet.5:2ff)? But how does the church, the Body of Christ, respond to this truth? We are not here speaking merely of Papal infallibility – to us manifestly absurd! – but of our basic epistemology :- how does the church, the Body of Christ, apprehend the truth of God? And Küng takes care to generalise his argument this way.

The two Vatican Councils were the first "post-Tridentine" Councils, referring to the Council of Trent (1545-1563) which was the Council previous to Vatican I. Vatican I was never completed, but was suspended by Pius IX in the political disturbances related to the unification of Italy: the Papal States were annexed by the new Kingdom of Italy on 20 September 1870 after Napoleon III withdrew his garrison in response to the bloody Franco-Prussian war which was started in July that year by Bismarck as a cynical move in his campaign for the unification of Germany.⁶

These political convulsions in Europe were the outward manifestations of the intellectual ferment at that time, and Vatican I was firmly located in this ferment. Küng says :-

Would papal infallibility ever have been defined in 1870 if the majority of the Council Fathers had not grown up in the period of political restoration and the anti-Enlightenment and anti-rationalist romanticism of the first half of the century? In the age that followed the chaos and excesses of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic period, Europeans longed for peace and order, for the good old days, and looked back longingly to the "Christian Middle Ages". Who better than the Pope could offer a religious basis for the maintenance or restoration of the political and religious *status quo*? Most of the leading [Roman] churchmen in the different countries were supporters of political and social reaction; some were connected with the fashionable philosophical trend of traditionalism ...

And would papal infallibility have been defined in 1870 if in the second half of the century the restoration had not been threatened to its foundations by the swift advance of liberalism (and its enemy, socialism, which had so much in common with it) that accompanied rapid industrialisation? Did not liberalism, with its faith in progress, and economic, political, scientific and cultural freedom, threaten to undermine all religious authority and tradition? Clericalism provoked anti-clericalism, and *vice versa*. The rationalism of the Enlightenment returned in the form of anti-idealist and anti-romantic positivism and the rising empirical sciences. The ecclesiastical authorities not only supported the established political system but clung to the traditional "biblical" cosmology, and this drove many politicians and scientists into violent aggressiveness towards all that had to do with religion.

As a result of this ... historical predicament, into which a Church leadership that had ceased to understand the signs of the times ... had largely manoeuvred itself, it was almost inevitable that

⁶ "Bismarck ... could consider a united Germany only if it was neither democratic nor too large to be dominated by Prussia. ... This implied the exclusion of Austria ... [and it] also implied making Prussian supremacy more palatable than Austrian to the rather anti-Prussian lesser German states, which Bismarck achieved by ... [a] brilliantly provoked and managed war against France in 1870-1" E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875* (1975) Ch.4, §I

Vatican I ... was conceived as a Council, not of hope but of fear, not of internal reform and renewal but of reaction and encapsulation against the outside world ... H. Küng, *Infallibility* (1970) Ch.2 §4

Küng is of course commenting from a Roman perspective but similar types of comment are equally applicable from a Reformed perspective. The times mould the church – necessarily! – and different traditions respond according to their predilections. In the nineteenth century the Romans responded by accentuated authoritarianism, and the English Free Churches responded by accentuated schisms. It is an unedifying spectacle either way.

Vatican II on the other hand was entirely different. It was because Vatican II had liberated the Roman Church from the worst influences of Trent and Vatican I that I was willing to consider a Catholic school for my children where previously this would have been unthinkable for me! Even so, Vatican II was only a partial reform, and Küng describes throughout the book how the Roman Curia⁷ has been trying to neutralise even these reforms ever since. In particular on Papal *infallibility*, astonishingly, Vatican II followed and affirmed Vatican I.

2: *The scholastic justification - Aquinas and the Isidorian decretals.* Papal primacy was asserted strongly by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) in the context of the Great Schism of the Roman with the Greek Orthodox Church (in *Contra errores Graecorum*⁸), and later included in his seminal *Summa Theologiae*.⁹ Thomas opens correctly by observing that *the publication of a profession of faith takes place in general council*, but then asserts that "*such a Council can be called only by the authority of the Pope*". He bases this assertion in good faith on the infamous "Isadorian Decretals", or *Pseudo-Isidore*: these were a set of forged documents, including genuine documents with forged interpolations, created under the pseudonym "Isadore Mercator" in the ninth century by Frankish monks. Wikipedia says that, "Immense labor and erudition went into creating this work, and a wide range of genuine sources were employed."¹⁰ They were only finally recognised unequivocally as a linked set of forgeries in 1628 (that is, *after* the Council of Trent!) by the Calvinist preacher David Blondel, who discovered that the

⁷ The *Curia* (a term dating from early times and referring to the Papal monarchical *court*) is the administrative apparatus of the Roman Church. The Curia has enormous power in Roman politics, and was established in its modern form by Pope Sixtus V following the Council of Trent.

⁸ "*Against the errors of the Greeks*", 1263. The Great Schism is usually dated as 1054 when the Romans and Greeks mutually excommunicated each other specifically on the issue of Roman primacy (although the *filioque* was also an important issue). The sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade was in 1204. The Second Council of Lyons in 1274 did not reconcile East and West, although there was a formal reuniting.

⁹ Aquinas' unfinished masterpiece, *Summa Theologiae (Compendium of Theology)*, was substantially finished at his death and was hugely influential, as it remains, like Aristotle's work, to this day. It represented the first systematic exposition of the "conflict" between science and faith. The newly discovered works of Aristotle were the cutting edge "science" of the day, but Aristotle was inconsistent with Christianity. He insisted, for example, that time was necessarily infinite (ruling out Creation!), and that everything had to have a cause (ruling out God!). But the Christians insisted that the eternal God was both Uncaused and the Cause of the whole creation. Aquinas showed how the Christians could consistently take and learn from what was good and true in Aristotle, while dissenting from him where he was in error. It is Aquinas who made modern science possible.

¹⁰ downloaded 22nd May 2012

alleged popes from the first centuries quoted extensively from authors of a much later time. They have universally been recognised as forgeries (including by the Roman theologians) only since the nineteenth century.

Thomas was concerned (in the context of the schism with the Greek Orthodox Church) to establish papal authority in the question of professions of faith – the Creed :-

A new publication of a profession of faith is necessary to avoid errors that are arising. The publication therefore comes under the authority which has to define formally what are matters of faith, so that they may be held by all with unshakable faith. But this belongs to the authority of the Supreme Pontiff, to whom the Church's greater and more difficult questions are referred. [Here there follows a passage from the Decretals based on Pseudo-Isadore.] Hence too our Lord says to Peter (Luke 22:32), since he had appointed him Supreme Pontiff: "*I have prayed for you, Simon ...*" And the reason for this is that there must be one faith of the whole Church according to 1 Cor.1:10: "*All say the same thing: let there be no divisions among you.*" This could not be maintained unless a question arising on faith were decided by him who presides over the whole Church, so that his judgement may be held by the whole Church. Hence a new publication of a profession of faith pertains solely to the authority of the Supreme Pontiff: as also everything else that pertains to the whole Church, such as convoking a general council and other things of the same kind.

Thomas Aquinas, *Contra errores Graecorum* (1263), quoted by H. Küng, *Infallibility*, ch.2 §7

Of course, the Scripture Thomas quotes is nowhere near sufficient to prove his point, as Thomas knows perfectly well. He bases his arguments not on Scripture itself, but on the interpretation given later to Scripture by (as he thought) impeccable authorities. But they were forgeries, and not impeccable at all! Küng comments icily :-

Papal exaggeration of the teaching authority in theory and practice can quote proved forgeries ... in its favour, as well as theological arguments based on [them] but it cannot rely on Scripture, or the common ecumenical tradition of the Church of the first millenium. It bears a substantial share of the responsibility for the maintenance of the schism with Eastern Churches, which have never accepted it, and with the Churches of the Reformation, which rebelled against it in the name of the freedom of the gospel and of Christian man.¹¹

H. Küng, *Infallibility*, ch.2 §7

On the critical question itself of the interpretation of Matt.16:18 ("*upon this rock I will build my church*") Thomas of course knew Augustine's Sermon on the Feast of Peter & Paul, which is fairly clear that the "rock" was not Peter himself but his *confession*, an interpretation that Jan Hus insisted on in his *De Ecclesia* (1413), for which he was murdered on 6th July 1415 at the Council of Constance (1414-1418), and the interpretation that Reformed churches have maintained ever since.

3: Roman authoritarianism. It is remarkable (to take up what I have just said about Augustine) that the favorite text of modern Roman pontiffs¹², Matthew 16:18f, is interpreted anachronistically by them. Küng says :-

Matthew 16:18f ... is not once quoted in full in the whole of Christian literature of the first two centuries, but is quoted for the first time in the second century by Tertullian, and then with reference, not to Rome but to Peter; that not until middle of the third century did a bishop of Rome – Stephen II, an early example of Roman authoritarianism who worked above all with the weapon of excommunication and abused the great St. Cyprian as a pseudo-apostle and pseudo-Christian – claim ... the pre-eminence of

¹¹ Küng is referring here to *The Freedom of the Christian Man*, which was the name of Martin Luther's very influential book of 1520.

¹² Küng points out that it was Leo the Great (bishop of Rome 440-461) who "was the first to adorn himself with the title of the pagan high priest *Pontifex Maximus*".

Peter; that it was not until the fourth century that Matthew 16:18f was quoted (notably by the Roman bishops Damasus¹³ and Leo ["the Great"]) in support of a claim to primacy, though without any formal claim to infallibility; and finally, that in the whole of the Eastern exegesis of Matthew 16:18 until the eighth century and beyond at most a personal primacy of Peter was thought of, without any idea of Roman primacy being seriously entertained. And neither in East or West was any claim to the Bishop of Rome's infallibility ever made in connection with Matthew 16:18f or Luke 22:32.

H. Küng, *Infallibility*, ch.2 §7

Küng precedes this by saying :-

The Roman claim [to primacy] became questionable as soon as it began to be imposed in an authoritarian fashion, and it was interpreted more and more legalistically as time went on, without respect for the individuality or independence of the other Churches in doctrine, liturgy or organisation; for example, when in the league of episcopal Churches towards the end of the second century Bishop Victor of Rome (against the opposition of the Western bishops, including St. Irenaeus, and the Eastern bishops also) [briefly] excommunicated the whole of Asia Minor in order to enforce a new Roman date for Easter; or when, in the middle of the third century, Bishop Stephen (against the opposition of St. Cyprian, the Churches of Africa and the great Churches of the East) wished to excommunicate large areas of the Church because of their different attitude to the baptism of heretics. Neither Victor nor Stephen succeeded in establishing their primacy in the succession to Peter. Not until the age of Constantine – and notably the Western rump synod of Sardica (Sofia) in 343 – did a monarchical structure begin to be established in the Western Church under Roman influence, as when Bishop Damasus first claimed the title of *Sedes Apostolica* ["Apostolic seat"] exclusively for the Roman see; when Bishop Siricius (a contemporary of the far more important Bishop Ambrose of Milan) first called himself "Pope" ..., and when Bishop Innocent I insisted on all important matters being laid before the Bishop of Rome for decision ... and tried to establish liturgical centralisation with the aid of historical fictions ...¹⁴

H. Küng, *Infallibility*, ch.2 §7

Roman primacy and Roman authoritarianism have always been *imposed* on the church, they have never been justified scripturally and they have repeatedly been justified with false, or even forged, "history".

4: *The attitude to Scripture in the Early Church.*

... in the early Church [second century and later] a theory of inspiration developed that was subject to manifold extra-Christian influences and gave rise to misunderstandings. While Palestinian Judaism saw God himself at work in the authors of the Bible, but took seriously their human and historical peculiarities, wholly in the spirit of the Old Testament, in Hellenised Judaism (Philo in particular)¹⁵ an attempt was made to eliminate these peculiarities, as human individuality was dissolved in ecstasy under the influence of the divine frenzy. Early Christian theologians regarded the authors of the Bible as tools

¹³ Damasus, bishop of Rome 366-384

¹⁴ Victor I was bishop of Rome 189-199, Irenaeus was bishop of Lugdunum (Lyon) 177-202, Cyprian was bishop of Carthage 249-258, Constantine ("the Great") was Emperor 306-337, Ambrose was bishop of Milan 374-397, Siricius was bishop of Rome 384-399, Innocent I was bishop of Rome 401-417.

¹⁵ Philo of Alexandria (20 BC – 50 AD) was a Jewish (not Christian) philosopher, "who considers [the Old Testament] as the source and standard not only of religious truth but in general of all truth. Its pronouncements are for him divine pronouncements. They are the words of the *ιερος λογος* ; *θεος λογος* ; *ορθος λογος* (*ieros logos*, holy word; *theos logos*, godly word; *orthos logos*, upright word)" (*Wikipedia*, downloaded 30th May 2012). Philo was strongly influenced by Plato, whose views he considers to be dependent on the Jewish Scriptures (which long predated Plato of course). Philo was very influential also for the early Christian thinkers, who liked the way he talked of the *logos* of God. It should be pointed out however, that John's understanding of *logos* was Jewish, not Hellenistic. Where the Christians followed Greek thought they were changing Biblical emphases in baleful ways, unfortunately outside our scope to discuss here.

who wrote under the 'impulse' or the 'dictation' of the Spirit (like a secretary, or a flute in the hands of the flautist). Finally, it was above all St. Augustine who, under the influence of Hellenistic theories of inspiration, regarded man as merely the instrument of the Holy Spirit; the Spirit alone decided the content and form of the biblical writings ... St. Augustine's influence in regard to inspiration and inerrancy prevailed throughout the Middle Ages and right into the modern age.

H. Küng, *Infallibility*, ch.4 §10

The common Reformed view of Biblical inspiration and inerrancy which our website reflects can be traced back to Augustine, complete with all his Platonic influences reaching back to Philo. I want to emphasise my admiration of Augustine: his influence is very extensive and mainly very beneficial. He was a brilliant thinker, and his book on the Trinity is sparkingly convincing – I suspect this is one powerful reason for the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity expressed in the Nicene Creed commanding universal acceptance by all Christians ever since (including us).¹⁶ But, being human, he is not infallible!

In particular, I want to draw attention here to Küng's – correctly – asserting that the first generation church had a different attitude to Scripture than becomes apparent in the second century and beyond. As the Jewish influence wanes so the doctrine of Scripture becomes prey to syncretic pagan influence. This is a long and complex story that N.T.Wright's magisterial books¹⁷ are at last throwing into sharp focus, a focus that it is becoming increasingly urgent to retrieve. But that is a story for another day. But we are in an excellent position today to at last start making a thorough re-evaluation of our positions, finishing the work started by the Reformers.

5: *The attitude to Scripture in the conciliar period.* I refer here to the Roman Church Councils throughout the Middle Ages.¹⁸ It would be an over-simplification to say that

¹⁶ Of course, Augustine was not alone. Athanasius of Alexandria (c.298-373), and the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, 330-379; Gregory of Nazianzus, c.329-390; and Gregory of Nyssa, c.335-395) were all very important contributors. But Augustine could have made so much simpler an argument in *De Trinitate* (c.417) had he accepted the equality of man and woman that Paul asserts emphatically in Gal.3:28. Just as man and woman, being two, are one flesh (Gen.2:24; Matt.19:5; Mark 10:8; 1 Cor.6:16; Eph.5:31), so God himself, in whose image man is made, being three persons is one substance. But Augustine had a Greek (pagan) doctrine of woman, and could not use this argument. Even so, our doctrine of the Trinity is correct! I think this is an astonishing miracle.

¹⁷ *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992), *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996), *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003). These are massive, and massively important, books of history by an academic historian.

¹⁸ In this millenium there were four early Lateran Councils (1123, 1139, 1179, 1215), two Councils of Lyons (1245, 1272-4), Vienne (1311-2), Constance (1414-8), Basel-Florence (1431-45), Lateran V (1512-17), Trent (1545-60), and two Vatican Councils (1870, 1962-5). Lateran II was held just after the internal Roman schism with the first antipope Anacletus II (elected 1130, died 1138); Lateran III to repair multiple schisms (two further antipopes and a war between the Pope and Frederick I, Holy Roman Emperor); the first Council of Lyons was held there because Frederick II was besieging Rome; Vienne (in southern France) was held at the start of the Avignon Exile (1309-76) where the popes moved to France to be out of the reach of the Holy Roman Emperor, this period became notorious for corruption; Constance ended the so-called Western Schism with multiple "Popes" (three at one point!), Jan Hus was also murdered there; Florence decreed reunification with the Eastern Church, but this was never ratified; Lateran V just preceded

these Councils were all about power – this is a complex period not easy to summarise – but power politics is a major theme. Küng correctly insists upon the historicity of the Gospel message – it is *because* a text always has many historical contexts that it can be timeless, quickened for succeeding generations :-

... the glad tidings [should not remain] enclosed in a book ... [instead, it should] always be proclaimed anew. This message can and should of course never be simply handed down in the form linked with a particular age. The first witnesses remain fundamental. But the gospel was not dictated to them in fixed forms of word or rigid doctrine, nor did they slavishly transmit it that way. Rather, they accepted it in their particular place with their special peculiarities and proclaimed it in the light of their own interpretation and theology. In the same way the present-day proclaimers of the gospel should pass it on in new form in their place, in their time, in their way. Scripture certainly is and remains the record, acknowledged by the Church, of the original testimony; it remains the standard by which all later Church proclamation and theology must constantly be measured. But the freedom, multiplicity and diversity of the testimony at that time justify the freedom, multiplicity and diversity of the testimony of the present day, the unifying simplicity of which lies in the message of man's salvation through Jesus Christ.
H. Küng, *Infallibility*, ch.4 §10

But in the conciliar period, freedom, multiplicity and diversity were shut down by every means. The pseudo-Isadorian forgeries were the cornerstone of Papal prerogative in this period, as we have seen, and the theoretical elaboration of these prerogatives proceeded with scant regard for the accompanying shocking corruption and absurd intra-papal conflict. And when Hus pointed out the absurdity of claiming on the one hand the right to lay down doctrine while on the other engaging in a three-cornered Papal fight, he was summarily dispatched to the stake.

Even so, throughout this period it was theoretically admitted that the Pope could be schismatic, therefore heretical, and *ipso facto* cease to be Pope! There was after all the example of Pope Honorius I, condemned posthumously in 681 and by subsequent councils and Popes, adduced as evidence *against* Papal infallibility by the minority at Vatican I. Küng notes that 'Aquinas did not know about Honorius, and after it became known Torquemada brazenly declared it to be an "error of the Greeks", and Bellamine even more brazenly declared it to be a forgery of the Council documents (which resulted in a sharp protest by Melchior Cano, the theologian of the Council of Trent)'.¹⁹

In all this, note well that the Pope personalises the "teaching office" of the Church, and all Christians acknowledge that the church must teach. And we all believe that the church, ultimately, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, teaches truly. So the issue is emphatically *not* a purely Roman one!

6: *The attitude to Scripture in the Reformation.* The question is, from where is *authority* derived? We have no difficulty in rejecting the (unreformed) Roman assertion that it derives from the Pope. But there are real difficulties in the Reformers' assertion that it derives from

Luther's challenge and Trent started the Counter Reformation. Finally, Vatican II repaired the worst of the Roman heresies of this entire period, particularly Vatican I and Trent.

¹⁹ H. Küng, *Infallibility* (1970) Ch.2 §7. Honorius was condemned (in passing) by the Third Council of Constantinople for the Monothelite heresy which denies that Christ has human free will. Torquemada (1420-1498) was the First Grand Inquisitor of Spain and was known as the "hammer of heretics" and famed for cruelty. Bellamine (1542-1621) in contrast was reputed a gentle saintly man, but his theological works were very influential in the Counter-Reformation. He was responsible for Galileo's warning in 1616.

Scripture, and these difficulties are to do with our view of authority. Interestingly, Küng makes the point that the "priesthood of all believers" (and therefore lay preaching) is theoretically acknowledged by all Churches, by the Roman (post-Vatican II) and by the Orthodox as well as by the Reformed Churches. But he comments, "This certainly does not mean that any man or woman who feels like it should climb into the pulpit on Sunday" (ch.4 §11). Who authorises the preacher? Who authorises the teacher? Who authorises the prophet?

For all the necessary criticism of the present leadership of the [Roman] Church we have frankly expressed, nothing we have said implies that Church leadership is not essential. It is not no leadership we want, but Church leadership in accordance with the gospel. We do not need less authority, but more qualified authority: authority based on service, and capable of subordinating itself to the subordinate if the latter have the gospel and reason on their side. ...

It is ... important to note that if we rightly speak of succession to the apostles in the various pastoral ministries, we have just as much right to speak of a succession to the prophets and teachers. In post-apostolic times teachers turned out to be indispensable ... Only where there were not enough prophets and teachers in the congregation, according to the *Didache*, was [the congregation] to choose bishops and deacons to "minister unto you the ministry (*leitourgia*, or the Eucharist) of the prophets and teachers" (15:1). ...

What becomes of a church in which the teachers are silent? ... What becomes of a church in which scholarly reflection on and interpretation of the original Christian message, the true transmission, the true translation of the message into the terms of the present day, have ceased? A church in which theologians had to be silent would become an untruthful church. Its teaching might be very correct and unchanged and conscientiously handed on. Its faith might seem secure from doubt, and its teaching might seem to present no serious problems. Yet it would often be evading men's real problems, and would fail to notice that it was bogged down in an outdated theological system, that it was handing on superannuated ideas and the empty husks of traditional concepts as truth, and that both in teaching and in life it had departed from the original message. ... There can be pastors who are also teachers but, according to St. Paul, they are the exception rather than the rule. ...

What would the church be without Origen, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, or Luther and Calvin, or the many great and small teachers of the church? The church has never been without its teachers. St. Paul believed that every congregation had its teacher. And where there is willingness in the church to listen to its teachers, the teachers will speak. Here too the Spirit must not be quenched, but allowed to express himself.

H. Küng, *Infallibility* (1970) Ch.4 §11

Küng cites the *Didache*²⁰ which is interesting from our point of view. There is very little surviving Christian literature from the first century so that it is not very clear how the early church described in Acts became changed to the monarchical Church of Augustine. It is this passage Küng mentions that suggests that the *Didache* :-

... represents a stage or organisation intermediate between the Corinthian and the Ephesian letters: parallel, let us say, roughly to the Epistle to the Philippians with its earliest mention of episcopi [bishops] and deacons.

C.H.Turner (1887), quoted in J.A.T.Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (1976) p.326

Küng makes an interesting comment on the development of the doctrine of Scriptural inspiration by the Reformed Churches:

Catholic insistence on tradition and the infallibility of certain doctrinal propositions was met at an early date by the Protestant principle of dependence on Scripture (*sola scriptura*) and the attribution of infallibility to biblical propositions. Here too polemics between the two sides led to distortion of the

²⁰ The *Didache* (Διδαχη, "teaching") or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* is dated by Robinson (op.cit.) between 40-60, after a discussion of a number of detailed studies. It was only rediscovered in 1873.

problem. The Reformers themselves countered the accepted traditions in Church, theology and piety, not by the infallibility of Scripture, but by the testimony of the content of Scripture ... But Lutheran and [Calvinist] orthodoxy, on the defensive against the claims of the [Roman] Church reinforced after the Council of Trent [that is, a generation after Luther and Calvin] systematically developed the theory of inspiration that was shared by the Reformers and the Council of Trent into a theory of literal inspiration, which was extended to the most minute details, both subjective (how inspiration took place in the sacred writer) and objective (how inspiration took objective form in the book).

H. Küng, *Infallibility* (1970) Ch.4 §10

The *Chicago Statement* is careful to deny the crude insistence on *literal* inspiration originating in the last part of the sixteenth century, and give a more nuanced account.

We affirm that God in His work of inspiration utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared.

We deny that God, in causing these writers to use the very words that He chose, overrode their personalities. Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, Article VIII (1978)

And in Article VII it comments that "The mode of divine inspiration remains largely a mystery to us." It seems to me that we are in the position today where we can revisit these old debates in a much calmer way and with a longer perspective.

Infallibility today, for all Christians

The crux of the matter is, *can any infallible propositions²¹ be identified?* If Scripture is inerrant and infallible (which it is), what in particular does it infallibly assert? The Roman doctrine of papal infallibility (asserted explicitly by Vatican I) rests on the (assumed) doctrine of Church infallibility, that is, our assurance that the Body of Christ can know the mind of Christ and that we are not deceived in our faith. Roman authoritarianism makes this understanding a juridical rather than a confessional issue, but Evangelicals are often too keen to take the same attitude.

What is truth? How true are true statements? I am referring here again to the philosophical (and theological) weight we can put on specific propositions, given Gödel's theorem.⁵ Küng illustrates the limitations of the *expressible* truth of propositions very elegantly in the context of the Protestant/Catholic divide by a consideration of faith and works :-

If every human statement of truth, with its human limitations, borders on and easily turns into error, this holds good for polemical Church definitions in a special way. A definition has a target; it is aimed at a specific error. But since there is no error without a kernel of truth, there is always a danger that a polemically aligned proposition will strike, not only the error, but also the truth contained in it. If a Protestant, for instance, states quite unpolemically that the just man lives by faith, the shadow of error that accompanies the proposition does not appear. But if he polemically makes the statement in reply to the error of a legalistic Catholic who exaggerates the importance of good works, there is a danger that the shadow of error may obscure the truth of his statement by the unexpressed implication that the just man lives by faith (without doing good works).

The converse also holds good. If a Catholic states unpolemically that the just man does works of charity, the shadow of error accompanying the proposition does not appear. But if he states polemically, in reply to the error of a quietist Protestant who attaches too much importance to faith, that the just man does

²¹ "propositions": that is, formal forms of words that purport to define something. I do not deny the value of propositions (I am an academic after all!), but we should beware of giving them too much weight. Knowledge of real things can never be absolutely certain (see footnote 5). Specific propositions should always be taken with a pinch of salt.

works of charity, there is a danger that the shadow of error will obscure the truth of his statement by the unexpressed implication that the just man does works of charity (and does not live by faith).

This classic example of Catholic-Protestant argument shows that a polemical statement of truth, never mind from which side it comes, runs the risk of being understood merely as a denial of an error. It thus necessarily ignores the kernel of truth contained in the error. This statement of truth thus becomes a half-truth; what it says is correct; but what it does not say is also correct. From the point of view of the person who makes it, it refutes the error at which it is directed; from the point of view of the person to whom it is addressed, it fails to refute the truth. To the former it seems – rightly – to be true; to the latter it seems – not wrongly – to be false. In short, because a half-truth is also a half-error, the two parties fail to understand each other. Each clings to his truth and sees the other's error. Though the truth of each includes the truth of the other, each excludes the other because of its lack of truth.

This sort of thing has constantly recurred throughout Church history. Definitions condemned errors without excluding from the condemnation the truth contained in them. Thus to the other party a true condemnation of error appeared a false condemnation of truth. Thus the Council of Trent condemned the doctrine of justification 'by faith alone' in so far as the latter was empty, presumptuous and dogmatical. It did not define the real [true] meaning that can be given to 'by faith alone' and what the Reformers meant by it, namely faith that put its whole trust in the Lord alone. Thus to the Protestant the true condemnation of the false doctrine of *sola fide* was the false condemnation of the true doctrine of *sola fide*.
H. Küng, *Infallibility* (1970) Ch.4 §10

What do we really believe in? Küng explains this in a luminous paragraph that should command all our assent, in my opinion:

What do we really believe in? What is the real basis for the Christian faith? Is it the Church or the Bible? It is neither, for that is a false alternative. The ground of faith is God himself in Jesus Christ; it is thus Jesus Christ himself who is attested in the Bible and is constantly proclaimed anew by the Church. The Christian does not believe in the Church, or in the Bible; he believes in God, in Jesus Christ. He believes, not in the Gospels, but in the gospel and in him who speaks through it. Thus Jesus Christ remains the Lord also of Scripture; as the source and yardstick of its authority he is the ultimate authority in matters of faith or theology. It is he who is the spiritual power of Scripture, with the result that the latter, notwithstanding all biblical criticism as the history of exegesis shows, constantly asserts and gains recognition of its truth anew. Thus I do not, for instance, first believe in Scripture or in the inspiration of the book, and then in the truth of the gospel, in Jesus Christ. I believe in the Jesus Christ who was originally attested in Scripture and, by experiencing Scripture as gospel in faith, I see how filled and permeated with the Spirit Scripture is. My faith in Jesus Christ originates in Scripture, because Scripture testifies to Jesus, but it is not based on Scripture; Jesus Christ, not an inspired book, is the ground of faith.
H. Küng, *ibid*

We do not believe the Bible because it is inspired; we believe the Bible is inspired because it is reliable. But we do not believe *in* the Bible; we believe in the Jesus Christ who is reliably attested *by* the Bible. The fact that this attestation is reliable makes it *possible* (but not necessary) to believe in him; truly, we believe in Jesus Christ *because he is alive today* (and not because we are compelled by the authority of the Bible): his Spirit touches us, enlivens and delights us, and quickens our understanding in many ways under the provision of the Father. And therefore we regard the Bible that reliably attests him as authoritative. We continue in the presence of "a great cloud of witnesses" (Heb.12:1).

I think that our website² should say something like this:

We are convinced that the Bible is a reliable record of the original witness to Jesus Christ by the men and women that loved him, who saw his deeds and heard his words; who touched him and were touched by him.