

THE  
INFALLIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

*A COURSE OF LECTURES*

DELIVERED IN THE  
Divinity School of the University of Dublin

BY  
GEORGE SALMON, D. D.

PROVOST OF TRINITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN SOMETIME REGIUS PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY  
IN THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN

Author of  
*A Historical Introduction to the Study of the Books of the New Testament*

SECOND EDITION

*LONDON*  
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET .  
1890

## Lecture IX.

### THE RULE OF FAITH.

THE subject on which I lectured on the last day would very commonly be stated in the form, What is the rule of faith? Scripture alone, or Scripture and tradition? There are some ambiguities in the words used in this mode of statement to which I ought to call your attention. First, as to the words, 'rule of faith.' I ought to mention that two or three very early Fathers\* give the name 'regula fidei' or 'regula veritatis' to a profession of faith nearly identical with our Apostles' Creed, as forming the rule according to which Christians ought to shape their belief. Our Church, in the Eighth Article, does not ascribe to the Creeds any independent authority, but receives them merely because they can be proved from Scripture. Of course that does not mean that the Bible is our only source of knowledge for the truth of all the things stated in the Creeds. I suppose that, if a single book of the New Testament had never been written, it would still have been possible for us to know that the doctrine in attestation of which the first preachers of Christianity hazarded their lives was, that the Founder of their religion had died and was buried, and rose again the third day. No one who contends for the sufficiency of Scripture is concerned to deny that many of the things stated in the Bible are capable of historical proof independently of the Bible. Nor are we at all concerned to determine the historical question whether, in the earliest age of the Church, the doctrines contained in that profession of faith which converts made at their baptism might not have been known to many of them independently of Scripture. Obviously, if it were proved that the great leading facts of our religion, though contained in the Bible, might also be handed down independently of the Bible for a hundred years or two, this would not at all prove that a number of things for which no Scripture warrant can be found might also have been handed down for eighteen hundred years. However, I have thought it the simplest plan to avoid all cavil as to the use of the phrase 'rule of faith,' and merely state the question of fact we have got to determine. Is there, besides the Scripture, any trustworthy source of information as to the teaching of our Lord and His Apostles?

It is more important to observe that there is an ambiguity about the word tradition. Bellarmine divides tradition into Divine, Apostolical, and Ecclesias-

---

\* Irenæus, *Haer.* i. ix. xxi.; Tertullian, *De Praescrip.* 13, *De Virgg. veland.* I, &c.

tical. Divine traditions are things ordained by Christ Himself. Such, for example, he says, are the matter and form of the Sacraments, because that it is certain that Sacraments could only be instituted by Christ Himself. Apostolic traditions are things ordained or taught by the Apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and by them handed down to the Church. It is concerning these two that we have controversy with the Church of Rome. Nothing turns on the distinction between the two. We readily admit ourselves to be bound to receive anything that can be traced up to the inspired teaching of the Apostles; and we raise no question whether the Apostles were repeating something taught them by our Lord's own lips during the period when He walked on earth, or were speaking under the immediate inspiration of the Holy Ghost. In both cases we acknowledge their teaching to be alike binding on us. Our controversy is whether, if any doctrine not contained in Scripture be propounded as necessary to salvation, satisfactory proof can be given that it was so propounded by the Apostles. Of course there is a great deal that is true of which the Bible does not tell us anything; but we do not hold that belief in truth of this kind is necessary to salvation.

The traditions which Bellarmine places in the third class are of quite a different kind. Ecclesiastical traditions are ancient customs of the Church, which, however instituted at first, have, by length of custom, the force of laws of the Church. Such traditions, says Bellarmine, are the observance of Easter and Whitsuntide, the custom of mixing water with the Eucharistic wine, the habit of making the sign of the Cross. Now, it is curious that, though in popular controversy tradition is commonly opposed to Scripture, the word tradition does not occur in our Sixth Article, which practically excludes Bellarmine's first two kinds of traditions, Divine and Apostolical, from holding a place on a level with Scripture in binding our faith. In the only place in our Articles in which the word 'tradition' occurs, namely, the Thirty-fourth Article, 'Of the Traditions of the Church,' it is used in the sense of what Bellarmine calls Ecclesiastical traditions. Concerning these last, except on the question of Roman supremacy, we have no controversy with the Church of Rome. Although we do not allow doctrines of faith to be taught except on the authority of Scripture, we do not require such authority for the institution of a rite or ceremony. We do not believe that the New Testament was intended as a code of ceremonial: and we allow each Church to order such matters as she finds most conducive to the edification of the people; and, as times and manners change, to alter such ceremonies again as she finds expedient, provided only that nothing is ordained contrary to the Word of God.

On this point there is very little room for controversy among Christians. No sect could consistently carry out the principle of having no Church rule without a Scripture text to authorize it; and, on the other hand, the Church of Rome herself most fully acknowledges the power of the Church, for reason which to her seems good, to alter Church rules of the most venerable antiquity. I need only remind you of her rule of withholding the cup from the laity, though she acknowledges that the Sacrament, on its first institution, was administered in both kinds, and that this mode of administration continued in the Church for many ages. It was necessary to point out to you this ambiguity in the word 'tradition,' because you will constantly find that, when passages of the Fathers are adduced which speak of traditions, the writers are not dreaming of any rule of faith distinct from Scripture, but only of ancient customs of the Church, as to the expedience, or, at any rate, the lawfulness, of retaining which we have no inclination to enter into dispute.

While speaking on this subject, I may give you a reference to an interesting list of early Church customs for which no Scripture authority can be given. It is in the beginning of Tertullian's treatise, *De Corona Militis*, and the list may be extended by means of the note to the Oxford translation of the passage. The occasion of it was that Tertullian—whose turn of mind led him, whenever a question was raised as to what was permissible to a Christian, to take what we may call a puritanically strict view—had pronounced it unlawful for Christians to wear a flower crown, as the heathens did, on occasions of rejoicing. It shows the feeling of the Church of the time on the sufficiency of Scripture that, whenever Tertullian puts forward any of these severe rules, he has always to meet the objection, Can you show from Scripture that what you condemn is wrong? On other occasions he makes some attempt to satisfy the demand. Here Scripture proof fails him, and he has to take his stand on the custom of the Church, which forbade the wearing of such wreaths; and this leads him to instance a number of practices which have no authority but Church usage. It is an argument *a fortiori* in favour of our rule of requiring Scripture proof for Divine or Apostolic traditions, that in the early Church such proof was demanded even for Ecclesiastical traditions.

There is another distinction worth bearing in mind when quotations from the Fathers are produced—that between tradition as signifying the 'res tradita' and the 'modus tradendi.' Every belief and custom which the Church of one age hands down to its successors is in one sense a tradition; and in many places the word 'tradition' is used as it is by St. Paul, so as not to determine anything as to the way in which the tradition comes—'Hold fast the traditions which you have received, whether by word or our epistle.' It is evident that any pas-

sage of this kind is misapplied if it be supposed to indicate a preference of oral tradition over the written Word.

With these cautions we might be well content to allow the question concerning Scripture and tradition to be determined by tradition alone; for, if anything can be established by tradition, there is a clear and full tradition to prove that the Scriptures are a full and perfect rule of faith; that they contain the whole Word of God; and that what is outside of them need not be regarded. To go into the details of the proof would scarcely be suitable to a *viva voce* lecture; for there would be little profit in reading out a string of passages which I could not expect you to remember. I will, therefore, refer you to the second part of Taylor's *Dissuasive*\* for a complete catena of Fathers establishing by their consent this principle, which no Father denies. And I am sure that there is no Roman Catholic doctrine disputed by us for which anything like so complete a tradition can be cited. I merely give you, as a sample, the following from St. Basil.† 'Without doubt it is a most manifest fall from faith, and a most certain sign of pride, to introduce anything that is not written in the Scriptures, our blessed Saviour having said, "My sheep hear My voice, and the voice of strangers they will not hear"; and to detract from Scripture, or to add anything to the faith that is not there, is most manifestly forbidden by the Apostle saying, "If it be but a man's testament, no man addeth thereto." 'In the same context St. Basil declares that he will only sparingly employ any words which, though they express the doctrine of Scripture, are not found in Scripture itself. I may remind you, in passing, how the dislike to employ a non-Scriptural phrase deterred many who were perfectly orthodox in doctrine from adopting the (ὁμοούσιος) of the Nicene Creed. In another treatise:‡ on the duties of different stations of life, having given a section to the duties of Christian teachers, he comes to the duties of hearers, and the first duty he names is, 'Those who are instructed in the Scriptures ought to test the things that are said by their teachers, and to receive what agrees with the Scriptures, and to reject what disagrees.' He establishes this caution by the texts, 'If thine eye offend thee,' &c.: 'A stranger they will not follow, but will flee from him; for they know not the voice of a stranger'; 'Though we or an angel from heaven preach any Gospel to you besides that ye have received, let him be anathema'—a text, I may observe, forcibly used for the same purpose by St. Augustine.§ And lastly, St.

---

\* The young reader may be cautioned that the *Opus Imperfectum* on St. Matthew which Taylor accepted as Chrysostom's is now known not to be his.

† *De Fide*, Garnier's Ed., ii. 313.

‡ *Moralia*. Reg. 72, vol. ii., p. 428.

§ *Cont. litt. Petiliani*, III. 6, vol. ix. 301.

Basil uses the text, 'Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.' Uneducated persons, who cannot read the Scriptures, are recommended by St. Basil to trust their teachers according as they see the fruits of the Spirit manifested in their life.

So much for an Eastern witness. For a Western I cannot take a better than St. Cyprian, because, as his controversy was with the Bishop of Rome, the quotation will also serve to show how little the supremacy or infallibility of the Roman See was acknowledged in the third century. Cyprian, as you no doubt know, opposed the then existing custom of the Church which acknowledged the validity of baptism conferred by heretics, contending that the claims of custom must give way to those of truth. He was resisted by Stephen, Bishop of Rome, who, in the vehemence of his opposition, transgressed all the bounds of charity, and proceeded so far as to excommunicate those who differed from him. Now, the question is, not who was right in that particular dispute, but what were the principles on which the Fathers of the Church then argued. Cyprian thus writes to another bishop,\* 'I have sent you a copy of the answer which our brother Stephen has sent to our letter, on reading which you will mark the error of him who endeavours to maintain the cause of heretics against the Church of God; for, among other things, either insolent or irrelevant, or self-contradictory, which he has rashly and thoughtlessly written, he has added this: "if anyone come to us from any heresy whatever, let no innovation be made on the tradition that hands be laid on him unto repentance." I may interrupt my quotation to say, that it appears to me clear, from the other documents of this controversy, that Stephen had put forward his succession from St. Peter, and had demanded that the traditional practice of the Roman Church in this matter should be accepted, as having been delivered to it by St. Peter and St. Paul. 'No innovation on the tradition,' cries St. Cyprian. 'Whence comes that tradition? Does it descend from the authority of our Lord and the *Gospels*? Does it come from the commands and *Epistles* of the Apostles? God testifies that we must do the things that are *written*, saying to Joshua, "the Book of the law shall not depart from thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate in it day and night, that thou mayest observe to do all that is written in it." Likewise, the Lord, when He sent His Apostles, commanded them to baptize all nations, and to teach them to observe whatsoever He commanded. If, therefore, it is commanded, either in the *Gospels*, or in the *Apostolic Epistles*, or in the *Acts*, that those coming from any heresy should not be baptized, but only hands laid on them, *then* this is a Divine tradition, and let it be observed; but if in these

---

\* Ep. 74, *Ad Pompeium*.

books heretics are called nothing but adversaries and anti-Christ; if we are told to avoid them as perverse and self-condemned, why should we not condemn those who, the Apostle witnesses, are self-condemned?' Plainly, Cyprian here maintains that the way to find out what traditions are genuine is not to take the word of the Bishop of Rome, but to search the Scriptures as the only trustworthy record of Apostolic tradition. As he says further on in the same letter, 'What do you do when the water in a conduit fails? You go back to the source.'

In this controversy the African bishops had extensive support in the East; in particular, the Churches of Asia Minor, who had been alienated from Rome by their quartodeciman practice, took part strongly against Stephen; and their leading bishop, Firmilian of Cappadocia, writing to Cyprian, rejects Stephen's authority in language more angry and contemptuous than Cyprian's. Dionysius of Alexandria interfered in the interests of peace. But what really silenced the controversy was the persecution which descended with equal weight on both parties, and gave alike to Stephen and to Cyprian opportunity to witness, that, whatever their differences, the cause of Christ was dear to both.

On the question of heretical baptism we have, as often happens, Father opposed to Father, and the views of Cyprian are refuted by Augustine; but the very disagreement brings out the fact, that there is a point on which all the Fathers are agreed, namely, the infinite superiority of Scripture to every other source of proof. Cyprian's doctrine about heretical baptism was an innovation at the time, as we may easily gather from the stand he takes on Scripture against tradition; and, as you know, it was not ultimately adopted by the Church. But his arguments were most acceptable to the followers of Donatus, who, in their controversy with St. Augustine, pressed him continually with the authority of that martyr saint, whose credit every where in the Church was so great, but naturally more particularly so in Africa. Now, Augustine differed from Cyprian in not thinking Scripture proof to be necessary in order to show a custom to be Apostolical. He thought, on the contrary, that the existence in the Church, from time immemorial, of a custom the origin of which could not be traced to a decree of a Council, or in any other such way accounted for, afforded a reasonable presumption that the custom was Apostolical. However this may be, I agree with him in thinking that the usage of the Church was justification enough for not re-baptizing those who had received heretical baptism. And when he was pressed by Cyprian's authority he replied, 'You are ever throwing in our teeth Cyprian's opinions, Cyprian's letters, Cyprian's council. Who knows not that the Canonical Scripture of the Old and New Testament is contained within certain limits, and that *its* authority is so far to be

preferred to all later letters of bishops, that no question can be raised whether what is found therein be true and right? Whereas the letters of bishops written after the settling of the Canon may be checked by the wiser language of any writer who happens to have more knowledge of the matter in question, or by the weightier authority of other bishops, and the skill of learned men, or by Councils; and particular or provincial Councils again must yield to the authority of General Councils gathered from the whole Christian world. Nay, earlier General Councils themselves may be corrected by later.’\* And again, in graceful language, which gives due weight to the authority of Cyprian, while it refuses to set any uninspired authority on the level of Scripture: ‘but now, seeing that which thou recitest is not Canonical, with that liberty to which the Lord hath called me, I do not receive the opinion different from Scripture of that man to whose praise I cannot reach, to whose great learning I do not compare my writings, whose genius I love, in whose spirit I delight, whose charity I admire, whose martyrdom I reverence.’†

I must not weary you with quotations; but you may take it as a general rule that there is not a Father who, if his own belief is demanded for something not contained in Scripture which he is not disposed to accept, will not reply in some such language as St. Jerome: ‘This, because it has not authority from the Scriptures, is with the same easiness despised as approved.’‡: ‘As we accept those things that are written, so we reject those things that are not written.’§ ‘These things which they invent, as if by Apostolic tradition, without the authority of Scripture, the sword of God smites.’\*\* You will see, then, that if we were at the desire of the Romish advocates to leave the Scriptures and resort to the Fathers of the early Church for a decision of our controversies, these very Fathers would send us back to the Scriptures as the only guide to truth, the only safeguard against heresy.

It is proper to mention the only set-off that I know of that can be made to the otherwise unanimous teaching of the Fathers on this subject it is Tertullian’s treatise on Prescription. And at first sight it might seem that this is opposed to our views, for the main point it is intended to establish is, that we ought not to argue with heretics out of the Scripture, but put them down by an appeal to antiquity or to the authority of the Church. And in reading this tract we recognize, with a little surprise, some of the arguments Roman Catholics

---

\* *De Bapt. Cant. Donatt.* II. 4, vol. ix., p. 98.

† *Cont. Crescon.* II. 40, vol. ix., p. 430.

‡ *in Matth.* xxiii. 35.

§ *Adv. Helvid.*

\*\* *in Aggaei Proph. cap. i. II.*

are in the habit of employing against us. Now, in the first place, I must observe, that it is a misrepresentation of the sentiments of the Fathers, as it would be of any set of men, when arguments which they have used in one controversy are applied to another which was not in their minds when they were writing. Very few people are such cautious disputants as not occasionally to use arguments which prove too much; which, though very effective for the immediate purpose to which they are applied, might on another occasion prove very inconvenient. Not infrequently at the present day Roman Catholics and Protestants arguing together, use arguments which an infidel might retort with effect against either; or, conversely, men arguing against infidels use principles which a Roman Catholic might be glad to have admitted.

Now, on looking into this treatise on Prescription, you will find that nothing could be further from the mind of its author than to inculcate a belief in any doctrine not contained in Scripture. Neither here nor elsewhere does Tertullian show a wish to do so. The doctrines which in this tract Tertullian desires to defend are the most elementary Articles of the Creed, and all lie on the very surface of the Bible. You will find that there was reason in Tertullian's assertion, that it was not possible to dispose of the heretics with whom he had to deal by Scripture arguments: for you can only argue with people on principles which you and they hold in common, and the Scriptures were not common ground between the Church and the heretics of the second century. The Gnostic heretics whom he had in view denied the most fundamental Articles of the Christian faith. Their theories made matter the root of all evil: consequently, they could not believe that the Supreme Being, whom they called the Good God, was the Creator of the world—a work which they attributed to some subordinate or even hostile Being. This Being they took to be the God of the Jews, who in the Old Testament had claimed the work of creation as His own; consequently, they held that the Old Testament was contrary to the New, and that Jesus was not the Messiah of the Jewish prophets. They could not believe that Christ had assumed a material body, that He had been really born, or really died, or that there would be any future resurrection of the body. Now, you can well believe that it was labour lost to argue out of the Scriptures with people who held such views as these. You could tell them nothing as to the difference between their teaching and that of the Bible that they must not have known perfectly well before you spoke to them.

They were prepared, however, with different modes of meeting the difficulty. They generally claimed to be in the possession of secret traditions of our Lord or His Apostles; for it was in the Gnostic sects that the idea of supplementing or superseding Scripture by tradition was first conceived. They had a

number of Gospels of their own containing these traditions, while they rejected some of the most inconvenient parts of our Canonical books. But one sect, the Valentinians, were content with the Church Canon, finding that the allegorical method of interpretation which prevailed in Egypt, the birthplace of that sect, might be used with as much success in eliciting the Gnostic tenets from the Bible, as it had been employed by orthodox interpreters in deriving the doctrines which they believed to be true. You can easily conceive that men who dealt in such arbitrary fashion with the Bible had no common ground on which the orthodox could battle with them by Scripture arguments. In order to refute the Gnostic pretence of secret traditions, the Churches took pains to establish their own connection with the Apostles, so as to make it appear that if any such traditions there were, it must be the Churches which had the possession of them. It was with this object that we find pains first taken to trace the succession of bishops; for whatever opinion you may entertain as to the form of Church government in the primitive Church, this, at least, is indisputable, that at the beginning of the last quarter of the second century there were bishops everywhere, and no memory survived that any other form of government had ever existed. Several of the great Churches claimed to be able to give lists of their bishops reaching up to the Apostles' times, and so they conceived that they established their right against the Gnostics to be regarded as the sole possessors of genuine Apostolic traditions. With this explanation you can better appreciate the line taken by Tertullian in his treatise on Prescription, a legal term with which Tertullian, as an advocate, was familiar, his object being to bar time right of these heretics to argue out of Scripture at all.

Tertullian begins by refuting the two principles, on one or other of which must rest the Gnostic claim to have a secret tradition unknown to the Church at large. This would imply either that the Apostles did not know the whole truth, or that, knowing it, they did not communicate it to those whom they taught. In disproving these two suppositions, Tertullian, at the same time, demolishes the modern theory of Development. Then complaining that no satisfactory result is arrived at by arguing out of Scripture with heretics, who either did not acknowledge the books received by the Church, or who mutilated and corrupted them, or who distorted their meaning by perverse interpretation, he proposes a shorter method of dealing with them, namely, to deny their right to use the Scriptures at all. The Scriptures had been given, not to them, but to the Churches who agreed in doctrine with Tertullian. Consult any of the Churches to which the Apostolic letters had been written. If you are in Achaia, consult Corinth; if in Macedonia, consult the Church of Philippi; if in Italy, or, like those whom Tertullian addressed, in Africa, consult the neighbouring Church

of Rome, and you will find all those Churches agree in maintaining the same doctrine. Now truth is uniform, but it is the very nature of error to be continually assuming new shapes. If the Churches had erred they would have erred after many different fashions. Whence, then, arises this surprising agreement in error? The single point that the same doctrine is maintained by so many different Churches, situate in distant quarters of the globe, affords a strong presumption of its truth. Where one and the same thing is found among many, this is not error but tradition. And lastly, truth came first, error afterwards : we cannot believe that the Gospel was for so many years wrongly preached, so many thousands wrongly baptized, so many miracles wrongly wrought, so many martyrdoms wrongly crowned, and that all this time truth was waiting for Marcion or Valentinus to set her free,

Such is the argument of the treatise on Prescription.\* It is an argument from tradition independent of Scripture; and if we had to own it to be a bad one, Tertullian would be neither the first nor the last who has defended a good cause by weak arguments. But I will not be deterred from saying, that I think the argument, on the whole, a good and successful one, even though Romanists do employ somewhat similar arguments against ourselves. For, first, as I said before, we may believe that tradition could successfully carry the knowledge of the facts stated in the Apostles' Creed through a century without believing that it could carry the doctrine of Pope Pius's Creed through nineteen. Tertullian uses the argument, where was your religion before Marcion or Valentinus? and I think it a good one even though Roman Catholics do ask us, Where was your religion before Martin Luther? If what Luther or Calvin taught was really as great novelty in the history of Christianity, and as unlike what had been taught before as what Valentinus taught was when it appeared, we should do well in rejecting it. What we receive we accept, because we believe it to be, not new error, but old truth. And, lastly, the argument from the unity of different Churches, which Tertullian argued with so much force, loses all its power in the hands of Roman Catholics. That a number of different and widely separated Churches, each of which was, a century ago, in direct and independent communication with the Apostles, should now all agree in teaching the same doctrines, affords a strong presumption that those doctrines are Apostolic; but that a number of different Churches who are all in direct communication with the Bishop of Rome, and who are taught that they are bound to submit to him implicitly, and that it is a sin to reject any thing which he teaches to them, that

---

\* In this argument Tertullian is much indebted to Irenæus. See, in particular, the beginning of his third book.

these should all agree in teaching the same doctrine proves no more than that the doctrine is Roman. In order that an argument from agreement of witnesses should have any force, it is absolutely necessary that the witnesses should be independent. If a number of manuscript copies, written by different persons from the same original, agree, that agreement furnishes a strong presumption of the correctness of their common reading; but that several copies of the same edition of a printed book agree proves nothing at all. Thus the tyranny of Rome cuts her off from the use of this topic of evidence to the truth of her teaching. If there are any remedies which are recognized as effectual by physicians of different countries, brought up in different schools, it may be presumed that such remedies really have the merits ascribed to them; but it proves nothing in favour of Holloway's pills, that those sold by different vendors, in different towns, turn out on analysis to be exactly the same. In short, the agreement of different Churches, in teaching the same doctrine, undoubtedly proves that this teaching must have had a common origin; but the question remains, whether that common origin was the teaching of the Apostles, or whether we can trace this concordant teaching to a common origin very much later than the Apostles. I have spent all this time on Tertullian's treatise, because I thought that fairness required me to dwell on what seemed to make against us, even though it be quite an exception to the general tenor of Patristical language and practice with regard to the controversial use of Scripture; while I have passed over in a summary way all that made for us, because it seemed superfluous to bring up one witness after another all to say the same thing.