

More's Dialogue Concerning Heresies And the Idea of the Church

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In Overview

A central theme in the first and second parts of Thomas More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*¹ is the idea of the visible Catholic Church as the guardian of the true Christian faith. By attending to the way in which More uses the dialogue form to develop this idea—that without a single, living, authoritative Church, there would be no reliable means of living the faith, much less any standard for disproving heretical doctrine—we gain invaluable insights into More's substantive teachings as well as the rhetorical strategies he uses to impart them. More's own persona in the *Dialogue* does not lecture on ecclesiology; the idea of the Church is revealed through friendly discussion and dispute. This was the Humanist ideal that More and Erasmus championed: Good faith criticism of Catholicism's failings, conducted in a spirit of humility, with the aim of true reformation in light of the careful linguistic scholarship and accepted doctrine, as developed by the Church fathers—in contrast to the prideful, egoistic revolution that those great friends saw in Luther and Tyndale's Reformation.

Ultimately, the Church revealed in More's *Dialogue* is a mystical person. Through humanist dialogue, true learning comes to be seen as a personal, not a solitary, pursuit. Rhetorical form thereby parallels substantive development, as the gracious give and take between More's persona and the Messenger is seen as a remedy to the error-prone methodology of *sola scriptura*. Indeed, it is that methodology with which More's persona will have to contend repeatedly throughout the *Dialogue*. As John Henry Newman would point out centuries later in his great work of ecclesiology: When critics of the Church disavow historical inquiry into doctrine, “they are forced whether they will or not, to fall back upon the Bible as the sole source of Revelation, and upon their own personal private judgment as the sole expounder of its doctrine” (Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Introduction § 4 [Univ. Notre Dame 1989, Ker, ed.]).

¹ References to the *Dialogue* shall be to Saint Thomas More, *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, rendered in modern English by M. Gottschalk (Scepter 2006).

Against *sola scriptura*, More posits the Church's necessary role as teacher. Because every text—sacred scripture not excepted—requires interpretation, there must be consistent standards of interpretation if there is to be a single, Christian faith. Books do not teach themselves; learning requires a teacher. As opposed to Luther's ideal of the believer alone with his Bible, More posits the believer reading and discussing the Bible in the company of—in communion with—the company of faithful Christians, with the Church as teacher, listening to the wisdom of the ages expressed through the Church Fathers. As such, the *Dialogue* demonstrates how the questing Christian, even one of a relatively skeptical nature, can enter into discussion with a patient teacher and find his way to truth—through persuasion, not force.

In historical context, the *Dialogue* sounds a poignant counterpoint to the violence of the Reformation. Indeed, More's depiction of the sack of Rome in the final part of the work serves as the frightening alternative to the civilized path More advocates.

Development of "The Church"

A chronological survey of the references to the Church in the *Dialogue* shows how More develops the idea of an identifiable, authoritative church on earth. This development is central to the first two parts of the *Dialogue* in which the idea takes shape. Once in place and accepted by the Messenger, it provides a foundation for the argument in parts III and IV.

Introduction and Friend's Letter

In order to prepare his reader for the dialogue itself, More's persona addresses the reader to explain the work's genesis and purpose. Apparently in passing, More reflects on the general purpose of writing itself—as an aid to memory and close reflection on complex issues. This understanding will anticipate the recurring *sola scriptura* debate. For More, the written word is not the source of knowledge or the end of thinking, but rather a means to understanding.

More's persona is also depicted as embodying the humble manner the *Dialogue* will advocate as being proper to a Christian believer and humanist scholar. More admits his need of advice and counselors more knowledgeable than he on matters of faith—this presumes the existence of settled dogma and experts thereon. He also explains the editorial process he used in preparing the *Dialogue* for publication: The draft was circulated to three wise readers; More would abide by editorial suggestions proposed by majority of them. Therefore, from the start, More's persona adopts a humble attitude. His work does not claim to set out his own novel teachings, but to give voice to teachings that rest on authority and consensus. As T.M.C. Lawler points out (in his interpretive essay, "General View of the *Dialogue*: An Anatomy of Heresy" in *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of Thomas More*, Vol. 6, pt. II, p. 448), "The Bible, like the *Dialogue*, is the imperfect record of an oral tradition. This, basically, is the orthodox argument against *sola scriptura* that More painstakingly explains to the Messenger."

In the letter of introduction from the author's friend on behalf of his close personal friend, the Messenger, the friend identifies "free and easy conversation" as a remedy for religious error. The friend, reflecting on the time he had recently spent in More's company, remarks that free speech and good humor are necessary for a fruitful conversation (44-45). Of course, More emphasized the critical importance of those two attributes in humanist works like *Utopia* as well as in his political address, the "Petition for Freedom of Speech" in 1523.

Book I, Part 2

More's first reference to the Church occurs in the context of the Messenger's assertion that he and his student friends desire to understand why certain persons and doctrines had recently been condemned as being heretical. More refers to his natural and practical adherence, as a layperson, on the "common faith and belief of Christ's church" as the source of belief as to true religious doctrine and the standard for determining heterodoxy (59). The substance of faith, More asserts, is the collection of practices and teachings received by the apostles from Christ and passed on to us through the mediation of "the saintly Fathers." In this transmission of doctrine, the essential supposition is the active working of the Holy Spirit as guide.

This long chapter is especially important because it draws deeply on the humanist tradition. In response to contemporary iconoclastic arguments voiced by the Messenger, More explains that contemporary church practices have been maintained over time because they respond to a felt, psychological need in diverse believers of all times. The iconoclastic arguments rest, in contrast, on overly logical scriptural interpretations that ignore biblical context and human nature. For instance, More concedes that it would be error to worship saints, images, or relics as if they were God—but the Church has never endorsed such worship and the common people understand that religious images point beyond themselves to the mystical reality that the Church intends them to worship.

In a brilliant rhetorical twist, More takes aim at the doctrine of *sola scriptura* by pointing out that all words and names, whether spoken or written, "are but images" (69). A believer who reverences the image of a saint or a crucifix is much like a person who loves another and takes delight in an image of his beloved. The lover no more believes the image to be his beloved than the believer confuses the saint, relic, or crucifix for God himself (69). In a Humanistic appeal to the Gospel against iconoclasm, More draws on St. Mary Magdalene's celebrated anointing of Jesus. If one adopts the iconoclastic rationale against "the old, ancient customs of Christ's church, mocking the setting up of candles, making silly wisecracks, asking with blasphemous mockery whether God and his saints lack light, or whether it is night with them, that they cannot see without candles," Mary's act of love would deserve the same kind of mockery. Hers too was a ritualistic act of devotion with no apparent practical benefit (71-72).² It follows that the adherent to *sola scriptura* is simultaneously giving scripture an unwonted primacy and debasing true and scripturally derived methods of reverence.

In the following chapter, in opposition to the Messenger's assertion that pilgrimages, veneration of saints, etc., are deviations from the true faith, More speaks of the devout rites and ceremonies of the Church being passed down from hand to hand from the time of the Apostles. Pilgrimages to places where God was especially present fits nicely with the idea that God acted in history with particular persons in identifiable places, which in turn is consistent with the belief in a living, active Church. Here, we see another recurring theme: the distinction between an acceptable teaching or ritual that promotes Church teaching and its corruption by individual lay persons or clergy who lack understanding or who intentionally abuse the practice or doctrine for personal gain.

In chapter 3, More elaborates on these points. To this day, reverent members of the clergy and laity are so committed to pilgrimages that he believes "this devotion to be in such a way planted by God's own hand in the hearts of the whole Church—that is to say, not the clergy alone, but the

² In part 1, chapter 18, More explains the Gospel foundation for another ritual, one that also places the veneration of Mary on Gospel foundation—keeping a candle burning in her honor during the Tenebrae lessons, when the ones symbolizing the apostles and disciples are extinguished one by one, to memorialize that the latter fled or faltered in faith, while she alone remained faithful (134).

whole congregation of all Christian people...” (77). Here, the definition of the Church broadly encompasses all those who reverence the

devout rites and ceremonies of the Church, both those in the liturgy (such as incensing, the hallowing of the fire, of the font, of the Paschal Lamb candle) and, moreover, the exorcisms, benedictions, and holy, esoteric gestures used in the Consecration or in the administration of the consecrated hosts. All of those holy things—many a one of which was from hand to hand passed down in the Church from the time of Christ’s apostles, and by them left to us as it was by God taught to them.... (78)

In part 1, chapter 5, More appeals to “the faith of Christ’s church, by the common accord of which these matters are settled” with “custom as a bona fide Christian and meritorious virtue” (85). Once again, the idea of the Church and membership therein consist in active adherence to the recognized teachings and practices that have developed over time.

Book I, Part 18

More defines the Church as “the whole congregation of Christian people professing his name and his faith and abiding in the body of the same, not being excommunicated and cut off” (133).³ This definition is made in the context of addressing the Church’s interpretation of the Gospel. The argument is grounded on Gospel accounts of the early church and in Christ’s recorded statements as being intended for all, not only for the Apostles to whom they were directly addressed. This implies the active, continuous reliance on Christ and the Holy Spirit as inspiring and guiding the Church.

It should also be noted that More defines “articles of faith” (136) as those doctrines or strictures that are necessary to believe. This defined term will be used as More develops his understanding of the Church. The “church of Christ” is referred to as the source of knowledge of those articles of faith—the normative standard upon which we can judge if we have fallen away. The Church must have an understanding of those articles of faith, otherwise there would be no unifying force or standard—this is a practical, rational inference based on Gospel accounts: that Christ intended to establish his church on earth as a guide to the faithful throughout the ages.

Book I, Part 19

A decisive turning point occurs in the *Dialogue* when the Messenger concedes that if Christ meant his church to last, it must have a single, unifying, and unerring faith (137). The Messenger affirms “that the Church cannot err in the right faith that it is necessary to believe, which is given and always kept in the Church by God” (138). This not only places primacy on the church with regard to faith, but implies that its members must believe in the truths the Church obliges them to believe. For purposes of the specific points of contention—whether it is Christian to believe in the propriety of praying to saints, venerating images and relics, making pilgrimages to shrines—it follows that the resolution turns on whether the Church endorses them.

More will re-emphasize these postulates in Book 1, Part 21 with special regard to scriptural interpretation, when he explains that their discussion has established two points as “true and intelligible to a Christian as any axiom of Euclid’s geometry.... Christ’s church cannot err in any

³ Later, in responding to Tyndale’s New Testament translation, More will criticize Tyndale for translating “ecclesia” as “congregation,” instead of “church” because it departs from traditional usage in order to conceal a doctrinal revolution.

article that God wills that it is necessary to believe” and, therefore, scripture cannot contradict those essential points of doctrine (148).

Book I, Part 20

Almost immediately, however, the Messenger has doubts and questions whether Christ’s continuing presence and guidance could be found in sacred scripture instead. *Contra sola scriptura*, More posits that the Bible itself shows that Christ taught by “mouth and inspiration” (142). If that is the model on which Christians are to learn their faith, then it requires a personal, living teacher—the church, not the Bible. Moreover, his presence in the sacraments administered by the Church testifies against the Messenger’s position.

Book I, Part 22

More responds to the Messenger’s running attack on humanist learning and reason as an impediment to the pure study of scripture. More explains how humanist learning, rightly undertaken, is an aid to theology. The root problem in misguided learning as to philosophy or theology is pride (and the solution to that problem is, therefore, humility). That is, there is nothing inherently wrong with humanist science and its application to religious matters. Scripture speaks through the church and particularly through the Fathers. As humanists do with the ancient thinkers, contemporary theologians should listen with humility to the Fathers—in communion with them. The danger of the version of scholarship the Messenger endorses—purged of any reliance on the Fathers—is that reason will be used egoistically, cut off from the persons who formed the ideas and doctrines we have inherited. There seems to be an implicit analogy to theologians of Dorp’s ilk, who reason from a set of abstract principles—as contrasted with the Erasmian approach of Gospel-based interpretation, guided by the Fathers and supported by careful translation.

Book I, Part 25

More, returning to the question of whether sacred scripture needs authoritative interpretation, points out that scripture itself demonstrates God has primarily taught his people through means other than the written word. After explaining that God imparted the knowledge of moral law to men before providing them with scripture, he discusses Moses and the written law of the commandments, pointing out that the written word was not sufficient:

And for the perceiving and good understanding of the written law, he sent always some good men whose words, right living, and sometimes also manifest miracles performed therewith, never left destitute of sufficient knowledge those who longed to learn the Law. (169-170)

Scripture itself—for example, the conversion of St. Paul—shows that teaching the faith comes through secret inspiration and “Christ’s holy mouth”—not primarily by writing, “only by conversation and preaching.” (1:25:171). At this point in the *Dialogue*, More provides a key metaphor: “And so fitting this was, for the law of life to be written in the living minds of human beings rather than in the dead skins of animals.” (Ibid.) Again, More grounds this understanding on the evidence of Gospel itself: “And no evangelist was there, or any apostle, who by writing ever

sent the faith to any nation unless there were first instructed by spoken word and God had begun his church in that place” (172).

Here we also find More’s first reference to the “Catholic Church” (175). More has shown that the source of faith is the words spoken by Christ to the Apostles and relayed to us, which are preserved and imparted by the church (not by scripture). In history, with the establishment of the church, the truth of Christ’s teachings is preserved by the working of the Holy Spirit. More refers to the “common faith of the Catholic Church,” meaning the core beliefs and practices from Christ to the Apostles to the Fathers—a development often in response to the challenge of preserving the faith and refining doctrine in face of challenges by heretical beliefs. As this is an encounter between persons—ultimately between Christ and the believer—it makes sense that the church be named.

More concludes that without a source of true beliefs, the Church—meaning an identifiable congregation of Christians—could not survive. Because people by nature will fall into error, there must be a constant, identifiable source of true doctrine if the faith is to survive.

Book I, Part 26

In response to the argument that scripture is the final authority as to God’s word, More equates the faith of the Church with the word of God spoken to the Church (180)—the Church is the collective person who is the final authority on questions of faith (190). As such, it makes perfect sense for the believer to place his trust in the scriptural interpretations of this mystical person/teacher—even when they seem to conflict with a particular reading of the Bible.

Book I, Part 28

More defines the church as the people who “have always the knowledge of how to serve and please our Lord” (204). This requires knowledge of specific doctrines understood as being true. *Sola scriptura* cannot work, logically or practically, because words and texts must be interpreted to be understood. This requires a teacher who can apply settled principles of interpretation. The church fills that role. As scriptural support for his argument, More invokes Pentecost, with God as creator of the church. As the eternal teacher of the church on earth throughout history, the Holy Spirit “shall always again teach the Church of new the old lessons of Christ” (208). This sentence with its blending of past, present, and the eternal conveys the timelessness of church teaching and beautifully portrays the notion of the mystical personhood of the church as a living source of communion with the living God.

Book II

The central point concerning the church in Book I was that the church cannot err on central points of faith, but rather is the teacher who sets the standards for interpreting scripture. The Messenger objects, asking what if the Catholic Church is not the true church? How do we identify the Church on earth?

When More proposes the answer that the *Dialogue’s* argument has repeatedly identified—the Church consists of the persons who are in communion with the Catholic Church—the Messenger offers two alternatives. Asserting that the true church must be comprised of those who will enter the kingdom of heaven, he first argues that membership must be limited to the predestinate. More,

however, points out that from a human perspective such persons do not form an identifiable group. Moreover, since a person destined for heaven might well live most of his life in sin, the Messenger's first alternative does not succeed the Messenger's purpose of identifying a church that excludes sinners from membership.

The second alternative, debated in Part 4, has a very modern sensibility. The Messenger proposes that the Church consists of good persons—those who “believe aright and live well,” without regard to formal church affiliation. That is, the true church has no worldly identity. As More counters, however, such an unknown, secret church does not correspond to the visible church of Christ's teachings as founded by the Apostles. Nor would it serve its intended purposes of converting non-believers to a single faith or helping believers to persevere in that faith—how would those persons who search for the faith hope to find it? How could they identify authoritative doctrines or practices?

In a masterful maneuver, More brings the Messenger back to the essential point he had previously admitted, by asking whether the hypothetical unknown Church would have the same single faith as the Church. If so, the secret church would have the same position on relics, saints, etc... as the Catholic Church (231). Having to concede the point, the Messenger argues the secret true church might nevertheless take the opposing position—that such practices are erroneous and idolatrous. But, counters More, if that were true, how would a person know how to choose which of the various churches had the authoritative doctrine. At that point, the Messenger again falls back on scripture: “‘They might,’ said he, ‘come upon Scripture’” (232).

More's comeback to this by now almost comic response is quick and decisive—and scripture-based. “‘They would,’ said I, ‘there be like the eunuch who could not understand without a teacher [see Acts 8:27-39]. And then if they came upon a wrong teacher of a wrong church, everything would be distorted’” (232). The *Dialogue* does not recapitulate the story of the Ethiopian's inability to understand a passage from Isaiah and his request for a teacher. Nor does More point out that it was the Holy Spirit who sent the Apostle Phillip to serve as teacher. But the Messenger and the reader would know the story well.

In his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Newman makes the same point from a post-Reformation perspective. The notion that the Bible provides an infallible guide to the faith that rivals and supplants the supremacy of the church fails because scripture was “not adapted or intended to subserve that purpose.” (*Essay on The Development of Christian Doctrine*, ch. II, sect.II (12), at 88.) “We are told,” he continues,

that God has spoken. Where? In a book? We have tried it and it disappoints; it disappoints us, that most holy and blessed gift, not from fault of its own, but because it is used for a purpose for which it was not given. The Ethiopian's reply, when St. Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading, is the voice of nature: ‘How can I, unless some man shall guide me?’ The Church undertakes that office; she does what none else can do, and this is the secret of her power.”⁴ (*Ibid.*)

⁴ This essential understanding is most recently found in an issuance of July 2007 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to clarify the Second Vatican Council's teaching that the Church founded by Christ “subsists in the Catholic Church.” The commentary began by explaining that the Magisterium had not changed over time, but that through development, doctrine had “deepened” and been “articulated it in a more organic way.” On the critical question, the commentary explained first why the Church established by Christ could not have more than one subsistence on earth. If that were the case, we would have to imagine the Church of Christ as the sum total of the existent Churches or the ecclesial Communities, or to think that the Church of Christ no longer exists today concretely—but existent “only in some ideal form emerging either through some future convergence or through the reunification of the diverse sister Churches, to be hoped for and achieved through dialogue.” Protection of the Church's “unity and unicity” therefore required subsistence in a single entity.

More follows up with other scriptural examples showing how Christ and the apostles intended the church to be identifiable and active in guiding and correcting God's people. In that context, More offers a definition of the church that includes his first reference to the Pope—"all Christian people whom we call the Church, under obedience to the pope" (236).

At this point in the argument, More adds a final component to the *Dialogue's* understanding of the church. He explains why the church must include sinners in its membership. To be an existent church—rather than a mere ideal or a fancy—it must consist of persons, good and bad. As a real, visible presence, the church "must necessarily be the common, known multitude of Christian people, good and bad together, as long as the Church is here on earth" (237). This means on the one hand that, as an institution made up of fallen persons, the church will contain sinners and be liable to corruption. But, on the other, under guidance of the Holy Spirit, it cannot err on the essentials of faith.

In another metaphor that emphasizes the mystical personhood of the church, More describes the church as a sick, erring person for whom Christ is the loyal spouse, teacher and physician. Of course, that metaphor is consistent with the teachings of St. Augustine and the Fathers. It also finds current expression by the faithful in the liturgy of the Eucharist—the invocations to "Strengthen in faith and love your pilgrim Church on earth" and, at the Sign of Peace, to "Look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church, and grant us the peace and unity of your kingdom where you live for ever and ever."

Book III

The Messenger returns to the theme that percolated thorough the first two Books: is scripture or the church the ultimate authority on faith? Now the question is raised directly in terms of the question, why believe the church, rather than scripture? More expands on a point raised in Book II: the church is antecedent to scripture, just as knowledge of God's word and will preceded scripture. Even before Moses, there existed a "number of good and right-believing folk, from whose mouths and tradition they heard the true belief" (290). The spirit of God inspires belief and knowledge, which is a precondition to faith in scripture's truth (292). Indeed, the precedence of the church over scripture is seen as a practical matter in the fact that, as More had pointed out before, it was the church that determined the canon of texts included in the Bible.

The key point More makes is that for readers of any text, as for Christians reading the Bible, it is the person's mindset—his openness to the truth and his humility and goodwill—that is the necessary starting point in journey to truth. The inherent danger of *sola scriptura* is that it dispenses with the authorities and guides that have been given to check our ignorance and arrogance.

Final Considerations

Where does More place the locus of authority in the church? From his argument, we know that ultimately, it is resides in Christ himself—but can it be identified on earth? While More gives no direct answer, I do not think he is being evasive. A clearly identifiable magisterium and hierarchy was largely a product of the Counter-Reformation. But, to More, the answer was "very simple" in

practice. In Part 1, chapter 27, the Messenger picks up on the idea that the church on earth consists of all Christians in communion with the church, good and bad together, and asks: Which party within that church should one believe? His question, practically speaking, means: If a group of Christians, who consider themselves members of the Catholic Church and who are not excommunicate, condemn an ongoing practice or advocate a new practice, how, then, do we know whether to follow that group?

In that context, building upon what has been proved so far, the answer can legitimately be viewed as simple. Church doctrine and practices originated with Christ, who taught them to the Apostles. Those teachings and practices developed from the early church and the Fathers—often in reaction to heretical movements—under the Holy Spirit’s guidance. So, at any time in history, if a new group advocates a correction or innovation to existing doctrines or practices, the burden is on that group to prove the Catholic Church had made a wrong turn at some point. It may be that the new position is a true one—a correction or addition to the true faith, rather than a deviation. But, for that, the Christian must wait to see if it finds “unanimous accord . . . either by joint determination at a general council or by a perfect persuasion and belief so received throughout Christendom . . .” (1:27:193). Remember, the question of development or correction in the *Dialogue* concerns “articles of faith” (136), meaning those doctrines that are necessary to believe. Thus, More’s repeated invocation of consensus as an essential mark of the true church finds its practical expression.

This is precisely the hermeneutic Newman employed in his ecclesiological *Essay*:

Till positive reasons grounded on facts are adduced to the contrary, the most natural hypotheses, the most agreeable to our mode of proceeding in parallel cases, and that which takes precedence over all others, is to consider that the society of Christians, which the Apostles left on earth, were of that religion to which the Apostles had converted them; that the external continuity of name, profession, and communion, argues a real continuity of doctrine; that, as Christianity began by manifesting itself as of a certain shape and bearing to all mankind, therefore it went on so to manifest itself; and that the more, considering that prophecy had already determined that it was to be a power visible in the world and sovereign over it, characters which are accurately fulfilled in that historical Christianity to which we commonly give the name. (*Essay on The Development of Christian Doctrine*, Introduction, at 5)