

The Fallibility of the Church

Ross Winn

1903

The church claims to be the interpreter of divine truth. Its ministers are the ambassadors of God—his spokesmen and advocates—and whosoever denies the church is an infidel, a blasphemer, and is to be damned here and hereafter. For sixteen centuries the church has been a dominant power. During this long period it has ruled by both spiritual and temporal authority, and its sway has been universal. It has held the purse and the sword. It has had unlimited opportunity for good and evil, and for centuries its power was undisputed. Yet, in spite of this, it has not held its ground. Its power has waned, and today it is almost swamped by the tide of “higher criticism” and open skepticism within its own fold. In the face of the evidence of its impotency, the claim of the church to be the evangel of divine will is an impudent absurdity. The church is purely a human institution. It is a structure of unstable clay, fashioned by the weak hand of human fallibility.

The church claims the credit for all that has been achieved by civilization, including civilization itself. But, as a matter of fact, the church has combatted every advance in civilization. It opposed every discovery of science. It was the relentless foe of investigation, and every superstition, every error, overthrown by discovery was defended by the church. Galileo invented the telescope, turned it to the heavens and in the book of the stars he read a new revelation that widened the horizon of human knowledge. The church imprisoned him and forced him to deny the facts he had discovered. Giordano Bruno proclaimed the fact that the world is a globe. The church burned him at the stake for that crime! It was thus the church encouraged and fostered learning and discovery! The church claimed to be infallible. Yet it was mistaken about the form of the earth, and is forced now to admit that Bruno was right—that he knew, and that it did not know. It also admits the revelations of Galileo’s telescope were correct, tho it opposed with fire and sword that revelation for six generations. The church invented two things—the thumbscrew and the rack. It discovered one fact—that knowledge is dangerous to its power. Otherwise the church, as was said of the Bourbons, never learns anything and never forgets anything.

I have no fight against religion. Every human soul big enough to hold an ideal is religious. Every intelligent man has a religion. Religion itself is a good thing, but I am a little particular about the brand. I believe in the religion of deeds, as opposed to this Sunday morning, amen-corner, sanctimonious variety, that is peddled around by long-faced parsons trying to pulverize purgatory with their puril pulpit palaver. The article of religious fervor that is long on precept and short on practice is a counterfeit. Its a plugged dime. In this day and generation of fashionable piety and \$50,000 churches, genuine religion—religion warrented for everyday home use—is

about as hard to find as a truthful newspaper editor. The woods are full of self-advertised saints the devil wouldn't have and anybody could buy in job lots, two dozen for a quarter. This fashionable church religion that promises humanity heavenly joys after it turns up its toes to the daisies and does nothing to abolish the sorrows of this world is a scintillating sham, and is as absolutely worthless as a political party platform.

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