

Salvation outside the Church and papal authority

I have a Protestant friend who has asked me two questions. I was wondering if you could help me with them. Thanks!!! First, the conclusion of the Papal Bull "Unam Sanctam" states: "Further, we declare, say, define, and pronounce it to be altogether necessary for salvation for every human creature that he be subject to the Roman pontiff." Is this saying that if I am not subject to the Pope, I am doomed? Further, Canon 9 of the Council of Trent says, "If anyone says the sinner is justified by faith alone . . . let him be anathema." This idea is also given in Canons 11, 12, and 24 of Trent. What biblical basis is there for saying our salvation lies in something outside of Christ? Second, is there any point at which Tradition supersedes Scripture? Pope Julius II removed the scriptural prohibition in Lev. 20:21 with a special dispensation allowing Henry VIII to marry his older brother's widow, Catherine. He believed that he could nullify Scripture. Was that a one-time thing or do all popes believe they have this authority?

Okay, let's briefly take the questions one at a time.

First, the conclusion of the Papal Bull "Unam Sanctam" states: "Further, we declare, say, define, and pronounce it to be altogether necessary for salvation for every human creature that he be subject to the Roman pontiff." Is this saying that if I am not subject to the Pope, I am doomed?

Unam Sanctam was written in 1302 by Pope Boniface VIII in response to the threatened interference by King Philip the Fair in Church affairs. This context is very important. The bull developed the theory that while the king had authority in temporal, worldly matters, the Church had authority in spiritual matters, to which even the king must defer.

That controversial statement quoted above has never been interpreted so narrowly as to mean that non-Catholics cannot be saved. In fact, the documents of Vatican II stress quite the opposite. However, we do know that any and all salvation comes through Christ, and through His mystical Body, the Church, even if one isn't aware of that truth (cf. Acts 4:12).

While only God knows the subjective state of any particular person, and we're judged based on how we respond to the lights and graces we've been given, the rejection of Christ and His Church (the two in a real sense have become one, see e.g. Ephesians 5:28-32) is an objectively serious problem that can only jeopardize one's chance of being saved.

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There's quite a leap here from the Church's affirmation of the biblical truth that we are not saved by faith alone to the groundless assertion that the Church says that salvation lies in something outside of Christ!

As James 2:14-17 teaches, faith that is not accompanied by works is dead. Similarly, Our Lord Himself says, “Not every one who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but He who does the will of my Father . . .” (Matthew 7:21-23). This concept appears many times in the writings of St. Paul, including in today’s reading from 2 Timothy, which affirms that biblical faith is meant to equip the man of God “for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17). It was Martin Luther who unsuccessfully attempted to remove the Letter of St. James from the Christian Bible. It’s true, though, that ecumenical strides have been made in this area.

And by the way, I always like to point out that in Acts 9:4, when Our Lord appeared to Saul (St. Paul) on the road to Damascus, He says “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Well, Our Lord had already ascended to His Father. What Saul was doing was persecuting the Church. Yet when the Church is persecuted, when Christians are persecuted, Christ is persecuted. That’s because Christ identifies with His Church. He is the head and the Church is the body. The Church is the New Israel: While we are all personally responsible for our commitment to Christ, our faith connects us not only with Christ, but also with His body, the Church.

Second, is there any point at which Tradition supersedes Scripture?

No. Scripture and Tradition are two complementary ways that the full revelation of the Word of God—Christ Himself—in transmitted to us. Since they come from the same divine well-spring, they do not supersede or contradict each other. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 76-82.

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Four comments:

(1) The Church does have authority when it comes to marriage. Marriage is of divine origin and was raised to the dignity of a Christian sacrament by Christ. So the Church Christ instituted (and not the state or the parties themselves) has jurisdiction. And so while Christ notes that because of the people’s hardness of heart Moses permitted divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4), from the beginning it was not so (Matthew 19:8-9; Mark 10:2-12), and He affirmed the indissolubility of marriage, despite what Deuteronomy says. There are various types of legislation recorded in the OT, and we can’t get into this complex subject here. But the point is that the Church, and not the Torah, is the ultimate arbiter of marriage on this side of heaven.

(2) The issue was that King Henry VIII requested and was given a dispensation so that he could marry Catherine of Aragon, who was his brother’s widow. About 15 years later, he wanted to undo the dispensation so he could marry Anne Boleyn so as to have male offspring. If we take the Catholic Church out of the picture, clearly Henry would have married Catherine of Aragon of his own accord. Then, later, he presumably would have proceeded to divorce Catherine when she couldn’t produce a male heir who could survive infancy. That’s what the Church of England would do. Yet this would be to allow divorce and remarriage--in essence, serial polygamy.

(3) Did the Pope contradict Scripture in giving Henry a dispensation in the first place? No. The cited passage from Leviticus is about an act of adultery with the wife of one's brother. In this situation, Henry's brother is deceased, so his sister-in-law is no longer married. Not only is the marriage of a deceased brother's wife permitted in the OT, but it's actually something of a duty, dating back to the time of Onan (Genesis 38:6-8). This "Levirate" or brother-in-law marriage was codified in Deuteronomy 25 and it comes up in Jesus' discourse with the Sadducees (Mark 12:18-27). Whatever one might think of the practice, the Pope didn't "nullify Scripture" in allowing it.

(4) As for Church practice in this area, according to canon law (canon 1078) there can be no dispensation from the impediment of consanguinity (blood relationships) in the direct line (i.e., you can't marry your children, grandchildren, parents, or grandparents). Nor can there be any dispensation in the second degree of the collateral line (i.e., you can't marry a sibling). In more remote relationships (as well as those involving in-laws, called "affinity"), the Church may, in rare instances and not contrary to divine law, grant a dispensation to allow the couple to get married despite the impediment.