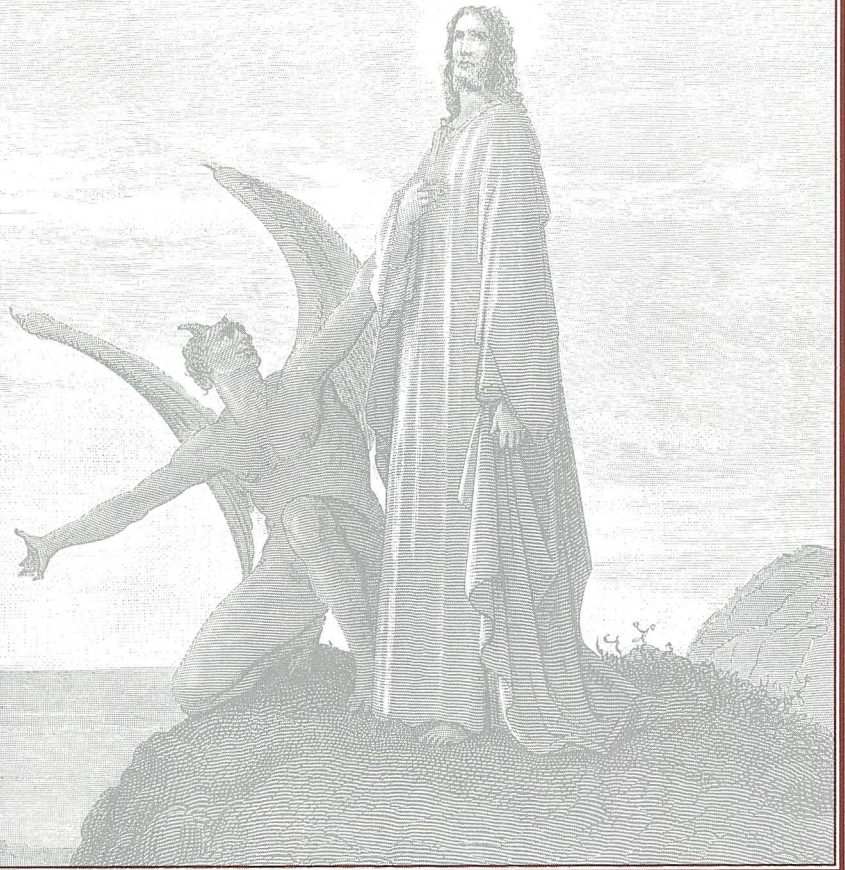


Standing with or Against the Grand Inquisitor

by Desmond Ford

*All religious organizations are
tempted to choose between the
cross or magic, mystery,
and authority*



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he *Christian Century* [Nov 6, 1991] published an article by a Christian Scien-

tist who, though loyal to his church, is perplexed by its present behavior.

Money and Mary's Biography

Stephen Gottschalk tells of a will by another church member, Knapp, who wrote a biography of Mary Baker Eddy entitled *The Destiny of Mother Church*. Knapp promised the church \$90 million if they would publish it as an authorized biography.

The problem is Knapp views Mother Eddy as someone as immaculate and important as Christ, an error Mary Baker Eddy never made; and, indeed, repudiated. (Knapp even claims that Eddy is predicted in the Bible's last book.) Here's the dilemma: the church does not officially view Mrs. Eddy as infallible or worthy to be ranked alongside God's revelation in Christ. But the church needs money.

Christian Science has not been grow-

ing in recent years; in fact, it is losing members at an appalling rate. What makes the situation worse is that current media presentations of the faith take a great deal of what the church doesn't have right now—dollars. That \$90m from one of the faithful would come in very handy indeed.

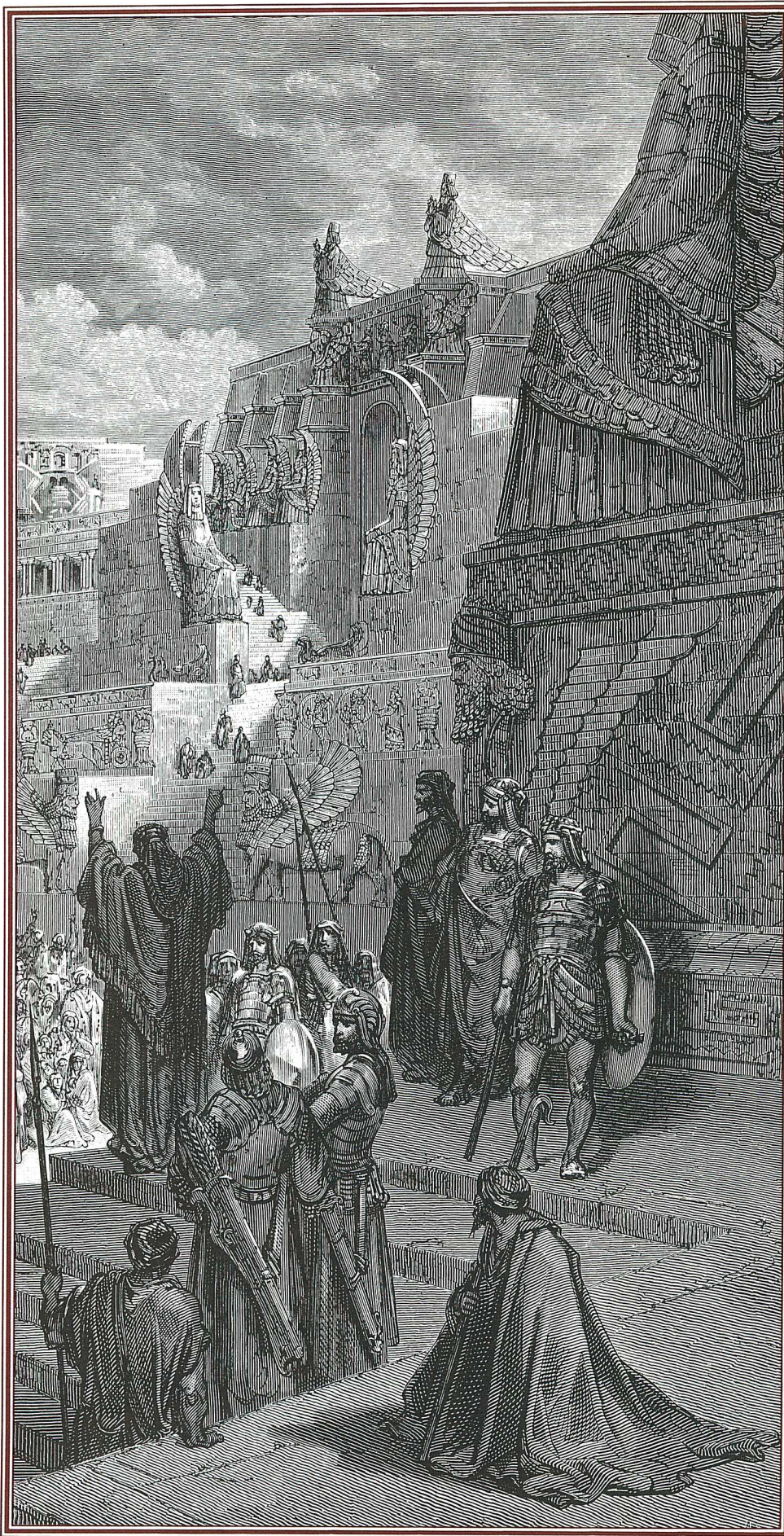
So the deed is done. The church published the book as authorized, and collected the money. In so doing it has horrified some of its best members, such as Stephen Gottschalk. Stephen says:

They are finding that in the Christian Science Church, as in any religious tradition, true unity cannot be imposed from above, any more than renewal can be manufactured. Both come from returning to the original source of the church's strength, and moving forward on the basis of loyalties that members already share.

Temptation of Magic, Mystery, and Authority

Again and again, the professed followers of Christ succumb to the temptations Christ dismissed. The Temptation in the desert, strategically placed at the beginning of his ministry, underlines how Christ refused to achieve right ends by wrong methods. We, his followers, are not always that wise. It is said that the Russian Orthodox Church, at the time of the Revolution of 1917, ruled the hearts and minds of the people by appealing to magic, mystery, and authority. This is the way of the flesh, and comes naturally to all of us.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has done similarly. Have you not heard a wholesome, earnest Mormon missionary give you his testimony that he **knows** the Book of Mormon is true? He does not, as a rule, pretend to be able to demonstrate rational supports for all his faith. But, if pressed, he will draw upon stories of



miracles and magic passed down from Joseph Smith.

Authority, too, is claimed. The missionary will tell you that now, after centuries of apostasy, the True Church is restored through Smith. In this faith, millions have lived and died—deceived.

Dangers in Church Development

In his splendid book, *Questions About the Spirit*, Bernard Ramm faces this problem as it applies to more orthodox religious groups. Ramm directs us to the need to discern between “churchly lumber and the limbering Spirit.” Every genuine church needs organization. But if its officers are not people of the Spirit, “then the church degenerates into a pile of churchly lumber.”

Drawing from Hans von Campenhausen’s classic study, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power*, Ramm summarizes how the original leaders of the Christian church—Christ and the apostles—were people of the Spirit:

Their authority was recognized in view of their spiritual power. However, as the church expanded geographically, grew in size numerically, and had to face ever new problems, the officers in the church tended to be less men of the Spirit and more men of ecclesiastical authority.¹

So, in all ages, Christian movements begin with an enthusiasm energized by the Spirit of God. As the years go by, more and more officials are needed as the quality of the movement is watered down. Ideas recede and rules multiply.

More and more the movement becomes a bureaucracy—and one in which rules become more important than people. Idolatry is now its greatest danger. It is tempted to fall into the trap of perpetuating itself, rather than the gospel. “Keeping the *status quo* has become more important than being creative and innovative.”

The Grand Inquisitor

To illustrate his thesis, Ramm draws from Fëdor Dostoevski’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, and the brilliant story of the Grand Inquisitor.

The time is the sixteenth century, at the height of the Great Inquisition.

The place is Seville, Spain. The Cardinal of Seville is the religious leader and Grand Inquisitor. He is busy burning heretics.

Jesus approaches, drawn by the burning of his people. As of old, he begins to heal people, and even raise the dead. He is recognized.

The Cardinal orders that Jesus be arrested and imprisoned. That night the Grand Inquisitor calls on Jesus, and taunts him with the claim that the church has corrected his work by offering miracle, mystery, and authority as the way of satisfying the flesh. The only condition exacted by the church is the surrendering of freedom, especially freedom of thought.

The Cardinal's way of salvation is one millions will readily embrace. The way of Christ—while the true way of freedom—calls for self-denial and faith in God's Word.

Miracle, Mystery, and Authority

Dostoevski is at his best as he tells his parable. "People find freedom too much of a burden," he says. They would prefer a religion that is easy to believe and easy to practice. This way they are relieved of the burden to constantly choose. Through surrendering to human authority, they can find the carnal way to peace.

Here, in a famous passage, the Grand Inquisitor rebukes Christ:

"Thou didst hope that man, following Thee, would cling to God and not ask for a miracle. But Thou didst not know that when man rejects miracles he rejects God too; for man seeks not so much God as the miraculous. And as man cannot bear to be without the miraculous, he will create new miracles of his own for himself, and will worship deeds of sorcery and witchcraft,... Thou didst not come down from the Cross when they shouted to Thee, mocking and reviling Thee: 'Come down from the Cross and we will believe that Thou art He.' Thou didst not come down, for again Thou wouldst not enslave mankind by a miracle, and didst crave faith given freely, not based on miracles.

"Thou didst crave for free love and not the base raptures of the

slave before the might that has overawed him forever. But Thou didst think too highly of men therein, for they are slaves, of course, though rebellious by nature. Look around and judge; fifteen centuries have passed, look upon them. Whom hast Thou raised up to Thyself? I swear, man is weaker and baser by nature than Thou hast believed him! Can he, can he do what Thou didst? By showing him so much respect, Thou didst, as it were, cease to feel for him, for Thou didst ask far too much from him—Thou who hast loved him more than Thyself! Respecting him less, Thou wouldst have asked less of him. That would have been more like love, for his burden would have been lighter. He is weak and vile....

"What was offered Thee?

"There are three powers, three powers alone, able to conquer and to hold captive forever the conscience of these impotent rebels for their happiness—these forces are miracle, mystery and authority. Thou hast rejected all three, and hast set the example for doing so.

... "The wise and dread Spirit, the spirit of self-destruction and non-existence ... talked with Thee in the wilderness.... And could anything truer be said than what he revealed to Thee in three questions which Thou didst reject, and which in the books is called 'the temptation'? ...

"The statement of those three questions was itself the miracle.... Imagine simply for the sake of argument that those three questions of the dread spirit had perished utterly from the books, and that we had to restore them and to invent them anew. To do so we had gathered together all the wise men of the earth—rulers, chief priests, learned men, philosophers, poets— and had set them the task of inventing three questions such as would not only fit the occasion but express in three words, three human phrases, the whole future history of the world and of humanity. Dost Thou believe that all the wisdom of the earth, united

could have invented anything in depth and force equal to the three questions which were actually put to Thee then by the wise and mighty spirit in the wilderness? From those questions alone, from the miracle of their statement, we can see that we have here to do not with the fleeting human intelligence, but with the absolute and eternal. For in those three questions the whole subsequent history of mankind is, as it were, brought together into one whole, and foretold. In them are united all the unsolved historical contradictions of human nature.... now that fifteen hundred years have passed, we see that everything in those three questions was so justly divined and foretold, and has been so truly fulfilled, that nothing can be added to them or taken from them."²

The Choice

Thus, Dostoevski points out that humanity must ever fight the same fight:

Will the creature live by faith in the Creator, and reject as primary all secondary goods? Will human beings live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God, worshiping only him, and refusing to tempt God by unbelief?

That is the fundamental issue of life; and, therefore, of all religion.

The Grand Inquisitor was correct. Humanity has found the precious gift of freedom an intolerable burden. We would sell our freedom, as did Esau his birthright, for a pottage of human authority. This relieves us of anxious study of the divine Word and exact obedience thereto. Church after church has been tempted to sell its freedom for human authority—and fallen. So have individual believers.

How is it with us? How is it with our community? Will we choose the way of the wilderness, the way of the cross, the way of faith—or join the Grand Inquisitor? ♦

Footnotes

1. *Questions About the Spirit*, page 55.
2. Fëdor Dostoevski, *The Brothers Karamazov*, chapter, "The Grand Inquisitor," Signet Classic edition, 1957, pages 232-236.