

The Gnostic Roots of Heresy

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"By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God." (1 John 4:2-3)

We typically think that gnosticism is simply one of many heresies. But I strongly suspect that gnosticism of some sort is at the root of all heresies. That is because every heresy is in some respect a denial of the incarnation, and the essence of gnosticism as I am using the term here, is its opposition to the enfleshment of God. Below I briefly consider the heresies faced by the Church in the first seven General Councils. Then I draw from the work of Vladimir Soloviev to show that the heresies faced by the first seven General Councils are not randomly arranged. Rather, each successive Council is confronting a more specific sort of denial of the incarnation. Each successive Council thus affirms a further and deeper implication of the incarnation, against a heresy that in that respect denied the incarnation.

The heresies of the first four centuries all deny the incarnation in some respect or other.¹ Two groups that may seem like exceptions to that claim are the Montanists, Novatianists, and Donatists on the one hand, and the Modalists on the other hand.² Modalism was an indirect denial of the incarnation, because distinguishing the modes of this one divine Person, such that one was incarnate and one was not, entailed "a mere indwelling or external union" between the divine nature and human nature.³ As for Montanism, Novatianism, and Donatism, I will come back to them later below.

¹ Simon Magus, the first heretic, claimed to be God in the flesh. He had a statue of himself set up in Rome with this inscription: Simon, the holy God. Among his errors was the denial of free will, and the claim that good works are not necessary for salvation. He denied the incarnation by treating a mere man (i.e. himself) as the incarnate God. Menander, the disciple of Simon Magus, claimed that Christ only appeared to exercise human functions. Cerinthus, who was opposed by the Apostle John, denied the divinity of Christ, claiming Him to be a mere man. Cerinthus claimed, essentially, that Christ and Jesus were two distinct persons, and that Christ abandoned Jesus on the cross, and that Jesus's body did not rise from the dead. Likewise Ebion denied the deity of Christ. Valentine the Egyptian (~140 AD) claimed that Jesus did not become incarnate by Mary, but brought His body with Him from heaven. Julius Capianus, a disciple of Valentine, was the founder of the Doceti (i.e. Docetists), who claimed that Christ only appeared to be human, but did not have a real human body. Corpocrates of Alexandria (who lived around 160 AD) denied the virgin birth; his followers were called gnostics. Tatian the Syrian (160 AD) believed that human flesh was not worthy to be united with divinity. Marcion, who lived in the second century and called himself a "Christian Gnostic", denied the incarnation for the very same reason Tatian did. Apelles, the disciple of Marcion, taught that Christ took a body of air that dissolved back into air upon His ascension. The Manicheans, detesting the flesh as evil, denied that Jesus took a body like ours. Theodotus and the adoptionists claimed that Christ was not the begotten Son of God, but the adopted son of God.

² The modalists I'm thinking of include Noetus of Smyrna, Praxeas, Sabellius, and Paul of Samosata.

³ "Further, their identification of the Father and the Son was not favourable to a true view of the Incarnation. The very insistence on the unity of God emphasized also the distance of God from man, and was likely to end in making the union of God with man a mere indwelling or external union, after the fashion of that which was attributed to Nestorius. They spoke of the Father as "Spirit" and the Son as "flesh", and it is scarcely surprising that the similar Monarchianism of Marcellus should have issued in the Theodotianism of Photinus." (From the Catholic Encyclopedia article on [Monarchianism](#)) The Priscillianists

The First Seven General Councils

Arianism was the heresy arising out of Alexandria and condemned by the first General Council of Nicea in 325. For the Arians, the being who took on human flesh was not consubstantial with the Father, and hence Arianism denied the incarnation by denying that it was *God* who became man.

Pneumatomachianism was the heresy advanced by Macedonius (d. 364), bishop of Constantinople, and condemned by the second General Council of Constantinople in 381.⁴ Like Arianism, Pneumatomachianism denied the incarnation by denying that it was *God* who became man. The Pneumatomachi *claimed* to accept the deity of Christ, but they denied the deity of the Holy Spirit. St. Athanasius recognized that this was nevertheless a denial of the deity of Christ because they [the Pneumatomachi] believed the Holy Spirit to be the essence of Christ.⁵

The other primary heresy dealt with by the Council of Constantinople (381) was Apollonarianism, which takes its name from Apollonaris (d. 392) bishop of Laodicea. Apollonaris taught that Christ had no human soul (or the highest part of the human soul), but that in the incarnation the eternal Word took the place of a human soul. This heresy thus denied that Christ became *fully* man.⁶

Nestorianism arose out of Constantinople and was condemned by the third General Council at Ephesus in 431 (and in a more specific way by the fifth General Council at Constantinople in 553). Nestorius (d. 451) denied that Mary was the *Theotokos* (i.e. God-bearer). By doing so, Nestorius implied that the person of Christ and the person of the Son were two different persons, united by some sort of a relationship. Nestorianism is a heresy because it is a denial of the incarnation; Nestorianism denies that God *became* man. The Son having a relationship with a human person is not the same as the Son *becoming* a human.⁷

Eutychianism (also called Monophysitism) arose out of Constantinople and was condemned by the fourth General Council at Chalcedon in 451. Eutychianism is the belief that Jesus's humanity was absorbed into the divine such that He no longer had a human nature, only His divine nature. Just as with Nestorianism, Eutychianism is a

of the fourth century were modalists and yet because of their Manicheanism they denied that Christ was truly born or resurrected, claiming that He did so only in appearance. By contrast, Hippolytus, the first antipope, approached the opposite heresy of the modalists, i.e. ditheism. But that position necessarily collapses either into Arianism or patripassianism.

⁴ In the Greek, the word *Pneumatomachi* means enemies of the Spirit.

⁵ "A synodal letter was sent to the people of Antioch advising them to require of all converts from Arianism a condemnation against "those who say that the Holy Spirit is a creature and separate from the essence of Christ. For those who while pretending to cite the faith confessed at Nicaea, venture to blaspheme the Holy Spirit, deny Arianism in words only, while in thought they return to it." (Catholic Encyclopedia, 'Pneumatomachi')

⁶ St. Gregory of Nazianzus said, "What is not assumed, is not healed." (*Epistola*, 101)

⁷ The heresy of Pelagianism was also condemned at this Council. Pelagianism denies the incarnation by denying man's need for the incarnation for salvation, and thus denying that Christ needed to have been divine.

heresy because it denies that God *becomes* man. If Christ does not have a human nature, then He did not *become* man.

Monothelitism arose out of the Monophysitic resistance, and was condemned by the sixth General Council at Constantinople in 680-681. Monothelitism is the notion that Christ did not have a human will, only a divine will.⁸ Like Apollonarianism, Monothelitism is a heresy because it denies that God became *fully* human.

The heresy condemned by the seventh General Council at Nicea in 787 was Iconoclasm. The bishops of the "Iconoclast Synod" of 754, under the direct authority of the Iconoclastic Emperor Constantine, had determined wrongly that images of Christ either show only His human nature (as the Nestorians held) or futilely and falsely attempt to represent His divine nature (as the Monophysites held).⁹ St. Theodore of Studium (759-826) argued against the iconoclasts. St. Theodore's "chief point [was] that Iconoclasts are Christological heretics, since they deny an essential element of Christ's human nature, namely, that it can be represented graphically. This amounts to a denial of its reality and material quality, whereby Iconoclasts revive the old Monophysite heresy."¹⁰ Iconoclasm was the culmination of the docetism of the gnostics of the first two centuries and the monophysitism of the fifth and sixth centuries. On the matter of Iconoclasm Soloviev writes,

"The Resurrection of Jesus Christ in the flesh has proved that bodily existence is not excluded from the union of the human and the divine, and that external and sensible objectivity can and must become the real instrument and visible image of the divine power. Hence the cult of holy images and relics, hence the legitimate belief in material miracles wrought by these sacred objects. [cf. Acts 19:12] Thus in declaring war on these images, the Byzantine emperors were not attacking a religious custom or a mere detail of worship so much as a necessary and infinitely important application of Christian truth itself. To claim that divinity cannot be sensibly expressed or externally manifested, or that the divine power cannot employ visible and symbolic means of action, is to rob the divine Incarnation of all its reality. It was more than a compromise; it was the suppression of Christianity."¹¹

Soloviev explains the progression over these seven councils. He shows first that the heretics tried to "abstract in principle the very *substance* of man's being from the divine-human unity". We see that in the heresies faced by the first five councils: Arianism and Pneumatomachianism, and then Nestorianism and Monophysitism. Then they tried to abstract "human will and activity, the *rational*

⁸ The term 'monothelitism' means "one will".

⁹ According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, after the decisions of the "Iconoclast Synod" of 754, "Instead of paintings of saints the churches were decorated with pictures of flowers, fruit, and birds, so that the people said that they looked like grocery stores and bird shops." (From the Catholic Encyclopedia article on ['Iconoclasm'](#)).

¹⁰ From the Catholic Encyclopedia article on ['Iconoclasm'](#).

¹¹ Ibid. pp. 27-28.

being of man, by absorbing it into the divine operation". We see that in the Apollonarianism condemned by the second General Council, and in the Monothelitism condemned by the sixth General Council. Then the heretics tried to remove from the incarnation "the *corporeal nature*, the external being of man and, through him, of the whole of nature. The denial to the material and sensible world of all possibility of redemption, sanctification, and union with God is at the root of the Iconoclastic heresy."¹²

Montanism, Novatianism, and Donatism

But what of Montanism, Novatianism, and Donatism? I sat them aside above, and here I return to them.

As early as Simon Magus, who went to Rome sometime shortly after 39 AD and set himself up as the leader of a 'church' in opposition to the true church in Rome, we find a rejection of the essential *sacramentality* of magisterial authority. By the *sacramentality* of magisterial authority I mean that magisterial authority is acquired sacramentally, i.e. the conferral of magisterial authority (i.e. Holy Orders) through the sacramental laying on of hands by those who themselves have been given magisterial authority sacramentally, and who therefore have the authority to confer such authority. Peter and John, being Apostles, had the authority to confirm believers with the Holy Spirit, while Philip, being a deacon did not.¹³ Simon Magus desired so much the authority had by the Apostles Peter and John that he offered them money for it. Peter and John refused; Simon Magus decided to arrogate authority to himself.

In general, the gnostics attempted to justify their rejection of sacramental magisterial authority by referring to secret or hidden knowledge which they claimed to have, and which they claimed that the sacramental magisterial authority did not have. Two gnostics who come to mind are Valentine and Marcion. Valentine came to Rome about 140-141 AD hoping to become pope over the whole Church, but was rebuffed by Pope Pius I (140-155 AD). When Valentine saw that Anicetus had been chosen to replace Pius I as Pope, Valentine left Rome to found three sects of his own.¹⁴ Marcion's father was a bishop of Sinope in Pontus. Marcion was born around 110 AD, and was made a bishop (but not the diocesan bishop) in his home town. He was eventually expelled from his own church by his father, when he committed a grave sin with a virgin. He traveled to Rome, arriving sometime around 140 AD. In 144 AD, Pope Pius I excommunicated Marcion from the church at Rome for his gnostic beliefs. Marcion left the Church in a fit of rage, saying, "I will cause an eternal division in your Church." And so he started his own Church in July of 144 AD, with a three-tiered hierarchical structure of bishops, priests, and deacons. St. Polycarp, coming across Marcion in Rome around 154, called Marcion the "first-born of Satan". It was not only for his gnosticism (i.e. *heresy*) that St. Polycarp addressed him in this way, but also for his rebellion against the rightful authority in the Church, i.e. for creating a *schism* by starting his own Church.

¹² Vladimir Soloviev, *The Russian Church and the Papacy*, p. 27.

¹³ Acts 8:14-17.

¹⁴ The Sethites, the Cainites, and the Ophites.

Around the year 156 AD, Montanus, a new convert, claimed that the Holy Spirit had descended upon himself in such a way that his [Montanus's] voice was the voice of the Paraclete. Montanus said things like: "I am the Father, the Word, and the Paraclete": "I am the Lord God omnipotent, who have descended into man", and "neither an angel, nor an ambassador, but I, the Lord, the Father, am come".¹⁵ Tertullian was drawn into this sect, in part because the Montanists were more strict than the Catholics, in its fasts and various penances. Montanism would not allow remarriage if one's spouse died. Montanism denied the possibility of forgiveness for serious sins. Montanism did not allow fleeing from persecution. For these reasons Tertullian referred to the Catholics as the "Psychici" (i.e. animals) whereas the Montanus were the "spiritual followers of the Paraclete".¹⁶ In his Montanist stage, Tertullian claimed that the authority to rule in the Church depended not on the sacrament of Holy Orders, but on spiritual gifts or spiritual endowments. For this reason he denied the need for bishops.

In 251 AD, after the Emperor Decius had martyred Pope Fabian, a Roman priest and theologian by the name of Novatian was passed over in the process of selecting a new pope, and Cornelius became pope. Then by intrigue, Novatian set himself up as antipope.¹⁷ His reasoning, as with the Montanists, included the notion that Cornelius was too willing to forgive the sins of those who had lapsed during the persecution.¹⁸ Treating himself as if he were the actual pope, he tried to take full control of the Church by appointing new bishops in sees all across the Roman Empire.¹⁹ St. Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, wrote the following to Novatian:

"Dionysius to his brother Novatian, greeting. If it was against your will, as you say, that you were led, you will prove it by retiring of your free will. For you ought to have suffered anything rather than divide the Church of God, and to be martyred rather than cause a schism would have been no less glorious than to be martyred rather than commit idolatry, nay in my opinion it would have been a yet greater act; for in the one case one is a martyr for one's own soul alone, in the other for the whole Church."²⁰

In a council of bishops later in 251, the Church settled the matter *not* by comparing the doctrines of Novatian and Cornelius, but by examining whether their ordinations to the office were valid and legitimate. Novatian refused to accept the decision of the council, and was excommunicated by Pope Cornelius. He led his followers in schism, into what became known as the Novatian sect. They called themselves *katharoi*, or "Puritans", and

¹⁵ Catholic Encyclopedia article on ['Montanists'](#).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ From the Catholic Encyclopedia article on ['Novatian and Novatianism'](#). Hippolytus was the first antipope, during the time of Popes Callistus I and Urban I (217 AD – 230 AD). Hippolytus also justified as rejection of sacramental magisterial authority on moral and doctrinal grounds, wishing Callistus to be more strict in his treatment of the Monarchians and in his treatment of sinners and the lapsed.

¹⁸ Novatian had himself been influenced by the works of Tertullian.

¹⁹ William Carroll points out that this is further evidence of what the authority of the pope was understood to be. (*The Founding of Christendom*, p. 493).

²⁰ From the Catholic Encyclopedia article on ['Novatian and Novatianism'](#).

the sect was still in existence as late as 600 AD. In dealing with the Novatians, Pope Stephen I (254-257 AD) defended the validity of baptism by heretics, against the position of St. Cyprian who held that baptism by heretics was *ipso facto* invalid.²¹ According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, "St. Cyprian's unfortunate letters became the chief support of the puritanism of the Donatists."²²

The Donatist schism began in 311 AD, and lasted about one hundred years, until St. Augustine helped bring the Donatists back into the Catholic Church around 411 AD. Under the Diocletian persecution beginning in 303, some bishops either gave up the sacred Scriptures to the secular authorities or gave up writings of various heretics in their place. For doing this instead of suffering martyrdom to protect the sacred Scriptures, these bishops were considered by some of the Christians of northern Africa (in the tradition of Tertullian and the Montanists for whom avoiding persecution and martyrdom was prohibited) to be *traditors* (or traitors). When Caecilian the deacon was ordained bishop of Carthage, these Christians (including the primate Secundus) did not accept his ordination because they claimed it was conferred by *traditors*. Those who did not accept as valid the ordinations of *traditors* came to be known as Donatists, and claimed that all who were in communion with *traditors* were necessarily excommunicate. Pope Melchior [Miltiades] (311-314) ruled that the Donatists were in error. But the Donatists rejected his ruling. The Council of Arles (314) also condemned the Donatist schism. The Donatists rejected the council's decision and appealed directly to emperor Constantine. Constantine is said to have written in reply: "O insolent madness! They appeal from heaven to earth, from Jesus Christ to a man." Like the Novatians, the Donatists thought of themselves as "the Pure", and referred to the Catholic Church as the "Church of the Traditors."²³ But this schism produced further schisms within itself, so many in fact, that "the Donatists themselves could not name them all".²⁴

Consider what these three schisms had in common. First, they each rejected the sacramental magisterial authority of the Church on doctrinal or moral grounds. Second, on these doctrinal or moral grounds, they set themselves up as the true magisterial authority and the true Church.

What does this have to do with denying the incarnation? When Simon Magus rejected the authority of Peter and John, he was implicitly denying that God had become man in space and time. If Christ had merely *appeared* to Peter and the Twelve, as the gnostic docetics claimed, then Christ could so likewise appear to anyone at any place or time, and so the

²¹ Baptism by heretics was valid so long as it was in the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit, and intending to do what the Church did in baptism. According to Pope Stephen I, the converted heretics were thus not to be rebaptized, but to be received with the sacrament of reconciliation and absolution.

²² From the Catholic Encyclopedia article on '[St. Cyprian of Carthage](#)'.

²³ "They taught that in all the rest of the world the Catholic Church had perished, through having communicated with the traditor Caecilian; their sect alone was the true Church. If a Catholic came into their churches, they drove him out, and washed with salt the pavement where he had stood. Any Catholic who joined them was forced to be rebaptized. They asserted that their own bishops and ministers were without fault, else their ministrations would be invalid." (From the Catholic Encyclopedia article on '[Donatists](#)')

²⁴ From the Catholic Encyclopedia article on '[Donatists](#)'

Apostles would have no more authority than any self-styled prophet or seer. But if God had actually become man, then those whom He (while in the flesh) had appointed had authority over those claiming to receive visions or revelations.²⁵ This was not only true for the first generation of Church leaders (i.e. the Apostles), but for all successive generations. When Montanus and Tertullian rejected the essential *sacramentality* of magisterial authority, and claimed that spiritual endowments spiritually discerned were the criterion of ecclesial authority, they were implicitly denying a direct implication of the incarnation: not only is ecclesial authority enfleshed (contra the gnosticism of individualism), but *the transfer of authority is necessarily enfleshed*.

The Novatians and the Donatists, however, also believed that the transfer of ecclesial authority is necessarily enfleshed. So we still have not reached the heart of the problem with these two schisms. The Novatians and the Donatists believed that the enfleshed transfer of magisterial authority was inhibited or nullified by the doctrine or practice of the ordaining bishop(s), and/or by the doctrine or practice of the ordinand.²⁶ The underlying heretical principle we find in Montanism, Novatianism and Donatism is that "the Church [is] composed of the just alone, and that all the wicked [are] excluded from it."²⁷ This is why they referred to themselves as the "Pure". At the "Collatio" of 411, Saint Augustine showed the Donatists that in this present age the Church is composed of both the righteous and the unrighteous. He also showed in his writings, in agreement with Pope Stephen I (254-257), that since Christ is the principle agent in the sacraments, therefore the validity of the sacrament does not depend upon the righteousness of the minister or recipient.

The great difficulty for the Montanists, Novatians and Donatists was that if Catholic bishops were the actual sacramental authorities, then the rigorism of the Montanists, Novatians and Donatists was itself the error. In order to reject the sacramental authority of a bishop on the grounds that either he or those who ordained him were in error, one must have access to an alternative authority by which to determine both that the alleged error is an error and that the alleged error invalidates the ordination. The Montanists, Novatianists, and Donatists had no such alternative authority.²⁸ They arrogated such authority to themselves, and in so doing, they thus denied a direct implication of the incarnation, as explained above. An implication of the incarnation is that the authoritative evaluation of the validity of the enfleshed conferral of ecclesial authority must itself

²⁵ (e.g. Montanus, Muhammed, Joseph Smith).

²⁶ I am not here discussing the matter of canon law, for it is unnecessary. The position of the Novatians and Donatists was not that the Catholic ecclesial authorities had transgressed canon law (i.e. that their sacraments were *illicit*), but that the *orders* of the Catholic ecclesial authorities were *invalid* (and thus that their sacraments were *invalid*, which is why the Donatists rebaptized). Along with the Novatians the Donatists I could add here the mentality of the first antipope, Hippolytus, who with Tertullian, opposed Pope Callistus I.

²⁷ Alphonsus Liguori, *The History of Heresies & Their Refutation*, p. 52.

²⁸ The Donatists did have the authority of the primate Secundus with the council of seventy bishops that met in Carthage in 312 to declare invalid the episcopal ordination of Caecilian, and to appoint Majorinus in Caecilian's place. But the decisions of this council were overturned by Pope Miltiade's special council in Rome of nineteen bishops in October of 313, which council the Donatists rejected. The decisions of the Council of Carthage (312) regarding Donatism were also rejected by the Council of Arles (August, 314) consisting of forty-six bishops from all over the empire.

necessarily rest in ecclesial authority whose authority was received by enfleshed transfer in unbroken succession from its original enfleshed source. Montanism, Novatianism, and Donatism were all challenges to the incarnation insofar as each, either propositionally or performatively, denied the necessary enfleshment of the transfer of ecclesial authority.

The Eighth Ecumenical Council

Given Soloviev's thesis regarding each successive General Council's penetration into deeper implications of the incarnation, we can hardly resist looking beyond the seventh council. But to do that we must step back a bit.

Dioscurus (d. 454) bishop of Alexandria, orchestrated the "Robber Council" of Ephesus (449), and had there not only attempted to excommunicate the bishop of Rome, but had sought to take over the Church in the East, and lead it into Monophysitism. He was condemned by the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) in the following words:

"Wherefore the most holy and blessed Archbishop of elder Rome, Leo, by us and the most holy council, together with the thrice and praiseworthy Peter the Apostle, is the rock and base of the Catholic Church and the foundation of the orthodox Faith, has stripped him of the episcopal and of all sacerdotal dignity. Wherefore this most holy and great council will decree that which is accordance with the canons against the aforesaid Dioscurus."²⁹

Acacius was the Patriarch of Constantinople from 471-489. He wrote the *Henoticon* as an attempt to effect a compromise between Catholics and Monophysites by essentially ignoring the Council of Chalcedon's affirmation of "two natures", and simply affirming the unity of the Son of God. As a result, Pope Felix II excommunicated Acacius in 484, and the resulting schism between East and West lasted thirty-five years. On Holy Thursday, March 28, 519 AD, the Greek bishops were reconciled with Pope Hormisdas (514-523) in Constantinople, by signing the confession of faith Pope Hormisdas had presented to them for reconciliation. That confession began as follows:

"The first means of safety is to guard the rule of strict faith and to deviate in no way from those things that have been laid down by the Fathers. And indeed the words of Our Lord Jesus Christ: "Thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church" [Matt. 16:18], cannot be disregarded; these things which were spoken are demonstrated by the results, for the Catholic religion has been preserved ever immaculate in the Apostolic See."³⁰

We need also recall that the seventh General Council had refuted the positions adopted by the "Iconoclast Synod of 754". The Synod of 754 did not have the authority of a General Council for the same reason that the "Robber Council" of Ephesus (449) did not have

²⁹ From the Catholic Encyclopedia entry on [Dioscurus](#).

³⁰ From the Catholic Encyclopedia entry on [Pope St. Hormisdas](#).

such authority. It was not approved by the bishop of Rome; and approval by the bishop of Rome was a necessary condition for a General Council.

So with what was the eighth General Council concerned? The eighth General Council confronted a direct challenge to the primacy of the bishop of Rome over the universal Church. Ignatius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, was unlawfully removed from his position by the Emperor Michael III. The emperor then unlawfully put Photius (c. 815-897) into Ignatius's place, Ignatius still being the rightful patriarch. Pope Nicholas I (858-867) decided that Ignatius must be restored, and that Photius would be excommunicate if he refused to abdicate the position he had usurped. Photius refused. In 867 Photius excommunicated the Pope and all the Western Catholics.³¹

That same year Michael III died suddenly, and the new emperor (Basil I) deposed Photius and restored Ignatius. Thus the eighth General Council commenced in 869 in Constantinople. At this Council "The legates from Rome presented to the members of the Council the famous formula (*libellus*) of Pope Hormisdas (514-23), binding its signatories "to follow in everything the Apostolic See of Rome and teach all its laws . . . in which communion is the whole, real, and perfect solidity of the Christian religion."³² Photius was tried by this Council, and when he refused to renounce his claims, he was excommunicated and banished to a monastery.

But when Ignatius died in 877, the emperor Basil sought the permission of Rome to have Photius recognized as the Patriarch of Constantinople. Pope John VIII (872-882) agreed, and absolved Photius "from all censure, and acknowledged him as patriarch." Subsequently in 879 Photius convened in Constantinople what the Orthodox today call the eighth General Council but what Catholics refer to as "Pseudosynodus Photiana", in which Photius revoked the acts of the eighth General Council (of 869), repeated his accusations against the Latins and anathematized any who added anything to the Creed. Photius sent the acts of his synod of 879 to Rome for confirmation. But upon receiving them, Pope John VIII promptly excommunicated Photius.

What has the eighth General Council to do with the incarnation? The fundamental truth under assault by Photius was the primacy of the successor of Peter as the Church's visible principle of unity and highest magisterial authority. The Church, which is the Body of Christ, is both divine and human, because Christ Himself is both divine and human. Subjecting the Church to the authority of the state is a denial of the Church's divinity. The Catholic Encyclopedia says the following:

³¹ According to the Catholic Encyclopedia article on [Photius](#), he did so on the following reasons: the Latins:

1. fast on Saturday
2. do not begin Lent till Ash Wednesday (instead of three days earlier, as in the East)
3. do not allow priests to be married
4. do not allow priests to administer confirmation
5. have added the filioque to the creed.

³² From the Catholic Encyclopedia article on the [Fourth Council of Constantinople](#).

"That Ignatius was the rightful patriarch as long as he lived, and Photius an intruder, cannot be denied by any one who does not conceive the Church as merely the slave of a civil government."³³

The attempt by the civil authority to remove and install bishops was a direct attack on the incarnation. Soloviev explains:

"The fundamental truth and distinctive idea of Christianity is the perfect union of the divine and the human individually achieved in Christ, and finding its social realization in Christian humanity, in which the divine is represented by the Church, centered in the supreme pontiff, and the human by the state. This intimate relation between Church and state implies the primacy of the former, since the divine is previous in time and superior in being to the human. Heresy attacked the perfect unity of the divine and the human in Jesus Christ precisely in order to undermine the living bond between Church and state, and to confer upon the latter an absolute independence."³⁴

If the installation and removal of bishops is ultimately subject to the civil government, then the City of God is inferior in authority to the City of Man (to borrow St. Augustine's terms). But if the City of God is inferior in authority to the City of Man, then the founder of the Church was not divine, but merely human. Therefore the installation and removal of bishops cannot be ultimately subject to the civil government. Caesaropapism is a denial of the incarnation because it is a denial of Christ's *deity*.

Likewise, denying that the Church has one visible head is a denial of Christ's *humanity*. In our discussion of the seventh General Council we saw that one implication of the incarnation is that Christ can be "represented graphically". But not only can Christ be "represented graphically" in human artifacts, He is actually and more perfectly represented in that organism that was not made by human hands, namely, His Body, the Church.³⁵ The Church does not have only an invisible head, nor is she polycephalous. The former notion denies the incarnation by denying that Christ has a *complete* human body. The latter notion denies the incarnation by denying that Christ is *human*. But both in some respect deny Christ's humanity. Christ's act of entrusting the keys of the kingdom to Peter established for all time the enfleshed headship of Christ's Body, the Church.³⁶

The Protestant Reformation and the Incarnation

Fast-forward now to the sixteenth century. Martin Luther, according to Louis Berkhoff, was the first to make a distinction between the Church as visible, and the Church as

³³ From the Catholic Encyclopedia article on [Photius](#).

³⁴ *The Russian Church and the Papacy*, p. 25.

³⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:12-30. The divinity of the Body of the Christ (i.e. the Church) depends on the virgin birth. (cf. St. John 1:13)

³⁶ Matthew 16:18-19.

invisible.³⁷ The Catholic Church had of course recognized that those who have died in a state of grace, remain united to the Church, even though they are no longer visible to us.³⁸ This is what is meant in the Apostles' Creed, that ancient symbol of the Church at Rome, by the phrase "communion of saints". Luther, Calvin and the other Reformers taught that the Church as visible was merely the "multitude" of believers spread over the earth. Luther described the visible Church as "the holy Christian people". He writes:

"If the words, "I believe that there is a holy Christian people," had been used in the Children's Creed, all the misery connected with this meaningless and obscure word ("church") might easily have been avoided.... *Ecclesia* ... should mean the holy Christian people, not only of the days of the apostles, who are long since dead, but to the end of the world...."³⁹

John Calvin writes,

"How we are to judge the church visible, which falls within our knowledge, is, I believe, already evident from the above discussion. For we have said that Holy Scripture speaks of the church in two ways. Sometimes by the term "church" it means that which is actually in God's presence, into which no persons are received but those who are children of God by grace of adoption and true members of Christ by sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Then indeed, the church includes not only the saints presently living on earth, but all the elect from the beginning of the world. Often, however, the name "church" designates the whole multitude of men spread over the earth who profess to worship one God and Christ."⁴⁰

"The church universal is a multitude gathered from all nations; it is divided and dispersed in separate places, but agrees on the one truth of divine doctrine, and is bound by the bond of the same religion. Under it are thus included individual churches, disposed in towns and villages according to human need, so that each rightly has the name and authority of the church."⁴¹

The Westminster Confession of Faith says of the Church visible:

³⁷ Louis Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology*, p. 565.

³⁸ "The doctrine of the visibility in no way excludes from the Church those who have already attained to bliss. These are united with the members of the Church Militant in one communion of saints. They watch her struggles; their prayers are offered on her behalf. Similarly, those who are still in the cleansing fires of purgatory belong to the Church. There are not, as has been said, two Churches; there is but one Church, and of it all the souls of the just, whether in heaven, on earth, or in purgatory, are members (Catech. Rom., I, x, 6). But it is to the Church only in so far as militant here below -- to the Church among men -- that the property of visibility belongs." (From the Catholic Encyclopedia article on "[The Church](#)")

³⁹ Martin Luther, *On the Councils and the Church* – Part III (1539)

⁴⁰ *Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV.1.7.

⁴¹ Ibid. IV.1.9

"The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation."⁴²

We can notice in these descriptions of the visible Church that the Reformers reduced the visibility of the Church to the visibility of believers. I use the word 'reduced' intentionally, because this is a kind of reductionism. The visible Church per se, for the Reformers, is nothing but her members.⁴³ This is equivalent to claiming that a human body is nothing but its parts. If a human body were nothing but its physical parts, there would be no such thing as *human* nature. There would only be the respective natures of the parts composing the human body. Likewise, if the visible Church is nothing but her members, then she is not an organic body, but a mere aggregate of individuals. An aggregate of entities is not an actual unity. But St. Paul tells us that the Church is the Body of Christ. And we confess in the Creed that we believe in **one**, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Therefore the visible Church is not just the multitude of believers across the earth. For this reason, reducing the visible Church to the aggregate or multitude of believers across the earth is a denial of the incarnation, for it treats the human nature that Christ assumed as something less than what it actually is, and in this way denies the fullness of the divine-human unity. The Reformers believed that the Church was essentially invisible. For them what binds us together is essentially invisible; we are visibly many, but invisibly one. But again, claiming that the Church is in essence invisible is claiming that the Body of Christ is in essence invisible. That's the docetic form of gnosticism that denies Christ's *humanity*.

The parts of a living organism are one in three ways. First, they share the same form or essence. Second, they all participate in the one overall activity of the organism. And third, they are all ordered hierarchically such that they are subject to the highest principle of that organism (e.g. reason in the case of humans). Likewise, the Church has three corresponding "bonds of unity". They are, respectively, first the profession of one faith received from the Apostles, second the common celebration of divine worship (especially of the sacraments), and third subjection to one highest magisterial authority in succession from the Apostles. These are also the ways in which the Church is visible. She is visible in her shared profession of faith. She is visible in her common worship, especially in her shared celebration of the sacraments. And she is visible in her ecclesial hierarchy sacramentally received from the Apostles. The visibility of the Church per se (and not just her members) is directly related to what makes her one Body.

Most Protestants rejected five of the seven sacraments, on the grounds of sola scriptura. But even those sacraments that were retained were gnosticized to various degrees by the Protestants. For Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), the sacraments were mere ceremonies and

⁴² *Westminster Confession of Faith* XXV.2.

⁴³ Pope Leo XIII in *Mystici Corporis* rejects the notion that the Church is "a mere spiritual entity, joining together by an invisible link a number of communities of Christians, in spite of their differences in Faith." (Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 301).

symbols. He taught that we are saved by "faith alone". Zwingli's position is simply a variation on the gnosticism of the first two centuries. It is a blatant denial of the line in the Nicene Creed: "I acknowledge one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins".⁴⁴ By denying the efficacy of the sacraments, Zwingli was denying that the blood and water that flowed from Christ's side are our source of salvation. (That blood and water continues to flow from the side of Christ's Body, the Church, in the sacraments; these are the 'rib' by which the Father is making a Bride for His Son.) To deny that the blood and water that flowed from Christ's side are salvific is either to deny that Jesus was God (i.e. Ebionism) or to deny that blood and water actually flowed from His side (i.e. Docetism). Denying the efficacy of the sacraments is in this way a denial of the incarnation.

By denying the sacramentality of Holy Orders, Protestants fell directly into the error shared in common by the Montanists, Novatianists, and Donatists – the error of denying the incarnation by denying the necessity of *enfleshed* transfer of magisterial authority. Spiritualizing (i.e. gnosticizing) the acquisition of magisterial authority is a denial of the organic nature of the Church, and thus a denial of Christ's humanity. It is precisely for this reason, I believe, that Protestantism is necessarily prone to perpetual fragmentation. Not only does it lack a visible principle of unity (as established by the eighth General Council), but it lacks the recognition of the necessary of enfleshed transfer of magisterial authority derived organically from the Apostles. In other words, it lacks Apostolic succession.

I am defending here the thesis that each of the heresies faced by the Church in the first millenarian was in some way a denial of the complete divine-human union of Christ's incarnation. Moreover, it seems to me that we should expect the same from the second millennium. If we recognize that which all the heresies of the first millennium have in common, and that in virtue of which they were heresies, we can better evaluate the schism between Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth century. The Church of the

⁴⁴ "Baptism signifies and actually brings about the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit." (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1215) "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (St. John 3:5); baptism is what Jesus means in saying we must be "born again" (St. John 3:3). St. Paul writes, "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit." (Titus 3:5) St. Peter writes, "... when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you – not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience – through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 3:20-21) St. Luke, quoting St. Peter, writes, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38) And again, "Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name." (Acts 22:16) St. Paul writes, "just as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word." (Ephesians 5:26) He also writes, "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection." (Romans 6:3-5)

sixteenth century needed reforms, but those reforms could not occur at the expense of the victories she had won against gnosticism in the first millennium. In their zeal the early Reformers overreacted to the point of erring with respect to the visibility of the Church and the efficacy and salvific role of the sacraments.