

29 The Church is riddled with frauds and fakes so how can I believe a word it says?

The Church is riddled with frauds and fakes so how can I believe a word it says? I remember seeing a TV series in my youth on the Borgia Popes which was full of incest, adultery, murder and all manner of lurid behaviour. How could Christianity be true, I thought, when it had such fraudulent leaders in the sixteenth century? If bishops were successors of the apostles didn't it matter that some of their predecessors were utter hypocrites?

Church history apart, now television has become a media for evangelism we see similar hypocrisy. Preachers condemn sexual misbehaviour on screen whilst philandering off screen! The misbehaviour of the tele evangelists is made all the worse by their emotional on screen appeals for donations which are sometimes siphoned off for the personal benefit of the preacher.

What's the answer? It's found surely in a God who's given authority to a unique body we call the church, binding himself to use limited human resources to bring his revelation to all ages. The fact that frauds turn up through the centuries doesn't disprove Christianity. If anything it makes all the more extraordinary the encounters we have with holy lives transformed by Christ centuries on. The dark episodes of Church history have not quenched the Holy Spirit!

By what authority do Christians believe? The answer is "God in Christ" - the Christian faith is kept going by its Author disclosed to people through encounter with Jesus. This faith is sustained within a body formed and authorised by God so that Christ promised *the gates of Hades will not prevail against (his church)* (Matthew 16v18b).

Christians exist in a community promised authoritative guidance in its task of bringing the whole world to the praise and service of God. The Church of England Articles of Religion define the church as *the congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached and the Sacraments be duly administered according to Christ's ordinance*. The Articles make clear that the church is always in need of God's mercy.

Even if the church has authority – she wouldn't have survived without it - it's no perfect body. The Bible says Christian good news is *treasure in earthen vessels* (2 Corinthians 4:7). God's truth shines on from age to age through human inadequacy – even the Borgia Popes did *some* good!

When the Lord gave authority to his church to hand on his good news he promised to confirm such teaching to people. In Hebrews Chapter 2 we read how the declared message of Christianity is confirmed *by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to God's will* (v4).

As the ministry of Jesus was confirmed by miracles so it's been with the church through the ages. In our own time many new Christians have become convinced of Christ through extraordinary signs that have accompanied the preaching and teaching they have engaged with.

Aren't some healings and miracles faked? There's no doubt that when you have thousands of people gathered at a rally there are very human forces at work that can manipulate people emotionally. On the other hand Jesus said that wherever people gather in his name there would be answered prayer. A good many Christians have come to faith at large rallies, such as those conducted by the evangelist Billy Graham. Whatever the failings there are about these occasions there are glorious successes as well!

The Church is riddled with frauds and fakes so how can I believe a word it says? Read the New Testament and you will find a similar concern for authenticity, as in the first letter of St. John. Test the spirits to see whether they are from God John says. He continues by saying that a true prophet has a loving spirit. In the same way St. Paul teaches that though extraordinary gifts like speaking in tongues are indeed from God if I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels but do not have love...I gain nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1,3)

Scripture itself claims to be a sure guide to what is believable, that is to God's own word, as stated in 2 Timothy 3:16 where we read that *all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*

Only God perfectly does what he says. Yet he's promised to meet people through the inadequate community we call the church. Many still find him to be as good as his word.