

Peter Abelard:
From *Sic et Non*, 1120 A.D.

There are many seeming contradictions and even obscurities in the innumerable writings of the church fathers. Our respect for their authority should not stand in the way of an effort on our part to come at the truth. The obscurity and contradictions in ancient writings may be explained upon many grounds, and may be discussed without impugning the good faith and insight of the fathers. A writer may use different terms to mean the same thing, in order to avoid a monotonous repetition of the same word. Common, vague words may be employed in order that the common people may understand; and sometimes a writer sacrifices perfect accuracy in the interest of a clear general statement. Poetical, figurative language is often obscure and vague.

Not infrequently apocryphal works are attributed to the saints. Then, even the best authors often introduce the erroneous views of others and leave the reader to distinguish between the true and the false. Sometimes, as Augustine confesses in his own case, the fathers ventured to rely upon the opinions of others.

Doubtless the fathers might err; even Peter, the prince of the apostles, fell into error: what wonder that the saints do not always show themselves inspired? The fathers did not themselves believe that they, or their companions, were always right. Augustine found himself mistaken in some cases and did not hesitate to retract his errors. He warns his admirers not to look upon his letters as they would upon the Scriptures, but to accept only those things which, upon examination, they find to be true.

All writings belonging to this class are to be read with full freedom to criticize, and with no obligation to accept unquestioningly; otherwise they way would be blocked to all discussion, and posterity be deprived of the excellent intellectual exercise of debating difficult questions of language and presentation. But an explicit exception must be made in the case of the Old and New Testaments. In the Scriptures, when anything strikes us as absurd, we may not say that the writer erred, but that the scribe made a blunder in copying the manuscripts, or that there is an error in interpretation, or that the passage is not understood. The fathers make a very careful distinction between the Scriptures and later works. They advocate a discriminating, not to say suspicious, use of the writings of their own contemporaries.

In view of these considerations, I have ventured to bring together various dicta of the holy fathers, as they came to mind, and to formulate certain questions, which were suggested by the seeming contradictions in the statements. These questions ought to serve to excite tender readers to a zealous inquiry into truth and so sharpen their wits. The master key of knowledge is, indeed, a persistent and frequent questioning. Aristotle, the most clear-sighted of all the philosophers, was desirous above all things else to arouse this questioning spirit, for in his *Categories* he exhorts a student as follows: "It may well be difficult to reach a positive conclusion in these matters unless they be frequently discussed. It is by no means fruitless to be doubtful on particular points." By doubting we come to examine, and by examining we reach the truth.

[Peter Abelard (born 1074, died 1142) was a French monk, scholar, and philosopher who sought to apply logical to the teachings of the mediaeval church. In his famous book, he presented 158 questions on which contradictory opinions had been given. He maintained that logic could satisfactorily explain these discrepancies, using reason to organize and systematize faith. As you read, note the explanations given for the seeming contradictions in the writings of the church fathers, and the way in which Abelard distinguishes the Scriptures from the writings of the church fathers. Below are some the actual questions from his book.]

001. Must human faith be completed by reason, or not?
002. Does faith deal only with unseen things, or not?
003. Is there any knowledge of things unseen, or not?
004. May one believe only in God alone, or not?
005. Is God a single unitary being, or not?
006. Is God divided into three parts, or not?
010. Is God to be seen as a part of everything, as present in everything, or not?
020. Does the first Psalm speak about the Messiah, or not?
027. Does God's foreknowledge determine outcomes, or not?
028. Does anything happen by accident or coincidence, or not?
030. Can even sins please God, or not?
031. Is God the cause and initiator of evil, or not?
032. Can God do anything and everything, or not?
033. Is it possible to resist God, or not?
034. Does God have free will, or not?
036. Does God do whatever He wants, or not?
037. Does anything happen contrary to God's will, or not?
038. Does God know everything, or not?