

Our Lord declares to Peter, "Upon this rock I will build my Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matt. xvi. 18.) This statement distinctly involves the unity and the perpetuity of the Church. But the question at once arises what is that Church, whose unity and perpetuity are promised by Christ? We must ask:

I. WHAT IS MEANT BY THE CHURCH?

There are in reality only two conceptions of the Church which are radically distinct. These we may, for brevity's sake, style the Romish and the Protestant. That these views differ widely need occasion no surprise; for they are not derived from the same source. The proximate ground of faith, according to the Roman Catholic, is the living infallible Church, whose office it is to authenticate and explain Scripture and tradition, and whose voice is decisive on all points upon which it speaks. According to the Protestant, the proximate ground of faith is the Bible alone.

Prior to the Reformation, there may be found in Christian writers a good deal of confusion of thought on this topic, which largely disappears after that date. The great religious struggle of the sixteenth century turned upon questions which compelled men to think themselves out on this subject, and attain a definiteness of conviction, which made dogmatic definition possible and inevitable. Even since the Reformation, some excellent men have failed to apprehend the import and bearing of the distinctions then made. And, if we are not mistaken, we can discover in some of the good men who are agitating for the re-union of Christendom, a sort of mental vacillation on this point which introduces weakness and confusion into their discussions.

1. The Romish definition of the Church, as given by Cardinal Bellarmine, is as follows, viz: "The Church is a Society of men on earth, united together by the profession of one and the self-same Christian faith and the communion of the same sacraments under the government of lawful pastors, and especially the Roman Pontiff." (De eccl. Lib. III, Cap.