

The Place of Private Judgment

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In his paper on private judgment in *Knots Untied*, Bishop Ryle said there were three great doctrines or principles which won the battle of the Reformation. These three were i) the sufficiency and supremacy of holy Scripture; ii) the right of private judgment; and iii) justification by faith only without the deeds of the law. These three principles were the keys to the whole controversy between the Reformers and the Church of Rome. If we keep firm hold on them our position is unassailable. If we give up any one of them, our cause is lost.

We find something similar in Griffith Thomas. (He is quoting from a Roman Catholic source but with approval):

Protestantism took its stand upon a twofold antagonistic principle of its own—first, the principle of the immediate guidance of the soul by the Holy Spirit or private judgment, which radically subverted all Christian [sic] authority, and notably that of the Supreme Pontiff, and secondly, the principle of justification by faith alone, which practically subverted the whole sacramental and sacrificial systems and with it the sacerdotalism or priestly ministry that it postulates. Both these Reformation principles are at root logically one.

What we need to notice in both these cases is the high place and priority given to the principle of private judgment. It is put on a par with the supreme authority of the Bible and justification by faith alone. What I find surprising is that today we hear a good deal from time to time about both the authority of Scripture and justification by faith, but private judgment is distinctly a poor relation. We do not hear much about it, and observers of the scene would be justified in thinking that it did not figure largely in our system. Out of interest, I have looked back through copies of *Churchman* for the last twenty years and found only one paper on private judgment, and that merely dealt obliquely with the subject. There are no doubt reasons for this state of affairs, which I shall come to in due course. But I want us at this point to recognize that the doctrine of private judgment was important for Protestantism in the past. If it is neglected today that neglect must materially weaken our position and is as serious in its way as the neglect of the doctrines of the supremacy and authority of Scripture and justification by faith.

What is private judgment?

I come then to the question, What is private judgment? Before I seek to define it, it might be worthwhile to refer to one of the most notable demonstrations of the exercise of private judgment in history, and that was Luther's famous stand at Worms,

Unless I am convinced by testimonies of the Scripture, or by evident reason—for I neither believe the Pope nor the Councils alone, since it is clear that they have often erred and contradicted one another—I am overcome by the Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is taken captive by the words of God, and I neither can nor will retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to act against conscience.¹

This was the declaration that established the principle of private judgment in Protestantism. Before this, as in Luther's disputation with Eck at Liepsic, Luther had been compelled to

recognize that ultimately he must take his stand against the claims of the Church of Rome solely upon the authority of Scripture. The main result of that meeting with Eck was that Luther no longer recognized the authority of the Roman Church in matters of faith. At first, he had only attacked the instructions given to the preachers of indulgences and the rules of the later schoolmen, but had expressly retained the decretals of the popes: then he had rejected these, but with appeal to the decision of a Council: he now emancipated himself from this last remaining human authority also; he recognized none but that of the Scriptures.²

While Luther was thus engaged, Melancthon his colleague, to whom the principles of protestant theology can be traced as much as to Luther, was engaged in study which led to the enunciation of one of those first and fundamental principles, which was published in a little treatise in 1519 *viz.*, that the Scripture was not to be expounded according to the Fathers, but that the Fathers were to be understood according to the sense of Scripture. Thus he overthrew and turned upside down the principle to which the Church of Rome had always adhered and taken for granted, *viz.*, that the Scripture must be understood and interpreted by the Fathers and by the Councils of the Church. The Reformers maintained that the Fathers contradicted each other and could err, as indeed councils could err. The only infallible authority is Scripture; the sayings of the Fathers and the decrees of Councils must therefore be interpreted by Scripture and not *vice versa*.

Councils and Churches

Luther afterwards took up and developed this principle in his little book *Councils and Churches*, in which he also argues, while examining one by one all the early Councils of the church, that Councils are not for the resolving of what was formerly unclear in Scripture, but rather simply for affirming what is clearly taught in Scripture, and they bear witness to that truth, for the truth is not established by Councils or articles, but by God himself in Scripture. It was, said Luther, an error, under which the Church of Rome laboured, to assert

that Councils are invested with power and right to establish new articles of belief and abolish the old. This is not true. Such a proposition we Christians must also tear to tatters. No Councils have done this, and never could they have done it; because the articles of faith must not emanate from terrestrial Councils, as if they arose out of a secret and new suggestion, but they must be openly given and revealed from heaven through the Holy Spirit. If not, they are no articles of faith.

The Council of Nicea did not invent the doctrine that Jesus Christ is God,

it was revealed to the apostles by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. It has remained and descended from the apostles down to this Council, and so came down in a straight line to ourselves, and will remain, too, down to the end of the world.³

The Scriptures, Luther maintained, are more plain and clear than Councils. The proper purpose of Councils is not to teach anything, but to prevent any new doctrine superseding the old.⁴ ‘They must confess and defend the primitive faith against new articles of belief, and not the new to the disparagement of the old’.⁵ Holy Scripture, not the Fathers or Councils, is the source of truth. ‘All Councils therefore which follow not Scripture are Councils of Caiaphas, Pilate, Herod, which took counsel against the Lord and His Anointed (Acts 4, Psalm 2).’⁶

All this is necessary for us to understand how the Reformers completely turned the tables on the Church of Rome, and established a quite different way of doing theology, the basis of which was the appeal to Scripture as supreme and sufficient, the only rule of faith, by which

everything else, Fathers, Councils, Church must be tested and tried. It was, of course, quite revolutionary, and especially when Luther appealed to this principle in his disputation with Eck, and later at Worms, as the ground for his refusal to recant. It must remain fundamental to our Reformed and Protestant position.

Objective truth of Scripture

But the question which was raised then and is sometimes raised today is, What right had Luther and Melancthon or anybody else to oppose their private, idiosyncratic interpretation of Scripture to that of the church? What right had they to pit their private judgment against the church's authority? To pose the question in that form, however, is false and misleading, and does not fairly represent what the Reformers understood themselves to be doing. They did not believe that they were opposing their private interpretation of Scripture to that of the church; they believed that they were opposing the testimony of Scripture itself to the erroneous teaching of the church. In other words, this was not the private view of Luther or Melancthon to which they appealed—that would have been of no account. It was the teaching of the Bible itself to which they appealed. They believed that there was an objective truth in Scripture independent of themselves, that Scripture had its own doctrines and faith to which they had been granted access by faith, and it was that truth and teaching which they were opposing to the teaching of the Church of Rome, not anything of their own. It was upon the truth of God's Word that they built, not upon anything in themselves.

This is put very well in Elliott's *Delineation of Roman Catholicism* where the author deals with the nature of private judgment.

The Protestant rule [of faith] is not the Bible as understood by every individual reader or hearer of it. No Protestant Church ever professed such a rule, yet all modern Roman Catholics take it for granted that that is our only rule . . . Our rule of faith is the Word of God as contained in the Holy Scriptures, not as understood by every man of sound judgment, but as holy men of God wrote them, under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. This is the perfect standard to which all Protestants appeal. It is not affected by the understanding or misunderstanding of any man or any body of men in the world. It is immutable and infallible truth in itself. If the Bible cannot be a perfect standard of faith and morals, because men differ in their judgment with regard to some points of it, there cannot be a perfect standard at all, for there never was a composition in human language, of which men will not form different opinions.⁷

Elliott is arguing that the Bible has an objective meaning in itself, independently of man, and it is our duty to seek to arrive at that objective meaning. Thus, Luther appealed to the Bible over against Rome, to its teaching, not to his own private apprehension of its meaning. He did not pit *himself* against Rome, but *the Bible* against Rome. The danger in which we stand today, even in evangelical circles, as a consequence of certain modern trends in interpreting the Bible, is of concluding that the Bible has no objective meaning in itself, over and above the particular interpretations of it by individuals or by groups. But I shall come to this again later. I return now to Elliott who says

No private interpretation by individuals is recognised as the rule of the Protestant faith. If it were true that our rule were the Bible as understood by every individual reader, it would involve the absurdity of being a rule and no rule at the same time. But while Protestants take the Word of God as their guide, in the sense which God intends, and in that sense only, they maintain that every man has the right to read it for himself, and to form his own judgment on its meaning.⁸

The Clarity of Scripture

This brings me to two related principles to which the Reformers appealed to support their view that Scripture has an objective meaning which is the rule of faith. The first is the *clarity and perspicuity of Scripture*, that is, that its principal teachings on salvation are clear and attainable. It is no good the Bible having an objective meaning and truth if that meaning and truth cannot be discovered or understood. But on the contrary, the message of salvation is clear and plain on the face of Scripture. Thus Luther put it:

It should be settled as fundamental, and most firmly fixed in the minds of Christians, that the Holy Scriptures are a spiritual light far brighter even than the sun, especially in what relates to salvation and all essential matters.⁹

This, he says, should be taken as axiomatic and, indeed, it is clear that the Reformation could not have proceeded one step forward if this had not been insisted upon by the Reformers. But, he continues, because we have so long been persuaded of the opposite by the Sophists, that the Scriptures are obscure and equivocal, we are compelled to begin by proving this very first principle. And so he goes on to show that, in Scripture, Scripture itself is described as a light, and as that which gives light. ‘How then can we make obscurity and darkness out of God’s Word?’ What were the apostles doing when they preached from the Scriptures? Were they hiding their darkness under greater darkness? Were they trying to prove what is better known by what is less well known? What was Christ doing when he told the Jews to search the Scriptures? Did he want them to be uncertain about faith in himself? . . . Does not all this prove that the apostles, like Christ himself, appealed to the Scriptures as the clearest witness to the truth of what they were saying? With what conscience then do we make them to be obscure?’¹⁰

Bullinger makes the same point:

Some things in the Scriptures, or Word of God, are so plainly set forth, that they have need of no interpretation, neither will admit any exposition: which if any man go about with his own expositions to make more manifest, he may seem to do as wittily as he, which with faggot-light and torches would help the sun at his rising to give more light unto the world.¹¹

Now, what the reformers were asserting was not that all Scripture is equally clear and intelligible, but that the main teaching of salvation through Christ is plainly set forth in it, so that he who runs may read, so that ‘the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein’. This was the great impetus that led to the translation and dissemination of the Scriptures and to the encouragement of men and women to read it for themselves, for it was based upon the belief that it was possible for the ordinary man and woman, who read the Bible, to come to the knowledge of salvation without any human intermediary. I hope we all still believe that, and that we will not be deflected from it by the sophistical arguments of some in the present day who speak about the difficulty and obscurity of the Bible—arguments which are, in principle, no different from those the Reformers had to meet and counter. It was this confidence in the clarity of Scripture that led to the compilation of the first homily by Cranmer, *A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture*, in which he urges the reading of the Bible by ordinary people, and combats the idea that the Bible is a dark and obscure book and not suitable for laymen. The Bible Societies acted in the same confidence, sending out colporteurs to distribute the Scriptures to simple folk. George Borrow in his classic *The Bible in Spain* describes his travels on behalf of the British and Foreign Bible Society and his determination to leave copies of the New Testament in the towns and villages, in the belief that the truth it contained could dawn upon the minds of

those who read it, whatever their condition might be. If Protestant Christianity retreats from this position it must, as Ryle said, have serious consequences; quite as serious as the abandonment of the doctrine of the supremacy of Scripture or justification by faith alone.

Scripture its own interpreter

However, we must remember that the Reformers did not claim that everything in Scripture, and all parts of it, were equally clear. They acknowledged that there were depths and mysteries in Scripture, but here they invoked another principle which is of great importance and that is, that the harder and more difficult parts of the Bible are to be understood and explained by those which are easier and plainly understood. *Scripture is its own interpreter: the Bible must be used to interpret the Bible.* This was something which Augustine had taught, and we find it everywhere insisted upon by the Reformers. Cranmer put it thus:

Although many things in Scripture be spoken in obscure mysteries, yet there is nothing spoken under dark mysteries in one place, but the selfsame thing in other places is spoken more familiarly and plainly to the capacity both of the learned and the unlearned.¹²

Bullinger expresses the principle in this way

As for those things which are so set down, that they seem to require our help to expound them, they must not be interpreted after our own fantasies, but according to the mind and meaning of him, by whom the Scriptures were revealed. For St Peter saith: 'The prophecy came not in the old time by the will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost'. Therefore the true and proper sense of God's word must be taken out of the Scriptures themselves, and not be forcibly thrust upon the scriptures, as we ourselves lust.¹³

Or as Archdeacon Philpot put it

He is a right good reader, which searcheth the interpretation of the sayings of scripture by the sayings of scripture, rather than make and determine it himself; and he should declare it by them, rather than bring it of his own head.¹⁴

And again Tyndale: 'The Scriptures, conferred together, expound themselves, as saith St Austin'.¹⁵ And Latimer: 'It is the comparison and collation of places that make scripture plain.'¹⁶

Sufficient has been said to show how important was this doctrine for the Reformers, that Scripture should be interpreted by Scripture. Only so can its true and full meaning be brought out and understood. And this keys in with the earlier principle to which we referred, namely, that Scripture has an objective meaning of its own, independently of man's mind. It is that message that must be heard and received, and the path to receiving it is to compare Scripture with Scripture. Scripture stands over against us and confronts us with its own truth, which we can only hear when we allow Scripture to speak for itself in this way. Thus we affirm the truth that

no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation. For Prophecy came not of old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost (2 Peter 1:20, 21).

The coming of Scripture, the giving of revelation, was not the product of man's mind, the invention of human faculties, nor is the interpretation of it. Scripture is not to be drawn aside

according to whim, philosophy, fancy and so forth. We are to discern the mind of the Spirit of God who gave utterance to it; we are to explore the mind of the Spirit with the mind of the Spirit; to compare spiritual things with spiritual, scripture with scripture, for only so is the true meaning of the Word to be discovered. As Whitaker put it in his *Disputation on Scripture*.

We must not bring any private meaning or any private opinions, but only such as agree with the mind, intention, and dictate of the Holy Spirit. For since he is the author of the Scriptures, it is fit that we should follow him in interpreting Scripture.¹⁷

The analogy of faith

Here we come upon a further facet of this doctrine which needs to be taken into account. Not only is Scripture to be interpreted by Scripture, but all is to be according to the analogy of faith.

Forasmuch as no prophecy is of any private motion, and whatsoever interpretation man giveth, if it agree not to the analogy of faith, which St. Paul gave commandment to be observed, is a private interpretation; special heed is to be had that one place of scripture be so expounded as it agree with another; and all to the proportion of faith.¹⁸

St. Paul refers to the ‘proportion of faith’ in Romans 12:6. The words used in the original text are *kata ten analogian* which mean ‘in right relationship to’, ‘in agreement with’ or ‘in proportion to’. So when St. Paul says ‘let us prophesy according to the *proportion* of faith’ he is saying let our preaching, our exposition be in accord, in agreement with the main articles of the faith. Let there be no contradiction or confusion there.

Matthew Henry’s comment on this text is

There are some staple-truths, as I may call them, some *prima axiomata*— first axioms, plainly and uniformly taught in Scripture, which are the touchstone of preaching, by which we must *prove all things* and then *hold fast that which is good*. . . Truths that are more dark must be examined by those that are more clear; and then entertained when they are found to agree and comport with the analogy of faith; for it is certain that one truth can never contradict another.

So there is a unity and accord in the exposition of Scripture. This is the concept of preaching that the Reformers espoused. It is ‘the opening of Scripture’ by Scripture. We progress from the plain and evident truths of the Bible to the deeper and harder passages, which are to be expounded on the lines of the clearer passages. The harder passages do not teach us anything different, in principle, from the plainer ones, but they shed more light and expose greater depths to our view. This is interpreting Scripture according to the analogy of faith, so that we do not pit one part of Scripture against another. (The 39 Articles lay down the rule that the Church may not ‘so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.’ Art. 20.) We do not find in the Bible warring and conflicting voices, as many contemporary critics claim. The Bible is essentially one because it is inspired by the one Holy Spirit of God. Thus the proper interpretation will lead to the unity of the faith gathered from every part of Scripture, and all will be consistent with the main, clear teachings of Scripture, with the articles of the Christian faith.

Bullinger summarizes the position in this way

. . . There are therefore certain rules to expound the word of God religiously by the very word of God itself: that is, so to expound it, that the exposition disagree not with the articles of our faith, nor be contrary to charity towards God and our neighbour; but that it be thoroughly

surveyed and grounded upon that which went before and followeth after, by diligent weighing of all the circumstances, and laying together of places.

And chiefly it is requisite, that the heart of the interpreter be godly bent, willing to plant virtue and pluck up vice by the roots, and finally, always ready evermore to pray to the Lord, that he will vouchsafe to illuminate our minds, that God's name may in all things be glorified.¹⁹

It is interesting that in dealing with this subject, puts the doctrine of Christ and justification by faith at the heart of the matter. These are the articles by which a right understanding of Scripture is to be gained. We are truly out of the way if our reading of Scripture does not put us in possession of this knowledge.

The scripture is that wherewith God draweth us unto him, and not that wherewith we should be led from him. The scriptures spring out of God, and flow unto Christ, and were given to lead us to Christ. Thou must therefore go along by the scripture as by a line, until thou come at Christ, which is the way's end and resting-place. If any man, therefore, use the scripture to draw thee from Christ, and to nosel thee in anything save in Christ, the same is a false prophet.²⁰

In his answer to Sir Thomas More he said,

When the pope makes great difficulty about the hardness of Paul's epistles, I say, 'It is impossible to understand either Peter or Paul, or anything at all in the scripture for him that denieth the justifying faith of Christ's blood'.

Without such controlling articles of faith to guide us we are groping about in the dark; the Bible will remain a maze and a mystery to us.

The illumination of the Holy Spirit

That brings us to the further point that all the reformers insisted on, and that is, that a man must have the illumination of the Holy Spirit in order to be able to interpret Scripture aright. It was not by the mind and will of man that Scripture came and therefore it is not of the mind and will of man that it is understood and interpreted.

We determine that the supreme right, authority and judgment of interpreting the Scriptures is lodged with the Holy Ghost and scripture itself.²¹

and Whitaker continues

The authority of Scripture depends upon, and is made clear by, the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, without which, though you were to hear a thousand times that this is the word of God, yet you would never believe, in such a manner as to acquiesce with an entire assent.²²

He sets this out more fully as against the doctrine of the Church of Rome in a further passage which may be summarized as follows: If the scriptures should be interpreted and understood by the same Holy Spirit by whom they were written, then it is necessary that all who would interpret and understand them should consult and be guided by that Holy Spirit. The Papists acknowledge this but in a different way from ourselves. They consider that the gift of the Holy Spirit in this respect, to lead into all truth, is given to the Pope; but the New Testament shows that it is given to all believers. John 1:20 declares 'You have an unction from the Holy One' that is, you have the Holy Ghost. What is it we have obtained by him? It follows 'and ye know all things', that is, all things necessary. Therefore John says, verse 27, 'Ye have no

need that any one teach you'. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to establish our hearts, to teach us internally and to seal upon our minds the truths of Holy Scripture.²³

The classical doctrine

We can see then something of the constituent elements of the classical protestant doctrine of private judgment. It is not a licence for the individual to make whatever he likes of Scripture, and use it as a nose of wax which he may fashion to suit his own fancy. It is rather a duty, a right, a privilege and indeed a necessity for each individual person to read Scripture with a view to understanding its true meaning. He must come humbly to submit his mind to the mind and teaching of the Bible. The way to discover that is through comparing Scripture with Scripture and allowing it to be its own interpreter. This must be done with due respect to the analogy of faith, that is, that the main articles of the faith set forth in Scripture must not be contradicted by those parts of the Bible which are less clear, but that the latter must be expounded by analogy with the former. Finally, each person must have the anointing of the Holy Spirit to give illumination and understanding to Scripture or he will not discover its true meaning. All that, we assert, is the right, duty, necessity and privilege of the individual.

Every individual has the *right* to judge for himself by the Word of God whether what is put before him is God's truth or not. To search the Scriptures, to prove all things and to hold fast that which is good. The Bereans were commended in Acts for doing this very thing and John says in his first Epistle 'Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits, whether they are of God', and again in 2 John 10 'If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house'.

Every individual has the *duty* to exercise private judgment in this way. God requires it of him. Faith is a personal thing. Others cannot exercise it for us, none can be saved by proxy. Faith is a personal persuasion and commitment and we must come to close quarters with what we believe and why we believe it.

Every individual is under the *necessity* to exercise private judgment as he loves his own soul and would not be deceived. The neglect of private judgment has always been the cause of immense evils in the church.

Private judgment is also the *privilege* of the individual and as such should be exercised responsibly. It belongs to the liberty of the Christian 'and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty' (2 Cor. 3:17). No Christian can claim to be truly free unless he knows something of the nature of private judgment and its exercise.

The Church of Rome

All this stands in marked contrast to the teaching of the Church of Rome both at the time of the Reformation and today, for she teaches that it is the duty of the individual to surrender his judgment to the church, to trust her implicitly in all matters of faith, because she knows best, and the individual is in no position to judge such weighty matters for himself.

The decree of the Council of Trent on the interpretation of Scripture declares:

No one, relying on his own skill, shall, in matters of faith, and of morals . . . dare to interpret the said sacred Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church, whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures, hath held and doth hold; or even contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers . . .²⁴

Vatican I renewed the decree of the Council of Trent and declared its meaning to be that

in matters of faith and morals affecting the structure of Christian doctrine, that sense of Sacred Scripture is to be considered as true which holy Mother Church has held and now holds; for it is her office to judge about the true sense and interpretation of Sacred Scripture; and, therefore no one is allowed to interpret Sacred Scripture contrary to this sense nor contrary to the unanimous agreement of the Fathers.²⁵

The decree of Vatican II on the subject represents no change in this position

The task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted *exclusively* to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.²⁶

The matter of interpreting the Bible is, according to the Church of Rome, altogether too difficult and complex a matter for the individual. The Scriptures themselves, they argue, present difficulties enough, but to interpret them one also needs the *Apocrypha*, unwritten traditions, the unanimous consent of the Fathers, the interpretations of popes which make a library, the *Missal*, the *Breviary*, and so on. This is what Bishop Ridley characterized as ‘the long faith of the papists’ because it entailed an impossible catalogue of authorities. ‘Let the papists go with their long faith, be you contented with the short faith’, that is, the Bible alone as its interpreter.²⁷

The impossibility of the individual under the Roman Catholic System, grappling at all with this recondite and complex matter puts private judgment out of court. It is best left to the Church. But the church of Rome goes further; not only need the individual not wrestle with faith, but he does not even need to know the content of his faith. By the doctrine of *implicit faith*, the Church of Rome disposes of the whole question for him. He assents to believe what the church believes, he does not need to know what that faith is. As the act of faith of the Roman Catholic Catechism puts it, ‘My God, I believe in you and all that your church teaches, because you have said it, and your word is true’. This was called in Italy the ‘collier’s faith’ from certain answers of a coal miner to questions about his faith. *Q.* ‘What do you believe?’ *A.* ‘I believe what the Church believes.’ *Q.* ‘What does the Church believe?’ *A.* ‘The Church believes what I believe’. *Q.* ‘Well, then, what is it that both you and the Church believe?’ *A.* ‘We both believe exactly the same thing’.

The necessity of private judgment

This surrender of the mind and judgment of the individual to the Church militates against true religion. First, it subverts the very end and purpose of religion which requires that faith must be personal commitment based upon knowledge. The individual cannot hand over the matter of faith to the church as if he were signing a blank cheque without thereby destroying the essence of faith. The connexion between faith and knowledge is firmly established in the New Testament and is beyond dispute, for ‘faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God’ (Rom. 10:17). Faith and the Word can no more be separated, as Calvin said, than the rays of light can be disconnected from the sun. Faith rests upon the promises of God and without the knowledge of those promises there can be no faith. But the force of saying that private judgment has no part in faith, as does the Church of Rome, is to disconnect knowledge and faith. Those matters in which we do not exercise private judgment, as we know well, are usually matters of little or no interest to us, and which do not occupy our thoughts. Therefore, to say that the individual ought not to exercise private judgment in

religious matters can only be combined with in one way, *viz.*, by his withdrawing his attention as much as possible from the whole subject, except as regards its outward forms. This we know is the essential nature of Roman Catholicism.

But there is another reason for the necessity of private judgment in matters of religion and faith; and that is simply, that God has laid this responsibility upon us, and we cannot possibly rid ourselves of it, not even by the method that Rome proposes, for an act of private judgment is entailed in accepting the Church of Rome as an infallible guide. As Archbishop Whately put it many years ago:

Before a man can rationally *judge* that he should *submit his judgment* in other things to the Church of Rome, he must have judged, 1) That there is a God; 2) That Christianity comes from God; 3) That Christ has promised to give an infallible authority in the Church; 4) That such authority resides in the Church of Rome.

Now, to say that men who are competent to form sound judgments on these points are quite incompetent to form sound judgments about any other matters in religion, is very like saying that men may have sound judgments of their own *before* they enter the Church of Rome, but that they *lose* all sound judgment entirely from the moment they enter it.²⁸

We see then how matters stand with regard to private judgment and the Church of Rome, but how do they stand today in the Protestant Churches? I began by saying that little attention now seems to be paid to this important doctrine, which was so fundamental to the Reformation. If it is neglected and decays then we shall find ourselves in serious difficulties, and I am inclined to think that many of the problems we face today result from this neglect. But worse still we shall find ourselves without a rationale for our position, and it might be quite legitimately asked, Why, then, do you continue as Protestants, and why should you not join the Church of Rome?

The new hermeneutic

I believe that the reason for the neglect of the doctrine of private judgment is the present disarray and confusion amongst many Protestants about the nature of revelation and how it is to be interpreted. This is associated with the *new hermeneutic* or the new method of interpreting Scripture. The new hermeneutic is based upon the view that in order to interpret and understand the Bible we must recognize certain things about it and about ourselves as interpreters of it.

First, it is said, we must recognize the pastness of the past, that is, that the Bible was written a long time ago, by many different authors, with very different cultural backgrounds and presuppositions from ourselves. We must also recognize that we who come to interpret the Bible bring with us our own cultural backgrounds and pre-understandings, which we are inclined to impose upon Scripture. Therefore, we must be aware of these factors and not allow them to distort our interpretation as we attempt to understand and express what, for example, an utterance meant for Isaiah and his contemporaries and what it might mean for us today.

Some of this may sound straightforward enough, and even as if it were the key to a better and clearer understanding of the Bible. Is it not, in fact, what every honest and sincere student of the Bible has been trying to do for a very long time? Unfortunately, it is not as straightforward as it appears. The 'pastness of the past' has been taken to mean by some the virtual inaccessibility of the past, so that it is almost impossible to understand the books of

the Bible in the sense in which they were originally intended. Similarly, the different cultural backgrounds of the Biblical writers have led to the assertion that Scripture does not speak with one voice, but that it sets before us very different teachings, some of which are even contradictory. It has led also to the view that there is not necessarily any objective truth or meaning in Scripture, but that each reader and interpreter of Scripture will take away from his encounter with the text his own particular meaning which is authentic and valid for him. This approach has its parallels in contemporary literary criticism which was described to me recently by a professor of English literature as anarchistic. In other words we find ourselves with the new hermeneutic in the very situation that the Reformers sought to avoid, and strenuously argued against, that is, the abuse of private interpretation, by which it is assumed that every individual's interpretation of the Bible is as valid and true as everyone else's, and that there is no objective meaning of Scripture, over and above the interpretations of groups or individuals. That of course is anarchy, it is private judgment run wild; it is neo-Protestantism from which we recoil in horror. It derives its rationale not from Scripture or Protestant theology but from existentialism, the belief that only that is real which is real for you. There is a certain truth here, but it has been perverted and distorted. The new hermeneutic can also lead to the very dangers against which it is supposed to warn, that is of imposing contemporary pre-understandings upon Scripture. Much liberation and kingdom theology does this by reading into the Old Testament, particularly the account of the Exodus, Marxist views of society and class conflict. Such misuse of Scripture is by no means new. There is such a thing as believing a lie with full assurance of the truth. 'Because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved, And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie' (II Thess. 2:10, 11). These, I say, are some of the dangers that attend the new hermeneutic, and in some respects, I believe, are implicit in its presuppositions.

But the question is, what are we to do in the face of it? I think we must understand and reaffirm the classic doctrine of private judgment, that is, that there is an objective meaning to Scripture, God's meaning, which stands over against us and confronts us, despite the cultural diversity of the authors, because this is God's word to man, and men were used as the instruments for communicating it, but were not themselves its source or origin. The objective unity and meaning of Scripture is found in its author God, because God is one. We must also point out that the difficulties of communicating across time and culture are often overstated. There is a unity amongst mankind and a unity in the structure of the mind that makes communication across such barriers possible. It is a false picture to present human beings as 'locked into' different cultural and temporal horizons, insulated from each other, almost like people behind glass screens whose mouths move when they speak but no sound or language emerges. But there is another factor that unites men in all ages and cultures, and that is the solidarity of the human race in sin. 'For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23). Here is a universal human factor and experience; and when the Bible addresses men and women it addresses them not primarily as cultural but as moral beings, sinful human beings under the curse of the law and the wrath of a righteous God, and in need of his grace. Because of this universal human condition the Bible can and does speak to men and women today with a simplicity, directness and force which demonstrates its divine origin.

The danger posed by the new hermeneutic threatens the evangelical constituency as much as any other. D. A. Carson recently drew attention to this.

Even some who lie more or less within the evangelical camp have now defended the position that the New Testament documents, for instance, do not provide us with any unified theology, but with a range of acceptable (yet at places mutually contradictory) theologies.

He is referring to, amongst others, Professor James Dunn whose controversial article on the authority of Scripture appeared in *Churchman* in 1982.

Conclusion

Private judgment should play just as vital a part today in our understanding and appreciation of Christian faith, as it has done in the past. We need Christians whose faith rests upon their personal knowledge of Scripture; for whom the Bible is alive, through the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit; who are able to confess the Catholic faith of the creeds and the Thirty-nine Articles, not simply because the church has declared these things, but because they have themselves searched them out, and proved them by Scripture to be so. We want informed and convinced Christians. But the proper understanding of private judgment, which every individual must exercise as his responsibility before God, is to be related to the Scriptures in their objective meaning and self-interpreting nature. We must do more than we have done in the past to point out the very real dangers of the present time in this respect and not yield to trends which endanger this understanding. For if we yield we shall make shipwreck of the faith just as effectively as if we were to abandon or compromise either the doctrine of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, or the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

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Endnotes:

- 1) See Henry Wace, *Principles of The Reformation*, London, 1910, p. 17.
- 2) Leopold von Ranke, *History of the Reformation in Germany*, London, 1905, p. 204.
- 3) Martin Luther, *Authority of Councils and Churches* (translated by C. B. Smyth), London, 1847, p. 72.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 158.
- 7) Charles Elliott, *Delineation of Roman Catholicism*, London, 1877, p. 14.
- 8) *Loc. cit.*
- 9) Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (translated J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston), James Clarke & Co. Ltd., London, 1957, p. 125.
- 10) *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- 11) *The Decades of Henry Bullinger I*, The Parker Society, Cambridge, 1849, p. 75.

- 12) *Homilies*. S.P.C.K., London, 1864, p. 8.
- 13) Bullinger, *loc. cit.*
- 14) *The Examination and Writings of John Philpot*, Parker Society, Cambridge, 1842, p. 377.
- 15) *Tyndale's Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, Parker Society, Cambridge, 1850, p. 249.
- 16) *The Seven Sermons Preached before King Edward VI*, Parker Society, Cambridge, 1844.
- 17) *A Disputation on Holy Scripture*, William Whitaker, Parker Society, Cambridge, 1849, p. 7.
- 18) *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles by Thomas Rogers*, Parker Society, Cambridge, 1854, p. 195.
- 19) *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, The First and Second Decades, Parker Society, Cambridge, 1859, p. 80.
- 20) *The Doctrinal Treatises of William Tyndale*, Parker Society, Cambridge, 1848, p. 318.
- 21) Whitaker *op. cit.*, p. 415.
- 22) *Ibid.*, p. 290.
- 23) *Ibid.*, p. 453.
- 24) *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Routledge, London, 1851, p. 19.
- 25) *The Church Teaches*, Tan Books, Illinois, 1973, p. 47.
- 26) *The Documents of Vatican II*, Abbott, London, 1966, p. 117.
- 27) *The Works of Bishop Ridley*, Parker Society, Cambridge, 1843, p. 114.
- 28) Archbishop Whately, *Cautions for the Times*, Chas. J. Thynne, London, p. 19.