

The Right to the Private Interpretation of the Bible

In this paper I will be asserting both the right to private interpretation and the duty of responsible interpretation. And I will be approaching the topic chiefly from an historical perspective.

The right of private interpretation lies at the heart of our Protestant heritage. When Luther was struggling for light in his monastery, he gave himself to intensive Bible study. But it was not easy for him. He had inherited a vast mass of church teachings which pressed down on him with great weight. He had also inherited a number of rules for Bible interpretation. One of these was the so-called four senses of Scripture (literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical). Yet another was "thinking with the church." And still another was the rule that that only is true what has been believed everywhere, always and by everyone.

The problem in Luther's time was that doctrine and practice had become so deeply corrupted, and the corruptions were so deeply entrenched in church and society that it was hard to get to the meaning and teaching of Scripture. A case in point is the text in Romans 3 "But now righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known." Luther was immediately repelled by the reference to the righteousness of God. That was what judged him, terrified him, almost made him hate God. His righteousness. And so he struggled long and hard with that text, trying to understand it, until eventually he began to see how wrongly he understood the phrase 'righteousness of God' in that context. As the light began to dawn, Luther developed his evangelical theology. Salvation is the free gift of God to all who believe in Christ. It is the gift of his grace, received by faith, purchased and given by Christ, according to Scripture, to the praise and glory of God.

Once Luther grasped the central theme of the gospel, he began to teach it boldly, promoting a revolution! There were violent reactions against it. This is novel! Heretical! At the Diet of Worms, Emperor Charles V declared, "It is impossible for one monk to be right and a thousand years of Christendom be wrong." Luther could only reply, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason ... my conscience is captive to the Word of God, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen." This was the triumph of faith that launched the Reformation, by a man asserting the right of private interpretation – responsibly.

The duty of responsible interpretation

Roman Catholic critics of the Reformers charged that this right of private interpretation would lead to a thousand sects and disunity as everyone asserted his own right to private interpretation of the sacred texts. And today, Roman Catholics point to the thousands of Protestant groups as proof that their forefathers were correct.

The fact is that the right to private interpretation, though essential for vital faith, is also dangerous when carried out in an irresponsible way. So what do we mean by

responsible interpretation? It is difficult to codify this in a simple formula. It embraces many things, including a spirit of humility, the importance of consultation, a respect for genuine scholarship, a grasp of hermeneutical principles and sound theology. Let us explore some of these elements.

Consultation. Jesus promised that the Spirit would lead us into all truth. The Holy Spirit is given to the whole church, the whole body of Christ; so that it is together that we are led into all truth. This is a process that takes time. We study the Bible together, listening respectfully to one another. We also recognise that God has given gifted teachers to the church, and we respect their gifts. We consult their commentaries. And we are not modernists, believing that only modern scholars have insight. We consult with great respect the fathers of the church, those older writers and scholars who have laboured to understand the truths of the Bible.

Humility. It is pride that leads to sects. Those who insist on their own view and despise all others, past and present. They often claim special revelation and work towards forming a party around themselves. This is the definition of heresy. Russell, who founded the JW's, insisted on having unique and perfect insight into Scripture, condemning all others. Marcion formed his own canon of Scripture and his own church, rejecting the process of dialogue that led to the consensus of the 27 books of the NT.

Respect of genuine scholarship. A knowledge of Hebrew and Greek. A grasp of sound hermeneutical principles. A sound theology. All these are vital to the correct interpretation of Scripture. A realisation that the Old Covenant has been replaced by the New Covenant, and therefore we must read and interpret the Old Testament in the light of the New. A clear understanding of the supremacy of Christ, of whom Moses and the Prophets spoke. The principle of interpreting more obscure passages in the light of clearer ones. All these are necessary in our task of Scripture interpretation.

Some of the early Pentecostal leaders became enraptured with the glory and power of the name of Jesus. If they had only been more familiar with the Nicene Creed and all the historical discussions surrounding that creed, they would not have rushed into the heresy of Oneness theology which denies the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

Although responsible biblical interpretation takes seriously the literal meaning of Scripture, a wooden literalism can also lead astray if not guided by sound doctrine. The insistence of Roman Catholics that "This is my body" teaches transubstantiation represents a failure to understand the spiritual nature of 'feeding on Christ' through believing the gospel. Origen reportedly had himself castrated on the basis of "some have made themselves eunuchs." Francis of Assisi insisted Christ's words "sell your possessions and follow me" required absolute poverty. Insistence on the 1000 years of Revelation 20 has led many to ignore the consistent NT teaching that the return of Jesus marks the transition between this present age and the eternity and perfection of the age to come. A new convert who had begun to read the Bible from Genesis once phoned me in alarm, "Must I circumcise my son?" Responsible interpretation strives to understand the whole message of the whole Bible through the lens of the

gospel of Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last.

Responsible interpretation is not easy. It is hard. It is the work of a life time. It cannot be separated from spiritual growth and maturity. I said at the beginning that the right of individual interpretation is necessary but dangerous. I say now that responsible interpretation is necessary and difficult. That is why the Protestant Evangelical world looks a bit like a building site – a big mess. But something beautiful is growing in that mess, a holy temple for the Lord.

Some, appalled by the mess, abandon the right of private interpretation and retreat to those places where we are told, by higher authorities, what the Bible means. The Magisterium (the pope and the bishops in communion with him) of the Roman Catholic Church, which alone guides the faithful in the true meaning of Scripture. The Organisation of the Jehovah Witnesses. The living apostles of the New Apostolic Church. The professional theologians of Harvard and Yale, Oxford or Cambridge, who by their learning have expert knowledge to which ordinary folk must yield.

To all the above we say NO! The Holy Spirit is given to all the followers of Jesus Christ, that they might study the sacred Scriptures diligently, throughout their lives, praying in the Holy Spirit for guidance, humbly consulting with others, listening carefully to their teachers, past and present, that they might grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. The result may look like a confused building site right now, but that is infinitely better than the neat and orderly prison, governed by tyrannical Guardians who allow no personal freedom or the right of individual interpretation of the Holy Scriptures so that we may know the truth that sets us free.