

No Private Interpretation? An Old and Neglected Doctrine Reaffirmed

Dr. Allen Baird

We live in a day in which the written word is under serious attack. We live in the era of image. It is difficult to think of a single area of our lives, from the products we purchase to the way we perceive those who are the rulers in our countries, that is not dominated by image, picture and form. In my opinion, the prime culprit for the present state of affairs is the television, which, as a medium, seems to necessarily trivialise and put a “spin” on every topic with which it comes into contact.¹ As a consequence, the attributes of reason and concentration, and the correlated virtues of patience and composure, are looked down upon. Short-term sentiment, purposeless passion and emotional egoism are promoted in their place.

It is a temptation for the Christian in such an environment to go and do likewise. Indeed, several evangelical authors have actually claimed that the church is following suit in a big way.² The preaching of the Word is replaced by hours of repetitious chorus singing, interviews with Christian “celebrities” and excursions into drama-land. This is not just a point about the fact that the various media of communication have altered within the Christian community over the years. Think of the effect such different forms of communication have upon the mind-set of a congregation. To sit under the preached Word and profit from it demands powers of self-control and reflection, whereas the other means mentioned foster an insatiable desire to be entertained, a quick fix of titillation, and ultimately an empty head.

¹See Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (Methuen, 1987).

²See, for instance, Os Guinness’s *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds* or Mark Noll’s *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.

Is this a new state for the church to be in? Has there ever been another time in the history of Christianity when show and razzmatazz were “in” while content and thoughtfulness were “out”? Although the exact *style* of the show is a little different now, our own time is moving closer than many realise to that of the church just prior to the Reformation. Then there were mystics with the stigmata; now we have charismatics who bleat like sheep. Then there was the enthralling pomp of the mass; now we have revival orators and celebrity singers to keep us spellbound. Then there was image, event and feeling in a Medieval context; now we have the same stuff in a post-modern one.

Now I want to introduce the subject to be considered for the rest of the article: *the Reformation doctrine of private judgement*. It might not be immediately obvious what this has to do with the above, but think about it. The Medieval church emphasised image at the expense of word as a means of keeping her people from thinking for themselves. It was a way of keeping authority over them. After all, if they did not think, they could not question, and they would not rebel. In that context, the Reformers stressed the doctrine of private judgement as a *right* which every Christian could exercise in order to free themselves from Roman *tyranny*.

Our present situation is a little different from this. The contemporary church emphasises image at the expense of word as a means of relieving her people from the bother of thinking at all. It is a way of keeping ourselves in a state of shallow passivity. After all, if we do not think, we will not judge, and cannot form absolute convictions upon which to act responsibly. In our context, I propose that we need to stress the doctrine of private judgement as a *responsibility* which every Christian must exercise in order to move us away from modern hedonism and indifference. The Medieval church opposed private judgement because it might lead people to espouse doctrinal and moral convictions which were contrary to her teaching. Today, we need to encourage private judgement once again for without it Christians will not espouse doctrinal or moral convictions at all.

So what is this doctrine of private judgement? It may be explained under the following points. Firstly, there is the necessity of private judgement - the impossibility of neutrality. A. A. Hodge made an excellent point about the impossibility of avoiding the *activity* of private judgement even if the *doctrine* itself is rejected. "Is there a God? Has he revealed himself? Has he established a church? Is that church an infallible teacher? Is private judgement a blind leader? Which of all pretended churches is the true one? Every one of these questions evidently must be settled in the private judgement of the enquirer before he can, rationally or irrationally, give up his private judgement to the direction of the self-asserting church."³ So Roman theologians have to appeal to Scripture in addressing people in order to prove the Scripture cannot be understood by them, and in so doing, appeal to their private judgement in order to persuade them that their private judgement is incompetent! And so it is with their modern Protestant counterparts who appeal to Scriptural teaching to "prove" that Scripture itself is untrustworthy; who write popular books explaining why Scripture may only to be interpreted by scholars and experts; and who classify Scripture as fallible and culturally-conditioned, forgetting that this must apply first of all to their own reasoning and theories.

Second, there is the opportunity for private judgement - the fallibility of the church. "It stands to the everlasting credit of the Reformers of the sixteenth century that they rebelled against the doctrine of ecclesiastical infallibility. They upheld the infallibility of the Bible alone. In consequence they insisted that every individual Christian has the right of private interpretation of the Word of God."⁴ If the church of Jesus Christ was inerrant or infallible, then there would be no opportunity for individuals to make private judgements about spiritual matters, since all they would have to do is listen to the teaching of the church and believe or do whatever the church said. But the church consists of finite men whose sin touches everything we do, even our reflection upon and preaching of the Scriptures.

³A. A. Hodge, *Outlines in Theology* (Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 91.

⁴R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 74.

Third, there is the right of private judgement - the limitation of the church. Not only is the church of Jesus Christ *fallible and errant*, it is also greatly *limited* with regard to her powers, according to the Presbyterian theologian James Bannerman. First, her authority is *spiritual*, and so she must seek to persuade the conscience only by spiritual means rather than physical compulsion. Second, her authority is *derived*, and so is limited to the scope of the delegated authority Christ has given her. Third, her authority is *canonical*, and so she cannot persuade beyond that which the Scriptures set down. Next comes Bannerman's final point. "It is an authority to be administered in conformity with the purchased liberties of Christ's people; and therefore, although the Church may, as a delegate of Christ and steward of His mysteries, unfold and declare His doctrine, yet it must never be under reservation of the rights of conscience in the individual, and in subordination, as regards the claims on his belief and submission, to the liberty of private judgement."⁵

Fourth, there is the context for private judgement - the liberty of conscience. This point follows from what has been said above, and it is a startling point if thought upon. If someone were to say to you, "Who has more authority in spiritual matters, you or the church?", we would probably look at them in some amazement, perhaps even embarrassment, and reply, "Why, the church, of course!" Well, in so saying, we might have satisfied our own artificial sense of humility, but we would be dead wrong. Consider these strong words. "The church has a certain amount of authority in matters of faith, although it is itself under authority also. It is the inferior tribunal; and over it, with the right of appeal open to every man on competent grounds, there is the tribunal of conscience ... And the authority of the church is a real authority also, although it is limited by and inferior to the authority both of the individual conscience and of Christ."⁶ Which takes us to the next point.

Fifth, there is the limit on private judgement - the Lordship of Christ. Previously, Bannerman has affirmed that the conscience of the individual

⁵James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: Volume 1* (Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), p. 283.

⁶Bannerman, *Ibid.*, p. 290.

Christian is a greater authority than that of the church. But is everything to be decided by the dictates of our own consciences, as if we were little gods? "But the authority of the conscience is a real authority, although limited by and inferior to the authority of Christ ... As absolute and supreme stands the authority of Christ, as both Head of every man, and also Head of the Church."⁷ There is, then, a hierarchy of spiritual authority: first Christ Himself, then conscience, and lastly the church. "These three ordinances of God, having a right to lay an obligation on men's understanding and belief in matters of faith, although different, and not inconsistent with each other." Matthew 23:8-9 is relevant to the supremacy of Christ over any human authority in matters of faith and practice.

Sixth, there is the heart of private judgement - the personal nature of true religion. In the final analysis, the conscience of the Christian must take precedence over the institution of the church because the Christian religion is in essence a very personal matter. Christianity can be analysed, at its most comprehensive, as a *world-view* or philosophy of life. It can also be taken in somewhat narrower terms as a *society* of people who profess a common doctrine and who are gathered together to fulfil a definite mission. But at its most simple and raw, Christianity concerns the *relationship* between our soul and the Person of God in Jesus Christ. This is not to make Christianity a purely individualistic matter but to emphasise the immediate and direct character of our relationship to God, for which we must finally give an account.⁸

Seventh, there is the means of private judgement - the perspicuity of Scripture. "The Bible is a plain book. It is intelligible by the people.

Ibid.

"In a matter so momentous as my obtaining a correct understanding of God's will for me, as where the eternal interests of my soul are concerned, it deeply concerns me to obtain first-hand information of the same, and not to accept blindly what others say or do, or receive without question what any church teaches ... Religion is an intensely personal thing which cannot be transacted by proxy. It consists of immediate dealings between the individual soul and its maker ... Each one of us is directly responsible to God for the use he makes and the compliance he renders to His word ... Whatever help may be obtained from God's ministers, we are not dependent on them. To understand and interpret the Scriptures is not the prerogative of any ecclesiastical hierarchy." Arthur W. Pink, *Practical Christianity* (Baker, 1991), pp. 172-173.

And they have the right, and are bound to read and interpret it for themselves; so that their faith may rest on the testimony of the Scriptures, and not on that of the Church ... It is not denied that the Scriptures contain many things hard to be understood; that they require diligent study; that all men need the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to right knowledge and true faith. But it is maintained that in all things necessary to salvation they are sufficiently plain to be understood even by the unlearned.”⁹ Hodge provides three main arguments for this: the personal nature of obligations to faith and obedience contained in Scripture; the fact that the Scriptures are everywhere addressed to the people and not to church officers; and the various exhortations in the Scriptures to study them and teach them to their children are made for all God’s people.

Eighth, there is the ability for private judgement - the prophethood of all believers. “It is often said that the Reformers taught the universal priesthood of believers. That is a perfectly correct statement. In defiance of Roman Catholic theology, they rejected a special class of men in the church known as priests and maintained that every single believer is a priest. However, it is no less correct to say that the Reformers taught the universal prophethood of believers. Every believer, according to them, has the right to interpret the Word of God and to teach it to others. In so doing he is not bound by the church’s interpretation. The Reformers themselves made diligent and vigorous use of that right.”¹⁰ Kuiper goes on to prove this doctrine from such passages as Numbers 11:29. Joel 2:28-29 and Acts 2:1-11.

Ninth, there is the abuse of private judgement - the problem of anarchy. It is interesting and informative that Charles Hodge finds cause to mention the right of private judgement in connection with the error of mysticism within the early Reformation movement. “It was very natural that the fanatical, in rejecting the authority of the church, should reject all external authority in matters of religion. They understood by

⁹Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1* (Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 183-184.

¹⁰Kuiper, *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

the right of private judgement, the right of every man to determine what he should believe from the operation of his own mind and from his own inward experience, independent of the Scriptures. But it is palpably absurd to expect, on such a subject as religion, a certainty either satisfactory to ourselves or authoritative for others, from our own reason or feelings, it was inevitable that these subjective convictions should be referred to a supernatural source. Private revelations, an inward light, the testimony of the Spirit, came to be exalted over the authority of the Bible.”¹¹ If the authority of the Christ speaking in His Word is not held to be supreme over conscience, the result is the doctrinal chaos and personality cults found in modern charismatic circles.

Finally, there is the consequence of private judgement - the existence of diversity. If due place is given to the doctrine of private judgement, then a certain necessary diversity will have to be permitted - even in a certain sense considered a good thing - within Christianity. Firstly, there will be a diversity *of* churches. There is a movement abroad today which seeks to define the unity of the church of Jesus Christ in terms of numerical identity, and would push for the formation of one super-denomination, arguing that the existence of a plurality of denominations is contrary to the unity of the church. In an excellent article, Dabney points out that this could only occur *if* the right of private judgement is destroyed by the setting up of an infallible theology to which all could assent, or an inspired umpire in doctrinal differences could be found other than Scripture.¹² Second, there will be a diversity *within* churches. When discussing differences of opinion in non-essential or minor issues which existed with the church at Rome, Paul refused to lay down a law himself but allowed the believers to exercise their right of private judgement on the matter (Romans 14:5 - see also 1 Corinthians 10:15; 11:13; 14:29). If the apostle displayed such a respect for the doctrine

¹¹Charles Hodge, *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹²*Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney: Volume Two* (Banner of Truth, 1982), 457. See also pages 437 and 451 for a further defence of denominationism. For an explanation of such institutional “multiformity”, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Banner of Truth, 1966), p. 572-574.

of private interpretation with all the authority he had at his disposal, how much more should Christian leaders today?

A little needs to be said in conclusion about how all of this applies to us. First of all, I believe that there is a very definite need to relate the Reformation truth of the right of private interpretation to the modern churches of the Reformation, which have compromised it in various ways. It is an easy matter to assert this doctrine against the tyranny of Rome, but what about the several forms of Protestant authoritarianism that exist today? Our Reformed church-world, for instance, suffers from the disease of Protestant clericalism in a way which demonstrates that the doctrine of private interpretation is still not being understood and lived out in all its fullness: ministers resist full accountability to their own congregation by having their membership elsewhere; seminary and college professors are in practice accountable only to committees of their peers for what they teach; principled distinctions are drawn between “teaching” and “ruling” elders so that the limited privilege of seminary training becomes a prerequisite before a man is deemed competent to preach or make judgements in theology; sermons are thought to be somehow infallible and therefore beyond serious scrutiny by ordinary members; ministers dress in special garb and live aloof from their congregations; and leaders dictate to church members what they must believe or how they ought to live in ways which go far beyond not only the Christian gospel and the moral law, but even the boundaries of the Reformed creeds. It is difficult to imagine how any of these things are consistent with a strong insistence upon the right of private interpretation and those other truths to which it is conjoined.¹³

But there is another problem which, if anything, is more dangerous than clericalism. Clericalism is the vestige of our Roman past, a dirty smudge left after our departure from Rome which we still have to learn to fully wipe away. This other problem is the product of the modern age. It

¹³Since some of these points may be classified as controversial by many, I point out that I am only expressing my own “private judgement” on these matters, and not stating the position of the BRF as a whole.

is the problem of “The Specialist”. Once upon a time it was the priests who told God’s people what to believe, or rather, veiled true belief in a cloud of exotic language and technical jargon which they themselves barely understood. Now, we have academics, experts and scholars dictating to us what we can and cannot believe in. They tell us which particular text of the New Testament we may trust (for a little while anyway, until someone wants to make a name and some bucks by publishing another “definitive” text); which latest PC version of the Bible we should use; whether we are permitted to disregard the myth of evolution yet; which Old Testament characters and miracles are “fictitious” and which “authentic”; and how child psychiatry should replace corporal punishment, how rehabilitation is better than Biblical restitution and chastisement, and how Christian education thwarts the child from realising their “maximum potential” as a “fully integrated” member of society.

What are we to do? First, we must learn to think for ourselves, and not be dependent upon the words of preachers or scholars. *Prove all things: hold fast to that which is good* (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Acquainting ourselves with different opinions and dealing honestly with arguments is necessary for this. Second, we must not be afraid to test the preaching we are exposed to on the Lord’s Day, but rather consider this a good and healthy habit to nurture. *Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world* (1 John 4:1). Such scrutiny must be carried out in a careful, charitable and humble way. Finally, we must become acquainted above all with the word of Christ itself, for this is our ultimate standard of truth and the final court of appeal. *These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether these things were so.* (Acts 17:11) The written Word of God alone was what brought salvation at the Reformation, and it is the written Word of God alone that can save us now.

This article was authored by Allen Baird, editor of the British Reformed Journal, who completed his PhD thesis on the doctrine of the Trinity.