

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY Part 3: Authority in Christian Practice Chapter 11 PRIVATE JUDGMENT

by A.W. Pink

Transcript

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Part 3: Authority in Christian Practice

Chapter 11

PRIVATE JUDGMENT

It is our present design to treat of the right, the necessity and the duty of each person freely to exercise his reason, conscience and will, especially in matters pertaining to his soul. Every man has the right to think for himself and express or aver his thoughts on political, moral and spiritual matters, without being subject to any civil or ecclesiastical penalty or inconvenience on that account. Conversely, no man is entitled to force his ideas upon others and demand that they subscribe thereto, still less to propagate them to the disturbing of the public peace. This is a truth which needs proclaiming and insisting upon today, not only because of the widespread apathy towards taking a firm stand for the same, but because the dearly bought liberties which have for so many years been enjoyed by those living in the English-speaking world are now in danger of being filched from them. On the one hand is the steady growth of what is termed "Totalitarianism," under which the minds and bodies of its subjects are little more than robots; and on the other hand is the rapidly increasing power and arrogance of Rome, in which the souls of its members are the slaves of a rigid and merciless tyranny. In writing upon the freedom of the individual, it is our design to shun as far as possible anything which savors of party politics; yet, since the scope of our present theme requires us to say at least a few words on the right of civil liberty, we cannot entirely avoid that which pertains to human governments. But instead of airing our personal views, we shall treat only of those broad and general principles which are applicable to all nations and all ages, and restrict ourselves very largely to what the Holy Scriptures teach thereon. God has not left His people, or even men at large, without definite instruction concerning their civil and spiritual duties and privileges, and it behooves each of us to be informed and regulated thereby. Broadly speaking, the purpose of the State is to promote the welfare of the commonwealth, and to protect each individual in the enjoyment of his temporal rights; but it is entirely outside its province to prescribe the religion of its subjects. Rulers, be they civil or ecclesiastical, have only a delegated power, and are the agents and servants of the community, who entrust to them so

much power as is necessary to the discharge of their office and duty. No human government is perfect, and it may appear to us that a particular form of government is acting unwisely in its legislation and arbitrarily in its administration. The question therefore arises, How should a Christian citizen act under a particularly offensive one? First, the Word of God requires from him full submission and obedience to all those of its enactments which are not in themselves sinful: and that not because the government is one of his choice or because its policy meets with his approval, but because God Himself has ordered, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God . . . Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God" (Romans 13:1, 2). Whatever be the particular form of government, it is of Divine ordering, and His providence has placed us under it. This is also evident from both the teaching and personal example of Christ, who bids us, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's" (Matt. 22:21). But second, if the government should demand of me compliance with anything which is contrary to the revealed will of God, then it is my bounden duty to refuse obedience; yet in such a case God requires me to submit meekly to any penalty imposed upon me for my declining to comply. That a child of God must refuse to do the bidding of a government when it enjoins something contrary to the Divine will is clear from the cases of the three Hebrews (Dan. 3:18), and of Daniel in Babylon (5:10-13), who firmly declined to conform unto the king's idolatrous demands. It is equally evident from the case of the apostles, who, when they were commanded by the authorities "not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus," answered "whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye" (Acts 4:19, and cf. 5:29). Yet note well that, while insisting upon their spiritual rights, in neither case did any of them defend themselves or their cause by resorting to violence against the chief magistrate. Let it be steadily borne in mind that an incompetent or an unjust government is better than none, for the only other alternative is anarchy and a reign of terror, as history clearly and tragically testifies—witness the horrors perpetrated in Paris, when its streets literally ran with blood at the great French Revolution; and the awful carnage and sufferings which more recently obtained in Russia when the regime of the Czars was overthrown. "It is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing" (1 Pet. 3:17). A further question needs considering at this point: Who is to be the judge of which decrees of a government are sinful? Obviously, in the last resort, the citizen himself. That is the scriptural and protestant doctrine of the right of private judgment: to test what the law of the land requires by the Divine Law. God's authoritative Word forbids me doing anything which He has prohibited or which is morally wrong. If any form of government insists upon being the absolute judge of its own case, then there is an end of personal independence and freedom. Every rational being lies under moral obligations to God—obligations which are immediate and inevitable. No government, and no human creature, can answer for him before God in a case of conscience or come between him and his guilt; and therefore it is the most monstrous injustice and iniquity that any power, save the Divine, should dictate to the conscience. It may be said that this is a dangerous doctrine, that it is likely to lead to disorder and insurrection. Not so where the two parts of it be maintained: the right to refuse only when something is demanded which God's Word forbids, and the duty of meekly submitting to the penalty thereof—the latter will check a misuse of the former. Under no conceivable circumstances should any man relinquish the right to think and decide for himself. His reason, will and conscience are Divine gifts, and God holds him responsible for the right use of them, and will condemn him if he buries his talents in the earth. But as it is with so many other of His favors, this one is not valued at its true worth and soon may not be prized at all unless it be entirely removed and there be a return to the bondage of the "dark ages." A considerable majority of the present generation are largely if not wholly unaware—so ignorant as they of history—that for centuries, even in Britain, civil liberty and the right of private judgment upon spiritual things were denied the masses by both State and Church, politicians and prelates alike lording it over the people. Nor was

their tyrannical dominion easily or quickly broken: only after much suffering and a protracted fight was full freedom secured. Alas, that such a dearly bought and hard-won privilege should now be regarded so lightly and be in real danger of being lost again. Nearly two hundred years ago Toplady pointed out, "Despotism has ever proved an insatiable gulf. Throw ever so much into it, it would still yearn for more." Significantly did he add, "Were liberty to perish from any part of the English-speaking world, the whole would soon be deluged by the black sea of arbitrary power." But we must now turn to that part of our subject which more especially concerns the child of God and his spiritual interests. There are three basic truths which the battle of the Reformation recovered for Christendom: the sufficiency and supremacy of the Scriptures, the right of private judgment, and justification by faith without the deeds of the law. Each of those was flatly denied by the Papacy, which taught, and still insists, that human "traditions" are of equal authority with God's Word, that the Romish church alone is qualified to explain the Bible or interpret its contents, and that human merits are necessary in order to our acceptance with God. Having treated at some length, in recent years with the first, we are now considering the second. Rightly did Luther affirm that man is responsible to none but God for his religious views and beliefs, that no earthly power has any right to interfere in the sacred concerns of the soul—to be lord of his conscience or to have dominion over his faith. But while the Reformers contended vigorously for the right and privilege of each individual to read the Scriptures for himself, and, under the illumination and guidance of the Holy Spirit, to form his own opinions of what they teach, yet considerable qualification was made in the application and outworking of that principle in actual practice. So it was too in the century that followed, commonly termed "the Puritan period." The early Reformers and many of the Puritans were for one uniform mode of worship and one form of temporal government, with which all must comply outwardly, whatever their individual convictions and sentiments. However desirable such a common regime might appear, to demand subjection thereunto was not only contrary to the very essence and spirit of Christianity, but also at direct variance with the right of private judgment. No man should ever be compelled, either by reward or punishment, to be a member of any Christian society, or to continue in or of it any longer than he considers it is his duty to do so. Any attempt to enforce uniformity is an attack upon the right of private judgment, and is to invade the office of Christ, who alone is the Head of His people. But alas, how few are fit to be entrusted with any measure of authority. When Anglicanism was supreme, at the close of the sixteenth century, anyone who failed to attend the parish church was subject to a fine! In the next century, when the Presbyterians held the reins, they proved to be equally intolerant to those who differed from them. "Each party agreed too well in asserting the necessity for uniformity in public worship, and of using the sword of the magistrate for the support and defence of their principles, of which both made an ill use whenever they could grasp the power into their own hands. The standard of uniformity according to the Bishops was the Queen's supremacy and the laws of the land; according to the Puritans, the decrees of provincial and national synods, allowed and enforced by the civil magistrate; but neither party was for admitting that liberty of conscience which is every man's right, so far as is consistent with the peace of the civil government" (Daniel Niel's History of the Puritans, volume 2, page 92). Well did that faithful and impartial historian point Out, "Christ is the sole lawgiver of His Church, and has appointed all things necessary to be observed in it to the end of the world; therefore, when He has indulged a liberty to His followers, it is as much their duty to maintain it, as to observe any other of His precepts." Differences of opinion, especially in "church government," soon led to further divisions and the formation of parties and sects, and in many instances Protestants were as dictatorial and tyrannical as the Papists had been, demanding unqualified submission to their articles of faith and forms of worship. Only after bitter persecution and much hardship did real religious liberty gradually emerge, and never yet has it fully and universally obtained in Protestantism. No doubt it would be interesting to many of our readers were we to trace the gradual emergence of religious

freedom from bondage in Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Britain and the U.S.A., and the various and often unexpected set-backs experienced; but even a bare outline of its history would be too lengthy a digression. Nor is it hardly necessary. Human nature is the same in all lands, and in all ages, and those possessing a workable knowledge of the same in themselves and their fellows can easily visualize with their minds the nature of those events. Most of us, if we are honest, must acknowledge that there is quite a bit of the pontiff in us, and therefore we should not be surprised to learn that there have been many popish men in most sections of Christendom, and that a spirit of intolerance and uncharitableness has often marred the characters of real Christians. It has been comparatively rare for those of prominence to insist that "Every species of positive penalty for differing modes of faith and worship is at once anti-Christian, and impolitic, irrational and unjust. While any religious denomination of men deport themselves as dutiful subjects of the State, and as harmless members of the community, they are entitled to civil protection and social esteem, whether they be Protestants, Papists, Jews, Mohammedans, or Pagans" (Toplady). That and nothing short of that, is a true Christian and Catholic spirit. "Seek ye out of the book of the Lord, and read" (Isa. 34:16), for in it alone is His will made known, the Divine way of salvation revealed, and a perfect rule and standard of conduct set before us. That Book is a Divine communication, an authoritative "Thus saith the Lord." It is addressed to the entire human race, and is binding on every member of it. By it each of us will be judged in the day to come. It is therefore both the duty and privilege of every person to read it for himself, that he familiarize himself with its contents, perceive their meaning, and conform his conduct to its requirements. It is to be read reverently, for it is the voice of the Most High which speaks therein. It is to be read impartially, setting aside personal prejudices and preconceived ideas, receiving it without doubting or question. It is to be read humbly, begging its Author to enlighten the understanding and teach His way. It is to be read constantly, daily, so that we may drink into its spirit and make it our counselor. It is not only to be read, but also "seek ye out of the book": take the trouble to compare one part with another, and thereby obtain its full light on each particular subject and detail. By such pains it will be found that the Holy Scriptures are self-interpreting. In a matter so momentous as my obtaining a correct understanding of God's will for me, and 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 and do, or receive without question what any church teaches. I must rigidly examine and test by God's Word all that I hear and read. "Every one of us shall give account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12). Religion is an intensely personal thing which cannot be transacted by proxy. It consists of immediate dealings between the individual soul and its Maker. No one can repent for me, believe for me, love God for me, or render obedience to His precepts on my behalf. Those are personal acts which God holds me responsible to perform. Every man is responsible for his beliefs. Neither ignorance nor error is merely a misfortune, but something highly culpable, since the Truth is available unto us in our mother tongue. If some be deceived by false prophets, the blame rests wholly on themselves. Many complain that there is so much difference and contrariety among preachers, they scarcely know what to believe or what to do. Let them do as God has bidden: "seek ye Out of the book of the Lord"! God has given me that precious Book for the very purpose of making known to me what I am to believe and do, and if I read and search it with a sincere desire to understand its meaning and be regulated by its precepts, I shall not be left in the dark. If I do so act, there will be an end to my perplexity because of the "confusion of tongues" in the religious world, for there are no contradictions, no contrarieties in God's Word. He holds me responsible to test everything preachers say: "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20). That Word is the sole standard of faith and practice, the "sure word of prophecy" to which we do well to give heed as unto a light shining in a dark place (2 Pet. 1:19). Faith rests not upon the testimony of any man, nor is it subject to any man. It rests on the Word of God, and it is

amenable to Him alone. "He that builds his faith upon preachers, though they preach nothing but the Truth, and he pretends to believe it, hath indeed no faith at all, but a wavering opinion, built upon a rotten foundation" (John Owen). Then "cease ye from man . . . for wherein is he to be accounted of?" (Isa. 2:22), and "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding." (Prov. 3:5). Each one of us is directly responsible to God for the use he makes and the compliance he renders to His Word. God holds every rational creature accountable to ascertain from His living oracles what is His revealed will and to conform thereunto. None can lawfully evade this duty by paying someone to do the work for him. 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. We have the Bible in our own mother tongue. The throne of grace is available, whither we may turn and humbly make request, "Teach me, O Lord . . . Thy statutes . . . Give me understanding . . . Make me to go in the path of Thy commandments" (Ps. 119:33-35). We have the promise of Christ to rest upon: "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine" (John 7:17). Hence there is no valid excuse either for spiritual ignorance or for misconception of what God requires us to believe and do. Unto His children God has graciously imparted His Spirit that they may "know the things that are freely given to us of God" (1 Cor. 2:12). Yet it is only as God's Word is personally received into the heart that it "effectually worketh also in you that believe" (1 Thess. 2:13). There is an urgent need for each person who values his soul and its eternal interests to spare no pains in making himself thoroughly familiar with God's holy Word and prayerfully endeavoring to understand its teaching, not only for the pressing reason stated above, but also because of the babble now obtaining in Christendom, and particularly in view of the numerous emissaries of Satan, who lie in wait at every corner, ready to seduce the unwary and the indolent. As pointed out before, the conflicting teaching which now abounds in the churches renders it all the more imperative that each of us should have strong and scripturally formed convictions of his own. Our Lord has expressly bidden us, "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves" (Matt. 7:15). That solemn warning points a definite duty, and also implies our being qualified to discharge the same. That duty is to examine closely and test carefully by God's Word all that we read and hear from the pens and lips of preachers and teachers; and that, in turn, presupposes we are well acquainted with the Word, for how else can we determine whether an article or a sermon be scriptural or unscriptural? There is nothing external by which perverters of the Truth may be identified. Not only are many of them men of irreproachable moral character and pleasing personality, but they appear to be deeply devoted unto Christ and His cause. Nor are they few in number, for we are told that "many false prophets are gone out into the world"—a statement which is prefaced by "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God" (1 John 4:1): that is, diligently weigh their teaching in "the balances of the sanctuary." These seducers of souls profess to be real Christians, and are often to be met with even in the circles of the orthodox. Though at heart ravening wolves, they are disguised "in sheep's clothing"—pretending to have a great love for souls, they ensnare many. They feign to be the very opposite of what they are, for instead of being the servants of Christ they are the agents of Satan "transformed as the ministers of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:15). Therein lies their "cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive" (Eph. 4:14) people by "good words and fair speeches," and thus delude the "hearts of the simple" (Rom. 16:18). Having shown the very real need there is for each person to form his own judgment of what God's Word teaches, we now turn to consider his God-given right to do so. This is plainly signified or clearly implied in many passages. "For the ear trieth words, as the mouth tasteth meat" (Job 34:2, 3). Upon which the Puritan, Joseph Caryl, very pertinently asked, "You will not swallow words until you have tried them. Why else have we ears to hear? Why are we trusted with reason to judge things with, or with rules to judge them by? There is no greater tyranny in the world than to

command men to believe (with implicit faith) as others believe, or to impose our opinions and assertions upon those who hear them and not give them liberty to try them." Allow none to dictate to you, my reader, upon spiritual matters. He that is called in the Lord is "the Lord's free man," and hence it follows, "Ye are bought with a price: be not ye the servants of men" (1 Cor. 7:22, 23). "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5). In order to ascertain the precise scope of those words we must examine the setting in which they occur. They were first addressed to the saints at Rome, who were composed of believing Jews and Gentiles, between whom there were differences of opinion upon minor matters. Though these Jews had heartily received Christ as their promised Messiah and Saviour, they clung to the idea that the Levitical law, with its distinction of clean and unclean meats and the observance of certain fasts and festivals, was still binding upon them. Not only did they contend zealously for the same, but they were strongly desirous of imposing them on their fellow Christians, whom they regarded as proselytes to Judaism. On the other hand, not only had the Gentile believers not been brought up under the Mosaic rites, but they were convinced that the ceremonial observances of Judaism had been annulled by the new and better dispensation which had been inaugurated by the Lord Jesus. This difference of opinion, with each party holding firm convictions thereon, menaced the unity of their fellowship and the exercise of brotherly love unto each other. The one needed to beware of looking upon the other as being lax and of a latitudinarian spirit, while the latter must refrain from viewing the former as being bigoted and superstitious. Nothing vital was at stake—any more than there is today when the wearing of jewelry and the use of tobacco are questions agitated in some Christian circles. But since the peace of the Roman assembly was being threatened, and a spirit of intolerance had begun to obtain, through failure of each party to allow full liberty of conscience unto their brethren, it was needful that the apostle should deal with this situation and give such instruction unto each as would prevent these differences of opinion upon non-essentials of faith and practice leading to a serious breach of the peace. Accordingly Paul was guided by the Holy Spirit so to counsel them as to give forth at the same time teaching which is most valuable, essential and pertinent to similar cases in all generations. This he did by laying down broad and general principles which it behooves all Christians to be regulated by; nay, we cannot disregard them without sinning, since they are clothed with Divine authority. While human nature remains as it is, and while differently constituted minds do not view things uniformly, if Christian charity is to be exercised and harmony prevail among God's people, it is most necessary that they understand and practice those principles. First, we are exhorted, "Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him" (Rom. 14:3). Therein both parties are forbidden to give place unto unbrotherly thoughts and sentiments. Second, they were asked, "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own Master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand." (verse 4). This is tantamount to saying that it is the height of arrogance for any Christian to ascend the tribunal of judgment and pass sentence of condemnation upon a brother in Christ. Third, it is admitted that "one man esteemeth one day above another; another esteemeth every day alike," and then follows, "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind" (verse 5). There is the charter of Christian liberty: let none allow himself to be deprived of it. Those words cannot mean less than that every Christian has the God-given right to think for himself, to form his own opinion of what Scripture teaches, and to decide what he considers is most pleasing and honoring unto God. Note well how emphatic and sweeping are the words of Romans 14:5. "Let every man": not only the preacher, but the private member too. "Be fully persuaded": not coerced, nor uncertain, as he will be if, instead of forming his own opinion, he heeds the confusion of tongues now abounding on every side. "In his own mind": neither blindly following the popular custom nor yielding to the ipse dixit (an assertion made but not proved; lit. "he himself said it") of others. Where doubtful things are concerned each one should turn to the

Scriptures for guidance and carefully examine them for himself, and then act according to his best judgment of what they require him to do. It is an obligation binding on each of us to be regulated by what appears to be the revealed will of God. This is what constitutes the very essence of practical Christianity: the personal recognition of Christ's property in me and authority over me, and in and over my brethren. I am neither to exercise dominion over them nor submit to theirs over me. Let us seek to help each other all we can, but let us leave Christ to judge us. He only has the capacity as He only has the right to do so. Perform what you are assured to be your duty and leave others to do likewise: thereby the rights of the individual are preserved and the peace of the community promoted. Different opinions on minor matters are to be expected, but that is no reason why those holding the same should not dwell together in amity and enjoy communion in the great fundamentals of the faith. If one is satisfied that certain "days" should be observed, that he has Divine warrant to solemnly celebrate "Christmas" or "Easter," then let him do so. But if another is convinced that such "days" are of human invention and devoid of Divine authority, then let him ignore them. Let each one act from religious conviction and suffer not the fear of censure from or contempt of others to deter him; nor the desire to ingratiate himself in the esteem of his fellows induce him to act contrary to his conscience. Each Christian is responsible to believe and act according to the best light which he has from God and continue to examine His Word and pray for more light. The dictates of conscience are not to be trifled with, and the right of private judgment is ever to be exercised by me and respected in others. Thereby the Christian duty of mutual forbearance is alone maintained and a spirit of tolerance and charity exercised. "I speak as to wise men: judge ye what I say" (1 Cor. 10:15). In those words the apostle called upon the saints to decide discreetly if what he had further to advance on the subject condemned them for continuing to feast in idol temples. He was treating with whether or not such an action came within the scriptural definition of idolatry. In terming them "wise men," he intimated that they were well able to weigh an argument, and therefore it was their duty to examine carefully and ponder prayerfully what he said. In his "judge ye" he signified his desire for them to be personally convinced, from the exercise of those spiritual "senses" which pertain to all the regenerate (Heb. 5:13). "Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God [with her head] uncovered?" (1 Cor. 11:13). Not only would Paul have them obediently submit to the Divine requirements, but also perceive for themselves what would be becoming, appealing to their sense of propriety, adding, "doth not nature itself teach you?" Again, "Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge" (1 Cor. 14:29). Once more they were called upon to exercise their own judgment—in this case whether the messages given out by those claiming to be "prophets" were really the oracles of God. Now this right of private judgment, and the duty of each person to determine for himself what God's Word teaches, is categorically denied by Rome, which avers that "ignorance is the mother of devotion," and that the highest form of service is that of "blind obedience." The Papacy insists that the Church is absolutely infallible in all matters of Christian Faith. During Session IV the Council of Trent (1563) decreed that "No one, relying on his own skill, shall, in matters of faith and of morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, wresting the sacred Scripture to his own senses, presume 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." This was ratified and repeated in the Dogmatic Decrees of the Vatican Council (chapter 2): "We, renewing the said decree, declare this to be their sense, that in matters of faith and morals, appertaining to the building up of Christian doctrine, that is to be held as the true sense of Holy Scripture, which our holy mother Church hath held and holds, to whom it belongs to judge of the true sense of the Holy Scripture; and therefore that it is permitted to no one to interpret the sacred Scripture contrary to this sense." Nor has the arch-deceiver and enslaver of souls receded one hair's breadth from that position since then. The following propositions

were denounced by the Papacy: "It is profitable at all times and in all places for all sorts of persons to study the Scriptures, and to become acquainted with their spirit, piety, and mysteries" (Proposition 79). "The reading of the Holy Scriptures in the hands of a man of business and a financier (Acts 8:28) shows that it is intended for everybody" (Proposition 80). "The Lord's day ought to be sanctified by the reading of books of piety, and especially of the Scriptures. They are the milk which God Himself, who knows our hearts, has supplied for them" (Proposition 81). "It amounts to shutting the mouth of Christ to Christians, and to wresting from their hands the Holy Bible, or to keeping it shut from them, by depriving them of the means of hearing it." Those, together with many other similar postulates, were "condemned to perpetuity" as being "false and scandalous in his "bull" (a Papal decree to which is affixed the Pope's seal)—Unigenitus by Clement XI, issued on September 8, 1713. In 1824 the encyclical epistle of Pope Leo XII complained of the Bible Societies, "which," it said, "violate the traditions of the Fathers and the Council of Trent, in circulating the Scriptures in the vernacular tongues of all nations." "In order to avoid this pestilence," said this poor creature, "our predecessors have published several constitutions . . . tending to show how pernicious for the faith and for morals is this perfidious instrument," i.e. the Bible Society. In those countries ruled by the emissaries of the Vatican, God's Word has ever been, and still is, withheld from the people, and they are forbidden to read or hear it read under pain of the Pope's anathema. All known copies of it are seized and committed to the flames. At this very hour the Lord's people in Spain are being persecuted for their loyalty to the Bible. So would they be in all English-speaking countries today if the Romanists could secure full temporal power over them. The Lord mercifully grant that such a catastrophe may never again happen. Ere passing from this aspect of our subject, let us briefly notice one verse to which appeal is made by Romanists in support of their contention that the laity have no right to form their own views of what God's Word teaches: "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Pet. 1:20). On the basis of those words it is insisted that the Bible must be officially interpreted, and that "holy mother Church" is alone authorized and qualified to discharge this duty and to render this service. But that verse affords not the slightest support of their arrogant claim. Those words, as their context clearly shows, treat of the source of prophecy and not its meaning. The very next sentence explains what is signified by verse 20: "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." Thus, verse 20 manifestly imports, Be assured at the outset that what the prophets delivered proceeded not from their own minds. The Greek word for "private" is never again so rendered elsewhere in the New Testament, but is translated scores of times "his own." Consequently the "interpretation" has reference to what was delivered by the prophets and not to the explication of it: had the "interpretation" which the prophets delivered issued from themselves, then they had been "by the will of man," which the next verse expressly denies. Taking verses 20 and 21 together, nothing could more emphatically affirm the absolute inspiration of the prophets. They spoke from God, and not from themselves. The force, then, of verse 20 is that no prophetic utterance was of human origination. It is the Divine authorship of their words, and not the explanation of their messages, that is here in view—the act of supplying the prophecy, and not the explaining of it when supplied. So far from lending any color to the view that there inheres somewhere in the Church and its ministers an authority to fix the sense of Holy Writ, this very verse, as it is rendered in the Authorized Version, obviously refutes the same, because for any man—be it the Roman pontiff or a Protestant prelate—to determine the meaning of God's Word would be of "private interpretation"! Alas, that is the very thing which has happened throughout Christendom, for each church, denomination, party, or "circle of fellowship" puts its own meaning on the Word, and in many instances contrary to the Truth itself. Let the Christian reader be fully persuaded that there is nothing whatever in 2 Peter 1:20, which forbids him weighing the words of Scripture, exercising his own judgment, and, under the guidance and grace of the

Holy Spirit, deciding what they signify. Not only is private judgment a right which God has conferred upon each of His children, but it is their bounden duty to exercise the same. The Lord requires us to make full use of this privilege, and to employ all lawful and peaceful means for its maintenance. Not only are we responsible to reject all erroneous teaching, but we are not to be the serfs of any ecclesiastical tyranny. "Be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven" (Matt. 23:8, 9). Those words contain very much more than a prohibition against according ecclesiastical titles unto men; yea, it is exceedingly doubtful whether such a concept is contained therein; rather is Christ forbidding us to be in spiritual bondage to anyone. In verse 2 He had stated, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat": that is, they have arrogated to themselves the power of religious legislation and demand entire subjection from their adherents. In the verses that follow, our Lord reprehended them for usurping authority and setting up themselves as demagogues; in view of which the Lord Jesus bade His disciples maintain their spiritual liberty and refuse all allegiance or subservience to any such tyrants. "But be ye not called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren" (Matt. 23:8). In every generation there are those of an officious spirit who aspire to leadership, demanding deference from their fellows. Such men, especially when they are endowed with natural gifts above the average, are the kind who become the founders of new sects and parties, and insist upon unqualified subjection from their followers. Their interpretation of the Scriptures must not be challenged, their dicta are final. They must be owned as "rabbis" and submitted to as "fathers." Everyone must believe precisely what they teach, and order all the details of his life by the rules of conduct which they prescribe, or else be branded as a heretic and denounced as a gratifier of the lusts of the flesh. There have been, and still are, many such self-elevated little popes in Christendom, who deem themselves to be entitled to implicit credence and obedience, whose decisions must be accepted without question. They are nothing but arrogant usurpers, for Christ alone is the Rabbi or Master of Christians; and since all of His disciples be "brethren" they possess equal rights and privileges. "Call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven" (verse 9). This dehortation has ever been needed by God's people, for they are the most part simple and unsophisticated, trustful and easily imposed upon. In those verses the Lord Jesus was enforcing the duty of private judgment, bidding believers suffer none to be the dictators of their faith or lords of their lives. No man is to be heeded in spiritual matters any further than he can produce a plain and decisive "thus saith the Lord" as the foundation of his appeal. To be in subjection to any ecclesiastical authority that is not warranted by Holy Writ, or to comply with the whims of men, is to renounce your Christian freedom. Suffer none to have dominion over your mind and conscience. Be regulated only by the teaching of God's Word, and firmly refuse to be brought into bondage to "the commandments and doctrines of men," with their "Touch not, taste not, handle not" (Col. 2:21, 22). Instead, "stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free" (Gal. 5:1); yet "not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God" (1 Pet. 2:16)—yielding unreservedly to His authority. Rather than conform to the rules of the Pharisees, Christ was willing to be regarded as a Sabbath-breaker! "Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for by faith ye stand" (2 Cor. 1:24). Weigh well those words my reader, and remember they were written by one who "was not a whit behind the very chief of the apostles," and here he disclaims all authority over the faith of these saints! In the previous verse he had spoken of "sparing" them, and here "lest it should be thought that he and his fellow ministers assumed to themselves any tyrannical power over the churches or lorded it over God's heritage, these words are subjoined" (John Gill). The word "faith" may be understood here as either the grace of faith or the object thereof. Take it of the former: ministers of the Gospel can neither originate, stimulate, nor dominate it: the Holy Spirit is the Author, Increaser, and Lord of it. Take it as the object of faith—that which is believed: ministers have no

Divine warrant to devise any new articles of faith, nor to demand assent to anything which is not plainly taught in the Bible. "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God" (1 Pet. 4:11), neither withholding anything revealed therein nor adding anything of his own thereto. Paul's work was to instruct and persuade, not to lord it over his converts and compel their belief. He had written his first letter to the saints in answer to the queries they had sent him, and at the beginning of this second epistle explains why he had deferred a further visit to them, stating that he was prepared to stay away until such time as they had corrected the evils which existed in their assembly. He refused to oppress them. "Faith rests not on the testimony of man, but on the testimony of God. When we believe the Scriptures, it is not man, but God whom we believe. Therefore faith is subject not to man, but to God alone . . . The apostles were but the organs of the Holy Spirit: what they spake as such they could not recall or modify. They were not the lords, so to speak, of the Gospel . . . Paul therefore places himself alongside of his brethren, not over them as a lord, but as a joint believer with them in the Gospel which he preached, and a helper of their joy, co-operating with them in the promotion of their spiritual welfare" (C. Hodge). If Paul would not, then how absurd for any man to attempt to exercise a spiritual dominion in matters of faith or practice! "The elders which are among you I exhort . . . Feed the flock of God which is among you . . . not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:1-3). These are part of the instructions given unto ministers of the Gospel as to how they are to conduct themselves in the discharge of their holy office, and we would earnestly commend them to the attention of every pastor who reads this article. They are Divinely forbidden to abuse their position and to assume any absolute authority or rule imperiously over the saints. Their task is to preach the Truth and enjoin obedience to Christ, and not unto themselves. They are not to act arbitrarily or in a domineering spirit, for though they be set over believers in the Lord (1 Thess. 5:12) and are to "rule" and therefore to be submitted unto in their lawful administration of the Word and the ordinances (Heb. 13:17), yet they are not to arrogate to themselves dominion over the consciences of men nor impose any of their own inventions; but instead, teach their flock to observe all things whatsoever Christ has commanded (Matt. 28:20). The minister of the Gospel has no right to dictate unto others, or insist in a dogmatic manner that people must receive what he says on his bare assertion. Such a spirit is contrary to the genius of Christianity, unsuited to the relation which he sustains to his flock, and quite unbecoming a follower of Christ. No arbitrary control has been committed to any cleric. True ministerial authority or church rule is not a dictatorial one, but is a spiritual administration under Christ. Instead of lording it over God's heritage, preachers are to be "ensamples to the flock": personal patterns of good works, holiness, and self-sacrifice; models of piety, humility, charity. How vastly different from the conduct enjoined by Peter has been the arrogance, intolerance, and tyrannical spirit of his self-styled successors! Nor are they the only ones guilty thereof. Love of power has been as common a sin in the pulpit as love of money, and many of the worst evils which have befallen Christendom have issued from a lusting after dominion and ecclesiastical honors. Such is poor human nature that good men find it hard to keep from being puffed up and misusing any measure of authority when it be committed unto them, and from not doing more harm than good with the same. Even James and John so far forgot themselves that, on one occasion, they asked Christ to grant them the two principal seats of power and honour in the day of His glory (Mark 10:35-37). Mark well this part of His reply: "Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them"—they love to bear sway, and, like Haman, have everybody truckle to them. "But so shall it not be among you" says Christ to His ministers—eschew any spirit of domineering, mortify the love of being flattered and held in honour because of your office. "But whosoever will be great among you shall be your minister; and whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all"—those who are to be accounted the greatest in Christ's spiritual kingdom are the ones

characterized by a meek and lowly heart, and those who will receive a crown of glory in the day to come are those who most sought the good of others. "For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many"—then make self-abnegation and not self-exaltation your constant aim. "Prove all things: hold fast that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21). This is yet another verse which, by clear and necessary implication, teaches the privilege and right of private judgment, and makes known the duty and extent to which it is to be exercised. Linking it with what has been before us in the preceding paragraphs, it shows that if it be unwarrantable for the servants of Christ to usurp an absolute power, it is equally wrong for those committed to their care to submit thereto. Church government and discipline are indeed necessary and scriptural, yet not a lordly authority but a rule of holiness and love, wherein a spirit of mutual forbearance obtains. God does not require the minds and consciences of His children to be enslaved by any ecclesiastical dominion. Each one has the right to exercise his own judgment and have a say and vote upon all matters pertaining to his local assembly; and if he does not, then he fails in the discharge of his responsibility. Well did one of the old divines say on Psalm 110:1, "Christ is Lord to employ, to command, whom and what He will. To Him alone must we say, 'Lord, save me, I perish.' To Him only we must say, 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' To Him only must we go for instruction—'Thou hast the words of eternal life.' It scarcely needs to be said that the right of private judgment certainly does not mean that we are at liberty to bring the Word of God to the bar of human reason and sentiment, so that we may reject whatever does not commend itself to our intelligence or appeal to our inclinations. The Bible does not submit itself unto our opinion or give us the option of picking and choosing from its contents: rather is it our critic (Heb. 4:12). The Law of the Lord is perfect and, the best of us being very imperfect, it is madness to criticize it. But when we hear preaching from it, we must try what is said whether or not it accords with the Word, and whether the interpretation be valid or strained. It is a fundamental truth that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," yet even in the days of the apostles there were those who, while acknowledging Him as the only Saviour, taught that there was no salvation apart from circumcision. Accordingly the church met at Jerusalem "for to consider of this matter" (Acts 15:4-11). So must we "consider" all we hear and read, whether it agrees with the Divine Rule, taking nothing for granted. "Prove all things." This is not optional but obligatory: we are Divinely commanded to do so. God's Word is the only standard of truth and duty, and everything we believe and do must be tested by it. Thousands have sought to evade this duty by joining Rome and allowing that system to determine everything for them. Nor are the majority of the members of non-popish churches much better, being too indolent to search and study the Bible for themselves, believing whatever their preachers tell them. Beware, my reader, of allowing any influence to come between your soul and God's Word. How early did the Holy Spirit have occasion to say to one of the primitive churches which had given way to a spirit of partisanship and bigotry, "Who then is Paul? and who is Apollos?" When the mind rests upon the human instrument, not only is spiritual progress in the Truth immediately arrested, but the living power of what Truth is already attained dies out of the enslaved heart, being displaced by dogmas received on human authority. Divine Truth then degenerates into a party distinction, for which many zealously contend in naught but a sectarian spirit. The origin of all sectarianism is subjection to men, human authority supplanting the authority of God, the preacher becoming the dictator. We must not suffer any to arrogate the place and office of the Holy Spirit. No human system can feed the soul: it has to come into immediate and quickening contact with the living and powerful Word of God in order to be spiritually nourished. Even where real Christians are concerned, many had their religious beliefs formed before they were converted, receiving them from their parents or the churches they attended, and not directly from God and His Word. Therefore they too need to heed this Divine injunction: "Prove all things: hold fast that which is good." Bring your beliefs to the test of the Scriptures, and you are likely to discover that it is much harder and

more painful to unlearn some things than it is to learn new ones. Very few think for themselves, and fewer still are really willing to "buy the Truth" and set aside their former opinions, no matter what may be the cost. Much grace is needed for that! Since the eternal interests of our souls are involved, it is the height of folly for us to depend upon the judgment of others, for the ablest ministers are fallible and liable to err. "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 those things were so" (Acts 17:11). Those Bereans sat in judgment upon the teaching of the apostles! They are commended for doing so! Not only was it their privilege and duty, but it is recorded to their honour. But mark how they discharged this duty. They brought all that they heard from the spoken discourse to the test of the written Word. They did not judge by their own preconceptions, views, prejudices, feelings, or partialities, but by God's Word. If what they heard was in accord therewith, they were bound to receive and submit to it; but if it was contrary thereto, they were equally bound to refuse and reject the ministry that taught it. That is recorded as an example to us! It reveals how we are to exercise this privilege of private judgment. The apostles claimed to be sent of God, but were they really preaching the Truth? The Bereans gave them a ready hearing, but took the trouble to examine and try their teaching by the Scriptures, and searched them daily whether they were so. Do thou likewise, and remember that Christ commended the Ephesian saints because they had tried those who said they were apostles and "found them liars" (Rev. 2:2). The right of private judgment does not mean that each Christian may be a law unto himself, and still less lord over himself. We must beware of allowing liberty to degenerate into license. No, it means the right to form our own views from the Scriptures, to be in bondage to no ecclesiastical authority, to be subject unto God alone. Two extremes are to be guarded against: slavery to human authority and tradition; the spirit of self-will and pride. On the one hand we are to avoid blind credulity, on the other hand an affectation of independence or the love of novelty, which disdains what others believe, in order to obtain a cheap notoriety of originality. Private judgment does not mean private fancy, but a deliberate conviction based on Holy Writ. Though I must not resign my mind and conscience to others, or deliver my reason and faith over blindfold to any church, yet I ought to be very slow in rejecting the approved judgment of God's servants of the past. There is a happy medium between limiting myself to what the Puritans and others taught, and disdaining the help they can afford me. Self-conceit is to be rigidly restrained. Private judgment is to be exercised humbly, soberly, impartially, with a willingness to receive light from any quarter. Ponder the Word for yourself, but mortify the spirit of haughty self-sufficiency; and be ready to avail yourself of anything likely to afford you a better understanding of the Truth. Above all, daily beg the Holy Spirit to be your teacher. "Prove all things": when listening to your favorite preacher, or reading this book. Accord your brethren the same right and privilege you claim for yourself.

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