

PRIVATE JUDGMENT IN THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE.

Private judgment, properly understood, simply means Personal Responsibility.

In the exercise of this responsibility, a man may, if he think fit, accept, with or without question, the decisions of Rome,--the conclusions of the Fathers, --the dogmas of the Puritan,--the Speculations of Rationalists, or the current opinions which belong to the religious circle in which he has been educated, or may, at any given time, happen to move. But, in each and every case, his conduct is an act of private judgment, for the wisdom or folly of which, with all its attendant consequences, he is alone and individually answerable.

Private judgment, thus viewed, implies a two-fold obligation, viz., first, that of a patient and diligent use of all the means placed within our reach for ascertaining truth; and secondly, the cultivation of those dispositions of heart which are favorable to spiritual discernment, and apart from which no man can rightly discriminate between truth and error.

The former will include in the case of those who have an opportunity to investigate, a thankful appreciation of the labors of scholars, in relation both to the text and to the translation of Holy Scripture, and an examination of the commentaries of pious and learned men, so far as they may seem to us to be truthful and unprejudiced expositions of Holy Writ: the latter, as graces of the Spirit, must be sought, where alone they can be obtained, at the footstool of him who is the Giver of every good and perfect gift.

To those we would add, a reverent listening to the voice of the Church which expresses itself in the lives and labors of holy men in all ages; a voice which is not the voice of the Priest, or the voice of a party, or the voice of the schoolmen, or the voice of the fathers, whether Greek or Latin, or the voice of England or Scotland,--Evangelical or Armenian, high or low, broad or exclusive; but that great silent testimony which issues from Apostles and Prophets, from martyrs and confessors, from poor and rich, from the palace and the peasant's cot, from the ignorant and the learned, from the living and the dead;--witnessing evermore to the truth of Christ's Holy Gospel,--to its influence over mankind, to its triumphs over the world, to its sole and exclusive power to enlighten, to solace, to sustain, and to save. Wretched indeed is the sophistry which would confound this sublime echo of the human heart responding to the Divine, with the decisions of a council or the dicta of a sect.

Human nature craves for infallibility in religious matters, and it is a happiness, we doubt not, even to think that we have secured it. This craving is the fruitful source both of superstition and atheism; but it is incessant in some minds. God has, however, not chosen to gratify it. And because he has not, because he has thought fit to make our apprehension of divine truth to depend mainly on a right state of heart, men of all classes quarrel with his method.

The mode in which this dissatisfaction manifests itself is various. Sometimes it is in the way of restlessness, and sometimes it finds expression in a reckless skepticism, followed by a predisposition to listen to any Church which professes to be infallible; and sometimes it carefully bars the door against all inquiry, and refuses, under any pretext, to be disturbed.

Hence the timidity and terror which is so often manifested when any new form of religious thought is first broached in Christian circles. That which is stated may indeed be true, but whether it is so or not matters little. It seems to introduce an element of uncertainty in quarters where neither doubt nor question has ever been allowed to enter and therefore it must be disallowed.

To all such we can only say, that for intelligent men to shrink from the investigation of truth of any kind, is, in fact, to evade the most important part of their moral discipline; that he who desires truth as the supreme good, cannot fail eventually to enjoy the blessedness it brings in its train; and that he who subordinates truth to what he calls peace, may in the end lose both truth and peace.

--H. Dunn.
