

About Private Interpretation

Barry O'Dell

Peter wrote his second epistle to stir up the minds of his brethren who had obtained “*like precious faith*” (2 Pet. 1:1; 3:1). It is a letter of instruction on making their call and election sure (2 Pet. 1) and of warning against false teachers (2 Pet. 2-3). In the midst of these two points, Peter wrote of his responsibility to remind them of things which they already knew (2 Pet. 1:12-15). The significance of this reminder and of the information that followed (1:16-21) contains the phrase “*private interpretation.*”

In Christendom, it is not uncommon to hear things like “My understanding of that verse is different” or “Well, we will just have to agree to disagree.” While it is certainly the case that passages such as Romans 14 teach that there is room for disagreement among believers, it is not the case that one “interpretation” of Scripture is just as good as another. If it were, why be concerned with “*handling aright the word of truth*” (2 Tim. 2:15)? In our language, the term *interpretation* means, “the action of explaining the meaning of something.” However, Peter was not writing in English and the translation of a Greek noun (ἐπιλύσεως) in the KJV/NKJV as *interpretation* is, in my opinion, unfortunate. The root word (λύω) is a verb that means, “to let loose or unfasten.” A unique version of this text comes from Young’s Literal Translation: “*This first knowing, that no prophecy of the Writing doth come from private exposition.*” Peter was writing of something that was not “let loose” or “exposed” privately. *Private* is a Greek adjective (ἰδίας) that means, “pertaining or belonging to oneself.” In fact, verse 21 explains verse 20. “*For prophecy never came by the will of man (one’s own letting loose), but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.*” Second Peter 1:20-21 is addressing the **origins** of Scripture, not the practice of **explanation** of Scripture. Examining the previous several verses will help in our understanding of Peter’s proposition in verses 20-21.

As stated earlier, Peter wanted his readers to know that this letter was serving as a reminder of things they already knew. He was writing to reinforce the truth in which they were currently standing (2 Pet. 1:12-15). He reminded them that his source material was

not “*cunningly devised fables*” (v. 16). He did not *copy sophisticated mythology* (v. 16a), but was an eye-witness to the majesty of Jesus Christ (v. 17-18). He was referencing his experience, beside James and John, on the mount of transfiguration (Matt. 17). Jesus has already been mentioned in Second Peter six times up to verse 18 (1:1-2, 8, 11, 14, 16-17). Part of Peter’s source material was the personal experience that he had, along with two of his fellow-apostles.

However, he does not stop with or just depend upon his visual experience on the mountain. Beginning in 1:19 he speaks of the “*prophetic word.*” The three apostles saw what they saw, but they also “*heard this voice which came from heaven*” (1:18). Peter did not depend on the encounter alone for the material he was writing. He heard God speak! He then instructed his readers that they would “do well to heed” the prophetic word that had been confirmed (v. 19). I believe he was speaking of the very letter he was

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writing because of what he then wrote in 1:20-21, “*Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, or prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy*

Spirit.”

One cannot truly know what “private interpretation” means without an understanding of the broader context (v. 15-19). As stated earlier, when English speaking people hear the word *interpretation*, they usually think of something being explained to them that they do not understand. Instead, Peter was stating that Scripture was not revealed (let loose) at man’s own discretion. Second Peter 1:20-21 is addressing the process of revelation and inspiration of holy writ. An interesting thought to me is that Jesus said this same thing of Himself and His message. “*He that rejecteth Me, and receiveth not My words, hath one that judgeth him - the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day. For I have not spoken of Myself; but the Father which sent, He gave Me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak. And I know that His commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto Me, so I speak*” (Jn. 12:48-50). In the Greek, the beginning of verse 49 reads, “*For I out of*

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Myself have not spoken...” What an amazing thought from Jesus Christ! He spoke what His Father commanded. To be honest, I do not know how to fully explain that concept, but Jesus acknowledged that His Father’s command was what He brought to earth and spoke. In the same way, Peter and other inspired writers did not rely on themselves for information. Rather, they were moved (carried along) by the Holy Spirit. Paul recognized that same process of revelation and inspiration in First Corinthians 2:6-16. The inspired speakers/writers spoke and wrote “*the wisdom of God*” that had been given to them by “*the Spirit who is from God*” (1 Cor. 2:7, 12). This is what Peter meant when he wrote that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation.

There is an idea that Second Peter 1:20-21 speaks to the thought that, in order for man to come to a “proper” understanding of Scripture, there must be a centralized, authoritative interpretation. Now, as we have already defined the terms used, that is not what Peter meant at all! Timothy was instructed to “*give*

attention to reading, the exhortation, to doctrine” (1 Tim. 4:13). Why do that if there is an official interpretation of Scripture? Some have attempted to use Acts 15 as an example of this type of “church” authority. That was not what was happening in the “Jerusalem Conference.” There were believers who were of a Jewish background that were attempting to bind circumcision and observation of the Law of Moses as prerequisites for salvation of Gentile converts. The apostles didn’t teach that and they, along with the elders in the church at Jerusalem, gathered to consider the matter (Acts 15:6). The truth that was verified in that gathering was that both Jews and Gentiles were saved in the same manner (Acts 15:11). This truth did not originate with either the apostles or the Jerusalem elders, but with God Himself (Acts 15:8, 18). Scripture, when read and diligently studied by an individual, can be understood. In fact, Scripture must be read and studied diligently so that it may be a lamp and a light (Ps. 119:105). In doing so we can find out what is acceptable to the Lord (Eph. 5:17).

Correct Terminology

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When our youngest son was about five years old, we had some interesting, albeit confusing, conversations. His inquisitive mind always had diverse and varying discussions ready for our daily commutes. One day after being picked up from school, he was conversing with his mother and their dialogue focused on peanuts. After buckling himself into the back seat of our van he said, “I don’t like the ‘dirty’ peanuts. I really like the peanuts with tails on them.” Understandably, my wife was confused by his words. She retorted, “You mean the peanuts with skins on them?” as she reasoned about the “dirty peanuts.” “Yes,” he replied. Still trying to figure out what he meant by the peanuts with “tails” on them, she finally realized he was talking about cashews! It is funny how language can be used to speak of common things in confusing terms. For this reason, we must be careful about how we use terms and make sure we apply them in a correct manner.

One might ask, “Why does it matter?” Well, we are told to speak about Biblical topics using correct terminology. 1 Peter 4:11 says, “*If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies,*

that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.” The term “oracles” could also be translated as an “utterance” of God. In other words, we need to use biblical terms in biblical ways to correctly represent God.

One of the big misuses of terminology in religion is the use of the word “pastor.” In the Bible, the terms elder, bishop, pastor, overseer, and shepherd are used interchangeably to refer to the same work in the New Testament. Three passages in the New Testament use the word “pastor” in various forms. The passages are Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:2, and Ephesians 4:11.

In Acts 20:28, the bishops or overseers (*episkopos in Greek*) were to feed or care for the flock. In 1 Peter 5:2, the shepherds (*poimaino in Greek*) or overseers were to tend the flock. In Ephesians 4:11 the shepherds or pastors (*poimen in Greek*) were to care for and teach the flock.

Incidentally, the terms “bishops” and “overseers” are used interchangeably in Titus 1:5-7. It says, “*For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders (presbuteros in Greek) in every city as I commanded you - if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife,*

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having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For a bishop (episkopos in Greek) must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money.” These works in the New Testament church were always referred to in the plural form of the word. Thus, there is no scriptural support for a single pastor, elder, or shepherd to oversee the work of the church. By the same token, it is not scriptural for a group of elders to oversee multiple congregations. The New Testament portrays elderships as a qualified group of men overseeing one autonomous congregation of the Lord’s people. Moreover, these men had to meet the scriptural qualifications to serve in this capacity. First Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 lists some of these qualifications. If one does not meet all the qualifications mentioned in the New Testament, he is not qualified to serve as an elder.

The term “priest” is also misused by those in denominations. The Bible plainly teaches that all Christians are part of a “royal priesthood.” First Peter 2:9 says, *“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”* In the New Testament, there are no distinctions made between a priestly caste and a laity caste. Exodus twenty-eight mentions the garments and ornaments of a

priest. However, one does not find a single reference to the re-establishment of a Levitical priesthood or a type of it in the New Testament. Thus, calling someone a priest in the New Testament dispensation does not carry with it the same understanding as a priest in the Old Testament. Why, then, do some in the religious world insist upon wearing robes and garments that identify them as “priests” within their particular denomination? There is no scriptural authority for this.

Along these lines of reasoning, I have seen advertisements on social media for a church of Christ that was preparing to name a new “pastor.” One hopes that the one being named as a pastor has met the scriptural qualifications of a shepherd and is serving in a biblical manner with the church and not referring to a new preacher. These same advertisements also picture a man in robes and garments that underscore a denominational understanding of the “priesthood.” At best, these images create a visual misunderstanding of what being a “priest” in the New Testament sense of the word entails. At worst, it creates a distinction that has no scriptural support. Brethren, I sincerely offer these words in love and in the hope of bringing about biblical change in harmony with the Word of God (Gal. 4:16). As Christians, we should use biblical terms in the correct fashion. Using improper language creates confusion in a world that is already mistaken about God and religion.

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In View of Eternity

Barry O'Dell

There are many passages of Scripture that address the transient nature of our existence. Psalm 90:10 reveals that man may typically have seventy to eighty years and then we “fly away.” James wrote, *“Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that”* (Jam. 4:13-15). Jesus asked, *“For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul”* (Matt. 16:26). In view of his tragic experience Job said, *“Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not”* (Job 14:1-2). What can we do in view of the facts that we are here for a very limited amount of time and that we will spend eternity in one of two places?

- Submit to God and resist the devil (Jam. 4:7).
- Draw near to God and cleanse the heart (Jam. 4:8).
- Live humbly (Jam. 4:10).
- Watch how you speak (Jam. 4:11-12).

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The Churches of Christ

- Bible only (2 Pet. 1:3)
- Name of Christ (Rom. 16:16)
- Began in Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2-3; Acts 2:1-4)
- Established by Jesus (Matt. 16:18)
- Purchased with Jesus' blood (Acts 20:28)
- Married to Christ (Rom. 7:4)
- Established in the 1st century (Acts 2:47)
- Jesus the Head of the One Body (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4; 5:23)
- Added to the church by God (Acts 2:41, 47)

Salvation

- Saved by grace, through faith (Eph. 2:8-9)
- Not by faith alone (Jas. 2:14-26)
- Not by grace alone (Matt. 7:21)
- Belief and baptism (Mk. 16:16)
- Repentance and baptism (Acts 2:37-38)
- Belief, confession, and baptism (Acts 8:37-38)
- Heard, believed, baptized (Acts 18:8)
- Faith and baptism (Gal. 3:26-27)
- Baptism does save us (1 Pet. 3:21)

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