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The Right and Wrong of Private Judgment

In his recent book *Luther and His Work* the Catholic writer Joseph Clayton says: "To this day Martin Luther is praised . . . for bringing the gift of private judgment in faith and morals to all believers. On the other hand, among Catholics Luther is held in abhorrence as an apostate monk who drew countless souls into heresy and whole nations into schism; the evil of whose life has lived after him." According to Luther "No one, neither pope nor bishop, has any right to dictate to the individual Christian what he shall or shall not believe. . . . The notion that the Pope has the right to interpret the Sacred Scriptures must be destroyed, since to all baptized believers is given the priesthood." "When Luther burned the whole collection of papal decrees known as the body of canon law and the bull of excommunication on Dec. 10, 1520 . . . a new theology was inaugurated, placing man's private judgment in the seat of authority and promising assurance of personal salvation." "Feeling usurped the place of thought, private judgment came to be raised above all decisions of pope and council, so that quite suddenly, as in a night while men slept, new creeds and new beliefs cropped up." "The path from Catholicism to private judgment in religion . . . led on to skepticism and thence to the ultimate atheism so widespread and active in our day" (pp. XV, XXIII, 75, 79, 84, 103).

Did Luther stand for the right of private judgment? All the world knows that he did. Clayton and the Pope and the liberal Protestants and we are agreed on that. But there is great disagreement as to what the right of private judgment involves. And in view of the fact that many Protestant groups make a false application of the glorious principle Luther re-established and in view of the further fact that many of us do not realize the sacred duty which

this principle imposes, a discussion of it would seem to be as timely now as in the days of Luther.

Let us study these two propositions: I. There is an exercise of private judgment which God sanctions and demands. II. There is an exercise of private judgment which God absolutely forbids and condemns.

I

When the Christian decides questions of faith and morals for himself, refusing to accept blindly what some other man tells him, and when he, in judging doctrine on the basis of Scripture, refuses to accept blindly what some other man tells him as to the meaning of Scripture, but searches Scripture for himself, he is exercising a right which God has given him and which he is required, for the salvation of his soul, to exercise. What this right involves will be presented in the present article under five heads. The following article will treat of its supreme importance.

1. "The right to judge, and pronounce on, matters of doctrine belongs to each and every Christian, so much so that he is doing an accursed thing who impairs this right by a hair's breadth" (Luther, XIX:241—344; concerning "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church"). God says that. He said to the Christians: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21); no man may do the testing for you. God approved of the instructions which Paul gave: "Judge ye what I say" (1 Cor. 10:15). When the Apostle said: "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), God impressed upon the Christians the need to examine carefully and thoroughly every religious teaching that comes to them. When Christ tells them to "beware of false prophets" (Matt. 7:15), He authorizes them to sit in judgment on the teachers of religion.

In the realm of the Pope this sacred right of private judgment has been abolished. The papist charter declares: "One is your master, I, the Pope at Rome; all ye are my subjects; it is for me to say what you are to believe." He does not use exactly these words; but these words express his meaning exactly. Luther's teaching that "no one, neither pope nor bishop, has any right to dictate to the individual Christian what he shall or shall not believe" is set down by J. Clayton as a reasonable proclamation. The good Catholic says: Does not the bull *Unam Sanctam* (Nov. 18, 1302) ascribe universal dominion to Boniface VIII and his successors? "We declare, determine, and decree that it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pontiff. . . . He judges all things, but himself is judged by no one." He is not only the absolute ruler of the State, but also the dictator

in religion. The Christians must regulate their belief according to his decisions. They dare not form their own judgments in religious matters, and they dare not question the teaching of the pope. The pope is judged by no one.¹⁾ The common Christians, laymen and clergy, are not competent to judge matters of faith. They have not sufficient Christian intelligence to do that, declared Innocent IV in his commentary on the canon law. "He has openly told us what amount of Christian culture and knowledge, both for clergy and laity, suits the papal system. It is enough, he says, for the laity to know that there is a God who rewards the good and, for the rest, to believe implicitly what the Church believes. Bishops and pastors must distinctly know the articles of the Apostle's Creed; the other clergy need not know more than the laity and also that the body of Christ is made in the Sacrament of the Altar. — *Comment. in Decr. 2*" (Janus, *op. cit.*, p. 131. Fick, *Das Geheimniss der Bosheit*, p. 177). Let not one of these form his own judgment on questions of faith, on questions of morals. Why, there is a provision in the papal law which says in effect: "Even if a pope is so bad that he drags down whole nations to hell with him in troops, nobody can rebuke him; for he who judges all can be judged of no man; the only exception is in case of his swerving from the faith" (of no longer professing the Christian faith).²⁾

Let him who judges all be judged by no man! His decrees and definitions of faith must not be called in question by any man, any Christian, any priest, any bishop, any cardinal. In the realm of Antichrist the right of private judgment does not exist.

"To this day," says Clayton, "Martin Luther is praised for bringing the gift of private judgment in faith and morals to all believers." Indeed, we thank God that He raised up Luther to proclaim to the Church: "The right to judge matters of doctrine belongs to each and every Christian. . . . Christ established this

1) See Hurst, *History of the Christian Church*, I, p. 774; Janus (Ignatius v. Doellinger), *The Pope and the Council*, p. 131, on "the universality of papal dominion" claimed in this bull; Th. Graebner, *The Dark Ages*, p. 110: "Boniface maintained that all kings and persons whatsoever, by divine command, owed perfect obedience to the Roman pontiff in all religious matters, and, as well, in all secular affairs."

2) The provision of the *Decretum Gratiani*, *Dist. 40, ch. 6*, is quoted in this form by Janus, who adds: "Cardinal Deusdedit published it under the venerated name of St. Boniface, the apostle of Germany." *Op. cit.*, p. 92. See Fick, *op. cit.*, p. 99. Luther quotes it in his *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*: "It must therefore have been the very prince of devils who said what is written in the canon law: 'If the Pope were so scandalously bad as to lead souls in crowds to the devil, yet he could not be deposed.' On this accursed and devilish foundation they build at Rome. . . ." See Luther X:275, where a footnote gives the whole text of the decree.—Luther did well when he consigned the canon law containing this decree and many others of equal antichristian wickedness to the flames.

right, as many passages incontestably show. There is, for instance, Matt. 7:15: 'Beware of false prophets.' This warning is addressed to the people, warning them against the teachers and commanding them to avoid their false teachings. But how can they avoid them if they do not know them? And how shall they know them if they have no right to judge doctrine? Yes, Christ gave to the people not only the right but also the command to judge. So this one passage suffices against the verdict of all popes, all fathers, all councils, all schools that ascribe the right to judge and determine only to the bishops and priests and have robbed the people, that is, the Church, the queen, of it in a most ungodly and sacrilegious manner. . . . When Christ says John 10:27, 5: 'My sheep hear My voice. A stranger they will not follow, but will flee from him,' does He not make the sheep judges, conferring the right to judge on the hearers? . . . 1 Thess. 5:21. . . . And again, 1 Cor. 2:15: 'He that is spiritual judgeth all things.' But every Christian is spiritual through the Spirit of Christ (1 Cor. 3:21, 22) 'All things are yours,' Paul says, 'whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas,' that means: You have the right to judge concerning all words and deeds. . . . No man can gainsay this: the right and power to judge and decide concerning doctrine lies with us, not with the councils, popes, fathers, teachers" (XIX:341—344).

Let us hear a few more similar statements and thank God for them. On Gal. 2:16: "While this doctrine, pacifying and quieting the conscience, remaineth pure and incorrupt, Christians are made judges over all kinds of doctrine and are lords over the laws of the whole world. Then can they certainly judge that the Turk with his Alcoran is damned, because he goeth not the right way. . . . In like manner they boldly pronounce sentence against the Pope, that he is condemned with all his kingdom . . ." (IX:184). And the treatise on "*The Right and Power of a Christian Congregation to Judge All Teaching*" declares: "The word and teaching of man have decreed and prescribed that the judging of doctrine be left altogether to bishops, theologians, and councils. Whatever these have decided all the world is bound to regard as law and as articles of faith. This is abundantly proved by their daily harping on the Pope's canon law. One hears scarcely anything else from them but the boast that they have the power and the right to judge what is Christian and what is heretical; the common Christian must wait their decision and abide by it. This claim of theirs, with which they have intimidated the whole world and which is their chief stronghold and defense, lo, how shamelessly and how senselessly it rages against God's Law and Word. For Christ decrees the very opposite. He takes from the bishops, theologians, and councils both the right and the power to judge doctrine and confers

them upon all men and upon all Christians in particular. . . . Here (John 10) you see plainly who has the right to judge teaching. Bishops, pope, theologians, and any one else have the power to teach; but the sheep are to judge whether what they teach is the voice of Christ or the voice of strangers. . . . Our fourth passage is again a saying of Christ's, in Matthew 24: 'Take heed that no man deceive you.' But what need is there of adducing further passages? All the warnings of St. Paul in Romans 16, 1 Corinthians 10, Galatians 2, 4, and 5, Colossians 2, and everywhere else, as well as all the sayings of all the Prophets in which they teach that doctrines of men are to be rejected, these altogether . . . assign this right and power to judge any teaching to the hearers with urgent commands and on pain of losing their souls. That means that the hearers not only have the power and the right to judge all preaching, but are obliged to judge it under penalty of forfeiting the favor of Divine Majesty" (X:1540—1543).³⁾

3) Against Erasmus, who had declared: "To these authorities, the sacred Writing and the decrees of the Church, I submit my opinion in all things," Luther wrote: "What say you, Erasmus? Is it not enough that you submit your opinions to the Scriptures? Do you submit it to the decrees of the Church also? What can the Church decree that is not decreed in the Scriptures? If it can, where, then, remains the liberty and power of judging those who make the decrees? As Paul, 1 Cor. 14, teaches: 'Let others judge.' Are you not pleased that there should be anyone to judge the decrees of the Church, which, nevertheless, Paul enjoins? What new kind of religion and humility is this, that, by your own example, you would take away from us the power of judging the decrees of men and give it unto men without judgment? Where does the Scripture of God command us to do this?" (*The Bondage of the Will*, XVIII:1678.) Again: "If they should say that it is not for us to judge which is the Gospel or that it has not yet been decided by a council, this we do not concede to them; for Scripture does not authorize a council, but each and every Christian to judge of doctrines, 1 Cor. 14:29, and to know and avoid the wolves, Matt. 7:15" (XXI a:397). On the Gospel for the eighth Sunday after Trinity: "Christ, our Lord, here commands and authorizes all Christians to be judges of all doctrine, granting them the right to decide what is right or wrong. Among the false Christians this article has been changed and perverted for us nigh unto a thousand years, so that we had no right to judge, but simply had to accept without any examination what the Pope and the councils decreed. Now this Gospel lesson completely overthrows popery and all councils; for we are not obliged to observe what the Pope commands and what men decree. Hence I say once more: Grasp well this Gospel; for neither the Pope nor the councils nor anyone is given authority to decree and decide what is faith. For Christ says: "Beware of false prophets!" Either the Gospel must be lying or else the Pope and his councils. Christ says: We have the right to judge all doctrines and whatever we are commanded to do or not to do. Here the Lord is not speaking to the Pope, but to all Christians. . . . Whence it clearly follows that I may indeed judge of doctrine" (XI:1394).—Clayton says: "The fundamental dogma in Luther's *Babylonian Captivity* is that no one, neither pope nor bishop, has any right to dictate to the individual Christian what he shall or shall not believe." That is absolutely correct. That is precisely what Luther taught and what every Christian believes in his heart.

God has given us the right of private judgment, and we shall not let this right be impaired by a hair's breadth. With Luther, we denounce the Pope as the temple robber who despoiled Christendom of her rights, as the temple robber who usurps God's prerogatives. "There is the *Clavis Scientiae*, the key of knowledge, by virtue of which the Pope has power over all laws, spiritual and secular, over all doctrine, both of God and of men, over all cases to be decided, over all questions and opinions. In sum, he is judge over all that is said and thought in heaven and earth. . . . What he wants to have taught, preached, judged, done, that must be taught, preached, judged, done; what he will not have taught, preached, judged, done, that may not be taught, preached, judged, done; and though it be God's Word or human right, it must be heresy; for he is Lord over all power and doctrine, over all dominions and right in heaven and on earth. . . . *Cuncta*: all Christendom throughout the whole world knows that no man may teach or judge the Pope, but all must submit to be judged by him. Item, Holy Scripture and God's Word, too, gets its authority from him, that is, *robur et auctoritatem accipere*; these are his very words. It has come to this, that neither God nor man may say to the Pope: What doest thou? or, By what right doest thou this? Nay, he may do and teach what he will, no man may hinder, censure, or correct him. Solches greulichen Bruellens ist viel in seinen geistlichen Rechten und Bullen" (*Schrift von den Schluesseln*, XIX:933). "Now you can see what sort of spirit possessed these odious councils; robbing God, desecrating the holy place, and flying in the face of these clear Scripture passages, they took away from the people the right to judge and conferred it upon the popes. . . . It is the worst kind of temple robbery and a wicked flouting of God's Scripture" (XIX:343). "Who does not see that they rage against this clear word of Christ by shamelessly taking from the sheep the judgment of doctrine and appropriating it to themselves by their own impudent decree? Hence they are certainly to be regarded as murderers, thieves, wolves, and apostate Christians, who are here openly convicted not only of denying the Word of God, but of setting up and carrying out decrees in opposition to this Word. What else could you expect of Antichrist and his kingdom, according to Paul's prediction in 2 Thessalonians 2:34? . . . Thus we see how wickedly the despots dealt with us when they deprived us of this right and made it their own. For this thing alone they have richly deserved to be cast out of the Christian Church and driven forth as wolves, thieves, and murderers, who contrary to God's Word and will set themselves up as our rulers and masters" (X:1541, 1543).

2. "St. Paul taught us this when he wrote: 'Prove all things.'

But if we are to test all doctrine, *what other touchstone can we apply but Scripture?*" (Luther, XVIII:1294.) The Christian bases his judgments on religious questions solely and exclusively on Scripture. God's Word is the sole judge of doctrine, and when the Christians are commanded to "try the spirits," this standard is set up for them: "To the Law and to the Testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Is. 8:20). See also 2 Tim. 3:15-17; 1 Tim. 6:3 ff., etc. The Bereans were commended because "they searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11). When God invested the Christians with the right to judge doctrine, He commanded them to make Scripture, not their reason, not their feelings, not their private ideas, the judge of doctrine. And so, when Luther urged the Christians to exercise their private judgment and test all religious teaching before accepting it, he told them in the same breath to test these teachings by Scripture. "What other touchstone can we apply but Scripture?"⁴

We need to stress this second point because some men are saying that Luther, in exercising the right of private judgment, placed man in the seat of authority. But men who know anything about Luther know that Luther and the Lutheran Church require all men to subject their religious thought to Scripture and forbid them to teach anything that Scripture does not teach. What did Luther tell Erasmus? "What can the Church decree that is not decreed in the Scriptures? Is it not enough that you submit your opinion to the Scriptures?" It was Luther who said at Worms: "My conscience is bound in God's Word." Luther said: "Mache nicht Artikel des Glaubens aus deinen Gedanken, wie der Greuel zu Rom tut" (XV:1565). Again: "When you have a decision of Scripture, you need not look for any further decision either from the Fathers or from church councils" (III:503). Again: "We must know what we believe; we must believe what God's Word teaches, not what the Pope and councils order and decree. . . . If you are asked to give an account of your faith, answer: There is the foundation of my faith—Scripture; that will not fail me; I care nothing for what Pope and bishops teach and decree" (IX:1236 f.). And once more: "I have said that if they decide anything in the council against Scripture, we must believe Scripture more than the council. The Scriptures are our guarantee; they embolden us

4) It is called *private* judgment in the sense that no man may dictate to me what I must think. But it is not a "private" judgment in the sense that I may act independently of Scripture in my religious thinking. The right of private judgment does not give us the right to think what we please, but it authorizes us to go to the Scriptures directly and learn from them what we should believe or not believe. (See *Theological Monthly*, 1924, p. 116.)

to challenge even an angel from heaven (Gal. 1:8), let alone a Pope and council. And why do they condemn me for this article? . . . Paul anathematizes an angel if he should teach anything contrary to Scripture; and I am not to have the right to disregard a man if he teaches otherwise? Why do you not condemn also *Panor. c. Significasti, de Elect.*, whom I quoted as saying that one must believe a layman when he offers clear Scripture or clear reason more than the Pope or council?" (XV:1549.)⁵

J. Clayton is wrong when he says that "Luther placed man's private judgment in the seat of authority," "that feeling usurped the place of thought," that Luther's teaching "attracts where feeling is ranked above intellect," and that "against the authority of the supreme pontiff, Luther set up the authority of the individual believer" (pp. 19, 85, 117). Luther recognized but one authority—Scripture.⁶ John Adam Moehler (Catholic) believes that the Lutheran Church has this teaching on private judgment: "Here each one is to give himself up to the guidance of his own subjective feelings and fancies and to be certain that what he feels and thinks is truly felt and thought." And he declares: "A Church which would authorize anyone to find what he pleased in Scripture, such

5) The disciples of Luther say the same. Walther: "Wer mir nicht sagen kann: Das gebietet Christus, das sagt die Heilige Schrift, der kann nicht sagen: Das gebiete ich dir. Wenn aber ein Kind mir es beweisen kann, dann gehorche ich." Pieper: "Den Christen wird 1 Thess. 5:21 aufgetragen: 'Pruefet alles.' Sie sollen aber die Pruefung nicht nach ihrem eigenen Kopf, sondern nach der Heiligen Schrift anstellen" (*Vortraege ueber "Die Ev.-Luth. Kirche die wahre sichtbare Kirche"*, p. 40). Scripture the sole rule and judge, not your private opinion! In the words of Chemnitz, as reproduced by Pieper (*op. cit.*, p. 56): "Jeder Christ hat zwar das Privilegium der Schriftauslegung, aber keiner darf sie auslegen nach seinem Sinn, sondern nach dem Sinn, den die Heilige Schrift an die Hand gibt" (*op. cit.*, p. 56). A Lutheran Christian is so constituted that he suppresses his own thoughts; he would think only the thoughts that Scripture supplies. Werner Elert: "Doctrinal declarations and decisions can never be made in the Church in opposition to the authority of Christ (John 6:68; Luke 12:11 f.); nor are they of equal authority with that of Christ. The Church reaches her decisions only in this wise that she bows to Christ's authority and subjects herself to its judgments." (See *Allg. Ev.-Luth. Kirchenzeitung*, Oct. 23, 1936.) Formula of Concord: "The Holy Scriptures alone remain the only judge, rule, and standard, according to which, as the only test-stone, all dogmas shall and must be discerned and judged, as to whether they are good or evil, right or wrong" (*Concordia Triglotta*, p. 779). Augsburg Confession: "Nothing has been received on our part against Scripture or the Church Catholic. . . . We are ready to present ampler information according to the SCRIPTURES" (*Triglotta*, p. 95).

6) To be sure, Luther taught that one must obey his conscience. The conscience exercises a tremendous authority. Luther could not do otherwise at Worms, because his conscience was bound in the Word of God. The conscience back of the private judgment may be called an authority. But Luther did not place man's conscience in the seat of authority. The conscience exercises a legitimate authority only when it "is bound in God's Word."

a Church would thereby declare that it believed in nothing" (*Symbolism*, pp. 298, 341). Do not tell Luther that he taught such things. He would say, among other things, "I do not frame articles of faith out of my thoughts and feelings; I leave that to the Abomination which is Rome." (See above.) To sum up: "In Holy Scripture we must find the judgment as to whether a certain teaching is right or wrong. . . . Scripture passes the judgment and decides whether what one believes is right or wrong. Therefore we need not seek further testimony, that of the fathers or that of the councils, but rest satisfied with the plain, clear, lucid Scriptures" (III: 503).

3. Have the Christians the right to go *directly to Scripture and determine for themselves what Scripture says*? This is the all-important point, and in denouncing the right of private judgment the Pope and his theologians have in mind particularly this point.

When the Christians inquire about God's will in this matter, they get the straight answer: "Search the Scriptures," John 5:39. They are told to follow the example of the Bereans who "searched the Scriptures daily whether these things were so," Acts 17:11.⁷⁾ And if God requires His people to test all teaching by Scripture (see above), He has certainly given them the right to use Scripture for this and the other purposes for which it was written, and, of course, has enabled them to understand it.

When the Christians seek information on this point from the Pope, they get the straight answer that they have no business to appeal to the Bible. They are told that they do not possess the spiritual intelligence to get the sense of what God's Word says. Only the Church can find the true sense. The laity—and, as it turns out, the priests and the bishops, too—must let the Pope interpret Scripture for them. When the Church interprets Rom. 3:28 to mean that justification is by works, the Christian is commanded by the Pope to accept this interpretation despite the protest of his intellect and conscience. The *Tridentinum* is very emphatic on this

7) Lenski's *Commentary*: "This is exactly what Paul and Silas desired—to have them examine, truly examine the Scriptures. That examination, properly made, could result in only one verdict: 'These things are so!' and that meant faith, intelligent faith, resting on the one true ground of faith, the Scriptures. . . . Here we have an excellent example of the right of private judgment, which is part of the royal priesthood of believers. Each man is to have direct access to the Scriptures, is to see and to judge for his own person and conscience. . . . Because Paul was an Apostle, he asked for this, demanded it. As an Apostle his whole preaching automatically rested on the Scriptures." Kretzmann's *Commentary*: "This fact they showed not only by their cheerful, unconditional willingness to accept the Word which Paul brought, but also by the earnestness and zeal with which they carefully searched the Scriptures every day, comparing prophecy and fulfillment and satisfying their own minds that the doctrine, as represented by Paul, agreed with the revelation of God."

point. The decree of Session the Fourth reads: "No one, relying on his own skill shall — in matters of faith and of morals pertaining to the edification of the 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. . . . Contraveners shall be made known by their ordinaries and be punished with the penalties by law established." The Creed of Pius IV solemnly repeats that. (See *Popular Symbolics*, p. 154.) Must we renounce the judgment of our intellect and conscience as to the meaning of Rom. 3:28 and any other statement of Scripture and wait till some other man tells us what the Scripture means? Cardinal James Gibbons tells men that that is their Christian duty. "The Church is the divinely appointed Custodian and Interpreter of the Bible. For her office of infallible Guide were superfluous if each individual could interpret the Bible for himself. God never intended the Bible to be the Christian's rule of faith independently of the living authority of the Church. . . . When a dispute arises in the Church regarding the sense of Scripture, the subject is referred to the Pope for final adjudication. . . . His sentence is final, irrevocable, and infallible. . . . Christ says to every Christian: Here, my child, is the Word of God, and with it I leave you an infallible interpreter. . . . I have appointed over it a Supreme Tribunal in the person of one 'to whom I have given the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven'" (*The Faith of Our Fathers*, pp. 77, 125, 135). "Cardinal Gibbons says: 'We have a man in Rome who is the successor of St. Peter and has received authority to decide for the whole world what they are to believe and do to be saved, and all you have to do is to surrender private judgment and submit all to him.'" (See *Proceedings, English District, 1927*, p. 21.) Holy Scripture, says the Pope, is beyond the understanding of the common Christian.⁸⁾

8) There are two main reasons why the Pope cannot permit common Christians to judge his teaching on the basis of Scripture. The first reason is that he does not get all of his teachings out of Scripture; he has other sources of doctrine, which are not accessible to everybody. Cardinal Gibbons says: "A rule of faith, or a competent guide to heaven, must be able to instruct in all the truths necessary for salvation. Now, the Scriptures alone do not contain all the truths which a Christian is bound to believe, nor do they explicitly enjoin all the duties which he is obliged to practice. . . . The Catholic Church correctly teaches that our Lord and His Apostles inculcated certain important duties of religion which are not recorded by the inspired writers. . . . The Scriptures do not contain all the truths necessary for salvation" (*op. cit.*, p. 89). The *Catholic Encyclopedia* makes the same statement (*s. v.* Tradition). Cardinal Manning made a similar statement. (See *Popular Symbolics*, p. 155. See also *Lutheran Witness*, 1943, p. 401.) One of these other sources is mentioned in the Preface of a Catholic Bible published with the "Approbation of James Cardinal Gibbons": "The Sacred Scriptures form a part of the divine revelation, the other part being contained in

It would be better for the common Christian not to read the Bible at all. At one time a law to this effect was in full force. "Naturally, therefore, the laity were forbidden to read the Bible in their own tongue and, if they conversed publicly or privately on matters of faith, incurred excommunication by a bull of Alexander IV and after a year became amenable to the Inquisition. — *Sext. Dec. 5, 2*" (Janus, *op. cit.*, p. 131). In this way the evil inclination of the people to apply the test of Scripture to the teaching of their priests was suppressed in the Dark Ages. The situation is not changed essentially today. The Pope may put the Bible into the hands of the people, but that is done with the provision that they must understand it in the sense which he puts into it. That amounts to the same thing as forbidding them to read it. By all means the people must be kept from letting the Bible speak directly to them. By all means—"Contraveners shall be punished with the penalties by law established." The *Tridentinum* agrees with the bull of Alexander IV: Those who presume to deal with Scripture directly, to exercise the right of private judgment, are subject to excommunication.

And that means the higher clergy, too. For a time the bishops held out for a shred of the right of private judgment, but they surrendered every vestige of it in 1870. The dogma of papal infallibility declares that all questions of faith and morals must be referred to the Pope for the final, infallible decision. He alone can determine the true sense of Scripture. All the rest, laity, lower clergy, higher clergy, must bow to his judgment. If anyone presumes to exercise his own judgment, let him be anathema. The infallibility of the Pope and the right of private judgment cannot exist side by side.⁹⁾—May the Christian deal directly with the

the depository of the Church and designated as the unwritten Word of God." (See *Theological Quarterly*, 1916, p. 179.) So it would be folly to tell the Pope that certain of his teachings have no basis in Scripture. He would tell these foolish objectors: These teachings I have gotten from my other source, which is not accessible to you.—His second reason is the common Christian's incapacity for understanding Scripture.

9) In "*Rome and the Newest Fashions in Religion*," published in 1875, Gladstone said: "The effect of it [the declaration of the pope's infallibility] was in the last resort to place the entire Christian religion in the breast of the Pope and to suspend it on his will. . . . The mere utterances of the Central See are laws, and they overrule at will all other laws. Over these utterances—in their preparation, as well as after their issue—no man has lawful control. . . . The Pope may tell you that there is no contrariety. If you have read, if you have studied, if you have seen, if you have humbly used every means of getting to the truth and you return to your point that there is contrariety, again his answer is ready: That assertion of yours is simply your private judgment; and your private judgment is just what my infallibility is meant and appointed to put down. . . . Idle then it is to tell us, finally, that the Pope is bound, by the moral and divine law, by the commandments of God, by the rules of the Gospel . . . for of these, one and all, the Pope himself, by himself, is the judge without appeal." (See *Lutheran Witness*, June 21, 1886.)

Bible? Rome denounces that as the height of wickedness and intolerable arrogance.

Let the Christian consult Luther on this matter. Luther denounced the Pope's injunction as wicked arrogance and intolerable tyranny. In "*An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*" he declared: "Christ also says in John 6:45 that all Christians shall be taught of God. . . . Therefore it is a wickedly invented fable, and they cannot produce a letter in defense of it that the interpretation of Scripture or the confirmation of its interpretation belongs to the Pope alone. They have usurped this power unto themselves. . . . Besides, we are all priests, as was said above. . . . All these and other texts (1 Cor. 2:15; 2 Cor. 4:13) should make us bold and free, and we should not allow the Spirit of liberty, as Paul calls Him, to be frightened off by the fabrications of the popes, but we ought to go boldly forward to test all that they do or leave undone according to our faithful understanding of Scripture. . . . Otherwise the prayer would have to run: 'I believe in the Pope at Rome' and so reduce the Christian Church to one man—which would be nothing else than a devilish and hellish error" (X:276 ff.).¹⁰ As Christ (John 5:39) and His Apostles placed the Bible in the hands of the common Christians and told them that if they possessed common intelligence and used their Christian intelligence, they will know what God is saying to them, so Luther tells God's people that they need not ask the Pope to unfold to them the meaning of God's Word and, furthermore, that it is their sacred duty to denounce the claim that the Pope is the judge of Scripture and the custodian of its meaning as devilish arrogance. "There are many who affirm that the Pope is above Scripture and has the right to interpret and change it at

10) A few more Lutheran pronouncements. Chemnitz, *Examen Decr. Conc. Tridentini*, in the section *De Interpretatione Scripturae*: "The Synod holds that any interpretation of Scripture given by the bishops there assembled must be received without proof; they have invented the fable that only the bishops are able to interpret Scripture. Sed hoc falsum est . . . 1 Cor. 12:11; 1 Thess. 5:21; Acts 17:11. . . .—They expect us to accept without question, without any examination, investigation, and study on our part what they tell us is the meaning of Scripture; they claim the sole right of interpretation and demand that we accept their mere word as God's truth. . . . The papal theologians have claimed the magisterial and dictatorial right to force their interpretation upon the people and have robbed the Church of the right of judgment. Et hoc est, quod in isto canone impugnamus." Pieper: "Jeder Christ hat das Privilegium der Schriftauslegung." G. E. Seamon, in *The Pastor's Monthly*, 1935, p. 37: "Exercise your right of private judgment. Private judgment is that right which gives to every man the privilege, nay the duty, to search the Word for himself, and by so doing arrive at the knowledge of what he is to believe and how he is to live." W. Arndt, in *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, 1936, p. 690: "Every individual Christian is to read the Scriptures and to meditate on them (Ps. 1:2), which is equivalent to saying that he is to interpret them for himself."

will; as he, indeed, has been doing" (XIX:912).¹¹ "But," Luther points out, "Holy Scripture is not the Jews' nor the heathen's nor the angels' much less the devils' chattel; Holy Scripture is God's, who alone spoke and wrote it—and He alone shall interpret and unfold it. Let the devils and men be the hearers" (XX:2103). And so Luther finally judges: "This sentence of Paul (Gal. 1:9) should remind us that all who hold that the Pope is the judge of Scripture and that the Church rules over Scripture are accursed" (IX:86).

The papistic teaching that *Scripture is obscure, its true meaning hidden from the common Christian*, is "a devilish and hellish error." God declares that His Book is clear and perspicuous, a Light in the darkness of this world, 2 Peter 1:19, a Lamp unto our feet and a Light unto our path, Ps. 119:105, also for the simple, Ps. 19:7, even for children, 2 Tim. 3:15. (See Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, I, p. 387.) That is not true, say the papists; the simple Christian cannot understand Scripture. They said it in the Dark Ages (see Baier, *Compendium*, 1, p. 175); they say it today. Cardinal Gibbons insists that because of "the hidden meaning" of Scripture an "infallible interpreter" is needed. "The Scriptures are not of themselves clear and intelligible even in matters of the highest importance" (*op. cit.*, p. 89).

In holy wrath Luther denounces this blasphemous disparagement of Holy Scripture thus: "It is a great and abominable tra-

11) Does the Pope really require the Christians to accept his "interpretation" even though their intelligence assures them that it is against the plain Scripture? None but Antichrist can do that; and the Pope does it. Chemnitz: "The papists claim the right to reject, whenever they please, the simple, native meaning of the words and to substitute a different sense, let the passage be as clear as the sun itself; exercising dictatorial authority, they require us to believe, not what Scripture plainly and manifestly says, but their dictatorial and arbitrary interpretation of Scripture. . . . They assert that these words (Rom. 3:28; Matt. 26:27, "all"; Hebrews 13:4; 1 Cor. 7:2, etc.) must not be understood as they read, but as they interpret them. And the canon under consideration gives them the right thus to play fast and loose with Scripture. Hosius says *de expresso verbo Dei*: 'If one has the interpretation of any Scripture passage as given by the Catholic Church, though he does not know or understand whether and how it agrees with the word of Scripture, he still has the very Word of God.' . . . With regard to a certain controverted point Erasmus freely admits that the papistical thesis is not based on firm and certain testimonies of Scripture and that the opposing thesis has better, clearer, and firmer Scripture proof back of it. 'However,' he adds, 'if the Church commands this, I'll believe it. For I bring my reason into captivity to the obedience of the Church.'" Gerhard: "The reason which Bellarmine gives is plainly an antichristian one. He says: 'If the ordained and called pastor and one who preaches, but is not called, teach contrary things, the people must by all means accept the teaching of their pastor and not that of the one who is not called, even if it should happen that their pastor were in error.'"—Walther adds the comment: "This passage shows how far the Catholics will go. Forsaking his usual caution, Bellarmine could pen this statement." (See Baier, I, p. 188.)

ducing and reviling of Holy Scripture and all Christendom when men say that it is obscure and not so clear that anyone may understand it, to ground his faith on it, prove his faith by it. . . . There is no clearer book upon earth than Holy Writ; it excels every other book just as the sun excels every other light. . . . Be assured and certain that there is nothing clearer than the sun, than Holy Scripture" (V:334 ff.). All that men need to know for their salvation is set down in Scripture in such simple and clear language that the common man needs no further clarification, explanation, interpretation in order to understand it. There is not a single point of the saving doctrine couched in such cryptic language that it needs the mystic insight of the college of bishops or the special illumination of the Pope to unravel its meaning. "Therefore come forward, you [Erasmus] and all the sophists together, and produce one single mystery [revealed doctrine] which is still abstruse in the Scriptures" (XVIII:1681). When God declares that Scripture is a clear light and the Pope answers: No, it speaks in riddles, after the manner of the Delphic oracle, Luther cries out: "I lose my patience when they thus write and blaspheme the Scriptures and the Fathers . . . Ps. 119:105. . . . Did not all the Fathers go to Scripture for their proof? But if they had regarded Scripture as a dense fog—that is Emser's blasphemous and scandalous description of Scripture—they would have been senseless and mad by attempting to impart light and clearness to their teaching through that which is obscure; according to Emser's philosophy and dagger, the Fathers were mad! Nay, they surely held the Scriptures to be the Light of lights and most clear and certain; they appealed to it and depended upon it as the plainest and clearest teaching by which every teaching must be judged and proved. . . . Dass euch Schriftlaesterern einmal Gott gebiete; wie aeffet ihr uns so jaemmerlich" (XVIII:1293—1298).¹²⁾

Discussing the clarity of Scripture, Dr. Pieper calls attention to this significant statement: "Wiewohl nicht alle Christen die Gabe

12) To be sure, there are difficult and obscure passages in the Bible, and some of these are found even in the doctrinal sections. But "in these there will be found nothing but what is found in other places, in the clear and plain passages. . . . If there is an obscure passage in Scripture, do not be alarmed, for it certainly contains the same truth which is taught plainly in another passage" (V:335, 338).—Speaking of "the right of private judgment" and "the duty of individual research," *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "It is the duty of every Christian man to test all new doctrine by the teaching of the divine Word. We are to search the Scriptures whether these things are so or not. There is no excuse for declining to do this. . . . God has so formed and written the Word that it is level to our understanding; He has given us the necessary mental faculties to comprehend it; and He has made the substance of it so simple, plain, appreciable that the wayfaring man may rejoice in it. It is not the recondite, abstruse, mystical utterance which some disclosures are. . . ." (On Acts 17:14.)

der Auslegung haben, so koennen sie doch alle Auslegungen kontrollieren, ob sie den Sinn der Schrift treffen oder nicht" (*Vortraege*, p. 56). No, not every Christian has the special gift of interpretation; not all of them are trained exegetes. But all of them are perfectly able to understand the simple words by which God has revealed the saving doctrine and are therefore able to control the "interpretation" of these passages. The simple Christian can here tell the most learned exegete: You are right, or, you are wrong. Rom. 3:28 is made up of intelligible words. And when the Catholic "interpreters" employ a great amount of skill to prove that certain classes of works are here called for as necessary for justification, the simple Christian will tell them: I know more about this than you; all works are excluded.—Dr. Pieper makes a similar statement in *Lehre und Wehre*, 1888, p. 3: "So ist Prof. Ritschl auch als wissenschaftlicher Lehrer der Kontrolle aller Christen unterstellt." (Note that the right of private judgment needs to be defended not only against the Pope, but also, as we shall later show, against various other kinds of theologians).¹³⁾

13) How much "interpretation" does Scripture need in order to become intelligible to the common Christian? Luther: ". . . auf dass der Widerpart, mit dem hellen Licht ueberwunden, sehe und bekenne, dass die Sprueche Gottes allein sind und keines Menschen Auslegung beduerfen" (XVIII:1924). "*Scriptura ipsa per sese rectissima, facillima, apertissima sui ipsius interpres*" (Weimar Ed., VII:97). *Scripture interprets itself!* This does not only mean that the occasional obscure passages should be placed in the light of the clear passages, but it means, first of all, that, as a rule, the words of Scripture carry their meaning in themselves and by their clarity restrain the reader from putting any other meaning into them. Men think a lot of exegesis is needed in order to explain Scripture. No, says Luther, let the text—*nuda Scriptura*—speak for itself. "Be it known, then, that Scripture, *without any gloss*, is the sun and the sole light from which all teachers receive their light and not the contrary. . . . The study that makes one fit for warfare is to be at home in Scripture and, as St. Paul says, able to contend with abundant clear passages, *without any glosses or commentaries*, as with a bared and drawn sword. . . . The words of God stand alone and do not need some man's interpretation" (XVIII:1293 f.). "When the Christian hears Scripture, it is so clear and plain that *aside from the glosses and commentaries* of all the Fathers and teachers, he says: That is right; that is what I believe" (V:335).—We prize the work of the exegetes. They throw light on some obscure passages. But the real value, "the real business and foremost duty of the exegetes consists in this, that they tie down the flighty spirit of man to the simple text and, where it has departed therefrom, lead it back to the simple text" (Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, I, p. 435). In the words of Dr. W. H. T. Dau: "To detect a faulty interpretation, what other means is there than the very text which has been wrongly expounded? The real interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself or the Spirit who gave, and who lays hold with His inward testimony on those whom He approaches with, the Word" (*Walther and the Church*, p. 53). Chemnitz-Augustine: "Many passages of Scripture are made up of clear and lucid words, which do not need a lot of erudite exegesis but *interpret themselves*. And in these clear passages *everything* that pertains to faith and morals is found." (See Pieper, *op. cit.*, p. 291.)

The papists object, further, that the common Christians lack the mental and spiritual faculties to get the sense of Scripture for themselves. That is "a devilish and hellish" malignment of God's people. "Alle haben gleiche Gewalt an dem Worte Gottes" (Luther, XIX:117). God's Word is for all of His people, and He has equipped everyone of them with the spiritual intelligence needed to understand it and operate with it. Luther: "Christ says in John 6:45 that all Christians shall be taught of God" (X:277). It is an insult to the Christians and to God's work in them to treat them as spiritual imbeciles. The Apostles did not so treat them. St. Paul did not so treat Timothy and Eunice and Lois. He spoke of all Christians as "enriched with all knowledge," Rom. 15:14; 1 Cor. 1:4. The *Pulpit Commentary* on 1 John 2:20, 27 and 4:1 says: "The unction from above imparts spiritual discernment. . . . The Apostle's confidence in the Christian discernment of his hearers. . . . Each Christian is anointed with the Spirit, 2 Cor. 1:21. The Christian has the basis of all knowledge, John 16:13 f.; 1 Cor. 2:9-16; John 14:26." The faith by which the common Christian has the right understanding of Scripture in no wise differs from the faith of the most learned theologian.

The papists claim to have Scriptural authority for speaking of the low intelligence of the common Christians. "They appealed to the passages in which the Christians are figuratively called 'sheep,' John 10:16 f.; 21:16 f. Our theologians answered: The Christians are indeed compared to sheep; however, not to foolish sheep, but, to wise sheep that can distinguish well the voice of Christ from the voice of the stranger and pseudoshepherd, John 10:4 f., 27: 'My sheep hear My voice'" (Pieper, *op. cit.*, p. 424).

Have the Christians the right of private judgment? Luther: "Observe that Christ here (Matt. 7:15) assigns the judgment not to the prophets and teachers, but to the pupils, or the sheep. For how could one beware of false prophets unless one examined, judged, and gave a decision on their teaching? . . . All teachers should and must, therefore, be subject with their teaching to the judgment of the hearers" (X:1542).

The papists claim, finally, that Scripture itself, in so many words, forbids the ordinary man to read the Scriptures without the priest or bishop or pope telling him what it means. Di Bruno: "The authoritative interpretation of Scripture made by the *lawful successors* of the Apostles is the true one and truly the Word of God. . . . Hence St. Peter condemns private interpretation of Scripture, saying: '*No prophecy (or explanation) of Scripture is made by private interpretation.*' 2 Peter 1:20." (*Catholic Belief*, p. 40—Italics in original.) But this text does not say and does not intimate in any way that the interpretation of Scripture belongs to the

hierarchy and not to all Christians. The simple Christian will ask: Which word in the text says that only the Pope can tell what Scripture means? What the text does say, is: "Understanding this, at the outset, that no prophetic Scripture allows a man to interpret it by himself." Scripture interprets itself! No man may interpret it to suit his own ideas. No man may force his ideas into the words of Scripture. Luther: "Do not think that you shall explain Scripture by your reason and wisdom. Any interpretation of Scripture by any of the Fathers which is thus derived is here (2 Peter 1:20) rejected and condemned. . . . What a man adds of his own cannot serve to get the true sense of Scripture" (IX:1362).¹⁴ The opposites are not "private interpretation" and the interpretation of the Pope, but "private interpretation" and Scripture itself. What is forbidden here is the sort of exegesis to which Catholic theology is addicted. "For instance," says Luther in the passage just quoted, "when they refer Matt. 16:18 to the Pope, that is a human, private interpretation, spun out of their own thoughts."

No, 2 Peter 1:20 does not deny or restrict the right of the private Christian, the layman, to study Scripture for himself. Walther, quoting Kromayer: "We must give a more ready ear to a plain layman when he adduces Scripture than to a whole council which takes a stand contrary to Scripture. . . . Even though a whole council expounded Scripture contrary to the intention of one of the holy writers, we should look upon such an exposition as a private interpretation (2 Peter 1:20). Die Privat-Meinung und Privat-Schriftauslegung, nicht die Auslegung eines Privaten wird verworfen" (*Lehre und Wehre*, 1868, p. 169. CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, 1939, p. 594). And this right of private judgment in studying Scripture we maintain. We thank Luther for recovering this right for Christendom: "It is a wickedly invented fable that the interpretation of Scripture belongs to the Pope alone."

4. According to Luther, says Clayton, "the notion that the Pope has the right to interpret the Sacred Scriptures must be destroyed, since to all baptized believers is given the priesthood." Correct! *The right of private judgment is one of the prerogatives of the royal*

14) Hofmann on our passage: "Es unterliegt keiner aus eigenem Verstande entnommenen Deutung des Lesers. Von aller Schriftweisung gilt, dass sie nicht eigener Deutung unterliegt, nicht Sache eigener Deutung ist." (See *Lehre und Wehre*, 1918, p. 114. Read the entire article.) Zahn's *Commentary*: What the text warns men against is "bei der Erklarung und praktischen Verwertung des ihnen vorliegenden Weissagungswortes ihre eigne Vernunft schalten und walten zu lassen." Stoeckhardt: "Keine Weissagung in der Schrift ist von eigener, menschlicher Deutung und Auslegung abhaengig" (*Lehre und Wehre*, 1886, p. 214). Exactly as Moffatt translates: "Understanding this that no prophetic Scripture allows a man to interpret it by himself."—This matter is exhaustively treated in CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, 1936, p. 685 ff.

priesthood. Luther: "No one can deny that every Christian has God's Word and is taught of God and anointed by Him to the priesthood, John 6:45; 1 Peter 2:9. Now, if Christians have the Word of God and are anointed by Him, they are in duty bound to confess, preach, and spread this Word" (X:1543). Again: "It is a wickedly invented fable that the interpretation of Scripture belongs to the Pope alone. . . . If we are all priests, as was said above . . . why should we not also have the power to test and judge what is correct and incorrect in matters of faith? What becomes of the word of Paul in 1 Cor. 2:15 and 2 Cor. 4:13? Why, then, should we not perceive what squares with faith and what does not, as well as an unbelieving pope?" (X:278).—"Jesus has made us kings and priests unto God" (Rev. 1:6). Antichrist will not have it so.¹⁵⁾

5. Let us emphasize, by way of recapitulation, that *the laity* does indeed possess the right of private judgment. A man does not acquire the right to judge doctrine through the Catholic Sacrament of Holy Orders nor through the Episcopalian Apostolic Succession nor through the call and ordination nor by taking a special course in theology. No, the ordinary Christian possesses it, the common layman. Hear Luther: "In the past the laymen were forbidden to read the Bible, and it was a clever move on the part of the devil to take the Bible from the people. . . . We must confess that St. Peter spoke these words (1 Peter 3:15) to all Christians, pastors and laymen, men and women, young and old, no matter to what station they may belong. It follows from this that every Christian should know the reason of his faith and be able to speak up for it and defend it at any time. . . . Hence we must know what

15) "Christus hat seine Christen nicht zu so miserablen Aschenbroedeln gemacht, die still und stumm jedem Wolf in den Rachen laufen; die alles einfach hinzunehmen und herunterzuschlucken haben: geistliche Seelenspeise oder Seelengift, Gottes Wahrheit oder Satansbetrug; die sich mit verbundenen Augen fuehren lassen und es darauf ankommen lassen, ob es gen Himmel geht oder zur Hoelle. Nein, er hat sie zu muendigen Priestern gemacht, die 'selbst von Gott gelehrt sind,' John 8:45; 1 Thess. 4:9; 1 John 9:24. Sie sollen und duerfen alle Lehre pruefen und urteilen, einerlei, wo und an wem sie sie finden. Und dazu hat er selbst sie befuehigt, indem er ihnen sein helles und vollkommenes Wort der Wahrheit als Richtscheid in die Hand gegeben hat" ("*Proceedings, Illinois District, 1898, p. 56*). *The Pastor's Monthly, 1931, p. 12 ff.*: "If we are to be priests, we must have direct and free access to God; otherwise our priesthood is but an idle dream. As Dr. Lenski says: 'Nobody in the world dare say, You must first come to me, and I will tell you what God has to say to you, or whether He has anything to say to you at all. Whoever attempts such a thing snatches your kingship away and makes himself a king over you, turning you into a slave. He robs you of your priesthood and makes himself priest over you, turning you into a priest-ridden dupe.' . . . But if we are to be true priests and have a truly open Bible, that must also include the right of private judgment. If we are not allowed to interpret the Bible for ourselves, but blindly accept the interpretations which others give us, we are again made dependent upon others and really have no access to God as His royal priests."

we believe, namely, whatever the Word of God teaches and not what the Pope or councils tell you to believe. For you must by no means trust in men, but base your faith solely on the Word of God" (IX:1235). Again: "It behooves every Christian to espouse the cause of faith, to understand and defend it, and to rebuke all errors" (X:278). It is expected of the common Christian "that, in all affairs and cases, he can advise, help, comfort, judge, and decide both spiritual and temporal matters and is qualified to sit in judgment upon all doctrines, estates, spirits, laws, and whatever else is in the world" (The Large Catechism, *Triglotta*, p. 573). Again: "Since, then, we have become Christians through this Priest and His priestly office and in Baptism have been incorporated into Him through faith, we possess also the privilege and authority to teach and confess before all men the divine Word which we have received of Him, everyone according to his calling and condition. For though we are not all in the public ministry, nevertheless every Christian may teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, and reprove his neighbor with the Word of God wherever this is necessary, as, for instance, when father and mother deal with their children, and servants, brothers, neighbors, burghers, peasants, with one another. For certainly a Christian can instruct the ignorant and weak in the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, etc., and admonish them; and everyone who hears this Christian is in duty bound to receive it of him as God's Word and to confess it with him publicly" (V:1038). And once more: "The time to keep silence has passed, and the time to speak is come. I have brought together some matters touching the reform of the Christian Estate in the hope that God may deign to help His Church through the efforts of the laity, since the clergy, to whom this task more properly belongs, have grown altogether indifferent" (X:266. See also XI:1394; XV:1549; XIX:341; etc.).¹⁶⁾

16) M. Doerne: "Wer hat zuerst die sogenannten Laien erinnert, dass auch von ihnen derselbe priesterliche Dienst gefordert ist wie vom Pfarrer? Wer hat die kurzschluessige Gegenueberstellung von Amt und Gemeinde ueberwunden durch eine theologische Synthese, die mit der Hohheit des Predigtamts auch die Verantwortung der Gemeinde und mit dem wiedergewonnenen Ernst evangelischen Hirtendienstes auch die Ehre der Gemeinde gesteigert hat? Das war Martin Luther" (*Theologia Militans* X, p. 57). And in the spirit of Luther Walther declares: "According to divine right the function of passing judgment on doctrine belongs indeed to the ministry of preaching. However, also the laymen have this right, and for this reason they also have a seat and vote with the preachers in church courts and councils" (Thesis X, *Kirche und Amt*. See *Walther and the Church*, p. 85). And Pieper: "Most certainly it is an acknowledged fact that it is the duty not only of Christian ministers but of all Christians without exception to be ceaselessly active in preaching the Gospel at home and abroad. That is God's own will and ordinance. There is indeed a laymen's movement which God Himself has commanded" (*What Is Christianity?* p. 101). And O. H. Nebe: "Es ist

The Christian layman, the simple peasant, has the right of private judgment.—And “he is doing an accursed thing who impairs this right by a hair's breadth.” Is such strong language called for? Let us see. (To be continued) TH. ENGELDER

Harnack's Theological Positions

The inclusion of Adolf Harnack in this series of articles on epoch-making modern theological leaders who promoted error requires an explanation. Strictly speaking, he was not the founder of a school of theology. He did not teach a system of doctrine of his own. In him we are dealing with a church historian, and not with a dogmatician. Still, when the persons to be treated in this series were listed, it was felt that Harnack's name would have to be included because in the period extending from about 1895 to 1920 he was the most frequently mentioned theologian of Germany, probably of the whole world, and exerted a vast influence in Europe and America.

I

Adolf (v.) Harnack was born 1851 in Dorpat in Livonia, where his father was theological professor at the time. Two years later the father was called to a chair of theology at Erlangen, which he occupied till 1866, when he returned to the University of Dorpat. Adolf, after absolving the theological course in the latter school, studied in Leipzig, where he earned his doctor's degree. His dissertation gave an indication of his chief interest; it dealt with the critical study of the sources pertaining to the history of Gnosticism. In Leipzig he began his teaching career as *professor extraordinarius* in 1876. In 1879 he was appointed to a regular professorship in Giessen, and in 1886 he was transferred to Marburg. Two years later he was called to the University of Berlin, where he served till his retirement in 1921. His death occurred June 10, 1930.

Harnack was the son of a staunch conservative Lutheran theologian, Theodosius Harnack (1817—1889), who was universally considered a pillar of orthodoxy. Besides other important books

wichtig zu sehen, dass in jeder christlichen Aussage, etwa in der eines Bauern, dass er lutherischer Christ sei, bereits ein theologisches Urteil enthalten ist, dass also im strengen Sinn *jeder Christ zugleich auch Theologe ist*” (*Theologia Militans*, XI, p. 13). Comment of CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, 1937, p. 743: “Da die Theologie ihrem eigentlichen Wesen nach nichts anderes tut, als die Aussagen der Schrift zu wiederholen, und die Schrift ein so einfaches, klares Buch ist, so muss man darauf gefasst sein, von dem gottesfuerchtigen, in der Schrift lebenden Bauern treffliche theologische Urteile zu hoeren.”