

PRIVATE INTERPRETATION AND CONTINUING REVELATION

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"First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." II Peter 1:20, 21 (RSV)

"Private interpretation and continuing revelation." I've been tossing these phrases around in my head for some time now. Aren't the sects which flourish in America based on a private interpretation of the Scriptures? Shouldn't claims of new revelations be like warning signals to us? Departures from the historic Christian faith are often directly connected with a totally new interpretation. As all this eventually affects us on a personal level we can hardly afford a carefree attitude of "who's to say who's right?"

The Christian church was led by the Holy Spirit, very early in history, to recognize which books should make up the canon of Scripture and which ones should be left out. The matter of an open-ended Bible was settled at a very early date.

The revelation then which the Muslims believe their prophet Mohammed received, some 600 years after Christ, remains a contradiction to us. From the various historical materials recorded in the Koran, their holy book, we see that the accounts of Old and New Testament events available to Mohammed at that period must have been confused and inaccurate. We are perturbed by the fact that the adherents of Islam now number around 700 million. We know that they consider their religion to be God's final revelation and thus superior to and superseding Christianity! We are beginning to realize why it is almost impossible for any Muslim country to tolerate within its boundaries any other religious group.

Equally puzzling, as to how it came to be, is the phenomenon of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, with its teaching of a continuing revelation. (The latest such revelation has opened up Africa as a potential mission field for the Mormons.) For these people the Book of Mormon is another word of God. Considering the life style of the Mormons it is hard to be critical of their strange beliefs. They appear to have a more consistent world and life view than we do. We admire their attitude towards family and Sabbath, their missionary zeal and their music.

However, the opening verses of the book of Hebrews tell us plainly that the days of the prophets have passed and God has spoken finally, once and for all, through His beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Savior. It is surprising that the Mormons use the book of Hebrews to prove to us that there must be further revelations. According to their reading of it, these revelations must be received by present-day prophets, called by God, just as Aaron was. They fault us for teaching that "the heavens were sealed, revelation was ended, there were no

more prophets and all the word of God was in the Bible." (Which Church is Right?) In their opinion the true church disappeared for hundreds of years and did not reappear until 1830 when Joseph Smith received his special revelation!

Having a clear stand about what one believes is very important. Someone might come to the door tomorrow with an invitation to a Bahai celebration, a Jehovah Witness study group, or a "new" religion. When we face the sects the book of Hebrews is full of valuable material. It remind us that we have a great high priest, from a different line than Aaron, who lives forever in the house of God, and that we have no need of a Joseph Smith or any other prophet. The Word of God is complete and sufficient as we have it.

Even within evangelical Christianity, and not to be classed with sects, a novel school of interpretation began in the 1800's, known as "Dispensationalism." A large segment of Christianity, which followed this way of Bible interpretation, ended up with an abbreviated Gospel. They still consider many portions of the New Testament as not applicable to this present time.

Enthusiastic new converts often tend to read the Scripture in a very individualistic way. They have no awareness of the God of the Church and of history. They get impatient with us if we mention to them the dangers of heresies, which have never ceased, and if we explain to them how the creeds of Christendom came into being to answer such errors. They feel they have a direct line to God.

We really have to "test the spirits" of this age and pray for wisdom. The Holy Spirit will not lead us into some new thing which is not in the Word of God. We know that the true church never disappeared and that God always preserved His remnant. We must cling to the historic Christian faith as seen in the early Creeds and in the Confessions of the Reformation era. We must be on guard against any method of studying and interpreting Scripture which does not reflect the genius of the historic Christian faith. Private interpretation often leads to heresy. Continuing revelation is a denial of the fulfillment of prophecy in Christ.