

The leaders of the Reformation affirmed the principle that every individual in the church possesses the right of private judgment, which means that every individual Christian has the right to investigate and to interpret the Word of God for himself. They did not view church councils and creeds as having no value; they simply held that the interpretations of church councils have authority only to the extent that they are in harmony with the teaching of Scripture as a whole, and that such harmony must be judged by each individual for himself. This conviction is well-expressed in the Second Helvetica Confession of AD 1566, Chapter II:

Wherefore, we suffer not ourselves, in controversies about religion or matters of faith, to be pressed with the bare testimonies of fathers or decrees of councils; much less with received customs, or with the multitude of men being of one judgment, or with prescription of long time. Therefore, in controversies of religion or matters of faith, we can not admit any other judge than God himself, pronouncing by the Holy Scriptures what is true, what is false, what is to be followed, or what is to be avoided.

At this point, however, some reader may recall 2 Pet 1:20 and ask, "How does that verse fit in with the right of private interpretation?" This question is very much to the point, since the verse reads, "But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation." What can we say to this? Does this not deny the right of private interpretation?

I must confess that, as a young Christian, I thought that verse 20 meant that no one should place his or her own interpretation upon a verse or passage of Scripture, but should seek the Spirit's interpretation. Although this is in principle what should be done, in actual practice this came to mean that I would adopt the interpretation of some well-known or persuasive Bible teacher or commentator. But later I came to see that this verse speaks not of the *reader's* interpretation but of the *writer's* interpretation.

Literally verse 20 states, "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture *comes into being* by one's own interpretation." The reason why this does not occur is given in the next verse: "For not by the will of man came prophecy at any time, but being borne up by the Holy Spirit, men