

Sermon by Rev. W. H. Simpson in the First Presbyterian Church, Madison, U. S., 5th June, 1877

Text.—John v. 89.—"Search the Scriptures." "Luke xi. 52.—"Woe unto you, lawyers! for you have taken away the key of knowledge; ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered."

I desire to say a few words this evening in deep earnestness, but all kindness, towards those who may differ from me, in vindication of that great and sacred right of Protestants which we call—The Right of Private Judgment.

This is a very precious and costly heritage. Our fathers won it for us, only after ages of conflict. They sealed it to us with their blood; we prize it above many things in our rich inheritance of liberties and rights. We shall resist all encroachment upon it, and maintain it at all hazards. The great enemy of this right has been the Church of Rome. She still denies it to her own members, and would keep it if she could from all others. We see that church to-day celebrating with enthusiasm the 50th anniversary of the Episcopate of the present Pope. He has been for about thirty years the supreme representative of this unparalleled and gigantic system of spiritual tyranny, which claims a Divine right to lord it absolutely over the minds and consciences of men. This Pope has ruled in the genuine spirit of the system he represents, and in his reign the Papacy has presented to the world the startling contrast of the genius of the Dark Ages, sombre, gloomy and superstitious, stamping sternly under his feet all independent thought and investigation, standing face to face with the light and liberty, and mental and moral manhood of the 19th century. Pope Pius the IX. is old and feeble, and in a few years must pass away forever from the scene of his struggles and triumphs, which have been aimed at turning the sun backward on the dial of the intellectual and moral progress of the race. He will die, but his system will live after him. It dies hard. It is the mightiest masterpiece of human skill in all history. The day of its final fall seems yet far in the ages of the future. Romanism bases its power, first, on the ignorance of its votaries, which it over and over where it strives to continue and perpetuate, as in itself a blessing. "Ignorance," says Rome, "is the Mother of Devotion." But the subjects of Rome are not all ignorant. Some of the grandest intellects in all the ages have been among her most submissive votaries. In proof of this, it is sufficient to mention the great names of Dante, Petrarch, Tasso, Pope, of Richelieu and Pascal and Bossuet, and Fenelon, in the past, not to speak of Thiers, the great statesman of France, and Newman and Manning and many another grandly gifted member of the Romish communion in our own day. Rome, it is admitted, reigns with undisputed sway over the minds and consciences of her members. How is this? We answer, here comes in the second great stone in the foundation of Roman power and dominion, viz., an absolute surrender of mind and conscience on the part of every Roman Catholic to the dogma of church authority. It may and does seem strange that intelligent and thoughtful Roman Catholics should be willing to do this, but a little consideration of the state of the case will explain the wonder. The supreme authority of the church in all matters of doctrine is in truth no new dogma of the Church of Rome. It has the venerableness of a thousand years. It comes with the overwhelming weight of almost unanimous consent, and the imprimatur of bishops and councils and popes, giving to it a solemnity and force which it requires extraordinary moral courage to resist. It comes to the Catholic with these tremendous sanctions from the earliest ages of the church, from the time of the fathers and the martyrs, nay almost from apostolic times, at least so Catholics are taught to believe.

Again there is an aspect of this matter that is very attractive to many minds. Many are intellectually active and inquiring, who are morally and spiritually indolent. Now the papal doctrine of the supreme authority of the church in all matters of belief relieves the Catholic church member of all responsibility as to his belief. The church does all his thinking for him—it solves all problems, resolves all difficulties, it expounds all Scripture, and declares all truth. He has nothing to do with processes of thought or investigation by which truth is discovered and explained. He has only to accept results which have been worked out for him by those whose supreme business it is to know and proclaim the truth. If he has doubts as to that being the truth, which the church declares is such, they are answered by the assurance that the church is the Divinely appointed custodian and teacher of the truth, and that the church is infallible, and, even were she not absolutely so, one mind is certainly more likely to err in its judgments than the combined mind and thought of the whole church in all ages. So the individual church member is overpowered by this tremendous dogma of church authority, and the generality of men, glad to be relieved of the labor and responsibility of thinking and judging for themselves, are ready enough to accept so convenient a doctrine. And then the idea of an infallible authority, and absolute certainty in its teachings, has its charms for some. The individual may err and may mistake the meaning of the Scriptures. Mistake in this matter may involve eternal consequences. But if there is an infallible church which can save me from this tremendous risk, shall I not enter its communion and be at rest? This is the way many reason. It was the peace and satisfaction offered in this doctrine of an infallible church, and the consequent certainty of its teachings, that led John Henry Newman, the most gifted English Catholic of modern times, to abandon the Church of England for that of Rome some thirty years ago. The divisions among the Protestants, the bewildering effect of conflicting doctrines, and spiritual indolence, and that desire that is natural to all men to escape responsibility has led many Protestants to the Church of Rome. But the great dogma of the Papal Church, which is the source of so much of her power, cannot stand investigation.

1st. It degrades the human mind. It demands that the great mass of men including the most learned and gifted, as well as the ignorant, shall tamely bow, without one word of study or research, before the authority of Church and Council, of Pope and priest, and take on trust from fallible men all that belong to their highest interest, in time and eternity. Now this is an intellectual and moral servitude of the most degrading character. We see what its results were before the reformation. We see what its fruit are to-day in countries untouched by the reformation. The Protestant Reformation was a grand revolt from this degrading tyranny of mind and conscience and the lands that felt its inspiration have never yielded since and never will to the tyranny of Rome.

2. But again, this dogma of Rome destroys individual responsibility. If man is to take from an infallible church his creed and round of duty, if she is to think and judge for him, and is to be the keeper of his conscience, then he becomes a mere machine, his responsibility is gone. The church having taken away his right to think and judge for himself, his individuality and personal responsibility, ought to assume the consequences of his acts if she leads him astray, but here unfortunately this otherwise cunningly contrived system fails. The church which robs men of independent thought and responsibility takes good care not to assume the consequences of their acts; hers is all the gain of their faithful service and devotion, but theirs is all the risk of failure. But a dogma that destroys individual responsibility is contrary to all human law and authority, and utterly unscriptural.

3d. This dogma is unscriptural. The right of private judgment is the right with reverence and according to reason and the laws of language, to read and understand, as far as possible, the word of God, which is the great constitution and statute book of the Christian Church. This is the inalienable right of every Protestant. Two great things were demanded by the Protestant reformers. First, an intelligible Bible, i. e., a Bible for every man in his own language, and second, an open Bible, i. e., a Bible free to each and all—to read and study and interpret as far as each was able, without dictation from church or bishop or priest, and responsible to God alone in this great matter. The reformation secured for our fathers and for us, their children, this precious boon, and it is too late in the day to seek to take it from us. But not only did our noble sires, in the battlefield, or at the stake of martyrdom, wrest from Rome this priceless privilege, but God gave it to His church under both the Mosaic and Christian dispensation. In the 6th of Deuteronomy, he commanded the nation of Israel to treasure up the holy scriptures in their hearts, to teach them daily to their children, at their rising up and at their lying down, at home and by the way, and to be able to answer their children's questions and show the connection of their laws and ordinances with the greatest events in their national history. Now this command demanded of all Israelites the most intimate acquaintance with their sacred writings, but no mention is made here of priest or Levite as the indispensable interpreters of the Scriptures to the common people.—They, of course, were appointed to teach and instruct the people but not as infallible guides, and not in any way that should prevent the people reading and interpreting for themselves, as far as they were able, the Divine word. And we find all through the Hebrew scriptures, that this was the will of God regarding Israel. His word to them was free, its study is commended. The neglect of it is censured and condemned. The great leaders of the Hebrew Nation, who were laymen—such as Joshua, Samuel, David, and Daniel, were most intimately acquainted with their Scriptures. No priest or church came between them and the word of God. The right of private judgment was not disputed by the Church 8,000 years ago, at least. It was not denied the humblest member in the exclusive church of Judaism. To Habakkuk, a prophet of that church, the command was given, "write the vision and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth." This right, we say, was fully accorded under the Jewish Dispensation. It cannot be withheld then under the larger and more liberal dispensation of Christ. And so we find when we go to find what Christianity is, not to Pope and priest and council, but to Christ. In Luke xi. 52, Christ severely condemns the doctors of the Jewish law for refusing the right of private judgment, "Woe unto you lawyers," he says, "for ye have taken away the key of knowledge, ye enter not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered." And here is the test, the blessed Christ himself, gives not only the right, but the imperative command to all, to "search the Scriptures." And this evidently applies to all Scriptures, to difficult passages as well as easy, for in the first chapter of the book of Revelation, a book which is confessedly the most obscure and difficult in all the Bible, we have this remarkable benediction pronounced on all who hear and read this portion of the word: Revelation i. 8. "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy." Christ gives us here, then, the right to read and study and interpret the whole Bible for ourselves.

We have here a Divine search warrant that applies to all Scripture, to all ages and nations, and to every individual of the race. Fourth. But further—the denial of the right of private judgment is opposed to all the creeds of the churches of the Reformation. This was the great principle they fought for, and they embodied it in all their creeds. The confession of the Presbyterian Church claims for all, the right to read and interpret the Scriptures for themselves, and utterly disowns the idea of Church infallibility, or the power of the Church, or its ministers, to do anything more than direct and assist its members in their efforts to arrive at the true meaning of the Scriptures. It declares most explicitly that the Holy Spirit alone is the Supreme teacher, and that Scripture is its own best interpreter, and not the Church, or any mere human authority. Besides this the Presbyterian Church utterly denies all priestly authority to its

ministers. Their power is only ministerial, i. e., they are ministers, literally the servants of the Church—the servants of its membership, who are to devote all their time and talents to the work of assisting and guiding them in the interpretation of the Word of God, and living a life in accordance with its heavenly teachings. But they possess no infallible, or dictatorial authority whatever. The only infallibility we acknowledge is that of God and His word.

Fifth.—Objections. The right of private judgment lays a heavy responsibility on the individual—too much some say. Well, every man has to answer for himself, and so, as the Scripture says, "every man shall bear his own burden." He must do this. No church or anything else can relieve him of it. 2nd. It leads to endless diversity of opinion, multiplicity of sects, and confusions of belief. We answer, There is no true unity in the Roman Catholic Church herself. Her arbitrary declarations, her claims to infallibility, have not made all her people believe alike. As great, or greater differences, have existed between members of her own communion than exist to-day among the various Protestant denominations. The Dominicans and the Franciscans, the Jansenists and the Jesuits, Fenelon and Bossuet, in their great controversies, were farther apart than John Wesley and John Calvin. Farther than even Presbyterian and Episcopalian ever were in doctrine, and doctrine is the principal thing. But these different wings of Roman Catholicism never left their church, you say; well, what of that? What is the value of mere uniformity without true unity? Better far separation than this perpetual civil war. 3rd. But it is said that this right of private judgment is a dangerous thing. Well, if this means that it involves responsibility and risk to all who use it, it is true. But this objection proves too much. All responsibility implies risk and danger. But are men therefore to be relieved of all responsibility? They cannot be so relieved. It is part of the nature of things. No church can bear that responsibility for any one. Every one, Catholic or Protestant, is personally responsible to God. God will so hold him. It is better for him to bear it intelligently, even though he runs some risk of failure, than to bear it blindly and superstitiously, and be lost. There is more risk the one way than the other.

4th. But this right, it is said, leads to infidelity. Does it more than Papal tyranny and superstition? What has been the effect of the recoil from these in France and Italy and Germany. Popery, not Protestantism, is responsible for infidelity. But we deny that free inquiry and investigation lead to infidelity. Reverently, honestly, in accordance with the nature of the subject, we must study the Bible, and that does not make men infidels.

In the month of January, 1077, 800 years ago, at the Castle of Canossa, in Italy, the Emperor, Henry IV. of Germany, for three days amid extreme cold, did penance to Rome, and humbled himself before Pope Gregory VII. Rome, last January, celebrated the 800th anniversary of this sad and humiliating spectacle. But even Rome, with her 200,000,000 who stand so faithful, and bow so low to her authority, cannot roll back the wheels of time, and transfer the spirit of the dark ages to our brighter era. If Rome, with all her power, cannot do this then, it is vain for anyone else to seek to roll back the mighty tide of human progress, and bring men again to bend their necks to the yoke that was for ever broken by our sires in the great Protestant Reformation. It is impossible; the recoil of the human mind from all such teachings will only tend to plant men more firmly on this solid ground, the birthright of Protestants, the Right of Private Judgment. The Holy Spirit, alone, in short—as the Presbyterian and all the reformed churches maintain—is the supreme interpreter of the Divine Word, and not only are all men permitted, but they are imperatively commanded to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, and in this supreme aspect of the matter, that of access to the Great Interpreter, all are placed upon an equal vantage ground.

Temperance. Editor BRITISH AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN. SIR,—Would some of our Presbyterian Ministers, elders or church members, write upon the subject of Temperance through your columns, as it is a question that is agitating the public mind all over the world? I would ask, should we Presbyterians allow church members to sell intoxicating drinks, not in dram-shops, but in groceries? or should church members, male or female, be permitted to deliberately use his or her property to damage public morals and to destroy souls? TOTAL ABSTAINER.

Correct Transcript of the Sentence of Death Pronounced against Jesus Christ. The following is a copy of the most memorable judicial sentence which has ever been pronounced in the annals of the world—namely that of death against the Saviour, which the journal Le Droit has collected, and the knowledge of which must be interesting in the highest degree to every Christian. Until now we are not aware that it has ever been published in the German papers. It is word for word as follows: Sentence pronounced by Pontius Pilate, intendant of the Lower Province of Gallilee, that Jesus of Nazareth shall suffer death by the cross. In the 17th year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, and on the 24th day of the month of March, in the most holy city of Jerusalem, during the pontificate of Annas and Caiaphas. Pontius Pilate, intendant of the Province of Lower Gallilee, sitting to judgment in the presidential seat of the Prator, sentences Jesus of Nazareth to death on a cross, between robbers, as the numerous and notorious testimonies of the people prove: 1. Jesus is a misleader. 2. He has excited the people to sedition. 3. He is an enemy to the laws.

4. He calls himself the Son of God. 5. He calls himself falsely the King of Israel. 6. He went into the temple followed by a multitude carrying palms in their hands. Orders the first centurion, Quirillus Cornelius, to bring him to the place of execution. Forbids all persons, rich or poor, to prevent the execution of Jesus. The witnesses who have signed the execution of Jesus are— 1. Daniel Robani, Pharisee. 2. John Zorobabel. 3. Raphael Robani. 4. Capot.

Jesus to be taken out of Jerusalem through the gate of Tournos. This sentence is engraved on a plate of brass, in the Hebrew language, and on its sides are the following words: "A similar plate has been sent to each tribe." It was discovered in the year 1280 in the city of Aquila, in the kingdom of Naples, by a search made for the Roman antiquities, and remained there until it was found by the commission of Arts in the French army of Italy. Up to the time of the campaign in southern Italy it was preserved in the sacristy of the Carthusians, near Naples, where it was kept in a box of ebony. Since then the relics has been kept in the chapel of Casoria. The Carthusians obtained by their petitions that the plate might be kept by them, which was an acknowledgment of the sacrifices which they made for the French army. The French translation was made literally by members of the commission of Arts. Denon had a fac simile of the plate engraved, which was bought by Lord Howard, on the sale of his cabinet, for 2800 francs. There seem to be no historical doubts as to the authenticity of this. The reasons of the sentence correspond exactly with those in the gospel.—Translated from the Kollische Zeitung.

A good idea in reference to the approaching Ecumenical Council of Presbyterians is being passed along by the religious journals. It is proposed that on Sabbath 24th June and 1st July, prayer should be offered from every Presbyterian pulpit in the world that God would grant an outpouring of His Spirit upon the members of the Council. A suggestion of this kind, like that which led to the appointment of the Week of Prayer, has in our day only to be mentioned in order to be carried out. The good which may be expected in the form of answers to the prayers of all our people is incalculable. With such a condition as the proposal implies fulfilled, who can doubt that the Council will be distinguished by its unity and friendly discussions.

Births, Marriages and Deaths. NOT EXCEEDING FOUR LINES 25 CENTS. MARRIED. At the residence of the bride's mother, London, Ont., on the 7th June, by the Rev. R. W. Wallace, M.A., Mr. C. BRACKETT ROBINSON, of the British Presbyterian, to FANNY C., young eldest daughter of the late Mr. William Cameron. At the residence of the bride's mother, Spencerville, Ont., on the 12th inst., by Rev. W. M. McKibbin, B.A., Edwardburg, Ont., assisted by Rev. D. L. Murray, Salline, Michigan, (brother-in-law of the bride), Rev. W. J. DRY, M.A., Spencerville, to MARGARET L., oldest daughter of the late Wm. B. Innie, Esq.

Official Announcements. MEETINGS OF PRESBYTERIES. QUEBEC.—At Three Rivers, on the first Wednesday of July, at ten o'clock a.m. PARIS.—Within Dumfries Street Church, Paris, on the first Tuesday of July, at eleven a.m. Donations payable to the Presbytery fund are payable at this meeting. BARRIE.—at Bracebridge, 1st Tuesday of August, at 7 o'clock. WHITBY.—The Presbytery of Whitty will meet in St. Andrew's Church, Whitty, on the third Tuesday of July, at 11 a.m. TORONTO.—In the lecture-room of Knox Church Toronto, on the first Tuesday of July, at 11 a.m. HAMILTON.—The next ordinary meeting will be held in Central Church, Hamilton, on the third Tuesday of July, at 11 o'clock a.m. Commissioners of elders will then be required for the next year.

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