

Is Private Interpretation Forbidden?

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Catholics say their church has the true meaning of Scripture. The Catholic *Catechism* states:

“The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form, or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successors of Peter, bishop of Rome.” (*Catechism*, 85)

According to Catholic belief, the Pope and the College of bishops, which is called the Magisterium, have the final say as to what the Bible means. To put it bluntly, the Bible means what they say it means, and who are you to challenge their authority? No matter how sincere you are or how much you study, you have neither the ability nor the right to say you know what a passage means.

One of the verses Catholics use to prove this is II Peter 1:20 where Peter says “no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation.” That is the NKJV. Catholics say this means you cannot interpret the Scriptures by yourself.

Here is how II Peter 1:20 reads in the New American Bible which is a Vatican-approved translation: “No prophecy of scripture is a matter of personal interpretation.” The New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition reads: “Above all else, however, remember that none of us can explain by ourselves a prophecy in the Scriptures.” An older Catholic Bible, the Douay version, says this in a footnote:

“This shows plainly that the Scriptures are not to be expounded by anyone’s private judgment, or private spirit, because every part of the holy Scriptures were written by men inspired by the Holy Ghost, and declared as such by the church; therefore they are not to be interpreted but by the Spirit of God, which he hath left, and promised to remain with his church to guide her in all truth to the end of the world.”

But what does II Peter 1:20 say? Let us cross into the forbidden zone and see what is actually there.

The overall purpose of the book of II Peter is clear. False teachers were leading Christians away from the truth. To keep them from falling, Peter tells his readers to grow in what they have learned. He says in II Peter 1:3 that God has “given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.” That verse complements II Timothy 3:16-17 which says that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” and equips us for “every good work.”

Then Peter told his readers to continue in the same things they had learned from the beginning of their Christian life in II Peter 1:5-15. Then he assured them that what they believed was the truth. In II Peter 1:16 he wrote, “For we have not followed cunningly devised fables.” He does not just call them fables, but cunningly devised fables.

We have the same problem today. The Book of Mormon is full of cunningly devised fables. The Quran is packed with cunningly devised fables. But the gospel is built on solid evidence. The New Testament Scriptures are not the invention of dishonest men with a vivid imagination.

Peter said he and the other apostles did not make all this up (II Pet. 1:16-18). They were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ glory. He said “we were with Him on the holy mountain.” He is referring to what we call the Mount of Transfiguration in Matthew 17:1-5 when they heard a voice from heaven saying,

“This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” That story is not a cunningly devised fable. It is a fact of history.

Then Peter gave them even more assurance by pointing them to the Scriptures. “And so we have the prophetic word confirmed” (II Pet. 1:19). A better translation would be “We also have a more sure prophetic word.” The Scriptures were already confirmed and sure. But because of the revelation of the Son of God attested by His miracles and the eyewitness testimony of the apostles, the Scriptures are even more sure.

The “prophetic word” or “word of prophecy” is not specifically prophecy in the sense of prediction. It means prophecy in the sense of divine revelation; it means the Bible. That is clear in the next verse where Peter talks about “prophecy of Scripture.”

“Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (II Pet. 1:20-21).

Here again the word prophecy means revelation from God, not predictive prophecy in particular. “Prophecy of Scripture” may sound redundant, but it is used for emphasis and means prophecy or revelation from God which is Scripture.

This kind of expression is not unusual. In Greek grammar it is called a genitive of identification or a genitive of apposition. For instance, in Colossians 3:24 the “reward of the inheritance” means the reward which *is* the inheritance. In Romans 4:11 the “sign of circumcision” means the sign which *is* circumcision. In the same way, “prophecy of Scripture” in this context means prophecy which *is* Scripture.

Peter then said no prophecy of Scripture “is of” any private interpretation. These two little words are very important. Much of the misunderstanding about this verse comes from not paying attention to the force of these words. They are from the word *ginetai* which is a form of the word *ginomai*. It means to be, to become, to come into being or existence. When Peter writes that no prophecy of Scripture *is of* any private interpretation, he is saying that Scripture does not *come from* private interpretation.

This verse is about where the Scriptures come from, not how they are interpreted. It is about the origin of Scripture, not its interpretation. The focus is on the inspired men who wrote the Bible, not the people who read and interpret it.

The inspired writers of the Scriptures did not write from their own “interpretation.” If the English word *interpretation* had not been used in several translations of this verse, the misunderstanding we are looking at would probably have never arisen.

The word in the Greek is *epiluseos*, the ablative form of *epilusis*; thus, from or out of “private interpretation” or one’s own interpretation. This is the only place where this word is used in the New Testament. It means a loosening, an unfolding, an explanation or interpretation. A good discussion of this word is found in the book *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* by E. W. Bullinger (pp. 129-130).

“Private interpretation” is just another way of saying what he wrote in verse 16. Verse 20 builds upon verse 16. Verse 16 says Peter and the other apostles did not follow cunningly devised fables. Verse 20 says the Scriptures did not originate with their own thoughts about spiritual matters.

The next verse explains this clearly: “For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (v. 21). Verse 20 says prophecy of Scripture does not come from private interpretation. Verse 21 says prophecy does not come from the will of man. The two expressions—private interpretation and the will of man—convey the same basic idea. That is what we mean by the Bible interpreting itself—something Catholics say it cannot do.

This parallel makes the meaning of verse 20 clear. But there is another statement in verse 21 that defines “private interpretation” in verse 20, and this time it does so by contrast. The Scriptures did not come from “private interpretation” (v. 20) or “the will of man” (v.21), *but* by holy men being “moved by the Holy Spirit” (v. 21).

These verses have nothing to do with Bible interpretation. This passage is about the *inspiration* of Scripture, not the *interpretation* of Scripture.

There is another passage in II Peter that Catholics misuse about interpreting the Bible. Ironically, it is a warning about the very thing Catholics are guilty of—twisting the Scriptures! It is II Peter 3:15-16:

“And consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.”

This is a favorite Catholic verse. If you talk to a Catholic about interpreting the Bible, chances are good that he will bring up this passage. He will stress that even the apostle Peter said these things are hard to understand. Then he will remind you that Christians have different opinions about what they mean. Even the best Bible scholars cannot come to an agreement. And then he will make you feel guilty for thinking you have the correct interpretation.

He is hoping you will give in and say, “I don’t know. Nobody knows.” Then he will tell you that is why the Catholic Church is here—to give the authoritative meaning of the Scriptures.

If you listen to a trained and articulate Catholic, you might feel intimidated. After all, look at all the division over the Bible in the so-called Christian world—thousands of denominations with endless interpretations. Of course, he usually won’t talk about the doctrinal chaos and division in the Roman Catholic Church. All their talk about uniformity of doctrine is what Peter said a few verses before this. He said these false teachers are “wells without water” (II Pet. 2:17).

Catholic authorities make empty claims with an air of great confidence. They make it appear that they could not possibly be wrong. But do not be intimidated. This passage does not say what they try to make it mean.

Paul spoke of “these things” in his epistles—the same things Peter was talking about—false teachers and especially the Lord’s coming. Paul wrote “some things” that were hard to understand on these topics. He did not say *everything* Paul wrote was difficult to understand; he said Paul wrote *some* things that are hard to understand. And, he did not say what Paul wrote was *impossible* to understand; he said certain parts were *hard* to understand.

But let us look at what Paul himself said about interpreting what he wrote. He told the Ephesians “I have written briefly already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ” (Eph. 3:3-4). Does that sound like they needed a Magisterium to interpret what he said? That was written for ordinary Christians in Ephesus 2,000 years ago and for all saints in every generation. If they could understand the Scriptures, why can’t we?

It is absurd for Catholics to twist what Peter said. The very way the Bible is written means that some sections require more effort to interpret than others. Some verses are harder to learn and require more time and effort and some are easier to grasp. The Bible talks about the milk and the meat of the Word (I Cor. 3:1-2; Heb. 5:12-14). How can we grow in our knowledge of the Bible unless there are challenging verses for people on different levels of knowledge and with varying degrees of ability?

Catholics hang themselves when they twist this verse. If the words of the Bible can be hard to understand, then what about the endless technical, hair-splitting decrees of the Roman Catholic Church? We'll say more about that later.

Another favorite Catholic passage is Acts 8:31. The Ethiopian eunuch was reading the book of Isaiah and Philip asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" (v. 30). The eunuch answered, "How can I, except someone guides me?" Catholics claim victory for the Magisterium with this verse.

In the first place, the eunuch was not even converted at this point. He is just asking a question. He is certainly not an inspired man. So how can anyone quote the words of an uninspired man to establish a doctrine of the New Testament church? Furthermore, he is definitely not part of the Magisterium, so what the eunuch said cannot be used as official Catholic teaching. Catholics should not, even by their own standards, use this verse to support their belief.

In reality, Catholics change the meaning of Acts 8:31. The eunuch asked, "How can I, except someone guides me?" The Catholic interpretation is: "How can I, except the *Magisterium* guides me?"

The eunuch is simply stating what happens at times when we read the Bible. He is not giving a universal law about how to interpret the Bible.

The Lord Himself told people they could interpret the Scriptures. He told the critical Pharisees, "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice'" (Matt. 9:13). That is a quotation of Hosea 6:6. Hosea wrote those words well over 700 years before Jesus cited them. But the Pharisees could have understood them if their heart had been right.

There is nothing in this text or in any other passage of the New Testament that suggests that these Pharisees were part of some mysterious Magisterium or that they were supposed to go and ask this Magisterium what Hosea 6:6 meant. They had the ability to figure it out for themselves. All they needed was honesty to go with that ability.

How many times did Jesus ask the Pharisees, "Have you never read...?" When they accused His disciples of breaking the sabbath, He replied, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?" (Matt. 12:3-5).

When they asked Jesus about divorce, He said, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?" (Matt. 19:4-5).

What would have been the point in the Pharisees reading the Scriptures if nobody but the so-called Magisterium could interpret them?

When Jesus warned the disciples about the destruction of Jerusalem, He said, "Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place" (whoever reads, let him understand)" (Matt. 24:15). Why would the Bible say you can understand what you read if you cannot?

The people in the city of Berea "received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). These people were certainly not part of any Magisterium. That honor supposedly belonged to Peter and the other apostles. But these Bereans tested what Paul and Silas said by comparing it to the Scriptures.

If the people of Berea were not in the Magisterium, then according to Catholic doctrine, how could they make that determination? And notice that these ordinary "lay" people (as Catholicism would

label them) could know whether even an apostle like Paul was telling the truth—not by asking a Magisterium, but by consulting the Scriptures!

And what about these words in I Thessalonians 5:20-22? “Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.” This epistle was written to ordinary Christians. They could make the proper judgment based upon their knowledge of the Word of God.

Catholics ask, “Who gave you the authority to decide between true and false interpretations?” It is a matter of privilege more than authority. Catholics use the word *authority* as if Scripture has no real meaning until and unless they declare it. But if they want to know where we get the right to interpret the Bible and test religious teachings, the answer is from God. God gives us the right, but not just the *right* to interpret it. He gave us the *ability* when He made us in His image and He gave us the *privilege* when He delivered the Scriptures to man.

The better question for the Catholic Church is, “Who gave you the right to interpret the Bible for everybody on the face of the earth?”

The arrogance and hypocrisy of the Catholic Church on this point is staggering. The *Catechism* gives advice and guidelines about reading the Bible. It says to read the Bible in light of the whole teaching of Scripture. It says to pay attention to the different senses of Scripture—the literal and the spiritual. But in the end, no matter how much you study it, they say you must conform your understanding of the Bible to a group of men who *claim* to be guided by the Holy Spirit to give the “authentic” interpretation!

The *Catechism* says, “All that has been said about the manner of interpreting Scripture is ultimately subject to the judgment of the Church which exercises the divinely conferred commission and ministry of watching over and interpreting the Word of God” (sec. 119). So, read the Bible. Study it the way we tell you. But remember that we decide what it means.

If a person believes this, what incentive would he have to read the Bible to begin with? Why spend your time studying a book you can’t understand? Catholics can deny it all they want, but their doctrine discourages Bible reading. They usually argue, “That’s not true. Our church wants us to read the Bible.”

If you bring up stories in Medieval times about Bibles being chained to pulpits, they make excuses like saying that people were stealing them from churches and that was the reason they were secured like this. Of course, they do not want to talk about the fact that the Catholic Church used civil law to prohibit people in those days from translating, printing and distributing Bibles.

The truth is they did not want people to have Bibles. They did not want them to read verses in the Bible that go against their doctrines and practices. They did not want people to see the hypocrisy of the Catholic leadership. So they told people they could not understand it and kept them from having copies of it.

William Tyndale defied their authority in 1526 when he translated the New Testament into English without their permission. He smuggled copies of the Bible into England. In his own words, all he wanted was for every plough boy to be able to read the Bible for himself. But authorities arrested him and in 1536 they strangled him for this terrible “crime” and burned his body. That is the ugly truth about the power-hungry Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Council of Trent in 1546 made this clear. It said that all those who “presume to interpret the said sacred Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church” holds or “even contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers” shall be “punished with the penalties by law established” (Fourth Session).

That Council said that if anyone printed Bibles without the permission of the Catholic Church, he was to be punished. It warned that if anyone circulated or even loaned a copy of an unauthorized Bible, he would be subject to the same penalty as the printers!

Listen to what Catholic author Henry G. Graham said in 1911. The book is entitled, *Where We Got the Bible: Our Debt to the Catholic Church*. This book has been reprinted over twenty times. He says the New Testament belongs to the Roman Catholic Church and it is “her own book.”

He wrote, “It is hers”—the Roman Catholic Church—“because she wrote it by her first apostles, and preserved it and guarded it all down the ages by her Popes and Bishops; nobody else has any right to it whatsoever, any more than a stranger has the right to come into your house and break open your desk, and pilfer your private documents” (p. 43).

This religion is one of the most high-handed, arrogant movements the world has ever known. The Bible says that God has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness (II Pet. 1:3), but the Catholic Church says He gave them to *us*, and you only have them because of our good graces!

There are some glaring inconsistencies in Catholic teaching on interpreting the Bible. First, Catholic teaching admits that *we can correctly interpret the evidence of creation and draw the conclusion that God is the Creator*. And it admits that we can do this individually *without the aid of the Magisterium!*

“Our holy mother, the Church, holds and teaches that God, the first principle and last end of all things, can be known with certainty from the created order by the natural light of reason.’ Without this capacity, man would not be able to welcome God’s revelation. Man has the capacity because he is created ‘in the image of God’” (*Catholic Catechism*, sec. 36).

The first statement is from the Vatican Council I and II. This is a crucial admission. It plainly says that we can know that the true God exists from nature (the creation), and it says we can know this by using natural reason. That means we can interpret the evidence in creation correctly and know that God exists! And notice these words again: “God...can be known with certainty from the created order by the light of reason.” The *Catechism* says, “Man’s faculties make him capable of coming to a knowledge of the existence of a personal God” (*Catechism*, sec. 35). So why can we not use those same faculties to understand the Bible?

It is true that we can know that God exists from the light of nature. That is what the Bible teaches in Psalm 19:1-4, Romans 1:18-20 and Acts 14:17.

This is traditional Catholic teaching. The famous Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas looked at the question “Can we know that God exists?” and set forth his “Five Ways” to prove the existence of God in his *Summa Theologica*. And I must give credit to Catholic apologetics. Catholics have done great work in classical Christian evidences when it comes to proving the existence of God.

And, of course, if they were to say today that we cannot use natural reason to know that God exists, they would be going against one of the champions of their cause—Aquinas himself!

We have seen in other lessons that some theologians say the creation is ambiguous. One person interprets it one way and another person interprets it a different way. One person looks at the universe and says it just happened; he decides to be an agnostic or an atheist. Another looks at the creation and concludes that many gods made it; he chooses to be a polytheist. Still another views the creation and decides that everything must be part of the whole we call God. He chooses to be a pantheist. And then there are those of us who say that the all-powerful, all-knowing God must have made the universe. Liberal theologians look at these different opinions and ask, “Who can say he has the right interpretation?”

I bring up what these theologians say not because I agree with them but in order to show a major flaw in Catholic reasoning. Catholic officials say we can know the true God from nature in spite of these different interpretations, but when it comes to Bible interpretation, they talk like these theologians! They say one person interprets it one way and another in a different way. They say individuals interpret the Bible in so many different ways that we must have the Magisterium to tell us the true, “authentic” meaning.

How is it that we can use the mind God gave us to correctly interpret His revelation in nature, but we are unable to use that same mind to correctly interpret the revelation of Scripture? If we can interpret the works of God in creation, then why can we not interpret the words of God in Scripture?

Catholics ask: “How can fallible human beings arrive at an infallible understanding of the Bible?” We would ask them, “How can fallible people have an infallible knowledge of God by reasoning from the evidence of creation?”

Here is another inconsistency in Catholic teaching on this point. They tell us that we have fallible minds. We make mistakes in reasoning. Sometimes we think we are right but we are wrong. Only God is infallible. Now the Holy Spirit is God, they remind us, and that means He is infallible. So when the Holy Spirit spoke through the apostles, His teaching was infallible. Therefore, they argue, since the Holy Spirit speaks through the Magisterium today, the Magisterium is infallible when it delivers dogmas.

Of course, the central issue with Catholicism is the bold claim that the Magisterium is guided by the Holy Spirit. And that claim is false.

But think about the charge that you cannot interpret the Bible because you are fallible and, therefore, you need them to give you the “infallible” interpretation of Scripture. When they give that infallible interpretation, they deliver it in *words*. They speak it and write it. But you are supposed to understand what they say. You are supposed to use your *fallible* mind to interpret their *infallible* pronouncements. That logically means that you are still prone to misinterpretation.

So if you cannot, as Catholics argue, trust your fallible mind to interpret the infallible Bible, then how can you use your fallible mind to interpret the infallible decrees of the Catholic Church?

And to make matters even worse, Catholics teach that there is a difference between the “official” pronouncements of the Catholic Church and the “unofficial” statements made by the Pope or anyone else. But if our minds are fallible and can’t be trusted, then how are we to know the difference? Of course, the quick response from the Vatican is: It’s official *when we tell you* it’s official! But no matter how they say it, this still means that we are using our fallible minds to interpret their so-called infallible decrees!

It is impossible for Catholics to escape these implications. If we can use our fallible mind to understand what the Magisterium says, then we can understand what the Bible says. But if we cannot use our mind to interpret the Bible, then we cannot use our fallible mind to interpret the teaching of the Magisterium.

Catholics appeal to the fact that Paul wrote some things that are hard to understand (II Pet. 3:15-16). What about Catholic dogmas? Are they clearer than the writings of the apostle Paul?

Catholics are not only guilty of claiming that their oral tradition is equal in authority to the Bible. They also imply that their “infallible” teaching is *clearer* than the Bible!

Catholics are also highly inconsistent when they quote Scripture. They *quote verses in the Bible* to convince us that we cannot understand Bible verses!

Another incongruity of Catholic teaching about interpreting the Bible is the idea of implicit and explicit teaching. Catholics argue that we need Tradition to clarify the Bible because (they say) the Bible does not address many issues of life. For instance, the Bible does not mention birth control or how to

deal with Covid or climate change. That is why we need the Magisterium—to make those matters plain. That was the same rationale Jewish rabbis used to develop oral tradition in Judaism before Jesus came.

Catholics tell us that the Bible *implicitly* contains what we need to know, but the Magisterium must bring out the meaning in *explicit terms*. In other words, the Magisterium makes explicit what is implicit in the Bible. For example, the idea of a succession of apostles down to our time is not explicitly taught in the New Testament, but the Holy Spirit through the Magisterium brings that meaning to light by elaborating on passages concerning the original apostles. Those passages do not come right out and say there would be a perpetual line of successors to the apostles, but that is what they mean.

And how are you supposed to know that? Because the Magisterium tells you. They take that implicit teaching and make it explicit!

This is why Catholics give a qualified definition of the “all-sufficiency” of Scripture. The Bible, they tell us, is *materially* sufficient, that is, it contains all the Truth we need. But it is not *formally* sufficient because it does not give us enough details about the meaning of those verses so that we can apply them. Somehow the meaning lies hidden in the text, and of course the only people who can bring that meaning to the surface are Catholic officials.

This is unbiblical and irrational. It is pure mysticism and it is just plain nonsense. It is simply another creative excuse to assert the authority of the Catholic Church. This religion is about power, and all this talk about implicit and explicit teaching and material and formal sufficiency is mere subterfuge for that purpose.

Jesus never talked like this. The Pharisees split hairs and made rules where God did not, but Jesus taught in a simple way that people could understand. And unlike the clergy of the Catholic Church, He spoke so that “the common people heard Him gladly” (Mark 12:37).

But the Magisterium is absolutely brazen in their empty claims. Consider the hypocrisy of this statement in Vatican II which also appears in the *Catechism*. After claiming that “the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God...has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone,” those documents state: “Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant” (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 10).

The audacity of this assertion is staggering in light of how Catholics treat the Bible. Let us see how submissive the Catholic Church is to the Word of God. First Timothy 3:2 says that a bishop *must* be the husband of one wife. But Catholic teaching says that a bishop *must not* be the husband of one wife. That is a clear contradiction. How do Catholics respond? They run to the Magisterium! Why? Because the Magisterium claims to have power to supersede what Paul wrote in I Timothy 3:2. So who is the servant and who is the master?

There are many more problems with the Catholic approach to interpreting the Bible. To put it in a nutshell, Catholics make interpreting the Bible hard so that you will turn to them and let them do it for you. Please do not be intimidated by them. God gave you the Bible and He gave you a mind to know what it says. Sure, you will not know the meaning of every passage. But just remember that they do not either. And you do not have to know what every verse means to be saved and go to heaven. You can know what to do to be saved.

What is hard about Mark 16:16? “He who believes and is baptized will be saved”? What is hard to understand about what Peter said in II Peter 1—add to your faith virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love—and if you do these things, you will make your calling sure (vv. 5-10)? And who on earth needs the Catholic Church to explain the meaning of the two

highest commands of all—to love God with all of your heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:29-31)?

So take comfort in the words of our Lord: “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

Further reading: *Debate Charts on Roman Catholicism* by Kerry Duke