

The Early Church Fathers on Private Interpretation of Scripture

The Church has always viewed the Bible in the same way that the Bible views itself. It is the inspired Word of God, (2 Timothy 3:16-17) it is not to be privately interpreted, (2 Peter 1:20) and it is on an equal basis with Sacred Tradition (2 Thessalonians 2:15). It also tells us that the Church and not the Bible is the pillar and foundation of truth (1 Timothy 3:15). There is no contradiction here as it was the Church that gave us the Bible. Yes, it is the Word of God. But God chose to give it to us through the Church He established. This view of the Early Church kept the power where it belonged; with God, and not men. As we are told in Proverbs 3:5: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own insight." And trusting in the Lord would mean living by His divine plan. And that would include the verses of Scripture quoted above.

Clement of Alexandria

For those are slothful who, having it in their power to provide themselves with proper proofs for the divine Scriptures from the Scriptures themselves, select only what contributes to their own pleasures. And those have a craving for glory who voluntarily evade, by arguments of a diverse sort, the things delivered by the blessed apostles and teachers, which are wedded to inspired words; opposing the divine tradition by human teachings, in order to establish the heresy (*Stromata* 7:16 [A.D. 202]).

Origen

Now the cause, in all the points previously enumerated, of the false opinions, and of the impious statements or ignorant assertions about God, appears to be nothing else than the not understanding the Scripture according to its spiritual meaning, but the interpretation of it agreeably to the mere letter. And therefore, to those who believe that the sacred books are not the compositions of men, but that they were composed by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, agreeably to the will of the Father of all things through Jesus Christ, and that they have come down to us, we must point out the ways (of interpreting them) which appear (correct) to us, who cling to the standard of the heavenly Church of Jesus Christ according to the succession of the apostles (*First Principles* 4:1:9 [A.D. 230]).

When heretics show us the canonical Scriptures, in which every Christian believes and trusts, they seem to be saying: 'Lo, he is in the inner rooms [the word of truth] '(Matt 24.6). But we must not believe them, nor leave the original tradition of the Church, nor believe otherwise than we have been taught by the succession in the Church of God (*Homilies on Matthew* 46, PG 13:1667 (ante A.D. 254).

Cyril of Jerusalem

A most precious possession therefore is the knowledge of doctrines: also, there is need of a wakeful soul, since there are many that make spoil through philosophy and vain deceit. The Greeks on the one hand draw men away by their smooth tongue, for honey drops from a harlot's lips: whereas they of the Circumcision deceive those who come to them by means of the Divine Scriptures, which they miserably misinterpret though studying them from childhood to all age and growing old in ignorance. But the children of heretics, by their good words and smooth tongue, deceive the hearts of the innocent, disguising with the name of Christ as it were with honey the poisoned arrows of their impious doctrines: concerning all of whom together the Lord said, Take heed lest any man mislead you. This is the reason for the teaching of the Creed and for expositions upon it (*Catechetical Lectures* 4:2 [A.D. 350]).

Hilary of Poitiers

The Church, ordained by the Lord and established by His Apostles, is one for all; but the frantic folly of discordant sects has severed them from her. And it is obvious that these dissensions concerning the faith result from a distorted mind, which twists the words of Scripture into conformity with its opinion, instead of adjusting that opinion to the words of Scripture. And thus, amid the clash of mutually destructive errors, the Church stands revealed not only by her own teaching, but by that of her rivals (*On the Trinity* 7:4 [inter A.D. 356-359]).

Athanasius

But since they allege the divine oracles and force on them a misinterpretation, according to their private sense, it becomes necessary to meet them just so far as to vindicate these passages, and to show that they bear an orthodox sense, and that our opponents are in error (*Discourse Against the Arians* I:37 [A.D. 362]).

Basil

To refuse to follow the Fathers, not holding their declaration of more authority than one's own opinion, is conduct worthy of blame, as being brimful of self-sufficiency (*Letter to the Canonicae* 52:1 [A.D. 370]).

Ephraim the Syrian

While (the sects) mutually refute and condemn each other, it has happened to truth as to Gideon; that is, while they fight against each other, and fall under wounds mutually inflicted, they crown her. All the heretics acknowledge that there is a true Scripture. Had they all falsely believed that none existed, someone might reply that such Scripture was unknown to them. But now that have themselves taken away the force of such plea, from the fact that they have mutilated the very Scriptures. For they have corrupted the sacred copies; and words which ought to have but one interpretation, they have wrested to strange significations. Whilst, when one of them attempts this, and cuts off a member of his own body, the rest demand and claim back the severed limb...It is the church which perfect truth perfects. The church of believers is great, and its bosom most ample; it embraces the fullness (or, the whole) of the two Testaments (*Against Heresies* [ante A.D. 373]).

Gregory of Nyssa

Wherefore he says, "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life," showing that often the obvious interpretation, if it be not taken according to the proper sense, has an effect contrary to that life which is indicated by the Spirit ...whereto if any one applies himself according to the obvious sense, he will make the Scripture a doctrine of death (*Against Eunomius* 7:1 [A.D. 382]).

Ambrose

Wherefore all other generations are strangers to truth; all the generations of heretics hold not the truth: the church alone, with pious affection, is in possession of the truth (*Commentary on Psalm* 118:19 [A.D. 387]).

Augustine

But when proper words make Scripture ambiguous, we must see in the first place that there is nothing wrong in our punctuation or pronunciation. Accordingly, if, when attention is given to the passage, it shall appear to be uncertain in what way it ought to be punctuated or pronounced, let the reader consult the rule of faith which he has gathered from the plainer passages of Scripture, and from the authority of the Church, and of which I treated at sufficient length when I was speaking in the first book about things (*On Christian Doctrine* 3:2:2 [A.D. 397]).

For heresies, and certain tenets of perversity, ensnaring souls and hurling them into the deep, have not sprung up except when good Scriptures are not rightly understood, and when that in them which is not rightly understood is rashly and boldly asserted. And so, dearly beloved, ought we very cautiously to hear those things for the understanding of which we are but little ones, and that, too, with pious heart and with trembling, as it is written, holding this rule of soundness, that we rejoice as in food in that which we have been able to understand, according to the faith with which we are imbued (*On the Gospel of John, Homily* 18:1 [A.D. 416]).

Vincent of Lerins

[A]ll heresies, that they evermore delight in profane novelties, scorn the decisions of antiquity, and ...make shipwreck of the faith. On the other hand, it is the sure characteristic of Catholics to keep that which has been committed to their trust by the holy Fathers (*Commonitory of the Antiquity and Universality of the Catholic Faith* 24:63 [A.D. 434]).