

Think for yourself

An appeal to those intimidated by others who tell them what to think, believe and do.

by

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Introduction

You and I have been made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), with a brain and an ability to think. God tells us to use that brain in an adult way, not to accept like a child whatever someone tells them, without checking if it is right or wrong. In 1 Corinthians 14:20 we read, “Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.”¹

It is for this reason that the apostle Paul writes of his own experience, “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.” (1 Corinthians 13:11) As adults, we are told to test what we are told (1 Thessalonians 5:21) and to take decisions about spiritual matters (Joshua 24:15).

As Christians, we know that God’s Word, the Bible, is truth. In His great prayer recorded in John 17:17-18, Jesus prays for His followers – which includes us! – with the words, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.”

Jesus also promises to all His followers that the Holy Spirit will guide them into all truth: “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.” (John 16:13)

This was indeed the experience of the Christians in New Testament times. So we read, for instance, in 1 John 2:27, “As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and *you do not need anyone to teach you*. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit — just as it has taught you, remain in him.” *Do not let anyone tell you that these glorious promises are not for you, because they are, and they have been the experience of Christians throughout the centuries.*

Of course, as believers we can learn from our brothers and sisters in Christ. But as human beings we must never abandon our ability to think logically, to reason and to ask questions. God has given us these abilities and instructs us to use them. We must never surrender our free will and our intelligence to other human beings. We must never let others think for us. We must never hand over to others the authority to tell us what the Bible means. We are commanded by God to do our own thinking, and to listen to God directly through the Bible.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 says “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the Godly person may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Note also what it does not say: *it does not say that someone else, somewhere else, has been appointed to tell us what it means. We can read it and understand for ourselves.*

“The Supreme Leader is the only person in the nation who is allowed to have a brain.”

This quotation is from Jang Jin-sung, which is a pseudonym that a defector from North Korea uses in order to protect the rest of his family, still in North Korea from reprisals. This man, who is reported to be a former high-ranking propaganda official in the North Korean régime², was interviewed on BBC Radio 4’s “Today” programme on 9th May 2014.

¹ Biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version.

² Wikipedia article on Jang Jin-sung, accessed on 10.05.14. According to the same article, his name may also be transliterated as Jang Jinseong or Chang Chinsöng

His statement succinctly summarises the status of the leader in this exceptionally-extreme totalitarian state. A corollary of this situation is that, by definition, the status of all the citizens is that none of them are allowed to have an opinion on anything at all.

This may strike us as a most extreme example of abuse of power and subjugation of the people – yet this is precisely the level of power and control that has been exerted by some religious organisations in the past and – more worryingly! – even at the present time in the 21st century. This is no doubt the case with various religions, but I refer, here, to organisations that call themselves “Christian”.

The Bible – a “dangerous” book

For centuries – and right into the 20th century! – the Roman Catholic church forbade its followers to read the Bible. During hundreds of years it burned Bibles that had been translated into the language of the people – and whenever possible it even burned alive the translators themselves!

By saying that the Bible could only be read in the Latin Vulgate translation, they preserved power for an “elite” of people who knew Latin and had access to this book. They told the people that they would not be able to understand the Bible and that reading it was dangerous.

It was of course indeed dangerous – to the elite! – since once people had the Bible in their own language and started reading it, they discovered that they had been lied to concerning many of the fundamentals of the Christian faith and Christian life. New rules and requirements had been added that were nowhere to be found in the Bible. And the basic principles of faith in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit had been hidden from them.

In Ephesians 5:6 we are instructed, “Let no-one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.”

The revolution that Martin Luther introduced in 1534 when his translation of the Bible into German was published was that from that moment on anyone at all could read the Bible and decide for themselves what it meant. This freedom to read, to think for oneself and to decide had a massive impact on the development of society and culture in those European countries that accepted the message spread by Luther and others who promoted freedom of thought and belief – and ultimately it impacted on the wider civilisation of large parts of the world. It led to a phenomenal expansion in the numbers of people who were motivated to learn to read and in time led to the development of democracy.

The Holy Office of the Inquisition

The Roman Catholic church responded with the violence and intolerance for which it is well-known, expanding the work of the Inquisition, which it had founded in the twelfth century. The routine way of working of this so-called “Holy Office” was to obtain information by means of torture. Those who thought differently from the doctrines taught by the church were branded as “guilty of heresy”, and the most common sentence for such people was to be burned alive. The Inquisition was responsible for the killing of at least hundreds of people, probably thousands, in many different countries.

Papal infallibility

The Roman Catholic church also declared that the Pope was infallible, as he was guided by the Holy Spirit in his pronouncements.

Two particular problems for this dogma are obvious:

- 1) As popes have frequently reversed the teachings of earlier popes, one must ask in each case which of them was infallible and guided by the Holy Spirit: the earlier pope or the one who subsequently changed his teaching?
- 2) This dogma is based on claim that only the pope can be guided by the Holy Spirit. This goes against the teaching of Jesus, who said, “when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.” (John 16:13, NIV) Since the word “Pope” does not occur in the Bible, this was obviously not a promise that was just for popes.

A totalitarian abuse of power

One of the greatest abuses of power and of fundamental human rights was the combining of the dictatorship by the Roman Catholic Church with political systems that denied freedom of thought and expression. Even in the 20th century and in Europe this was seen under Franco’s fascist dictatorship of Spain, where the totalitarian State supported the Roman Catholic Church and the totalitarian church supported the State dictatorship. United, they persecuted people who tried to think independently, whether about politics or religion.

Thankfully, the arrest, torture and murder of those who disagreed with the Roman Catholic church is now in the past and the Roman Catholic church is also now allowing its members to read the Bible, although the Bibles that it authorises for publication have been prepared by Roman Catholics and contain notes to tell the readers what it “really” means, thus continuing to try to exercise control over the thoughts and minds of its followers. Many of these notes actually contradict the clear and unambiguous meaning of the original text.

A new totalitarian abuse of power

However, continuing right into the 21st century, another purportedly-Christian religious organisation continues to prevent its followers from thinking independently. The Watchtower Bible & Tract Society *still* applies the same rules and principles that the Roman Catholic church *used to* apply. Beneath a pretence of stating that its members, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, must study the Bible, in practice it tells them that they must not expect to *understand* it. It tells them that the promise of the Holy Spirit is not for them; it is only for a privileged few in Brooklyn, USA, the world headquarters of the organisation. *It is incredible that anyone should believe this, since Brooklyn is nowhere mentioned in the Bible.* On the contrary, the Bible says, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for ALL who are far off — for ALL whom the Lord our God will call.” (Acts 2:38-39) That includes all believers, including those who are “far off”, whether from Rome – or from Brooklyn!

So we can *all* read the Bible and see for ourselves what it means – without reading footnotes that explain away the real meaning, and without following “Bible Studies” that may put many Bible references in brackets and footnotes, but that do not actually let the Bible speak for itself. We can all experience the guidance that comes when the Holy Spirit enlightens our understanding to enable us to see the simple truths of the Bible.

A major feature of Jehovah’s Witness “Bible Studies” actually consists of explaining with very convoluted arguments why the Bible allegedly does *not* mean what it appears on the surface to be saying. Jehovah’s Witnesses are told that it is dangerous to read the Bible on its own without

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following the “Bible Studies” published in the Watchtower literature, which will “explain” what the Bible means. What a remarkable echo of the words used by the Roman Catholic church until very recently!

This restriction of individual thinking is backed up by the following controls:

- 1) the claim that only the “Governing Body” of the JW organisation understands the Bible;
- 2) the insistence that Jehovah’s Witnesses read *only* the translation published by their organisation, “The New World Translation”;
- 3) the prohibition on members publishing *anything* with a spiritual, religious or teaching content.

Here I will limit myself to the following brief comments on each of the above three points:

- 1) The term “Governing Body” occurs nowhere in the Bible, nor is there anything analogous to it.
- 2) The “New World Translation” consistently mis-translates and distorts the meaning of the original text.³
- 3) The prohibition on publishing is equivalent to the “Imprimatur” of the Roman Catholic church, without which no religious book may be published by Roman Catholics.

The controls imposed by the leadership of the Jehovah’s Witnesses – like some of the Roman Catholic rules on which they are modelled – aim to obtain total control of the minds and the thinking processes of its followers. Anyone who steps out of line or reveals independent thinking will be challenged, intimidated and silenced, if necessary by the JW equivalent of Roman Catholic excommunication, “disfellowshipping”. The Roman Catholic church taught – and still teaches! – that anyone that it has excommunicated will be rejected by God and consigned to hell. The leaders of the Jehovah’s Witnesses have an equivalent threat, although, as is usual for the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the terminology has been changed to match their doctrines: anyone “disfellowshipped” will not be accepted by God into His earthly kingdom.

But the control exercised by the Watchtower organisation is actually greater than the control exercised by the Roman Catholic church, because if a member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses is “disfellowshipped”, no Jehovah’s Witness is allowed to talk to them, to eat with them or even to greet them in the street. At the dictat of the organisation, the ex-Jehovah’s Witness will find that all those that they had believed were close friends will cut them off totally, immediately and irrevocably. Worse, members of their own family will refuse to have any contact with them. *Even if they are living in the same house, they will not be allowed to eat with them or talk to them*. Parents are cut off from their own children, children from their parents, and marriages are torn apart.

What a contrast with what the Bible says! In Malachi 4:5-6 we read, “I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.” (NIV) Christ said of John the Baptist, “if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.” (Matthew 11:14, NIV) From this we see that the promise of reconciling parents with their children applies to our days – even if in certain specific cases it does not become reality because one party or the other rejects what the Lord commands. But this sad reality does not justify a doctrine that imposes divisions on families in the way that is done by the Governing Body of the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

³ Examples of blatant mistranslations by the Jehovah’s Witnesses are documented in other articles on this website.

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Furthermore, this doctrine, which also destroys marriages, goes against the clear command of Scripture: “To the married I give this command ...: A wife must not separate from her husband.” (1 Corinthians 7:10). The above passage goes on to say: “If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.” (1 Corinthians 7:12-13)

It also involves the Jehovah’s Witnesses (and the Roman Catholics!) in assuming for themselves the right to take on a role that God has reserved for Himself, for the Bible repeatedly says “ ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (see Romans 12:19, Hebrews 10:30, Deuteronomy 32:35, etc).

Who has “the Truth”?

The Roman Catholic church has frequently criticised and often still criticises those it calls “Protestants”, saying that the many different groups and denominations are “divisions” that “prove that Protestants do not have the truth.”

In the 20th century, the Governing Body of the Jehovah’s Witnesses adopted this argument, naturally extending it to include also the Roman Catholic church, saying that all other ‘so-called Christian’ groups other than the Watchtower Society are in error and do not have “The Truth”. The Jehovah’s Witness leadership proclaims that it alone in all the world has “The Truth” and that those who leave the organisation “leave The Truth”.

Yet the number and variety of the groups and denominations within “Protestant” Christianity are part of its strength, for the following reason:

No one person or organisation in the whole world has a monopoly on *all the truth*.

Only Christ Himself is “the Truth” (John 14:6), and no-one in Rome, Brooklyn or anywhere else can justifiably claim this without implying that Jesus was wrong when He made this exclusive claim. As individual Christian believers have the humility to recognise that no single one of them has – exclusively – the whole truth, so they accept that there can be other Christian believers who have a different – even possibly a better and fuller! – understanding of some aspects of the faith and the ways that it is manifested.

The “Supreme Leader” – regardless of the name he gives himself – is not the only one with a brain.

No single Christian leader or organisation has a monopoly on the Holy Spirit.

In fact, there is evidence that there are within the Jehovah’s Witnesses many people who no longer believe what the organisation teaches, but they do not voice their thoughts and they do not leave the organisation because they know that if they do so they will lose all of those nearest and dearest to them. Such people occasionally confess to this situation and explain their fears, protected by the anonymity of pseudonyms on the internet. It is appalling that an organisation that claims to act in the name of God has caused this degree of oppression and fear amongst its own members.

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In an article in the English “Daily Telegraph” on 4th October 2014⁴, Yeonmi Park, who escaped from North Korea seven years previously, writes concerning the agents of North Korea, “*I am still not free. They still have power over me. They still try to control me.*” The same sort of experience is shared by many people who wish they could leave the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and even by many who have left the sect.

For such people, Paul’s words in Galatians 5:1 may be helpful:

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.
Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

God commissioned humanity to assume responsibility for the whole of creation (Genesis 1:26-28). He has made us in His image and has told us, “in your thinking be adults.” Instead of surrendering our minds to *any* religious figure or an organisation, *let us act on His words!*

⁴ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/11138496/Escape-from-North-Korea-How-I-escaped-horrors-of-life-under-Kim-Jong-il.html>