

“Prove All Things.”

BY

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“*Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.*”—1 THESS. v. 21.

READER,

You live in days when the text before your eyes is one of the first importance. The truths it contains are especially truths for the times. Give me your attention for a few minutes, and I will try to show you what I mean.

There were three great doctrines or principles which won the battle of the Protestant Reformation. These three were: (1) the sufficiency and supremacy of Holy Scripture, (2) the right of private judgment, and (3) justification by faith only, without the deeds of the law.

These three principles were the keys of the whole controversy between the Reformers and the Church of Rome. If we keep firm hold of them when we argue with a Roman Catholic, our position is unassailable: no weapon that the Church of Rome can forge against us will prosper. If we give up any one of them, our cause is lost. Like Samson, with his hair shorn, our strength is gone. Like the Spartans, betrayed at Thermopylae, we are out-flanked and surrounded. We cannot maintain our ground. Resistance is useless. Sooner or later we shall have to lay down our arms, and surrender at discretion.

Let us carefully remember this. The Roman Catholic controversy is upon us once more. We must put on the old armour, if we would not have our faith overthrown. The sufficiency of Holy Scripture,—the right of private judgment, justification by faith only,—these are the three great principles to which we must always cling. Let us grasp them firmly, and never let them go.

One of the three great principles to which I have referred appears to me to stand forth in the verse of Scripture which heads this paper. I mean the right of private judgment. I wish to say something about that principle.

The Holy Ghost, by the mouth of St. Paul, says to us, “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” In these words we have two great truths.

I. The right, duty, and necessity of private judgment: “Prove all things.”

II. The duty and necessity of keeping firm hold upon truth: “Hold fast that which is good.”

In this paper I propose to dwell a little on both these points.

I. Let me speak first, of the *right, duty, and necessity of private judgment.*

When I say the *right* of private judgment, I mean that every individual Christian has a right to judge for himself by the Word of God, whether that which is put before him as religious truth is God’s truth, or is not.

When I say the *duty* of private judgment, I mean that God requires every Christian man to use the right of which I have just spoken;—to compare man’s words and man’s writings with God’s revelation, and to make sure that he is not deluded and taken in by false teaching.

And when I say the *necessity* of private judgment, I mean this,—that it is absolutely needful for every Christian who loves his soul and would not be deceived, to exercise the right, and discharge the duty to which I have referred; seeing that experience shows that the neglect of private judgment has always been the cause of immense evils in the Church of Christ.

Now the Apostle Paul urges all these three points upon our notice when he uses those remarkable words, “Prove all things.” I ask particular attention to that expression. In every point of view it is most weighty and instructive.

Here, we must remember, the Apostle Paul is writing to the Thessalonians,—to a Church which he himself had founded. Here is an inspired Apostle writing to young inexperienced Christians,—writing to the whole professing Church in a certain city, containing laity as well as clergy,—writing, too, with especial reference to matters of doctrine and preaching, as we know by the verse preceding the text: “Despise not prophesyings.” And yet mark what he says,—“Prove all things.”

He does not say, “Whatsoever Apostles,—whatsoever evangelists, pastors, and teachers, whatsoever your Bishops,—whatsoever your ministers tell you is truth, that you are to believe.” No! he says, “Prove all things.” He does not say, “Whatsoever the universal Church pronounces true, that you are to hold.” No! he says, “Prove all things.”

The principle laid down is this: “Prove all things by the Word of God; all ministers, all teaching, all preaching, all doctrines, all sermons, all writings, all opinions, all practices,—prove all by the Word of God. Measure all by the measure of the Bible.—Compare all with the standard of the Bible.—Weigh all in the balances of the Bible.—Examine all by the light of the Bible.—Test all in the crucible of the Bible. That which can abide the fire of the Bible, receive, hold, believe, and obey. That which cannot abide the fire of the Bible, reject, refuse, repudiate, and cast away.”

This is private judgment. This is the right we are to exercise if we love our souls. We are not to believe things in religion merely because they are said by Popes or Cardinals,—by Bishops or Priests,—by Presbyters or Deacons,—by Churches, Councils, or Synods,—by Fathers, Puritans, or Reformers. We are not to argue, “Such and such things must be true, because these men say so.” We are not to do so. We are to prove all things by the Word of God.

Now I know such doctrine sounds startling in some men’s ears. But I write it down advisedly, and believe it cannot be disproved. I should be sorry to encourage any man in ignorant presumption or ignorant contempt. I praise not the man who seldom reads his Bible, and yet sets himself up to pick holes in his minister’s sermons. I praise not the man who knows nothing but a few texts in the New Testament, and yet undertakes to settle questions in divinity which have puzzled God’s wisest children. But still I hold with Bishop Bilson (A.D. 1575), that “all hearers have both liberty to discern and a charge to beware of seducers; and woe to them that do it not.” And I say with Bishop Davenant (A.D. 1627) “We are not to believe all who undertake to teach in the Church, but, must take care and weigh with serious examination, whether their doctrine be sound or not.”¹

Some men I know, refuse to believe this doctrine of private judgment; but I assert confidently that it is continually taught in the Word of God.

This is the principle laid down by the prophet Isaiah. (Isa. viii. 19.) His words were written, we should remember, at a time when God was more im-

mediately King over His Church, and had more direct communication with it than He has now. They were written at a time when there were men upon earth who had express revelations from God. Yet what does Isaiah say?—"When they shall say unto you, Seek unto them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards that peep, and that mutter: should not a people seek unto their God? for the living to the dead? To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." If this be not private judgment, what is?

This, again, is the principle laid down by our Lord Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. The Head of the Church says there:—"Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruit." (Matt. vii. 15.) How is it possible that men shall know these false prophets, except they exercise their private judgment as to what their fruits are?

This is the practice we find commended in the Bereans, in the Acts of the Apostles. They did not take the Apostle Paul's word for granted, when he came to preach to them. We are told, that they "searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so," and "*therefore*," it is said, "many of them believed." (Acts xvii. 11, 12.) What was this again but private judgment?

This is the spirit of the advice given in 1 Cor. x. 15,—“I speak as unto wise men; judge ye what I say:” and in Col. ii. 18,—“Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit;” and in 1 John iv. 1, “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits, whether they are of God;” and in 2 John 10,—“If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house.” If these passages do not recommend the use of private judgment, I do not know what words mean. To my mind they seem to say to every individual Christian, “Prove all things.”

Whatever men may say against private judgment, we may be sure it cannot be neglected without immense danger to the soul. We may not like it; but we never know what we may come to if we refuse to use it. No man can say into what depths of false doctrine we may be drawn if we will not do what God requires of us, and “prove all things.”

Suppose that, in fear of private judgment, we resolve to believe whatever *the Church* believes. Where is our security against error? The Church is not infallible. There was a time when almost the whole of Christendom embraced the Arian heresy, and did not acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ to be equal with the Father in all things. There was a time, before the Reformation, when the darkness over the face of Europe was a darkness that might be felt.—The General *Councils* of the Church are not infallible. When the whole Church is gathered together in a General Council, what says our Twenty-first Article? “They may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God. Wherefore things ordained by them as necessary to salvation, have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of Holy Scripture.”—The particular *branches of the Church* are not infallible. Any one of them may err. Many of them have fallen foully, or have been swept away. Where is the Church of Ephesus at this day? Where is the Church of Sardis at the present time? Where is Augustine's Church of Hippo in Africa? Where is Cyprian's Church of Carthage? They are all gone! Not a vestige of any of them is left! Shall we then be content to err merely because the Church errs? Will our company be any excuse for our error? Will our erring in company

with the Church remove our responsibility for our own souls? Surely it is a thousand times better for a man to stand alone and be saved, than to err in company with the Church, and be lost? It is better to “prove all things” and go to heaven, than to say, “I dare not think for myself,” and go to hell.

But suppose that, to cut matters short, we resolve to believe whatever *our minister* believes. Once more I ask,—Where is our security against error? Ministers are not infallible, any more than Churches. All of them have not the Spirit of God. The very best of them are only men. Call them Bishops, Priests, Deacons, or whatever names you please, they are all earthen vessels. I speak not merely of Popes, who have promulgated awful superstitions, and led abominable lives. I would rather point to the very best of Protestants, and say, “Beware of looking upon them as infallible,—beware of thinking of any man (whoever that man may be) that he cannot err.” Luther held consubstantiation; that was a mighty error. Calvin, the Geneva Reformer, advised the burning of Servetus;²—that was a mighty error. Cranmer and Ridley urged the putting of Hooper into prison because of some trifling dispute about vestments; that was a mighty error. Whitgift persecuted the Puritans;—that was a mighty error. Wesley and Toplady in the last century quarrelled fiercely about Calvinism;—that was a mighty error. All these things are warnings, if we will only take them. All say, “Cease ye from man.” All show us that if a man’s religion hangs on ministers, whoever they may be, and not on the Word of God, it hangs on a broken reed. Let us never make ministers Popes. Let us follow them so far as they follow Christ, but not a hair’s breadth further. Let us believe whatever they can show us out of the Bible, but not a single word more. If we neglect the duty of private judgment, we may find, to our cost, the truth of what Whitby says: “The best of overseers do sometimes make oversights.” We may live to experience the truth of what the Lord said about the Pharisees: “If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.” (Matt. xv. 14.) We may be very sure no man is safe against error, unless he acts on St. Paul’s injunction,—unless he “proves all things” by the Word of God.

I have said that it is impossible to overrate the evils that may arise from neglecting to exercise private judgment. I will go further, and say that it is impossible to overrate the blessings which private judgment has conferred both on the world and on the Church.

I ask my readers, then, to remember that the greatest discoveries in science and in philosophy, beyond all controversy, have arisen from the use of private judgment. To this we owe the discovery of Galileo, that the earth went round the sun, and not the sun round the earth.—To this we owe Columbus’ discovery of the continent of America.—To this we owe Harvey’s discovery of the circulation of the blood.—To this we owe Jenner’s discovery of vaccination.—To this we owe the printing press, the steam engine, the powerloom, the electric telegraph, railways, and gas. For all these discoveries we are indebted to men who dared to “think for themselves.” They were not content with the beaten path of those who had gone before. They were not satisfied with taking for granted that what their fathers believed must be true. They made experiments for themselves. They brought old-established theories to the proof, and found that they were worthless. They proclaimed new systems, and invited men to examine them, and test their truth. They bore storms of obloquy and ridicule unmoved. They heard the clamour of prejudiced lovers of old traditions without flinching. And they prospered and succeeded in what they did.

We see it now. And we who live in the nineteenth century are reaping the fruit of their use of private judgment.

And as it has been in science, so also it has been in the history of the Christian religion. The martyrs who stood alone in their day, and shed that blood which has been the seed of Christ's Gospel throughout the world,—the Reformers, who, one after another, rose up in their might to enter the lists with the Church of Rome,—all did what they did, suffered what they suffered, proclaimed what they proclaimed, simply because they exercised their private judgment about what was Christ's truth.—Private judgment made the Waldensians, the Albigensians, and the Lollards, count not their lives dear to them, rather than believe the doctrines of the Church of Rome.—Private judgment made Wickliffe search the Bible in our own land, denounce the Romish friars, and all their impostures, translate the Scriptures into the vulgar tongue, and become “the morning star” of the Reformation.—Private judgment made Luther examine Tetzels abominable system of indulgences by the light of the Word.—Private judgment led him on, step by step, from one thing to another, guided by the same light, till at length the gulf between him and Rome was a gulf that could not be passed, and the Pope's power in Germany was completely broken.—Private judgment made our own English Reformers examine for themselves, and inquire for themselves, as to the true nature of that corrupt system under which they had been born and brought up.—Private judgment made them cast off the abominations of Popery, and circulate the Bible among the laity.—Private judgment made them draw from the Bible our Articles, compile our Prayerbook, and constitute the Church of England as it is. They broke the fetters of tradition, and dared to think for themselves. They refused to take for granted Rome's pretensions and assertions. They examined them all by the Bible, and because they would not abide the examination, they broke with Rome altogether. All the blessings of Protestantism in England, all that we are enjoying at this very day, we owe to the right exercise of private judgment. Surely if we do not honour private judgment, we are thankless and ungrateful indeed!

Let us not be moved by the common argument, that the right of private judgment is liable to be abused,—that private judgment has done great harm, and should be avoided as a dangerous thing. Never was there a more miserable argument! Never was there one which, when thrashed, proves so full of chaff!

Private judgment has been abused! I would like the objector to tell me what good gift of God has not been abused? What high principle can be named that has not been employed for the very worst of purposes? Strength may become tyranny, when it is employed by the stronger to coerce the weaker; yet strength is a blessing when properly employed.

Liberty may become licentiousness, when every man does that which is right in his own eyes, without regarding the rights and feelings of others; yet liberty, rightly used, is a mighty blessing. Because many things may be used improperly, are we therefore to give them up altogether? Because opium is used improperly by some, is it not to be used as a medicine on any occasion at all? Because money may be used improperly, is all money to be cast into the sea? You cannot have good in this world without evil. You cannot have private judgment without some abusing it, and turning it to bad account.

But private judgment, people say, *has done more harm than good!* What harm has private judgment done, I would like to know, in matters of religion,

compared to the harm that has been done by the neglect of it? Some are fond of telling us that among Protestants who allow private judgment, there are divisions, and that in the Church of Rome, where private judgment is forbidden, there are no divisions. I might easily show such objectors that Romish unity is far more seeming than real. Bishop Hall, in his book called *The Peace of Rome*, numbers up no less than three hundred differences of opinion existing in the Romish Church. I might easily show that the divisions of Protestants are exceedingly exaggerated, and that most of them are upon points of minor importance. I might show that, with all the “varieties of Protestantism,” as men call them, there is still a vast amount of fundamental unity and substantial agreement among Protestants. No man can read the *Harmony of Protestant Confessions* without seeing that.

But grant for a moment that private judgment has led to divisions, and brought about varieties. I say that these divisions and varieties are but a drop of water when compared with the torrent of abominations that have arisen from the Church of Rome’s practice of disallowing private judgment altogether. Place the evils in two scales,—the evils that have arisen from private judgment, and those that have arisen from no man being allowed to think for himself. Weigh the evils one against another, and I have no doubt as to which will be the greatest. Give me Protestant divisions, certainly, rather than Popish unity, with the fruit that it brings forth. Give me Protestant variations, whatever a man like Bossuet may say about them, rather than Romish ignorance, Romish superstition, Romish darkness, and Romish idolatry. Give me the Protestant diversities of England and Scotland, with all their disadvantages, rather than the dead level, both intellectual and spiritual, of the Italian peninsula. Let the two systems be tried by their fruits,—the system that says, “Prove all things,” and the system that says, “Dare to have no opinion of your own;”—let them be tried by their fruits in the hearts, in the intellects, in the lives, in all the ways of men, and I have no doubt as to the result.

In any case let us not be moved by the specious argument, that it is humility to disallow private judgment, and to have no opinion of our own, that it is the part of a true Christian not to think for himself!

I tell men boldly that such humility is a false humility, a humility that does not deserve that blessed name. Call it rather laziness, idleness, and sloth. It makes a man strip himself of all his responsibility, and throw the whole burden of his soul into the hands of the minister and the Church. It gives a man a mere vicarious religion, a religion by which he places his conscience and all his spiritual concerns under the care of others. He need not trouble himself! He need no longer think for himself! He has embarked in a safe ship, and placed his soul under a safe pilot, and will get to heaven! Oh, let us beware of supposing that this deserves the name of humility! It is refusing to exercise the gift that God has given us. It is refusing to employ the sword of the Spirit which God has forged for the use of our hand. Blessed be God, our forefathers did not act upon such principles! Had they done so, we should never have had the Reformation. Had they done so, we might have been bowing down to the image of the Virgin Mary at this moment, or praying to the spirits of departed saints, or having a service performed in Latin. From such humility may the good Lord ever deliver us!

As long as we live, let us resolve that we will read for ourselves, think for ourselves, judge of the Bible for ourselves, in the great matters of our souls.

Let us dare to have an opinion of our own. Let us never be ashamed of saying, "I think that this is right, because I find it in the Bible;" and "I think that this is wrong, because I do not find it in the Bible." "Let us prove all things," and prove them by the Word of God.

As long as we live, let us beware of the blindfold system, which many commend in the present day,—the system of following a leader, and having no opinion of our own,—the system which practically says, "Only keep your Church, only receive the Sacraments, only believe what the ordained ministers who are set over you tell you, and then all shall be well." I warn men that this will not do. If we are content with this kind of religion, we are perilling our immortal souls. Let the Bible, and not any Church upon earth, or any minister upon earth, be our rule of faith. "Prove all things" by the Word of God.

Above all, as long as we live, let us habitually look forward to the great day of judgment. Let us think of the solemn account which every one of us will have to give in that day before the judgment-seat of Christ. We shall not be judged by Churches. We shall not be judged by whole congregations. We shall be judged individually, each by himself. What shall it profit us in that day to say, "Lord, Lord, I believed everything the Church told me. I received and believed everything ordained ministers set before me. I thought that whatever the Church and the ministers said must be right"? What shall it profit us to say this, if we have held some deadly error? Surely, the voice of Him that sits upon the throne will reply, "You had the Scriptures. You had a book, plain and easy to him that will read it and search it in a child-like spirit. Why did you not use the Word of God when it was given to you? You had a reasonable soul given you to understand that Bible. Why did you not 'Prove all things,' and thus keep clear of error?" If we refuse to exercise our private judgment, let us think of that awful day, and beware.

II. And now let me speak of the *duty and necessity of keeping firm hold upon God's truth.*

The words of the Apostle on this subject are pithy and forcible. "Hold fast," he says, "that which is good." It is as if he said to us, "When you have found the truth for yourself, and when you are satisfied that it is Christ's truth,—that truth which the Scriptures set forth,—then get a firm hold upon it, grasp it, keep it in your heart, never let it go."

St. Paul speaks as one who knew what the hearts of all Christians are. He knew that our grasp of the Gospel, at our best, is very cold, that our love soon waxes feeble, that our faith soon wavers,—that our zeal soon flags,—that familiarity with Christ's truth often brings with it a species of contempt,—that, like Israel, we are apt to be discouraged by the length of our journey,—and, like Peter, ready to sleep one moment and fight the next,—but, like Peter, not ready to "watch and pray." All this St. Paul remembered, and, like a faithful watchman, he cries, by the Holy Ghost, "Hold fast that which is good."

He speaks as if he foresaw by the Spirit that the good tidings of the Gospel would soon be corrupted, spoiled, and plucked away from the Church at Thessalonica. He speaks as one who foresaw that Satan and all his agents would labour hard to cast down Christ's truth. He writes as though he would forewarn men of this danger, and he cries, "Hold fast that which is good."

The advice is always needed,—needed as long as the world stands. There is a tendency to decay in the very best of human institutions. The best visible

Church of Christ is not free from a liability to degenerate. It is made up of fallible men. There is always in it a tendency to leave its first love. We see the leaven of evil creeping into many a Church, even in the Apostle's time. There were evils in the Corinthian Church, evils in the Ephesian Church, evils in the Galatian Church. All these things are meant to be beacons in these latter times. All show the great necessity laid upon the Church to remember the Apostle's words: "Hold fast that which is good."

Many Churches of Christ since then have fallen away for the want of remembering this principle. Their ministers and members forgot that Satan is always labouring to bring in false doctrine. They forgot that he can transform himself into an angel of light,—that he can make darkness appear light, and light darkness, truth appear falsehood, and falsehood truth. If he cannot destroy Christianity, he ever tries to spoil it. If he cannot prevent the form of godliness, he endeavours to rob Churches of the power. No Church is ever safe that forgets these things, and does not bear in mind the Apostle's injunction: "Hold fast that which is good."

If ever there was a time in the world when Churches were put upon their trial, whether they would hold fast the truth or not, that time is the present time, and those Churches are the Protestant Churches of our own land. Popery, that old enemy of our nation, is coming in upon us in this day like a flood. We are assaulted by open enemies without, and betrayed continually by false friends within. The number of Roman Catholic churches, and chapels, and schools, and conventual and monastic establishments, is continually increasing around us. Already the clergy of the Church of Rome are using great swelling words about things to come, and boasting that, sooner or later, England shall once more be brought back to the orbit from whence she fell, and take her place in the Catholic system. Surely now or never, we ought all of us to awake, and "Hold fast that which is good."

Perhaps we supposed, some of us, in our blindness, that the power of the Church of Rome was ended. We dreamed, in our folly, that the Reformation had ended the Popish controversy, and that if Romanism did survive, Romanism was altogether changed. If we did think so, we have lived to learn that we made a most grievous mistake. Rome never changes. It is her boast that she is always the same. The snake is not killed. He was scotched at the time of the Reformation, but was not destroyed. The Romish Antichrist is not dead. He was cast down for a little season, like the fabled giant buried under Aetna, but his deadly wound is healed, the grave is opening once more, and Antichrist is coming forth. The unclean spirit of Popery is not laid in his own place. Rather he seems to say, "My house in England is now swept and garnished for me; let me return to the place from whence I came forth."

And the question is now, whether we are going to abide quietly, sit still, and fold our hands, and do nothing to resist the assault. Are we really men of understanding of the times? Do we know the day of our visitation? Surely this is a crisis in the history of our Churches and of our land. It is a time which will soon prove whether we know the value of our privileges, or whether, like Amalek, "the first of the nations," our "latter end shall be that we perish for ever." It is a time which will soon prove whether we intend to allow our candlestick to be removed, or to repent, and do our first works, lest any man should take our crown. If we love the open Bible,—if we love the preaching of the Gospel,—if we love the privilege of reading that Bible, no man letting or

hindering us, and the opportunity of hearing that Gospel, no man forbidding us, if we love civil liberty,—if we love religious liberty,—if these things are precious to our souls, we must make up our minds to “hold fast,” lest by and by we lose all.

If we mean to “hold fast,” every parish, every congregation, every Christian man, and every Christian woman, must do their part in contending for the truth. Each one of us should work, and pray, and labour as if the preservation of the pure Gospel depended upon himself or herself, and upon no one else at all. The Bishops must not leave the matter to the priests, nor the priests leave the matter to the Bishops. The clergy must not leave the matter to the laity, nor the laity to the clergy. The Parliament must not leave the matter to the country, nor the country to the Parliament. The rich must not leave the matter to the poor, nor the poor to the rich. We must all work. Every living soul has a sphere of influence. Let him see to it that he fills it. Every living soul can throw some weight into the scale of the Gospel. Let him see to it that he casts it in. Let every one know his own individual responsibility in this matter; and all, by God’s help, will be well.

If we would “hold fast” that which is good, we must never tolerate or countenance any doctrine which is not the pure doctrine of Christ’s Gospel. There is a hatred which is downright charity,—that is, the hatred of erroneous doctrine. There is an intolerance which is downright praiseworthy,—that is, the intolerance of false teaching in the pulpit. Who would ever think of tolerating a little poison given to him day by day? If men come among us who do not preach “all the counsel of God,” who do not preach of Christ, and sin, and holiness, of ruin, and redemption, and regeneration, and do not preach of these things in a Scriptural way, we ought to cease to hear them. We ought to act upon the injunction given by the Holy Ghost in the Old Testament: “Cease, my son, to hear the instruction which causes to err from the words of knowledge.” (Prov. xix. 27.) We ought to carry out the spirit shown by the Apostle Paul, in Gal. i. 8: “Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other doctrine unto you than that which we have preached, let him be accursed.” If we can bear to hear Christ’s truth mangled or adulterated,—and can see no harm in listening to that which is another Gospel,—and can sit at ease while sham Christianity is poured into our ears,—and can go home comfortably afterwards, and not burn with holy indignation,—if this be the case, there is little chance of our ever doing much to resist Rome. If we are content to hear Jesus Christ not put in His rightful place, we are not men and women who are likely to do Christ much service, or fight a good fight on His side. He that is not zealous against error, is not likely to be zealous for truth.

If we would hold fast the truth, we must be ready to unite with all who hold the truth, and love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. We must be ready to lay aside all minor questions as things of subordinate importance. Establishment or no Establishment, Liturgy or no Liturgy, surplice or no surplice, Bishops or Presbyters,—all these points of difference, however important they may be in their place and in their proportion,—all ought to be regarded as subordinate questions. I ask no man to give up his private opinions about them. I wish no man to do violence to his conscience. All I say is, that these questions are wood, hay, and stubble, when the very foundations of the faith are in danger. The Philistines are upon us. Can we make common cause against them, or can we not? This is the one point for our consideration. Surely it is not right to say

that we expect to spend eternity with men in heaven, and yet cannot work for a few years with them in this world. It is nonsense to talk of alliance and union, if there is to be no co-operation. The presence of a common foe ought to sink minor differences. We must hold together, if we mean to “hold fast that which is good.”

Some men may say, “This is very troublesome.” Some may say, “Why not sit still and be quiet?” Some may say, “Oh, that horrid controversy! What need is there for all this trouble? Why should we care so much about these points of difference?” I ask, what good thing was ever got, or ever kept, without trouble? Gold does not lie in English corn-fields, but at the bottom of Californian rivers, and Australian quartz reefs. Pearls do not grow on English hedges, but deep down in Indian seas. Difficulties are never overcome without struggles. Mountains are seldom climbed without fatigue. Oceans are not crossed without tossings on the waves. Peace is seldom obtained without war. And Christ’s truth is seldom made a nation’s property, and kept a nation’s property, without pains, without struggles, and without trouble.

Let the man who talks of “trouble” tell us where we should be at this day, if our forefathers had not taken some trouble? Where would be the Gospel in England, if martyrs had not given their bodies to be burned? Who shall estimate our debt to Cranmer, Latimer, Hooper, Ridley, and Taylor, and their brethren? They “held fast that which is good.” They would not give up one jot of Christ’s truth. They counted not their lives dear for the Gospel’s sake. They laboured and travailed, and we have entered into their labours. Shame upon us, if we will not take a little trouble to keep with us what they so nobly won! Trouble or no trouble, pains or no pains,—controversy or no controversy,—one thing is very sure, that nothing but Christ’s Gospel will ever do good to our own souls. Nothing else will maintain our Churches. Nothing else will ever bring down God’s blessing upon our land. If, therefore, we love our own souls, or if we love our country’s prosperity, or if we love to keep our Churches standing, we must remember the Apostle’s words, and “hold fast” firmly the Gospel, and refuse to let it go.

I have set forth in plain language two things. *One* is the right, the duty, and necessity of private judgment. *The other* is the duty and necessity of keeping firm hold upon truth.—It only remains to apply these things to the individual consciences of my readers, by a few concluding words. (1) For one thing, if it be our duty to “prove all things,” let me beseech and exhort all English Churchmen to arm themselves with a thorough knowledge of the written Word of God. Let us read our Bibles regularly, and become familiar with their contents. Let us prove all religious teaching, when it is brought before us, by the Bible. A little knowledge of the Bible will not suffice. A man must know his Bible well, if he is to prove religion by it; and he must read it regularly, if he would know it well. There is no royal road to a knowledge of the Bible. There must be patient, daily, systematic reading of the Book, or the Book will not be known. As one said quaintly, but most truly, “Justification may be by faith, but a knowledge of the Bible comes only by works.” The devil can quote Scripture. He could go to our Lord and quote a text when he wished to tempt Him. A man must be able to say, when he hears Scripture falsely quoted, perverted, and misapplied, “It is written again,” lest he be deceived. Let a man neglect his Bible, and I see nothing to prevent his becoming a Roman Catho-

lic, an Arian, a Socinian, a Jew, or a Turk, if a plausible advocate of any of these false systems shall happen to meet him.

(2) For another thing, if it be right to “prove all things,” let us take special care to try every Roman Catholic doctrine, by whomsoever put forward, by the written Word of God. Let us believe nothing, however speciously advanced,—believe nothing, with whatever weight of authority brought forward,—believe nothing, though supported by all the Fathers,—believe nothing, except it can be proved to us out of the Scripture. The Bible alone is infallible. That alone is light. That alone is God’s measure of truth and falsehood. “Let God be true, and every man a liar.” The New Zealander’s answer to the Romish priests when they first went among them, was an answer never to be forgotten. They heard these priests urge upon them the worship of the Virgin Mary. They heard them recommend prayer to the dead saints, the use of images, the mass and the confessional. They heard them speak of the authority of the Church of Rome, the supremacy of the Pope, the antiquity of the Romish Communion. They knew the Bible, and heard all this calmly, and gave one simple but memorable answer: “*It cannot be true, because it is not in the Book.*” All the learning in the world could never have supplied a better answer than that. Latimer, or Knox, or Owen, could never have made a more crushing reply. Let this be our rule when we are attacked by Romanists, or semi-Romanists; let us hold fast the sword of the Spirit; and say, in reply to all their arguments, “*It cannot be true, because it is not in the Book.*”

(3) Last of all, if it be right to “hold fast that which is good,” let us make sure that we have each laid hold personally upon Christ’s truth for ourselves. It will not save us to know all controversies, and to be able to detect everything which is false. Head knowledge will never bring us to heaven. It will not save us to be able to argue and reason with Roman Catholics, or to detect the errors of Popes’ Bulls, or Pastoral Letters. Let us see that we each lay hold upon Jesus Christ for ourselves, by our own personal faith. Let us see to it that we each flee for refuge, and lay hold upon the hope set before us in His glorious Gospel. Let us do this, and all shall be well with us, whatever else may go ill. Let us do this, and then all things are ours. The Church may fail. The State may go to ruin. The foundations of all establishments may be shaken. The enemies of truth may for a season prevail. But as for us, all shall be well. We shall have in this world peace, and in the world which is to come, life everlasting; for we shall have Christ, and having Him, we have all. This is real “good,” lasting good, good in sickness, good in health, good in life, good in death, good in time, and good in eternity. All other things are but uncertain. They all wear out. They fade. They droop. They wither. They decay. The longer we have them the more worthless we find them, and the more satisfied we become, that everything here below is “vanity and vexation of spirit.” But as for hope in Christ, that is always good. The longer we use it the better it seems. The more we wear it in our hearts the brighter it will look. It is good when we first have it. It is better far when we grow older. It is better still in the day of trial, and the hour of death. And it will prove best of all in the day of judgment.

FOOTNOTE

1 The people of God are called to try the truth, to judge between good and ill, between light and darkness. God hath made them the promise of His Spirit, and hath left unto them His Word. They of Berea, when they heard the preaching of Paul, searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so as he taught them, and many of them believed. So do you: give heed to instruction, and yet receive not all things without proof and trial that they are not contrary to the wholesome doctrine of the Word of God.”—*Bishop Jewell, author of the “Apology of the Church of England.” 1583.*

2 When the Genevan Council found Servetus guilty and sentenced him to be burnt alive at the stake, just as the Roman Catholic Church had already done in his absence through his escape from them, it was Calvin alone who pleaded to mitigate the severity of that sentence to one of the sword. [Editor, 2003AD]