

**'PROVE ALL THINGS', OR,
EARTHLY AND HEAVENLY
DOCTRINES CONTRASTED**

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'Prove all things', or, Earthly and heavenly doctrines contrasted by W. Mason

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EARTHLY AND HEAVENLY DOCTRINES

CONTRASTED.

BY THE

REV. W. MASON.



“Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.”

1 Ep. THOM. v. 21.

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“PROVE ALL THINGS.”

To “prove all things,” is the advice of one of our Lord’s apostles*, and there can be no doubt that the very things which he recommended should be proved, were the things of religious doctrine, called in the verse previous, “prophesyings;” and when he added, “Hold fast that which is good,” he must have meant by that which is good, that religious doctrine which you have *proved* to be “good.” Now, from this exhortation, Christians might have drawn the obvious conclusion, that it is every one’s duty to submit the religious doctrine which he has been taught to believe, to a legitimate proof. But to do this, is the very last thing that religious people, and especially those who deem themselves religious, are disposed to do. Each seems content that his forerunners or cotemporaries should prove the doctrine for him. Every one will admit that it is our duty to exercise our rational faculties in the pursuit of truth; also that the Great Author of those faculties has given them to us for this very purpose; but every one seems to prefer to discharge this individual duty by proxy. It is not seen that investigation is as necessary to the personal appropriation of truth, so as to make it a part of our mental constitution, as mastication is necessary to the assimilation of our bodily food.

* 1 Thess. v. 21.

But then, such investigation pre-supposes the possibility of changing our religious opinions, and this change every one is led by his parents, if they give themselves credit for possessing any religion at all, to regard as something really shocking; so that it actually comes to this, that as every one is unwilling to change his religious opinions, every one is disposed to neglect the apostolic injunction to prove all things; "For," says he, "why should I submit the faith in which I have been educated to the proof, when I am determined never to change it?" Very true!

We not unfrequently find an adherence to the religious opinions in which a person has been educated, applauded as something exceedingly meritorious, while the abandonment of them is stigmatized as if it were a proof of weakness, if not of wickedness. And supposing a person not only to abandon "the religion of his forefathers," but also to see reason afterwards to change his newly-adopted sentiments, the admirers of "things as they are," are ready to regard such an "apostate" as little better than a pest and outcast of society; nay more, some persons will even speak of such an individual as if he had set a worse example to his fellow-creatures than the drunkard or the brawler. "But is there no merit then, it may be asked, in consistency?" Undoubtedly there is, if by consistency be meant consistency of conduct, as implying a uniform adherence, in practice, to the principles professed. This, assuredly, is the highest degree of merit. Until finite creatures, however, are proved to be infallible in their judgment; until it can be demonstrated that the first opinion formed must, of necessity, be right,—BECAUSE it is the first formed, there can be no merit in never chang-

ing an opinion. Indeed it appears to be one of the deceptions to which fallen man is prone to have recourse,—to give to things not really praiseworthy, names and descriptions which imply that they are so. Thus a bigoted, obstinate, and even stupid adherence to an opinion for no better reason than its long standing, is dignified with the well-sounding appellation of “consistency of opinion!” But “He who never changed any of his opinions (says an old proverb), never corrected any of his mistakes.” This sentiment is well worthy of remembrance. Every one admits readily enough that man is liable to fall into mistakes, but almost every one appears to be inclined to plead an exemption from error in his own particular case. Faults he may have, but as to his being in error, it is quite an affront to suppose such a thing!

Propositions are often assented to in the gross, while they are denied in detail, as if a general statement could be true, while all the particulars which are involved in it are untrue. If we,—if the whole human race,—are indeed very liable to error, it must almost follow, of necessity, that every individual will fall into an inaccurate way of thinking in some particular. But how can mistakes be corrected if they are never to be examined? And how can an examination of an opinion commence, until so much of mistrust of our judgment is admitted, as implies the possibility of being in the wrong? And why not be wrong in our interpretation of Scripture as well as in any thing else?

What reliance is to be placed on doctrinal interpretations merely because they are ancient? Some Protestants are great admirers of “consistency of opinion,” but what consistency of this kind was shewn by the

Protestant reformers, when they boldly challenged the Romish Church with having lapsed into deadly errors? And is it not possible that some of these errors may yet remain unremoved? Is it quite certain that the Athanasian Creed, for instance, with all its unintelligible asseverations, deserved to be saved out of the immense stock of Roman Catholic legends? What said "the great Lord Chatham," of the church by law established?—"That it had a Popish liturgy, a Calvinistic creed, and an Arminian clergy!" If this be a testimony not to be despised, it is difficult to see what merit there can be in adhering without investigation, to "the religion of one's forefathers," since it is impossible to make any thing more of such an adherence than an obstinate attachment to opinions, whether they be right, or whether they be wrong! At any rate, it is impossible to reconcile this miscalled "consistency" with the Apostle's injunction, "Prove all things: hold fast that which is good." Nor is it more agreeable to his commendation of the Bereans for searching the Scriptures of the Old Testament, in order to ascertain whether his own conclusions and statements from them were accurate. (Acts xvii. 11.)

But let it not be imagined that we advocate a change of religious opinions from mere fickleness, or fondness for change, or what is even worse than this, from interested considerations, or from merely personal feelings, either friendly to the new, or hostile to the old party. The right and reasonableness to make a change in religious opinions, however frequently it may be exercised, is all that we contend for, and with this important proviso, that the change be made conscientiously and judiciously. When a man comes to mature age,

it is not only his right to examine whether his educational religion be accurately drawn from Scripture or not, but it is also his solemn duty to do so, and thus to apply to their destined purpose the talents committed to his trust by his Creator. What could be said in favour of such an address as this to the Giver of all wisdom? "I will diligently use my rational powers to promote my worldly advantage, but I will not use them at all in the pursuit of religious truth, nor to the advancement of my mind in intelligence in spiritual things." And yet this seems clearly to be involved in what is commonly called "consistency of opinion," as meaning an implicit adherence to the opinions of those who have gone before us, without the exercise of our own powers of reason and judgment upon them. Admitting even the system of divinity thus implicitly adopted on the authority of others to be altogether sound, still, as regards the blind adherent to it individually, it is nothing better to him than "man-made divinity," for it is adopted from a blind confidence in the supposed infallibility of fallible creatures, without any examination worthy of the name, into its grounds and evidences.

It sometimes happens that the noisiest partizans of the Bible and "the religion of our ancestors," are precisely the persons who are least acquainted with the sacred records from personal inspection. If their own attachment to the Bible were to be tested by their ability or qualification to join in the particular expressions of attachment to God's truth which are to be found in the 119th Psalm,—an attachment arising from diligent study and delighted meditation,—their zeal would very frequently be found to consist in mere words, de-

riving a sort of galvanic life from the excitement of self-will and the love of dominion.

We hope, then, that we have reconciled the reader to a conscientious change taking place in a person's religious opinions, and that he is convinced, that such a change may be altogether reasonable and legitimate, provided it be conscientious. By way of fortifying the conclusion that such a change may be perfectly justifiable, we will cite another proverb,—and proverbs are to a considerable extent the concentration of the common sense of mankind;—"Wise men change their minds, but fools—NEVER!"

One of the greatest hindrances to compliance with the Apostolic exhortation, is, the universal belief that true Christian Doctrine is an unfathomable mystery. What a man is sure he can never understand, he can have no motive to try to understand by investigation. What is in its own nature unintelligible cannot be submitted to any proof except that which having proved it unintelligible, leaves it to the condemnation of being useless. Did the apostle mean to say "Religion is an unfathomable mystery, *therefore* prove it?" Impossible. The fact of his enjoining us to prove it, proves that he deemed it proveable or capable of proof, and therefore not unintelligible. But orthodox believers in mystery think otherwise, and therefore neglect the apostolic injunction.

Where all is mystery and contradiction, no contradiction can be too large for the capacity of credulous faith! No disciple of mystery thinks of asking himself what it is that he hears, or whence it is, or what it means. *A teacher of mystery* wounds no prejudices, he disturbs