

The Grounds of Our Faith

by J.H. Newman

The sermon discusses the dangers of theology and the tendency of Protestantism to emphasize Scripture and reject the subtle and nuanced aspects of it, leading to a hard, intractable temper and a lack of faith and obedience.

Scripture: Leviticus 8:35, Psalm 32:9, Mark 8:11, Romans 10:17, 1 Corinthians 1:18, 1 Corinthians 2:14, Ephesians 4:14, Colossians 2:8, 2 Timothy 4:3, Hebrews 11:1

Topics: "Church Authority", "Protestant Theology"

Description

J.H. Newman discusses the dangers inherent in every system of theology, including the tendency towards evil that arises from human corruption and external influences. He highlights how Protestantism, while discarding the authority of the Church for Scripture, has led to a cautious and discriminative turn of thought, rejecting subtle truths and indications of God's will. Newman warns against the spirit of ultra-Protestantism, which demands certainty and proof over faith and obedience, ultimately stifling genuine belief. He emphasizes the importance of maintaining doctrines like Episcopacy based on historical Christian practices, even when the direct scriptural evidence may not be explicit, drawing parallels to other essential beliefs like the doctrine of the Trinity.

Transcript

EVERY system of theology has its dangers, its tendencies towards evil. Systems short of the truth have this tendency inherent in themselves, and in process of time discover it, and work out the anticipated evil, which is but the legitimate though latent consequence of their principles. Thus, we may consider the present state of Geneva the fair result on the long run of the system of self-will which was established there in the sixteenth century. But even the one true system of religion has its dangers on all sides, from the weakness of its recipients who pervert it. Thus the Holy Catholic doctrines, in which the Church was set up, were corrupted into Popery, not legitimately, or necessarily, but by various external causes acting on human corruption, in the lapse of many ages. St. Paul's command of obedience to rulers, was changed into the tyrannical rule of one Bishop over all countries; his recommendation of an unmarried life, for certain religious objects, was made a rule of celibacy in the case of the clergy. Now let us ask, what are the bad tendencies of Protestantism? for this is a question which nearly concerns ourselves. We are nearly 300 years from its rise in this country; have any evils yet shown themselves from it? It is not here proposed to examine the question at large; but a hint on one part of the subject, may be made in answer to it.

At the Reformation, the authority of the Church was discarded and by the spirit then predominant among Protestants, and Scripture was considered as the sole document both for ascertaining and proving our faith. The question immediately arose, "Is this or that doctrine in Scripture?"—and in consequence, various intellectual gifts, such as argumentative subtilty, critical acumen, knowledge of the languages, rose into importance, and became the interpreters of Christian truth. Exposition lay through controversy. Now the natural effect of disputation is to make us shun all but the strongest proofs, those which an adversary will find substantial impediments in his line of reasoning; and, therefore, to generate a cautious discriminative turn of thought, to fix in the mind a standard of proof simulating demonstration, and to make light of mere probabilities. This intellectual habit, resulting from controversy, would also arise from the peculiar exercises of thought necessary for the accurate scholar or antiquarian. It followed, that in course of time, all the delicate shades of truth and falsehood, the unobtrusive indications of GOD'S Will, the low tones of the "still small voice," in which Scripture abounds, were rudely rejected; the crumbs from the rich man's table, which Faith eagerly looks about for, were despised by the proud-hearted intellectualist, who (as if it were a favour in him to accept the Gospel,) would be content with nothing short of certainty, and ridiculed as superstitious and illogical whatever did not approve itself to his own cold, hard, and unimpassioned temper. For instance, if the cases of Lydia, of the jailer, of Stephanas, were brought to show our LORD'S wish as to the baptism of households, the actions of his apostles to interpret his own commands, it was answered; "This is no satisfactory proof; it is not certain that everyone of those households was not himself a believer; it is not certain there were any children among them;"—though surely, in as many all three households, the probability is on the side which the Church has taken, especially viewing the texts in connexion with our SAVIOUR'S words, "Suffer the little children," &c. Again, while the observance of the LORD'S day was grounded upon the practice of the apostles, it was somehow felt, that this proof was not strong enough to bind the mass of Protestants: and so the chief argument now in use is one drawn from the Jewish law, viz. the direct Scripture command, contained in the fourth commandment.

Our SAVIOUR has noticed the frame of mind here alluded to, in Mark viii. 11, 12, where his feelings and judgment upon it are also told us:—"And the Pharisees came forth, and began to question with Him, seeking of Him a sign from heaven, tempting Him. And He sighed deeply in His spirit, and saith, Why doth this generation seek after a sign? Verily I say unto you, There shall no sign be given unto this generation. And He left them."

We are warned against the same hard, intractable temper in the book of Psalms:—"I will inform thee, and teach thee in the way wherein thou shalt go; and I will guide thee with Mine eye. Be ye not like to horse and mule, which have no understanding; whose mouths must be held with bit and bridle, lest they fall upon thee." Ps. xxxii. 9, 10. This stubborn spirit, which yields to nothing but violence, is determined to feel CHRIST'S yoke ere it submits to it, will not see except in broad day-light, and like the servant who hid his talent, is ever making excuses, murmuring, doubting, grudging obedience, and stifling docile and open hearted faith, is the spirit of ultra-Protestantism, i.e. that spirit, to which the principles of Protestantism tend, and which they have in a great measure realized. On this subject the reader may consult Nos. 4, 8, and 19, of this series of Tracts.

Now to apply this to the doctrines, at present so much undervalued, which it is the especial object of these Tracts to enforce.

When a clergyman has spoken strongly in defence of Episcopacy, a hearer will go away saying, that there is much very able and forcible, much very eloquent and excellent, in what he has just heard; but after all,

there is very little about Episcopacy in Scripture. This is the point to which a shrewd, clear-headed reasoner will resort, "after all;" we come round and round to it; the doctrine advocated is plausible, useful, generally received hitherto; granted; but Scripture says very little about it.

Now it cannot be for a moment allowed, that Scripture contains little on the subject of Church Government; though it may readily be granted that it obtrudes on the reader little about it. The doctrine is in it, not on it; not on the surface. This need not be proved here, since the subject has been variously considered in former Numbers of this series. But it may be useful in a few words to show how the state of the argument and controversy concerning Episcopacy, illustrates the above remarks, and how parallel it is to the state in which other religious truths are found, which no Churchman ventures to dispute.

1. Now in the first place, let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that Episcopacy is in fact not at all mentioned in Scripture: even then it would be our duty to receive it. Why? because the first Christians received it. If we wish to get at the truth, no matter how we get at it, if we get at it. If it be a fact, that the earliest Christian communities were universally episcopal, it is a reason for our maintaining Episcopacy; and in proportion to our conviction, is it incumbent on us to maintain it.

Nor can it be fairly dismissed as a non-essential, or ordinance indifferent and mutable, though formerly existing over Christendom; for, who made us judges of essentials and non-essentials? how do we determine them? In the Jewish law, the slightest transgression of the commandment was followed by the penalty of death; vide Lev. viii. 35; x. 6. Does not its universality imply a necessary connexion with Christian doctrine? Consider how much reasonings would carry us through life; how the business of the world depends on punctuality in minutes; how "great a matter" a mere spark dropped on gunpowder "kindleth."

But, it may be urged, that we Protestants believe the Scriptures to contain the whole rule of duty. Certainly not; they constitute a rule of faith, not a rule of practice; a rule of faith, not a rule of practice; a rule of doctrine, not a rule of conduct or discipline. Where (e.g.) are we told in Scripture, that gambling is wrong? or again, suicide? our Article is precise: "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation, so that whatsoever is not read therein, &c. is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of faith." Again it says, that the Apocrypha is not to be applied "to establish any doctrine," implying that this is the use of the canonical books.

2. However, let us pass from this argument, which is but founded on a supposition, that Episcopacy is not enjoined in Scripture. Suppose we maintain, as we may well maintain, that it is enjoined in Scripture. An objector will say, that, at all events it is but obscurely contained therein, and cannot be drawn out from it without a great deal of delicate care and skill. Here comes in the operation of that principle of faith in opposition to criticism, which was above explained; the principle of being content with a little light, where we cannot obtain sunshine. If it is probably pleasing to CHRIST, let us maintain it. Now take a parallel case: e.g. the practice of infant baptism; where is this enjoined in Scripture? No where. Why do we observe it? Because the primitive Church observed it, and because the Apostles in Scripture appear to have sanctioned it, though this is not altogether certain from Scripture. In a difficult case we do all well as we can, and carefully study what is most agreeable to our LORD and SAVIOUR. This is how our Church expresses it in the xxviii Article: "The baptism of young children is in any wise to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the institution of CHRIST." This is true wariness and Christian caution; very different from that spurious caution which ultra-Protestantism exercises. Let a man only be consistent, and apply the same judgment in the case of Episcopacy: let him consider whether the duty of

keeping to Bishops, be not "most agreeable with the institution of CHRIST." If, indeed, he denies this altogether, these remarks do not apply; but they are addressed to waverers, and falsely moderate men, who cannot deny, that the evidence of Scripture is in favour of Churchmen, but say it is not strong enough. They say, that if Almighty GOD had intended an uniformity in Church Government among Christians, he would have spoken more clearly.

Now if they carried on this line of argument consistently, they would not baptize their children: happily they are inconsistent. It would be more happy still, were they consistent on the other side; and, as they baptize their children, because it is safer to observe than to omit the sacrament, did they also keep to the Church, as the safer side. The received practice, then, of infant baptism seems a final answer to all who quarrel with the Scripture evidence for Episcopacy.

3. But further still, infant baptism, like Episcopacy, is but a case of discipline. What shall we say, when we consider that a case of doctrine, necessary doctrine, doctrine the very highest and most sacred, may be produced, where the argument lies as little on the surface of Scripture,--where the proof, though most conclusive, is as indirect and circuitous as that for Episcopacy; viz. the doctrine of the Trinity? Where is this solemn and comfortable mystery formally stated in Scripture, as we find it in the creeds? Why is it not? Let a man consider whether all the objections which he urges against the Scripture argument for Episcopacy may not be turned against his own belief in the Trinity. It is a happy thing for themselves that men are inconsistent; yet it is miserable to advocate and establish a principle, which, not in their own case indeed, but in the case of others who learn it of them, leads to Socinianism. This being considered, can we any longer wonder at the awful fact, that the descendants of Calvin, the first Presbyterian, are at the present day in the number of those who have denied the LORD who bought them?

OXFORD,

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