

Appendix 4

J.C.Ryle on 'Prove All Things'

Prove all things: hold fast that which is good (1 Thess. 5:21).

In these words you have... the right, duty and necessity of private judgment: 'Prove all things'...¹

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,² 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; [that is,] 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 that it is absolutely needful for every Christian who loves his soul and would not be deceived, to exercise that right, and discharge that 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... urges all these three points upon your notice when he uses those remarkable words: 'Prove all things'. I ask your particular attention to that expression. In every point of view it is most weighty and instructive.

¹ This Appendix is an abridged version of the first part of Ryle's tract with this title. The emphases are mine. I am grateful to the correspondent who drew my attention to the appropriateness of Ryle's tract to my book.

² I let Ryle's use of 'religious' and 'religion' stand though, being Christendom-speak, they are abhorrent to me.

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Here, you will remember, the apostle... 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... writing too with especial reference to matters of doctrine and preaching... And yet mark what he says: 'Prove all things'.

He does not say: 'Whatsoever apostles, whatsoever evangelists, pastors and teachers... 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.

Reader, this is private judgment. This is the right you are to exercise if you love your soul. You are not to believe things... merely because they are said by popes or... priests, by presbyters or deacons, by churches, councils or synods, by Fathers, Puritans or Reformers. You are not to argue: 'Such and such things must be true, because these men say so'. You are not to do so. You are to prove all things by the word of God.

I know such doctrine sounds shocking in some men's ears. But I write it down advisedly, and believe it cannot be disproved. I want to encourage no 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

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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... that 'all hearers have both liberty to discern and a charge to beware [of] seducers; and woe to them that do it not'... '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'.³

Reader, men may dislike the doctrine of private judgment, but there is no doubt that it is continually taught in the word of God.

This is the principle laid down in Isaiah 8:19-20. These words were written, remember, at a time when God... had more direct communication... with [his people] than he has now. They were written at a time when there were men upon earth who had direct 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. Remember what he says: 'Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. You shall know them by their fruit' (Matt. 7:15). 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 you find commended in the Bereans, in the Acts... They did not take... Paul's word for granted, when he came to preach to them. You are told that 'they searched

³ Ryle was quoting Thomas Bilson (1575) and John Davenant (1627).

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the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so', and 'therefore', it is said, 'many of them believed' (Acts 17:11-12). What was this again but private judgment?

This is the spirit of the advice given in 1 Corinthians 10:15: 'I speak as unto wise men; judge what I say'; and in Colossians 2:18: 'Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit'; and in 1 John 4:1: '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'.

Reader, whatever men may say against private judgment, you may depend it cannot be neglected without immense danger to your soul. You may not like it, but you never know what you may come to if you refuse to use it. No man can say into what depths of false doctrine you may be drawn if you will not do what God requires of you, and 'prove all things'.

Suppose that, in fear of private judgment, you resolve to believe whatever the church believes. Where is your security against error? The church is not infallible... The General Councils of the Church are not infallible... 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 the church of Hippo in Africa? Where is the church of Carthage? They are all gone! Not a vestige of any of them is left! Will you then be content to err merely because the church errs? Will your company be any excuse for your error? Will your erring in company with the church remove your responsibility for your own soul? Oh, reader, it were surely a thousand times better for a man to stand alone and

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be saved, than to err in company with the church and be lost! It were 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, you resolve to believe whatever your minister believes. Once more I ask, Where is your safety? Where is your security? 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 us... whatever names you please [Minister, Pastors, Reverend – DG], we 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... Zwingli... Calvin... Cranmer and Ridley... Whitgift... Wesley and Toplady... [all got some things wrong]. All these things are warnings, if you will only take them. All say: 'Cease 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. Never make ministers popes. Follow us so far as we follow Christ, but not a hair's breadth further. Believe whatever we can show you out of the Bible, but do not believe a single word more.

Neglect the duty of private judgment, and you may find, to your cost [that] the best of overseers do sometimes make oversights. You may live to experience the truth of what the Lord said to the Pharisees: When the blind lead the blind, both fall into the ditch. [See Matthew 15:14]. Reader, be very sure no man is safe against error, unless he acts on... Paul's injunction, unless he 'proves all things' by the word of God.

Reader, I have said that it is impossible to overrate the evils that may arise from neglecting to exercise your private judgment. I will go further, and say that it is impossible to

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overrate the blessings which private judgment has conferred both on the world and on the church...

Private judgment made the Waldenses, the Albigenses, and the Lollards count not their lives dear to them, rather than believe the doctrines of the Church of Rome. Private judgment made Wycliffe search the Bible in our land [that is, England], denounce the Romish friars, and all their impostures... [and drove him to] translate the Scriptures into the vulgar tongue [that is, the common language of the people], and become 'the morning star' of the Reformation. Private judgment made Luther examine Tetzel's 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 enquire 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 [people]... 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 [that is, Rome's pretensions and assertions] would not abide the examination, they broke with Rome altogether. All the blessing 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!

Reader, I warn you not to 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!

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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? Grant, for a moment, that among Protestants who allow private judgment, there are divisions. Grant that in the Church of Rome, where private judgment is forbidden, there are no divisions. I might easily show that Romish unity is far more seeming than real...

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 greater...

Reader, I warn you above all things not to be moved by the specious argument, that it is humility to disallow private

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judgment, that it is humility to have no opinion of your own, that it is the part of a true Christian not to think for himself!

I tell you that such humility is a false humility, a humility that does not deserve that blessed name. Call it rather laziness. Call it rather idleness. Call it rather 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, beware of supposing that this deserves the name of humility. It is refusing to exercise the gift that God has given you. It is refusing to employ the sword of the Spirit which God has forged for the use of your hand. Blessed be God, our forefathers did not act upon such principles! Had they done so, we should never have had the Reformation... From such humility may the good Lord ever deliver you!

Reader, as long as you live resolve that you will read for yourself, think for yourself, judge of the Bible for yourself, in the great matters of your soul. Have an opinion of your own. 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'. 'Prove all things', and prove them by the word of God.

As long as you live, beware of the blindfold system, which many commend in the present day: the system of following a leader, and having no opinion of their 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 you that this will not do. I warn you that if you are content with this kind of religion, you are imperilling your immortal soul. Let the Bible, and not any church upon earth, or any minister upon earth, be your rule of faith. 'Prove all things' by the word of God.

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And, above all, as long as you live, look forward to the great day of judgment. Think of the solemn account which every one of us shall have to give in that day before the judgment seat of Christ. We shall not be judged by [that is, as] churches. We shall not be judged by [that is, as] whole congregations.⁴ We shall be judged individually, each by himself. What shall it profit you or me 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 childlike 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?

Oh, reader, if you refuse to exercise your private judgment, think of that awful day, and beware!

⁴ Christ, of course, does judge churches (Rev. 2 & 3).