

"Contest between Truth and Falsehood in the Church"
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"The kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away." Matt. xiii. 47, 48.

1 IN the Apostles' age, the chief contest between Truth and Falsehood lay in the war
2 waged by the Church against the world, and the world against the Church—the Church,
3 the aggressor in the name of the Lord; the world, stung with envy and malice, rage and
4 pride, retaliating spiritual weapons with carnal, the Gospel with persecution, good with
5 evil, in the cause of the Devil. But of the conflict *within* the Church, such as it is at this
6 day, Christians knew comparatively little. True, the Prophetic Spirit told them that "even
7 of their own selves should men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples
8 after them;" that "in the last days perilous times should come." [Acts xx. 30. 2 Tim. iii. 1.]
9 Also they had the experience of their own and former times to show them, as in type,
10 that in the Church evil will always mingle with the good. Thus, at the flood, there were
11 eight men in the Ark, and one of them was reprobate; out of twelve Apostles, one was a
12 devil; out of seven Deacons, one (as it is said) fell away into heresy; out of twelve tribes,
13 one is dropped at the final sealing. These intimations, however, whether by instance or
14 prophecy, were not sufficient to realize to them, before the event, the serious and awful
15 truth implied in the text, viz.—that the warfare which Christ began between his little flock
16 and the world should be in no long while transferred into the Church itself, and be
17 carried on by members of that Church one with another.

18 This, I say, the early Christians did not see fulfilled, as our eyes see it; and so hard is it
19 to possess ourselves of a true conviction about it, that even at this day, when it may be
20 plainly seen, men will not see it. They will not so open and surrender their minds to
21 Divine truth, as to admit that the Holy Church has unholy members, that blessings are
22 given to the unworthy, that "the Kingdom of heaven is like a net that gathers of every
23 kind." They evade this mysterious appointment in various ways. Sometimes they deny
24 that bad men are really in God's Church, which they think consists only of good men.
25 They have invented an Invisible Church, distinct and complete at present, and peopled
26 by saints only,—as if Scripture said one word, anywhere, of a spiritual body existing in
27 this world separate from, and independent of, the Visible Church; and they consider the
28 Visible Church to be nothing but a mere part of this world, an establishment, sect, or
29 party. Or, again, while they admit it as a Divine ordinance, they lower its standard of
30 faith and holiness, and its privileges; and, considering the communion of saints to be
31 but a name, and all Christians to be about alike, they effectually destroy all notions,
32 whether of a Church or of a conflict. Thus, in one way or other, they refuse to admit the
33 idea, contained in the text, that the dissimilitude, the enmity, and the warfare which once
34 existed between the world and the Church, is now transferred into the Church itself.

35 But let us try, with God's blessing, to get a firm hold upon this truth, and see if we
36 cannot draw some instruction from it. The text says, that "the Kingdom of Heaven," that

37 is, the Christian Church, "is like unto a net that was cast into the sea, and gathered of
38 every kind." Elsewhere St. Paul says, "In a great house there are not only vessels of
39 gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to
40 dishonour." [2 Tim. ii. 20.] Now, passages such as these admit of a very various
41 application. I shall consider them here with reference to the contest between Truth and
42 Falsehood in the Church.

43 Doubtless, in the eye of natural reason, it would be a privilege, were the enemies of
44 Christ and of our souls separated from us, and did the trial of our faith take place on
45 some broad questions, about which there could be no mistake; but such is not the fact
46 "in the wisdom of God." Faith and unbelief, humbleness and pride, love and selfishness,
47 have been from the Apostles' age united in one and the same body; nor can any means
48 of man's device disengage the one from the other. All who are within the Church have
49 the same privileges; they are all baptized, all admitted to the Holy Eucharist, all taught in
50 the Truth, all profess the Truth. At all times, indeed, there have been those who have
51 avowed corrupt doctrine or indulged themselves in open vice; and whom, in
52 consequence, it was easy to detect and avoid. But these are few; the great body in the
53 Christian Church profess one and the same faith, and seem one and all to agree
54 together. Yet, among these persons, thus apparently unanimous, is the real inveterate
55 conflict proceeding, as from the beginning, between good and evil. Some of these are
56 wise, some foolish. Who belong to the one, and to the other party, is hid from us, and
57 will be hid till the day of judgment; nor are they at present individually formed upon the
58 perfect model of good or evil; they vary one with another in the degree and mode of
59 their holding to the one or the other; but that there are two parties in the Church, two
60 parties, however vague and indefinite their outlines, among those who live, in one
61 sense, as familiar friends, I mean, who eat the same spiritual Food, and profess the
62 same Creed, is certain.

63 Next, what do they contend about? how and where is their conflict? The Apostles
64 contended about the truth of the Gospel with unbelievers; their immediate successors
65 contended, though within the Church, yet against open heresies, such as they could
66 meet, confute, and cast out; but in after times, in our own day, now, what do the two
67 secret parties in the Church, the elect and the false-hearted, what do they contend
68 about?

69 It is difficult to answer this question suitably with the reverence due to this sacred place,
70 in which the language of the world should not be heard. Yet, in so important a matter,
71 one would wish to say something. That contest, which was first about the truth of the
72 Gospel itself, next about the truth of doctrine, is now commonly about very small
73 matters, of an every-day character, of public affairs, or domestic business, or parochial
74 concerns, which serve as tests of our religious state quite as truly as greater things, in
75 God's unerring judgment—serve as powerfully to form and train us for heaven or for
76 hell.

77 I say, that as the early Christians were bound to "contend earnestly for the faith once
78 delivered to the saints," so the trial of our obedience commonly lies in taking this or that

79 side in a multitude of questions, in which there happen to be two sides, and which come
80 before us almost continually; and, before attempting to explain what I mean, I would
81 have you observe how parallel this state of things is to God's mode of trying and
82 disciplining us in other respects.

83 For instance, how is our devotion to Christ shown? Ordinarily, not in great matters, not
84 in giving up house and lands for His sake, but in making little sacrifices which the world
85 would ridicule, if it knew of them; in abridging ourselves of comforts for the sake of the
86 poor, in sacrificing our private likings to religious objects, in going to Church at a
87 personal inconvenience, in taking pleasure in the society of religious men, though not
88 rich, or noble, or accomplished, or gifted, or entertaining; in matters, all of them of very
89 little moment in themselves.

90 How is self-denial shown? Not in literally bearing Christ's Cross, and living on locusts
91 and wild honey, but in such light abstinences as come in our way, in some poor efforts
92 at fasting and the like, in desiring to be poor rather than rich, solitary or lowly rather than
93 well-connected, in living within our income, in avoiding display, in being suspicious of
94 comforts and luxuries; all of which are too trifling for the person observing them to think
95 about, yet have their use in proving and improving his heart.

96 How is Christian valour shown? Not in resisting unto blood, but in withstanding mistaken
97 kindness, in enduring importunity, in not shrinking from surprising and hurting those we
98 love, in undergoing little losses, inconveniences, censures, slights, rather than betray
99 what we believe to be God's Truth, be it ever so small a portion of it.

100 As then Christian devotion, self-denial, courage, are tried in this day in little things, so is
101 Christian faith also. In the Apostles' age faith was shown in the great matter of joining
102 either the Church, or the pagan or Jewish multitude. It is shown in this day by taking this
103 side or that side in the many questions of opinion and conduct which come before us,
104 whether domestic, or parochial, or political, or of whatever kind.

105 Take the most unlettered peasant in the humblest village; his trial lies in acting for the
106 Church or against it in his own place. He may happen to be at work with others, or
107 taking refreshment with others; and he may hear religion spoken against, or the Church,
108 or the King; he may hear voices raised together in scoffing or violence; he must
109 withstand laugh and jest, evil words and rudeness, and witness for Christ. Thus he
110 carries on, in his day, the eternal conflict between Truth and Falsehood.

111 Another, in a higher class of society, has a certain influence in parish matters, in the
112 application of charities, the appointment of officers, and the like; he, too, must act, as in
113 God's sight, for the Truth's sake, as Christ would have him.

114 Another has a certain political power; he has a vote to bestow, or dependents to advise;
115 he has a voice to raise, and substance to contribute. Let him act for religion, not as if
116 there were not a God in the world.

117 My brethren, I must not venture to keep silence in respect to a province of Christian
118 duty, in which men are especially tried at this day, and in which they especially fail.

119 It is sometimes said that religion is not (what is called) political. Now there is a bad
120 sense of the word "political," and religion is nothing that is bad. But there is also a good
121 sense of the word, and in this sense whoever says that religion is not political speaks as
122 erringly, and (whether ignorantly or not) offends with his tongue as certainly, as if in St.
123 Paul's time a man had said it mattered not whether he was Christian or heathen; for
124 what the question of Christian or no Christian was in the Apostle's day, such are
125 questions of politics now. It is as right to take one side, and as wrong to take the other,
126 now, in that multitude of matters which comes before us of a social nature, as it was
127 right to become a Christian in St. Paul's day, and wrong to remain a heathen.

128 I am not saying *which* side is right and which is wrong, in the ever-varying course of
129 social duty, much less am I saying that all religious people are on one side and all
130 irreligious on the other (for then would that division between good and evil take place,
131 which the text and other parables assure us is not to be till the Day of Judgment); I only
132 say there *is* a right and a wrong, that it is not a matter of indifference which side a man
133 takes, that a man will be judged hereafter for the side he takes.

134 When a man (for instance) says that he takes part against the King or against the
135 Church, because he thinks kingly power or established Churches contrary to Scripture, I
136 think him as far from the truth as light is from darkness; but I understand him. He takes
137 a religious ground, and, whatever I may think of his doctrine, I praise him for that. I had
138 rather he should take a religious ground (if in sincerity) and be against the Church, than
139 a worldly selfish ground, and be for it; that is, if done in earnest, not in pretence, I think it
140 speaks more hopefully for his soul. I had rather the Church were levelled to the ground
141 by a nation, really, honestly, and seriously, thinking they did God service in doing so
142 (fearful indeed as the sin would be), than that it should be upheld by a nation on
143 the *mere* ground of maintaining property, for I think this a much greater sin. I think that
144 the worshipper of mammon will be in worse case before Christ's Judgment-seat than
145 the mistaken zealot. If a man must be one or the other (though he ought to be neither),
146 but if I must choose for him, I had rather he should be Saul raging like a wild beast
147 against the Church, than Gallio caring for none of these things, or Demas loving the
148 present world, or Simon trafficking with sacred gifts, or Ananias grudging Christ his
149 substance, and seeking to be saved as cheaply as possible. There would be more
150 chance of such a man's conversion to the Truth; and, if not converted, less punishment
151 reserved for him at the last day. Our Lord says to the Church of Laodicea, "I would thou
152 wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will cast
153 thee from My mouth!" [Rev. iii. 15, 16.]

154 Men, however, generally act from mixed motives; so I do not mean that they are at once
155 in a fearful peril, or as bad as fanatical revolutionists, for having some regard to the
156 security of property, while they defend what is called the Church Established;—far from
157 it, though I still think it would be better if the thought of religion absorbed all other
158 considerations:—but I am speaking against an avowed doctrine maintained in this day,

159 that religion has nothing to do with political matters; which will not be true till it is true
160 that God does not govern the world, for as God rules in human affairs, so must His
161 servants obey in them. And what we have to fear more than any thing else at this time
162 is, that persons who are sound on this point, and do believe that the concerns of the
163 nation ought to be carried on on religious principles, should be afraid to avow it, and
164 should ally themselves, *without protesting*, with those who deny it; lest they should keep
165 their own opinion to themselves, and act with the kindred of Gallio, Demas, Simon and
166 Ananias, on some mere secular basis, the mere defence of property, the security of our
167 institutions, considered merely as secular, the maintenance of our national greatness;
168 forgetting that, as no man can serve two masters, God and mammon, so no man can at
169 once be in the counsels of the servants of the two;—forgetting that the Church, in which
170 they and others are, is a net gathering of every kind; that it is no proof that others are to
171 be followed and supported in all things, because they happen to be in it and profess
172 attachment to it; and that though we are bound to associate in a general way with all
173 (except, indeed, such as openly break the rules of the Church, heretics, drunkards, evil
174 livers, and the like, who ought of course to be put out of it), yet we are not bound to
175 countenance all men in all they do, and are ever bound to oppose bad principles—
176 bound to attempt to raise the standard of faith and obedience in that multitude of men
177 whom, though we disapprove in many respects, we dare not affirm to be entirely
178 destitute of the life of the Holy Ghost, and not to suffer friend or stranger to take part
179 against the Truth without warning him of it according to our opportunities.

180 Lastly, this union of the True and the False in the Church, which I have been speaking
181 of, has ever existed in the governing part of it as well as among the people at large. Our
182 Saviour sets this truth before us in the twenty-third chapter of St. Matthew's gospel, in
183 which He bids His hearers obey their spiritual rulers in all lawful things, even though
184 they be unworthy of their office, because they hold it—obey "as unto the Lord and not to
185 men." "The Scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat; all, therefore, whatsoever they
186 bid you observe, that observe and do: but do not ye after their works, for they say, and
187 do not." And no one can read, ever so little, the history of the Church since He was on
188 earth, without perceiving that, under all the forms of obedience and subordination, of
189 kind offices and social intercourse, which Christ enjoins, a secret contest has been
190 carried on, in the most sacred chambers of the temple, between Truth and
191 Falsehood;—rightly, peaceably, lovingly by some, uncharitably by others, with a strange
192 mixture at times of right principles and defective temper, or of sincerity and partial
193 ignorance; still, on the whole, a contest such as St. John's against Diotrephes, or St.
194 Paul's against Ananias the High Priest, or Timothy's against Hymeneus and Alexander.
195 Meantime, the rules of ecclesiastical discipline have been observed on both sides, as
196 well as the professions of faith, as conditions of the contest; nevertheless, the contest
197 has proceeded.

198 Now I would have every one who hears me bring what I have said home as a solemn
199 truth to his own mind;—the solemn truth, that there is nothing indifferent in our conduct,
200 no part of it without its duties, no room for trifling, lest we trifle with eternity. It is very
201 common to speak of our political and social privileges as *rights*, which we may do what
202 we like with; whereas they merely impose *duties* on us in God's sight. A man says, "I

203 have a right to do this or that; I have a right to give my vote here or there; I have a right
204 to further this or that measure." Doubtless, you *have* a right—you have the right of
205 freewill—you have from your birth the birthright of being a free agent, of doing right or
206 wrong, of saving yourself or ruining yourself; you have the right, that is, you have the
207 power—(to speak plainly) the power to damn yourself; but (alas!) a poor consolation will
208 it be to you in the next world, to know that your ruin was all your own fault, as brought
209 upon you by yourself—for what you have said comes to nothing more than this; and be
210 quite sure, men do not lose their souls by some one extraordinary act, but by a course
211 of acts; and the careless, or rather, the self-sufficient and haughty-minded use of your
212 political power, this way or that, at your pleasure, which is now so common, is among
213 those acts by which men save or lose them. The young man whom Solomon speaks of,
214 thought he had a right to indulge his lusts, or, as the rich man in the Gospel, to "take his
215 ease, eat, drink, and be merry;" but the preacher says to him, "Rejoice, O young man in
216 thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of
217 thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: *but know thou, for all these things God will*
218 *bring thee into judgment.*" [Eccles. xi. 9.]

219 So, again, many a man, when warned against the sin of leaving the Church, or of
220 wandering about from one place of worship to another, says, "he has a right to do so."
221 So it is, he has a strange notion that it is an Englishman's right to think what he will, and
222 do what he will, in matters of religion. Nay, it *is* the right of the *whole world*, not ours
223 alone; it *is* the attribute of all rational beings to have a right to do wrong, if they will. Yet,
224 after all, there is but one right way, and there [are] a hundred wrong ways. You *may* do
225 as you will; but the first who exercised that right was the devil when he fell; and every
226 one of us, when he does this or that in matters between himself and his God, merely
227 because he *wills* it, and not for conscience' sake, is (so far) following the devil's pattern.

228 Now let us put aside these vain fancies, and look at our position steadily. Every one of
229 us here assembled is either a vessel of mercy or a vessel of wrath fitted to destruction;
230 or rather, I should say, *will be* such at the Last Day, and now is acting *towards* the one
231 or the other. We cannot judge each other, we cannot judge ourselves. We only know
232 about ourselves whether or no we are in some measure trying to serve God; we know
233 He has loved us and "blessed us with all spiritual blessings in Christ," and desires our
234 salvation. We know about others around us that they too have been blessed by the
235 same Saviour, and are to be looked on as our brethren, till, by word or deed, they
236 openly renounce their brotherhood. Still it is true that the solemn process
237 of *separation* between bad and good is ever going on. The net has at present gathered
238 of every kind. At the end of the world will be the final division; meanwhile there is a
239 gradual sorting and sifting, silent but sure, towards it. It is also true that all the matters
240 which come before us in the course of life are the trials of our faith, and instruments of
241 our purification. It is also true that certain principles and actions are right and others
242 wrong. It is true, moreover, that our part lies in finding out what is right, and observing
243 and contending for it. And without judging of our brethren's state, and, again, without
244 being over-earnest about little matters, it is our duty plainly to witness against others
245 when we think them wrong, and to impress our seriousness upon them by our very
246 manner towards them; lest we suffer sin in them, and so become partakers of it.

247 If all this be true, may God Himself, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, enable us
248 heartily to act upon it! May He give us that honesty and simplicity of mind, which looks
249 at things as He views them, realizes what is unseen, puts aside all the shadows and
250 mists of pride, party-feeling, or covetousness; and not only knows and does what is
251 right, but does it because it knows it, and that not from mere reason and on grounds of
252 argument, but from the heart itself, with that inward and pure sense, and scrupulous
253 fear, and keen faith, and generous devotion, which does not need arguments, except as
254 a means of strengthening itself, and of persuading and satisfying others.