Fifteen Sermons
Preached before the University of Oxford

John Henry Newman

Sermon 12
Love the Safeguard of Faith against Superstition

Preached on the Whit-Tuesday, 21 May 1839

“The sheep follow Him, for they know His voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him, for they know not the voice of strangers.”

John x. 4, 5.

FAITH, CONSIDERED AS AN EXERCISE OF REASON, has this characteristic,—that it proceeds far more on antecedent grounds than on evidence; it trusts much to presumptions, and in doing this lies its special merit. Thus it is distinguished from Knowledge in the ordinary sense of that word. We are commonly said to know a thing when we have ascertained it by the natural methods given us for ascertaining it. Thus we know mathematical truths, when we are possessed of demonstrative evidence concerning them; we know things present and material by our senses. We know the events of life by moral evidence; we know things past or things invisible, by reasoning from certain present consequences of the facts, such as testimony borne to them. When, for instance, we have ascertained the fact of a miracle by good testimony, the testimony of men who neither deceive nor are deceived, we may be said to know the fact; for we are possessed of those special grounds, of that distinct warrant in its behalf, which the nature of the case assigns and allows. These special grounds are often called the Evidence; and when we believe in consequence of them, we are said to believe upon Reason.

2. By the exercise of Reason, indeed, is properly meant any process or act of the mind, by which, from knowing one thing it advances on to know another; whether it be true or false Reason, whether it proceed from antecedent probabilities, by demonstration, or on evidence. And in this general sense it includes of course Faith, which is mainly an anticipation or presumption; but in its more popular sense (in which, as in former
Discourses, I shall here for the most part use it) it is contrasted with Faith, as
meaning in the main such inferences concerning facts, as are derived from
the facts in question themselves, that is from Evidences, and which lead
consequently to Knowledge.

3. Faith, then, and Reason, are popularly contrasted with one another;
Faith consisting of certain exercises of Reason which proceed mainly on
presumption, and Reason of certain exercises which proceed mainly upon
proof. Reason makes the particular fact which is to be ascertained the point
of primary importance, contemplates it, inquires into its evidence, not of
course excluding antecedent considerations, but not beginning with them.
Faith, on the other hand, begins with its own previous knowledge and
opinions, advances and decides upon antecedent probabilities, that is, on
grounds which do not reach so far as to touch precisely the desired
conclusion, though they tend towards it, and may come very near it. It acts,
before actual certainty or knowledge [Note 1], on grounds which, for the
most part, near as they may come, yet in themselves stand clear of the
definite thing which is its object. Hence it is said, and rightly, to be a venture,
to involve a risk; or again, to be against Reason, to triumph over Reason, to
surpass or outstrip Reason, to attain what Reason falls short of, to effect
what Reason finds beyond its powers; or again, to be a principle above or
beyond argument, not to be subject to the rules of argument, not to be
capable of defending itself, to be illogical, and the like.

4. This is a view of Faith on which I have insisted before now; and
though it is a subject which at first sight is deficient in interest, yet I believe
it will be found to repay attention, as bearing immediately on practice. It is,
moreover, closely connected with the doctrine laid down in the text, and
with the great revealed truth which we commemorate at this Season, and
with a view to which the Gospel for the day, of which the text forms a part,
has been selected.

5. To maintain that Faith is a judgment about facts in matters of conduct,
such, as to be formed, not so much from the impression legitimately made
upon the mind by those facts, as from the reaching forward of the mind itself
towards them,—that it is a presumption, not a proving,—may sound
paradoxical, yet surely is borne out by the actual state of things as they come
before us every day. Can it, indeed, be doubted that the great majority of
those who have sincerely and deliberately given themselves to religion, who
take it for their portion, and stake their happiness upon it, have done so, not
on an examination of evidence, but from a spontaneous movement of their
hearts towards it? They go out of themselves to meet Him who is unseen,
and they discern Him in such symbols of Him as they find ready provided
for them. Whether they examine afterwards the evidence on which their faith
may be justified or not, or how far soever they do so, still their faith does not
originate in the evidence, nor is it strong in proportion to their knowledge of
the evidence; but, though it may admit of being strengthened by such
knowledge, yet it may be quite as strong without it as with it. They believe
on grounds within themselves, not merely or mainly on the external
testimony on which Religion comes to them.

6. As to the multitude of professed Christians, they indeed believe on
mere custom, or nearly so. Not having their hearts interested in religion, they
may fairly be called mere hereditary Christians. I am not speaking of these,
but of the serious portion of the community; and I say, that they also, though
not believing merely because their fathers believed, but with a faith of their
own, yet, for that very reason, believe on something distinct from
evidence—believe with a faith more personal and living than evidence could
create. Mere evidence would but lead to passive opinion and knowledge; but
anticipations and presumptions are the creation of the mind itself; and the
faith which exists in them is of an active nature, whether in rich or poor,
learned or unlearned, young or old. They have heard or recollect nothing of
“interruptions of the course of nature,” “sensible miracles,” “men neither
deceivers nor deceived,” and other similar topics; but they feel that the
external religion offered them elicits into shape, and supplies the
spontaneous desires and presentiments of their minds; certain, as they are,
that some religion must be from God, though not absolutely certain or able
to prove, at starting, nay, nor asking themselves, whether some other form is
not more simply from Him than that which is presented to them.

7. The same view of Faith, as being a presumption, is also implied in our
popular mode of regarding it. It is commonly and truly said, that Faith is a
test of a man’s heart. Now, what does this really mean, but that it shows
what he thinks likely to be?—and what he thinks likely, depends surely on
nothing else than the general state of his mind, the state of his convictions,
feelings, tastes, and wishes. A fact is asserted, and is thereby proposed to the
acceptance or rejection of those who hear it. Each hearer will have his own
view concerning it, prior to the evidence; this view will result from the
character of his mind; nor commonly will it be reversed by any ordinary
variation in the evidence. If he is indisposed to believe, he will explain away
very strong evidence; if he is disposed, he will accept very weak evidence.
On the one hand, he will talk of its being the safer side to believe; on the
other hand, that he does not feel that he can go so far as to close with what is
offered him. That the evidence is something, and not every thing; that it tells
a certain way, yet might be more; he will hold, in either case: but then
follows the question, what is to come of the evidence, being what it is, and
this he decides according to (what is called) the state of his heart.

8. I do not mean that there is no extent or deficiency of evidence
sufficient to convince him against his will, or at least to silence him; but
commonly the evidence for and against religion, whether true religion or
false religion, in matter of fact, is not of this overpowering nature. Neither
do I mean that the evidence does not bear one way more than another, or
have a determinate meaning (for Christianity and against Naturalism, for the
Church and against every other religious body), but that, as things are, amid
the engagements, the confusion, and the hurry of the world, and, considering
the private circumstances of most minds, few men are in a condition to
weigh things in an accurate balance, and to decide, after calm and complete
investigations of the evidence. Most men must and do decide by the
principles of thought and conduct which are habitual to them; that is; the
antecedent judgment, with which a man approaches the subject of religion,
not only acts as a bearing this way or that,—as causing him to go out to meet
the evidence in a greater or less degree, and nothing more,—but, further, it
practically colours the evidence, even in a case in which he has recourse to
evidence, and interprets it for him.

9. This is the way in which judgments are commonly formed concerning
facts alleged or reported in political and social matters, and for the same
reason, because it cannot be helped. Act we must, yet seldom indeed is it
that we have means of examining into the evidence of the statements on
which we are forced to act. Hence statements are often hazarded by persons
interested, for the very purpose of bringing out the public mind on some
certain point, ascertaining what it thinks, and feeling how their way lies, and
what courses are feasible and safe. And, in like manner, startling or
unexpected reports are believed or disbelieved, and acted on in this way or
that, according as the hearer is or is not easy of belief or desirous of the
event, or furnished with precedents, or previously informed. And so in
religious matters, on hearing or apparently witnessing a supernatural
occurrence, men judge of it this way or that, according as they are credulous
or not, or wish it to be true or not, or are influenced by such or such views of
life, or have more or less knowledge on the subject of miracles. We decide
one way or another, according to the position of the alleged fact, relatively to
our existing state of religious knowledge and feeling.

10. I am not saying that such religious judgments are parallel to those
which we form in daily and secular matters, as regards their respective
chances of turning out correct in the event. That is another matter. Reports in
matters of this world are many, and our resources of mind for the
discrimination of them very insufficient. Religions are few, and the moral powers by which they are to be accepted or rejected, strong and correspondent. It does not follow, then, because even the most sagacious minds are frequently wrong in their antecedent judgments in matters of this world, that therefore even common minds need be wrong in similar judgments about the personal matters of the world unseen. It does not follow, because, in the insignificant matters of this world, à priori judgments run counter to judgments on evidence, that therefore, in the weightier matters of the next, a merciful Providence may not have so ordered the relation between our minds and His revealed will, that presumption, which is the method of the many, may lead to the same conclusions as examination, which is the method of the few. But this is not the point. I am not speaking of the trustworthiness of Faith, but of its nature: it is generally allowed to be a test of moral character. Now, I say that it is a test, as matters of this world show, only so far as it goes upon presumptions, whatever follows from this as to the validity of its inferences, which is another matter. As far, then, as its being a test of moral character is of the essence of religious Faith, so far its being an antecedent judgment or presumption is of its essence. On the other hand, when we come to what is called Evidence, or, in popular language, exercises of Reason, prejudices and mental peculiarities are excluded from the discussion; we descend to grounds common to all; certain scientific rules and fixed standards for weighing testimony, and examining facts, are received. Nothing can be urged, or made to tell, but what all feel, all comprehend, all can put into words; current language becomes the measure of thought; only such conclusions may be drawn as can produce their reasons; only such reasons are in point as can be exhibited in simple propositions; the multiform and intricate assemblage of considerations, which really lead to judgment and action, must be attenuated or mutilated into a major and a minor premiss. Under such circumstances, there is as little virtue or merit in deciding aright as in working a mathematical problem correctly; as little guilt in deciding wrongly as in mistakes in accounts, or in a faulty memory in history.

11. And, again:—As Faith may be viewed as opposed to Reason, in the popular sense of the latter word, it must not be overlooked that Unbelief is opposed to Reason also. Unbelief indeed, considers itself especially rational, or critical of evidence; but it criticizes the evidence of Religion, only because it does not like it, and really goes upon presumptions and prejudices as much as Faith does, only presumptions of an opposite nature. This I have already implied. It considers a religious system so improbable, that it will not listen to the evidence of it; or, if it listens, it employs itself in doing what
a believer could do, if he chose, quite as well, what he is quite as well aware can be done; viz., in showing that the evidence might be more complete and unexceptionable than it is. On this account it is that unbelievers call themselves rational; not because they decide by evidence, but because, after they have made their decision, they merely occupy themselves in sifting it. This surely is quite plain, even in the case of Hume, who first asks, “What have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses,” in favour of certain alleged miracles he mentions, “but the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events which they relate? And this surely,” he adds, “in the eyes of all reasonable people, will alone be regarded as a sufficient refutation;” that is, the antecedent improbability is a sufficient refutation of the evidence. And next, he scoffingly observes, that “our most holy Religion is founded on Faith, not on Reason;” and that “mere Reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity.” As if his infidelity were “founded on Reason,” in any more exact sense; or presumptions on the side of Faith could not have, and presumptions on the side of unbelief might have, the nature of proof.

12. Such, then, seems to be the state of the case, when we carefully consider it. Faith is an exercise of presumptive reasoning, or of Reason proceeding on antecedent grounds: such seems to be the fact, whatever comes of it. Let us take things as we find them: let us not attempt to distort them into what they are not. True philosophy deals with facts. We cannot make facts. All our wishing cannot change them. We must use them. If Revelation has always been offered to mankind in one way, it is in vain to say that it ought to have come to us in another. If children, if the poor, if the busy, can have true Faith, yet cannot weigh evidence, evidence is not the simple foundation on which Faith is built. If the great bulk of serious men believe, not because they have examined evidence, but because they are disposed in a certain way,—because they are “ordained to eternal life,” this must be God’s order of things. Let us attempt to understand it. Let us not disguise it, or explain it away. It may have difficulties; if so, let us own them. Let us fairly meet them: if we can, let us overcome them.

13. Now, there is one very serious difficulty in the view which I have taken of Faith, which most persons will have anticipated before I refer to it; that such a view may be made an excuse for all manner of prejudice and bigotry, and leads directly to credulity and superstition; and, on the other hand, in the case of unbelief, that it affords a sort of excuse for impenetrable obstancy. Antecedent probabilities may be equally available for what is true, and what pretends to be true, for a Revelation and its counterfeit, for Paganism, or Mahometanism, or Christianity. They seem to supply no intelligible rule what is to be believed, and what not; or how a man is to pass
from a false belief to a true. If a claim of miracles is to be acknowledged because it happens to be advanced, why not in behalf of the miracles of India, as well as of those of Palestine? If the abstract probability of a Revelation be the measure of genuineness in a given case, why not in the case of Mahomet, as well as of the Apostles? How are we to manage (as I may say) the Argument from Presumption in behalf of Christianity, so as not to carry it out into an argument against it?

14. This is the difficulty. It is plain that some safeguard of Faith is needed, some corrective principle which will secure it from running (as it were) to seed, and becoming superstition or fanaticism. All parties who have considered the subject seem to agree in thinking some or other corrective necessary. And here reasoners of a school which has been in fashion of late years have their answer ready, and can promptly point out what they consider the desired remedy. What, according to them, forms the foundation of Faith, is also its corrective. “Faith is built upon Reason [Note 2], and Reason is its safeguard. Cultivate the Reason, and in the same degree you lead men both to the acknowledgment, and also to the sober use of the Gospel. Their religion will be rational, inasmuch as they know why they believe, and what. The young, the poor, the ignorant, those whose reason is undeveloped, are the victims of an excessive faith. Give them, then, education; open their minds; enlighten them; enable them to reflect, compare, investigate, and infer; draw their attention to the Evidences of Christianity. While, in this way, you bring them into the right path, you also obviate the chance of their wandering from it; you tend to prevent enthusiasm and superstition, while you are erecting a bulwark against infidelity.”

15. This, or something like this, is often maintained, and, if correctly, it must be confessed, nothing can be more extravagant than to call Faith an exercise or act of Reason, as I have done, when, in fact, it needs Reason; such language does but tend to break down the partition-wall which separates Faith from Superstition, and to allow it to dissipate itself in every variety of excess, and to throw itself away upon the most unworthy and preposterous objects.

16. This is what, perhaps, will be objected; and yet I am not unwilling to make myself responsible for the difficulty in question, by denying that any intellectual act is necessary for right Faith besides itself; that it need be much more than a presumption [Note 3], or that it need be fortified and regulated by investigation; by denying, that is, that Reason is the safeguard of Faith. What, then, is the safeguard, if Reason is not? I shall give an answer, which may seem at once common-place and paradoxical, yet I believe is the true one. The safeguard of Faith is a right state of heart. This it is that gives it
birth; it also disciplines it. This is what protects it from bigotry, credulity, and fanaticism. It is holiness, or dutifulness, or the new creation, or the spiritual mind, however we word it, which is the quickening and illuminating principle of true faith, giving it eyes, hands, and feet. It is Love which forms it out of the rude chaos into an image of Christ; or, in scholastic language, justifying Faith, whether in Pagan, Jew, or Christian, is *fides formata charitate*.

17. “Verily, verily, I say unto you,” says the Divine Speaker, “I am the Door of the sheep … I am the Good Shepherd, and know My sheep, and am known of Mine.”

18. “Ye believe not, because ye are not of My sheep, as I said unto you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give unto them eternal Life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any one pluck them out of My hand.”

19. “He that entereth in by the door is the Shepherd of the sheep. To Him the porter openeth, and the sheep hear His voice, and He calleth His own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when He putteth forth His own sheep, He goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him, for they know His voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from Him, for they know not the voice of strangers.”

20. What is here said about exercises of Reason, in order to believing? What is there not said of sympathetic feeling, of newness of spirit, of love? It was from lack of love towards Christ that the Jews discerned not in Him the Shepherd of their souls. “Ye believe not, because ye are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and follow Me.” It was the regenerate nature sent down from the Father of Lights which drew up the disciples heavenward,—which made their affections go forth to meet the Bridegroom, and fixed those affections on Him, till they were as cords of love staying the heart upon the Eternal. “All that the Father giveth Me, shall come to Me. No man can come unto Me, except the Father which hath sent Me draw him. It is written in the Prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man, therefore, that hath heard and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto Me.”

It is the new life, and not the natural reason, which leads the soul to Christ. Does a child trust his parents because he has proved to himself that they are such, and that they are able and desirous to do him good, or from the instinct of affection? We believe, because we love [Note 4]. How plain a truth! What gain is it to be wise above that which is written? why, O men, deface with your minute and arbitrary philosophy the simplicity, the reality, the glorious liberty of the inspired teaching? Is this your godly jealousy for Scripture? this your abhorrence of human additions?
21. It is the doctrine, then, of the text, that those who believe in Christ, believe because they know Him to be the Good Shepherd; and they know Him by His voice; and they know His voice, because they are His sheep; that they do not follow strangers and robbers, because they know not the voice of strangers: moreover, that they know and follow Christ, upon His loving them. “I am come that they might have life … The hireling fleeth, because he is a hireling, and careth not for the sheep.” The divinely-enlightened mind sees in Christ the very Object whom it desires to love and worship,—the Object correlative of its own affections; and it trusts Him, or believes, from loving Him.

22. The same doctrine is contained in many other places, as in the second chapter of St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians. In this passage, doubtless, there are one or two expressions, which, taken by themselves, admit, and may well be taken to include, another interpretation: as a whole, however, it distinctly teaches the nothingness of natural Reason [Note 5], and the all-sufficiency of supernatural grace in the conversion of the soul. “And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom,” (with discussion, argument, elaborate proof, cumulation of evidence,) “declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified … And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom,” not with the reasonings of the schools, “but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power,” with an inward and spiritual conviction, “that your Faith should not stand in the wisdom of men,” natural Reason, “but in the power of God,” His regenerating and renewing influences. “But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned: but he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ.” Here a certain moral state, and not evidence, is made the means of gaining the Truth, and the beginning of spiritual perfection.

23. In like manner St. John: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us; but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us. But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things.” If this unction and this knowledge which God the Holy Ghost bestows, be a moral gift, (as who will deny?) then also must our departing from Christ arise from the want of a moral gift, and our adhering to Him must be the consequence of a moral gift.
24. Again:—"The anointing which ye have received of Him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you, but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is true and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in Him." [1 Cor. ii. 1, 2, 4, 14-16. 1 John ii. 19, 20-27.] Surely the faculty by which we know the Truth is here represented to us, not as a power of investigation, but as a moral perception.

25. If this, then, is the real state of the case (as I do think would be granted by all of us, if, discarding systems, we allowed Scripture to make its legitimate and full impression upon our minds), if holiness, dutifulness, or love, however we word it, and not Reason, is the eye of Faith, the discriminating principle which keeps it from fastening on unworthy objects, and degenerating into enthusiasm or superstition, it now follows, to attempt to analyze the process by which it does so. I mean, let us examine how it does so, what in the actual course of thinking and determining is the mode by which Love does regulate as well as animate Faith, guiding it in a clear and high path, neither enervated by excitement, nor depressed by bondage, nor distorted by extravagance. For till we have done this in some good measure, it is plain that we have made little advance towards grasping the meaning of the Scripture statements on the subject. I will make an endeavour this way, as far as time permits, and so bring my present remarks to an end.

26. Right Faith is the faith of a right mind. Faith is an intellectual act; right Faith is an intellectual act, done in a certain moral disposition. Faith is an act of Reason, viz. a reasoning upon presumptions; right Faith is a reasoning upon holy, devout, and enlightened presumptions. Faith ventures and hazards; right Faith ventures and hazards deliberately, seriously, soberly, piously, and humbly, counting the cost and delighting in the sacrifice. As far as, and wherever Love is wanting, so far, and there, Faith runs into excess or is perverted. The grounds of Faith, when animated by the spirit of love and purity, are such as these:—that a Revelation is very needful for man; that it is earnestly to be hoped for from a merciful God; that it is to be expected; nay, that of the two it is more probable that what professes to be a Revelation should be or should contain a Revelation, than that there should be no Revelation at all; that, if Almighty God interposes in human affairs, His interposition will not be in opposition to His known attributes, or to His dealings in the world, or to certain previous revelations of His will; that it will be in a way worthy of Him; that it is likely to bear plain indications of His hand; that it will be for great ends, specified or signified; and moreover, that such and such ends are in their nature great, such and such a message important, such and such means worthy, such and such circumstances congruous. I consider that under the guidance of such anticipations and
calculations as these, which Faith—not mere Faith, but Faith working by
Love—suggests, the honest mind may, under ordinary circumstances, be led,
and practically is led, into an acceptable, enlightened, and saving
apprehension of Divine Truth without that formal intimacy and satisfaction
with the special evidence existing for the facts believed, which is commonly
called Reasoning, or the use of Reason, and which results in knowledge.
Some instances will serve to explain how:—

27.  (1.) Superstition, in its grossest form, is the worship of evil spirits.
What the Gentiles sacrifice is done (we are told) “to devils, not to God;”
their table is “the table of devils.” “They offered their sons and their
daughters unto devils.” [1 Cor. x. 20. Ps. cvi. 37.] It is needless to say, that
the view above taken of the nature of Religious Faith has no tendency
towards such impieties. Faith, indeed, considered as a mere abstract
principle, certainly does tend to humble the mind before any thing which
comes with a profession of being supernatural; not so the Faith of a religious
mind, a right religious Faith, which is instinct with Love towards God and
towards man. Love towards man will make it shrink from cruelty; love
towards God from false worship. This is idolatry, to account creatures as the
primary and independent sources of providence and the ultimate objects of
our devotion. I say, the principle of Love, acting not by way of inquiry or
argument, but spontaneously and as an instinct, will cause the mind to recoil
from cruelty, impurity, and the assumption of divine power, though coming
with ever so superhuman a claim, real or professed. And though there are
cases in which such a recoil is erroneous, as arising from partial views or
misconceptions, yet on the whole it will be found a correct index of the state
of the case, and a safe direction for our conduct.

28.  (2.) Again: another kind of Superstition, as the word is usually
understood, is the payment of religious honour to things forbidden. Such
were some of the idolatries to which the Israelites surrendered themselves,
as the worship of the golden calf. Moreover, when a ritual has directly been
given from heaven, what is not commanded may be accounted forbidden,
except a power of making additions has been granted; it being the same
undutifulness to supersede or alter the revealed manner of approaching God
as to adopt means actually unlawful. Such might be the continued worship of
the Brazen Serpent, which, though at a certain juncture an ordained symbol
and instrument of God, nevertheless, in a rigid system of rites, such as the
Mosaic, could not be honoured in continuance at the people’s will,
especially with self-devised rites, without great undutifulness, or lack of love.
On the other hand, Nebuchadnezzar’s homage to Daniel, when the king “fell
on his face and worshipped him, and commanded that they should offer an
oblation and sweet odours unto him,” was accepted by the Prophet, as coming from a heathen, to whom such works of reverence had not been forbidden by any imposed ritual, and who on the other hand could not mean to acknowledge Daniel as the very source of prophetic knowledge, both because the Prophet had himself just declared that there was a “God in heaven that revealeth secrets, and maketh known to the king Nebuchadnezzar what shall be in the latter days,” and also because the king himself, while commanding the oblation, proceeds to say, “Of a truth it is that your God is a God of gods, and a Lord of kings, and a Revealer of secrets, seeing thou couldest reveal this secret.” Nebuchadnezzar then (it would seem) did not stop short of God; but honoured Daniel as God’s visible emblem, and that without any revealed prohibition of his doing so. And if so, his faith did not evince any deficiency of love, or any superstition.

29. (3.) Here we may lay it down as a principle, that what is superstition in Jew or Christian is not necessarily such in heathen; or what in Christian is not in Jew. Faith leads the mind to communion with the invisible God; its attempts at approaching and pleasing Him are acceptable or not, according as they are or are not self-willed; and they are self-willed when they are irrespective of God’s revealed will. It was a superstition in the Israelites, and not faith, to take the Ark to battle uncommanded, and they were punished with the loss of it. It was no superstition in the Philistines, abundantly superstitious and wicked as they otherwise were, to yoke the kine to the Ark, and to leave them to themselves to see what they would do; thus making trial of the Ark’s sacredness. It was a trial which could but be unsuccessful, but might give them assurance; and whatever of heathen irreverence there was in the circumstances of the action, yet still it was to a certain extent a tacit, or (if we will) an unwilling, acknowledgment of the God of Israel. Again, sacrifices of blood were not necessarily superstitious in heathen; they would be most superstitious and profane in Christians, as being superseded by the great Atonement made once for all, and the continual Memory of it in Holy Communion. On the other hand, the Sign of the Cross in Baptism would be superstitious, unless the Church had “power to decree rites and ceremonies in the worship of God.”

30. (4.) Again: when the barbarous people of Melita saw the viper fasten upon St. Paul’s hand, first they considered him a murderer, then a god. What is to be said of their conduct? Plainly it evinced Faith; but was it healthy Faith or perverted? On the one hand, they had a sense of the probability of supernatural interference such, as to lead them to accept this occurrence as more than ordinary, while they doubted and wavered in their interpretation of it according as circumstances varied. Faith accepted it as supernatural;
and in matter of fact they were not wrong in the main point. They judged rightly in thinking that God’s presence was in some immediate way with St. Paul; Reason, following upon Faith, attempted to deduce from it. Their reasoning was wrong, their faith was right. But did it not involve Superstition? We must distinguish here. It is no refinement, surely, to say that they were not superstitious, though their conduct, viewed in itself, was such. Their reasoning was superstitious in our idea of Superstition; I mean, with our superior knowledge of religious truth, we are able to say that they were seeing in things visible what was not there, and drawing conclusions which were not valid; but it needs to be proved that they acted preposterously or weakly under their circumstances. I am speaking, be it observed, of their incidental reasoning; and concerning this I say that it does not become us, who are blessed with light, which gives us freedom from the creature by telling us definitely where are the paths and dwelling-places of God in the visible world, to despise those who were “seeking Him, if haply they might feel after Him and find Him.” Superstition is a faith which falls below that standard of religion which God has given, whatever it is. We are accustomed naturally and fairly to define, according to our own standard, what things are abstractedly superstitious and what are not; but we have no right to apply this standard, in particular cases, to other men whose circumstances are different from our own.

31. (5.) The woman with the issue of blood, who thought to be healed by secretly touching our Lord’s garment, may perhaps be more correctly called superstitious than the barbarians of Melita. Yet it is remarkable that even she was encouraged by our Lord, and that on the very ground of her faith. In His judgment, then, a religious state of mind, which is not free from Superstition, may still be Faith,—nay, and high Faith. “Daughter,” He said, “be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace, and be whole of thy plague.” I have said that she showed a more superstitious temper than the people of Melita, inasmuch as what she did was inconsistent with what she knew. Her faith did not rise to the standard of her own light. She knew enough of the Good Shepherd to have directed her faith to Him as the one source of all good, instead of which she lingered in the circumstances and outskirts of His Divine Perfections. She in effect regarded the hem of His garment as an original principle of miraculous power, and thereby placed herself almost in the position of those who idolize the creature. Yet even this seems to have arisen from great humbleness of mind: like the servants of the ruler of the synagogue, who were then standing by, she feared probably to “trouble the Master” with her direct intercession; or like the Apostles on a subsequent occasion, who rebuked those who brought children for His touch,
she was unwilling to interrupt Him; or she was full of her own unworthiness, like the centurion who prayed that Christ would not condescend to enter his roof, but would speak the word instead, or send a messenger. She thought that a little one, such as herself, might come in for the crumbs from His table by chance, and without His distinct bidding, by the perpetual operation and spontaneous exuberance of those majestic general laws on which He wrought miracles. In all this,—in her faith and her humility, her faith tinged with superstition, her abject humility,—she would seem to resemble such worshippers in various ages and countries in the Christian Church, as have impaired their simple veneration of the Invisible, by an undue lingering of mind upon the outward emblems which they have considered He had blessed.

32. (6.) One more instance shall be added,—that of the Prophet from Judah, who had a message brought him by a lying Prophet in the name of the Lord, bidding him go home with him. Had he not been a Prophet himself, had he known for certain the other to have been a Prophet; nay, or even considering that that other called himself such, and that prophets then were in Israel, there would have been nothing very superstitious or wrong in his yielding to his solicitations. But of course the character of the act was quite changed, considering his own commission, and the express directions which had been given him how to conduct himself in the apostate land. If he went back with his seducer merely to refresh himself, as it would appear, of course neither Faith nor Superstition had any thing to do with his conduct, which was a mere yielding to temptation; but if he did suppose that he was thereby commending himself to God, he showed credulousness, not Faith.

33. And here we see why it is not Faith, but credulousness and superstition, to listen to idle tales of apparitions, charms, omens, and the like, which may be current even in a Christian land; viz. because we have already received a Revelation. The miracles, which we believe, indispose us to believe the report of other miracles which are external to the revealed system. We have found the Christ, we are not seeking. And much more, if the doctrine put forth in the professed revelation of today contradicts or invalidates the doctrine of those revelations which have been received from the beginning. Hence we are expressly warned in Scripture, that though an Angel from heaven preach unto us any other Gospel than that we have received, he must be pronounced anathema.

34. And this was the sin of the Judaizers, that having received the Spirit, they went back for perfection to the rites of the Law then abolished. In like manner the Israelites had been warned by Moses: "If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder come to pass whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let
us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the Lord your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” And hence it was a point of especial moment with St. Paul to prove that the Gospel was not an annulling of the Law, but its fulfilment, built upon it and intended by it; and that in the rejection of the Jews and the calling of the Gentiles, the old Church as well as the old Commandment was still preserved.

35. And thus, even in the case of the heathen, the Apostle was anxious to pay due respect to the truths which they already admitted, and to show that the Gospel was rather the purification, explanation, development, and completion of those scattered verities of Paganism than their abrogation. “Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship,” he says, “Him declare I unto you.” In other words, it was not his method to represent the faith, to which he exhorted his hearers, as a state of mind utterly alien from their existing knowledge, their convictions, and their moral character. He drew them on, not by unsettling them, but through their own system, as far as might be,—by persuasives of a positive nature, and which, while fitted to attract by their innate truth and beauty, excluded by their very presence whatever in Paganism was inconsistent with them. What they already were, was to lead them on, as by a venture, to what they were not; what they knew was to lead them on, upon presumptions, to what they as yet knew not. Neither of Jew nor of Gentile did he demand Faith in his message, on the bare antecedent ground that God was everywhere, and therefore, if so be, might be with himself in particular who spoke to them; nor, again, did he appeal merely to his miraculous powers; but he looked at men steadfastly, to see whether they had “faith to be healed;” he appealed to that whole body of opinion, affection, and desire, which made up, in each man, his moral self; which, distinct from all guesses and random efforts, set him forward steadily in one direction,—which, if it was what it should be, would respond to the Apostle’s doctrine, as the strings of one instrument vibrate with another,—which, if it was not, would either not accept it, or not abide in it. He taught men, not only that Almighty God was, and was everywhere, but that He had certain moral attributes; that He was just, true, holy, and merciful; that His representative was in their hearts; that He already dwelt in them as a lawgiver and a judge, by a sense of right and a conscience of sin; and that what he himself was then bringing them fulfilled what was thus begun in them by nature, by tokens so like the truth, as to constrain all who loved God under the Religion of Nature to believe in Him as revealed in the Gospel.

36. Such, then, under all circumstances, is real Faith; a presumption, yet
not a mere chance conjecture,—a reaching forward, yet not of excitement or of passion,—a moving forward in the twilight, yet not without clue or direction;—a movement from something known to something unknown, but kept in the narrow path of truth by the Law of dutifulness which inhabits it, the Light of heaven which animates and guides it,—and which, whether feeble and dim as in the Heathen, or bright and vigorous as in the Christian, whether merely the awakening and struggling conscience, or the “affection of the Spirit,” whether as a timid hope, or in the fulness of love, is, under every Dispensation, the one acceptable principle commending us to God for the merits of Christ. And it becomes superstition or credulity, enthusiasm or fanaticism, or bigotry, in proportion as it emancipates itself from this spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and ghostly strength, of knowledge and true godliness, and holy fear. And thus I would answer the question how it may be secured from excess, without the necessity of employing what is popularly called Reason for its protection,—I mean processes of investigation, discrimination, discussion, argument, and inference. It is itself an intellectual act, and it takes its character from the moral state of the agent. It is perfected, not by intellectual cultivation, but by obedience. It does not change its nature or its function, when thus perfected. It remains what it is in itself, an initial principle of action; but it becomes changed in its quality, as being made spiritual. It is as before a presumption, but the presumption of a serious, sober, thoughtful, pure, affectionate, and devout mind. It acts, because it is Faith; but the direction, firmness, consistency, and precision of its acts, it gains from Love.

37. Let these remarks suffice, insufficient as they are in themselves, on the relation and distinction between Faith and Superstition. Other important questions, however, remain, which have a claim on the attention of all who would gain clear notions on an important and difficult subject.