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A N
ENQUIRY
INTO THE
CAUSES of the DECAY
OF THE
Dissenting INTEREST.
IN A
LETTER
TO A
DISSENTING MINISTER.

*Justum & tenacem propositi Virum
Non Civium ardor PRAVA JUBENTIUM,*

*Non Vultus instantis tyranni
Mente quatit solidâ ; ----*

HOR.

Nullum Numen abest si sit PRUDENTIA ---

JUV.

L O N D O N :

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A

LETTER

TO A

Dissenting Minister.

Reverend SIR,

I Can't but think the conversation we lately had with some friends about the dissenting interest might be very useful, if made more publick, because tho' every one is sensible it gradually declines, yet no one has endeavour'd to recover it, tho' a great part of that company thought it not difficult to effect. I believe this is owing to our disagreement as to the *causes* of its decay, and unless the causes are found out a remedy cannot possibly be apply'd, but it must continue consuming 'till it is quite worn out and spent. You may remember there were many reasons hereof assign'd at that time, some of which appear to have but very little, if any, pretence to it. Such as the lenity of the government, the want of a persecution to keep us together, the loss of a puritanical spirit, &c. As to the first, I can't think it to

be any cause, for men are rather apt perversely to abuse the lenity of the government, and to go in direct opposition to it, and those who can suffer *persecution* for the truth, would certainly act consistently with it at other times; but if it be indeed the reason, then the interest is not worth supporting, because 'twould be founded upon mere obstinacy, and proceed from a spirit of contradiction. The last cannot be the cause, inasmuch as the true puritanical spirit is not lost, but rather carry'd farther and improv'd. The spirit of the good old Puritans was nothing else but a spirit of *liberty*; and considering what they suffer'd in the defence of it, they cannot but be thought as much superiour to the Patrons of civil liberty, as civil liberty is inferiour to religious. Indeed some of them had a few *oddities* mix'd with this generous sentiment, which it must be acknowledg'd were ridiculous enough; and these have been improv'd by witty and sarcastical men to the prejudice of their sentiments. But their successors have by degrees thrown them off, and still continue to do so, 'till 'tis to be hop'd they will in time entirely vanish, that so their true spirit, abstracted therefrom, may appear in its own colours, bright and lively, and be valu'd as the alone principle, not only of dissenting, but even of truth and religion themselves. So that I think the grand causes of the present decay of the dissenting interest are

igno-

ignorance of their own principles, and *ill conduct* and management of their own interests.

The first of these must be one cause, for when they are rightly understood they are unanswerable. They are only those of the *reformation* carry'd farther than in the Church of *England*; and 'tis surprizing how any who pretend to be *reform'd* can entertain that enmity to them, which has always been more or less strong in those who call themselves *Tories*. But especially I'm surpriz'd at those who have wrote in *other* cases upon the same principles. How then comes it to pass we should be branded as upstarts? for our principles are not new, but eternally true and sacred; or that any who have ever heard of them should be ashame'd of, or renounce them? So that I am perswaded those who leave us either have never thoroughly learnt them, or else their circumstances are so unhappy that, either from the perverseness of those they have to do with, or else from their own private affairs, they cannot act consistently with them.

Therefore for the benefit of those who have been bred in ignorance, or instructed in false principles, I think, Sir, 'twould be very proper to acquaint the world what our *true* sentiments are, and to disclaim those which are prejudicial to truth, and introductory of bigotry and enthusiasm; for such are not only false but vicious. And yet how many dissenters are there who have run into them,
and

and thereby driven others from us who see their absurdity, if they do not examine whether we have any thing more solid, and convincing to say for ourselves. I never yet met with any who could withstand the force of them, when they were rightly explain'd ; and even those who are led to approve the ceremonies of the establishment, as proper enough in a *political* view, yet can never vindicate them when objected against upon the foot of liberty.

The fundamental principle of the dissenters is, as I apprehend, a *liberty* for every man to form his own sentiments, and to pursue them by all lawful and regular methods ; to disclaim the *impositions* of men, and to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience. It supposes that God has given to all men capacities of understanding their obligations to him ; and therefore as every man is accountable to God for his actions, he is under the strictest obligations to act according to *his own* knowledge, and whenever he does not, he is guilty of a voluntary violation of truth. It supposes the scriptures to be a sufficient rule of the conduct of men, as well in religious as in secular affairs, and that no one has a right to enjoin things as *necessary* to church-communion which are not enjoin'd in the scriptures ; and that the arguments from *antiquity* and the practice of the *primitive church* are not a sacred and

and infallible rule for our practice, because then they would not have been left to the discretion even of the Antients themselves, but been mention'd by the Apostles, who only were inspir'd; and however we may follow any of their customs as fit and proper enough, yet we are not to pay them any particular reverence, or to acknowledge a *divine right* in them. That as the circumstances of churches, or private societies vary, so their method of worship and communion must likewise vary; and however it may be proper for them to agree upon certain customs and ceremonies amongst themselves, yet they must not be consider'd as binding the conscience; and therefore 'tis proper sometimes to alter them, lest custom should seem to bear the stamp of authority. It supposes that the Church of Christ is not *national* but private, and since neither our Saviour, nor his Apostles have laid down any rules for the government of the churches, no particular rules were design'd for all churches in every particular place, but were left to the discretion of every one, according as they appear'd best suited to answer the purposes of religious worship therein. This is the reason why we differ amongst ourselves, tho' that has been objected against us, because we have all an equal right to judge for ourselves, and one church has the same liberty of making *discretionary rules* as another. This seems absolutely inconsistent

consistent with any national establishment and imposition, and the same reasons that induce us to dissent in *England* would lead us to the same in *Rome*, or at *Scotland*.

This is the general opinion of the dissenters, stedfast and unmoveable in all places, and at all times; I mean of those who understand themselves. It must be allow'd there are many who dissent from the establishment, not upon this principle, but because they think their own method of worship to be the only scriptural method, and plead as strictly, and with as much bigotry for it, as the highest in the Church of *England* do for the *divine right* of episcopacy. But these I shall reject afterwards, and shew not only their tendency to destroy the dissenting interest, but the necessity of our dissenting as entirely from them as from the establishment. I am now, Sir, only speaking of those who are in the same generous free sentiments with yourself, and who have long renounced all bigotry and enthusiasm.

And if those which I have mention'd be our genuine opinions, let us consider how necessarily they oblige us to decline the communion of the establishment, both as to the *clergy* and the *laity*, for there are great, tho' not equal hardships that are impos'd upon each.

As to the *clergy*, their hardship consists, not only in submitting to all the forms and cere-

ceremonies; which the laity must likewise submit to, and which 'tis impossible they can always approve of; but they are likewise oblig'd to subscribe in the most solemn manner that they *assent* to the truth of every tittle contain'd in the book of common prayer and the homilies, and that they *consent* to the use of them upon all the times therein mention'd; as likewise to the truth of thirty nine articles drawn up in the time of Queen Elizabeth, for the avoiding diversities, of opinions, and for the establishing consent touching true religion. I will not now dispute the truth of any of these articles, but only say in the general that there are many of the best and wisest of the Church of England that cannot believe some of them to be true in any sense whatever; and there are others the whole current of whose opinions run contrary to them. 'Tis well known the generality of the Divines of the Church are in the opinions commonly call'd Arminian, and that these articles are compil'd in a Calvinistical strain, and are not true in any Arminian sense whatever; and therefore we find that some who at their first promotion could subscribe to them, as literally true, have yet afterwards, upon a change of sentiment, declin'd preferment, rather than make a declaration so contrary to their consciences; for, you know, they are oblig'd to subscribe to them upon every new preferment.

Now what an infinite hardship is this ! and what a shrewd temptation either to perjure themselves, or leave the church and turn dissenters ? and, which of the two is more preferable, let even the most virulent advocates for the establishment determine.

There are but two arguments for this subscription, or rather excuses for it, for most of the arguments for impositions are only excuses for them ; and they are, either that they may be subscrib'd in any *scriptural sense*, or else they *now* mean just nothing at all, and are only preserv'd as an old ceremony in the church, to prevent innovations. This you know, Sir, has often been said, and Bishop Burnet has endeavour'd, in his preface to the articles, to show that, tho' they must be assented to, yet they may be taken in *any* sense the subscriber can put upon them to make them literally true ; and quotes a royal declaration in King James I's time, that *no man thereafter shall put his own sense or comment to be the meaning of the articles, but shall take them in the literal and grammatical sense*; and thence infers that persons on both sides of a question may subscribe them. And there are many of the Bishops who, at ordinations, will not hear the senses they are taken in, but only require the candidates to satisfy themselves. These are the shifts that are made to vindicate a thing of the worst consequences imaginable. Moreover as to

the use of some of the ceremonies which are not only unscriptural but absurd, and which they have *consented* to the use of, if the Dignitary cannot comply with them himself, 'tis, some of them think, only to keep a Curate in such low circumstances that he must be forced to it. Thus how many of the superior clergy never read the common prayer, and especially the creed of *Athanasius*? Now this being the case what abundant reason have all your brethren for their dissenting ? and how great an instance of virtue is it to move in a lower sphere of life, and submit to many inconveniences that are put upon them, for the sake of their consciences and a regard to truth ? for it must be acknowledg'd that many of them, if they could comply with the impositions of the church, would be entitled, by their learning and piety, to considerable preferments, and such considerable preferments have sometimes been laid as baits to draw them into it.

But let us see how unreasonable this subscription is in either of the two views that have been mention'd, and then how right it is to dissent, and how much more inconvenient it would be to the conscience to comply with them, than 'tis to their worldly circumstances to avoid them. You know, Sir, there are many who think the very word *conscience* implies something superstitious and enthusiastical ; but since we pretend to dissent

only upon a rational account, we must let these gentlemen know that we mean by *conscience* nothing else but reason, honour, integrity, &c. and that 'tis the rule whereby we judge of the lawfulness or unlawfulness of our actions, and the principle that tells us whether we do right or wrong.

As to the first, that they may be subscrib'd to in any scriptural sense ; this cannot answer their end, which is to prevent *diversities of opinions*, because then 'tis no more than an assent to the truth of such particular passages of scripture ; and how absurd is it to give an explanation of scripture, for so 'twas originally intended, which must afterwards be explain'd by the scripture. This is to explain or prove a thing by itself, which is both needless and tedious, because an assent to the one is an assent to the other. But supposing some of them would admit of no scriptural sense at all, as, if I was a Clergy-man and call'd upon to subscribe, would be the case with me, then I must either in a manner perjure myself, or else be debarr'd of that service to men's best interests which I might think myself capable of. I do not say there cannot possibly be any scriptural sense put on the articles upon any scheme of christians, but then this must effectually exclude innumerable of the wisest and most learned of the clergy ; for when they are subscrib'd in a scriptural sense, it must mean not according to the *letter* but the interpretation of

of scripture, and let any, but the most rigid *Calvinists*, thus subscribe them, if they can. But if by subscribing them in a scriptural sense be meant bringing them to suit with any *words* of scripture, then what is it we may not subscribe to? that God is corporeal, because we read of his eyes, hands, &c. or to the doctrine of transubstantiation, for our Saviour has literally said this *is* my body. I could by this rule receive any preferments in the Church of *Rome*, if the condition was that I would subscribe to this doctrine, tho' I meant according to the protestant interpretation of that passage, *this is my body*, that is, this is the resemblance of my body. But what would our Bishops say, if a Presbyterian was to do this at *Rome*? 'Tis plain this was not the view of the compilers, and I believe no one ever thought it was; all then that can be said for it is, that 'tis the view of the present government who now impose them. But where has the government made this declaration? The requirement of this subscription is to be consider'd as an act of parliament, which is in full force, 'till 'tis abrogated or explained; but neither of these have been done. The private declarations in conversation of any who are concern'd in the government cannot alter the design of them, any more than the dislike of any one member of parliament to an old statute can repeal it, without a publick assent of the *whole legislature.*

gislature. So that the way of subcribing them in any private or particular sense will not do ; but they are to be consider'd in the original sense of the compilers, or else they *now* mean just nothing, but are only an old ceremony preserv'd in the church, to prevent innovations.

But is this honest, or is it not a very near approach to perjury ? Do the ceremonies and solemnity of the subscription signify nothing ? Are they a mere farce ? Can they satisfy themselves with so solemn a mockery both of God and man ? certainly they have little reason to expect to receive the *Holy Ghost*, after they have thus publickly ly'd to him. I know not how 'tis possible a man can do this with an upright mind, either with regard to the thing itself, or to the very evil consequences of it upon all truth and common morality. The thing itself cannot be vindicated from a crime almost as bad as perjury, and the consequence is to set an example of it to the laity. With what face can a man dissuade them from trifling with serious things, when he has done it so egregiously himself ? What is become of justice, truth, and fidelity, if this be allow'd ? What is it a man may not say, or swear to, for valuable considerations ? Where is that strict adherence to truth which is not only inculcated in the christian revelation, but is a principle of nature ? Why might not the primitive christians have

have sacrific'd to idols, deny'd their Master, and so avoided persecution, since they meant nothing more by it than an outward ceremony which in the sight of God meant nothing at all? How is it possible a man can ever suffer for truth, and be a martyr in its cause? -- But, such Sir, are you and your brethren, since you are often ridicul'd and contemn'd, sometimes abandon'd to misery and want, for not doing that which in *civil* cases the pillory would punish! What an infinite pleasure is the satisfaction of your own minds, beyond the thousands which a contrary practice might procure!

Upon the whole, this subscription is absurd, because it absolutely prevents all searches and enquiries after truth, and only tends to shackle the mind, or to betray it into vice. It does not keep any out of the church but men of honesty and integrity; for those either of no principles, or of very unstable ones, will not scruple it, and then it does not avoid diversities of opinions, but encourages the very worst of all opinions, that a man may subscribe any thing for a *living*. Why then is it not entirely laid aside, since answers no one valuable purpose, but it may have the worst consequences imaginable? Bishop Burnet has declar'd this subscription cannot lawfully be made, as to *articles of peace*. And indeed how can an honest man be at peace, while the world is in an error that he
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can correct. If he can, he may subscribe to *Mahometanism* in Turkey, that is, since 'tis the establish'd religion there, he will not dispute against it; and so 'tis impossible a false establishment can ever be laid aside, and truth introduc'd.

If these be the consequences of subscription in all views, why does not the government either take it away, or else publickly explain what is *now* meant by it, that so there may be no temptation to that which honest minds ought not to do, and generous ones cannot. Can men consent to the use of the common prayer, who think some things in it to be so absurd, that 'tis an affront to the Divine Being to offer it to him? How many are there who think *Athanasius's* creed to be the most inconsistent jargon that ever was invented, and yet 'tis read, at certain seasons of the year, in the most solemn manner, *as the catholick faith which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved*. I know there are many shifts made use of to excuse this, as that those, who do not believe it themselves, repeat it not as their own faith, but only as the faith of *Athanasius*, and the Church of *England*. But how then are the *people* of *England* taught? why, to believe that a great part of the clergy will be damn'd, since there are a great part of them that do not believe it. And thus a man who either resolves to search into religion

gion for himself, which every good christi-an and honest man ought to do, must either abide out of the church, or else play the hypocrite in it. For if he teaches the people his own opinions in opposition to those of the church, he has *manifestly* sub-scrib'd to what he did not believe ; if he does not, he is instrumental in keeping them in ignorance. But I shall say no more on this head, because I know, Sir, you have read and justly approv'd a pamphlet entitled, *The Difficulties and Discouragements which attend the Study of the Scriptures in the Way of private Judgment, represented in a Letter to a young Clergyman*, said to be written by a Gentleman who is since advanced to a bishoprick. This I wish the people would universally read, because it has a strength and conviction of argument that no considerations whatsoever should overcome ; and 'tis to be hop'd this Reverend Prelate will now do his endeavour to take these discouragements away, which the title-page says was his design in writing it.

These, Sir, you know are the hardships that lie upon the clergy, and keep you and your brethren out of the church ; yet, I think, are not peculiar to the clergy, but lie pretty heavy upon the laity too. For it seems to be principally out of regard to them, that these impositions are preserv'd, because they cannot bear any alterations in that

which they have been accustom'd to think sacred. I have met with many of the lower sort, who esteem the common prayer to be of equal authority with the scriptures themselves: and this renders it very improper to bind them up together, as is too common, and I think no small affront to the *holy Bible*. Now persons of better sense must be exposed to these things, for the sake of vulgar prejudices. Thus who could be grave to hear Mr. *Addison*, or Mr. *Pope*, chaunting out the Psalms of *Sternhold* and *Hopkins*? when Dr. *Watt's*, which have all the charms of poetry in them, cannot be sung in a church without publick authority.

It must be confess'd, there are many excellent things in the common prayer; some of the ceremonies are very grave and decent, and many of the prayers are incomparably the best that are extant, and as good as could be devis'd. But are there not others that are very exceptionable, and cannot well be joined with? Why may not these be laid aside? or what injury would it be, if every Clergyman had a liberty of reading them, or leaving them out, according as he and his congregation shall approve, or dislike them? If they are only *human* composures, why should such regard be paid to them, than which no stronger can be paid to those that are *divine*? and every one must as universally agree to them? I think this is a very

ry great hardship both upon clergy and laity, and effectually deprives both of that liberty of *private judgment*, which they have an indisputable right to. 'Tis wonderful they do not exert themselves, and stand up for their rights and privileges ; and that *Englishmen*, who cannot bear the thought of *civil slavery*, can yet be zealous for *ecclesiastical*. Dissenters think it an inconsistency to be *Englishmen*, and not to be in possession of the liberty of their consciences.

The laity should consider that if they were universally against impositions, it would not be in the power of the clergy to lay them upon them ; and therefore they are in a great measure accessory even to those which are put upon the *freer* clergy themselves. And however they may think it excusable to comply with the authority of the *civil magistrate*, for that is all that can be said for them, yet I thought it had been long incontestable that the *civil magistrate* has no power in matters of a religious nature ; for if he has any at all, he has the same in *Turky*, at *Rome*, in *Scotland* and all other parts of the world ; and the same reasons of order, decency, &c. will be as strong there as here. Why then should they give up a right to the magistrate, which he can have no reasonable claim to ? The whole right he has at all is deriv'd only from the consent of the people ; but the people have always, in *free countries*, reserv'd

some previledges, as sacred, to themselves, which they ought not, nor cannot part with. Such are those of judging of the conduct of the magistrate, of writing and speaking freely on all subjects, and consequently the liberty of the press ; and whenever the government has endeavour'd to deprive them of these, they have immediately grown jealous of slavery, and some way or other prevented it: and all those who, have not stood up in their defence, have been thought enemies to the constitution. But certainly the liberty of judging for themselves in matters of religion is infinitely preferable to these, and what they ought never to resign upon any views whatsoever. And if every church was to use a private method of worship of their own, and *christianity* only, in general, was to be the establish'd religion in these kingdoms, what would be the prejudice? Men would search into those matters for themselves, and heats of party, which have had the most mischievous consequences of any thing, would be absolutely impossible, because then none of them could be uppermost; and 'tis likely no other zeal but that for brotherly love could prevail amongst us. Men could not have less religion, for it is not true religion that is forc'd ; but every one's, when 'tis his own, would be most likely to be genuine. These are the desirable consequences of private judgment, and

and these are the principles of the Dissenters.

I believe, Sir, we are all agreed that the civil magistrate has a right to annex what preferments and rewards he pleases, to learning and merit, and that the Bishops, as they are creatures of the civil power, are to be honour'd as Nobility ; and whoever will not give their Lordships that respect which is due to their quality, over and above their personal merit, is whimsical and unmannerly. But when they pretend to convey *spiritual gifts*, and that no one can be a Minister of Christ who is not regularly ordain'd by them ; when they pretend to be the lineal successors of the Apostles, and have a divine authority for governing the churches, they are so far from deserving honour that they should be despis'd. This I should not have mention'd, but thought it an exploded opinion, if Mr. *Betty* had not, in a Sermon to a full and reverend assembly at *Oxford*, and dedicated to his Lordship of that diocese, again reviv'd it. But as I believe the laity are not so very priest-ridden as to become proselytes to him, I shall only say that the civil magistrate, upon whom he and all in the establishment depend, is, in my opinion, too indulgent, in not calling him to account for his insolence in setting himself and his brother *representatives of God* so much superior to him,

him, as to be *superior to Angels and Archangels themselves.* These opinions are very prejudicial to society, and I think the most justly punishable of any.

Such authority as this you, Sir, and your brethren do not pretend to claim, and for that reason are to be honour'd, since you have every whit as much right to it, and I believe have receiv'd *the Spirit of God*; tho' not *the Holy Ghost* from the hands of a diocesan Bishop. If learning, virtue, and piety are meritorious, how many dissenting Ministers have merit? and why do not the laity rather espouse your cause, than the cause of such vain and pert pretenders? For Clergymen of every denomination are only valuable for their personal, not for their reflected merit, whether from their predecessors, or from the government. However if the laity are willing to be impos'd upon, there is no help for it, they must be indulg'd. I know there are some of them who think 'tis no imposition, since they *conform* out of their own choice, and may, by the toleration, go to separate congregations, if they please. But they are not free in either case; the only difference is this, in one they *give up* their liberty, in the other 'tis *taken away* from them.

But besides this general consideration of imposition, I think, they may make several particular objections to the ceremonies of the

the church, and see the hardships that lie upon them. The general rule in the scripture for religious worship is, that *all things should be done decently and in order.* But what an indecent noise is made by the responses? the most confus'd and harsh one can hear! What superstition in bowing to the altar, and the cross in baptism? But above all, what tender parent can be willing to give up his own natural right over his child, and have it dedicated in baptism by others? This seems one of the most absurd ceremonies of the whole. Nay by the 29th canon 'tis exprefly ordain'd that *no parent shall be urg'd to be present, nor be admitted to answer as god-father for his own child.* The reverend Mr. *Harrison* who has lately got an *unmixed light* into those things, which he and all his former brethren had been before in *obscure darkness* about, labours to vindicate this ceremony, especially against the objection of its abuse; tho' he has forgot to justify his subscription which is the main objection to his proceeding of all. But surely he ought to think that parents, the nearest relation of all, and who have the most tender affection for their own offspring, would, if they are serious in the matter, be very glad to offer them up to God themselves, and are most nearly engag'd to provide for them. This objection was strong at the first establishment of it, but more especially is it so now, when
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the pernicious consequences of it have been so much felt; how few are there that perform the promise they make, or who is there that does not turn it into jest? This single imposition would keep me from their communion, since I could not in conscience ask a Minister who has subscrib'd to the canons to administer the ordinance without it; for the 38th says, *a minister who omits to use the form of common prayer, or any of the orders or ceremonies prescrib'd in the communion book, let him be suspended;* and so I must be either a stranger at my child's baptism, or else tempt the Minister to break the solemn promise he has made. Parents, who are unnatural enough to approve of this, are incapable of being reason'd out of it; and as to the rest, let their affections to their children speak. I shall mention but one notorious imposition more, for I would not appear tedious or disputatious, and that is, *kneeling* at the communion. I do not object to the posture itself; there are many who think it the most reverend of any, and they ought to use it; but there are others who scruple it, and therefore ought to be excus'd. But if the most did agree in it, why should it be made *necessary* to communion, so that whosoever will not comply with it must be excluded? Would the decency, solemnity, or validity of the ordinance be less, if some kneel'd, others were prostrate, and others stood? certainly not,

not, for there would be a greater appearance of true devotion, and less of coldness and formality.

So that all these restraints in the church are very great hardships upon the laity, and I wonder they so universally comply with them; but more especially at those who were *call'd unto Liberty* amongst the Dissenters, but yet have forsaken it, and voluntarily put on the fetters of the church. If they have known these to be the principles of the Dissenters, I know not what to say, but that either they are in love with bondage, or else they cannot act consistently with those principles, and they may as well be impos'd upon in the church as out of it; indeed I cannot say but they had, especially the clergy, who are in the way of getting more by it.

And here I wish, Sir, I could rather ex-postulate with them that they are mistaken, than join with them in the complaint. These principles are so exceeding good that none but those, who have too extravagant an opinion of their own power, and who delight to exercise it, can oppose them, as soon as they are mention'd; and I have seen persons always educated Dissenters (who yet thro' some dislike, or other, have been going off to the church) surpriz'd to hear there were principles so strong to detain them. And there are many who have no objection to

the ceremonies in themselves, that yet, when they consider' them as *impositions*, cannot but object to them, but are forc'd to comply with them, because they think there is something equivalent among the Dissenters.

Too many of the younger people know no other reasons for their separation, than because 'tis a *sin* for the Minister to wear a surplice, or bow towards the altar, or for themselves to bow at the name of *Jesus*, read their prayers &c. but when they come to consider these things, and find no immorality in them; that they are *establish'd* ceremonies, and many of them grave, solemn, and cheerful, they fancy 'tis only a whim to stand out for things of lesser importance, and so resign their liberty at once, and ten to one become zealous for their chains. But this is thinking by halves, and indeed if they think no farther they may be as easy in the church as any-where. I personally know many who have been thus drawn into it, and have nothing to say in answer to the principles I have mention'd, but that they do not see they are *practis'd* among us. Indeed it must be acknowledg'd there is generally so much *bigotry*, and manag'd in so *disagreeable* a way, that I do not wonder at the decay of our interest. When men are as warm for disputable opinions of their own, as for the ceremonies of worship, 'tis as well to comply with the last as with the first, and of all

all *Tories*, dissenting *Tories* are the most inconsistent. But when men will practise as freely as they think, 'tis then only they are truly unanswerable.

The different denominations of Presbyterians, Independents, and Baptists arise from different notions of the government of the church and its communion; but heats and contentions about them seem happily to be laid aside, and they agree in a friendly manner amongst each other, tho' all think their particular one to be the scriptural method. Let them enjoy their sentiment with freedom, as long as they do not quarrel about it or avoid one another upon its account; for a friendly dissention here is as necessary as from the church. I must own I think none of them to be the only scriptural method, because there is no method at all laid down in the scriptures, but is left to the discretion of them all: but 'tis plain every one ought to follow what *he thinks* to be the scriptural method, as long as he does not impose it as such upon the rest. If they would but enjoy their other sentiments in as friendly a manner, we might have a good prospect; but 'till then I am quite out of hopes. For their different characteristicks are now from their different notions in metaphysical disputes; and *Calvinism*, *Arminianism*, *Baxterianism*, or *Arianism* are to each other a mutual term of reproach; insomuch that even the lower and most

ignorant sort of people have often fallen out about these things, tho' they know no more of them than the Lady who would not suffer her daughter to marry an *Arminian*, merely because he was so. And how can this be otherwise when Ministers are perpetually writing and preaching against each other, each party as warm, as if the whole salvation of mankind depended upon their faith in these dubious matters? The unhappy difference at *Salters-Hall* injur'd the dissenting interest more than all their enemies together. Many who acted consistently with their principles were thereby driven to the greatest inconveniences, and their opponents spirited up their congregations to use them ill, and sometimes even to a necessity of leaving them for ever. But where was the liberty for *every man to be fully persuaded in his own mind?* when he was oblig'd, not to consult his own sentiments, but the humour of his people. How many were forc'd to quit the ministry entirely, because they could not conform to the establish'd impositions either of the Church of *England*, or those which the Dissenters themselves introduc'd in their stead? when they ought rather to have been valu'd as men of honesty and principle; for what could be a greater demonstration of it, than to sacrifice their own interests to what they thought the publick good?

Sir,

Sir, I do not mention this to revive the unhappy difference, no, 'twould grieve me to be the instrument of any new mischief ! I only mention it to shew that such disputes tend to weaken the common interest, and occasion its destruction : How often have the people reproach'd you, that the Ministers can't agree among themselves ? If they mean in sentiment, 'tis impossible. If they mean in brotherly love, the reproach is too just, and you do not follow your principles. For my own part, I value moderate men of each side the question ; those who subscrib'd in the fear of God, and in brotherly love, testify'd their zeal for what they thought the christian faith ; and those who did not subscribe, with the same temper, testify'd their zeal for what they thought to be christian liberty, and the principles of the Dissenters. The design of each was good, as long as they stopp'd there ; but it became evil, when they tended to inflame their own passions and their people's, and denounc'd too hard and severe censures upon each other. As long as these parties are kept up, and mutual liberty is oppress'd, your interest can never revive ; but when you give the liberty that is due to each other 'tis very possible it may : But bigotry will ever be the ruin of every cause.

I know, Sir, you understand me too well, when I speak of *bigotry*, to think I mean an attach-

attachment to one's own principles. 'Tis impossible for any one to be without, and a man ought to act consistently with them, or else he resigns his judgment, and has no settled rule of action. By *bigotry* I only mean so violent an interest in particular sentiments as to impose them upon others, and occasion censure if they do not receive them; or else such an obstinacy in present sentiments, as will silence all others that are different from them. Here it ought to be consider'd, that, when this is the case, the civil magistrate has an equal right to restrain you all, as you have to restrain one another; from whence 'tis plain that nothing, but the *Liberty* I have been speaking of, can be the *fundamental principle* of the Dissenters, and the support of their interest.

They mistake our principles who think we pretend to be in every tittle perfect, or better than the church, and shun us, because they do not find our actions agreeable to this opinion. Whoever imagine this of themselves are exceedingly mistaken and intolerably vain; nor are the whole body of Dissenters to be reproach'd, because there are such amongst them. I know there are some who mistake themselves to be the only gospel churches, and would join with no other upon any terms. But their spiritual pride is as odious to the more generous of us, as 'tis to the Church of *England*. Certainly, Sir,
those

those in the establishment would think it very unjust in us to reflect all the superstition of Archbishop *Laud*, or of Dr. *Sacheverel*, upon their communion ; yet 'tis as unfair in them to think us all as enthusiastical as the most rigid *Antinomians*. But tho' they have an *equal* right with the rest to enjoy their opinions, we differ as much from them as from the church.

If the whole present generation of the laity were to know this, I doubt not but they would continue with us, since if they do not find all the instances of liberty they desire, 'twould be no difficult matter to raise congregations where they might fix them ; and then they would likewise preserve the younger Ministers too who are forc'd to go into the church, since they cannot meet with encouragement in their sentiments at present.

It has often been wonder'd at, and therefore made an objection to the free principles I have advanc'd, that those who have conform'd from us to the church have generally been of these sentiments, and yet have resign'd them notwithstanding. I must confess 'tis a very great unhappiness that they have been forc'd to do so, and I believe it has always arose from their not being able to live by them ; therefore why do not we consider this, and endeavour to prevent it ? 'Tis a very great weakening of our interest that the best are oblig'd in justice to themselves, to their fami-

families, and to society, which they ought not to encumber, to quit us, and seek provision elsewhere ; and that those are principally maintain'd whose births and hopes are low, and consequently can practise the low arts of wheedling the people into a choice of them. Indeed I wonder the people themselves are not above this, and why they will not be well instructed by those who have the courage to teach them even disagreeable truths, rather than flatter'd into what may possibly be false, and, if it be true, is but of the least importance in religion. If flattering and indulging the people be the only way to succeed with us, the Bishops and secular powers may as well be flatter'd, since they are much better able to pay for it. And whoever cannot go into the church, because he cannot submit to things contrary to justice, generosity, and freedom, ought not to submit to them amongst us. So that I cannot but admire, and value the virtue of those younger Gentlemen, who, notwithstanding all these difficulties, remain with us, since their want of success is only owing to their want of this mean and groveling art. I wish those Gentlemen, who *have been* strong and powerful advocates for liberty, would rather have sought some, civil than ecclesiastical, preferments from the government, since they have now given up the cause, which does it a greater prejudice, than never to have engag'd in it. I doubt not but

but as they are many of them persons of virtue and piety, as well as of learning and good sense, they have taken care *some way, or other*, to satisfy themselves in what they have done. I wish I could guess at the principle, and make an excuse, more honourable for them, and more creditable to us, than necessity; but as I think the subscription will not bear it, unless they are in *Calvinistical* sentiments, I know not what to say farther; I shall forbear to judge them however, and think the best and most worthily of them that I am able.

I know, Sir, the blame of this has often been laid upon you and your brethren, that *you* do not provide for them, and settle them according to their merit. But I think nothing can be more unjust, and more contrary to your principles; for as you pretend to no authority over the people, you have not the disposal of their congregations, nor any right to be their dictators. Indeed the people may consult you as friends, and persons intimately acquainted with each other's characters, but they have the choice in themselves, and are not to be over-rul'd: and 'twould be better they would generally consult the reputation of the interest more than their own particular fancy. 'Tis an ill principle not to receive instruction, unless it be given in a particular manner; and a great many of those things that *please* the people have very often a bad tendency in general. 'Tis good to please ten

persons, but not to drive as many away from us. Truth and good sense will generally be for edification ; but the being pleas'd, which they generally insist so much upon, seldom arises from any thing but some oddness that hits their peculiar humour, and is not from any view to edification at all ; therefore too mean to be worthy any one's study. The people do not usually know wherein oratory, strength of speech, the art of persuasion, &c. consist, and therefore 'tis vanity in such to pretend to be judges of them. I wish I could deny that, amongst us, they generally fall into the falsest and lowest taste imaginable. In these things I think 'twould be an instance of their modesty to resign up their pleasures to the general notions and judgment, for then there could be no general objections against them ; thus a man would mortify his inclinations to sensual pleasure, for the good of society. Whoever consults the writings, or prejudices against us will find nothing objected of any value, but against the awkwardness and unpoliteness of our Preachers. What was Dr. South's wit levell'd against, but those things that were really foolish and ridiculous in themselves ? and so people of wit and politeness grew ashame'd of them, and chose a more *graceful* way of religion. Therefore I admire the art of our opponents rather to banter and ridicule, than argue with us. But when we take away

away this objection and polish ourselves, let another Dr. *South* endeavour to ridicule us anew. So that herein I think the people should rather consult our general credit than their own humours ; and if they would encourage our younger Ministers who study good sense and politeness, and endeavour to recommend the interest to the esteem of the rest of mankind, I make no doubt but 'twould still revive and flourish more than ever ; but if they will continue selfishly to indulge themselves, they have an indisputable *right* to ruin and destroy it.

I make no doubt, Sir, of your general disposition, whenever the people think fit to consult you in their choice, to promote the interest of those whom you think most likely to do us a credit upon the whole. The credit of the interest can only arise from the learning and piety of those engag'd in it. The latter without the former is amiable in private life, but no *complete* recommendation of a Minister ; and the first alone, tho' it may enliven his publick performances, is not sufficient for his *whole* relation. They must both join to make him perfect. And here I cannot but look about me with pleasure, since we have still *some* remaining of this character, whose publick labours and private lives and conversation are both useful and entertaining. The Church of *England* may know this, and grow jealous, unless she hopes

from the perverseness of our people to draw them over to her side; and indeed if some proper methods are not taken to prevent it, I will not promise for them; for they were not born to starve, and 'tis a sin to do it, if there is a justifiable prevention.

There are many who confidently assert that these Gentlemen's learning and politeness will be our ruin. But what can be more absurd and perverse? For nothing can recover those who have left us for want of these, but the study of them. There are many Gentlemen, who can give no other reason, for leaving us, but that they are ashame'd of our interest; but that can be no longer a reason, when we have the very qualities they seek in the Church. There is no other advantage in principle, or practice, she could possibly have over us, but then she can have none. I believe there are *many* of the laity who are not so much against this as 'tis imagin'd. They have lately done some very considerable things to encourage learning and good sense. Else whence the crowded auditory to a certain lecture, than which a greater or finer amongst us was never establish'd? And I believe, whenever the Preacher sinks in the goodness of his sermons, he will sink in the esteem and encouragement of the hearers. But as I believe he is incapable of it; so I hope it will be an encouragement to follow his example of love to truth and original christianity, which he has defend-

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ed in the politest and finest manner of any Writer this age has produc'd. There are many others that would shine out, if they had the same advantages from the world; but as they may hope it will, in time, be just to them, as it has been to him, I hope they will support their courage, and struggle, 'till they at last recover the interest from its present low condition.

Since therefore 'tis possible a free and generous way of thinking and speaking may please among us, suppose these Gentlemen were no longer in fear of being under disagreeable, censures, and harsh imputations, but had as *unbounded a liberty* of speaking their sentiments in publick, as of forming them in private, I apprehend they would have no longer inclinations towards the Church, where after having well got thro' the difficulty of entrance, they frequently take more liberty than either their general rules or our bye laws will allow: supposing likewise the gross of the people, instead of assuming the characters of Judges and Censors of sermons, would put on the modest and humble disposition of learners, which is not at all inconsistent with their judging for themselves, and receive the truth without being jealous of heresy in their younger Preachers, they would no longer terrify and frighten them from us, nor give them an opportunity of complaining that they do not act consistently

ly with their principles. For I know not whence it comes to pass, but if they happen to think out of the common road, and speak elegantly and politely, it is immediately thought they are inclin'd to the Church, because they are *like* it, and, being consequently shunn'd and avoided, are unavoidably forc'd into it. But must we keep aloof from every thing like the Church, because some things in it are wrong? *Fas est & ab hoste doceri.* We should follow what is really good, and learn it, tho' it were from our greatest enemies. Certainly if our younger people are generally inclining to the Church, the more we are like it, the more they will value us, and be likely to stay with us; and 'tis wicked to dislike any thing, merely because it resembles another. If they go on in this unreasonable prejudice, we shall in time lose both Ministers and people. It ought to be consider'd that as the taste of mankind differs, so the method of applying to it must differ; and therefore what was fashionable to our fore-fathers is now as disagreeable to us as their dress, which no one is so foolishly singular as to continue. But yet whoever will compare the pert oratory of a young *Oxonian*, and the solid as well as polite sermons of one of our younger Divines will discern but very little resemblance; so consequently there is as little danger.

Thus, Sir, have I given you my sentiments of the subject we happen'd upon in conver-

conversation; and I have pursu'd them in the method that appears to me most likely to serve the interest of truth and religion. I have address'd them in a Letter to you, because I have long known your candour and goodness, and I believe you cannot be conscious of having contributed to the decay, since, without flattery, you would be a credit to any cause whatever. Since that time, I have thought of some regulations, which I believe would forward the desir'd effect, to preserve and revive the interest; but I submit them to your judgment, and the judgment of your brethren. They relate to the management of our publick assemblies, and to the persons educated for the ministry.

I think there are two faults in your manner of publick worship, that your prayers are too short, and your sermons too long. The one has too little of reverence towards God, and the other is too tedious to ourselves. It appears to me that the principal design of publick assemblies is to worship God in society, which tends most of any thing to maintain a sense of religion in the world; and one of the greatest parts of it should consist in adoration of him, and celebrating his perfections. This infinitely becomes us, as we are dependent creatures, and stand at an infinite distance from God our Maker. 'Tis both a solemn and pleasant employment; it tends to enoble our natures, preserve us from

from vice, and beget in us all those affections of love, fear, and joy, that result from our relation to the most amiable, powerful, and indulgent Being. Nothing creates a greater pleasure to me than *rational* worship. As on the one hand I abominate all foppishness and buffoonery in religion, so on the other I hate an affected gravity, that has nothing in it manly and cheerful. A mixture of reverence and cheerfulness is the true spirit of devotion. There is too little of the one in some places, and too little of the other among us. To this of longer prayers, it may be objected that they may be difficult to the suppliant, and tedious for the people. But by longer prayers, I only mean longer in proportion to the sermon. I think to worship God for twenty minutes, and to dictate to men for sixty, is not so equal as one could wish. If it be difficult for the Minister, 'tis but for him to compose his prayers before, when his mind may be in a better temper and disposition, and he may have leisure to review whether what he says be proper and worthy of the divine Being, or not. I know not why the people should object to this, any more than to the use of notes in your sermons, for, at first, the one was as much a novelty as the other may be now; or why you should study more accuracy in the last than in the first. It would prevent a great deal

deal of tautology, incorrectness, and improprieties, and too often things absolutely unfit to be utter'd : which I think are very indecent towards our Maker. As to this method's being tedious to the hearers, I would not have them so long as that comes to ; and if there be any danger of it, I cannot but recommend the practice of the Church, of diversifying the worship ; but this should be at the discretion of the Minister. The singing of psalms, when you happen to have a good clerk, would relieve the mind ; and the whole of this would prevent the objections against *extempore* prayers, which have often been too unluckily made.

As to your sermons, excuse me, Sir, I think they too might be regulated. They might be shorter, and more intelligible. I know there are many of our Ministers who pride themselves in being plain, and to the capacity of the people. But I have been often present, where, thro' the Preacher's distinctions, hard words, *Jewish* or *scholastical* expressions, I have been absolutely at a loss for his meaning, if he meant any thing, and came away as ignorant as I went there ; and how often have we been insulted by the Church-party, for what they stile the *cant* of preaching. I think too if they were delivred in a more easy and *natural* manner, they would hear better, and be more instructive. I hope no one will think I intend to affront him by

a particular application ; I only say it in the general with a regard to our own credit, and the publick good.

From this it will appear how necessary it is to take great care of persons to be educated for the ministry ; that they should be creditable and promising, chosen either out of the families of Gentlemen, or else upon the account of a very extraordinary genius. The first, because such are commonly best acquainted with the world, and know how to behave themselves ; and the last may possibly be advanc'd by their own merit and abilities, without those advantages. And as to the fund, if it was only apply'd to the education of those whose parents are decay'd, or have spent their fortunes in the interest, it would be much better than to encourage the vanity of low and mechanical persons, who imagine a gravity and seriousness in their children, and then throw them to be a dishonour and burden upon us. Is it lawful to spoil a mechanick who might earn his bread, and maintain his family, and take him to misguide the people ? (for they are too often ignorant and vain) bring a family into the world to live meanly, and at last be left in distres? Your consciences, as well as policy, should forbid this. And here, by the way, I think it would be well, instead of encouraging such by the fund to apply it in larger quantities to men of *real* merit, and furnish them, not barely with bread for their bodies,

bodies, but books to enterain and improve their minds. If a few very small villages had no *meeting* 'twould be of less importance than to have large country towns, surrounded with *Tory*-gentlemen, ill furnish'd and disgrac'd. Poverty and want are none of the least objections to us in the eye of the world.

But to return to Students; if, after they were thus selected, they were perfectly taught *Latin* and *Greek*, and not suffer'd to go to the academy 'till thoroughly acquainted with them: if the time usually wasted in old systems of logick and metaphysicks was spent in studying and *understanding* the classicks, the *Belle Letres*, oratory, and particularly the art of speaking *naturally*, justly, and genteelly, it would quite destroy all those unnatural tones and gestures, which are the grand causes of our reproach and contempt. It may seem odd and whimsical to propose a dancing-master for one tutor at an academy, but if something equivalent to it was contrived, to give them a gracefulness and gentility of address, and prune off all clumsiness and awkwardness that is disagreeable to people of fashion, and which gives learning the air of pedantry, it would do them a most eminent service. For nothing carries any man so easily and happily thro' life as a good address. This may look improper to the general smallnes\$ of your salaries: but 'twould be none if Gentlemen were not ashame'd

asham'd to breed up their children to the ministry, and those, who have no great fortune of their own, had the art of appearing handsome with a little; which is natural to some, and might easily be acquir'd by others. The same effect would be answer'd, if the congregations were fewer, and of consequence the salaries larger. I am not for mixing bigotted and generous people in a congregation, for that lays the Minister under too grea restraints to please both parties; but in country places prudent management in elections would prevent the fatal and destrucive breaches that end in the ruin of both fides.

Thus, Sir, have I taken a liberty which I hope you will excuse, and which I would not have assum'd the vanity of for any other cause, but that of Liberty the true foundation of the dissenting interest; Liberty, which I verily believe to be the cause of God, and the happiness of mankind.

I am,

Reverend SIR,

Your most Obedient Servant.

F I N I S.

