

WRITINGS

OF THE REV.

JOHN KNOX,

Minister of God's word in Scotland.

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THE
EXHORTATION
OF
JOHN KNOX

TO HIS BELOVED BRETHREN THE COMMONALTY OF SCOTLAND.

A.D. 1558.

DURING Knox's abode at Geneva, in 1558, he published "The Appellation of John Knox, from the cruel and most unjust sentence pronounced against him by the false bishops and clergy of Scotland, with his Supplication and Exhortation to the Nobility, Estates, and Commonalty of the realm." This tract was written with a design to instruct and animate such of his countrymen as were favourable to the Reformation.

In the former part he urged, that the care and reformation of religion was a duty especially incumbent upon those who were in authority. The nature of its contents renders this supplication to the nobility interesting and valuable as a historical and political document; but it does not appear so well suited for the objects of the present collection as the Exhortation addressed to the Commonalty, which points out their duty and interest respecting the subjects then agitated, showing that a question in which the welfare of their souls was so deeply interested, required attention from every individual. Knox therein gave a summary of the doctrines he had taught during his last visit to Scotland, for which the Romish clergy had condemned him as a heretic when they learned that he was upon his return to the continent, although they had avoided calling him publicly to judgment while he remained in the country.

THE
EXHORTATION
OF
JOHN KNOX

TO THE COMMONALTY OF SCOTLAND.

*To his beloved brethren, the Commonalty of Scotland, John Knox wishes
grace, mercy, and peace, with the spirit of righteous judgment.*

WHAT I have required of the queen regent, estates, and nobility, as the chief heads for this present of the realm, I cannot cease to require of you, dearly beloved brethren, which are the commonalty and body of the same, namely, That notwithstanding the false and cruel sentence which your disguised bishops have pronounced against me, you would please to be so favourable unto me, as to be impartial auditors of my just purgation; which, if God earnestly move your hearts to do, as I nothing doubt but that your enterprise shall redound to the praise and glory of his holy name, so am I assured, that you and your posterity shall by that means receive most singular comfort, edification, and profit. For when ye shall hear the matter debated, you shall easily perceive and understand upon what ground and foundation that religion is built, which amongst you is this day defended by fire and sword.

As for mine own conscience, I am most assuredly persuaded, that whatsoever is used in the papistical church is altogether opposed to Christ's blessed ordinance, and is nothing but mortal venom; of which whosoever drinks, I am assuredly persuaded, that therewith he drinks death and damnation, except, by true conversion unto God, he be purged from the same. But because that long silence of God's word has begotten ignorance in almost all sorts of men, and ignorance, joined with long custom, has confirmed superstition in the hearts of many; I therefore, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, desire audience, as well of you the commonalty my brethren, as of the estates and nobility of the realm, that in public preaching I may have place amongst you at large to utter my mind in all matters of controversy this day in religion. And further I desire, that ye, concurring with your nobility, would compel your bishops and clergy to cease their tyranny. And also, that, for the better assurance and instruction of your conscience, you would compel your said

bishops and false teachers, to answer by the scriptures of God, to such objections and crimes as shall be laid against their vain religion, false doctrine, wicked life, and slanderous conversation.

Here I know it will be objected, That I require of you a thing most unreasonable, namely, that you should call your religion* in doubt, which has been approved and established by so long continuance, and by the consent of so many men before you. But I shortly answer, That neither the long continuance of time, nor yet the multitude of men, is a sufficient approbation, which God will allow for our religion. For as some of the most ancient writers do witness, neither long process of time can justify an error; nor can the multitude of such as follow it change the nature of the same; but if it were an error in the beginning, so is it in the end; and the longer it is followed, and the more that receive it, it is the more pestilent, and more to be avoided. For if antiquity or multitude of men could justify any religion, then was the idolatry of the Gentiles, and now is the abomination of the Turks, good religion; for antiquity approved the one, and a multitude has received, and defends the other. But to answer otherwise—Godly men may wonder, from what fountain such a sentence proceeds—that no man ought to try his faith and religion by God’s word, but that he safely may believe and follow every thing which antiquity and a multitude have approved. The Spirit of God teaches us otherwise; for the Wisdom of God, Christ Jesus himself, referred his adversaries to Moses and the scriptures, to try by them whether his doctrine were of God or not. The apostles Paul and Peter command men to try the religion which they profess by God’s plain scriptures, and praise men for so doing. St. John strictly commands, that we believe not every spirit, but willeth us to try the spirits, whether they be of God or not.

Now, seeing that these evident testimonies of the Holy Ghost direct us to try our faith and religion by the plain word of God, it is wonderful, that the papists will not be content that their religion and doctrine come under the trial of the same. If this sentence of Christ be true (as it is most true, seeing it springeth from the verity itself,) “Whoso doth evil hateth the light, neither will he come to the light, lest that his evil works be manifested and rebuked;” then do our papists, by their own sentence, condemn themselves and their religion; for in so far as they refuse examination and trial, they declare, that they know some fault which the light will utter; which is a cause of their fear, and why they claim the privilege, that no man dispute of their religion. Verity and truth being of the nature of fine purified gold, do not fear the trial of the furnace; but the stubble and chaff of man’s inventions, and such is their religion, may not abide the flame of fire.

* The Romish religion.

True it is, that Mahomet pronounced this sentence, That no man should, on pain of death, dispute or reason of the ground of his religion, which law, to this day, by the art of Satan, is observed amongst the Turks, to their mortal blindness, and horrible blaspheming of Christ Jesus, and of his true religion: and from Mahomet (or rather from Satan the father of all lies) the pope, and his rabble, have learned this lesson; namely, That their religion should not be disputed upon, but what the fathers have believed, that ought and must the children approve: and, in so devising, Satan lacked not his foresight; for no one thing has more established the kingdom of that Roman antichrist than this most wicked decree, namely, That no man be permitted to reason of his power, or to call his laws in doubt. This is most assured, that whenever the papistical religion shall come to examination, it will be found to have no other ground than the religion of Mahomet has, namely, man's inventions, devices, and dreams, over-shadowed with some colour of God's word. Therefore, brethren, seeing that religion is to man as the stomach to the body, which, if it be corrupted, infects the whole members, it is necessary that the same be examined; and if it be found replenished with pestilent humours, I mean with the fancies of men, then of necessity it is that those be purged, else shall your bodies and souls perish for ever: for of this I would you were most certainly persuaded, that a corrupt religion defiles the whole life of man, though it appear ever so holy.

Neither would I that you should esteem the reformation and care of religion less to appertain to you, because you are not kings, rulers, judges, nobles, nor in authority. Beloved brethren, you are God's creatures, created and formed in his own image and similitude, for whose redemption the most precious blood of the only beloved Son of God was shed, to whom he has commanded his gospel and glad tidings to be preached, and for whom he has prepared the heavenly inheritance, so that you will not obstinately refuse, and disdainfully contemn the means which he has appointed to obtain the same, namely, his blessed gospel, which now he offers unto you, to the end that ye may be saved. For the gospel and glad tidings of the kingdom truly preached, is the power of God to the salvation of every believer, which to credit and receive, you the commonalty are no less obliged than your rulers and princes are; for albeit God hath put and ordained distinction and difference betwixt the king and subjects, betwixt the rulers and the common people, in the government and administration of civil policies, yet in the hope of the life to come he has made all equal. For as in Christ Jesus the Jew has no greater prerogative than the Gentile, the man than the woman, the learned than the unlearned, the lord than the servant, but all are one in him; so there is but one way and means to attain to the participation of his benefits and spiritual graces, which is, a lively faith, working by love.

And therefore I say, that it no less appertains to you, beloved brethren, to be assured, that your faith and religion are grounded and established upon the true and undoubted word of God, than to your princes or rulers. For as your bodies cannot escape corporeal death, if with your princes you eat or drink deadly poison, although it be by ignorance or negligence, so shall you not escape the everlasting death, if with them you profess a corrupt religion. Yea, except in heart you believe, and with mouth you confess the Lord Jesus to be the only Saviour of the world, which you cannot do except you embrace his gospel offered, you cannot escape death and damnation; for as the just liveth by his own faith, so doth the unfaithful perish by his infidelity. And as true faith is engendered, nourished, and maintained, in the hearts of God's elect, by Christ's gospel truly preached; so is infidelity and unbelief fostered by concealing and repressing the same. And thus, if you look for the life everlasting, you must try if you stand in the faith; and if you would be assured of a true and lively faith, you must needs have Christ Jesus truly preached unto you.

And this is the cause, dear brethren, that so oft I repeat, and so constantly I affirm, that to you it no less appertains, than to your king or princes, to provide that Christ Jesus be truly preached amongst you, seeing that without his true knowledge neither of you can attain to salvation. And this is the point wherein I say all men are equal, "That as all are descended from Adam, by whose sin and disobedience death entered into the world, so it behoves all that shall obtain life, to be ingrafted in one; that is, in the Lord Jesus, who, being the just servant, doth by his knowledge justify many; namely, all that unfeignedly believe in him."

Of this equality, and that God requires no less of the subject, be he ever so poor, than of the prince and rich man, in matters of religion, he has given an evident declaration in the law of Moses. For when the tabernacle was built, erected, and set in order, God did provide, how it, and the things pertaining to the same, should be sustained, so that they should not fall into decay. And this provision, albeit heaven and earth obey his empire, he would not take from the secret and hid treasures which lie dispersed in the veins of the earth, neither yet would he take it from the rich and potent of the people; but he commanded that every one of the sons of Israel, were he rich, or were he poor, from twenty years and upward, should yearly pay half a shekel for an oblation to the Lord, in remembrance of their redemption, and for an expiation or cleansing of their souls: which money God commanded should be bestowed upon the ornaments and necessities of the tabernacle of testimony. He furthermore added a precept, that the rich should give no more for that use, and in that behalf, than should the poor; neither yet that the poor should give any less than the rich should in that consideration.

This law, to man's reason and judgment, may appear very unreasonable; for some rich man might have given a thousand shekels with less hurt of his substance than some poor man might have paid the half-shekel: and yet God makes all equal, and wills that the one shall pay no more than the other, neither yet the poor any less than the rich. This law, I say, may appear very unequal: but if the cause which God added be observed, we shall find in the same the great mercy and inestimable wisdom of God to appear; which cause is expressed in these words: "This money received from the children of Israel, thou shalt give in for the service of the tabernacle, that it may be to the children of Israel for a remembrance before the Lord, that he may be merciful to your souls." This cause, I say, evidently declares, that as the whole multitude was delivered from the bondage of Egypt, by the mighty power of God alone; so was every member of the same, without respect of persons, sanctified by his grace, the richest, in that behalf, nothing preferred to the poorest: for by no merit and worthiness of man was he moved to choose and to establish his habitation and dwelling amongst them; but their felicity, prerogative, and honour, which they had above all other nations, proceeded only from the fountain of his eternal goodness, who loved them freely, as he freely had chosen them to be his priestly kingdom, and holy people, from all nations of the earth. Thus to honour them, that he would dwell in the midst of them, he neither was moved, I say, by the wisdom of the wise, by the riches of the potent, neither yet by the virtue and holiness of any state amongst them, but of mere goodness did he love them, and with his presence did he honour that whole people; and therefore, to point out the same, his common love to the whole multitude, and to cut off occasions of contention, and doubts of conscience, he would receive no more from the rich than from the poor, for the maintenance of his tabernacle, by which was represented his presence and habitation amongst them.

If the rich had been preferred to the poor, then as the one should have been pulled up with pride, as though he had been more acceptable to God, by reason of his greater gift; so should the conscience of the other have been troubled and wounded, thinking that his poverty was an impediment, that he could not stand in such perfect favour with God as did the other, because he was not able to give so much as did the rich to the maintenance of his tabernacle. But He, who of mercy, as is said, chose his habitation amongst them, and also who best knows what lieth within man, provided the remedy for the one, and for the other, making them equal in that behalf, who in other things were most unequal. If the poor should have found himself grieved by reason of that tax, and that as much was imposed upon him as upon the rich, yet he had no small cause of joy, that God himself would please to compare him, and to make him equal, in the maintenance of his tabernacle, to the most rich and potent in Israel.

If this equality were commanded by God, for maintenance of that transitory tabernacle, which was but a shadow of a better to come, is not the same required of us, who now have the Verity, which is Christ Jesus? who being clad with our nature, is made “Immanuel, that is, God with us; whose natural body, although it be received into the heavens, where he must abide till all be complete that is forespoken by the prophets, yet hath he promised to be present with us to the end of the world.” And for that purpose, and for the greater assurance of his promise, he has erected among us, here in the earth, the signs of his own presence with us, his spiritual tabernacle, the true preaching of his word, and right administration of his sacraments; to the maintenance whereof the subject is no less bound than the prince, the poor than the rich: for as the price which was given for man’s redemption is one, so God requires of all that shall be partakers of the benefits of the same a like duty; which is a plain confession, that by Christ Jesus alone we have received whatsoever was lost in Adam.

Of the prince God requires, That he deny himself, and that he follow Jesus Christ—of the subject he requires the same. Of the kings and judges it is required, “That they kiss the Son;” (Psalm ii.) that is, give honour, subjection, and obedience to him: and from such reverence God does not exempt the subject that shall be saved. And this is that equality which is betwixt the kings and subjects, the most rich or noble, and betwixt the poorest and men of lowest estate; namely, That as the one is obliged to believe in heart, and with mouth to confess the Lord Jesus to be the only Saviour of the world, so also is the other. Neither is there any of God’s children, who has attained to the years of discretion, so poor, but that he has thus much to bestow upon the ornaments and maintenance of their spiritual tabernacle, when necessity requires; neither yet is there any so rich, of whose hands God requires any more. For albeit that David gathered great substance for the building of the temple—that Solomon, with earnest diligence, and incredible expenses, erected and finished the same—that Hezekiah and Josiah purged the religion, which before was corrupted; yet to them was God no further debtor, in that respect, than he was to the most simple of the faithful posterity of faithful Abraham. For their diligence, zeal, and works, gave rather testimony and confession before men, what honour they did bear to God, what love to his word, and reverence to his religion, than that any work proceeding from them either established or increased God’s favour towards them, who freely loved them, in Christ his Son, before the foundation of the world was laid: so that these fore-named, by their notable works, gave testimony of their unfeigned faith; and the same does the poorest who unfeignedly and openly professes Christ Jesus, and embraces his glad tidings offered, who abhors superstition, and flees from idolatry.

The poorest, I say, and most simple, who this day on earth, in the days of this cruel persecution, firmly believes in Christ, and boldly confesses him before this wicked generation, is no less acceptable before God, neither is judged in his presence to have done any less in promoting Christ's cause, than the king, who by the sword and power, which he has received of God, roots out idolatry, and so advances Christ's glory. But to return to our former purpose; it is no less required, I say, of the subject to believe in Christ, and to profess his true religion, than of the prince and king: and therefore I affirm, That in God's presence it shall not excuse you to allege, that ye were not chief rulers, and therefore that the care and reformation of religion did not appertain unto you.

Dear brethren, as before is said, ye are the creatures of God, created after his own image and similitude; to whom it is commanded, to hear the voice of your heavenly Father, to embrace his Son Christ Jesus, to flee from all doctrine and religion which he has not approved by his own will, revealed to us in his most blessed word. To which precepts and charges if you be found disobedient, you shall perish in your iniquity, as rebels and stubborn servants, who have no pleasure to obey the good will of their sovereign Lord, who most lovingly calls for your obedience: and therefore, brethren, in this behalf, it is your part to be careful and diligent. For the question is not of things temporal, which, although they be endangered, yet by diligence and in process of time may afterwards be redressed; but it is of the damnation of your bodies and souls, and of the loss of life everlasting, which once lost can never be recovered: and therefore, I say, that it behoves you to be careful and diligent in this so weighty a matter, lest that you contemning this occasion, which God now offers, find not the like, although that afterwards with groaning and sobs you languish for the same. And that you be not ignorant of what occasion I mean, in few words I shall express it.

Not only I, but with me also divers godly and learned men, offer unto you our labours, faithfully to instruct you in the ways of the Eternal, our God, and in the sincerity of Christ's gospel, which this day, by the pestilent generation of antichrist, I mean, by the pope, and by his most ungodly clergy, are almost hid from the eyes of men. We offer to jeopardy our lives for the salvation of your souls, and by manifest scriptures to prove that the religion, which is maintained amongst you by fire and sword, is false, vain, and diabolical. We require nothing of you, but that patiently you will hear our doctrine, which is not ours, but the doctrine of salvation revealed to the world by the only Son of God; and that you will examine our reasons, by which we offer to prove the papistical religion to be abominable before God: and lastly, we require, that by your power the tyranny of those cruel beasts, I mean, of priests and friars, may be bridled, till we have uttered our minds in all matters this day debatable in religion. If these things, in the fear of God, ye grant to

me and unto others, who unfeignedly, for your salvation, and for God's glory, require the same, I am assured, that ye shall be blessed of God, whatsoever Satan shall devise against you. But if ye contemn or refuse God, who thus lovingly offers unto you salvation and life, ye shall neither escape plagues temporal, which shortly shall apprehend you; neither yet the torment prepared for the devil and for his angels; except by speedy repentance ye return to the Lord, whom ye now refuse, if ye refuse the messengers of his word.

But yet I think ye doubt what ye ought, and may do, in this so weighty a matter. In few words I will declare my conscience in the one and in the other. Ye ought to prefer the glory of God, the promoting of Christ's gospel, and the salvation of your souls, to all things that are in the earth: and although you are but subjects, you may lawfully require of your superiors, be it of your king, be it of your lords, rulers, and powers, that they provide for you true preachers; and that they expel such as, under the name of pastors, devour and destroy the flock, not feeding the same as Christ Jesus hath commanded: and if in this point your superiors be negligent, or yet pretend to maintain tyrants in their tyranny, most justly you may provide true teachers for yourselves, pastors according to the mind and heart of God, by whom you may be fed with that most comfortable food of your souls, Christ's gospel truly preached. You may moreover, in a peaceable manner, without sedition, withhold the fruits and profits which your false bishops and clergy most unjustly receive of you,* unto such time as they shall faithfully do their charge and duties; which is, to preach unto you Christ Jesus truly, rightly to minister the sacraments according to his own institution, and so to watch for the salvation of your souls, as is commanded by Christ Jesus himself, and by his apostles Paul and Peter.

If God shall move your hearts in his true fear, to begin to practise these things, and to demand and crave the same of your superiors, which most lawfully ye may do, then I doubt not but, of his great mercy and free grace, he will illuminate the eyes of your minds, that his undoubted verity will be a lantern to your feet, to guide and lead you in all the ways which godly wisdom doth approve. He will make your enemies tremble before your face; he will establish his gospel amongst you, to the salvation and perpetual comfort of yourselves, and of your posterity after you. But if, as God forbid, the love of friends, the fear of your princes, and the wisdom of the world, draw you back from God, and from his Son Christ Jesus, be certainly persuaded, that ye shall drink the cup of his vengeance; so many, I mean, as shall contemn and despise this loving calling of your heavenly Father.

* The voluntary, or rather involuntary, offerings required by the Romish clergy at certain festivals and on other occasions.

It will not excuse you, dear brethren, in the presence of God, neither yet will it avail you in the day of his visitation, to say, “We were but simple subjects; we could not redress the faults and crimes of our rulers, bishops, and clergy; we called for reformation, and wished for the same: but lords brethren were bishops, their sons were abbots, and the friends of great men had the possession of the church, and so we were compelled to give obedience to all that they demanded.” These vain excuses, I say, will nothing avail you in the presence of God, who requires no less of the subjects than of their rulers, that they decline from evil, and that they do good; that they abstain from idolatry, superstition, blasphemy, murder, and other such horrible crimes, which his law forbids, and yet nevertheless are openly committed and maliciously defended in that miserable realm.

And if you think that you are innocent, because you are not the chief actors of such iniquity, you are utterly deceived; for God not only punishes the chief offenders, but with them he also condemns the consenters to such iniquity; and all are judged to consent, who, knowing that impiety is committed, give no testimony that the same displeases them. To speak this matter more plainly—As your princes and rulers are guilty, with your bishops, of all idolatry committed, and of all the innocent blood that is shed for the testimony of Christ’s truth, and that because they maintain them in their tyranny; so are you, I mean so many of you as give no plain confession to the contrary, criminal and guilty of the same crimes with your princes and rulers, because you assist and maintain your princes in their blind rage, and give no declaration that their tyranny displeases you.

This doctrine, I know, is strange to the blind world; but the verity of it has been declared in all notable punishments from the beginning. When the original world perished by water; when Sodom and Gomorrah were consumed by fire; and, finally, when Jerusalem was horribly destroyed; does any man think that all were alike wicked before the world? Evident it is that they were not, if they be judged according to their external facts: for some were young, and could not be oppressors, neither yet could defile themselves with unnatural and beastly lusts; some were pitiful and gentle of nature, and did not thirst for the blood of Christ, nor of his apostles. But did any escape the plagues and vengeance which did apprehend the multitude? Let the scriptures witness, and the histories be considered, which plainly do testify, that by the waters all flesh in earth at that time did perish, Noah and his family excepted; that none escaped in Sodom, and in the other cities adjacent, except Lot and his two daughters. And evident it is, that in the famous city Jerusalem, in the last and horrible destruction of the same, none escaped God’s vengeance, except so many as before were dispersed.

And what is the cause of this severity, seeing that all were not alike offenders? Let the flesh cease to dispute with God, and let all men, by these

examples, learn betimes to flee and avoid the society and company of the proud contemnors of God, if that they list not to be partakers of their plagues. The cause is evident, if we can be subject to God's judgments without grudging, which in themselves are most holy and just; for in the original world none was found that either did resist the tyranny and oppression that universally were used, nor yet that earnestly reprehended the same. In Sodom none were found who did oppose that furious and beastly multitude, which compassed about and besieged the house of Lot; none would believe Lot, that the city should be destroyed. And, finally, in Jerusalem none were found that studied to repress the tyranny of the priests, who conspired against Christ and his gospel; but all fainted,—I except such as gave witness with their blood, or their fleeing, that such impiety displeased them,—all kept silence; by which all approved iniquity, and joined hands with the tyrants, and so were all arrayed and set, as it had been in one battle, against the Omnipotent, and against his Son Jesus Christ: for whosoever gathereth not with Christ in the day of his harvest is judged to scatter; and therefore they were all partakers of one vengeance temporal.

Which thing, as before I have touched, ought to move you to the deep consideration of your duties in these last and most perilous times. The iniquity of your bishops is more than manifest; their filthy lives infect the air; the innocent blood which they shed cries for vengeance in the ears of our God; the idolatry and abomination, which they openly commit, and without punishment maintain, doth corrupt and defile the whole land, and none amongst you doth unfeignedly study for any redress of such enormities. Will God in this behalf hold you as innocents? Be not deceived, dear brethren; God hath punished not only the proud tyrants, filthy persons, and cruel murderers, but also such as with them did draw the yoke of iniquity, whether by flattering their offences, obeying their unjust commandments, or in winking at their manifest iniquity: all such, I say, God once punished with the chief offenders. Be assured, brethren, that, as He is immutable of nature, so he will not pardon you in that which he has punished so severely in others; and now the less, because he has plainly admonished you of the dangers to come, and has offered you his mercy before he pour forth his wrath and displeasure upon the disobedient.

God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Father of glory, and God of all consolation, give you the Spirit of wisdom, and open unto you the knowledge of himself, by the means of his dear Son, by which you may attain to the expectation and hope, that, after the troubles of this transitory life, you may be partakers of the riches of that glorious inheritance, which is prepared for such as deny themselves, and fight under the banner of Christ Jesus in the day of this his battle: that in deep consideration of the same you may learn to prefer the invisible and eternal joys to the vain pleasures that are present.

God further grant you his Holy Spirit, rightly to consider what I, in his name, have required of your nobility, and of you the subjects, and move you all together so to answer, that my petition be not a testimony of your just condemnation, when the Lord Jesus shall appear to avenge the blood of his saints, and the contempt of his most holy word. Amen.

“Sleep not in sin, for vengeance is prepared against all disobedient. Flee from Babylon, if ye will not be partakers of her plagues.”

Be witness to my Appellation. Grace be with you.

From Geneva, the 14th
of July, 1558.

Your brother to command in godliness,

JOHN KNOX.