

THE
WORKS
OF
THE REV . JOHN NEWTON

LATE RECTOR OF THE UNITED PARISHES OF
ST. MARY WOOLNOTH AND ST. MARY WOOLCHURCH-HAW,
LOMBARD STREET, LONDON.

CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA,
DISCOURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

BY THE REV. R. CECIL, A. M.

COMPLETE IN ONE VOLUME.

EDINBURGH

Printed at the University Press, for

PETER BROWN AND THOMAS NELSON.

1830.

APOLOGIA;
OR
FOUR LETTERS
TO
A MINISTER OF AN INDEPENDENT CHURCH
BY
A MINISTER OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.

—Quid me alta silentia cogis
Rumpere? _____ VIRG.

[“Why force me to break the deep silence?” (Virgil)]

Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another. For in Jesus Christ, neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love. ROM. xiv. 19. GAL . v. 6.

LETTER I.

MY DEAR FRIEND AND BROTHER,

YOU have more than once gently called upon me for the reasons which induced me to exercise my ministry as a Clergyman of the Church of England, rather than among the Dissenters, where my first religious connections were formed, and with many of whom I still maintain a cordial friendship. Hitherto I have usually waived the subject, and contented myself with assuring you in general terms, that as the preference I gave to the Establishment was the result of serious, and, I trust, impartial inquiry; so I had never seen reason to repent of it, no not for a minute, since the day of my ordination. I now purpose to give you a more particular answer. And as you are not the only person who has expressed a friendly surprise at my choice, I shall communicate my reasons from the press, that all my friends who have been at a loss to account for my conduct, may have such satisfaction as it is in my power to give them. I shall, however, keep you particularly in my eye while I write, that a just sense of the candour and affection with which you have always treated me, may regulate my pen, and preserve me (if possible) from that harsh and angry spirit, into which writers upon controversial points are too often betrayed.

I confess, that as in this business my conscience is clear in the sight of him to whom alone I am properly accountable; I could wish still to continue silent, and submit to be a little misunderstood by some persons whose good opinion I prize, rather than trouble the public with what more immediately relates to myself. But something upon this subject seems expedient in the present day; not so much by way of apology for one or a few individuals, as with a view of obviating prejudices, and preventing, or at least abating, the unhappy effects of a party-spirit.

There was a time when the Non-conformists groaned under the iron rod of oppression, and were exposed to fines, penalties, and imprisonment, as well as to cruel mockings, and the lawless rage of a rabble, for worshipping God according to the light of their consciences. Yet I apprehend their non-conformity was rather the occasional and ostensible, than the real cause of the hard treatment they met with. The greater part of the Non-conformist ministers of that day were the light and glory of the land.—They were men full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, penetrated with a deep sense of the Redeemer's glory and love, and of the worth of souls. Their ministrations were accompanied with unction and power, and they were instrumental in turning many sinners from the evil of their ways. It is no wonder that the world hated such men; that snares were spread for their feet, their liberty abridged, and that many said, Away with them, they are not worthy to live! It is probable that if these servants of the Most High could have enjoyed

that freedom for their persons and assemblies, which, in answer to their prayers, is now possessed by those who bear the same name, they would have been well satisfied that the Established Church should have remained in peaceful possession of its own order and ritual. And several among them, not the lowest in repute for wisdom and piety, continued long to worship occasionally in the Parish Churches, after they had been ejected from them as preachers. But things were studiously carried against them with a high hand. The exaction of re-ordination, and the little time allowed for subscribing the book of Common Prayer, which many of the ministers had not been able to procure when the law called for their assent to it, were two circumstances which greatly contributed to swell the Bartholomew-list. It was well known to some of the leaders in that unhappy business, that there were among the Non-conformists wise and moderate men, who were not disposed to quit their parochial cures, unless they were constrained by the harshest and most violent measures; such therefore were the measures they adopted.

It is our mercy to live in more quiet times. We are on all sides freed from restraints in religious concerns; and every person is at liberty to profess, preach, worship, or print as he thinks proper. But it is still to be lamented, that they who are united upon the same foundations, and agree in the same important leading principles, should lay so much stress upon their circumstantial differences in sentiment, as to prevent the exercise of mutual love and forbearance, and that, instead of labouring in concert within their respective departments to promote the common cause, they should be at leisure to vex and worry each other with needless disputation and uncharitable censure. I hope, amongst us, the High-Church principles which formerly produced unjustifiable and oppressive effects, are now generally exploded. But may we not lay a claim in our turn, to that moderation, candour, and tenderness, from our dissenting brethren, which we cheerfully exercise towards them? But as we (I think) are no longer the aggressors, so they seem no longer content to stand upon the defensive. We wish to join them with heart and hand in supporting and spreading the great truths of the gospel; and such as you, my friend, approve our aims, and rejoice with us, if God is pleased to give us success. But there are those among you, whose persons and general conduct we respect, from whom we do not find equal returns of good-will, because we cannot join with them in the support of a palladium which bears the name of the Dissenting Interest. I know not whether this phrase was in use a hundred years ago; but were I to meet with it as referring to that period, I should understand by it little more or less than the interest of the Redeemer's kingdom. At present, when I consider the various names, views, and sentiments, which obtain among those who form this aggregate, styled the Dissenting Interest, I am at a loss what sense to put

upon the term. May I not say without offence, that it is, at least, a very heterogeneous body? May I not hope, without presumption, that though you and I are not agreed on the subject of Church Government, yet I am related to you by a much nearer and stronger tie than that which binds you to the Dissenting Interest? I confess that so far as it is the interest of those who depreciate the person and blood of the Saviour, and deny the agency and influence of the Holy Spirit, or the total depravity of fallen man, so far I cannot (in a religious view) be a friend to it. On the other hand, so far as it regards those who love, avow, and preach the doctrines, experience, and practice, which both you and I include in our idea of the Gospel, so far I can truly say, though not a Dissenter myself, the Dissenting Interest is dear to my heart, and has a share in my daily prayers. And in this I am persuaded I speak the sentiments of many both ministers and laymen, in the Establishment. We are sorry, therefore (at least I am sorry), though not angry, when books are written, or declarations¹ (perhaps in the most solemn occasions of worship) unseasonably made, which seem not so much designed to confirm Dissenters in their own principles, as to place those who cannot accede to them in an unfavourable light; the ministers especially, who, according to some representations, must be supposed to be almost destitute of common sense, or else of common honesty.

When I write a letter, especially to a friend, I think myself released from that attention to method which I might observe if I were composing a treatise. As my heart dictates, my pen moves. I therefore hope you will bear with me if I do not come directly to what I proposed; which was, to give you some account of the motives of my own conduct. It may not be improper to premise a few preliminary observations. I shall not weary you by attempting to justify everything that obtains in our way, nor call your attention to all the minutiae which might furnish subject for debate to those who know not how to employ their time better. It would be mere trifling to dispute for or against a surplice or a band, a gown or a cloak, or to inquire whether it be the size, or the shape, which renders some of these habiliments more or less suitable for a minister, than the others. But perhaps a few strictures upon establishments and liturgies may not be wholly impertinent to my design.

That national religious establishments under the New Testament dispensation are neither of express divine appointment, nor formed in all points upon a scriptural plan, I readily admit. Whether upon this account they cannot be submitted to without violating the obedience we owe to the Lord Jesus as head and lawgiver of his church, I shall consider hereafter. At present permit me only to hope (for my own sake), that such submission is not

¹ Some of these letters were written in the year 1777.

absolutely sinful; and in that view to offer a word in favour of their expedience. I plead not for this or that establishment, or the administration of one preferably to another; but chiefly for that circumstance which I suppose is common to them all: I mean, the parcelling out a country, the government of which is professedly Christian, and certain districts, analogous to what we call parishes, and fixing in each of those districts, a person with a ministerial character, who by his office is engaged to promote the good of souls within the limits of his own boundary. I think the number of parishes in England and Wales is computed to be not much fewer than ten thousand. The number of dissenting churches and congregations in England and Wales (if those whom I have consulted as the most competent judges are not mistaken), will not be found greatly to exceed one thousand. In how many, or in how few of these the old Puritan Gospel (if I may so call it) is preached or prized, I deem you a better judge than myself. It is certain, that the number of Dissenting ministers who are very willing it should be publicly known that they differ widely from the sentiments of their forefathers, is not small. However, we will take them all into the estimate. Now, let us for a moment suppose the establishment with all its provisions removed and annihilated. In this case, some of the Dissenting ministers might indeed change their situations, and fix in places where they might hope for more extensive influence; but as none of them could be in two places at once, about nine-tenths of the kingdom would be deprived, at a stroke, of the very form of public religion, and reduced in a short time (for any relief the Dissenting interest could afford) to a state little better than heathenism. That there is any regard paid to the Lord's day through the greater part of the land, that the holy scriptures are publicly read to thousands who probably would otherwise know no more of the Bible than they do of the Koran, are good effects of the national establishment, which I think can hardly be denied, even by those who are most displeased with it. For this reason, if I could not conform to the establishment myself, I think I should speak respectfully of it, and bless God for it. Some established form of religious profession, with a full and free toleration for all who think they can serve God more acceptably upon a different plan, appears to me the most desirable and promising constitution, for preserving the rights of conscience, and for promoting the welfare of souls. I believe, therefore, that the church of England, as by law established (for it claims no higher title), though it be not a perfect institution, and notwithstanding its real or supposed defects, and the faults of individuals within its community, has been upon the whole, and will be, a blessing to the nation; and that its preservation is an effect of the wise and gracious providence of the great Head of the Church universal.

From the expediency of parochial order, I would farther deduce the ex-

pediency of a rubric and liturgy. For I cannot conceive an established church, without including, in my idea, some determinate rule or line respecting doctrine and worship, by which it is discriminated from other churches which are not so established. As to our liturgy, I am far from thinking it incapable of amendment; though, when I consider the temper and spirit of the present times, I dare not wish that the improvement of it should be attempted, lest the intended remedy might prove worse than the disease. As I am not called to defend it, I shall only say, what I believe will be allowed by many candid persons on your side, that the general strain of it is scriptural, evangelical, and experimental. It recognizes with precision the one great object of worship, in his personal distinctions, and glorious attributes: the honours and offices of the Redeemer, the power and agency of the Holy Spirit, the evil of sin, the depravity of man, and all the distinguishing doctrines of the gospel. As to the composition, I question if anything in the English language (our version of the Bible excepted), is worthy of being compared with it, for simplicity, perspicuity, energy, and comprehensive fulness of expression. But I suppose the objection does not lie so much against our liturgy in particular, as in general against the use of liturgies of any kind. And for aught I know, if the compilers of our liturgy could have expected, that all the parishes in the kingdom, and from age to age, would be supplied with ministers competently acquainted with the mysteries of the gospel, and possessed of the spirit of grace and supplication, they might have left them under less restraint in conducting public worship. I believe many of the Dissenters take it for granted, that a considerable part of our clergy are not only unable to pray in public to the edification of their hearers without a form, but are unfit for the ministerial office in every view. Should this be true, it is a truth which I hope would excite lamentation rather than ridicule or invective, in all who profess a regard to the glory of God, or love to the souls of men. But upon this supposition I should think an evangelical liturgy a great blessing; as it must secure the people, (that is the bulk of the nation) from being exposed to the same uncertainty and disappointment from the reading-desk, as they are liable to from the pulpit. For they who cannot, or do not preach the gospel, are not like to pray agreeably to the spirit of the gospel, if that part of the public service was likewise left to their own management. Or shall we say, it is an advantage to some dissenting congregations, that their ministers, not being confined to a form of sound words, there is little more of Christ or of grace to be found in their prayers than in their sermons? Is it not too hastily taken for granted by many, that God cannot be worshipped in spirit and in truth by those who use a form of prayer? or that he will not afford them who so approach him any testimony of his acceptance? If the words of a form suit and express the desires and feelings of my mind, the prayer is as much my

own, as if I had conceived it upon the spot. On the other hand, if I have the greatest readiness and fluency in diversifying expressions, so that my prayer should always appear unstudied and new, yet if my spirit, or the spirits of those who join with me, be not engaged in it, though I may admire my own performance, and be applauded by others, it is no better than a mere lifeless form, in the sight of him who searcheth the heart. Not to say, that many who profess to pray extempore, that is, without either a printed or a written form, go so much in a beaten path, that they who hear them, frequently can tell with tolerable certainty, how they will begin, when they are about the middle, and when they are drawing towards the close of their prayer.

It is said, that a prescribed form precludes the exercise of a gift in prayer, which is true; but then, as I hinted before, it in some good measure supplies the want of such a gift; and blessed be the Lord, there are many living witnesses who can declare to his praise, that a form does not restrain, much less preclude the exercise of grace. They know and are sure that their Lord and master owns and comforts them in what their brethren hastily condemn them for. It is well for us that he seeth not as man seeth, and is no more a respecter of parties than of persons.

It cannot be denied, that the Lord himself appointed forms of prayer and praise to be used in the Old Testament church. When the ark set forward, and when it rested, Moses addressed the Lord, not according to the varied emotions of his own spirit, but stately in the same determinate expressions, Numb. x. 35, 36. So likewise in the solemn benediction which the high priest was to pronounce upon the people, Numb. vi. 25, 27. Again, at the presenting of the first fruits, though the heart of the offeror might be filled with gratitude, he was not to express it in his own way, but the Lord himself prescribed the form of his acknowledgement, confession, and prayer, Deut. xxvi. 12-15. But it may be said, these were enjoined under the Levitical institution, which is now abrogated, and that we live under a dispensation of greater light and liberty. I wish however, with all our light and liberty, we could more fully come up to the spirit of some of the devotional parts of the Old Testament, which were recorded for our instruction, and most certainly are not abrogated. The book of Psalms especially, contains a rich variety of patterns for prayer, if we may not call them forms, adapted to all the various exercises of the life of faith. And if, when I read or repeat such Psalms as the 63d, 84th, or 86th, I could feel, in the manner I wish, the force of every expression, I should think I prayed to good purpose, though I were not to intermingle a single word of my own. So likewise with respect to that summary which our Lord condescended to teach his disciples; though I believe it had a peculiar reference to the state in which they were before his passion, and while he was still with them; yet agreeable to the fulness of his wisdom, it is so comprehensive, that I apprehend every part

of a believer's intercourse with God in prayer, may be reduced, without forcing, to one or the other of the heads of this prayer. And I should esteem it a golden hour indeed, one of the happiest seasons I ever enjoyed in prayer, if I could repeat it with a just impression of the meaning of every clause. But alas! such are the effects of our unhappy differences, or rather of a wrongness of spirit in maintaining them, and so prone are we to think we cannot be too unlike those whom we are not pleased with, that even the words which our Lord himself has taught us, are depreciated and disused by many, I fear, upon no better ground than because they are retained in the usage of the Church of England. Though, besides giving us a pattern to pray after that manner, he has at least permitted us to use it as a form, directing us, when we pray to say, "Our Father, which art in heaven," &c. If scriptural warrant be required, I think we have one more clear and express for the use of this prayer, than can be found for some things upon which no small stress is laid by our Dissenting brethren.

Some persons might possibly allege, that if the use of scriptural forms of prayer were admitted, it would plead nothing in favour of such forms as are of human composition. But as I believe the more judicious part of the Dissenters would not make this distinction, a few words may suffice for an answer. Most of us, when we preach, profess to preach the word of God, and I think we are sufficiently authorized to use the expression, so far as our sermons are explanatory of scriptural truths, and agreeable to them. For though the system of truth contained in the holy scriptures has a peculiar authority, as the fountain from whence we are to derive our public discourses, and the standard by which they are to be tried; yet truth, as to its nature, does not admit of degrees, but all propositions, if they be true, must be equally true, and every conclusion which is rightly inferred from scriptural premises, must be, in whatever words it is expressed (if they are precise and clear), as true as the premises from which it is drawn. If I give a just definition or explication of a doctrine of the Bible in my own words, the truth or importance of that doctrine is not affected or weakened by the vehicle in which I convey it; nor would a hearer have a right to withhold his attention or assent, from a pretence, that though the proposition itself was true, he was not concerned in it, because I had not expressed it in scriptural phrases. It is only upon this ground that the propriety and authority of preaching can be maintained; and the like reasoning may be applied to prayer. A prayer is scriptural, if conformable to the promises, patterns, and truths of scripture, though it should not contain one phrase taken *totidem verbis*² from the Bible.

May I not here appeal to the practice of the Dissenters themselves? I

² ["In so many words."]

suppose Dr. Watts' Hymns, and his imitation of David's Psalms, especially the latter, are used, by a large majority of Dissenting congregations, in their public worship. Many of these pieces are devotional, that is, they are in the strain of prayer, or praise. They are therefore forms of prayer or praise; and when the first line is given out, it is probable that several persons in the assembly know beforehand every word they are to sing. In some congregations the psalm or hymn is delivered line by line, and in most, the bulk of the people are provided with books. Now it appears to me, that when a worshipper who attends to what is going forward, and is not content with a mere lip-service, joins in singing verses, which express the desires and petitions of his heart to the Lord, he prays; and if he uses verses with which he was before acquainted, he prays by a form; he does the very thing for which we are condemned; unless it can be proved that the fault and evil which is essential to a form in prose, is entirely removed if the substance of the obnoxious form be expressed in metre or rhyme.

Crito freely will rehearse
Forms of prayer and praise in verse:
Why should Crito then suppose
Forms are sinful when in prose?
Must my form be deemed a crime
Merely for the want of rhyme?

I have heard of a minister who used to compose hymns in the pulpit. It was his custom to give out one line, and by the time the congregation had sung the first, he had a second ready for them, and so on, so long as he thought proper to sing. These were not forms, they were composed *pro re nata*.³ Before he had finished a second stanza, the former (as to the verse and cadence) was in a manner forgotten and the same hymn was never heard twice. I know not what these unpremeditated pieces were in point of composition; but were I persuaded of the unlawfulness of forms of prayer, and, at the same time, approved of the practice of singing in public worship; I should extremely covet the talent of extempore hymn-making, as one of the most necessary gifts a minister could possess in order to maintain a consistency in his whole service.

I here close what I intended by way of introduction. In my subsequent letters, I purpose to acquaint you more directly with the reasons which determined my own choice, and which still satisfy me, that in receiving Episcopal ordination, and exercising my ministry in the established church, I have not acted wrong. At present, I shall relieve your attention, by subscribing myself,

Your affectionate Friend and Brother.

³ ["For an occasion as it arises."]

LETTER II.

MY DEAR FRIEND AND BROTHER,

AS such I address you; as such, notwithstanding our different views of church-government, you acknowledge me. You have confirmed your love to me by many repeated proofs; and it is the desire of my heart that nothing may take place on either side to weaken the exercise of that friendship, which having the faith and hope of the gospel for its basis, is calculated to subsist and flourish in a better world. With this thought upon my mind, it is impossible that I should write a single line with an intention of grieving or offending you; and I am persuaded, the same consideration on your part will dispose you to a candid perusal of what I offer. I had rather be silent than plead even for truth in an angry contentious spirit. For every year of my life strengthens my conviction of the importance of that divine aphorism, "The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God."

How far what I have suggested in favour of establishments and liturgies may appear conclusive to you, I know not. I depend much upon your candour; but I make allowances for the unavoidable influence of education, connection, and habit, both in you and in myself. We generally ascribe the dissent of those who differ from us, in part at least, to prejudices of this kind; but as it is very natural to think favourably of ourselves, we almost take it for granted that we have either escaped or outgrown every bias. Though some of the principles we maintain have been instilled into us from our childhood, and we have been confirmed in what we say is right, by the instruction, advice, and example of friends, exactly as others have been confirmed in what we call wrong; yet that positiveness which in them is the effect of ignorant prejudice is in us a very different thing; a just attachment to truth, and the result of impartial examination and full conviction. For my own part, I dare not say that I am free from all bias and prepossession, but I desire and endeavour to guard against their influence. But though I have ventured to defend the propriety of a national establishment, and upon that ground, the expediency of a liturgy, I need not tell you that I had no hand in forming either the one or the other. By the allotment of Divine Providence, I was born in a nation where these things had taken place long before I came into the world. Therefore, when the Lord gave me a desire to preach his gospel, and it became necessary to determine under what character I should exercise my ministry; the question before me was not, What form of church-government I might propose as the most scriptural, if all parties amongst us were willing to refer themselves to my decision? But my inquiry was rather directed to this point, What would be my path of duty, *re-*

bus sic stantibus,⁴ living, as I did, in the island of Great Britain, and in that part of it named England? At first, indeed, I saw but little room for deliberation. For, about six years after I was awakened to some concern for my soul, my situation in life had secluded me equally from every religious party. During this period, in which I walked alone, the Lord was pleased to show me the way to the throne of grace, and to lead me to study and prize his holy word. By his blessing, I made some advances in knowledge, though slowly, under such discouragements and disadvantages, as they, who from the beginning of their inquiries, are favoured with public ordinances, and the help of Christian conference, can have no proper conception of. At length I became acquainted with some of his people, and had frequent opportunities of hearing the gospel. My first connections of this sort were chiefly with Dissenters, and brought me, as it were, into a new world. For, till then, I had hardly an idea of the different names and modes by which professing Christians were distinguished and subdivided, nor of the animosity with which their various disputes were carried on. But as I received benefit and pleasure from my intercourse with my new friends, it is no wonder that while my heart was warm, and my experience and judgment unformed, I should enter with readiness into all their views. Thus, together with the real advantages I obtained among them, I imbibed at the same time a strong prejudice against the established church, and hastily concluded, that though I might occasionally communicate with it as a private person, it would be impossible to officiate in it as a minister without violating my conscience. Accordingly, my first overtures were to the Dissenters; and had not the Providence of God remarkably interposed to prevent it, I should probably have been a brother with you in every sense. But my designs were overruled. A variety of doors by which I sought entrance (for I did not give up upon the first disappointment) were successively shut against me.

These repeated delays afforded me more time to think and judge for myself; and the more I considered the point, the more my scruples against conformity gave way. Reasons increased upon me, which not only satisfied me that I might conform without sin, but that the preference (as to my own concern) was plainly on that side. Accordingly, in the Lord's due time, after several years waiting to know his will, I sought and obtained Episcopal ordination. And I seriously assure you, that though I took this step with a firm persuasion that it was right, I did not at that time see so many reasons to justify my choice, nor perhaps any one reason in so strong a light, as I have since. Far from having regretted this interesting part of my conduct for a single hour, I have been more satisfied with it from year to year. You will

⁴ ["in these circumstances"]

please, therefore, to accept what I am about to offer, not merely as an account of the motives which influenced me twenty years ago, but rather as the considerations which at this minute call upon me to be heartily thankful to the Lord, for leading me by a way which I knew not, to labour in that part of his vineyard, which experience has proved to be most suitable for maintaining my personal peace and comfort, and (I verily believe likewise) for promoting my usefulness as a minister.

Some of our Dissenting brethren, who I hope are willing to think as well of the awakened clergy as they can, kindly allow us to be well-meaning people; they believe we desire to be useful, and think it not impossible but that in some instances we may be so: but they pity us either for not having more light or for not having courage to follow that light, which they suppose must force itself upon us, if we did not wilfully shut it out. From what they hear of us they are staggered. They are loath to deny that the Lord is with us at all: but then, if the Lord be with us indeed, why are we thus? It is almost unaccountable to them upon this supposition how we can remain where we are. They are expecting from day to day, that if we are enlightened, as we profess, and honest men, as they wish to find us, we shall surely come out from Babylon, renounce our slavery and will-worship, and openly attach ourselves to the Dissenting Interest. Could we do this, and persuade our people to follow us, they would probably no longer doubt whether the Lord had wrought by our ministry, or not.

I could wish you not to think of me while you read the paragraph I am now beginning. You know many of our ministers, and you know that there are amongst them men of sound sense, solid judgment, and extensive reading: Men whom the Lord has been pleased to favour with an eminency in gifts and spiritual knowledge; in a word, able ministers of the New Testament: Men, who though in the sight of the Lord they lie low in the dust, conscious of inherent defilement, and that their best services need forgiveness; yet with regard to their fellow-creatures, can in the integrity of their hearts appeal to all around them, that their conversation is not unbecoming the gospel which they preach. Some of these men, at least, have carefully studied the subject matter of debate between us and the Dissenters, have read the books, and consider the arguments, which are supposed sufficient to convert and reform us; but after all their endeavours to obtain information, though they agree with the evangelical Dissenters in their views of the gospel (which yet they received not from them, but from the holy scriptures) they are still constrained to differ on the question of church form and order. Now why should this be imputed to their ignorance and blindness? Does it require a sharper eye to perceive the precise delineation of a gospel-church in the New Testament, if it be really there, than to apprehend and embrace what the scripture teaches concerning the person and

characters of the Redeemer, the way of a sinner's acceptance, or the nature of the life of faith? These things, we are assured by the apostle, the natural man, however qualified, cannot discern. Surely the external form of a gospel-church cannot be equally mysterious with these doctrines; especially as it is professedly seen with the glance of an eye, by some persons who declare themselves enemies to mysteries of any kind. Or why should their not acceding to you be imputed to interested motives? There are with us men whose integrity and ingenuousness are in every other respect unimpeachable; and it is hard, that without sufficient evidence, they should be charged with prevarication in a business which concerns the honour of their Saviour, and the uprightness of their consciences in his sight. Besides, what can be the powerful motives for such hypocrisy? Do they by remaining in the establishment avoid the offence of the cross, and find a shelter from that opprobrium and opposition which must be their lot if they had the fortitude to unite with the Dissenters? Here at least, however, we may be mistaken. I apprehend the Lord has assigned to us the post of honour; and that in the treatment we meet with from an unbelieving world, our lot rather resembles that of the Dissenters of the last century than of the present. It is true, we are no more exposed to fines and imprisonment than you are; but if it be an honour to suffer shame for his name's sake, I think we have the pre-eminence. As to money-matters, I could name several of our clergy who are not so plentifully provided for in the establishment, but that if they were to leave us, and to go over to your side, it is very probable the manner in which converts of such characters and abilities would be received amongst you, might prove considerably to their emolument. Nor can it upon better grounds be ascribed to obstinate prejudice and incurable bigotry, that your arguments do not prevail. For it is well known, that many of our ministers show a cordial and liberal spirit to the Dissenters, receive them gladly into their houses, attend occasionally upon their preaching, recommend and encourage applications for the support of their ministers, or places of worship, and are ready to concur with them in every plan for usefulness. And I believe this disposition would be more general, had not experience shown that the candour of some clergymen in these respects, has been too often improperly requited by ungenerous attempts to prejudice and perplex our people, and to weaken our hands.

Yet one or another, or all these charges must be insinuated against us, rather than fallible men will suppose themselves anything less than infallible, even in points of a circumstantial nature; and though others whom they have no reason to think inferior to themselves either in judgment or integrity, are compelled to differ from them.

If not so frequent, would not this be strange?

That 'tis so frequent—this is stranger still!

Be assured, dear Sir, that in thus apologizing for my brethren, I write not only without their desire, but without their knowledge. I think I have now finished all my preambles, and I proceed immediately to acquaint you with my reasons for conforming to the Established Church, and continuing in it.

My first, and principal reason is, *The regard I owe to the honour and authority of the Lord Jesus Christ as Head and Lawgiver of his Church*. I do not mean that this consideration obliges me absolutely to prefer the form of the church of England to any other form, but only that it will not permit me to join with those who make dissenting from it necessary in point of conscience.

I cannot suppose that any true christian in our land of light and liberty, will hesitate a moment to acknowledge that Christ is the one infallible, authoritative legislator and governor of his church; that he is the Lord, and the only Lord of conscience, and that nothing inconsistent with his revealed will should be practised, nothing that he has enjoined be omitted, by those who profess allegiance to him. But however generally acknowledged these principles are, I believe the misconstruction and misapplication of them have contributed more to divide the people of God, and to alienate their affections from each other, than any other cause that can be assigned. It seems reasonable to expect that they whose hopes are built upon the same foundation, who are led by the same spirit, who are opposed by the same enemies, and interested in the same promises, would look upon each other with mutual complacence, would love as brethren, would bear each other's burdens, and so fulfil their Master's law, and copy his example. But alas! a mistaken zeal for his honour fills them on all sides with animosity against their fellow disciples, splits them into a thousand parties, gives rise to fierce and endless contentions, and makes them so earnest for and against their respective peculiarities, that the love, which is the discriminating characteristic of his religion, is scarcely to be found amongst them in such a degree of exercise, as to satisfy even candid observers whether they bear his mark or not.

The visible church of Christ comprises all who call themselves by his name, and who profess to receive his gospel as a divine revelation. It is a floor on which the grain and the chaff are promiscuously mingled; a field in which the wheat and the tares grow together; a net inclosing a multitude of fishes both good and bad. But the visible church of Christ taken in this large extent, is not the proper subject of his government, as he is the King of saints. For his kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, which none can understand, and his rule is a spiritual rule, which none can receive or obey, until

born from above, and made new creatures by the power of the Holy Spirit. If these regenerated persons, who it is to be feared, are seldom the largest number in any denomination, be considered as detached from the visible church, the remainder is a mere *caput mortuum*,⁵ differenced from the world, which lies in wickedness, in nothing but a name, and in the privilege of having the oracles of God committed to it. But nominal christians, though they have, or may have in their hands the scriptures, which are able to make sinners wise unto salvation, are no less distant and alienated from the life of God (until he is pleased to reveal his power in their hearts) than Mahomedans or Heathens. And with respect to these, the honour of the Lord Jesus Christ is but little concerned with the different ways in which they may think proper to constitute themselves into national or particular churches, and please themselves with a lifeless form of worship, while their hearts are in a state of enmity to his grace. Admitting that a plan of a gospel-church was described with the same precision in the New Testament, as the institutions of the Levitical worship in the Old, and punctually complied with to the minutest circumstance, though the worshippers might applaud and admire their own exactness, and censure and despise all who differed a hair's breadth from them, yet if they did not serve God in spirit and in truth, their boasted church-order would avail them nothing. All that related to the worship of God under the law, was confessedly of divine appointment; and the people in the time of the prophets were not so much charged with neglecting the prescribed forms, as with resting in them. When this evil became general, and they thought to compensate for their want of spirituality, by their feasts, fasts, and sacrifices, the Lord expresses himself as displeased with his own institutions, Isa. i. 11-15. lxvi. 3, 4. Jer. vii. 8-14, 22, 23. They could plead his prescription for their observances; but in vain they trusted to the temple, and said, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are we," when the Lord of the temple was departed from them. And certainly he will be no more pleased with a form without the heart now, than he was then.

I must therefore confine my inquiry to the church of Christ in a more limited and proper sense, as expressive of his mystical body, composed of all who by faith are united to him as their foundation and root, of all to whom he is the head of vital influence, who have fellowship with him in his death, and are partakers of the power of his resurrection. These are infallibly known only to himself. They are scattered far and wide, separated from each other by seas and mountains; they are a people of many nations and languages. But wherever their lot is cast, they hear his voice, are under his gracious eye, and the life which they live in the flesh is by faith in

⁵ ["worthless residue" (lit. "dead head")]

his name. They have not all equal degrees of light or measures of grace, nor are they all favoured with equal advantages for knowing or enjoying the full extent of the liberty of the gospel. But they are all accepted in the Beloved, and approved of God. They are spiritual worshippers, joint partakers of grace, and will hereafter appear together at their Saviour's right hand in glory.

At present they are in an imperfect state. Though created anew in Christ Jesus, they are not freed from a principle of indwelling sin. Their knowledge is clouded by much remaining ignorance, and their zeal, though right in its aim, is often warped and misguided by the corrupt influence of self. For they still have many corruptions, and they live in a world which furnishes frequent occasions of exciting them; and Satan, their subtle and powerful enemy, is always upon his watch to mislead and ensnare them. They are born, educated, and called under a great variety of circumstances. Habits of life, local customs, early connections, and even bodily constitution, have more or less influence in forming their characters, and in giving a tincture and turn to their manner of thinking. So that though, in whatever is essential to their peace and holiness, they are all led by the same Spirit, and mind the same things; in others of a secondary nature, their sentiments may, and often do differ, as much as the features of their faces. A uniformity of judgment among them is not to be expected while the wisest are defective in knowledge, the best are defiled with sin, and while the weaknesses of human nature which are common to them all, are so differently affected by a thousand impressions which are from their various situations. They might however, maintain a unity of spirit, and live in the exercise of mutual love, were it not that every party, and almost every individual, unhappily conceives that they are bound in conscience to prescribe their own line of conduct as a standard to which all their brethren ought to conform. They are comparatively but few who consider this requisition to be as unnecessary, unreasonable, and impracticable, as it would be to insist, or expect that every man's shoes should be exactly of one size.

Thus, though all agree in asserting the authority and right of the Lord Jesus, as King and Head of his Church, the various apprehensions they frame of the rule to which he requires them to conform, and their pertinacious attachment to their own expositions of it, separate them almost as much from each other, as if they were not united to him by a principle of living faith. Their little differences form them into so many separate interests; and the heat with which they defend their own plans, and oppose all who cannot agree with them in a tittle, makes them forget that they are children in the same family, and servants of the same master. And while they vex and worry each other with disputations and censures, the world

wonders and laughs at them all. The spirit of love is restrained, offences are multiplied, and Satan is gratified by beholding the extensive effects of his pernicious and long practised maxim, *Divide et impera*.⁶

I am far from supposing that all the various modes of church-government under which spiritual worshippers are cast, are equally agreeable to the spirit and genius of the gospel, or equally suited to the purposes of edification. Perhaps there is no considerable body of people who profess themselves Christians, however erroneous in their plans of doctrine or worship, among whom the Saviour has not some hidden ones, known to himself, though lost to human observation in the crowd of pretenders which surround them. The power of his grace can break through all disadvantages, and make a few individuals wiser than their teachers, by revealing his truth to their heart, sooner or later, so far as is necessary to salvation. But it must be owned, that some communities which bear the name of Christian have departed so very far from the simplicity of the gospel, that if we reason *a priori*, we are ready to conclude it as almost impossible for a converted person to continue a single day in such a communion. But hypotheses cannot be maintained against plain facts. Thus the Church of Rome, not merely by adopting an unmeaning burdensome train of ceremonies, but by her doctrines of Papal infallibility, invocation of saints and angels, purgatory, absolution, the mass, and others of the like stamp, is become so exceedingly adulterated, that possibly some persons who may read these letters, will form an unfavourable opinion of me, for declaring that I have not the least doubt but the Lord Jesus has had, from age to age, a succession of chosen and faithful witnesses within the pale of that corrupt church. Yet I should hope that they, who, having themselves tasted that the Lord is gracious, know the language of a heart under the influence of his Spirit, would, in defiance of Protestant prejudices, be of my mind, if they had opportunity of perusing the writings of some Papists. If such persons as Fenelon, Pascal, Quesnal, and Nicole (to mention no more), were not true christians, where shall we find any that deserve the name? In the writings of these great men, notwithstanding incidental errors, I meet with such strains of experimental godliness, such deep knowledge of the workings of the Spirit of God, and of the heart of man, and such masterly explications of many important passages of scripture, as might do honour to the most enlightened Protestant. And yet these men lived and died in the Popish communion; and, to their latest hours (for anything that appears to the contrary), thought they could not separate from it without sin. And, though I have not equal means of information, I can as little doubt that the Lord has a people likewise in the Greek

⁶ ["divide and rule."]

Church, which, as to its external frame, seems to be little less unscriptural than the Church of Rome itself.

However, I desire to be thankful that I am not a Papist. I am at least one step nearer to the true and acceptable worship of God. For I believe the most rigid of our Dissenting brethren will allow, that the Church of England, if almost, yet is not altogether so depraved and corrupt in its constitution as the church of Rome. I am now in my track, and shall trouble you with fewer digressions in the sequel. My next point will be to examine the different claims, of Protestant churches to the honour they all assume, that their respective institutions are most conformable to the rules the apostles have laid down on the subject of church-government, and express the greatest regard to the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, the undoubted Head and Lawgiver of his Church. And to avoid as much as I can, encumbering what I write in an epistolary way to a friend, with the stiffness of argumentation, I shall content myself with giving you a simple account of what occurred to me upon this head, when I made the inquiry for my own direction. But it is time to conclude this letter by assuring you that I am,

Your affectionate Friend.

LETTER III.

MY DEAR FRIEND AND BROTHER,

IF the authority of men truly respectable for learning, judgment, and grace, were sufficient to determine the question, Which of the various forms of church-government now obtaining among Christians is most agreeable to the letter and spirit of the New Testament? a modest inquirer, who wishes for the sanction of those whom he esteems wiser and better than himself, would probably, without hesitation, join himself to that party to which he might be first led to apply for direction. For whatever difference there may be in the merit of their several claims for pre-eminence, the claim itself is made with an equal degree of confidence by them all. At a time when I was very sensible of my own incompetency to decide this point for myself, I received (as I hope) much benefit from the writings of Bishop Hall, Reynolds, Davenant, Mr. Hooker, and other divines of the Church of England. I perceived they were persons of strong sense, extensive literature, sound in the faith; and from such accounts of their lives as I could collect, I judged they had been zealous and diligent in their callings, and burning and shining lights in the world. I could not perceive that any of them were dissatisfied with the Established Church in which they lived and died and some of them I found were very strenuous in its defence, not only pleading that it was lawful to maintain communion with it, but offering many arguments to prove that it was even sinful to separate from it, and that it was the only resemblance of the primitive apostolical church. I own to you that I thought some of their assertions upon this head were too strong, and some of their arguments not fully conclusive. Yet I was a little staggered, and it gave me pain to be forced to differ in any point from men whom I believed to have been full of faith and of the Holy Ghost. However, some general idea I possessed of the liberty of the gospel, a conviction that the Lord had a people and a work in other countries where the form of the Church of England could not take place, and the previous attachment I had to the Dissenters, with whom, as I have said, I was first acquainted, prevented me from becoming what is called a High-Church man. But as for these reasons I could not give the Church of England an exclusive preference, or think myself authorized to brand those who dissented from it with the hard names of schismatics and fanatics, so on the other hand, I could not go into the opposite extreme, or suppose that a church in which the Lord employed and owned such valuable men, and had a numerous spiritual people, was no better than a Babylon, from whence all who loved his name and salvation, were in duty and conscience bound to withdraw.

Many books likewise came in my way written by divines of the Church of Scotland. In the writings of Durham, Fleming, Halyburton, and others, I

found proofs that they were not inferior in light, holiness, and a sound spiritual judgment, to the most eminent luminaries of our own Church. In what concerned the life and power of religion, I could perceive no considerable difference between them. As they were all taught by the same Spirit, so they were all teachers of the same truths. But in their sentiments upon church-government they differed very widely. Wherein they agreed, I could fully agree with them. Wherein they differed, I was left in the uncertainty of a traveller, who, inquiring his way of two persons, is told by one to turn to the right, and by the other directly opposite to the left. My English guides would persuade me that the form of the church from the apostles' days was Episcopal. My Scotch guides were rather more positive that our prelacy was almost equally with the papacy, a branch and a mark of Antichrist. If I compared the sufficiency of each to decide for me, I knew not which to prefer. On both sides were men of wisdom and grace, and who I believed would not wilfully mislead me; on both sides they confessed themselves in general to be, like myself, fallible, and liable to mistake. Only in this one point both sides appeared confident, that they could not be mistaken, and yet their opinions were not only diverse, but contradictory.

The suspense in which I was held by these incompatible claimants, sent me more readily and attentively to renew my inquiries amongst my former friends of your denomination. By these I was instructed, that I need not trouble myself with weighing and comparing the arguments which the English and Scotch Churches had to offer in favour of their respective constitutions, for they were both equally destitute of any foundation in truth or scripture: That I had only to read the New Testament for myself, and it must appear very plain, that the Lord Christ had not left a concern of this importance undetermined, but had directed his apostles to leave in their writings a pattern, according to which it was his pleasure all his churches in future ages should be formed: That the first churches were Congregational or Independent, and that every other plan was unscriptural, and a presumptuous deviation from the declared will of the Lord. As I had been a debtor to some of their writers likewise, and was personally acquainted with several of their ministers, their representation had so much weight with me as to increase my embarrassment.

My difficulties grew upon me, when I found, by consulting different Independent writers who had professedly treated this subject, that though they were of one mind in asserting that a plain and satisfactory pattern for this Congregational order might be easily collected and stated from a perusal of the New Testament; yet when they came to delineate and describe it according to their own idea, they were far from being agreed among themselves as to the nature and number of the officers, powers, and acts which are requisite to the constitution and administration of a regularly or-

ganized gospel-church. I formerly employed much time and attention in this disquisition; but not having for many years past reviewed a controversy which I think rather dry and uninteresting, I cannot from memory enter into a detail of particulars. Nor is it needful. Of the fact, I think I may be confident, that there is not such an agreement amongst them as might be expected, if the plan from which they all profess to copy was clearly and expressly revealed in the New Testament as obligatory upon all christians. Here I was at a loss again; for, if I could have admitted their principle, That every circumstance of worship and government in a church ought to have the warrant of a precept or a precedent from the scripture, still I needed help to digest and put together the several regulations which were dispersed in so many different parts of the Gospels and Epistles; for I found myself unable to frame the detached materials into one orderly structure by my own skill. But when they who professed to have the light which I wanted were themselves divided upon the point, I was precluded from the hope of any certain assistance; for as to probabilities and conjectures, I might as well depend upon my own, as upon those of another.

Nor was this the whole of my difficulty. I was honestly advised to read and examine for myself. I did so; and it appeared to me, by comparing what I read with what I saw, that the Independents could not, at least did not, keep closely to their own principles. I thought I met with usages in the churches planted by the apostles which did not obtain in any of the Congregational churches I was acquainted with; and, on the other hand, I noticed some usages among these of which I could find no traces in the inspired account we have of the primitive churches. Permit me, by way of specimen, to mention one instance in each kind. If it was necessary I could mention several, but I wish not to be tedious.

The apostle Paul addresses the Corinthians as a church of Christ; and we have from him a larger and more particular account of the practices of their church than of any other. In chap. xiv. of his first epistle, after censuring and correcting some improprieties which had obtained in their public assemblies, he gives them this direction: "Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If anything be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted." The general practice of the Congregational churches in our time, seems not to comply with this apostolic injunction. I think, my friend, in your assemblies, especially in your solemn stated worship on the Lord's day, there is seldom more than one speaker. The same minister who preaches, usually begins and ends the service. Should it be pleaded that the apostle speaks of prophesying, and evidently supposes that the church of Corinth was favoured with extraordinary gifts and revelations which are now ceased, and that therefore the rule cannot in

that respect extend to us, I have two answers to make.

In the first place, though we do not expect extraordinary revelations, we have encouragement to hope for the presence of our Saviour, and the gracious influences of his Spirit, when we meet in his name, sufficient to enable us to speak to his praise, and to the edification and comfort of our brethren, if not in foreign tongues, at least in our own. And it is probable that you have more than once been a hearer in a public assembly, when your heart has been so warmed and impressed with the truths of the gospel, that you would not have been unwilling to have ascended the pulpit yourself, either to confirm or correct what you had been hearing, or to indulge the liberty you found in your mind upon some other important subject. Perhaps something was then revealed to you, which might have been very suitable to the occasion, and to the state of the congregation. Why did you not then declare it? Why did you neglect to stir up the gift of God that was in you? Would it have been contrary to the custom of your churches? But would you not, upon your principles, have been justified by the custom of a New Testament church, and the injunction of an apostle?

But, secondly, and chiefly, I answer, if it be admitted, that because the primitive churches had extraordinary gifts, there are some things in their practice which are not proper for our imitation⁷, who have not the same gifts; then I quite give up the hope of being able to determine the exact and invariable form of a church, by such lights as the Acts of the Apostles and their Epistles afford me; unless some man or set of men be qualified and commissioned to draw the line for me, and to show me distinctly how far, and in what instances, the state of the first Christians is limited from being a pattern to us, by the extraordinary dispensations of that age; and how far, and in what cases, their pattern is binding upon us still, notwithstanding those dispensations have long since ceased. To be directed to study these churches as a model, and to be told at the same time, that some parts of their practice were not designed for the imitation of future ages, without distinctly specifying which were, and which were not, is rather the way to perplex and bewilder an inquirer, than to help him to information. Upon this ground, though I might refuse to trust the assumed infallibility of the Pope, I must feel the need of an infallible visible guide to reside somewhere in the church; for without such assistance I could not take a single step with certainty, but must be liable to stumble at the very threshold of my inquiry.

I think it is the usual practice in your churches, to require from all persons who wish to be admitted into your communion, an account, either ver-

⁷ See Neale's History of the Puritans, Vol. i. p. 379. 2d edit. 1732.

bal or written, of what is called their experience; in which, not only a declaration of their faith in the Lord Jesus, and their purpose, by grace, to devote themselves to him, is expected, but likewise a recital of the steps by which they were led to a knowledge and profession of the gospel. I select this as one instance in which I conceive you have neither precept nor precedent in the scripture for your warrant. A profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, of acceptance of him, and submission to him in his offices and characters, supported by the evidence of a gospel-conversation, should, I apprehend, be deemed sufficient to entitle a person to church-membership; and especially by those who so loudly insist upon the evil of superadding any regulations to those which are already provided by our Lord and his apostles. The authority which makes it a prerequisite for admission, that a person shall relate how and when he was awakened, what exercises of mind he has passed through, and other particulars of a like nature, appears to me to be as merely human, as the authority which prescribes the canons of an established church. If the practice be defensible, it must be on the plea of expediency. It is not my present business to inquire how far it may be expedient for young converts, for young persons, especially for young women, to be compelled to speak before a public assembly; or if that be dispensed with for the sake of other interfering expediciencies, how far it is expedient to trust to a written experience: otherwise I could say a good deal upon this head. But it is sufficient for my purpose, if no shadow of this practice can be found in the New Testament. On the contrary, I read, that when Saul, after he escaped from Damascus, essayed to join himself to the disciples, it was Barnabas, and not Saul⁸ himself, who informed them both of his conversion, and of the extraordinary manner in which it was effected, subjoining a testimony of his conduct from the time that he professed a change. But if expediency may warrant a measure in your churches not expressly commanded, why not likewise in ours? Be it either right or wrong in one case, it must be so in both. And therefore my remark on this particular will at least have the force of *argumentum ad hominem*.

I am afraid I shall weary you by only giving a brief account of the long and intricate road which I travelled, to discover, if I could, the best constituted church. But I must entreat your patience a little longer, till I bring you to the end of my journey. It may be necessary to inform some of my readers, though not you, that a considerable part of the congregational churches differ from the rest, with respect to the mode and subjects of baptism. At the time when my thoughts were most engaged about church-order, I lived in intimate habits of friendship with several Baptists, who were very will-

⁸ See Dr Guyse on Acts ix. 27.

ing to assist me in settling my judgment. These, though they would have been pleased to see me yield to the arguments of their Pædobaptist brethren, would not be satisfied that I should stop where they stopped. They urged scripture precepts and precedents to lead me farther: and said, that none of the Congregational churches but their own were agreeable to the mind of Christ. They told me, that though I should acknowledge and embrace the Congregational order, which undoubtedly was the only one countenanced by scripture, still I could not be right till I had renounced what I called the baptism I had received in my infancy, and submitted (as they termed it) to baptism by immersion, to which I was bound not only by the practice of the primitive church, but by the example of our Lord himself, who, when he was baptized, said for our instruction, “Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.”

I own, Sir, that if I had seen it my duty to accede to the church-order of the Independents, I know not but their principles would have led me from them again, to join with the Baptists. How they, who, maintaining infant-baptism, press scripture precedent so strongly upon me, answer the Baptists, who in this point press it as strongly upon themselves, is not my concern. I did not stand upon the same ground, and therefore the arguments of the Baptists did not much affect me. I thought the example of our Lord pleaded as much for circumcision as for baptism. I questioned whether I, a poor sinner, had any call to imitate him in those things which it became him as our Surety to perform, in order to fulfil all righteousness. It appeared to me that John’s baptism and the christian baptism were different; and though the Baptists assured me that they were the same, I was not convinced. I thought they were plainly distinguished in Acts xix. 2-5. And I was grieved by the attempts of some wise and good men to wrest a sense from that passage, so contrary to its plain and obvious meaning, merely to support a favourite scheme. And as the form of christian baptism is laid down in express words, Matth. xxviii. 19, I must continue to think it different from the baptism of John, till I can have sufficient proof that John baptized our Saviour in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

I found likewise that the Baptists, though unanimous against us, and even against those who in every point but one agree with them, were divided among themselves. Some of them, while they practise what they think a duty, do not so peremptorily prescribe it to others, as to make it an indispensable term of communion; but they will receive a person as a church-member whom they judge to be sound in the faith, and of a good conversation, though they consider him in strictness of speech as unbaptized. But others are much hurt by this concession, and bear testimony against it as

unscriptural and wrong. Their views are so strict that if they certainly knew that a person who wished to communicate with them was the most eminent christian in the land, unless he was likewise baptized in their manner, they could not, they durst not admit him to the Lord's table, to eat of that bread and to drink of that cup which is by his command and appointment, the privilege and portion of all believers. This difference of judgment between them has been thought so important, that the reasons for and against, and their mutual censures of each other, have been laid before the public, by good men on each side of the question.

Now, my dear friend, upon this state of the case, what could I do? I had reviewed and compared the sentiments of a number of respectable writers and ministers of different names. In essentials I agreed with them all, and in circumstantialia I differed no more from any of them, than they differed among themselves. They all confessed they were fallible, yet they all decided with an air of infallibility; for they all in their turns expected me to unite with them, if I had any regard to the authority and honour of the Lord Jesus as Head of the church. But the very consideration they proposed restrained me from uniting with any of them. For I cannot think that I should honour the headship and kingly office of Christ, by acknowledging him as the Head of a party and subdivision of his people to the exclusion of the rest. Every party uses fair sounding words of liberty; but when an explanation is made, it amounts to little more than this—that they will give me liberty to think as they think, and to act as they act; which to me, who claim the same right of thinking for myself and of acting according to the dictates of my own conscience, is no liberty at all. I therefore came to such conclusions as these—that I would love them all—that I would hold a friendly intercourse with them all, so far as they should providentially come in my way; but that I would stand fast in the liberty with which Christ had made me free, and call none of them master—in fine, that if others sought to honour him by laying a great stress on matters of doubtful disputation, my way of honouring him should be by endeavouring to show that his kingdom is not of this world, nor consists in meats and drinks, in pleading for forms and parties, but in righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost; and that neither circumcision is anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature, and the faith which worketh by love. There was a time when I could have joined with the Dissenters, if the providence of God had opened my way to them; but farther experience and observation have so far altered my judgment, that had I my choice to make again, it seems to me, that I could no more officiate as a minister among any people who insist upon other terms of communion than those which our Lord has appointed, faith and holiness, than I could subscribe to the dogmas of the Council of Trent. My regard to his honour will not allow me to exclude any whom I believe he has been

pleased to receive. Thus much for the first reason of my conformity. Yet in justice to the non-conformists I must add, that if I wished to avail myself of the sanction of great names, I could mention some among them, who, if they were now living, I am persuaded would not blame me for conforming, though they could not in conscience do it themselves. Particularly I judge thus (from many of his writings) of the truly great Mr Howe, whose praise is in all the churches.

I am sincerely yours, &c.

LETTER IV.

MY DEAR FRIEND AND BROTHER,

I HAVE given you the chief reason why I am not a Dissenter; and it appears to me a sufficient one, though I could assign no other. I have, however, two or three more to offer you, but I hope to comprise them all within the compass of this letter. For indeed I begin to be weary of a subject which is not quite suitable to my taste and inclination. But it seems not unseasonable, and I hope may not be unuseful to show you that the preference I have given to the Church of England, is not the effect either of inconsideration or prejudice.

My second reason for not being a Dissenter is, *Because I highly value the right of private judgment, and my liberty as a man and as a Christian.* Here again I think we are agreed in principle. You rejoice in the name of a Protestant Dissenter, as setting you free from the shackles and impositions of men; and probably think of me and my brethren in the Establishment, with a degree of friendly pity; taking it for granted, that the engagements we are under hold us in a painful state of subjection and bondage, from which you charitably wish to see us released.

We are obliged to persons of your candid disposition for your sympathy and good wishes; and we repay you in kind. As we cannot think exactly alike, this seems the best method we can take. Harsh censures and angry disputations would be unbecoming our profession, and hurtful to our spirits; but it can do us no harm to pity and pray for each other. Perhaps you are ready to say, "You would surely pity me if you knew all my inward and outward trials; but you need not pity me for being a Dissenter, because I account it my great privilege." I may say the same, with the alteration of one word. If you knew the evils which I feel within, and the snares and difficulties which beset me from without, you would pity me indeed. But that I exercise my ministry in the Church of England, appears to me, as things stand, to be rather a subject for congratulation than compassion. I cannot become a Dissenter till I am weary of my liberty. If you please we will compare notes upon this head.

Let me first speak of the restraints we are under. I am bound, by my subscription, to the forms and rubric of the Common Prayer; but my subscription was really *ex animo*.⁹ I approve the service, and therefore it is no burden to me to use it. I do not consider it as faultless, nor can I subscribe to any book of human composition in the same absolute manner as I would to the Bible. But by assenting to our church-ritual I give up less of my own private judgment for the sake of peace, than I should by espousing the rules

⁹ ["from the heart."]

and practices of any Dissenting churches I am acquainted with. Again, having accepted a designation to the cure of souls, my public ministry is thereby confined to parish churches, and I cannot, consistently with what I conceive to be the import of my voluntary engagements, preach at random, and in all places without reserve. But this is no restraint upon my conscience. While I have the examples of our Lord and his apostles in my view, I cannot doubt the lawfulness of preaching on mountains or plains, in market-places, or on the sea-shore. But things in themselves lawful are not always, nor to all persons, expedient. I approve of parochial order. I interfere not with the conduct of others; but believe it is, upon the whole, best for me to confine myself to the duties of my own charge, and to such opportunities of preaching in parochial pulpits as may occasionally offer. Between the one and the other I have sufficient employment. And though the Bishop who ordained me laid me under no restrictions, I would not have applied to him for ordination, if I had not been previously determined to submit to his authority and to the rules of the church. I thought, and still think it my duty to preserve a consistency of character; for I was not ordained to be an apostle or evangelist, to spread the gospel throughout a kingdom, but to take care of the particular flock committed to my charge. But I need not enlarge upon this point, as I think the Dissenters do not in general by their practice countenance what we call irregularity, but are almost as seldom seen preaching in the fields, or by the waysides, as the most regular of our clergy; though they cannot plead our reasons for not doing it, and are certainly not restrained either by the precepts or precedents of the New Testament.

Nor am I under any disagreeable constraint from my superiors in the church. The Archdeacon in his district, and the Bishop in his diocese, hold their respective visitations; the former annually, the latter once in three years. At these visitations the clergy (especially in the country) are expected to attend. On these occasions we answer to our names, hear a sermon or a charge, and usually dine together. There is nothing painful to me in paying these tokens of respect to my acknowledged superiors, and receiving marks of civility from them. At all other times, while we keep within the limits which I have already told you, I subscribed and consented to *ex animo*,¹⁰ we scarcely know, at least we do not reel, that we have any superiors. So far as I am concerned, I have reason to acknowledge that the administration of our church. government is gentle and liberal. I have from the first preached my sentiments with the greatest freedom. I always acted in the parishes which I have served according to my own judgment: and I have done some things which have not the sanction of general custom, but I never met with the smallest check, interference, or mark of displeasure

¹⁰ ["from the heart."]

from any of my superiors in the church, to this hour. Such are my restraints, and such is my liberty. I am bound by no regulations but what I myself approve; and within these boundaries I do as I please, no man forbidding or controlling me.

Indeed I have often thought that I have as good a right to the name of Independent as yourself. Neither you nor I would assume it to the prejudice of our dependence upon our Lord and Saviour; and, with respect to the influence of men, perhaps we have the advantage of you. I think we are more dependent of our brethren, and more independent of our people.

Though according to your plan every particular church is called independent, as possessing and exercising every kind of church-power within itself, and not subject to the control of any other Christian society; yet, considering you as a body, or (according to the modern phrase) an interest, there is a kind of union and association among your ministers, which has a greater effect than some people are aware of, and which I apprehend may in some instances be rather unfriendly to the liberty you so highly prize. Some of your ministers, from their situation or connection, have more influence than others. They have opportunities of assisting poorer ministers, and are, I suppose, in many cases, the judges whether they shall be assisted or not, and how far. They who best know human nature, are best qualified to judge how far the professed independence of your churches may be abated by this influence of connection; and whether the weight of a board of ministers may not be occasionally felt by those who pity us for being subordinate to a bench of Bishops. I own, I have upon some occasions been led to compare your ministers to a company of soldiers in their exercise, where everyone must move in a prescribed line, keep the same pace, and make the like motions with the rest, on pain of being treated as refractory. Ministers in the establishment know nothing of these restraints. We are connected in love, but not upon system. We profess the same leading principles and aims, but each one acts singly and individually for himself.

I think we are likewise more independent of our people. The constitution of your churches, which you suppose the only one agreeable to the scripture, appears to me faulty, in giving a greater power to the people than the scripture authorizes. There is doubtless a sense in which ministers are not only the servants of the Lord, but, for his sake, the servants of the churches; but it is a service which implies rule, and is entitled to respect. Thus the apostle says, "Obey them that have the rule over you." Their office is that of a steward, who is neither to lord it over the household, nor to be entirely under subjection to it, but to superintend and provide for the family. Scriptural regulations are wisely and graciously adapted to our state of infirmity; but I think the power which the people with you claim, and attempt to exercise, is not so. Many of them, though truly gracious persons, may, notwith-

standing, from their situation in life, their want of education, and the narrowness of their views, be very incapable of government; yet when a number of such are associated according to your plan, under the honourable title of a Church of Christ, they acquire a great importance. Almost every individual conceives himself qualified to judge and to guide the minister; to sift and scrutinize his expressions, and to tell him how and what he ought to preach. But the poorer part of your flocks are not always the most troublesome. The rich can contribute most to the minister's support, who is often entirely dependent upon his people for a maintenance; their riches likewise give them some additional weight and influence in the church; and the officers, whom you call the Deacons, are usually chosen from among the more wealthy. But it is not always found that the most wealthy church-members are the most eminent, either for grace or wisdom. We may be rather sure, that riches, if the possessors are not proportionably humble and spiritual, have a direct tendency to nourish the worms of self-conceit and self-will. Such persons expect to be consulted, and that their judgment shall be followed. The preaching must be suited to their taste and sentiment; and if anything is either enforced or censured which bears hard upon their conduct, they think themselves ill-treated. Although a faithful minister, in his better hours, disdains the thought of complying with the caprice of his hearers, or conniving at their faults, yet human nature is weak, and it must be allowed, that in such circumstances, he stands in a state of temptation. And if he had grace to maintain his integrity, yet it is painful and difficult to be obliged frequently to displease those on whom we depend, and who in some other respects may be our best friends and benefactors. I can truly say, that my heart has been grieved for the opposition, neglect, and unkindness, which some valuable men among you have to my knowledge met with, from those who ought to have esteemed them very highly for their work's sake. The effects of this supreme power lodged in the people, and of the unsanctified spirit in which it has been exercised, have been often visible in the divisions and subdivisions which have crumbled large societies into separate handfuls, if I may so speak. And to this I am afraid, rather than to the spread of a work of grace, may be ascribed in many instances, the great increase of the number of your churches of late years. Now, in the Establishment, we know but little of these difficulties: we are not so much at the mercy of our hearers for our subsistence; and though we probably preach to some who are wiser and better, as well as richer than ourselves, we have no hearers who assume a right to direct us, or whom we should stand in fear of, if they did. For my own part, I wish to have a spirit willing to profit by a hint, even from a child, and to pay attention to the advice of any person who speaks to me in love, and in a right temper. But humble loving christians are more disposed to find fault with themselves than with

their minister, and to receive instruction than to offer it. But should a conformist to the world, or a zealot for a party, expect me to accommodate my preaching to his practice, or to his Shibboleth, I could give him an answer without being afraid of consequences.

I may add, that I apprehend we have more liberty with respect to our pulpits. At least I remember to have heard sermons from some of your pulpits, the strain of which has been so very different from the professed sentiments of the proper pastor of the church, that I have thought to myself, How came this minister to preach in this place? Upon inquiry I have found at one time, that the gentleman belonged to the *connection*; at another, that he was asked to preach at the desire of a principal person in the church or congregation, who it seems approved him, though I was persuaded the pastor did not.

I esteem it likewise a branch of my Christian liberty, that I can hear whom I please, and form what acquaintance I please, among the various denominations of Christians, without being called to account for it. I hope the Dissenters are likewise growing more into this liberty. However, as I know some among your people who would willingly hear us occasionally, were they not afraid of their ministers; so I know some of your ministers who would be willing to hear us, but do not, because they are afraid of their people.

Thus much (though more might be said) by way of comparing our advantages in point of liberty. I am well pleased with my lot; if you are equally pleased with yours, I am glad of it. I write only on the defensive; I neither expect nor wish to alter your views. Enjoy your liberty; only allow me to enjoy and be thankful for mine.

I have now acquainted you with my two principal reasons for not being a Dissenter. The first concerned my conscience. For though my regard to the authority of the great Lord and Lawgiver of the church did not directly oblige me to unite with the Establishment, it discouraged me from uniting with any of the parties, who pretended an exclusive right from him to enforce their own particular church-forms. When conscience did not interfere, my second reason, though rather of a prudential kind, was of considerable weight with me. I loved liberty, and therefore gave a preference to the Church of England, believing I might in that situation exercise my ministry with the most freedom. I have made the experiment, and have no reason to repent of it. These points being cleared, my way was open to attend to another consideration which had a farther influence in determining my mind. This, I am about to offer to you as a third reason for my being where I am. *The probability of greater usefulness*. This probability, as to myself, and to others who can conform with a good conscience, seemed to lie on the side of the Establishment upon several accounts.

1. Great multitudes in this Christian nation (so called) are grossly ignorant of the first principles of religion, inattentive to the worth and welfare of their souls, and lamentably destitute of the proper means of instruction. I hoped for opportunities in the Establishment of preaching to many who could not hear the Dissenters. The children of God, known to himself, are scattered abroad, far and wide. And as faith more usually comes by hearing, I admire his condescension and goodness in permitting his ministers to think differently on some external points, that they may with an upright heart serve him in the different departments of his vineyard. They who are Dissenters upon principle, would act against their judgments and consciences, were they to conform for the sake of usefulness. I am well content that they should remain as they are. But it has proved a mercy to thousands, that all who are called and qualified to preach the gospel, are not like-minded in this respect.

2. The spirit of bigotry and prejudice is too prevalent on all sides. As there are Dissenters who would think it sinful to be seen within the walls of a church, so there are other persons who place a principal part of their religion in an ignorant attachment to our forms, and could not easily be prevailed upon to enter within the doors of a meeting-house. But their prepossession in favour of our churches gives the minister who can conscientiously meet them there a great advantage *ad hominem*,¹¹ by confirming the truths of the gospel (which when first declared are generally disliked and opposed) from the tenor of our Liturgy and Articles, to which they profess some regard. A large part of our auditories, especially in places where the gospel is considered as a novelty, consists of persons of this description. But the Lord has been pleased in very many instances to honour our service amongst them with his blessing. By the power of his Spirit the truth is made manifest to their hearts, they are turned from darkness to light, and from the bondage of sin, to serve the living God. Then their former prejudices subside; insomuch that many, who once despised and hated the Dissenters, have been afterwards persuaded to join with them. The Dissenting interest would probably have been much weaker than it is at present, if it had not been strengthened by the accession of many church-members, and more than a few of your teachers and pastors, who had no inclination to hear your ministers, until they were first awakened under ours. The words of our Lord may in this sense be applied to many of your churches: “Other men laboured, and ye have entered into the fruits of their labours.” The aim of my ministry, I trust, is not to promote the interests of a party, but to win souls to Christ. We have, however, the comfort, to find, that a number are not only called, but edified and established by the blessing of God on our

¹¹ [lit. “to the man”]

preaching; and that many of the most judicious and spiritual of our people, are proof against the insinuations which prevail on some to forsake the Church of England in hopes of enjoying a purer and more acceptable worship among the Dissenters. As to those who do leave us, if they are truly benefited, if they really grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord, in humility, meekness, benevolence, and deadness to the world, more among you, than they would have done amongst us, I can sincerely rejoice. But I think your brethren have no just reason to be either displeased or sorry, that God has raised up ministers to preach to thousands to whom they would never have had access.

3. I saw likewise, that the Lord had been pleased of late years to return by the power of his Spirit to the Church of England, which I believe many Dissenters thought he had so utterly forsaken that he would return no more. This leads me to a tender point, and I wish to touch upon it with great tenderness. We have none of us anything to boast of. Our warmest exertions in the service of such a Master are far too cold; and our greatest success falls very short of what we ought to pray for. We preach no other gospel than you do. We love and respect many of your ministers for their knowledge, piety, and exemplary conversation. But I believe you will allow, that the general state of your churches at present, is not so lively and flourishing as it was in the days of the old non-conformists. I believe the best of your people were long ago sensible of a decline, that they sincerely lamented it, and earnestly prayed for a revival. Their prayers were at length answered, but not in the way they expected. A great and spreading revival of religion took place, but the instruments were not Dissenters. At the time when I was ordained there was a considerable number of regular parochial ministers who preached the doctrines of the Reformation. The number has been greatly increased since, and is still increasing. I could not but judge, that the Lord's presence with his word in awakening sinners, and in applying it with power to the heart, was more evident and striking on this side, than on yours. Not because we are better than you; but because the work with us is rather new, whereas amongst you it is of an older date. The history of the Church of God and of human nature in past ages, teaches us to expect that revivals of religion will seldom stand long at their primitive height, but will gradually subside and degenerate, till things return in a course of time nearly to their former state; though a name, perhaps first imposed as a stigma by the world, and a form, which owed all its value to the spirit that once enlivened it, may still remain. I wish I could affirm that none who were otherwise competent judges of a revival, have been prevented by their prepossessions from rejoicing in what God has wrought amongst us. But I fear it has been otherwise, and that a spirit of prejudice and party discovered itself upon the occasion, which proved hurtful to some good men. When I

think of the abilities and characters of some Dissenting' ministers, I cannot but ascribe the little visible success they meet with, in some measure to their unwillingness to acknowledge a work of God in which they themselves were not employed. Their exceptions were not wholly groundless: A lively zeal for the glory of God, and the good of souls, in persons whose judgments were not fully ripened by observation and experience, did not secure them from incidental mistakes and blemishes. These were easily seen and eagerly noticed. A desire of being free from the least suspicion of giving countenance to the unguarded, though well-meant sallies of active spirits, seems to have led some of your ministers into a contrary extreme; and their public discourses, though solid and judicious compositions, lost that animation in delivery, which is in some degree necessary to engage attention, and to keep up an auditory. Thus, while preachers much inferior to them for learning and general knowledge in divinity have had crowded assemblies, the pleasure with which I have heard some of your most eminent ministers, has been often abated by observing that the number of the hearers has been much smaller than the number of pews in the place. I must therefore confess that one consideration which deterred me from joining the Dissenters was, a fear lest the love of peace, and a temper rather compliant, might insensibly betray me into an over cautious spirit, damp my zeal, or divert it into a wrong channel, and thereby prevent the success at which I aimed. I rather chose to unite with those people whom I thought the most likely to maintain and encourage what little fervour I possessed; and where I saw the most evident tokens of a power from on high accompanying the public ministrations. And as I had my reasons likewise for not being an Itinerant, a regular and stated charge in the Established church engaged my preference.

4. My fourth reason (the last I think it necessary to mention) being rather a point of experience, must depend chiefly upon my own testimony, and therefore I need not enlarge much upon it. Superadded, however, to those which I have already stated, it greatly contributed to give full satisfaction to my mind. I mean, the proofs I had, that the Lord by the openings and leadings of his providence, pointed out to me the situation in which I was to serve him. The first explicit notice I gave of my desire to enter the ministry, was to an intimate friend in your denomination, nearly six years before I was ordained. In the course of this interval I made, and I received a variety of applications and proposals; but everything failed, and every door by which I sought admission remained shut against me. I have already observed, that this state of suspense gave me leisure to examine the subject of church-government more closely, and that the result of my disquisitions was the gradual, and at length the complete removal of the difficulties and exceptions I had at first hastily imbibed against the Establishment. At

length the Lord's time came; then obstacles apparently unsurmountable suddenly and unexpectedly disappeared. Then I learnt the reason of former disappointments. My way had been mercifully hedged up with thorns, to prevent me taking a wrong course, and to keep me waiting until the place and service of his own appointment were prepared and ready for me. The coincidence of many circumstances which I cannot explain to another, gave me a very comfortable sense of the Lord's guidance. I received ordination in the Church of England with a fulfilment with wind and tide (if I may so speak) in my favour, with the most pleasing disposition of outward events, and the most assured persuasion in my own mind, that I was following the call, and doing the will of God; of which I had at that time little more doubt than if an angel had been sent from heaven to tell me so. Nor have I hesitated upon the point a single hour from that day to this.

I think you will not be sorry to find I am drawing towards a close. Indeed I should be ashamed to have written so much merely on my own account. I began this ideal correspondence with you about seven years ago. More than the one half of it was then written in a few weeks; but I felt a reluctance to proceed, because it seemed to be so much my own affair; but I have frequently thought since, that something upon the subject, written in a moderate and friendly spirit (which it has been my prayer and endeavour to preserve), might, by the Lord's blessing, be a means of promoting candour and benevolence among those, who, whatever else they differ in, have one Lord, one faith, one hope. A desire of being instrumental in so good a work, has at length prevailed on me, to revise what I had begun, to add what I thought farther necessary for completing my design, and to send it abroad. I cannot give you particular reasons why I have not done it sooner, or why I do it now. Our times, plans, and purposes are under a superior guidance and direction, which it is our duty and our privilege always to acknowledge, though we cannot always distinctly discern it. I shall be happy if the event shall prove that I have been led to choose the fittest time, and to offer a word in season. They who love and preach the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, whatever name they bear among men, and whatever body of people they are united to, are engaged in one common cause; they are opposed by the same enemies; their severest conflicts and their sweetest comforts are derived from the same sources; and they will ere long meet in the same kingdom of glory, and join in the same songs of eternal praise, to him who sitteth upon the throne, and to him who redeemed us to God by his blood. How desirable then is it, that while we live here, we should be at peace amongst ourselves, and live in the spirit of that love (the only infallible mark of our being truly the servants of Christ), which seeketh not its own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, but beareth, hopeth, and believeth all things!

As what I write to you is to appear in print, I think it proper to add, for my own sake, that my whole intention will be fulfilled by the publication. I do not mean to enter into controversy; and therefore if these letters, contrary to my wish, should raise me an opponent, and give occasion to an answer, I shall not think myself bound to reply, unless I could be convicted of such a wilful misrepresentation, as would render it my duty to ask pardon of God, and of the Public.

I commend you and yours to the blessing of our Lord, and remain

Your affectionate Friend.

March 1, 1784.