

LETTERS  
TO  
THE REVEREND MR. S——

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LETTER I.

*June 23, 1775.*

DEAR SIR,

I HAVE met with interruptions till now or you would have heard from me sooner. My thoughts have run much upon the subject of your last, because I perceive it has a near connection with your peace. Your integrity greatly pleases me; far be it from me to shake the principle of your conduct, yet in the application I think there is a possibility of carrying your exceptions too far.

From the account you give me of your sentiments, I cannot but wonder you find it so difficult to accede to the Athanasian Creed, when it seems to me you believe and avow what that Creed chiefly sets forth. The doctrine of the Trinity, some explication of the terms being subjoined, is the catholic faith, without the belief of which a man cannot be saved. This damnatory clause seems to me proved by Mark xvi. 16, "He that believeth shall be saved," &c. The object of faith must be truth. The doctrine of the deity of Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, in union with the Father, so that they are not three Gods, but one God, is not merely a proposition expressed in words, to which our assent is required, but is absolutely necessary to be known, since without it no one truth respecting salvation can be rightly understood, no one promise duly believed, no one duty spiritually performed. I take it for granted, that this doctrine must appear irrational and absurd in the eye of reason, if by reason we mean the reason of man in his fallen state, before it is corrected and enlightened by a heavenly teacher. No man can say Jesus is Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.

I believe, with you, that a man may be saved who never heard of the Creed, who never read any book but the New Testament, or perhaps a single Evangelist; but he must be taught of God the things that accompany salvation, or I do not think he can be saved. The mercies of God in Christ

will not save any, as I apprehend, but according to the method revealed in his word, that is, those who are truly partakers of faith and holiness. For, as the religion of the New Testament ascribes all power to God, and considers all goodness in us as the effect of his communication, we being by nature destitute of spiritual life or light, so those whom God himself is pleased to teach, will infallibly attain the knowledge of all that they are concerned to know. This teaching you are waiting for, and it shall be given you; yea the Lord, I trust, has begun to teach you already; but if you consider yourself as a learner, and that it is possible, under the Spirit's increasing illumination, you may hereafter adopt some things which at present you cannot approve, I should think it too early as yet to prescribe to yourself rules and determinations for the government of your future life. Should the will of God appoint you a new path for service, he may, sooner than you are aware, quiet your mind, and enable you to subscribe with as full a persuasion of mind as you now object to subscription. If it depended upon me, I could be content that the Creed should rest at the bottom of the sea, rather than embarrass a single person of your disposition. Nor am I a warm stickler for subscription in itself; but something of this kind seems necessary, upon the supposition of an establishment.

When I think of an enclosure, some hedge, wall, bank, ditch, &c is of course included in my idea; for who can conceive of an enclosure without a boundary? So, in a national church, there must be, I apprehend, something marked out, the approbation or refusal of which will determine who do or do not belong to it; and for this purpose articles of some kind seem not improper. You think it would be better to have these articles in scriptural expressions. But if it be lawful to endeavour to exclude from our pulpits men who hold sentiments the most repugnant to the truth, I wish you to consider, whether this can be in any measure secured by articles in which the scripture-doctrines are not explained and stated, as well as expressed. This proposal is strenuously pleaded for by many in our day, upon views very different from yours. The Socinians, for instance, would readily subscribe a scriptural declaration of the high priesthood, atonement, and intercession of Christ (while they are allowed to put their own sense upon the terms), though the sense they maintain be utterly inconsistent with what those who are enlightened by the Holy Spirit learn from the same expressions.

I acknowledge, indeed, that the end is not answered by the present method; since there are too many, like the person you mention, who would easily subscribe nine hundred articles, rather than baulk his preferment: yet

the profligacy of some seems to be no just reason why the church, why any church, should not be at liberty to define the terms upon which they will accept members or teachers, or why conscientious persons should object to these terms (if they think them agreeable to the truth), merely because they are not expressed in the precise words of scripture. If allowance may be made for human infirmity in the Liturgy, I see not why the Articles may not be entitled to the same privilege. For it seems requisite that we should be as well satisfied with the expressions we use with our lips, in frequent solemn prayer to God, as in what we subscribe with our hands. I am persuaded that the leaders of the Association at the Feathers Tavern, some of them at least, though they begin with the affair of subscription, would not (if they might have their wish) stop there, but would go on with their projected reform, till they had overturned the Liturgy also, or at least weeded it from every expression that bears testimony to the deity of the Saviour, and the efficacious influence of the Holy Spirit. I bless God that you are far otherwise minded.

I hope, however, though you should not think yourself at liberty to repeat your subscription, the Lord will make you comfortable and useful in your present rank as a curate. Preferment is not necessary, either to our peace or usefulness. We may live and die contentedly, without the honours and emoluments which aspiring men thirst after, if he be pleased to honour us with a dispensation to preach his gospel, and to crown our endeavours with a blessing. He that winneth souls is wise; wise in the choice of the highest end he can propose to himself in this life; wise in the improvement of the only means by which this desirable end can be attained. Wherever we cast our eyes, the bulk of the people are ignorant, immoral, careless. They live without God in the world; they are neither awed by his authority, nor affected by his goodness, nor enabled to trust to his promises, nor disposed to aim at his glory. If perhaps, they have a serious interval, or some comparative sobriety of character, they ground their hopes upon their own doings, endeavours or purposes; and treat the inexpressible love of God revealed in Christ, and the gospel-method of salvation by faith in his name, with neglect, often with contempt. They have preachers, whom perhaps they hear with some pleasure, because they neither alarm their consciences by insisting on the spirituality and sanction of the divine law, nor offend their pride by publishing the humiliating doctrines of that gospel, which is the power of God through faith unto salvation. Therefore what they do speak, they speak in vain; the world grows worse and worse under their instructions; infidelity and profligacy abound more and more; for God will

own no other doctrine but what the apostle calls the truth as it is in Jesus; that doctrine which drives the sinner from all his vain pleas, and points out the Lord Jesus Christ as the only ground of hope, the supreme object of desire, as appointed of God to be wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, to all who believe in his name. When ministers themselves are convinced of sin, and feel the necessity of an almighty Saviour, they presently account their former gain but loss, and determine, with the apostle, to know nothing but Jesus Christ, and him crucified. In proportion as they do this, they are sure to be wondered at, laughed at, and railed at, if the providence of God and the constitution of their country, secure them from severer treatment. But they have this invaluable compensation, that they no longer speak without effect. In a greater or less degree a change takes place in their auditories; the blind receive their sight, the deaf hear, the lepers are cleansed;—sinners are turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God;—sinful practices are forsaken; and a new course of life in the converts, evidences that they have not followed cunningly-devised fables, or taken up with uncertain notions; but that God has indeed quickened them by his Spirit, and given them an understanding to know him that is true. The preachers, likewise, while they attempt to teach others, are taught themselves: a blessing descends upon their studies and labours, upon their perusal of the scriptures, upon their attention to what passes within them and around them. The events of every day contribute to throw light upon the word of God: their views of divine truth grow more enlarged, connected and comprehensive; many difficulties, which perplexed them at their first setting out, trouble them no more; the God whom they serve, and on whom they wait, reveals to them those great things, which, though plainly expressed in the letter of scripture, cannot be understood and realized without divine teaching. 1 Cor. ii. 9. to 15. Thus they go on from strength to strength; hard things become easy, and a divine light shines upon their paths. Opposition from men perhaps may increase; they may expect to be represented, as those who turn the world upside down; the cry, “*Great is Diana*” [in Greek, Acts xix. 28.] will be raised against them, the gates of the temple of preferment will be seldom open to them; but they will have the unspeakable consolation of applying to themselves those lively words of the apostle, “*As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.*” [in Greek, 2 Cor. vi. 10.]

It is the strain of evident sincerity which runs through your letters, that gives me a pleasing confidence the Lord is with you. A disinterested desire of knowing the truth, with a willingness to follow it through all

disadvantages, is a preparation of the heart which only God can give. He has directed you to the right method, searching the scriptures, with prayer. Go on, and may his blessing attend you. You may see, from what I have written above, what is the desire of my heart for you. But I am not impatient. Follow your heavenly leader, and in his own time and manner he will make your way plain. I have travelled the path before you, I see what you yet want; I cannot impart it to you, but he can, and I trust he will. It will rejoice my soul to be any way assistant to you; but I am afraid I should not afford you much, either profit or satisfaction, by entering upon a dry defence of creeds and articles.

The truths of scripture are not like mathematical theorems, which present exactly the same ideas to every person who understands the terms. The word of God is compared to a mirror, 2 Cor. iii. 18.: but it is a mirror in which the longer we look the more we see; the view will be still growing upon us; and still we shall see but in part while on this side eternity. When our Lord pronounced Peter blessed, declaring he had learnt that which flesh and blood could not have taught him, yet Peter was at that time much in the dark. The sufferings and death of Jesus, though the only and necessary means of his salvation, were an offence to him. But he lived to glory in what he once could not bear to hear of. Peter had received grace to love the Lord Jesus, to follow him, to venture all, and to forsake all for him; these first good positions were of God, and they led to further advances. So it is still. By nature, self rules in the heart: when this idol is brought low, and we are truly willing to be the Lord's, and to apply to him for strength and direction, that we may serve him, the good work is begun; for it is a truth that holds universally and without exception, a man can receive nothing except it be given him from heaven. The Lord first finds us when we are thinking of something else, Isaiah lxv. 1.; and then we begin to seek him in good earnest, and he has promised to be found of us. People may, by industry and natural abilities, make themselves masters of the external evidences of Christianity, and have much to say for and against different schemes and systems of sentiments; but all this while the heart remains untouched. True religion is not a science of the head, so much as an inward and heartfelt perception, which casts down imaginations, and every *ὕψωμα* ["high thing" 2 Cor. 10:5.] that exalteth itself in the mind, and brings every thought into a sweet and willing subjection to Christ by faith. Here the learned have no real advantage above the ignorant; both see when the eyes of the understanding are enlightened; till then both are equally blind. And the first

lesson in the school of Christ is to become a little child, sitting simply at his feet, that we may be made wise unto salvation.

I was not only prevented beginning any letter so soon as I wished, but have been unusually interrupted since I began it. Often, as soon as I could well take the pen in hand, I have been called away to attend company and intervening business. Though I persuade myself, after what I have formerly said, you will put a favourable construction upon my delay, yet it has given me some pain. I set a great value upon your offer of friendship, which, I trust, will not be interrupted on either side, by the freedom with which we mutually express our difference of sentiments, when we are constrained to differ. You please me with entrusting me with the first rough draught of your thoughts; and you may easily perceive by my manner of writing, that I place equal confidence in your candour. I shall be glad to exchange letters as often as it suits us, without constraint, ceremony, or apology; and may he who is always present with our hearts make our correspondence useful. I pray God to be your sun and shield, your light and strength, to guide you with his eye, to comfort you with his gracious presence in your own soul, and to make you a happy instrument of comforting many,

I am, &c.