

Toleration justified and persecution condemned

In an answer or examination of the London ministers' letter, whereof many of them are of the Synod and yet framed this letter at Sion College to be sent, among others, to themselves at the Assembly: in behalf of reformation and church government

2 Corinthians 11: 14–15: 'And no marvel, for Sathan himself is transformed into an Angell of Light. Therefore it is no great thing, though his Ministers transform themselves, as though they were the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works.'¹

London. Printed in the Year, 1646

2

The letter of the London ministers to the Assembly of Divines at Westminster against toleration,³ mildly examined, and the mistakes thereof friendly discovered, as well for the sakes of the Independent and Separation,⁴ as for the good of the commonwealth.

When I call to mind the general oppression before the parliament exercised upon good people conscientious in the practice of their religion, and that the presbyters did not only suffer as much as any therein but exclaimed and laboured as much as any thereagainst, it is a wonder to me – now that yoke is removed and a blessed opportunity offered by Almighty God to the people and their parliament to make every honest heart glad by allowing a just and contentful freedom to serve God without hypocrisy and according to the persuasion of conscience – that

¹ These verses come from the Geneva Bible of 1560, the language and spelling of which would have seemed archaic in 1645. At almost all other times the Levellers used the Bible of 1611, authorised by King James I.

² End of title page.

³ *A letter of the ministers of the City of London, presented the first of Jan. 1645* (1 January 1646).

⁴ 'Independent' and 'Separation' were the names given to the membership of the Independent and Separating churches. The distinction between the two was unclear in conception and in practice; but, roughly, Independent churches (and Independents) claimed the right to meet separately from the parochial congregations of the established church (at first episcopal, then Presbyterian) while remaining willing that their members should attend them. Separatists (sometimes also called Sectaries) resisted any dealings at all with the established church.

one sect amongst us, that is the presbyters that have been yoke-fellows with us, should not rest satisfied with being free as their brethren but become restless in their contrivances and endeavours till they become lords over us. The wonder is the same as it would have been had the Israelites after the Egyptian bondage⁵ become task-masters in the Land of Canaan one to another; but it is more in them who have been instructed by our Saviour in that blessed rule of doing unto others what they would have others do unto themselves.⁶

To discover the several policies the presbyters have used to get into the chair they have jostled the bishops out of, whose example they have followed in many particulars, as especially in the politic and gradual obtaining the Ordinance for Licensing⁷ upon a pretence of stopping the king's writings, but intentionally obtained and violently made use of against the Independents, Separation, and commonwealthsmen, who either see more than, or something contrary to the designs of the licenser. To signify to the people how the presbyters have laboured to twist their interest with the parliament's, as the bishops did theirs with the king, how daily and burdensomely importunate they are with the parliament to establish their government (which they are pleased to call Christ's)⁸ and back it with authority and a compulsive power (which by that very particular appears not to be His). To lay open their private juntos and counsels, their framing petitions for the easy and ignorant people, their urging them upon the Common Council, and obtruding them upon the choosers of common councilmen at the wardmote elections, even after the parliament had signified their dislike thereof.⁹ To sum up their bitter invectives in pulpits and strange liberty they take

⁵ On the Egyptian bondage see Genesis 45 to Exodus 25.

⁶ This 'golden rule' was much favoured by Walwyn, Overton and Lilburne. Its classic formulation by Christ is at Matthew 7: 12: 'Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them: for this is the law and the prophets.'

⁷ By ordinances of June and July 1643 licences for printing were established and the licensed texts were ordered to be entered on the register of the Stationers' Company. Unlicensed printing presses, or presses printing unlicensed texts, were to be destroyed; those implicated in producing unlicensed books were to be arrested and taken to parliament's Committee of Examinations for appropriate punishment.

⁸ They claimed that their form of church government was *jure divino*, by right according to God's law indicated in the practice of church government followed by the apostles.

⁹ The Presbyterian clergy of London were strongly opposed to the parliament's policy of accommodating 'tender consciences' (n. 43 below). They were behind citizen's petitions for Presbyterianism and non-toleration addressed to parliament from September 1645 onwards.

as well there as in their writings to make the Separation and Independents odious by scandals and untrue reports of them, in confidence of having the press in their own hands, by which means no man without hazard shall answer them. To lay open the manner and depth of these proceedings is not the intention of this work.

I only thought good to mention these particulars that the presbyters may see they walk in a net¹⁰ – know 'tis no cloud that covers them – and that they may fear that in time they may be discerned as well by the whole people as they are already by a very great part thereof.

The London ministers' letter, contrived in the conclave of Sion College is one of the numerous projects of the clergy not made for the information of the Synod¹¹ but the misinformation of the people, to prevent which is my business at this time. I will only take so much of it as is to the point in hand, to wit, toleration.

Letter: 'It is true, by reason of different lights and different sights among brethren, there may be dissenting in opinion; yet why should there be any separating from church communion?'

Why? Because the difference in opinion is in matters that *concern* church communion. You may as well put the question why men play not the hypocrites – as they must needs do if they should communicate in that church society their mind cannot approve of. The question had been well put if you had said: 'by reason of different lights and different sights, there may be dissenting in opinion, yet why should our hearts be divided one from another? Why should our love from hence, and our affections grow cold and dead one towards another? Why should we not peaceably bear one with another till our sights grow better, and our light increase?' *These* would have been questions, I think, that would have puzzled a truly conscientious man to have found an answer for.

That which next follows, to wit, 'the church's coat may be of divers colours,¹² yet why should there be any rent in it?' is but an old jingle¹³

¹⁰ Psalm 9: 15: 'The heathen are sunk down in the pit that they made: in the net which they hid is their own foot taken.'

¹¹ Synod = (here) the Westminster Assembly of Divines, which, authorised by parliament, met in the Jerusalem Chapel of Westminster Abbey from 1643–8 to settle the form and discipline of a new church government to replace episcopacy. Sion House was the Cripplegate Street meeting place – virtually the club – of the London Presbyterian divines who, allied with Scots ministers seconded to the Assembly, agitated for a strict Presbyterian settlement.

¹² Genesis 37: 3, 23, 32.

¹³ 'Jing' in the original.

of the bishops, spoken by them formerly in reference to the presbyters, and now mentioned to make that which went before – which has no weight in itself – to sound the better.

Letter: 'Have we not a touchstone of truth: the good word of God? And when all things are examined by the word, then that which is best may be held fast; but first it must be known, and then examined afterward.'

I shall easily concur with them thus far: that the word of God is the touchstone that all opinions are to be examined by that and that the best is to be held fast. But now 'who shall be the examiners?' must needs be the question. If the presbyter examine the Independent and Separation they are like to find the same censure the presbyters have already found (being examined by the bishops) and the bishops found from the pope. Adversaries certainly are not competent judges. Again, in matters disputable and controverted, every man must examine for himself – and so every man does, or else he must be conscious to himself that he sees with other men's eyes and has taken up an opinion not because it consents¹⁴ with his understanding but for that it is the safest and least troublesome as the world goes, or because such a man is of that opinion (whom he reverences) and verily believes would not have been so, had it not been truth. I may be helped in my examination by other men, but no man or sort of men are to examine for me, insomuch that before an opinion can properly be said to be *mine* it must concord with my understanding. Now here is the fallacy – and you shall find it in all papists, bishops, presbyters or whatsoever other sort of men who have or would have in their hands the power of persecuting – that they always suppose themselves to be competent examiners and judges of other men differing in judgement from them. And upon this weak supposition (by no means to be allowed) most of the reasons and arguments of the men forementioned are supported.

They proceed to charge much upon the independents for not producing their model of church-government. For answer hereunto, I refer the reader to the reasons printed by the independents and given into the House in their own justification,¹⁵ which the ministers might have taken notice of.

¹⁴ consents = agrees.

¹⁵ Thomas Goodwin, Jeremiah Burroughs etc., *A copy of a remonstrance lately delivered to the Assembly . . . declaring the grounds and reasons of their declining to bring into the Assembly their model of church government* (1645). The authors were Independent ministers.

I proceed to the supposed reasons urged by the ministers against the toleration of independency in the church.

I

1. Their first reason is, 'because the desires and endeavours of Independents for a toleration are at this time extremely unseasonable and preposterous', for 'the reformation of religion is not yet perfected and settled amongst us according to our Covenant.'¹⁶ And why may not the reformation be raised up at last to such purity and perfection that truly tender consciences may receive abundant satisfaction for ought that yet appears?

I would to God the people – their own friends especially – would but take notice of the fallacy of the reason. They would have reformation perfected according to the Covenant before the independents move to be tolerated. Now, reformation is not perfected according to the Covenant, 'till schism and heresy is extirpated' – which in the sequel of this letter,¹⁷ they judge independency to be. Their charity thinks it, then, most seasonable to move that independency should be tolerated *after* it is extirpated. Their reason and affection in this are a like sound to the Independents. Their drift in this indeed is but too evident. They would have the Independents silent till they get power in their hands – and then let them talk if they dare. Certainly, the most seasonable time to move for toleration is while the parliament are in

¹⁶ I.e. *The Solemn League and Covenant for the reformation and defence of religion, the honour and happiness of the king, and the peace and safety of the three kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland*. It was taken by members of the House of Commons on 25 September 1643 as the price for gaining the Scots as allies against Charles I. Presbyterians believed the Solemn League required a Presbyterian church reformation, but Independents and Sectaries exploited an ambiguity of wording lodged in the document at the time of its negotiation with the Scots. The first article called for 'the preservation of the church of Scotland, in doctrine, worship, discipline and government', together with the 'reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland, in doctrine, worship, discipline and government, according to the word of God and the example of the best reformed churches'. But what, the opponents of Presbyterianism asked, *were* the 'best reformed churches'?

¹⁷ sequel = (here) later on in the *Letter*. There (p. 3), Independents are argued to be in schism because they depart from 'our churches, being true churches'; they seduce others into following them; they 'erect separate congregations under separate and undiscovered government'; they refuse communion in the sacraments with 'our churches'; their ministers will not preach 'amongst us as officers; and their members, when they do join 'with us' in hearing the word and praying, 'yet they do it not as with the ministerial word and prayer, nor as acts of church communion'. And schism is not to be tolerated: 1 Corinthians 1: 10, 10: 3, 12: 25; Romans 16: 17; Galatians 5: 20.

debate about church government; since if stay be made till a church government be settled, all motions that may but seem to derogate from that – how just soever in themselves, how good soever for the commonwealth – must needs be hardly obtained.

And whereas they say: 'Why may not reformation be raised up at last to such purity and perfection that truly tender consciences may receive abundant satisfaction, for ought that yet appears?' Observe that these very ministers, in the sequel of their letter, impute it as levity in the independents that they are not at a stay,¹⁸ but in expectation of 'new lights' and 'reserves' (as they say) so that a man would think *they themselves* were at a certainty. But 'tis no new thing for one sort of men to object that as a crime against others which they are guilty of themselves – though indeed but that the presbyters use any weapons against the Independents is no crime at all. Yea, 'tis excellency in any man or woman not to be pertinacious or obstinate in any opinion but to have an open ear for reason and argument against whatsoever he holds, and to embrace or reject whatsoever upon further search he finds to be agreeable to, or dissonant from, God's holy word. It doth appear from the practices of the presbyters and from this letter and other petitions expressly against toleration, that unless the Independents and Separation will submit their judgements to theirs, they shall never be tolerated if *they* can hinder it.

2. Their second reason is that it 'is not yet known what the government of the Independent is; neither would they ever let the world know what they hold in that point, though some of their party have been too forward to challenge the London petitioners as led with blind obedience and pinning their souls upon their priest's sleeve for desiring an establishment of the government of Christ before there was any model of it extant.'¹⁹

3. Their third reason is much to the same purpose.

I answer, that the ministers know that the independent government *for the general* is resolved upon by the Independents, though they have not yet modelised every *particular* – which is a work of time, as the

¹⁸ not at stay = not at rest.

¹⁹ The City petition of November 1645 *To the right honourable Lords and Commons*, had asked parliament 'to make all possible haste to establish, by your civil sanction, that government and discipline amongst us, which Christ hath left his church (a model whereof the reverend Assembly of Divines, according to the wisdom given unto them, have framed, and – as we understand – already presented unto your honours)'. This elicited the response of their being ignorant of the model proposed.

framing of the Presbyterian government was. The Independents, however, have divers reasons for dissenting from the Presbyterian way, which they have given in already. And though they have not concluded every particular of their own but are still upon the search and enquiry, yet it is seasonable however to move for toleration. For that the ground of moving is not because they are *Independents* but because *every man* ought to be free in the worship and service of God – compulsion being the way to increase, not the number of converts, but of hypocrites. Whereas it is another case for people to move for establishing of a government they understand not, having never seen it, as the London petitioners did. That is most evidently a giving up of the understanding to other men. Sure the presbyters themselves cannot think it otherwise, nor yet the people upon the least consideration of it. Besides, the London petitioners did not only desire (as here the ministers cunningly say) an establishment of the government of Christ, but an establishment of the government of Christ 'a model whereof the reverend Assembly of Divines have framed'²⁰ – which they never saw! So that herein the people were abused by the divines by being put upon a petition wherein they suppose that government which they never saw to be Christ's government. If this be not sufficient to discover to our Presbyterian lay-brethren the divines' confidence of their ability to work them by the smoothnesses of phrase and language to what they please, and of their own easiness and flexibility to be so led, I know not what is.

II

Secondly, the ministers urge 'that the desires and endeavours of the Independents for toleration are unreasonable and unequal in divers regards'.

1. 'Partly because no such toleration has hitherto been established (so far as we know) in any Christian state, by the civil magistrate.'

But that the ministers have been used to speak what they please for a reason in their pulpits without contradiction, they would never sure have let so slight a one as this have passed from them. It seems by this reason, that *if in any* Christian state a toleration by the magistrate had been allowed, it would not have been unreasonable for *our* state to allow it – the practice of states being here supposed to be the rule of what's

²⁰ See previous note.

reasonable. Whereas *I* had thought that the practice of Christian states is to be judged by the rule of reason and God's word, and not reason by them. That which is just and reasonable is constant and perpetually so; the practice of states, though Christian, is variable we see – different one from another and changing according to the prevalency of particular parties – and therefore a most uncertain rule of what is reasonable. Besides, the state of *Holland* doth tolerate; and therefore the ministers' argument, even in that part where it seems to be most strong for them, makes against them. Again, if the practice of a Christian state be a sufficient argument of the reasonableness of a toleration, *our* state may justly tolerate because Christian, and because they are free to do whatever any other state might formerly have done. But I stay too long upon so weak an argument.

2. 'Partly because some of them have solemnly professed that they cannot suffer presbytery, and answerable hereunto is their practice in those places where independency prevails.'

(1) 'Tis unreasonable it seems to tolerate Independents because Independents would not (if they had the power) suffer presbyters. A very Christianly argument, and taken out of Matthew 5: 44. 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which hurt you, and persecute you.' What, were all our London ministers forgetful of their Saviour's instructions? Does their fury so far blind their understanding and exceed their piety? (Which seems to be but pretended now, since in their practice they would become Jews and cry out 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth'.²¹) Whosoever meddles with them it seems shall have as good as they bring. Was ever so strange a reason urged by a sect of men that say they are ministers – Christ's ministers, reformers too, that would make the world believe they are about to reduce all matters Christian to the original and primitive excellency of Christ and the apostles – and yet who²² speak and publish to the world a spleenish reason so expressly contrary to the precepts and the practices of Christ and his followers? To Christ I say, that bids us love our enemies,²³ that we may be the

²¹ Matthew 5: 38–9: 'Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.' (The Jewish versions: Exodus 21: 42; Leviticus 24: 20; Deuteronomy 19: 21.)

²² 'to' in the original.

²³ Matthew 5: 44; Luke 6: 27, 35.

children of our Father which is in heaven, who makes the sun to shine on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.²⁴ The ministers should be like the Master. What a disproportion is here? As if the title were taken up for some other end. We know the Apostle²⁵ speaks of ministers that could transform themselves as though they were the ministers of righteousness. I pray God *our* ministers do not so. I would willingly suppress those fears and suspicions, which, do what I can, arise in me from their words and practice. Sure they had approved themselves better Christians if upon the discovery of so bad a spirit in any of the Independents as to persecute had they power (though I believe there are not any such) – I say it had been more Christ-like in our ministers to have dissuaded them from so unmanly, so much more *unchristianly* a vice, than to have it made an argument for practice in themselves. They might by the same rule be Jews to the Jew or Turk to the Turk, oppressors to the oppressor, or do any evil to other that others would do to them if other men's doing of it be an argument of the reasonableness thereof. But I hope our ministers will be so ingenuous, as, where they see their weaknesses, to forsake them. It will be both more comfortable to all other sorts of men and in the end more happy for themselves.

(2) Again, I suppose your suggestion to be very false: namely, that the Independents, if they had power, would persecute the presbyters. Though let me tell you, of all sects of men, those deserve least countenance of a state that would be persecutors, not because of their consciences in the practice and exercise of their religion (wherein the ground of freedom consists) but because a persecuting spirit is the greatest enemy to human society, the dissolver of love and brotherly affection, the cause of envyings, heart-burnings, divisions, yea, and of war itself. Whosoever shall cast an impartial eye upon times past and examine the true cause and reason of the subversion and devastation of states and countries, will, I am confident, attribute it to no other than the tyranny of princes and persecution of priests. So that all states, minding their true interests – namely the good and welfare of the people – ought by all means to suppress in every sect or degree of men (whether papists,²⁶ episcopals,²⁷ presbyters, Independents,

²⁴ Matthew 5: 25.

²⁵ I.e. St Paul. See the quotation from 2 Corinthians on the title page of this pamphlet.

²⁶ The rude, and most common, word in England for Roman Catholics.

²⁷ The supporters of an English episcopalian church, i.e. one with bishops.

Anabaptists,²⁸ etc.) *the spirit of domination and persecution*, the disquieter and disturber of mankind, the offspring of Satan. God being all love, and having so communicated himself unto us, gave us commands to be like him: merciful, as he our heavenly Father is merciful,²⁹ to bear with one another's infirmities.³⁰ Neither does reason and true wisdom dictate any other to us than that we should do unto others as we would be done unto ourselves. That spirit therefore which is contrary to God, to reason, to the well being of states – as the spirit of persecution evidently is – is most especially to be watched and warily to be circumscribed and tied up by the wisdom of the supreme power in commonwealths. I speak not this to the disgrace of presbyters as *presbyters*. For as such I suppose they are not persecutors, forasmuch as I know some (and I hope there are many more of them) that are zealous and conscientious for that form of government³¹ and yet enemies to a compulsive power in matters of religion. But I speak for this end only: namely to beget a just and Christian dislike in all sorts of men, as well presbyters as others, of forcing all to one way of worship, though disagreeable to their minds – which cannot be done without the assistance of this fury and pestilent enemy to mankind, persecution.

III

I proceed to the ministers' third reason: 'And partly to grant to them, and not to other sectaries who are free-born as well as they and have

²⁸ English Baptists were often called Anabaptists to identify them with the horrors of the regime of John of Leyden in Münster and of German peasant revolts, and with the doctrine that all human power and magistracy was rooted in sin. In fact it was their theology that distinguished them from other sects. They believed in baptism only when a person had reached adulthood and could make a reasonable choice. 'Particular' Baptists (like Lilburne before and during his Leveller phase) were Calvinists and believed that only the elect, preordained as such by God, should be baptised; 'General' Baptists did not believe in predestination but (like Overton and many other military and civilian Levellers) in the 'free grace' of God which made it possible for individual people by their own belief and action to attain (or reject) salvation: so baptism was not to be limited. Walwyn himself believed in free grace, does not seem to have cared much about the forms and ceremonies of worship, and attended his parochial Anglican church as well as many other sectarian ones.

²⁹ Luke 6: 36.

³⁰ Romans 15: 1.

³¹ Presbyterian church government (unlike episcopalian, which was governed by clerics) was mixed among clerics (the presbyters or ministers) and laymen. Again, where bishops and archbishops were chosen by the king and governed their dioceses, each Presbyterian congregation (within limits) chose its own minister and (lay) elders; these in turn sent

done as good service as they to the public (as they use to plead) will be counted injustice, and great partiality. But to grant it to all, will scarce be cleared from impiety.'

To the former part of this argument I gladly consent, that sectaries have as good claims to freedom as any sorts of men whatsoever: because free-born, because well-affected and very assistant to their country in its necessities. The latter part of the argument is only an affirmation without proof. The ministers think sure it will be taken for truth because they said it – for such a presumption it seems they are arrived to. In the meantime, what must they suppose the people to *be* that do imagine their bare affirmations sufficient ground for the people's belief? I would the people would learn from hence to be their own men and make use of their own understandings in the search and belief of things. Let their ministers be never so seemingly learned or judicious, God has not given them understandings for nothing. The submission of the mind is the most ignoble slavery, which being in our own powers to keep free, the subjection thereof argues in us the greater baseness.

But to the assertion that it will be impiety to grant it to all sectaries, I answer that the word 'sectary' is communicable both to presbyters and Independents, whether it be taken in the good sense for the followers of Christ – for such, all presbyters, Independents, Brownists,³² Anabaptists and all else suppose and profess themselves to be – or, in the common sense, for followers of some few men more eminent in their parts and abilities than others. And hereof the Independents and presbyters are as guilty as the separation, and so are as well sectaries. Now all sectaries (whether presbyters, Independents, Brownists, Antinomians,³³ Anabaptists, etc.) have a like title and right to freedom or a toleration, the title thereof being not any particular of the opinion, but the equity of every man's being free in the state he lives in and is obedient to – matters of opinion being not properly to be taken into cognisance any further than they break out into some disturbance or disquiet to the state. But you will say that by such a toleration,

representatives to Classes, which sent representatives to Provinces, which sent representatives to a national Assembly.

³² Here used as a generic word for strict Separatist congregations gathered on a covenanting principle. They were named after Robert Browne, the Elizabethan churchman (1550?–1633?).

³³ Those who believed that they were freed from the Mosaic law of the Old Testament by Christ's living, redeeming grace. They tended to be anti-scripturalist and anti-clerical, and to sin purposefully to show that they were free in Christ.

blasphemy will be broached, and such strange and horrid opinions as would make the ears of every godly and Christian man to tingle. What, must *this* also be tolerated? I answer, it cannot be just to set bounds or limitations to toleration any further than the safety of the people requires. The more horrid and blasphemous the opinion is the easier suppressed by reason and argument, because it must necessarily be that the weaker the arguments are on one side the stronger they are on the other; the grosser the error is the more advantage has truth over it, the less colour likewise and pretence there is for imposing it upon the people. I am confident that there is much more danger in a small but speciously formed error that has a likeness and similitude to truth than in a gross and palpable untruth.

Besides, can it in reason be judged the meetest³⁴ way to draw a man out of his error by imprisonment, bonds or other punishment? You may as well be angry and molest a man that has an imperfection or dimness in his eyes and think by stripes or bonds to recover his sight. How preposterous would this be? Your proper and meet way, surely, is to supply things pertinent to his cure. And so likewise to a man whose understanding is clouded, whose inward sight is dim and imperfect, whose mind is so far misinformed as to deny a deity or the scriptures – for we'll instance in the worst of errors. Can Bedlam or the Fleet reduce such a one?³⁵ No certainly. It was ever found by all experience that such rough courses did confirm the error, not remove it. Nothing can do that but the efficacy and convincing power of sound reason and argument, which, 'tis to be doubted, they are scarce furnished withal that use other weapons. Hence have I observed that the most weak and passionate men, the most unable to defend truth or their own opinions, are the most violent for persecution. Whereas those whose minds are established and whose opinions are built upon firm and demonstrable grounds care not what winds blow, fear not to grapple with any error, because they are confident they can overthrow it.

IV

'Independency is a schism, and therefore not to be tolerated.' The principal argument brought to prove it is this: because they depart from

³⁴ meetest = most appropriate.

³⁵ Notoriously the most unpleasant prisons in London.

the presbyter churches, which are 'true churches', and so confessed to be by the Independents.

I answer that this argument only concerns the Independents, because they only acknowledge them to be true churches. Whether they are still of that opinion or no, I know not; 'tis to be doubted they are not,³⁶ especially since they have discerned the spirit of enforcement and compulsion to reign in that church – the truest mark of a *false* church. I believe the Independents have changed their mind, especially those of them whose pastors receive their office and ministry from the election of the people or congregation and are not engaged to allow so much to the presbyters because of their own³⁷ interest as deriving their calling from the bishops and pope for the making up a supposed succession from the apostles, who for their own sakes are enforced to acknowledge the presbyter for a true church, as the presbyters are necessitated to allow the episcopal and papist church true or valid for the substance – as they confess in the Ordinance for Ordination³⁸ – because they have received their ministry therefrom, without which absurdity they cannot maintain their succession from the apostles.

But that the Independents are not a schism, they have and will, I believe, upon all occasions sufficiently justify. I shall not therefore – since it concerns them in particular – insist thereupon, but proceed to the supposed mischiefs which the ministers say will inevitably follow upon this toleration, both to the church and commonwealth.

V(i) First to the Church

1. 'Causeless and unjust revolts from our ministry and congregations.' To this I say that it argues an abundance of distrust the ministers have in their own abilities and the doctrines they preach to suppose their auditors will forsake them if other men have liberty to speak. 'Tis *authority* it seems must fill their churches, and not the truth and efficacy of their doctrines. I judge it for my part a sufficient ground to suspect that for gold that can't abide a trial.³⁹ It seems our ministers'

³⁶ 'tis to be doubted they are not = they are probably not.

³⁷ I.e. the presbyters' interest.

³⁸ 4 October 1644.

³⁹ A reference to Revelation 3: 18–19, a favoured quotation of Walwyn's to be used as the title of *Gold tried in the fire* (1647) printed below. The church at Laodicea is 'neither hot nor cold'; it is rich; the prophet reports God as saying 'I counsel thee to buy of me

doctrines and religion are like Dagon of the Philistines that will fall to pieces at the appearance of the ark.⁴⁰ Truth sure would be more confident, in hope to appear more glorious, being set off by falsehood. And therefore I do adjure the ministers, from that loveliness and potency that necessarily must be in truth and righteousness – if they think they do profess it – that they would procure the opening of every man's mouth, in confidence that truth, in whomsoever she is, will prove victorious, and like the sun's glorious lustre, darken all errors and vain imaginations of man's heart. But I fear the *consequence* sticks more in their stomachs – the emptying of their churches being the eclipsing of their reputations and the diminishing of their profits. If it be otherwise, let it appear by an equal allowing of that to others which they have laboured so much for to be allowed to themselves.

2. 'Our people's minds will be troubled and in danger to be subverted, Acts 15: 24.'

Answer. The place of scripture may concern themselves and may as well be urged upon them by the Separation or Independents as it is urged by them upon the Separation and Independents: namely that they trouble the people's minds and lay injunctions upon them they were never commanded to lay. And 'tis very observable, the most of those scriptures they urge against the separation do most properly belong unto themselves.

3. 'Bitter heart-burnings among brethren, will be fomented⁴¹ and perpetuated to all posterity.'

I answer. Not *by*, but for *want* of a toleration, because the state is not equal in its protection but allows one sort of men to trample upon another. From hence must necessarily arise heart-burnings, which, as they have ever been so they will ever be perpetuated to posterity, unless the state wisely prevent them by taking away the distinction that foments them – namely the particular indulgence to one party and neglect of the other – by a just and equal toleration. In that family, strife and heart-burnings are commonly multiplied where one son is more cockered⁴² and indulged than another, the way to foster love and

gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich', because salvation is through trial: 'As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.'

⁴⁰ 1 Samuel 5.

⁴¹ fomented = stimulated.

⁴² cockered = pampered.

amity as well in a family as in a state being an equal respect from those that are in authority.

4. They say the 'godly, painful, and orthodox ministers will be discouraged and despised'.

Answer. Upon how slight foundation is their reputation supported that fear being despised unless authority forces all to church to them? Since they have confidence to vouch themselves godly, painful and orthodox, methinks they should not doubt an audience. The apostles would empty the churches and Jewish synagogues and by the prevalence of their doctrine convert 3,000 at a sermon. And do our ministers fear, that have the opportunity of a church and the advantage of speaking an hour together without interruption, that they cannot keep those auditors they have, but that they shall be withdrawn from them by men of meaner lights (in their esteem) by the illiterate and under-valued lay preachers that are (as the ministers suppose) under the cloud of error and false doctrine? Surely they suspect their own tenets or their abilities to maintain them? They esteem it a discouragement to be opposed and fear they shall be despised if disputed withal.

5. They say 'the life and power of godliness will be eaten out by frivolous disputes and vain janglings.'

Answer. Frivolous disputes and vain janglings are as unjustifiable in the people as in the ministry; but mild and gentle reasonings (which authority are only to countenance) make much to the finding out of truth, which doth most advance the life and power of godliness. Besides, a toleration being allowed, and every sect labouring to make it appear that they are in the truth – whereof a good life, or the power of godliness being the best badge or symptom – hence will necessarily follow a noble contestation in all sorts of men to exceed in godliness, to the great improvement of virtue and piety amongst us. From whence it will be concluded too, that that sect will be supposed to have least truth in them that are least virtuous and godlike in their lives and conversations.

6. They urge that 'the whole course of religion in private families will be interrupted and undermined'.

Answer. As if the Independents and Separation were not as religious in their private families as the presbyters.

7. 'Reciprocal duties between persons of nearest and dearest relations will be extremely violated.'

Answer. A needless fear, grounded upon a supposition that difference in judgement must needs occasion coldness of affection – which indeed proceeds from the different countenance and protection which states have hitherto afforded to men of different judgements. Hence was it that in the most persecuting times, when it was almost as bad in the vulgar esteem to be an Anabaptist as a murderer, it occasioned disinheriting and many effects of want of affection in people of nearest relations. But since the common odium and vilification is in great measure taken off by the wise and just permission of all sects of men by the parliament,⁴³ man and wife, father and son, friend and friend, though of different opinions, can agree well together and love one another – which shows that such difference in affection is not properly the effect of difference in judgement but of persecution and of the distinct respect and different countenance that authority has formerly shown towards men not conforming.

8. They say that ‘the whole work of reformation, especially in discipline and government, will be retarded, disturbed, and in danger of being utterly frustrate and void’.

It matters not, since they mean in the *Presbyterian* discipline and government, accompanied with persecution. Nay, it will be abundantly happy for the people and exceedingly conducing to a lasting peace (to which persecution is the greatest enemy) if such a government so qualified be never settled. The presbyters I hope will fall short in their aims. (1) ’Tis not certain that the parliament mean to settle the Presbyterian government, since they have not declared that government to be agreeable to God’s word – although the presbyters are pleased, in their expressions, frequently to call their government, ‘Christ’s government’. Howsoever, their determination (which may well be supposed to be built upon their interest) is not binding. They are called to *advise* withal, not to *control*.⁴⁴ (2) In case the parliament should approve of

⁴³ On 13 September 1644, the Assembly had been subject to the Accommodation Order of the Commons to ‘take into consideration the differences of opinion of the members of the Assembly in point of church government and to endeavour a union if it be possible; and, in case it cannot be done, to endeavour the finding out some ways how far tender consciences who cannot in all things submit to a common rule which shall be established, may be born with, according to the Word and as may stand with the public peace’.

⁴⁴ The Assembly had been ordered to ‘consult with’ and ‘advise’ parliament on ‘a government . . . in the church as shall be most agreeable to God’s holy word, and most apt to procure the peace of the church at home and nearer agreement with the church of Scotland and other reformed churches abroad’. Parliament was not amenable to the

that government in the main, yet the prelatial and persecuting power of it we may well presume (since they themselves may smart under it as well as the rest of the people) they will never establish.

9. ‘All other sects and heresies in the kingdom will be encouraged to endeavour the like toleration.’

Sects and heresies! We must take leave to tell them that those are terms imposed *ad placitum*,⁴⁵ and may be retorted with the like confidence upon themselves. How *prove* they Separation to be sects and heresies? Because they differ and separate from them? That’s no argument, unless they can first prove themselves to be in the truth – a matter with much presumption supposed but never yet made good. And yet upon this groundless presumption the whole fabric of their function – their claim to the churches, their pre-eminence in determining matters of religion, their eager pursuit after a power to persecute, is mainly supported. If the Separation are sects and heresies because the presbyters (supposing themselves to have the countenance of authority and some esteem with the people) judge them so, the presbyters by the same rule were so because the *bishops* – once in authority and in greater countenance with the people – did so judge *them* to be.

And whereas they say that sects and heresies will be ‘encouraged to endeavour the like toleration’ with the independents, I answer that ’tis their right, their due as justly as their clothes or food; and if they endeavour not for their liberty they are in a measure guilty of their own bondage. How monstrous a matter the ministers would make it to be for men to labour to be free from persecution. They think they are in the saddle already, but will never I hope have the reins in their hands.

10. Their tenth fear for the church is the same. They say ‘the whole Church of England’ (they mean *their* whole Church of England) ‘in short time will be swallowed up with distraction and confusion’.

These things are but said, not proved. Were it not that the divines blew the coals of dissension and exasperated one man’s spirit against another, I am confidently persuaded we might differ in opinion and yet love one another very well. As for any distraction or confusion that might trench upon that civil peace, the laws might provide against

ideas that the form of church government was laid down in detail in God’s law or (because of that) that it was immune from the control of the secular power. It took the so-called Erastian line that the secular power ought to control the church.

⁴⁵ *ad placitum* = at their own pleasure, without constraint of rule, or of reason.

it – which is the earnest desires both of the Independents and Separation.

V(ii)

They say toleration will bring divers mischiefs upon the commonwealth. For:

1. 'All these mischiefs in the church will have their proportionable influence upon the commonwealth.'

This is but a slight supposition and mentions no evil that is like⁴⁶ to befall the commonwealth.

2. They urge 'that the kingdom will be woefully weakened by scandals and divisions, so that the enemies both domestic and foreign will be encouraged to plot and practice against it'. I answer that the contrary hereunto is much more likely, for two reasons. (1) There is like to be a concurrence and joint assistance in the protection of the commonwealth which affords a joint protection and encouragement to the people. (2) There can be no greater argument to the people to venture their estates and lives in defence of their country and that government under which they enjoy not only a liberty of estate and person but a freedom likewise of serving God according to their consciences, which religious men account the greatest blessing upon earth. I might mention notable instances of late actions of service in Independents and Separatists, which, arising but from hopes of such a freedom, can yet scarce be paralleled by any age or story.

3. They say 'it is much to be doubted lest⁴⁷ the power of the magistrate should not only be weakened but even utterly overthrown – considering the principles and practices of independents, together with their compliance with other sectaries, sufficiently known to be antimagistratical'.

An injurious but common scandal this, whereof much use has been made to the misleading the people into false apprehensions of their brethren the separatists, to the great increase of enmity and disaffection amongst us – whereof the ministers are most especially guilty.⁴⁸ Let

⁴⁶ like = likely.

⁴⁷ much to be doubted lest = very likely that.

⁴⁸ The most famous exercise in this respect was to be Thomas Edwards' *Gangraena: or a catalogue and discovery of many of the errors, heresies, blasphemies and pernicious practices of the Sectaries*, which was published in three parts in 1646, beginning in February. But there were already other books attacking Independents and Sectaries, by authors like William Prynne and John Bastwick (puritan 'martyrs' who had had their ears clipped in 1639 by the bishops) and by Robert Baillie, a Scots commissioner in London.

any impartial man examine the principles and search into the practices of the Separation, and he must needs conclude that *they* are not the men that trouble England, but those rather that lay it to their charge. The Separation indeed and Independents are enemies to tyranny – none more – and oppression, from whence I believe has arisen the fore-mentioned scandal of them. But to just government and magistracy, none are more subject and obedient; and therefore the ministers may do well to lay aside such obloquies, which will otherwise, by time and other discovery, turn to their own disgrace.

VI

In the last place they say 'tis opposite to the Covenant, (1) because opposite to the reformation of religion, 'according to the word of God, and example of the best reformed churches'.⁴⁹

I answer that the example of the best reformed churches is not binding further than they agree with the word of God, so that the word of God indeed is the only rule. Now the word of God is express for toleration, as appears by the parable of the tares growing with the wheat,⁵⁰ and by those two express and positive⁵¹ rules: (i) every man should be fully persuaded of the truth of that way wherein he serves the Lord, and (ii) that whatsoever is not of faith is sin,⁵² and (iii) by that rule of reason and pure nature cited by our blessed Saviour: namely, whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, that do you unto them.⁵³

2. They say it 'is destructive to the three kingdoms'⁵⁴ nearest conjunction and uniformity in religion and government'.

I answer that the same toleration may be allowed in the three kingdoms, together with the same religion and government – whether it

⁴⁹ See note 16 above.

⁵⁰ Matthew 13: 3–23.

⁵¹ Positive rules were those rules in the Bible directly commanded by God or by Jesus.

⁵² See Romans 14, a letter in which the apostle Paul enjoins toleration of differences in observance among Christians, and argues that no-one should undertake an observance (e.g. either eating meat or not, or worshipping on one particular day of the week and not another) if they do not believe that observance to be commanded. It concludes (v. 23) 'And he that eateth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin'.

⁵³ Matthew 7: 12.

⁵⁴ 1. England and Wales; 2. Scotland; 3. Ireland.

shall be Presbyterian or Independent or Anabaptistical. Besides that, I suppose which is principally intended by this part of the Covenant, 'tis the union of the three kingdoms, and making them each defensive and helpful to the other – which a toleration will be a means to further because of the encouragement that every man will have to maintain his so excellent freedom, which he cannot better do than by maintaining them all, because of the interdependency⁵⁵ they will have one upon the other.

3. 'Tis expressly 'contrary to the extirpation of schism, and whatsoever shall be found contrary to sound doctrine, and the power of godliness'.

I answer that when it is certainly determined by judges that cannot err, who are the schismatics, there may be some seeming pretence to extirpate them – though then also no power or force is to be used, but lawful means only, as the wise men have interpreted it. That is, schism and heresy (when they appear to be such) are to be rooted out by reason and debate: the sword of the spirit, not of the flesh; arguments, not blows – unto which men betake themselves upon distrust of their own foundations and consciousness of their own inability. Besides, as the presbyters judge others to be a schism from them, so others judge them to be a schism from the truth, in which sense only the Covenant can be taken.

4. 'Hereby we shall be involved in the guilt of other men's sins, and thereby be endangered to receive of their plagues.'

I answer that compulsion must necessarily occasion both much cruelty and much hypocrisy: whereof the divines, labouring so much for the cause – which is persecution – cannot be guiltless.

5. 'It seems utterly impossible (if such a toleration should be granted) that the Lord should be one, and His name one in the three kingdoms.'

I suppose they mean by that phrase, it is impossible that our judgments and profession should be one. So I believe it is whether there be a toleration or no. But certainly the likeliest way – if there be any thereunto – is by finding out one truth, which most probably will be by giving liberty to every man to speak his mind and produce his reasons and arguments, and not by hearing one sect only. That, if it does produce a forced unity, it may be more probably in error than in truth – the ministers being not so likely to deal clearly in the search thereof because of their interests as the laity, who live not thereupon,

⁵⁵ 'independency' in original.

but enquire for truth for truth's sake and the satisfaction of their own minds.

And thus I have done with the argumentative part of the letter. I shall only desire that what I have said may be without prejudice considered, and that the people would look upon all sorts of men and writings as they are in themselves and not as they are represented by others or forestalled by a deceitful rumour or opinion.

In this controversy concerning toleration, I make no question but the parliament will judge justly between the two parties – who have both the greatest opportunity and abilities to discern between the integrity of the one side and the interest of the other: that the one party pleads for toleration for the comfort and tranquillity of their lives and the peaceable serving of God according to their consciences, in which they desire no man's disturbance; and that the other that plead against it, may (I would I could say only *probably*) be swayed by interest and self-respects, their means and pre-eminence. I make no question but the parliament, before they proceed to a determination of matters concerning religion, will as they have heard one party – the divines – so likewise reserve one ear for all other sorts of men, knowing that they that give sentence, all parties being not heard, though the sentence be just (which then likely will not be) yet they are unjust. Besides the parliament themselves are much concerned in this controversy, since upon their dissolution they must mix with the people and then either enjoy the sweets of freedom or suffer under the most irksome yoke of priestly bondage. And therefore since they are concerned in a double respect: first, as chosen by the people to provide for their safety and freedom, whereof liberty of conscience is the principal branch, and so engaged by duty; secondly, as members of the commonwealth, and so obliged to establish freedom out of love to themselves and their posterity.

I shall only add one word more concerning this letter, which is this: that 'tis worth the observation that the same men are part of the contrivers of it, and part of those to whom 'twas sent – Mr Walker being President of Sion College, Mr Seaman one of the Deans (observe that word) and Mr Roborough, one of the Assistants.⁵⁶ All three, members

⁵⁶ George Walker (1581?–1651), Henry Roborough (*fl.* 1642–51), and Lazarus Seaman (d. 1675). The problem with Seaman being a Dean was probably that the word was not

of the Synod, who with the rest framing it seasonably and purposely to meet with the letter from Scotland concerning church government, may well remove the wonder and admiration that seemed to possess one of the Scotch grand divines in the synod, at the concurrence of providence in these two letters⁵⁷ – of the politic and confederated ordering whereof he could not be ignorant.

FINIS

biblical, and that 'deans and chapters' had been abolished as part of the ongoing church reform.

⁵⁷ Overton, *Divine observations upon the London ministers' letter* (21 January 1646) explains (p. 3) that on 1 January a letter from the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland against the toleration of Independency was read in the Westminster Assembly, and has Alexander Henderson, the Scots divine and member of the Assembly, exclaiming: 'Doubtless no other but God was the father of two such blessed twins! That at one instant of time, so many godly, learned and orthodox of the two kingdoms should so happily concur and meet with their desires and advice for this general uniformity.'