

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Secrets of Church Polity

John Witherspoon

Editor's note: One of the most notable of early American Presbyterians was John Witherspoon, sixth president of the College of New Jersey at Princeton (Jonathan Edwards had been the third president of this institution that later was known as Princeton University); the only clergyman and educator to sign the Declaration of Independence; principal author of the form of church government for the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. adopted in 1788; member of the New Jersey provincial Congress and the Continental Congress; educator of presidents, vice presidents, justices of the United States Supreme Court, state and federal legislators, and dozens of Presbyterian ministers; and author of many essays and sermons, among which is Ecclesiastical Characteristics: or, the Arcana of Church Policy, from which these excerpts are taken.

In 1766, when Witherspoon was invited by the board of trustees at the College of New Jersey to become Princeton's sixth president, he was the leader of the popular or orthodox faction in the Church of Scotland. Thirteen years before, at the age of 30, he had anonymously published Ecclesiastical Characteristics in order to ridicule the clergymen of the moderate party. In 1754—while on a fundraising trip to Scotland with Gilbert Tennent—the Reverend Samuel Davies, president of the College, read Witherspoon's satire on the Scots clergy and remarked that its humor was "not inferior to that of Dean Swift."

Enormously popular with the laity, Ecclesiastical Characteristics ran into seven editions and was the

first of Witherspoon's works to be published in America. According to Witherspoon, the Ecclesiastical Characteristics "make a complete system for the education and accomplishment of a moderate clergyman, for his guidance in public judgment, and his direction as to private practice." The book was the focus of rage and resentment among the powerful moderate clergymen of Scotland, and Witherspoon was forced to defend the satire before the Synod of Glasgow. He did so brilliantly, and we have included here part of that defense.

Our reasons for reprinting part of Witherspoon's work are several: First, not many Americans know anything about Witherspoon, even though he was certainly one of the most influential Christians of his generation. Second, those who have heard his name do not seem to be aware that he wrote brilliant satire. Third, many of those who profess to be Christians seem to think that satire is somehow un-Christian, yet it is, perhaps, the only form of humor found in Scripture. Certainly Elijah mocked the priests of Baal, Paul mocked the judaizers, and Jesus mocked the Pharisees. Satire, sarcasm, and ridicule, used in defense of the truth, are legitimate weapons; for falsehood is, among other things, ludicrous. Finally, there are just as many clergymen in 1987 as there were in 1753 who deserve to be ridiculed. Some of Witherspoon's Maxims are as appropriate today as they were two centuries ago. Here are Witherspoon's own words from Serious Apology for the Ecclesiastical Characteristics:

"The *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* is evidently a satire upon clergymen of a certain character. It is a satire too, which every body must see was intended to carry in it no small measure of keenness and severity. This was to be expected from the nature and design of the performance. A satire that does not bite is good for nothing. Hence it necessarily follows, that it is essential to this manner of writing to provoke and give offence.... The rage and fury of many ministers in Scotland when this pamphlet was first published, is known almost to all its readers. The most opprobrious names were bestowed upon the concealed author, and the most dreadful threatenings uttered, in case they should be so fortunate as to discover and convict him.

"...[W]hat first induced me to write, was a deep concern for the declining interest of religion in the church of Scotland, mixed with some indignation at what appeared to me a strange abuse of church-authority.... I am altogether at a loss to know what is the argument in reason, or the precept in Scripture, which makes it criminal to censure ministers when they deserve it.... I hold it as a first principle, that as it is in them doubly criminal and doubly pernicious, so it ought to be exposed with double severity.... [I]f, in any case, erroneous doctrine, or degeneracy of life, is plain and visible, to render them completely odious, must certainly be a duty. When it is not done, it provokes men to conclude that the clergy [are] all combined together, like 'Demetrius and the craftsmen,' and more concerned for their own power and credit, than for the interest and benefit of those committed to their charge....

"There have been, within these few years, writings published in Scotland directly levelled against religion itself, taking away the very foundation of morality, treating our Redeemer's name with contempt and

derision, and bringing in doubt the very being of God. Writings of this kind have been publicly avowed, and the names of the authors pre fixed. Now, where has been the zeal of the enemies of the *Characteristics* against such writings? Have they moved for the exercise of discipline against the writers? ... Does this not tempt men to say, as was said an age ago by Moliere in France, or by some there, on occasion of a play of his called *Tartuffe*, That a man may write what he pleaseth against God Almighty in perfect security; but if he write against the characters of the clergy in power, he is ruined forever....

"[I]t seems very reasonable to believe, that as human beings are never at a stand, a church and a nation, in a quiet and peaceable state, is always growing insensibly worse, till it be either so corrupt as to deserve and procure exterminating judgments, or in the infinite mercy of God, by some great shock or revolution, is brought back to simplicity and purity, and reduced, as it were, to its first principles.... [I]t is every man's duty to do all in his power to retard the progress of corruption, by strictness and tenderness in his own personal walk, fidelity and vigilance in the duties of a public station, and a bold and open testimony against every thing contrary to the interest of true and undefiled religion."

In his Speech in the Synod of Glasgow, Witherspoon pulled no punches with his critics:

"[M]ust the least attempt to show that there are corruptions among the clergy be an unpardonable crime? I have seen it insisted on in print, that as soon as the liberty of the press is taken away, there is an end of every shadow of liberty. And as of late years it hath been very frequent to borrow from what is customary in the civil government, and apply it to the church, I shall beg leave to borrow this maxim, and

to affirm, that so soon as it is not permitted in general to lash the characters of churchmen, there is established a sacerdotal tyranny, which always was, and always will be, of the most cruel, relentless, and illegal kind....

"To conclude, Sir, though I will never approve of, or give my consent for establishing a practice which I think unjust and tyrannical; yet as to my own case, I will even submit to be interrogated by this very party upon this just, this self-evidently just condition, that the ministers of that Presbytery do submit themselves to be interrogated by me in turn, on their doctrine...."

Let us now turn to Ecclesiastical Characteristics.

MAXIM I

All ecclesiastical persons, of whatever rank, whether principals of colleges, professors of divinity, ministers, or even probationers, that are suspected of heresy, are to be esteemed men of great genius, vast learning, and uncommon worth; and are, by all means, to be supported and protected.

All moderate men have a kind of fellow-feeling with heresy, and as soon as they hear of any one suspected, or in danger of being prosecuted for it, zealously and unanimously rise up in his defense. This fact is unquestionable. I never knew a moderate man in my life, that did not love and honor a heretic, or that had not an implacable hatred at the persons and characters of heresy-hunters; a name with which we have thought proper to stigmatize these sons of Belial, who begin and carry on prosecutions against men for heresy in church-courts.

It is related of the apostle John, and an ugly story it is, that upon going into a public bath, and observing the heretic Cerethinus there before him, he retired with the utmost precipitation, lest the edifice should fall, and crush him, when in company with such an enemy of the truth. If the story be true, the apostle's conduct was ridiculous and wild ... ; however,

whether it be true or not, the conduct of all moderate men is directly opposite.

As to the justice of this maxim, many solid reasons may be given for it.—Compassion itself, which is one of the finest and most benevolent feelings of the human heart, moves them to the relief of their distressed brother.—An other very plain reason may be given for it: moderate men are, by their very name and constitution, the reverse, in all respects, of bigotted zealots. Now, it is well known, that many of this last sort, both clergy and common people, when they hear of a man suspected of heresy, conceive an aversion at him, even before they know any thing of the case; nor after he is acquitted (as they are all of them commonly in our church-courts) can they ever come to entertain a favorable opinion of him. The reverse of this is to be as early and vigorous in his defense, as they are in his prosecution, and as implicit in our belief of his orthodoxy, as they are in their belief of his error

....

This brings to mind another reason for the maxim, viz. That heretics being so nearly related to the moderate men, have a right to claim their protection out of friendship and personal regard....

MAXIM II

When any man is charged with loose practices, or tendencies to immorality, he is to be screened and protected as much as possible; especially if the faults laid to his charge be, as they are incomparably well termed in a sermon, preached by a hopeful youth that made some noise lately, "good humored vices."

The reason upon which this maxim is founded, may be taken from the reasons for the former, "mutatis mutandis"; there being scarcely any of them that does not hold equally in both cases. A libertine is a kind of practical heretic; and is to be treated as such....

I must not, however, omit taking notice, to prevent mistakes, of one exception that must be made from this maxim; that is that when the person to whose charge any faults are laid, is reputed orthodox in his principles, in the common acceptation of that word,

... in that case they are all to be taken for granted as true, and the evil of them set forth in the liveliest colours. In consequence of this, he is to be prosecuted and torn to pieces on account of these crimes. But if it so happen, that he cannot be convicted upon a trial, then it is best to make use of things as they really are; that is, to express suspicions, to give ingenious and dubious hints, and if possible, ruin him without any trial at all....

MAXIM III

It is a necessary part of the character of a moderate man, never to speak of the Confession of Faith but with a sneer; to give sly hints, that he does not thoroughly believe it; and to make the word orthodoxy a term of contempt and reproach.

The *Confession of Faith*, which we are now all laid under a disagreeable necessity to subscribe, was framed in times of hot religious zeal; and therefore it can hardly be supposed to contain any thing agreeable to our sentiments in these cool and refreshing days of moderation. So true is this, that I do not remember to have heard any moderate man speak well of it, or recommend it, in a sermon, or private discourse, in my time, And, indeed, nothing can be more ridiculous, than to make a fixed standard for opinions, which change just as the fashions of clothes and dress. No complete system can be settled for all ages, except the maxims I am now compiling and illustrating, and their great perfection lies in their being ambulatory, so that they may be applied differently, with the change of times.

Upon his head some may be ready to object. That if the *Confession of Faith* be built upon the sacred Scriptures, then, change what will, it cannot, as the foundation upon which it rests, remains always firm and the same. In answer to this, I beg leave to make a very new, and therefore striking comparison: When a lady looks in a mirror, she sees herself in a certain attitude and dress, but in her native beauty and colour; should her eye, on a sudden, be tinctured with the jaundice, she sees herself all yellow and spotted; yet the mirror remains the same faithful mirror still, and the alteration arises not from it, but from the object that looks at it. I beg

leave to make another comparison: When an old philosopher looked at the evening-star, he beheld nothing but a little twinkling orb, round and regular like the rest; but when a modern views it with a telescope, he talks of phases, and horns, and mountains, and what not; now this arises not from any alteration in the star, but from his superior assistance in looking at it. The application of both these similitudes I leave to the reader.

But besides these general reasons, there is one very strong particular reason why moderate men cannot love the *Confession of Faith*; moderation evidently implies a large share of charity, and consequently a good and favorable opinion of those that differ from our church; but a rigid adherence to the *Confession of Faith*, and high esteem of it, nearly borders upon, or gives great suspicion of harsh opinions of those that differ from us: and does not experience rise up and ratify this observation? Who are the narrow-minded, bigotted, uncharitable persons among us? Who are the severe censurers of those that differ in judgment? Who are the damnors of the adorable Heathens, Socrates, Plato, Marcus Antonius, &c.? In fine, who are the persecutors of the inimitable heretics among ourselves? Who but the admirers of this antiquated composition, who pin their faith to other men's sleeves, and will not endure one jot less or different belief from what their fathers had before them! It is therefore plain, that the moderate man, who desires to inclose all intelligent beings in one benevolent embrace, must have an utter abhorrence at that vile hedge of distinction, the *Confession of Faith*.

I shall briefly mention a trifling objection to this part of our character.—That by our subscription we sacrifice sincerity, the queen of virtues, to private gain and advantage. To which I answer, in the first place, That the objection proves too much, and therefore must be false, and can prove nothing: for allowing the justice of the objection, it would follow, that a vast number, perhaps a majority, of the clergy of the Church of England are villains; their printed sermons being, many of them, diametrically opposite to the articles which they subscribe. Now, as this supposition can never be admitted by a charitable man, the objection from

whence it flows, as a necessary consequence, must fall to the ground.

But further, what is there more insincere in our subscriptions, than in those expressions of compliment and civility, which all acknowledge lawful, although they rarely express the meaning of the heart! The design is sufficiently understood in both cases; and our subscriptions have this advantage above forms of compliment, in point of honesty, that we are at a great deal of pains usually to persuade the world that we do not believe what we sign; whereas the complaisant gentleman is very seldom at any pains about the matter.

What is said might suffice in so clear a case; but I am here able to give a proof of the improvement of the age, by communication to the reader a new way of subscribing the *Confession of Faith*, in a perfect consistency with sincerity, if that be thought of any consequence: it is taken from the method of attesting some of our gentlemen elders to the general assembly. Many insist, that they ought to be at tested, and do attest them, as qualified in all respects, if the attestors are wholly ignorant about the matter; because, in that case, there is not evidence to the contrary, and the presumption ought to lie on the favorable side. Now, as every new discovery should be applied to all the purposes for which it may be useful, let this method be adopted by the intrants into the ministry, and applied to their subscription of the *Confession to Faith*. Nothing is more easy than for them to keep themselves wholly ignorant of what it contains; and then they may, with a good conscience, subscribe it as true, because it ought to be so.

MAXIM IV

A good preacher must not only have all the above and subsequent principles of moderation in him, as the source of every thing that is good; but must, over and over, have the following special marks and signs of a talent for preaching. 1. His subjects must be confined to social duties. 2. He must recommend them only from rational considerations, viz. the beauty and comely proportions of virtue, and its advantages in the present life, without any regard to a future state of more extended self-interest. 3. His

authorities must be drawn from heathen writers, none, or as few as possible, from Scripture. 4. He must be very unacceptable to the common people

MAXIM V

A minister must endeavor to acquire as great a degree of politeness, in his carriage and behavior, and to catch as much of the air and manner of a fine gentleman, as possibly he can.

This maxim is necessary, because without it the former could not be attained to. Much study is a great enemy to politeness in men, just as a great care of household affairs spoils the free careless air of a fine lady: and whether politeness is to be sacrificed to learning, let the impartial world judge. Besides the scheme which I have permitted the moderate man to study, doth actually supercede the use of all other learning, because it contains a knowledge of the whole, and the good of the whole; more than which, I hope, will be allowed to be not only needless, but impossible.

This scheme excels in brevity; for it may be understood in a very short time; which, I suppose, prompted a certain clergyman to say, that any student might get as much divinity as he would ever have occasion for in six weeks.... Agreeably to all this, have we not seen in fact, many students of divinity brought up in hot-beds, who have become speakers in general assemblies, and strenuous supporters of a falling church, before their beards were grown, to the perfect astonishment of an observing world? ... Then there will be no need at all for the critical study of the Scriptures, for reading large bodies of divinity, for an acquaintance with church history, or the writings of those poor creatures the Christian fathers....

We find that moderate men have mostly, by constitution, too much spirit to submit to the drudgery of the kinds of learning above-mentioned, and despise all those who do so. There is no controversy now about Arian, Arminian, Pelagian, or Socinian tenets ... This shows, by the by, the injustice and malignity of those poor beings the Seceders, who cry out of erroneous doctrines in the church, and assert, that Arminianism is publicly

taught by many. It is known, that they mean the moderate men, when they speak so; and yet I will venture to affirm, that there are not a few young men of that character, who, if they were asked, could not tell what the five Arminian articles are, so little do they regard Arminianism.... It will perhaps be objected against this maxim, That the moderate party commonly set up on a pretence of being more learned than their adversaries; and are, in fact, thought to be very learned in their sermons by the vulgar, who, for that reason hate them. Now, as to their pretending to be more learned than their adversaries, it is most just; for they have, as has been shown, got hold of the sum-total of learning, although they did not calculate it themselves. And as to their being thought learned in their sermons by the vulgar, it is sufficient for that purpose that they be unintelligible. Scattering a few phrases in their sermons ... will easily persuade the people that they are learned: and this persuasion is, to all intents and purposes, the same thing as if it were true.

MAXIM XI

The character which moderate men give their adversaries of the orthodox party must always be that of "knaves" or "fools"; and, as occasion serves, the same person (if it will pass) may be represented as a "knave" at one time, and as a "fool" at another.

MAXIM XII

As to the world in general, a moderate man is to have great charity for Atheists and Deists in principle, and for persons that are loose and vicious in their practice; but none at all for those that have a high profession of religion, and a great pretence to strictness in their walk and conversation

... [T]he very meaning of charity is to believe without evidence; it is not charity at all to believe good of a man when we see it, but when we do not see it. It is with charity in sentiment, as with charity in supplying the wants of the necessitous; we do not give alms to the rich but to the poor. In like manner, when there are all outward appearances of goodness, it requires no charity to believe well of the persons: but when there are none at all, or perhaps very many to the contrary, then I will

maintain it is charity, and charity in its perfection, to believe well of them. Some object to this, Well, since it is your will, have charity for them; but have charity also for such as are apparently good. Oh! the stupid world! and slow of heart to conceive! is it not evident to a demonstration, that if the appearance of wickedness be the foundation of charity, the appearance of goodness, which is its opposite, must be the foundation of a quite contrary judgment, viz. suspecting, or rather believing ill of them? If any still insist, That if not charity, yet justice should incline us to believe well of them? as I have seemingly confessed; I answer, That we have no occasion for justice, if we have charity; for charity is more than justice, even as the whole is more than a part: but though I have supposed, ... that justice requires this, yet it is not my sentiment; for the persons meant being usually great enemies to us, are thereby cut off from any claim in justice to our good opinion; and being also, as have been proved, improper objects of charity, it remains that we should hate them with perfect hatred, as in fact we do.

MAXIM XIII

All moderate men are joined together in the strictest bond of union, and do never fail to support and defend one another to the utmost, be the cause they are engaged in what it will.

Time would fail me, if I should go through all the excellencies of this crowning maxim; and therefore I shall only further observe, that it excels all the known principles of action for clearness and perspicuity. In order to determine which side to chose in a disputed question, it requires no long discussions of reason, no critical inquiry into the truth of controverted facts, but only some knowledge of the characters of men; a study much more agreeable, as well as more common, than that of books. To speak more properly, it requires no study at all of any kind; for, as to the gross, or general tendency of a character, common fame communicates the impression, and seldom or never deceives us.