

True Spiritual Liberty

William Penn

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(Condensed from "A Brief Examination and State of Liberty Spiritual Both with respect to Persons in their private capacity and in their Church Society and Communion." 1681)

Dear Friends and Brethren,

True spiritual Liberty is one of the most glorious things in the World, but it is little understood and frequently abused by many. I beseech Almighty God to preserve you, His people, in the right knowledge and use of the liberty, which Jesus Christ is redeeming us into.

Christ's liberty is obtained through Christ's cross. They that would be his freemen must be his bondsmen and wear his yoke. His liberty is from sin, not to sin; to do his will and not our own. This is the freedom that comes by Jesus Christ, to as many as receive him in the way which God hath given him, to wit, to save us from our corruptions, and guide us in the narrow way of his holy cross, and through the straight gate of self denial. As many as have entered at this door are come to have unity with God and with one another. "The church that dwells in God, if she dwells in God, then in love." Consequently her members are of one mind in church matters since she has but one head to rule her.

True spiritual liberty is deliverance from sin. "If the truth makes you free then are you free indeed," saith Christ. The liberty of God's people stands in the Truth, and their communion in it, in the perfect spiritual law of Jesus Christ, which delivers and preserves them from every evil thing.

False spiritual liberty is departing from this blessed spirit of truth, and rebelling against the perfect law of liberty in the heart, and being at liberty to do our own wills.

Question: Since God hath given me a manifestation of his spirit and since I have the gift of God in myself, should I not be left to act according as I am free and persuaded in my own mind, in the things that relate to God, lest looking upon myself as obligated by what is revealed to another, though it be not revealed unto me, I should be led out of my own measure, and act upon another's motion and so offer a blind sacrifice to God?

Answer: That is true in a sense; that is, if thou art such an one that canst do nothing against Truth, but for the Truth, then may thou be safely left to thy freedom in the things of God. And the reason is plain; because thy freedom stands in the perfect law of liberty, and in the Truth, which is Christ Jesus, which makes free indeed: free from all that is bad and free to all that is holy.

But if thou pleadest thy freedom against good and requisite things, thy freedom is out of the truth and against the perfect law of liberty.

Question: Must I Conform to things whether I can receive them or no?

Answer: No. But now consider the reason thou canst not receive them. Is the fault in the things themselves? Are they inconsistent with Truth or will not the Truth assent unto them? Or is the fault in thee? Is it thy weakness or carelessness? If thy weakness, it is to be borne with, and informed; if thy carelessness, thou oughtest to be admonished. For it is the root of Ranterism to assert that nothing is a duty incumbent upon thee, but what thou art persuaded is thy duty. The seared conscience pleads liberty against all duty, the unenlightened conscience is unconcerned, and the dead conscience is uncondemned unless this distinction be allowed. There may be ignorance from inability or incapacity and ignorance from disobedience and prejudice. So though thou art not to conform to a thing ignorantly, yet thou art seriously to consider why thou art ignorant and what the cause of such ignorance may be. It can't be God; it must be thyself, who hast not yet received a sense for or against the matter about which thou art in doubt.

Question: Ought I not be left to the grace of God in my own heart?

Answer: That is of all things most desirable, since they are well left that are there left. Where all are left with the one spirit of Truth, they must be of one mind; they can't be otherwise. So that to plead this against unity is to abuse the very plea. Therefore if thou pleadest against the counsel and spirit of the Lord in other faithful persons under the pretense of being left to this spirit in thyself, thou opposeth the spirit to the spirit and pleadest for disunity under the name of liberty.

Question: But are there not various measures, diversities of gifts and offices in the body?

Answer: True. But are not the members of one mind, one will, and one judgment in matters relating to the family and church of God? There can't be a falser reasoning than to Conclude discord from diversity, contrariety

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from variety. So though it be granted that there is a diversity of gifts and a variety of offices yet there is no disagreement and no contrariety of judgment Concerning them.

"There is but one Lord, one faith, one baptism." His light, life and spirit is at Unity with itself in all. What comes from the light, life or spirit is one, it is the same in truth and unity with the rest. This is seen in our assemblies every day and will be throughout all generations in the church of God, among those that live in the lowly truth.

"God is not a God of Confusion, but order." Everyone in his order hath unity and true fellowship with whatever comes from the life of God in another, for this precious life reacheth throughout the heritage of God. The saints' way is in the light, yes, they are Children of light and "Lights of the world," and can it be that such should Contradict each other in the order and practice in the church before the world?

Oh, the blessed seamless garment of Jesus! Where that is known these things can never arise. "They that walk in the light have fellowship one with another." What shall we say of those who plead being left to the light in order to justify their not having fellowship one with another? And, which is worse, who suppose people may conscientiously and justifiably dissent within themselves by reason of the variety of the degrees of the spirit and grace that are given of God unto them, as if the lesser degree may dissent from the greater, because of its not being able to Comprehend it. And such tell us, "This is the ancient principle of Truth," and "How will you else be able to maintain the Quakers' principles?"

The fallacy of this lieth in not rightly distinguishing between diversity and disagreement, variety and contrariety. For this diversity hath concord and this variety hath unity.

It is a blindness that hath caused some, by going from the one life and spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, first to fall into disagreements and then plead for it under the notion of diversity of measures. I would ask all such persons, who arrogate to themselves such a peculiar knowledge of the Quakers' first principles, first, Whether they believe there be a Christian body? second, Whether this body hath a head? third, Whether Christ be not this head? fourth, Whether this head seeth, heareth, smelleth, tasteth differing and contrarily to itself? And whether this body hath a contrary feeling at the same time about the same thing? And if the church of Christ sees with the same eye, hears with the same ear, speaks with the same mouth, and is led by the same spirit, then where is this disagreement or dissent about the things of the church?

Question: But members of Christ's church had different apprehensions as in the case of Paul and Peter.

Answer: The difference between Peter and Paul testifies the weakness of Peter and justifies Paul's reproof of his too great compliance with the Jews in some of their rites. Paul exercised his Godly authority and we find those that opposed it are branded with contention. But Christ's people were of one heart and of one mind; for Christ is not divided. They that have Christ for their head have one prophet, and one bishop, and disagree not in their judgments relating to him and the good of his church. They have one and the same guide, for the one spirit into which all have drunk and by it baptized into one body leads them all. To every member is given a measure of the same spirit and though every member is not an eye, ear, nor mouth, the eye sees for the mouth, the mouth speaks for the eye, and the ear hears for both. Each member is aware of the other and moves and acts in the same life which is proportionable to every member in his distinct office. All cannot be the eye neither can all be the hand for then they would act disagreeably to the great Orderer of his church. And if I will not comply with him that God hath made an eye I resist the Lord, though under pretense of resisting man for the Lord's sake. Truly, this is the rock that some have split upon. They have not been contented with their station in the body; they have not kept to their own gift, nor to their own place in the church. Walking loose from the holy cross there can be no such thing as concord and fellowship in the church of Christ.

Furthermore, the same lowly frame of mind that receives and answers the mind of the spirit of the Lord in a man's self will receive and have unity with the mind of the same spirit through another, and the reason is plain, because the same self evidencing power that ariseth from the spirit of Truth in one's self and that convinceth a man in his own heart, doth also attend the discovery of the mind of the same spirit when delivered by another. He whose soul is left with the spirit of Truth in himself differs not from his brethren that are of the same spirit.

Question: But what if I do not presently see that service in a thing that the rest of my brethren agree in? In this case what is my duty, and theirs?

Answer: It is thy duty to wait upon God in silence and patience, and as thou abide in the simplicity of Truth thou wilt receive an understanding with the rest of thy brethren about the thing doubted. And it is their duty,

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whilst thou behavest thyself in meekness, to bear with thee, and carry themselves tenderly and lovingly towards thee.

The enemy is at work to scatter the minds of Friends, by that loose plea, "What hast thou to do with me? Leave me to my freedom and to the grace of God in myself," and the like; but this is a deviation from, and a perversion of the ancient principle of Truth. For this is the plain consequence of this plea, that anyone, especially if they are but lately convinced, shall say, "I see no evil in declining a public testimony in suffering times or hiding in times of persecution, and no man hath power to reprove me, but I may be as good a Friend as any of you according to my measure." Here is measure set up against measure—which is confusion itself.

The enemy is working to rend and divide the heritage of God who, under the pretense of crying down man, forms, and prescriptions, is crying down the heavenly Man, Christ Jesus and his blessed order and government.

Let us keep low, and remember the rock from whence we were hewn. I do not doubt that God will preserve His people from this spirit that is not in covenant with God nor under the yoke of His law of true spiritual liberty.

Dear Friends, keep in the simplicity of the Truth and cross of Jesus lest God, who hath richly visited us, should remove His blessing from amongst us and place his candlestick amidst another people. Be watchful, keep to your first love and works that so you may endure to the end.