

SKETCHES
OF
V I R G I N I A
HISTORICAL
AND
B I O G R A P H I C A L.

BY THE
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Pastor of Presbyterian Church, Romney, Virginia.

PHILADELPHIA:
WILLIAM S. MARTIEN, 142 CHESTNUT STREET.
1850.

Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1849,
By WILLIAM S. MARTIEN,
In the Clerk's office of the District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania.

The subject of a general assessment was brought before the Legislature, in its two sessions, in the year 1784, by petitions from several counties, which prayed—that, “as all persons enjoyed the benefit of religion, all might be required to contribute to the expense of supporting some form of worship or other.” From the inhabitants of Mecklenburg, Lunenburg and Amelia, the petition said—“that they conceive the stability of our government, and the preservation of peace and happiness among the individuals of it, depend in a great measure, on the influence of religion, without which no government, however wisely formed, can long exist; that they consider its rapid declension, within a few years, as proceeding from the inattention of the Legislature, which has an undoubted right to compel every individual who partakes of those blessings, which are originally derived from it, to contribute to the support of it, and praying *that an Act may pass for a general assessment for that purpose, and for securing to the Protestant Episcopal Church the property vested in it.*”

That from the Protestant Episcopal Church, says Dr. Hawks, pp. 156, 157—set forth that—“their Church laboured under many inconveniences and restraints by the operation of sundry laws in force, which direct modes of worship, and enjoin the observance of certain days, and otherwise produce embarrassment and difficulty; and praying that all acts which direct modes of faith and worship and enjoin the observance of certain days may be repealed; that the present vestry laws may be repealed or amended; that the churches, glebe lands, donations, and all other property heretofore belonging to the established church may be forever secured to them by law; that an act may pass to incorporate the Protestant Episcopal Church in Virginia to enable them to regulate all the spiritual concerns of that Church; and in general, that the Legislature will aid and patronize the Christian religion.”

The Presbytery of Hanover met at Timber Ridge, October 27th, 1784—“Mr. Smith agreeable to an order of last Presbytery, produced a copy of the memorial presented to the last sessions of the General Assembly, complaining of certain infringements on our religious liberty. The Presbytery approves of the memorial and ordered it to be recorded in the Presbytery book. Messrs. Graham and Smith were appointed a committee to prepare a memorial to be presented at the present session of the General Assembly of the State, and to produce it to-morrow for the inspection of the Presbytery.” On the next day a memorial was presented—“complaining of, and praying a redress of certain grievances.” The Presbytery approved it and ordered it to be sent to the Assembly then in session.

MEMORIAL.

The Presbytery of Hanover, to the Assembly, in October, 1784.

To the Honourable Speaker and House of Delegates of Virginia,
Gentlemen,

The united clergy of the Presbyterian church of Virginia assembled in Presbytery, beg leave again to address your honourable house, upon a few important subjects, in which we find ourselves interested as citizens of this State.

The freedom we possess is so rich a blessing, and the purchase of it has been so high, that we would ever wish to cherish a spirit of vigilant attention to it, in every circumstance of possible danger. We are anxious to retain a full share of all the privileges which our happy revolution affords, and cannot but feel alarmed at the continued existence of any infringement upon them, or even any indirect attempt tending to this. Impressed with this idea as men, whose rights are sacred and dear to them, ought to be, we are obliged to express our sensibility upon the present occasion, and we naturally direct our appeal to you, gentlemen, as the public guardians of your country's happiness and liberty, who are influenced we hope by that wisdom and justice which your high station requires. Conscious of the rectitude of our intentions and the strength of our claims, we wish to speak our sentiments freely upon these occasions, but at the same time with all that respectful regard, which becomes us, when addressing the representatives of a great and virtuous people. It is with pain that we find ourselves obliged to renew our complaints upon the subjects stated in our memorial last spring. We deeply regret that such obvious grievances should exist unredressed in a Republic, whose end ought to be the happiness of all the citizens. We presumed that immediate redress would have succeeded a clear and just representation of them; as we expect, that it is always the desire of our representatives to remove real grounds of uneasiness, and allay jealous commotions amongst the people. But as the objects of the memorial, though very important in their nature, and more so in their probable consequences, have not yet been obtained, we request that the house of delegates would be pleased to recollect what we had the honour to state to them in that paper at their last sessions; to resume the subject in their present deliberation; and to give it that weight which its importance deserves. The uneasiness which we feel from the continuance of the grievances just referred to, is increased under the prospect of an addition to them by certain exceptionable measures said to be proposed to the Legislature.—We have understood that a comprehensive incorporating act, has been and is at present in agitation, whereby ministers of the gospel as such, of certain descriptions, shall have legal advantages which are not proposed to be extended to the people at large of any denomination. A proposition has been made by some gentlemen in the house of delegates we are told, to extend the grace to us, amongst others, in our professional capacity. If this be so, we are bound to acknowledge with gratitude our obligations to such gentlemen for their inclination to favour us with the sanction of public authority in the discharge of our duty. But as the scheme of incorporating clergymen, *independent of the religious communities to which they belong*, is inconsistent with our ideas of propriety, we request the liberty of declining any such solitary honour should it be again proposed. To form clergymen into a distinct order in the community, and especially where it would be possible for them to have the principal direction of a considerable public estate by such incorporation, has a tendency to render them independent, at length, of the churches whose ministers they are; and this has been too often found by experience to produce ignorance, immorality, and neglect of the duties of their station.

Besides, if clergymen were to be erected by the State into a distinct political body, detached from the rest of the citizens, with the express design of “enabling them to direct spiritual matters,” which we all possess without such formality, it would naturally tend to introduce that antiquated and absurd system, in which government is owned, in effect, to be the fountain head of spiritual influences to the church. It would establish an immediate, a peculiar, and for that very reason, in our opinion, illicit connexion between government, and such as were thus distinguished. The Legislature in that case would be the head of a religious party, and its dependent members would be entitled to all decent reciprocity, to a becoming paternal and fostering care. This we suppose, would be giving a preference, and creating a distinction between citizens equally good, on account of something entirely foreign from civil merit, which would be a source of endless jealousies, and inadmissible in a republic or any other well-directed government.—The prin-

ciple too, which this system aims to establish, is both false and dangerous to religion, and we take this opportunity to remonstrate and protest against it. The real ministers of true religion, derive their authority to act in the duties of their profession from a higher source than any Legislature on earth, however respectable. Their office relates to the care of the soul, and preparing it for a future state of existence, and their administrations are, or ought to be, of a spiritual nature suited to this momentous concern. And it is plain from the very nature of the case, that they should neither expect, nor receive from government any permission or direction in this respect. We hope therefore that the House of Delegates shares so large a portion of that philosophic and liberal discernment, which prevails in America at present, as to see this matter in its proper light—and that they will understand too well the nature of their duty, as the equal and common guardians of the chartered rights of all the citizens, to permit a connexion of this kind we have just now mentioned, to subsist between them and the spiritual instructors of any religious denomination in the State.—The interference of government in religion, cannot be indifferent to us, and as it will probably come under consideration at the present session of the Assembly, we request the attention of the honourable House, to our sentiments upon this head.

We conceive that human legislation, ought to have human affairs alone for its concern. Legislators in free States possess delegated authority, for the good of the community at large in its political or civil capacity.

The existence, preservation and happiness of society should be their only object; and to this their public cares should be confined. Whatever is not materially connected with this, lies not within their province as statesmen. The thoughts, the intentions, the faith, and the consciences of men, with their modes of worship, lie beyond their reach, and are ever to be referred to a higher and more penetrating tribunal. These internal and spiritual matters cannot be measured by human rules, nor be amenable to human laws. It is the duty of every man, for himself, to take care of his immortal interests in a future state, where we are to account for our conduct as individuals; and it is by no means the business of a Legislature to attend to this, for THERE governments and states as collective bodies shall no more be known.

Religion, therefore, as a spiritual system, and its ministers in a professional capacity, ought not to be under the direction of the State.

Neither is it necessary to their existence that they should be publicly supported by a legal provision for the purpose, as tried experience hath often shown; although it is absolutely necessary to the existence and welfare of every political combination of men in society, to have the support of religion and its solemn institutions, as affecting the conduct of rational beings more than human laws can possibly do. On this account it is wise policy in legislators to seek its alliance and solicit its aid in a civil view, because of its happy influence upon the morality of its citizens, and its tendency to preserve the veneration of an oath, or an appeal to heaven, which is the cement of the social union. It is upon this principle alone, in our opinion, that a legislative body has a right to interfere in religion at all, and of consequence we suppose that this interference ought only to extend to the preserving of the public worship of the Deity, and the supporting of institutions for inculcating the great fundamental principles of all religion, without which society could not easily exist. Should it be thought necessary at present for the Assembly to exert this right of supporting religion in general by an assessment on all the people, we would wish it to be done on the most *liberal plan*. A general assessment of the kind we have heard proposed is an object of such consequence that it excites much anxious speculation amongst your constituents.

We therefore earnestly pray that nothing may be done in the case, inconsistent with the proper objects of human legislation or the Declaration of Rights as published at the Revolution. We hope that the assessment will not be proposed under the idea of supporting religion as a spiritual system, relating to the care of the soul and preparing it for its future destiny. We hope that no attempt will be made to point out articles of faith, that are not essential to the preservation of society; or to settle modes of worship; or to interfere in the internal government of religious communities; or to render the *ministers of religion independent of the will of the people whom they serve*. We expect from our representatives, that careful attention to the political equality of all the citizens, which a Republic ought ever to cherish; and that no scheme of an assessment will be encouraged which will violate the happy privilege we now enjoy of thinking for ourselves in all cases where conscience is concerned.

We request the candid indulgence of the honourable house to the present address; and their most favourable construction of the motives which induce us to

obtrude ourselves into public notice. We are urged by a sense of duty. We feel ourselves impressed with the importance of the present crisis. We have expressed ourselves in the plain language of freemen, upon the interesting subjects which called for animadversion; and we hope to stand excused with you, gentlemen, for the manner in which it is executed, as well as for the part we take in the public interests of the community. In the present important moment, we conceived it criminal to be silent; and have therefore attempted to discharge a duty which we owe to our religion as Christians; to ourselves as freemen; and to our posterity, who ought to receive from us a precious birthright of perfect freedom and political equality.

That you may enjoy the direction of Heaven in your present deliberations, and possess in a high degree the spirit of your exalted station, is the prayer of your sincere well wishers,

THE PRESBYTERY OF HANOVER.

There was a strong impression that some kind of assessment would be demanded by a majority of the citizens of the State. And it appears that, for a time, there was a leaning that way, in some, at least, of the members of Presbytery: for at the same session of Presbytery in which the foregoing memorial was prepared, the following—"plan was also introduced, agreeably to which alone Presbytery are willing to admit a general assessment for the support of religion by law; the leading principles of which are as follows:—1st. Religion as a spiritual system is not to be considered as an object of human legislation, but may in a civil view, as preserving the existence and promoting the happiness of society. 2d. That public worship and public periodical instruction to the people, be maintained in this view by a general assessment for this purpose. 3d. That every man, as a good citizen, be obliged to declare himself attached to some religious community, publicly known to profess the belief of one God, his righteous providence, our accountability to him, and a future state of rewards and punishments. 4th. That every citizen should have liberty annually to direct his assessed proportion to such community as he chooses. 5th. That twelve titheables, or more, to the amount of one hundred and fifty families, as near as local circumstances will admit, shall be incorporated, and exclusively direct the application of the money contributed for their support. Messrs. Todd, Graham, Smith and Montgomery are appointed to present the memorial, and attend the assembly with the plan of an assessment."

At the first meeting of the General Committee of the Baptist Church, which assembled October 9th, 1784, says Mr. Semple, p. 70—"The law for the solemnization of marriage, and the vestry law, were considered political grievances. They also resolved to oppose the law for a general assessment, and that for the incorporation of religious societies, which were now in agitation. A memorial to the General Assembly, praying for a repeal of the vestry law, and an alteration in the marriage law, was drawn and committed to the hands of the Rev. Reuben Ford, to be presented to the next Assembly"—which was to meet on the eighteenth of the month.