

*The Charge of Sedition and Faction against  
good Men, especially faithful Ministers,  
considered and accounted for.*

4379.6.2  
8

A

# SERMON,

BY JOHN WITHERSPOON, D. D.

LATE PRESIDENT OF

PRINCETON COLLEGE, N. JERSEY.

**BOSTON:**

RE-PRINTED AND SOLD BY LINCOLN & EDMANDS,  
NO. 53, CORNHILL.

1811.

Digitized by Google



# SERMON.

ACTS xvii. 6.

*These that have turned the world upside down,  
have come hither also.*

MY BRETHREN,

YOU have had, of late, frequent opportunities of hearing discourses on the ministerial character and office. These subjects, indeed, have, on occasions of this and a similar nature, been so often and so well handled, that it is hard to say any thing on them, which shall not be either bare repetition, or an alteration very much for the worse. I have therefore made choice at this time of a subject somewhat different, but the usefulness of which, both to ministers and people, may be easily discerned.

A great part of the sacred volume consists of history. And, as the knowledge of past events, and the history of mankind in general, is an improving study ; so there is no object of study more pleasant or more profitable, than that extensive view of the great plan of providence which is exhibited to us in the word of God. There we have access to observe the power, the wisdom, and the grace of the various revelations of the divine will given in successive ages, their correspondence one to another, and how well

each is suited to the season, and other circumstances of its discovery. Above all, it is useful and delightful to observe, the perfect union and harmony of the whole, and the several striking and distinguishing characters that are to be found on all the works of the one, eternal, and unchangeable God.

This uniformity is in nothing more remarkable than in the sufferings of good men, and their causes. True religion being the same in substance in every age, we may expect to find a very strong likeness in all the real servants of God, however distant the periods in which they make their appearance. A conformity of state also may be expected, as well as a similarity of character. They have the same end in view, they tread in the same path, and therefore must meet with resistance from the same enemies. There was from the beginning, and there will be to the end of the world, a strife and conflict between the righteous and the wicked, between "the seed of the woman, and the seed of the serpent." And, in particular, it is natural to suppose, that slander and calumny will be always one of the weapons used by the enemies of the truth. We have no reason then to be surprised that every good man should have occasion to say with the psalmist David, and with a greater than he, the Son of David, "They laid to my charge things that I knew not."

This was the case with the apostle Paul and his companion, in the passage of history of which my text is a part. But the nature of the accusation here brought against them seems to be singular, and to merit particular attention. They were the servants and the ministers of

the Prince of peace. Their office was to preach and publish the gospel of peace. Their doctrine was full of meekness and love. They discovered the love of God to men; and, after the example of their master, they charged men to love one another. They were mean in their outward appearance, and neither possessed, nor claimed any earthly dominion. In one word they had nothing about them that one would think could give jealousy to the civil power, that could seem formidable or dangerous to any character or class of men. Yet here they are charged as seditious, as disturbers to the public peace, as enemies to the government. "These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also. These all do contrary to the decrees of Cesar, saying, that there is another king, one Jesus." What sort of an accusation is this? not only false, but improbable. Does not the arch enemy, the accuser of the brethren, seem to have failed in his usual skill? Is there the least prospect of success in so groundless a charge?

But what shall we say, if, upon an accurate examination, it be found, that the same charge hath been brought against the servants of God in every age? That none hath been advanced with greater boldness, and none with greater success? Nay, perhaps, that it is the single standing charge, from which their enemies have never departed since the beginning of the world, and which, of all others, hath been most readily and most universally believed. In other instances, the reproaches thrown upon the children of God have been opposite, and mutually destruc-

tive of each other. Christ himself, when his zeal in his Father's business made him forget to eat bread, was said to be beside himself, and mad. At other times he was called a cunning deceiver, and master of the curious arts. But in this, his enemies, and those of his people, have never varied. And their success has been equal to their malice. They crucified him as an enemy to Cesar, with the title of usurpation written over him ; and they have compelled all his disciples after him, to bear his cross, and to groan under the weight of the same unjust and slanderous charge.

There are few subjects more worthy of the serious attention of those who firmly believe the word of God. None which will afford greater occasion to adore the mysterious depth of divine providence, or furnish more instructive lessons to such as desire to hold on with steadiness in the paths of true religion. Above all, this subject may be useful to ministers of the gospel. It will contribute to ascertain the character which they ought to bear ; to direct them in their duty ; to prepare them for, and fortify them against the trials which it is impossible they can avoid.

In discoursing further upon this subject it is proposed, through the assistance of divine grace,

I. By a short historical deduction, chiefly from the holy scriptures, to shew, that the character of *seditions*, *troublesome*, and *disorderly*, hath been constantly given by wicked men to the servants of God.

II. To inquire, and to endeavour to point out, what it is in true religion that gives occa-

sion to this charge, and makes the world prone to believe it.

In the last place, To make some practical improvement of what may be said.

I return to the first of these, viz.

I. By a short historical deduction, to shew, that the character of seditious, troublesome, and disorderly, hath been constantly given by wicked men to the servants of God. It would not be difficult to point out something of the spirit prevailing in the world, from the life of almost every good man, whose name stands upon record, however short and general the account be that is given of many of them in scripture. But, as much of what might properly enough fall under this head, will be necessary in the illustration of the second ; to prevent confusion and repetition, I shall content myself with some leading instances in very different ages, from the earliest to the latest times.

The first I shall mention, is, a passage as extraordinary in its nature, and as singular in its circumstances, as any that history affords. It is the meeting of Ahab and Elijah, in the time of a great famine in the land of Israel. Ahab, that profane prince, had by his apostasy and idolatry, brought down the judgment of a righteous God, both on his kingdom and on his house. We are told, " That he did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger, than all the kings of Israel that were before him."\* He had persecuted the worshippers of the true God with unrelenting violence ; and, as it was natural to expect, he hated with uncommon ran-

\* 1 Kings xvi. 33.

cour, and distinguished by uncommon severity, all the prophets who continued stedfast in the cause of truth. As many of them as he could lay hold of, he had put to death. He had hunted for Elijah, not only through all the kingdom of Israel, but through the neighbouring nations, as we find related by Obadiah, his principal servant. "As the Lord thy God liveth, there is no nation or kingdom whither my lord hath not sent to seek thee; and when they said, he is not there, he took an oath of the kingdom and nation that they found thee not."\* After all this severity on his part, when Elijah, by the command of God, went out to meet him, see the form of his salutation: "And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, art thou he that troubleth Israel?"† To this the prophet makes the following strong and just reply; "I have not troubled Israel: but thou, and thy father's house, have troubled Israel, in that thou hast forsaken the commandments of the Lord; and thou hast followed Baalim."

Another instance similar to the former may be found in Jehosaphat and Ahab's consultation before going out to battle. "And Jehosaphat said, is there not here a prophet of the Lord besides, that we may inquire of him? And the king of Israel said unto Jehosaphat, there is yet one man (Micaiah the son of Imlah) by whom we may inquire of the Lord; but I hate him, for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil."‡ Here, you see, Micaiah was the object of hatred and aversion, because he

\* 1 Kings xviii. 10. † Ibid. ver. 17. ‡ 1 Kings xxii. 7, 8.

denounced the judgment of God against the king's wickedness. That vengeance which he himself not only merited but solicited by his crimes, was attributed to malice in the prophet.

See an instance of a general accusation of this kind against all the worshippers of the true God, by Haman in the book of Esther. "And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, there is a certain people scattered abroad, and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom, and their laws are diverse from all people, neither keep they the king's laws; therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them."\*

The prophet Jeremiah met with the same treatment at different times. Neither prince, nor priests, nor prophets, were able to bear without resentment, the threatenings which he denounced in the name of God. "Now it came to pass, when Jeremiah had made an end of speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak unto all the people, that the priests and the prophets, and all the people took him, saying, Thou shalt surely die. Why hast thou prophesied in the name of the Lord, saying, This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate without an inhabitant, and all the people were gathered against Jeremiah in the house of the Lord.†—Then spake the priests and the prophets unto the princes and to all the people, saying, This man is worthy to die, for he hath prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your ears."‡ We find him afterwards expressly accused of

\* Esther iii. 8.

† Jer. xxvi. 8, 9.

‡ Ibid. ver. 11.

treachery on the same account. "And when he was in the gate of Benjamin, a captain of the ward was there, whose name was Irijah, the son of Shelemiah, the son of Hananiah, and he took Jeremiah the prophet, saying, Thou fallest away to the Chaldeans."\*

The prophet Amos is another instance, precisely parallel to the last. Because of his fidelity to God, he was invidiously represented as an enemy to the king. "Then Amaziah the priest of Beth-el sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, Amos hath conspired against thee in the midst of the house of Israel: the land is not able to bear all his words."† Our blessed Lord and Saviour fell under the same accusation. However plain and artless his carriage, he is called a deceiver of the people. "There was much murmuring among the people concerning him, for some said, he is a good man; others said, nay, but he deceiveth the people."‡ His enemies endeavoured to embroil him with the civil government by this insidious question, "Is it lawful to give tribute to Cesar or not?" And that which brought him at last to the cross was the same pretended crime. "And from thenceforth Pilate sought to release him; but the Jews cried out, saying, if thou let this man go, thou art not Cesar's friend: whosoever maketh himself a king, speaketh against Cesar."||

I shall close this view of the scripture history, with the passage of which my text is a part. The whole crime of the apostle Paul, and his companion, was, preaching the doctrine of the

\* Jer. xxxvii. 13. See also chap. xxxviii. 4.

† Amos vii. 10. ‡ John vii. 12. || Ibid. xix. 12.

cross of Christ, his great and darling theme. We are told, he "opened" and "alleged, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead." Then the Jews, to whom this doctrine always was a stumbling block, were "moved with envy," and endeavoured to inflame the resentment of the idolatrous multitude: they took for their associates the most wicked and profligate, "certain lewd fellows of the baser sort:" They "set all the city in an uproar:" And as, no doubt, the friends of Paul and Silas would endeavour to protect them from the injurious assault, their enemies very gravely charge them as the authors of the confusion, both there and elsewhere, "They that have turned the world upside down, are come hither also."

Having produced these instances from the holy Scriptures, which are liable to no exception, I shall say but little on the subsequent periods of the church. Only in general, the same spirit will be found to have prevailed in every age. Whoever will take the pains to look into the history of the church before the reformation, cannot fail to observe, that when any one, either among the clergy or laity, was bold enough to reprove the errors in doctrine, or the ambition, luxury, and worldly lives of his contemporaries, he was immediately branded as a factious and disorderly person, and often severely punished as an enemy to the peace of the church.

That this was the case with the first reformers, both at home and abroad, is too well known to need any proof. And we have had still more recent examples of it in both parts of the united kingdom. The noble struggle which many in

England made, about an hundred years ago, for their liberties sacred and civil, still bears the name of the grand rebellion. And it is remarkable, that, however just a title they had to stand up for their rights as men and christians, yet their doing so at that time, was in a great measure owing to the fury and violence of their enemies, who were, in every respect, the aggressors. A very judicious historian says on this subject, "That which, upon the whole, was the great cause of the parliament's strength, and the king's ruin, was, that the debauched rabble through the land, took all that were called Puritans for their enemies; so that if a man did but pray in his family, or were but heard to repeat a sermon, or sing a psalm, they presently cried out, Rebels, roundheads! and all their money and goods that were portable, proved guilty, how innocent soever they were themselves. This it was that filled the armies and garrisons of the parliament with sober pious men. Thousands had no mind to meddle with the wars, but greatly desired to live peaceably at home, when the rage of soldiers and drunkards would not suffer them."\*

And in Scotland, after the restoration, though there was no struggle for civil liberty, all who chose to obey God rather than man, either in the substances or circumstances of religious duties, were charged with treason, and suffered as rebels. They were expelled from the church; yet censured as schismatics. They were harassed, fined, and imprisoned, when living in peace, without any fault but "concerning the

\* Calamy's Life of Baxter, Chap. IV.

law of their God ;” and yet complained of as troublesome. They were banished, excommunicated, and denied the common benefits of life ; and yet when the extreme rigour of their oppressors compelled them to take up arms in self defence, they were condemned in form of law, for resisting that government which had denied them its protection.

I forbear to add any more particular examples ; but from the deduction above given, it will plainly appear, that worldly men have been always disposed, first to oppress the children of God, and then to complain of injury from them, that by slander they might vindicate their oppression. Their slander, too, hath still run in the same strain ; troublers of Israel, deceivers of the people, enemies to Cesar, and turners of the world upside down, have been the opprobrious titles generally given to the most upright and most faithful men, in every age and country.

We proceed now,

II. In the second place, to inquire, What it is in true religion that gives occasion to this charge, and makes the world prone to believe it.

That there must be something of this kind is very evident. So uniform an effect, could not take place without an adequate cause : And, to a serious and attentive observer, I am persuaded, it is not difficult to discern : The general cause of this effect is, that, in an equivocal sense, the charge is just. True religion does, indeed, give trouble and uneasiness to wicked men, while they continue such ; and it cannot

be supposed, but they will deeply resent it. In order to illustrate this a little more fully, I beg your attention to the three following observations.

I. The examples of the servants of God, is a continual and sensible reproach to the contrary conduct of the men of the world. Nothing can preserve peace to any man, but some measure of self-satisfaction. As a deceived heart turns the wicked aside, so the continuance of self-deceit is necessary to his tasting those pleasures of sin in which his mistaken happiness is placed. To reproach his conduct, therefore, is to disturb his dream, and to wound his peace. And as pride, however finely disguised, has the dominion in every unrenewed heart, how offensive must every species of reproof be, to men of this character! Now, is not the example of every good man, a severe and sensible, though silent reproof to the wicked? With whatever specious argument men may sometimes plead for sin, with whatever false pretences they may often excuse and palliate it to their own minds, when it is brought into one view with true religion, it is not able to bear the comparison. The example of good men to the wicked is, like the sun upon a weak eye, distressing and painful. It is excellent in itself, but is offensive to them. It, if I may so speak, flashes light upon the conscience, rouses it from a state of insensible security, points its arrows, and sharpens its sting. What else was it that produced the first act of violence that stands upon record, the murder of Abel by his brother Cain? Of this the apostle John speaks in the following terms, "Not as Cain, who

was of that wicked one, and slew his brother ; and wherefore slew he him ? because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous."

And as every worldly man's own conscience is thus made troublesome to him by the example of the children of God ; so it tends to set sinners at variance with one another, and exposes the conduct of each to the censure of the rest. Sin, however, universally practised, is yet generally shameful. Conscience, though bribed, and comparatively blind in a man's own case, is often just and impartial, at least under far less bias, in the case of others. It is in this way, and in this way alone, that the public honour and credit of religion is preserved, amidst so great a majority who are enemies to it in their hearts. Must not, then, the example of a strict and conscientious person, set in the strongest light the faults of those who act a contrary part, so often as they happen to fall under observation together ? Nay, does it not open the eyes of the world upon many lesser blemishes, which would otherwise escape its notice ? The degree of shame that attends any practice, is always in proportion to the sense which the bulk of mankind have of the evil of it. And this sense, cannot, by any means, be more strengthened, than by an example of what is good ; as deformity never appears so shocking as when compared with perfect beauty. Thus, a truly pious man is, by every instance of his visible conduct, exposing to reproach some one or other, and by consequence provoking their resentment.

It is for this reason that men discover such a proneness to disparage every profession of piety

superior to their own. How common is it to ascribe every such appearance to weakness or hypocrisy. In the generality of wicked men this is not so properly malice as self defence. If they should allow the excellence of such a character, it would be condemning themselves out of their own mouths. Their inward reflection in all probability, is perfectly similar to that of the Pharisees, when Christ asked them, Whether the baptism of John was from heaven or of men? "They reasoned with themselves, saying, if we shall say from heaven, he will say unto us, why did ye not believe him?" In the same manner, should any confess the excellence of a conduct, opposite to their own, it would be impossible to avoid saying to them, why do you then so sin against light?

Every one will see that this must necessarily hold most strongly in the case of those whose office, or whose work, is of a public nature. They are like a city set on a hill. As their character is most conspicuous, it is, by necessary consequence, most useful to the good, and most provoking to the wicked. Faithful ministers of Christ, for instance, are the lights of the world, and, by their piety and diligence, are a standing reproach to the world lying in wickedness. But, in a particular manner, they must be the objects of the hatred and resentment of those of their own order, who will not follow their steps. This is an evident consequence of the principle above laid down. As their character suffers most by the comparison, their passions must necessarily be most inflamed. Let a minister of Christ be ever so guarded in his speech, ever so inoffensive in

his carriage, ever so distant in reality from injuring others; if he is more frequent or more affectionate in preaching, if he is more assiduous in the duties of his function, this must naturally excite the resentment of the lazy, slothful part of his profession. This of itself, is injury enough to those who love their worldly ease, and have more pleasure in the possession of their benefice than the exercise of their office. Is this surprising? Not in the least. His conduct does indeed molest their quiet: it either forces them to greater diligence, or holds up their real character to light, and exposes them to contempt and scorn.

In order at once to confirm and illustrate this truth, be pleased, my brethren, to observe, that the force and malignity of envy in defaming of characters, is always in proportion to the nearness of the person to whom the character belongs. Distance, either of time or place, greatly abates, if not wholly extinguishes it. Suppose the character of a person drawn, who lived many years ago, or even at present in a very distant country; suppose him represented as eminent in virtue of every kind, as remarkably diligent, as indefatigably active in doing good; there are few who shew any disposition to call in question the fact, or impute it to sinister motives. But let the same be the apparent character of any man among his contemporaries, and how many are immediately up in arms against him? How implicitly do they believe, and with what pleasure do they spread, every idle calumny to his prejudice? How is his piety immediately converted into hypocrisy,

his zeal into faction and ill nature, his fervour and diligence into affectation and love of popularity ; and, in a word, every valuable quality into that vice, by which it is most commonly or most artfully counterfeited.

That this difference of judgment is entirely owing to the reason I have assigned, will further appear, if you consider, that so soon as a connection of the same nature happens, by any accidental circumstance to be established, the same invidious resentment immediately takes place against the most distant characters. What inveterate prejudice do infidels generally show against the characters of the scripture saints, and those of the fathers of the christian church, because the establishment of such characters does necessarily and manifestly infer the overthrow of the cause in which they are embarked ! In the mean time, the wise men of the heathen nations are suffered to possess, without contradiction, all the reputation which their countrymen in after ages have thought fit to bestow upon them. Nay, sometimes to serve a certain purpose, their character is increased and magnified beyond all reasonable bounds. What pains have been taken by those christians who patronise the modern inventions and improvements in theology, to undermine the characters of the most eminent champions of the ancient faith ! What would some persons teach us to believe of Athanasius and Augustine in earlier, Calvin, Luther, and Melancthon in latter times ? Not that we have not well attested evidence of their piety and integrity, but that, being of different sentiments from

their accusers, the excellence of their character is too good a support to their cause.\*

2. Another reason why the servants of God are represented as troublesome, is, because they will not, and dare not, comply with the sinful commandments of men. In matters merely civil, good men are the most regular citizens and the most obedient subjects. But, as they have a Master in heaven, no earthly power can constrain them to deny his name or desert his cause. The reply of Peter and John to the Jewish rulers when they were commanded "Not to speak at all or teach in the name of Jesus," was in the following terms, "Whether it be right in the sight of God, to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye."† With what invincible constancy and resolution did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse to bow

---

\* I take the opportunity here to add, that the principle above laid down, will plainly account for the great and unassaulted reputation, which the monks and retired devotees so long enjoyed in popish times. It was their reputation, indeed, which upheld, for so long a period, that immense load of idolatrous superstition, the Romish religion; and it was not lost, till they were grossly corrupted, and convents were become receptacles of the most shameful impurity and lust. These persons were separated from the world. No frequent, and few near comparisons could be made between them and others. Nay, their character was voluntary, and peculiar to themselves, containing no pretence of an obligation upon all others to imitate it; and therefore, they were suffered to live unenvied. But, if any persons of piety towards God, and fidelity to their Master's cause live in the world, and refuse to be conformed to it, they must expect the same treatment that he met with. This he hath told them himself. "If the world hate you, you know that it hated me before it hated you." John xv. 18. "The servant is not greater than his Lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also." Verse 20.

---

† Acts iv. 19.

before Nebuchadnezzar's golden image? The case of Daniel was perfectly similar, whom even the king's commandment could not restrain from prayer to God.

When good men are unhappily brought into these circumstances, their conduct is an apparent contradiction to authority. How ready are lordly and oppressive tyrants to style it obstinacy and pride? And when are there wanting slavish and submissive flatterers near every infernal tribunal, to aggravate the crime, and to cry, "If thou let this man go, thou art not Cesar's friend?" It is not to be imagined, indeed, but such as are strangers to true religion, must be greatly provoked at those who will not comply implicitly with their command. There is a remarkable passage in a letter of Pliny the younger, to the emperor Trajan, which plainly points out the sentiments entertained by many on this subject. He was a man in other matters abundantly humane, and yet hear his own account of the treatment of the christians when brought to his tribunal. "I asked them if they were christians; if they confessed, I asked them again, threatening punishment. If they persisted, I commanded them to be executed; for I did not at all doubt but, whatever their confession was, their stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy ought to be punished."

There is a love of dominion natural to all men, which is under no control or restraint in those who are void of religion. This must naturally dispose them to carry on their schemes, and to insist in having them universally complied with. It frets and provokes them, therefore, to find any who will not be subservient to their

pleasures. A refusal to obey on a principle of conscience, is expressly setting bounds to their authority, and saying, Hitherto shalt thou go, but no farther. How few are able to bear this with patience, the history of the world in every age is one continued proof.

Such refusals also, do always reflect some dishonour upon the measures to which they stand in opposition. Whatever any person refuses to do, he, as far as in him lies, represents as wrong and sinful: and, in some respects, unworthy or unfit to be done. Thus it comes to be considered not only as withdrawing his own allegiance, but as corrupting and seducing others. And, no doubt, it tends to draw the attention of the world to the disputed command, and make some, perhaps, sift and examine what they had before blindly gone into without suspicion. Hence, it naturally follows, that whenever such interference happens between human and divine authority, good men must be considered as disorderly and troublesome: and those of them of all others most troublesome, who with the greatest constancy adhere to their duty, or who, with the greatest honesty and boldness, resist and oppose corrupt measures.

It is less surprising to find instances of this between heathen and christian, between the professing servants and open enemies of the true God. But it is astonishing to think, how often the same thing has happened between christian and christian, who ought to have been better acquainted with the rights of conscience, the measures of submission, and the duty of forbearance. Not only all the persecutions, but many, if not most, of the schisms and divisions

that have fallen out in the christian church, have arisen from the rigorous impositions of usurped authority. Unjust authority is the very essence of popery. The church of Rome has expressly claimed a power of making laws to bind the conscience distinct from the laws of God : and severely punishes all who call this authority in question. Nor hath this been confined to them ; protestant churches, though their separation is founded upon the very contrary principle, have yet often in practice acted in the same arbitrary manner. They insist upon obedience to all their appointments, however sinful in the judgment of the subject : and as a good man will not comply in such cases, how often doth it happen, that, after they have expelled him from their society, stript him of his office, and robbed him of his maintenance, they also cast out his name as evil, loudly charge him as seditious and troublesome, and the author of all that conclusion which their own tyranny occasions.

3. One other reason why the servants of God are accused as troublesome, is, because they are, in many instances, obliged to bear testimony against the sins of others, and openly to reprove them. Reproof is plainly, of all others, the greatest offence and provocation of the proud, and draws down their heaviest resentment ; and yet it is often unavoidable. There are some cases in which every christian, without exception, must feel the constraint of this divine law, " Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him \*" Some sins are so flagrant in their nature that, even to witness

---

\* Lev. xix. 17.

them with silence, would imply some<sup>1</sup> participation of the guilt. In such cases it is the glory of the poorest and meanest servant of God, to resent the dishonour that is done to his name, and reprove the most exalted sinner.

But this duty, and the odium arising from it, falls most frequently to the share of the prophets and ministers of God, who have received a commission to speak in his name, and to plead his cause. The faithful discharge of their duty, includes in it plainness and boldness in reproof of sin of every kind. They must assert and maintain the truth, and point out the errors opposite to it, with all their guilty fruits, and all their dreadful consequences. How offensive this to human pride ! It must certainly either convince or provoke, reform or inflame. When righteous Lot says, in the mildest terms, to the lustful Sodomites, " I pray you, brethren, do not so wickedly," how fierce is the answer ! " And they said, Stand back. And they said again, This one fellow came in to sojourn, and he will needs be a judge."\*

How many martyrs to truth have there been since the world began ! Without mentioning those in the old testament, you see John the baptist lost his life by reproof of the incestuous adultery of Herod and Herodias. Our blessed Saviour gives the following account of the hatred of the world to him, and the contrary reception it gave to his temporizing brethren, " The world cannot hate you ; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil." By consulting the history of the gospel you will find,

that what gave rise to the conspiracy of the Scribes and Pharisees against him, was the dragging off the mask under which they lay concealed, and discovering the errors of their doctrine, and the licentiousness of their practice. When they "perceived that he spake against them,—they took counsel against him to put him to death," and accomplished it so soon as they could do it with safety. But there cannot be a better example, or indeed, a more lively and well drawn picture of the effect of plain and just reproof, than in the case of Stephen, when pleading his cause before the Jewish rulers. "Ye stiff-necked, and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost ; as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted ? And they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the just One ; of whom you have been now the betrayers and murderers.—When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth."\* It is plainly for this reason that the apostles, in their prayers for assistance, do almost constantly ask, that they may be endued with a proper degree of boldness and resolution, "And now, Lord, behold their threatenings ; and grant unto thy servants that with all boldness they may speak thy word."† Many other prayers are to be found in the apostolic writings, which run in the same strain.‡

It is very natural for every one at this distance, to imagine, that he could have been in no danger of making such an obstinate resistance to the

\* Acts vii. 51, 52, 54. † Acts iv. 29. ‡ See Eph. vi. 19. 2 Thes. iii. 2.

truth, or persecuting, with such implacable enmity, those who espoused it. But, my brethren, all worldly men, in every age, have still the same abhorrence of the faithful servants of God; the same impatience of reproof, when it touches themselves. Our Saviour draws their character with great beauty, in speaking to the Pharisees; “Wo unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous; and say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets.” It is very delicately hinted in this last verse, that they were of the same nature, that they grew as it were upon the same stock, and therefore it might be expected that they would bring forth the same fruit. I cannot but here mention a remark of a very eminent writer upon this passage; “That all nations partake much of this disposition of the Jew, to honour the dead saints, and persecute the living.”\*

I have taken notice above, that in every period of the church, the most faithful of the servants and ministers of God, have, in fact, been counted troublesome by corrupt and worldly men. The same passages of history constantly shew, that this has arisen chiefly from their attempts to stem the tide of prevailing vice; from their boldness and faithfulness in reproofing fashionable crimes. In the twelfth century Arnulphus, a devout man, and excellent preacher, speaks

thus to the clergy : “ I know that you seek my life, and will shortly kill me : But why ? I speak the truth to you, I reprehend your pride and haughtiness, avarice and luxury, therefore I please you not.”\* And in the fourteenth century, an ancient writer speaks of the court of Rome in the following terms ; “ For what can you conceive will happen where virtue was long ago extinct and buried ? There surely truth is the highest crime, and of itself sufficient to procure the hatred of many. For how can we expect but that should happen, where a true word cannot be spoken without a great reproach, where the worst of men are promoted,—where simplicity is esteemed madness,—where good men are rendered ridiculous, insomuch that now scarce any of them doth appear to be laughed at ! These few things truth itself hath dared to speak, whence you may gather what you are to think of many others, which fear doth force me to conceal.”† It is unnecessary to cite many passages to this purpose : I shall therefore conclude this head with the following just reflection of the pious, diligent, and catholic Mr. Baxter ; “ I see there is no help for it, but we must offend wicked men. It is impossible to avoid it, but either by our silence or their patience. Silent we cannot be, because the word of God commands us to speak : and patient they cannot be, because sin has the dominion in their hearts.”

We now proceed in the last place, to make some practical improvement of what has been said. And,

\* Whitby's App. to his book on Host-worship.

† Petrarch's Ep.

In the first place, You may learn from what has been said upon the subject, the just and proper answer to an objection against the gospel, much insisted on by its enemies, viz. That it has introduced persecution for conscience' sake, with which the world was in a great measure unacquainted before. There are few subjects, on which infidels enlarge with greater pleasure, than the cruel hatred and animosity that has prevailed ; the bloody wars that have been carried on ; nay, the savage and inhuman massacres that have been perpetrated on a religious account, since the publication of the gospel. I think this objection is but seldom answered as it might be. It is usually indeed, and justly observed, that whatever may have been done by those professing the gospel, there is no countenance given in it to such a spirit and practice. But the objection is not wholly removed, while infidels are allowed still to contend, as if it served their own cause, that persecution has been its constant attendant and inseparable effect. We ought therefore to wrest this argument out of their hands, and first to produce this fact as an accomplishment of our Saviour's prediction : " Think not that I am come to send peace on earth : I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household."\*

Having gone thus far, we have reason to contend that the disciples of Christ have always

suffered, and never inflicted the injury, though they have been often obliged to bear the blame. The multitude of heathen religions, though not always, yet did generally agree together : and well they might, for they were all from the same author. None of them, however, could agree with the gospel ; for this plain reason, that “ no lie is of the truth.” But from what quarter did the violence proceed ? Did not the dreadful persecutions against the christians, in the three first centuries, proceed from the heathens ? Did the christians commit any other crime against them, than pointing out the sin and danger of their idolatrous worship, and immoral practices ? Was not this alone sufficient to raise a cry against them, as turning the world upside down ? And in all the subsequent persecutions among professing christians, was it any thing else than the proud, violent, and worldly spirit of those who made a gain of godliness, oppressing the few real believers of every denomination ? There is an antichristian spirit in every church that shews itself in persecution, in a greater or less degree. But there can be nothing more unjust, than to attribute the persecution of Christ’s disciples by his enemies and theirs, to the spirit of his religion.

Is it then boldly affirmed by some, that the christian is the only religion in the world that leads to persecution ? I answer, on the contrary, it is the only religion that has suffered persecution from all its numerous enemies : and at the same time, it is the only religion in the world that requires and points out the obligation of mutual forbearance, and makes the just and proper division between the things that are

Cesar's and the things that are God's. That it is often blamed as persecuting others, is a proof and illustration of this truth. For all is of a piece, and the false accusation arises from the source which I have opened up above, and confirmed by examples produced from history. To these I shall now only add one observation, which comes in with peculiar propriety here; that innumerable instances may be given, in which those very persons who were ready to lift the secular arm against good men, have loudly complained of the exercise of discipline, and the censures of the church upon their crimes. These they often style persecution, and always affirm to flow from a persecuting spirit. But as they are often necessary, so even they are unjustly applied, it is plain from their very nature, that if they be groundless, they must be perfectly harmless.

Thus the state of the world is so far from being an objection against, that it is a proof of the truth of the gospel. True christians have suffered from every quarter : from within and from without ; from open enemies and from false brethren. They have been first persecuted, and then slandered as persecuting others ; nay, obliged to bear the odium of that very oppression under which they groaned. Of all this they are fairly forewarned by their Saviour, who says, " Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves." They are exposed to injurious treatment from many, and may expect to suffer without cause. None however make so cruel a havock, as those wolves who put on

sheep's clothing ; and yet, of all their cruelty, the poor suffering sheep must bear the blame.

2. From what hath been said, you may see the guilt and danger of those who falsely accuse the children of God. Perhaps you may be ready wholly to refuse the charge, and to say, Where is the necessity, where is the propriety of this at present ? Have we not all civil and religious liberty ? and are not religion and its ministers in esteem and repute ? I answer, It is never unnecessary. The fault I complain of is no part of the peculiar degeneracy of this age. It is not confined to any one age, country, or profession, but is common to them all : and we would but deceive ourselves should we fondly fancy we are exempted from it. Nay, our present state, as a church and nation, seems to render such a warning peculiarly seasonable. We have long enjoyed outward peace. In every other country this has introduced a worldly spirit, ambition, luxury, and sloth. And is there no vestige of these characters among us now ? Who will pretend it ? Are there not some who cannot endure such strictness as is inconsistent with conformity to the gay and fashionable world ? Do not all such incline to charge every profession of piety with hypocrisy ? Do they not consider every faithful reprove, as an enemy to their peace ? Do they not hear with secret pleasure, and spread with apparent triumph, every report to the prejudice of such troublers of Israel ?

This then is the character ; and as many of you as conscience charges with the guilt, may see your danger. You may see whose cause you plead, and whose reward you shall share.

What inward enmity do you discover against the spirit and power of true religion? You are of the number of those who "Hate the light, and will not come to the light, lest your deeds should be reprov'd." You are of the number of those who say "to the seers, See not, and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, and prophecy deceit." You will not "endure sound doctrine," but love and follow only that which will exercise and amuse your imagination and fancy, sooth and gratify your pride and vanity, or make and keep you at peace with yourselves. You are asleep in security, and will avoid every thing that may tend to disturb or interrupt your dangerous repose. And how hurtful is your conduct to others! You blast the characters and lessen the usefulness of the ministers of Christ. You bring an evil report upon the truth, by rendering them odious or contemptible who bear it. And if we, my brethren, who are ministers of the gospel, imitate this example, in any measure, if we discover a suspicion and jealousy, or an aversion and hatred, at all who are more diligent than ourselves, what dishonour must fall upon our profession, what a hinderance is it to the edification of others, and what guilt do we bring upon our own souls!

3. If this has been the constant lot of all the servants of God, to be accused as seditious and troublesome, let every cautious person beware of being misled by the persecuting cry. I ask any man who is conversant in the world, if he hath not, in many instances, been insensibly taught to form a hateful idea, or to entertain a despicable opinion of many ministers, with-

out the least personal knowledge, the least satisfying evidence or proof? What is the reason? Why, he hath been told, that they are proud, hypocritical, factious, censorious, and troublesome men. Well; the thing is possible, no doubt. But, in the mean time, it is far from being certain; and this sort of character industriously propagated, is no evidence of it at all; or rather is a presumption of the contrary. You see from the instances produced above, that this is a reproach perpetually thrown upon the most upright and faithful of the servants of God; that it may very naturally arise from their fidelity itself; and that it cannot be avoided by those who resist the corrupt measures, who reprove the public vices, or who shame the criminal laziness, and negligence of others. An ignorant, vicious, worthless minister, is envied by nobody. He is therefore quite safe from all the poisoned arrows which fly from that quarter. He is rather a foil to many, to set off and illustrate their own comparative excellence. He is therefore often pardoned, pitied, and protected. Whereas a faithful minister, who openly dares to bear witness against the apostasy of others, is traduced and slandered, loaded with imaginary crimes, and often falls a martyr to the sinking cause of truth and righteousness.

4. Since the world is so prone to receive the accusation of faction against the children of God, let them be careful to give no real ground for it. Unjust calumny has sometimes the contrary effect. When men find, that it is impossible to please a capricious world, or wholly to escape slander, they are apt to give up all solicitude upon that head, and take no farther pains

to avoid suspected appearances. This I take to be, precisely, what the scripture calls being "overcome of evil." But how much better is it to "overcome evil with good?" Let us, as often as possible, confute the accusation by an unblameable carriage; and when we must suffer, let us be careful that we suffer, not as evil doers, but for well doing. For this purpose I would humbly offer to ministers the two following directions, which I esteem of great moment.

(1.) Let all our zeal for the glory of God be conducted not only with steadiness, but with meekness. Let us ever remember, that the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. Let our language be always strictly guarded, and free from expressions of rage and fury. If we are faithful to our duty, it will sufficiently provoke sinners; we need not add to it by any mixture of human passion. What noble and effectual principles are we furnished with in scripture, for avoiding every dangerous extreme! Love to God, and love to man, make up the sum of practical religion. These are the immediate fruits of faith, and all the truths of the gospel tend to strengthen and improve them. And as love to God produces indignation against sin, resolution and boldness in opposing it; so love to man will naturally produce the deepest compassion for the miserable state of every enemy of God, and prevent firmness from degenerating into violence.

(2.) The other direction I would offer upon this subject is, that ministers take care to avoid officiously intermeddling in civil matters. A minister should be separated and set apart for his own work; he should be consecrated to

his office. It is little glory to him to be eminently skilled in any other science, except such as may be handmaids to theology, and are by him habitually turned into a divine channel. Ministers giving themselves to worldly employments, has been commonly of bad fame ; and, where there is a sufficient provision made for their maintenance, seems to be an unjust alienation of their time and talents. But it is still more sinful and dangerous for them to desire or claim the direction of such matters as fall within the province of the civil magistrate. When our blessed Saviour says, " My kingdom is not of this world," he plainly intimates to his disciples, that they have no title to intermeddle with state affairs. Nay he expressly warns them against a lordly and arbitrary dominion, even in their own proper sphere. " The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them ; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so : but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger ; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve."\* I cannot help mentioning here, that this is one of the things for which the worthy ancestors of the church of Scotland (now despised by many) deserve the highest commendation. It was an invariable principle with them, to be against the civil power and places of kirkmen. And surely, if ministers confine themselves entirely to their own proper duty, they will be much less liable to exception than otherwise. They may then, warrantably use the greatest fidelity in reprovng, and the greatest

---

\* Luke xxii. 25, 26.

strictness in discipline ; and though the wicked slander and oppose them, the good will defend them, and God will support them.

5. In the last place, Since the charge of faction and sedition has been always brought against faithful ministers, let us learn to bear it with patience, and never dissemble the truth, or depart, in any measure, from our duty, in order to avoid it. A person of a generous mind, feels a wound in his reputation more deeply, than almost any other injury. We are still apt fondly to flatter ourselves, that as religion is truly amiable in itself, and ought to make no enemies, that therefore, we shall have none. Some are very apt to omit, or slightly to perform, several parts of their duty, through that "fear of man that bringeth a snare." They are unwilling to forego the hope, that by certain prudent compliances, they will conciliate and preserve the favour of every man and every party. But the expectation is wholly vain. The experience of many ages hath proved it so. Let us therefore bear with patience the false accusation. It hath been the lot of the best and worthiest men in every age. It was the lot of our blessed Master, and shall we refuse to bear his cross ? "Is it not enough for the disciple that he be as his Master, and the servant that he be as his Lord ?" The triumph of sinners is but very short. In a little time all earthly relations shall be dissolved. Then high and low, magistrates and subjects, ministers and people, shall stand before the judgment seat of Christ. He shall "render to every one according to his deeds." There the great and noble shall find

no partial favour ; there the poor and mean shall not escape observation ; and there the lying slanderer shall be put to eternal silence. He shall openly acknowledge every faithful servant, and “ bring forth his righteousness as the light, and his judgment as the noon day.”

25 17 38

