

The Christian Office-Bearer

First, then, we observe, that no Christian is at liberty to use physical force in defence or propagation of his religious views. On this point the precepts of scripture are numerous and explicit. "The servant of the Lord must not strive."

The Christian office-bearer must be "no striker," while to every individual member of the Church the strong and authoritative injunction is addressed from the lips of the Master himself:—"Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also." "Ye have heard it hath been said, thou shalt love thy neighbour and hate thine enemy, but I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you."

If the former injunctions be regarded as referring to private resentments, and the avenging of personal wrongs, the last must at least be acknowledged to convey a prohibition of all violence in the name of religion. The Christian is commanded to love and pray for his persecutors that is such as assail and harass him for his religion's sake; and, if in any case violence may be met with violence, it would surely be in such a case as this.

Nay, brethren, if any case could be supposed in which the use of violence might have seemed at once natural and commendable, it would have been when, not only the cause, but the person of the Saviour was exposed to the malice of his foes yet little thanks did his impetuous follower receive for unsheathing the sword in his defence.

What Christian will plead his circumstances, his wrongs, or his religious zeal, in justification of the use of carnal weapons in the cause of his Lord, while the memorable warning stands on record, with the circumstances in which it was delivered—"Put up again thy sword into his place, for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword"?

In the duty of forbearance, or individual toleration, the Saviour was our example, no less than our instructor. Amid all the insults which he endured, and the cruel sufferings to which he was subjected, never once did he put forth his power to punish or to check by physical inflictions. He did "not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street." He was brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he" opened "not his mouth."

He might have poured out the vials of his vengeance upon the guilty heads of his insulters. He might have driven his assailants before him by the utterance of that voice before which the sea fled in terror, and Jordan was driven back. But "when he suffered he threatened not." He might have summoned legions of those angels who did his work on Sodom and the sister cities of the plain, to kindle a more terrible fire on earth and burn up his enemies, like the briars and the thorns. But when his disciples prayed him to repeat Elijah's miracle of vengeance, he rebuked them, saying—"Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of."

As then, the Christian would be a follower of his Lord, he must relinquish all thought of defending or promoting his religious views by the weapons of this world. If He who, in virtue of his infallibility, could pronounce all to be in error who differed from and opposed Him, yet refrained from the use of physical coercion, how much more ought we, who are ever liable to err, shrink from the thought of constraining or punishing such as differ from us in opinion, and whose views may possibly, after all, be more correct than our own?

Our fallibility, brethren, should teach us forbearance. The man who would constrain all others to think as he does, claims the attribute of infallibility, thereby making himself equal with God. We would say to such a man, Where are thy credentials? Let us see thy miracles. Seeing thou art not God, thou must at least have the signet of Heaven to thy creed, before mankind can be prepared to give it an unqualified reception. But, if it rest on thine own authority, thou art guilty of a daring presumption, and dost take upon thee an awful responsibility, in seeking to propagate it by force.

Presumption, because the man who coerces others into a profession of certain religious views extorts a homage to himself in the name of truth and God. Responsibility, because the man who would constrain others to think with him, (if it were possible so to do), by means of physical force, must be prepared to answer for the constrained thoughts of such before the Judge of all. But, brethren, it is sufficient to know that truth cannot be extended by physical coercion.

All the weapons that human hands have ever forged, however ingeniously adapted to maim, or mutilate, or pain, or pierce the body, are powerless to alter one settled conviction of the mind. Let christians confine themselves to argument and persuasion in the spirit of humility and affection, for whatsoever is more than these cometh of the evil one.

It is somewhat singular that, of all things, men are most intolerant in the matter of religion. Men who have been distinguished for their suavity in daily life, and forbearance in regard to the common affairs of men, have been, of all religious persecutors, the most bitter and intolerant.

Just as in our own day, many who pique themselves on their liberality in commercial or political assemblies, and who would not, for any consideration, force their views in such departments upon any one, will be found most unscrupulous and overbearing in a meeting of their fellow christians, where Church matters form the theme.

But this only proves that Satan takes especial pains to mar God's best works, and steals into the Church from the same motive which led him into Paradise. The spirit of persecution is from below. Let all of you, brethren, who profess to be born from above, resist its first risings, and renounce all thought of using that violence in which it finds expression. "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal."

(The Armour of the Christian Church: Three Discourses by John B. Ritchie, Aberdeen: A Brown & Co., M.DCCC.LL., ebook, 7-10, Paragraph Structure Modified)