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The St Mary's Heritage Project

Letter to the congregation of St. Mary's Episcopal Chapel,
Glasgow, by the Right Rev. W. J. Trower, D.D.,
Bishop of Glasgow and Galloway, 1851.

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MY DEAR BRETHREN IN CHRIST,

You are aware that I have abstained from noticing publicly the attacks which have recently been made by various parties in this city on the Scottish Episcopal Church, and on myself by name. From this course I do not mean to depart, except by explaining at the close of my present letter an accidental error in the recent Petition to Parliament, from the Bishops of this Church, as it was originally printed and to a certain extent circulated. The Scottish Episcopal Church has outlived more serious assaults than those which have recently been directed against her; and while indeed there is much in the speeches and writings to which I am alluding to occasion grief as well as surprise, that grief (in my own mind at least) does not arise from any apprehension of permanent injury, from these attacks, to the church which I feel it my highest happiness to serve (if God enables me to do so) in the remotest degree. And with respect to attacks on myself, whether by name or by allusion, I believe that it is by far the better plan to abstain from any particular reference to them. I must trust, by the blessing of God, if my life be spared, that in the long run my neighbours generally, and more especially my own people and fellow-churchmen, will see that the "hard speeches" and sarcasms, in which a mistaken zeal for their own opinions has led certain persons to indulge, have scarcely done justice to the motives, under the influence of which I both accepted my sacred office, and also endeavour (however imperfectly) to discharge its responsible duties. To one point I think you will bear witness; namely, that in my public ministrations, I have studiously endeavoured to avoid whatever topics might be likely to divert attention from the great realities of faith and duty - the great work of preparing for what awaits us all - the blessed temper of Christian charity, which is the end of the commandment. Let us follow peace and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. Let us strive to keep away from us the spirit of wrath, strife, jealousy, and animosity. If we are assailed, let us neither be moved from attachment to those principles which have stood the test of time, and against which the violence of opponents has but broken itself like waves against the rock; nor, on the other hand, let us be provoked to bitterness or retaliation. There must be differences of opinion. They are the very means of proving our constancy. We live in times when there is special occasion for Christian firmness and stability, as well as Christian love and meekness. I do not say that nothing can plausibly be said against the Scottish Episcopal Church. What is there in this wide world against which plausible objections may not be made? But I express only the deepest convictions of my heart and understanding, when I avow my belief that the Scottish Episcopal Church, *in her present ecclesiastical constitution, and in her authorised doctrines and liturgy*, embodies more nearly than any existing communion what a student of Scripture and ecclesiastical antiquity would expect to be the organization and teaching of the Church of Christ; and what a primitive Christian, if he could revisit this world, would expect to find; from his recollections of his own experience in the days when the faith had recently been delivered to the saints. Let us value above all things, and guard as the apple of our eye, the privilege of which we are conscious. Turning aside as far as possible from fruitless

controversies, whether on such subjects as I allude to more immediately in this letter, or on the unspeakable littleness of questions about what is merely formal and ritual, let us in these times of tumult and division (and the exhortation is also especially suited to the sacred season in which I am addressing you) provoke only to love and good works, and the restoration in ourselves and others of the image of God. May your ministers ever remember to speak "as dying men unto dying men;" and may both ministers and people "stick to God's testimonies," and to our beloved Prayer-Book, as the most blessed aid in devotion, and the safest guide in the interpretation of Holy Scriptures. Would God that the Scottish Episcopal Church as nearly resembled the primitive church in spirit and practice, in self-devotion and seal, in works of faith and labours of love, as I believe her to resemble that model for the church in all ages, in constitution and in doctrine.

The error which I wish to explain is as follows. In drawing up their Petition the Bishops found it necessary to refer to the Act, (3 and 4 Vic. c. 33,) which describes their present legal status. They referred to a document which was on their table, and which they (no doubt unguardedly,) supposed to be a copy of the Act, when it was only a copy of the Bill, as originally introduced. In that document, the word "diocese," as well as the words "district" and "place," occurred in the description of the Scottish Bishops; and the word "diocese" was thence copied into the proposed form of Petition. That form, though printed for convenience, and circulated among many persons interested in the subject, was not finally and absolutely adopted; for a discretionary power was given to two of the Bishops to make certain alterations after consultation with legal friends. The error, (however,) as to the word diocese was almost immediately discovered; and in the Petition presented by Mr. Stuart, and read at the table of the House of Commons, the word does not appear.

I think it necessary to add, that the person chiefly responsible for the use that has been made of this accidental error, was in possession of this explanation at least a fortnight ago.

I find that it is thought, by some persons, incredible that the Bishops should have fallen into this error; or that, (if indeed it was an error,) the discovery must make a great difference in their view of their legal status. Such persons seem to think that the Scottish Bishops are thinking about nothing but their territorial titles, and about the Act 3 and 4 Vic. c. 33. How far this is the case I must leave to you, my beloved brethren, to judge for yourselves. And again, it is a mistake to suppose that any very great importance is attached to the word diocese. The word district is equally territorial; and though, no doubt, the Scottish Episcopal Church would have preferred the retention of the more ecclesiastical word "diocese," yet the argument of the Bishops in their Petition is not affected by its omission. It would be difficult to describe the word "diocese" otherwise than by the word "district;" though common use, no doubt, has attached an ecclesiastical sense to the one word, and not to the other. The substantial value of the Act 3 and 4 Vic. c. 33, is, that it is *a legal recognition of a line or succession of Bishops in Scotland, with local and territorial missions, derived canonically from the Bishops who were formerly in legal, as well as ecclesiastical possession of the Scottish Sees; and, (in the judgment of Parliament at least,) a succession equally real, canonical, and orthodox with the line of Bishops in England.*

This legal recognition, of course, was in no degree necessary to the ecclesiastical status of the Scottish Bishops; but it is valuable in many respects: and, I believe, more valuable, in some respects, to the Church of England than to her unendowed sister in Scotland.

I have thought it better to circulate among you this brief explanation of what was certainly an error. I might say much more about it and the subjects connected with it; but it is not without reluctance that I write to you on a topic thus different from the more healthful, more blessed, more spiritual subjects on which it is my usual privilege to address you. At this solemn season it is especially painful to think or write on what has not immediate bearing on the most sacred facts which ought so specially to be before the Christian's mind. Let me close by calling on you to offer up your earnest prayers at this time for the peace and prosperity of the Church of England, as well as of our own branch of Christ's Catholic Church; and that all the sad defections to the Church of Rome, as well as these strange aggressions on those who would willingly abstain from speaking severely of such as differ from them, may lead us only to cling more closely and more fondly to the Church whose motto is "Evangelical Truth and Apostolic Order;" and to hold fast the form of sound words which we have received. And if there be any who seem to be doing what they can to injure the communion to which it is our happiness to belong, let us remember the rule which bids us pray for those who despitefully use us.

Commending you to the grace and blessing of God, I am, your affectionate Friend, and (I trust) your faithful Pastor and Diocesan,

W. J. Trower
Bishop of Glasgow and Galloway.

12 Claremont Terrace
Monday in Passion Week, 1851.

P.S. - The person who has been active during the last fortnight in circulating his remarks on the error which I have above explained, (although himself all that time apprised of the accident which occasioned it, and also of its immediate discovery and recall,) has now requested me to authorise him to publish the note in which I explained to him the circumstances of the mistake. As, however, I have felt it necessary to decline direct communication with him, I think it best to make public in my own way the simple statement which I sent to him (I believe) as long ago as March 22d. I have really neither time nor inclination for angry or controversial correspondence, and I wish especially to avoid it in the case of a person who stands in very peculiar relation to myself.