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OF THE

Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia.

BY

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CHARLES F. JAMES.

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PRESBYTERIAN MEMORIALS.

[Presented October 24, 1776.]

To the Honorable the General Assembly of Virginia :

The Memorial of the Presbytery of Hanover humbly represents : That your memorialists are governed by the same sentiments which have inspired the United States of America ; and are determined that nothing in our power and influence shall be wanting to give success to their common cause. We would also represent that dissenters from the Church of England in this country have ever been desirous to conduct themselves as peaceable members of the civil government, for which reason they have hitherto submitted to several ecclesiastical burdens, and restrictions, that are inconsistent with equal liberty. But now when the many and grievous oppressions of our mother country have laid this continent under the necessity of casting off the yoke of tyranny, and of forming independent governments upon equitable and liberal foundations, we flatter ourselves that we shall be freed from all the incumbrances which a spirit of domination, prejudice, or bigotry, hath interwoven with most other political systems. This we are the more strongly encouraged to expect by the Declaration of Rights, so universally applauded for that dignity, firmness and precision with which it delineates and asserts the privileges of society, and the prerogatives of human nature ; and which we embrace as the *magna charta* of our Commonwealth, that can never be violated without endangering the grand superstructure it was destined to sustain. Therefore we rely upon this Declaration, as well as the justice of our honorable Legislature, to secure us the *free exercise of religion according to the dictates of our consciences* ; and we should fall short in our duty to ourselves, and the many and numerous congregations under our care, were we, upon this occasion, to neglect laying before you a state of the religious grievances under which we have hitherto laboured ; that they no longer may be continued in our present form of government.

It is well known that in the frontier counties, which are justly supposed to contain a fifth part of the inhabitants of Virginia, the dissenters have borne the heavy burdens of purchasing glebes, building churches, and supporting the established clergy, where there are very few Episcopalians, either to assist in bearing the expenses, or to reap the advantage; and that throughout the other parts of the country there are also many thousands of zealous friends and defenders of our State, who, besides the invidious, and disadvantageous restrictions to which they have been subjected, annually pay large taxes to support an establishment from which their consciences and principles oblige them to dissent; all which are confessedly so many violations of their natural rights, and in their consequences a restraint upon freedom of inquiry and private judgment.

In this enlightened age, and in a land where all of every denomination are united in the most strenuous efforts to be free, we hope and expect that our representatives will cheerfully concur in removing every species of religious, as well as civil, bondage. Certain it is that every argument for civil liberty gains additional strength when applied to liberty in the concerns of religion; and there is no argument in favor of establishing the Christian religion but what may be pleaded, with equal propriety, for establishing the tenets of Mahomed by those who believe the Alcoran; or if this be not true, it is at least impossible for the magistrate to adjudge the right of preference among the various sects that profess the Christian faith without erecting a chair of infallibility, which would lead us back to the Church of Rome.

We beg leave farther to represent that religious establishments are highly injurious to the temporal interests of any community. Without insisting upon the ambition, and the arbitrary practices of those who are favored by government; or the intriguing, seditious spirit which is commonly excited by this, as well as every other kind of oppression; such establishments greatly retard population, and consequently the progress of arts, sciences, and manufactures: witness the rapid growth and improvements of the Northern provinces, compared with this. No one can deny that the more early settlement and the many superior advantages of our country would have invited multitudes of artificers, mechanics and other useful members of society to fix their habitation among us, who have either remained in their place of nativity, or preferred worse civil govern-

ments, and a barren soil, where they might enjoy the rights of conscience more fully than they had a prospect of doing it in this.

From which we infer that Virginia might have now been the capitol of America, and a match for the British arms, without depending on others for the necessaries of war, had it not been prevented by her religious establishment.

Neither can it be made to appear that the gospel needs any such civil aid. We rather conceive that when our blessed Saviour declares his kingdom is not of this world, he renounces all dependence upon State power, and as his weapons are spiritual, and were only designed to have influence on the judgment and heart of man, we are persuaded that if mankind were left in the quiet possession of their unalienable rights and privileges, Christianity, as in the days of the Apostles, would continue to prevail and flourish in the greatest purity by its own native excellence and under the all disposing providence of God.

We would humbly represent that the only proper objects of civil government are the happiness and protection of men in the present state of existence, the security of the life, liberty and property of the citizens, and to restrain the vicious and encourage the virtuous by wholesome laws, equally extending to every individual. But that the duty which we owe our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can only be directed by reason and conviction, and as nowhere cognizable but at the tribunal of the universal Judge.

Therefore we ask no ecclesiastical establishments for ourselves; neither can we approve of them when granted to others. This, indeed, would be giving exclusive or separate emoluments or privileges to one set of men, without any special public services, to the common reproach and injury of every other denomination; and for the reasons recited we are induced earnestly to entreat that all laws now in force in this Commonwealth which countenance religious denomination, may be speedily repealed—that all, of every religious sect, may be protected in the full exercise of their several modes of worship, and exempted from all taxes for the support of any church whatsoever further than what may be agreeable to their own private choice, or voluntary obligation. This being done, all partial and invidious distinctions will be abolished, to the great honour and interest of the State, and every one be left to stand or

fall, according to merit, which can never be the case so long as any one denomination is established in preference to others.

That the great Sovereign of the Universe may inspire you with unanimity, wisdom and resolution, and bring you to a just determination on all the important concerns before you, is the fervent prayer of your memorialists.

Signed by order of the Presbytery.

JOHN TODD, Moderator.

CALEB WALLACE, P. Clerk.

[Presented June 3, 1777.]

To the Honorable the General Assembly of Virginia :

The memorial of the Presbytery of Hanover humbly represents, That your memorialists and the religious denomination with which we are connected are most sincerely attached to the common interest of the American States, and are determined that our most fervent prayers and strenuous endeavours shall ever be united with our fellow-subjects to repel the assaults of tyranny and to maintain our common rights. In our former memorial we have expressed our hearty approbation of the Declaration of Rights, which has been made and adopted as the basis of the laws and government of this State; and now we take the opportunity of testifying that nothing has inspired us with greater confidence in our Legislature than the late act of Assembly declaring that equal liberty, as well religious as civil, shall be universally extended to the good people of this country; and that all the oppressive acts of parliament respecting religion which have been formerly enacted in the mother country shall henceforth be of no validity or force in this Commonwealth; as also exempting all dissenters from all levies, taxes, and impositions, whatsoever, towards supporting the Church of England as it now is or hereafter may be established. We would, therefore, have given our honorable Legislature no further trouble on this subject, but we are sorry to find that there yet remains a variety of opinions touching the propriety of a general assessment, or whether every religious society shall be left to voluntary contributions for the maintenance of the ministers of the gospel who are of different persuasions. As this matter is deferred by our Legislature to the discussion and final