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TWO LETTERS

TO THE RIGHT HON. LORD TEIGNMOUTH,

**ON THE RIGHT OF MINISTERS TO MOVE AND
SECOND RESOLUTIONS IN THE COMMITTEE OF
THE BRITISH AND FOREIGN BIBLE SOCIETY.**



L. B. SEELEY, WESTON GREEN, THAMES DITTON.

TWO LETTERS
TO LORD TEIGNMOUTH.

48 Hatton Garden, Nov. 29, 1826.

MY LORD,

A **DEEP** sense of the duty which I owe to that valuable Institution over which your Lordship has so long presided, compels me to call your Lordship's attention to a recent innovation on its practice.

The Thirteenth law of the British and Foreign Bible Society provides, That " every clergyman or dissenting minister, who is a member of the Society, shall be entitled to attend and vote at all meetings of the Committee."

Your Lordship is perfectly aware, that at the commencement of this Society, the members of the Committee were chosen " indiscriminately from the Episcopal clergy, dissenting ministers, and the laity at large;" and that, on remodelling the Committee, to adopt the words of Mr. Owen, " In order to secure the services of the clergy, and of ministers generally, provision was made for their admission to a seat, and

a vote in the Committee, on the terms which made them members of the Society; a provision, which while it concealed their names, recognized their privileges, and retained their cooperation.” *

What those privileges were, which were thus recognized, can only be ascertained either by the terms of the recognition; or by the uniform and invariable practice of the Society. That practice has been for clergymen and dissenting ministers, being members of the Society, to attend at their pleasure on the meetings of the Committee, and not merely to sit and vote, but also to take an active part in the deliberations, to propose or second resolutions or amendments; to institute inquiries, examine documents, and in short, exercise every privilege in common with the elected members: the only exception which I can recollect, being their abstaining from balloting for the new Committee,—an abstinence arising solely, I conceive, from courtesy, and not required by any rule of the Institution.

Your Lordship is, I am sure, fully aware, that a very considerable proportion of the resolutions and amendments which have been handed to the chair, have been moved or seconded by clergymen or dissenting ministers; and that the Rev. Drs. Clarke and Thorpe, and the Rev. Messrs. Cunningham, Dealtry, Pratt, Townsend, D. Wilson, with many others, have thus rendered very essential services to the Society.

* Owen's History, vol. i. 58.

Such being the law of the Society, and such its practical interpretation; it was, my Lord, with no small surprise that, on rising to move a grant of one thousand Testaments to the Secretary of the Frankfort Bible Society, I found myself interrupted by one of the oldest members of the Committee; and assured by him, *You cannot move because you are a clergyman.* I deemed it, my Lord, a duty owing not merely to myself, but to all the clergy and all the dissenting ministers who are members of the Bible Society, to protest against this doctrine; to assert on their behalf and on my own, the right which I had myself exercised for so many years, and which the Chairman on that occasion, as well as the objector himself, knew had been incessantly exercised by others, from the period when this rule was originally adopted. I deemed it my duty farther to pledge myself to call the attention of the Committee, at some regular monthly meeting, to this important subject; and I now therefore address this Letter to your Lordship, with a humble request, that your Lordship will direct it to be read on Monday next, in the Committee, and will kindly suggest such measures as the circumstances of the case may require.

Your Lordship will, I doubt not, excuse my trespassing further on your patience, while I advert to the importance of the point at issue. To myself, individually, it is a matter of small consequence; for my own increasing avocations compel me to be very frequently absent both from the Bible and several other Committees. But it is of immense importance

to the permanence and the prosperity of the British and Foreign Bible Society, that the clergy and the dissenting ministers should continue to exercise the privileges they have so long exercised; and should exercise these privileges as a matter of right and not merely by sufferance. Those of us, my Lord, who have been for some years accustomed to take part in the discussions at Earl Street, care very little about the rebuffs with which we occasionally meet, and are prepared either there or in Free Masons Hall, if need be, to assert our claims; but as advancing years, increasing avocations, and the dispensations of providence gradually withdraw those ministers from the Committee, who witnessed the origin of the Institution, great care should be taken that the younger ministers are not discouraged from engaging in the actual conduct of its concerns: if they cannot propose a resolution, suggest an amendment, institute an inquiry, or engage in a discussion as a matter of right, they will soon be discouraged from the attempt, and will gradually lose their interest in the Society; the whole conduct of the Bible Society will eventually devolve on a Committee of Thirty-six laymen, ministers of all denominations will be practically excluded, the Society will lose the aid of those who are usually most competent to decide on Texts, Versions, and other Literary Questions; and in case any new deviation from the fundamental laws of the Society shall arise, there will be little opportunity of applying those remedies which have recently proved so eminently successful.

These considerations, my Lord, have determined me to persevere in calling attention to the innovation on the Society's practice which has recently been attempted. What one individual has ventured to assert will probably be reasserted on some future occasion. I am anxious to guard against this danger, and to secure to all succeeding clergymen and dissenting ministers, the privileges which have been hitherto practically recognized as pertaining to them. After the question which has thus been raised concerning the meaning of the Thirteenth Rule, those privileges can only be secured by the sanction of a General Meeting. I would therefore humbly suggest the propriety of a recommendation from the Committee to the next General Meeting of the Society in May, that to the words of the Thirteenth Rule as it now stands, there be added the following sentence:—“*and shall during such attendance, exercise all other privileges of a member of the Committee.*” The whole rule would then read as follows :

XIII. *Every clergyman or dissenting minister, who is a member of the Society, shall be entitled to attend and vote at all meetings of the Committee, AND SHALL DURING SUCH ATTENDANCE EXERCISE ALL OTHER PRIVILEGES OF A MEMBER OF THE COMMITTEE.*

The same end would be answered by another means, if the rule were explained as follows :

XIII. *Every clergyman or dissenting minister, who is a member of the Society,* SHALL ALSO BE A MEMBER OF THE COMMITTEE.

I am very far, my Lord, from maintaining that either of these explanations is unobjectionable, and shall rejoice to see them superseded by somewhat more perfect. I have not time, my Lord, nor opportunity to confer with those friends on whose superior judgment I can confidently rely. Should this subject appear to the Committee of that importance which it appears to me, I am persuaded some satisfactory expedient will be adopted. Should the Committee deem it undeserving of notice, I shall most probably print this letter, and be guided in any ulterior measure which may appear expedient by the advice of those clergymen and dissenting ministers who are members of the Society to whom I may have access. Under all circumstances, however, I shall have great pleasure in every renewed opportunity of subscribing myself, my Lord,

Your Lordship's very obedient,

and humble Servant,

THOMAS WEBSTER.

48 *Hatton Garden*, 26th Dec. 1826.

MY LORD,

I RECEIVED in due course your Lordship's obliging favor of the 7th instant, announcing the receipt of my letter of the 29th ultimo, and stating that it was forwarded to Earl Street, in order that it might be laid before the Committee. It was in consequence read in Committee on Monday the 18th instant, when a resolution to the following effect was proposed, namely :

That every clergyman or dissenting minister who is a Member of the Society, and who attends and votes at any meeting of this Committee, is entitled during such attendance, to exercise all the privileges of an elected member.

This resolution was objected to, as being a mere truism ;—as asserting no more than the rule itself implied ; and claiming a right which was universally acknowledged ; it was maintained that the right of a minister to speak, and move, or second resolutions, was unquestionable ; that it had never been doubted by the Committee ; that the circumstance which called forth my letter was the mere unsupported interference of an individual ; that if such individual improprieties were made the subjects of distinct propositions, legislation would exceed all bounds ; that the writing of such letters was highly objection-

able and improper ; and that instead of appealing to your Lordship, and thus making a personal grievance a matter of recorded complaint, I ought rather to have appeared in my place in the Committee, and sought a remedy by an appropriate motion.

In answer to such remarks, my Lord, it was stated, that the right of clergymen and dissenting ministers, had been explicitly questioned in Committee, by one of the oldest Members, on the 16th of October ; that the chairman had been distinctly appealed to, and requested to interfere ; that he had taken no notice of such appeal ; that no officer of the Society had interfered ; that the objecting Member had appealed to the rule which empowers clergymen *to attend and vote*, and maintained that the language of the rule did not empower them to move resolutions ; and that the whole responsibility rested on the elected Members ; that his statements were protested against by the only other minister present except the Secretary ; that the motion was then proposed by the objector himself, and being seconded by a third person, was adopted by the Committee ; that the Committee having so acted, my right to renew the subject at another meeting was questionable ; that it was the more questionable because the highest assembly in the realm clearly recognizes a distinction between the right of attending and moving ; and that therefore there remained only the alternative of writing to your Lordship, or appealing to the Society at a general meeting. The latter might perhaps have been the more regular way of pro-

ceeding, but few, I apprehend, would conceive it advisable, except in case of absolute necessity.

It was next attempted, my Lord, to devise some other expedient. It was proposed that the Secretary should write an answer to my letter, recognising the right which had been disputed. To this, I of course had no objection, only intimating that such letter would necessarily require a previous resolution, which would of course make my address to your Lordship a matter of record. This was objected to on the ground of perpetuating a charge against an individual; an objection which I attempted to obviate, by remarking that the name of the individual might be omitted.

It was then proposed to the Committee, That the right of ministers to move &c. having never been questioned, no resolution was necessary. I objected to this as incorrect, since the right had been questioned in the Committee of October 16; but was prepared to support a resolution which should express, *That the right of ministers to move and second resolutions BEING UNQUESTIONABLE, no farther proceedings were necessary.*

The question appeared now to be approaching to an amicable and unanimous conclusion; when an objection was taken to the entry of any such minute on our books, under the idea that it might be intended to print such minute together with my letter. A pledge was immediately given that no such publication was at all contemplated; and I distinctly stated that my grand object in writing to your Lordship

was, that some simple recognition of the right might be suggested, in which all might agree, so as to prevent an invidious subject coming before the public. A sort of panic, however, seemed to prevail, and I was urged on every side to withdraw my letter. This I deemed it my duty to decline.* The original motion was then put and lost, and the chairman proposed to proceed to the other orders of the day : when I deemed it expedient to announce my determination of printing the letter which had just been read, an annunciation which called forth some remarks so evidently founded on misapprehension, as neither to require nor deserve particular notice.

In committing these letters to the press I am not conscious of any unfriendly feeling, either to the society over which your Lordship presides, its committee, or its officers. I desire simply to communicate to my brethren in the ministry who are members of the Bible Society, and who reside in the metropolis and its vicinity, the exact situation in which we are placed, and shall leave it to them to determine whether any ulterior measures are necessary.

I consider the right in question as distinctly recognized by the oral testimony of the individuals who took part in the debate of the committee of the 18th

* The withdrawing of the letter would obviously have implied either,—*that it ought never to have been written*;—or, *that the object was effectually secured*;—or, *that there was some part or parts of it which I was ready to retract*. Concessions which I cannot in any degree admit.

instant. No one speaker questioned the right, or gave the least countenance to the interruption which took place on the 16th of October ; but the right was, on the contrary, maintained by all the leading persons present. * But still it has not been recognized by the committee by any formal act ; it still rests only on precedent, and on individual opinion ; † the same kind of special pleading, which was adopted on the 16th of October, may be again resorted to whenever it shall appear expedient : nor can the verbal recognition of the right by any number of individuals, however respectable, afford that security against renewed violations which would have been obtained by the insertion of a short resolution on your minutes, and a brief notice of the circumstance, as a mere matter of history, in your next report. Those who have observed the distinction, so frequently made on recent occasions, between elected and privileged members, and who have attended to remarks which

* This has been represented to me as somewhat too strongly expressed. I am informed, but did not myself distinctly hear it, that the Gentleman who presided when the interruption took place stated, that he did not understand that an appeal was made to him as Chairman, and *had he so understood it, he should have felt some difficulty in deciding off-hand on the question.*

† So deeply was the late lamented Mr. Owen convinced of the importance of clergymen and ministers being always present at the meetings of the Committee, that he frequently requested them to attend, and obtained permission of some to allow themselves to be summoned in common with the lay members. Some of those who were thus regularly summoned have been removed by providential dispensations, but others remain, and occasionally attend.

have escaped in conversation, or from the press, will possibly feel with me—that the right is not so firmly established as many may imagine.*

Some observations advanced on the 18th instant, as well as on a former occasion, induce me, my Lord, to express my full conviction—that it is the privilege of every member of a voluntary society to address the

* “If, in the course of these discussions, and the numerous Resolutions formed in consequence, at various times, there may have been an appearance of vacillation in the conduct of the Committee, the cause will principally be found in that part of its constitution which opens it to Subscribers of a certain amount, and to all Ministers contributing One Guinea per Annum. So that more than Five Hundred individuals are entitled to attend and vote, and on all these occasions Members thus privileged have taken an equal, if not a more prominent part, than the thirty-six elected Members.

“The Committee having thus, on various occasions, been exceedingly numerous, great diversity of sentiment resulted: and this has given rise to much misconception among persons who were only occasionally present, as well as in the public mind: for those who are not aware that the privileged Members have often equalled or exceeded in number the elected Members present, and are unacquainted with the leading part they have taken in these discussions, have naturally supposed that the different Resolutions *all* emanated from the majority of the elected Members. In making this remark, I would request you clearly to understand, that I do not refer to this circumstance with any wish that an attempt should be made to alter these Rules and limit these Privileges.—On the contrary, I should deprecate such a proceeding. I merely refer to the simple matter of fact, and must remark, that the *elected* Members of a Committee thus constituted should not be held entirely responsible for proceedings, which the constitution of the Society does not subject wholly to their controul.”—*Remarks on Recent Accusations.* P. 11.

president, the committee, or the officers of that society, either by letter, or in any other way which may appear to the individual member most conducive either to his own interests or the interests of the society at large : and I shall therefore not hesitate one moment in addressing your Lordship, or the committee and officers of the British and Foreign

“ We have understood, (and we think that, if true, it ought to be generally known,) that there would have been no difficulty, on the part of the Committee, in coming to an agreement as to the adoption of an official reply to the charges brought against them, had not their proceedings been subjected to a vexatious interference from persons, not Members of the elected Committee, but having the privilege of attending and voting at their meetings.

“ The Regulation which confers this Privilege, was at one time regarded as strengthening the hands of the Committee ; and so long as things go on smoothly, open committees may work very well. But let any source of dispute occur, and the opportunity they afford for cabal, and espionage, and all sorts of mean annoyance, will soon be seen. An open committee is, in fact, no committee ; the very purposes for which a committee are elected, being nullified by the self-intrusion of other individuals. A small minority within a committee may, by the aid of such auxiliaries, completely baffle, and perhaps outvote, the other members ; and they may do this the more easily, as they can at any time take the regular members by surprise. And if they cannot carry their point, they may maintain an endless litigation, and throw obstacles in the way of every proceeding, and transform the committee room into a scene of perpetual and vexatious debate. Much of the vacillation and apparent indiscretion chargeable on the Earl Street Committee, have originated in the short-sighted Regulation alluded to. Those whom the public entrusted with the conduct of the Society, have not been its managers.”—*Eclectic Review for December*. P. 568.

Bible Society, on any occasion which may appear to myself expedient. I must contend, my Lord, that publicity is the very best security of societies like ours, founded on honest principles, conducted by honest men, and using honest means; and that, though occasional inconveniences may arise from such publicity, yet that these inconveniences are abundantly compensated by corresponding advantages.

I cannot, however, close this Letter without adding my feeble testimony to the integrity, impartiality, and politeness with which your Lordship has on every occasion sustained the duties of your high office. Most sincerely do I hope that your Lordship may long be continued among us, and enabled to guide by your salutary counsels our admirable institution, of which, notwithstanding any and every defect, I hesitate not to affirm that it is one of the most valuable and important which has ever yet existed.

I have the honour to be,

My Lord,

Your Lordship's obedient, humble Servant,

THOMAS WEBSTER.