

The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience*

A Reply to the Aforesaid Answer of Mr. Cotton, In a Conference Between Truth
and Peace

Roger Williams

1644

Truth- In what dark corner of the world, sweet Peace, are we two met? How hath this present evil world banished me from all the coasts and quarters of it? And how hath the righteous God in judgment taken thee from the earth? Rev. vi. 4.

Peace- It is lamentably true, blessed Truth, the foundations of the world have long been out of course: the gates of earth and hell have conspired together to intercept our joyful meeting and our holy kisses. With what a wearied, tired wing have I flown over nations, kingdoms, cities, towns, to find out precious Truth!

Truth. The like inquiries in my flights and travels have I made for Peace, and still am told she hath left the earth, and fled to heaven.

Peace. Dear Truth, what is the earth but a dungeon of darkness, where Truth is not?

Truth. And what is the Peace thereof but a fleeting dream, thine ape and counterfeit?

Peace. Oh! where is the promise of the God of heaven, that Righteousness and Peace shall kiss each other?

Truth. Patience, sweet Peace, these heavens and earth are growing old, and shall be changed like a garment, Psal. cii. 26. They shall melt away, and be burnt up with all the works that

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are therein; and the Most High Eternal Creator shall gloriously create new heavens and new earth, wherein dwells righteousness, 2 Pet. iii. 13. Our kisses then shall have their endless date of pure and sweetest joys. Till then both thou and I must hope, and wait, and bear the fury of the dragon's wrath, whose monstrous lies and furies shall with himself be cast into the lake of fire, the second death, Rev. xx. 10, 14.

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Peace. Dear Truth, I have two sad complaints. First, the most sober of thy witnesses, that dare to plead they cause, how are they charged to be mine enemies—contentious, turbulent, seditious! Secondly. Thine enemies, though they speak and rail against thee, though they outrageously pursue, imprison, banish, kill they faithful witnesses, yet how is all vermilioned over for justice against the heretics! Yea, if they kindle coals, and blow the flames of devouring wars, that leave neither spiritual nor civil state, but burn up branch and root, yet how do all pretend an holy war! He that kills, and he that is killed, they both cry out, “It is for God, and for their conscience.”

Truth. Dear Peace, to ease thy first complaint, it is true, thy dearest sons, most like their mother, peace-keeping, peace-making sons of God, have borne and still must bear the blurs of troublers of Israel, and turners of the world upside down. And it is true again, what Solomon once spake: *The beginning of strife is as when one letteth out water, therefore, saith he, leave off contention before it be meddled with.* This caveat should keep the banks and sluices firm and strong, that strife, like a breach of waters, break not in upon the sons of men. Yet strife must be distinguished: it is necessary, or unnecessary, godly or ungodly, Christian or unchristian, &c.

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The cry of the whole earth, made drunk with the blood of its inhabitants slaughtering each other in their blinded zeal for conscience, for religion, against the catholics, against the Lutherans, &c. What hast thou there?

Peace- Arguments against persecution for cause of conscios.

Truth. First, whereas they say, that the civil power may erect and establish what form of civil government may seem in wisdom most meet: I acknowledge the proposition to be most true, both in itself, and also considered with the end of it, that a civil government is an ordinance of God, to conserve the civil peace of people so far as concerns their bodies and goods, as formerly hath been said.

But from this grant I infer, as before hath been touched, that the sovereign, original, and foundation of civil power, lies in the people—whom they must needs mean by the civil power distinct from the government set up: and if so, that a people may erect and establish what form of government seems to them most meet for their civil condition. It is evident that such governments as are by them erected and established, have no more power, nor for no longer time, than the civil power, or people consenting and agreeing, shall betrust them with. This

is clear not only in reason, but in the experience of all commonweals, where the people are not deprived of their natural freedom by the power of tyrants.

And if so—that the magistrates receive their power of governing the church from the people—undeniably it follows, that a people, as a people, naturally considered, of what nature or nation soever in Europe, Asia, Africa, or America, have fundamentally and originally, as men, a power to govern the church, to see her do her duty, to correct her, to redress, reform, establish, &c. And if this be not to pull God, and Christ, and Spirit out of heaven, and subject them unto natural, sinful, inconstant men, and so consequently to Satan himself, by whom all peoples naturally are guided, let heaven and earth judge.

Peace. It cannot, by their own grant, be denied, but that the wildest Indians in America ought (and in their kind and several degrees do) to agree upon some forms of government, some more civil compact in towns, &c., some less. As also, that their civil and earthly governments be as lawful and true as any governments in the world, and therefore consequently their governors are keepers of the church, of both tables, if any church of Christ should arise or be amongst them: and therefore, lastly, if Christ have betruſted and charged the civil power with his church, they must judge according to their Indian or American consciences, for other consciences it cannot be supposed they should have.

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Truth. If the civil magistrate have no power to restrain or constrain their subjects in things in their own nature indifferent, as in eating of meats, wearing this or that garment, using this or that gesture; but that they are bound to try and examine his commands, and satisfy their own reason, conscience, and judgment before the Lord, and that they shall sin, if they follow the magistrate's command, not being persuaded in their own soul and conscience that his commands are according to God: it will be much more unlawful and heinous in the magistrate to compel the subjects unto that which, according to their consciences' persuasion, is simply unlawful, as unto a falsely constituted church, ministry, worship, administration, and they shall not escape the ditch, by being led blindfold by the magistrate; but though he fall in first, yet they shall [fall] in after him and upon him, to his greater and more dreadful judgment.

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Peace. A guilt of the hypocrisy of their subjects and people, in forcing them to act and practise in matters of religion and worship against the doubts and checks of their consciences, causing their bodies to worship when their souls are far off, to draw near with their lips, their hearts being far off, &c. With less sin ten thousand-fold may a natural father force his daughter, or the father of the commonweal force all the maidens in a country to the marriage-beds of such and such men whom they cannot love, than the souls of these and other subjects to such worship or ministry, which is either a true or false bed, Cant. i. 16.

Truth. Sweet Peace, your conclusions are undeniable, and oh! that they might sink deep into those noble and honourable bosoms it so deeply concerns!