

**SHALL OUR COMMON SCHOOL
BE DESTROYED?: AN ARGUMENT
AGAINST PERVERTING THE
SCHOOL FUND TO SECTARIAN
USES**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649235148

Shall Our Common School be Destroyed?: An Argument Against Perverting the School Fund to sectarian uses by Joseph P. Thompson

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JOSEPH P. THOMPSON

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SHALL OUR COMMON SCHOOLS BE DESTROYED?

An Argument

AGAINST

PERVERTING THE SCHOOL-FUND TO
SECTARIAN USES.

BY

Revised
JOSEPH P. THOMPSON, D.D., LL.D.

DELIVERED IN

THE BROADWAY TABERNACLE CHURCH, FEBRUARY 6TH,

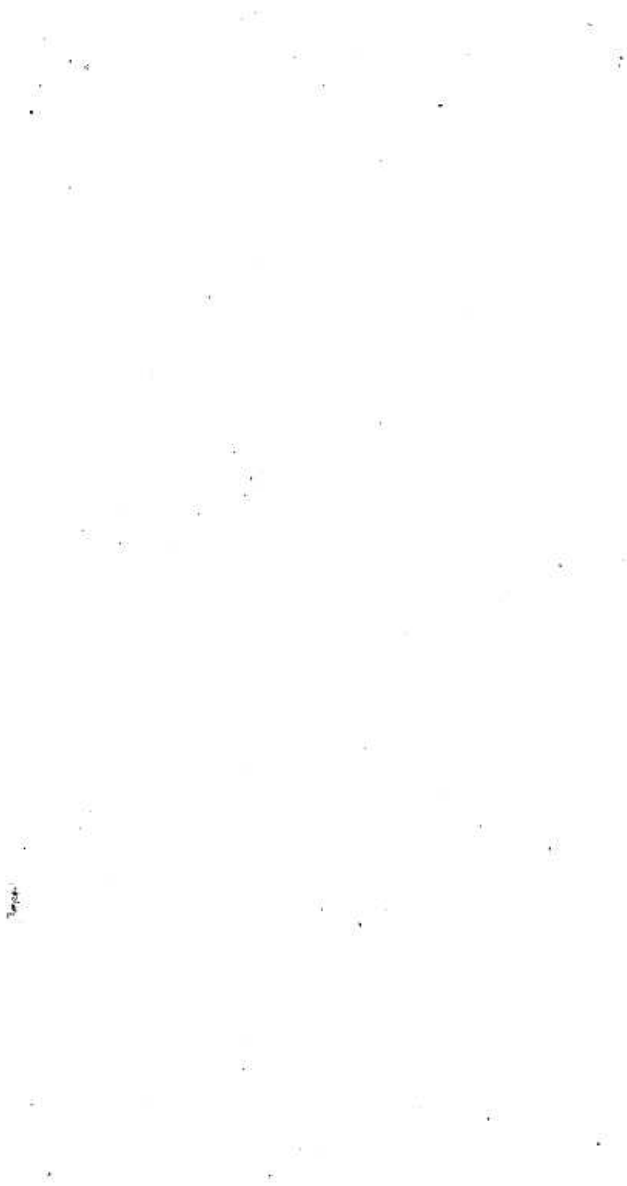
AND REPEATED BY REQUEST, FEB. 20, 1870.

MAY 24 1877

NEW YORK:

EDWARD O. JENKINS, PRINTER, 20 NORTH WILLIAM ST.

1870.



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SHALL OUR COMMON SCHOOLS BE DESTROYED?

I.—THE QUESTION DEFINED.

I AM grateful to you, my friends, for the pains you have taken to come on this inclement night,—some of you for the second time, to listen to a discussion of the question which has been announced for our consideration.

We cannot overestimate the gravity of this question, either for the Church or for the Commonwealth. It is not in any sense a Theological question as between different schools of religious belief. I have no controversy whatever in this discussion with forms of faith. Neither is it an Ecclesiastical question as between different modes of administration of Church affairs. Within the sphere of this discussion, it is of no moment by what particular form Christians may organize and govern themselves. Neither is it a Political question as affecting the measures of parties or bringing political parties as now constituted under criticism and review. Yet it is a question of the profoundest significance both for Religion and for Public Policy. On one side it touches the fundamental principle of purity and spirituality in Religion—a principle always threatened by alliance with the State;—on the other hand, the question touches the fundamental principle of liberty of conscience, which is always impaired or trammelled when the State in any wise meddles with Religion. It is a question also of grave concern to the peace and order of Society; for upon its timely settlement by wise and just principles, may depend whether men of all creeds shall here live together with mutual respect and good will; or the Government be turned into an engine of intolerance by the fanatic zeal of a majority, and the land be deluged with the horrors of a religious war,—always, as history proves, the worst form of civil strife.

The question calls for patient thought. No man should presume to speak upon it who has not given to it all the consideration of which his understanding and judgment are capable. It is a question that calls preeminently for practical wisdom. Involving as it does, such varied and conflicting interests, it requires that serenity of judgment, that freedom from prejudice and passion which alone can be trusted to determine it aright. Above all, the question should be approached in the spirit of candor. We should endeavor, as far as possible, to forget our prepossessions, our denominational relations, our political affiliations.

ties, and to look at it upon its naked merits as a question of principle; for if settled at all, it must be settled by principles that shall commend themselves to the judgment of all fair-minded men.

I have nothing, therefore, as I have already said, to do with the tenets of a sect, or with the action of a party; but shall endeavor to discuss the principle involved, first of all, in the light of history and experience, hoping thus, to bring it before you so distinctly, that you will make its practical application to the case in hand.

II.—A STATE-CHURCH FORBIDDEN BY THE CONSTITUTION.

The fundamental question is The Relations that should subsist between the Church and the State, or rather it is the principle of THE NON-INTERVENTION OF THE STATE IN MATTERS OF RELIGION, AND THE NON-INTERFERENCE OF THE CHURCH, ORGANICALLY, IN MATTERS OF THE STATE.

Christianity began in extreme simplicity as a doctrine and a life; and when it took on an organic form, this was merely the adjustment of an outward working body to the principle of spiritual life. Its founder declared that His Kingdom was not of this world, but a kingdom of Truth and Testimony, spiritual in its nature, and destined to work by spiritual forces alone. He did not invoke the secular arm, but laid it down as a rule to govern his disciples—when he was arraigned before Pilate,—that they should not employ physical force in his cause.

The union of Church and State, however, under the Emperor Constantine, subverted this command of the Master, and was fruitful of evils to both parties. This false and mischievous alliance was not broken by the Reformation, nor is Europe yet emancipated from its curse. Great as was the religious agitation of the XVIth and XVIIth centuries, there was hardly a question anywhere as to the right of the State to order in matters of religion, to support the Church, and even to enforce uniformity of worship. Though the particular exercise of this authority may have challenged debate, or provoked resistance, yet the authority itself was not thoroughly contested, until the failure to perfect the Reformation within the Church of England, or to obtain liberty of conscience and of spiritual preaching and practice, compelled some to become Separatists and Independents, who had begun only as Puritans. The Puritans were really a State-Church party, and hoped to purify morals and religion by compulsory acts of Parliament. The Independents reasserted the absolute spirituality of the kingdom of Christ.

But it was reserved to the people of these United States, in the articles of their Constitution as a nation, to furnish a conspicuous example to the world of the separation of Church and State. Article VI declares that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualifica-

tion to any office of public trust under the United States ;" and in the first amendment to the Constitution, it is provided that " Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The question naturally arises, why did this come in in the form of an amendment, and not as an article of the Constitution as at first submitted from the Convention ?

The matter was debated in the Convention. Mr. Charles Pinckney of South Carolina had proposed an article to this effect :—" The Legislature of the United States shall pass no law on the subject of Religion." The prevailing feeling, however, was that the temper of the people was so far settled on that point that such a provision was not necessary. But no sooner was the Constitution submitted to the States for ratification, than public opinion demanded that the prohibition of an Establishment should be incorporated into the organic law. New Hampshire proposed an amendment to this effect :—" Congress shall make no laws touching religion, or to infringe the rights of conscience." The Virginia and North Carolina Conventions suggested an amendment in admirable phraseology—" No particular religious society shall be favored or established by law, in preference to others." John Adams testifies, that the scheme of creating an Episcopate over the colonies, and thus reproducing here an established church, modelled after the Church of England, " contributed as much as any other cause to arouse the attention not only of the inquiring mind, but of the common people, and urge them to close thinking on the Constitutional authority of Parliament over the Colonists." The argument was : " If Parliament can erect dioceses and appoint bishops, they may introduce the whole hierarchy, may establish tithes, forbid marriages and funerals, establish religions, forbid dissenters, make schism heresy, impose penalties extending to life and limb, as well as to liberty and property*."

The same fact comes out in the writings of Sam. Adams ; especially in a letter drafted by him, from the Assembly of the Province of Massachusetts to its agent in London. Apprehensive of this very evil that John Adams has referred to, the Assembly of Massachusetts declared itself in these words : " The establishment of a Protestant Episcopate in America is very zealously contended for, and it is very alarming to a people whose fathers, from the hardships they suffered under such an establishment, were obliged to fly their native country into a wilderness in order peaceably to enjoy their privileges, civil and religious. We hope in God, that such an establishment will never take place in America, and we desire you would strenuously oppose it†."

The temper of the people in those times upon this question is strikingly shown in a caricature, which I dare say many of you have seen.

* Works, Vol. X. p. 135.

† Life of S. Adams Vol. I. p. 187.