# THIRD THOUSAND, NO. I. MY CHURCH POLITICS: IN LETTERS TO MY PEOPLE; WITH SPECIAL
# REFERENCE TO THE PRESENT POSITION OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND IN ITS RELATIONS TO THE STATE

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N. MORREN

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IN

# LETTERS TO MY PEOPLE;

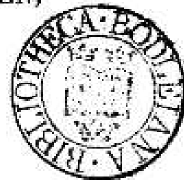
WITH

Special Reference to the Present Position

OF

THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND IN ITS RELATIONS TO THE STATE.

BY THE REV. N. MORREN,
NORTH CHURCH, GREENOCK.

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# TO THE MEMBERS

OF

# THE NORTH CHURCH CONGREGATION,

## GREENOCK.

My Dear Friends,

I feel that the time is come, when the members of my congregation are entitled to receive from their minister, a full and undisguised exposition of the views he has been led to form regarding the position of the Church of Scotland in its relations to the State, and the consequent duties incumbent both upon minister and people. Some of you, perhaps, are of opinion, that I ought to have done this sooner; but in answer to that implied reproach, I have just to plead —not certainly my unwillingness that my sentiments should be fully known—(for I have never sought to conceal them); but simply my long-cherished hope, that by some satisfactory settlement of the question, I should have been spared the necessity of entering on the painful discussion. Being unshackled by the trammels of party, which has ever been the bane of our Church, and now threatens to be its ruin—seeing much to condemn and deplore in the principles and proceedings of both the extremes of faction, by which the Church is rent, I am one of those who have been waiting in the expectation, that by some well-devised measure, in which both Church and State might agree, every ground of controversy between them might in the meantime have been taken out of the way, and their harmonious co-operation restored. In that hope, I grieve to say, I have been disappointed; and now, by the irresistible force of events, (which, however, it was not difficult to foresee,) things are hastening to such a pass, that it becomes the imperative duty of every one, be he clergyman or layman, to come forward, and freely and frankly declare both his sentiments as to the past, and his determination as to the future.

As the origin of the lamentable controversy dates more than eight years back, it will be necessary to refresh your memories with certain facts, which you heard of at the time, but may since have forgotten. The *two* points, therefore, to which I would devote the present letter, are, 1st. What was the leading motive of the Church in framing the Veto Act: and, 2d. What was the course open for her to pursue, when she found that in the judgment of the Supreme Civil Court she had thereby exceeded her constitutional power.

I presume you are all aware, that that which brought the Church

into her present difficulties, was what is commonly termed the Veto Law; an Act, which, with the best intentions she passed, to the effect, that, whenever the majority of the male heads of families in a parish shall simply *dissent* from the settlement of a presentee, (though without assigning any reasons for rejecting him,) the Presbytery, without further procedure, shall refuse to admit him to the cure.

Now it is of great importance to ascertain, in the outset, what was the leading motive and governing aim of the Church in enacting such a law. Whether was it, that those who then acquired for the first time the ascendancy in her councils, discovered that it was absolutely incompetent, nugatory, *sinful*, to settle a minister in these circumstances:—or, whether was it, that having as they supposed, full authority by the law of the country to impose this popular check upon the exercise of patronage, they deemed it right and expedient to apply it—though, at the same time, upon general principles, they might not think the people's rejection of a man, *without reasons*, a positive bar to his induction? In other words, whether was the enactment of the Veto Law a matter of strict conscience, and essential principle, and held to be of indispensable necessity, because including a something without which ordination ought never to be granted—or if granted, would not be valid? Or, whether was it only a matter of high Christian expediency; an arrangement in ecclesiastical polity, which the Church thought very desirable, and which she would exhaust her legal powers in obtaining for the people, but which, at the same time, she might with perfect consistency alter or abandon, if she found that she had exceeded the powers given her by law; while she would still unite with the people in urging the State to grant them a privilege which it would then have been found the State alone can effectually or constitutionally bestow?—for no third party can be allowed to come between the sovereign power and its own subjects, pretending to grant them *public immunities* at the expense of others of its subjects, which the declared law of the country has not sanctioned.

Now this is a question to which different answers will, perhaps be given, according to the different ideas and intentions of those who combined to carry the measure in the Church courts. As for myself, and many other clerical friends, who voted with me for the adoption of the Veto Act, I can honestly say, that we did so, simply because we regarded it (with all its faults,) as an expedient supposed to be within the Church's own power, for preventing the abuse of patronage. But we certainly never for a moment regarded it as a measure of indispensable necessity,—as if no Scriptural Church could exist without it. Nor does the Act itself bear any thing on the face of it which can lead to the conclusion, that such a stringent view of its object was entertained by those who drew it up.* Even though

* The precise terms of the Act will be discussed in a future letter. It is enough for our present purpose to remark, that though professing to be based on an alleged fundamental law of the Church, (which was erroneously assumed to be the *law of the State* also,) it did not take up the ground either of essential principle, or of indispensable necessity.

it could be shown then, that some of those who voted for it did so, because they thought the absence of the people's dissent essential to ordination, that would be far from proving, that such was the motive of the entire Church in adopting it.

It is necessary, however, to clear up this point somewhat more fully, for in truth it lies at the foundation of the whole controversy. Will it then be seriously maintained, that about the year 1834 or 1835, those who till then had been the minority of the Church, but who then acquired the majority, all at once felt themselves constrained in conscience to adopt the principle, that the consent of a congregation, or at least the absence of their dissent, is an essential element in every lawful ordination, so that what has been termed "the pastoral relation," cannot be formed without it? I beg you just to look calmly at the practical consequences which such a position would involve. The principle laid down, if it be held applicable to all ministerial ordinations subsequent to the year 1834, must be equally applicable to all those which preceded it, seeing that the fundamental laws of Christ's house are unalterably the same. Now it is well known, that with regard to the great mass of those by whom the Veto Act was carried, the element in question, said to be so essential to pastoral ordination, was so far from entering into theirs, that there was not so much as any inquiry instituted as to whether the people dissented from their settlement or not. There was, it is true, the *form* of a call, for receiving consents—(a document seldom indeed signed by a majority, yet sustained as a matter of course)—but there was no arrangement whatever for receiving *dissents;* and it is an indisputable fact, that, down to the passing of the Veto, those called the *popular* clergy, took ordination, without any proof of the people's consent, quite as readily as did their opponents. If, therefore, this alleged principle of the new Law be correct and scriptural, there is no evidence of its promoters and supporters being themselves lawfully ordained ministers of Christ: in the case of many of them, abundant proof might be found to the contrary; and on either supposition, there would be (on their own showing) an end to their pastoral relation altogether, or I should rather say, there never was a beginning. And if they are not lawfully constituted pastors, they are not office-bearers in the Church at all, and consequently they had no right to make either the Veto Law, or any other law, for the regulation of the affairs of a body into which they were wrongously intruded, and of which they are no true members.

It is no answer to this to allege, that since the time of their own ordination these good men have received new light on the subject. For their bare knowledge of an essential omission in their own ordination cannot supply the want of it; yea, their sincere regret for the omission cannot of itself give them the status of rightly ordained pastors, if so it be that proof of the absence of the people's dissent be necessary to form the pastoral relation. If, to use their own illustration, (though I am far from thinking it the true meaning of the passage,) if he who cometh not in by the door, but climbeth up some other way, is a thief and a robber, he will not cease to be a thief and a robber, merely because he knows and laments that he did not come in

by the door. Or, as in the case of marriage, (which is another of their favourite illustrations,) if either of the parties can prove that their consent was neither asked nor obtained, there would be legally an end to the connection.

But while by some it may be admitted, that the majority who passed the Veto Act, did not thereby mean to insinuate, that the bare dissent of the congregation necessarily vitiates an ordination, (for that would have been to pronounce their own condemnation,) still they may affirm that their object in making that law was to declare, that they held the people's dissent, though without reasons, to be so vital and important a point, that *every thing*, even connection with the state, should, if necessary, be sacrificed, in order to give effect to it; and that to disregard it, would be not only highly inexpedient and improper, but *absolutely sinful*.

And when, I ask, is it said, that this opinion was formed, and this declaration made? Why not until, (and I beg you to fix in your minds the precise period,) not until those who till then had been in the minority, chanced to acquire the majority. For it is a fact not to be lost sight of, that all of them, from the time of their own ordination, down to the time when their increased majority enabled them to carry the Veto Act, all of them had taken a part, and often a willing and active part, in many a settlement, in which no inquiry was instituted, or was proposed to be instituted by themselves or others, as to whether the people dissented from the appointment or not. Mark the fact which follows,—they proposed the Veto in the Assembly of 1833, but were then left in a minority, and it was not until 1835 that it became the law of the Church. Did they then in 1833 proclaim to the world that they would not, because they could not with a good conscience, take part in any settlements where the principle was not enforced? No, my friends!—they went on ordaining and inducting just as before; and we say it without any breach of charity, (for no candid man of their number will deny it,) that if they had not happened then to acquire a majority in the councils of the Church, they would have been going on just as before, even down to this day,—taking a part in settlements in obedience to their ecclesiastical superiors, according to what the law and practice of the Church might be. I grant you, that they often protested against the old system; I doubt not they would have continued to protest, and to use every constitutional means to have the evil remedied. But there is a vast and essential difference between our doing a thing against which we protest, because, for various reasons, we think it objectionable,—and our doing a thing against which we protest because we hold it to be absolutely *sinful*. In the former case, we *may* take part in it, in obedience to lawful authority, and by our protest save both our consistency and our conscience. But in the latter case, no protest can save us in the sight of conscience, or in the sight of the God of conscience, from the guilt of being partakers in other men's sins. Who ever heard of a man joining with others in the commission of theft or murder, and fancying he would be saved from the consequences, because he had committed the crimes under protest? The first Reformers were called protestants, because they *protested* against

the errors of popery, but let it be remembered that they at the same time left the popish communion. Could there be a severer reflection on any portion of the present majority of the Church, than to affirm (as do some of their friends,) that by their own acknowledgment, during all their previous ministerial incumbency, down to the year 1834, they had allowed themselves to be active instruments in committing sin,—that they themselves got possession of their livings and their cures, and were the agents in inducting many others, by a method which their own consciences solemnly condemn as a "great crime," and yet that by some unaccountable coincidence of circumstances, they did not discover it to be so very criminal until they happened to secure a majority for their party in the Church courts?

These, I beg you to observe, are not my assertions, but the assertions of some of their own friends. But I will not do any of my fathers and brethren in the majority the foul injustice to suppose these allegations are correct. I know, on the contrary, that with respect to the great body of those who carried the Veto Law, these assertions are positively incorrect. That law was brought in and passed, not with a view to meet any new scruples of the clergy on the subject of ordination, but simply, as a well-meant but ill-managed attempt to confer influence on the people. The way in which it originated shows this, and will be recollected by all but the youngest of you. Its origin was this. The French Revolution of 1830 gave a prodigious impulse to the movement in favour of all kinds of popular rights throughout Europe. It was the means of procuring, or at least of hastening in this country, first, Parliamentary, and then Municipal Reform, as well as various other *liberal* measures, all based on the principle of "the will of the people." Now it was not to be wondered at, that this demand for the extension of popular influence should in Scotland show itself in reference to the mode of appointing ministers, a matter in which our countrymen, (I say it to their honour,) have always taken a lively interest; an interest which was in those days greatly heightened, in consequence of the attack made upon the Establishment, on that very score, by the Voluntary Dissenters. Petitions on the subject of Patronage were addressed to the legislature, and a Parliamentary committee was appointed to inquire, and did inquire and report. But the government of the day being unwilling or afraid to attempt any measure themselves, handed the matter over to the then leaders of the Church, that they might devise, in concert with the crown lawyers, some scheme, by which the Church, without interfering with the ascertained legal rights of patronage, might yet impose on it some popular check.

The result of their deliberations was, not an attempt to enforce the call, and thereby insist on the element of the people's *consent;* but the announcement of a new principle (for which a word had to be coined,) called Non-Intrusion, which was embodied in the Veto Act. And as that Act took its rise from the agitation of secular politics; so the Church, in adopting it, was guided, not so much by a *subjective* view of her own duties in reference to ordination, as by an *objective* view of the privileges she was advised it was in her power to confer upon the people.