



**The Absolute Unlawfulness of the Stage-  
Entertainment**

Law, William

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### **About Law:**

In 1705 he entered as a sizar at Emmanuel College, Cambridge; in 1711 he was elected fellow of his college and was ordained. He resided at Cambridge, teaching and taking occasional duty until the accession of George I, when his conscience forbade him to take the oaths of allegiance to the new government and of abjuration of the Stuarts. His Jacobitism had already been betrayed in a tripos speech which brought him into trouble; and he was now deprived of his fellowship and became a non-juror. For the next few years he is said to have been a curate in London. By 1727 he was domiciled with Edward Gibbon (1666-1736) at Putney as tutor to his son Edward, father of the historian, who says that Law became the much-honoured friend and spiritual director of the whole family. In the same year he accompanied his pupil to Cambridge, and resided with him as governor, in term time, for the next four years. His pupil then went abroad, but Law was left at Putney, where he remained in Gibbon's house for more than ten years, acting as a religious guide not only to the family but to a number of earnest-minded folk who came to consult him. The most eminent of these were the two brothers John and Charles Wesley, John Byrom the poet, George Cheyne the physician and Archibald Hutcheson, MP for Hastings. The household was dispersed in 1737. Law was parted from his friends, and in 1740 retired to Kings Cliffe, where he had inherited from his father a house and a small property. There he was presently joined by two ladies: Mrs Hutcheson, the rich widow of his old friend, who recommended her on his death-bed to place herself under Law's spiritual guidance, and Miss Hester Gibbon, sister to his late pupil. This curious trio lived for twenty-one years a life wholly given to devotion, study and charity, until the death of Law on the 9th of April 1761. [from Wikipedia]

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I am sensible that the Title of this little Book will, to the Generality of People, seem too high a Flight; that it will be looked upon as the Effect of a fanatical Spirit, carrying Matters higher than the Sobriety of Religion requires. I have only one Thing to ask of such People, that they will suspend their Judgment for awhile, and be content to read so small a Treatise as this is, before they pass any Judgment, either upon the Merits of the Subject, or the Temper of the Writer.

Had a Person some Years ago, in the Time of Popery, wrote against the Worship of Images, as a Worship absolutely unlawful, our Ancestors would have looked upon him as a Man of a very irregular Spirit. Now it is possible for the present Age to be as much mistaken in their Pleasures, as the former were in their Devotions, and that the allowed Diversions of these Times may be as great a Contradiction to the most essential Doctrines of Christianity, as the Superstitions and Corruptions of the former Ages. All therefore that I desire, is only a little Free-thinking upon this Subject; and that People will not as blindly reject all Reason, when it examines their Pleasures, as some blindly reject all Reason, when it examines the Nature of their Devotions.

It is possible that something that is called a Diversion, may be as contrary to the whole Nature of Religion, as any invented Superstition, and perhaps more dangerous to those that comply with it. As the Worship of Images was a great Sin, though under a Pretence of Piety, so the Entertainment of the Stage may be very sinful, though it is only intended as a Diversion.

For if the Worship of Images did not cease to be sinful, though it was intended for pious Purposes, it must be great Weakness to imagine, that the Entertainment of the Stage cannot be any great Sin, because it is only used as a Diversion.

Yet this is a Way of reasoning that a great many People fall into: They say, Diversions are lawful; that the Stage is only a Diversion; that People go to it without meaning any Harm, and therefore there can be no Sin in it.

But if these People were to hear a Man say, that Religion is lawful; that the Worship of Images was an Act of Religion; that he used Images as a Means of religious Devotion, and therefore there could be no Sin in it; they would mightily lament the Bigotry and Blindness of his Mind. Yet surely this is as wise and reasonable, as for a Person to say, I go to a Play only as to a Diversion: I mean no Harm, and therefore there can be no Sin in it. For if Practices may be exceeding sinful, though they are

intended for pious Ends, certainly Practices may be very abominable, though they are only used as Diversions.

When therefore we condemn the Blindness of some Christian Countries, for conforming to such gross Corruptions of Religion, we should do well to remember, that they have thus much to be pleaded in their Excuse, that what they do is under a Notion of Piety; that it is in Obedience to the Authority both of Church and State, and that they are at the same time kept entire Strangers to the Scriptures. But how justly may the same Blindness be charged upon us, if it should appear, that without having any of their Excuses, our Public Stated Diversions are as contrary to Scripture, and the fundamental Doctrines of Religion, as any of the grossest Instances of Superstition? If we hold it lawful to go to wicked sinful Diversions, we are as great Strangers to True Religion, as they who are pleased with buying Indulgences, and worshipping Pieces of holy Wood.

For a Sinful Diversion is the same Absurdity in Religion, as a Corrupt Worship, and it shews the same Blindness of Mind, and Corruption of Heart, whether we sin against God in the Church, or in our Closets, or in the Play-House. If there is anything contrary to Religion in any of these Places, it brings us under the same Guilt. There may perhaps be this difference, that God may be less displeased with such Corruptions as we comply with through a blind Devotion, than with such as we indulge ourselves in through a Wantonness of Mind, and a Fondness for Diversions.

The Matter therefore stands thus: If it should appear that the Stage-Entertainment is entirely sinful; that it is contrary to more Doctrines of Scripture than the Worship of Images; then it follows, that all who defend it, and take their Share of it, are in' the same State as they who worship images, and defend Drunkenness and Intemperance. For to defend or support any sinful Diversion, is the same Thing as supporting or defending any other sinful Practice. It therefore as much concerns us to know whether our Diversions are reasonable, and conformable to Religion, as to know whether our Religion be reasonable and conformable to Truth. For if we allow ourselves in Diversions that are contrary to Religion, we are in no better a State than those whose Religion is contrary to Truth.

I have mentioned the Worship of Images, because it is so great a Corruption in Religion, so contrary to Scripture, and so justly abhorred by all the Reformed Churches; that the Reader may hence learn what he is to think of himself, if the Stage is ever his Diversion: For I am fully

persuaded, that he will here find Arguments against the Stage, as strong and plain as any that can be urged against the Worship of Images, or any other Corruption of the most corrupt Religion.

Let it therefore be observed, that the Stage is not here condemned, as some other Diversions, because they are dangerous, and likely to be Occasions of Sin; but that it is condemned, as Drunkenness and Lewdness, as Lying and Profaneness are to be condemned, not as Things that may only be the Occasion of Sin, but such as are in their own Nature grossly sinful.

You go to hear a Play: I tell you, that you go to hear Ribaldry and Profaneness; that you entertain your Mind with extravagant Thoughts, wild rants, blasphemous Speeches, wanton Amours, profane Jests, and impure Passions. If you ask me, Where is the Sin of all this? You may as well ask me, Where is the Sin of Swearing and Lying? For it is not only a Sin against this or that particular Text of Scripture, but it is a Sin against the whole Nature and Spirit of our Religion.

It is a Contradiction to all Christian Holiness, and to all the Methods of arriving at it. For can anyone think that he has a true Christian Spirit, that his Heart is changed as it ought to be, that he is born again of God, whilst he is diverting himself with the Lewdness, Impudence, Profaneness, and impure Discourses of the Stage? Can he think that he is endeavouring to be holy as Christ is holy, to live by his Wisdom, and be full of his Spirit, so long as he allows himself in such an Entertainment? For there is nothing in the Nature of Christian Holiness, but what is all contrary to the whole Spirit and Temper of this Entertainment. That Disposition of Heart which is to take Pleasure in the various Representations of the Stage, is as directly contrary to that Disposition of Heart which Christianity requires, as Revenge is contrary to Meekness, or Malice to Good-will. Now that which is thus contrary to the whole Nature and Spirit of Religion, is certainly much more condemned, than that which is only contrary to some particular Part of it.

But this is plainly the Case of the Stage: It is an Entertainment that consists of lewd, impudent, profane Discourses, and as such is contrary to the whole Nature of our Religion. For all the Parts of Religion, or its whole Nature has only this one Design, to give us Purity of Heart, to change the Temper and Taste of our Souls, and fill us with such holy Tempers, as may make us fit to live with God in the Society of pure and glorious Spirits.

An Entertainment therefore which applies to the Corruption of our Nature, which awakens our disordered Passions, and teaches to relish

Lewdness, immoral Rant, and Profaneness, is exceeding sinful, not only as it is a Breach of some particular Duty, but as it contradicts the whole Nature, and opposes every Part of our Religion.

For, this Diversion, which consists of such Discourses as these, injures us in a very different manner from other Sins. For as Discourses are an Application to our whole Soul, as they entertain the Heart, and awaken and employ all our Passions, so they more fatally undo all that Religion has done, than several other Sins. For as Religion consists in a right Turn of Mind; as it is a State of the Heart; so whatever supports a quite contrary Turn of Mind and State of the Heart, has all the Contrariety to Religion that it can possibly have.

St. John says, Hereby we know that he abideth in us by the Spirit which he hath given us. There is no other certain Sign of our belonging to Christ; every other Sign may deceive us: All the external Parts of Religion may be in vain; it is only the State of our Mind and Spirit, that is a certain Proof that we are in a true State of Christianity. And the Reason is plain, because Religion has no other End, than to alter our Spirit, and give us new Dispositions of Heart, suitable to its Purity and Holiness. That therefore which immediately applies to our Spirit, which supports a wrong Turn of Mind, which betrays, our Hearts into impure Delights, destroys all our Religion, because it destroys that turn of Mind and Spirit, which is the sole End and Design of all our Religion.

When therefore you are asked, Why is it unlawful to swear? You can answer, Because it is contrary to the Third Commandment. But if you are asked, Why is it unlawful to use the Entertainment of the Stage? You can carry your answer farther, Because it is an Entertainment that is contrary to all the Parts, the whole Nature of Religion, and contradicts every holy Temper which the Spirit of Christianity requires. So that if you live in the use of this Diversion, you have no Grounds to hope that you have the Spirit and Heart of a Christian.

Thus stands the first Argument against the Stage: It has all the Weight in it. That the whole Weight of Religion can give to any Argument.

If you are only for the Form of Religion, you may take the Diversion of the Stage along with it. But if you desire the Spirit of Religion, if you desire to be truly religious in Heart and Mind, it is as necessary to renounce and abhor the Stage, as to seek to God, and pray for the Guidance of his Holy Spirit.

Secondly. Let the next Argument against the Stage be taken from its manifest Contrariety to this important Passage of Scripture: Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good,

to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace to the hearers. And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed to the day of redemption.

Here we see, that all corrupt and unedifying Communication is absolutely sinful, and forbidden in Scripture, for this Reason, because it grieves the Holy Spirit, and separates Him from us. But if it be thus unlawful to have any corrupt Communication of our own, can we think it lawful to go to Places set apart for that Purpose; to give our Money, and hire Persons to corrupt our Hearts with ill Discourses, and inflame all the disorderly Passions of our Nature? We have the Authority of Scripture to affirm, that evil Communication corrupts good Manners, and that unedifying Discourses grieve the Holy Spirit.

Now the Third Commandment is not more plain and express against Swearing, than this Doctrine is plain and positive against going to the Play-House. If you should see a Person that acknowledges the Third Commandment to be a divine Prohibition against Swearing, yet going to a House, and giving his Money to Persons who were there met to Curse and Swear in fine Language, and invent Musical Oaths and Imprecations, would you not think him mad in the highest Degree? Now consider whether there be a less Degree of Madness in going to the Play-House. You own that God has called you to great Purity of Conversation; that you are forbid all foolish Discourse, and filthy Jestings, as expressly as you are forbid swearing; and that you are told to let no corrupt Communication proceed out of your mouth, but such as is good, for the use of edifying: And yet you go to a House set apart for corrupt Communication: You hire Persons to entertain you with all manner of Ribaldry, Profaneness, Rant, and impurity of Discourse, who are to present you with vile Thoughts, lewd Imaginations, in fine Language, and to make wicked, vain, and impure Discourse more lively and affecting, than you could possibly have it in any ill Company. Now is not this Sinning with as high a Hand, and as grossly offending against plain Doctrines of Scripture, as if you were to give your Money to be entertained with Musical Oaths and Curses?

You might reasonably think that Woman very ridiculous in her Piety, that durst not swear herself, but should nevertheless frequent Places to hear Oaths. But you may as justly think her very ridiculous in her Modesty, who though she dares not to say, or look, or do an immodest Thing herself, should yet give her Money to see Women forget the Modesty of their Sex, and talk impudently in a Public Play-House. If the Play-House was filled with Rakes and ill Women, there would be

nothing to be wondered at in such an Assembly: For such Persons to be delighted with such entertainments, is as natural, as for any Animal to delight in its proper Element. But for Persons who profess Purity and Holiness, who would not be suspected of immodest or corrupt Communications, for them to come under the Roof of a House devoted to such ill Purposes, and to be pleased Spectators of such Actions and Discourses, as are the Pleasures of the most abandoned Persons; for them to give their Money to be thus entertained, is such a Contradiction to all Piety and common Sense, as cannot be sufficiently exposed.

Consider now, if you please, the Worship of Images. You wonder that any People can be so blind, so regardless of Scripture, as to comply with such a Devotion. It is indeed wonderful, But is it not as wonderful, that you should seek and delight in an Entertainment made up of Lewdness, Profaneness, and all the extravagant Rant of disordered Passions, when the Scripture positively charges you to forbear all corrupt Communication, as that which grieves the Holy Spirit, and separates him from us? Is not this being blind and regardless of Scripture in as high a degree? For how can the Scripture speak higher, or plainer, or enforce its doctrines with a more dreadful Penalty, than that which is here declared? For without the Holy Spirit of God, we are but Figures of Christians, and must die in our Sins.

If it was said in Scripture, Forbear from all Image-Worship, because it grieves and removes the Holy Spirit from you, perhaps you would think the Worshippers of Images under greater Blindness, and Corruption of Heart, than they now are. But observe, that if you go to the Stage, you offend against Scripture in as high a degree as they, who should worship Images, though the Scriptures forbid it as grievous to the Holy Spirit.

If therefore I was to rest here, I might fairly say, that I had proved the Stage to be as contrary to Scripture, as the Worship of Images is contrary to the Second Commandment. You think it a strange Contrariety, to see People on their Knees before an Image at a Time that the Heart and Mind should raise itself to God. But then, is it not as strange a Contrariety, that a Person should indulge himself in the lewd profane Discourses of the stage, who should have his Heart and Mind preserved in the Wisdom, the Purity, and Spirit of Religion? For an Image is not so contrary to God, as Plays are contrary to the Wisdom, the Purity, and the Spirit of Scripture. An Image is only contrary to God, as it has no Power or Perfection: but plays are contrary to Scripture, as the Devil is contrary to God, as they are full of another Spirit and Temper. He therefore that indulges himself in the wicked Temper of the Stage, sins against as plain

Scripture, and offends against more doctrines of it, than he that uses Images in his Devotions.

I proceed now to a Third Argument against the Stage.

When you see the Players acting with Life and Spirit, Men and Women equally bold in all Instances of Profaneness, Passion, and Immodesty, I daresay you never suspect any of them to be Persons of Christian Piety. You cannot, even in your Imagination, join Piety to such Manners, and such a Way of Life. Your Mind will no more allow you to join Piety with the Behaviour of the Stage, than it will allow you to think two and two to be ten. And perhaps you had rather see your Son chained to a Galley, or your daughter driving Plough, than getting their Bread on the Stage, by administering in so scandalous a manner to the Vices and corrupt Pleasures of the World. Let this therefore be another Argument, to prove the absolute Unlawfulness of going to a Play. For consider with yourself, Is the Business of Players so contrary to Piety, so inconsistent with the Spirit and Temper of a true Christian, that it is next to a Contradiction to suppose them united, how then can you take yourself to be innocent, who delight in their Sins, and hire them to commit them?

You may make yourself a Partaker of other Men's Sins, by Negligence, and for want of reproving them: But certainly, if you stand by, and assist Men in their evil Actions, if you make their Vices your Pleasures and Entertainment, and pay your Money to be so entertained, you make yourself a Partaker of their Sins in a very high degree; and consequently, it must be as unlawful to go to a Play, as it is unlawful to approve, encourage, assist, and reward a Man for Renouncing a Christian Life.

Let therefore all Men and Women that go to a Play, ask themselves this Question; Whether it suits with their Religion, to act the Parts that are there acted? Perhaps they would think this as inconsistent with that degree of Piety that they profess, as to do the vilest Things. But let them consider, that it must be a wicked and unlawful Pleasure to delight in anything, that they dare not to do themselves. Let them also consider, that they are really acting those Indecencies and Impieties themselves, which they think is the particular Guilt of the Players. For a Person may very justly be said to do that himself, which he pays for the doing, and which is done for his Pleasure.

You must therefore, if you would be consistent with yourself, as much abhor the Thoughts of being at a Play, as of being a Player yourself. For to think that you must abhor the one, and not the other, is as absurd as to suppose, that you must be temperate yourself, but may assist, encourage, and reward other People for their Intemperance. The Business of a Player

is profane, wicked, lewd, and immodest: To be anyway therefore approving, assisting, or encouraging him in such a Way of Life, is as evidently sinful, as it is sinful to assist and encourage a Man in Stealing, or any other Wickedness.

This Argument is not far-fetched, or founded in any Subtilties of Reasoning, but is so plain and obvious, that the meanest capacity must needs understand it. I may venture to challenge anyone to shew me, that the Business of the Player is a more Christian Employment than that of Robbers. For he must know very little of the Nature of Religion, that can look upon Lust, Profaneness, and disorderly Passions, to be less contrary to Religion, than the taking Money from the right Owner. And a Person who devotes himself to this Employment, to get his Bread by gratifying the corrupt Taste of the World with wanton, wild, profane Discourses, may be justly supposed to have a more corrupt Heart himself, than many a Man who has taken unlawful Ways of relieving his Wants.

I speak to this Matter with thus much Plainness, because there is so plain Reason for it; and because I think, there is as much Justice and Tenderness in telling every Player that his Employment is abominably sinful, and inconsistent with the Christian, as in telling the same Thing to a thief. As it ought to be reckoned no Sign of Enmity or Ill-will, if I should attempt to prove to Malefactors the horrid Nature of their Sins, and the Necessity of a sincere Repentance, so I hope it will not be looked upon as a Sign of ill Temper, or Anger at any particular Persons, that I set the Business of Players among the most abominable Crimes. For it is with no other Intent, but that they themselves may avoid the dreadful Guilt of so wicked a Profession, and that other People may not dare any longer to support them in it. For it certainly concerns all People, who are not so void of Religion as to be Players themselves, to be strictly careful that they have no Share in the Guilt of so unchristian a Profession.

This we reckon very good Reasoning in all other Cases. A Person that dares not steal, thinks it equally sinful to encourage Theft. Anyone that abhors Perjury, or Murder, knows that he commits those Sins, if he encourages other People in them. What therefore must we think of ourselves, if the Blasphemy, Profaneness, Lewdness, Immodesty, and wicked Rant of Plays, are Parts that we dare not act ourselves, yet make it our Diversion to be delighted with those that do? Shall we think ourselves more enlightened, or more reasonable, than those that worship Images? The Second Commandment cannot fright them from the use of Images, but it is because they have had a superstitious Education, are taught to be blindly obedient, and have the Pretence of Piety for what

they do. But all the grossest Sins of the Stage cannot fright us from it, though we see the Sins, and have nothing to pretend for Compliance, but mere idleness and Diversion.

If anyone was to collect all the foolish vain Devotions, which poor mistaken Creatures have paid to Images, it would sufficiently justify our Abhorrence of them, and shew the Wisdom of the Reformation in abolishing the Use of them. But if a Person was to make a Collection of all the wicked, profane, blasphemous, lewd, impudent, detestable Things, that are said in the Play- House only in one Season, it would appear to be such a Mass of Sin, as would sufficiently justify anyone in saying, that the Business of Players is the most wicked and detestable Profession in the World.

All People therefore who ever enter into their House, or contribute the smallest Mite towards it, must look upon themselves, as having been so far Friends to the most powerful Instruments of Debauchery, and to be guilty of contributing to a bold, open, and public Exercise of Impudence, Impurity, and Profaneness. When we encourage any good Design, either with our Consent, our Money, or Presence, we are apt to take a great deal of Merit to ourselves; we presently conclude that we are Partakers of all that is good and praise-worthy in it, of all the Benefit that arises from it, because we are Contributors towards it. A Man does not think that he has no Share in some public Charity, because he is but one in ten thousand that contributes towards it; but if it be a religious Charity, and attended with great and happy Effects, his Conscience tells him that he is a Sharer of that great Good to which he contributes. Now let this teach us, how we ought to judge of the Guilt of encouraging anything that is bad, either with our Consent, our Money, or our Presence. We must not consider how much our single Part contributes towards it, nor how much less we contribute than several thousands of other People, but we must look at the whole thing in itself, and whatever there is of Evil in it, or whatever Evil arises from it, we must charge ourselves with a Share of the whole Guilt of so great an Evil. Thus it is that we hope and desire to partake of the Merit of all good Designs, which we any way countenance and encourage; and thus it is that the Guilt of all wicked things, which we countenance and assist, will certainly be laid to our Charge.

To proceed now to a fourth Argument. When I consider Churches, and the Matter of Divine Service, that it consists of holy Readings, Prayers, and Exhortations to Piety, there is Reason to think that the House of God is a natural Means of promoting Piety and Religion, and rendering Men devout, and sensible of their Duty to God. The very Nature of Divine

Assemblies, thus carried on, has this direct Tendency: I ask you whether this is not very plain, that Churches thus employed should have this Effect? Consider therefore the Play-House, and the Matter of the Entertainment there, as it consists of Love-Intrigues, blasphemous Passions, profane Discourses, lewd Descriptions, filthy Jests, and all the most extravagant Rant of wanton profligate Persons of both Sexes, heating and inflaming one another with all the Wantonness of Address, the Immodesty of Motion, and lewdness of Thought, that Wit can invent; consider, I say, whether it be not plain, that a House so employed is as certainly serving the Cause of immorality and Vice, as the House of God is serving the Cause of Piety? For what is there in our Church Service that shews it to be useful to Piety and Holiness, what is there in Divine Worship to correct and amend the Heart, but what is directly contrary to all that is doing in the Play-House? So that one may with the same Assurance affirm, that the Play-House, not only when some very profane Play is on the Stage, but in its daily common Entertainments, is as certainly the House of the Devil, as the Church is the House of God. For though the Devil be not professedly worshipped by Hymns directed to him, yet most that is there sung is to his Service; he is there obeyed and pleased in as certain a manner, as God is worshipped and honoured in the Church.

You must easily see, that the Charge against the Play-House is not the Effect of any particular Temper, or Weakness of Mind; that it is not an uncertain Conjecture, or religious Whimsy; but it is a Judgment founded as plainly in the Nature and Reason of Things, as when it is affirmed, that the House of God is of Service to Religion: And he that absolutely condemns the Play-House, as wicked and of a corrupting Nature, proceeds upon as much Truth and Certainty, as he that absolutely commends the House of God, as holy and tending to promote Piety.

When therefore anyone pretends to vindicate the Stage to you, as a proper Entertainment for holy and religious Persons, you ought to reject the Attempt with as much Abhorrence, as if he should offer to shew you, that our Church Service was rightly formed for those Persons to join in, who are devoted to the Devil. For to talk of the Lawfulness and Usefulness of the Stage, is full as absurd, and contrary to the plain Nature of Things, as to talk of the Unlawfulness and Mischief of the Service of the Church. He therefore that tells you, that you may safely go to the Play-House, as an innocent useful Entertainment of your Mind, commits the same Offence against common Sense, as if he should tell you, that it was dangerous to attend at Divine Service, and that its Prayers and Hymns were great Pollutions of the Mind.

For the Matter and Manner of Stage-Entertainments are as undeniable Proofs, and as obvious to common Sense, that the House belongs to the Devil, and is the Place of his Honour, as the Matter and Manner of Church Service prove that the Place is appropriated to God.

Observe therefore, that as you do not want the Assistance of anyone to shew you the Usefulness and Advantage of Divine Service, because the thing is plain, and speaks for itself, so neither, on the other hand, need you anyone to shew the Unlawfulness and Mischief of the Stage, because there the thing is equally plain, and speaks for itself. So that you are to consider yourself as having the same Assurance, that the Stage is wicked, and to be abhorred and avoided by all Christians, as you have, that the Service of the Church is holy, and to be sought after by all Lovers of Holiness. Consider therefore, that your Conduct, with relation to the Stage, is not a Matter of Nicety, or scrupulous Exactness, but that you are as certain that you do wrong in as notorious a manner, when you go to the Play- House, as you are certain that you do right, when you go to Church.

Now it is of mighty Use to conceive Things in a right manner, and to see them as they are in their own Nature. Whilst you consider the Play-House only as a Place of Diversion, it may perhaps give no Offence to your Mind, there is nothing shocking in the Thought of it; but if you would lay aside this Name of it for awhile, and consider it in its own Nature, as it really is, you would find that you are as much deceived, if you consider the Play-House as only a Place of Diversion, as you would be, if you considered the House of God only as a Place of Labour.

When therefore you are tempted to go to a Play, either from your own Inclination, or from the Desire of a Friend, fancy that you was asked in plain Terms to go to the Place of the Devil's Abode, where he holds his filthy Court of evil Spirits; that you was asked to join in an Entertainment, where he was at the Head of it; where the whole of it was in order to his Glory, that Men's Hearts and Minds might be separated from God, and plunged into all the Pollutions of Sin and Brutality. Fancy that you are going to a Place that as certainly belongs to the Devil, as the heathen Temples of old, where Brutes were worshipped, where wanton Hymns were sung to Venus, and drunken Songs to the God of Wine. Fancy that you are as certainly going to the Devil's Triumph, as if you were going to those old Sports, where People committed Murder, and offered Christians to be devoured by wild Beasts, for the Diversion of the Spectators. Now whilst you consider the Play-House in this View, I suppose you can no more go to a Play, than you can renounce your Christianity.

Consider now therefore, that you have not been frightening yourself with groundless Imaginations, but that which you have here fancied of the play-House is as strictly true, as if you had been fancying, that when you go to Church you go to the House of God, where the heavenly Hosts attend upon his Service; and that when you read the Scriptures, and sing holy Hymns, you join with the Choirs above, and do God's Will on Earth as it is done in Heaven. For observe, I pray you, how justly that Opinion of the Play-House is founded. For was it a Joy to God to see Idols worshipped, to see Hymns and Adorations offered up to impure and filthy Deities? Were Places and Festivals appointed for such Ends justly esteemed Places and Festivals devoted to the Devil? Now give the Reason why all this was justly reckoned a Service to the Devil, and you will give as good a Reason why the Play-House is to be esteemed his Temple.

For what though Hymns and Adorations are not offered to impure and filthy Deities, yet if Impurity and Filthiness is the Entertainment, if immodest Songs, profane Rant, if Lust and Passion entertain the Audience, the Business is the same, and the Assembly does the same Honour to the Devil, though they be not gathered together in the Name of some Heathen God.

For Impurity and Profaneness in the Worshippers of the True God is as acceptable a Service to the Devil, as Impurity and Profaneness in Idolaters; and perhaps a lewd Song, in an Assembly of Christians, gives him a greater Delight than in a Congregation of Heathens.

If therefore we may say, that a House or Festival was the Devil's, because he was delighted with it, because what was there done, was an acceptable Service to him, we may be assured that the Play-House is as really the House of the Devil, as any other House ever was. Nay, it is reasonable to think, that the Play-Houses in this Kingdom are a greater Pleasure to him, than any Temple he ever had in the Heathen World. For as it is a greater Conquest to make the Disciples of Christ delight in Lewdness and Profaneness, than ignorant Heathens, so a House that, in the Midst of Christian Churches, trains up Christians to Lewdness and Profaneness, that makes the Worshippers of Christ flock together in Crowds, to rejoice in an Entertainment that is as contrary to the Spirit of Christ, as Hell is contrary to heaven; a House so employed may justly be reckoned a more delightful Habitation of the Devil, than any Temple in the Heathen World.

When therefore you go to the Play-House, you have as much Assurance that you go to the Devil's peculiar Habitation, that you submit to his Designs, and rejoice in his Diversions, which are his best Devices against

Christianity, you have as much Assurance of this, as that they who worshipped filthy Deities were in reality Worshippers of the Devil.

Hence it appears, that if instead of considering the Play-House, as only a Place of Diversion, you will but examine what Materials it is made of; if you will but consider the Nature of the Entertainment, and what is there doing; you will find it as wicked a Place, as sinful a Diversion, and as truly the peculiar Pleasure of the Devil, as any wicked Place, or sinful Diversion in the Heathen World. When therefore you are asked to go to a Play, do not think that you are only asked to go to a Diversion, but be assured that you are asked to yield to the Devil, to go over to his Party, and to make one of his Congregation. That if you do go, you have not only the Guilt of buying so much vain Communication, and paying People for being wicked, but are also as certainly guilty of going to the Devil's House, and doing him the same Honour, as if you were to partake of some Heathen Festival. You must consider, that all the Laughter there is not only vain and foolish, but that it is a Laughter among Devils, that you are upon profane Ground, and hearing Music in the very Porch of Hell.

Thus it is in the Reason of the thing. And if we should now consider the State of our Play-House, as it is in Fact, we should find it answering all these Characters, and producing Effects suitable to its Nature. But I shall forbear this Consideration, it being as unnecessary to tell the Reader, that our Play-House is in Fact the Sink of Corruption and Debauchery; that it is the general Rendezvous of the most profligate Persons of both Sexes; that it corrupts the Air, and turns the adjacent Places into public Nuisances; this is as unnecessary, as to tell him that the Exchange is a Place of merchandise.

Now it is to be observed, that this is not the State of the playhouse through any accidental Abuse, as any innocent or good thing may be abused; but that Corruption and Debauchery are the truly natural and genuine Effects of the Stage-Entertainment. Let not therefore anyone say, that he is not answerable for those Vices and Debaucheries which are occasioned by the Play-House, for so far as he partakes of the Pleasure of the Stage, and is an Encourager of it, so far he is chargeable with those Disorders which necessarily are occasioned by it. If Evil arises from our doing our Duty, or our Attendance at any good Design, we are not to be frightened at it; but if Evil arises from anything as its natural and genuine Effect, in all such Cases, so far as we contribute to the Cause, so far we make ourselves guilty of the Effects. So that all who any way assist the Play-House, or ever encourage it by their Presence, make themselves

chargeable, in some degree, with all the Evils and Vices which follow from it. Since therefore it cannot be doubted by anyone, whether the Play-House be a Nursery of Vice and Debauchery, since the evil Effects it has upon People's Manners is as visible as the Sun at Noon, one would imagine, that all People of Virtue and Modesty should not only avoid it, but avoid it with the utmost Abhorrence; that they should be so far from entering into it, that they should detest the very Sight of it. For what a Contradiction is it to common Sense, to hear a Woman lamenting the miserable Lewd-ness and Debauchery of the Age, the vicious Taste and irregular Pleasures of the World, and at the same time dressing herself to meet the lewdest Part of the World at the Fountain-head of all Lewdness, and making herself one of that Crowd, where every abandoned Wretch is glad to be present? She may fancy that she hates and abominates their Vices, but she may depend upon it, that till she hates and abominates the Place of vicious Pleasures; till she dares not come near an Entertainment, which is the Cause of so great Debauchery, and the Pleasure of the most debauched People; till she is thus disposed, she wants the truest Sign of a real and religious Abhorrence of the Vices of the Age.

For to wave all other Considerations, I would only ask her a Question or two on the single Article of Modesty. What is Modesty? Is it a little mechanical outside Behaviour, that goes no farther than a few Forms and Modes at particular Times and Places? Or is it a real Temper, a natural Disposition of the Heart, that is founded in Religion? Now if Modesty is only a mechanical Observance of a little outside Behaviour, then I can easily perceive how a modest Woman may frequent Plays; there is no Inconsistency for such a one to be one thing in one Place, and another in another Place; to disdain an immodest Conversation, and yet at the same Time relish and delight in immodest and impudent Speeches in a public play-House. But if Modesty is a real Temper and Disposition of the Heart, that is founded on the Principles of Religion, then I confess I cannot comprehend, how a Person of such Modesty should ever come twice into the Play-house. For if it is Reason and Religion that have inspired her with a modest Heart, that make her careful of her Behaviour, that make her hate and abhor every Word, or Look, or Hint in Conversation that has the Appearance of Lewdness. that make her shun the Company of such as talk with too much Freedom; if she is thus modest in common Lie, from a Principle of Religion, a Temper of Heart, is it possible for such a one (I do not say to seek) but to bear with the Immodesty and Impudence of the stage? For must not Immodesty and Impudence, must not loose and wanton Discourse be the same hateful things, and give the

same Offence to the modest Mind, in one Place as in another? And must not that Place, which is the Seat of Immodesty, where Men and Women are trained up in Lewdness, where almost every Day in the Year is a Day devoted to the foolish Representations of Rant, Lust, and Passion; must not such a Place of all others be the most odious to the Mind, that is truly modest upon Principles of Reason and Religion? One would suppose, that such a Person should as much abominate the Place, as any other filthy Sight, and be as much offended with an Invitation to it, as if she was invited to see an immodest Picture. For the Representations of the Stage, the inflamed Passions of Lovers there described, are as gross an Offence to the Ear, as any Representation that can offend the Eye.

It ought not to be concluded, that because I affirm the Play- House to be an Entertainment contrary to Modesty, that therefore I accuse all People as void of Modesty whoever go to it. I might affirm, that Transubstantiation is contrary to all Sense and Reason; but then it would be a wrong Conclusion, to say that I affirmed that all who believe it are void of all Sense and Reason.

Now as Prejudices, the Force of Education, the Authority of Numbers, the Way of the World, the Example of great Names, may make People believe, so the same Causes may make People act against all Sense and Reason, and be guilty of Practices which no more suit with the Purity of their Religion, than Transubstantiation agrees with common Sense.

To proceed. Trebonia thus excuses herself for going to the Play-House. I go but seldom; and then either with my Mother or my Aunt: We always know the Play beforehand, and never go on the Sacrament-Week: And what harm pray, says she, can there be in this? It breaks in upon no Rules of my Life. I neglect no Part of my Duty: I go to Church, and perform the same Devotions at home, as on other Days.

It ought to be observed, that this Excuse can only be allowed, where the Diversion itself is innocent: It must therefore first be considered, what the Entertainment is in itself; whether it be suitable to the Spirit and Temper of Religion: For if it is right and proper in itself, it needs no Excuse; but if it be wrong and contrary to Religion, we are not to use it cautiously, but to avoid it constantly.

Trebonia must be told, that it is no Proof of the Innocence of a Thing, that it does not interfere with her Hours of Duty, nor break the Regularity of her Life; for very wicked Ways of spending Time may yet be consistent with a regular Distribution of our Hours. She must therefore consider, not only whether such a Diversion hinders the Regularity of her Life, or breaks in upon her Hours of Devotion, public or private, but

whether it hinders, or any way affects the Spirit and Temper which all her Devotions aspire after. Is it conformable to that heavenly Affection, that Love of God, that Purity of Heart, that Wisdom of Mind, that Perfection of Holiness, that Contempt of the World, that Watchfulness and Self-denial, that Humility and Fear of Sin, which Religion requires? Is it conformable to those Graces, which are to be the daily Subject of all her Prayers? This is the only way for her to know the Innocence of going to a Play. If what she there hears and sees, has no Contrariety to any Grace or Virtue that she prays for; if all that there passes, be fit for the Purity and Piety of one that is led by the Spirit of Christ, and is working out her Salvation with fear and trembling; if the Stage be an Entertainment that may be thought to be according to the Will of God; then she disposes of an Hour very innocently, though her mother or her Aunt were not with her.

But if the contrary to all this be true; if most of what she there hears and sees be as contrary to the Piety and Purity of Christianity, as Feasting is contrary to Fasting; if the House which she supports with her Money, and encourages with her Presence, be a notorious Means of Corruption, visibly carrying on the Cause of Vice and Debauchery; she must not think herself excused for being with her Mother.

Trebonia would perhaps think it strange, to hear one of her virtuous Acquaintance giving the like Reason for going now and then to a masquerade.

Now this Diversion is new in our Country; and therefore most People yet judge of it in the manner that they ought, because they are not blinded by Use and Custom. But let anyone give but the true Reasons, why a Person of Virtue and Piety should not go to Masquerades, and the same Reasons will as plainly shew, that Persons of Virtue and Piety should keep at as great a distance from the Play-House. For the Entertainment of the stage is more directly opposite to the Purity of Religion, than Masquerades, and is besides as certain a Means of Corruption, and serves all bad Ends in as great a degree as they do. They only differ, as bad Things of the same Kind may differ from one another. So that if the evil Use, and ill Consequences of Masquerades, be a sufficient Reason to deter People of Piety from partaking of them, the same evil Use, and ill Consequences of the Stage, ought to keep all People of Virtue from it. If People will consult their Tempers only, they may take the Entertainment of one, and condemn the other; as following the same Guide, they may abhor Intemperance, and indulge Malice: But if they will consult Religion, and make that the Ground of their Opinions, they will find more

and stronger Reasons for a constant Abhorrence of the Stage, than of Masquerades.

Again: If Trebonia should hear a Person excusing her Use of Paint in this manner; That truly she painted but very seldom; that she always said her Prayers first; that she never used it on Sundays, or the Week before the Communion: Trebonia, would pity such a Mixture of Religion and Weakness. She would desire her to use her Reason, and either to allow Painting to be innocent, suitable to the Sobriety and Humility of a Christian, or else to think it is as unlawful at one Time, as at another. But, Trebonia, would you not think it still stranger, that she should condemn painting as odious and sinful, and yet think that the Regularity of her Life, and the Exactness of her Devotions, might make it lawful for her to paint now and then?

I doubt not but you plainly see the Weakness and Folly of such a Pretence for Painting, under such Rules, at certain Times. And if you would but as impartially consider your Pretences for going sometimes to the Play-House, under the same Rules, you would certainly find them more weak and unreasonable. For Painting may with more Reason be reckoned an innocent Ornament, than the Play-House an innocent Diversion. And it supposes a greater Vanity of Mind, a more perverted Judgment, and a deeper Corruption of Heart, to seek the Diversion of the Stage, than to take the Pleasure of a borrowed Colour. Painting, when considered in itself, is undoubtedly a great Sin; but when it is compared to the Use of the Stage, it is but as the Mote compared to the Beam.

I know you are offended at this Comparison, because you judge by your Temper, and Prejudices, and do not consider the things as they are in themselves, by the pure Light of Reason and Religion. Painting has not been the way of your Family; it is supposed to be the Practice but of very few; and those who use it endeavour to conceal it: This makes you readily condemn it. On the contrary, your Mother and your aunt carry you to the Play; you see virtuous People there, and the same Persons that fill our Churches; so that your Temper is as much engaged to think it lawful to go sometimes to a Play, as it is engaged to think the Use of Paint always odious and sinful.

Lay aside therefore these Prejudices for a while, and fancy that you had been trained up in some Corner of the World in the Principles of Christianity, and had never heard either of the Play-House or Painting. Imagine now that you was to examine the Lawfulness of them by the Doctrines of Scripture; you would first desire to be told the Nature of these Things, and what they meant. You would be told, that Painting

was the borrowing of Colours from Art, to make the Face look more beautiful. Now though you found no express Text of Scripture against Painting, you would find that it was expressly against Tempers required in Scripture; you would therefore condemn it, as proceeding from a Vanity of Mind, and Fondness of Beauty. You would see that the Harm of Painting consisted in this, that it proceeded from a Temper of Mind contrary to the Sobriety and Humility of a Christian, which indeed is harm enough; because this Humility and Sobriety of Mind is as essential to Religion, as Charity and Devotion. So that in judging according to Scripture, you would hold it as unreasonable to paint sometimes, as to be sometimes malicious, in devout, proud, or false.

You are now to consider the Stage; you are to keep close to Scripture, and fancy that you yet know nothing of Plays. You ask therefore first, what the Stage or Play-House is? You are told that it is a Place where all sorts of People meet to be entertained with Discourses, Actions, and representations, which are recommended to the Heart by beautiful Scenes, the Splendour of Lights, and the Harmony of Music. You are told that these Discourses are the Invention of Men of Wit and Imagination, which describe imaginary Intrigues and Scenes of Love, and introduce Men and women discoursing, raving, and acting in all the wild indecent Transports of Lust and Passion. You are told, that the Diversion partly consists of lewd and profane Songs sung to fine Music, and partly of extravagant Dialogues between immodest Persons talking in a Style of Love and madness, that is nowhere else to be found, and entertaining the Christian Audience with all the Violence of Passion, Corruption of Heart, Wantonness of Mind, Immodesty of Thought, and Profane Jests, that the Wit of the Poet is able to invent. You are told, that the Players, Men and Women, are trained up to act and represent all the Descriptions of Lust and Passion in the liveliest manner, to add a Lewdness of Action to lewd Speeches; that they get their Livelihood by Cursing, Swearing, and Ranting for three Hours together to an Assembly of Christians.

Now though you find no particular Text of Scripture condemning the Stage, or Tragedy or Comedy, in express Words; yet what is much more, you find that such Entertainments are a gross Contradiction to the whole Nature of Religion; they are not contrary to this or that particular Temper, but are contrary to that whole Turn of Heart and Mind which Religion requires. Painting is contrary to Humility, and therefore is to be avoided as sinful; but the Entertainment of the Stage, as it consists of blasphemous Expressions, wicked Speeches, swearing, cursing, and profaning the Name of God, as it abounds with impious Rant, filthy Jests,

distracted Passions, gross Descriptions of Lust, and wanton Songs, is a Contradiction to every Doctrine that our Saviour and his Apostles have taught us. So that to abhor Painting at all times, because it supposes a Vanity of Mind, and is contrary to Humility, and yet think there is a lawful Time to go to the Play-House, is as contrary to common-Sense, as if a Man should hold that it was lawful sometimes to offend against all the Doctrines of Religion, and yet always unlawful to offend against any one Doctrine of Religion.

If therefore you were to come (as I supposed) from some Corner of the World, where you had been used to live and judge by the Rules of Religion, and upon your Arrival here had been told what Painting and the Stage was; as you would not expect to see Persons of religious Humility carrying their Daughters to Paint-Shops, or inviting their pious Friends to go along with them, so much less would you expect to hear, that devout, pious, and modest Women carried their Daughters, and invited their virtuous Friends to meet them at the Play. Least of all could you imagine, that there were any People too pious and devout to indulge the Vanity of Painting, and yet not devout and pious enough to abhor the Immodesty, Profaneness, Ribaldry, Immorality, and Blasphemy of the Stage.

To proceed. A polite Writer<sup>1</sup> of a late Paper thought he had sufficiently ridiculed a certain Lady's Pretensions to Piety, when, speaking of her closet, he says,

Together lie her Prayer-Book and Paint, A t once to improve the Sinner and the Saint.

Now, whence comes it that this Writer judges so rightly, and speaks the Truth so plainly, in the Matter of Painting? Whence comes it that the generality of his Readers think his Observation just, and join with him in it? It is because Painting is not yet an acknowledged Practice, but is for the most part reckoned a Shameful Instance of Vanity. Now as we are not prejudiced in favour of this Practice, and have no Excuses to make for our own Share in it, so we judge of it impartially, and immediately perceive its Contrariety to a Religious Temper and State of Mind. This Writer saw this in so strong a Light, that he does not scruple to suppose, that Paint is as natural and proper a Means to improve the Sinner, as the Prayer-Book is to improve the Saint.

I should therefore hope, that it need not be imputed to any Sourness of Temper, Religious Weakness, or Dulness of Spirits, if a Clergyman should imagine, that the Profaneness, Debauchery, Lewdness, and

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1.Spectator, No. 79

Blasphemy of the Stage, is as natural Means to improve the Sinner, as the Bottle of Paint: Or if he should venture to shew, that the Church and the Play-House are as ridiculous a Contradiction, and do no more suit with the same person, than the Prayer-Book and Paint.

I shall now make a Reflection or two upon the present celebrated Entertainment of the Stage, which is so much to the Taste of the People, that it has been acted almost every Night one whole Season.

The first Scene is said to be a magnificent Palace discovered: Venus attended with Graces and Pleasures.

Now how is it possible, that such a Scene as this should be fit for the Entertainment of Christians? Can Venus and her Graces and Pleasures talk any Language that is like themselves, but what must be unlike to the Spirit of Christianity? The very proposing such a Scene as this, supposes the Audience to be fit for the Entertainment of Lust and Wantonness. For what else can Venus and her Pleasures offer to them? Had we any Thing of the Spirit of Christianity in us, or were earnestly desirous of those holy Tempers, which are to render us pure in the Eyes of God, we should abominate the very Proposal of such a Scene as this, as knowing that it must be an Entertainment fitter for public Stews, than for People who make any Pretences to the Holiness and Purity of the Spirit of Christ. The Scripture says, Mortify therefore your members which are upon earth, fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence. This is the Religion by which we are to be saved. But can the Wit of Man invent anything more contrary to this, than an Entertainment from Venus attended with her Pleasures? That People should have such a Religion as this, and at the same time such an Entertainment, is an astonishing Instance of the Degeneracy of the present State of Christianity among us. For if the first Scene had been the Devil attended with Fiends, cursing and blaspheming, no one could shew that such a Scene was more contrary to the Religion of Christians, than a Scene with Venus and her Pleasures. And if the Devil himself had been consulted by our Stage Wits, which of these Scenes he had rather have, he would certainly have chosen Venus and her Pleasures, as much fitter to debauch and corrupt a Christian Audience, than a Scene of cursing and blaspheming.

The Scripture thus describes the Infatuation of the old Idolaters. And none considereth in his heart, neither is there knowledge nor understanding to say, I have burnt part of it in the fire; yea, I have also baked bread upon the coals thereof, and shall I make the residue thereof an abomination? Shall I fall down to the Stock of a Tree?<sup>2</sup> It is here reckoned a

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2. Isaiah xliv. 19

strange Instance of their Blindness, that they did not make so easy a Reflection upon the nature of Things. But how near are we to this Blindness, if we do not make as easy a Reflection upon this Entertainment; for the very mentioning of such a Scene as this, is as plain a Demonstration that the Entertainment is contrary to our Religion, as the burning of Wood, and its falling into Ashes, is a Demonstration that Wood is of a Nature contrary to God. How are we therefore more enlightened, if none of us considers in his Heart, neither is there Knowledge nor Understanding in us to say, These are the filthy Deities of the Devil's Invention, with which he polluted and defiled the Heathen World. And shall we still preserve their Power among us? Shall we make such Abominations our Diversion?

For if we worship the God of Purity, if we cannot worship him but with hearts devoted to Purity, what have we to do with these Images of Lewdness? If we dress a Venus, and celebrate her Power, and make her Graces and Pleasures meet us in wanton Forms, and wanton Language, is it not as absurd, as contrary to our Religion, as to set up a Baal in the Temple of God? What greater Contradiction is there, either to Reason or Religion, in one Case than in the other? Baal is as fit for our Devotions, as Venus is for our Rejoicings and Praises.

So that the very naming of such a Scene as this is unlawful Language, and carries as great a Contrariety to our Religion, as the Worship of Baal.

Two Women (whom I suppose to be baptized Christians)

Represent Venus and Diana, singing, and celebrating their Lusts and Wantonness, as the Sweets that Life improve.

Now, if a common Prostitute was to come drunk out of a Brandy-Shop singing their Words, she would act like herself. No one could say that she had forgot her Character, or was singing one way, and living another. And I dare say, there is no Rake in the Audience so debauched, as not to think this a sufficient Celebration of the Praises and Happiness of his Pleasures.

But what do other People do here? Is there any Entertainment in this Place h\* pious, sober, and devout Minds? Does it become them to sing the Praises of Debauchery, or sit among those that do?

When we hear of a Witches Feast, we do not hear of any but Witches that go to it: The Mirth and Joy of such Meetings is left wholly to themselves. Now if these impudent Celebrations of Venus and her Pleasures were left wholly to Rakes and Prostitutes; if we reckoned it an Entertainment as contrary to Religion, as a Witches' Feast; it would only shew, that we judged as rightly in the one Case as in the other. And indeed,

one would think, that no Christian need to be told, that Venus and her Graces are as much the Devil's Machinery as Witches and Imps.

To proceed. If a Person in Conversation was to address himself to a Modest Lady in the words of this Entertainment, she would think herself very ill-used, and that she ought to resent such Treatment. She would think, that her Modesty might well be questioned, if she bore such Language.

But how it is consistent with such Modesty, to hire People to entertain her with the same Language in Public, is a Difficulty not easily to be explained. Can Fathers and Mothers, who sit here with their Children, recommend Purity to them at home, when they have carried them to hear the Praises of Lewdness, as the Sweets which Life improve?

If a Person was to make a public Harangue in favour of Image- Worship, telling us, that it was the finest Means of raising the Heart to a Delight in God, we should think him a very wicked Man, and that the Ears and Hearts of Christians ought to detest such Discourses. Yet Christian People can meet in Crowds, and give their Money to have repeated in their Ears, what are here said to be the Sweets which Life improve. This, it seems, is no idolatry.

We are told in Scripture, that Covetousness is Idolatry; and the Reason is, because it alienates the Heart from God, and makes it rest in something else. The covetous Man is an Idolater, because his Heart says, that Gain and Bags of Gold are the Sweets which Life improve. And can we think that that

Corrupt Heart, that celebrates Lust and Wantonness, as the Sweets which Life improve, is guilty of less Idolatry, than he that says the same thing of Riches? As sure as there is such a Sin as Idolatry, as sure as the sordid Miser is guilty of it, so sure is it that these words are chargeable, not only with excessive Immodesty, but plain Idolatry. For how do we think that the Pagans worshipped Venus? We cannot suppose that it was with fasting and Prayer, or any serious Devotion. No; they paid her such a Devotion, as the Stage now does; they called upon her in lewd Songs, and praised her, in praising the Pleasures of Lust and Impurity, in rejoicing in her mighty Power, and celebrating her Pleasures, as the Sweets which Life improve.

These Women go on, and with Music and Voices, as wanton as their Words, are employed to make a deeper Impression on the Hearts of the Audience. Then enter Bacchus, Pan, and Silenus, attended with Satyrs, Fawns, and Sylvans.

And indeed, they enter very properly; for the Discourse is very agreeable to their Nature. But what have Christians to do with this Company? Do they come here to renounce their Religion? Or can they think that this Society, with the most beastly Images that the Heathen World could invent, is a Society that they may partake of without Renouncing Christ?

Our Religion charges us, not to keep company, if anyone that is called a Brother be a fornicator<sup>3</sup> &c. But where have we left our Religion, if we not only accompany with People devoted to Impurity, but make their Company our Delight, and hire them to entertain us with all the lewd Imaginations that can be invented? If we are not content with this, but conjure up all the impure Fictions of the Heathen World, and make their imaginary Deities more vile and wanton than ever they made them, to render them agreeable to our Christian Minds, shall we reckon this among our small Sins? Shall we think it a pardonable Infirmary, or partake of such an Entertainment as this?

The Apostle says, Ye cannot drink the Cup of the Lord, and the Cup of Devils: Ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's Table, and the Table of Devils: And can we think that we are not drinking the Cup of Devils, or that we are not at the Devil's Table, when his most favourite Instruments of Impiety, Venus, Bacchus, Silenus, Satyrs and Fawns, are the Company that we meet to be entertained with? If this is not being at the Devil's Table, he had no Table in the Heathen World. For surely they who call up Devils to their Entertainment, who cannot be enough delighted unless the Impious Demons of the Heathen World converse with them, are in a stricter Communication with the Devil, than they who only eat of that Meat which had been offered in Sacrifice.

Our blessed Saviour says, He that looketh upon a Woman to lust after her, hath already committed Adultery with her in his Heart. Can we reckon ourselves his Disciples, who hire our Fellow-Christians, and Christian Women, whose chief Ornament is a sincere Modesty, to sing in merry Assemblies such Words as are used in this Entertainment.

Who can say that I carry Matters too high, when I call this renouncing Christianity? For, can any Words be more expressly contrary to the Doctrine of our Saviour, and that in so important a Point? And does he not sufficiently renounce Christianity, who renounces so great a Doctrine, that has Christ for its Author?

If we were to make a Jest of the Sacraments in our merry Assemblies, we should shew as much Regard to Christianity, as by such Discourses as these. For all lewd Discourses are as plainly contrary to essential

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3.I Cor. V. li. F I Cor. X. 21

Doctrines of Scripture, as any Ridicule upon the Sacraments that can be invented. It may be you could not sit in the Play-House, if you saw Baptism made a Jest of, and its Use reproached. But pray, why do not you think that there is as much Profaneness and Irreligion in impudent Speeches and Songs? Has not Christ said as much about Purity of Heart, as about either of the sacraments? Has not he made Chastity of Heart as necessary to Salvation as the Sacraments? How comes it then, that an impudent Praise of Lust and Wantonness is not as profane, as a ridicule upon the Sacraments? What Rule of Reason or Religion do you go by, when you think it highly sinful to sit and hear the Sacraments jested upon, and yet are cheerful and delighted with such Songs and Discourses, as ridicule Chastity of Heart, and religious Modesty? Can you suppose, that in the Eyes of God you appear as a better Christian, than those who make merry with profaning the Sacraments? If you can think this, you must hold that the Sacraments are more essential to Religion than Purity of Heart; and that it is more acceptable to God to wash, than to be clean; more pleasing to him to treat the Altar as holy, than to live in Holiness of Heart.

The Sacraments have nothing valuable in their own Nature; they are only useful to Christians, and to be treated with Reverence, because Christ has appointed them as Means of Holiness. But Purity and Chastity of Heart is an essential and internal Excellence, that by its own Nature perfects the Soul, and renders it more acceptable to God. To abhor therefore a Jest upon the Sacraments, and yet divert ourselves with impure Rant, and lewd Songs, is being like those who abhor Idols, and yet commit Sacrilege.

All therefore who partake of this sinful Entertainment, who take their Share of Mirth in such Scenes of Impurity and Lewdness, must look upon themselves, not only as Offenders against the Laws of Purity, but also as chargeable with such Irreligion and Profaneness,^^, they are who are merry in such Meetings as ridicule and deride the Use of the Holy Sacraments.

It is a great Aggravation of the Guilt of these Assemblies, that Women are employed to lay aside the peculiar Ornament of their Sex, and to add an Immodesty of Action and Address to immodest Speeches. If we knew of an Assembly, where Clergymen met to ridicule the sacred Rites of Religion for the sake of entertaining the Audience with Eloquence; if we should find that great Part of the Audience were Clergymen, who could not forbear an Entertainment so contrary to their Profession; it would easily be seen, that such a sinful Entertainment was more unreasonable,

because Clergymen acted in it, and Clergymen came to be entertained with it.

Now this is the Case with the Stage-Entertainment. Women are as particularly called to a singular Modesty, as Clergymen are to the Duties of their Profession. If therefore Women act Parts in lewd and impudent Entertainments, they have as much forgot themselves, and appear as detestable, as Clergymen that talk profanely. And if other Women come to delight themselves with seeing their Sisters acting so contrary to themselves, and the peculiar Duties of their Condition, they as much forget themselves as those Clergy who should meet to see their Brethren raise Diversion out of Profaneness. When therefore virtuous and prudent Women think they may go to the Stage, where Women so openly depart from the Decencies which are necessary to their Sex, let them consider what they would think of such virtuous and prudent Divines, as should meet to see Clergymen openly contradict the Duties of their sacred Office. For it is the same Absurdity, for modest Women to take Pleasure in a Diversion where Women are immodest, as for a good Clergyman to be pleased with a Meeting where Clergymen are profane. This must be owned to be strictly true, unless it can be shewn, that Impudence and Immodesty are not so contrary to the Duties of Women, as Profaneness is contrary to the Duty of a clergyman. For if there is the same Contrariety, then it must be equally monstrous for Women to encourage a Number of Women in an immodest way of Life, as for Bishops and Priests to encourage a Number of Clergymen in a State of Profaneness.

Let us now take one Step farther in this Entertainment. The Stage has now upon it, Venus, Bacchus, Silenus, Pan, Satyrs, Fawns, Sylvans, Bacchanals, and Bacchantes. Now if there were really such Beings as these, one would not wonder to see them got together. As they have all one common Nature of Vileness, they are sufficiently recommended to one another. But is it not astonishing, that these fictitious Beings, which are only imaginary Representations of such Lust, Sensuality, and Madness, As never had any real Existence, but were invented by the Devil for the Delusion of the Heathen World, should be preserved to talk their filthy Language to Congregations of Christians? And perhaps Silenus never so publicly recommended Lust and Impudence in any Heathen Assembly, as he does here among Christians. For our Stage has made him a fine Singer, that his Lewdness may have all the Recommendation which can be had from it.

Surely no one will now think that I carried the Charge too high, when I called the Play-House the House of the Devil; for if his fictitious Beings,

talking his Language, and acting such Parts as they do, be not a sufficient Proof that it is his Work that is here carrying on, it is in vain to pretend to prove anything: There is no Certainty that two and two are four.

If our Eyes could shew us the holy Angels in our Church- Assemblies, it would not be a stronger Proof of the Divine Presence, than the seeing such Images as these and hearing their Language is a Proof that the Stage is the Devil's Ground. For how can he more certainly assure us of his Presence in any Place, than by Satyrs, Bacchanals, Bacchantes, and such like Images of Lewdness? He cannot appear to us as a Spirit; he must therefore get such Beings as these to appear for him; or, what seems to be more to his Purpose, make deluded Christians supply their Places. If therefore there be any certain Marks of the Devil's Power or Presence in any Assemblies, Places, or Temples of the Heathen World, the same are as certain Marks of his Power and Presence in our Play-House.

Again: Is it any Argument that the Church is God's House, because we there meet the Ministers of God, who act in his Name; because we there sing divine Hymns, hear holy Instructions, and raise our Hearts unto God and heavenly Matters; is this any Proof that we are then drawn near to God? If therefore there be a Place set apart for lewd and profane Discourses, where the same Beings are introduced as filled Heathen Temples, where we celebrate their Power, and praise their Being with wanton Songs and impure Rant, and where we open our Hearts to the Impressions of wild and disordered Passions, is not this as certain a Proof, that such a Place must belong to some Being that is contrary to God, and that we are then as certainly drawn near to him? He that does not see this with a sufficient Clearness, could never have seen that the Devil had any Power or Worship in the Heathen World. You must therefore observe, the Play-House is not called the House of the Devil, only by way of Terror, and to fright you from a bad Place; but it is called so, because it really is so in the strictest fullest Sense of the Words.

Let us now suppose, that the Disorders of the Stage cannot drive you from it; and that you are no more offended at the Meeting of these filthy Daemons of the Heathen World, than if you were to meet your Friends.

If this be your Case, how will you prove that your Religion has had any Effect upon you, or that it has done you the least good? For if the same Lewdness and Immorality please you, which pleased the Worshipers of Venus; if you delight in such Rant and Madness, as was the Delight of bacchanals, and Bacchantes, is not this a Proof that you have the same Heart and Temper that they had? And if you are like Idolaters in that which constituted their Idolatry, have you any Reason to think that

Christianity has had any Effect upon you? It would even be Profaneness in anyone to pretend to the true Spirit of Christianity, so long as he can take pleasure in such an Entertainment as this. For what is there that is unlike to the Spirit of Christ, if this is not? Who that can rejoice in the Lewdness and Beastiality of Silenus, and the impure Rant of vile Daemons, can make any Pretences to a reasonable Piety? Does this Company look as if we had anything holy and divine in our Tempers? Is this living in the Spirit of Christ? Is this the way to be as the Angels of God when we die? Shall we go from the Pleasures of Bacchus, Silenus, Bacchanals, and Bacchantes, to the Choir of blessed Spirits that are Above? Is there any Reasonableness or Fitness in these Things? Why should we think, that such a Life as this will have an End so contrary to it?

We reckon it strange Grossness of Mind in the Turks, to expect a Paradise of carnal Delights. But what a Degree of Grossness it is in us, to know the God of Purity, and hope for a Heaven which only the pure in Heart shall enjoy, and yet call up all the vile Fictions of Lust and Sensuality that corrupted the Heathen World to entertain our Hearts, that from their Mouths we may hear the Praises of Debauchery and Wantonness? Let any one but consider this, as everything ought to be considered, by the pure Light of Reason and Religion, and he will find that the Use of the Stage may be reckoned amongst our worst Sins, and that it is as great a Contradiction to our Religion, as any Corruption or vile Practice of the Heathen World.

I have made these few Reflections upon this Entertainment, not because it exceeds the ordinary Wickedness of the Stage, but for the contrary Reason, because it is far short of it, and is much less offensive than most of our Plays. That by showing the Stage to be so impious and detestable, so contradictory to all Christian Piety, in an Entertainment that is moderate, if compared with almost all our Plays, there might be no room left for sober Christians to be at any Peace with it. They who would see how much the Impieties of the Stage exceed what I have here observed of this Entertainment, may consult Mr. Collier's short View of the Stage, Sir Richard Blackmarks Essays, and A Serious Remonstrance, &c., by Mr. Bedford.

To return: Levis hears all these Arguments against the Stage; he owns they are very plain, and strictly prove all that they pretend to; he does not offer one word against them; but still Levis has an Answer for them all, without answering any one of them.' I have, says he, my own Experience, that these Diversions never did me any hurt, and therefore I shall use them.'

But Levis does not consider, that this very Answer shews, that he is very much hurt by them; that they have so much disordered his Understanding, that he will defend his Use of; hem in the most absurd manner imaginable, rather than be driven from them by any Arguments from Religion. For how can a Man shew that he is more hurt by any Practice, or that it has more blinded and perverted his Mind, than by appealing to his own inward Experience in Defence of it, against the plain Nature and Reason of things? Let Levis look at this way of reasoning in other Matters. If a Person that prays in an unknown Tongue, should disregard all the Arguments that are brought to shew the Absurdity of it, and rest contented with saying, that it never hurt his Devotion, but that he was as much affected in that way, as he could possibly be in any other, Levis would certainly tell such a one, that he had lost his Understanding, and that his long Use of such absurd Devotions made him talk so absurdly about them.

Again: If a Worshipper of Images was, in Answer to the Second Commandment, only to say, that he had his own Experience that he found no hurt by them; and that he had the same Devotion of Heart to God, as if he did not worship Images; Or, suppose another Person to keep very ill Company; and when he is told that Evil communications corrupt good manners, should content himself with saying, that he would still use the same ill Company, because he was sure it did him no hurt, nor made any Impression upon him: Now as Levis would be sure that a Man was notoriously hurt by the Worship of Images, that should thus blindly defend them, and that the other is sufficiently hurt by ill Company, who should so obstinately stick to it, so he ought to be as sure, that he himself is sufficiently hurt either by Plays, or something else, when with an equal Blindness he defends his Use of them.

Farther: When Levis says, that he is sure that the Use of Plays does him no harm, let him consider what he means by that Speech. Does he mean, that though he uses the Diversion of the Stage, yet he finds himself in the true State of Religion; that he has all those holy Tempers in that degree of Perfection which Christianity requires? Now if he cannot say this; how can he say, he is sure that Plays do him no harm? If a Person was to affirm, that Intemperance did him no hurt, it would be expected that he should own that he was in a perfect State of Health; For if he had any Disorder or ill Habit of Body, he could not say, that his Intemperance did not contribute towards it. In like manner, if Levis will maintain that Plays do no ways disorder him, or corrupt his Heart; he must affirm, that he has no Disorder or Corruption of Heart belonging to him;

for if he has, he cannot say that the Use of Plays does not contribute towards it.

When therefore Levis says, Plays do me no harm at all; it is the same thing as if he had said, I have no Disorder at all upon me; my Heart and all my Tempers are in that exact State of Purity and Perfection that they should be.

Again: Let Levis consider, that his Taste and Relish of the Stage is a Demonstration that he is already hurt by something or other; and that his Heart is not in a right State of Religion. Levis thinks this is a very censorious Accusation, because he is known to be a very good Churchman, to live a regular Life for the most part, to be charitable, and a Well-wisher to all good Designs. All this is true of Levis: But then it is as strictly true, that his Taste for Plays is a Demonstration, that his Heart is not in a right State of Religion. For does Levis think, that his frequenting the Church is any Sign of the State of his Heart? Am I to believe, that he has inward Dispositions that suit with the holy Strains of Divine Service, because he likes to be at Church? I grant, I am to believe this; there is good Reason for it. But then, if Levis uses the Play-House, if the disordered Passions, the lewd Images, the profane Rant, and immodest Parts that are there acted, are a Pleasure to him, is not this as . Strong a Demonstration, that he has some Dispositions and Tempers that suit with these Disorders? If I am to conclude

Anything from a Man's liking and frequenting Divine Service, is there not as certain a Conclusion to be drawn from a Man's liking and using the stage? For the Stage can no more be liked, without having some inward Corruptions that are suitable to the Disorders that are there represented, than the Divine Service can be a Pleasure to anyone, that has no Holiness or Devotion in his Heart.

It is infallibly certain, that all Pleasures shew the State and Condition of our Minds; and that nothing can please us, but what suits with some Dispositions and Tempers that are within us; so that when we see a Man's Pleasures, we are sure that we see a great deal of his Nature. All Forms of Life, all outward Actions, may deceive us. We cannot absolutely say, that People have such Tempers because they do such Actions; but wherever People place any Delight, or receive any Pleasures, there we have an infallible Token of something in their Nature, and of what Tempers they have within them.

Diversions therefore and Pleasures, which are reckoned such uncertain Means of judging of the State of Men's Minds, are of all Means the most certain; because nothing can please us, or affect us, but what is according

to our Nature, which finds something within us that is suitable to it. Had we not inward Dispositions of Tenderness and Compassion, we should not find ourselves softened and moved with miserable Objects. Had we not something harmonious in our Nature, we should not find ourselves pleased with Strains of Music. In like manner, had we not in our Nature lively Seeds of all those Disorders which are acted upon the Stage, were there not some inward Corruption that finds itself gratified by all the irregular Passions that are there represented, we should find no more Pleasure in the Stage, than blind Men find in Pictures, or deaf Men in Music.

And, on the other Hand, if we were full of the contrary Tempers, were our Hearts full of Affections contrary to those on the Stage, were we deeply affected with Desires of Purity and Holiness, we should find ourselves as much offended with all that passes upon the Stage, as mild and gentle Natures are offended at the Sight of Cruelty and Barbarity. These Things are of the utmost Certainty.

All People therefore, who use the Stage, have as much Assurance that their Heart is not in a right State of Religion, as they possibly can have of anything that relates to themselves.

I hope, none of my Readers will think this too general, or too rash an Assertion; but that they will rather observe, that it is founded on such Evidence of Reason as cannot be rejected, without rejecting everything that is plain and certain in Human Nature. They must not think it a sufficient Answer to this, to consider either how good they are themselves, or how many excellent Persons they know who do not abstain from the Stage. For this is a way of Reasoning, that is not allowed in any other Case.

Now when it is affirmed, that all Persons who are pleased with the Stage must have some Corruptions of Heart, that are gratified with the corrupt Passions which are there acted, is not this as plain and evident, as if it was said, that all who are pleased with seeing barbarous Actions, must have some Seeds of Barbarity in their Nature? If you are delighted with the Stroke of the Whip, and love to see the Blood fly, is it not past all doubt, that you have a Barbarity within you? And if impure Speeches, if wanton Amours, if wild Passions, and immoral Rant, can give you any Delight, is it not equally past all doubt, that you have something of all these Disorders in your Nature? Is it any more uncharitable to affirm this, than to affirm, that all who love to see the Blood fly have something barbarous in their Nature? Is there any more Rashness or Severity in it,

than in saying, that all who love such or such Strains of Music have some Disposition in their Nature that is gratified by them?

It signifies nothing therefore to say, that you know such or such excellent Persons who are pleased with the Stage, whom no one ought to suspect to be defective in Piety; it is as absurd as to say, that you know excellent Persons who are pleased with seeing barbarous Actions, whom no one ought to suspect to be defective in Tenderness. If you delight in barbarous Sights, and are pleased with the Groans and Pains of the Afflicted, I do not suspect you to be defective in Tenderness, you have put your Case out of all Suspicion, you have proved that you have a Barbarity in your Nature. So if you delight in the Stage, if you taste and relish its Entertainment, I do not suspect you to be defective in Piety; you have put your Case beyond Suspicion; you have proved that you have Dispositions in your Nature, that are gratified by the disorderly Passions of the Stage.

Again, consider it in another View: How is it possible that anyone should delight in the Stage, but through a Defect in Piety? For is not the Stage guilty of Impurity, Profaneness, Blasphemy, and Immorality? Now though People may differ about the Degree in which they will make this Charge, yet all must own it in some degree. Now if the Charge be but true in any degree, must there not be a Want of Piety in those that can partake of an Entertainment chargeable with Impurity, Profaneness, and Immorality? If People were so pious that they could not bear such an Entertainment as this, if nothing could persuade them to be present at it, this would be no Proof that they were Saints; for to abhor an Entertainment loaded with so much Guilt, is but a small Instance of an advanced Piety. But surely, if they cannot only bear it, but be pleased with it, it is Proof enough, that their Hearts want several Degrees of Piety which become Christians. Besides, can pious Persons, who use the Stage, tell you of any one Play for this forty or fifty Years, that has been free from wild Rant, immodest Passions, -and profane Language? Must they not therefore be defective in Piety, who partake of a Diversion that is at no time free from this Guilt in some degree or other? But supposing there was such a thing as an innocent Play once or twice in an Age (which is like supposing innocent Lust, sober Rant, or harmless Profaneness) could this make it at all allowable for pious Persons to use the Stage? Could this be any Proof that Persons of real Piety might take Pleasure in it? For could it be consistent with an enlivened Piety to use a Diversion, which in its common ordinary State is full of monstrous Impiety and Profaneness, because it sometimes happened in a Number of Years, that it might be

innocent for a Day or two? But even this does not happen. The Stage never has one innocent Play; not one can be produced that ever you saw acted in either House, but what abounds with Thoughts, Passions, and Language, contrary to Religion. Is there therefore any Rashness or Severity in saying, That Persons who use a Diversion, which in its ordinary State is full of monstrous Wickedness and Impiety, and in its best State is never free from Variety of Sin, must be defective in Piety? How can we know anything with Clearness and Evidence, if we know not this to be clear and evident? For surely it is a necessary Part of Piety to abhor Lewdness, Immorality, or Profaneness, wherever they are; but they who are so pious, as not to be able to be pleased where any of those are, have a Piety that will not permit them ever to see a Play.

There is no Doctrine of our Blessed Saviour, that more concerns all Christians, or is more essential to their Salvation, than this: Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Now take the Stage in its best State, when some admired Tragedy is upon it, are the extravagant Passions of distracted Lovers, the impure Ravings of inflamed Heroes, the Joys and Torments of Love, and gross Descriptions of Lust; are the indecent actions, the amorous Transports, the wanton Address of the Actors, which make so great a Part of the most sober and modest Tragedies; are these things consistent with this Christian Doctrine of Purity of Heart? You may as well imagine, that Murder and Rapine are consistent with charity and Meekness. It is therefore as necessary, as reasonable and as consistent with Christian Charity, to tell Levis that his Use and Delight in the Stage is as certain a Proof of his want of Piety, as to tell the same thing to a malicious, intemperate, or revengeful Person. Some People who are guilty of Personal Vices may have some Violence of Temptation, some natural Disorder to plead in their Excuse; they perhaps may be so tender as to desire to conceal them, and be afraid to encourage others in the like Practices; but the Use and Encouragement of the Stage has no Excuses of this kind; it has no Infirmary, Surprise, or Violence of Temptation, to appeal to; it shews no Tenderness of Mind, or Concern for others, but is a deliberate, continued, open and public Declaration in favour of Lewdness, Immorality, and Profaneness. Let anyone but collect, not all the Wickedness that has appeared on the stage since he first used it, but only so much as passes there in anyone Season, and then he will see what a dreadful Load of Guilt he has brought upon himself. For surely no one can be so weak as to imagine, that he can use and encourage a wicked Entertainment, without making himself a full Sharer of all its Wickedness.

Archbishop Tillotson treats the Stage in this manner.' I shall' now speak a few Words concerning Plays, which, as they are' now ordered among us, are a mighty Reproach to the Age and

' Nation. As now the Stage is, they are intolerable, and not

'Fit to be permitted in a civilised, much less a Christian Nation.

' They do most notoriously minister to Infidelity and Vice.

' And therefore I do not see how any Person pretending to' Sobriety and Virtue, and especially to the pure and holy' Religion of our Blessed Saviour, can without great Guilt, and open Contradiction to his holy Profession, be present at such' lewd and immodest Plays, as too many are; who yet would' take it very ill to be shut out of the Community of Christians,' as they would most certainly have been in the first and purest' Ages of Christianity.'<sup>4</sup>

Here let it be observed, that this Archbishop, who has generally been reckoned eminent for his Moderation, and gentle manner of treating everything, says of Plays, that they are a mighty Reproach to the Nation; that they are intolerable, and not fit to be permitted in a Civilized, much less a Christian Nation; that they notoriously minister to Infidelity and Vice.

Now this, I suppose, is as high a Charge, as he would have brought against the worst Articles of Popery. If I have said, that People cannot use the Stage without being defective in Piety, I have not said it in a declaiming way, but have asserted it from Variety of plain Arguments: But this great Man, so much admired for his tender Remarks upon Persons and Things, goes much farther. He does not say. That People of real and advanced Piety cannot use the Stage, but he makes it inconsistent with so much as pretending to Sobriety and Virtue, much less the Purity of the holy Religion of our Blessed Saviour. He does not say, that such People cannot be Excellent and Exemplary Christians, or that they must be defective in Piety, but he charges them with great Guilt, and open Contradiction to their holy Religion, and assures them, that if they had lived in the first and purest Ages of Christianity, they would have been excommunicated.

I have appealed to this great Name, for no other End, but to prevent the charge of Uncharitableness. For surely, if such an eminent Instance of a charitable and gentle Spirit can roundly affirm, that the Use of such a Stage as ours is an open Contradiction to Christianity, and such a scandalous Offence, as would certainly have been punished in the first and purest Ages of the Church with the dreadful Punishment of

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4.Sermon upon Corrupt Communication

Excommunication; surely it can be no Proof of an uncharitable Spirit in me, that I shew by Variety of Arguments, that the Use of such a Stage cannot consist with the true Spirit of Christianity, but that there must be some Defect in their Piety, who are able to use it.

Jucunda resolves in great Cheerfulness to hear no Arguments against the Stage: She says it can be but a small Sin; and considering the Wickedness of the Age, that Person is in a very good State, that is only guilty of going to Plays. Desire her ever so often only to consider the plainest Arguments in the World, she puts all off with only this Reply, God send I may have no greater Sin to answer for, than seeing a Play !

Jucunda thinks a Clergyman would do better, to insist only upon the material Parts of Religion, and not lay so much Stress upon Things that are only Diversions, lest by making Religion to contradict People in everything, Religion itself should be brought into Dislike. Jucunda desires, that she may be instructed in some greater Things, than the Sinfulness of going to a Play; for she is resolved to hear no more of that.

But pray, Jucunda, consider all that you have here said. You say it can be but a small Sin. How is it that you know it is but a small Sin? What care have you taken to understand its true- Magnitude? You shut your Eyes, and stop your Ears, and resolve against all Information about it, and then call it a small Sin. But suppose it was but a small Sin; is that a Reason why you should be guilty of it? Does the Smallness of Sins recommend them to your Choice? Our blessed Saviour says,<sup>5</sup> If thy foot offend thee, cut it off; it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out; it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell-fire. Now this passage, I suppose, does not mean, If thou art guilty of some great Sin, either of Murder, Perjury, or the like, thou must cut them off. For the Comparison of a Foot and an Eye, must signify something that is not directly sinful in itself, but only dangerous in its Use; as it sets us too near to some Sins, or is become too full of Temptation. Yet such Ways of Life as these, which are only dangerous, and expose our Virtue to too great a Hazard, however pleasant and useful, though like an Eye, or Foot, are yet to be entirely cut off, that we may not fall into Hell-fire. Can it be supposed that Jucunda is of this Religion, who pleases herself with a Diversion, because it is but a small Sin? Will she ever think of saving herself by cutting off a Foot, or plucking out an Eye?

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5. Mark ix. 45, 47

Indeed, to talk of a small Sin, is like talking of a small Law of God: For as there is no Law of God but is a great one, because it comes from God, so every Sin, as it is a Transgression of some Law of God, must needs be a great one. There may be Sins that have a smaller degree of Guilt, because they are committed through Infirmary, Ignorance, or Surprise; but no Sin is small, that is either carelessly or wilfully continued in. If it be a Sin therefore to use the Stage, it cannot be a small one, because it has none of those Circumstances which render a Sin a small one. It becomes a very great one to Jucunda, because she carelessly and wilfully resolves to continue in it, merely for the sake of a little Diversion.

Let Jucunda consider again, what she means by wishing that she may have no greater Sin to answer for than going to a Play. It is a Wish that is silly in itself, because she is not to wish to die in small Sins, but in a perfect Repentance and Abhorrence of all kind of Sin; but it is much sillier still, when it is given as a Reason for going to a Play. For it is saying, / expect to die guilty of greater Sins than of going to a Play, and therefore there is no Occasion to forbear from that. Now, if she understands herself, she must know, that this is the plain Meaning of her Words. Yet who that understands anything of Religion, or that has any Desire of Holiness, can talk at this rate? It is a Language that is fitter for an Atheist, than for a Person that is but half a Christian. If a Tradesman that allows himself only to lie in the Prices of his Goods, should content himself with saying, God send I may have no greater Sin to answer for, no one would suppose him to be much concerned about Religion. Yet as many Christian Reasons might be produced, to shew these Lies to be but small Sins, as to shew that the Use of the Stage is but a small Sin.

Jucunda would have a Clergyman insist upon the most material Parts of Religion, and not lay so much stress upon Things that are only Diversions. I am of your mind, Jucunda, that a Clergyman ought to insist upon the most material Parts of Religion; but then it does not follow, that he must not lay much Stress upon things that are Diversions. For as something that is called a Diversion may be entirely sinful, so if this should happen, it is as necessary for a Clergyman to call all Christians from it, as it is necessary to exhort them to keep the Commandments. Religion seems to have as little to do with Trades, as with Diversions; yet if a Trade be set up, that is in its own Nature wicked, there is nothing more material in Religion, than to declare the Necessity of forsaking such an Employment. But after all, Jucunda, the most essential, and most material Parts of Religion, are such as relate to common Life, such as alter our Ways of living, such as give Rules to all our Actions, and are the

Measure of all our Conduct, whether in Business or Diversion. Nothing is so important in Religion to you, as that which makes you sober and wise, holy and heavenly-minded, in the whole Course of your Life. But you are for such material Parts of Religion, as should only distinguish you from a Jew or an Infidel, but make no Difference in common Life betwixt you and Fops and Coquettes. You are for a Religion that consists in Modes and Forms of Worship, that is tied to Times and Places, that only takes up a little of your time on Sundays, and leaves you all the Week to do as you please. But all this, Jucunda, is nothing. The Scripture has not said in vain, He that is in Christ is a new Creature. All the Law and the Gospel are in vain to you; all Sacraments, Devotions, Doctrines, and Ordinances, are to no purpose, unless they make you this new Creature in all the Actions of your Life. He teaches you the most material Parts of Religion, who teaches you to be of a religious Spirit in everything that you do; who teaches you to eat and drink, to labour and rest, to converse and divert yourself in such degrees, and to such ends, as best promote a pious Life.

If Sots and Gluttons should desire a Clergyman to insist upon the most material Parts of Religion, and not lay so great a stress upon Gluttony and Intemperance, which are things which only relate to eating and drinking, they would shew that they understood Religion as well as Jucunda. For everyone must see, that some Diversions may as much disorder the Heart, and be as contrary to Religion, as Gluttony and Intemperance. And perhaps as many People have lived and died unaffected with Religion, through a Course of Diversions and Pleasures, as through Gluttony and Intemperance.

If it displeases People to be told, that Religion is to prescribe Rules to their Diversions, they are as unreasonable as those are, who are displeased that Religion should prescribe Rules to their Tempers, and Passions, and Inclinations. For as Diversions are only the Gratifications of our Tempers, so if Religion is to forbear us in our Diversions, it is to forbear our Tempers, Passions, and Inclinations. But the Truth is, we ought to be more religiously cautious and watchful about our Diversions, than any other Part of common Life, not only because they take such deep hold of us, but because they have no necessary Foundation in Nature, but are our own Inventions. Trade and Business, though they are necessary for great Ends of Life, are yet to be subject to the strictest Rules of Religion; surely therefore Diversions, which are but like so many Blanks in Life, that are only invented to get rid of Time, surely such things ought of all others to have no mixture of anything that is sinful in them.

For if the thing itself be hardly pardonable, surely it must be a high Crime to add to it the Sin of doing it in a sinful manner. For as Diversions are at best only Methods of losing Time, the most innocent have something in them that seems to want a Pardon; but if we cannot be content with such as only pass away our Hours, unless they gratify our disordered Passions, we are like those who are not content to sleep away their time, unless they can add the Pleasure of sinful Dreams.

Jucunda therefore is much mistaken, if she thinks that Religion has nothing to do with her Diversions, for there is nothing that requires a more religious Exactness than they do. If we are wrong in them, it is the same thing as if we are wrong in our Religion, or sinful in our Business. Nay, Sin in our Diversions is less excusable, and perhaps does us more harm than in anything else. For such as our Diversions are, such are we ourselves. If Religion therefore is to have any Power over us, if it is to enter into our Hearts, and alter and reform the State of our Souls, the greatest Work that it has to do, is to remove us from such Pleasures and Ways of Life as nourish and support a wrong State of our Souls.

If dying Sinners that go out of the World under a Load of Guilt could see what brought them into that State, it would often be found, that all their Sins, and Impieties, and Neglect of Duty, were solely owing to their Diversions; and perhaps were they to live their Lives over again, there would be no other possible way of living better than they had done, but by renouncing such ways of Life as were only looked upon as Diversions and Amusements.

People of Fashion and Quality have great Advantage above the Vulgar; their Condition and Education gives them a Liveliness and Brightness of Parts, from whence one might justly expect a more exalted Virtue. How comes it then, that we see as ill Morals, as open Impiety, as little religious Wisdom, and as great Disorders among them, as among the most rude uneducated Part of the World? It is because the Politeness of their Lives, their Course of Diversions and Amusements, and their Ways of spending their Time, as much extinguishes the Wisdom and Light of Religion, as the Crossness and Ignorance of the dullest Part of the World. A poor Creature that is doomed to a stupid Conversation, that sees nothing but drudgery, and Eating, Drinking, and Sleeping, is as likely to have his Soul aspire to God, and aim at an exalted Virtue, as another that is always in the Brightness and Gaiety, of polite Pleasures. It is the same thing, whether the good Seed be burnt up with the Heat and Brightness of the Sun, or be lost in Mud. Many Persons that live and die in a Mine, that are confined to Drudgery and Darkness, are just so fatally

destroyed by their way of Life, as others that live in a Circle of Pleasures and polite Engagements are destroyed by their way of Life. Everyone sees and owns the Effects of such a gross way of Life; it is not usual to expect anything wise, or holy, or truly great, from Persons that live and die digging Coals. But then it is not enough considered, that there are other ways of Life, of a contrary Appearance, that as certainly and unavoidably produce the same Effects. For a Heart that is devoted to polite Pleasures, that is taken up with a Succession of vain and corrupt Diversions, that is employed in Assemblies, Gaming, Plays, Balls, and such like Business of a genteel Life, is as much disposed of, and taken as far out of the way of true Religion, and a divine and holy Life, as if it had been shut up in a Mine. These are plain and certain Truths, if there is anything plain and certain, either in the Nature of Religion, or the Nature of Man. Who expects Piety from a Tapster, that lives among the Rudeness, Noise, and Intemperance of an Ale-House? Who expects Christian Holiness from a Juggler, that goes about with his Cups and Balls? Yet why is not this as reasonable, as to expect Piety and Christian Holiness from a fine Gentleman that lives at a Gaming-Table? Is there any more reason to look for Christian Fortitude, divine Tempers, or religious Greatness of Mind, in this State of Life? Had such a one been born in low Life with the same turn of Mind, it had in all probability fixed him in an Ale-House, or furnished him with Cups and Balls.

The sober honest Employments of Life, and the reasonable Cares of every Condition in the World, make it sufficiently difficult for People to live enough to God, and to act with such holy and wise Tempers as Religion requires. But if we make our Wealth and Fortunes the Gratifications of idle and disordered Passions, we may make it as difficult to be saved in a State of Politeness and Gentility, as in the basest Occupations of Life.

Religion requires a steady resolute Use of our best Understanding, and an earnest Application to God for the Light and Assistance of his Holy Spirit.

It is only this watchful Temper, that is full of Attention to everything that is right and good, that watches over our Minds, and guards our Hearts, that desires Wisdom, and constantly calls upon God for the Light and Joy of his Holy Spirit; it is this Temper alone that can preserve us in any true State of Christian Holiness. There is no Possibility of having our Minds strengthened and fixed in wise and reasonable Judgments, or our Hearts full of good and regular Motions, but by living in such a way of Life, as assists and improves our Mind, and prepares and disposes us to

receive the Spirit of God. This is as certainly the one only way to Holiness, as there is but one God that is Holy. Religion can no more subsist in a trifling vain Spirit, that lives by Humour and Fancy, that is full of Levity and Impertinence, wandering from Passion to Passion, giddy with silly Joys, and burdened with impertinent Cares, it can no more subsist with this State of the Soul, than it can dwell in a Heart devoted to Sin.

Any way of Life therefore that darkens our Minds, that misemploys our Understanding, that fills us with a trifling Spirit, that disorders our Passions, that separates us from the Spirit of God, is the same certain Road to Destruction, whether it arises from stupid Sensuality, rude Ignorance, or polite Pleasures. Had anyone therefore the Power of an Apostle, or the Tongue of an Angel, he could not employ it better, than in censuring and condemning those ways of Life, which Wealth, Corruption, and Politeness, have brought among us. We indeed only call them Diversions; but they do the whole Work of Idolatry and Infidelity, and fill People with so much Blindness and Hardness of Heart, that they neither live by Wisdom, nor feel the want of it, but are content to play away their Lives, as regardless of everything that is wise, and holy, and divine, as if they were mere birds, or Animals, and as thoughtless of Death, and Judgment, and Eternity, as if these were Things that had no Relation to human Life.

Now all this Blindness and Hardness of Heart is owing to that way of Life which People of Fortune generally fall into. It is not gross Sins, it is not murder, or Adultery, but it is their Gentility and Politeness that destroys them: It fills them with such Passions and Pleasures, as quite extinguish the gentle Light of Reason and Religion. For if Religion requires a sober Turn of Mind; if we cannot be reasonable, but by subduing and governing our blind Tempers and Passions; if the most necessary Enjoyments of Life require great Caution and Sobriety, that our Souls be not made earthly and sensual by them; what way of Life can so waste and destroy our Souls, so strengthen our Passions, and disorder our Hearts, as a Life of such Diversions, Entertainments, and Pleasures, as are the Business of great Part of the World?

If Religion is to reform our Souls, to deliver us from the Corruption of our Nature, to restore the divine Image, and fill us with such Tempers of Purity and Perfection, as may fit us for the Eternal Enjoyment of God, what is the polite Part of the World doing? For how can anyone more resist such a Religion as this; how can more renounce the Grace of God, and hinder the Recovery of the Divine Image, than by living in a Succession of such Enjoyments, as the Generality of People of Fashion are

devoted to? For no one who uses the Stage has any more Reason to expect to grow in the Grace of God, or to be enlightened and purified by his Holy Spirit, than he that never uses any Devotion. So that it is not to be wondered at, if the Spirit and Power of Religion is wanted, where People so live, as neither to be fit to receive, nor able to co-operate with the Assistance and Light of God's Holy Spirit.

We are taught, that Charity coverlet a multitude of sins; and that alms shall purge away sins. Now let this teach some People how to judge of the Guilt of those Gifts and Contributions, which are given contrary to Charity. I do not mean such Money, as is idly and impertinently squandered away, but such Gifts and Contributions as are to support People in a wicked Life. For this is so great a Contradiction to Charity, that it must certainly have Effects contrary to it: It must as much cover our Virtues, as Charity covers our Sins.

It is no strange Thing, to hear of Ladies taking care of a Benefit-Night in the Play-House. But surely they never reflect upon what they are doing. For if there is any Blessing that attends Charity, there must as great a Curse attend such Liberalities, as are to reward People for their Wickedness, and make them happy and prosperous in an unchristian Profession. How can they expect the Blessings of God, or to have their Virtues and Charities placed to their Account, when they have blotted them out, by their Contributions and Generosities to the most open Enemies of the Purity and Holiness of Christ's Religion? He that is thus in the Interest of the Play-House, is most openly against God, and is as certainly opposing Religion, as he that rewards those that labour in the Cause of Infidelity.

It is no uncharitable Assertion to affirm, that a Player cannot be a living Member of Christ, or in a true State of Grace, till he renounces his Profession with a sincere and deep Repentance. Christianity no more allows such Plays and Players as ours are, than it allows the grossest Vices. They are Objects of no other Charity or Kindness, than such as may reduce them to a sincere Repentance. What a Guilt therefore do they bring upon themselves, who make Players their Favourites, and public Objects of their Care and Generosity; who cannot be in the Favour of God, till they cease to be such as they encourage them to be, till they renounce that Life for which they esteem and reward them?

When an Object of Distress is offered to People, it is common to see them very scrupulous in their Charity; they seem to think there may be such a thing as a blamable Charity; they desire to know whether the Person be worthy, whether his Distress is not owing to his Follies and Extravagances, that they may not relieve such a one as ought to feel the

Punishment of his Follies. But what must we say to these things, if those who are thus nice in their Alms are yet unreasonable in their Generosities; who are afraid of assisting a poor Man, till everything can be said in his Favour, and yet eager to make another rich, who is only recommended by his Follies? What shall we say to these things, if Persons who have so many Rules to govern and restrain their Piety to poor Men, have yet no Rules to govern their Liberalities and Kindness to Libertines, if they should have a Benefit-Night upon their hands, not to relieve the Poverty, but to reward the Merit of a Player, that he may have the Substance of a gentleman from Christians, for a way of Life that would be a Reproach to a sober Heathen? Shall we reckon this among our small Offences? Is this a pardonable Instance of the Weakness of human Nature? Is it not rather an undeniable Proof, that Christianity has no hold of our Reason and Judgment? And that we must be born again from such a State of Heart as this, before we can enter into the Spirit of Christianity?

I have now only one thing to desire of the Reader, not that he would like and approve of these Reflections, but that he will not suffer himself to dislike or condemn them, till he has put his Arguments into Form, and knows how many Doctrines of Scripture he can bring against those things that I have asserted. So far as he can shew that I have reasoned wrong, or mistook the Doctrine of Scripture, so far he has a Right to censure. But general Dislikes are mere Tempers as blind as Passions, and are always the strongest where Reasons are most wanted. If People will dislike because they will, and condemn Doctrines only because it suits better with their Tempers and Practices, than to consider and understand them to be true, they act by the same Spirit of Popery as is most remarkable in the lowest Bigots, who are resolute in a general Dislike of all Protestant Doctrines, without suffering themselves to consider and understand upon what Truth they are founded.

I can easily imagine that some People will censure these Doctrines, as proceeding from a rigid, uncharitable Temper, because they seem to condemn so great a Part of the World. Had I wrote a Treatise against Covetousness, or Intemperance, it had certainly condemned great Part of the World; but surely he must have strangely forgot himself, that should make that a Reason of accusing me of an uncharitable Temper. Such People should consider also, that a Man cannot assert the Doctrines of Christian Charity and Meekness themselves, without condemning a very great Part of the World. But would it be an Instance of an uncharitable Spirit; to preach up the Necessity of an universal Charity, because it might condemn a very great Part of the World? And if the Holiness of

Christianity cannot be asserted, without condemning the Pleasures and Entertainments of the fashionable Part of the World, is there any more Uncharitableness in this, than in asserting the Doctrine of universal Love? Does this any more shew an unchristian rigid Spirit, than when the beloved Apostle said, All that is in the World, the Lust of the Flesh, the Lust of the Eyes, and the Pride of Life, is not of the Father, but is of the World?

But I shall not now consider any more Objections, but leave all that I have said to the Conscience and Reason of every Person. Let him but make Reason and Religion the Measure of his Judgment, and then he is as favourable to me as I desire him to be.

It is very common and natural for People to struggle hard, and be loath to own anything to be wrong that they have long practised. Many People will see so much Truth in these Arguments against the Stage, that they will wish in their own Minds that they had always foreborne it. But then finding that they cannot assent to these Arguments, without taking a great deal of Blame to themselves, they will find strong Inclinations to condemn the plainest Reasonings, rather than condemn themselves. Let but a Person forget that he has any Guilt in relation to the Stage, let him but suppose that he has never been there, and that he will go or stay away, just as he finds Reason, when he has examined all that can be said against it, let a Man but put himself in this State of Mind, and then he will see all the Arguments against the Stage as plain and convincing, as any that can be brought against the grossest Vices.

If we could look into the Minds of the several Sorts of Readers, we should see how differently People are affected with Arguments, according to the State that they are in. We should see how they, who have never used the Stage, contend with the whole Force of their Minds, and see the Certainty and Plainness of every Argument against it. We should see others struggling and contending against all Conviction, in proportion to the Use that they have made of the Stage. They that have been its Friends and Advocates, and constant Admirers, will hate the very Name of a Book that is written against it, and will condemn every Argument, without knowing what it is. They who have used the Stage much, though in a less degree than this, will perhaps vouchsafe to read a Book against it; but they will read with Fear, they will strive not to be convinced, and be angry at every Argument, for proving so much as it does. Others, that have used the Stage in the most moderate degrees, have yet great Prejudices: They perhaps will own, that the Stage is blamable, and that it is very well to persuade People from it: But then, these People will

not assent to the whole Truth. They will not condemn the Stage, as they ought, because having been there sometimes themselves, it suits better with their own Practice only to condemn it in the general, than to declare it to be sinful in such a degree, as should condemn those who ever use it.

These are the several Difficulties, which this Treatise has to contend with: It is to oppose an evil Practice, and charge it with such a Degree of Guilt, as few can consent to, without taking some Part of that Guilt to themselves.

I have mentioned these several Degrees of Prejudice, to put People upon suspecting themselves, and trying the Stage of their Hearts. For the only way to be wise and reasonable, is to suspect ourselves, and put Questions to ourselves in private, which only our own Hearts can answer. Let anyone who reads this Treatise, ask himself, Whether he reads it, as he reads those things which have no Relation to himself? When he reads a Treatise against Image Worship, or Prayers to Saints, he knows that he attends to the whole Force of the Arguments; that he desires to see them in their full Strength, and to comprehend every Evil that they charge upon it. Now everyone can tell, whether he reads this Treatise with this Temper, or whether he comes heavily to it, and unwilling to be convinced by it. If this is his State, he ought to charge himself with all that, which he charges upon the most absurd and perverse People in Life. For it is only this Temper, an Inclination not to be convinced, that makes People so positive and obstinate in Ways and Opinions, that appear so shocking to all reasonable Men. It is this Temper, that makes the Jew, the Infidel, the Papist, and the Fanatic of every kind. And he that is not reasonable enough to read impartially a Treatise against the Stage, has no Reason to think that his Mind is in better Order than theirs is, who cannot freely consider a Book that is wrote against the Worship of Images, and Prayers to Saints.

There is but one Thing for reasonable People to do in this Case, either to answer all the Arguments here produced against the Stage, or to yield to the Truth of them, and regulate their Lives according to them. Our Conduct in this Affair is far from being a small Matter. I have produced no Arguments, but such as are taken from the most Essential Parts of Religion: If therefore there is any Truth in them, the Use of the Stage is certainly to be reckoned among great and flagrant Sins.

I have now only to advise those, who are hereby made sensible of the Necessity of renouncing the Stage, that they will act in this Case, as they expect that others should act in Cases of the like nature; that they will not think it sufficient to forbear the Stage themselves, but be

instrumental as far as they can in keeping others from it; and that they will think it as necessary to make this Amends for their former Compliance, and ill Example, as it is necessary to make Restitution in cases of Injury. The Cause of Religion, the Honour of God, the Good of their Neighbour, and the Peace and Satisfaction of their own Minds, necessarily require this at their Hands. For as no one can tell how far his Example may have influenced others, and how many People may have been injured by his means, so it is absolutely necessary, that he do as much good as he can by a better Example, and make his own Change of Life a Means of reducing others to the same State of Amendment.

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"There's half a score of your ancestral halls," said Julius Rohscheimer, "that I could sell up to-morrow morning!

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expressed no emotion whatever. Sir Richard Haredale flashed contempt from his grey eyes—only to veil his scorn of the man's vulgarity beneath a cloud of tobacco smoke. Tom Sheard, of the Gleaner, drew down a corner of his mouth and felt ashamed of the acquaintance. Denby, the music-hall comedian, softly whistled those bars of a popular ballad set to the words, "I stood in old Jerusalem."

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The Westminster Divines

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*The Westminster Confession of Faith*

The Westminster Confession of Faith is a Reformed confession of faith, in the Calvinist theological tradition. Although drawn up by the 1646 Westminster Assembly, largely of the Church of England, it became and remains the 'subordinate standard' of doctrine in the Church of Scotland, and has been influential within Presbyterian churches worldwide.

In 1643, the English Parliament called upon "learned, godly and judicious Divines", to meet at Westminster Abbey in order to provide advice on issues of worship, doctrine, government and discipline of the Church of England. Their meetings, over a period of five years, produced the confession of faith, as well as a Larger Catechism and a Shorter Catechism. For more than three centuries, various churches around the world have adopted the confession and the catechisms as their standards of doctrine, subordinate to the Bible.

The Westminster Confession of Faith was modified and adopted by Congregationalists in England in the form of the Savoy Declaration (1658). Likewise, the Baptists of England modified the Savoy Declaration to produce the Second London Baptist Confession (1689). English Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists would together (with others) come to be known as Nonconformists, because they did not conform to the Act of Uniformity (1662) establishing the Church of England as the only legally-approved church, though they were in many ways united by their common confessions, built on the Westminster Confession.

Thomas Paine

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*The Age of Reason*

The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology, a deistic treatise written by eighteenth-century British radical and American revolutionary Thomas Paine, critiques institutionalized religion and challenges the inerrancy of the Bible. Published in three parts in 1794, 1795, and 1807, it was a bestseller in America, where it caused a short-lived deistic revival. British audiences, however, fearing increased political radicalism as a result of the French revolution, received it with more hostility. The Age of Reason presents common deistic arguments; for example, it highlights the corruption of the Christian Church and criticizes its efforts to acquire political power. Paine advocates reason in the place of revelation, leading him to reject miracles and to view the Bible as an ordinary piece of literature rather than as a divinely inspired text. The Age of Reason is not atheistic, but deistic: it promotes natural religion and argues for a creator-God.

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