

Philpot's letter of resignation from the Church of England

March 28 –1835

Mr. Provost:

I beg leave to resign the Fellowship of Worcester College, to which I was elected in the year 1826. This step I am compelled to take because I can no longer with a good conscience continue a Minister or a Member of the Established Church.

After great and numerous trials of mind, I am, as I trust, led by the hand of God thus to separate myself from that corrupt and worldly system, called the Church of England. Her errors and corruptions, as well as her utter contrariety to a Gospel Church as revealed in the New Testament, have been for two or three years gradually opening upon my mind. But though I have thus slowly and by degrees obtained light from above to see the Established Church somewhat in her true colors, it is, I confess, only but very lately that the sin of remaining in her has been forcibly laid upon my conscience. I have felt of late that, by continuing one of her ministers, I was upholding what in the sight of the holy Jehovah is hateful and loathsome.

I have felt that, by standing up in her pulpit, I was sanctioning a system in principle and practice, in root and branches, corrupt before God. I have felt that I was keeping those children of God who sat under my ministry in total darkness as to the nature of a true Gospel Church. I have felt that both I myself, and the spiritual people that attended my ministry, were, in principle and system, mixed up with—the ungodly, the Pharisee, the formalist, the worldling, and the hypocrite. And thus, while I remained in the Church of England, my principles and my practice, my profession and my conduct, my preaching and my acting, were inconsistent with each other. I was building up with the right hand what I was pulling down with the left.

I was contending for the 'power'—while the Church of England was maintaining the 'form'. I was, by my preaching, separating the people of God from 'the world lying in wickedness'—and the Church of England, in her Liturgy and Offices, was huddling together the spiritual and the carnal, the regenerate and the unregenerate, the sheep and the goats. I was contending for regeneration as a supernatural act wrought upon the souls of the elect alone by the Eternal Spirit—and the Church of England was thanking God for regenerating every child that was sprinkled with a little water. True prayer I was representing as the Spirit's work upon the soul, as the groanings of a burdened heart, as the pouring out of a broken spirit, as the cry of a child to his heavenly Father, as the hungering and thirsting of a soul that panted after God. The Church of England tied me down to cold, hackneyed, wearisome forms, in which I prayed for the Royal Family, the Parliament, the Bishops, and all sorts and conditions of men, with scarcely one petition that the Spirit would rule in a regenerate heart.

My soul was pained and burdened within me at hearing the wicked and the careless take into their lips the sweet petitions of David in the Psalms. I heard around me those who I knew from their life and conversation had never for a moment spiritually felt the pangs of a wounded conscience, say, 'I stick fast in the deep mire where no ground is; I am come into deep waters, so that the floods run over me'. I heard those who never desired or longed after anything but the gratification of their own lusts and covetousness, repeat aloud, 'Like as the deer desires the water-brooks, so longs my soul after you, O God'. Those that were dressed up in all the colors of the rainbow, I heard saying, 'As for me, I am poor and needy'. Graceless men who had never felt a drop of the Spirit's teachings, and who outside of the Church swore, jeered, and scoffed, would cry in my hearing, 'Take not your Holy Spirit from me'.

Adulterers and adulteresses repeated aloud, 'I will wash my hands in innocency, and so will I go to Your altar'. While the self-righteous Pharisee would sound in my ears, 'I will go forth in the strength of the Lord God, and will make mention of Your righteousness only'.

Thus the gracious and blessed experience of God's saints was mocked and trampled upon, and the fervent prayers and breathings of the Spirit in contrite souls were profaned by the ungodly taking them into their unhallowed lips. And all this I was conscious was not a casual occurrence, or such as arose from the unsuggested will of individuals, but was the deliberate principle and system of the Church of England. I saw it was so by her teaching every child to say he was made in his baptism 'a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of Heaven'. I saw it was so by that system of responses which she enjoins upon all the congregation to make, and again and again has my soul been burdened at hearing the wicked little children around me mock God by shouting out the responses, as they had been systematically trained to do by ignorant ministers, parents, school-masters and school mistresses.

Being for the last three years a hearer and not a reader of the Liturgy, I have been compelled at times to close my ears with both my hands, that I might not hear the mechanical cries of the children, one of whose responses they always thus worded, 'We have left undone those things which we ought not to have done'. I have groaned within me at hearing the ungodly around me thus mock God, and so far was I from joining in the dead and spiritless forms of the Prayer Book, that I could only secretly pray, 'Lord, deliver me from this worldly and unholy system'.

Every dull and dry prayer seemed to lay a fresh lump of ice on my heart, and when I got into the pulpit, nothing but the hand of God, to whom I cried for help, could take off that deadness and barrenness which these wearisome forms had, in a great measure, laid upon me. At times, too, when I viewed the gettings up and sittings down, the bowings, the turnings to the East, the kneeling in this place and standing in that, and the whole routine of that 'bodily service' with which the blessed Jehovah was mocked, I could not but look on the whole as a few degrees only removed from the mummery of a Popish mass-house.

But though I felt, and at times could groan beneath the wretched formality of the Church of England, I was from two motives chiefly kept within her. One was, that I desired to be useful to the children of God in a dark neighborhood, with whom I had been connected for nearly seven years, and of whom some professed to derive profit from my ministry. The other was altogether carnal, and, though hiding itself in the secret recesses of my heart and therefore unperceived, was doubtless of much weight with me. This was the desire of retaining that comfortable competence which my Fellowship secured. My heart, I freely confess, has often sunk within me at the prospect of my already weak health terminating in confirmed illness, with poverty and need staring me in the face. I was also praying for an opening from the Lord to show me my path clearly, as, though I was determined neither to accept preferment, nor take another curacy, I was unwilling to throw up my ministry until the 'death of the very aged incumbent.' Lately, however, I have been brought to see 'that I must not do evil that good may come', and that if my conscience was fully convinced of the sin of remaining in the Church of England, no clearer or more direct intimation of the will of God was needed.

Thus have I laid open the inward workings of my heart, and the experience through which I have been led, in order to show that the resignation of my Fellowship and Curacy, and secession from the Church of England, is no sudden and hasty step, but the gradual and deliberate conviction of my soul. But besides these particular evils under which I especially 'groaned, being burdened', as being brought into continual contact with them, I have felt that by continuing in the Establishment I sanction and uphold every other corruption that is mixed up with so worldly a system.

Thus I must sanction—the union of Church and State; the putting of the King in the place of Christ as Head of the Church; the luxury and pomp of the bishops; the giving away of livings for electioneering purposes; the heaping of office by ungodly parents on ungodly children; the system of tithes (I cannot but wonder how men who profess spiritual religion, and call themselves Evangelical ministers, can take tithes from carnal and ungodly farmers; no, as I have known some do, screw them up to the highest pitch, and even employ legal means to enforce their payment; while others of the same name and pretension exact tithes from gardens watered by the sweat of the laborer, and enforce burial and similar fees from the poor, when they themselves ride about in their carriages and phaetons. Of this I am confident, that they are not taught thus to act by the Blessed Spirit, who guides the regenerate into all truth, makes the conscience tender, and gives compassion towards the poor and needy. The New Testament authorizes no other payment to ministers but free and voluntary offerings; and thus all tithes, fees, and dues are part of that ‘mystery of iniquity’ of which Babylon, the mother of harlots, is the head); the principle and practice of Ecclesiastical Courts; the manufacturing of ministers by the gross at the Bishops’ ordinations, and all that mass of evil which has sprung out of a worldly and wealthy Establishment. When Christ has bidden me ‘call no man Father on earth’, and not to be called myself ‘Rabbi’, and ‘Master’, and consequently by no title distinctive of priesthood or ministerial office, I must sanction the decking out of His professed ministers with the trappings of Antichrist, such proud titles, I mean, as Reverend, Very Reverend, Right Reverend, Most Reverend, Father in God, My Lord, Your Grace, and the like.

As a minister of the Establishment I must also sanction that abominable traffic in livings whereby ‘the souls of men’ are bought and ‘sold’ (an especial mark of Babylon, Rev. 18:13), and knocked down to the highest bidder by the auctioneer’s hammer. Thus the whole system, in its root, stem, and branches, manifests itself to a renewed and spiritual mind as part and parcel of that Antichrist and Babylon which the Lord foreshowed His servants should arise, and from which He calls them to come out and be separate.

As a member, too, of the University, and Fellow of the College, I am unavoidably and necessarily mixed up with many evils, which I am convinced are equally hateful to God. Thus, in this capacity, I must sanction the whole principle of a University, as needful to qualify men to become ministers of Jesus Christ. But who that knows experimentally the sovereignty of Jehovah in choosing His ministers will not feel it to be dreadful presumption thus to train up unregenerate men to stand forth in His holy name?

The call to the ministry is as sovereign as the call by grace. And Jehovah will take the tinker from his barrow, and the cobbler from his stall, and send them to preach His Word, as he took Elisha from the plough, and Amos from ‘gathering sycamore fruit’. By continuing, therefore, a member of the University I tacitly set aside the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit, which can alone qualify a man for the ministry, and substitute a knowledge of Latin and Greek, and such mere ‘letter-learning’ as is called Divinity. But by doing this I necessarily reject as ministers some of God’s most eminent and deeply-taught servants, as Bunyan, Deer, and Huntington; and exalt in their room unregenerate men, who were never taught a single truth by the Eternal Spirit.

And as, by continuing a member of the University, I sanction its principle, so in some measure do I sanction its practice. What that practice is, let those testify who have passed through the various stages of Undergraduate, Bachelor, and Master of Arts. But where in all that practice do I see the marks of Christ, or ‘the footsteps of His flock’? Can they be traced in the drawing rooms and dining rooms of the Heads of Houses? in the Common-rooms of the Fellows? in the breakfasts, wine-parties, and suppers of the Undergraduates? What, I would ask, is usually heard in the latter but shouting, and singing of unclean songs, or conversation on the boat-race, the steeple-chase, or the fox-hunt? And what is commonly heard in the former but the news and politics of the day, and all such trifling, and sometimes

even unseemly conversation, as is the mark of the soul that is 'dead in sins'? Where among all these, either professed ministers of Jesus Christ or such as are training to be so, is the name of the Savior, or the voice of prayer heard? If anywhere, it is among a few despised undergraduates, who have enough religion to see the open evils around them, but not enough grace or faith to separate from the system altogether.

And who that knows the University will not allow the following to be a faint sketch of the course run by most of her children? Initiated in boyhood in wickedness at one of the public schools, those dens of iniquity, or at a private school, in some cases but a shade better and in others worse, the youthful aspirant to the ministry removes to College, where, having run a career of vanity and sin for three years, he obtains his degree. Fortified with this, and his College testimonials, procured without difficulty except by the very notoriously immoral, and those who have shown some symptoms of spiritual religion, he presents himself to the Bishop for ordination. Examined by the Bishop's Chaplain on a few commonplace topics of divinity, and approved, he is ordained amid a heap of other candidates, without one question of a spiritual nature, one inquiry as to his own conversion to God, or one serious admonition as to his motives and qualifications for so dreadful a work. The cold heartlessness and technical formality usually displayed by Bishop, Chaplain, Archdeacon, and Registrar, with the carelessness and levity of most of the candidates, can never be forgotten by one whose heart God has touched, and who has witnessed the solemn mockery of a semi-annual ordination.

But further, as a Fellow of a College, I am connected with a body of men, who, however amiable and learned they may be (and if I forget the kindness of some of them I would be ungrateful indeed), are yet ignorant of Jesus Christ. Their acts as a body I am a party to, and indirectly, if not directly, sanction. Thus I help to give away college livings to unregenerate men, though I may know in my own conscience that they are not even called by grace, much less to the work of the ministry. I am a party also to giving testimonials indiscriminately of good life and conduct to be presented to the Bishop by the candidates for ordination (the document requiring the college seal), as well as to the electing of Fellows and Scholars for their classical attainments, and thus thrusting them into the ministry, and, in a word, to the whole system of education pursued, which, as a means of qualifying men to be ministers, I believe to be hateful to God.

In short, I am mixed up with a society of men whose life and conduct, however amiable, moral, and honorable, are not those of 'the poor and afflicted' family of God. No other way, then, have I to escape these evils, to 'keep myself pure, and not to be partaker of other men's sins,' than by fleeing out of Babylon.

Lastly, I secede from the Church of England because I can find in her scarcely one mark of a true church. She tramples upon one ordinance of Christ by sprinkling infants, and calling it regeneration (the Word of God allowing no other than the baptism of believers, and that by immersion); and profanes the Lord's Table by permitting the ungodly to participate. The true Church is despised; but she is honored. The true Church is persecuted; but she is a persecutor. The true Church is chosen out of the world; but she is part and parcel of it. The true Church consists only of the regenerate; but she embraces in her universal arms all the drunkards, liars, thieves, and immoral characters of the land. She christens them, she confirms them, she marries them, she buries them. And she pronounces of all for whom she executes these offices, that they are regenerate, that 'all their sins are forgiven them', that they are 'the servants of God'.

If perhaps on a dying bed any doubts and convictions should arise that all is not right for eternity, she sends her minister to visit them, and 'to absolve them from all their sins'. And having thus lulled their fears, and deluded them to die in peace, she quiets the rising doubts of their friends at the mouth of the

grave, by assuring those who ‘this our brother is delivered out of the miseries of this sinful world’, and is ‘committed to the dust in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life’

Oh! could the dreadful veil that hides eternity be for a moment lifted up, we would see that thousands, whom the Church of England is blessing, God is cursing; and that tens of thousands whom she is asserting to be ‘in joy and felicity’, are at that moment ‘lifting up their eyes in hell, being in torment’. And while she thus speaks peace and comfort to all that will call her ‘Mother’, although unregenerate and dead in sins, she in her canons excommunicates and pronounces ‘guilty of wicked error’ all that are enlightened of the Spirit to declare she is not a true church, and separate from her communion. What is this but to remove the ancient landmarks of truth and error; ‘to call evil good, and good evil; to put darkness for light, and light for darkness, bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter’?

At the same time, she shuts up and seals the mouth of all her ministers, and ties them down to say what she says, and to deny what she denies, by compelling them to ‘give their sincere assent and consent to all and everything contained and prescribed in and by the Common Prayer Book, and to promise that they will ‘conform to the Liturgy as by law established’. And if any of them are haply taught of God the things of Christ in their own souls, and having grace and faithfulness to preach what they have tasted, felt, and handled; contradict in the pulpit what they assert in the desk, they are frowned on by Bishops, despised by the clergy around them, and hated by all the worldly part of their parish, until at length the powerful convictions of an enlightened conscience force them to deliver their souls by fleeing out of Babylon.

But I am told that the Church of England is the only true church; that she derives her sacraments and ministers in a direct, uninterrupted line from the apostles, and that to secede from her is to be guilty of schism. But where are the outward marks of this only true church? Where are the ‘signs’ of these successors of the apostles, as ‘wrought among us in all patience, in signs and wonders, and mighty deeds’? (2 Cor. 12:12). Are they to be found in lordly Bishops, proud and pampered dignitaries, fox-hunting, shooting, dancing, and card-playing clergy? Or are they to be discovered in those mere moral and outwardly decent ministers, who, after their solemn vow ‘to lay aside the study of the world and the flesh’, busy themselves in classics, mathematics, history, modern languages, natural philosophy, divinity, and everything and anything but to know Christ in their own souls?

Where are the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit visible in men, who, not being able to utter a word but what is written down, either copy their sermons from books, or forge out of their own heads a weekly lecture on stale morality? Where are the seals of their commission, whereby they ‘approve themselves as ministers of God, by pureness, by knowledge, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left’? (2 Cor. 6 : 6, 7).

But, perhaps, these outward marks of the successors of the apostles may be discovered in the Evangelical clergy, by some esteemed so highly. What are these, however, as a body, now generally doing but making common cause with the worldly clergy, whom in their hearts they consider to be neither Christians nor ministers, to uphold an unholy system? They are for the most part compounding their sermons out of Simeon’s dry and marrowless ‘Outlines’, looking out for preferment, buying and selling livings, training up their unregenerate sons for the ministry, and ‘putting them into the priest’s office that they may eat a piece of bread’.

Who among them can give a clear and decisive account of his call by grace, or of his call to the ministry? What description can they give of the entrance of the law into their conscience, bringing with it guilt, condemnation, and death, and of a deliverance by the inward revelation of Christ and the

application of the 'blood of sprinkling'? The greater part are violently opposed to the fundamental doctrines of unconditional election, particular redemption, imputed righteousness, and man's helplessness. And those who do set forth the doctrines of free and sovereign grace preach them with such dryness and deadness as clearly show that they were never wrought into their experience by the blessed Spirit. Under their ministry the 'spiritual children' of God will not sit; for knowing little or nothing of the work of regeneration, and the trials, temptations, or consolations of the people of Christ, they cannot approve themselves to the consciences of the spiritual, either as called by grace or as sent to preach the gospel.

Thus, with perhaps a few and rare exceptions, the Clergy of the Church of England, whether Orthodox or Evangelical, correspond to that description given by the Holy Spirit, Micah 3: 11: "Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money. Yet they lean upon the Lord and say—Is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us."

And need we wonder if, as is the priest, so is the people? The congregation of the High church, or Orthodox clergy, as they proudly call themselves, consists, with possibly a few exceptions, of none but open sinners, self-righteous pharisees, and dead formalists. In this 'congregation of the dead' the blind lead the blind, and all their weekly confessions, absolutions, prayers, praises, services, and sacraments are, as they will one day find, but one continual mockery of the blessed God, who requires of His worshipers that they 'should worship Him in spirit and in truth'.

Of those who sit under the ministry of the Evangelical clergy, the greater part in no wise differ from 'the congregation of the dead' described above, being attracted there by the superstitious charm of the Parish Church. Of the remaining part, there may be a few seeking souls who range over these barren heaths, until fairly driven from them by starvation, or brought off by tasting the green pastures and still waters of gospel grace under an experimental minister. The rest are mere formalists, with an evangelical creed in their heads, but without any grace in their hearts; or, if the minister be a high Calvinist, such 'twice dead' doctrinal professors as never felt the plague of their own hearts, never had their consciences ploughed up by the law, never loathed themselves in their own sight, and were never 'plunged in the ditch until their own clothes abhorred them'.

Humble, lowly, contrite souls, who are deeply acquainted with the workings of grace and of corruption, whose consciences have been made tender, and who have landmarks of the dealings of God with them, cannot long continue where they have fellowship with neither minister nor people. And, indeed, so opposed is the whole principle and practice of the Church of England to the work of grace upon the souls of the elect, and 'to simplicity and godly sincerity', that a minister, who is not a hypocrite or a formalist, must, when he has reached a certain point in Christian experience, either flee out of her or awfully sin against the convictions of his own conscience. He may remain in her as a presumptuous dead Calvinist; he may take the highest tone of doctrine, and preach Sunday after Sunday about assurance of personal salvation; but if once he describes the work of the Spirit on the soul he must, at a certain point, either come out of her or, by remaining contentedly within her pale, manifest himself a hypocrite in experience, of all hypocrites and of all hypocrisies the most deceiving and the most dreadful.

Can a man, for instance, who has known the work of regeneration in his own soul, and whose conscience is made tender by the blessed Spirit, go on long to lie unto God by thanking Him for regenerating infants? Can he who has been sprinkled with the blood of Christ, and been fed with His flesh, continue long to give the elements of His body and blood to the unbeliever, the self righteous, and the ungodly? Can he who has tasted the covenant of grace, and experimentally entered into the everlasting distinction between the sheep and the goats, go on long to mock God by declaring at the

grave's mouth of every departed unbeliever, swearer, and drunkard, that he is a 'brother', and is 'taken to be with God'?

Notions in the head, however correct, doctrines, however high, a presumptuous confidence of salvation, however loud and lofty, may allow a man thus to trifle with the living JEHOVAH. But a tender conscience, a godly fear, and a trembling sense of God's holiness and majesty, such as the blessed Spirit works in the soul, must sooner or later bring a man out of this dreadful mockery.

From this worldly and unholy system I now SECEDE; and blessed be the name of God Most High, who has poured light on my eyes to see these abominations, and given me, I trust, a small portion of that faith of Moses whereby 'he was willing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season'. For sooner far would I die in a workhouse, under the sweet shinings-in of the eternal Comforter, and His testimony to my conscience that I am born of God, than live and die in ease and independence, without following Jesus in that path of trial and suffering which alone leads to eternal life.

But my long relationship with yourself, as Head of Worcester College, and with my brother Fellows, will not allow me thus to dissolve my connection with you without faithfully WARNING both you and them of your present state before God. What marks, then, are there in you, or them, of that new birth, without which none can enter the kingdom of heaven? What signs have you, or they, of a broken and contrite spirit? What marks of 'the faith of God's elect'? What inward discoveries have you, or they, had of the blood and righteousness of Christ? What testimony of the blessed Spirit to the pardon of your sins, and to your adoption into the family of God? 'If any man has not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His', though a sound classic, an acute mathematician, or a learned divine. And to have been professed ministers of Jesus Christ will only add to your condemnation, if you and they live and die in your present state of unbelief and unregeneracy.

I am weak and ignorant, full of sin and compassed with infirmity, but I bless God that He has in some measure shown me the power of eternal things, and by free and sovereign grace stopped me in that career of vanity and sin in which, to all outward appearance, I was fast hurrying down to the chambers of death.

With all due respect to you as Provost of Worcester College,

Yours faithfully,

J. C. Philpot