

## Equality and Simplicity

extract from Proposition XV § ii

§ ii. . . . Before I begin a particular discussion of these six affirmations, I shall first outline some general considerations to prevent all mistakes, and then add some other considerations which apply to all six. I do not want anyone to think that we intend to destroy the mutual relation between king and people, master<sup>1</sup> and servants, parents and children; not at all. We will give proof that our principle in these matters has no such tendency, and that it establishes the ground for these natural relationships rather than doing damage to them in any way. Next, no one should think that our opinion in these matters implies any necessity of leveling,<sup>2</sup> nor that all people must hold their property in common. Our principle leaves everyone to peacefully enjoy what his own industry or his parents have purchased for him; it tells him to use his possessions properly, for his own good and that of his brethren, and all to the glory of God. In this matter his actions should be voluntary and unconstrained.

Furthermore, we do not say that no one can use the things of this world more or less than anyone else. We know that it has pleased God to distribute the creation in different ways, giving some people more and others less, for each to use it according to what they have. The different circumstances in which people live and their corresponding education and training show that this is true: the servant is

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<sup>1</sup> Or employer.

<sup>2</sup> Latin: *reducendi omnes cum bonis suis in æqualitatem, aut communiae omnia habendi*, “reducing everyone and their property to equality, or having everything in common.” During the English Civil War, there was a movement called the Levellers, who did advocate doing away with all social distinctions and private property.

not brought up in the same way as the master; nor the tenant like the landlord, nor the rich like the poor, nor the prince like the peasant. It is not lawful for anyone, no matter what abundance they may have or how they were brought up, to use things that are merely superfluous. Yet seeing that their upbringing has accustomed them to it, and their resources enable them to do it without being profuse or extravagant, they may use a better quality of things than people whose upbringing has not accustomed them to such things, and whose resources are not sufficient. It is beyond question that everything the creation provides is for human use, and the moderate use of these things is lawful, yet according to circumstances they may be lawful for some and not for others. For example, someone who because of his resources and upbringing has been accustomed to eat meat and drink wine, and to be clothed with the finest wool may do these things if his finances will support it and he doesn't do these things in superfluity or immoderately.<sup>3</sup> If he tried to eat or dress himself the way peasants do, perhaps it might injure the health of his body without benefit to his soul. But if someone whose resources and upbringing had accustomed him to coarser food and clothing tried to stretch himself beyond his means or beyond what he was used to, even though this negatively affected his family and children, no doubt it would be unlawful for him. . . .

The safe way is for those who have abundance to take care that they use it moderately and avoid all superfluities, and that they are willing, as far as they can, to help out those to whom Providence has given a smaller portion. Let the brother of high degree rejoice when he is brought low, and let those whom God has placed in low degree be content with their condition and not envy the brothers who have greater abundance, knowing that they have received

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<sup>3</sup> This describes Barclay's own privileged circumstances.

abundance in the inward man, which is the most important thing. . . .

Having said these things, I would seriously propose this to everyone who wishes to be a real Christian, in *nature* and not only in *name*: that it would be desirable and it would greatly contribute to the good opinion of Christianity and to the increase of the life and virtue of Christ, if all superfluous titles of honor, profuseness in food and clothing, and excess of gaming, sporting, and playing were laid aside. Those who abandon these things live more like the disciples and apostles of Christ, and are nearer their example than those who continue in these excesses. Would laying these things aside prevent anyone from being a good Christian? Would not Christians be better without them than with them?

Sources: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition XV § ii (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 433-434 and Roberti Barclaii, *Teologiae verè Christianae apologia*, facsimile (Amsterdam: Jacob Claus, 1676) pp. 334-335.