

THE WORKS OF
JOHN WITHERSPOON

VOLUME IV

Divinity, Education, and Public Life

John Witherspoon

Annotated Edition



Ligature

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PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

John Witherspoon (1723–1794) was a Presbyterian minister, educator, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and president of the College of New Jersey. His work joined theology, education, church leadership, political thought, and public service in the early United States.

This volume follows Volume IV of the revised Philadelphia edition of 1802. It contains lectures on divinity, letters on education and marriage, ecclesiastical speeches, and political and economic writings. It closes with Witherspoon's American public writings and *The Druid*. The 1802 edition governs the order and titles.

Ligature collated every page against the Princeton copy and completed a second visual proof against the Harvard copy. The Harvard copy omits printed pages 286–288. The Philadelphia first edition of 1801 confirmed that passage.

This is a faithful reading edition. It preserves Witherspoon's words, spelling, sentence order, paragraph order, headings, and source notes. It removes running heads, printed page numbers, signatures, publisher advertisements, the subscriber list, and other production matter. It rejoins words divided at page and line endings. It uses modern quotation marks, apostrophes, spacing, Bible-book abbreviations, and Arabic Scripture chapter numbers.

Numbered footnotes reproduce notes from a source edition. Notes introduced by "Editor's note" identify a person, define an obsolete term, or supply needed historical context. They do not recast Witherspoon's doctrine.

The historical conversations identify the main disputes behind the works. The annotated source guide identifies books, writers, and movements named or clearly implied in the volume. The Scripture Index identifies explicit Bible references and their pages in this edition.

—The Editors
Ligature Press

LECTURES ON DIVINITY



LECTURE I

It is a very agreeable thing to see a number of young persons determined to apply themselves to the study of divinity. We must charitably hope that they are actuated by the noblest principles; that they are resolved to devote their life and talents to the service of Christ in the gospel. He is a good Master; his service is liberty. They have not any flattering prospect of an illustrious or opulent state; but they may have in that office the greatest inward consolation, and very commonly more serenity and peace, and as much of the real and desirable enjoyment of this life, as any class of men whatever.

It is altogether agreeable to the design of this institution, to have young men of piety and ability fitted for the public services of the churches. This was the very point in view with the worthy founders of this seminary, some of whom are yet alive; and as there was never, perhaps, any seminary, the support of which was more the effect of faith and dependance upon God, so it is to be hoped that he will honour many of the youth brought up in it, with employment in his vineyard and success in his service.

If I may be allowed to say any thing personal, I incline to add, that it is peculiarly agreeable to me. Nothing would give me a higher pleasure, than being instrumental in furnishing the minds and improving the talents of those who may hereafter be the ministers of the everlasting gospel. The hope of it is, indeed, the chief comfort in my present station. Notwithstanding the many encouraging circumstances that have happened since my arrival here, and the evident smiles of Providence upon the college, yet I confess I have often regretted the want of a pastoral charge. After having been for twenty three years constantly employed in preaching the gospel to a numerous, obedient, and affectionate people, to be employed in a way of life so considerably different, must have created some uneasiness. Just figure to yourselves, one that had been so long accustomed to preach to a crowded audience of from twelve to fifteen hundred souls every day, and all subject to my private oversight and discipline; now to have such a thin and negligent assembly, and mostly composed of those who think themselves under no obligation to attend but when they please. In such a situation the sphere of usefulness seems to be greatly narrowed; but if I am made instrumental in sending out faithful labourers into the harvest, it will be an ample recompence; for as one of great zeal and discernment expressed himself to me in Britain: "You will be greatly mortified to see the difference between a small country society in America, and a large city congregation in Scotland; but

if you be instrumental in sending out ministers of the New Testament, it will be a still more important station, for every gownsmen is a legion.”

In this preliminary discourse, what I chiefly mean is to repeat, and endeavour to bring you to enter into the great and leading view which you ought to have in your studies, and which I desire to have still before my eyes in teaching. This may be expressed in one sentence: to unite together piety and literature—to shew their relation to, and their influence one upon another—and to guard against any thing that may tend to separate them, and set them in opposition one to another. This is of more consequence, and indeed of more difficulty than perhaps you will as yet be able to apprehend; experience, however, has taught me to view it in a most important light. Some persons truly, and perhaps eminently pious, from an inward conviction that religion is better than all the learning in the world; and perhaps observing that ill-principled persons, the more learning they have, are the more dangerous to the truth—have come to despise learning itself, as if the natural talent was to blame for the moral depravity. Of those who profess religion, some also, from a forward zeal, are impatient to begin the ministry before they are fitted for the charge.

Such persons are often quite insensible to the hurt they do to the interest of religion, and how much they injure the truths of God by their manner of handling them. On the other hand, there are some who promised very well in early life, but applying with vigor and success to their studies, became too much enamoured with human wisdom, and thought themselves such great scholars that they were too proud to be Christians. Intellectual pride is perhaps as dangerous a distemper as any we are liable to. I have often thought that great natural abilities, and great acquired knowledge, operate as a temptation, in a way similar to great wealth or external property; they are apt to intoxicate the mind, to produce self sufficiency and contempt of others, and to take away from that humility which is the greatest beauty, or, if the expression be proper, the real glory of a Christian. I would therefore begin, by earnestly beseeching you to keep clear views of the importance both of piety and literature, and never suffer them to be divided. Piety, without literature, is but little profitable; and learning, without piety, is pernicious to others, and ruinous to the possessor. Religion is the grand concern to us all, as we are men; whatever be our calling and profession, the salvation of our souls is the one thing needful. It is however further, and essentially necessary for a minister. I do not mean that it is necessary to the being of a minister in the visible church, or to the efficacy of the ordinances of the gospel to those who receive them. This is, properly speaking, a

popish tenet, against which there is a question in the Shorter Catechism expressly levelled: "How do the sacraments become effectual to salvation? The sacraments (and it must be equally true of every other ordinance) become effectual to salvation," &c. Some weak enthusiasts have gone into this mistake, and have said it is as impossible for an unconverted minister to convert a soul, as for a dead man to beget a living child. A similitude is no argument at all, properly speaking, but only an illustration, if the thing itself be just. In this case it is wholly misapplied; for it is neither the converted nor the unconverted minister that converts the soul, but the power of omnipotent grace, by any means that the God of grace sees proper to employ. But, on the other hand, this takes nothing away from the necessity of religion in a minister, when properly understood. It is certainly necessary, in the most absolute sense, to the faithful discharge of a minister's trust; and for the same reason, it is of the greatest importance to his success. True religion seems to give a man that knowledge which is proper for a minister to direct and turn into its proper channel the knowledge he may otherwise acquire. It seems necessary to make a minister active and diligent, upright and impartial, happy and successful.

On this subject, I must give you the following particular advices:

I. Do not content yourselves barely with sound principles, much less turn religion into controversy, but seek for inward vital comfort, to know in whom you have believed, and endeavour after the greatest strictness and tenderness of practice. When I desire you to look for inward vital comfort, I do not mean that you should wholly suspend your preparations for the ministry, or immediately lay aside thoughts of it, because you have not all that clearness and satisfaction concerning your own state, that you should both desire and endeavour to attain. There is hardly any principle so good, or any so clear, but it is within the reach of temptations, and capable of being perverted. Some being deeply convinced that it is a dreadful thing to preach an unknown Saviour, and not seeing reason to be wholly satisfied with themselves, have been thrown into doubts, and embarrassed with scruples, and have given up wholly that sacred office, to which they seemed both inclined and called; this seems to be taking a very unhappy, and a very blameable course. If such fears had excited them to give all diligence to make their calling and election sure, they would have been properly improved. But laying aside the thoughts of the ministry only on this account, seems to carry in it a supposition, that they either do not intend, or do not hope ever to be better. It is certainly to the public a much greater calamity that there should be a bad minister, than a bad man of some other profession; but to the person himself, if he die in an unrenewed state,

it will bring but little comfort. I would have you upon this subject to observe, that real Christians have very different degrees of comfort, and that if we examine the sacred oracles with care and accuracy, we shall find that what is termed assurance, is just the grace of hope in lively exercise. It is called the assurance of hope, Heb. 6:11, as well as elsewhere, and as every real believer has some degree of hope, which makes him rest and rely on Christ alone for salvation, as he is offered in the gospel, so perhaps there are not very many who have such a degree of steady and firm assurance as to exclude all doubting. I know there are some that have taken it up as a principle, and make assurance, even in this reflex sense, the essence of faith; but when it comes to experience, except the phraseology itself, I do not find they differ much from others.

I mentioned to you particularly, strictness and tenderness of practice. This is of the utmost moment, as the fruit and evidence of real religion. All principles are valuable but as they produce practice. But to explain strictness and tenderness of practice a little, observe, that the expression of tenderness is borrowed from that passage of Scripture found in 2 Kings 22:19, 2 Chron. xxxiv. 27. where of Josiah it is said, “because thine heart was tender,” &c.; it signifies a heart easily susceptible of conviction, and obedient to reproof. When this is applied to the carriage of one devoted to the service of the ministry, I think it implies, 1. The strictest watchfulness to discover sin and duty, and a disposition to obey the dictates of conscience with respect to both. 2. A concern to avoid, not only what is in itself directly and certainly sinful, but whatever is but doubtful, according to the apostolic doctrine, “he that doubteth,” &c. 3. A willingness to abstain from lawful things, if liable to exception, or likely to be matter of offence.

II. A second advice I would give you upon this subject is, that you should remember the importance of the exercises of piety, and the duties of the closet. As there are no forms of prayer with us, the habit of closet devotion is necessary to give a minister fulness, propriety, and fervency in prayer. This for his own sake also he should attend to; for it is necessary to the preservation and improvement of the spiritual life. Pray without ceasing, says the apostle; intimating that the very spirit and temper of a believer should be that of dependance upon God, and deriving by faith from him every necessary supply. In order to recommend it particularly to you, I would observe that it is peculiarly necessary to be begun in early life; perhaps there are few, if any instances of persons coming to a greater degree of fervour in devotion, or attention to the duty of it, in advanced years, than they had in youth. There are

many particulars in which an aged, if a real Christian, will insensibly improve: he will improve in meekness and humility, in prudence and judgment, in attention to Providence, in purity of principle, in submission to the divine will; but fervour in devotion must be begun early, while the passions are strong, and continued by the power of reason and habit. Perhaps you may think it of small moment, yet some very judicious and experienced Christians have given it as a rule upon this subject, to be strictly punctual and regular in point of time, and even place.

- III. Early fix, and study under the influence of those principles which should animate all your future labours, a concern for the glory of God, and love for the souls of men. If these are the principles of study, they will keep you from mistaking the way, and having taken early and deep root, they will bring forth fruit more abundantly in after life. Living by faith is extremely proper for cultivating these principles. Keeping the whole system of revealed truth in view, will shew its moment; and particularly what is revealed concerning the eternal condition of men, cannot fail to fill us with a concern for their welfare.
- IV. Be diligent to acquire every necessary qualification, and yet study self-denial in the use of them. This is one of the most important, and, at the same time, one of the most difficult attainments. It is comparatively easy to avoid vain glory, if at the same time we indulge in sloth and negligence. But to meditate upon these things, to give ourselves wholly to them, for the glory of God and the good of souls, without having it in view to serve ourselves, this is real excellence, and here lies the greatest difficulty. Form yourselves to a true taste and real knowledge; let your capacity want no improvement that it may be more useful, but beware of studying only to shine.
- V. Lastly, guard against the temptation that is most incident to your state and situation, particularly making the exercises of piety and the ordinances of the gospel, matter of science and criticism, rather than the means of edification. When students begin to learn how things ought to be done, they are apt at all times to be passing their judgment of the manner, instead of improving the matter of public instruction; not that it is possible to be wholly inattentive to this, but let it not carry you so much away, as to hinder your teaching others as humble Christians, as well as discoursing to them as able ministers.

