

EZRA BARKER TO SOLOMON WARRINER, JR., WILBRAHAM, AUGUST 8, 1780

Transcribed by Prof. Ross W. Beales, Jr.

Sir -

A few sabbaths past I was very early at the Meeting House. Soon after I arrived, one Informed me that it was proposed to spend part of the Intermission Season at noon in the exercise of singing of Psalms. My heart rejoiced at the tidings, provided it might be performed with a Religious design, and in a decent manner. I was in hopes it might serve greatly to prevent a great deal of needless, (and I may venture to say wicked) conversation on Sabbath-day noons, which is too much the practice in this degenerate day, Alas!--I waited awhile after the forenoon exercise was over, and seeing no motion made toward the proposed singing, I did not know but the report I received in the morning was a mistake. But just before the time of the afternoon exercise as I sat on my seat abroad at the east side of the Meeting House, I heard the sounding of Notes within the House. I suddenly arose meaning to join in that desirable exercise of singing of Praise to our Maker and Redeemer. But as I was almost stepping into the House, my Heart sunk within me finding myself disappointed, for I soon perceived that I could have no part or lot in the matter, unless it were to be amused only with sounds of some new adopted Tune, at the same time my Understanding remained unfruitfull for want of knowing the matter sung. I soon returned to the seat from whence I arose, thinking it more my duty to Meditate upon the sermon delivered in the forenoon, than to attend upon such a method of carrying an end on the Holy Sabbath day--But to my grief I speak it, Just so of late in the Time of our Social Worship, I, and more than three quarters of a large congregation are deprived of bearing a part in that solemn Worship viz.--that part of singing Gods praise, and all for want of having the Psalm read line by line. Perhaps the reply may be, They do so in other places, and people should bring books. Answer--We may not follow a multitude to do evil, and it is impossible for all to get Books; and if all had Books, they could not all be benefitted by them, some being old and dim-sighted, others young and not versed enough in reading to keep pace while singing, yet each and all of so competent an understanding as to be edified if they would be faithfull to attend, and could be favoured with having each line read. It is true some have not voices to sing, but it is our duty to sing in Heart with the Understanding as well as with our voices if we would find acceptance with our God. I think each one of the Assembly ought to have the Priviledge of joining in such manner as they are capable. This I presume no serious person will deny. Upon the whole, the way and manner of singing in our Assembly of late, is highly inconsistant with social worship, nor do I think it agreable to the Institution, or acceptable in the sight of God. Besides, some of the Tunes made use of are so airy and lite that one at a distance would be apt to imagine that a merry company had got together for singing and Dancing, they being in no way adapted to the gravity of the verse. This was a thing which much grieved good Dea Warriner and caused him to take his hat and go out several times. But to return to singing without reading, when I consider how many are deprived of bearing their part, I cannot but be of Opinion (and I am not alone in the Opinion) that it would in some good measure be as justifiable for our ministers to set up Preaching & Praying in the Latin or some unknown tongue, as to sing without reading. In that case we might be entertained with a smooth voice, but our understanding remain barren & unfruitful--Upon the whole the Practice is not Right let who will recommend it, or encourage it. We have been wont to cry out against Separates, but this I think is a new way of separating. And

I could wish it may not too much resemble an abomination which will bring on a Desolation-- And were it not that I am so exceedingly pleased and entertained with the performances from the pulpit each sabbath, I should be almost tempted to tarry at home, and read my Bible.

As to singing at noon betwix meetings I would not be understood to disapprove of it entirely, but should be glad to have it performed differently viz--to being a little sooner and let the Psalm be read line by line while singing. If a little christian conversation were added, doubtless it might be profitable, the whole performed with seriousness, having a single eye to the glory of God, & mutual edification, the whole completed and finished before the minister comes in for the afternoon exercise. But how grating think ye it must be to a serious mind, to observe a long Intermission spent away in conversation about the world & anything that comes uppermost (and upon Gods Holy Sabbath day too) and just before afternoon service slip into God's House and go to singing and continue some time after the Minister is come; at the same time the bigger part only amused with a noise--I dont say what this resembles. But this I will venture to say; that I wish that we all could avoid worldly conversation more than is practiced at this day—

But before I close, I cannot but make some remarks upon what I and some others have observed for several years past. To pass over many things which ought to be lamented, such as sabbath-breaking, extortion, profane speaking, &c &c &c The following hath been taken notice of viz--A running into new modes & novels not only in Dress, but in the performance of Divine Worship; such as singers sitting together out of their proper place according to decency--often shifting of Tunes, throwing by good old grave & solid Tunes, for new and more airy & light merry Tunes, &c. So that by little & little that part of the worship is performed but by a few. These things have been remarked as a sure sign that religion was going to decay. While these things have increased, Pure Gospel Religion hath abundantly decreased. It not only happens in this town, but in towns all around us, and unless a speedy and universal Reformation takes place, we may not expect that Gods Publick Judgments will be taken away. If war should cease, God hath other Judgments in store to punish a wicked & backsliding people. According to what we read we have great reason to fear that unless we are Reformed we shall be destroyed.

The reason of my directing this to you Sr, is because I understand you at present give the lead to the singing--and as I think I sincerely desire that our Publick Worship might be performed to the Honour and Glory of God, and our mutual edification, so I hope you will accept it as wrote with that design. You are at Liberty in a prudent way to communicate it to any whom it may more immediately concern. Perhaps some may make lite of it, and misimprove it; they must answer for that and not I.

Inasmuch as I have for a number of years had the care of youth & children under my instruction I write the more freely. And yourself being one of the number, you may remember as well as all others whom I have instructed can testify, that I have not only industriously endeavoured to learn you the art of Reading, but also have endeavoured to instil good Principles as your abilities would admit, and to teach each one his duty both toward God & man. And I cannot but have a peculiar regard for every one I have had the charge of. And I think my heart would rejoice to have a general Reformation take place in this Town and especially among our young men and women and children. If we could be blessed with the outpourings of God's Spirit

in such abundance as I have been evidence to in some Towns since my remembrance, I say if this could be our happy case, the cry among us would not be, how did you like the new tune to-day, but the cry would be, Men & Brethren, what must I do to be saved.

My Friend, What if you should endeavour to promote & set up a meeting for Prayer among those of your age about once a week or once a Fortnight--Who knows but God might hear & pour out of his Spirit and cause a stirring among the dry bones. I am persuaded that we should in that case be less carried away with modes & outward ceremonies in Worship, and be more concerned to be Born again, to become new creatures, to get our peace made with God, to get an Interest in the merits of Jesus Christ, to be made holy & heart & life, and be made meet for an inheritance with the saints in light, where we may ever sing praise to Him who sitteth on the Throne, and shall stand in no need of these modes & ceremonies for our assistance, and where Jargon & Discord will never be permitted to enter--Amen. I have run out to a greater length than I designed when I began--if it shall prove beneficial I shall not repent--this I must leave to Him who alonce [*sic*] can give a blessing.--I subscribe your real Friend

Ezra Barker

Wilbraham, Aug^t 8th 1780

Religion governed by fashion, is not true Religion.

When the Tune chiefly is aimed at, and the matter sung disregarded, we become guilty of Idolatry.

In Prov. 24, 21 I read, My son fear thou the Lord and meddle not with them that are given to change.