

# Non-Collegiate Studies, 1779.

A Letter from Robert Burnside to Dr. Samuel Stennett.

Aberdeen, Decr. 23., 1779.

REVD. SIR,

Some weeks have now elapsed since I proposed to pay my respects to you; but by one thing or other I have hitherto been prevented. However an opportunity now offers itself which I gladly embrace. And I shall without further preface proceed to inform you of what I have been doing since the last time I was favored with your company and conversation.

I have endeavoured with the most scrupulous exactness to pursue that course of study which you prescribed me with regard both to Composition and the Authors you recommended for my entertainment and profit. My doors are shut against all Expositions and Commentaries except Dr. Doddridge's *Paraphrase* and Poole's *Annotations*, neither of which I have been able as yet to procure. So that I have no other mean of discovering the sense of Scripture than comparing one Text with another and making it its own Interpreter. This practice requires much time and application, and prevents my advancing so fast as I could wish. It costs me so much labour to explain the Text and Context, to invent matter, to dispose my materials in a proper order, and to express my ideas that with all my attention and diligence I am only composing the third sermon since my arrival. I attempted several Expositions chiefly of passages out of ye Epistles, but, after having wasted a great deal of time about them, and well-nigh exhausted my Spirits, have been obliged to give them over. There appears to be much greater difficulty in explaining the Epistles than I formerly apprehended. When the Apostle Paul adduces proofs in favour of any doctrine, he brings other proofs to strengthen these &c: By which means the parts of the Epistles are so closely connected with and dependant upon each other, that it is no easy matter to take a part for the subject of an exposition without explaining the whole. Again, it often happens that I do not see y<sup>e</sup>. connection between one verse and another, or how the one proves the other which yet is intimated by the causal Particle (For). And, to add no more, the members of sentences, or the sentences themselves, are not always disposed agreeably to our notions of order and regularity, what was said in one member or sentence being repeated with some little variation in another, which whenever

it happens breeds some sort of confusion, and increases the difficulty of analysing them. These are the principal reasons why I have not succeeded better in analytical discourses.

The third kind of exercise which you recommended to me was Essays, in which I find as great if not greater difficulties than in the other two. The reason is that I am more intimately acquainted with the Doctrines and Duties of Religion than with those things which are the proper subjects of Essays. But this and the other difficulties will I hope decrease as I improve in knowledge.

I am sometimes very much distressed on account of the little Progress I make, at which seasons Religion greatly supports my mind. The same Providence which began will I hope complete his own Work.

You will excuse my freedom in troubling you with my difficulties. You have in some measure drawn the trouble upon yourself; for by your past kindness to me you have given incontestable proof that no earthly friend more heartily wishes my welfare or is more able to promote it than yourself.

I am abridging Mr. Grove, and Dr. Ward agreeably to your advice.

Dr. Clarke's argument *a priori* in proof of the existence of a Deity has cost me a great deal of time and labour. I will endeavour to give you my idea of it. In the former propositions he proves an absurdity from supposing that there is no independant and immutable Being. Such a Being then exists of necessity i.e. We must either believe his existence, or admit an absurdity. But it is one thing for my belief to be necessary, and another for his existence to be necessary. When I see two ideas evidently to agree I am necessitated to believe their agreement, but that necessity which is the cause why I believe their agreement ought not to be assigned as the cause of their agreement. And yet Dr. Clarke seems to have done this in the present case, when he asserts necessity to be the cause why the supreme Being does exist rather than does not exist, whereas it is in truth no more than the cause why we believe his existence. Professor McLeod seems to have much the same idea of this argument as I have, for when I mentioned it to him he replied that that necessity regarded us and not the Supreme Being. If this be all that the argument *a priori* amounts to, I do not see wherein it differs from an argument *a posteriori*.

I thought to have said something concerning Mr. Locke's notion of Free-Will, but the limits of my paper will not allow me.

I have been enquiring after a Boarding-house for Mas<sup>r</sup>. Stennett. From the character Mrs. Cruddie gives me of the Seceders I am apt to believe that there is a great deal of

enthusiasm among them, and were it possible to find one fit for your purpose respecting Religion, none of them keeps boarders; for there is but one boarding-house in all the town. Mrs. Cruddie informs me of a Minister's Widow, a very pious gentlewoman who keeps boarders in the New-town, and takes none but sober youths. If this gentlewoman would remove to the old-town, she seems to be the most likely to answer your purpose. But it will be very inconvenient for Mas<sup>r</sup> Stennett to walk the distance between ye Towns backwards and forwards to the College three times every day. If I may presume to give my opinion, I should think it would be best for him to board in a moral though not religious Family in the old-town, and on Sabbath-day, or whenever he has an opportunity to go over to the new-town and visit Mrs. Cruddie or any other religious person. I am very sorry that my enquiries turn out so little to your satisfaction, but really there is little prospect of procuring what you wish for in the old-town. I will however continue to enquire, and, if I meet with better success, shall be happy to let you know.

I am,

Sir,

With great respect,

Your much obliged

and humble Serv<sup>t</sup>.

ROBT. BURNSIDE.

P.S.—Please to present my best Resp<sup>ts</sup>. to M<sup>dm</sup>. &c: and my duty to my Parents &c:

To, The Revd. Dr. Stennett,  
to the care of Mr. John Burnside,  
Palmer's Rents, Snow's Fields,  
Borough, London.