Journal of
Scottish Thought

1495 ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

A Failed Utopia: John Witherspoon's *History of a Corporation of Servants*

Euan D. C. Gorrie
HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
euandcgorrie@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Using Witherspoon's published works while in Scotland, the article analyses his growing pessimism about the state of virtue in the Church of Scotland and wider society. From the witty Ecclesiastical Characteristics to the bitter and self-pitying History of a Corporation Servants, it looks at his criticisms of the Moderates, charts his disengagement from the Church, and casts light on his decision to emigrate in 1768.

A. Spring time in America

> Some have observed that true religion, and in her train dominion, riches, literature, and arts, have taken their course in a slow and gradual manner, from east to west since the earth was settled after the flood, and from thence forebode the future glory of America. I leave this as a matter rather of conjecture than certainty, but observe that if your cause is just, if your principles are pure, and if your conduct is prudent you need not fear the multitude of opposing hosts.[1]

John Witherspoon (1723–1794) directed this reassurance to his congregation at Princeton on 17 May, 1776 in his *The Dominion of Providence* sermon. That true religion, together with wealth and civilisation, had moved from from east to west, and that America had a glorious future, was the confirmation his congregation wanted to hear. Witherspoon was addressing himself as much as the congregation and a wider American audience. Throughout his time as a minister in Scotland, and then in America, his cause was just, his principles were pure, and

[1] John Witherspoon, *The dominion of Providence over the passions of men. A sermon preached at Princeton, on the 17th of May, 1776. Being the general fast appointed by the Congress through the United Colonies. To which is added, an address to the natives of Scotland residing in America* (Philadelphia, 1776), 39.

https://doi.org/10.57132/jst.377

his conduct was prudent. His move to America, like the cause of independence, was directed by Providence. He had no need to fear the multitude of opposing hosts.

While in Scotland, Witherspoon had mused on the adverse effect of a prolonged period of peace and prosperity on church and society, of the 'spiritual slumber' which had taken over in Scotland.[2] In contrast, America, 'a rich and valuable soil, and an extensive country' was for Witherspoon, as for so many Scots over the years, a land pregnant with hope and opportunity.[3] The American States will become 'numerous, powerful, and opulent.'[4] America was youthful, vigorous, and growing, it was 'spring' in America: 'a country newly planted … affords the highest delight to a contemplative philosopher, and is … the strongest invitation to activity and usefulness.'[5]

But America was also a moral and religious project, a land of refuge for previous generations escaping 'from the rage of ecclesiastical tyranny'.[6] At the head of the College of New Jersey, an important educational establishment, Witherspoon was well placed to aid the spread of true religion, of real virtue for the salvation of the individual and the benefit of the whole society. Jeffry Hays Morrison argued that in America Witherspoon continued to preach 'the public interest of religion', under which everyone had a duty to act against impiety and vice, an individual's religious belief was necessary for virtue and that virtue was required for liberty.[7] Religious virtue, ignored or corrupted in Scotland, had put down roots in America, and Witherspoon saw an opportunity, but also an obligation, to be useful and nurture it.

In contrast to the opportunities provided by a 'country newly planted', this essay examines Witherspoon's souring view of The Church of Scotland, and his place in it, through his published works while in Scotland. It considers his mounting frustration as his warnings of corruption (inappropriate behaviour, lax discipline, doctrinal and theological failings) in the Church and Society were ignored, and his route to greater prominence and influence was blocked.[8] It

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2 John Witherspoon, 'Ministerial Fidelity in Declaring the Whole Counsel of God', in *Sermons on practical subjects: To which is added, a farewel [sic] discourse, delivered at Paisley in April and May 1768* (Glasgow, 1768), 285.

3 John Witherspoon, 'An Address to the Natives of Scotland residing in America' (1776), attached to *Dominion of Providence*, 65–6.

4 Witherspoon, 'Address', 69 and 73.

5 John Witherspoon, 'Druid 1', in *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon* (Virginia, 2004), 9 vols., (WJW 2004), vol. 8, 199.

6 John Witherspoon, 'The Absolute Necessity of Salvation Through Christ' (1758), in *The works of the Rev. John Witherspoon, D.D. L.L.D. late president of the college, at Princeton New-Jersey.* In three volumes (Philadelphia, 1800) (WJW 1800), vol. [1], 284.

7 Jeffry Hays Morrison, 'John Witherspoon and "The Public Interest of Religion"', *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 41 No. 3 (Summer 1999), 563.

8 Witherspoon's colleague in the Glasgow Synod William Thom minister at Govan identified corruption and decay in Scotland's upper classes and landowners and recommended emigration to America where true religion, harmony and prosperity could be found–see, Ned C. Landsman, 'Witherspoon and the Problem of Provincial Identity' in Richard Sher and J. Jeffrey Smitten (eds), *Scotland & America in the Age of the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1990), 39.

traces his increasing disillusionment by looking in particular at the change in Witherspoon's tone and language from the witty and controlled satire of *The Ecclesiastical Characteristics* (1753), his best known Scottish work, to the more bitter, pessimistic vision of *The History of a Corporation of Servants* (1765).[9] What does this change reveal about his state of mind in the period leading up to his emigration in 1768? How does this fit with Ronald Lyndsay Crawford's argument that legal and reputational issues were a factor in his decision to emigrate?[10]

Witherspoon's thought, like his career, is often portrayed in binary terms, as various scholars have detected a tension in his thought between the traditional and orthodox, and the enlightened and modern, between 'reliance on regenerating divine grace and the assumption that human efforts could improve society'.[11] Gideon Mailer, in his recent biography of Witherspoon, refers to the ambiguity of his American legacy, 'considered as both a conduit for moral sense philosophy and for evangelical reasoning and … conceived as both a progenitor of religious disestablishment and promoter of pious governance.'[12] Do Witherspoon's Scottish works show such a tension or ambiguity, or are they evidence that he was one of the ministers Crawford had in mind when highlighting overlap between Enlightenment values and Popular ministers?

> For all their doctrinal differences, it has emerged that what used to be regarded as anomalous cases of Popular party ministers espousing Enlightenment values were actually nothing of the kind; and that it is by no means unknown for certain orthodox ministers to display receptiveness to enlightened ideas by Enlightenment authors they might ordinarily have been expected to abhor.[13]

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9 John Witherspoon, *Ecclesiastical Characteristics or, the Arcana of Church Policy. Being an Humble Attempt to Open up the Mystery of Moderation. Wherein is shewn A plain and easy way of attaining to the character of a moderate man, as at present in repute in the church of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1753). John Witherspoon, *The history of a corporation of servants. Discovered a few years ago in the interior parts of South America. Containing some very surprising events and extraordinary characters* (Glasgow, 1765).

10 Ronald Lyndsay Crawford, *The Lost World of John Witherspoon: Unravelling the Snodgrass affair, 1762–1776* (Aberdeen, 2015), https://doi.org/10.57132/book16.

11 See for example, Ned C Landsman, 'Religion and Revolution: The Two Worlds of John Witherspoon', in Sher and Smitten (eds), *Scotland & America*, 29–30. In a similar vein Richard Sher in his seminal *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), found it "ironic" that Witherspoon, the scourge of 'the Moderate vision of an enlightened clergy in an enlightened society', transported the philosophical principles of the Scottish Enlightenment to America 160–1. Jonathan Israel is an extreme version of this view. *Democratic Enlightenment Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights 1750–90* (Oxford University Press, 2011). Gideon Mailer, *John Witherspoon's American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 2017), 5.

12 Mailer, *American Revolution*, 39.

13 Ronald Lyndsay Crawford, *Scotland and America in the Age of Paine* (Aberdeen, 2022), 151. Love also suggested: 'Witherspoon himself read with considerable catholicity of spirit … [he] knew the writings of Mandeville and Samuel Butler; of Addison, Pope, Swift, Young, Bishop Burnett; he read French constantly and was intimately acquainted with Pascal

While in Scotland, Witherspoon was an orthodox Presbyterian minister.[14] He rejected any softening of Church doctrine or discipline to take account of changing social mores and 'the unnatural mixture … of modern philosophy with ancient Christianity."[15] Religion, the eternal, the salvation of the soul came first. But as he demonstrated in his published work, he was familiar with modern philosophy and, as a product of the same education at Edinburgh University as various luminaries of the Moderate wing of the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Enlightenment – such as his contemporaries, William Robertson, Hugh Blair and Alexander Carlyle – when transported to a different environment and different role (of 'presiding over the instruction of youth, in the liberal arts'), it is not surprising that Witherspoon went on to teach enlightened moral sense philosophy.[16] This was at a time when, according to Peter Jones, the Scottish professoriate were moving away from the idea of universities as 'schools of godliness and good learning' towards an ethos where 'the liberal arts' were becoming 'a vital forming-process for the character of citizens in a modern Scottish *res publica*."[17]

B. Moderate Men

Published anonymously, *Characteristics* appeared to be written as a guide to acceptable behaviour and beliefs for Moderate clergy in the Church, to 'attain[ing] to the Character of a Moderate Man, as at present in repute in the Church of Scotland', but was actually a witty and vicious lampoon of their behaviour and lack of belief.[18] It had an important role both in giving Witherspoon a national reputation, making him one of the leaders of the orthodox or Popular faction in the Church, and in the view that while in Scotland he was against 'enlightenment' values and philosophy.

Characteristics was a considerable change of style and approach for Witherspoon. His orthodox sermons and other religious writing, both before and after *Characteristics* appeared, often contained general (and fairly typical) laments about the current 'profanity and neglect of God … contempt or desertion of his worship' at all levels of society:

> what pride and luxury, what riot and sensuality, what uncleanness and debauchery, what lying, fraud, and perjury … that true religion has been generally, as it

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and the Port Royalists. The *Esprit des Lois* also was a favorite book.' Mary Love, 'John Witherspoon in Scotland', *The Princeton Theological Review*, Vol XI issue 3, 1913, 473.

14 Ordained in 1745, he was a minister first at Beith and then from 1758 Paisley.

15 'The Absolute Necessity', 260.

16 At Edinburgh University he 'excelled in his college studies', see Sher, *Church*, 59. Also see Love, 'Witherspoon in Scotland', 467–8. John Witherspoon, 'The Success of the Gospel Entirely of God', *WJW 2004*, vol. 4, 229.

17 Peter Jones, "The Scottish professoriate and the polite academy", in Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (eds), *Wealth & Virtue, The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2001), 90.

18 The title was a nod to Lord Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711). *Witherspoon, Characteristics, front page.*

> still is, in a struggling or persecuted state, we ought to be humbled for the sin of our nature, and the share which each of us has contributed to the general guilt.[19]

But they were not explicitly and publicly critical of the behaviour of fellow ministers or of Church governance.

Concerned by the 'declining interest of religion in the church of Scotland', Witherspoon was prompted to write *Characteristics* following the Torphicen and Inverkeithing depositions in 1751 and 1752 respectively, and then by the publication of *A Just View of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland* (1753), which was critical of those who did not follow the directions of the General Assembly in the Inverkeithing case.[20] What particularly irritated Witherspoon was the suggestion that those who opposed the General Assembly directions were 'agitators' and 'not acting upon conscience'.[21] *Characteristics* was also, in part, a riposte to *Reasons of Dissent* (1752), co-authored by Robertson and Blair among others, which argued against leniency for those who failed to obey instructions from the General Assembly.[22] As well as causing anger among the Moderate clergy, *Characteristics* was a considerable publishing success. There were eight editions during the 1750s and 1760s, with Witherspoon amending and extending the work.[23] It was also read quite widely outside Scotland (Witherspoon claimed that the Bishops of London, Oxford and Gloucester all commended the work).[24] He clearly anticipated that *Characteristics* would cause a reaction as he went to some care to try to keep his authorship secret.[25]

Of the thirteen Maxims (increased from twelve in the first edition) in *Characteristics* by 'which moderate men conduct themselves', five dealt with doctrine (Maxims I, III, IV, VI and XII), three with patronage (Maxims VIII, IX and X), and the rest with behaviour or discipline (Maxims II, V, VII, XI and XIII). Although he later came to regard patronage as the root problem, initially it was secondary to doctrinal and behavioural laxity. Witherspoon was far from being the first (or last) to highlight concern with patronage, Church governance and lax doctrine and discipline, but he was the first minister to do so through satire and public ridicule.

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19 John Witherspoon, 'All Mankind by Nature under Sin', in *WJW* 1800, 420.

20 *See* John Witherspoon, *A Serious Apology for the Ecclesiastical Characteristics* (Edinburgh, 1763), 6. The abuse was the deposition of Mr Adam and the Presbytery at Linlithgow for failing to attend a settlement at Torphichen, and then of the evangelical minister Thomas Gillespie for failing to obey an order from the General Assembly to officiate at the installation of an unpopular candidate as minister of Inverkeithing. John Hyndman, *A Just View of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland, and of the Proceedings of the Last General Assembly in Relation to the Deposition of Mr. Gillespie* (Edinburgh, 1753).

21 Witherspoon, *Apology*, 13.

22 *Reasons of dissent From the sentence and resolution of the Commission of the General Assembly, met at Edinburgh March 11. 1752, concerning the conduct of the presbytery of Dunfermline* (Edinburgh, 1752). See also Maxim X of *Characteristics.* See Love, *Witherspoon In Scotland*, 476–8. Witherspoon may also have authored, at least in part, the *Answers to the Reasons of Dissent* (1752) issued in rebuttal to *The Reasons of Dissent*–see Sher, *Church*, 54.

23 Sher, *Church*, 58.

24 Witherspoon, *Apology*, 27.

25 Witherspoon, *Apology*, 5.

Dealing first with concerns over lax doctrine, Maxim I covered the protection of those accused of heresy, 'I never knew a moderate man in my life, that did not love and honour a heretic'.[26] Similarly, Maxim XII required Moderate men 'to have great charity for Atheists and Deists in principle, and for persons that are loose and vicious in their practice.'[27] In Maxim III, he claimed Moderates were hypocrites, subscribing to the Confession of Faith which they sneered at and did not teach:

> The Confession of Faith, which we are now all laid under a disagreeable necessity to subscribe, was framed in a time of hot religious zeal; and therefore it can hardly be supposed to contain any thing agreeable to our sentiments in these cool and refreshing days of moderation … I do not remember to have heard any moderate man speak well of it, or recommend it … And, indeed, nothing can be more ridiculous, than to make a fixed standard for opinions, which change just as the fashion of clothes and dress.[28]

Witherspoon could be seen to be aligning himself with the conservative and reactionary in society generally, beyond just matters of religion. But, although *Characteristics* satirised modern enlightened beliefs and behaviour, the target was not 'enlightened' ideas as such, but the hypocrisy of clergymen holding, and inappropriately promoting, a sanitised moral code, in conflict with, and at the expense of, religious orthodoxy. *Characteristics* was, because of its style and tone, an enlightened way of making his point.[29] Critical in his sermons of lax moral behaviour throughout society, ministers were meant to promote Calvinist orthodoxy and behave in a certain manner, and it was inappropriate for them to move in fashionable 'polite' society.[30]

Maxim VI was devoted to ridiculing the learning necessary for a Moderate Man, as '[M]uch study is a great enemy to politeness'.[31] Modern learning should not be at the expense of 'the critical study of the Scriptures, for reading large bodies of divinity, for an acquaintance with church history or the writings of those poor creatures the Christian fathers'.[32] The Moderates claimed to be 'more learned than their adversaries', but their learning consisted of sprinkling

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26 Witherspoon, *Characteristics*, 9. Professors Simson and Leechman had been defended against charges of heresy, and various leading Moderate figures were friendly with David Hume.

27 *Ibid.* 47.

28 *Ibid.*, 13.

29 Witherspoon was, Love argued, influenced in both style and tone by Pascal and Swift. *Witherspoon in Scotland*, 476–8.

30 See Witherspoon, *Apology*, 25.

31 Witherspoon, *Characteristics*, 25.

32 'Mistake me not, my brethren: I am not speaking against learning in itself; it is a precious gift of God, and may be happily improved in the service of the gospel; but I will venture to say … Accursed is all that learning which sets itself in opposition to the cross of Christ! … accursed is all that learning which is not made subservient to the honor and glory of the cross of Christ!'. John Witherspoon, 'Glorying in the Cross', *WJW* 1800, 531. Witherspoon, *Characteristics*, 26. He wrote while in America that 'the pride of unsanctified knowledge do[es] great injury to

terms from modern philosophers like Shaftesbury, Hume and Hutcheson in their sermons, making them unintelligible to the common man.[33] This intellectual elitism made the people 'declared enemies of moderation'.[34]

Characteristics suggested some disapproval of 'modern discoveries' concerning 'moral virtues', and 'good humoured vices'.[35] But he needed, and displayed, sufficient familiarity with the 'modern discoveries' to effectively satirise them. His ridiculing of fashionable ideas, those of Lord Shaftesbury being a favourite target, was through the behaviour of clergymen seen as representing those ideas in the Church and their substitution of those ideas for orthodox doctrine. Where there was a conflict Witherspoon was clear that sermons were for the study and explanation of the Scriptures, the saving of souls, not for rational justification of social duties (Maxim IV).[36]

The message from *Characteristics* was that Moderates were hypocritical, they neither believed nor taught orthodox beliefs. They were arrogant, 'polite', and full of superficial modern learning at the expense of scriptural and religious knowledge. They were elitist, intolerant (Maxim XI), and contemptuous of the common people. In *Characteristics* Witherspoon made his point through exaggeration, ridicule, and humour. It was a controlled and powerful satire, written in an engaging modern style. He ended with a large wink to his readers, wagering that the author would be taken as orthodox, but suggesting that 'every properly prejudiced mind' was being provided 'with a complete system upon which to … regulate his conduct.'[37] Was the author Moderate or orthodox? Despite the mockery and contempt, it was not a pessimistic work. By exposing the foibles and failings of the Moderate faction in the Church to public derision Witherspoon hoped he would prompt change.

Characteristics was a partial success. It raised the profile and prestige of the, assumed, author among the orthodox, and made him a target for the Moderates. But in its wider purpose 'to bring down self-sufficient persons with whom there is no dealing', it was a failure.[38]

C. Nominal Christians

Witherspoon kept up the criticism, preaching against the danger of 'nominal Christians', who 'disguise or alter the gospel' to 'render it palatable to a corrupt worldly mind'.[39] He was active in church controversies, such as the 1757 dispute in the General Assembly regarding

religion;' The problem was not learning as such, but was the separation of knowledge from religious truths. 'An Address to the Students of the Senior Class', WJW 2004, vol. 5, 94.

33 Witherspoon, *Characteristics*, 27.

34 The moderate man 'glories in their hatred, and rejoices in himself … to provoke and disoblige them.' *Ibid.*, 21–2.

35 Witherspoon, *Characteristics*, 5th Edition (Edinburgh, 1763), 22.

36 Witherspoon, *Characteristics*, 15.

37 Witherspoon, *Characteristics*, 5*th* Edition, 68.

38 John Witherspoon, 'Lectures on Eloquence', WJW 2004, vol. 6, 240.

39 Witherspoon, 'The Absolute Necessity', 260.

the qualifications of representatives from certain Presbyteries, and showed a strong grasp of Church law.[40] However, during the late 1750s and 1760s, Moderates began to dominate university and ecclesiastical offices in Edinburgh, as well as pick up crown appointments.[41] Some of Witherspoon's contemporaries at Edinburgh University came to the fore. Robertson became Principal of Edinburgh University in 1762, Moderator of the General Assembly in 1763 and was appointed Historiographer Royal in 1764. Blair became a minister at St Giles in Edinburgh and in 1762 was appointed Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at Edinburgh University. 'It was chiefly by controlling the general assembly … that the Moderate literati of Edinburgh dominated the kirk during the 1760s, 1770s and early 1780s.'[42]

Warnings of a coming just retribution from the action of Providence abound in Witherspoon's work, as Scottish society, and especially the Church, was beset with individual and public corruption. 'Affliction springs not out of the dust. National calamity is not the rigor of an arbitrary tyrant, but the wise chastisement of a gracious father, or the punishment of a righteous judge.'[43] Even if in the short term the country prospered, 'without … a revival of religion, it would be no blessing but a curse', and only temporary so that 'when the appointed time of vengeance should come, their destruction might be more terrible'.[44]

A *Serious Apology for the Ecclesiastical Characteristics* (1763), again published anonymously, was a defensive work written without satire or humour.[45] It was dedicated particularly to 'The Nobility and Gentry of Scotland' who were Elders of the Church and who attended the General Assembly, the constituency he needed to convince to upset Moderate control of the Assembly and limit the 'high-flying clergy'.[46] His damning assessment was that only the laity could reform the Church as the clergy were already corrupted.[47] Gleefully he quoted from

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40 'There were few more weighty speakers in the Church courts on the popular side than Dr. Witherspoon, minister of Paisley. His manner was inanimate and drawling; but the depth of his judgment, the solidity of his arguments, and the aptitude with which they were illustrated and applied, never failed to produce a strong impression on the Assembly.' Thomas Somerville, *My Own Life and Times* (Edinburgh, 1861), 99–100.

41 *Sher*, *Church*, 120.

42 *Sher*, *Church*, 121.

43 John Witherspoon, 'Prayer for National Prosperity and for the Revival of Religion Inseparably Connected' (1758), *in The works of the Rev. John Witherspoon, D.D. L.L.D. late president of the college, at Princeton New-Jersey* (Philadelphia, 1800), vol. 1, 368.

44 Witherspoon, '*National Prosperity*', 369.

45 The title referenced Swift's A *Tale of a Tub* (1704) to which Swift added an "*Apology for the &c.*" in 1710. Witherspoon had already referred to A *Tale of a Tub* directly in the Dedication to *Characteristics*, 4.

46 Witherspoon, *Apology*, iii.

47 'Individuals may, but … it ought not to be expected, that the majority of any body of men will give up private benefit in wealth, power, or ease, for public good …. once the clergy are corrupted, their reformation can be looked for from the laity only, and not from themselves.' *Ibid.*, 344–5.

Robertson's *History of Scotland* (1759) in support of his view: 'To abandon usurped power, to renounce lucrative error … from any society of men, no such effort can be expected.'[48] He ended the dedication by referring to two enduring themes, asking the laity to 'frown upon the luxurious and aspiring' clergy, and by reminding them that: 'The interest of religion in this nation, is … inseparable from our temporal prosperity.'[49] There had been a significant change in mood since *Characteristics*. He was more pessimistic about the future, as '[I]rreligion and infidelity has made rapid progress among us'.[50]

Witherspoon felt under pressure, including from fellow evangelicals, to justify why he had used satire in *Characteristics* and why he had publicly highlighted lapses in behaviour and the split in the Church.[51] There were many other ministers who criticised patronage, church discipline, and the lack of orthodox beliefs of the Moderate clergy, such as John Erskine (1721–1803), another contemporary of Witherspoon's at Edinburgh University, and a leading Popular Party figure in the Church, but who was also friendly with William Robertson. In a 1763 sermon, while critical of lax behaviour and morality among the clergy, Erskine argued against public criticism: 'By wounding our good name, you render our ministry despicable and unsuccessful; than which nothing can be more pleasing to Satan'.[52] He was also critical of church discipline and the silencing of sober debate 'by raillery, by dark malicious innuendoes, [or] by bitter satirical invectives'.[53] James Oswald (1703–1793), preaching to the General Assembly in 1766, the year after he had been Moderator, was comparatively restrained but spoke out against the 'contemptuous neglect of religious duties' and 'a corruption of manners so gross … as cannot be passed over in silence'.[54] There was a lack of the 'gravity of deportment, and purity of manners' expected of ministers.[55] What made Witherspoon unusual was the form and detail of his criticism, but also how he intruded himself into the debate. *Characteristics* may have been a publishing success, but it was not necessarily popular with all orthodox ministers.

Witherspoon had published *Characteristics* because: '[T]he characters and behaviour' of the clergy was more important than 'any speculative reasonings' in influencing attitudes to

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48 William Robertson, *The History of Scotland During the Reigns of Queen Mary and of King James VI. till His Accession to the Crown of England. With a Review of the Scotch History Previous to That Period* (London, 1761 4th Edition), vol. 1, Bk II, 167, Witherspoon, *Apology*, iv.

49 Witherspoon, *Apology*, vi.

50 *Ibid.*, 8.

51 He had also been under pressure from the Synod of Glasgow where, in opposition to his call to Paisley, he was accused of being the author of *Characteristics*. In 1756 he gave a speech to the Synod in his defence which was of Jesuitical skill, focussed entirely on the flaws in process and completely ignoring the accusation that he was the author. S*ee* WJW 2004, vol. 7, 221–40. Various passages in *Apology* closely followed the Glasgow speech.

52 John Erskine, *Ministers of the Gospel cautioned against giving offence* (Edinburgh, 1764), 28.

53 Erskine, *Ministers* 19.

54 Sher, Church, 130. James Oswald, A *Sermon, preached at the opening of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, May 22, 1766* (Edinburgh, 1766), 29.

55 Oswald, *Sermon*, 40.

religion.[56] For the gentry forming a bad opinion of a minister was a prime contributor to infidelity. He also argued that corruption among the clergy through 'neglect of duty, luxury in dress or table, laxness in principle, or licentiousness in practice' could not be a secret to those in society.[57] Sin and bad behaviour were corrosive, as experience showed the 'unhappy influence' of poor examples which reduced our horror of sin.[58] But he was aware that this could be used as an argument against a work such as *Characteristics* which publicly exposed lax behaviour. Fabulous narratives and profane history were only justified in revealing sin where 'necessary to some good end' and 'for repelling the attacks of adversaries, and giving us … a view of the plan of Providence'.[59] Even when written for an appropriate purpose the facts and style used must be to glorify God rather than please men. Witherspoon was walking a fine line in *Characteristics*, and later in *Corporation*, were they written to glorify God or please man?

Characteristics was intended to be severe, to wound: 'A satire that does not bite is good for nothing.' It must 'provoke and give offence' to have any effect.[60] Given the 'rage and fury' of many ministers since it was published and 'the most opprobrious names … and the most dreadful threatenings uttered' against the author, it had succeeded in that objective at least.[61] Not shy of putting himself in august company, Witherspoon compared himself to the 'greatest satirists' of all ages, such as Horace and Pope, who by exposing 'objects of scorn and derision to the public' made many enemies.[62]

D. Exposing Tyrants

Why did he take the unusual step, for a Scottish minister, of using satire in *Characteristics* (and later in *Corporation*) to make his point?[63] According to Colin Kidd, satire 'had little place in a Scottish Enlightenment which was sedate, largely consensual, and non-confrontational.'[64] While a questionable view of satire in wider society, the use of satire by a minister, a genre intended to mock and abuse the target rather than reach an understanding or compromise,

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56 Witherspoon, *Apology*, 8.

57 *Ibid.*, 9.

58 John Witherspoon, *A serious enquiry into the nature and effects of the stage. Being an attempt to show, that contributing to the support of a public theatre, is inconsistent with the character of a Christian* (Glasgow, 1757), 45.

59 Witherspoon, *Serious Enquiry*, 49 / np. 49.

60 Witherspoon, *Apology*, 5.

61 *Ibid.*, 5.

62 *Ibid.*, 5. It is hard to tell whether this was meant ironically or whether he felt he belonged in that company.

63 *Ibid.*, 15. 'Would it not have been better, gravely to have convicted them of their sin, and warned them of their danger, than to set them in a ridiculous point of light, and expose them to the public scorn?'

64 Colin Kidd, 'Enlightenment and Ecclesiastical Satire before Burns', in Ralph McLean, Ronnie Young and Kenneth Simpson (eds), *The Scottish Enlightenment and Literary Culture* (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, 2016), 96.

was all the more shocking for its relative rarity.[65] *Characteristics* and *Corporation* were deliberately confrontational.

Witherspoon wanted to 'procure the attention of the public'.[66] There was a general 'sloth, or an unwillingness to bestow great or long application of mind upon any subject', and as there was a 'levity of mind' prevailing at all levels it was hard to get attention for anything serious.[67] Satire made *Characteristics* stand out from the numerous sermons or pamphlets by others treating the same issues.[68] If he hadn't written *Characteristics* as a satire, he was afraid that no one would have read it. It also, probably not coincidentally, was a medium that allowed Witherspoon to demonstrate that he was as clever and educated as the Moderates. He further explained his use of satire by claiming that irony was often used in the scriptures, and by quoting (apparently unironically) from a list of Biblical examples including God, Elijah, Isaiah and Jesus, as well as assorted church fathers. Some issues should, he claimed, be dealt with by mockery rather than by giving them importance by seriously debating them.[69]

'Ridicule is the test of truth' was, Witherspoon claimed in justification, a leading principle of Lord Shaftesbury, a great advocate for 'modern notions of philosophy' which had 'so greatly contributed to the corruption of the clergy' and a favourite author of the Moderate literati.[70] This 'test of truth' did not actually appear in Lord Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks*, and he did not propose this test, arguing rather for freedom of opinion and public discussion, and that no subject should be exempt from ridicule because it was deemed too grave or serious: 'Gravity is of the very essence of imposture'.[71] Witherspoon had already expressed his disagreement with the idea that ridicule was a test of truth in *Serious Enquiry*:

> But, though I deny not the lawfulness of using ridicule in some cases … yet I am far from thinking it is the test of truth. It seems to be more proper for correction than for instruction: and though it may be fit enough to whip an offender it is not unusual or unsuitable first to expostulate a little with him, and show him he deserves it.[72]

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65 Kidd, *Satire*, 95–6.

66 Witherspoon, *Apology*, 19.

67 *Ibid.*, 18–9. See also Witherspoon, *Serious Enquiry*, 3.

68 See Sher, *Church*, 55–61.

69 In *Serious Enquiry*, discussing comedy in the theatre Witherspoon, asked: 'Is not ridicule a noble means of discountenancing vice? And is not the use of it warranted by the satire and irony that is to be found in the Holy Scriptures?' 10. But he also dismissed it as 'contrary to the purity of our religion' and 'inconsistent with the character of a Christian'. 6.

70 Witherspoon, *Apology*, 21.

71 See Alfred Owen Aldridge, 'Shaftesbury and the Test of Truth', *PMLA*, vol. 60 No.1 (Mar, 1945), 129. Although Shaftesbury did refer to "the test of ridicule" in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, Lawrence Eliot Klein (ed.) (Cambridge, 1999), 8. Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Glasgow, 1758), vol. 1, 8.

72 Witherspoon, *Serious Enquiry*, 4.

In *Characteristics*, and later in *Corporation*, he was not seeking to instruct the Moderates, but to whip them.

The role of ridicule was discussed by various members of the Scottish literati, as a means of revealing pomposity and falsehood. Allan Ramsay, in his *An Essay on Ridicule* (1753), took Shaftesbury to suggest that ridicule was a test of truth by its detection of falsehood, and as such was to be indulged without limit.[73] Adam Smith suggested that true ridicule was 'where real foibles and blemishes in the characters or behaviour of men are exposed to our view in a ridiculous light. This … tends to the reformation of manners and the benefit of mankind.'[74] While James Beattie (1735–1803) asserted that ridicule was intended to 'excite laughter mixed with disapprobation or contempt'.[75]

Later, in his *Lectures on Eloquence* given at the College of New Jersey, Witherspoon was ambivalent about satire, but argued that satire and ridicule had a place in political controversies where needed 'to expose tyrants or persons in power' and 'to bring down self-sufficient persons with whom there is no dealing till their pride is leveled [sic]'.[76] Ridicule was meant to express disapproval and encourage reformation, not merely excite laughter. Witherspoon was using an effective literary weapon because he needed to expose tyrants, to level their pride.

The same issues of 'Doctrine, Discipline, and Government' concerned him in *Apology* as in *Characteristics*.[77] Settlement of ministers forced on congregations, lack of belief in the Confession of Faith, lax behaviour of ministers, attending stage plays and heresy, among other issues, were all covered. There was a long running rot going on, the Kirk was in a 'lax and degenerate state.'[78] One change of emphasis since *Characteristics* was a greater focus on church governance and especially the settlement of ministers. While supporting the right of everyone 'to judge for himself in every thing that regards religion, and to adhere to any minister he pleases', he was not a believer in congregational democracy.[79] The clergy had wrongly surrendered their influence to the aristocracy and landed gentry, they had given up effective control of the quality and beliefs of applicants for the ministry. As a result, Witherspoon

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73 Allan Ramsay, *An Essay on Ridicule* (London, 1753), 5.

74 Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, *transcribed by John Lothian*, quoted in Rosaleen Keefe, *Scottish Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Exeter, 2014), 89.

75 James Beattie, *Essays. On the nature and immutability of truth, in opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* (Edinburgh, 1776), 587.

76 Witherspoon, *Lectures on Eloquence*, *WJW* 2004, vol. 6, 240–1.

77 Witherspoon, *Apology*, 28. Jones asserted that 'by the time that Principal Robertson took over leadership of the Moderates, the sort of liberalism for which Hutcheson and the Rankenians had stood was no longer controversial. It was the manners of the Moderates which gave offence now to the orthodox, rather than their pronouncements as professors or authors; or it was their large incomes by comparison with those of ordinary ministers which so infuriated Thom.' (Jones, 115) While clearly Moderate manners angered Witherspoon, and perhaps also the income of authors like Robertson, Hutchesonian liberalism from the pulpit was still repugnant to him.

78 Witherspoon, *Apology*, 25.

79 *Ibid.*, 38.

found many Moderates personally contemptible – their behaviour was 'criminal', they were 'great[er] bigots' and many 'justly merit[s] the detestation of every faithful minister, and every real christian', they were guilty of 'direct, premeditated, and perpetual perjury'.[80] He was also feeling hounded and persecuted over the 'lamentable outcry' caused by *Characteristics* and the 'malice and resentment' against the author.[81]

He ended *Apology* with an exhortation not to give way to despondency, despite his darkening assessment of the chances of reform. Acknowledging that writers commonly bemoan the degeneracy of their own times, he suggested that:

> [C]ertainly [virtue] often changes its residence, and leaves one nation, to settle in another .... a church and nation, in a quiet and peaceable state, is always growing insensibly worse, till it be either so corrupt, as to deserve and procure exterminating judgments, or in the infinite mercy of God, by some great shock or revolution, is brought back to simplicity and purity[82]

He vacillated between the assertion that reform was already too late – 'The evil hath taken so deep root' – and prayer and hope for the speedy revival of the KIrk.[83]

Little happened in the church in the two years leading to publication of *Corporation* to lighten Witherspoon's mood.[84] Moderate control of the General Assembly continued.

E. Corporation of Servants

Corporation was a laboured parable about the complacency, corruption, and laziness of the contemporary Kirk disguised as a tale told by a shipwrecked seaman about the history of servants (for which read clergy) in an unknown far away land, discovered by accident. It adopted a familiar literary form, used in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and most famously by Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).[85] He gave a faint patina of plausibility by basing the shipwreck on an actual event, the shipwreck of HMS Wager, part of Commodore Anson's fleet, in 1741 in the Pacific.[86] Witherspoon maintained the traveller's tale conceit throughout, including stock jokes such as the seaman being offended when the narrator expressed incredulity at what he is being told: 'If we tell you things that are common, you look upon them

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80 *Ibid.*, 20, 34 and 31.

81 *Ibid.*, 28.

82 *Ibid.*, 33.

83 *Ibid.*, 43. 'the force of custom, and power of prejudice, will probably shut their ears to anything I have to offer.' *Ibid.*, 37.

84 In 1764 he was made a DD by the University of St Andrews.

85 *See* Gregory Claeys, *Utopias of the British Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2003), Introduction, xi.

86 Witherspoon, *Corporation*, 43.

as insipid and trifling; and, if we tell you things that are quite new and surprising, you let us know with great good manners that you do not believe us.'[87]

Corporation was only dealt with in passing by his early biographers. Ashbel Green's assessment was that 'the satire, although equally severe, is not so pointed and palpable, and … gave less offense. Whatever was the cause, it appears to have attracted far less notice than the *Characteristics*.'[88] In part, he put this down to lack of novelty, it was a re-hash of the same issues. Varnum Collins gave a brief outline of the story but little other information.[89] More recent Witherspoon scholars have also either ignored it or only given it brief consideration.[90] Kevin DeYoung, in addition to terming it 'too laboured and too oblique', contrasted the pessimistic nature of *Corporation* with the more optimistic and progressive tone of Robertson's *History of Scotland* to explain the lack of success.[91] Witherspoon was out of step with the optimistic spirit of the time. His warnings had been ignored, the Moderates were even more deeply entrenched. He was frustrated.

In the Introduction to *Corporation* Witherspoon mocked two of his favourite targets, firstly David Hume: 'A great living author' whose work 'was … but little taken notice of when first published, and is now almost wholly forgotten.' Secondly 'the lofty and sonorous Earl of Shaftesbury', for whom 'the excellency of history … lies in its being like fiction, and the excellency of fiction in its being like real facts.'[92] *Corporation* would be 'like the truth, because it is true; and it will be like fiction, because the same train of events, perhaps, never happened in any other place or nation.'[93]

The traveller's tale provided physical distance and separation from Scotland and allowed Witherspoon to be more biting than if he had written a direct criticism like *Apology*.[94] But the society described was no ideal, no utopia, rather it was the history of a society that had become corrupted and perverted. His suggestion of a possible utopia, of a harmony lost, emphasised his increasing estrangement. The reversal of the expected order (servants ignoring and lording over masters) made the abuses he described all the more stark.[95]

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87 *Ibid.*, 39.

88 Ashbel Green, *The Life of the Rev. John Witherspoon*, in WJW 2004, vol. 9, 70.

89 Varnum Lansing Collins, *President Witherspoon*, vol. 1, 66–8, Quoted in WJW 2004, vol. 6, Preface, 3–4.

90 There is for example no reference to it in Mailer's recent biography.

91 Kevin DeYoung, *The Religious Formation of John Witherspoon* (Abingdon and New York, 2020), 137. Witherspoon's view of history generally, was one of human guilt, compared to the enlightenment notion of human history represented by Robertson and others as one of progress, 45. See Witherspoon, 'All Mankind by Nature Under Sin', WJW 1800, 411–2.

92 Witherspoon, *Corporation*, 4–5.

93 *Ibid.*, 5.

94 He was already embroiled in a libel case – see Crawford, *Lost World*.

95 It is possible that the idea of using servants as the central conceit in his satire and of the upheaval of the expected order was influenced by Swift's satire on society, polite behaviour and servants, *Directions to Servants* (1745), although there are also many biblical tales involving servants.

Witherspoon's increasingly intemperate language also marked his growing pessimism with the state of virtue in Scotland, with the state and future of the Church of Scotland, and with his own position and prospects in the Church. *Characteristics* was from a different time when he still had hope. In *Corporation*, he was lashing out with little expectation of reformed behaviour. Although typically seen as a satire, *Corporation* is perhaps better seen as a form of secular jeremiad. It has much in common with the jeremiad tradition of sermons typified by 'National Prosperity':

> It is not, indeed, to be wondered at, that not only this nation, but the protestant states of Europe in general should be brought under the rod, as they have so shamefully departed from that purity of faith and strictness of morals which was the glory of the reformation.[96]

Corporation was a warning to God's covenanted people of the afflictions that had come, and, as a providential test, would come, as a consequence of the backsliding and corruption in the Church and society.[97] There was no attempt to instruct or persuade, there was no real attempt to outline an alternative vision of church or society, other than a vague suggestion of an earlier golden period. Amend your ways or your fences will be knocked down, your fields will lie fallow.

The narrative arc for both parts of the history, pre- and post- Reformation, is very similar. In both, the people are happy at the outset and there is harmony between masters and servants. Then greed, ambition and sloth intrude, the servants (or some at least) usurp power and this leads to flattery of great men and neglect of the people. The early chapters briefly covered church history up to the Reformation. Initially, all was well; servants were hired by every family (or parish), and 'were in general honest, sober and industrious. They had the interests of their masters at heart.'[98] There were still flashes of the ironic style and tone from *Characteristics*, as when discussing the establishment of a Corporation to govern the servants he observed: 'The whole was founded upon the most excellent reasons. Who so proper to judge the capacity and diligence of servants as those who are servants themselves?'[99] But, after the servants were given various privileges, they became lazy, their hours of work diminished, they became greedy.

There was conflict between the servants, oppression of those who spoke out, and then a servant emerged who revealed the iniquities of the situation. In the first part of the history, a servant, indignant 'at the oppression which the rest were guilty of, set himself to … expose their wickedness', including the corruption of the emperor's court. '[I]nnumerable calumnies' were made against him, and the servants he criticised 'would often hire desperadoes to

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96 Witherspoon, 'National Prosperity', 376.

97 For a discussion of Witherspoon and the jeremiad tradition see Richard B. Sher, 'Witherspoon's Dominion of Providence and the Scottish Jeremiad Tradition', in *Scotland & America*, 46–64.

98 Witherspoon, *Corporation*, 9.

99 *Ibid.*, 14.

assassinate him'. There was then a bringing of the servants 'back to the old, reasonable and natural foundation."[100]

Passing through the Reformation, and after many battles and much slaughter, the people in a Northern Province renounced the authority of the emperor over servants, banished all 'overseers' and 'arch-overseers' and resolved to prevent the return of corruption among the servants, who had in future to 'live sober, grave and mortified lives; to forbear all ranting, junketing and gaming."[101] There was a law that 'no servant should be forced upon any family against their will."[102] Again, all went well for a while, the province was exceedingly happy, and there was harmony between families and servants as well as plentiful crops. 'But alas … [a]mbition, avarice and luxury, would not be kept out'. Despite fierce struggles in corporation meetings, the right for 'great men to nominate servants to inferior families' was re-established.[103] As Witherspoon had tartly observed earlier, 'great men would understand the interest of the country, and the capacity of servants, much better than the vulgar …. they were above all suspicion of partiality, and would be sure always to send fit and accomplished servants to every house."[104] But often a 'poor ordinary family' would be sent 'a foreign cook' who would give them 'a course of flimsy dishes, finely garnished, but entirely disguised, so that the poor people could not imagine what they contained."[105]

There was a re-telling of the story of the publication of *Characteristics*. A servant who was 'a great opposer of the prevailing measures' painted the general faults of the servants in a ludicrous light, including 'the likeness of the principal and most active leaders of the corporation'. He did this 'to expose their knavery and ostentation.' After this, the ridiculed servants tell lies about him and 'there was always a set of desperadoes lying in wait for him, armed with clubs, and fully determined to beat his brains out'.[106] If Luther was the heroic indignant servant in the first part of the history, Witherspoon was the satiric painter in the second part. Witherspoon saw, or wished, himself to be at the centre of things, to be useful and make a mark. The first part of the history ended with true, pure religion moving to the Northern Province, the implication being that, at the end of the second part, virtue could move again.

He viewed patronage as firmly aligning the common people with orthodoxy and against the Moderates – 'the inclinations of the common people are to be utterly despised'.[107] But his view had hardened, the corruption of patronage was, Witherspoon had come to believe, the crux of all the problems facing the Church. It encouraged greed, inappropriate and loose behaviour, lax and unorthodox doctrine, and ultimately, religious scepticism. The 'fundamental error' was giving the power of nomination to great men, resulting in 'an excessive

100 *Ibid.*, 30.
101 *Ibid.*, 32.
102 *Ibid.*, 31–3.
103 *Ibid.*, 34.
104 *Ibid.*, 26.
105 *Ibid.*, 37.
106 *Ibid.*, 54–6.
107 Witherspoon, *Characteristics*, 5th *Edition*, 44.

impropriety in the appointment of servants to different families."[108] He suggested that many landowners became elders and members of the courts of the corporation so that they could 'provide servants in places."[109] Patronage corrupted the Church, the great men, and the landed gentry.[110] But, it was unsurprising that having obtained a right of patronage the great landowners would be loathe to give it up. Support for patronage also came from fashionable society, who despised 'the folly and impudence of the common people' and laughed at any with a contrary view.[111]

In *Corporation*, there was little humour. The behaviour of the servants was ridiculous and reprehensible, but this time the finger of blame was pointed as much at those who appointed the ministers. The great men who had the power of patronage were corrupted by flattery and greed, they were blind to the needs of the common people, they too were complicit in the corruption of the Church.

He again associated the corrupt or incompetent with the fashionable, as in the questioning of a hapless applicant servant who, after failing to answer any serious questions asked by a 'discontented zealot', was then asked by some 'moderate men … a few polite and fashionable questions, such as: what is the genteelest lining for a red coat? in what manner should you present a glass of wine to a lord and how to a farmer?"[112] When the nomination of ministers by lords or great men was reintroduced, 'the trial of their sufficiency turned to a mere farce."[113]

Witherspoon drew the Moderates with a long list of familiar flaws, such as bad character and incompetence, flattery of great men, protection of misbehaviour, including 'pilfering, negligence, drunkenness, or wantonness among the maids', 'a prodigious hankering after the high-sounding titles and immense revenues' found in England, and the worst of all crimes, impeaching the authority of 'the annual meetings of the corporation."[114] He also mocked their pretension, seeing themselves as philosophers given to 'abstract reflections upon the nature of things', who believed 'that all the wisdom of the nation centred in them; and that all the rest were downright fools or madmen.[115]

An explicit link was made in *Corporation* between spiritual virtue and harmony, and temporal happiness and plenty. During periods before the servants were corrupted there was 'universal satisfaction', '[t]he fields were dressed and trimmed to great perfection … every house

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108 Witherspoon, *Corporation*, 36–7.

109 *Ibid.*, 36.

110 Contrast Smith's optimistic assertion that flattery to get a parish was rare, rather the established clergy gained favour; 'by their learning, by the irreproachable regularity of their life, and by the faithful and diligent discharge of their duty.' Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Glasgow edition,V.i.g.37, 809.

111 Witherspoon, *Corporation*, 38.

112 *Ibid.*, 47.

113 *Ibid.*, 45.

114 *Ibid.*, 53, 62 and 53.

115 *Ibid.*, 67. Kidd suggested that this was an echo of the Academy of Lagado from Gulliver's Travels. Kidd, 'Satire', 108.

was like a little palace, and every country seat like a little paradise."[116] Similarly, for a period after the revised constitution in the Northern Province, people were 'exceeding happy', and 'the fields were assiduously cultivated, and brought every year immense crops'.[117] Once corruption had set in, not only were all the fences broken down, with strange cattle grazing on their master fields, but there were 'vast tracts of uncultivated ground' and the neglected field were in a 'desolate condition'.[118]

Corruption was modern, fashionable, and abstract or speculative, as where the servant seeking a certificate that he was skilled in the cultivation of land had never seen a plough and was apprenticed in a toy shop.[119] Similarly, Witherspoon enjoyed mocking the improvement schemes put forward by members of the Edinburgh Select Society observing that 'the mark of an improver is not to have a good crop, but to be able to give rational and philosophical account how he came to have a bad one'.[120]

Witherspoon went beyond general criticism and satire and used specific events to illustrate the Moderate corruption of the church, including the unsuccessful attempts at the General Assembly in 1755 and 1756 to try David Hume and Lord Kames for heresy. In Witherspoon's re-telling heresy, or more likely David Hume, became a large bull which, with other strange cattle, had invaded the pastures of the servants' master.[121] Suggestions to remove it and repair the fences were met with a succession of objections – 'it is only a speculative point which beast belongs to one master, and which to another'.[122] His tale was similar to the account of the heresy debate at the 1756 General Assembly as summarised in the Scots Magazine, and so easily identifiable.[123] It clearly had great significance for Witherspoon who devoted a whole chapter to it.

He also included an easily recognisable satire of William Robertson who had 'a very great knack of story telling' and 'was a fellow of uncommon ability'.[124] However, Robertson collected salaries, neglected, and then abused his 'family' and laughed at the simplicity of those who rewarded him–'He blessed God that mankind were so easily deceived by the formal countenance of a servant'.[125] As they were contemporaries and knew many of the same people, by publicly portraying Robertson as greedy, neglectful of his duties, abusive, arrogant,

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116 Witherspoon, *Corporation*, 15–6.
117 *Ibid.*, 34.
118 *Ibid.*, 69.
119 *Ibid.*, 45–7.
120 *Ibid.*, 40.
121 The terms used to describe the bull 'broad shoulders, firm joints, and a lank belly', being similar to the virtues of 'tapered legs, and broad shoulders' associated with Hume in John Witherspoon, *Essay on Justification* (Edinburgh, 1756), *2nd edition*, 52n, and he also associates 'broad shoulders' with Hume in the Introduction to *Corporation*.
122 Witherspoon, *Corporation*, 60.
123 *Scots Magazine*, Edinburgh, June 1756, vol. 18, 280–4.
124 In America Witherspoon acknowledged Robertson's ability as a writer. 'Lectures on Eloquence II', *WJW 2004*, vol. 6, 169.
125 *Corporation*, 64–5.

deceitful, and smug, it is hard not to conclude that the criticism was intended to be personal, intended to wound.[126]

Corporation was clearly more angry and bitter than the satire in *Characteristics*. By the time of *Corporation*, his hope for change had largely disappeared and his frustration and dislike spilt through onto the page. This may in part explain the difference in reception of the two satires; the first, though biting, was light and optimistic; the second pessimistic, self-pitying, and bitter. The language used in *Corporation* was harsher, idle servants hold a 'rancorous hatred' for the humble servants and 'spread slanders against them without number', they were malicious, vengeful, and 'not ashamed to become pimps and pandars to great men, and even sometimes … attend[ed] them in their nocturnal expeditions'.[127] They acted as spies and informers. Meanwhile, Witherspoon's feeling of persecution as the author of *Characteristics* grew. The 'fury and resentment' of the servants ridiculed could not be conceived, they 'employed themselves night and day in devising methods of revenge'.[128] In the meantime, they lied about him and termed him depraved and a rascal. While *Characteristics* directed the reader to laugh at the ridiculous Moderates, *Corporation*, with the most diaphanous of satiric veils, tells the reader that the Moderates were corrupt, careless, lazy, dishonest, vicious, vengeful, greedy, and with no theological knowledge.

In describing the frustration of the people towards the badly behaved servants, Witherspoon was reflecting his own frustration with the Moderates, but also with fellow orthodox ministers; 'the patience of many of them had been at an end for many years; but, being divided among themselves, their influence was not sufficient to produce a general change.'[129] The orthodox would not compromise, would not combine and so were consistently out voted by the more organised Moderate faction who appeared secure in their control of the General Assembly. He concluded, in terms similar to *Apology*, that while there was a glimmer of hope from the elders and lay members of the General Assembly,

> there was not the most distant prospect of reformation by the servants themselves. The honester sort were always borne down, traduced and slandered; and those of an opposite character had so long kept the management of the corporation in their hands, that they reckoned themselves secure in their authority, and openly set at defiance both the people in general, and their fellow servants.[130]

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126 DeYoung makes the point that Witherspoon had a similar background to and knew most of the leading Moderates. He then concluded 'None of this is to suggest that Witherspoon was motivated by jealousy or personal animus.' (*Religious Formation*, 121) While motivation is hard to determine at this distance, his published works suggest considerable resentment of the success of his contemporaries, especially as he despised their lack of orthodox belief and hypocritical behaviour.

127 Witherspoon, *Corporation*, 51 and 64.

128 *Ibid.*, 55.

129 *Ibid.*, 66.

130 *Ibid.*, 75.

As it was unlikely any material change would occur soon, the fight was lost in Scotland for the time being, virtue had changed its residence, 'and therefore … we can only send that unhappy people our good wishes'.[131] This sounded like someone who had given up on any significant Church reform and was mentally disengaging. He was conflicted about Scotland, referring to it as a happy island while crying out against the corruption in the Church and resulting growth of impiety and infidelity in society. Scotland needed spiritual regeneration; human effort unaided was ineffectual.

F. Conclusion

The accuracy of Witherspoon's satire of the Moderates is open to debate. For example, Sher argued that:

> None of the Moderates in the William Robertson circle had any scruples about subscribing to the church's rigorously Calvinist creed, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and none of them ever overtly denied its fundamental tenets … [but] Without explicitly rejecting Calvinist doctrine, they sought to shift the emphasis of Scottish Presbyterianism from predestination and election to individual and social morality.[132]

Kidd claimed the Moderates had a 'cheerfully progressive outlook' of historical progress, and that they considered that 'Protestantism conferred on each generation a duty to review the standards of its predecessors'.[133] Although neither the Moderate nor the Popular wings of the Church were homogeneous, Witherspoon believed his portrayal, and, like all good satires, his version had enough truth to sting and stick.[134]

DeYoung suggested Witherspoon was a man caught between two ages, 'a pessimist in an era of optimism, a traditionalist in time of Enlightenment, and a man who, in a future looking age, was intent on preserving the glories of the past.'[135] He looked at the Church's religious settlement, the Confession of Faith, at religious orthodoxy, as fixed and frozen, not subject to change at the whims of fashion. Certainly in this respect, Witherspoon thought in different time scales from his Moderate foes. Instead of seeing him as backward looking in a forward-looking age, it is better to see him as operating in a temporal and a theological time scale. The temporal was transient, while the theological was fixed. But that did not mean that it

131 *Ibid.*, 76.

132 Sher, *Church*, 35

133 *Colin* Kidd, 'Subscription, the Scottish Enlightenment and the Moderate Interpretation of History', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 55.3 (2004): Print, 511 and 514.

134 'the Moderates were at bottom an establishmentarian grouping, their identity based less on a common theological outlook, than a shared conception of ecclesiastical polity.' Kidd, *Subscription*, 517.

135 DeYoung, *Religious Formation*, 94.

was not worth building a better world. He was pessimistic about the Church of Scotland and Scottish society, but optimistic about America and the growth of true religion there.

Witherspoon consistently argued that both eternal life and earthly happiness were only gained by salvation through Christ. 'We have no warrant to ask national prosperity without a revival of religion.'[136] *Corporation* showed a Scotland where the impiety and lack of virtue of the ministry prevented a religious revival and imperilled eternal life as well as earthly happiness. Wider society suffered. The idea of the 'good of the whole', which he had mocked in Maxim VI of *Characteristics*, depended on the regeneration of the individual.

Witherspoon worked his way from a cool, ironic, knowing, and almost detached style in *Characteristics*, through an earnest, self-justificatory lecturing approach in *Apology*, to an angry, personal dystopia in *Corporation.* As his sense of estrangement grew, the Church of Scotland– and therefore also Scotland – became increasingly a 'diseased, bad, faulty, or unfavourable place', a 'failed utopia'.[137] What distinguished the secular jeremiad in *Corporation* from religious jeremiads was how personal he made it. He was as clever and well educated as the Moderate leaders; he was not a hypocrite like they were – he was righteous and his motives were pure, but he was persecuted and could not write or preach freely. This was far from the picture of growing tolerance, debate, 'polite' behaviour, and 'moderation' usually associated with the Scottish Enlightenment.

The circumstances of Witherspoon's decision to emigrate have been described elsewhere.[138] However, reading his Scottish works it is hard to accept the view that there was no ego, no personal envy or dislike in his decision to emigrate. He was, as Benjamin Rush observed, blocked.[139] This view is complimentary to the hypothesis put forward by Crawford that 'the aggregate humiliation' of his legal entanglements with Snodgrass and others were a psychological and emotional drain which pushed him to emigrate.[140] But on its own, that does not seem a sufficient explanation.[141] Witherspoon needed the wider sense of religious and professional frustration to provide justification for his move.

His anger and frustration came through in his farewell sermon, where he referred to the church in Corinth being 'greatly infested with divisions and contentions', which were 'unhappily inflamed by ambitious and factious teachers'.[142] Who was the 'man of strife' who claimed

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136 Witherspoon, 'National Prosperity', 367.

137 Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Oxford, 2017), 4 and 5.

138 DeYoung, *Religious Formation*, 93–5, provides a summary of the differing views on Witherspoon's reasons for emigrating.

139 *See* Mailer, *American Revolution*, 103.

140 *Crawford*, *Lost World*, 300.

141 As Michael Griggs observed in his review of *Lost World* 'Witherspoon's reputation remained largely intact in Scotland even after the affair.' *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies* 37.1 (2017): 114–6. Also, the timings seem odd, his disillusion with his position was already becoming clear in 1765–6 at a time when the legal cases were largely quiet and, although uncertain, still had a long period to run.

142 Witherspoon, 'Ministerial Fidelity', 281.

'a flaming profession of religion', but was 'a son of Belial'?[143] He also spoke of the frustration of seeing 'one attempt after another for the revival of truth and righteousness defeated by the strength of corruption' resulting in the 'danger of impatience and fretfulness against Providence'.[144] Sentiments directed as much to himself as to his congregation.

Although he did not accept the approach from the College of New Jersey until 1767, he had already burnt his bridges; the rupture was not just theological or a matter of governance, it was deeply personal.[145] Witherspoon told his congregation that among the most dreadful Divine judgments was when God 'ceases to strive with a people'.[146] *Corporation* marked an important step towards the time when he ceased to strive, and followed God in saying to the Church of Scotland: 'But my people would not hearken to my voice, Israel would have none of me, so I gave them up to their own hearts lusts, and they walked in their own counsels.'[147]

[143] *Ibid.*, 281–2. His farewell sermon was an extended swipe at the Moderates. Of those who do not declare the whole counsel of God 'I would despise the wisdom of such persons; it is arrogance, it is impiety.' *Ibid.*, 267.

[144] *Ibid.*, 286.

[145] Mailer refers to Witherspoon becoming "estranged from his friends". *American Revolution*, 3.

[146] Witherspoon, 'National Prosperity', 369.

[147] *Psalms* 81:11–2, quoted in 'National Prosperity', 369.