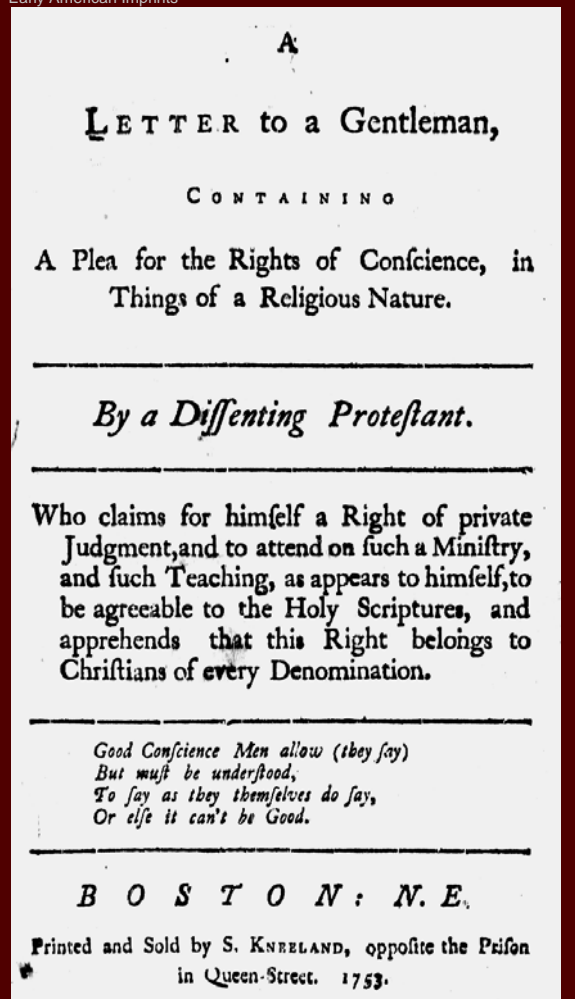




Early American Imprints



*Good Conscience Men allow (they say)  
 But must be understood,  
 To say as they themselves do say,  
 Or else it can't be Good.*

***“Injustice, Oppression, and  
 Spiritual Tyranny”***

**A LETTER to a Gentleman**

Containing A Plea for the Rights of  
 Conscience, in Things of a Religious Nature

*By a Dissenting Protestant*

**1753**\_\_EXCERPTS

By Massachusetts law in the 1700s, each town selected one Protestant clergyman who would be paid with colony taxes. To protest the “spiritual tyranny” of the law, an anonymous writer published *A Letter to a Gentleman*, appealing for the right of conscience. “Can such Compulsion be reconciled to the Rules of Equity and Justice?” he asks.

June 1752

*Honoured Sir,*

... I am therefore persuaded, that it never was the Intent of the Law that all, without Distinction, should be taxed towards the Support of a Ministry in which the Consciences of some cannot acquiesce; yet I earnestly wish that our Laws were rendered more plain and easy to be understood in their genuine Sense and Meaning.

I covet for myself and mine the Enjoyment of a learned as well as pious and orthodox Ministry; and count it a singular Favor of Heaven, which calls for great Admiration as well as Thankfulness, that in our

degenerate Age there are any, and so many, faithful Gospel Ministers continued in our Land: And I wish they may ever be duly encouraged and supported; but I am not able to discover any Scripture-Foundation for any Act or Acts of the Civil Authority to compel any who conscientiously and on the Account of a different understanding of the Meaning of the Scriptures, do dissent even from the Ministry of such as by the major Part are esteemed to be the most eminent, to hear, or pay for, such Preaching, as they apprehend to be disagreeable to the great End of the Gospel Ministry.

Can such Compulsion be reconciled to the Rules of Equity and Justice? Can it be founded on, yeah, is it not directly contrary to, the Example of Christ and his Apostles, and to the Practice of the primitive Churches, who neither used themselves, nor prescribed to succeeding Ages, any compulsive Methods to

<sup>1</sup> National Humanities Center, 2009: [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/). Accessed through Early American Imprints online, American Antiquarian Society; permission pending. Some spelling and punctuation modernized by NHC for clarity. Complete image credits at [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagecredits.htm](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagecredits.htm).

bring Men to embrace the Gospel? And are not persuasive and convictive Arguments for the enlightening of the Mind, the only Scripture Method to promote sincere Religion?

Yet I am persuaded, that if it were but suspected, that any Laws of the Province had put it in the Power of a major Part, to provide a costly Entertainment, for the whole Town, once a Week, and to compel every one to pay his Part of the Cost, it would raise a grievous Hubbub, and People would be apt to think it an Infringement upon their natural Rights, as men, that other Men should choose their Diet: and that it was unreasonable to compel them to pay for the Provision, if they found it so unsavory that they could not eat it; and much more if they were assured that something of a poisonous Quality, or that had a Tendency to breed Diseases in the Body, was mixed with it.

Now, in as much as the Care of every Man's own Soul is peculiarly belonging to himself, and is of infinitely greater Importance than the Concerns of the Body; and we are pathetically cautioned to take Heed both how, & what we hear. To be aware of false Teachers & corrupt Doctrines, and are expressly required to cease from hearing the Instruction that causeth to err from the Words of Knowledge, it cannot be less reasonable and necessary (but vastly more so) that every Man be left entirely free, to act according to the Dictates of his own Understanding, in the Choice of his spiritual Food, and to put himself under such a Ministry as he apprehends to be agreeable to the Mind of Christ, and consequently most likely to subserve his own Edification. . . .

And now (Honoured Sir), Since our Laws are construed by many to intend such a Power, I refer to your superiour Judgment, whether Reason and Religion, as well as the just Vindication of the Laws of this Province (relating to the Settlement and Support of Minister) from such Aspersions, does not require that something be done, in a very explicit manner, to rescue them from such Misconstructions and prevent their being abused to Injustice, Oppression, and spiritual Tyranny? said Instances whereof have already been in several Places in our Land.

So rests,  
*Honoured Sir,*

***Your humble Servant***