Penn on Religious Tolerance (1675)

This excerpt is from an essay in which William Penn stated his argument for religious tolerance. A wealthy Quaker, Penn had been jailed several times in England for his unorthodox religious beliefs. After receiving a large tract of land that became modern-day Pennsylvania, he resolved to create a new colony with a founding charter based on religious tolerance.

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Certain it is, that there are few Kingdoms in the World more Divided within themselves [by religion than England]....

Your Endeavours for a [religious] Uniformity have been many; Your Acts not a few to Enforce it, but they Consequence, whether you intended it or not, through the Barbarous Practices of those that have had their Execution, hath been the Spoiling of several Thousands of the free inhabitants of this Kingdom of their Unforfeited Rights. Persons have been flung into Jails, Gates and Trunks broke open, Goods destroyed, till a stool hath not been left to sit down on, Flocks of Cattle driven, whole Barns full of Corn seized, Parents left with out Children, Children without their Parents, both without subsistence....

Finding then by Sad Experience, and a long Tract of Time, That the very Remedies applied to cure Dissension increase it; and that the more Vigorously a Uniformity is coercively prosecuted, the Wider Breaches grown, the more Inflamed Persons are, and fixt in their Resolutions to stand by their Principles; which, besides all other Inconveniences to those that give them Trouble, their very Sufferings beget that Compassion in the Multitude...and makes a Preparation for not a few Proselytes....

The Question. What is most Fit, Easie and Safe at this Juncture of Affairs to be done, for Composing, at least Quieting Differences; for Allaying the Heat of Contrary Interests, and making them Subservient to the Interest of the Government, and Consistent with the Prosperity of the Kingdom?

The Answer.

I. An Inviolable and Impartial Maintenance of English Rights.

II. Our Superiours governing themselves upon a Balance, as near as may be, towards the several Religious Interests.

III. A sincere Promotion of General and Practical Religion....

I shall not at this time make it my Business to manifest the Inconsistency that there is between the Christian Religion, and a forced Uniformity; not only because it hath been so often and excellently done by Men of Wit, Learning and Conscience, and that I have elsewhere largely deliver'd my Sense about it; but because Every free and impartial Temper hath of a long time observ'd, that such Barbarous Attempts were so far from being indulged, that they were most
severely prohibited by Christ himself....

Instead of Peace, Love and good Neighborhood, behold Animosity and contest! One Neighbour watcheth another...; this divides them, their Families and Acquaintance....

Nor is this Severity only Injurious to the Affairs of England, but the whole Protestant World: For besides that it calls the Sincerity of their Proceedings against the Papists into Question, it furnisheth them with this sort of unanswerable Interrogatory: "The Protestants exclaim against us for Persecutor, and are they now the very men themselves?..."

But there are...objections that some make against what I have urged, not unfit to be consider'd. The first is this: If the Liberty desired be granted, what know we but Dissenters may employ their Meetings to insinuate against the Government, inflame the People into a Dislike of their Superiours, and thereby prepare them for Mischief....Answer....What Dissenter can be so destitute of Reason and Love to common Safety, as to expose himself and Family; by plotting against a Government that is kind to him, and gives him the Liberty he desire....