

On Trading in Superfluities

~Other Speakers S-Z: John Woolman:

I have felt great Distress of Mind since I came on this Island⁽²⁾, on Account of the Members of our Society being mixed with the world in various sorts of business and Traffick, carried on in impure Channels. Great is the Trade to Africa for Slaves: and in loading these Ships abundance of People are employ'd in the Manufactories.

Friends in early time refused, on religious Principle, to make or trade in Superfluities, of which we have many large Testimonies on Record, but for want of Faithfulness, some gave Way, even Some whose Example were of Note in Society, and from these others took more Liberty; Members of our Society worked in Superfluities, and bought and sold them, and thus Dimness of Sight came over many. At length Friends got into the Use of some Superfluities in Dress, and in the Furniture of their Houses, and this hath spread from less to more, till Superfluity of some Kind is common amongst us.

In this declining State many look at the Example of one another, and too much neglect the pure Feeling of Truth. Of late Years a deep Exercise hath attended my Mind, that Friends may dig deep; may carefully cast forth the loose Matter, and get down to the Rock , the sure Foundation, and there hearken to that Divine Voice which gives a clear and certain Sound.

And I have felt, in that which doth not deceive, that if Friends who have known the Truth, keep in that Tenderness of Heart, where all views of outward Gain are given up, and their Trust is only on the Lord, he will generously lead some to be Patterns of deep Self-denial, in Things relating to Trade, and handicraft Labour: and that some who have Plenty of Treasure of this World, will example in a plain frugal Life, and pay Wages to such whom they may hire, more liberally than is now customary in some Places.⁽³⁾

While Friends were kept truly humble, and walked according to the purity of our Principles, the Divine Witness in many Hearts was reached; but, when a world Sprit got Entrance, therewith came in Luxuries and Superfluities, and spread little and little, even amongst the foremost Rank in Society, and from these others took Liberty in that Way more abundantly.

In the Continuation of these Things from Parents to Children there were many wants to supply, even Wants unknown to Friends, while they faithfully followed Christ. And, in striving to supply these Wants, amy have exacted on the poor, many have enter'd on Employments, in which they often labour in upholding Pride and Vanity. Many have looked on one another, been strenghten'd in these things, one by the Example of another, and as to the pure Divine Feeling, dimness hath come over many, and the Channels of true Brotherly Love been obstructed.

NOTES

(1) With may be compared the earlier essay, "Serious Considerations on Trade."

(2) England.

(3) The next two paragraphs, in the first edition, 1774, from part of the essay "On a Sailors Life," but the York MS. places them here.