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Letter from George Sibley to William Russell, June 1, 1836

George Champlin Sibley
Lindenwood College

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Linden Wood June 1st, 1836

To Mr. Wm Russell,

Dear Sir.

Your long letter by Mr. Wherry of the 27th Ult., in answer to mine of the 23rd, was duly received on the 30th, on which day Mr. Wherry entered Miss Lewis as a Pupil and Boarder. I have not failed to read your letter with attention, and to consider its contents in that spirit of candour and frankness that belongs to sincere friendship; but were I to attempt a formal & detailed answer, it might involve me in a Religious controversy with you, which I do not. There are some particulars of your letter, that I must not omit to notice, and this must be done briefly. Whenever Mr. Stillwell and Mr. Phillips (the Guardians of Mary and Lucy Ann Lewis) see fit to remove their Wards from Linden Wood, they will of course do so – all that I have to ask of you in the matter, is simply to make them understand fully and well, the Nature of the difficulties that have arisen in your own Mind, & which you consider such unsurmountable objections to entrusting the education of Youth to our care. On this point I wish it to be understood, and well & clearly understood that tho' I ask no Patronage Public or Private for this School; it is due to Mrs. Sibley & myself, as well as to our friends and the Public, that when Parents or Guardians think proper to withdraw their confidence from us for reasons assigned; that those reasons must fully and fairly explained, whenever circumstances may require it. For unless this be done, much injury may be done not only to ourselves, but to the general cause of Education. Therefore, I must request, that when you consult those whose duty it has become to guard the interests and look after the welfare of Col: Lewis' orphan children, as to the propriety of continuing them here as Pupils and Boarders; that you will not omit to refer to me for information in respect to those objections of your own. It may be, that it is with them, as it is with most persons having such charges; that what you apprehend to be one of the most dreadful Misfortunes that be befall a youth; to them may appear in quite a different light, at least they may not choose to incur the responsibility of so far interfering in the Matter of Religion as to direct the minds of those Orphans to be kept carefully free from its benign influence. I should feel no right however, to ask this favor of you; but for the peculiar circumstances of the case; which seems to make it proper for you to make known your reasons for separating Mary Lewis from your Daughter.

You ask me for an "interpretation" of the Sentence I quoted in my last, from the Circular that I propose soon to publish concerning the School at Linden Wood. In this request you intimate, that tho' the Sentence conveys a sensible meaning, and is, in itself, unexceptionable, even in your own view; yet that it seems to your jealous eye, to be so contrived as if purposely to allow an almost illimitable control over the minds of the Pupils in the matter of Religion, even to the occupying of the most of their time & attention to "the study of Religion". That it contains a covert design, to make this School a sort of theological nursery, and an instrument for the use of "Revival Makers" and "Bigot Makers", and the free resort of Religious Fanatics and Sectarian Zealots And you desire me to re-assure you, for the information of others, whether or not this Sentence I really intended thus to assume such privileges under the simple declaration of its common sense meaning. Why Sir, if you can believe or suspect Mrs. Sibley and I capable of any such subterfuge as your query seems to imply, you will not believe us whatever we may say to repel such an imputation. "The settled Principles of the Christian Religion" are perfectly plain & Simple, easily understood, and not easily misunderstood, they are incapable of producing harm – Tho' they may be made the pretense for the foolery of fanaticism and bigotry – like every other good thing. They may be, and very often are, mightily perverted. Those who entertain

doubts of our honesty of purpose, prudence, and discretion, as respects this matter, will not & ought not to confide their children to our care – those who consider that it is hurtful to youth whilst they are at School to employ any of their time in obtaining some knowledge of the “Settled Principles” of the Religion on which is founded the Government and Civil institutions of their Country, and that their future prospects are likely to be ruined by an early Religious bias; ought not by any means to send their charges to Linden Wood, for altho’ we have no intention or wish to introduce “the Study of Religion” into the School, or to suffer the interference of Religious Zealots in our Household, or to lead or suffer to be led, any of our Pupils, to Nightly or daily meetings of an improper character, where superstition, wild fanaticism, and overtrained excitement are likely to preside; yet as we shall always enjoin it upon them as a duty, to attend with becoming decorum around our domestic altar at stated times, and to attend, when we think they can, and ought to attend, Public Worship; it may occur that some among them may receive Religious impressions of an enduring character, which we should not deem it proper to repress or discourage. We should however, always in such cases immediately apprise the Parents and Guardians of the true state of the case, & restrain the youth from any improper commitment, by no means allowing any connection with any church or religious associations, without the approbation of Parents or Guardians - - and we shall never attempt to persuade any one, much less a Pupil, to join ours or any other particular branch of the Church of Christ. Here I desire to close this subject, and hope I have made myself understood. One word as to the Sunday School; which by the way, I think you will find sufficiently explained and commented on in my letter to you of the 24th October 1834, of which I find I have a copy.

To those like yourself, object to the youthful mind being encumbered whilst at School with anything like “the study of Religion” or of their being placed occasionally where by any possibility they may receive a religious bias, the preceding explanations will be sufficient, for they will not trust us at any rate, & of course will not care what is our rule respecting the Sunday School. There are persons however (and those who have the Guardianship of Col. Lewis’ children may be of the number) who tho’ they are religious, and desire that their children shall read & study the Bible, and obtain religious instructions; are yet opposed to the Sunday School System – Now altho’ we are convinced of the very great utility of this institution, and know it to be entirely anti-sectarian in its construction, object and tendency, yet we do not undertake to do more than to commend it to those who place their Daughters and Wards under our care. Our rule as to this matter is this. Unless Parents & Guardians direct the contrary, their Daughters and Wards will be required to attend the usual exercises of the Sunday School, either at Linden Wood or St. Charles, as we may find it most fit & convenient for them – the Pupils whose Parents or Guardians desire them to be exempted from thus attending, will not be required or permitted to do so – but when the school is in Town which we attend – all the Pupils must go together to the place of Public Worship (unless particular places are assigned by Parents &c. for particular individuals) this is obviously necessary as a general rule, to prevent confusion, and to preserve that watchful care over all, as to their deportment and safety, that it is incumbent at all times on us to observe.

Having thus dispatched the business part of your letter, and still having some leisure time, I must avail myself of this occasion to notice some other parts of it. The next point in order, that seems to demand some explanation, is where you intimate your earnest hope, that Mrs. S & myself have not used any effectual means to inflict on you, what you would consider a Mortal evil, and which “would very nearly take your life” Meaning as I understand you, that if we or either of us have persuaded Ann or Mary, or suffered the, to be persuaded by any means to religious conviction, or to use a quaint expression, to “get Religion” that you would consider us in any other light than as your friends. In your

former letter of the 22d May, you allude to this matter in such terms of threatening warning, that I felt myself called on to desire you to remove Ann & Mary immediately from my family. Until the receipt of that letter, I was not aware of the deadly hostility that you indulged in against Christianity – I supposed you were, as I recently was myself, merely an unbeliever, and not a violent oppose – I knew that you did not wish your daughter to “study religion”, or to get it in any way whilst at school; but it never entered into my imagination, or that of Mrs. Sibley’s, that you expected us to set a special watch and guard over her in this particular, and that if our vigilance should be ineffectual you meant to hold us responsible. As soon as I understood you on this point, I desired you to take away the Girls. If we disclaim all intention of teaching religion as a School exercise, we certainly do not mean to lend ourselves to discourage it or to favor irreligion. Whether your daughter has or has not received any religious impressions, I am unable to inform you. I am sure of one thing however; that no special pains have been taken with her on the Subject in any way. She knows how to read the Bible, and has occasionally done so no doubt; and has often heard sermons of the able & impressive character; and I have no doubt that her attendance in the Sunday School has enabled her to comprehend something of the Christian Religion.

And let me add, that in my opinion, Ann is an amiable good girl, and every way deserving of your affectionate regards. She carried with her from Linden Wood the blessing of Mrs. S. & myself, and shall ever have our prayers for her happiness in this life, and in that to which we all desire to look with hope.

You accuse me of inconsistency in my religious principles. To this charge I plead guilty so far as to acknowledge that my present views are materially different from what they were at the time you allude to, and if there is any blame in inconsistency, I am willing to bear it. But you are mistaken if you suppose that I was ever an oppose of Christianity – I was an unbeliever in it ‘till within about the last two years – I always since I can remember, wished I was a Christian, and admired the simple & Sublime character of Christ and his precepts. My mother was one of his devoted followers, and died full of faith and hope, and I was by her brought up “in fear & nurture of the Lord” Never have I known a human being for whom I could feel such deep and abiding reverence and affection as I did for her, & still do for her memory. Well do I remember when in my childhood (I was a child when she died) that blessed Mother taught me to offer up my prayers to God, and how she taught me the Simple story of Christ, and counseled me to follow his precepts, if I would secure my earthly and eternal happiness. The lessons she taught me I never forgot, tho’ I did for many, many years neglect them. Their force and truth have at length roused me from my dream, and I am now, at the last stage of my life, endeavoring to fulfil the wishes of my Mother, to realize if possible, the object of her many anxious prayers to Heaven on my behalf. Yet Sir, I am persuaded that had it not been for the early religious impressions that I received from my Mothers lips and example; that I could never at my late period of life, have tuned from my follies, and chosen the “inconsistent” course that I have entered upon. This is an inconsistency that I should rejoice my friend, to see you guilty of; and I assure you I do not despair of seeing it if God spares your life another year or two. Allow me Sir to notice one other point in your Letters – the opportunity is every way very favorable, and tho’ I may detain you a little longer than I intended or expected when I sat down, I hope you will excuse me. In your last two letters you express the opinion in terms very positive that “Religion is one of the most difficult Studies, & most difficult of clear demonstration, while it is the most important of any on earth, and requires more strength and maturity of mind than any other. I am convinced that it is an unfit subject of Study until the “mind is matured” and in another place you say “While is is of paramount importance, it is the most difficult of demonstration of any study on earth, and requires more strength & maturity of Mind than any other; therefore unfit, as I think, for

children at School". Assuming that when you use the term "Religion" you mean your remarks to apply to the Religion of the Bible, or in other words Christian Religion shall here offer you some of the reasons that occur to me for dissenting entirely from the position you have taken, In the first place I venture to assert that the System of Religion founded by Jesus Christ, is the Simplest, Plainest, and most easy of comprehension of any other System whatever – One of the most striking arguments & proofs of its truth is this very fact, because, being planed by Heavenly Wisdom for the use of Mankind, it must of course be adapted to their understanding, and intended for their government as soon as they can be justly held accountable for their actions. The moment the human intellect can distinguish between right and wrong (or to state my meaning more precisely) as soon as the child knows the distinction between the approving Smile and the reprovng frown of the other, so soon is that child capable of receiving from that mother the first lesson of Christian duty; and when the child has so far advanced in Worldly wisdom as to comprehend one abstract truth, say that little System of abstract truths, the Multiplication Table, then is he or she perfectly competent to understand the Christian System, with clearness and ease, Surely it would be mockery to say, that God has revealed his will to mankind; but that it is enveloped in such deep mystery, that nearly half the days allotted for life of many must be spent in obtaining that strength and maturity of mind necessary to understand what he requires &c. According to this notion, we are not accountable creatures until after we have finished our "Schooling" which on an average occupies the first 18 years of life. The annals of Mortality tell us that a very large proportion of the human race go to their graves before they reach the age of maturity, I know not – it may be safely assumed I think that it does not, sooner than the body does – the laws of most countries fix the age of discretion at about 21 years, or at the age of puberty. This expression (Maturity of mind) is so very vague, that if I had not some other clue to your meaning, I should be at a loss how to proceed. You have expressed the belief that the mind must first be stored with knowledge derived from study, experience, and observation, before it can understand the Religion of the Bible, and consequently not being able to understand, cannot be expected to discharge the duties therein enjoined. Of course you think your daughter Ann and Mary Lewis too little Matured in their minds to be able to comprehend the Subject. At any rate you have brought your own mind to the conviction that it is above their understanding, & that it would be wrong in you, & wickedness in your and their friends to attempt giving them any instruction of advice; except to caution them occasionally against any influence their minds might receive from the example and admonition of Christians, as such, - and this subject, which you say "is the most important of any on earth" you insist shall be forbidden, debased & utterly shut out from persons who are 12 and 15 years old, and who are perfectly competent to understand and apply, the abstruse proposition in Algebra, Geometry &c. the construction of language, the Sciences of Astronomy, Chemistry, Music &c. Why sire, compared with these things, the understanding of the Christian Religion is plainness itself, so very plain is it that it address itself to the meanest understanding, and in the emphatic language of a great author "he who runs may read and understand". And the lessons that Christ thought proper to draw from his system, are equally as plain to the young mind, as any lessons that a Mother teaches her children. Let us see what is the Religion of Christ. As I understand it, as it is spread before us in our Bible, it is this – Mankind in their fallen & degraded state are naturally prone to do evil, and are sinful in all their propensities, insomuch, that they are unfit to enjoy happiness in this world, much less to participate in those scenes of unmixed joy and contentment that Heaven, the dwelling place of the eternal God affords. We possess no power in ourselves, to rid the world of this evil; and except we are freed from it, we must look for future misery in the eternal World, to which we are all obliged very soon to go – God who made us, has declared it to be hi purpose to make us happy forever, provided we obey

him. He send his son to communicate to us the terms of our freedom, and to consummate the covenant, reassuring us that if we acknowledge with repentance sincere, all our past wickedness, and believe and confide in his Son, he will yet receive us as his children into life eternal – To his Son Christ, he gives entire sovereignty over all mankind & makes him, our final Judge, And Christ has warned us all, that unless we accept of this last offer of Love and Mercy from the Most High God; he as our Judge will refuse us admission into the never ending joys of Heaven, and will send us into eternal woe. These are the “Settled principles of Christianity” I believe, and are illustrated, enforced, & their truth demonstrated in the Scriptures, especially in the New Testament, in language far, very far more simple and beautifully sublime, than any that my pen can even attempt to paraphrase. Theologians, commentators & over zealous sectarians, have indeed “shed much darkness” over this beautifully simple. Sublime and all important subject; but so long as we possess the Bible and retain our civil and religious rights to read & study and investigate its truth; none need ever fear that the fanatic, or the bigot, or the infidel can prevail over it. We must look to God thro’ his son Christ, for the light if truth to conduct is safely thro’ this to a better world. This light he has given – it burns & shines brightly in our highly favored land. If we disregard it whilst our own nearly exhausted taper lasts; there is no alternative for us, but to remain in darkness and misery forever. Some think that the Christian religion, is a great, mysterious gloomy & incomprehensible system – Indeed they See, to imagine that altho’ Religion is of paramount importance, and absolutely necessary as a passport to a happy eternity, yet it is so exceedingly dull & monotonous in its duties, & interferes so much with the important business & pleasures of life as to justify them in their own view of the matter at least, in putting it away from their thoughts. God they allow has given us a Code of Laws for our government in relation to ourselves, by which to regulate our intercourse with one another, and he has given us other laws of a much more solemn character. The first, or Moral code points out our duty to Men, the other, relates entirely to our duty towards God, and is Religion, the necessarily includes the first – but the first does not include the last by any means. Those therefore who are Religious, must also be Moral. But we may be Moral, in the common & true meaning of the term, and not be Religious. Both are commended by God. Now the question occurs is it reasonable to expect that God will excuse us for the neglect of our Religious duty towards him, altho’ we may have well and truly discharged every one of our Moral duties to our fellow Man? – Just reflect upon this a moment, Does it not appear perfectly clear that if God is just to himself, & faithful to his own decrees, such pretension would greatly aggravate our offence? Those therefore who chuse [choose] to content themselves with merely the discharge of their Moral obligations, neglecting Religion, comprise of the world that are in the gift of men; they may get wealth, & engage in what we call important enterprises; they may say to themselves, I will enjoy life soberly and rationally, and spend the decline of lie in ease, comfort & happiness. Alas Sir, did you or any other man ever know or hear of an instance of success in such a course? But suppose it successful, what then? Now my dear Sir, I will venture to assert, there can be no real happiness or satisfaction in this life, except it spring from a well founded hope of Heaven; which no one can possibly entertain, who has neglected God’s Service, as by Christ required. We can take no pleasure or satisfaction in toil, except we can look forward with certainty or at least confidence to future reward – and Vice Versa – Just as you Sir never could have endured the swamps and sloughs of Arkansas, if you had not hoped to enjoy the fruits if your toil at some future period, in some much more eligible place. Whilst you were encountering the very many privations & vexations that doubtless fell in your way at the time I refer to. I think I run no hazard of mistake, when I suppose you to have enjoyed in fond anticipation, the ample fortune that you are now enjoying in sober reality, and which it is my sincere wish that you may long enjoy.

I have thus endeavored to illustrate my position, that the Christian Religion is not only not difficult of comprehension, but that it is on the contrary very easily understood by youth of even a tender age, and that it ought to be understood as soon as we can be reasonably supposed to be accountable for our actions. And I think Sir, that whatever may be your views as to its truth, that you will find on a fair and candid examination, that the System itself is one of the very plainest propositions, if not the plainest, of any other, not excepting the Multiplication table. But I must be understood to mean the System as it is contained in the Old and New Testament, perfectly clear of all the commentaries that have been written & published thereon.

I have already troubled you too long I fear, else I should notice some other tatters hinted at in your last letter, upon which I differ with you in opinion – I will only further remark in allusion to the last paragraph of your last letter: that you are entirely mistaken when you suppose to that I consider myself bound by any vows or oaths either as a Christian, or a Member of a particular chirstian association, that can in any wise conflict with the duties and obligations of friendship – Christianity my dear Sir admits of no such pledges – on the contrary it enjoins on its supporters just the opposite course – and altho' there does indeed appear to be a very wide difference between us as to the Christian Religion, and the duties it enjoins &c. yet I am not disposed by any means to discontinue our ordinary friendly intercourse, and shall be much pained if anything that has recently occurred between us, should have any such tendency. I have given you my views frankly & honestly; if a word or sentence has escaped my pen, to wound your feelings, I assure you I did not so intend, and am sorry for it.

And I remain yrs. As ever,

G. C. Sibley

P.S. I know not when I shall have any of the School circulars printed. – When I do, I will furnish you some of them if you wish them – My house goes on so very slowly that I fear it may be late before 'tis finished.
G.C.S.