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**A Discourse
concerning
Evangelical Love,
Church Peace,
and
Unity**

John Owen





A Discourse concerning Evangelical Love, Church Peace, and Unity

Author(s): Owen, John (1616-1683)

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Description: *Evangelical Love, Church Peace and Unity* was written at a time when John Owen found it necessary to speak of a sinful decay of love among professors of the gospel in this nation. It deals with the importance of these virtues at all levels of church life. Owen believed the Church needed more love, because without it, more and more arguments and schisms would occur and unity would be dissolved. Schisms were almost impossible to overcome, Owen said, because neither side was willing to sacrifice its pride. Disunity in the church also created more dissenters and nonconformists. The lessons Owen teaches here also need to be heard in the modern church, and this book will offer several strategies for remedying broken churches today.

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A discourse
concerning
evangelical love, church peace, and unity;
with the
occasions and reasons of the present differences and divisions about things sacred and
religious.



“Speciosum quidem nomen est pacis, et pulchra opinio unitatis; sed quis ambigat eam
solam unicam ecclesiæ pacem esse quæ Christi est?” — Hilary

Prefatory note.

In 1672, the year in which this “Discourse concerning Evangelical Love, Church-Peace, and Unity” was published, an indulgence had been extended to Dissenters; and, encouraged by this capricious gleam of better feeling on the part of the Government, Dr Owen endeavours in the following discourse to exhibit the religious principles of his denomination, under a light fitted to disarm hostility and allay the rancour with which they had been long regarded.

He shows, Chap. i., that it was not from want of Christian love they continued in a state of separation from the Church of England. After illustrating the obligation of Christian love to all mankind in general, ii., he proceeds to establish the claims of the Church of Christ on our affections, considering it first as the spiritual body of Christ, secondly, in regard to its outward profession, and, thirdly, as consisting of professors of the gospel ranged under particular churches. In a position of dissent from the Church of England, there is no repudiation of it as a true church of Christ, and no sin of schism from the church, viewed as catholic and *invisible*, or as *visibly professing* the fundamental truths of the gospel, iii. The causes of schisms and divisions are specified, such as erroneous views of evangelical unity, and the neglect of various duties incumbent upon the churches for the preservation of order and purity, iv. In the last chapter the grounds and reasons of nonconformity are stated. He first proves that the imposition of terms of communion not required by divine law is inconsistent with the *rule of communion* established by Christ himself; secondly, with the *practice* of the apostles; thirdly, with the *doctrine* of Scripture on the duty of churches and the liberty of Christians in these matters; fourthly, with certain *special facts* in the history of the primitive churches; and, fifthly, he argues that if unscriptural terms of communion are allowed, it would follow that no rule of communion had been fixed by Christ himself, — an inference which would set aside the authority of Christ over the church. He next illustrates in what respects the terms of communion in the Church of England are unscriptural; — in the subscription to the liturgy which is exacted; in the canonical submission required to the polity of the church; in the observance of unscriptural ceremonies; and in the oath of canonical obedience, which must be taken by its ministers. He shows farther, that in conforming to the usages and polity of the Established Church, consent would be given, to the omission of sundry duties which Christ expressly enjoins, — such as the obligation of every minister of the gospel to take the *immediate care* of the flock whereof he is the overseer, and the responsibility under which he lies to admit to sacramental privileges those only who make “a credible profession of repentance, faith, and obedience.” The scope of the argument is to produce the conviction that the guilt of schism rests not with those who refuse, but with those who exact compliance with unscriptural terms of communion.

Mr Orme states that this work of Owen, though very excellent, has not attained the celebrity and circulation of his other writings, “perhaps in consequence of its being without

his name.” He does not seem to have been aware that though the work on its first issue was anonymous, within a twelvemonth after its publication it was issued anew with the name of the author on the title-page. The value of this discourse would be less appreciated when the controversy between the Established Church and Dissenters assumed another phase. The charge of schism, with the refutation of which it is occupied, soon lost all power, when, in the course of discussion, it came to be felt that this question depended entirely on the validity of the grounds on which secession from any church took place. And to this change in the nature of the discussion, more than to the circumstance that the work was at first published anonymously, may be attributed the comparative neglect into which, in later times, the treatise had fallen. It contains, nevertheless, much important matter, and the spirit which it breathes throughout is admirable. — Ed.

A Discourse
concerning
Christian Love and Peace



Chapter I.

Complaints of want of love and unity among Christians, how to be managed, and whence fruitless — Charge of guilt on some, why now removed, and for whose sakes — Personal mis-carriages of any not excused — Those who manage the charge mentioned not agreed.

The great differences that are in the world amongst professors of the gospel, about things relating to the worship of God, do exercise more or less the minds of the generality of men of all sorts; for, either in themselves or their consequences, they are looked on to be of great importance. Some herein regard principally that disadvantageous influence which they are supposed to have into men's spiritual and eternal concernments; others, that aspect which they fancy them to have upon the public peace and tranquility of this world. Hence, in all ages, such divisions have caused "great thoughts of heart," [Judges v. 15](#), especially because it is very difficult to make a right judgment either of their nature or their tendency. But generally by all they are looked on as evil; — by some, for what they are in themselves; by others, from the disadvantage which they bring (as they suppose) unto their secular interests. Hence there are amongst many great complaints of them, and of that want of love which is looked on as their cause. And, indeed, it seems not only to be in the liberty, but to be the duty of every man soberly to complain of the evils which he would but cannot remedy; for such complaints, testifying a sense of their evil and a desire of their cure, can be no more than what love unto the public good requireth of us. And if in any case this may be allowed, it must be so in that of divisions about sacred things or the worship of God, with their causes and manner of management amongst men: for it will be granted that the glory of God, the honour of Christ, the progress of the gospel, with the edification and peace of the church, are deeply concerned in them, and highly prejudiced by them; and in these things all men have, if not an equal, yet such a special interest as none can forbid them the due consideration of. No man, therefore, ought to be judged as though he did transgress his rule, or go beyond his line, who soberly expresseth his sense of their evil and of the calamities wherewith they are attended. Yet must it not be denied but that much prudence and moderation are required unto the due management of such complaints; for those which either consist in, or are accompanied with, invectives against the persons or ways of others, instead of a rational discourse of the causes of such divisions and their remedies, do not only open, inflame, and irritate former wounds, but prove matters of new contention and strife, to their great increase. Besides, in the manifold divisions and differences of this nature amongst us, all men are supposed to be under an adherence unto some one party or other. Herein every man stands at the same distance from others as they do from him. Now, all complaints of this kind carry along with them a tacit justification of those by whom they are made; for no man can be so profligate as to judge himself, and the way of religious worship wherein he is engaged, to be the cause of blamable divisions amongst Christians, and yet continue therein: reflections,

therefore, of guilt upon others they are usually replenished withal. But if those are not attended with evident light and unavoidable conviction, because they proceed from persons supposed not indifferent, yea, culpable in this very matter more or less themselves, by them whom they reflect upon, they are generally turned into occasions of new exasperations and contests. And hence it is come to pass, that although all good men do on all occasions bewail the want of love, forbearance, and condescension that is found among professors of the gospel, and the divisions which follow thereon, yet no comfortable nor advantageous effects do thence ensue. Yea, not only is all expectation of that blessed fruit, which a general serious consent unto such complaints might produce, as yet utterly frustrated, but the small remainders of love and peace amongst us are hazarded and impaired, by mutual charges of the want and loss of them on the principles and practices of each other. We have, therefore, need of no small watchfulness and care, lest in this matter it fall out with us as it did with the Israelites of old on another occasion, [2 Sam. xix. 41–43](#). For when they had, by a sinful sedition, cast out David from amongst them, and from reigning over them, after a little while, seeing their folly and iniquity, they assembled together with one consent to bring him home again; but in the very beginning of their endeavours to this purpose, falling into a dispute about which of the tribes had the greatest interest in him, they not only desisted from their first design, but fell into another distemper of no less dangerous importance than what they were newly delivered from. It must be acknowledged that there hath been a sinful decay of love among professors of the gospel in this nation, if not a violent casting of it out, by such prejudices and corrupt affections as wherewith it is wholly inconsistent. And it would be a matter of no small lamentation if, upon the blooming of a design for its recovery and reduction, with all its train of forbearance, condescension, gentleness, and peace, if any such design there be, by contests about the occasions and causes of its absence, with too much fierceness in our own vindication, and pleas of a special interest in it above others, new distempers should be raised, hazarding its everlasting exclusion.

In this state of things we have hitherto contented ourselves with the testimony of our own hearts unto the sincerity of our desires, as to walk in love and peace with all men, so to exercise the fruits of them on all occasions administered unto us. And as this alone we have thus far opposed unto all those censures and reproaches which we have undergone to the contrary, so therewithal have we supported ourselves under other things which we have also suffered. Farther to declare our thoughts and principles, in and about the worship of God, than they are evidenced and testified unto by our practice, we have hitherto forborne, lest the most moderate claims of an especial interest in the common faith and love of Christians should occasion new contests and troubles unto ourselves and others. And we have observed, that sometimes an over-hasty endeavour to extinguish flames of this nature hath but increased and diffused them, when, perhaps, if left alone, their fuel would have failed, and themselves expired. Besides, a peaceable practice, especially if accompanied with

a quiet bearing of injuries, gives a greater conviction to unprejudiced minds of peaceable principles and inclinations than any verbal declaration, whose sincerity is continually obnoxious to the blast of evil surmises. In a resolution, therefore, to the same purpose we had still continued, had we not so openly and frequently been called on either to vindicate our innocency or to confess and acknowledge our evil. One of these, we hope, is the aim and tendency of all those charges or accusations, for want of love, peaceableness, and due compliance with others, of being the authors and fomenters of schisms and divisions, that have been published against us, on the account of our dissent from some constitutions of the church of England: for we do not think that any good men can please themselves in merely accusing their brethren, whereby they add to the weight of their present troubles, and evidently expose them unto more; for every charge of guilt on those who are already under sufferings gives new encouragement and fierceness to the minds of them from whom they suffer. And as no greater encouragement can be given unto men to proceed in any way wherein they are engaged than by their justification in what they have already done; so the only justification of those who have stirred up persecution against others consists in charging guilt on them that are persecuted. As, therefore, we shall readily acknowledge any evil in our persons, principles, or ways, which we are or may be convinced of; so the sober vindication of truth and innocency, that none of the ways of God be evil spoken of by reason of us, is a duty in the care whereof we are no less concerned. Yea, did we design and directly endeavour our own justification, we should do no more than the prime dictates of the law of nature, and the example of some of the best of men, will give us a sufficient warrant for. Besides, the clearing of private persons, especially if they are many, from undue charges and false accusations, belongs unto public good, that those who have the administration of it committed unto them may not be misled to make a wrong judgment concerning what they have to do, as David was in the case of Mephibosheth, upon the false suggestions of Ziba, [2 Sam. xvi. 4](#). Neither could we be justly blamed should we be more than ordinarily urgent herein, considering how prone the ears of men are to receive calumnious accusations concerning such as from whom they expect neither profit nor advantage, and how slow in giving admittance to an address of the most modest defensative. But this is the least part of our present design. Our only aim is, to declare those principles concerning mutual love and unity among Christians, and practices in the worship of God, wherein our own consciences do find rest and peace, and others have so much misjudged us about. This, therefore, we shall briefly do, and that without such reflections or recriminations as may any way exasperate the spirits of others, or in the least impede that re-introduction of love and concord which it is the duty of us all to labour in. Wherefore we shall herein have no regard unto the revilings, reproaches, and threatenings of them who seem to have had no regard to truth, or modesty, or sobriety, indeed to God or man, in the management of them. With such it is our duty not to strive, but to commit our cause to Him that judgeth righteously, especially

with respect unto those impure outrages which go before unto judgment. Furious persons, animated by their secular interests or desire of revenge, unacquainted with the spirit of the gospel and the true nature of the religion revealed by Jesus Christ, incompassionate towards the infirmities of the minds of men, whereof yet none in the world give greater instances than themselves, who have no thoughts but to trample under foot and destroy all that differ from them, we shall rather pity and pray for, than either contend withal or hope to convince. Such they are, as, if outward prevalency were added to their principles and desires, they would render all Christians like the Moabites, Ammonites, and Edomites, who came out to fight against Judah, [2 Chron. xx. 23](#). The two greater parties, upon some difference or distaste, conspire at first to destroy the inhabitants of Seir, not doubting but that, when they had despatched them out of the way, they should accord well enough among themselves; but the event deceived their expectation, — their rage ceased not until issued in the mutual destruction of them all. No otherwise would it be with those who want nothing but force or opportunity to exterminate their next dissenters in matters of religion; for when they had accomplished that design, the same principle and rage would arm them to the wasting of the residue of Christians, or their own, for a conceit of the lawfulness hereof is raised from a desire of enlarging power and dominion, which is boundless. Especially is it so where an empire over the reason, faith, and consciences of men is affected; which first produced the fatal engine of papal infallibility, that nothing else could have strained the wit of men to invent, and nothing less can support. Unto such as these we shall not so much as tender satisfaction, until they are capable of receiving the advice of the apostle, [Eph. iv. 31](#), “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice;” for until this be done, men are to be esteemed but as “raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame,” whom it is to no purpose to seek to pacify, much less to contend withal.

It is for the sake of them alone who really value and esteem love, peace, and unity among Christians for themselves, that we here tender an account of our thoughts and principles concerning them; for even of them there are some who unduly charge us with owning of principles destructive unto Christian love and condescension, and suited to perpetuate the schisms and divisions that are amongst us. Whether this hath been occasioned by an over-valuation of their own apprehensions, conceiting that their judgments ought to give rule and measure to other men’s; or whether they have been, it may be insensibly unto themselves, biased by provocations, as they suppose, unjustly given them; we are not out of hopes but that they may be convinced of their mistakes. Upon their indications we have searched our consciences, principles, and practices, to find whether there be any such way of perverseness in them as we are charged withal; and may with confidence say that we have a discharge from thence, where we are principally concerned. Having, therefore, satisfied that duty which on this occasion was in the first place incumbent on us, we shall now, for their satis-

faction and our own vindication with all impartial men, declare what are our thoughts and judgments, what are our principles, ways, and practices, in and about the great concerns of Christian love, unity, and peace, referring the final decision of all differences unto Him who “hath appointed a day, wherein he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained.”

This being our present design, none may expect that we should attempt to justify or excuse any of those miscarriages or failings that are charged on some or all of those professors of the gospel who at this day come not up unto full communion with the church of England; for we know that “no man liveth and sinneth not,” yea, that “in many things we all offend.” We all know but in part, and are liable to manifold temptations, even all such as are common unto men. Those only we have no esteem of who through the fever of pride have lost the understanding of their own weak, frail, and sinful condition. And we do acknowledge that there are amongst us “sins against the Lord our God,” for which he might not only give us up unto the reproaches and wrath of men in this world, but himself also cast us off utterly and forever. We shall not, therefore, in the least complain of those who have most industriously represented unto the public view of the world the weakness and miscarriages that have fallen out amongst some or more of them whose cause we plead, and discovered those corrupt affections from whence, helped on with variety of temptations, they might probably proceed; nor shall we use any reflections on them who have severely, and we fear maliciously, laid to their charge things which they knew not; as hoping that by the former the guilty may learn what to amend, now they are taught with such thorns and briers as are the scorns and reproaches of the world, and by the latter the innocent may know what to avoid. Such charges and accusations, therefore, we shall wholly pass over, with our hearty prayers that the same or worse evils may never be found amongst them by whom they are accused. Much less shall we concern ourselves in those reflections on them which are raised from the words, expressions, or actions of particular persons, as they have been reported and tossed up and down in the lips of talkers. The debate of such things tends only to mutual exasperations and endless strife. It may be, also, that for the most part they are false, or misreported invidiously, or misapplied; and, true or false, have been sufficiently avenged by severe retortions. And in such altercations few men understand the sharpness of their own words. Their edge is towards them whom they oppose; but when a return of the like expressions is made unto themselves, they are sensible how they pierce. So are provocations heightened, and the first intendment of reducing love ends in mutual defamatory contentions. All things, therefore, of this nature we shall pass over, and help to bury by our silence.

The principal charge against us, and that whereinto all others are resolved, is *our non-conformity unto the present constitutions of the church of England*; for hence we are accused to be guilty of the want of Christian love and peaceableness, of schism, and an inclination to all sorts of divisions, contrary to the rules and precepts of the gospel. Now, we think it

not unreasonable to desire that those who pass such censures on us would attend unto the common known rule, whereby alone a right judgment in these cases may be made; for it is not equal that we should be concluded by other men's particular measures, as though by them we were to be regulated in the exercise of love and observance of peace. And as we doubt not but that they fix those measures unto themselves in sincerity, according unto their own light and apprehension of things, so we are sure it will be no impeachment of their wisdom or holiness to judge that others who differ from them do with an equal integrity endeavour the direction and determination of their consciences in what they believe and practice; yea, if they have not pregnant evidence to the contrary, it is their duty so to judge. A defect hereof is the spring of all that want of love whereof so great a complaint is made. And rationally they are to be thought most sincere and scrupulous herein who take up with determinations that are greatly to their outward disadvantage; for unless it be from a conviction of present duty with respect unto God and their own eternal good, men are not easily induced to close with a judgment about sacred things and religious worship, which will not only certainly prejudice them, but endanger their ruin in things temporal. It is ordinarily outward secular advantages, wherewith the minds of men are generally too much affected, that give an easy admission unto persuasions and practices in religion. By these are men turned and changed every day from what before they professed, when we hear of no turnings unto a suffering profession but what arise from strong and unavoidable convictions. Moreover, should we endeavour to accommodate ourselves to the lines of other men, it may make some change of the persons with whom we have to do, but would not in the least relieve us against the charges of guilt, of schism, and want of love, which we suffer under. Some would prescribe this measure unto us: That we should *occasionally join with parish assemblies*, as now stated, in all their worship and sacred administrations, but will not require of us that we should absolutely forbear all other ways and means of our own edification. Will this measure satisfy all amongst us? will it free us from the imputation we suffer under? shall we not be said any more to want Christian love, to be factious or guilty of schism? It is known unto all how little it will conduce unto these ends, and how little the most will grant that church peace is preserved thereby. Yea, the difficulty will be increased upon us beyond what an ordinary ability can solve, though we doubt not but that it may be done, for if we can do so much, we may expect justly to be pressed severely to answer why we do no more; for others say immediately that our attendance on the public worship must be constant, with a forbearance of all other ways of religious worship beyond that of a family: yet this they would have us so to do, as in the meantime studiously to endeavour the reformation of what is judged amiss in the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the church. This is the measure which is prescribed unto us by some, and we know not how many censures are passed upon us for a nonconformity thereunto. Will, therefore, a compliance unto this length better our condition? will it deliver us from the severest reflections of being persons

unpeaceable and intolerable? Shall we live in a perpetual dissimulation of our judgments as to what needeth reformation? will that answer our duty, or give us peace in our latter end? Shall we profess the persuasions of our minds in these things, and endeavour by all lawful means to accomplish what we desire? shall we then escape the severest censures, as of persons inclined to schisms and divisions? Yea, many great and wise men of the church of England do look on this as the most pernicious principle and practice that any can betake themselves unto; and in reporting the memorials of former times,¹ some of them have charged all the calamities and miseries that have befallen their church to have proceeded from men of this principle endeavouring reformation according unto models of their own without separation. And could we conscientiously betake ourselves to the pursuit of the same design, we should not, especially under present jealousies and exasperations, escape the same condemnation that others before us have undergone. And so it is fallen out with some; which might teach them that their measures are not authentic; and they might learn moderation towards them who cannot come up unto them, by the severity they meet withal from those that do outgo them. Shall we, therefore, — which alone seems to remain, — proceed yet farther, and, making a renunciation of all those principles conceiving the constitution, rule, and discipline of the church, with the ways and manner of the worship of God to be observed in the assemblies of it, which we have hitherto professed, come over unto a full conformity unto the present constitution of the church of England, and all the proceedings of its rulers thereon? “Yea, this is that,” say some, “which is required of you, and that which would put an end unto all our differences and divisions.” We know, indeed, that an agreement in any thing or way, right or wrong, true or false, will promise so to do, and appear so to do for a season; but it is truth alone that will make such agreements durable or useful. And we are not engaged in an inquiry merely after peace, but after peace with truth. Yea, to lay aside the consideration of truth, in a disquisition after peace and agreement in and about spiritual things, is to exclude a regard unto God and his authority, and to provide only for ourselves. And what it is which at present lays a prohibition on our *consciencences* against the compliance proposed shall be afterward declared. Neither will we here insist upon the discouragements that are given us from the present state of the church itself; which yet are not a few. Only, we must say, that there doth not appear unto us in many that steadiness in the profession of the truth owned amongst us upon and since the Reformation, nor that consent upon the grounds and reasons of the government and discipline in it that we are required to submit unto, which were necessary to invite any dissenters to a thorough conformity unto it. That there are daily inroads made upon the ancient doctrine of this church, and that without the least control from them who pretend to be the sole conservators of it, until, if not the whole, yet the principal parts of it are laid waste, is sufficiently evident, and may be easily proved. And we fear not to own



1 *Heyl. Hist. of Presb.*

that we cannot conform to Arminianism [and] Socinianism, on the one hand, or Popery on the other, with what new or specious pretences soever they may be blended. And for the ecclesiastical government, as in the hands of our mere ecclesiastical persons, when it is agreed among themselves whether it be from heaven or of men, we shall know the better how to judge of it. But suppose we should waive all such considerations, and come up to a full conformity unto all that is, or shall, or may be required of us, will this give us a universally pleadable acquitment from the charges of the guilt of want of love, schism, and divisions? We should, indeed, possibly be delivered from the noise and clamour of a few crying-out sectaries, fanatics, schismatics, church-dividers; but withal should continue under the censures of the great, and at present thriving church of Rome, for the same supposed crimes. And sure enough we are, that a compliance with them who have been the real causes and occasions of all the schisms and divisions that are amongst Christians almost in the whole world, would yield us no solid relief in the change of our condition; yet without this no men can free themselves from the loudest outcries against them on the account of schism. And this sufficiently manifests how little indeed they are to be valued, seeing, for the most part, they are nothing but the steam of interest and party. It is therefore apparent, that the accommodations of our judgments and practices to the measures of other men will afford us no real advantage as to the imputations we suffer under, nor will give satisfaction unto all professors of Christianity that we pursue love and peace in a due manner: for what one sort requireth of us, another will instantly disallow and condemn; and it is well if the judgment of the major part of all sorts be not influenced by custom, prejudices, and secular advantages. We have, therefore, no way left but that which, indeed, ought to be the only way of Christians in these things, — namely, to seek in sincerity the satisfaction of our own consciences, and the approving of our hearts unto the Searcher of them, in a diligent attendance unto our own especial duty, according to that rule which will neither deceive us nor fail us; and an account of what we do herein we shall now tender unto them that follow truth with peace.



Chapter II.

Commendations of love and unity — Their proper objects, with their general rules and measures — Of love toward all mankind in general — Allows not salvation unto any without faith in Christ Jesus — Of the differences in religion as to outward worship.

The foundation of our discourse might be laid in the commendation of Christian love and unity, and thereon we might easily enlarge, as also abound in a collection of testimonies confirming our assertions; but the old reply in such a case, — “By whom ever were they discommended?” — evidenceth a labour therein to be needless and superfluous. We shall therefore only say, that they are greatly mistaken who, from the condition whereinto at present we are driven and necessitated, do suppose that we value not these things at as high a rate as themselves, or any other professors of Christian religion in the world. A greater noise about them may be made, possibly, by such as have accommodated their name and notion to their own interests, and who point their pleas about them and their pretences of them to their own secular advantage; but as for a real valuation of the things themselves, as they are required of us and prescribed unto us in the gospel, we shall not willingly be found to come behind any that own the name of Christ in the world. We know that God hath styled himself the God of love, peace, and order in the church, because they are eminently from him, and highly accepted with him. And as love is the new commandment which Jesus Christ hath given unto his disciples, so he hath appointed it to be the bond of perfection unto them; which nothing else will ever be, however *finely invented* for them, or *forcibly imposed* on them. Without this love, in what relates to church communion, whatever else we are, we are but as “sounding brass and tinkling cymbals.” And all unity or agreement in outward order not proceeding from and animated by this love, are things wherein neither Christ nor the gospel is much concerned. An endeavour also after one mind and one judgment, [Phil. ii. 2](#), [1 Cor. i. 10](#), amongst all believers, for a help unto us to keep the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” we acknowledge to be indispensably required of us. And, therefore, where any opinion or practice, in or about religion or the worship of God, do apparently in themselves impair the gracious, holy principles of love and peace, or obstruct men in the exercise of any duties which those principles require or lead unto, it is a great and weighty prejudice against their truth and acceptation with God. As, therefore, we shall not boast of the prevalency of these principles in our minds, seeing that, though we should know nothing to the contrary by ourselves, yet are we not therefore justified; so we are assured that none can justly condemn us for the want of them, unless they can make good their charge by instances not relating to the peculiar differences between them and us, for what doth so will neither warrant any to make such a judgment, nor carry any conviction in it towards them that are judged. Upon the whole matter, we shall not easily be diverted from pursuing our claim unto an equal interest in these things with any other professors of the

Christian religion, although at present we do it not by enlarged commendations of them. Much less are we in the least moved or shaken in our minds from the accusations of them who, having the advantage of force and power, do make a compliance with themselves, in all their impositions and self-interested conceptions, the sole measure of other men's exercise and actings of these principles. We have a much safer rule whereby to make a judgment of them, whereunto we know "we shall do well to attend, as unto a light shining in a dark place." But, now, whereas all these things, — namely, love, peace, and unity, — are equally dear unto us, yet there are different rules prescribed for the exercise and pursuit of them. Our love is to be catholic, unconfined as the beams of the sun, or as the showers of rain that fall on the whole earth. Nothing of God's rational creation in this world is to be exempted from being the object thereof. And where only any exception might seem to be warranted by some men's causeless hatred, with unjust and unreasonable persecution of us, there the exercise of it is given us in especial and strictest charge; which is one of the noble singularities of Christian religion. But whereas men are cast into various conditions on account of their relation unto God, the actual exercise of love towards them is required of us in a suitable variety; for it is God himself, in his infinite excellencies, who is the first and adequate object of our love, which descends unto others according to their participation from him, and the especial relations created by his appointment; whereof we shall speak afterward. Our duty in the observance of peace is, as unto its object, equally extended; and the rule or measure given us herein is the utmost of our endeavours in all ways of truth and righteousness which are required or may have a tendency thereunto: for as we are commanded to "follow peace with all men," [Heb. xii. 14](#), under the same indispensable necessity as to obtain and observe "holiness" in our own persons, "without which no man shall see the Lord;" so as to the measure of our endeavours unto this end, we are directed, "if it be possible, and as far as in us lieth, to live peaceably with all men," [Rom. xii. 18](#). The rule for unity, as it is supposed to comprise all church-communion, falls under many restrictions; for herein the especial commands of Christ and institutions of the gospel committed unto our care and observance falling under consideration, our practice is precisely limited unto those commands and by the nature of those institutions.

These being the things we are to attend unto, and these being their general rules and measures, we shall, with respect unto the present state of religious affairs in the world amongst those who make profession of the Christian religion, plainly declare what are our thoughts and judgments, what we conceive to be our duty, and what is our practice; submitting them unto the present apprehensions of unprejudiced persons, leaving the final sentence and determination of our cause to the judgment-seat of Jesus Christ.

Love toward *all mankind in general* we acknowledge to be required of us, and we are debtors in the fruits of it to the whole creation of God: for he hath not only implanted the principles of it in that nature whereof we are in common partakers with the whole race and



kind, whereunto all hatred and its effects were originally foreign, and introduced by the devil, nor only given us his command for it, enlarging on its grounds and reasons in the gospel; but in his design of recovering us out of our lapsed condition unto a conformity with himself, proposeth in an especial manner the example of his own love and goodness, which are extended unto all, for our imitation, [Matt. v. 44, 45](#). His philanthropy and communicative love, from his own infinite self-fullness, wherewith all creatures, in all places, times, and seasons, are filled and satisfied, as from an immeasurable ocean of goodness, are proposed unto us to direct the exercise of that drop from the divine nature wherewith we are intrusted. “Love your enemies,” saith our Saviour, “bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.” Now, all mankind may be cast into two ranks or orders: for, first, there are those who are yet “without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world,” [Eph. ii. 12](#), — such, we mean, as are either negatively or privatively infidels or unbelievers, who have yet never heard the sound of the gospel, or do continue to refuse and reject it where it is proposed and tendered unto them; and there are those, secondly, who have in one way or other received the doctrine of the gospel, and do make profession thereof in the world. To both these sorts we do acknowledge that we owe the duty of love. Even towards the infidel, pagan, and Mohammedan world, Jews and Gentiles, we are debtors in this duty; and we desire to be humbled for it as our sin, wherein we are wanting in the discharge of it, or wherein the fruits of it do not abound in us to the praise of God. Now, love, in the first notion of it, is the willing of a wanted good unto the object of it, or those that are loved, producing an endeavour to effect it unto the utmost of the ability of them in whom it is. Where this absent good is of great importance, the first natural and genuine effect of love is *compassion*. This good, as unto all unbelievers, is whatever should deliver them from present or eternal misery, — whatever should lead, guide, or bring them unto blessedness in the enjoyment of God. Besides, the absence hereof is accompanied, even in this world, with all that blindness and darkness of mind, all that slavery unto sin and the devil, that can any way concur to make a rational being truly miserable. If we have not hearts like the flint or adamant, we cannot but be moved with compassion towards so many perishing souls, originally made like ourselves, in the image of God, and from whom that we differ in any thing is an effect of mere sovereign grace, and not the fruit of our own contrivance nor the reward of our worth or merit. And those who are altogether unconcerned in others are not much concerned in themselves; for the true love of ourselves is the rule of our love unto other men. Again, compassion proceeding from love will work by *prayer* for relief; for it is God alone who can supply their wants, and our only way of treating with him about it is by our humble supplications. And if herein



also we should be found wanting, we should more judge ourselves to be defective in true Christian love and charity than we can for many of those mistakes which are charged on us in other things, were we convinced that such they are, which as yet we are not. It is therefore our continual prayer, that God would send out his light and his truth unto the utmost parts of the earth, to visit by them those dark places which are yet filled with habitations of cruelty; that he would remove the veil of covering which is yet on the face of many great and populous nations; that “the whole earth may be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea;” even that, according to his promise, “he would turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him with one consent.” And this we desire to be found doing, not in a formal or customary manner, but out of a sincere compassion for the souls of men, a deep sense of the interest herein of the glory of God, and a desire after the accomplishment of those prophecies and promises in the Scripture which speak comfortably towards an expectation of abundant grace to be manifested unto the residue of sinners, both Jews and Gentiles, in the latter days. Moreover, unto compassion and supplications, love requireth that we should add also all other possible *endeavours for their relief*. Herein consists that work and labour of love which are so much recommended unto us. But the actings of love in these most useful ways are, for the most part, obstructed unto us by the want of opportunities; which, under the guidance of divine Providence, are the rule of our call unto the duties wherein such endeavours consist, and whereby they may be expressed. Only, this at present we have to rejoice in, that, through the unwearied labours of some holy and worthy persons, sundry churches of Indians are lately called and gathered in America; wherein the natives of those parts of the world, who for so many generations sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, do, under the guidance of pastors and elders of their own, walk in the fellowship of the gospel, giving glory to God by Jesus Christ.² And



2 So early as 1556, some missionaries were sent to labour among the natives of America by the church of Geneva, and this is affirmed to have been the first protestant mission. In 1644, a petition was presented to the English parliament in favour of a similar mission to America, and an ordinance of the Lords and Commons was passed, authorizing the Earl of Warwick to take measures in furtherance of this object. “The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England,” was established in 1649, by the authority of parliament. Eliot distinguished himself as “the apostle of the Indians,” and three authentic narratives were published, in 1653, 1655, and 1659, giving an account of the remarkable success which had attended his labours, containing several sermons by Indian converts, and mentioning several villages in which the inhabitants had wholly conformed to the principles and usages of Christianity. It is interesting to notice the germ of the vast system of modern missions; and when a disposition has been manifested to reproach our fathers for indifference to this great work, it is well to find that Owen was fully alive to its importance, and that the pressure of circumstances alone hindered British Christians in his day from engaging in it on a scale worthy alike of its momentous nature and their own eagerness to advance it. — Ed.

let it not seem impertinent that we have given this account of our judgments concerning that love which we do and ought to bear unto all, even the worst of men; seeing those by whom our testimony is received will not, nay cannot, easily suppose that we would willfully neglect the exercise of the same affections towards those concerning whom our obligations thereunto are unspeakably greater and more excellent.

There is, indeed, another kind of pretended charity towards this sort of men, which we profess we have not for them, although we judge we do not want it; for there can be no want unto any of an error or mistake, wherein the charity intended doth consist. And this is the judgment of some, that they, or some of them, may attain salvation or eternal blessedness in the condition wherein they are, without the knowledge of Jesus Christ. This, we acknowledge, we neither believe nor hope concerning them; nor, to speak plainly, can desire it should be so, unless God had otherwise revealed himself concerning Jesus Christ and them than yet he hath done. And we are so far from supposing that there is in us, on this account, any blamable defect of charity, that we know ourselves to be freed by this persuasion from a dangerous error, which, if admitted, would both weaken our own faith and impair all the due and proper effects of charity towards others: for “though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) yet to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him,” [1 Cor. viii. 5, 6](#). We know “there is no salvation in any other” but by Jesus Christ; and that “there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved,” [Acts iv. 12](#). Nor is this name given any otherwise amongst men but by the gospel; for it is not the giving of the person of Christ absolutely to be a mediator, but the declaration of his name by the gospel, as the means of salvation, that is intended. Hence our Lord Jesus Christ, giving that commission to his apostles to preach it, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature,” he adds unto it that decreitory sentence concerning the everlasting condition of all men with respect thereunto, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned,” [Mark xvi. 15, 16](#). As the preaching of the gospel, and the belief on Jesus Christ thereon, are the only means of obtaining salvation, so all those who are not made partakers of them must perish eternally. So when the apostle affirms that the Jews would have hindered them from preaching to the Gentiles “that they might be saved,” [1 Thess. ii. 16](#), he plainly declares that without it they could not so be. Neither were any of them ever better, or in a better condition, than they are described by the same apostle, [Eph. ii. 12](#), and in sundry other places, wherein he allows them no possibility of obtaining eternal blessedness. Neither do we in this matter consider what God can do, or what he hath done, to the communicating of grace and faith in Jesus Christ unto any particular persons at any time, or in any place, in an extraordinary manner. We are not called to make a judgment thereof, nor can any rule be hence collected to regulate the exercise of our love: “Secret things belong to the Lord our God, but revealed

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things to us and our children, that we may do his will.” When and where such grace and faith do manifest themselves by their effects, we ought readily to own and embrace them. But the only inquiry in this matter is, what those that are utterly destitute of the revelation of Jesus Christ, either as made originally in the promise or as explained in the gospel, may, under the mere conduct of the light of nature, as consisting of the innate principles of reason, with their improvement, or as increased by the consideration of the effects of divine power and providence, by the strength and exercise of their own moral principles, attain unto, as unto their present acceptance with God and future eternal salvation? That they may be saved in every sect who live exactly according to the light of nature, is a doctrine anathematized by the church of England, article xviii.; and the reason given hereof is, because the Scriptures propose the name of Jesus Christ alone whereby we may be saved. And if we do believe that description which is given in the Scripture of men, their moral abilities and their works, as they lie in the common state of mankind since the entrance of sin, with respect unto God and salvation, we shall not be able to be of another mind: for they are said to be “blind,” [Luke iv. 18](#); yea, to be “darkness,” to be “dead in trespasses and sins,” not to “receive the things of the Spirit of God, because they are foolishness unto them,” and their minds to be “enmity against God” himself, [Acts xxvi. 18](#); [Eph. ii. 1–3, iv. 18](#); [Rom. viii. 7](#). That there may be any just expectation concerning such persons, that they will “work out their salvation with fear and trembling,” we are not convinced; neither do we think that God will accept of a more imperfect obedience in them that know not Jesus Christ than he requires of them who do believe in him, for then should he prove a disadvantage unto them. Besides, all their best works are severely reflected on in the Scripture, and represented as unprofitable; for whereas in themselves they are compared to evil trees, thorns, and briers, we are assured they neither do nor can bring forth good grapes or figs. Besides, in the Scripture the whole business of salvation, in the first place, turns upon the hinge of faith supernatural and divine: for “without faith it is impossible to please God,” and “he that believeth not shall be damned,” “he that believeth not in the name of the Son of God is condemned already;” for “neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love;” and it is “by faith that the just shall live,” [Heb. xi. 6](#), [[Mark xv. 16](#),] [John iii. 18, 36](#), [Gal. v. 6](#), [[Hab. ii. 4](#).] That this faith may be educed out of the obediential principles of nature was, indeed, the opinion of Pelagius of old; but it will not now, we hope, be openly asserted by any. Moreover, this faith is in the Scripture, if not limited and determined, yet directed unto Jesus Christ as its necessary peculiar object: “For this is life eternal, that we may know the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent.” It seems, therefore, that the knowledge of the only true God is not sufficient to attain eternal life, unless the knowledge of Jesus Christ also do accompany it; for “this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life,” [1 John v. 11, 12](#); which is enough to determine the controversy. And those assertions,



that “there is none other name given among men whereby they must be saved,” and that “other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ,” [Acts iv. 12](#), [1 Cor. iii. 11](#), are of the same importance; and it were needless to multiply the testimonies that are given us to that purpose elsewhere. Neither can it be made to appear that the concatenation of the saving means, whereby men that are adult are brought unto glory, is not absolutely universal; and amongst them there is vocation, or an effectual calling ([Rom. viii. 29, 30](#)) to the knowledge of Christ by the gospel. Neither will the same apostle allow a saving invocation of the name of God to any but those that are brought to believe by hearing the word preached, [Rom. x. 13–15](#). It is said that God may, by ways secret and unknown to us, reveal Jesus Christ to them, and so by faith in him sanctify their natures and endow them with his Spirit; which things it is granted, we suppose, are indispensably necessary unto salvation. Those whom God thus deals withal are not Pagans but Christians, concerning whom none ever doubted but they might be saved. It is also granted that men may learn much of the power, wisdom, and goodness of God, which both require and teach many duties to be performed towards him; but withal, we believe that without the internal sanctification of the Spirit, communicated by and with the knowledge of Jesus Christ, no man can be saved. But we intend not here to dispute about these things. Instead of an effect of love and charity, it is manifest that the opinion which grants salvation unto the heathen, or any of them, upon the due improvement of their rational faculties and moral principles, ariseth from a want of due consideration of the true nature of sin and grace, of the fall of man and his recovery, of the law and gospel, and of the wisdom and love of God in sending Jesus Christ to make atonement for sinners, and to bring in everlasting righteousness. And not only so, but it evidently prepares the way unto those noxious opinions which at this day among many infest and corrupt Christian religion, and foment those seeds of atheism which spring up so fast as to threaten the over-spreading of the whole field of Christianity; for hence it will follow, by an easy deduction, that every one may be saved, or attain unto his utmost happiness, in his own religion, be it what it will, whilst under any notion or conception he acknowledgeth a divine Being, and his own dependence thereon. And seeing that, on this supposition, it must be confessed that religion consists solely in moral honesty, and a fancied internal piety of mind towards the Deity (for in nothing else can a centring of all religions in the world unto a certain end be imagined), it follows that there is no outward profession of it indispensably necessary, but that every man may take up and make use of that which is best suited unto his interest in his present condition and circumstances. And as this, being once admitted, will give the minds of men an indifferency as unto the several religions that are in the world, so it will quickly produce in them a contempt of them all. And, from an entertainment of, or an indifferency of mind about, these and the like noisome opinions, it is come to pass that the gospel, after a continued triumph for sixteen hundred years over hell and the world, doth at this day, in the midst of Christendom, hardly with multitudes maintain the reputation

of its truth and divinity; and is by many, living in a kind of outward conformity unto the institutes of Christian religion, despised and laughed to scorn. But the proud and foolish atheistical opiniators of our days, whose sole design is to fortify themselves by the darkness of their minds against the charges of their own conscience upon their wicked and debauched conversations, do but expose themselves to the scorn of all sober and rational persons; for what are a few obscure, and, for the most part, vicious renegadoes, in comparison of those great, wise, numerous, and sober persons, whom the gospel, in its first setting forth in the world, by the evidence of its truth and the efficacy of its power, subdued and conquered? Are they as learned as the renowned philosophers of those days, who, advantaged by the endeavours and fruits of all the great wits of former ages, had advanced solid, rational literature to the greatest height that ever it attained in this world, or possibly ever will do so, the minds of men having now something more excellent and noble to entertain themselves withal? Are they to be equalled in wisdom and experience with those glorious emperors, senators, and princes who then swayed the scepters and affairs of the world? Can they produce any thing to oppose unto the gospel that is likely to influence the minds of men in any degree comparably to the religion of these great, learned, wise, and mighty personages; which, having received by their fathers from days immemorial, was visibly attended with all earthly glories and prosperities, which were accounted as the reward of their due observance of it? And yet, whereas there was a conspiracy of all those persons, and this influenced by the craft of infernal powers, and managed with all that wisdom, subtlety, power, and cruelty that the nature of man is capable to exercise, on purpose to oppose the gospel, and keep it from taking root in the world; yet, by the glorious evidence of its divine extract and original wherewith it is accompanied, by the efficacy and power which God gave the doctrine of it in and over the minds of men, all managed by the spiritual weapons of its preachers, which were “mighty through God to the pulling down of those strongholds, casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalted itself against, the knowledge of God,” [2 Cor. x. 4, 5](#), it prevailed against them all, and subdued the world unto an acknowledgment of its truth, with the divine power and authority of its Author. Certainly there is nothing more contemptible than that the indulgence of some inconsiderable persons unto their lusts and vices, who are void of all those excellencies, in notion and practice, which have already been triumphed over by the gospel when set up in competition with it or opposition unto it, should be once imagined to bring it into question or to cast any disreputation upon it. But to treat of these things is not our present design; we have only mentioned them occasionally, in the account which it was necessary we should give concerning our love to all men in general, with the grounds we proceed upon in the exercise of it.



Chapter III.

Nature of the catholic church — The first and principal object of Christian love — Differences among the members of this church, of what nature, and how to be managed — Of the church catholic as visibly professing — The extent of it, or who belong unto it — Of union and love in this church-state — Of the church of England with respect hereunto — Of particular churches; their institution; corruption of that institution — Of churches diocesan, etc. — Of separation from corrupt particular churches — The just causes thereof, etc.

In the *second sort of mankind*, before mentioned, consists the visible kingdom of Christ in this world. This being grounded in his death and resurrection, and conspicuously settled by his sending of the Holy Ghost after his ascension, he hath ever since preserved in the world against all the contrivances of Satan or opposition of the gates of hell, and will do so unto the consummation of all things; for “he must reign until all his enemies are made his footstool.” Towards these, on all accounts, our love ought to be intense and fervent, as that which is the immediate bond of our relation unto them and union with them. And this kingdom or church of Christ on the earth may be, and is generally, by all considered under a three-fold notion:—First, As therein, and among the members of it, is comprised that *real living and spiritual body of his*, which is firstly, peculiarly, and properly the *catholic church militant* in this world. These are his elect, redeemed, justified, and sanctified ones, who are savingly united unto their head by the same quickening and sanctifying Spirit, dwelling in him in all fulness, and communicated unto them by him according to his promise. This is that catholic church which we profess to believe; which being hid from the eyes of men, and absolutely invisible in its mystical form, or spiritual saving relation unto the Lord Christ and its unity with him, is yet more or less always visible by that profession of faith in him and obedience unto him which it maketh in the world, and is always obliged so to do: “For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation,” [Rom. x. 10](#). And this church we believe to be so disposed over the whole world, that wherever there are any societies or numbers of men who ordinarily profess the gospel, and subjection to the kingly rule of Christ thereby, with a hope of eternal blessedness by his mediation, we no way doubt but that there are among them some who really belong thereunto. In and by them doth the Lord Christ continually fulfil and accomplish the promise of his presence by his Spirit with them that believe in his name; who are thereby interested in all the privileges of the gospel, and authorized unto the administration and participation of all the holy ordinances thereof. And were it not that we ought not to boast ourselves against others, especially such as have not had the spiritual advantages that the inhabitants of these nations have been intrusted withal, and who have been exposed unto more violent temptations than they, we should not fear to say, that among those of all sorts who in these nations hold the Head, there is probably, according unto a judgment to be



made by the fruits of that Spirit which is savingly communicated unto the church in this sense alone, a greater number of persons belonging thereunto than in any one nation or church under heaven. The charge therefore of some against us that we paganize the nation, by reason of some different apprehensions from others concerning the regular constitution of particular churches for the celebration of gospel worship, is wondrous vain and ungrounded. But we know that men use such severe expressions and reflections out of a discomposed habit of mind, which they have accustomed themselves unto, and not from a sedate judgment and consideration of the things themselves; and hence they will labour to convince others of that whereof, if they would put it unto a serious trial, they would never be able to convince themselves.

This, then, is that church which, on the account of their sincere faith and obedience, shall be saved, and out of which, on the account of their profession, there is no salvation to be obtained: which things are weakly and arrogantly appropriated unto any particular church or churches in the world; for it is possible that men may be members of it, and yet not belong or relate unto any particular church on the earth; and so it often falleth out, as we could manifest by instances, did that work now lie before us. This is the church which the Lord Christ “loved and gave himself for; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it unto himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish,” [Eph. v. 26, 27](#). And we must acknowledge that in all things this is the church unto which we have our first and principal regard, as being the spring from which all other considerations of the church do flow. Within the verge and compass of it do we endeavour to be found, the end of the dispensation of the gospel unto men being that they should do so. Neither would we, to save our lives (which, for the members of this church and their good, we are bound to lay down, [1 John iii. 16](#), when justly called thereunto), willfully live in the neglect of that love towards them or any of them which we hope God hath planted in our hearts, and made natural unto us, by that one and selfsame Spirit, by whom the whole mystical body of Christ is animated. We do confess, that, because the best of men in this life do know but in part, all the members of this church are in many things liable to error, mistakes, and miscarriages; and hence it is that, although they are all internally acted and guided by the same Spirit in all things absolutely necessary to their eternal salvation, and do all attend unto the same rule of the word, according as they apprehend the mind of God in it and concerning it, have all, for the nature and substance of it, the same divine faith and love, and are all equally united unto their Head, yet, in the profession which they make of the conceptions and persuasions of their minds about the things revealed in the Scripture, there are, and always have been, many differences among them. Neither is it morally possible it should be otherwise, whilst in their judgment and profession they are left unto the ability of their own minds and liberty of their wills, under that great variety of the means of light and truth, with other

circumstances, whereinto they are disposed by the holy wise providence of God. Nor hath the Lord Christ absolutely promised that it shall be otherwise with them; but securing them all by his Spirit in the foundations of eternal salvation, he leaves them in other things to the exercise of mutual love and forbearance, with a charge of duty after a continual endeavour to grow up unto a perfect union, by the improvement of the blessed aids and assistances which he is pleased to afford unto them. And those who, by ways of force, would drive them into any other union or agreement than their own light and duty will lead them into, do what in them lies to oppose the whole design of the Lord Christ towards them and his rule over them. In the meantime, it is granted that they may fall into divisions, and schisms, and mutual exasperations among themselves, through the remainders of darkness in their minds and the infirmity of the flesh, [Rom. xiv. 3](#); and in such cases mutual judgings and despisings are apt to ensue, and that to the prejudice and great disadvantage of that common faith which they do profess. And yet, notwithstanding all this (such cross-entangled wheels are there in the course of our nature), they all of them really value and esteem *the things wherein they agree* incomparably above those wherein they differ. But their valuation of the matter of their union and agreement is purely spiritual, whereas their differences are usually influenced by carnal and secular considerations, which have, for the most part, a sensible impression on the minds of poor mortals. But so far as their divisions and differences are unto them unavoidable, the remedy of farther evils proceeding from them is plainly and frequently expressed in the Scripture. It is love, meekness, forbearance, bowels of compassion, with those other graces of the Spirit wherein our conformity unto Christ doth consist, with a true understanding and the due valuation of the “unity of faith,” and the common hope of believers, which are the ways prescribed unto us for the prevention of those evils which, without them, our unavoidable differences will occasion. And this excellent way of the gospel, together with a rejection of evil surmises, and a watchfulness over ourselves against irregular judging and censuring of others, together with a peaceable walking in consent and unity so far as we have attained, is so fully and clearly proposed unto us therein, that they must have their eyes blinded by prejudices and carnal interests, or some effectual working of the god of this world on their minds, into whose understandings the light of it doth not shine with uncontrollable evidence and conviction. That the sons or children of this church, of “Jerusalem which is above, and is the mother of us all,” should, on the account of their various apprehensions of some things relating to religion or the worship of God, unavoidably attending their frail and imperfect condition in this world, yea, or of any schisms or divisions ensuing thereon, proceeding from corrupt and not thoroughly mortified affections, be warranted to hate, judge, despise, or condemn one another, much more to strive by external force to coerce, punish, or destroy them that differ from them, is as foreign to the gospel as that we should believe in Mohammed and not in Jesus Christ. Whatever share, therefore, we are



forced to bear in differences with or divisions from the members of this church (that is, any who declare and evidence themselves so to be by a visible and regular profession of faith and obedience), as it is a continual sorrow and trouble unto us, so we acknowledge it to be our duty (and shall be willing to undergo any blame, where we are found defective in the discharge of it, unto the utmost of our power) to endeavour after the strictest communion with them in all spiritual things that the gospel doth require, or whereof our condition in this world is capable. In the meantime, until this can be attained, it is our desire to manage the profession of our own light and apprehensions without anger, bitterness, clamour, evil speaking, or any other thing that may be irregular in ourselves or give just cause of offence unto others. Our prayers are also continually for the spiritual prosperity of this church, for its increase in faith and holiness, and especially for the healing of all breaches that are among them that belong thereunto throughout the world. And were we not satisfied that the principles which we own about the right constitution of the churches of Christ, and the worship of God to be observed in them, are singularly suited to the furtherance and preservation of union and due order among all the members of this church, we should not need to be excited by any unto their renunciation. But our main design in all these things is, that both they and we with them may enjoy that peace which the Lord Christ hath bequeathed unto us, and walk in the way which he hath prescribed for us. And these things we mention, neither to boast of nor yet to justify ourselves, but only to acknowledge what is our conviction concerning our duty in this matter. And might there any sedate, peaceable, unprejudicate endeavours be countenanced and encouraged, for the allaying of all occasional distempers and the composing of all differences among them who belong to this church of Christ, so as that they might all of them (at least in these nations) not only “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” but also agree and consent in all ways and acts of religious communion, we doubt not to manifest that no rigid adherence unto the practice of any conceptions of our own, in things wherein the gospel alloweth a condescension and forbearance, no delight in singularity, no prejudice against persons or things, should obstruct us in the promotion of it to the utmost of our power and ability. Upon the whole matter, we own it as our duty to follow and seek after peace, unity, consent and agreement in holy worship, with all the members of this church, or those who, by a regular profession, manifest themselves so to be; and will, with all readiness and alacrity, renounce every principle or practice that is either inconsistent with such communion, or directly or indirectly is in itself obstructive of it.

Secondly, The church of Christ may be considered with respect unto its *outward profession*, as constitutive of its being, and the formal reason of its denomination. And this is the church catholic visible, whereunto they all universally belong who profess the invocation of the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours, under the limitations that shall be mentioned afterward. And this is the visible kingdom of Christ; which, on the account

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of its profession, and thereby, is distinguished from that world which lieth in evil and is absolutely under the power of Satan. And so in common use the church and the world are contradistinguished. Yet, on other accounts, many who belong unto this church, by reason of some kind of profession that they make, may justly be esteemed to be the world, or of it. So our Lord Jesus Christ called the generality of the professing church in his time. “The world,” saith he, “hateth me,” [John xvii. 18, 19, 25](#). And that we may know that he thereby intended the church of the Jews, besides that the circumstances of the place evince it, he puts it out of question by the testimony which he produceth in the confirmation of his assertion concerning their unjust and causeless hatred, — namely, “It is written in their law, They hated me without a cause;” which, being taken out of the Psalms ([Ps. xxxv. 19](#)), was part of the law or rule of the Judaical church only. Now, he thus terms them, because the generality of them, especially their rulers, although they professed to know God, and to worship him according to his word and the tradition of their fathers, yet were not only corrupt and wicked in their lives, but also persecuted him and his disciples, in whom the power and truth of God were manifested beyond what they were able to bear. And hence a general rule is established: That what profession soever any men do make of the knowledge and worship of God, to what church soever they do or may be thought to belong, yet if they are wicked or ungodly in their lives, and persecutors of such as are better than themselves, they are really of the world, and with it will perish, without repentance. These are they who, receiving on them a form or delineation of godliness, do yet deny the power of it; from whom we are commanded to “turn away.” But yet we acknowledge that there is a real difference to be made between them who in any way or manner make profession of the name of Christ, with subjection unto him, and that infidel world by whom the gospel is totally rejected, or to whom it was never tendered.

In this *catholic visible church*, as comprehensive of all who throughout the world outwardly own the gospel, there is an acknowledgment of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism:” which are a sufficient foundation of that love, union, and communion among them, which they are capable of, or are required of them; for in the joint profession of the same Lord, faith, and baptism, consists the union of the church under this consideration, — that is, as catholic and visibly professing, — and in nothing else. And hereunto also is required, as the principle animating that communion, and rendering it acceptable, mutual love with its occasional exercise, as a fruit of that love which we have unto Jesus Christ, who is the object of our common profession. And setting aside the consideration of them who openly reject the principal fundamentals of Christian religion (as denying the Lord Christ to be the eternal Son of God, with the use and efficacy of his death, as also the personal subsistence and deity of the Holy Spirit), there is no known community of these professors in the world but they own so much of the truths concerning “one Lord, one faith, and one baptism,” as is sufficient to guide them unto life and salvation. And thereon we no way doubt but that

among them all there are some really belonging to the purpose of God's election, who by the means that they do enjoy shall at length be brought unto everlasting glory: for we do not think that God, by his providence, would maintain the dispensation of the gospel in any place, or among any people, among whom there are none whom he hath designed to bring into the enjoyment of himself; for that is the rule of his sending and continuing of it, whereon he enjoined the apostle Paul to stay in such places where he had "much people" whom he would have to be converted, [Acts xviii. 9–11](#). He would not continue from generation to generation to scatter his pearls where there were none but rending swine, nor send fishers unto waters wherein he knew there were nothing but serpents and vipers. It is true the gospel, as preached unto many, is only a testimony against them, [Matt. xxiv. 14](#), leaving them without excuse, and proves unto them "a savour of death unto death." But the first, direct, and principal design of the dispensation of it being the conversion of souls and their eternal salvation, it will not probably be continued in any place, nor is so, where this design is not pursued nor accomplished towards any; neither will God make use of it anywhere merely for the aggravation of men's sins and condemnation; nor would his so doing consist with the honour of the gospel itself, or the glory of that love and grace which it profeseth to declare. Where it is indeed openly rejected, there that shall be the condemnation of men; but where it finds any admittance, there it hath somewhat of its genuine and proper work to effect. And the gospel is esteemed to be in all places dispensed and admitted, where, the Scripture being received as the word of God, men are, from the light, truth, and doctrine contained therein, by any means so far instructed as to take upon them the profession of subjecting their souls to Jesus Christ, and of observing the religious duties by him prescribed, in opposition to all false religions in the world. Amongst all these the foundations of saving faith are at this day preserved; for they universally receive the whole canonical Scripture, and acknowledge it to be the word of God, on such motives as prevail with them to do so sincerely. Herein they give a tacit consent unto the whole truth contained in it, for they receive it as from God, without exception or limitation; and this they cannot do without a general renunciation of all the falsities and evils that it doth condemn. Where these things concur, men will not believe nor practice any thing in religion but what they think God requires of them and will accept from them. And we find it also in the event, that all the persons spoken of, wherever they are, do universally profess that they believe in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in his only and eternal Son. They all look, also, for salvation by him, and profess obedience unto him, believing that God raised him from the dead. They believe, in like manner, that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Son, with many other sacred truths of the same importance; as also, that "without holiness no man shall see the Lord." However, therefore, they are differenced and divided among themselves, however they are mutually esteemed heretics and schismatics, however, through the subtlety of Satan, they are excited and provoked to curse and persecute one another with wonderful folly, and



by an open contradiction unto other principles which they profess; yet are they all subjects of the visible kingdom of Christ, and belong all of them to the catholic church, making profession of the name of Christ in the world, in which there is salvation to be obtained, and out of which there is none.

We take not any consideration at present of that absurd, foolish, and uncharitable error, which would confine the catholic church of Christ unto a particular church of one single denomination, or, indeed, rather unto a combination of some persons in an outward mode of religious rule and worship; whereof the Scripture is as silent as of things that never were, nor ever shall be. Yea, we look upon it as intolerable presumption, and the utmost height of uncharitableness, for any to judge that the constant profession of the name of Christ made by multitudes of Christians, with the lasting miseries and frequent martyrdoms which for his sake they undergo, should turn unto no advantage, either of the glory of God or their own eternal blessedness, because in some things they differ from them. Yet such is the judgment of those of the church of Rome, and so are they bound to judge by the fundamental principles and laws of their church-communion. But men ought to fear lest they should meet with “judgment without mercy, who have shewed no mercy,” [James ii. 13](#). Had we ever entertained a thought uncharitable to such a prodigy of insolence, had we ever excluded any sort of Christians absolutely from an interest in the love of God or grace in Jesus Christ, or hope of salvation, because they do not or will not comply with those ways and terms of outward church-communion which we approve of, we should judge ourselves as highly criminal, in want of Christian love, as any can desire to have us esteemed so to be.

It is, then, the universal collective body of them that profess the gospel throughout the world which we own as the catholic church of Christ. How far the errors in judgment, or miscarriages in sacred worship, which any of them have superadded unto the foundations of truth which they do profess, may be of so pernicious a nature as to hinder them from an interest in the covenant of God, and so prejudice their eternal salvation, God only knows. But those notices which we have concerning the nature and will of God in the Scriptures, as also of the love, care, and compassion of Jesus Christ, with the ends of his mediation, do persuade us to believe that where men in sincerity do improve the abilities and means of the knowledge of divine truth wherewith they are intrusted, endeavouring withal to answer their light and convictions with a suitable obedience, there are but few errors of the mind of so malignant a nature as absolutely to exclude such persons from an interest in eternal mercy. And we doubt not but that men, out of a zeal to the glory of God, real or pretended, have imprisoned, banished, killed, burned others for such errors as it hath been the glory of God to pardon in them, and which he hath done accordingly. But this we must grant, and do, that those whose lives and conversations are no way influenced by the power of the gospel, so as to be brought to some conformity thereunto, or who, under the covert of a Christian profession, do give themselves up unto idolatry and persecution of the true wor-



shippers of God, are no otherwise to be esteemed but as enemies to the cross of Christ; for as “without holiness no man shall see the Lord,” so “no idolater or murderer hath eternal life abiding in him,” [Heb. xii. 14](#); [Rev. xxi. 8](#); [1 John iii. 15](#).

With respect unto these things we look upon the church of England, or the generality of the nation professing Christian religion (measuring them by the doctrine that hath been preached unto them and received by them since the Reformation), to be as sound and healthful a part of the catholic church as any in the world; for we know no place nor nation where the gospel for so long a season hath been preached with more diligence, power, and evidence for conviction, nor where it hath obtained a greater success or acceptance. Those, therefore, who perish amongst us, do not do so for want of truth and a right belief, or miscarriages in sacred worship, but for their own personal infidelity and disobedience; for according to the rules before laid down, we do not judge that there are any such errors publicly admitted among them, nor any such miscarriages in sacred administration, as should directly or absolutely hinder their eternal salvation. That they be not any of them, through the ignorance or negligence of those who take upon them the conduct of their souls, encouraged in a state or way of sin, or deprived of due advantages to further their spiritual good, or led into practices in religion neither acceptable unto God nor tending to their own edification, whereby they may be betrayed into eternal ruin, is greatly incumbent on themselves to consider.

Unto this catholic church we owe all Christian love, and are obliged to exercise all the effects of it, both towards the whole and every particular member, as we have advantage and occasion. And not only so, but it is our duty to live in constant communion with it. This we can no otherwise do but by a profession of that faith whereby it becomes the church of Christ in the notion under consideration. For any failure herein we are not, that we know of, charged by any persons of modesty or sobriety. The reflections that have been made of late by some on the doctrines we teach or own, do fall as severely on the generality of the church of England (at least until within a few years last past) as they do on us; and we shall not need to own any especial concernment in them until they are publicly discountenanced by others. Such are the doctrines concerning God’s eternal decrees, justification by faith, the loss of original grace, and the corruption of nature, the nature of regeneration, the power and efficacy of grace in the conversion of sinners, that we say not of the Trinity and satisfaction of Christ. But we do not think that the doctrines publicly taught and owned among us ever since the Reformation will receive any great damage by the impotent assaults of some few, especially considering their management of those assaults by tales, railing, and raillery, to the lasting reproach of the religion which themselves profess, be it what it will.

Thirdly, The church of Christ, or the visible professors of the gospel in the world, may be considered as they are disposed of by providence, or their own choice, in *particular churches*. These at present are of many sorts, or are esteemed so to be; for whereas the Lord



Christ hath instituted sundry solemn ordinances of divine worship to be observed jointly by his disciples, unto his honour and their edification, this could not be done but in such societies, communities, or assemblies of them to that purpose. And as none of them can be duly performed but in and by such societies, so some of them do either express the union, love, and common hope that is among them, or do consist in the means of their preservation. Of this latter sort are all the ways whereby the power of Christ is acted in the discipline of the churches. Wherefore, we believe that our Lord Jesus Christ, as the king, ruler, and lawgiver of his church, hath ordained that all his disciples, all persons belonging unto his church in the former notion of it, should be gathered into distinct societies, and become as flocks of sheep in several folds, under the eye of their great Shepherd and the respective conducts of those employed under him. And this conjunction of professors in and unto particular churches, for the celebration of the ordinances of sacred worship appointed by Christ, and the participation of his institutions for their edification, is not a matter of accident, or merely under the disposal of common providence, but is to be an act in them of choice and voluntary obedience unto the commands of Christ. By some this duty is more expressly attended unto than by others, and by some it is totally neglected; for neither antecedently nor consequentially unto such their conjunction do they consider what is their duty unto the Lord Christ therein, nor what is most meet for their own edification. They go on in these things with others, according to the customs of the times and places wherein they live, confounding their civil and spiritual relations. And these we cannot but judge to walk irregularly, through ignorance, mistakes, or prejudices. Neither will they in their least secular concerns behave themselves with so much regardlessness or negligence; for however their lot previously unto their own choice may be cast into any place or society, they will make an after-judgment whether it be to their advantage, according to the rules of prudence, and by that judgment either abide in their first station, or otherwise dispose of themselves. But a liberty of this nature, regulated by the gospel, to be exercised in and about the great concerns of men's souls, is by many denied and by most neglected. Hence it is come to pass that the societies of Christians are for the most part mere effects of their political distributions by civil laws, aiming principally at other ends and purposes. It is not denied but that civil distributions of professors of the gospel may be subservient unto the ends of religious societies and assemblies; but when they are made a means to take off the minds of men from all regard to the authority of the Lord Christ instituting and appointing such societies, they are of no small disadvantage unto true church communion and love.

The institution of these churches, and the rules for their disposal and government throughout the world, are the same, — stable and unalterable. And hence there was in the first churches, planted by the apostles, and those who next succeeded them in the care of that work, great peace, union, and agreement; for they were all gathered and planted alike, according unto the institution of Christ, all regulated and ordered by the same common

rule. Men had not yet found out those things which were the causes of differences in after ages, and which yet continue so to be. Where there was any difference, it was for the most part on the account of some noisome, foolish, fantastical opinions, vented by impostors, in direct opposition to the Scripture; which the generality of Christians did with one consent abhor. But on various occasions, and by sundry degrees, there came to be great variety in the conceptions of men about these particular churches appointed for the seat and subject of all gospel ordinances, and wherein they were authoritatively to be administered in the name of Jesus Christ; for the church in neither of the former notions is capable of such administrations. Some, therefore, rested in particular assemblies, or such societies who did or might meet together under the guidance and inspection of their own elders, overseers, guides, or bishops, [Acts xiv. 23, xx. 28](#); [1 Pet. v. 1–3](#); [Acts xv. 2](#); [Phil. i. 1](#). And hereunto they added the occasional meetings of those elders and others, to advise and determine in common about the especial necessities of any particular church, or the general concernments of more of them, as the matter might require. These in name, and some kind of resemblance, are continued throughout the world in parochial assemblies. Others suppose a particular church to be such a one as is now called diocesan, though that name in its first use and application to church affairs was of a larger extent than what is now applied unto, for it was of old the name of a patriarchal church. And herein the sole rule, guidance, and authoritative inspection of many, perhaps a multitude of particular churches, assembling for sacred worship and the administration of gospel ordinances distinctly, is committed unto one man, whom, in contradistinction from others, they call the Bishop: for the joining of others with him, or their subordination unto him in the exercise of jurisdiction, hinders not but that the sole ecclesiastical power of the diocese may be thought to reside in him alone; for those others do either act in his name or by power derived from him, or have no pretence unto any authority merely ecclesiastical, however in common use what they exercise may be so termed. But the nature of such churches, with the rule and discipline exercised in them and over them, is too well known to be here insisted on. Some rest not here, but unto these diocesan add metropolitan churches; which also are esteemed particular churches, though it be uncertain by what warrant or on what grounds. In these one person hath in some kind of resemblance a respect unto and over the diocesan bishops, like that which they have over the ministers of particular assemblies. But these things being animated and regulated by certain arbitrary rules and canons, or civil laws of the nations, the due bounds and extent, of their power cannot be taken from any nature or constitution peculiar unto them; and therefore are there, wherever they are admitted, various degrees in their elevation. But how much or little the gospel is concerned in these things is easy for any one to judge; neither is it by wise men pretended to be so, any farther than that, as they suppose, it hath left such things to be ordered by human wisdom for an expediency unto some certain ends. One or more of these metropolitan churches have been required, in latter ages, to constitute a church national:

though the truth is, that appellation had originally another occasion, whereunto the invention of these metropolitan churches was accommodated; for it arose not from any respect unto ecclesiastical order or rule, but unto the supreme political power, whereunto the inhabitants of such a nation as gives denomination to the church are civilly subject. Hence, that which was provincial at the first erection of this fabric, which was in the Romish empire whilst the whole was under the power of one monarch, became national when the several provinces were turned into kingdoms, with absolute sovereign power among themselves, wholly independent of any other. And he who, in his own person and authority, would erect an ecclesiastical image of that demolished empire, will allow of such provincial churches as have a dependence upon himself, but cares not to hear of such national churches as in their first notion include a sovereign power unto all intents and purposes within themselves: so the church of England became national in the days of King Henry VIII., which before was but provincial.

Moreover, the consent of many had prevailed that there should be patriarchal churches, comprehending under their inspection and jurisdiction many of these metropolitical and provincial churches. And these also were looked on as particular; for, from their first invention, there having been four or five of them, no one of them could be imagined to comprise the catholic church, although those who presided in them, according to the pride and vanity of the declining ages of the church, styled themselves Œcumenical and Catholic. Things being carried thus far, about the fifth and sixth century of years after Christ, one owned as principal or chief of this latter sort set up for a church denominated Papal, from a title he had appropriated unto himself; for by artifices innumerable he ceased not from endeavouring to subject all those other churches and their rulers unto himself, and by the advantage of his pre-eminence over the other patriarchs, as theirs over metropolitans, and so downwards, whereby all Christians were imagined to be comprised within the precincts of some of them, he fell into a claim of a sovereignty over the whole body of Christianity, and every particular member thereunto belonging. This he could have had no pretence for, but that he thought them cast into such an order as that he might possess them on the same grounds on which that order itself was framed; for had not diocesan, metropolitical, and patriarchal churches made way for it, the thought of a church papal, comprehensive of all believers, had never befallen the minds of men; for it is known that the prodigious empire which the pope claimed and had obtained over Christianity, was an emergency of the contests that fell out amongst the leaders of the greater sorts of churches about the rights, titles, and pre-eminencies among themselves, with some other occasional and intestine distempers. Only, he had one singular advantage for the promotion of his pretence and desire; for whereas this whole contiguation of churches into all these storeys, in the top whereof he emerged and lifted up himself, was nothing but an accommodation of the church and its affairs unto the government of the Roman empire, or the setting up of an ecclesiastical image and representation of its secular

power and rule, the centring therein of all subordinate powers and orders in one monarch inclined the minds of men to comply with his design as very reasonable. Hence, the principal plea for that power over the whole church which at present he claims lies in this, that the government of it ought to be monarchical. And therein consists a chief part of the mystery of this whole work, that whereas this fabric of church rule was erected in imitation of and compliance with the Roman empire, so that he could never effect his sovereignty whilst that empire stood in its strength and union, under the command of one or more emperors by consent, yet when that empire was destroyed, and the provinces thereof became parcelled out unto several nations, who erected absolute independent sovereignties among themselves, he was able, by the reputation he had before obtained, so to improve all emergencies and advantages as to gather all these new kingdoms into one religious empire under himself, by their common consent. In the meantime, by the original divisions of the empire, and the revolutions that happened afterward amongst the nations of the world, the greatest number of Christians were wholly unconcerned in this new church-sovereignty, which was erected in the western provinces of that empire. So was the mystery of iniquity consummated; for whereas the pope, to secure his new acquisitions, endeavoured to empale the title and privileges of the catholic church unto those Christians which professed obedience unto himself, unto an exclusion of a greater number, there ensued such a confusion of the catholic and a particular church, as that both of them were almost utterly lost.

Concerning these several sorts of conceited particular churches, it is evident that some of them, as to their nature and kind, have no institution in or warrant from the Scripture, but were prudential contrivances of the men of the days wherein they were first formed; which they effected by various degrees, under the conduct of an apprehension that they tended unto the increase of concord and order among Christians. Whether really and effectually they have attained that end, the event hath long since manifested. And it will be one day acknowledged that no religious union or order among Christians will be lasting, and of spiritual use or advantage unto them, but what is appointed and designed for them by Jesus Christ. The truth is, the mutual intestine differences and contests among them who first possessed the rule of such churches, about their dignities, pre-eminencies, privileges, and jurisdictions, which first apparently let in pride, ambition, revenge, and hatred into the minds and lives of church guides, lost us the peace of Christendom; and the degeneracy of their successors more and more into a secular interest and worldly frame of spirit, is one great means of continuing us at a loss for its retrieval.

How far any man may be obliged in conscience unto communion with these churches in those things wherein they are such, and as such behave themselves in all their rule and administrations, may be inquired into by them who are concerned. What respect we have unto them, or what duty we owe them, as they may in any place be established by the civil laws of the supreme magistrate, is not of our present consideration. But whereas, in their

original and rise, they have no other warrant but the prudential contrivance of some men, who unquestionably might be variously influenced by corrupt prejudices and affections in the finding out and management of their inventions, what ground there is for holding a religious communion with them, and wherein such communion may consist, is not easy to be declared; for the notion that the church-communion of the generality of Christians and ministers consists only in a quiet subjection unto them who, by any means, may pretend to be set over them and claim a right to rule them, is fond and impious. In the meantime, we wholly deny that the mistakes or disorders of Christians in complying with or joining themselves unto such churches as have no warrantable institution ought to be any cause of the diminishing of our love towards them, or of withdrawing it from them: for, notwithstanding their errors and wanderings from the paths of truth in this matter, they do or may continue interested in all that love which is due from us unto the church of Christ upon the double account before insisted on; for they may be yet persons born of God, united unto Christ, made partakers of his Spirit, and so belong to the church catholic mystical, which is the first principal object of all Christian love and charity. The errors wherewith they are supposed to be overtaken may befall any persons under those qualifications, the admittance of them, though culpable, being not inconsistent with a state of grace and acceptation with God. And they may also, by a due profession of the fundamental truths of the gospel, evince themselves to be professed subjects of the visible kingdom of Christ in the world, and so belong to the church catholic visibly professing; under which notion the disciples of Christ are in the next place commended unto our love. And it is the fondest imagination in the world, that we must of necessity want love towards all those with whom we cannot join in all acts of religious worship, or that there need be any schism between them and us on the sole account thereof, taking schism in the common received notion of it. If we bear unkindness towards them in our minds and hearts; if we desire or seek their hurt; if we persecute them, or put them to trouble in the world for their profession; if we pray not for them; if we pity them not in all their temptations, errors, or sufferings; if we say unto any of them when naked, "Be thou clothed," and when hungry, "Be thou fed," but relieve them not according unto our abilities and opportunities; if we have an aversion to their persons, or judge them any otherwise than as they cast themselves openly and visibly under the sentence of natural reason or Scripture rule, — we may be justly thought to fail in our love towards them. But if our hearts condemn us not in these things, it is not the difference that is or may be between them and us about church-constitutions or order that ought to be a cause, or can be an evidence, of any want of love on our parts. There will, indeed, be a distinct and separate practice in the things wherein the difference lies; which in itself, and without other avoidable evils, need not on either side to be schismatical. If by censures, or any kind of power, such churches or persons would force us to submit unto or comply with such things or ways in religious worship as are contrary unto our light, and which they have no authority



from the Lord Christ to impose upon us, the whole state of the case is changed, as we shall see afterward.

As for those particular churches, which in any part of the world consist of persons assembling together for the worship of God in Christ, under the guidance of their own lawful pastors and teachers, we have only to say, that we are full well assured that “wherever two or three are gathered together in the name of Christ,” there he is present with them; and farther than this, there are very few concerning whom we are called to pass any other censure or judgment. So we hope it is with them, and so we pray that it may be. And therefore we esteem it our duty to hold our communion with all these assemblies, when called thereunto; which is required of any Christians in the like cases and circumstances. Unless we are convinced that, with respect unto such or such instances, it is the mind of Christ that neither among ourselves, nor in conjunction with others, nor for the sake of the present communion with them, we should observe them in his worship, we judge ourselves under an obligation to make use of their assemblies in all acts of religion unto our edification, as occasion shall require. But where the authority of Christ in the things of sacred worship doth intervene, all other considerations must be discarded; and a compliance therewith will secure us from all irregular events.

It must be acknowledged that many of these churches have woefully degenerated, and that any of them may so do, both from their primitive institution and also the sole role of their worship. And this they may do, and have done, in such various degrees and ways as necessarily requires a great variety in our judgments concerning them and our communion with them. The whole Christian world gives us instances hereof at this day; yea, we have it confirmed unto us in what is recorded concerning sundry churches mentioned in the Scripture itself. They were newly planted by the apostles themselves, and had rules given by them to attend unto for their direction; and, besides, they were obliged in all emergencies to inquire after and receive those commands and directions, which they were enabled infallibly to give unto them. And yet, notwithstanding these great advantages, we find that sundry of them were suddenly fallen into sinful neglects, disorders, and miscarriages, both in doctrine, discipline, and worship. Some of these were reprov'd and reformed by the great apostle, in his epistles written unto them for that end; and some of them were rebuked and threatened by the Lord Christ himself immediately from heaven, [Rev. ii.](#), [iii.](#) That in process of time they have increased in their degeneracy, waxing worse and worse, their present state and condition in the world, or the remembrance of them which are now not at all, with the severe dealings of God with them in his holy, wise providence, do sufficiently manifest. Yea, some of them, though yet continuing under other forms and shapes, have, by their superstition, false worship, and express idolatry, joined with wickedness of life and persecution of the true worshippers of Christ, as also by casting themselves into a new worldly constitution, utterly foreign unto what is appointed in the gospel, abandoned their interest in the state



and rights of the churches of Christ. So are sundry faithful cities become harlots; and where righteousness inhabited, there dwell persecuting murderers. Such churches were planted of Christ wholly noble vines, but are degenerated into those that are bitter and wild. Whatever our judgment may be concerning the personal condition of the members of such apostatized churches, or any of them, all communion with them, as they would be esteemed the seat of gospel ordinances, and in their pretended administration of them, is unlawful for us, and it is our indispensable duty to separate from them: for whatever indifference many may be growing into in matter of outward worship, — which ariseth from ignorance of the respect that is between the grace and institutions of Christ, as that from an apprehension that all internal religion consists in moral honesty only, — yet we know not any other way whereby we may approve ourselves faithful in our profession but in the observance of all whatever Christ hath commanded, [Matt. xxviii. 20](#), and to abstain from what he condemns; for both our faith and love, whatever we pretend, will be found vain if we endeavour not to keep his commandments, [John xv. 10, 14](#).

Such was the state of things in the church of Israel of old, after the defection under Jeroboam. It was no more a true church, nor any church at all, by virtue of positive institution; for they had neither priests, nor sacrifices, nor any ordinances of public worship, that God approved of. Hence it was the duty of all that feared God in the ten tribes not to join with the leaders and body of the people in their worship; as also to observe those sacred institutions of the law which were forbidden by them, in the order that they should not go up to Jerusalem, but attend unto all their sacred solemnities in the places where the calves were set up, [1 Kings xii., xiii.](#); [2 Chron. xi., xiii.](#) Accordingly, many of the most zealous professors among them, with the priests and Levites, and with a great multitude of the people, openly separated from the rest, and joined themselves unto Judah in the worship of God continued therein. Others amongst them secretly, in the worst of times, preserved themselves from the abominations of the whole people. In like manner under the New Testament, when some have deserved the title of “Babylon,” because of their idolatry, false worship, and persecution, we are commanded to “come out from among them,” in an open, visible, professed separation, that we be not partakers of their sins and plagues. But this judgment we are not to make, nor do make concerning any, but such as among whom idolatry spreads itself over the face of all their solemn assemblies, and who join thereunto the persecution of them who desire to worship God in spirit and in truth. The constitution of such churches, as to their being acceptable assemblies of worshippers before God, is lost and dissolved; neither is it lawful for any disciple of Christ to partake with them in their sacred administrations, for so to do is plainly to disown the authority of Christ, or to set up that of wicked and corrupt men above it.

Yet all this hinders not but that there may in such apostatical churches remain a profession of the fundamental truths of the gospel. And by virtue thereof, as they maintain the

interest of Christ's visible kingdom in the world, so we no way doubt but that there may be many amongst them who, by a saving faith in the truths they do profess, do really belong to the mystical church of Christ.

An instituted church, therefore, may, by the *crimes and wickedness of its rulers* and the generality of its members, and their idolatrous administrations in holy things, utterly destroy their instituted estate, and yet not presently all of them cease to belong unto the kingdom of Christ: for we cannot say that those things which will certainly annul church administrations, and render them abominable, will absolutely destroy the salvation of all individual persons who partake in them; and many may secretly preserve themselves from being defiled with such abominations. So in the height of the degeneracy and apostasy of the Israelitish church, there were seven thousand who kept themselves pure from Baalish idolatry, of whom none were known to Elijah. And therefore did God still continue a respect unto them as his people, because of those secret ones, and because the token of his covenant was yet in their flesh, affording unto them an extraordinary ministry by his prophets, when the ordinary by priests and Levites was utterly ceased. This we are to hope concerning every place where there is any profession made of the name of Christ, seeing it was the passion of Elijah which caused him to oversee so great a remnant as God had left unto himself in the kingdom of Israel. And from his example we may learn, that good men may sometimes be more severe in their censures for God than he will be for himself.

Moreover, such as were baptized in those churches were not baptized into them as particular churches, nor initiated into them thereby; but the relation which ensued unto them thereon was unto the catholic church visible, together with a separation from the infidel world, lying wholly in darkness and evil, by a dedication unto the name of Christ. Upon a personal avowment of that faith whereinto they were baptized, they became complete members of that church. Whatever state they are hereby admitted into, whatever benefit or privilege they are personally interested in, they lose them not by the miscarriage of that particular church whereunto they do relate; yea, losing the whole advantage of an instituted church-state, they may still retain whatever belongs unto their faith and profession. Were baptism only an institution into a particular church, upon the failure of that church, baptism, as to all its benefits and privileges, must cease also. We do therefore own, that amongst those whose assemblies are rejected by Christ, because of their false worship and wickedness, there may be persons truly belonging to the mystical church of God, and that also by their profession are a portion of his visible kingdom in the world. How far they do consent unto the abominations of the churches whereunto they do belong, how far they have light against them, how far they do bewail them, how far they repent of them, what God will bear withal in them, we know not, nor are called to judge. Our love is to be towards them as persons relating unto Jesus Christ in the capacity mentioned; but all communion with them in the acts of false worship is forbidden unto us. By virtue also of that relation in which they still

continue unto Christ and his church, as believers, they have power, and are warranted (as it is their duty), to reform themselves, and to join together anew in church order, for the due celebration of gospel ordinances, unto the glory of Christ and their own edification; for it is fond to imagine, that by the sins of others any disciples of Christ, in any place of the world, should be deprived of a right to perform their duty towards him, when it is discovered unto them. And these are our thoughts concerning such churches as are openly and visibly apostatical.

Again, there are *corruptions* that may befall or enter into churches, that are not of so heinous a nature as those before insisted on, especially if, as it often falls out, the whole lump be not leavened; if the whole body be not infected, but only some part or parts of it, which others more sound do resist and give their testimony against. And these may have none of the pernicious consequences before mentioned. Thus, many errors in doctrines, disorders and miscarriages in sacred administrations, irregular walking in conversation, with neglect or abuse of discipline in rulers, may fall out in some churches, which yet may be so far from evacuating their church state, as that they give no sufficient warrant unto any person immediately to leave their communion or to separate from them. The instances that may be given of the failings of some of the primitive churches in all these things, with the consideration of the apostolical directions given unto them on such occasions, render this assertion evident and uncontrollable. Nor do we in the least approve of their practice (if any such there be that are considerable), who, upon every failing in these things in any church, think themselves sufficiently warranted immediately of their own minds to depart from its communion. Much more do we condemn them who suffer themselves in these things to be guided by their own surmises and misapprehensions; for such there may be as make their own hasty conceptions to be the rule of all church administrations and communion, — who, unless they are in all things pleased, can be quiet nowhere. Wherefore, when any church, whereof a man is by his own consent antecedently a member, doth fall, in part or in whole, from any of those truths which it hath professed, or when it is overtaken with a neglect of discipline or irregularities in its administration, such a one is to consider that he is placed in his present state by divine Providence, that he may orderly therein endeavour to put a stop unto such defections, and to exercise his charity, love, and forbearance towards the persons of them whose miscarriages at present he cannot remedy. In such cases there is a large and spacious field for wisdom, patience, love, and prudent zeal to exercise themselves. And it is a most perverse imagination, that separation is the only cure for church disorders. All the gifts and graces of the Spirit bestowed on church members, to be exercised in their several stations at such a season, — all instructions given for their due improvement unto the good of the whole, — the nature, rules, and laws of all societies, — declare that all other remedies possible and lawful are to be attempted before a church be finally deserted. But these rules are to be observed provided always that it be judged unlawful, for any persons, either, for the sake of

peace, or order, or concord, or on any other consideration, to join actually in anything that is sinful, or to profess any opinion which is contrary to sound doctrine or the form of wholesome words, which we are bound to hold fast on all emergencies. And farther: if we may suppose, as sure enough we may, that such a church, so corrupted, shall *obstinately persist* in its errors, miscarriages, neglects, and maladministrations; that it shall refuse to be warned or admonished, or being so, by any means, shall willfully reject and despise all instruction; that it will not bear with them that are yet sound in it, whether elders or members, in peaceable endeavours to reduce it unto the order of the gospel, but shall rather hurt, persecute, and seek their trouble for so doing, whereby their edification comes continually to be obstructed, and their souls to be hazarded, through the loss of truth and peace; — we no way doubt but that it is lawful for such persons to withdraw themselves from the communion of such churches, and that without any apprehension that they have absolutely lost their church-state, or are totally rejected by Jesus Christ; for the means appointed unto any end are to be measured and regulated according unto their usefulness unto that end. And let men's present apprehensions be what they will, it will one day appear that the end of all church order, rule, communion, and administrations, is, not the grandeur or secular advantage of some few, not outward peace and quietness, unto whose preservation the civil power is ordained; but the edification of the souls of men, in faith, love, and gospel obedience. Where, therefore, these things are so disposed of and managed as that they do not regularly further and promote that end, but rather obstruct it, if they will not be reduced unto their due order and tendency, they may be laid aside and made use of in another way. Much more may any refuse the communion of such churches, if they *impose on them* their corruptions, errors, failings, and mistakes, as the condition of their communion; for hereby they directly make themselves lords over the faith and worship of the disciples of Christ, and are void of all authority from him in what they so do or impose. And it is so far [from being true], that any men's withdrawing of themselves from the communion of such churches, and entering into a way of reformation for their own good, in obedience to the laws of Christ, should infer in them a want of love and peaceableness, or a spirit of division, that to do otherwise were to divide from Christ, and to cast out all true Christian love, embracing a cloud of slothful negligence and carelessness in the great concernments of the glory of God and their own souls in the room thereof. We are neither the authors nor the guides of our own love: he who implants and worketh it in us hath given us rules how it must be exercised, and that on all emergencies. It may work as regularly by sharp cutting rebukes as by the most silken and compliant expressions, — by manifesting an aversation from all that is evil, as by embracing and approving of what is good. In all things and cases it is to be directed by the word. And when, under the pretence of it, we leave that rule, and go off from any duty which we owe immediately unto God, it is will, pride, and self-conceit in us, and not love. And among all the exhortations that are given us in the Scripture unto unity and concord, as the

fruits of love, there is not one that we should agree or comply with any in their sins or evil practices. But as we are commanded in ourselves to abstain “from all appearance of evil,” so are we forbidden a participation in the sins of other men, and all “fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness.” Our love towards such churches is to work by pity, compassion, prayer, instructions; which are due means for their healing and recovery; — not by consent unto them or communion with them, whereby they may be hardened in the error of their way, and our own souls be subverted: for if we have not a due respect unto the Lord Christ and his authority, all that we have, or may pretend to have, unto any church is of no value; neither ought we to take into consideration any terms of communion whose foundation is not laid in a regard thereunto.

Moreover (as hath been declared), there is no such society of Christians in the world, whose assemblies, as to instituted worship, are rejected by Christ so that they have a bill of divorce given unto them, by the declaration of the will of the Lord Jesus to that purpose in the Scripture, but that, until they are utterly also, as it were, extirpate by the providence of God (as are many of the primitive plantations), we are persuaded of them that there are yet some secret, hidden ones among them, that belong unto the purpose of God’s grace; for we do judge that wherever the name of Jesus Christ is called upon, there is salvation to be obtained, however the ways of it may be obstructed unto the most by their own sins and errors. They may also retain that profession which distinguisheth them from the infidel world. In these things we are still to hold communion with them, and on these accounts is our love to be continued unto them. Some kind of communion we may hold with them that are of no instituted or particular churches, or whose church-state is rejected, even as a person excommunicated is to be admonished as a brother. And some kind of communion we may lawfully refuse with some true churches; instances whereof shall be given afterward.

There is, therefore, no necessity that any should deny all them to be true churches from whom they may have just reason to withdraw their communion; for such as are so may require such things thereunto as it is not lawful for them to accept of or submit unto. What assemblies of Christians we behold visibly worshipping God in Christ, we take for granted to be true visible churches. And when we judge of our own communion with them, it is not upon this question, *whether they are true churches or no*, as though the determination of our practice did depend solely thereon: for as we are not called to judge of the being of their constitution, as to the substance of it, unless they are openly judged in the Scripture, as in the case of idolatry and persecution persisted in; so a determination of the truth of their constitution, or that they are true churches, will not presently resolve us in our duty as to communion with them, for the reasons before given. But in such a case two things are by us principally to be considered:— 1. That nothing *sinful* in itself, or unto us, be required of us as the condition of communion. 2. That we may in such churches obtain the *immediate*



end of their institution and our conjunction with them; which is our edification in faith, love, and obedience.

And the things whereof we have discoursed comprise our thoughts concerning those societies of Christians whose degeneracy from their primitive rule and institution is most manifest and notorious. Whilst there is any profession of the gospel, any subjection of souls unto Jesus Christ avowed, or any expectation of help from him continued among them, we cannot but hope that there are, in all of them, at least some few names that are “written in the Lamb’s book of life,” and which shall be saved eternally: for as a relation unto a particular visible church, walking according to the order and rule of the gospel, is the duty of every believer to give himself up unto, as that which is a means appointed and sanctified to the furtherance of his edification and salvation; so where it cannot be obtained, through invincible outward impediments, or is omitted through ignorance of duty, or is on just causes refused where opportunities make a tender of it, or where the being and benefit of it are lost through the apostasy of those churches whereunto any persons did belong, the utter want of it, and that always, is not such as necessarily infers the eternal loss of their souls who suffer under it.

Other churches there are in the world, which are not evidently guilty of the enormities, in doctrine, worship, and discipline, before discoursed of. These all we judge to be true churches of Christ, and do hope that his promised presence is with them in their assemblies. Answerable hereunto is our judgment concerning their officers or rulers, and all their sacred administrations. It becomes us to think and believe that the one have authority from Christ, and that the other are accepted with him; for it is most unwarrantable rashness and presumption, yea, an evident fruit of ignorance, or want of love, or secular, private interest, when upon lesser differences men judge churches to be no true churches, and their ministers to be no true ministers, and, consequently, all their administrations to be invalid. So do some judge of churches, because they have bishops; and so do more of others because they have none. But the validity or invalidity of the ordinances of Christ, which are the means of union and communion with him unto all his disciples, depend not on the determination of things highly disputable in their notion, and not inconsistent with true gospel obedience in their practice. And we are unduly charged with other apprehensions. God forbid that any such thought should ever enter into our hearts, as though the churches constituted in all things according unto our light, and the rules we apprehend appointed in the Scripture for that purpose, should be the only true churches in the world. They do but out of design endeavour to expose us to popular envy and hatred who invent and publish such things concerning us, or any of us. But whatever be the judgment of others concerning us, we intend not to take from thence any such provocation as might corrupt our judgments concerning them, nor to relieve ourselves by returning the like censures unto them as we receive from them. Scripture rule and duty must in these matters regulate our thoughts on all occasions. And



whilst we judge others to be true churches, we shall not be much moved with their judgment that we are none, because we differ from them. We stand to the judgment of Christ and his word. We cannot but judge, indeed, that many churches have missed, and do miss, in some things, the precise rules of their due constitution and walking; that many of them have added useless, superfluous rites to the worship of God among them; that there is in many of them a sinful neglect of evangelical discipline, or a carnal rule erected in the stead of it; that errors in doctrines of importance and danger are prevalent in sundry of them; that their rulers are much influenced by a spirit of bitterness and envy against such as plead for reformation beyond their measure or interest; — yet that hereupon they should all or any of them immediately forfeit their church-state, so as to have no lawful ministers nor acceptable sacred administrations, is in itself false imagination, and such as was never by us entertained.

In particular, as to those churches in Europe which are commonly called Reformed, we have the same thoughts of them, the same love towards them, the same readiness for communion with them, as we would desire any disciples of Christ in the world to have, bear, or exercise towards ourselves. If we are found negligent in any office of love towards them or any of their members, — in compassion, help, or assistance, or such supplies in outward or inward things as we have opportunity or ability for, — we are willing to bear the guilt of it as our sin, and the reproach of it as our shame. And herein we desire to fulfil the royal law, according to the Scripture, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” The same we say concerning all the churches in England of the same mould and constitution with them; especially if it be true, which some say, that parochial churches are under a force and power, whereby they are enjoined the practice of sundry things and forbidden the performance of others, wherein the compliance of some is not over-voluntary nor pleasing to themselves. Neither is there a nullity or invalidity in the ordinances administered in them, any otherwise than as some render them ineffectual unto themselves by their unbelief. And this is the paganizing of England which some of us are traduced for! We believe that, among the visible professors in this nation, there is as great a number of sincere believers as in any nation under heaven; so that in it are treasured up a considerable portion of the invisible mystical church of Christ. We believe that the generality of the inhabitants of this nation are, by their profession, constituted an eminent part of the kingdom of Christ in this world. And we judge not, we condemn not, those who, walking according to their light and understanding in particular rites, do practice such things in the worship of God as we cannot comply withal; for we do not think that the things wherein they fail, wherein they miss or outgo the rule, are in their own nature absolutely destructive of their particular church-state. And what more can reasonably be required of us, or expected from us, in this matter, we know not. The causes of the distance that doth remain between us all shall be afterward inquired into. For our duty in particular presential communion, at the celebration of the same individual ordinances, with such churches as are remote from us, in Asia or Africa, we shall, we



hope, be directed to determine aright concerning it when we are called thereunto. In the meantime, what are our thoughts concerning them hath been before declared: to love them as subjects of the kingdom of Jesus Christ in the world, to pray for them that they have all needful supplies of grace and the Holy Spirit from above, that God would send out his light and truth to guide them in their worship and obedience, and to help them in things spiritual and temporal, as we have opportunity, is the sum of the duty which is required in us towards them. Those we are more concerned in who are within the lines of our ordinary communication, among whom we walk and converse in the world. Unto any of these it is in the liberty and power of every believer to join himself, by his own consent. And no more is required hereunto, in the present constitution of churches among ourselves, but that a man remove his habitation, to comply with his own desires herein: and this choice is to be regulated by a judgment how a man may best improve and promote his own edification. We see not, therefore, how any man, with the least pretence of sobriety or modesty, can charge us with the want of an esteem and valuation of evangelical unity; for we embrace it on all the grounds that it is in the gospel recommended unto us. And we do know within what narrow bounds the charity and unity of some are confined, who yet advantage themselves by a noise of their pretence. But that we do not in the least disturb, break, or dissent from the catholic church, either as it is invisible, in its internal form, by faith and the renovation of the Holy Ghost, or as visibly professing necessary, fundamental truths of the gospel, we have sufficiently evinced. And the principles laid down concerning particular churches, congregations, assemblies, or parishes, have not as yet been detected by any to spring from want of love, or to be obstructive of the exercise of it. Having, therefore, thus briefly given some account of what we conceive to be our duty in relation unto the whole church of God, we can with confidence and much assurance of mind own as dear a valuation of love, unity, and peaceableness in the profession of the gospel as any sort of professors whatever. And we are persuaded that our principles do as much tend and conduce unto the improvement of them as any that are or can be proposed unto that end; for we either do or are in a readiness to embrace every thing or way that the Lord Christ hath appointed or doth bless thereunto.

We doubt not, as hath been before acknowledged, but that there have been many failings and sinful miscarriages among all sorts of professors, who *separate*, or are rather driven from, the present public worship. There is no question but that in them all there are some remainders of the bitter root of corrupt affections, which, under the various temptations and provocations they have been exposed unto, hath brought forth fruit of an unpleasant relish. It is no new thing that irregular prejudices should be found acting themselves in professors of the gospel; it hath been so among them from the beginning. And we hope that, where there is or hath been any guilt of this nature, the reproofs which have been publicly given unto it (with what spirit or intention soever managed) may be useful to the amendment

of them who have offended. But for our own parts, we must bear this testimony, unto our sincerity, that we not only condemn but abhor all evil surmises among professors, all rash and uncharitable censures, all causeless aversations of mind and affections, all strife, wrath, anger, and debate, upon the account of different apprehensions and practices in and about the concerns of religious worship. Much more do we cast out all thoughts of judging men's eternal state and condition with respect unto such differences; nor do we, nor dare we, give countenance unto any thing that is in the least really opposite to love, peace, unity, or concord, amongst the disciples of Christ. And as we shall not excuse any of those extravagancies and intemperate heats, in words or otherwise, which some it may be have been guilty of, who, until their repentance, must bear their own judgment; so we will not make a recharge on others who differ in persuasion from us of the same or the like crimes; nor indeed need we so to do, their principles and practices, contrary unto all Christian love and charity, being written as with the beams of the sun. And we do not complain of our lot in the world, — that the appearance of such things in any of us would be esteemed a scandalous crime, which others that condemn them in us indulge in themselves without the least check or control. The law of this condition is put upon us by the profession which we do avow. Only, we are not willing that any should make advantage against us by their pleas for love, unity, and concord; as if, indeed, they were for peace, but that we make ourselves ready for war. Could they convince us that we come behind them in the valuation and seeking after these things by all ways and means blessed by Christ to that purpose, we should judge ourselves with a severity at least commensurate to the utmost they are able to exercise against us, whilst free from malice and evil designs. Only we must add, that there is no true measure of love to be taken by the accessions that men can make towards them who depart from truth. If it were so, those must be judged to abound most with it who can most comply with the practices of the church of Rome. But we are persuaded that such discourses, with the application of them unto those who differ from their authors, do proceed from sincerity in them; only, as we fear, somewhat leavened with an apprehension that their judgments and practices, being according unto truth, ought to be the standard and measure of other men's, perhaps no less sincere and confident of the truth than themselves, though differing from them. And hence it is unhappily fallen out, that, in the reproofs which some do manage on the foundations mentioned, and in the way of their management, many do suppose that there is as great an appearance, if not evidence, of evil surmises, ungrounded, temerarious censures; of self-conceit and elation of mind; of hard thoughts of, undue charges on, and the contempt of others; and in all of a want of real love, condescension, and compassion, as in any things that are true and to be really found among professors blamed by them: for these things, both as charged and recharged, have a double appearance. Those from whom they proceed look on them in the light of that sincerity and integrity which they are conscious of to themselves, wherein they seem amiable, useful, and free from all offence; whereas others, that are con-

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cerned, viewing of them in the disordered reflections of their opposition unto them, and the disadvantage which they undergo by them, do apprehend them quite of another nature. And it is a matter of trouble unto us to find that when some are severely handled for those principles and ways wherein they can and do commend their consciences unto God, — and thereby apprehending that their intentions, purposes, principles, and affections, are injuriously traduced and perverted, — they fall with an equal severity on them by whom they are reproved; though their reproofs proceed from an equal sincerity unto what themselves profess and expect to be believed in. Especially are such mutual reflections grievous and irksome unto men, when they apprehend that in them or by them professed friends do industriously expose them to the contempt and wrath of professed adversaries.

Chapter IV.

Want of love and unity among Christians justly complained of — Causes of divisions and schisms — 1. Misapprehensions of evangelical unity — Wherein it doth truly consist — The ways and means whereby it may be obtained and preserved — Mistakes about both — 2. Neglect in churches to attend unto known gospel duty — Of preaching unto conversion and edification — Care of those that are really godly — Of discipline: how neglected, how corrupted — Principles seducing churches and their rulers into miscarriages: 1. Confidence of their place; 2. Contempt of the people; 3. Trust unto worldly grandeur — Other causes of divisions — Reminders of corruption from the general apostasy — Weakness and ignorance — Of readiness to take offence — Remedies hereof — Pride — False teachers.

Upon the whole matter, it is generally acknowledged that there is a great decay of love, a great want of peace and unity, among professors of the gospel in the world. And it is no less evident nor less acknowledged that these things are frequently commanded and enjoined unto them in the Scripture. Might they be obtained, it would greatly further the ends of the gospel and answer the mind of Christ; and their loss is obstructive unto the one, and no less dishonourable unto that profession which is made of the name of the other: for the divisions of Christians (occasioned chiefly by false notions of unity, and undue means of attaining it) are the chief cause of offences unto them who are yet strangers from Christianity. The Jews object unto us the wars among Christians, which they suppose shall have no place under the kingdom and reign of the true Messiah. And we have been reproached with our intestine differences by Gentiles and Mohammedans; for those who never had either peace, or love, or unity among themselves, do yet think meet to revile us with the want of them, because they know how highly we are obliged unto them. But any men may be justly charged with the neglect of that duty which they profess, if they be found defective therein. Under the sad effects of the want of these things we may labour long enough, if we endeavour not to take away the causes of it. And yet in the entrance of our disquisition after them we are again entangled. Christians cannot come to an agreement about these causes; and so live under the severity of their effects, as not being able to conclude on a remedy. The multitude of them is here divided, and one crieth one thing, another another. Most place the cause of all our differences in a dissent from themselves and their judgments; yea, they do so apparently who yet disavow their so doing. And it may be here expected that we should give some account of our thoughts as to the causes of these differences, whereof we also have now complained, so far as they are contrary to the nature or obstructive of the ends of the gospel. We shall therefore briefly endeavour the satisfaction of such as may have those expectations. Particular evils, which contribute much unto our divisions, we shall not insist upon; much less shall we reflect upon and aggravate the failings of others, whether persons or societies.



Some of the principal and more general reasons and causes of them, especially amongst Protestants, it shall suffice us to enumerate.

1. The principal cause of our divisions and schisms is no other than the *ignorance or misapprehension that is among Christians of the true nature of that evangelical unity* which they ought to follow after, with the ways and means whereby it may be attained and preserved. Hence it is come to pass, that, in the greatest pleas for unity and endeavours after it, most men have pursued a shadow, and fought uncertainly, as those that beat the air; for having lost every notion of gospel unity, and not loving the thing itself, under what terms soever proposed unto them, they consigned the name of it unto, and clothed with its ornaments and privileges, a vain figment of their own, which the Lord Christ never required, nor ever blessed any in their endeavours to attain. And when they had changed the end, it was needful for them also to change the means of attaining it, and to substitute those in their room which were suited to the new mark and aim they had erected. Farther to evidence these things, we shall give some account of the nature of evangelical unity, the means of attaining it, with the false notion of it that some have embraced, and the corrupt means which they have used for the compassing of the same.

First, That unity which is recommended unto us in the gospel is *spiritual*; and in that which is purely so lies the foundation of the whole. Hence it is called “The unity of the Spirit,” which is to be kept “in the bond of peace;” because “there is one body, and one Spirit,” whereby that body is animated, [Eph. iv. 3, 4](#). Thus, all true believers become one in the Father and the Son, or perfect in one, [John xvii. 21, 22](#). It is their participation of, and quickening by, the same Spirit that is in Christ Jesus, whereby they become his body, or members of it, “even of his flesh and of his bones,” [Eph. v. 30](#); that is, no less really partakers of the same divine spiritual nature with him, [2 Pet. i. 4](#), than Eve was of the nature of Adam, when she was made of his flesh and his bones, [Gen. ii. 23](#). The real union of all true believers unto the Lord Christ as their head, wrought by his Spirit, which dwelleth in them, and communicates of his grace unto them, is that which we intend; for as hereby they become one with and in him, so they come to be one among themselves, as his body; and all the members of the body, being many, are yet but one body, wherein their oneness among themselves doth consist. The members of the body have divers forms or shapes, divers uses and operations, much more may be diversely clothed and adorned; yet are they one body still, wherein their unity doth consist. And it were a ridiculous thing to attempt the appearance of a dead, useless unity among the members of the body, by clothing of them all in the same kind of garments or covering. But granting them their unity by their relation unto the Head, and thence to one another, unto the constitution of the whole, and their different forms, shapes, uses, operations, ornaments, all tend to make them serviceable in their unity unto their proper ends. And saith the apostle, “As the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ. For by



one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit," [1 Cor. xii. 12, 13](#). And he doth elsewhere so describe this fundamental unity of believers in one body, under and in dependence on the same Head, as to make it the only means of the usefulness and preservation of the whole. They "grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love," [Eph. iv. 15, 16](#). The conjunctions of all the members into one body, their mutual usefulness unto one another, the edification of the whole, with its increase, the due exercise of love (which things contain the whole nature and the utmost ends of all church-communion), do depend merely and solely upon, and flow from, the relation that the members have to the Head, and their union with him. He speaketh again to the same purpose in the reproof of them who "hold not the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God," [Col. ii. 19](#). This is the foundation of all gospel unity among believers, whereunto all other things which are required unto the completing of it are but accessory; nor are they, without this, of any value or acceptance in the sight of God. Whatever order, peace, concord, union in the church, any one may hold or keep who is not interested herein, he is but like a stone in a building, laid it may be in a comely order, but not cemented and fixed unto the whole; which renders its station useless to the building and unsafe unto itself: or like a dead, mortified part of the body, which neither receives any vital influence from the head, nor administers nourishment unto any other part. Now, it cannot be denied but that, in the contests that are in the world about church union and divisions, with what is pleaded about their nature and causes, there is little or no consideration had thereof. Yea, those things are principally insisted on, for the constituting of the one and the avoiding of the other, which casts a neglect, yea, a contempt upon it. It is the Romanists who make the greatest outcries about church-union, and who make the greatest advantage by what they pretend so to be. But hereunto they contend expressly, on the one side, that it is indispensably necessary that all Christians should be subject to the pope of Rome and united unto him; and, on the other, that it is not necessary at all that any of them be spiritually and savingly united unto Christ. Others, also, place it in various instances of conformity unto and compliance with the commands of men; which, if they are observed, they are wondrous cold in their inquiries after this relation unto the Head. But the truth is, that where any one is interested in this foundation of all gospel unity, he may demand communion with any church in the world, and ought not to be refused, unless in case of some present offence or scandal. And those by whom such persons are rejected from communion, to be held on gospel terms, on the account of some differences not intrenching on this foundation, do exercise a kind of church tyranny, and are guilty of the schism which may ensue thereon. So, on the other

side, where this is wanting, men's compliance with any other terms or conditions that may be proposed unto them, and their obtaining of church-communion thereon, will be of little advantage unto their souls.

Secondly, Unto this foundation of gospel unity among believers, for and unto the due improvement of it, there is required *a unity of faith*, or of the belief and profession of the same divine truth; for as there is one Lord, so also [there is] one faith and one baptism unto believers. And this ariseth from and followeth the other; for those who are so united unto Christ are all taught of God to believe the truths which are necessarily required thereunto. And however, by the power of temptation, they may fall in it or from it for a season, as did Peter, yet, through the love and care of Jesus Christ, they are again recovered. Now, unto this unity of faith two things are required: — *First*, A precise and express profession of the *fundamental articles* of Christian religion; for we outwardly hold the Head by a consent unto the form of wholesome words wherein the doctrine of it is contained. Of the number and nature of such fundamental truths, whose express acknowledgment belongs unto the unity of faith, so much has been discoursed by others as that we need not add any thing thereunto. The sum is, that they are but few, plainly delivered in the Scripture, evidencing their own necessity, all conducing to the begetting and increase of that spiritual life whereby we live unto God. *Secondly*, It is required hereunto, that in other things and duties “every man be *fully persuaded in his own mind*,” and, walking according to what he hath attained, do follow peace and love with those who are otherwise persuaded than he is, [Rom. xiv. 5](#); [Phil. iii. 16](#); — for the unity of faith did never consist in the same precise conceptions of all revealed objects; neither the nature of man nor the means of revelation will allow such a unity to be morally possible. And the figment of supplying this variety by an implicit faith is ridiculous; for herein faith is considered as professed, and no man can make profession of what he knoweth not. It is, therefore, condescension and mutual forbearance whereby the unity of faith, consisting in the joint belief of necessary truths, is to be preserved with respect unto other things about which differences may arise.

Yet is not this so to be understood as though Christians, especially ministers of the gospel, should content themselves with the knowledge of such fundamentals, or confine their Scripture inquiries unto them. Whatever is written in the Scripture is “written for our admonition, [1 Cor. x. 11](#); and it is our duty to search diligently into the whole counsel of God, therein revealed; yea, to inquire with “all diligence,” [1 Tim. iv. 13–16](#); [2 Tim. iii. 15–17](#); [1 Pet. i. 10, 11](#), in the use of all means and the improvement of all advantages, with fervent supplications for light and aid from above, into the whole mystery of the will of God, as revealed in the Scripture, and all the parts of it, is the principal duty that is incumbent on us in this world. And those who take upon them to be ministers and instructors of others, by whom this is neglected, who take up with a superfiary knowledge of general principles, and those such, for the most part, as have a coincidence with the light of nature, do but betray

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the souls of those over whom they usurp a charge, and are unworthy of the title and office which they bear. Neither is there any thing implied in the means of preserving the unity of faith that should hinder us from explaining, confirming, and vindicating any truth that we have received, wherein others differ from us, provided that what we do be done with a spirit of meekness and love; yea, our so doing is one principal means of ministering nourishment unto the body, whereby the whole is increased as “with the increase of God.”

But in the room of all this, what contentings, fightings, destructions of men, body and soul, upon variety of judgments about sacred things, have been introduced, by the craft of Satan and the carnal interest of men of corrupt minds, is known to all the world.

Thirdly, There is a *unity of love* that belongs unto the evangelical unity which we are in the description of; for love is the bond of perfection, that whereby all the members of the body of Christ are knit together among themselves, and which renders all the other ingredients of this unity useful unto them. And as we have discoursed of the nature of this love before, so the exercise of it, as it hath an actual influence into gospel unity among Christians, may be reduced unto two heads. For, *first*, It worketh effectually, according to the measure of them in whom it is, in the *contribution of supplies of grace, and light*, and helps of obedience, unto other members of the body. Every one in whom this love dwelleth, according to his ability, call, and opportunities, which make up his measure, will communicate the spiritual supplies which he receiveth from the head, Christ Jesus, unto others, by instructions, exhortations, consolations, and example, unto their edification. This he will do in love, and unto the ends of love, — namely, to testify a joint relation unto Christ, the head of all, and the increase of the whole by supplies of life from him. Instead hereof, some have invented bonds of ecclesiastical unity, which may bind men together in some appearance of order, whilst in the meantime they live in envy, wrath, and malice, biting and devouring one another; or if there be any thing of love among them, it is that which is merely natural, or carnal and sensual, working by a joint consent in delights and pleasure, or at best in civil things, belonging unto their conversation in this world. The love that is among such persons in this world is of the world, and will perish with the world. But it is a far easier thing to satisfy conscience with a pretence of preserving church-unity, by an acquiescency in some outward rules and constitutions, wherein men’s minds are little concerned, than to attend diligently unto the due exercise of this grace of love against all oppositions and temptations unto the contrary; for indeed the exercise of this love requires a sedulous and painful “labour,” [Heb. vi. 10](#). But yet this is that alone which is the bond of perfection unto the disciples of Christ, and without which all other pretences or appearances of unity are of no value with him. *Secondly*, This love acts itself *by forbearance and condescension* towards the infirmities, mistakes, and faults of others; wherein of what singular use it is for the preservation of church peace and order, the apostle at large declares, [1 Cor. xiii](#).

Fourthly, The Lord Christ, by his kingly authority, hath instituted *orders for rule, and ordinances for worship*, [Matt. xxviii. 19, 20](#); [Eph. iv. 8–13](#), to be observed in all his churches. That they be attended unto, and celebrated in a due manner, belongs unto the unity which he requires among his disciples. To this end he communicates supplies of spiritual ability and wisdom, or the gifts of his Spirit, unto the guides and rulers of his churches, for their administration unto edification. And hereon, if a submission unto his authority be accompanied with a due attendance unto the rule of the word, no such variety or difference will ensue as shall impeach that unity which is the duty of them all to attend unto.

In these things doth consist that evangelical church-unity which the gospel recommends unto us, and which the Lord Christ prayed for, with respect unto all that should believe on his name, [John xvii. 20–23](#). One Spirit, one faith, one love, one Lord, there ought to be in and unto them all. In the possession of this unity, and no other, were the first churches left by the apostles; and had they in succeeding generations continued, according to their duty, in the preservation and liberty of it, all those scandalous divisions which afterward fell out among them, on account of pre-eminences, jurisdictions, liturgies, rites, ceremonies, violently or fraudulently obtruded on their communion, had been prevented, [2 Cor. x. 4, 5](#).

The ways and means whereby this unity may be obtained and preserved amongst Christians are evident from the nature of it: for whereas it is spiritual, none other are suited thereunto, nor hath the Lord Christ appointed any other but his Spirit and his word; for to this end doth he promise the presence of his Spirit among them that believe unto the consummation of all things, [Matt. xxviii. 20](#); [John xiv. 16](#). And this he doth, both as to lead and “guide them into all truth” necessary unto the ends mentioned, so to assist and help them in the orderly performance of their duties in and about them. His word, also, as the rule which they are to attend unto, he hath committed unto them. And other ways and means for the compassing of this end, besides the due improvement of spiritual assistances in a compliance with the holy rule, he hath not desired or appointed.

This is that gospel unity which we are to labour after, and these are the means whereby we may do so. But now, through the mistake of the minds of men, with the strong influence which carnal and corrupt interests have upon them, we know how it hath been despised, and what hath been set up in the room thereof, and what have been the means whereby it hath been pursued and promoted. We may take an instance in those of the church of Rome. No sort of Christians in the world (as we have already observed) do at this day more pretend unto unity, or more press the necessity of it, or more fiercely judge, oppose, and destroy others for the breach of it, which they charge upon them, nor more prevail or advantage themselves by the pretence of it, than do they; but yet, notwithstanding all their pretences, it will not be denied but that the unity which they so make their boast of, and press upon others, is a thing utterly foreign to the gospel, and destructive of that peace, union, and concord among Christians which it doth require. They know how highly unity is commended



in the Scripture, how much it is to be prized and valued by all true believers, how acceptable it is to Jesus Christ, and how severely they are condemned who break it or despise it: these things they press, and plead, and make their advantage by. But when we come to inquire what it is that they intend by church-unity, they tell us long stories of subjection unto the pope, — to the church in its dictates and resolutions, without farther examination, merely because they are theirs. Now, these things are not only of another nature and kind than the unity and concord commended unto us by Jesus Christ, but perfectly inconsistent with them, and destructive of them. And as they would impose upon us a corrupt confederacy, for their own secular advantage, in the room of the spiritual unity of the gospel; so it was necessary that they should find out means suitable unto its accomplishment and preservation, as distant from the means appointed by Christ for the attaining of gospel union as their carnal confederacy is from the thing itself. And they have done accordingly; for the enforcing men, by all ways of deceit and outward violence, unto a compliance with and submission unto their orders, is the great expedient for the establishment and preservation of their perverse union that they have fixed on. Now, that this fictitious unity and corrupt carnal pursuit of it have been the greatest occasion and cause of begetting, fomenting, and continuing the divisions that are among Christians in the world, hath been undeniably proved by learned men of all sorts. And so it will fall out, wherever any reject the union of Christ's institution, and substitute in the room thereof an agreement of their own invention; as his will be utterly lost, so they will not be able to retain their own.

Thus, others also, not content with those bounds and measures which the gospel hath fixed unto the unity of Christians and churches, will have it to consist almost wholly in an outward conformity unto certain rites, orders, ceremonies, and modes of sacred administrations, which themselves have either invented and found out or do observe and approve. Whoever dissents from them in these things must immediately be branded as a schismatic, a divider of the church's unity, and an enemy unto the peace and order of it. Howbeit, of conformity unto such institutions and orders of men, of uniformity in the observation of such external rites in the worship of the church, there is not one word spoken, nor any thing of that nature intimated, in all the commands for unity which are given unto us, nor in the directions that are sanctified unto the due preservation of it. Yet such a uniformity being set up in the room of evangelical unity and order, means suited unto the preservation of it, but really destructive of that whose name it beareth and whose place it possesseth, have not been wanting. And it is not unworthy of consideration how men endeavour to deceive others, and are deceived themselves, by manifold equivocations in their arguings about this matter. For, first, they lay down the necessity of unity among Christians, with the evil that is in breaches, divisions, and schisms; which they prove from the commands of the one and the reproofs of the other that abound in the Scripture. Then, with an easy deduction, they prove that it is a duty incumbent on all Christians, in their several capacities, to observe,



keep, further, and promote this unity; and to prevent, oppose, resist, and avoid all divisions that are contrary thereunto. If so, the magistrate must do the same in his place and capacity. Now, seeing it is his office, and unto him of God it is committed, to exercise his power in laws and penalties for the promoting of what is good, and the punishing of what is contrary thereunto, it is his duty to coerce, restrain, and punish, all those who oppose, despise, or any way break or disturb, the unity of the church. And this ratiocination would seem reasonable were it not doubly defective. For, first, the unity intended in the first proposition, whose necessity is confirmed by Scripture testimonies, is utterly lost before we come to the conclusion, and the outward uniformity mentioned is substituted in the room thereof. And hereby, in the second place, are they deceived to believe that external force and penalties are a means to be used by any for the attaining or preserving of gospel unity. It is not improbable, indeed, but that it may be suited to give countenance unto that external uniformity which is intended; but that it should be so unto the promotion of gospel union among believers is a weak imagination. Let such persons keep themselves and their argument unto that union which the Scripture commends amongst the disciples of Christ and his churches, with the means fitted and appointed unto the preservation of it, and they shall have our compliance with any conclusion that will thence ensue.

Herein, therefore, lies *the fundamental cause of our divisions*; which will not be healed until it be removed and taken out of the way. Leave believers or professors of the gospel unto their duty in seeking after evangelical unity in the use of other means instituted and blessed unto that end, — impose nothing on their consciences or practice under that name, which indeed belongs not thereunto; and although, upon the reasons and causes afterward to be mentioned, there may for a season remain some divisions among them, yet there will be a way of healing continually ready for them, and agreed upon by them as such. Where, indeed, men propose unto themselves different ends, though under the same name, the use of the same means for the compassing of them will but increase their variance: as where some aim at evangelical union, and others at an external uniformity, both under the name of unity and peace, in the use of the same means for these ends, they will be more divided among themselves. But where the same end is aimed at, even the debate of the means for the attaining of it will insensibly bring the parties into a coalition, and work out in the issue a complete reconciliation. In the meantime, were Christians duly instructed how many lesser differences, in mind, and judgment, and practice, are really consistent with the nature, ends, and genuine fruit, of the unity that Christ requires among them, it would undoubtedly prevail with them so to manage themselves in their differences, by mutual forbearance and condescension in love, as not to contract the guilt of being disturbers or breakers of it; for suppose the minds of any of them to be invincibly prepossessed with the principles wherein they differ from others, yet all who are sincere in their profession cannot but rejoice to be directed unto such a managery of them as to be preserved from the guilt of dissolving the



unity appointed by Christ to be observed. And, to speak plainly, among all the churches in the world which are free from idolatry and persecution, it is not different opinions, or a difference in judgment about revealed truths, nor a different practice in sacred administrations, but pride, self-interest, love of honour, reputation, and dominion, with the influence of civil or political intrigues and considerations, that are the true cause of that defect of evangelical unity that is at this day amongst them; for set them aside, and the real differences which would remain may be so managed, in love, gentleness, and meekness, as not to interfere with that unity which Christ requireth them to preserve. Nothing will from thence follow which shall impeach their common interest in one Lord, one faith, one love, one Spirit, and the administration of the same ordinances according to their light and ability. But if we shall cast away this evangelical union among the disciples and churches of Christ, — if we shall break up the bounds and limits fixed unto it, and set up in its place a compliance with, or an agreement in, the commands and appointments of men, making their observations the rule and measure of our ecclesiastical concord, — it cannot be but that innumerable and endless divisions will ensue thereon. If we will not be contented with the union that Christ hath appointed, it is certain that we shall have none in this world; for concerning that which is of men's finding out, there have been, and will be, contentions and divisions, whilst there are any on the one side who will endeavour its imposition, and on the other who desire to preserve their consciences entire unto the authority of Christ in his laws and appointments.

There is none who can be such a stranger in our Israel as not to know that these things have been the great occasion and cause of the divisions and contentions that have been among us near a hundred years, and which at this day make our breaches wide like the sea, that they cannot be healed. Let, therefore, those who have power and ability be instrumental to restore to the minds of men the true notion and knowledge of the unity which the Lord Christ requireth among his churches and disciples; and let them be left unto that liberty which he hath purchased for them, in the pursuit of that unity which he hath prescribed unto them; and let us all labour to stir up those gracious principles of love and peace which ought to guide us in the use of our liberty, and will enable us to preserve gospel unity; — and there will be a greater progress made towards peace, reconciliation, and concord, amongst all sorts of Christians, than the spoiling of the goods or imprisoning the persons of dissenters will ever effect. But, it may be, such things are required hereunto as the world is yet scarce able to comply withal; for whilst men do hardly believe that there is an efficacy and power accompanying the institutions of Christ, for the compassing of that whole end which he aimeth at and intendeth, — whilst they are unwilling to be brought unto the constant exercise of that spiritual diligence, patience, meekness, condescension, self-denial, renunciation of the world and conformity thereunto, which are indispensably necessary in church guides and church members, according to their measure, unto the attaining and preservation of gospel unity, but do satisfy themselves in the disposal of an ecclesiastical

union into a subordination unto their own secular interests, by external force and power, — we have very small expectation of success in the way proposed. In the meantime, we are herewith satisfied: Take the churches of Christ in the world that are not infected with idolatry or persecution, and restore their unity unto the terms and conditions left unto them by Christ and his apostles, and if in any thing we are found uncompliant therewithal, we shall without repining bear the reproach of it, and hasten an amendment.

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2. Another cause of the evil effects and consequences mentioned is, the *great neglect that hath been in churches and church rulers in the pursuance of the open, direct ends of the gospel*, both as to the doctrine and discipline of it. This hath been such and so evident in the world that it is altogether in vain for any to deny it, or to attempt an excuse of it. And men have no reason to flatter themselves that, whilst they live in an open neglect of their own duty, others will always, according to their wills or desires, attend with diligence unto what they prescribe unto them. If churches or their rulers could excuse or justify their members in all the evils that may befall them through their miscarriages and maladministrations, it might justly be expected that they should go along with them under their conduct, whither ever they should lead them: but if it can never be obliterated out of the minds and consciences of men that *they must every one live by his own faith, and every one give an account of himself unto God*; and that everyone, notwithstanding the interposition of the help of churches and their rulers, is obliged immediately, in his own person, to take care of his whole duty towards God; it cannot be but that in such cases they will judge for themselves, and what is meet for them to do. In case, therefore, that they find the churches whereunto they do relate under the guilt of the neglect mentioned, it is probable that they will provide for themselves and their own safety. In this state of things it is morally impossible but that differences and divisions will fall out, which might all of them have been prevented had there been a due attention unto the work, doctrine, order, and discipline of the gospel in the churches that were in possession of the care and administration of them; for it is hard for men to believe that, by the will and command of Christ, they are inevitably shut up under spiritual disadvantages, seeing it is certain that he hath ordered all things in the church for their edification. But the consideration of some particular instances will render this cause of our divisions more evident and manifest.

The first end of preaching the gospel is, *the conversion of the souls of men unto God, Acts xxvi. 17, 18*. This, we suppose, will not be questioned or denied. That the work hereof, in all churches, ought to be attended and pursued with zeal, diligence, labour, and care, all accompanied with constant and fervent prayers for success, in and by the ministers and rulers of them, is a truth also that will not admit of any controversy among them that believe the gospel, *1 Tim. v. 17; 2 Tim. iv. 1, 2*. Herein principally do men in office in the church exercise and manifest their zeal for the glory of God, their compassion towards the souls of men, and acquit themselves faithfully in the trust committed unto them by the “great

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Shepherd of the sheep,” Christ Jesus. If, now, in any assembly or other societies professing themselves to be churches of Christ, and claiming the right and power of churches towards all persons living within the bounds or limits which they have prescribed unto themselves, this work be either totally neglected, or carelessly and perfunctorily attended unto; if those on whom it is immediately incumbent do either suppose themselves free from any obligation thereunto, upon the pretence of other engagements, or do so dispose of themselves, in their relation unto many charges or employments, as that it is impossible they should duly attend unto it, or are unable and insufficient for it; so that, indeed, there is not in such churches a due representation of the love, care, and kindness of the Lord Jesus Christ towards the souls of men, which he hath ordained the administration of his gospel to testify, — it cannot be but that great thoughts of heart, and no small disorder of mind, will be occasioned in them who understand aright how much the principal end of constituting churches in this world is neglected among them. And although it is their duty for a season patiently to bear with, and quietly seek the reformation of, this evil in the churches whereunto they do belong, yet when they find themselves excluded, — it may be by the very constitution of the church itself, it may be by the iniquity of them that prevail therein, — from the performance of any thing that tends thereunto, it will increase their disquietment. And whereas men do not join themselves, nor are by any other ways joined, unto churches, for any civil or secular ends or purposes, but merely for the promotion of God’s glory, and the edification of their own souls in faith and gospel obedience, it is altogether vain for any to endeavour a satisfaction of their consciences that it is sin to withdraw from such churches, wherein these ends are not pursued nor attainable; and yet a confidence hereof is that which hath countenanced sundry church-guides into that neglect of duty which many complain of and groan under at this day.

The second end of the dispensation of the gospel, in the assemblies of the churches of Christ, by the ministers of them, is *the edification of them that are converted unto God and do believe*. Herein consists that feeding of his sheep and lambs that the Lord Christ hath committed unto them; and it is mentioned as the principal end for which the ministry was ordained, or for which pastors and teachers are granted unto the church, [Eph. iv. 8–13](#). And the Scripture abounds in the declaration of what skill and knowledge in the mystery of the gospel, what attendance unto the word and prayer, what care, watchfulness, and diligent labour in the word and doctrine, are required unto a due discharge of the ministerial duty. Where it is omitted or neglected; where it is carelessly attended unto; where those on whom it is incumbent do act more like hirelings than true shepherds; where they want skill to divide the word aright, or wisdom and knowledge to declare from it “the whole counsel of God,” or diligence to be urgent continually in the application of it — they are like to be exercised withal who make conscience of the performance of their own duty, and understand the necessity of enjoying the means that Christ hath appointed for their edification. And it is certain

that such churches will in vain, or at least unjustly, expect that professors of the gospel should abide in their particular communion, when they cannot or do not provide food for their souls, whereby they may live to God. Unless all the members of such churches are equally asleep in security, divisions among them will in this case ensue. Will any disciple of Christ esteem himself obliged to starve his own soul for the sake of communion with them who have sinfully destroyed the principal end of all church-communion? Is there any law of Christ, or any rule of the gospel, or any duty of love, that requires them so to do? The sole immediate end of men's joining in churches being their own edification and usefulness unto others, can they be bound in conscience always to abide there, or in the communion of those churches where it is not to be attained, where the means of it are utterly cast aside? This may become such as know not their duty, nor care to be instructed in it, and are willing to perish in and for the company of others; but for them which in such cases shall provide, according to the rules of the gospel, for themselves and their own safety, they may be censured, judged, and severely treated, by them whose interest and advantage it is so to do, — they may be despised by riotous persons, who sport themselves with their own deceivings, — but with the Lord Christ, the judge of all, they will be accepted. And they do but increase the dread of their own account, who, under pretence of church power and order, would forcibly shut up Christians in such a condition as wherein they are kept short of all the true ends of the institution of churches. To suppose, therefore, that every voluntary departure from the constant communion of such churches, made with a design of joining unto those where the word is dispensed with more diligence and efficacy, is a schism from the church of Christ, is to suppose that which neither the Scripture nor reason will give the least countenance unto. And it would better become such churches to return industriously unto a faithful discharge of their duty, whereby this occasion of divisions may be removed out of the way, than to attempt their own justification by the severe prosecution of such as depart from them.

Thirdly, In pursuit of the doctrine of the gospel so improved and applied, it is the known and open duty of churches, in their guides or ministers, by all means to countenance and *promote the growth of light, knowledge, godliness, strictness, and fruitfulness of conversation,* in those members of them in whom they may be found, or do appear in an especial manner. Such are they to own, encourage, and make their companions, and endeavour that others may become like unto them. For unless men, in their ordinary and common conversation, in their affections, and the interest which they have in the administration of discipline, do uniformly answer the doctrine of truth which they preach, it cannot be avoided but that it will be matter of offence unto others, and of reproach to themselves. Much more will it be so, if, instead of these things, those who preside in the churches shall beat their fellow-servants, and eat and drink with the drunken. But by all ways it is their duty to separate the precious from the vile, if they intend to be as the mouth of the Lord, even in their judgments,



affections, and conversations. And herein what wisdom, patience, diligence, love, condescension, and forbearance are required, they alone know, and they full well know, who for any season have in their places conscientiously endeavoured the discharge of their duty. But whatever be the labour which is to be undergone therein, and the trouble wherewith it is attended, it is that which, by the appointment of Christ, all ministers of the gospel are obliged to attend unto. They are not, by contrary actings, to make sad the hearts of them whom God would not have made sad, nor to strengthen the hands of them whom God would not have encouraged, as they will answer it at their peril. The hearts of church guides, and of those who in an especial manner fear God, thriving in knowledge and grace under the dispensation of the word, ought to be knit together in all holy affections, that they may together grow up into him who is the Head; for where there is the greatest evidence and manifestation of the power and presence of Christ in any, there ought their affections to be most intense. For as such persons are the crown, the joy and rejoicing of their guides, and will appear to be so in the day of the Lord; so they do know, or may easily do so, what obligations are on them to honour and pay all due respects unto their teachers, how much on all accounts they owe unto them; whereby their mutual love may be confirmed. And where there is this uniformity between the doctrine of the gospel as preached, and the duties of it as practised, then are they both beautiful in the eyes of all believers, and effectual unto their proper ends. But where things in churches, through their negligence or corruption, or that of their guides, are quite otherwise, it is easy to conjecture what will ensue thereon. If those who are forwardest in profession, who give the greatest evidence that they have received the power of that religion which is taught and owned among them, who have apparently attained a growth in spiritual light and knowledge above others, shall be so far from being peculiarly cherished and regarded, from being loved, liked, or associated withal, as that on the other side they shall be marked, observed, reproached, and it may be on every slight provocation put even to outward trouble; whilst men of worldly and profane conversation, ignorant, perhaps riotous and debauched, shall be the delight and companions of church guides and rulers; — it cannot be that such churches should long continue in peace, nor is that peace wherein they continue much to be valued. An agreement in such ways and practices is rather to be esteemed a conspiracy against Christ and holiness than church order or concord; and when men once find themselves hated, and it may be persecuted, for no other cause, as they believe, but because they labour in their lives and professions to express the power of that truth wherein they have been instructed, they can hardly avoid the entertainment of severe thoughts concerning them from whom they had just reason to expect other usage, and also to provide for their own more peaceable encouragement and edification.

Fourthly, Hereunto also belongeth *the due exercise of gospel discipline*, according to the mind of Christ. It is, indeed, by some called into question whether there be any rule or discipline appointed by Christ to be exercised in his churches. But this doubt must respect

such outward forms and modes of the administration of these things as are supposed, but not proved necessary: for whether the Lord Christ hath appointed some to *rule* and some to be *ruled*; whether he hath prescribed laws or rules, whereby the one should govern and the other obey; whether he hath determined the matter, manner, and end of this rule and government, — cannot well be called into controversy by such as profess to believe the gospel. Of what *nature* or kind these governors or rulers are to be, what is their *office*, how they are to be invested therewith, and by what authority, how they are to behave themselves in the administration of the laws of the church, are things determined by him in the word. And for the *matters* about which they are to be conversant, it is evidently declared of what nature they are, how they are to be managed, and to what end. The *qualifications* and *duties* of those who are to be admitted into the church, their deportment in it, their removal from it, are all expressed in the laws and directions given unto the same end. In particular, it is ordained that those who are unruly or disorderly, who walk contrary unto the rules and ways of holiness prescribed unto the church, shall be rebuked, admonished, instructed; and if, after all means used for their amendment, they abide in impenitency, that they be ejected out of communion. For the church, as visible, is a society gathered and erected to express and declare the holiness of Christ, and the power of his grace in his person and doctrine; and where this is not done, no church is of any advantage unto the interests of his glory in this world. The preservation, therefore, of holiness in them, whereof the discipline mentioned is an effectual means, is as necessary and of the same importance with the preservation of their being. The Lord Christ hath also expressly ordained, that in case offences should arise in and among his churches, that in and by them they should be composed, according to the rules of the word and his own laws; and, in particular, that in sinful miscarriages causing offence or scandal, there be a regular proceeding, according unto an especial law and constitution of his, for the removal of the offence and recovery of the offender; as also, that those who in other cases have fallen by the power of temptation should be restored by a spirit of meekness; and, not to instance in more particulars, that the whole flock be continually watched over, exhorted, warned, instructed, comforted, as the necessities or occasions of the whole, or the several members of it, do require. Now, supposing these and the like laws, rules, and directions, to be given and enjoined by the authority of Christ (which gives warranty for their execution unto men prudent for the ordering of affairs according to their necessary circumstances, and believers of the gospel, doing all things in obedience unto him), we judge that a complete rule or government is erected thereby in the church. However, we know that the exercise of discipline in every church, so far as the laws and rules of it are expressed in the Scripture, and the ends of it directed unto, is as necessary as any duty enjoined unto us in the whole course of our gospel obedience. And where this is neglected, it is in vain for any churches to expect peace and unity in their communion, seeing itself neglecteth the principal means of them. It is pleaded, that the mixture of those that are



wicked and ungodly in the sacred administrations of the church doth neither defile the administrations themselves, nor render them unuseful unto those who are rightly interested in them and duly prepared for the participation of them. Hence, that no church ought to be forsaken, nor its communion withdrawn from, merely on that account, many of old and of late have pleaded. Nor do we say that this solely of itself is sufficient to justify a separation from any church. But when a church shall tolerate in its communion not only evil men, but their evils, and absolutely refuse to use the discipline of Christ for the reformation of the one and the taking away of the other, there is great danger lest the “whole lump be leavened,” and the edification of particular persons be obstructed beyond what the Lord Christ requires of them to submit unto and to acquiesce in.

Neither will things have any better success where the *discipline degenerates into an outward forcible jurisdiction and power*. The things of Christ are to be administered with the spirit of Christ. Such a frame of heart and mind as was in him is required of all that act under him and in his name. Wherefore, charity, pity, compassion, condescension, meekness, and forbearance, with those other graces which were so glorious and conspicuous in him and in all that he did, are to bear sway in the minds of them who exercise this care and duty for him in the church. To set up such a form of the administration of discipline, or to commit the exercise of it unto such persons, as whereby or by whom the Lord Christ, in his rule of the church, would be represented as furious, captious, proud, covetous, oppressive, is not the way to honour him in the world, nor to preserve the peace of the churches. And indeed some, while they boast of the imitation of Christ and his example, in opposition to his grace, do in their lives and practices make unto the world a representation of the devil. But an account of this degeneracy is given so distinctly by Pietro Soave,³ the author of the *History of the Council of Trent*, lib. iv. ad ann. 1551, that we think it not unmeet to express it in his own words. He saith, therefore, that “Christ having commanded his apostles to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments, he left also unto them, in the person of all the faithful, this principal precept, to love one another, charging them to make peace between those that dissented; and, for the last remedy, giving the care thereof to the body of the church, promising it should be bound and loosed in heaven, whatever they did bind and loose, on earth, and that whatever they did ask with a common consent should be granted by the Father. In this charitable office, to give satisfaction to the offended and pardon to the offender, the primitive church was always exercised. And in conformity to this, St Paul ordained that brethren having civil suits one against another should not go to the tribunals of infidels, but that wise men should be appointed to judge the differences. And this was a kind of civil judgment, as the other had the similitude of a criminal; but were both so different from the judgments of the world, that as these are executed by the power of the judge, who enforceth

3 Now better known by his real name, Paul Sarpi. — Ed.

submission, so those only by the will of the guilty to receive them, who refusing of them, the ecclesiastical judge remaineth without execution, and hath no power but to foreshow the judgment of God, which, according to his omnipotent good pleasure, will follow in this life or the next. And, indeed, the ecclesiastical judgment did deserve the name of charity, in regard that it did only induce the guilty to submit, and the church to judge with such sincerity, that neither in the one any bad effect could have place, nor just complaint in the other; and the excess of charity in correcting did make the corrector to feel greater pain than the corrected, so that in the church no punishment was imposed without lamentation in the multitude, and greater of the better sort. And this was the cause why to correct was called to 'lament.' So St Paul, rebuking of the Corinthians for not chastising the incestuous, said, 'Ye have not lamented to separate such a transgressor from you.' And in another epistle, 'I fear that when I come unto you, I shall not find you such as I desire, but in contentions and tumults, and that at my coming I shall lament many of those who have sinned before.' The judgment of the church (as it is necessary in every multitude) was fit that it should be conducted by one, who should preside and guide the action, propose the matters, and collect the points to be consulted on. This care, due to the most principal and worthy person, was always committed to the bishop; and when the churches were many, the propositions and deliberations were made by the bishop first in the college of the priests and deacons, which they called the presbytery, and there were ripened, to receive afterward the last resolution in the general congregation of the church. This form was still on foot in the year 250, and is plainly seen by the *epistles of Cyprian*; who, in the matter concerning those who did eat of meats offered to idols, and subscribe to the religion of the Gentiles, writeth to the presbytery that he doth not think to do any thing without their counsel and consent of the people; and writeth to the people, that at his return he will examine the causes and merits thereof in their presence and under their judgment; and he wrote to those priests who of their own brain had reconciled some, that they should give an account to the people.

"The goodness and charity of the bishops made their opinion for the most part to be followed, and by little and little was cause that the church, charity waxing cold, not regarding the charge laid upon them by Christ, did lean the ear to the bishop; and ambition, a witty passion, which doth insinuate itself in the show of virtue, did cause it to be readily embraced. But the principal cause of the change was the ceasing of the persecutions; for then the bishops did erect, as it were, a tribunal, which was much frequented; because, as temporal commodities, so suits did increase. This judgment, though it were not as the former in regard of the form, to determine all by the opinion of the church, yet it was of the same sincerity. Whereupon Constantine, seeing how profitable it was to determine causes, and that by the authority of religion captious actions were discovered which the judges could not penetrate, made a law that there should be no appeal from the sentences of bishops, which should be executed by the secular judge. And if, in a cause depending before a secular tribunal, in any

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state thereof, either of the parties, though the other contradict, shall demand the episcopal judgment, the cause shall be immediately remitted to him. Here the tribunal of the bishop began to be a common pleading-place, having execution by the ministry of the magistrate, and to gain the name of episcopal jurisdiction, episcopal audience, and such like. The emperor Valens did enlarge it, who in the year 365 gave the bishops the care over all the prices of vendible things. This judicial negotiation pleased not the good bishops. Possidonius doth recount that Austin being employed herein, sometimes until dinner-time, sometimes longer, was wont to say that it was a trouble, and did divert him from doing things proper unto him; and himself writeth, that it was to leave things profitable and to attend things tumultuous and perplexed. And St Paul did not take it unto himself, as being not fit for a preacher, but would have it given to others. Afterward, some bishops beginning to abuse the authority given them by the law of Constantine, that was seventy years after revoked by Arcadius and Honorius, and an ordinance made that they should judge causes of religion, and not civil, except both parties did consent, and declared that they should not be thought to have a court; which law being not much observed in Rome, in regard of the great power of the bishops, Valentinian being in the city in the year 452, did renew it, and made it to be put in execution. But a little after, some part of the power taken away was restored by the princes that followed, so that Justinian did establish unto them a court and audience, and assigned unto them the causes of religion, the ecclesiastical faults of the clergy, and divers voluntary jurisdictions also over the laity. By these degrees the charitable correction of Christ did degenerate into domination, and made Christians lose their ancient reverence and obedience. It is denied in words that ecclesiastical jurisdiction is dominion as is the secular, yet one knoweth not how to put a difference between them. But St Paul did put it when he wrote to Timothy, and repeated it to Titus, that a bishop should not be greedy of gain, nor a striker. Now, on the contrary, they made men pay for processes, and imprisoned the parties, as is done in the secular court," etc.

This degeneracy of discipline was long since esteemed burdensome, and looked on as the cause of innumerable troubles and grievances unto all sorts of people; yea, it hath had no better esteem among them who had little or no acquaintance with what is taught concerning these things in the Scripture, only they found an inconsistency in it with those laws and privileges of their several countries whereby their civil liberties and advantages were confirmed unto them. And if at any time it take place or prevail amongst persons of more light and knowledge, who are able to compare it or the practice of it with the institutions of Christ in the gospel, and the manner of the administration therein also directed, it greatly alienates the minds of men from the communion of such churches. Especially it doth so if set up unto an exclusion of that benign, kind, spiritual, and every way useful discipline that Christ hath appointed to be exercised in his church. When corruptions and abuses were come to the height in the Papacy in this matter, we know what ensued thereon. Divines,

indeed, and sundry other persons learned and godly, did principally insist on the errors and heresies which prevailed in the church of Rome, with the defilements and abominations of their worship. But that which alienated the minds of princes, magistrates, and whole nations from them, was the ecclesiastical domination which they had craftily erected and cunningly managed unto the ends of their own ambition, power, and avarice, under the name of church rule and discipline. And wherever any thing of the same kind is continued, — that a rule under the same pretence is erected and exercised in any church after the nature of secular courts, by force and power, put forth in legal citations, penalties, pecuniary mulcts, without an open evidence of men being acted in what they do herein by love, charity, compassion towards the souls of men, zeal for the glory of God and honour of Christ, with a design for the purity, holiness, and reformation of the members of it, — that church may not expect unity and peace any longer than the terror of its proceedings doth overbalance other thoughts and desires proceeding from a sense of duty in all that belong unto it. Yea, whatever is or is to be the manner of the administration of discipline in the church, about which there may be doubtful disputations, which men of an ordinary capacity may not be able clearly to determine, yet if the avowed end of it be not the purity and holiness of the church, and if the effects of it in a tendency unto that end be not manifest, it is hard to find out whence our obligation to a compliance with it should arise. And where an outward conformity unto some church-order is aimed at alone, in the room of all other things, it will quickly prove itself to be nothing or of no value in the sight of Christ. And these things do alienate the minds of many from an acquiescence in their stations or relations to such churches; for the principal enforcements of men's obedience and reverence unto the rulers of the church are because they "watch diligently for the good of their souls, as those that must give an account," [Heb. xiii. 17](#). And if they see such set over them as give no evidence of any such watchful care acting itself according to those Scripture directions which are continually read unto them, but rather rule them with force and rigour, *seeking theirs, not them*, they grow weary of the yoke, and sometimes regularly, sometimes irregularly, contrive their own freedom and deliverance.

It may not here be amiss to inquire into the reasons and occasions that have seduced churches and their rulers into the miscarriages insisted on. Now, these are chiefly some principles with their application that they have trusted unto, but which indeed have really deceived them, and will yet continue so to do.

1. And the first of these is, that *whereas they are true churches, and thereon intrusted with all church power and privileges*, they need not farther concern themselves to seek for grounds or warranty to keep up all their members unto their communion; for be they otherwise what they will, so long as they are true churches, it is their duty to abide in their peace and order. If any call their church-state into question, they take no consideration of them but how they may be punished, it may be destroyed, as perverse schismatics. And they are

ready to suppose, that upon an acknowledgment that they are true churches, every dissent from them in anything must needs be criminal, — as if it were all one to be a true church — a supposition including a nullity in the state of those churches which in the least differ from them, than which there is no more uncharitable nor schismatical principle in the world. But in the common definition of schism, that it is a causeless separation from a true church, that term of *causeless* is very little considered or weighed by them whose interest it is to lay the charge of it on others. And hence it is come to pass, that wherever there have been complaints of faults, miscarriages, errors, defections of churches, in late ages, their counsels have only been how to destroy the complainers, not in the least how they should reform themselves; as though, in church affairs, truth, right and equity, were entailed on power and possession. How the complaints concerning the church of Rome, quickened by the outcries of so many provinces of Europe, and evidence and matter of fact, were eluded and frustrated in the council of Trent, leaving all things to be tried out by interest and force, is full well known. For they know that no reformation can be attempted and accomplished, but it will be a business of great labour, care, and trouble, things not delightful unto the minds of men at ease. Besides, as it may possibly ruffle or discompose some of the chiefs in their present ways or enjoyments, so it will, as they fear, tend to their disreputation, as though they had formerly been out of the way or neglective of their duty: and this, as they suppose, would draw after it another inconvenience, by reflecting on them and their practices as the occasions of former disorders and divisions. They choose, therefore, generally to flatter themselves under the name and authority of the church, and lay up their defence and security against an humble, painful reformation, in a plea that they need it not. So was it with the church of Laodicea of old, who, in the height of her decaying condition, flattered herself “that she was rich, and increased with goods, and had need of nothing; and knew not,” or would not acknowledge, “that she was wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked,” [Rev. iii. 17](#). Now, it cannot but seem exceeding strange, unto men who wisely consider these things, that, whereas the churches which were planted and watered by the apostles themselves, and enjoyed for some good season the presence and advantage of their infallible guidance to preserve them in their original purity and order, did within a few years, many of them, so degenerate and stand in need of reformation, that our Lord Jesus Christ threatened from heaven to cast them off and destroy them, unless they did speedily reform themselves according to his mind, those now in the world, ordered at first by persons fallible, and who in many things were actually deceived, should so continue in their purity and holiness from age to age as to stand in need of no reformation or amendment. Well will it be if it prove so at the great day of visitation. In the meantime, it becomes the guides of all the churches in the world to take care that there do not such decays of truth, holiness, and purity in worship, fall out under their hand in the churches wherein they preside, as that for them they should be rejected by our Lord Jesus Christ, as he threatens to deal with those who are guilty of



such defections; for the state of the generality of churches is such at this day in the world, as he who thinks them not to stand in need of any reformation may justly be looked on as a part of their sinful degeneracy. We are not ignorant what is usually pleaded in bar unto all endeavours after church reformation; for they say, "If, upon the clamours of a few humorous, discontented persons, whom nothing will please, and who, perhaps, are not agreed among themselves, a reformation must instantly be made or attempted, there will be nothing stable, firm, or sacred left in the church, — things once well established are not to be called into question upon every one's exceptions." And these things are vehemently pleaded and urged, to the exclusion of all thoughts of changing anything, though evidently for the better. But long-continued complaints and petitions of multitudes, whose sincerity hath received as great an attestation as human nature or Christian religion can give, it may be, deserve not to be so despised. However, the jealousy which churches and their rulers ought to have over themselves, their state and condition, and the presence of the glory of Christ among them, or its departure from them, especially considering the fearful example of the defection and apostasy of many churches, which is continually before their eyes, seems to require a readiness in them, on every intimation or remembrance, to search into their state and condition, and to redress what they find amiss: for suppose they should be in the right, and blameless as to those orders and constitutions wherein others dissent from them, yet there may be such defects and declensions in doctrine, holiness, and the fruits of them in the world, as the most strict observation of outward order will neither countenance nor compensate. For to think to preserve a church by outward order, when its internal principles of faith and holiness are decayed, is but to do like him who, endeavouring to set a dead boy upright, but failing in his attempt, concluded that there was somewhat wanting within.

2. Another principle of the same importance, and applied unto the same purpose, is, that *the people are neither able nor fit to judge for themselves*, but ought in all things to give themselves up unto the conduct of their guides, and to rest satisfied in what they purpose and prescribe unto them. The imbibing of this apprehension, which is exceedingly well suited to be made a covering to the pride and ignorance of those unto whose interests it is accommodated, makes them impatient of hearing anything concerning the liberty of Christians in common to judge of what is their duty, what they are to do, and what they are not to do, in things sacred and religious. Only, it is acknowledged there is so much ingenuity in the management of this principle and its application, that it is seldom extended by any beyond their own concernments: For whereas the church of Rome hath no way to maintain itself, in its doctrine and essential parts of its constitution, but by an implicit faith and obedience in its subjects, seeing the animating principles of its profession will endure no kind of impartial test or trial, they extend it unto all things, as well in matters of faith as of worship and discipline: but those who are secure that the faith which they profess will endure an examination by the Scripture, as being founded therein and thence educed, they will allow

unto the people at least a judgment of discerning truth from falsehood, to be exercised about the doctrines which they teach; but as for the things which concern the worship of God and rule of the church wherein they have an especial interest and concern, there they betake themselves for relief unto this principle. Now, as there is more honesty and safety in this latter way than in the former, so it cannot be denied but that there is less of ingenuity and self-consistency; for if you will allow the people to make a judgment in and about anything that is sacred or religious, you will never know how to hit a joint aright to make a separation among such things, so as to say, with any pretence of reason, "About these things they may judge for themselves, but not about those." And it is a little too open to say that they may exercise a judgment about what God hath appointed, but none about what we appoint ourselves. But, without offence be it spoken, this apprehension, in its whole latitude, and under its restrictions, is so weak and ridiculous, that it must be thought to proceed from an excess of prejudice, if any man of learning should undertake to patronize it. Those who speak in these things out of custom and interest, without a due examination of the grounds and reasons of what they affirm or deny, as many do, are of no consideration; and it is not amiss for them to keep their distance and stand upon their guard, lest many of those whom they exclude from judging for themselves should be found more competent judges in those matters than themselves. And let churches and church rulers do what they please, every man at last will be determined in what is meet for him to do by his own reason and judgment. Churches may *inform* the minds of men; they cannot *enforce* them. And if those that adhere unto any church do not do so, because they judge that it is their duty, and best for them so to do, they therein differ not much from a herd of creatures that are called by another name. And yet a secret apprehension in some, that the disposal of the concernments of the worship of God is so left and confined unto themselves as that nothing is left unto the people but the glory of obedience, without any sedulous inquiry after what is their own duty with respect unto that account which every one must give of himself unto God, doth greatly influence them into the neglect insisted on. And when any of the people come to know their own liberty and duty in these things, as they cannot but know it if at all they apply their minds unto the consideration of them, they are ready to be alienated from those who will neither permit them to judge for themselves nor are able to answer for them if they should be misled; for "if the blind lead the blind," as well he that is led as he that leads "will fall into the ditch."

3. Add hereunto the thoughts of some, that *secular grandeur* and outward pomp, with a distance and reservedness from the conversation of ordinary men, are necessary in ecclesiastics, to raise and preserve that popular veneration which they suppose to be their due. Without this, it is thought, government will not be carried on, nor the minds of men awed unto obedience. Certain it is that this was not the judgment of the apostles of old, nor of the bishops or pastors of the primitive churches. It is certain, also, that no direction is given for it in any of the sacred or ancient ecclesiastical writings; and yet they all of them abound with

instructions how the guides of the church should preserve that respect which is their due. The sum of what they teach us to this purpose is, that in humility, patience, self-denial, readiness to take up the cross, in labours, kindness, compassion, and zeal in the exercise of all the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit, they should excel and go before the flock as their example, [1 Pet. v. 1–3](#); [Acts xx. 18–21, 28, 31](#). This way of procuring veneration unto church guides, by worldly state, greatness, seeming domination or power, was, as far as we can find, an utter stranger unto the primitive times; yea, not only so, but it seems to be expressly prohibited in that direction of our Saviour unto them for avoiding conformity in these things unto the rulers of the world, [Luke xxii. 24–26](#). “But those times,” they say, “are past and gone; there remains not that piety and devotion in Christians, as to reverence their pastors for their humility, graces, labours, and gifts. The good things of this world are now given them to be used; and it is but a popular levelling spirit that envies the dignities and exaltation of the clergy.” Be it so, therefore, that in any place they are justly and usefully, at least as unto themselves, possessed of dignities and revenues, and far be it from us or any of us to envy them their enjoyments, or to endeavour their deprivation of them; but we must crave leave to say, that the use of them to the end mentioned is vain and wholly frustrate. And if it be so, indeed, that Christians, or professors of the gospel, will not pay the respect and duty which they owe unto their pastors and guides, upon the account of their office, with their work and labour therein, it is an open evidence how great a necessity there is for all men to endeavour the reduction of primitive light, truth, holiness, and obedience into churches; for this is that which hath endangered their ruin, and will effect it if continued, — namely, an accommodation of church order and discipline, with the state and deportment of rulers, unto the decays and irreligion of the people, which should have been corrected and removed by their reformation. But we hope better things of many Christians; whose faith and obedience are rather to be imitated than the corrupt degeneracy of others to be complied with or provided for. However, it is evident that this corrupt persuasion hath in most ages, since the days of Paulus Samosatenus, let out and given countenance unto the pride, covetousness, ambition, and vain-glory of several ecclesiastics; for how can it be otherwise with them, who, being possessed of the secular advantages which some churches have obtained in the world, are otherwise utterly destitute of those qualifications which the names of the places they possess do require? And yet all this while it will be impossible to give one single instance where that respect and estimation which the Scripture requires in the people towards their spiritual guides were ingenerated or improved by that worldly grandeur, pomp, and domination, which some pretend to be so useful unto that end and purpose; for that awe which is put thereby on the spirits of the common sort of men, — that terror which these things strike into the minds of any who may be obnoxious unto trouble and disadvantage from them, — that outward observance which is by some done unto persons vested with them, with the admission which they have thereby into an equality of society

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with great men in the world, — are things quite of another nature. And those who satisfy and please themselves herewith, instead of that regard which is due unto the officers or guides of the churches of Christ from the people that belong unto them, do but help on their defection from their duty incumbent on them. Neither were it difficult to manifest what innumerable scandalous offences, — proceeding from the pride and elation of mind that is found among many, who, being perhaps young and ignorant, it may be corrupt in their conversations, have nothing to bear up themselves withal but an interest in dignities and worldly riches, — have been occasioned by this corrupt persuasion. And it is not hard to judge how much is lost hereby from the true glory and beauty of the church. The people are quietly suffered to decay in that love and respect towards their pastors which is their grace and duty, whilst they will pay that outward veneration which worldly grandeur doth acquire; and pastors, satisfying themselves therewith, grow neglective of that exemplary humility and holiness, of that laborious diligence in the dispensation of the word and care for the souls of the flock, which should procure them that holy respect which is due unto their office by the appointment of Jesus Christ. But these things are here mentioned only on the occasion of what was before discoursed of.

Another great occasion of schisms and divisions among Christians ariseth from the remainders of that confusion which was brought upon the churches of Europe, by *that general apostasy* from gospel truth, purity, and order, wherein they were for sundry ages involved. Few churches in the world have yet totally freed themselves from being influenced by the relics of its disorders. That such an apostasy did befall these churches we shall not need to prove. A supposition of it is the foundation of the church-state of England. That things should so fall out among them was of old foretold by the Holy Ghost, [2 Thess. ii.](#) That many churches have received a signal deliverance from the principal evils of that apostasy, in the Reformation, we all acknowledge; for therein, by several ways, and in several degrees of success, a return unto their pristine faith and order was sincerely endeavoured. And so far was there a blessing accompanying of their endeavours, as that they were all of them delivered from things in themselves pernicious and destructive to the souls of men. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied but that there do yet continue among them sundry remainders of those disorders, which under their fatal declension they were cast into. Nor doth there need any farther proof hereof than the incurable differences and divisions that are found among them; for had they attained their primitive condition, such divisions with all their causes had been prevented. And the Papists, upbraiding Protestants with their intestine differences and schisms, do but reproach them that they have not been able in a hundred years to rectify all those abuses and remove all those disorders which they were inventing and did introduce in a thousand. There is one thing only of this nature, or that owes itself unto this original, which we shall instance in, as an occasion of much disorder in the present churches, and of great divisions that ensue thereon. It is known none were admitted unto the fellowship of

the church in the days of the apostles but upon their repentance, faith, and turning unto God. The plain story of their preaching, the success which they had therein, and their proceedings to gather and plant churches thereon, put this out of the reach of all sober contradiction. None will say that they gathered churches of Jews and Gentiles, — that is, while they continued such; nor of open sinners continuing to live in their sins. An evidence, therefore, and confession of conversion to God, were unavoidably necessary to the admission of members in the first churches; neither will we ever contend with such importune prejudices as, under any pretences capable of a wrangling countenance, shall set up against this evidence. Hence, in the judgment of charity, all the members of those churches were looked on as persons really justified and sanctified, — as effectually converted unto God; and as such were they saluted and treated by the apostles. As such, we say, they were looked on and owned; and as such, upon their confession, it was the duty of all men, even the apostles themselves, to look on them and own them, though absolutely in the sight of God, who alone is “searcher of the hearts of men,” some among them were hypocrites, and some proved apostates. But this profession of conversion unto God by the ministry of the word, and the mutual acknowledgment of each other as so converted unto God, in a way of duty, was the foundation of holy, spiritual love and unity among them. And although this did not, nor could, preserve all the first churches absolutely free from schisms and divisions, yet was it the most sovereign antidote against that infection, and the most effectual means for the reduction of unity, after that, by the violent interposition of men’s corruptions and temptations, it had been lost for a season. Afterward, in the primitive times, when many more took on them the profession of Christian religion, who had not such eminent and visible conversions unto God as most of those had who were changed by the ministry of the apostles, that persons unfit and unqualified for that state and condition, of being members of churches, might not be admitted into them, unto the disturbance of their order and disreputation of their holy conversation, they were for some good season kept in the condition of expectants, and called catechumens, or persons that attended the church for instruction. In this state they were taught the mysteries of religion, and trial was made of their faith, holiness, and constancy before their admission; and by this means was the preservation of the churches in purity, peace, and order, provided for. Especially were they so in conjunction with that severe discipline which was then exercised towards all the members of them. But after that the multitudes of the Gentile world, in the times of the first Christian emperors, pressed into the church, and were admitted on much easier terms than those before mentioned, whole nations came to claim successively the privilege of church-membership, without any personal duty performed or profession made unto the purpose on their part. And so do they continue to do in many places to this day. Men generally trouble themselves no farther about a title to church membership and privileges, but rest in the prepossession of their ancestors, and their own nativity in such or such places; for whatever may be owned

or acknowledged concerning the necessity of a visible profession of faith and repentance, and that credible as to the sincerity of it, in the judgment of charity, it is certain for the most part no such thing is required of any, nor performed by them. And they do but ill consult for the edification of the church, or the good of the souls of men, who would teach them to rest in an outward, formal representation of things, instead of the reality of duties and the power of internal grace. And no small part of the present ruin of Christian religion owes itself unto this corrupt principle; for whereas the things of it, — which consist in powers internal and effectual operations of grace, — have outward representations of them, which, from their relation unto what they represent, are called by the same names with them, many take up with and rest in these external things, as though Christianity consisted in them, although they are but a dead carcass, where the quickening life and soul of internal grace is wanting. Thus it is in this matter, where there is a shadow and appearance of church-order, when the truth and substance of it is far away. Men come together unto all the ends of the church assemblies whereunto they are admitted, but on no other grounds, with no other hearts nor designs, but on and with what they partake in any civil society, or jointly engage in any other worldly concern. And this fundamental error in the constitution of many churches is the occasion, as of other evils, so in particular of divisions among professed Christians. Hence, originally, was the discipline of the church accommodated, by various degrees, to the rule and government of such persons as understood little, or were little sensible, of the nature, power, and efficacy of that spiritual discipline which is instituted in the gospel; which thereby at last degenerated into the outward way of force and power before described: for the churches began to be composed of such as could no otherwise be ruled, and instead of reducing them to their primitive temper and condition, whereunto the evangelical rule was suited, there was invented a way of government accommodate unto that state whereinto they were lapsed; which those concerned found to be the far easier work of the two. Hence did sincere mutual love, with all the fruits of it, begin to decay among church members, seeing they could not have that tolerable persuasion of that truth or profession in each other which is necessary to preserve it without dissimulation, and to provoke it unto a due exercise. Hence did *private spiritual communion* fail amongst them, the most being strangers unto all the ways and means of it, yea, despising and contemning it in all the instances of its exercise; which will yet be found to be as the life and soul of all useful church-communion. And where the public communion is only attended unto, with neglect hereof, it will quickly wither and come to nothing; for on this occasion do all duties of watchfulness, exhortations, and admonitions, proceeding from mutual love and care of each other's condition, so frequently recommended unto us in the Scripture, utterly cease and become disused. Hence members of the same church began to converse together as men only, or at the best, civil neighbours; and if at all as Christians, yet not with respect unto that especial relation unto a particular church wherein their usefulness as members of the



same organical body is required, [1 Cor. xii. 14–21](#). Hence some persons, looking on these things as intolerable, and not only obstructive of their edification, but destructive unto all really useful church-communion, we ought not to wonder if they have thought meet to provide otherwise for themselves. Not that we approve of every departure or withdrawing from the communion of churches where things continue under such disorders, but only show what it is that occasioneth many so to do; for as there may sometimes be just cause hereof, and persons in so doing may manage what they do according unto Scripture rule, so we doubt not but that some may rashly and precipitately, without due attendance unto all the duties which in such undertakings are required of them, without that charity and forbearance which no circumstances can absolve them from, make themselves guilty of a blamable separation. And these are some of those things which we look upon as the general causes or occasions of all the schisms and divisions that are at this day found among professors of the gospel. Whether the guilt of them will not much cleave unto them by whom they are kept on foot and maintained is worth their inquiry; for so doth it befall our human nature, apt to be deceived and imposed on by various pretences and prejudices, that those are oftentimes highly guilty themselves of those miscarriages, whose chiefest satisfaction and glory consist in charging them on others. However, if these things do not absolutely justify any in a secession from the churches whereunto they did relate, yet they render the matter so highly questionable, and the things themselves are so burdensome upon the minds of many, as that divisions will thereon undoubtedly ensue. And when it is so fallen out, to design and contrive the reduction of all unto outward unity and concord, by forcing them who on such occasions have dissented and withdrawn themselves from the communion of any church, without endeavouring the removal of those occasions of their so doing and the reformation of those abuses which have given cause thereunto, is severe, if not unjust. But when the Lord Jesus Christ, in his care towards his churches, and watchfulness over them, shall be pleased to remove these and the like stumbling-blocks out of the way, there will, we hope, be a full return unto gospel unity and peace among them that serve and worship him on the earth.

In this state of things, wherever it be found, it is no wonder if the *weaknesses, ignorance, prejudices, and temptations* of men do interpose themselves unto the increase and heightening of those divisions whose springs and occasions lie elsewhere. When none of these provocations were given them, yet we know there was enough in professors themselves to bring forth the bitter fruit of differences and schisms, even in the days of the apostles, [1 Cor. i. 11, iii. 3](#). How much more may we fear the like fruits and effects from the like principles and corrupt affections! Now the occasions of drawing them forth are more, temptations unto them greater, directions against them less evident and powerful, and all sense of ecclesiastical authority, through its abuse and maladministration, is, if not lost and ruined, yet much weakened and impaired. But from the darkness of the minds of men and their unmortified

affections (as the best know but in part, nor are they perfectly sanctified) it is that they are apt to take offence one at another, and thereon to judge and censure each other temerarily; and, which is worst of all, every one to make his own understanding and persuasion thereon the rule of truth and worship unto others. All such ways and courses are against us in the matter of love and union, all tending to make and increase divisions among us: and the evil that is in them we might here declare, but that it falls frequently under the chastisement of other hands; neither, indeed, can it well meet with too much severity of reproof. Only, it were desirable that those by whom such reproofs are managed would take care not to give advantages of retortion or self-justification unto them that are reprov'd by them; but this they do unavoidably, whilst they seem to make their own judgments and practices the sole rule and measure of what they approve or disallow. In what complies with them there is nothing perverse; and in what differs from them there is nothing sincere! And on this foundation, whilst they reprove censuring, rash-judging, and reproaching of others, with pride, self-conceitedness, false opinions, irregular practices in church-worship, or any other concerns of religion, backbiting, easiness in taking up false reports, with the like evils, as they deserve severely to be rebuked, those reprov'd by them are apt to think that they see the guilt of many of the crimes charged on themselves in them by whom they are reprov'd. So on all hands things gender unto farther strife; whilst every party, being conscious unto their own sincerity, according unto the rule of their present light, which is the only measure they can take of it, are ready to impeach the sincerity of them by whom they suppose themselves causelessly traduced and condemned. This evil, therefore, is to be diligently watched against by all that love unity, truth, holiness, or peace; and seeing there are rules and precepts given us in the Scriptures to this purpose, it may not be unmeet to call over some of them.

[First,] One rule of this nature and import is, that we should all of us “study to be quiet, and to do our own business,” in things civil and sacred, [1 Thess. iv. 11](#). Who will harm men, who will be offended with them, whilst they are no otherwise busied in the world? And if any attempt to do them evil, what need have they to be troubled thereat? Duty and innocency will give peace to a worthy soul in the midst of all storms, and whatever may befall it. Now, will any one deny, or can they, but that it is the duty and ought to be the business of every man to seek his own edification and the saving of his soul? Deny this unto any man, and you put yourself in the place of God to him, and make him more miserable than a beast. And this, which no man can forbid, no man can otherwise do than according to that light and knowledge of the will of God which he hath received. If this, therefore, be so attended to as that we do not thereby break in upon the concerns of others, nor disturb them in what is theirs, but be carried on quietly and peaceably, with an evidence in what we do that it is merely our own personal duty that we are in the pursuance of, all cause of offence will be taken away; for if any will yet be offended with men because they peaceably seek the salvation



of their own souls, or do that in order thereunto which they cannot but do, unless they will cast off all sense of God's authority over them, it is to seek occasions of offence against them where none are given. But when any persons are acted by a pragmatical curiosity to interpose themselves in the ways, affairs, and concerns of other men, beyond what the laws of love, usefulness, and mutual Christian aid do require, tumults, disorders, vexations, strife, emulations, with a world of evils, will ensue thereon; — especially will they do so when men are prone to dwell on the real or supposed faults of others, which, on various pretences of pity for their persons, or a detestation of their evils, or public reproof of them, they will aggravate, and so on all occasions expose them to public censure, perhaps, as they think, out of zeal to God's glory and a desire for the church's good; for the passions and interests of such persons are ready to swell over the bounds of modesty, sobriety, and peace, though, through the blindness which all self-love is accompanied withal, they seldom see clearly what they do. Would we, therefore, labour to see a beauty, desirableness, and honour in the greatest confinement of our thoughts, words, and actions, unto ourselves and our own occasions, that express duty will admit of, it might tend very much to the preservation of love and peace among professors, for unto this end it is prescribed unto us.

Secondly, It is strictly commanded us that we should “not judge, that we be not judged,” [Matt. vii. 1, 2](#). There is no rule for mutual conversation and communion in the Scripture that is oftener repeated or more earnestly inculcated, [Luke vi. 37](#); nor is there any of more use, nor whose grounds and reasons are more evident or more cogent, [Rom. xiv. 3, 4, 10](#). Judging and determining in ourselves, or divulging censures concerning others, their persons, states, and conditions towards God, their principles as to truth and sincerity, their ways as to righteousness and holiness, whether past or present, any otherwise than by the “perfect law of liberty,” and that only when we are called thereunto in a way of duty, is the poison of common love and peace, and the ruin of all communion and society, be it of what nature it will. For us to judge and determine whether these or those churches are true churches or no, whether such persons are godly or no, whether such of their principles and actions are regular or no, and so condemn them in our minds (unless where open wickedness will justify the severest reflections), is to speak evil of the law, and to make ourselves judges of it as well as of them who, together with ourselves, are to be judged by it, [James iv. 11, 12](#). Nor is a judgment of that nature necessary unto our advantage in the discharge of any duty required at our hands. We may order all our concernments towards churches and persons without making any such judgment concerning them. But so strong is the inclination of some persons unto an excess in this kind, that no consideration can prevail with them to cast it out, according to its desert. Whether they do it as approving and justifying themselves in what they condemn in others, or as a thing conducing unto their interests, or out of faction and an especial love to some one party of men, or some secret animosities and hatred against others, it is a matter they seldom will quit themselves of whilst they are in this world. Yea,



so far do some suffer themselves to be transported, as that they cannot restrain from charging of others with the guilt of such things as they know to be charged on themselves by them who pretend to be the only competent judges in such cases; and so will they also reflect upon and complain of other men for miscarriages by severities, in instances exceedingly inferior, as by themselves represented, unto what it is known they were engaged in. But men are apt to think well of all they do themselves or those whom they peculiarly regard, and to aggravate whatever they conceive amiss in such as they dislike. Were it not better by love to cover a multitude of faults, and to leave the judgment of persons and things, wherein we are not concerned, unto “Him who judgeth righteously, and will render unto every man according to his works?” However, certain it is that until this evil fountain of bitter waters be stopped, until we cease to bless God, even the Father, and at the same time to curse men made after the similitude of God, the wounds that have been given to the love and peace of professors will not be healed.

Thirdly, Unto the same end are all men forbidden to think that they have a *dominion* over the faith of others, or that the ordering and disposal of it is committed unto them. It is Christ alone who is the Lord of the consciences of his disciples; and therefore the best and greatest of the sons of men who have been appointed by him to deal with others in his name, have constantly disclaimed all thoughts of power or rule over the consciences or faith of the meanest of his subjects, [2 Cor. i. 24](#); [1 Pet. v. 3](#). How many ways this may be done we are filled with experiences; for no way whereby it may be so hath been left unattempted. And the evil of it hath invaded both churches and particular persons; some whereof, who have been active in casting off the dominion of others, seemed to have designed a possession of it in themselves. And it is well if, where one pope is rejected, many do not rise in his place, who want nothing but his power and interest to do his work. The indignation of some, that others do not in all things comply with their sentiments and subject themselves unto their apprehensions and dictates, ariseth from this presumption; and the persecutions wherein others engage do all grow out of the same bitter root: for men can no otherwise satisfy their consciences herein but by a supposition that they are warranted to give measures unto the minds and practices of others, — that is, their faith and consciences, — in sacred things. And whilst this presumptuous supposition, under any pretence or colour, possesseth the minds of men, it will variously act itself unto the destruction of that gospel unity which it is our duty to preserve; for when they are persuaded that others ought to give up themselves absolutely to their guidance in the things of religion, either because of their office and dignity, or because they are wiser than they, or it may be are only able to dispute more than they, if they do not immediately so do, especially seeing they cannot but judge themselves in the right in all things, they are ready to charge their refusal on all the corrupt affections, principles, and practices which they can surmise, or their supposed just indignation suggest unto them. That they are proud, ignorant, self-conceited, wilful, factious, is immediately

concluded; and a semblance unto such charges shall be diligently sought out and improved. Nothing but a deceiving apprehension that they are some way or other meet to have a dominion over the faith of their brethren and fellow-servants would prevail with men otherwise sober and learned so to deal with all that dissent from them as they are pleased to do.

Fourthly, All these evils mentioned are much increased in the minds of men when *they are puffed up with a conceit of their own knowledge and wisdom*, [Rom. xii. 3](#); [1 Cor. viii. 1](#). This, therefore, we are warned to avoid, that the edification of the church may be promoted and love preserved; for hence are very many apt to take false measures of things, especially of themselves, and thereon to cast themselves into many mischievous mistakes, [2 Cor. x. 12](#). And this is apt to befall them who, for ends best known unto themselves, have with any ordinary diligence attended to the study of learning; for on a supposal of some competent furniture, with natural abilities, they cannot but attain some skill and knowledge that the common sort of unstudied persons are unacquainted withal; — oftentimes, indeed, their pre-eminence in this kind consists in matters of very small consequence or importance. But whatever it be, it is ready to make them think strange of the apostle's advice: "If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise," [1 Cor. iii. 18](#). Apt it is to puff them up, to influence their minds with a good conceit of themselves, and a contempt of others. Hence may we see some, when they have got a little skill in languages, and through custom, advantaged by the reading of some books, are able readily to express some thoughts, perhaps not originally their own, presently conceit themselves to be so much wiser than the multitude of unlettered persons, that they are altogether impatient that in any thing they should dissent from them; and this is a common frame with them whose learning and wit being their all, do yet but reach half way towards the useful ends of such things. Others also there are, and of them not a few, who having been in the ways wherein the skill and knowledge mentioned are usually attained, yet through their incapacity or negligence, or some depraved habit of mind or course of life, have not really at all improved in them; and yet these also, having once attained the countenance of ecclesiastical offices or preferments, are as forward as any to declaim against and pretend a contempt of that ignorance in others which they are not so stupid as not to know that the guilt of it may be reflected on themselves. However, these things at best, and in their highest improvement, are far enough from solid wisdom, especially that which is from above, and which alone will promote the peace and edification of the church. Some have no advantage by them but that they can declare and speak out their own weakness; others, that they can rail, and lie, and falsely accuse, in words and language wherewith they hope to please the vilest of men. And certain it is that science, — which whatever it be, without the grace of God, is but falsely so called, and oftentimes falsely pretended unto, for this evil end of it alone, — is apt to lift up the minds of men above others, who perhaps come not behind



them in any useful understanding. Yea, suppose men to have really attained a singular degree in useful knowledge and wisdom, and that either in things spiritual and divine, or in learning and sciences, or in political prudence, yet experience shows us that a hurtful elation of mind is apt to arise from them, if the souls of men be not well balanced with humility, and this evil particularly watched against. Hence ariseth that impatience of contradiction, that jealousy and tenderness of men's own names and reputations, those sharp revenges they are ready to take of any supposed inroads upon them or disrespects towards them, that contempt and undervaluation of other men's judgments, those magisterial impositions and censures, which proceed from men under a reputation of these endowments. The cautions given us in the Scripture against this frame of spirit, the examples that are proposed unto us to the contrary (even that of Christ himself), the commands that are multiplied for lowliness of mind, jealousy over ourselves, the sovereignty of God in choosing whom he pleaseth to reveal his mind and truth unto and by, may, in the consideration of them, be useful to prevent such surprisals with pride, self-conceit, and contempt of others, as supposed or abused knowledge is apt to cast men into, whereby divisions are greatly fomented and increased among us. But it may be these things will not much prevail with them who, pretending a zeal and principle above others in preaching and urging the example of Christ, do in most of their ways and actings, and in some of their writings, give us an unparalleled representation of the devil.

Lastly, It is confessed by all, that *false teachers*, seducers, broachers of novel, corrupt, and heretical doctrines, have caused many breaches and divisions among such as once agreed in the profession of the same truths and points of faith. By means of such persons, whether within the present church-state or without, there is scarce any sacred truth, which had formerly secured its station and possession in the minds of the generality of Christians in this nation, but what hath been solicited or opposed. Some make their errors the principal foundation, rule, and measure in communion; whoever complies with them therein is of them, and whoso doth not they avoid: so at once they shut up themselves from having any thing to do with them that love truth and peace. And where these consequents do not ensue, men's zeal for their errors being overbalanced by their love of and concern in their secular interest, and their minds influenced by the novel prevailing opinion of a great indifferency in all things appertaining unto outward worship, yet the advancing and fomenting of opinions contrary unto that sound doctrine which hath been generally owned and taught by the learned and godly pastors, and received by the people themselves, cannot but occasion strife, contentions, and divisions among professors. And it may be there are very few of those articles or heads of religion which in the beginning of the Reformation, and a long time after, were looked on as the most useful, important, and necessary parts of our profession, that have not been among us variously opposed and corrupted. And in these differences about doctrine lie the hidden causes of the animosities whereby those about worship and

discipline are managed; for those who have the advantage of law and power on their side in these lesser things are not so unwise as to deal openly with their adversaries about those things wherein the reputation of established and commonly-received doctrines lie against them; but under the pretence and shelter of contending for legal appointments, not a few do exercise an enmity against those who profess the truth, which they think it not meet as yet openly to oppose.

Such are the causes and such are the occasions of the differences and divisions in and about religious concerns that are among us, by which means they have been fomented and increased: heightened they have been by the personal faults and miscarriages of many of all sorts and parties. And as the reproof of their sinful failings is in its proper season a necessary duty, so no reformation or amendment of persons will give a full relief, nor free us from the evil of our divisions, until the principles and ways which occasion them be taken out of the way.

Chapter V.

Grounds and reasons of nonconformity.

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Having briefly declared our sense concerning the general causes and occasions of our differences, and that present want of Christian love which is complained of by many, we shall now return to give some more particular account concerning our inconformity unto and non-compliance with the observances and constitutions of the church of England. It is acknowledged, that we do in sundry things dissent from them; that we do not, that we cannot, come up unto a joint practice with others in them. It is also confessed, that hereon there doth ensue an appearance of schism between them and us, according as the common notion of it is received in the world. And because in this distance and difference the dissent unto compliance is on our parts, there is a semblance of a voluntary relinquishment of their communion; and this we know exposeth us, in vulgar judgments and apprehensions, unto the charge of schism, and necessitateth us unto self-defence, as though the only matter in question were, whether we are guilty of this evil or no. For that advantage have all churches which have had an opportunity to fix terms of communion, right or wrong, just or unequal, — the differences which ensue thereon, they will try out on no other terms, but only whether those that dissent from them are schismatics or not. Thus they make themselves actors oftentimes in this cause who ought in the first place to be charged with injury; and a trial is made merely at the hazard of the reputation of those who are causelessly put upon their purgation and defence. Yea, with many, a kind of possession and multitude do render dissenters unquestionably schismatical; so that it is esteemed an unreasonable confidence in them to deny themselves so to be. So deals the church of Rome with those that are reformed. An open schism there is between them; and if they cannot sufficiently fix the guilt of it on the reformed by confidence and clamours, with the advantage of prepossession, yet, as if they were perfectly innocent themselves, they will allow of no other inquiry in this matter but what consists in calling the truth and reputation of the other party into question. It being our present condition to lie under this charge from many, whose interest it is to have us thought guilty thereof, we do deny that there is any culpable secession made by us from the communion of any that profess the gospel in these nations, or that the blame of the appearing schism that is among us can duly or justly be reflected on us; which, in the remainder of our discourse, we shall make to appear.

What are our thoughts and judgments concerning the church state and interest of the professors of the gospel in this nation, we have before declared; and we hope they are such that, in the judgment of persons sober and impartial, we shall be relieved from those clamorous accusations which are without number or measure by some cast upon us. Our prayers are also continually unto the God of love and peace, for the taking away of all divisions and their causes from among us. Nor is the satisfaction which ariseth from our sincerity herein

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in the least taken off or rent from us by the uncharitable endeavours of some to rake up pretences to the contrary. And should those in whose power it is think meet to imitate the pastors and guides of the churches of old, and to follow them in any of the ways which they used for the restoration of unity and agreement unto Christians, when lost or endangered, we should not decline the contribution of any assistance, by counsel or fraternal compliance, which God should be pleased to supply us withal. But whilst some, whose advantages render them considerable in these matters, seem to entertain no other thoughts concerning us but what issue in violence and oppression, the principal duty incumbent on us is quietly to approve our consciences unto God, that in sincerity of heart we desire in all things to please him, and to conform our lives, principles, and practices to his will, so far as he is graciously pleased to make it known unto us. And as for men, we hope so to discharge the duty required of us as that none may justly charge us with any disorders, unpeaceableness, or other evils; for we do not apprehend that we are either the cause or culpable occasion of those inconveniences and troubles which some have put themselves unto by their endeavours for our disturbance, impoverishing, and ruin. Let none imagine but that we have considered the evils and evil consequents of the schisms and divisions that are among us; and those who do so, do it upon the forfeiture of their charity. We know how much the great work of preaching the gospel, unto the conversion of the souls of men, is impeded thereby; as also what prejudice ariseth thence against the truth wherein we are all agreed, with what temptations and mutual exasperations, to the loss of love, and the occasioning of many sinful miscarriages in persons of all sorts, do hereon ensue: but we deny that it is in our power to remove them, or take them out of the way; — nor are we conscious unto ourselves of any sin or evil, in what we do, or in what we do not do, by our not doing of it in the worship of God. It is duty alone unto Jesus Christ whereunto in these things we attend, and wherein we ought so to do. And where matters of this nature are so circumstanced as that duty will contribute nothing towards unity, we are at a loss for any progress towards it. The sum of what is objected unto us (as hath been observed) is our nonconformity, or our forbearance of actual personal communion with the present church constitutions, in the modes, rites, and ceremonies of its worship: hence the schism complained of doth ensue. Unless the communion be total, constant, without endeavour of any alteration or reformation, we cannot, in the judgment of some, be freed from the guilt hereof. This we deny, and are persuaded that it is to be charged elsewhere; for, —

First, All the conditions of absolute and complete communion with the church of England, which are proposed unto us, and indispensably required of us, especially as we are ministers, are *unscriptural*, — such as the word of God doth neither warrant, mention, nor intimate, especially not under any such consideration as necessary conditions of communion in or among the churches of Christ. We dispute not now about the lawfulness or unlawfulness of things in themselves, nor whether they may be observed or no by such as have no convic-

tion of any sin or evil in them; neither do we judge or censure them by whom they are observed. Our inquiry is solely about our own liberty and duty. And what concerneth them is resolved into this one question, as to the argument in hand: Whether such things or observances in the worship of God as are wholly unscriptural may be so made the indispensable condition of communion with any particular church, as that they by whom they are so made and imposed on others should be justified in their so doing; and that if any differences, divisions, or schisms do ensue thereon, the guilt and blame of them must necessarily fall on those who refuse submission to them or to admit of them as such? That the conditions proposed unto us, and imposed on us indispensably, if we intend to enjoy the communion of this church, are of this nature, we shall afterward prove by an induction of instances. Nor is it of any concernment, in this matter, what place the things inquired after do hold, or are supposed to hold, in the worship of God; our present inquiry is about their warranty to be made conditions of church communion. Now, we are persuaded that the Lord Christ hath set his disciples at liberty from accepting of such terms of communion from any churches in the world. And on the same grounds we deny that he hath given or granted unto them authority to constitute such terms and conditions of their communion, and indispensably to impose them upon all that enjoy it, according to their several capacities and concerns therein; for, —

1. The *rule of communion* among the disciples of Christ in all his churches is invariably established and fixed by himself. His commission, direction, and command, given out unto the first planters and founders of them, containing an obliging rule unto all that should succeed them throughout all generations, hath so established the bounds, limits, and conditions of church-communion, as that it is not lawful for any to attempt their removal or alteration. “Go ye,” saith he to them, “and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world,” [Matt. xxviii. 19, 20](#). All the benefits and blessings, all the comfort and use of church assemblies and communion, depend alone on the promise of the presence of Christ with them. Thence doth all the authority that may be exercised in them proceed, and thence doth the efficacy of what they do unto the edification of the souls of men arise and flow. Now, that any one may thus enjoy the presence of Christ in any church, with the fruits and benefits of it, no more can be required of him but that, through the preaching of the gospel and baptism, being made a professed disciple, he do or be ready to do and observe all whatsoever Christ hath commanded. This hath he established as the rule of communion among his disciples and churches in all generations. In all other things which do relate unto the worship of God, he hath set them and left them at liberty, [Gal. v. 1](#); which, so far as it is a grant and privilege purchased for them, they are obliged to make good and maintain. We know it will be here replied, that among the commands of Christ it is that we should “hear the church,”



and obey the guides and rulers thereof; whatever, therefore, is appointed by them, we are to submit unto and observe, even by virtue of the command of Christ. And, indeed, it is certainly true that it is the will and command of the Lord Jesus that we should both hear the church and obey the guides of it; — but, by virtue of this rule, neither the church nor its guides can make any thing necessary to the disciples of Christ, as a condition of communion with them, but only what he hath commanded; for the rule here laid down is given unto those guides or rulers, who are thereby bound up, in the appointments of what the disciples are to observe, unto the commands of Christ. And were a command included herein of obeying the commands or appointments of church guides, and the promise of the presence of Christ annexed thereunto, as he had given them all his own power and placed them in his throne, so we had been all obliged to follow them whither ever they had carried or led us, although it were to hell itself, as some of the canonists, on this principle, have spoken concerning the pope. Here, therefore, is a rule of communion fixed, both unto them that are to rule in the church and them that are to obey. And whereas, perhaps, it may be said, that if the rulers of the church may appoint nothing in and unto the communion of the church but what Christ hath himself commanded, then, indeed, is their authority little worth, yea, upon the matter none at all, for the commands of Christ are sufficiently confirmed and fixed by his own authority; and to what end, then, serves that of the rulers of the church? — we must say that their whole authority is limited in the text unto teaching of men to observe what Christ hath commanded; and this they are to do with authority, but under him and in his name, and according to the rules that he hath given them. And those who think not this power sufficient for them must seek it elsewhere, for the Lord Christ will allow no more in his churches.

To make this yet more evident, we may consider that particular instance wherein the primitive Christians had a trial in the case as now stated before us; and this was in the matter of Mosaical ceremonies and institutions, which some would have imposed on them as a condition of their communion in the profession of the gospel. In the determination hereof was their liberty asserted by the apostles, and their duty declared, to abide therein. And this was the most specious pretence of imposing on the liberty of Christians that ever they were exercised withal; for the observation of these things had countenance given unto it from their divine original, and the condescending practice of the apostles for a good season. That other instances of the like nature should be condemned in the Scripture is impossible, seeing none had then endeavoured the introduction of any of that nature. But a general rule may be established in the determination of one case as well as in that of many, provided it be not extended beyond what is eminently included in that case. Herein, therefore, was there a direction given for the duty and practice of churches in following ages, and that in pursuit of the law and constitution of the Lord Christ before mentioned. Neither is there any force in the exception, that these things were imposed under a pretence of being commanded by

God himself: for they say, to require anything under that notion, which indeed he hath not commanded, is an adding to his command, which ought not to be admitted; but to require things indifferent without that pretence may be allowed. But as in the former way men add unto the commands of God formally, so in this latter they do it materially, which also is prohibited; for in his worship we are forbidden to add to the things that he hath appointed no less than to pretend commands from him which he hath not given. He, therefore, who professeth and pleadeth his willingness to observe and do in church-communion whatever Christ hath instituted and commanded cannot regularly be refused the communion of any church, under any pretence of his refusal to do other things which confessedly are not so required.

It is pleaded, indeed, that no other things, as to the *substance* of the worship of God, can or ought to be appointed besides what is instituted by Jesus Christ; but as to the *manner* or modes of the performance of what he doth command, with other rites and ceremonies to be observed for order and decency, they may lawfully be instituted by the rulers of the church. Let it therefore at present be granted that so they may be, by them who are persuaded of the lawfulness of those modes, and of the things wherein they consist, seeing that is not the question at present under agitation; — neither will this concession help us in our present inquiry, unless it be also granted that whatever may be lawfully practised in the worship of God may be lawfully made a necessary condition of communion in that worship; but this will not be granted, nor can it ever be proved. Besides, in our present difference, this is only the judgment of one party, that the things mentioned may be lawfully observed in and among sacred administrations; and thereon the conclusion must be, that whatever some think may be lawfully practised in divine worship may lawfully be made an indispensable condition of communion unto the whole. Nor will it give force unto this inference, that those who judge them lawful are the rulers and guides of the church, unto whose determination the judgment of private persons is not to be opposed; for we have showed before that a judgment concerning what any one is to do or practice in the worship of God belongs unto every man who is to do or practice aught therein, and he who makes it not is brutish. And the judgment which the rulers of the church are to make for the whole, or to go before it, is in what is commanded, or not so, by Jesus Christ, not in what is fit to be added thereunto by themselves. Besides, if it must be allowed that such things may be made the conditions of church-communion, then any who are in places of authority may multiply such conditions according unto the utmost extent of their judgments, until they become burdensome and intolerable unto all, or really ridiculous in themselves; as it is fallen out in the church of Rome. But this would prove expressly destructive unto that certain and unvariable rule of church-communion which the Lord Christ hath fixed and established, whereof we shall speak again afterward.



Neither will that plea which is by some insisted on in this case yield any solid or universal relief. It is said that *some may warrantably and duly observe in the worship of God what is unduly and unwarrantably imposed on them by others*. And, indeed, all controversies about church constitution, discipline, and external worship, are by some reduced unto these two heads: That the magistrate may appoint what he pleaseth, and the people may observe whatever he appoints; for as there is no government of the church determined in the Scripture, it is meet it should be erected and disposed by the supreme magistrate, who, no doubt, upon that supposition, is only fit and qualified so to do. And for outward worship, and the rites thereof, both it and they are so far indifferent as that we may comply with whatever is imposed on us; whether they be good and useful, or evil, lies at the doors of others to answer about. But this seems to rise up in express contradiction unto those commands which are given us to “stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free,” and in these things not to be “the servants of men;” for what do we do less than renounce the privilege of our liberty, purchased for us at a high rate and price, or what are we less than “servants of men,” whilst we bring ourselves in bondage unto the observation of such things in the worship of God as we judge neither commanded by him nor tending unto our own edification, but merely because by them ordained? Moreover, suppose it be the judgment of some, as it is of many, that the things mentioned, though in their own nature indifferent, do become unlawful unto them to observe when imposed as necessary conditions of all church-communication, contrary to the command and appointment of Christ. We know this is exceedingly declaimed against, as that which is perverse and froward: “For what,” say many, “can be more unreasonable than that things in their own nature indifferent should become unlawful because they are commanded?” But it is at least no less unreasonable that things confessedly indifferent should not be left so, but be rendered necessary unto practice, though useless in it, by arbitrary commands. But the opinion traduced is also much mistaken; for although it be granted that the things themselves are indifferent in their own nature, — not capable, but as determined by circumstances, of either moral good or evil, yet it is not granted that the observation of them, even as uncommanded, is indifferent in the worship of God. And although the command doth not alter the nature, and make that which was indifferent become evil, yet that command of itself being contrary to many divine commands and instructions given us in the Scripture, a compliance with the things commanded therein may become unlawful to us. And what shall they do whose judgment this is? Shall they admit of them as lawful, upon the consideration of that change about them which renders them unlawful? This they will not easily be induced to give their assent unto.

Let, therefore, the rule of church-communication be observed which our Lord Jesus Christ hath fixed, and no small occasion of our strifes and divisions will be removed out of the way. But whilst there is this contest amongst us, if one pleads his readiness “to do and observe whatever the Lord Christ hath commanded,” and cannot be convinced of insincerity in his

profession, or of want of understanding in any known institution of his, and thereon requires the communion of any church; but others say, “Nay, you shall observe and do sundry other things that we ourselves have appointed, or you shall have no communion with us;” — as it cannot be but that divisions and schisms will ensue thereon, so it will not be difficult for an indifferent bystander to judge on whether side the occasion and guilt of them doth remain.

2. We have *the practice of the apostles*, in the pursuance of the direction and command of their Lord and ours, for our guide in this case. And it might be well and safely thought that this should give a certain rule unto the proceedings and actings of all church guides in future ages. Now, they did never make any thing unscriptural, or what they had not received by divine revelation, to be a condition of communion in religious worship and church-order among Christians: for as they testified themselves that “they would give themselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word,” [Acts vi. 4](#), so it was of old observed concerning them, “that their constant labour was for the good of the souls of men in their conversion unto God, and edification in faith and holiness;”⁴ but as for the institution of festivals or fasts, of rites or ceremonies, to be observed in the worship of the churches, they intermeddled with no such things. And thence it came to pass, that in the first entrance and admission of observances about such things, there was a great and endless variety in them, both as to the things themselves observed and as to the manner of their observation; and this was gradually increased unto such a height and excess, as that the burden of them became intolerable unto Christendom. Nor, indeed, could any better success be expected in a relinquishment and departure from the pattern of church-order given us in their example and practice. Neither is the plea from hence built merely on this consideration, that no man alive, either from their writings or the approved records of those times, can manifest that they ever prescribed unto the churches or imposed on them the observance of any uninstituted rite, to be observed as a measure and rule of their communion, but also it so fell out, in the good providence of God, that the case under debate was proposed unto them, and jointly determined by them; for, being called unto advice and counsel in the difference that was between the Jewish and Gentile converts and professors, wherein the former laboured to impose on the latter the observation of Moses’ institutions as the condition of their joint communion, as was mentioned even now, they not only determine against any such imposition, but also expressly declare that nothing but “necessary things” (that is, such as are so from other reasons antecedently unto their prescriptions and appointments) ought to be required of any Christians in the communion or worship of the church, [Acts xv](#). And as they neither did nor would, on that great occasion, in that solemn assembly, appoint any one thing to be observed by the disciples and churches which the Lord Christ had not commanded, so in their direction given unto the Gentile believers for a temporary abstinence from the use

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4 *Socrat. Hist., lib. v.*

of their liberty in one or two instances whereunto it did extend, they plainly intimate that it was the avoidance of a present scandal, which might have greatly retarded the progress of the gospel, that was the reason of that direction. And in such cases it is granted that we may in many things for a season forego the use of our liberty. This was their way and practice, this the example which they left unto all that should follow them in the rule and guidance of the church. Whence it is come to pass in after ages that men should think themselves wiser than they, or more careful to provide for the peace and unity of the church, we know not. But let the bounds and measures of church-communion fixed in and by their example stand unmoved, and many causes of our present divisions will be taken away. But, it may be, it will be offered, that the present state of things in the world requires some alteration in or variation from the precise example of the apostles in this matter. The due observation of the institutions of Christ, in such manner as the nature of them required, was then sufficient unto the peace and unity of the churches; but primitive simplicity is now decayed among the most, so that a multiplication of rules and observances is needful for the same ends. But we have showed before, that the accommodation of church rule and communion to the degeneracy of Christians or churches, or their secular engagements, is no way advantageous unto religion. Let them whose duty it is endeavour to reduce professors and profession to the *primitive standard* of light, humility, and holiness, and they may be ordered in all church concerns according to the apostolical pattern. Wherefore, when Christians unto the former plea of their readiness to observe and do whatsoever Christ hath commanded them, do also add their willingness to comply with whatever the apostles of Christ have either by precept or example in their own practice commended unto them, or did do or require in the first churches, and cannot be convinced of failing to make good their profession, we do not know whence any can derive a warranty enabling them to impose any other conditions of communion on them. The institution, therefore, of the Lord Christ, and the practice of the apostles, lie directly against the imposing of the conditions inquired about. And first to invent them, then to impose them, making them necessary to be observed, and then to judge and censure them as schismatics, as enemies to love and peace, who do not submit unto them, looks not unlike the exercise of an unwarrantable dominion over the faith and consciences of the disciples of Christ.

3. Not only by their example and practice, but they have also *doctrinally* declared what is the duty of churches, and what is the liberty of Christians in this matter. The apostle Paul discourseth at large hereon, [Rom. xiv.](#), [xv.](#) The attentive reading of these two chapters is sufficient to determine this cause among all uninterested and unprejudiced persons. He supposeth in them, — and it is the case which he exemplifies in sundry instances, — that there were among Christians and churches at that time different apprehensions and observances about some things appertaining unto the worship of God; and these things were such as had some seeming countenance of a sacred and divine authority, for such was their ori-



ginal institution. Some, on the consideration hereof, judged that they were still to be observed, and their consciences had been long exercised in a holy subjection unto the authority of God in the observance of them. Nor was there yet any express and positive law enacted for their abrogation; but the ceasing of any obligation unto their observance from their primitive institution was to be gathered from the nature of God's economy towards his church. Many, therefore, continued to observe them, esteeming it their duty so to do. Others were persuaded and satisfied that they were freed from any obligation unto the owning and observance of them; and whereas this liberty was given them by Jesus Christ in the gospel, they were resolved to make use of it, and not to comply with the other sort, who pressed conformity upon them in their ceremonies and modes of divine worship. So it may fall out in other instances. Some may be persuaded that such or such things may be lawful for them to observe in the worship of God, — they may be so unto them, and, as is supposed, in their own nature; on the consideration of some circumstances, they may judge that it is convenient or expedient to attend unto their observance; lastly, all coincidences weighed, that it is necessary that so they should do, and that others also that walk with them in the profession of the gospel should conform themselves unto their order and practice. On the other hand, some there are who, because the things of the joint practice required are not appointed by Jesus Christ, nor doth it appear unto them that he hath given power unto any others to appoint them, do not judge it expedient, nor yet, all circumstances considered, lawful to observe them. Now, whereas this case answers unto that before proposed, the determination thereof given by the apostle may safely be applied unto this also. What rule, therefore, doth he give therein, which he would have attended unto as the means for the preservation of love, peace, and unity among them? Is it that the former sort of persons, provided they be the most or have the most power, ought to impose the practice of those things which they esteem lawful and convenient on those who judge them not so, when it is out of question that they are not appointed by Christ, only it is pretended that they are not forbidden by him? Where, indeed, the question was about the institutions of Christ, he binds up the churches precisely unto what he had received from him, [1 Cor. xi. 23](#); but in cases of this nature, wherein a direct command of Christ cannot be pleaded nor is pretended, he absolutely rejects and condemns all thoughts of such a procedure. But supposing that differences in judgment and practice were and would be among Christians, the sum of his advice is, that all offences and scandals ought to be diligently avoided; that censuring, judging, and despisings, on the account of such differences, be cast out; that tenderness be used towards them that are weak, and nothing severely pressed on them that doubt; and for their different apprehensions and ways, they should all walk in peace, condescending unto and bearing with one another. Nothing can more evidently determine the unlawfulness of imposing on Christians unscriptural conditions of communion than do the discourses of that great apostle to this purpose. Yea, better it is, and more agreeable unto the mind of Christ, that persons and particular

churches should be left unto different observations in sundry things relating unto sacred worship, wherein they cannot join with each other nor communicate together, endeavouring in the meantime to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” than that they should be enforced unto a uniformity in the practice of things that have not the immediate authority of Christ enstamped on them. Accordingly it so fell out among them unto whom the apostle gave these directions, and that suitably unto his intention in them; for the dissenting parties agreeing in the common faith and profession of the gospel, did yet constantly meet in distinct assemblies or churches for the celebration of holy worship, because of the different rites wherein they did not agree. And in this posture were peace and love continued among them, until in process of time, their differences through mutual forbearance being extinguished, they coalesced into one church state and order. And the former peace which they had in their distances was deemed sufficient, whilst things were not measured nor regulated by secular interest or advantages. But it is a part of our present unhappiness, that such a peace among Christians and particular churches is mistaken to have an ill aspect upon the concerns of some belonging unto the church in power, honour, and revenue. But as we apprehend there is, as things are now stated among us, a plain mistake in this surmise, so, if the glory of God and the honour of the gospel were chief in our consultations about church affairs, it would be with us of no such consideration as to hinder us from committing quietly the success and events of duty unto the providence of God.

4. There was also a signal vindication of the truth pleaded for, in *an instance of fact* among the primitive churches. There was an opinion which prevailed very early among them about the necessary observation of Easter, in the room of the Jewish passover, for the solemn commemoration of the death and resurrection of our Saviour. And it was taken for granted by most of them, that the observance hereof was countenanced, if not rendered necessary unto them, by the example of the apostles; for they generally believed that by them it was observed, and that it was their duty to accommodate themselves unto their practice; only there was a difference about the precise time or day which they were to solemnize as the head and rule of their festival, as every undue presumption hath one lameness or other accompanying it, — it is truth alone which is square and steady. Some, therefore, pleaded the example of John the apostle and evangelist, who, as it is strongly asserted and testified by multitudes, kept his Easter at such a time and by such a rule; whom they thought meet to follow and imitate. Others, not inferior unto them in number or authority, opposed unto their time the example of Peter, whom they affirmed (on what grounds and reasons they knew best, for they are now lost) to have observed his Easter at another time, and according unto a different rule. And it is scarcely imaginable how the contests hereabouts troubled the churches both of Europe and Asia, who certainly had things more material to have exercised themselves about. The church of Rome embraced that opinion which at length prevailed over the other, and obtained a kind of catholicism against that which was countenanced



only by the authority of St John; as that church was always wondrous happy in reducing other churches unto an acquiescency in its sentiments, as seldom wanting desire or skill dexterously to improve its manifold advantages. Now, this was that Easter was to be celebrated on the Lord's day only, and not by the rule of the Jewish passover, on the fourteenth day of the first month, what day of the week soever it fell out upon. Hereon Victor, the bishop of that church, being confident that the truth was on his side, — namely, that Easter was to be observed on the Lord's day, — resolved to make it a condition of communion unto all the churches, for otherwise he saw not how there could be either union, peace, or uniformity among them. He did not question but that he had a good foundation to build upon; for that Easter was to be observed by virtue of apostolical tradition was generally granted by all. And he took it as unquestionable, upon a current and prevalent rumour, that the observation of it was confined to the Lord's day by the example of St Peter. Hereupon he refused the communion of all that would not conform unto his resolution for the observation of Easter on the Lord's day, and cast out of communion all those persons and churches who would observe any other day; which proved to be the condition of the principal churches of Asia, amongst whom the apostle John did longest converse. Here was our present case directly exemplified or represented so long beforehand. The success only of this fact of his remaineth to be inquired into. Now, it is known unto all what entertainment this his new rule of communion found among the churches of Christ. The reproof of his precipitancy and irregular fixing new bounds unto church-communion was famous in those days; especially the rebuke given unto him and his practice by one⁵ of the most holy and learned persons then living is eminently celebrated, as consonant to truth and peace, by those who have transmitted unto us the reports of those times. He who himself first condemned others rashly was for his so doing generally condemned by all. Suppose, now, that any persons living at Rome, and there called into communion with the church, should have had the condition thereof proposed unto them, — namely, that they should assent and declare that the observation of Easter, by apostolical tradition, was to be on the Lord's day only, — and upon their refusal so to do should be excluded from communion, or on their own accords should refrain from it, where should the guilt of this disorder and schism be charged? And thus it fell out, not only with those who came out of Asia to Rome, who were not received by that Diotrephes, but also with sundry in that church itself, as Blastus and others; as what great divisions were occasioned hereby between the Saxons and Britons hath been by many declared. But, in the judgment of the primitive churches, the guilt of these schisms was to be charged on them that coined and imposed these new rules and conditions of communion; and had they not been judged by any, the pernicious consequences of this temerarious attempt are sufficient to reflect no inconsiderable guilt upon it. Neither could the whole observance itself, from



5 The allusion is to Irenæus; see *Eus. v. 24.* — Ed.

first to last, ever compensate that loss of love and peace among Christians and churches which was occasioned thereby; nor hath the introduction of such things ever obtained any better success in the church of God. How free the churches were until that time, after they were once delivered from the attempt of the circumcised professors to impose upon them the ceremonies of Moses, from any appearance of unwritten conditions of communion, is manifest unto all who have looked into the monuments which remain of those times. It is very true that sundry Christians took upon them very early the observation of sundry rites and usages in religion whereunto they had no guidance or direction by the word of God; for as the corrupted nature of man is prone to the invention and use of sensible present things in religion, especially where persons are not able to find satisfaction in those that are purely spiritual, requiring great intension of mind and affections in their exercise, so were they many of them easily infected by that tincture which remained in them from the Judaism or Gentilism from which they were converted. But these observances were free, and taken up by men of their own accord, not only every church, but every person in the most of them, as far as it appears, being left unto their own liberty. Some ages it was before such things were turned into laws and canons, and that perhaps first by heretics, or at least under such a degeneracy as our minds and consciences cannot be regulated by. The judgment, therefore, and practice of the first churches are manifest against such impositions.

5. Upon a supposition that it should be lawful for any persons or churches to assign unscriptural conditions of their communion, it will follow that *there is no certain rule of communion* amongst Christians fixed and determined by Christ. That this is otherwise we have before declared, and shall now only manifest the evil consequences of such a supposition: for if it be so, no man can claim an admission into the society or communion of any church, or a participation in the ordinances of the gospel with them, by virtue of the authority of Jesus Christ; for notwithstanding all his pleas of submission to his institutions, and the observation of his commands, every church may propose something, yea, many things, unto him that he hath not appointed, without an admission whereof and subjection thereunto he may be justly excluded from all church privileges among them. Now, this seems not consonant unto the authority that Christ hath over the church, nor that honour which ought to be given unto him therein. Nor, on the same supposition, are his laws sufficient to rule and quiet the consciences, or to provide for the edification of his disciples. Now, if Diotrephes is blamed for not receiving the brethren who were recommended unto the church by the apostle, [3 John 9, 10](#), probably because they would not submit to that pre-eminence which he had obtained among them, they will scarcely escape without reproof who refuse those whom the Lord Christ commends unto them by the rules of the gospel, because they will not submit unto such new impositions as, by virtue of their pre-eminence, they would put upon them. And what endless perplexities they must be cast into who have learned in these things to call him only Lord and Master is apparent unto all. Baptism, with a voluntary



credible profession of faith, repentance, and obedience unto the Lord Christ, in his commands and institutions, is all the warranty which he hath given unto any of his disciples to claim their admission into his churches, which are instituted and appointed to receive them, and to build them up in their faith. And if any person who produceth this warranty, and thereon desireth, according to order, the communion of any church, — if he may be excluded from it or forbidden an entrance into it, unless it be on grounds sufficient, in the judgment of charity, to evince the falseness and hypocrisy of his profession, little regard is had to the authority of Christ, and too much unto men's own. Churches, indeed, may more or less insist upon the explicitness of this profession and the evidences of its sincerity, as they find it tend to their peace and edification, with a due attendance unto the rule and example left unto them in this matter in the gospel. And that the exercise of this power in any churches may not turn to the prejudice of any, every professor is allowed, with reference unto particular assemblies, to make his choice of the measure he will comply withal, at least if he will make the choice of his habitation subservient unto his edification. Hereby the peace and duty both of churches and private persons are secured. And this rule of church admission and communion furnished Christians with peace, love, and unity for many ages, setting aside the ruffle given them in the rashness of Victor before mentioned. It was also rendered practicable and easy by virtue of their communion as churches among themselves; for from thence commendatory letters supplied the room of actual profession in them who, having been admitted into one church, did desire the same privilege in any other. And on this rule were persons to be "received," though "weak in the faith," though it may be in some things "otherwise minded" than the generality of the church, though "babes" and "unskilful" as to degrees in the word of truth, [Rom. xiv. 1](#); [Phil. iii. 15](#); [Heb. v. 12–14](#). But this rule was always attended with a proviso, that men did not contradict or destroy their own profession by any unholy conversation; for such persons never were, nor never are to be, admitted unto the especial ordinances of the church; and a neglect of due attendance hereunto is that which principally hath cast us into all our confusions, and rendered the institutions of Christ ineffectual. And if this warranty, which the Lord Christ hath given unto his disciples, of claiming a participation in all the privileges of his churches, an admission unto a joint performance of all the duties required in them, may, upon the supposition of a power left to impose other conditions of communion on them, be rejected and rendered useless, all church-communion is absolutely resolved into the variable wills of men. The church, no doubt, may judge and determine upon the laws of Christ, and their due application unto particular occasions, — as whether such persons may according to them be admitted into their fellowship; to deprive churches of this liberty is to take away their principal use and service: but to make laws of their own, the subject-matter whereof shall be things not commanded by

Christ, and to make them the rule of admitting professed Christians unto their communion, is an assumption that cannot be justified. And it is certain that the assuming of an authority by some churches for such like impositions is that which hath principally occasioned many to deny them so to be; so at once to overthrow the foundation of all that authority which in so many instances they find to be abused. And although the church of Rome may prevail on weak and credulous persons, by proposing unto them an absolute acquiescency in their dictates and determinations, as the best, readiest, and most facile means of satisfaction, yet there is nothing that doth more alienate wise and conscientious persons from them than doth that unreasonable proposal. Moreover, it is highly probable that endless disputes will arise on this supposition about what is meet and convenient, and what not, to be added unto the Scripture rules of communion. They have done so in the ages past, and continue yet to do. Nor can any man on this principle know, or probably conjecture, when he hath a firm station in the church, or an indefeasible interest in the privileges thereof; for supposing that he hath concocted the impositions of one church, on the first removal of his habitation he may have new conditions of communion prescribed unto him. And from this perplexity nothing can relieve him but a resolution to do in every place whereunto he may come according to the manner of the place, be it good or bad, right or wrong. But neither hath the Lord Christ left his disciples in this uncertainty which the case supposeth, nor will accept of that indifferency which is in the remedy suggested. They, therefore, who regulate their communion with any churches by the firm stated law of their right and privilege, if they are not received thereon, do not by their abstinence from it contract the guilt of schism or any blamable divisions.

Moreover, upon a supposition of such a liberty and power to prescribe and impose unwritten conditions of church-communion on Christians, who or what law doth or shall prescribe bounds unto men, that they do not proceed in their prescriptions beyond what is useful unto edification, or unto what will be really burdensome and intolerable unto churches? To say that those who claim this power may be securely trusted with it, for they will be sure not to fall into any such excesses, will scarcely give satisfaction; for besides that such a kind of power is exceedingly apt to swell and extend itself unmeasurably, the common experience of Christendom lies against this suggestion. Was not an excess of this kind complained of by Austin of old, when yet the observation of ecclesiastical customs was much more voluntary than in after ages, neither were they made absolutely conditions of communion, unless among a very few? Do not all Protestants grant and plead that the papal church hath exceeded all bounds of moderation and sobriety herein, so that from thence they take the principal warranty of their secession from it? Do not other churches mutually charge one another on the same account? Hath not a charge of this excess been the ball of contention in this nation ever since the Reformation? If, then, there be such a power in any, either the exercise of it is confined unto certain instances by some power superior unto them, or it is

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left absolutely, as unto all particulars whereunto it may be extended, unto their own prudence and discretion. The first will not be asserted, nor can be so, unless the instances intended can be recounted, and the confirming power be declared. If the latter be affirmed, then let them run into what excesses they please, unless they judge themselves that so they do, which is morally impossible that they should, none ought ever to complain of what they do; for there is no failure in them who attend unto their rule, which in this case is supposed to be men's own prudence and discretion. And this was directly the state of things in the church of Rome; whence they thought it always exceedingly unequal that any of their ecclesiastical laws should be called in question, since they made them according to their own judgment, the sole rule of exercising their authority in such things. Where is the certainty and stability of this rule? Is it probable that the communion and peace of all churches and all Christians are left to be regulated by it? And who will give assurance that no one condition directly unlawful in itself shall be prescribed and imposed by persons enjoying this pretended power? or who can undertake that the number of such conditions as may be countenanced by a plea of being things in their own nature indifferent, shall not be increased until they come to be such a burden and yoke as are too heavy for the disciples of Christ to bear, and unlawful for them to submit themselves unto? May any make a judgment but themselves who impose them, when the number of such things grows to a blamable excess? If others may judge, at least for themselves and their own practice, and so of what is lawful or not, it is all that is desired. If themselves are the only judges, the case seems very hard, and our secession from the church of Rome scarcely warrantable. And who sees not what endless contests and differences will ensue on these suppositions, if the whole liberty of men's judgments and all apprehensions of duty in professors be not swallowed up in the gulf of atheistical indifferency as to all the concerns of outward worship?

The whole of what hath been pleaded on this head might be confirmed with the testimony of many of the learned writers of the church of England, in the defence of our secession from that of Rome; but we shall not here produce them in particular. The sum of what is pleaded by them is, *That the being of the catholic church lies in essentials; that for a particular church to disagree from all other particular churches in some extrinsical and accidental things is not to separate from the catholic church, so as to cease to be a church. But still, whatever church makes such extrinsical things the necessary conditions of communion, so as to cast men out of the church who yield not to them, is schismatical in its so doing, and the separation from it is so far from being schism, that being cast out of that church on these terms only returns them unto the communion of the catholic church; and nothing can be more unreasonable than that the society imposing such conditions of communion should be judge whether those conditions be just and equitable or no.* To this purpose do they generally plead our common cause. Wherefore, from what hath been discoursed, we doubt not but to affirm that where unscriptural conditions of communion, indispensably to be submitted unto and observed,

are by any church imposed on those whom they expect or require to join in their fellowship, communion, and order, if they on whom they are so imposed do thereon withhold or withdraw themselves from the communion of that church, especially in the acts, duties, and parts of worship wherein a submission unto these conditions is expressed either verbally or virtually, they are not thereon to be esteemed guilty of schism; but the whole fault of the divisions which ensue thereon is to be charged on them who insist on the necessity of their imposition.

That this is the condition of things with us at present, especially such as are ministers of the gospel, with reference unto the church of England, as it is known in itself, so it may be evidenced unto all by an enumeration of the particulars that are required of us, if we will be comprehended in the communion and fellowship thereof. For, —

1. It is indispensably enjoined that we give *a solemn attestation unto the liturgy and all contained in it, by the subscription or declaration of our assent and consent thereunto*; which must be accompanied with the constant use of it in the whole worship of God. As was before observed, we dispute not now about the lawfulness of the use of liturgies in the public service of the church, nor of that in particular which is established among us by the laws of the land. Were it only proposed or recommended unto ministers for the use of it in whole or in part, according as it should be found needful unto the edification of their people, there would be a great alteration in the case under consideration. And if it be pretended that such a liberty would produce greater diversity, yea, and confusion in the worship of God, we can only say that it did not so of old, when the pastors of churches were left wholly to the exercise of their own gifts and abilities in all sacred administrations. But it is the making of an assent and consent unto it, with the constant use of it or attendance unto it, a necessary condition of all communion with the church which at present is called into question. It will not, we suppose, be denied but that it is so made unto us all, both ministers and people, and that by such laws, both civil and ecclesiastical, as are sufficiently severe in their penalties; for we have rules and measures of church-communion assigned unto us by laws merely civil. Were there any colour or pretence of denying this to be so, we should proceed no farther in this instance; but things are evidently and openly with us as here laid down. Now, this condition of communion is unscriptural; and the making of it to be such a condition is without warranty or countenance from the word of God, or the practice of the apostolical and primitive churches. That there are no footsteps of any liturgy, or prescribed forms for the administration of all church ordinances, to be imposed on the disciples of Christ in their assemblies, to be found in the Scripture, no intimation of any such thing, no direction about it, no command for it, will, we suppose, be acknowledged. Commanded, indeed, we are to make “supplications and prayers” for all sorts of men in our assemblies; to instruct, lead, guide, and “feed the flock of God,” [1 Tim. ii. 1](#); [Acts xx. 28](#); [1 Pet. v. 2](#); to administer the holy ordinances instituted by him; and to do all these things “decently and in order.” The apostles also,



describing the work of the ministry in their own attendance unto it, affirm that they would “give themselves continually unto prayer, and to the ministry of the word,” Acts vi. 4. But that all these things should be done (the preaching of the word only excepted) in and by the use or reading of a liturgy and the prescribed forms of it, without variation or receding from the words and syllables of it in any thing, that the Scripture is utterly silent of. If any one be otherwise minded, it is incumbent on him to produce instances unto his purpose. But withal he must remember, that in this case it is required not only to produce a warranty from the Scripture for the use of such forms or liturgies, but also that rules are given therein enabling churches to make the constant attendance unto them to be a necessary condition of their communion. If this be not done, nothing is offered unto the case as at present stated. And whatever confidence may be made use of herein, we know that nothing unto this purpose can be thence produced. It is pleaded, indeed, that our Saviour himself composed a form of prayer, and prescribed it unto his disciples: but it is not proved that he enjoined them the constant use of it in their assemblies, nor that they did so use it, nor that the repetition of it should be a condition of communion in them, though the owning of it as by him proposed, and for the ends by him designed, may justly be made so; least of all is it, or can it be proved, that any rule or just encouragement can hence be taken for other men who are neither Jesus Christ nor his apostles, but weak and fallible as ourselves, to compose entire liturgies, and impose the necessary use of them in all the worship of the Church. Neither is there the least countenance to be obtained unto such impositions from the practice or example of the *first churches*. Liturgies themselves were an invention of after ages, and the use of them now inquired after of a much later date: for those which pretend unto apostolical antiquity have long since been convicted to be spurious and feigned, nor is there scarce any learned man who hath the confidence to assert them to be genuine; and on a supposition that so they are, no tolerable reason can be given why the use of them should be neglected, and such others taken up as are of a most uncertain original. The first condition, therefore, of communion proposed unto us is not only unscriptural (which is sufficient unto our present argument), but also destitute of any ancient example or usage among the churches of Christ to give countenance unto it. This if we admit not of, if we attend not unto, we are not only refused communion in other things, but also excommunicated, or cast out of the whole communion of the church, as many are at this day; yet some are so, not only for refusing compliance with the whole of it in general, but for not observing every particular direction belonging unto it (as might be manifested in instances) of no great importance. If, therefore, any divisions or schisms do ensue among us on this account, that some indispensably require an assent and consent unto the liturgy and all things contained in it as the condition of complete church-communion, or a necessary attendance on the whole religious worship thereby performed and therein prescribed, which others refuse to admit of as such, and thereon forbear the communion proposed unto them, it is evident, from the rules laid down,



where the guilt of them is to be charged. And we do not discourse of what any may do among themselves, judging it meet for their edification, nor of what a civil law may constitute with respect unto public places, employments, and preferments; but only where lies the sin and evil that attends divisions arising on these impositions, and which by their removal would be taken away. And there seems to be an aggravation of this disorder, in that not only all men are refused communion who will not submit unto these terms of it, but also they are sought out and exposed unto severe penalties if they will not admit of them, though expressly contrary to their consciences and persuasions.

2. *Canonical submission* unto the present ecclesiastical government of the church, and the administration of the discipline thereof, in their hands by whom the power of it is possessed, with an acquiescency therein, are to the same purpose required of us and expected from us. Who these are, and what are the ways and means of their administrations, we shall not repeat, as unwilling to give offence unto any. We cannot but know how and in what sense these things are proposed unto us, and what is expected from us thereon. Neither dare we give another sense of them in our minds than what we judge to be the sense and intention of them who require our submission and obedience unto them. It is not, certainly, their design nor mind that we should look on the offices of the church as unwarrantable, and on their rule as inconvenient, so as to endeavour a reformation in the one and of the other. It is such a conformity they intend as whereby we do, virtually at least, declare our approbation of all these things in the church, and our acquiescency in them. Neither can we be admitted to put in any exception, nor discharge our consciences by a plain declaration of what we dislike or dissent from, or in what sense we can submit unto any of these things. We take it, therefore, for granted, that in the conformity required of us we must cordially and sincerely approve the present ecclesiastical government, and the administration of church discipline thereby, for it is the profession of our acceptance of it as proposed unto us; and if we acquiesce not therein, but express an uneasiness under it, we do it at the hazard of the reputation of our sincerity and honesty in conforming. Now, this condition of communion with the church of England is also unscriptural, and consequently unlawful to be made so. This is by many now plainly acknowledged; for they say there is no government determined in the Scripture. But this now in force amongst us is erected by the authority of the magistrate, who hath supreme power in things ecclesiastical; and on that ground a lawful government they plead it to be, and lawful to be exercised, and so also by others to be submitted to. But we have now sundry times declared that this is not our present question. We inquire not whether it be lawful or no, or on what account it may be so esteemed, or how far it may be submitted unto, or wherein; but we say, the professed acknowledging of it, with submission unto it, as the government of the church, is required of us as a necessary condition of our communion. If they are not so, give us liberty to declare our sense concerning it without prejudice; and if it be so, then may we refuse this condition as unscriptural. For in the case



of conformity, there is not only a submission to the government required, but expressly (as was said) an approbation of it, that it is such as it ought to be; for in religious things our practice declares a cordial approbation, as being a part of our profession, wherein we ought to be sincere. Some again make some pleas, that bishops, and some government by them, are appointed by the apostles, and therefore a submission unto them may be justly required as a condition of communion. For we will not now dispute but that whatever is so appointed may be so required, although we believe that every particular instance of this nature is not rigidly to be insisted on, if it belong not unto the essentials of the church, and it be dubious to some whether it be so appointed or no; but yet neither doth an admittance of this plea give us any relief in this matter: for suppose it should or might be proved that there ought to be, according to the mind of Christ, in all churches, bishops, with a pre-eminence above presbyters in order or degree, and that the rule of the church doth principally belong unto them that are so, yet will not this concession bear an application to the present question, so as to afford us any relief; for the granting of things so dubious and questionable can never give them such an evidence of truth and firmitude in the church as to warrant the making of them necessary conditions of communion unto all Christians. Neither doth it follow, from any thing that pretendeth to fall under Scripture proof, that such bishops should be diocesan; that they should depend on archbishops over them; that they should assume the whole power of church rule and discipline into their hands; that they should administer it by chancellors, archdeacons, commissaries, and the like; that this should be done by presentments, or indictments, citations, processes, litigious pleadings, after the manner of secular or civil courts, to the exclusion of that rule and discipline which the gospel directs unto, with the management of it in love and brotherly compassion, in the name and by the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. But these things we shall not in particular insist upon, for the reason before given. This we must say, that take the whole of the government and the administration thereof together, — which by the conformity required of us we must testify our approbation of and acquiescence in, or we deal hypocritically with them that require it of us, — and we know it to be so far unscriptural as that an acknowledgment of it and submission unto it cannot duly and justly be made a necessary condition of communion unto us. It may be it will be said that submission unto the government of the church is not so much a condition of communion with it as it is that wherein our communion itself with it doth consist, and it is but a fancy to think of communion with a church without it. But this is otherwise; as appears in those churches where all rule and government being left in the hand of the civil magistrate, there communion is merely spiritual in the administration of evangelical ordinances. And might but that be admitted which nature, reason, the law of the Christian faith and gospel obedience, do require, — namely, that church-fellowship and communion be built upon men's own judgment and choice, — this would go a great way towards the pacification of our differences. But if this be so, and that all church-communion

consists in submission to the government of it, or at least that it doth so principally, it becomes them by whom it is owned and avowed so to do to take care that that government be derived from the authority of Christ, and administered according to his mind, or all church-communion, properly so called, will be overthrown.

3. We are required to use and observe the *ceremonies* in worship which the present church hath appointed, or doth use and observe. This also is made a necessary condition of communion unto us; for many are at this day actually cast out of all communion for not observing of them. Some are so proceeded against for not observing of holy-days, some for not kneeling at the sacrament of the Lord's supper, some for not using the sign of the cross in baptism; and what would become of ministers that should neglect or omit to wear the surplice in sacred administrations is easy to conjecture. But these things are all of them unwritten and unscriptural. Great and many, indeed, have been the disputes of learned men to prove that although they have no divine institution, nor yet example of apostolical or primitive practice, yet that they may be lawfully used, for decency and order in the worship of God. Whether they have evinced what they aimed at is as yet undetermined. But supposing in this case all to be as they would pretend and plead that it should be, yet because they are all granted to be arbitrary inventions of men, and very few of those who make use of them are agreed what is their proper use and signification, or whether they have any or no, they are altogether unmeet to be made a necessary condition of communion; for inquiry may be made, on what warranty or by what rule they may be appointed so to be? Those who preside in and over the churches of Christ do so in his name and by his authority; and therefore they can impose nothing on them, as a condition of their communion together, but what his name is upon or what they have his authority for, and it will be dangerous to set his seal unto our own appointments. For what men think meet to do themselves in the matters of the house of God and his worship, it may be measured and accepted with him according to their light and design; but for what they impose on others, and that under no less penalty than the deprivation of the outward administration of all the privileges procured for them by Jesus Christ, they ought to have his warrant and authority for. And their zeal is to be bewailed who not only cast men out of all church-communion, so far as in them lieth, for a refusal to observe those voluntarily-imposed ceremonies in sacred worship, but also prosecute them with outward force, to the ruin of them and their families; and we cannot but wonder that any should as yet think meet to make use of prisons, and the destruction of men thereby, as an appendix of their ecclesiastical discipline, exercised in it he highest severity, on no greater occasions than the omission of the observance of these ceremonies. Whether such proceedings are measured by present interest, or the due consideration of what will be pleasing to the Lord Jesus Christ at the last day, is not difficult to determine.

4. As we are *ministers*, there is in some cases required of us, under the same penalty, *an oath of canonical obedience*. We need not labour to prove this to be unscriptural; nor, to

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avoid provocations, shall we at present declare the rise, nature, and use of it, with the fierce digladiations that have formerly been about it We can look upon it no otherwise but as that which is contrary to the liberty and unworthy of the office of a minister of the gospel.

We know not any thing else which is required of us unto the end mentioned, unless it be of some *a subscription unto the articles of religion*. And this, because the Scripture enjoins unto all a consent unto sound doctrine and a form of wholesome words, may be admitted so far as those articles concern only points of faith; but whereas there is annexed unto them and enjoined, with other things, an approbation of all those instances of conditions of communion before insisted on, a subscription unto the whole becomes of the same nature with things themselves therein approved of.

These are the conditions of communion with the church of England which are proposed unto us, and which we are indispensably to submit unto if we intend to be partakers thereof; and these are all that we know of that nature. That any of these are in particular prescribed in the word of God, much less that they can derive any warranty from thence to be made necessary conditions of church-communion, will not, we suppose, be pretended by any. If, therefore, any divisions do ensue on the refusal of some to admit of these conditions, the guilt of them cannot, by any rule of Scripture, or from any example of the first churches, be charged on them who make that refusal. Other groundless accusations and charges we value not, for this is but man's day, the judgment whereof we neither stand nor fall unto; yea, we esteem ourselves obliged, in all peaceableness and sobriety, to bear witness against such impositions, and unto that liberty wherewith the Lord Christ hath made his churches and disciples free. And if once things were come unto that state that men would assign no other terms of church-communion than what Christ hath appointed, it would quickly appear where the guilt of our divisions would yet remain, if any such divisions would yet remain; but so long as there is a desire to make the wills and wisdoms of some men, fallible even as others, the rule and measure of obedience in spiritual things, an end of strife and contention among Christians will be expected in vain. And this we say with hearts in some measure sensible and pained to see the body of Christ torn in pieces by the lusts, passions, and carnal interests of men. Could we contribute any thing to the healing of the wounds and ruptures that are amongst Christians, provided it may have a consistency with the mind of Christ and the duty we owe unto him (as, indeed, nothing else will really contribute any thing thereunto), we should with all readiness and faithfulness give up our best endeavours therein; and where we can do nothing else, we hope we shall bear with patience those disdainful reproaches which the pride of men, blown up by a confluence of secular, perishing advantages, prompts them to pour out upon us for our noncompliance with their impositions.

Secondly, By the conformity required of us, we must consent unto *the omission of sundry duties*, which are made so unto us by the command and appointment of Jesus Christ. If we are at any time hindered in the discharge of any necessary duty by others, we have somewhat

to plead in our own excuse, but if we ourselves voluntarily consent to the neglect or omission of them, we cannot avoid the guilt of sin; and the worst way whereby such a consent may be expressed is by compact and agreement with others, as though it were in our power to bargain with other men what duties we will observe and what we will omit in the worship of God. Now, in the conformity required of us we are to give this consent, and that as it were by compact and agreement, which deprives us of all pretence of excuse in our omissions. It is no time afterward to plead that we would discharge such duties were we not hindered or forbidden, — we have ourselves antecedently and voluntarily renounced a concern in such forbidden duties; for no man can honestly conform but it is with a declared resolution to accept of all the terms and consequents of it, with an approbation of them. Under this notion it is that we look on conformity; and what others apprehend thereby or understand therein, who seem to press men to conform unto what they do not approve, we know not. If, then, there be any omission of known duties inseparably accompanying our conformity, that thereby we solemnly consent unto.

This, therefore, we are obliged to refuse, because without sin, in the voluntary neglect and omission of duty, we cannot comply with it; which, therefore, can be no schism in us, nor what might in any way render us blamable. The Lord Christ hath prescribed no such law of unity and peace unto his churches as that his disciples should be bound constantly to neglect any known duty which they owe to himself for their sakes; nor do his institutions interfere, that the observance of any one should exclude a due attendance unto another. Neither doth he by his commands bring any one into a necessity of doing that which is evil, or of omitting any thing that is required of him in the way of duty. However, therefore, we value church peace and union, we dare not purchase it by an abrenunciation of any duty we owe to Jesus Christ; nor would an agreement procured on such terms be of any use unto us, or of advantage to the church itself. Wherefore, that compliance in church-communion which would be obstructive of any necessary duties is not by the Lord Christ enjoined us; and therefore its omission cannot be culpable in us: but it would itself be our sin; especially would it be thus where the duties so to be omitted are such as are incumbent on us by virtue of especial office, wherein we are peculiarly required to be faithful. It remaineth, therefore, only that we declare wherein we should by conformity engage unto the omission of such duties as are indispensably required of us; and this we shall do in some few instances:—

1. Every minister of the gospel hath, by the appointment of Jesus Christ, *the whole immediate care of the flock* whereof he is overseer committed unto him. That no part hereof which belong unto their edification is exempted from him, the charge that is given unto him and the account which will be expected from him do sufficiently evidence. For as ministers are called overseers, rulers, guides, pastors, and the like, so are they commanded to feed the flock, to take the oversight of it, and to rule the house of God, [Acts xx. 17, 28](#); [1 Tim. iii. 5](#); [1 Pet. v. 1–4](#); [Heb. xiii. 17](#); — a discharge of all which must come into their account.



Nor is there any word spoken in the whole Scripture, relating to the rule and government of the church, which is not spoken principally with respect unto them. Nor is there the least intimation of an exemption of any part of the discipline of the gospel from their office or care. If it be pretended that there is, let the places be produced wherein such an exemption is made, or any instances of it among the first churches, and they shall be considered; for hitherto no such thing has been attempted that we know of. Nor is it at all concluded from the plea that some are appointed unto a superior degree above others in the rule of the church; for a man may have the whole rule of his flock committed unto him, although he should be obliged to give an account unto others of his discharge thereof. It is, therefore, the duty of all ministers of the gospel, not only to teach, instruct, and preach to their flocks, but to go before them also in rule and government, and in the exercise of the spiritual discipline appointed in the gospel, in the order wherein it is appointed, for their edification. The keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed unto them, or they are not: if they are not, by what authority do they take upon them to open and shut in the house of God, in ministerial teaching and authoritative administration of sacred ordinances? for these things belong unto the authority which is given by Christ under that metaphorical expression of “the keys of the kingdom of heaven,” the reason of the allusion and its application being obvious. And if these are not received by any, they are usurpers if they undertake to administer unto the church authoritatively in the name of Jesus Christ. If they are given or granted unto them, how may it be made to appear that they are so for the ends mentioned only, but not for the rule and government of the church, which also belongs unto them? where is the exemption in the grant made to them? where are the limits assigned unto their power, that they shall exercise it in some concerns of the kingdom of heaven, but not in others? And whereas the greatest and most necessary parts of this power, such as are ministerial teaching and the administration of the sacraments, are confessedly committed unto them, how comes it to pass that the less should be reserved from them; for whereas the former are necessary to the very being of the church, the latter are esteemed by some scarcely to belong unto it. To say that bishops only receive these keys, and commit or lend the use of them to others, for such ends and purposes as they are pleased to limit, is both foreign to the Scripture and destructive of all ministerial power. And if ministers are not the ministers of Christ, but of men; if they have not their authority from him, but from others; if that may be parcelled out unto them which they have from him, at the pleasure of any over them, — there needs not much contending about them or their office.

Besides, the relation of these things one to another is such, as that if they were absolutely separated, their efficacy unto edification will be exceedingly impaired, if not destroyed. If those who have the dispensation of the word committed unto them have not liberty and authority; if it be not part of their office-duty to watch over them unto whom it is dispensed, and that accompanied with spiritual weapons, “mighty through God” towards the fulfilling

of the obedience of some and the “revenging of disobedience” in others; if they have no power to judge, admonish, or censure them that walk unanswerably to the doctrine of the gospel preached unto them, and whose profession they have taken upon them, — they will be discouraged in the pursuit of their work, and the word itself be deprived of a helpful means appointed by Christ himself to further its efficacy. And those who shall content themselves with the preaching of the word only, without an inquiry after its success in the minds and lives of them that are committed to their charge, by virtue of that care and authoritative inspection which indeed belongs to their office, will find that as they do discharge but one part of their duty, so they will grow cold and languid therein also. And when there hath been better success, — as there hath where some against their wills have been hindered by power from the exercise of the charge laid on them by Christ in this matter, making up as they were able, by private solicitude and persuasion, what they were excluded from attending unto in public ministerial acts, — it hath been an effect of especial favour from God, not to be ordinarily expected on the account of any rule. And thence it is that, for the most part, things openly and visibly do fall out otherwise, the people being little reformed in their lives, and preachers waxing cold and formal in their work. And if the censures of the church are administered by them who preach not the word unto the people, they will be weak and nervous as unto any influence on the consciences of men. Their minds, indeed, may be affected by them so far as they are attended with outward penalties; but how little this tends unto the promotion of holiness or the reformation of men’s lives experience doth abundantly testify. Church discipline and censures are appointed merely and solely to second, confirm, and establish the word, and to vindicate it from abuse and contempt, as expressing the sense that Jesus Christ hath of them by whom it is received, and of them by whom it is despised. And it is the word alone which gives authority unto discipline and censures. Where, therefore, they are so separated, as that those by whom the word is administered are excluded from an interest in the exercise of discipline, and those unto whom the administration of discipline is committed are such as neither do nor for the most part ought to preach the word, it cannot be but that the efficacy and success of them both will be impeded.

2. It is so, also, as to the administration of the sacraments, especially that of the supper of the Lord. These are the principal mysteries of our religion, as to its external form and administration, — the sacred rites whereby all the grace, mercy, and privileges of the gospel are sealed and confirmed unto them who are in a due manner made partakers of them. About them, therefore, and their orderly administration, did the primitive churches always use their utmost care and diligence; and these in an especial manner did they make use of with respect unto them to whom they were to be communicated: for they feared, partly lest men should be made partakers of them to their disadvantage, being not so qualified as to receive them to their benefit, as knowing that where persons through their own defaults obtain not spiritual profit by them, they are in no small danger of having them turned into



a snare; and partly that these holy and sacred institutions themselves might neither be profaned, contaminated, nor exposed unto contempt. Hence, of those who gave up their names unto the church, and took upon them the profession of the gospel, the greatest part were continued for a long season under their care and inspection, but were not admitted into the society of the church in those ordinances until upon good trial they were approved. And if any one after his admittance was found to walk unanswerably unto his profession, or to fall into any known sin, whence offence did ensue among the faithful, he was immediately dealt withal in the discipline of the church, and, in case of impenitency, separated from the congregation. Nor did the guides or pastors of the church think they had any greater trust committed unto them than in this, that they should use their utmost care and diligence that persons unmeet and unworthy might not be admitted into that church relation wherein they should have a right to approach unto the table of the Lord, and to remove from thence such as had demeaned themselves unworthy of that communion. This they looked on as belonging unto their ministerial office, and as a duty required of them in the discharge thereof by Jesus Christ. And herein they had sufficient direction, both in the rule of the word, as also in the nature of the office committed unto them, and of the work wherewith they were intrusted; for all ministers are stewards of the mysteries of Christ, of whom it is required that they should be faithful. Now, as it belongs unto a faithful steward to distribute unto the household of his lord the provisions which he hath made for them and allows unto them in due season; so also to keep off those from partaking in them, who without his master's order and warrant, would intrude themselves into his family, and unjustly possess themselves of the privileges of it. In these things doth the faithfulness of a steward consist. And the same is required in ministers of the gospel with respect unto the household of their Lord and Master, and the provision that he hath made for it. These, therefore, being undeniably parts of the duty of faithful pastors or ministers, it is evident how many of them we must solemnly renounce a concernment in, upon a compliance with the conformity in matter and manner required of us. Neither are these duties such as are of light importance, or such as may be omitted without any detriment unto the souls of men. The glory of Christ, the honour of the gospel, the purity of the church and its edification, are greatly concerned in them. And they in whose minds a neglect of these things is countenanced, by their attendance unto some outward forms and appearances of order, have scarcely considered Him aright with whom they have to do. Some, therefore, of these duties we shall instance in:— First, it is the duty of all faithful ministers of the gospel *to consider aright who are so admitted* into the church as to obtain a right thereby unto a participation of all its holy ordinances. Take care they must that none who have that right granted them by the law of Christ be discouraged or excluded, nor any altogether unworthily admitted. And hereunto, as it is generally acknowledged, a credible profession of repentance, faith, and obedience (that is, of those which are sincere and saving) is required. To neglect an inquiry after these things



in those that are to be admitted unto the table of the Lord is to prostitute the holy ordinances of the gospel unto contempt and abuse, and to run cross to the constant practice of the church in all ages, even under its greatest degeneracy. And the right discharge of this duty, — if we may be allowed to be in earnest in spiritual things, if it be believed that it is internal grace and, holiness for the sake whereof all outward administrations are instituted and celebrated, — is of great weight and importance to the souls of men; for on the part of persons to be admitted, if they are openly and visibly unworthy, what do we thereby but what lies in us to destroy their souls? It cannot be but that their hardening and impenitency in sin will be hazarded thereby; for whereas they have granted unto them the most solemn pledge of the Lord Christ's acceptance of them, and of his approbation of their state towards God, that the church is authorized to give, what reason have they to think that their condition is not secure, or to attend unto the doctrine of the church pressing them to look after a change and relinquishment of it? For although the administration of the sealing ordinances doth not absolutely set the approbation of Christ unto every individual person made partaker of them, yet it doth absolutely do so to the profession which they make. They witness in the name of Christ his approbation of it, and therewithal of all persons, according to their real interest in it and answering of it. But those who in no considerable instances do answer this profession can obtain nothing unto themselves but an occasion of hardening, and rendering them secure in a state of impenitency; for tell men whilst you please of the necessity of conversion to God, of reformation, and a holy life, yet if, in the course of their unholiness, you confirm unto them the love of Christ, and give them pledges of their salvation by him, they will not much regard your other exhortations. And thence it is come to pass in the world that the conformity (worth that we contend about ten thousand times over) which ought to be between the preaching of the word, the administration of the sacraments, and the lives of them who are partakers of them, is for the most part lost. The word still declares that without regeneration, without saving faith, repentance, and obedience, none can enter into the kingdom of God. In the administration of the other ordinances there is an abatement made of this rigorous determination, and men have their salvation assured unto them without a credible profession, yea, or a pretence of these qualifications; and the lives of the most who live in the enjoyment of these things seem to declare that they neither believe the one nor much regard the other.

In the meantime, the church itself, as to its purity and the holiness of its communion, is damaged by the neglect of a careful inspection into this duty; for it cannot be but that ignorance, worldliness, and profaneness, will spread themselves as a leprosy over such a church, whence their communion will be of very little use and advantage unto believers. And hereby do churches, which should be the glory of Christ, by their expression of the purity, the holiness, and excellency of his person and doctrine, become the principal means and occasions of his dishonour in the world; and he that shall read that "Christ loved his

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church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it unto himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish,” [Eph. v. 25–27](#), will be much to seek after the effects of this design of Christ in his love and death, if he measure them by what appears in churches under the power and influence of this neglect. Nor do those who plead for the continuance of things in such a state, without reformation, sufficiently consider the representation that the Lord Christ made of himself when he was about to deal with his churches, some of which were overtaken with carelessness and negligence in this matter; and yet hath he therein laid down a rule as to what kind of proceedings particular churches are to expect from him in all generations. And it is a matter of no small amazement that any churches dare approve and applaud themselves in such a state of impurity and defection as is evidently condemned by him in those primitive patterns. Do men think he is changed, or that he will approve in them what he judged and condemned in others? or do they suppose he minds these things no more, and because he is unseen, that he seeth not? But we shall all find at length that he is “the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever,” and that as the judge of all he stands at the door.

Now this duty, by conformity, we renounce a concernment in, so as to attend unto it, by virtue of ministerial authority; whence the guilt of all the evil consequents thereof before mentioned must fall on us: for it is known that a mere shadow of the work of this duty, and not so much as a shadow of authority for it, would be left unto us. For what is allowed in case of a sudden emergency, upon an offence taken by the whole congregation at the wickedness of any (which is instructed beforehand that this ought to be no matter of offence unto them), as it may be it cannot be proved ever to have been observed in any one instance, so the allowed exercise of it would yield no relief in this case. And if any should extend the rule beyond the interpretation that is put upon it by the present current administration of church-discipline, there is no great question to be made what entertainment he would meet withal for his so doing. And it is to no purpose to come into the church as it were on purpose to go out again. And if, instead of dealing with the souls and consciences of men in the name and authority of Christ, as stewards of his mysteries, any can content themselves to be informers of crimes unto others, we desire their pardon if we cannot comply with them therein. And this is the sum of what at present we are pleading about: It is the duty of ministers of particular churches to judge and take care concerning the fitness of them, according unto the rule of the gospel and the nature of the duty required of them, who are to be admitted into the fellowship of the church, and thereby into a participation of all the holy ordinances thereof. This charge the Lord Christ hath committed unto them, and hereof will require an account from them. Upon the neglect or right discharge of this duty consequents of great moment do depend; yea, the due attendance unto it hath a great influence into the preservation of the being of the church, and is the hinge whereon the well-being of it doth turn.



But the power of exercising ministerial authority, in a just attendance unto this duty, we must renounce in our conformity, if we should submit thereunto; for we have showed before, that after we have conformed, we can pretend no excuse from what is enjoined of us or forbidden unto us by virtue thereof, all being founded in our own voluntary act and consent. Hence, the guilt of this omission must wholly fall on us; which we are not willing to undergo.

There are, we know, many objections raised against the committing of this power and trust unto the ministers of particular congregations. Great inconveniences are pretended as the consequences of it. The ignorance and unfitness of most ministers for the discharge of such a trust, if it should be committed unto them, the arbitrariness and partiality which probably others will exercise therein, the yoke that will be brought on the people thereby, and disorder in the whole, are usually pleaded to this purpose and insisted on. But, —

1. This trust is committed unto some or other by Christ himself; and it is necessary that so it should be. Never did he appoint, nor is it meet, nor was it ever practised in the primitive church, that every one should at his pleasure, on his own presumption, intrude himself into a participation of the holy things of the house of God. The consideration of men's habitations, with their age, and the like, are of no consideration with respect unto any rule of the gospel. Either, therefore, it must be left unto the pleasure and will of every man, be he never so ignorant, wicked, or profligate, to impose himself on the communion of any church of Christ, or there must be a judgment in the church concerning them who are to be admitted unto their communion.

2. From the first planting of the Christian religion, those who preached the gospel unto the conversion of the souls of men were principally intrusted with this power; and it was their duty to gather them who were so converted into that church order and fellowship wherein they might partake of the sacred mysteries or solemn ordinances of the Christian worship. And this course of proceeding continued uninterrupted, with some little variation in the manner of the exercise of this power and duty, until corruption had spread itself over the face of the whole professing church in the world. But still a shadow and resemblance of it was retained; and in the papal church itself to this day, particular confessors are esteemed competent judges of the meetness of their penitents for an admission unto the sacraments of their church. And who shall now be esteemed more meet for the discharge of this duty than those who succeed in the office and work of preaching the word, whereby men are prepared for church-society? And as it is a thing utterly unheard-of in antiquity, that those who dispensed the word unto the illumination and conversion of men should not have the power of their disposal, as to their being added to the church or suspended for a time, as there was occasion; so it is as uncouth that those who now sustain the same place and office unto several congregations attending on their ministry should be deprived of it.

3. If there be that ignorance and disability in ministers as is pretended, the blame of it reflects on them by whom they are made; and we are not obliged to accommodate any of



the ways or truths of Christ unto the sins and ignorance of men. And if they are insufficient for this work, how come they to be so sufficient for that which is greater, — namely, to divide the word aright unto all their hearers? But we speak of such ministers as are competently qualified, according to the rule of the gospel, for the discharge of their office, and no other ought there to be; and such there are, blessed be God, through the watchful care of our Lord Jesus Christ over his church, and his supplies of the gifts of his Spirit unto them. And such as these know it is their duty to study, meditate, pray, ask counsel and advice of others, perhaps of more wisdom and experience than themselves, that they may know how in all things to behave themselves in the house of God. Nor will God be wanting unto them who in sincerity seek direction from him for the discharge of any duty which he calls them unto. Other security of regular, orderly, and useful proceedings in this matter, Christ hath not given us, nor do we need; for the due observance of his appointments will not fail the attaining of his ends, which ought to be ours also.

4. The judgment and acting of the church-officers, in the admission of persons into the complete society of the faithful, is not arbitrary, as is pretended. They have the rule of the Scripture, which they are diligently to attend unto. This is the entire rule which the Lord Christ hath left unto his church, both for their doctrine and discipline; whatever is beyond this or beside it is not his, nor owned by him. What is not done according to this rule is of no force in the consciences of men, though it may stand, until lawfully recalled, for the preservation of outward order. And whatever arbitrariness may be supposed in making a judgment upon the rule of the word, or in the application of its rule unto the present case, it must abide in some or other. And who shall be thought more meet or able to make a right determination thereon than those whose duty it is, and who have the advantage to be acquainted with all the circumstances belonging to the case proposed? Besides, there is the judgment of the church, or the congregation itself; which is greatly to be regarded. Even in the church of England, a suspension of any from the Lord's supper is allowed unto the curate, upon the offence of the congregation: which is a sufficient evidence that a judgment in this case is owned to be their due; for none can take offence but upon a judgment of the matter at which he is offended, nor, in this case, without a right to determine that some offences ought to debar persons from a participation of the holy ordinances, as also what those offences are. This, therefore, is to be considered as an aid and assistance unto ministers in the discharge of their duty. It is the church into whose communion persons are to be admitted. And although it be no way necessary that determinations in this case should be always made by suffrage or a plurality of votes in the body of the church, yet, if the sense or mind of the congregation may be known, or is so (upon the inquiry that ought to be made unto that purpose), that any persons are unmeet for their communion, it is not convenient they should be received; nor will their admission, in this case, be of any advantage to themselves or the church. The light of reason, and the fundamental, constitutive principles of all free societies,



such as the church is, ascribe this liberty unto it; and the primitive church practised accordingly, [Acts ix. 26–28](#); [Rom. xiv. 1](#). So, also, is the judgment and desire of the congregation to be considered in the admission of any, if they are made known to the guides of it; for it is expected from them they should confirm their love unto them without dissimulation, as members of the same body: and, therefore, in their approbation of what is done, their rulers have light and encouragement in their own duty. Besides, there is appointed, and ought to be preserved, a communion among churches themselves. By virtue hereof, they are not only to make use of mutual aid, advice, and counsel, antecedently unto actings of importance, but each particular church is, upon just demand, to give an account unto other churches of what they do in the administration of the ordinances of the gospel among them; and if in any thing it hath mistaken or miscarried, to rectify them upon their advice and judgment. And it were easy to manifest how, through these means and advantages, the edification of the church and the liberty of Christians is sufficiently secured in that discharge of duty which is required in the pastors of the churches about the admission of persons unto a participation of holy ordinances in them.

5. This duty, therefore, must either be wholly neglected, — which will unavoidably tend to the corrupting and debauching of all churches, and in the end unto their ruin, — or it must be attended unto by each particular church under the conduct of their guides and rulers, or some others must take it upon themselves. What hath been the issue of a supposal that it may be discharged in the latter way is too well known to be insisted on: for whilst those who undertake the exercise of church-power are such as do not dispense the word or preach it unto them towards whom it is to be exercised, but are strangers unto their spiritual state, and all the circumstances of it; whilst they have no way to act or exercise their presumed authority but by citations, processes, informations, and penalties, according to the manner of secular courts of judicature in causes civil and criminal; whilst the administration of it is committed unto men utterly unacquainted with and unconcerned in the discipline of the gospel, or the preservation of the church of Christ in purity and order; and whilst herein many, the most, or all of them who are so employed, have thereby outward emoluments and advantages, which they do principally regard, — the due and proper care of the right order of the churches, unto the glory of Christ and their own edification, is utterly omitted and lost. It is true, many think this the only decent, useful, and expedient way for the government of the church; and think it wondrous unreasonable that others will not submit thereunto and acquiesce therein. But what would they have us do? or what is it that they would persuade us unto? Is it that this kind of rule in and over the church hath institution given it in the Scripture, or countenance from apostolical practice? Both they and we know that no pretence of any such plea can be made. Is it that the first churches after the apostles, or the primitive church, did find such a kind of rule to be necessary, and therefore erected it among themselves? There is nothing more remote from truth. Would they persuade us



that as ministers of the gospel, and such as have or may have the care of particular churches committed unto us, we have no such concernment in these things but what we may solemnly renounce, and leave them wholly to the management of others? We are not able to believe them. The charge that is given unto us, the account that will be required, of us, the nature of the office we are called unto, continually testify other things unto us. Wherefore, we dare not voluntarily engage into the neglect or omission of this duty, which Christ requireth at our hands, and of whose neglect we see so many sad consequents and effects. The Lord Christ, we know, hath the same thoughts, and makes the same judgment of his churches, as he did of old, when he made a solemn revelation and declaration of them; and then we find that he charged the failings, neglects, and miscarriages of the churches principally upon the angels or ministers of them. And we would not willingly, by our neglect, render ourselves obnoxious unto his displeasure, nor betray the churches whereunto we do relate unto his just indignation, for their declension from the purity of his institutions, and the vigour of that faith and love which they had professed. We should, moreover, by the conformity required of us, and according to the terms on which it is proposed, engage ourselves against the exercise of our ministerial office and power, with respect unto them who are already members of particular churches; for this we carry along with us, that by conforming we voluntarily consent unto the whole state of conformity, and unto all that we are to do or not to do by the law thereof. Now, it is not to be expected that all who are duly initiated or joined unto any church shall always walk blameless, according unto the evangelical rule of obedience, without giving offence unto others. The state of the church is not like to be so blessed in this world, that all who belong unto it should be constantly and perpetually inoffensive. This, indeed, is the duty of all, but it will fall out otherwise. It did so amongst the primitive churches of old; and is not, therefore, otherwise to be expected amongst us, on whom the ends of the world are come, and who are even pressed with the decays and ruins of it. Many hypocrites may obtain an admission into church societies, by the strictest rules that they can proceed upon therein; and these, after they have known and professed the ways of righteousness, may, and often do, turn aside from the holy commandment delivered unto them, and fall again into the pollutions of the world. Many good men, and really sincere believers, may, through the power of temptations, be surprised into faults and sins scandalous to the gospel, and offensive to the whole congregation whereof they are members. Hath the Lord Christ appointed no relief in and for his churches in such cases; no way whereby they may clear themselves from a participation in such impieties, or deliver themselves from being looked on as those who give countenance unto them, as they who continue in this communion may and ought to be; no power whereby they may put forth from among them the old leaven, which would otherwise infect the whole; no way to discharge themselves and their societies of such persons as are impenitent in their sins; no means for the awakening, conviction, humiliation, and recovery of them that have offended; no way to declare his

mind and judgment in such cases, with the sentence that he denounceth in heaven against them that are impenitent? [1 Cor. v. 1, 2, 6, 7](#); [2 Cor. ii. 6, vii. 11](#); [Matt. xvi. 19, xviii. 15–20](#); [Rev. ii. 1, 2](#). If he hath done none of these things, it is evident that no churches in this world can possibly be preserved from disorder and confusion. Nor can they, by love, and the fruits of a holy communion, be kept in such a condition as wherein he can be pleased with them, or continue to walk amongst them; for let men please themselves whilst they will with the name of the church, it is no otherwise with them where persons obstinately and impenitently wicked, and whose lives are wholly discrepant from the rule of the gospel, are suffered to abide without control. But if he hath made the provision inquired after in this case, as it is evident that he hath, both the authority he hath granted unto his church for these ends, his commands to exercise it with care and watchfulness, with the rules given them to proceed by, with the known end of all instituted churches for the promotion of holiness, being all open and plain in the Scripture, it must then be inquired unto whom this trust is firstly committed, and of whom these duties are principally required.

For private members of the church, what is their duty, and the way how they may regularly attend unto the discharge of it, according to the mind of Christ, in case of scandalous sins and offences among them, they are so plainly and particularly laid down and directed, as that, setting aside the difficulties that are cast on the rule herein by the extremely forced and unprovable exceptions of some interested persons, none can be ignorant of what is required of them, [Matt. xviii. 15–20](#). And a liberty to discharge their duty herein, they are bound by the law of Christ in due order to provide for. If they are abridged hereof, and deprived thereby of so great a means of their own edification, as also of the usefulness required in them towards the church whereof they are members, it is a spiritual oppression that they suffer under. And where it is voluntarily neglected by them, not only the guilt of their own, but of other men's sins also lies upon them. Neither is their own guilt small herein; for suffering sin to abide on a brother without reproof is a fruit of hatred in the interpretation of the law, [Lev. xix. 17](#); and this hatred is a sin of a heinous nature in the sense of the gospel, [1 John ii. 9, 11, iii. 15](#). The duty, also, of the whole church in such cases is no less evidently declared: for from such persons as walk disorderly, and refuse to reform on due admonition, they are to withdraw, and to put from amongst them such obstinate offenders; as also, previously thereunto, to “watch diligently lest any root of bitterness spring up among them, whereby they might be defiled.” And hereunto, also, are subservient all the commands that are given them to exhort and admonish one another, that the whole church may be preserved in purity, order, holiness, and faithfulness. But the chief inquiry is, With whom rests the principal care and power, according to the mind of Christ, to see the discipline of the church in particular congregations exercised, and to exercise it accordingly? If this should be found to be in the ministers, and, through their neglect in the administration of it, offenders be left in their sins and impenitency, without a due application of the means for their healing

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and recovery; if the church itself come to be corrupted thereby, and to fall under the displeasure of Jesus Christ, — as these things, in one degree or other, more or less, will ensue on that neglect, — it will not turn unto their comfortable account at the great day. That this is their duty, that this authority and inspection is committed unto them, the reasons before insisted on in the ease of admission do undeniably evince. And if those ministers who do conscientiously attend unto the discharge of their ministerial office towards particular flocks would but examine their own hearts by the light of open and plain Scripture testimonies, with the nature of their office, and of the work they are engaged in, there would need little arguing to convince them of what trust is committed unto them, or what is required from them. If the consciences of others are not concerned in these things, if they have no light into the duty which seems to be incumbent on them, their principles and practices, or as we think mistakes and neglects, can be no rule unto us. What we may be forbidden, what we may be hindered in, is of another consideration. But for us voluntarily to engage unto the omission of that duty, which we cannot but believe that it will be required of us, is an evil which we are every way obliged to avoid.

There are also sundry particular duties, relating unto these that are more general, which in like manner, on the terms of communion proposed unto us, must be foregone and omitted. And where, by these means or neglects, some of the principal ways of exercising church-communion are cast out of the church, some of the means of the edification of its members are wholly lost, and sundry duties incumbent on them are virtually prohibited unto them, until they are utterly grown into disuse, it is no wonder if, in such churches where these evils are inveterate and remediless, particular persons do peaceably provide for their own edification by joining themselves unto such societies as wherein the rule of the gospel is more practically attended unto. It is taken for granted that the church is not corrupted by the wicked persons that are of its communion, nor its administrations defiled by their presence and communication in them, nor the edification of others prejudiced thereby, because it hath been so said by some of the ancients, though whether suitably unto the doctrine of the apostles or no is very questionable, [1 Cor. v. 6, 9–11](#); [2 Thess. iii. 6](#). But suppose this should be so, yet where wicked persons are admitted, without distinction or discrimination, unto the communion of the church, where they are tolerated therein, without any procedure with them or against them, contrary to express rules of the Scripture given to that purpose, so that those who are really pious among them can by no means prevail for the reformation of the whole, they may, not only without breach of charity, impairing of faith or love, or without the least suspicion of the guilt of schism, forsake the communion of such a congregation to join unto another, where there is more care of piety, purity, and holiness, but if they have any care of their own edification, and a due care of their salvation, they will understand it to be their duty so to do.



And we may a little touch hereon once for all. The general end of the institution of churches, as such, is the visible management of the enmity on the part of the seed of the woman, Christ the head, and the members of his body mystical, against the serpent and his seed. In the pursuit of this end, God ever had a church in the world, separate from persons openly profane doing the work of the devil, their father; and there is nothing in any church-constitution which tends unto or is compliant with the mixing and reconciling these distinct seeds, whilst they are such, and visibly appear so to be. And therefore, as the types, prophecies, and promises of the Old Testament did declare that when all things were actually brought unto a head in Christ Jesus, the church and all things that belong unto it should be holy, — that is, visibly so, — so the description generally and uniformly given us of the churches of the New Testament when actually called and erected is, that they consisted of persons called, sanctified, justified, ingrafted into Christ, [Isa. xxvi. 2](#); [Ezek. xliii. 12, xliv. 9](#); or saints, believers, faithful ones, purified and separate unto God, [Lev. xi. 44](#); [Rom. i. 6](#); [1 Cor. i. 1, 2, xii. 13](#); [Phil. i. 1](#); [Col. ii. 11](#). Such they professed themselves to be, such they were judged to be by them that were concerned in their communion; and as such they engage themselves to walk in their conversation. By what authority so great a change should be now wrought in the nature and constitution of churches, that it should be altogether indifferent of what sort of persons they do consist, we know not. Yea, to speak plainly, we greatly fear that both the worship and worshippers are defiled, [2 Tim. ii. 22](#), where open impenitent sinners are freely admitted unto all sacred administrations without control. And we are sure that as God complaineth that his sanctuary is polluted, when there are brought into it “strangers, uncircumcised in heart, and uncircumcised in flesh,” [Ezek. xliv. 7](#); so the true members of the church are warned of the evil and dangers of such defiling mixtures, and charged to watch against them, [1 Cor. v. 6](#); [Heb. xii. 15, 16](#).

We might yet farther insist on the great evil it would be in us, if we should give a seeming, outward approbation unto those things and their use which we cannot but condemn and desire to have removed out of the worship of God; and, moreover, there is, as we believe, an obligation upon us to give a testimony unto the truth about the worship of God in his church, and not absolutely to hide the light we have received therein under a bushel. Nor would we render the reformation of the church absolutely hopeless, by our professed compliance with the things that ought to be reformed. But what hath been pleaded already is sufficient to manifest that there neither is nor can be a guilt of schism charged either on ministers or people who withhold themselves from the communion of that church or those churches whereof the things mentioned are made conditions necessary and indispensable, and that wherein they must be denied the liberty of performing many duties made necessary unto them by the command of Jesus Christ. And as the rigid imposition of unscriptural conditions of communion is the principal cause of all the schisms and divisions that are among us, so let them be removed and taken out of the way, and we doubt not but that



among all that sincerely profess the gospel there may be that peace and such an agreement obtained, as in observance whereof they may all exercise those duties of love which the strictest union doth require. These we profess ourselves ready for so far as God shall be pleased to help us in the discharge of our duty; as also to renounce every principle or opinion whereof we may be convinced that they are in the least opposite unto or inconsistent with the royal law of love and the due exercise thereof. If men will continue to charge, accuse, or revile us, either out of a causeless distaste against our persons, or misunderstanding of our principles and ways, or upon certain reports, or merely prompted thereunto through a vain elation of mind, arising from the distance wherein, through their secular advantages, they look upon us to stand from them; as we cannot help it, so we shall endeavour not to be greatly moved at it, for it is known that this hath been the lot and portion of those who have gone before us in the profession of the gospel, and sincere endeavours to vindicate the worship of God from the disorders and abuses that have been introduced into it, and probably will be theirs who shall come after us. But the whole of our care is, that “in godly simplicity and sincerity we may have our conversation in the world, not corrupting the word of God, nor using our liberty as a cloak of maliciousness, but as becomes the servants of God.”

But perhaps it will yet be pleaded that this is not the whole which we are charged withal: for it is said that *we do not only withdraw ourselves from the communion of the church of England, but also that we assemble in separate congregations for the celebration of the whole worship of God; whereby we evidently make a division in the church, and contract unto ourselves the guilt of schism*, for what can there be more required thereunto? But what would those who make use of this objection have us to do? Would they have us starve our souls by a wilful neglect of the means appointed for their nourishment? or would they have us live in a constant omission of all the commands of Christ? By them, or those whose cause they plead, we are cast out and excluded from church-communion with them, by the unscriptural conditions of it which they would force upon us. The distance between us that ensues hereon they are the causes of, not we; for we are ready to join with them or any others upon the terms of Christ and the gospel. And do they think it meet that we should revenge their faults upon ourselves by a voluntary abstinence from all the ways and means of our edification? Doth any man think that Jesus Christ leaves any of his disciples unto such a condition as wherein it is impossible they should observe his commands and institutions without sin? That we should join in some societies, that in them we should assemble together for the worship of God in him, and that we should in him do and observe whatever he hath appointed, we look upon as our indispensable duty, made so unto us by his commands. “These things,” say some, “you shall not do with us, if you will do no more; and if you do them among yourselves, you are schismatics.” But this is a severity which we know we shall not meet with at the last day. *We stand at the judgment-seat of Jesus Christ.*

It will, it may be, be demanded by what warrant or authority we do assemble ourselves in church societies, for the administration of gospel ordinances? and who gave us this authority? We answer, that it is acknowledged there is a difference between them and us, so that with them we cannot enjoy the worship of God; but of this difference we are not the cause, nor do give occasion to any blamable divisions by our principles or practices. Where the cause is found, there the guilt remains. This being the state of things with us, it is fond to imagine that any professors of the gospel do absolutely want a warranty or authority to obey Jesus Christ, to observe his commands, and to serve him according to his revealed will. His command in his word, his promise of the acceptance of them, and of his presence among them in all the acts of their holy obedience, the assistance and guidance of his Holy Spirit, which he affords graciously unto them, are a sufficient warranty and authority for what they do in express compliance with his commands; and more they will not plead a power for. Where the Spirit and word of Christ are, there is his authority; and this is no otherwise committed unto men but to enable them to act *obedientially* towards him and *ministerially* towards others. And were church actings considered more with respect unto the obedience that in them is performed unto Christ, which is their first and principal consideration, it would quickly be evident whence men might have authority for their performance. And by the same means are we directed in their order and manner. Besides, the ministers, who go before the people in their assemblies, are all of them (so far as we know) solemnly set apart unto their office and work according unto what Christ hath appointed; and their duty it is to teach unto all men the good ways of Christ, and to go before them who are convinced and persuaded by them in their practice. These things hath their Lord and Master required of them; and an account concerning them will he call them unto at the last day. A dispensation is committed unto them, and a necessity is thence incumbent on them to preach the gospel; and who shall excuse them if they neglect so to do? for that all those who are ministers of the gospel are called to preach the gospel, and that diligently, every one according as he hath received the gift of the grace of God, is out of question with them that do believe the gospel. And of the stewardship which is committed unto them herein are they to give an account; and we do know that "it is a fearful thing" for sinners, that is, wilful neglecters of his commands, "to fall into the hands of the living God." Our Lord Jesus Christ also hath testified beforehand that "he who setteth his hand to this plough, and looketh back again, is not fit for the kingdom of God." He alone who calls them to this work can discharge them of it, and that either by the rule of his word or his providence; and when men are invincibly hindered, as many are at this day, it is their suffering, but not their sin. Otherwise none can absolve them from the duty they owe to Jesus Christ in this matter, and that debt which they owe to the souls of men in undertaking the work of the ministry. Some, indeed, suppose, or pretend to suppose, that a prohibition given them by superiors, forbidding them to preach, though not by nor according unto any rule of the gospel, doth discharge them from any



obligation so to do, that it shall be no more their duty. It would do so, no doubt, had they received no other command to preach the gospel, nor from any other authority, than that of and from those superiors by whom they are forbidden; but being persuaded that they have so from Him who is higher than the highest, they cannot acquiesce in this discharge, nor, being “bought with a price,” can they now be servants of men. But by whom are they thus forbidden to preach? It will be supposed that the church which differs from them, and which originally makes itself a party in these differences, by the conditions of communion which it would impose upon them, is no competent judge in this case; nor will their prohibitions, who apparently thereby revenge their own quarrel, influence the consciences of them that dissent from them: for we speak not of what will or may take place, but what the consciences of men will or may be concerned in. By the civil magistrate they are not forbidden to preach, that we know of. It is true they are prohibited to preach in the legal public meeting-places or churches; and these places being in the power and care of the magistrate, it is meet his terms and conditions of their use should be accepted of, or his prohibition observed, or his penalty quietly undergone, where a peaceable occasion is made use of contrary unto it. As to other places, ministers are not absolutely forbid to preach in them, — no such power is as yet assumed or exercised; only, the manner of assemblies for sacred worship, and the number of them that may assemble, are regulated by laws for secular ends or civil security, and that under express penalties incurred on a contrary practice. But the consciences of ministers cannot be concerned in such laws, so far as to be exempted by them from the obligation that lies upon them from the command of Christ to preach the gospel. This they are commanded by him to do, and others know the penalties from men, under the danger whereof they must attend unto them. Besides, the reasons of these legal prohibitions, so far as they do extend, are taken from civil considerations alone, — namely, of the peace and quiet of the nation, — and not from any scripture or religious rules. And were these prohibitions only temporary or occasional, suited unto such emergencies as may give countenance unto their necessity, there might be a proportionable compliance with them. But whereas they respect all times alike, it is no doubt incumbent on them who act any thing contrary unto such prohibitions to secure their own consciences that they no way interfere with the intention and end of the law, by giving the least countenance or occasion unto civil disturbances; and others, also, by their peaceable deportment in all they do. But whereas they have received a talent from the Lord Christ to trade withal, have accepted of his terms and engaged into his service, without any condition of exception in case of such prohibitions, it is not possible they should satisfy their consciences in desisting from their work on such occurrences, any farther than in what they must yield unto outward force and necessity. It is pretended by some that if such a legal prohibition were given unto all the ministers of the gospel, it would not be obligatory unto them; for if it should be so esteemed, it were in the power of any supreme magistrate lawfully to forbid the whole work of preaching the gospel

unto his subjects, which is contrary to the grant made by God the Father unto Jesus Christ, that “all nations shall be his inheritance,” and the commission he gave thereon unto his apostles, to “teach all nations,” and to “preach the gospel to every creature” under heaven: but it being some only that are concerned in this prohibition, it is their duty, for peace’ sake, to acquiesce in the will of their superiors therein, whilst there are others sufficient to carry on the same work. That peace is or may be secured on other terms hath been already declared; but that one man’s liberty to attend unto his duty, and his doing it accordingly, should excuse another from that which is personally incumbent on himself, is a matter not easily apprehended, nor can be readily digested. Besides, what is pretended of the sufficient number of preachers, without any contribution of aid from the Nonconformists, is indeed but pretended; for if all that are found in the faith, gifted and called to the work of the ministry, in these nations, were equally encouraged unto and in their work, yet would they not be able to answer the necessities of the souls of men requiring an attendance unto it in a due measure and manner: and those who have exercised themselves unto compassionate thoughts towards the multitudes of poor sinners in these nations will not be otherwise minded. Wherefore, these things being premised, we shall shut up these discourses with a brief answer unto the foregoing objection, which was the occasion of them; and we say, —

1. That schism being the name of a sin, or somewhat that is evil, it can in no circumstances be any man’s duty. But we have manifested, as satisfactorily unto our own consciences, so we hope unto the minds of unprejudiced persons, that in our present condition our assemblies for the worship of God are our express duty; and so can have no affinity with any sin or evil. And those who intend to charge us with schism in or for our assemblies must first prove them not to be our duty.

2. Notwithstanding them, or any thing by us performed in them, we do preserve our communion entire with the church of England (that is, all the visible professors of the gospel in this nation), as it is a part of the catholic church, in the unity of the faith owned therein, provided it be not measured by the present opinions of some who have evidently departed from it. Our non-admittance of the present government and discipline of the church, as apprehended national, and as it is in the hands of merely ecclesiastical persons, or such as are pretended so to be, we have accounted for before. But we are one with the whole body of the professors of the protestant religion, in a public avowment of the same faith.

3. Into particular churches we neither are nor can be admitted, but on those terms and conditions which not only we may justly, but which we are bound in a way of duty to refuse; and this also hath been pleaded before. Besides, no man is so obliged unto communion with any particular or parochial church in this nation, but that it is in his own power at any time to relinquish it, and to secure himself also from all laws which may respect that communion, by the removal of his habitation. It is therefore evident that we never had any relation unto any parochial church but what is civil and arbitrary, a relinquishment whereof is practised



at pleasure every day by all sorts of men. Continuing, therefore, in the constant profession of the same faith with all other Protestants in the nation, and the whole body thereof as united in the profession of it under one civil or political head; and having antecedently no evangelical obligation upon us unto local communion in the same ordinances of worship numerically with any particular or parochial church; and being prohibited from any such communion, by the terms, conditions, and customs indispensably annexed unto it by the laws of the land and the church, which are not lawful for us to observe, being Christ's freemen; it being, moreover, our duty to assemble ourselves in societies for the celebration of the worship of God in Christ, as that which is expressly commanded; — we are abundantly satisfied that, however we may be censured, judged, or condemned by men in and for what we do, yet that He doth both accept us here and will acquit us hereafter whom we serve and seek in all things to obey. Wherefore, we are not convinced that any principle or practice which we own or allow is in any thing contrary to that love, peace, and unity which the Lord Christ requireth to be kept and preserved among his disciples, or those that profess faith in him and obedience unto him according to the gospel. We know not any thing in them but what is consistent and compliant with that evangelical union which ought to be in and among the churches of Christ; the terms whereof we are ready to hold and observe even with them that in sundry things differ from us; as we shall endeavour, also, to exercise all duties of the same love, peaceableness, and gentleness towards them by whom we are hated and reviled.

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