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The Reverend  
Samuel Miller, D. D.  
in token of filial respect,  
from  
John H. Kennedy.



**LETTERS,**  
ON THE  
**GENERAL STRUCTURE,**  
GOVERNMENT, LAWS AND DISCIPLINE  
OF THE  
**CHURCH;**  
EMBRACING SOME REMARKS  
ON  
CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS OF FAITH.

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ADDRESSED TO THE PEOPLE OF HIS CHARGE.

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BY DAVID ELLIOTT, A. M.  
*Pastor of the Congregation of Upper West Conococheague,  
Mercersburg, Pennsylvania.*

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"Do not ye judge them that are within?" 1 Cor. 5. 12.

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**Chambersburg :**  
PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR,  
BY G. K. HARPER,  
1826.





*Eastern District of Pennsylvania, to wit :*



BE IT REMEMBERED, That on the twenty-fourth day of November, in the fifty-first year of the Independence of the United States of America, A. D. 1826, DAVID ELLIOTT, A. M. of the said District, hath deposited in this office the Title of a Book, the right whereof he claims as Author, in the words following, to wit :

*"Letters, on the General Structure, Government, Laws and Discipline of the Church ; embracing some Remarks on Creeds and Confessions of Faith. Addressed to the People of his charge. By David Elliott, A. M. Pastor of the Congregation of Upper West Conococheague, Mercersburg, Pennsylvania.*

*"Do not ye judge them that are within?"—I. Cor. 5. 12.*

In conformity to an Act of the Congress of the United States, entitled "An Act for the Encouragement of Learning, by securing the Copies of Maps, Charts, and Books, to the Authors and Proprietors of such Copies, during the times therein mentioned."—And also to the Act, entitled, "An Act supplementary to an Act, entitled, "An Act for the Encouragement of Learning, by securing the Copies of Maps, Charts, and Books, to the Authors and Proprietors of such Copies during the times therein mentioned," and extending the benefits thereof to the arts of designing, engraving, and etching historical and other prints."

D. CALDWELL, Clerk of the Eastern  
*District of Pennsylvania.*



## PREFACE.

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THE following Letters were principally drawn up during the suspension of the author's public labours, for a short season, by a special affliction, which, although it disabled him from preaching, did not altogether destroy his ability to write. Their publication was not determined upon, for some time after they were written. The reason was, the great reluctance which he felt to appear before the public in connection with subjects requiring a much abler pen; as well as the weak state of his health, which almost disqualified him for the revision of the manuscript. Nor should they now have been committed to the press, had it not been from a conviction that something of this kind was needed in the particular district of the church, and country in which Providence had cast his lot. For although the several topics here presented, may have been discussed by others, the author had not met with any thing affording a connected and practical view of the principles, developed in the following pages, nor such as appeared suited to the peculiar circumstances of the church in his region.

Although brevity has been consulted, the critical reader will occasionally discover the same thoughts illustrated under different forms, in different parts of the work, bearing the appearance of repetition. This, it is hoped, will not be attributed to any want of attention on the part of the author, but to a desire to have his



views well understood by those, whose intellectual powers and habits might render them less capable of comprehending them in a more compressed form. In the IV Letter, some of his readers will recognize the substance of a Lecture, delivered, not long since, from the pulpit. It has been altered to comport with the form of the present publication.

With regard to the remarks in the VI Letter, on the subject of Creeds and Confessions, in which the Rev. Mr. Duncan's views are opposed, perhaps a word or two of explanation may be necessary. By what has been written on this subject, it is not intended to interfere with the very respectable writer, who has already been engaged in this controversy, and who is fully competent to conduct it to a successful issue. But the author had heard it intimated, that the point respecting the *divine warrant* for Creeds and Confessions of Faith, on which Mr. D. had laid so much stress, had not received that attention, which its importance in the controversy required. Being sensible that some were in difficulties on this point, he was desirous to relieve their embarrassment, by a developement of the grounds on which, in his opinion, their scriptural character might be sustained. This was the more desirable, as Dr. Miller had intimated his determination to take no farther notice of the subject; and even if he should, those whose conviction is sought in the remarks now submitted, might have no opportunity of perusing his abler productions. It may, also, be here stated, as the intelligent reader will observe, that the subject of Creeds is prosecuted no farther than as it stands connected with church government. The nature of the



work led the author to treat of it, in this particular aspect: and many reasons, which need not be detailed, forbade his taking it up on other grounds.

As the author has drafted these Letters for the special benefit of the people of his own charge, he has not sought the authority of great names to give them currency. Those to whom they are addressed, will know how to appreciate his good intentions, whatever they may think of the merit of the work. If others approve, he will be gratified. If any who read them should be profited, he will rejoice. And even if some should find fault, he will not be surprised. They are committed to the special protection and blessing of Him, whose honour they are designed to advance, and the rights of whose church they are intended humbly to vindicate.

*Sept. 12th, 1826.*

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# LETTERS, &c.

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## LETTER I.

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### *CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,*

EVER since there has existed a Church on earth, her laws, government, and order have been subjects intimately connected with her highest interests. If these have been badly framed, or injudiciously, or erroneously applied, the church has necessarily participated in the unhappy results arising from such mismanagement: just as the state, the structure of whose government and laws is founded in mistake, and the administration of which is in accordance with her established order, must suffer injury from the operation of the whole machinery of her government.—And, doubtless, the prosperity of the church, in her most vital interests, has often been greatly promoted by the scriptural character, and wise application of her external forms of order. These are matters of fact, well attested by the history of the church, from the earliest ages.



But how is the church to be constructed? What order shall obtain in her? Who shall bear authority in God's house? Or, are not all attempts at organization, and government in the church, by human hands, a daring usurpation of the high prerogatives of heaven? These, and other similar questions, have afforded ample scope for controversy, and have employed the talents, and the pens of many distinguished disputants in different ages of the christian church—nor is the controversy yet at rest. It still occupies a place among the various topics which interest the hearts, and furnish exercise to the intellects of the friends of Zion.

It is not my intention, christian brethren, to enter this field of controversy as a disputant—I am not sensible that I am qualified for such a station.—But in the course of my ministry among you, subjects connected with the organization, government, and order of the church have been frequently forced upon my attention, by the progress of events, with which the greater part of you are acquainted.—This has led to reflections and enquiries in relation to these subjects, which under different circumstances, would probably never have been made. And as my enquiries have been, in a great measure, elicited by the peculiar matters in controversy among ourselves, their results will, of course, be the better adapted for the perusal and instruction of those among whom I have been called to labour. It is with a view, therefore, to your edification, in some points of church order and government, about which there is perhaps a diversity of opinion amongst ourselves, and which are probably not sufficiently understood by all, that I



now appear before you and the public, in connection with controverted questions which have so often agitated the christian church, and some of which are, at the present time, occupying a large share of the attention of certain portions of the ecclesiastical world.

In the remarks which I have to offer, you will find but little reference to those sources of argument which have often been so extensively urged by the advocates of different forms of church order, arising out of the history of the early opinions of the church, as imbodied in the works of the Fathers. My local situation has prevented me from having free access to radical authorities, and I am unwilling that you should be taxed with the recital of that, which the writer himself should be obliged to receive on trust from others. Whatever claims therefore, may be set up in favour of church authority, and the principles and mode according to which it should be exercised, I shall attempt to sustain from the word of God, (the only infallible ground of appeal in matters of this kind) and by such arguments as may present themselves from the nature and constitution of society in its different organic forms.—This course, I should prefer, even though I had access to all the Fathers, and could find every principle which I wish to establish, clearly sustained by their authority. For while it is allowed that the authority of the Fathers may furnish us with a degree of collateral evidence in matters of fact, which ought not to be rejected, I apprehend that all arguments drawn from precedents, or the practice of the church, subsequent to the days of the Apostles, would have but little weight with those at whose conviction we aim in the following pages. Unless the



scriptures, and the necessity imposed by our social relations, bear us out in our claims, they may justly flout at every pretension which may be set up on different grounds. If the church has been exercising an unscriptural, and unnecessary authority, her own practice can never be a fair ground of appeal to establish her right. This we may, and ought to admit, as the adversaries of church authority are so ready to avail themselves of the inconclusiveness of the argument arising from precedent, which has sometimes been so indiscreetly urged by the advocates of church government.

In making our appeal to the scriptures, we find the Lord Jesus Christ distinctly recognised as “the head of the church:”<sup>\*</sup> and for her special benefit, constituted “head over all things.”<sup>†</sup> This elevation belongs to him as Mediator. It was as Mediator that he obeyed and suffered for the salvation of his people, and in this character, he has sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high, as the acknowledged head of his church. Nor is he the head only of the invisible church, but also of that which is visible.—The one necessarily involves the other.—Being the head of a peculiar seed over which he shall reign forever, there was a necessity for his being constituted head of the whole visible assembly of professing christians, that he might hereby gather in that seed, and put them in possession of the blessings of his kingdom.—We should, therefore, consider Christ as the constituted head, and Lord of the *whole church*, whose supreme authority should be every where owned, and obeyed.

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<sup>\*</sup>Eph. 5. 23,   <sup>†</sup>Eph. 1. 22.



As to the precise grounds on which he acquired this headship over the church, we may enumerate 1. The appointment of the Father—He was called of God to this elevated station.—“And he said unto me, thou art my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified. And now saith the Lord that formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the Lord, and my God shall be my strength.—And he said, it is a light thing that thou shouldst be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel, I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.”\* And the apostle declares that “the Father gave him to be head over all things to the church.”† 2. His own voluntary contract, or stipulation. “Lo, I come, in the volume of the book, it is written of me. I delight to do thy will, O my God, yea, thy law is within my heart.”‡ But it was “the will of God,” that he should be “the head of the church”; and to this, he consented, and engaged.—3. He became the head of the church also, by virtue of his mediatorial work. “He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross: wherefore God hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”§ Here you will observe that the exalta-

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\* Is. 49. 3. 5. 6. † Eph. 1. 22. ‡ Ps. 40. 7. 8. § Phil. 2. 8—12.



tion of Christ is represented as a result of his obedience unto death.—It was for this that he was crowned “Lord,” and appointed to reign as the acknowledged head of his church. 4. To these, we may add the special unction of the Holy Ghost. “God thy God hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows. I have found David my servant: with my holy oil have I anointed him.”\* And Peter declares “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost, and with power.”† Having had the church committed to his hands, and being engaged for its salvation, the Father granted him a pledge for the accomplishment of his work, by giving the Holy Spirit to him without measure.

Such, I conceive, are some of the principal grounds on which the Son of God acquired the honour of being the head of the church. It is an honour which neither angels nor men can claim without the most daring impiety. It is an honour to which they have no just title, having never received the appropriate designation of heaven, nor performed those works which would lay a foundation for so glorious a distinction. These appertain to the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone is King in Zion. Nor was this distinguished elevation granted to him, for the purpose of making an idle display of his glory, irrespective of the glory and interests of his church. On the contrary, it is evident that the interests and glory of the church entered largely into the view of Jehovah in constituting the Lord Jesus her Mediatorial head.

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\* Ps. 45. 7. 89. 20. † Acts 10. 38.



It might be profitable to unfold the various ends for which Christ was appointed to the sovereignty of the church, and which indicate how intimately her interests and glory are associated with his. For, a small attention to the scriptures will have taught us that the ends of his elevation, in this respect, are numerous. He was appointed "to sanctify and cleanse the church with the washing of water by the word;"\* to gather in and save all whom the Father had given him:† and in the day of final retribution, to exercise a supreme judicial power, in conferring on his redeemed people the rewards of his grace.‡ For he who saved them by his blood, shall crown them with glory. He who undertook the work of salvation, shall declare its consummation. And he who laid the foundation of this glorious building, the church of the living God, shall place on it, its last, and loftiest decorations.

But however instructive it might be to trace, and unfold all these different ends connected with the lordship of Christ over his church, it comports more immediately with our design, to confine our remarks to that particular end which relates to the governmental power with which he has been invested. He became the head of the church, that he might *govern her by his laws*. The very idea of headship seems to involve authority. Standing at the head of the church, the Lord Jesus has a right to give such laws, and ordain such regulations in relation to her, as he thinks proper. The Father "hath given him authority, to execute judgment also, because

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\* Eph. 5. 26, 27. † Jno. 6. 37. ‡ Jno. 5. 22. Matt. 25, 34.



he is the son of man.”\* And while this high prerogative with which he has been invested, contributes largely to his glory, it is attended with both glory, and advantage to the church, over which he presides. For it cannot be endured for a moment, that the exercise of any power, or agency with which our mediatorial sovereign has been clothed, can be unproductive of beneficial, and honourable results to his church, which is the object of his special care. We know indeed, that in this age of bold and licentious thinking, there are men who view all governmental restraints in the church as detrimental to her interests, and derogatory to her glory. But what community ever promoted either its interest or glory by laying aside the restraints of wholesome authority, and good government? Much less can the church, whose essential happiness and glory consist in obedience to her Supreme Lord.

The laws which Christ has ordained in relation to his church, are contained in the scriptures of truth. These comprise the revelation of his will, which forms the standard of duty, and obligation to all his subjects. Whatever is here prescribed must be considered as of imperative force, and ought to be scrupulously regarded by all who profess to receive the scriptures as the revealed will of God. We do not, indeed, affirm that the whole external order of the church, in all its details, is exhibited, in so many words, in the sacred volume. But on what is there revealed, all the various statutes of the visible church must be founded. The authority of the Saviour, as presented in the revelation of his

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\* John 5, 27:



will, must be recognized in all the various regulations which enter into the details of church government.— This, we conceive, ought to be sufficient to satisfy any reasonable mind. If nothing be admitted as of scriptural origin, which is not sustained by the *direct* testimony of scripture, delivered in so many words, we shall be obliged to yield some of our most sacred institutions, and privileges to the demands of lawless scepticism, and unsanctified profligacy. It is enough, that according to the rules of fair interpretation, such as are employed in the elucidation of other writings, it can be shewn that our forms of order are in conformity with the Saviour's will, as revealed in his word.

With regard to the administration of Christ's laws, he conducts it through the medium of subordinate means and agents. The ministry of the word, the dispensation of the sacraments, admonition, rebuke, suspension, excommunication, are means which he employs for the accomplishment of his gracious designs towards his church. In these various ways, his laws are applied to their legitimate objects. They are thus brought into action, and through the influences of his spirit, rendered operative and efficient.

That Christ has appointed subordinate officers in his church, who are charged, under him, with the execution of his laws, is abundantly obvious from the word of God. Against this arrangement, no good reason can be assigned. Indeed, the very nature of the church, considered as a visible society, seems to require such human, visible agents for its regulation and government. I doubt, whether as a visible community, it could other-



wise exist, or its functions proceed. But of the authority of the church, as vested in her officers, I shall speak more fully in its proper place. For the present, let it be recollected, that in whatever way Christ has seen fit to regulate his church, as to her officers and laws, he himself is the head of all authority. From him all ecclesiastical power is derived. Whatever agents are employed, whatever authority they may possess, whatever decisions they may form, or whatever means, and efforts, they may exert, they must all be considered as subordinate to the will, and authority of him who is chief in his own house. "Christ is the head of the Church," and any views of ecclesiastical order, which would impair his supreme prerogative, must be rejected as an impious invasion of *his* right, who is "the head of all principality and power."\*

I have been thus particular in giving you my views of that authoritative dominion which Jesus Christ maintains in the church, that there may be no misapprehension as to where we place the fountain of ecclesiastical power. This would have been unnecessary, were it not known that some who are most hostile to church government as exercised by her authorized officers, are constantly in the habit of charging those who claim and exercise authority in the house of God, with an invasion of the supreme prerogatives of the Saviour—whether such a charge can be sustained by any fair process of scriptural argument remains to be seen. But the foregoing remarks will shew, that, whatever may be the consequences of our views of ecclesiastical order,

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\* Col. 2. 10.



we lay claim to no authority which is not derived from, and subordinate to that supreme dominion which appertains alone to the anointed Son of God. In the administration of ecclesiastical law, we consider ourselves merely as the functionaries of the great head of the church, whose servants we are, and to whom we must give an account of our stewardship. Any attempt at the invasion of the divine prerogatives, or the usurpation of the people's rights, we utterly disclaim. As officers in Christ's house, we *do* feel ourselves called to the exercise of authority. But it is an authority prescribed by the master, and to be exercised, and applied agreeably to his statutes. And if Christ has instituted laws, and required their execution by authorized, subordinate agents, such an exercise of power by those agents, can never be fairly construed into an invasion of his rights. On the contrary, a refusal on the part of such agents to their official functions for the execution of the Saviour's laws, would evince a wanton disregard of his authority, highly criminal, and deservedly censurable. It is true, that the officers of the church may abuse their authority, by exceeding their powers. But this abuse of authority can never be fairly urged against its existence, and legitimate exercise. And as to such abuses, we conceive there is little danger of their extending to any dangerous length, in the present enlightened state of the christian church, and in the midst of a community, the texture of whose political institutions has taught them to exercise a scrupulous jealousy in relation to all their rights.



That there should be a perfect freedom from all mistakes in the exercise of scriptural authority, and the application of scriptural laws, by the officers of the church, ought not to be expected. This would require a wisdom more than human: especially, when it is recollected, that the statutes of the Redeemer in relation to this subject, lie scattered throughout his word; are, in many cases, delivered incidentally; and their force and application are frequently to be learned, only after much diligent inquiry, and importunate, and believing prayer. If an assembly of Apostolic men,\* found difficulty in the practical application of scriptural laws, much more is it to be expected among men where the extraordinary gifts of the spirit do not obtain. And if errors should be committed, through the weakness of the human understanding, or the imperfect state of our moral perceptions, or from any other cause, the best method of rectifying them, will be by a candid appeal to the scriptures, or to those modes of correction which the scriptures recognize as applicable to the case. This would certainly be much more agreeable to the principles of the gospel, than to attempt to inflame the public mind, by declaiming against church courts, and charging them with the heaven-daring crime of usurping the prerogatives of the Son of God.

That it may be seen how far our views of the government, and order of the church accord with the scriptures, your attention is respectfully solicited, while we examine some of the scriptural representations, which it is believed have a bearing on these points. In pro-

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\* Acts 15.



secuting our purpose, it is not intended to go into an examination of the structure of the *Presbyterian church*, nor of any other *particular church*. Neither shall I attempt to give a full and systematical view of church government. But after offering some remarks on the general constitution of the visible church of Christ, I shall prosecute such details in relation to her authority, and the application of her laws, as occurrences have suggested, or the promotion of evangelical order among those for whose particular benefit I write, may seem to require. At the same time, I shall endeavour to preserve such a connection between the topics discussed, as may impart a degree of unity to the work, and aid the reader in forming a judgment upon the whole. In my next letter, the general structure of the church, or those principles which pervade the whole system of her organization, shall be examined.



## LETTER II.

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### *CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,*

THAT Christ is the head of the visible, as well as of the invisible church, and that the organization of the former, has been with a view to secure the interests and glory of the latter, has been already intimated. Hence, it is manifest, that whatever principles of arrangement enter into the visible church, they must be such as will tend to promote the best interests of Christ's spiritual kingdom. The visible church is not a mere worldly, or political corporation, organized for the attainment of temporal objects; but it is a spiritual community, which, while it comprises a system of external means, is to be conducted on spiritual principles, and with a view to the attainment of spiritual ends.

In looking into the scriptures, it will be found that there are some principles pertaining to the church, which are of a more general, and some of a more specific character. Some are applicable to the whole church, and pervade her entire structure; others relate to the details of her order, and the developement of her powers, under the diversified condition of her members. It may, perhaps, prepare the way for the better understanding and application of the particular statutes of the



church, to endeavour first to ascertain what are some of those general principles which enter into her structure, and pervade the whole system of her organization.

And in the first place, I remark, that one of those general principles which seems to enter into the structure of the church, and to be of great importance to her enlargement and prosperity, is that of *fitness and proportion in the collocation and arrangement of her different members*: all which are so joined together, and adjusted, that each in his proper place, and according to the capacities with which he has been endowed, contributes to the increase of the whole. This appears to be indicated by the Apostle, when he affirms that from Christ, “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.”\*

It is observable that a principle of fitness, or proportion is regarded throughout all the works of nature. Every thing which has been formed, is exactly adapted to the station for which it was intended by the great Creator. And both in the natural and moral world, there appear to be certain affinities by which different objects are inclined to, and fitted for connection with each other. And from this fitness or adaptation for each other arises that closeness, and firmness of connection which obtains between them. This principle of fitness pervades the church of Christ, and binds it to-

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\* Eph. 4. 16.



gether by a tie which is not easily dissolved. All its different members are so arranged (when the Master's order is not violated) that there is an adaptation of each to the station which it occupies, and the functions which it has to perform. As in the human body there are different members occupying different stations, and performing different offices, so it is in the church. All these members likewise, are necessary to the church in their proper places, and all have their appropriate duties to discharge. Thus the Apostle after exemplifying the fact from the human body, observes that "God hath set some in the church; first Apostles; secondarily, prophets; thirdly, teachers; after that miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, governments, diversities of tongues."\* Here, you will observe, that besides the private members, God has established in the church, various other members, endowed according to the duties which they have to perform. Some of these are extraordinary, endowed for extraordinary states of the church; others are ordinary, and always necessary to the church, to enable her to attain the ends of her organization.

Such, then, being the fact, that the church has been organized by the Saviour, having its members proportioned, and adapted to the functions to be performed by each respectively, there ought to be no interference of one part with the others, so as to prevent the regular operations of the whole. Against such disorder the Apostle protests. "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles?

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\* 1 Cor. 12. 28.



Have all the gift of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?\*

By these pointed interrogatories, the Apostle doubtless intended to expose the conduct of those who aspired after distinctions in the church, without the necessary endowments, and to shew the folly and impropriety of all aiming to engross that which had been assigned to a particular part. The same interrogatories may be repeated in relation to the ordinary gifts of the church. Are all teachers? Are all helps? Are all governments? Such an assumption would destroy the symmetry of the whole, and like a dislocation of the members of the human body, would impede its operation altogether, and disqualify it for the discharge of its appropriate functions.

In order, therefore, that the church may increase, her different members must act according to their gifts, and the station which they respectively occupy. Each member must attend to the appropriate duties of his station, and according to the measure of his gifts, endeavour to contribute to the enlargement and prosperity of the whole. Such is the exhortation of the Apostle. "For as we having many members in one body, and all members have not the same office; so we being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing, according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophecy according to the proportion of faith: or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation; he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity;

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\*1 Cor. 12. 29, 30.



he that ruleth, with diligence ; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness.”\* By such an appropriate application of their talents, and gifts by the different members of the church, we may hope to see it increase, and “grow up into him in all things which is the head, even Christ.”

This harmonious co-operation of all the different members, and parts of the church, each occupying its proper position, according to the fitness of the connection which obtains throughout the whole, is of great importance to its growth and extension. In this respect, the church is like a well organized government, in which there is no clashing of the different parts, but each part, in its proper place, operates within prescribed limits, and co-operates with the other parts in promoting the good of the whole. Accordingly, we find that those branches of the church which preserve their symmetrical arrangement entire, each operating in its proper position, agreeably to the designation of the master, are most prosperous, and increase with the greatest rapidity, provided external and providential circumstances be equally favourable, and each part be faithful in the discharge of its appropriate duties. How can it be otherwise? Where he that teacheth, attends to his teaching; he that exhorteth, to his exhortation; he that ruleth, to his ruling; in short, where the ministers of Christ attend to their proper business, and the people to theirs, each labouring within their assigned limits, and both striving to promote the cause of the Redeemer according to their ability, how can they fail

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\* Rom. 12. 4, 8.



of success? The building of God must advance towards its summit in the skies, where there is such a well proportioned and simultaneous action of its parts, under the direction and superintendence of the great master builder himself.

But what a reverse of prosperity must the church suffer, where this great scriptural principle is invaded, and the different members of the church, leaving the stations which the master has assigned them, attempt to usurp the prerogatives, and perform the functions which belong to others. Confusion and disorder must necessarily ensue, and instead of an increase, we may look for a decrease of the church's prosperity and glory. These disastrous effects must result, (in what proportions is not easy to determine) whether the officers of the church usurp the rights of the people, or the people invade the prerogatives of those whom "the Holy Ghost hath made overseers of his flock." That both these kind of dislocations, if I may be allowed the use of the term, have taken place, and that both have been productive of the most mischievous results, the history of the church abundantly testifies. The professed ministers of Christ have not unfrequently sought to become "lords over God's heritage," and by transcending the powers with which they have been invested, to hold the people in hard subjection to their ghostly authority.—The history of "the man of sin," whose arrogant claims have extended to the destruction of human liberty in matters both of faith and practice, presents a striking exemplification of the principle which we are attempting to illustrate. Nor have there been wanting men, in parts of the church claiming a greater exemp-



tion from corruption, who, by invading the rights of the people, have proved eccentric from the sphere of harmonious and associated operation, in which the master designed that they should act. How the church has been impeded in her march to glory by such deviations, is too well known to need repetition.

Nor have the evils been much less, when the people leaving their appointed places, have sought to possess "the chief seats in the synagogue," and to act the part of teachers and rulers in the house of God. What floods of error have such introduced into the church, when passing beyond the limits assigned them, they have attempted to teach others, while they themselves needed to be taught "the first principles of the oracles of God?" And who is ignorant of the confusion, and broils, and schisms, which have been produced by the resistance of turbulent, ambitious men, to the exercise of that scriptural authority which Christ has deposited in the hands of those whom he has made officers in his house? "Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem, and hast not known these things?" The reading and observation of many of you, will, I have no doubt, furnish you with many cases in illustration of this remark.— And what has been the result, as it regarded the increase of the church? Has she grown under the operation of such jarring elements? Or, have not her beautiful proportions been disfigured amidst these contests for pre-eminence, and instead of a rich harvest of increase, has she not shrivelled and dwindled into the most uncomely and dwarfish dimensions? And such will ever be the case, when the members of the church, refusing to act their parts, in the stations in which they



have been placed by their supreme head, attempt to usurp the rights, and exercise the prerogatives of others.

Another general principle which appears to enter largely into the structure of the church, is that of *doctrinal unity, in matters which are fundamental.*— This seems of indispensable importance to the attainment of the ends for which the visible church has been constituted. With regard to fundamental principles of belief, it is apprehended that they are so clearly revealed, as to create no substantial diversity of opinion amongst honest inquirers. Unless this be admitted, we shall be obliged to maintain, that the revelation of God's will, in relation to man's salvation, is a revelation which does not answer the purposes for which it has been given; and that with the word of God in his hands, an honest inquirer may mistake the way to life. None, however, will venture this assertion. Allowing then that fundamental doctrines are clearly revealed, it is believed, that in the constitution of the visible church, the Saviour designed there should be a unity of faith avowed and expressed in these doctrines. Accordingly, we find the Apostles insisting, with great emphasis, on the necessity of adherence to such radical principles, and of rejecting those who did not unite in their reception. Thus, Paul, writing to the Galatian churches, observes, "There be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from Heaven preach any other gospel unto you, than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, if any man preach any other gos-



pel unto you, than that ye have received, let him be accursed.”\*

Now, it is well known, that the points against which the Apostle warned the Galatians, were those which impaired the fundamental principles of the christian faith; and that it was the cardinal doctrine of the sinner's justification before God, by the atoning righteousness of Christ, which he insisted on their unitedly maintaining. In writing to the Ephesians also, and urging them to a unity of feeling and conduct; he presses them with an argument drawn from the *unity of their faith*. And, in anticipating the period of the church's maturity in spiritual attainments, he describes her as reaching this consummation, “*in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God.*”† Now although the Apostle proceeds on the supposition, that the Ephesians were living members of Christ's mystical body, as they professed to be; yet he obviously treats with them in their visible character, and in this capacity recognizes the unity of their faith in the grand doctrines of the gospel. Nor can it be doubted, but if as real christians, they had but “one faith,” in regard to the fundamental principles of religion, as professing christians, they ought to have but one, in relation to the same points.

It is worthy of remark also, that the Apostle John in writing to the elect lady, gives the following direction: “If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, (i. e. the doctrine of Christ as an incarnate Saviour,) receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is

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\* Gal. 1. 7, 9. † Eph. 4. 5, 13.



partaker of his evil deeds.”\* Now it matters not whether this elect lady was a church, or a particular christian matron, the Apostle’s direction shews, that professing christians should be united in the fundamental principles of their faith, in order to christian fellowship; and that where this unity was wanting there could be no communion, without incurring guilt.

In organizing the church therefore, on scriptural principles, care should be taken to secure the unity of her faith in the fundamental doctrines of the gospel. A professed adherence to such doctrines should be demanded. Without this there could be neither harmony of feeling, nor unity of design, nor efficiency of action for the attainment of the great ends for which the church has been organized. For, how could those who were radically opposed to each other in their views of doctrinal truth, harmonize and co-operate in plans and efforts for the accomplishment of good to the church? How, for example, could those who believed the doctrine of the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus Christ, and a limited salvation, hold communion, and co-operate for the attainment of spiritual objects with Arians, Socinians and Universalists? Among such there could be no real concord. Collision must necessarily arise; the unity of the church be broken; her communion marred; and her best interests made the subject of perpetual conflict. Hence it appears necessary, that the principle of doctrinal unity in fundamental points be maintained by the church, in order that she may sustain her scriptural character, and answer the ends of her organization.

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\* 2 John 10, 11.



A farther general principle which appears to be recognized in the constitution of the church is, *the visible conformity of her members to the laws and institutions of the Saviour.* The existence of laws supposes the necessity of obedience in those who are placed within the sphere of their operation. What are laws for but to be obeyed? This is their primary design.—Christ has given laws and ordinances to the church.—These are all of a spiritual character, designed to promote holiness in the members of his house. Hence visible conformity to these laws, seems necessary to give persons a standing in the visible church. For would it not be incongruous in the extreme, for a society organized on holy principles, and for the attainment of holy objects, to admit to its communion men who were palpably and notoriously unholy? Such discordant materials could not long remain united, nor answer the holy purposes for which the church on earth has been organized. The proportion of the parts being so different, they could not be associated without destroying that beautiful symmetry which ought always to adorn the building of God. Those churches, therefore, which make no distinction between the holy and the profane; which make visible regularity of conduct no part of their system of order, seem to depart from the master's law. The church is “a holy temple in the Lord,” and ought not to be profaned by the admission of men, who, in their conduct, give no indications of their willingness to contribute to her increase in holy things. This, we conceive, is a principle of universal application.



Nor, in this enumeration, ought *Love* to be forgotten as a grand principle by which the church in all her parts should be bound together. This is a principle which, by the order of Christ, should pervade the whole structure of the church. Her members should dwell in love, and love, as a sacred cement, should give firmness and consistence to this spiritual building of God. This is largely insisted on in the New Testament, and was one of the prominent and distinguishing attributes of the primitive church. "The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and one soul."\* And when the church shall have attained her highest glory, there is little doubt but that she will be peculiarly distinguished by her fraternal charity.

But while love is thus recognized as a powerful principle which ought to pervade the whole church, and which, under appropriate circumstances, will bind men together in holy fellowship; it seems to us, that some expect more from it, than in the present state of things it can accomplish. For, whatever may be its importance as a principle of church union, or whatever sway it will ultimately hold in the kingdom of God, it is believed, that in the present state of human nature and of christian attainments, it exerts too feeble an influence, and displays too variable a temperature to sustain the church in her unity, without the concurrence of other principles of order and arrangement, such as, in the present letter, we are endeavouring to unfold. I fear we should have a bad specimen of evangelical order in the church, if no other principle of union were admit,

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\* Acts 4. 32.



ted into her composition but that of love, as it exists and operates at the present day. This, I know, may be deemed a reflection on the existing state of christian society. But we cannot help it. We must take things as they are, and not as they ought, or as we would wish them to be. Other principles, therefore, must be brought into operation in connection with that of love. We must endeavour to form a union that will embody a sound faith and a godly practice, and by organizing the church according to those principles of proportion, which, by the law of Christ, enter into her structure, conduct her forward to higher attainments in that heaven-born charity which "thinketh no evil," and which will abide when faith and hope shall have expired.

While, therefore, I would "not lay aside *charity* to maintain faith," I should equally deprecate the idea of laying aside *faith* to maintain charity. Faith must be cherished and maintained in her integrity. On this, as one of her main pillars, the church must be organized, if she would sustain her unity, and preserve herself free from the intrusions of error. And it is confidently believed, that to attempt the organization of the church on the exclusive basis of love, while no regard was paid to harmony of doctrinal views or their practical effects, or the proper collocation and arrangement of her members, would, under existing circumstances, be as chimerical as to expect, by the simple operation of the same principle, to hold in fraternal fellowship the governments of the old and the new world, the whole theory of whose constitutions is radically and diametrically opposed to each other. Nor can we conceive how love could be regulated and directed in its



operations, but by the controuling influence of truth. She might, indeed, display the capaciousness and omnipotence of her "compacting" powers, by bringing together Christians and Heretics, Mahomedans and Jews, and proclaiming their unity; but wanting the mark of that charity which "rejoiceth in *the truth*,"\* she would not be received by the followers of the Lamb, as the bond of their union, and the solace of their fellowship. But where the faith of christians harmonize in that which forms the foundation of their hope of eternal life, their love operating in the channel of truth, and their faith working by love, they are thus bound together in holy fellowship, and grow up according to the most comely proportions, "a holy temple unto the Lord."

I am well persuaded, indeed, that the church, in the developement and application of all her faculties, should have an eye to the advancement of christian affection towards Christ and all his members. You will observe that I say, *towards Christ and all his members*; for love to the Saviour is too often overlooked by some of the most strenuous advocates for charity. They are ardent in seeking contributions to that fraternal charity which should reign amongst the followers of Christ, and seem to imagine that by this sacred cement they can hold the church together in holy fellowship, amidst all the distractions and revolutions which obtain in our wretched world. Hence, they direct all their efforts to this point, without giving a proportionate attention to the cultivation of love to the Redeemer, without

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\* 1 Cor. 13. 6.



which, love to the brethren can neither exist, nor thrive in the soul. In this, they act from partial and mistaken conceptions of the nature and extent of christian affection. For surely love to the Saviour is of capital importance, and its advancement should be sought by the church in the discharge of her prescribed functions, with equal earnestness as that of love to his members. Indeed, these should never be separated, as they go to make up that blessed charity "which is the bond of perfectness."\* And as long as the church thus seeks by all her movements to produce this heavenly result, she may expect to advance in every lovely attribute, 'till she becomes "the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth."† But, whenever forgetful of her own edification in love, she suffers contrary principles to prevail, her glory is departed, and "Tekel, thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting," may be inscribed on the walls of her sanctuaries !

The edification of the church in love, will be best secured by preserving her organic structure entire, and engaging, as far as practicable, every member to discharge the duties which belong to him in the station which he occupies. It is a great mistake to imagine that love will be best promoted by the destruction of church order, and the removal of those barriers to error and crime, which are to be found in the proper collocation and arrangement of her various members. That system, which, under the guise of making God the only lord of conscience, would destroy every principle of church government, and annihilate all respon-

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\* Col. 3. 14. † Sam. 2. 15.



sibility of her members to the legitimate exercises of authority in the house of God, instead of building up the church in love, would, in our humble apprehension, be the fruitful source of more "vain janglings" and unhallowed contentions, than charity with all her healing powers could remove. Such a dissolution of the relationships and responsibilities which God himself has created for the increase and edification of the church, like similar movements in the state, would be attended with the most disastrous results. And we all know what confusion, and disorder, and strife have been produced by the prostration of civil constitutions, and the dislocation of the members of the body politic. Events within the recollection of some of us who are not yet forty years of age, and which stained some of the fairest fields of Europe with blood, testify to the dangerous nature of those principles which would confound, and destroy the order and consistence of the social compact, as embodied in her government and laws.— Instead of producing that lovely union of patriots and philanthropists which had been so confidently predicted, they generated a brood of misanthropic monsters and cannibals whose voracious appetites could only be satiated by rivers of human blood.

Whether the same kind and amount of evil would result to the church by the prostration of that system of order which her king has established for her edification, it would perhaps be presumptuous to determine. But we are well persuaded that love would not be promoted by such an event, but that discord and confusion would necessarily ensue. Nor do we wish this allegation to pass to our credit gratuitously and unsup-



ported by scriptural evidence. The finger of inspiration has indicated a very substantial reason for calculating on such a result. The church has been "fitly joined together," or organized according to certain proportions, "to the edifying of itself in love."\* This system of order, therefore, is necessary to the accomplishment of the end which has been designated, or it would not have been ordained by the head of the church for that purpose. And if necessary, and ordained for such a purpose, who can doubt but that the end will be attained by the proper application and developement of the instituted means. But let the case be reversed—Let the system of order which has been established be removed, and the end for which it was vouchsafed by infinite wisdom, will not be attained; nay, the contrary evils will result. The church will not only fail of her own edification in love, but will become a prey to every hateful passion, and be torn by many an unholy contest. If this be not admitted, we shall be driven to the necessity of maintaining that Christ has guarded the church against imaginary evils, by the establishment of a system of order, and hereby sought to promote an end, which might have been as well, or better, attained without it. But who would not shrink from such a blasphemous supposition! The result then is, that the best and only scriptural method of building up the church in christian affection and evangelical duties, is by maintaining her structure and laws in their integrity, and bringing them into full and unrestrained operation, agreeably to the injunctions of the Saviour.

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\*Eph. 4. 16.



That there are no other principles which enter into the general constitution of the church, besides those which have been detailed, we are not fully prepared to decide. Those which have been mentioned, however, appear to hold a prominent station, and were recognized by the primitive church, as constituting the chief materials of her organization. And it is certainly not easy to conceive how the church could sustain her scriptural character, in the absence of any one of the principles enumerated. For they are not principles which relate to particular exigencies of the church; but they belong to her general constitution, and ought to exert a commanding influence in the ever varying circumstances of christian society. And it may be useful to remark in this place, that many of the mistakes, and much of the false reasoning of system builders, originate in their separating these principles, and giving them a detached operation in the affairs of the church. One pleads for a balance of power and privilege, as every thing; another considers the church as a mere doctrinal reservoir; a third, regardless of doctrinal orthodoxy, insists entirely on external holiness of conduct; while a fourth, laying all these aside, confidently maintains that *love* is amply sufficient to conduct the church safely through all the vicissitudes of her earthly condition, untill she reaches her consummation in the Heavens. It is easy to perceive, how men, who thus limit the constitutional structure of the church to a single general principle, will be led astray in their subsequent reasonings with regard to the application of her particular laws. The superstructure will necessarily be made to correspond with the foundation. And while some of



the laws of Christ's house will be either rendered void, or greatly circumscribed in their operation, others will be made to exert and extended and exclusive control, in the administration of his visible kingdom. This error, we should seek to avoid, by retaining in their integrity every principle, which the scriptures recognize as entering into the general constitution of the church. And in the interpretation of the particular statutes of the Redeemer's house, nothing should be admitted which would contravene these principles in their concurrent and legitimate operation. How far we shall be able to exemplify this remark, in our subsequent discussions, must be left with you to determine.



### LETTER III.

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CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,

HAVING in the preceding Letter given you my views of the principles which enter into the general structure of the church, I shall next invite your attention to some remarks on *the authority of the church*, as deposited in the hands of her officers. This authority is extensive: pertaining to the dispensation of the word; the administration of the sacraments; the exercise of government, and discipline; and whatever other functions are involved in the executive power of regulating the church according to scriptural forms. It is not my intention, however, to go into an examination of her authority in relation to all these points. Few, if any, entertain doubts of the right of the church to exhibit the truth, and dispense the sacraments, through the medium of her ministry. This is so universally conceded among ourselves, both as to principle and form, that any attempt to establish it, would be justly deemed nugatory and superfluous. But the authority of the church *for the purposes of government*, is not so universally conceded. It may be of some importance, therefore, to examine how far the scriptures sanction her claims to governmental authority over her own members—for if such an authority cannot be sustained

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from the scriptures, it ought certainly to be abandoned as an unwarrantable usurpation.

As a general remark, preliminary to the introduction of scriptural testimony in favour of church government, it may be observed, that it does not consist so much in a direct affirmation of the fact, as in commands, and directions relating to its exercise, and which necessarily suppose its existence. For if it had no existence, all directions pertaining to its exercise, and which involve obedience to it, would be absurd, and ridiculous.

That obedience to church authority is required, and directions relating to its exercise given in the holy scriptures, the following passages, with the accompanying remarks, will, I trust, clearly evince. The Apostle Paul, in writing to the Hebrews, has this emphatical injunction: "*Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give an account; that they may do it with joy, and not with grief; for that is unprofitable for you.*"\* Obedience, and submission to "them that had the rule over them," are here required. This supposes that those who ruled were possessed of authority, and that in consequence of this, they had a right to govern. Indeed obedience and authority seem to be reciprocal. The one, in all ordinary cases, supposes and implies the other.

Now, that these were *ecclesiastical rulers*, to whom the Apostle enjoined obedience, is manifest from the passage itself. "*They watch for your souls, as they*

\* Heb. 13. 17.



that must give account." This is the proper business of the officers of the church. *They* have the care of *the souls* of those who belong to their respective societies. The ministers of the gospel especially "watch for the souls" of their hearers. Their great business is to engage persons to secure their salvation, as the one thing needful, and to lead them to the fountain of Christ's blood, that they may have their "souls" cleansed from all impurity. In short, "the soul," in its spiritual interests, is that to which the vigilance and labour of every faithful minister of Jesus Christ is habitually directed. And to this he is required to attend in the view of the most solemn account. "O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore, thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and warn them from me. When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from it; if he do not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity, but thou hast delivered thy soul."\* From this it is obvious, that it is ministers especially who are intended by "them that watch for their souls, as they that must give an account." When, therefore, the Apostle requires of christians to yield obedience to such, it is an obvious recognition of the authority of church officers, and a most explicit injunction to the acknowledgment of that authority on the part of the people,

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\* Ezek. 33. 7, 9.



But if any doubt should remain with regard to the rulers here intended, it will be immediately dissipated by turning to the 7th verse of this same chapter, where the Apostle has fixed it, by still more determinate expressions: "Remember them which have rule over you, and who *have spoken unto you the word of God.*" Now, who but the ministers of the gospel had spoken unto them the word of God? To preach *the word* is their proper business, according to the original commission of Christ to his Apostles. "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."\* Those therefore, who ruled over them, were the ministers of the gospel, as they must have been the very persons who had spoken unto them the word of God. To such, they were required to yield obedience and submission. Consequently, they, as rulers in the church of Christ, had authority to demand, and enforce this obedience, by such spiritual sanctions as the scriptures authorize, otherwise, words have no definite signification.

But, perhaps, it will be said that this obedience which christians are required to yield to their church officers, is nothing more than a compliance with the calls and invitations of the word of God, which they preach, and consequently that the authority of such officers consists only in presenting them with these calls, or in preaching the gospel to them. But if nothing more than this had been intended, it is not probable that the Apostle would have said any thing about "*them that have the rule,*" which so forcibly suggests the idea of authority.

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\* Mark 16. 15.



It would have been sufficient for his purpose, to have said, "obey them that watch for your souls, who have spoken unto you the word of God." But it is obvious, that, in addition to their pastoral character, he intended that the ministers of Christ should be recognized as *rulers* in the church, and that obedience should be rendered to them, not only by receiving their messages, but by submitting to their judicial decisions, when such decisions were in conformity with the word of God.

This idea is confirmed from the use of the same original word (*Peithesthe*) which is here translated "obey," in other places where authority in relation to government is certainly meant—thus, in Titus 3. 1. it is used as a compound (*Peitherhein*) to express obedience to civil magistrates or rulers. In that case, it will not be disputed that there is a recognition of the authority of those to whom obedience is enjoined. And if so, in the case of magistrates, why not in that of ministers, when the very same word is employed to enforce obedience to each? It is true that the authority in the two cases is of a different kind, the one temporal, the other spiritual; but the existence of an official power for the purpose of government is, in both cases, equally recognized. The same original word (*Peithesthai*) is also used in James 3. 3. to express the subjection of the inferiour animals to man, and by consequence, the government and controul of man over them. "Behold we put bits in the horses mouths, that they may *obey us*; and we turn about their whole body." Here obedience obviously implies government, or authority as its opposite. Such then, being the construction of the



term in those places, it furnishes a strong presumption in favour of a similar construction in other places where the same word is used.

From these remarks, I apprehend, it is manifest that authority in relation to, and for the purposes of ecclesiastical government, is vested in the ministers of Christ—that it is their business to rule, as well as to preach the word; and that the members of the church are required to obey, and be in subjection to them. I do not pretend to affirm that this function of government in the church, is to be confined exclusively to the ministers of the gospel. Others, I believe, are recognized as participating with them in the exercise of ecclesiastical authority. Thus Paul, in writing to Timothy, says, “let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in word and doctrine.”\* From which it would appear that there are elders who *rule*, distinct from those who labour in word and doctrine. The Apostle also, in an enumeration of the gifts of the church, speaks of “governments”† as a class distinct from teachers; which seems to indicate that there are others besides ministers in the church, whose business it is to assist in her government. What precise order of men is designated by these terms, we need not, at present, inquire. It is sufficient for the purpose of my argument, to shew that authority in relation to government has been lodged in the hands of men holding official stations in the house of God. And this, if we are not mistaken, has been fully established by the foregoing remarks in relation to

\* 1 Tim. 5. 17. † 1 Cor. 12. 28.



the authority of the ministers of the word, which appears to be so evidently sanctioned by the volume of inspiration.

In the fifth chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians, we have also, a very distinct enunciation of church authority. Nor is it a single passage which bears upon the point, but the whole chapter is devoted to the subject. The case of a bold offender is stated. The necessity, and duty of his expulsion from the church is enforced; and the members of the church are warned against all intimate associations or intercourse with him, or with any such gross and pertinacious offenders. In this chapter, the Apostle distinguishes between the improper assumption of judicial powers, with regard to persons not within the controul of the church, and the legitimate exercise of these powers in relation to her own members. "For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? *Do not ye judge them that are within?*" Here, while he disclaims the right of judging persons "without," who do not belong to the church, he gives the broad sanction of his authority to their practice of judging "them that are within," or their own members. This they did; and this they had a right to do. And he reproves them for not exercising, in the case of the incestuous person, a right which they claimed, and for not putting forth an authority which they possessed, and finally, he concludes, by directing them to "put away from among themselves that wicked person."

Here there can be no mistake, no quibbling about the location and connection of the text, the construction of



the terms, or the structure of the sentences, by which single passages are often distorted from their natural signification, and dragged into the service of error.— But here is a whole chapter devoted to the discussion of the particular topic of church order. The offence is stated. The offender is arraigned. The right of the church to deal with him is asserted. Her neglect is censured. And she is finally ordered to assert her authority, by excluding him from her communion. If any principle is clearly recognized, by a discussion founded upon its existence, then that of church authority is unequivocally asserted in the chapter to which we refer.

But, we shall be told that this was an extraordinary case, and that the rules relating to it, cannot be applied to any other but cases of incest, such as that mentioned. But this is an assumption without proof. Nay, the contrary is manifest from the Apostle's statement of the case. Does he not clearly recognize the right of the church to judge her members, in all cases of offence? Was not such her practice? "Do not ye judge them that are within?" Not those alone who were guilty of incest, but "fornicators, and covetous, and idolaters, and railers, and drunkards, and extortioners," whom he had just mentioned, and with whom he had directed them not to keep company, "no not to eat." Though the case of incest, and the incestuous person, gave occasion to his remarks, they are evidently not of so restricted a character, as to prevent their application to other cases of a similar nature. And his mentioning a train of offenders who were unworthy of their



communion, shews clearly that the right of judging, to which he here refers, was not to be confined to the particular case of the incestuous person, but was to be exercised in relation to all gross and scandalous offenders against the peace and purity of the church.

And if it be the right of the church to maintain and exert her authority over her own members, it is certainly the duty of her members to submit to that authority legitimately exercised. This seems to be a necessary consequence. For it is perfectly idle to talk of legitimate authority, without a corresponding obligation to obedience. If the government be founded in right, and administered according to the rules prescribed, there exists of necessity an obligation on the part of its subjects, to yield obedience to its requisitions. If this be not the case, not only ecclesiastical, but civil government is an empty name.

A farther proof in favour of church government we have in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew, from the 15th to the 17th verse, where our Lord is giving instructions in relation to private offences. Though this passage relates more especially to the application of church authority, yet in directing to its application, our Saviour unquestionably recognized the power. For if there were no power, there would be no room for its application. The command, "tell it to the church," supposes that the church had the right, and power of hearing and determining in the case, else why tell it to her? But on the argument derived from this passage I shall not dwell at present, as it will be

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examined in detail in a subsequent letter, when the subject of private offences shall be considered. I shall also reserve for the same place, some remarks intended to shew that by "the church" in this passage, and other corresponding ones, we are to understand her officers in their official characters, and in the exercise of their appropriate official functions. I shall only observe here, that if we have been successful, in the preceding part of this Letter, in shewing that it is the officers of the church, who are invested with authority for purposes of government, it will furnish a strong presumption that wherever authority is required to be exerted *by the church*, it is to be understood of the church acting by her officers, who are her constituted organs and representatives for this purpose.—Indeed, unless we admit this interpretation, we will find insuperable difficulty in reconciling the different scriptural representations on this subject. For if by "the church" in Matthew 18. 17. we are not to understand the officers, but the private members of the church, and it be their proper business to take judicial cognizance of offences, and act authoritatively for their disposal; then, what comes of the Apostolic statement in Hebrews 13. 7, 17, which has already been considered, and in which the ministers of the gospel are distinctly recognized as *rulers* in the house of God? Are both ministers, and people rulers? And do both exercise judicial powers in the investigation, and disposal of whatever offences may occur? Then all are rulers. And if all are rulers, where are the ruled? If all are to exercise government, then where are the subjects of their authority? And besides, what comes of that important principle of arrangement



in the church of Christ, where each member in his place, and according to his measure, contributes to her increase, "according to the effectual working, in the measure of every part, making increase of the body?" But more of this again.

It would be easy to multiply passages of scripture in which ecclesiastical authority is referred to with more or less distinctness. In writing to Timothy, the Apostle Paul lays down this authoritative rule, "against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses."\* The form of judicial authority and process, seems here to be evidently recognized. The direction of this same Apostle to Titus is, "a man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition reject."† But is he to be adjudged a heretic, admonished again and again, and finally rejected by persons having no official power for these purposes? This would certainly be a very strange anomaly, which few will be disposed to believe. It is obvious that the Apostle intended to enjoin it upon Titus, *as an officer in the church of God*, to exercise his official powers in the trial, and rejection of heretics. And that the injunction extends to the ordinary ministers, and officers of the church, we may be certain from the fact that heresy is the sin of every age, as well as of that in which the Apostolic mandate was registered. The injunction, therefore, being applicable to all ages of the church, the official power which is necessary to give it effect, must belong to the ordinary officers of the church in every successive age.

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\* 1 Tim. 5. 19. † Titus 3. 10.



But I shall not multiply passages of scripture on a point which seems to be so clearly established by those which have been already adduced. Indeed, the force of scriptural testimony does not depend on the number of passages which can be brought forward in support of a doctrine, but on their clearly teaching the doctrine in question. A few are as good as a thousand, to those who accredit the authority of divine revelation. And I apprehend that enough have been adduced to satisfy every unprejudiced mind, that the church is invested with authority over her own members, which authority is to be exercised by her officers in the discharge of their appropriate functions.

It may not, however, be unworthy the attention of those who seek for collateral testimony on this subject, to reflect how far the scriptural argument in favour of church government derives confirmation from considerations of necessity; a necessity growing out of the very structure of society as it exists in the present state.— Society cannot be maintained without laws regulating, and prescribing the duties which belong to its members respectively. The law of love is not of itself sufficient, as we have already seen, to hold in unison the component parts of the social compact. Other laws must be added, accompanied by adequate sanctions. Nor are we justified in asserting that the simple promulgation of these laws will restrain men from transgression.— The whole history of social man proves the contrary. And this is as true of the church considered as a visible society, as of any other association, though not perhaps to the same extent. Her laws are, and will be violated,



as long as her members are in any measure under the influence of corruption. Such then being the fact, the necessity for some official or governmental power to enforce respect to her laws, appears indispensable.

Shall we be told that moral suasion, and the exhibition of that punishment which God has threatened against transgression, are the only means which ought to be employed? But these we know do not answer the purpose in many cases. Men frequently disregard these restraints, and indulge in gross, and scandalous offences against the peace, and order of the church.— And must they be left to the unrestrained indulgence of their passions, to disturb the church, and violate her order? And has the church no means of separating them from her communion? If such be the case, she is in a worse state than civil or political communities, all of which have the power of defending themselves from the evils arising from offending and disorderly members. And is it not seriously to be apprehended that her social existence would be placed in jeopardy by the unrestrained indulgence of crimes which, in their nature, are subversive of all social order? Such assuredly would be the case in civil society. It could not exist without the restraints of government and law. And we cannot doubt but the same results would arise in the church, in the present state of things. Crime would thus acquire strength. Offenders would become bold; and their influence would be exerted in favour of those licentious practices which would, ere long, overwhelm her in ruin. The existence, and order of the church, therefore, in



her social character, seem to render some governmental restraints absolutely, and indispensably necessary.

Against the existence, and exercise of official authority in the church, I am aware that it has been urged, that it is an improper interference between God and the human conscience; that religion ought to be perfectly free from all restraints; and that all attempts to control and restrain men, other than those which arise from moral suasion, are the ambitious efforts of men after aggrandizement and power. But, if Christ in the constitution of his church, has vested his officers with authority for the purposes of government, as has been shewn; the exercise of such an authority, within the limits prescribed, cannot be an infringement on the liberty of conscience, unless we charge the Saviour with the erection of an inquisitorial power in his own house. And the fact is, that the exclusion of men from the privileges of the church, for the flagrant violation of her laws, does not in the least interfere with any legitimate right of conscience, unless any will be so absurd as to maintain, that the liberty of sinning against both divine and human laws, is one of the unalienable rights of conscience. Yet such really appears to be the amount of the objection in question. Men cry out against the exercise of church authority, in the exclusion of disorderly members, on the ground that it is encroaching on the rights of conscience. But what right of conscience is encroached upon in such a case? Obviously no other than that of sinning in any manner, and to any extent men may think proper. And must we be careful to leave them in the full and undisturbed



possession of this precious liberty of conscience? Then, liberty of conscience, and licentiousness are the same; and the Apostle might have spared his remark, when he tells the Galatians "not to use their liberty for an occasion to the flesh."\* For according to the principle of the objection, "serving the flesh," is one of the precious privileges of that liberty wherewith Christ hath set us free.

And as to religion being free from all restraints, it is granted that where it exists in all its purifying power, it needs not the control of ecclesiastical laws. It is a truth of general application that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly, and for sinners.† And we may venture to assure those whose faith and practice are in accordance with the principles of the gospel, that we never wish to see the authority of the church exerted to disturb their peace, or infringe their rights. But as to the religion of those who claim the right of "serving the flesh," by the promulgation of antisciptural principles, or the indulgence of angry passions, and sensual appetites, and at the same time insist on being accounted good, and regular members of the church; we wish never to see such religion free from the restraints of a wholesome discipline, which would purge it of its corrupt attributes, and under the direction of divine grace, impart to it something of the consistency, and spirituality of genuine devotion. The truth however is, that it is not religion that is laid under restraint, by ecclesiastical law. But it is the corruptions of men, which

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\* Gal. 5. 13. † 1 Tim. 1. 9.



would interfere with, and destroy the free and regular exercise of religion, that are restricted, and controled by the chastening hand of discipline. And shall the officers of the church be chargeable with ambition, and an undue aspiring after personal aggrandizement, because in the exercise of a scriptural function, they seek to restrain the licentiousness of men, and to keep them within the bounds which the gospel has prescribed, and which the peace and purity of the church imperiously require? If this be ambition, I know not what good man would not be ambitious thus to promote the spiritual interests of his fellow-men, and be instrumental in restraining them from those licentious courses which would lead them to perdition. If this is to be aspersed as the craving of an unholy ambition, all attempts to restrain the disorders of society, and to maintain its soundness, by the administration of wholesome laws, may be branded with the same odious epithet. But surely every reflecting mind will readily perceive that the regular exercise of that scriptural authority which Christ has ordained in his church, so far from evincing ambitious views in those who exercise it, is an evidence of their regard for his sacred institutions, and of their desire to exalt him who is "the head of all principality and power." And we have much greater reason to suspect those persons of ambitious views, who are for prostrating the authority which Christ has erected in his house, than those who are for maintaining it in its integrity. For let the government of the church, and the restraints which it imposes be broken down, and there will be no barrier against the dictation and encroachments of lawless, aspiring men. If therefore, you would live in the safe en-



joyment of that liberty wherewith Christ has made you free, let the government of the church be faithfully and steadfastly maintained.

But may not a very small amount of government answer the purpose? This is, perhaps, with many, a favourite idea. A little, they seem to imagine, may be tolerated, as a necessary evil, "growing out of our moral infirmities:" but that in general, "we ought to have in the church as little government as possible." With regard to this, I would say, that the less government of a *disciplinary kind* that is required by the crimes, and disorders of church members, the better. But whatever may be the amount of crimes to which ecclesiastical authority is required to be applied, by the direction of the Saviour, there ought to be exactly so much government in the church, and neither more, nor less. The more numerous the offences against the peace, and purity of the church, the more frequently must the church put forth her authority for their correction. And in proportion as crimes diminish, among the members of the church, in the same proportion will the necessity for this kind of government diminish. In this sense, it is undoubtedly true, that there ought to be as little government of a disciplinary kind in the church, as the crimes and disorders of men will permit. But less than this, there cannot, nor ought not to be, while the Master's law, is regarded as the rule of our conduct. And it is utterly in vain to imagine, that any thing less than this, will meet the exigencies of the church, or be more conducive to her spiritual prosperity.

Nor can any thing be more fallacious than to reason,



as some have done, that because the necessity for church government has its origin in the "moral infirmities" of our nature, and its design is to guard against collision, and preserve order, and thus promote the good of the whole, there ought, therefore, to be but little government in the church. For who does not see that by such a process of reasoning, they would deprive the church of her choicest mercies.—They would reason her out of the gospel, and all the grace which it contains. For, I apprehend, it is true of the whole system of grace, that its necessity grew out of our "moral infirmities," and that its great end, in subserviency to the glory of God, is to rectify these evils, and promote the good of the whole church; and, therefore, according to the mode of reasoning adopted in the objection, we ought to have in the church as little grace as possible. The conclusion is just as logical in the one case, as in the other. But it is one thing to form a conclusion, and another to deduce it fairly, and legitimately, from its premises.—And certainly, most men would imagine, that the moral evils which obtain in religious society, and the tendency of church government to correct them, instead of furnishing a reason why we should have but little government in the church, would go far to prove the contrary.—At least, they would seem naturally to lead to the conclusion, that there ought to be as much as the moral necessities of the church require.—And why should we wish for less? If the master has instituted government in the church to meet the exigencies of her earthly condition, and serve as a means, under his grace, of restraining the evils to which she is liable, and building her up in holy things, what but mischief could result from its



destruction ? Let men beware how they tamper with a  
divine institution !



## LETTER IV.

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### CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,

IT is admitted on all hands by those who receive the Bible as the word of God, that the gospel of Jesus Christ furnishes the best remedy for the evils which exist in human society. It is a system of peace, and love, and in proportion as it prevails, discord and contention will cease. Until the arrival of the Millenium, however, we are not to look for the entire prevalence and triumph of Gospel principles over the corruptions of human nature. Even in the church, and amongst the followers of Christ, the jarring elements of corruption will occasionally break forth, and disturb that concord which ought to prevail among the members of the same spiritual family. Such seems to be the necessary result of remaining corruption in the human heart, "for it must needs be that offences come."\* This our Lord well knew, and in wisdom has provided for the adjustment, and disposal of such difficulties. In the eighteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel, he has given detailed instructions for the management of those offences, which are of *a private and personal nature*, and which sometimes occur amongst his professed followers.

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\* Matt. 18. 7.



The agency of the church in the disposal of such offences, shall be the subject of examination in the present Letter.

The whole passage relating to the management of private offences reads thus: "Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two, or three witnesses, every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man, and a publican. Verily, I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in Heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in Heaven. Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth, as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in Heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I, in the midst of them."\*

In this passage, we find the authority of the church recognized, and its application to a particular species of offences asserted. The preliminary steps to be pursued by the members of the church, antecedently to the intervention of church authority, are, however, so important in a practical point of view, that I shall claim your indulgence, while I offer some remarks on the whole process, as marked out by the Saviour himself.

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\* Matt. 18. 15—20.



In the case which is here detailed, you will observe that it is “a brother,” a fellow christian, who is supposed to have given the offence. You will observe also, that the offence, or trespass, is represented as having been committed against an individual. From the nature of the case, therefore, it is supposed to be a private concern ; a matter, for the present, entirely between the brother offending, and the brother offended. It is one of those cases of too frequent occurrence, in which professing christians come in conflict with each other, and in which the bonds of christian harmony are broken. Something is said or done, which either is, or is supposed to be offensive—offence is taken, and unkind, and discordant feelings usurp the place of the spirit of christian affection. Now, in this state of things, what is to be done? How is the difficulty to be disposed of? According to the direction of our Lord, it is made the duty of *the person offended*, or against whom the trespass has been committed, to go, and in *a private manner*, tell the other of his fault. In this direction, there are two things, which I apprehend, are not sufficiently attended to.—These are, *the person* on whom the duty of seeking explanation is imposed, and *the manner*, in which this explanation is to be sought.

With regard to the first of these points, persons frequently reverse the rule in the text. They take offence at their brother, and without ever going, and telling him of his fault, they insist upon it that their brother shall come to them, and make reparation ; and if he does not, they consider it as an aggravation of the offence. Now to say nothing of the unreasonableness



of this course, it is sufficient to observe, that it is in the very face of our Lord's direction.—And we need not ask whether a statute of the Saviour, or the dictate of irritated feeling ought to direct our conduct. For, I apprehend, we will all agree, that where the instructions of Christ are explicitly given, they ought to be implicitly obeyed. And as to *the manner* in which explanation ought to be sought, it is notorious that the rule is also frequently violated. How often do men pursue a course directly at variance with the Saviour's injunction to tell their brother his fault “between them, and him alone?” The offence is no sooner given than they make it a point to publish it wherever they go, and that too, with all the colouring and aggravation which can be given to it by irritated feelings. And it sometimes happens that the whole country are in possession of the matter, before the individual who has been so unfortunate as to be the occasion of the offence, knows any thing about it. This, we must be permitted to say, is a most mischievous practice, and cannot be too strongly reprobated. It is attended with great injustice to the individual from whom private explanation ought to have been sought, as it is enlisting public sentiment against him, before he has had an opportunity of a hearing. It disturbs the peace of the church; and it wounds and injures religion in its most vital parts. In such a criminal point of light did the framers of our Book of Discipline view this practice of spreading the knowledge of an offence, “unless so far as shall be unavoidable in prosecuting it before the proper judicatory, or in the due performance of some other indispensable duty,” that they have provided, that the person guilty “shall



be liable to censure, as a slanderer of his brethren.”\* If persons, instead of disregarding the directions of our Lord, would rigidly adhere to them, and when they conceive themselves in any way injured by a brother, would go, and in a private manner, tell him candidly and affectionately of his fault, the result would often be favourable. There are few real christians of so contentious a texture, who might not, by such a mode of treatment, be induced to settle existing controversies. And if success should attend their efforts, they would be amply rewarded. “If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.” You will have acquired an additional hold upon his confidence and affection: and if he has really done you wrong, you will have brought him to a sense of his sin, and been the instrument of gaining him back to Christ. This will be a rich, and blessed reward, infinitely surpassing any sacrifice of sinful feelings which you may have made in your efforts to obtain a reconciliation.

Our Lord well knew, however, that there might be some refractory spirits, who, either from constitutional temperament, or circumstances of strong excitement, or some other causes, would withstand such private attempts at settling their disputes. He has, therefore, directed that if this first effort fail, another attempt should be made, under a different form. “One or two more,” must be called upon by the person offended, to accompany him to his brother, that they may be witnesses of all that pass between them. As the parties

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\* Book of Dis. chap. 2, sect. 5.



in the dispute are supposed to be christians, I apprehend that the persons who should be chosen to be present as witnesses on the occasion, should be persons making a credible profession of religion. This is the most obvious interpretation of the phrase "one or two more;" that is, one or two more *brethren*, for of such our Lord had just been speaking. And as the matter has not yet been published to the world, there is a manifest propriety in committing it only to brethren who will not abuse the confidence reposed in them. Besides, brethren will be better able, and more willing, if godly men, to assist in the adjustment of the controversy, instead of widening the breach, as is too often done by mischievous men who care not for the interests of religion.

The wisdom of this direction of our Lord, in having a few disinterested, pious men present, under the circumstances here supposed, is manifest. The parties at their first interview, may have become unduly excited. There is danger, therefore, that they may come together a second time, under the influence of irritated feelings. In this situation, they will be liable to say things which afterwards they would not be able distinctly to recollect, nor willing to admit. Hence the necessity of witnesses to take cognizance of the whole matter. Besides, the person seeking reconciliation may set up very improper claims. He may make terms which, neither the principles of justice nor christianity, will require the other to yield; and because these terms are not complied with, may take advantage of the other to defame him as obstinate and implacable! This, we



know, has sometimes been done. The presence of one or two christian brethren in such a case, is highly important, that they may give a fair statement, on which, in the event of the matter going farther, a correct judgment may be framed : or, if fair overtures of reconciliation should be offered and rejected, that they may testify accordingly.

It so happens, however, that this second step in the process of settling private disputes is often neglected. Even those who take the first step, and fail of success, are comparatively seldom found taking the second. Some, perhaps, abandon the matter as hopeless ; and others, no doubt, because they have set up improper claims, and are afraid to have the affair canvassed in the presence of witnesses. Christians, however, who consider themselves called upon in duty, to notice the injuries inflicted by a brother, by seeking an explanation between themselves alone, should, in the event of failure, make a full experiment, according to the whole of our Lord's directions. And our Book of Discipline wisely provides that "no complaint or information on the subject of personal and private injuries, shall be admitted (before a church judicatory) unless those means of reconciliation, and of privately reclaiming the offender, have been used, which are required by Christ, Matthew, xviii, 15, 16.\*

But what if this second step in the process should fail, and after all that the offended person, and his brethren can do, the brother still remains incorrigible ? What

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\* Book of Dis. chap. 2, sect. 3.



is then to be done? Hear the Saviour: "And if he shall neglect to hear them, *tell it unto the church.*" It is before "the church" then, that the dispute must be finally adjusted, if neither of the foregoing methods of settling it succeed. But who are we to understand by "the church," which is here recognized as the tribunal of last resort in matters of private offence? In the solution of this question, and what follows, you will find a redemption of the pledge given in my last letter.

That interpretation which would make "the church" here to mean "a civil court," or a court of law, is not worthy a serious reply. The whole connection and circumstances of the case contradict it. Neither can it mean the whole body of professing christians throughout the world, who constitute the church of Christ on earth. To tell *them* would be impracticable. There are only two senses, in one or other of which, it can reasonably be understood here. It must either denote, *the whole of the members of the particular church to which the person complained of belongs*: or, *the rulers, or officers of that particular church.* That it does not here mean the whole of the members, but *the officers* of the particular church to which the person belongs, I am decidedly of opinion, after the most mature deliberation. I shall state the reasons, on which this opinion is founded, leaving you to judge of their validity.

It is well known that the Jewish courts, for the trial of ecclesiastical matters, were composed of their elders and officers, by whom the subject in controversy was heard and adjudicated. This was the case in each syna-



gogue; and these inferiour courts were subordinate to the Sanhedrim, which was the grand council of the nation. The people were never called together to hear, and determine on matters of controversy, but the whole was referred to their ecclesiastical rulers. Our Lord, therefore, we conceive, spoke in the common language of Judea: and when he directed that information be given to "the church," he evidently referred to the synagogue court, which was composed of officers met in judicatory, whose proper business it was to decide on all such cases of controversy. And on the abolition of these Jewish courts, he must have intended their correspondent ones under the christian dispensation, made up of the officers of the church. Another reason for understanding "the church" here to mean its officers, is the fact, that in the church, the scriptures recognize a distinction between *rulers* and *ruled*. Accordingly, Paul says, "obey them that have the *rule over you*, and *submit yourselves*."\* That there are ecclesiastical rulers, to whom obedience is required, has already been shewn.† Now such being the fact, that there are rulers in the church distinct from those who are ruled, we need be in no doubt to which of these the power of deciding in matters of controversy ultimately belongs. From the very nature of the case, it must pertain to those who are rulers. And if so, then by "the church" here we are to understand her officers, who are rulers in the church of God, and whose duty it is to hear, and decide in all such cases.‡ But we have an additional, and what appears to us, a very cogent reason for understand-

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\* Heb. 13. 17. † Letter iii.

‡ M'Cleod's Catechism in Ridgeley, V. iii. p. 548.



ing "the church?" here of her officers, arising out of the connection of the passage. Our Lord, in the verse immediately following that on which we are remarking, goes on to shew how the decisions of the church will be ratified: "Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven." Now it is manifest that the persons who are represented in this 18th verse, as "binding and loosing," are the same as "the church" in the 17th verse, whoever that may be. The connection, we think, places this beyond a doubt. But by turning to Matthew, 16. 19. you will find that these are the officers of the church. To them the keys of the kingdom of heaven were given, with the assurance that "whatsoever they should bind on earth should be bound in heaven, and whatsoever they should loose on earth should be loosed in heaven." The connection, therefore, we conceive, clearly determines, that by "the church" in this place, we are to understand her officers in their official characters.

But why, you will ask, call them "the church?" Why did not the Saviour say explicitly "the officers of the church," if such were the persons intended? I answer, that the Greek word *Ekklesia*, here translated "church," signifies *an assembly of any kind*. It comes from a root which denotes to call together. What kind of an assembly it means, must be determined by the connection, and other concurrent circumstances, all which, in the present case, declare so fully, and unequivocally in favour of an ecclesiastical assembly, as to preclude doubt in any unprejudiced mind. And are



not church officers, convened in judicatory for the transaction of business, an ecclesiastical assembly, as much as a convention of church members? All the difference, in this respect, is that they are generally less numerous. The word "church," therefore, which our Lord employs, determines nothing against the view which we are endeavouring to establish. It is only a perverted usage that would narrow the signification of the term, in such a manner as to exclude her officers. Besides, the officers of the church are the representatives, as well as a prominent and constituent part of the church; and, on this account, the term "church" may be appropriated to them, when convened for the transaction of business in which the honour and interests of the church are involved. They are the church acting in her representative character, just as the authorized officers of our national government are the nation acting by her constituted organs.

Having thus ascertained the meaning of the term "church," in this connection, and having seen that it denotes the officers of the particular church to which the person complained of belongs, I would next invite your attention to the effect to be produced, or the object to be gained, by laying this information before the church. That the church is required to act somehow in the case, there can be no doubt. When our Lord says "*if he neglect to hear the church,*" it is evidently implied, that the church has exerted herself in some way to reduce him to a proper temper, and to remove the offence. But *how* is the church to act in the case? Must she act authoritatively? or only as a council of advice,



having no authority to exclude the impenitent offender ? Although I would not preclude the idea of a church judicatory acting as a council of advice, I would not restrict her functions to this, believing that she possesses authoritative powers to inflict censure, even to exclusion from the privileges of the church, on those who will not be reclaimed by more gentle means. This authoritative power seems to be evidently recognized in the statement of the case in question. Before the matter is referred to "the church," it is supposed to have been canvassed before a friendly council of a few christian brethren, acting in their private characters. The very fact then, of its being referred to the officers of the church for final adjudication, supposes that they possess plenary powers for that purpose. If they possessed no authority over the parties, why refer it to them, rather than to any other members of the church ? If nothing more than advice were wanting, many other members would, in a great variety of cases, be as competent to give advice, nay more so, than the church officers. If therefore, our Lord had not intended that the case should be issued officially, and authoritatively, by the proper tribunal, he would, doubtless, have directed that it should be referred to whatever members would be most likely by their known prudence and piety, to conduct it to an amicable conclusion. But the direction in all cases is, *"tell it unto the church."*

But we have still more conclusive evidence that the church judicatory must act authoritatively, and exclude from her communion the obstinate offender, who refuses to be reconciled to his brother, who has sought redress



in the proper manner. This evidence is derived from the subsequent direction of our Lord in the case. “If he neglect to hear the church, *let him be to thee as an heathen man and a publican.*” Now, this must mean, either that you must have no religious fellowship with him in the ordinances of Christ’s house ; or, that you must have no familiar intercourse with him, in the ordinary expressions of friendly and confidential regard ; or it must imply both these. But if the meaning be, that *you must have no religious fellowship with him in the ordinances of Christ’s house*, how will this comport with the notion that the church does nothing more than advise reconciliation, and in the event of failure, leaves the offender in the enjoyment of his church privileges. Then the case will stand thus. If your brother offends, and if, after taking all the different steps prescribed, he should still remain obstinate, and refuse to be reconciled, the church having no power to exclude him, he must be permitted to remain in the enjoyment of all her ordinances, but *you* must have no fellowship with him in these ordinances.—You must treat him as you would do an heathen man, or a publican : or in other words, *you* must decline communion in the ordinances of Christ’s house, because your brother chooses to persevere in his obstinacy.—And if it be the duty of the person offended thus to withdraw from christian fellowship with him, in the sacraments, it would be the duty of all the other members of the church to do the same : and according to this interpretation, the whole, would become *unchurched*, and be driven from spiritual ordinances, for the sake of one obstinate offender, who would be left in the sole, and undisturbed possession of

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the privileges of the sanctuary. Now who does not see, how grossly absurd, and ridiculous this would be? Yet, on the supposition that the above interpretation of Christ's injunction be correct, nothing short of this would be the result of maintaining that the church should do nothing more in the case, than offer advice, and in the event of failure, leave the offender in the full possession of his standing and privileges.

But although the foregoing remarks have been made, to meet any objections which might arise from the view of the subject which has been presented, it is believed, that the direction of our Lord does not point so directly to withdrawing from our offending brother, in the special ordinances of the sanctuary. This, to be sure is implied, as a necessary result of the application of church authority to the case. But his obvious meaning is, that we should have *no familiar intercourse with him, in the ordinary expressions of friendly and confidential regard*. So the Jewish proselytes, to whom the direction was primarily given, would understand it; as they held it to be unlawful to have any friendly, familiar intercourse, either with heathens, or publicans, both of whom, they utterly detested. Taking this, therefore, as the true meaning of the injunction, how will it accord with the supposition of the church doing nothing more than offering advice, while the offender remains in the enjoyment of all her privileges? Would any one pretend that our Lord would direct a total suspension of familiar and friendly intercourse between persons who were allowed to sit at the same communion table? Would he enjoin it as a duty to withhold the ordinary



expressions of friendship from one whom the church acknowledged as a member in common with himself? We cannot believe it. In our humble apprehension, the Saviour would never have authorized and encouraged a course of conduct, so subversive of christian principle, and the unity of the church.

The only consistent interpretation then, is that which supposes the offender to be authoritatively excluded from the communion of the church, by the proper tribunal. Then, and then only, will the direction of our Lord apply to the case. Then it is that we should withdraw from familiar intercourse with him. So Paul, writing to the Corinthians says, "now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother, be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner, *with such an one, no not to eat.*" And to shew that the church either had, or ought to have excluded such persons, he adverts to the acknowledged power which she possessed for that purpose. "Do not ye judge them that are within."\* To withdraw intercourse, therefore, from one who has been excluded according to our Lord's direction, is acting agreeably to the tenor of scriptural precept. And as this last direction of the Saviour can be made to comport only with that view of the subject, which implies the power of the church to exclude the offender from her bosom, it follows that the church is, in duty, bound to exert that power, unless by repentance and reconciliation, the offence be taken out of the way.

But when is an offender chargeable with "neglecting

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\* 1 Cor. 5. 11, 12.



to hear the church?" Doubtless, if he refuses to appear before the church, when the matter is regularly brought up, and thus withholds his assent from the scriptural mode of adjustment, he emphatically neglects to hear her. He places himself beyond the reach of her voice, and as far as his conduct goes, endeavours to obstruct that course of proceeding which our Lord has marked out for the final settlement of the controversy. He is chargeable with contravening the statute of the Saviour, and the church would be justifiable in treating him as contumacious. Accordingly, our Book of Discipline provides that a person thus repeatedly refusing to appear before the proper judicatory, when convened for the settlement of his case, "shall be excluded from the communion of the church, for his contumacy, until he repent."\* This provision, we believe, is completely within the spirit of this statute of the Redeemer. An offender is also chargeable with neglecting to hear the church, when, after having been advised, admonished, or rebuked by the church, he still remains incorrigible. And, finally, he "neglects to hear the church," when the church having excluded him from her communion, he remains without, and does not, in the spirit of repentance and conciliation, seek to be restored to her privileges, and the fellowship of all her members. It is not, however, until the church shall have decided officially in the case, that the party offended can have evidence that he refuses to hear her, if indeed he does refuse. Of course, it is not until then, that the direction of our Lord to withdraw from christian intercourse with him, can, or ought to be acted upon.

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\* Book of Dis. chap. 4, sect. 10.



In the performance of this duty of excluding the impenitent offender from her communion, the officers of the church are authorized to expect the sanction of her exalted head. "Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven." So far as the Apostles, and extraordinary officers of the church were concerned in this declaration, it is to be understood as extending to all their official acts, for this reason, that they acted under the direction of the spirit of inspiration, which preserved them from all mistakes. Consequently, all their decisions would be confirmed in heaven, as infallibly correct. But with regard to the ordinary officers of the church, who cannot lay claim to inspiration, it is to be understood that their decisions will be ratified in heaven, *only so far as they are in accordance with the principles, and directions contained in the word of God*, which is the great charter of the church's rights, authority, and liberties. I am not ignorant that some confine this power entirely to the Apostles, to whom they contend, that the sole prerogative of "binding and loosing," in the sense of the text is limited. But the connection and circumstances of the case, seem to require that we include the ordinary officers of the church in this authoritative grant. It will not be denied, that the case of private offences, as here contemplated, is one pertaining to every age of the church. Of course, the agency which the church is required to employ in relation to it, is not confined to the Apostles, but extends to the ordinary officers of the church, wherever such cases of offence



exist. Our Lord, therefore, having distinctly recognized the authoritative decisions of the ordinary officers of the church, in the 17th verse, in disposing of the matter referred to them, immediately adds in the 18th verse, in relation to the same functionaries, this high privilege of having all their *scriptural* determinations ratified in the courts of heaven. Unless we admit this construction, there will be a disruption of the different parts of what is manifestly a connected series of remarks on the same topic.

But why should it be thought strange that such a grant should be made to the ordinary officers of the church? In them, you will observe, that our Lord recognizes a tribunal governed by religious principles, and looking up to heaven for wisdom to guide it in its deliberations, and decisions. And, he has given them a pledge, that where such an appeal should be made to heaven for direction, it would not be in vain, since it was a principle in the divine administration, that "if any two of them should agree on earth as touching any thing that they should ask, it would be done for them. For where but two or three were gathered together in his name, he was in the midst of them." Now, although this promise may primarily refer to the Apostles, when, in the exercise of their Apostolic functions, they inflicted miraculous punishments on obstinate offenders, we can perceive no good reason why it is not equally applicable to every church judicatory seeking direction in the matters before them; and we may add, to every social meeting for prayer, in which wisdom and counsel are sought from the Father of lights. It is true, that



in the latter cases, the promise cannot be understood absolutely, as they are liable to err both as to the subject and end of their prayers, as well as in the manner of asking, which could not be the case with the inspired Apostles. But on the condition of their prayers being according to the divine will, in their form, matter, and end, we believe that the promise will be made good to them. The Saviour, who is in the midst of them, will take care to present them with success before his Father's throne, and obtain for them the accomplishment of their most extended desires. So that the ratification, by the Head of the church, of a judicial decision, formed under the direction of the spirit of prayer, and according to the principles of the word of God, is nothing more than a confirmation and approval of that to which God himself has directed. And is it arrogance in the church to expect the seal of heaven to that which is in conformity to Jehovah's will? It would evince a culpable degree of unbelief not to be assured, that God will thus honour the acts of his servants, who honour him by a faithful application of the principles, and order which he has established in his house.

Having thus examined, in detail, the whole case of private offences, and shewn you the agency which the church is required to exert in their disposal, I would conclude the present letter, by remarking, that if the foregoing views be correct, a most important duty is imposed on both the members and officers of the church, in relation to the management of those unpleasant occurrences which sometimes interrupt their harmony.—The Saviour, whom we all acknowledge as our law-giver,



has taken cognizance of private offences, and detailed the mode of their adjustment. Where such high authority is concerned, recollect, dear brethren, that your feelings are not to be the guide of your conduct. To follow these, to the disregard of his injunctions, would be perilous in the extreme. You may think the requisition severe, and unnecessary, and you may quarrel with the officers of the church for attempting to carry them into effect; but recollect, that *the law is of Christ's forming, and not of ours*; and that to *him* you must give an account.

It also becomes the officers of the church to weigh well the force of Christ's statutes, and be careful how they carry them into execution. Either to transcend our powers, or through fear or favour, to fail of giving them their full operation, according to the demands of the Saviour, will be highly criminal, and dangerous. To guard against such unhappy results, let both the officers and members of the church cultivate more of the spirit of prayer, and less of the spirit of contention and strife. Though offences must come, they would come less frequently, and be disposed of more easily, if the whole church were importunate at the throne of grace for the peace and prosperity of Zion. Oh! brethren, when shall we all learn the heavenly lesson of praying down the offences, and disorders of the church? When shall the mischievous spirit of strife, which seeks to diffuse the leaven of malice, and ill-will, give place to the holy breathings of that charity which "rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;" and which "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all



things, endureth all things?" It will only be when the church shall agree, as one man, to ask it of the Father, to do it for them. May the good Lord hasten forward that blessed day, and in the mean time, let it be our united cry, "Even so come Lord Jesus: come quickly. Amen."



## LETTER V.

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### *CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,*

THERE are many who, although they admit the existence of an authoritative power in the church, give it such a circumscribed operation, as to render it of very little practical utility. Finding this power so clearly recognized in various passages of scripture, and its application to private offences, and the case of the incestuous person in the Corinthian church so evidently asserted, they are not prepared to hazard a denial either of the general principle, or the propriety of its application in these particular cases. But while they are constrained to go thus far, they utterly deny the right of the church to extend her authority to any other cases than those which are specifically, and expressly detailed. In the cases specified, it is allowed that we have the authority of express statute, for the exercise of church power, but that in all other cases to which it is attempted to be applied, there is a stretch of prerogative not warranted by the word of God. And it is urged, that an extension of church authority beyond the cases defined by express statute, is placing a discretionary power in the hands of the officers of the church, highly dangerous to the liberties of the people. For if we



have no express scriptural statutes defining what offences are cognizable by church courts, then any thing may be made an offence which the caprice, or prejudice, or malignity of the officers of the church may dictate.

It is my design, in the present Letter, to examine how far objections of this kind are founded on truth, and shew you on what grounds, and to what extent, the practice of the church, in applying her authority to other cases than those which are expressly specified, can be sustained from the scriptures. By looking back to Letter iii, where the case of the incestuous person at Corinth is under review, you will find some remarks tending to establish the right and duty of the church to deal with other offenders, than that particular one whose case constitutes the theme of the Apostle's instructions on the subject. I would now add, that on every principle of fair construction, it is manifest, that "fornicators, and covetous, and idolaters, and railers, and drunkards, and extortioners," who are there mentioned, are equally liable to the operation of church authority, with him who was guilty of "such fornication, as is not so much as named amongst the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife."<sup>\*</sup> The whole structure of the Apostle's argument requires, that we give this extent to the application of that power which Christ has conferred on the officers of the church, "for edification, and not for destruction."<sup>†</sup> For if with such, we are required "*no not to eat*;" then, evidently, not to hold spiritual fellowship in the sacraments of the Redeemer's house. But we have already shewn you,<sup>‡</sup> that to justify us in

<sup>\*</sup> I. Cor. 5.    <sup>†</sup> II. Cor. 10. 8.    <sup>‡</sup> Letter iv.



withholding either sacramental fellowship, or familiar intercourse from offending brethren, there must be an interposition of church authority, suspending or excluding them from her communion. Now here, at least, are a number of offences besides incest, to which we may apply the discipline of the church. And if to these offences, why not to all others of a similar nature, or which belong to the same class? For, what good reason can be assigned, why the church should deal authoritatively in the infliction of discipline on “fornicators, and covetous, and idolaters, and railers, and drunkards, and extortioners;” and suffer thieves, and liars, and slanderers, and Sabbath-breakers, and perjured persons, and knaves, and murderers, and other such gross offenders, entirely to escape? To suppose that the Apostle intended to exclude the former, and not the latter, would be to suppose that he viewed the crimes of the former as destructive to the souls of men, and the purity of the church, while he considered those of the latter as harmless, and unproductive of evil, either to the spiritual interests of those committing them, or to the Zion of God. This, however, we cannot believe. To give consistency, therefore, to the Apostolic instructions in relation to this subject, we will be obliged to maintain, that while he enjoined the exclusion of those who are particularly mentioned in connection with the incestuous person, he at the same time intended, that a similar treatment should be extended to all whose crimes were of a character equally flagrant, and destructive of the purity, peace, and edification of the church. Nothing short of this will answer the legitimate demands of fair interpretation.

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I know it may be asked, why did not the Apostle expressly enumerate all those offenders, if he intended that all such should be excluded? I do not say that this would have been impossible: but certainly to have acted on this principle of giving instructions *expressly*, or in so many words, in relation to all matters pertaining to truth and duty, under the ever varying conditions of individuals, and of the church, would have swelled the volume of inspiration to a size beyond convenience, and the retention of ordinary minds. Besides, in the present case, it would have been unnecessary. Having expressly detailed a number of cases, with their mode of treatment, the inference, that all similar cases were to be placed under the operation of the same rules, was so obvious, as to forbid farther detail. It would also have been contrary to his practice in other cases of equal, if not greater importance. Thus, for example, in writing to the Corinthians on the subject of the Lord's supper, he has censured them for a particular abuse which prevailed among them. "When ye come together, therefore, into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's supper. For in eating every one taketh before other, his own supper, and one is hungry, and another is drunken. What, have ye not houses to eat and drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I praise you not."\* Here we have a particular, specified disorder, against which the Apostle has borne testimony. Suppose now, that instead of the abuse here specified, the members of a particular church should, when they come together on sacramental occasions, in-

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\* I. Cor. xi. 20—22.



dulge in some other species of disorder, and crime, such as lewdness, wrangling, profane revellings, or the like, would not the Apostolic censure against the Corinthians be considered as falling upon them? Does not every person, in reading his disapprobation of the disorderly and intemperate conduct of the Corinthian church, consider him as bearing testimony against all similar crimes, occurring under correspondent circumstances? Yet, according to the doctrine of those who require express statute for every thing, any other kind of criminal disorder, excepting that here specified, may obtain in connection with the celebration of the Lord's supper, and the Apostle's censure of the Corinthians, is not to be brought in proof that it is wrong. But who does not see that this is imposing a restriction on scriptural rules, which will narrow them down to a circle much less extended than that of human crimes? It would have been easy for the Apostle to have enumerated a number of disorders, and levelled his censure against them. But this was unnecessary. Having condemned the one, he left the church to infer, as a matter of course, his disapprobation of all similar disorders and crimes, under like circumstances.

Take another example. It is the rebuke which Paul administered to Peter, his fellow-Apostle, for the dissimulation which he practised in a certain specified case. "But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles; but when they were come, he withdrew, and separated himself, fearing them which were of the cir-



cumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him ; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation. But when I saw that they walked not uprightly, according to the truth of the Gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, if thou being a Jew, livest after the manner of the Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews ?”\* Now from the high disapprobation which the Apostle Paul manifested, and expressed against this act of ministerial dissimulation, thus particularly detailed, do we not feel ourselves authorized to bear testimony against, and condemn other similar acts committed under kindred circumstances ? No person ever thinks of requiring that every act of ministerial duplicity, with all its circumstances, should have been detailed ; or that there should have been an express statute condemning every such act, before he ventures to declare his disapprobation of it. On the contrary, we feel ourselves fully warranted from the Apostle’s conduct towards Peter, frankly, and pointedly to expose the conduct of our brethren, who, regardless of their convictions of truth and duty, accommodate themselves to popular views, and thus carry others away “with their dissimulation.” And for the Apostle to have entered into a detail of every case of ministerial dissembling, with all its circumstances, which should ever occur in the church, and expressly entered his protest against it, would, after what is here recorded, have been a work of supererogation. Nor would it, in our humble opinion, have given us any greater degree of certainty in our conduct, in relation to such offences.

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\* Gal. 2. 11—14.



than that which we derive from the single case which has been left on record for our instruction.

These cases, with others which might be adduced, shew that it was not the Apostle's manner to detail every case of transgression, and give express statutes in relation to each. But by the application of certain principles to one, or more particular cases, he has left us in the exercise of that wisdom which the spirit and word of God impart, to apply these principles to all other similar cases which might arise. Such then, being the state of facts, we feel ourselves fully justified, from what the Apostle has enjoined in relation to the application of church power to the incestuous person at Corinth, and other gross offenders there specified, in applying the same principles, and modes of treatment, to all other gross offenders, who violate her laws, and impair the sanctity of her institutions. And to require more minute and explicit details than the Apostle has given us on this subject, is making a demand, which, if the foregoing views be correct, is not authorized, either by necessity, or scriptural practice.

But there are other grounds on which the church is to be regulated in determining what offences are the legitimate objects of authoritative process and discipline. I presume it will be conceded, that whatever crimes would prevent the reception of a person into the church, on his first application, ought, if committed after his admission, to exclude him from her fellowship. This principle appears so obviously correct, that I cannot see how it can be reasonably called in question, and may,



therefore, be assumed in the present argument. Now, if we can only ascertain on what grounds persons may be lawfully refused admission to the privileges of the church, we will have a safe, and definite rule, by which to guide us, in their exclusion, after they have been admitted. Perhaps, we will arrive most successfully at this result, by inquiring on what grounds applicants for special church privileges ought to be received. For if this can be ascertained, then whatever materially affects this, is cause of rejection.

If we have not greatly misunderstood the scriptures, *a credible profession* of the religion of Jesus Christ, is that which entitles to the privileges of the church, and on the exhibition of which, persons ought to be admitted. By a credible profession of religion, I mean *a sound faith, and a godly practice*; or, the adoption of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, exemplified by a correspondent holiness in the external conduct.—That a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, *as the Son of God*, was required of those who were applicants for sealing ordinances in the primitive church, is well known to those acquainted with the New Testament history. The admission of this capital point, may have been accepted in their case, as a credible profession, as it was made at the expense of many and great sacrifices, and, generally, in the face of the most appalling difficulties. Besides, they might not, owing to their peculiar circumstances, have been made acquainted in every case, with all the other points necessary to be believed. The canon of scripture was not yet completed, nor the grounds of faith fully developed. Hence, a profession of faith



in the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, and the Saviour of sinners, might have been accepted in many cases, without requiring the *explicit* admission of the other correspondent doctrines, not yet fully made known. But since the will of God has been fully made known, and we have been instructed in his word, that faith in Christ necessarily implies the admission of the other important doctrines of the gospel, it would be wrong to receive to fellowship in the church, those who denied these other doctrines, even though they did profess to believe in the Saviour. Take for example, the doctrine of human guilt. Could any man who denied this doctrine, be allowed to have made a credible profession of faith in Christ, let his declarations be what they might? Certainly not; when we recollect that the very object for which Christ came into the world, was to save *guilty sinners*. Take also, the doctrine of the agency of the Holy Spirit in the work of conversion. Does he credibly profess Jesus Christ, who denies it? Surely not; for one of the objects of Christ's ascension, was to send down this Spirit *to convince of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment*. The same might be remarked of other fundamental doctrines of the gospel.

In demanding the adoption of all those doctrines, therefore, which are necessarily involved in, and connected with, faith in Christ, before we admit persons to fellowship in the church, is doing nothing more than the gospel seems necessarily to require. Why this was not *formally* done in the case of the primitive converts, has already been, in part, accounted for. But if, as has just been shewn, a profession of faith in Jesus Christ,



as the Saviour of sinners, where honestly made, necessarily involves in it the adoption of the other radical doctrines of the gospel, the Apostles and their coadjutors may possibly have attended to all these points, though the fact be not recorded. For as faith in Christ was the grand point necessary, and to the existence of which, the admission of the others served as evidence, it was not necessary to mention any thing more than what appears in the historical narrative of the Evangelist. These remarks, with that already made, that they were not perhaps fully acquainted with all the principal articles of faith, may serve to remove the objection arising from the silence of the scriptures in relation to the acknowledgment of any other point than that of faith in Jesus, as the Son of God, being demanded of the primitive applicants for church privileges. And permit me to repeat the remark, that if we are determined to reject every thing for which we have not an express precept or example in the scriptures, we will reject almost half their contents.

In connection with a sound faith, persons should exhibit a godly practice, so far as time, and circumstances will permit, in order to their making such a credible profession as will entitle them to special privileges in the church of Christ. This has already been intimated.\* I would now add, that if you will but carefully examine some of the cases recorded in the New Testament, you will find that the persons admitted, so far as we can judge from the brief notices taken of them, gave external evidence in favour of their profession of faith.

\* Letter ii.



Take as an example the case of Simon the sorcerer,\* who afterwards apostatized. Did he not give external evidence which induced Philip to believe that he was sincere in his profession? Most unquestionably he abandoned his sorceries. It is obvious also, that he forsook his former vicious resorts; for we are expressly told, that "he continued with Philip." His continuing with Philip is, indeed, mentioned as taking place after his baptism. But think you that Philip would have baptized him without some probable evidence of his design to devote himself to the gospel, arising from his conduct? We may be certain that he would not, for this very obvious reason, that the moment Simon discovered himself a deceiver, he was denounced by the Apostles, notwithstanding that he still made a profession of the Christian faith. Is it at all probable, therefore, that he would have been admitted without external evidences of sincerity, when, as soon as his duplicity was made manifest by such evidences, he was rejected? We cannot believe it. That which led to his rejection after his admission, would have barred the way to his having been received on his first application. Examine also the case of the Ethiopian eunuch, recorded in the same chapter. He gave external evidence of the soundness of his profession. When Philip met him, he was reading the scriptures. He received Philip into his chariot, for the purpose of being instructed by him. He readily listened to his word, and cheerfully embraced the truth when expounded to him. These were favourable evidences, and so far as opportunity offered, he proved by his works, that the profession of faith in Jesus Christ, which he af-

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\* Acts 8. 13—24.



terwards made, was sincere, and that his heart was right with God. And even the jailer, whose admission to the church occurred so immediately after his conversion, proved his profession to be credible, to the extent of his opportunities, by his external conduct: for “he took the Apostles the same hour of the night, *and washed their stripes.*”<sup>\*</sup> Under more extended opportunities, he would, doubtless, have given more ample demonstration, that his profession was worthy of credit, by doing other “works meet for repentance.”

From the whole of these remarks, it would appear evident, that the scriptures recognise a credible profession of religion, consisting in a sound faith and a godly practice, as constituting the ground on which persons should be admitted to the special privileges of the church of Christ. Accordingly, it is required in our Directory for worship, that “those who are to be admitted to sealing ordinances shall be examined, *as to their knowledge and piety.*”<sup>†</sup> From which it would appear, that a competent knowledge of radical doctrines, and of the ordinances themselves, together with such evidences of piety, as constituted the whole of their profession credible in the view of the church, was deemed necessary by the compilers of our Directory, and ought to be required in order to admission to sealing ordinances. And if such be the only scriptural grounds on which persons should be admitted, then the want of this credible profession ought to bar the way to their being received. Accordingly it has been correctly provided that “such as are found to be ignorant, or

<sup>\*</sup> Acts 16. 33.    <sup>†</sup> Dir. Worship. Ch. IX, S. 3.



scandalous, notwithstanding their profession of the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, may, and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church, until they receive instruction, and manifest their reformation."\*

Where there is not a credible profession, therefore, by a competent acquaintance with, and adoption of, the radical doctrines of the gospel, accompanied by a correspondent practice, persons ought to be refused admission to christian fellowship in the church of Christ. The rejection of such, on their application, we conceive to be fully sustained from the scriptures.

Now, let us carry out this principle, so clearly established from the word of God, and we shall have a definite rule, by which to proceed in the exclusion of persons when admitted. For if the want of a credible profession would, and ought to bar the way to their admission at first, then whenever, by overt acts; they forfeit the credibility of the profession which they have made, they ought to be excluded. Hence, radical errors in doctrine, formally expressed and avowed, with such deviations in practice, as contradict and oppose all the scriptural indications of christian character, are legitimate grounds of exclusion from the privileges of the church. But will not this oblige us, you will ask, to exclude members from the church for every erroneous opinion, and every immoral act, inasmuch as all such impair the credibility of their profession? I answer, No. Every person knows that there is a difference between that which *impairs*, and that which *des-*

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\* Conf. Faith, p. 320.



troys the evidences of christian character. Members of the church may commit many offences, which may greatly impair the credibility of their profession, but which do not completely destroy it. Such offences are proper subjects of discipline, but not of total exclusion from the privileges of the church. Hence, a foundation is laid for advice, rebuke, admonition, temporary suspension from the sacraments, according to the grade and circumstances of the offence. But where the offence is of a more notorious, and flagrant character, and where it is persevered in, against all these more gentle methods of reformation, it evinces a predominance of sinful principles, as long as it remains unrepented of, incompatible with, and destructive of, the credibility of religious profession. In such cases, entire exclusion from the sealing ordinances of God's house, being the only remaining scriptural alternative, becomes the bounden duty of the church.

I am aware, that it may be urged that the exclusion of a disorderly member on the ground of the credibility of his profession, being *destroyed*, is to hold him unregenerate, and treat him as an enemy; whereas Paul calls him "a brother," and requires that we "count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."\* We do not feel ourselves obliged, however, to admit such a consequence. It will be conceded, at least by those who urge this objection, that a child of God may be left for a season to indulge in sin to such an extent, as to destroy the credibility of his profession, and yet be a

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\* II. Thess. 3. 6—15. See Review of Dr. Dickey's Letters on Communion, in the Religious Monitor, February, No. 1826, p. 356, extracted from the Evangelical Witness.



subject of grace. Was not such the case with David, Peter, and others, whose cases are recorded in the scriptures? While David persevered in his murder and adultery, and Peter in the denial of his Lord, did they give credible evidence of their piety? or, was not this evidence destroyed, for the time being? Most assuredly it was. So, also, it may be with others. And the evidence of their religion being destroyed, who will say that they should not be excluded from the privileges of the church? But what is the object of their exclusion? Besides purging the church, their reformation is unquestionably intended. The very design of their exclusion, is to bring them to a sense of their guilt, and thus restore the credibility of their profession.\* Hence, until the effect of this act of exclusion on them is known, they are still to be treated as "brethren," and admonished as such. Although they give no credible evidence of religion at the time of their excision, yet, as they had in their former conduct testified to the sincerity of their profession, we should hope that their fall may not be final, and that by the operation of this act of discipline, they will, in due time, bring forth the credible fruits of righteousness. And it is not, until by a persevering resistance of this disciplinary process, as the last resort of the church, that they are to be accounted as *enemies*, and ranked with the unregenerate.

But allowing the principle for which we are contending to have been sustained, and the right of exclusion from the church for such offences as destroy the credibility of christian profession to be admitted, still it may

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\* I. Tim. 1. 20.



be alleged that we have no definite rule, by which the officers of the church are to be governed in determining what offences destroy the credibility of christian profession ; and that hence, a wide door is left open for abuses, and encroachments on the rights of the people. But in answer to this, I would ask, do not the scriptures define with sufficient clearness the various evidences of christian character ? No one doubts it. Surely then, the diminution, or total destruction of these evidences must be indicated with equal clearness. The one is a necessary consequence of the other. In forming a judgment on these scriptural evidences, for and against the credibility of men's professions, none will be so absurd as to include secret sins, or sins of thought, farther than they are indicated by outward acts. These may assist the person who is the subject of them, in coming to a conclusion in his own case ; but they can be no evidence to others. It is overt acts alone, consisting in the avowal of false principles, or the exhibition of immoralities in the practice, either by sins of omission or commission, which can furnish evidence to the church, impairing, or destroying the credibility of the profession of her members. "By their fruits ye shall know them."

But is the church competent to decide on this evidence ? The answer to this question would lead to the discussion of the right of the church to interpret the laws and instructions of the Saviour, with a view to their application to purposes of church government and discipline. The question is one of great magnitude, and interest. But as its discussion would swell the



present Letter beyond its proper dimensions, I shall reserve it for another place. For the present, I shall content myself with expressing my conviction that the church possesses this right, which it is both her duty, and privilege to exercise. Indeed, if this cannot be maintained, all attempts, not only to exclude disorderly members from the bosom of the church, but to prevent their admission at first, by requiring of them an expression of their doctrinal views, or the exhibition of a correct deportment, must be abandoned as unwarrantable usurpations. And the result will be, that every man who may choose to enter the sacred enclosure of christian ordinances, must be admitted, and retained, irrespective of religious, or moral character; and thus the church will be converted into a vast theatre, on which conflicting views, and multifarious and adverse forms of religion, and profligacy, will be exhibited, in motly assemblage, before the world.

Assuming it, therefore, for the present, that the church is competent, and has the right to judge in relation to those offences which impair, or destroy the credibility of religious profession, we do not conceive that there can be any very great uncertainty in the exercise and application of this right. With regard to gross, and scandalous offences, such as have been already noticed, there can be no uncertainty. These so manifestly impair, and when persevered in, destroy the credibility of christian profession, that few will venture to deny it, or to call in question the right of the church to proceed against them. And even in cases in which there is less of that degrading prominence of guilt, which is con-



nected with drunkenness, adultery, and other such gross offences, there may be such evident indications of religious defection, that under the direction of scriptural principles, we can be at no great loss in forming a correct judgment.

Take, as an example, the case of habitual neglect in attending upon the public worship of God, and the instituted means of grace, where favourable opportunities exist, and where there are no providential obstructions in the way. This is a crime which, though it may not be accompanied with any gross immoralities in the conduct, obviously destroys the credibility of religious profession, and lays a foundation for suspension, or exclusion from sealing ordinances. This will appear evident, if we consider that the public preaching of the word, with its associated duties, is an ordinance of God, instituted for the purpose of promoting the salvation of sinners.\* The total, and allowed neglect, therefore, of this ordinance, evinces a want of respect for the authority of Jesus Christ, by whom it was appointed. It also discovers a disposition hostile to the divine appointments, which would thus set them aside for the purpose of attending to something else, which the arrogance of human wisdom would pronounce of equal, or greater importance. Besides, it is prosecuting a course, which is calculated to subvert the church, and supercede the preaching of the gospel altogether. For who does not see, that if all were to act on this principle, (and if it be the duty of one, it is the duty of all,) associations for public worship could no longer exist, nor would there

\* Mark 16. 15, 16.



be any opportunity for the public proclamation of the gospel of peace? And is not an offence, which is thus calculated to destroy the very existence of the visible church, and which pours contempt on the authority, and appointments of the Saviour, to be accounted destructive of the credibility of christian profession? If "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God;" and if they "cannot hear without a preacher,"\* certainly that man's profession of faith is far from being credible, who, in the midst of the most favourable opportunities, refuses to hear "the word of God" from the mouth of the preacher. There can be no uncertainty here, unless we are determined to disregard the plainest indications of religious conduct, which the scriptures present.

And if the scriptures enable us to decide with so much certainty in relation to gross offences, and prominent omissions of duty, which destroy the credibility of religious profession, doubtless they furnish principles by which we may decide with equal safety, in regard to minor offences which only *impair* that credibility. The only difficulty seems to be in determining the precise amount of discipline which should be administered in the different cases of offence. Here, the scriptures appear to have left a much greater discretionary power in the hands of the church, than in the case of offences themselves. For while these, as subjects of discipline, are indicated with sufficient certainty, we are frequently left, in the exercise of a sound discretion, to proportion the discipline to the character and circumstances

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\* Rom. 10. 14—17.



of the offence, thus ascertained and defined. Still, we have certain general, scriptural principles, which are *the common law* of the christian church, and which, in the absence of more definite rules, may preserve us from any dangerous mistakes in the application of this discretionary power. Such is that which declares the authority of the church to be “given us for edification and not for destruction;”\* and that which affirms her whole organization, and its practical development to be “the edification of itself in love,”† and, its “growth unto an holy temple in the Lord.”‡ A sacred regard to these principles will, where nothing more explicit can be obtained, lead to such an application of discipline, as will rarely transcend the character of the offence, and be best calculated to promote the edification and improvement of all concerned.

And will a discretionary power of this kind, thus bounded and directed by general principles, and the nature and circumstances of the different gradations of offence, be pronounced dangerous and inadmissible? Is not such a discretion exercised every day, by courts of law, in apportioning punishments according to the nature of the crime, except in specific cases which are provided for by express statute? That these tribunals may err, in fixing the punishment too high or too low, is never urged as an objection against the exercise of the power itself; nor is such a power considered dangerous to the liberties of the people. I know that in such cases, it may be said, that the aggrieved party has a prompt remedy in the courts of appeal. But surely not

\* II. Cor. 10. 8.—13. 10. † Eph. 4. 16. ‡ Ib. 2. 21.



more so, than in cases of ecclesiastical process. In the Presbyterian church, in our country, there are no less than four courts, three of which are courts of appeal and revision, where, if errors are committed below, the aggrieved has every reasonable security, which the nature of the case will admit, of having them corrected. If there were but one ecclesiastical court, whose decisions should be final, there might be some ground of objection. A discretionary power, where there was no opportunity of having errors corrected by appeal, might, indeed, be dangerous to the liberties of the people. We are far from believing, however, that the Head of the church has placed in such eminent hazard the rights of the people, by leaving them at the mercy of a single minister, and a few elders, without making any provision for the correction of errors, by some superior, controlling power. On the contrary, it is believed, that in the structure of the christian church, the principles of human liberty and right are well secured, by the institution of such tribunals, as may furnish relief against the errors of inferior courts, may impose a restraint on individual ambition, and guard the liberties of the people from the grasp of those who would aim at absolute dominion in the house of God.

I have thus, dear brethren, attempted to explain to you, the grounds on which persons may be excluded from the church for other offences than those which are provided for by express statute, and to shew you the certainty with which the scriptures direct to the application of the power which she possesses for that purpose. How far I have succeeded, must be left with you



to judge. I am not without hope, however, that if the foregoing remarks be carefully weighed, in the spirit of christian candour, they will lead to the conclusion, that the application of church authority to the various crimes, and disorders which may arise in the church, is not that vague, conjectural, uncertain thing, which its enemies would persuade us to believe. On the contrary, it will appear that it is regulated, and directed by rules sufficiently definite for all the purposes of safe, and salutary government, which, while it maintains in their integrity the institutions of the Saviour, secures, at the same time, all the just rights, and immunities of the people.

In my next Letter, I shall examine more fully, the right, and privilege of the church, to interpret the laws, and instructions of the Saviour, with a view to their application to the purposes of church government and discipline.



## LETTER VI.

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### *CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,*

THERE is nothing more easy than to prejudice the mind against any opinion, by representing it in some unhallowed connection, or associating it with some repulsive heresy. This is often done by those who wish to suppress free inquiry, and to engage others to a rejection of principles which they themselves dislike, and which are destructive of their favourite system. Nor is it to be disguised that this stratagem has often been employed against the principle which it is the design of the present Letter to establish. The right of the church to interpret the laws of the Saviour for purposes of self-government and discipline, has been ranked with the arbitrary usurpations of Papal dominion, which claims to sit in the chair of St. Peter, and to impose, as infallible, her decrees and interpretations, thus making the word of God of none effect. Such imputations, however, are more easily made, than proved. In asserting the right of the church to construe the scriptures, for the purposes mentioned, we wish it to be distinctly understood, that nothing is intended, which would, in the smallest degree, impair the supreme authority of the



word of God, or which would give the church a participation in the Popish claim of infallibility. The scriptures, we hold to be the supreme law of the church ; but like all other laws, they must be interpreted, and applied to their respective objects, to render them of any practical utility. And while the right of private judgment is held to be universal, and unalienable, this right is believed to be equally susceptible of being exercised by man in his associated state, as a member of the church, and in his more insulated capacity, as an individual. This, I presume, must be palpable to every reflecting mind. For what more is done by men, when they come to form a judgment on the scriptures, as an ecclesiastical community, than when they act as individuals ? Each one, in the exercise of his private judgment, presents his views, which being done, the aggregate, if found to accord, becomes the judgment of the whole. It is then the united judgment, or interpretation of the church ; that is, of all her members, acting either personally, or by their representatives ; and all this, in perfect consistency with the free, and unrestrained exercise of individual liberty, and private judgment. The judgment of each is as freely exercised, and remains as fully unimpaired in this case, as though it had never been brought into contact with that of any other. There is here, no usurpation of individual rights ; no imposition of one man's opinions on the consciences of others, for the purposes of arbitrary rule. Let none then be startled at the cry of Popish usurpation, which would sacrifice the rights of private judgment, at the shrine of a pretended infallibility, nor prevented from sitting down to an unbiassed examination of the church's right to interpret



the laws, and instructions of the Saviour, with a view to their application to the purposes of ecclesiastical government and discipline. The question is not to be decided by declamatory and groundless imputations, but by "the law, and the testimony."

That the church in her visible, and collective character, is invested with an authoritative power, for the purpose of preserving her purity, and sustaining the integrity of her laws, by the exclusion of disorderly members, has already been proved.\* This power, it is conceded on all hands, must be exercised agreeably to the word of God, which is the supreme law of the church. But how shall the holy scriptures be applied to the purposes of government, for the detection of error and crime? Will it be said, that they must be taken as they stand, and thus applied, irrespective of exegetical construction? Then, no man can be subjected to discipline for opinions, or practices of any kind, who professes his belief in the scriptures, as the rule of his faith and practice, and claims conformity to them. For no matter how repugnant both his principles and conduct may be to the scriptures, he may allege that they exactly correspond with them; and the church having no right to interpret the sacred oracles against him, cannot exclude him. So that according to this scheme, none but atheists and infidels, who disavow their belief in the scriptures, can ever be excluded from the church. All others, who profess to receive the Bible as the word of God, and the standard of their faith and practice, must be admitted to holy fellowship in the sacraments,

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\* See Letters iii. iv. v. passive.



and treated as brethren in the Lord. And such has, in fact, been the case, in those christian communities which have acted on this plan. Thus, the *general* Baptists in England, according to Mosheim, though they have a Confession of Faith, “reject none from their communion who profess themselves christians, and receive the holy scriptures, as the source of truth, and the rule of faith.” Accordingly, “Mr. Whiston, *though an Arian*, became a member of this Baptist community, which, as he thought, came nearest to the simplicity of the primitive, and Apostolic age. The famous Mr. Emlyn, who *was persecuted on account of his Socinian principles*, joined himself also to this society, and died in their communion.”\* So much for the practical operation of the system!

It is very evident, therefore, according to the notions of those who make the Bible the only test of religious character, and ecclesiastical standing, without any regard to the construction which the church may put upon it, that the power with which she has been invested by her supreme head, for the preservation of her purity and laws, is of no practical utility, as it cannot be applied to any but avowed unbelievers, who neither wish to enter, nor remain within the walls of God’s Zion. And, think you, that God would have vested his church with a power which could not be carried into practical operation for her own benefit, agreeably to his requirements? If not, as all must admit, then those views

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\* Mosheim’s Eccles. Hist. Vol. III. p. 349, and Note.—According to a writer in the Christian Advocate, similar, and even more deplorable results followed the adoption of this same system, by the Synod of Ulster, in the North of Ireland—Christian Adv. Sept. 1826, p. p. 402-3.



which would deny to the church the right of interpreting the scriptures, for the purpose of giving practical effect to that system of order which Christ has established in his own house, must be wrong. In order, therefore, that the church may obey the injunctions of the Saviour, by excluding from her fellowship those whose principles, or practices, are at variance with the requirements of the gospel, her right to interpret the scriptures for this purpose must be admitted.

This will, perhaps, be better illustrated, and more easily understood, by stating a particular case. It is embraced in the command of Paul to Titus: "*A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject.*"\* We have already shewn you, that this admonition and rejection of heretical persons, is to be performed by the church, in the exercise of that power, with which Christ has clothed her, for the purposes of her own government.† It is an authoritative act, to which the church is bound by the command of her supreme Lord. The duty of the church, therefore, in this case, will not be questioned. The command being imperative, and unconditional, there is no option, but in unconditional obedience.

Now, let us see how the church is to carry this law of the Saviour into effect, on the principles of those who deny her the right of interpreting the scriptures, for purposes of ecclesiastical government. In this process, it is obvious, that the very first step must be to ascertain what is heresy, and what it is that constitutes a

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\* Tit. 3. 10.    † Letter iii.



man a heretic. But is this defined with so much certainty in the scriptures, that all who profess to receive them as the word of God, can perceive it, the moment their pages are opened? This will not be pretended, since it is well known to every theologian, that a diversity of opinion has obtained among the best scholars on this subject. Now, suppose a man arraigned before the church, and charged with heresy. He pleads, not guilty, and refers to the scriptures to sustain his plea. The church examines, and compares all the different passages which bear upon the subject, call in to their aid the primitive and classical use of the original word, and finally come to the conclusion, that, according to the fairest and best construction, which they can put upon the whole, the crime with which he stands charged, is heresy. But the person arraigned alleges that they have mistaken the nature of heresy, in the exercise of their interpreting power; and that the scriptures do not teach as they pretend. Here, the parties are at points. What now is to be done? The church charges the accused with heresy. He denies it. And both appeal to the scriptures. But the scriptures, irrespective of fair interpretation, do not decide the question at issue. And the right of interpretation being denied to the church, the process must stop, and the heretic be allowed to remain in the undisturbed possession of his privileges.

But even supposing the parties to agree in their definition of heresy, still, *the fact*, whether the person accused was guilty of the crime thus agreed upon, might come in controversy between them. And, I apprehend, that the same difficulties would arise, and the same ob-



structions to any definite or final process, present themselves, as in the case just detailed. For how could the fact be ascertained, but by a comparison of the man's conduct with the word of God, and *constructively* pronouncing it to correspond with the attributes of heresy as indicated in the holy scriptures? And as in this case, also, the party accused might deny the construction of the church to be correct, and the church having no right to interpret the scriptures against him, the whole matter would be at an end. But who does not see, that this is to render the Apostolic injunction, in relation to heretics, perfectly nugatory. It is converting it into a dead letter; and being of no practical utility, it might as well be torn from the page of inspiration. For a law that cannot be carried into effect, all will agree, might as well be expunged from the statute book.

But is not this, you will say, to destroy the right of private judgment? Must an accused person be denied the privilege of judging the scriptures, and be made to succumb to the judgment of the church? Let the matter be fairly understood. No one doubts the right of an individual to judge the scriptures *for himself*. But this is not the question. This individual is now a member of a community, which is charged with the function of government, by the Head of the church. This function is to be administered according to prescribed laws. Now, the question is, whether the man who is charged with violating these laws, and thus impeding the regular operations of the government, is to be allowed the right of interpreting these laws *against the church*, so as to exonerate himself and subvert her order? Or, does



this right of interpretation, for the preservation of her peace, order, and purity, belong to the church? If you say, the right belongs to the individual, then the rights of the whole christian community must be sacrificed to that of an individual, and the operation of church government, be entirely frustrated. For, to make this more plain, I would inquire, to whom are those laws, relating to administrative government in the church, given? Is it to an individual, in his insulated capacity? or, is it to the church as a body, to be executed by her, in her representative character? That it is to the latter, no intelligent Presbyterian will hesitate, for a moment, in affirming.\* Then, assuredly, the right of interpretation belongs to the church, to whom the law is given in charge, and at whose hand, its execution will be demanded. Nor can it be fairly alleged that there is any sacrifice of individual right in the case, because, as an individual, he is not constituted, nor recognized by the supreme law-giver, as *the judge* in matters pertaining to government, and in which the interests of the whole community, of which he is a member, are involved. This, by the appointment of the Saviour, belongs to the

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\* This presents one important reason why subscription to the standards of the church should be so imperatively demanded of her *officers*. The power and duty of carrying into effect the laws of the church, for the purposes of government, belong to them, as her representatives. And as these laws, as will be made more fully to appear, cannot be carried into effect, without some standard, by which the principles and conduct of men may be tested, it is important, and necessary, that the adhesion of the officers of the church to such standards, be explicitly made known, that the operation of the Saviour's statutes, in relation to her government, may be thus fully secured. The same necessity for subscription to ecclesiastical standards, on the part of the people, does not appear to exist, as they are not charged directly with the function of government, and should they diverge from the established order of Christ's house, the same evils would not result.



church. Besides, the individual has entered the church, with the full knowledge (if he has chosen to inform himself) of her system of order, and of the rights, and responsibilities, which pertain to the rulers and ruled, respectively. Having consented, therefore, to assume the station of a member, he has consented to be governed by her laws, administered by her authorized officers. Hence, the church has his own guaranty for submission to the regular administration of the government, according to the laws prescribed by the Saviour. Even allowing, therefore, (which we do not,) that there were any sacrifice of individual right in the case, it is one which has been voluntarily made by the individual himself, on his becoming a member of the church.

And is this any thing more than what takes place in civil society? Does not every individual, upon his entering a political community, consent to the operation of its laws? And is it ever deemed an encroachment on the rights of private judgment, when the authorized depositories of power, interpret the laws against him, in cases of alleged offence? Even though they should interpret them wrong, the tribunal of correction is never pretended to be, the private opinion of the individual charged with the offence. He has consented to be dealt with according to the established order of the state. Thus the celebrated Rosseau, in a work which the National Assembly of France considered as having laid the foundation for their Revolution, and for which they decreed him posthumous honours, says, that "*when the state is instituted, the consent of all those who reside in it, is supposed: for whoever inhabits a territory, gives a*



*tacit promise that he will submit to the laws by which it is governed.*"\* I do not quote Rousseau, as authority in matters of religion, as it is well known that he was an infidel ; nor from any respect which I have for his moral character ; but to shew, that one who had very high notions of the rights of private judgment, and personal liberty, and who cannot be charged with the cravings of priestly ambition, did not consider the pledge of submission to the laws, upon becoming a member of a political community, any encroachment on, or abandonment of either. For it will be recollected, that Rousseau was a Republican of the French school, and penned the above paragraph, at the very period in which the nation was preparing to rise in arms against the encroachments of regal and arbitrary power. And if such a principle is deemed compatible with the highest individual liberty in politics, why not in religion ? The objection, therefore, we conceive to be entirely gratuitous, unsupported by any rational evidence, or established principles, either in religious, or political jurisprudence.

But to return to the question of right. It is manifest from what has been said, that on the principles of those who deny to the church the right of interpreting the scriptures for purposes of government, no heretic can ever be rejected from the church, if by his own act, he does not choose to retire. His heresy cannot be detected, nor his heretical character sustained ; because, professing to receive the scriptures, and the church having no right to interpret them against him, there is no *test*,

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\* Rousseau's *Contract*. p. 238, A. D. 1791. See also Dr. Witherspoon's *Lect. Mor. Phil.* V. III. of his works, p. 430.



by which his pernicious tenets can be evolved. But surely the Apostolic command, to “admonish and reject heretics,” supposes the practicability of its execution. On the above scheme, however, its execution is not practicable; and, consequently, the scheme itself must be erroneous, unless we allow men the privilege of constructing a system, which will render nugatory the appointments of the Son of God.

But let us proceed a step farther. The command in relation to heretics, not only supposes the practicability of its execution, but it *authorizes* whatever means may be necessary to carry it into full effect, in consistency with the word of God. This, I apprehend, is a sound principle in the judicial construction of all laws, without which, legislative and parliamentary injunctions would generally remain, as *blank forms*, on the pages of the statute book. On this ground, therefore, the church is authorized to interpret the scriptures for the purpose of fixing the meaning of her laws, and detecting those who would violate them to her detriment. In the exercise of this right, she can declare what is heresy, and what it is that constitutes a man a heretic, in the sense of the scriptures; and by this, as a *test*, she can ascertain the heretical tenets of those who stand charged with this corruption, and proceed against them as directed by the Apostle. This, in short, gives to the church the authority to form a *Creed, or Confession of her Faith*, according to her views of scriptural truth, for the purpose of ecclesiastical government, and fellowship. For, if the command of the Apostle to deal with, and cast out heretics, authorizes the use of whatever means



are necessary for these purposes; and if, as has been shewn, heretics cannot be detected, and expelled from the church, without some constructive, or declarative expression of what she believes the scriptures to teach, in relation to this subject; or, in other words, without a creed or confession of faith; then it follows, that such a creed, or such a constructive exhibition of those scriptural principles, the denial of which, with the accompanying circumstances, involve heresy, is a necessary means to the attainment of these ends. And if it be a necessary means to the attainment of these ends, then the church has the sanction of scriptural authority, for making use of such a creed.

Perhaps it may be thought that there is a difference between the right of interpreting the scriptures against heretics, and that of making, and employing a Creed for their detection and expulsion. I can see none. In both cases, the church forms a judgment on the scriptures, which judgment is *authoritatively* applied for the purpose of giving effect to the Saviour's laws. In both cases, the Bible is acknowledged as the supreme law of the church, from which all ecclesiastical authority is derived. And that the interpretation of the church is reduced to a written form, can certainly afford no reasonable ground of objection. For if she has the right to interpret the scriptures at all, for the purpose of authoritative process, why not to reduce that interpretation to writing, and call it a Creed? Such incidental circumstances cannot alter the nature of the thing. And it will certainly be less liable to misconstruction in this written form, than when floating in the minds, or imbo-



died in the verbal expressions of those who employ it. The principle, however, is the same; and all that has been said to establish the right of the church to interpret the scriptures, for the purpose of her own government, equally establishes her right to make a Creed. And it will be incumbent on those who deny her the right of making a creed for the attainment of the ends of her government, to disprove her right to interpret the scriptures for the same purposes. Until this is done, her right to form, and employ such an ecclesiastical instrument, for the ends which have been indicated, must be considered as established.

But after all, it will be asked, are such instruments as Creeds really necessary, for the purposes alleged? May not the church do without them? I am aware that their necessity has been, and still is strenuously denied; and by none more so, perhaps, than by a writer who has been, for some time, before the public, the *Rev. John M. Duncan*, of Baltimore.\* Thus, after quoting Dr. Du-pin, to shew that there were neither Creeds nor Councils in the primitive church, until towards the end of the second century, he makes the following remarks: "The fact is, that there were no such Creeds in existence; and yet there was as much need for them then, as there has been since, or can be now. Their bishops had no opportunity to assemble and make them, even if they had thought of them. They had enough to do in contending for the common faith, which they could all

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\* I have introduced Mr. Duncan's name, not from any desire to invite controversy with that gentleman, but for the purpose of guarding you against his principles on the subject of Creeds and Confessions of Faith, which I consider highly mischievous.



learn from the scriptures ; and fearful persecution formed the test of their sincerity : so much so, that Tertulian remarked, that the blood of the martyrs was the seed which produced an abundant harvest of new christians. And there was no great difficulty in detecting, and excluding heretics : these were censured and avoided by common consent, under the operation of that inherent power, which religious society has, like all other societies, to regulate itself according to its own constituent principles."\* And he has quoted largely throughout the first part of his Book, from various historians, to shew that the church never enjoyed such a season of peace and purity, as in the absence of Creeds and Confessions of Faith ; nor was her purity ever corrupted, nor her peace destroyed, until the introduction of these ecclesiastical instruments of oppression. And all this is thought to be a most overwhelming, and unanswerable objection against the necessity, and use of Creeds and Confessions in the church of God.

But before we admit the objection to the full extent of its claims, let us dispassionately weigh its force. Because we believe in, and have advocated the necessity of Creeds, or some constructive exhibition of what the scriptures teach, in order to the detection and expulsion of heretics, in the ordinary states, and exigencies of the visible church ; we are not to be understood, nor does the nature of our argument require us to maintain, that these Creeds should be used with the same frequency, and formality, in every state of the church. Although, as in many other things pertaining to the state and char-

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\* Remarks on Creeds and Confessions of Faith, p. p. 80, 81.



acter of the christian church, in its earliest periods, the inspired writers have given us no circumstantial details on this subject, there is good reason to believe that something of this kind was in use, even in the times of the Apostles, from the injunction given to the church, to "*try*" those who came to them in the character of teachers, or expounders of the scriptures. But heretical men professed to receive the scriptures then, as well as now, as the rule of their faith and practice. How then could the church *try* them, but by the scriptures, *according to her understanding of them*, which understanding, or interpretation was, in fact, her creed? For it will not be contended, that the exposition of the heretics, could be admitted, as the test of their orthodoxy. And by the scriptures themselves, irrespective of exegetical construction, they could not be tried, seeing both appealed to them in support of their peculiar opinions. The church, therefore, having it in charge, to "*try*" those who came to her, professing to be teachers; and as such a trial could not accomplish the end for which it was instituted, without granting to the church her own exposition of the scriptures, and according to that exposition, pronouncing on the character of those who sought admission to her highest honours; it is evident, that *the Creed-principle*, at least, was recognized, and acted upon, for the purpose of testing the pretensions of those, who might otherwise have crept into the church, and corrupted her purity.

It is quite probable, however, that these tests were used with less formality, during the early age of the christian church, than in subsequent periods. The rea-



son is obvious. There was not the same necessity for them, although Mr. D. has asserted the contrary. The Apostles could be referred to, while living; and after their death, their "traditions"\* were fresh in the recollection of the primitive christians. Besides, as Mr. D. himself has observed: "Fearful persecution formed the test of sincerity" among those who professed their adherence to the doctrine of Christ. Heretical intruders, therefore, would sooner pass out of the church, of their own accord, in many cases, than be subjected to such a fiery ordeal. And where it might be necessary to "try" them more formally, the Apostolic decisions being of recent date, and fresh in their memories, would serve to direct them to a safe, and equitable result. The peculiar state of the primitive church, therefore, in the midst of fiery persecution, and having the traditions of the Apostles yet uncorrupted by the lapse of time, furnishes a substantial reason, why we find so little reference to such documents in that age of the church. Although, from the necessity of the case, they were, doubtless, used informally, under certain circumstances, there was evidently less necessity for them, in that state of the church; a state of the church, we may remark, which, as it regards its vicinity to the Apostles, and the facilities thereby furnished for knowing their views of scriptural law, can never recur.

But when the Apostolic "traditions" had passed through a greater distance of time; when the church was relieved from persecution by the protection of the state; and when heretics became more numerous and

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\* II. Thess. 2. 15.



obtrusive ; how then were these corrupters, and disturbers of the christian church to be detected, and censured ? Mr. D. would doubtless reply : “ Under the operation of that inherent power, which religious society has, like all other societies, to regulate itself, according to its own constituent principles.” But what are the constituent principles of religious society ? So far as we are able to understand Mr. D. on this subject, he makes them to be certain “ modes of thinking, and habits of action,” by which “ individuals will approximate to, or recede from each other ;” and that by these, or some other inherent or accidental power, which he has not defined, “ some social principles will be adopted by common consent, or something like a *social Creed* will be tacitly formed.”\* And of such a Creed, he approves. But then, these modes of thinking, and habits of action, must have relation to some standard or rule, by which they are evolved, otherwise, different individuals could never, in the exercise of them, approximate so as to form a social creed. Modes of thinking, and habits of action, operating irrespectively of some common standard, instead of producing approximation, would be the fruitful source of discord. This, I presume, will not be denied : and Mr. D. will readily allow this standard to be the Bible, that precious book, by which we all wish to regulate our modes of thinking, and habits of action. According to Mr. D. then, religious society, or the church, will *tacitly*, and of necessity, form a social creed, or a summary of scriptural doctrines, from their common perceptions of the word of God, which will be adopted by common consent. And this social creed,

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\* Remarks, p. 41.



which is the product of that inherent power, which, according to him, belongs to the church, is the precise *standard or test*, by which he would detect, and censure heretics. For he expressly declares, that they are to be "*censured and avoided by common consent*," that is, by a social creed, thus tacitly formed and adopted, "under the operation of that inherent power, which religious society has to regulate itself according to its own constituent principles." Here is his *authoritative rule*.

Now who does not see, that notwithstanding Mr. D's hostility to Creeds and Confessions of Faith, he has been driven to the necessity of employing one for the purpose of detecting, and excluding heretics from the church? All the difference, in fact, then, between us is, that *he* employs a Creed, *tacitly formed and adopted*, and *we* employ one which has been formed, and adopted, *after a free, and open interchange of expressions, and published to the world*. And is this *tacit creed*, which exists only in the minds of those who adopt it, that which is to secure the rights of conscience, and to form an impregnable fortress around the tree of religious liberty? That man must have strange notions of religious liberty, and individual rights, who could think himself more secure, under the operation of such a Creed, than one written out, and published in a visible form. And here is one of the grand defects of Mr. D's scheme. Rejecting written Creeds, and finding it impracticable to get along without some conventional agreement, he is obliged to have recourse to those *tacit* Confessions of Faith, which in the hands of unprincipled men, may be wield-



ed for the most oppressive and destructive purposes. And why should Mr. D. object against written Creeds, as tests of orthodoxy, when he allows of tacit ones, for the same ends? If the church may exclude a heretic under the operation of the latter, why not under the operation of the former? Certainly, even in the formation of this social Creed, thus tacitly framed, the right of interpreting the scriptures for purposes of ecclesiastical fellowship, and discipline, is conceded; unless it be maintained, that the church arrives at this result, under the operation of blind impulse.

In justice to Mr. D. it ought to be known, that in a later publication than that referred to, in the foregoing observations, he has disclaimed the use of the term *Creed*, "in an ecclesiastical sense, i. e. as expressing a rule of faith and manners, composed, authorized, and enforced by a voluntary association;" and has told us, that by a *social creed*, he intended only "a certain coincidence of sentiment, at least, in regard to the first principles of christianity;" or "certain truths which men will embrace in common, from the very nature of the case;" or, in other words, "*public opinion*."\* But what, I would ask, is this "coincidence of sentiment," this "public opinion," but *the judgment, or Creed* of the church, tacitly formed, as to what the scriptures teach? Now if Mr. D. had gone no farther than to maintain the right of the church to hold, and exhibit this Creed before the world, he might consistently deny his having used the term in an ecclesiastical sense. But he has gone farther than this, as the preceding re-

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\* Reply to Dr. Miller's Letter to a gentleman of Baltimore, p. p. 22, 24, 25.



marks shew. And even when he comes to explain himself, he clothes this social creed, with all the powers of an ecclesiastical formula. Thus, in explanation of a passage in his "Remarks," in which he had affirmed, that in the primitive church, "heretics were censured, and avoided by common consent," he says, that "when he wrote it, his impressions were of this kind; that when certain elemental truths should be necessarily adopted by any community, or by society at large, any man who would undertake to question them, would be condemned by every tongue; and thus *heretics would be kept out by the force of enlightened public opinion*. So it was in the primitive church. So it *should* be now, without the help of an ecclesiastical creed."\*

Now, is it not manifest, that while Mr. D. disclaims the ecclesiastical use of the term, he actually employs his social creed for the same purposes, for which we employ our written constitutions, to "*keep out heretics*" from the church. It is, in fact, his test of orthodoxy, and his "rule of faith and manners," which he brings into the church, and *enforces* for the expulsion of those who, according to its decisions, are unsound in the faith. It matters not, therefore, by what name he calls it, or in what sense he uses his terms. Words cannot alter the nature of things. And as long as he gives to this social instrument, *an authoritative power over others*, it is as truly "ecclesiastical" in its character, as any Creed or Confession of Faith, which has ever been adopted, and acted upon by the church. Besides, it is liable, as every body knows, to be moulded into numberless forms,

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\* Reply to Dr. Miller's Letter to a gentleman of Baltimore, p. 25.



by a thousand incidental circumstances, and the excitement and turmoil created by the ambitious efforts of designing men ; and on this ground, as I shall presently shew you, is far less safe, than a written constitution, which cannot be changed, but by the *deliberate act* of the church.

But then it will be said, that this social Creed is not “composed, authorized, and *enforced*, by a voluntary association.”\* By whom then, I would ask, is it composed, anthorized, and enforced? Mr. D. seems to consider the whole, as the necessary result of the operation of the constituent principles of religious society, independent of any formal, ecclesiastical proceeding in the case.† But if so, why did the Apostle leave this imperative injunction with the church? “An heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject.” If such offenders would *necessarily* be kept out of the church,

\* Mr. D. is a great enemy to *voluntary associations* in the church, when dealing with his adversaries. He rejects with warmth, the consequence which he supposes had been attributed to his views, that “men may form voluntary associations, and frame articles of belief for one another.”† Of some of Dr. Miller's reasonings, he observes, that “they rest upon the assumption that we have a right to construct the church in the form of *voluntary associations*. But this is not granted ; on the contrary, it is *most explicitly denied*.”‡ In his “Remarks” also, he has employed a whole section of sixteen pages, against voluntary associations in the church. Yet after all, when Mr. D. comes to take his station, at the head of a new association, and act his part as a principal member of it, we hear him holding the following language : “In commencing this inquiry (in relation to the form of ordaining Elders) we must remark that the scriptures have not said much on the subject ; and that *we, in arranging an ecclesiastical sect, or framing a voluntary association, are reduced to the necessity of making laws for ourselves.*”§ Alas! for so dire a “necessity,” which obliges men to contradict in practice, what they have advocated in theory!

† Reply, p. 23.      ‡ Ib. p. 44.

§ Discourse on the Official Relations of N. T. Elders, p. 25.

† Reply, p. p. 24, 25.

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“by the force of enlightened *public opinion* ;” whence the necessity for requiring that they be admonished again, and again, and then rejected? If their exclusion would take place, as a matter of course, why did not the Apostle leave things to take their course, without clogging their operation, by directing to such formality of process? Surely, he could not have been acquainted with Mr. D’s scheme, or he would not thus have interfered with the natural, and necessary operations of religious society! And farther, might we not inquire, who, according to his plan, is to carry into effect, this Apostolic command, in relation to heretics? If “public opinion” is that which is to be brought into operation against them, then *the public*, or the whole community, must admonish, and cast them out, *according to that opinion*, which is their rule of action. But how will this accord with Mr. D’s notion, that the Presbytery is *the only tribunal* which has the management of the spiritual concerns of the church? \* Besides, do we see, in this command of the Apostle, relative to heretics, nothing like the formality of ecclesiastical process intimated? Nothing, but a rhetorical flourish, in which “public opinion” is summoned to the stage of action, and directed to pursue the heretic, with her thousand tongues, and drive him from the communion of the pious? Assuredly, the Apostle would not thus trifle, however men may trifle with his injunctions!

From the whole course of these remarks, you will perceive, that there is an absolute necessity for the church to form some interpretation, or put some con-

\* Dis. on the Offi. Rel. of the N. T. Elders, p. 37.



struction on the scriptures, in order to attain the ends of her government, in the expulsion of heretics. In no other way, can their heretical character be ascertained, and established, for the purposes of discipline. From the necessity of the case, therefore, and the impracticability of carrying the scriptural injunctions, in regard to heretics, and other offenders, into effect, without some constructive exhibition of scriptural truth, we believe the church has the authority of her great law-giver, for the formation of such, on the principles of the Bible, and under her responsibility to her supreme Head. And, as we have attempted to shew, we *do* think that Mr. D's own views of "the inherent power" of the church, necessarily involve, and lead to the exercise of this right.

Now, brethren, if we are not greatly mistaken, the foregoing observations go far to settle the grand difficulty, respecting Creeds and Confessions of Faith. For the difficulty is not so much about the formation of a Creed, by the church, but the making use of that Creed *as a test* of men's profession, for the purpose of admitting, or excluding them from ecclesiastical fellowship. Hear Mr. Duncan. "He (the master) never gave them (the church) a right to say, upon what principles his church should be formed, but taking that matter into his own hand, he has decided for us all, and commanded us to be of "one mind," and to "love one another." If any imagine that they are duly authorized to take this stand in the management of religious things, it becomes them to shew their *scriptural commission*; and to prove that they have a divine right to make a Creed or Confes-



sion, to which others must bow. We have now explicitly stated our difficulty. Some men undertake to make a summary of scriptural doctrines for other men; and bringing that summary into the church of God, as substantially a rule of faith and morals, they exclude from scriptural privileges those who will not receive, and adopt it. Where is their *divine warrant*? Let this question be fairly, and unequivocally answered.”\*

Upon this statement of Mr. D's, one or two remarks may be made. The advocates of Creeds, do not claim for the church, as he would intimate, “a right to say on what principles Christ's church should be formed,” irrespective of the word of God. We believe as much as he does, that the Master has taken this into his own hand. But to know what the Master has determined respecting the church, she must interpret the sacred oracles. Nor is it strictly true, that she “undertakes to make a summary of scriptural doctrines *for other men*.” It is for *her own use*, and for the maintainance of that system of laws, which the Redeemer has established *in the church*, that such summaries are formed. This is their primary design. And they operate on “other men,” only so far as they choose to place themselves under their operation, by seeking fellowship with the church.

With the above exceptions, the passage which I have quoted from Mr. D. is sufficiently explicit to shew what he, and others who think with him, consider the grand, and radical difficulty respecting Creeds and Confessions.

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\* Remarks on Creeds and Confessions, p. 43, 44.



It is the want of a *divine warrant*. Such a warrant, we think we have produced, by shewing that the scriptural injunctions which have been given in charge to the church, could not possibly be carried into execution, without something of this kind. You may call them Creeds, or Confessions of Faith, or Formularies of christian doctrine, or constructive exhibitions of what the scriptures teach, or whatever else you please. But something of this kind, the church *must* have, in the ordinary states of her existence, to enable her to carry into effect, her Master's injunctions, and sustain in its integrity, that government which he has established for the edification of all her members. For, surely, as has already been alleged, the Saviour would never have established a system of government, which could not go into practical operation, for the purpose of giving effect to his own laws. And this, we have shewn you, would inevitably be the case, unless the right of the church to interpret the scriptures for purposes of self-government, be conceded. For the exercise of this right, therefore, we conceive she has the sanction of scriptural authority. And this, if our understanding has not egregiously imposed upon us, ought forever to put to rest the question respecting the lawfulness of Creeds and Confessions in the Church of Christ.

But, perhaps, it will be said, that the whole of our argument rests on the particular injunction of the Apostle respecting heretics ; which injunction was intended only for the Apostolic, and primitive ages of the church ; and that now, there are no such persons as heretics, in the offensive sense of the term. But although Mr. D.



has quoted, with applause, a passage from Milton, who, as it now appears, was one of the greatest heretics of his age,\* to prove that "he is the only heretic, who counts all heretics but himself:"† yet from the whole of what Mr. D. has written on this subject, I should not judge him to be of this opinion. And, I apprehend, there are few, who would deny the existence of heretics, even in our day. For, whether we adopt the opinion of the learned Dr. Campbell, of Aberdeen, that a heretic is "a factious man," or one who makes parties or factions:‡ or, that of Stebbing, Scott, and others, that he is "a professed christian, who obstinately denies and opposes some fundamental doctrine of the gospel; especially, if he earnestly propagates it, from a desire to become the head of a party, and so make divisions in the church:"§ in either case, I presume, the existence of heretics, in every age of the church, will be admitted. For, who does not know, that there always have been, and even now are, *factious men* in the church, both among those who adopt, and those who reject the fundamental doctrines of christianity, who desire above all things, *to stand at the head of a party*? And if there always have been, and still are such, in the church, then, the law relating to them continues in full force, and our argument, respecting the power of the church to carry it into execution, remains unshaken.

We wish it to be understood, however, that the validity of our conclusions, does not rest on this solitary case. We have selected this, merely for the sake of

\* See Review in Christian Advocate, Feb. 1826, p. 85.

† Remarks, p. p. 56—58. ‡ Prelim. Diss. p. 169.

§ Scott in Loco. Stebbing in Dod. p. 433.



giving distinctness to our illustrations on the subject. The same course of argument might be employed, in relation to all the other laws, which the Saviour has given to the church, for the purposes of government, and the exclusion of disorderly members. To give them their legitimate operation, they must be interpreted by those at whose hand their execution is required, otherwise they will remain, as a dead letter, on the page of inspiration. And this right of interpretation, for the purposes of ecclesiastical government, involves the right of forming a Creed for the same purposes, agreeably to the principles of scriptural truth, as indicated in the Bible. And without some such instrument, it appears to us impossible that the church can ever attain the ends of her government.

Mr. D. has, indeed, attempted to shew, how the purity of the church may be sustained, and heretics kept out, without the formality of an ecclesiastical Creed. His plan simply is, to remove "ecclesiastical power," and "scholastic theology" from the church, and place ourselves under "the protection of God's word, and Spirit."\* But was not the primitive church, *according to Mr. D's own view of it*, free from these ghostly evils, and most emphatically under the protection of God's word, and Spirit? And why, in this state of things, so exactly according to his mind, did she not preserve herself free from the intrusions of heretics? Yet she did not; for agreeably to his own statements, heretics found their way into the church, before the introduction of Creeds, which, he asserts, were brought in, as a "re-

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\* Reply, p. p. 56, 59, 67.



*cipe*” for the evil.\* It is true, that he ascribes this state of things to the love of power, and an unhallowed zeal in doctrinal disputation, which corrupted the church then, as they have often done since.” Be it so. Where was “*enlightened public opinion*,” that it did not correct the evil? If it be an instrument, so stable in its character, and so potent in its operation, as Mr. D. represents it, “overturning every thing which opposes it, and establishing its own enlarged, and liberal principles;”† why did it not rise in its might, and put down these unhallowed instruments of corruption? Had not the church become corrupted, it seems that Mr. D’s system would have accomplished wonders! Had no evils found their way into the church, “public opinion” would have kept every thing straight! But whenever corruption entered to pollute the church, and degrade its character, she retired from the contest, and ceased to furnish protection to the object of her charge. What is such a system worth! A system suited only to a state of the church, which, even according to Mr. D’s own account of the matter, has never existed, since the days of *Origen*! And has the church, really been wandering from the Master’s law, and usurping his prerogatives, ever since the introduction of Creeds? And yet how strange, that he continues to bless her! How many, even of those voluntary associations, which have been most rigid in their adherence to their Creeds, have received copious effusions of the Spirit of God, and been made glad by the number of their converts? One would think, that if they were guilty of so high an offence, as that of superceding the holy scriptures, by their secta-

\* Renly, p. 64.

† Ib. p. 25.



rian regulations, they would not have been thus marked, as the objects of heaven's spiritual bounties.

Let none imagine from these remarks, that we entertain low, or disrespectful notions of the word, and Spirit of God. On the contrary, we are as firm believers as Mr. D. can be, in the sufficiency of God's word and Spirit, for all the purposes, for which they have been vouchsafed to the church. Wherein then, it will be asked, do we differ? I answer; that while in common, we plead for the entire sufficiency of God's word and Spirit, for the purification and protection of the church; we differ in this, that Mr. D. restricts the operation of those divine agents, within narrower limits, than *we* conceive him warranted to do, from the scriptures. For it is manifest from the whole tenor of his remarks on this subject, that it is by the reading and preaching of the word, and the administration of the sacraments alone, accompanied by the agency of the Spirit, that he expects the church to be preserved free from corruption, and matured in all holy graces. A system of government, such as would require the interpretation, and application of scriptural law, and the exertion of authority in the exclusion of offenders, seems to form no part of his plan. Church authority is, with him, another name for ecclesiastical tyranny.

And here, we do conceive, that after all Mr. D. has said to exalt the word of God, he has impaired its just claims, by not giving it that extended operation which the scriptures themselves indicate and require. For as I have attempted to shew you, in another place, church

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government, involving the interpretation, and application of scriptural laws, is an ordinance of the Saviour, and *authorized by the word of God*. The proper observance of this ordinance, therefore, is "throwing ourselves under the protection of God's word and Spirit," just as much, as when we attend on the other exhibitions of the word, which the Saviour has appointed. In fact, the system of government and order, which Christ has established in his church, is *substantially* a part of his word. In order, therefore, that the church be "placed under the word of God," she must be placed under that system of government, which Christ has instituted for the preservation of her purity, as well as under the operation of the other ordinances, which the word of God authorizes. The laws of the Saviour, which were framed in the full view of the corruptions which would arise in the church, and which were designed to meet such an emergency, must be brought into operation, and executed, by the depositories of her power, agreeably to the designs of her law-giver, as indicated in the scriptures. And for the church to lay aside the exercise of that authority with which the Master has invested her, for the exclusion of heretics and other offenders, would be *going out* from under the protection of God's word, and trusting to her own energies, for security against the evils to which she stands exposed.

So far, therefore, from derogating from the word and Spirit of God, by our views, we give them their full operation, agreeably to the appointment of the Saviour himself. Believing that the system of government which he has established, and which involves in it, the right



of the church to deal with offenders, according to her views of scriptural law, was not formed for a state of the church, in which no evils would obtain, but for the church, as invaded by all the evils of her militant condition on earth ; we deem it necessary to maintain that system entire, looking to the Spirit of God, to bless his own institution. And is this, as Mr. D. intimates,\* seeking for other and “better guardians, than the Bible and the Spirit?” Is this attempting to “defend the church from her enemies,” by other means, than those which the scriptures recognize? Is this evincing any “practical unbelief” in the efficacy of God’s word and Spirit? Is it not, on the contrary, honouring the word, by the use of *all its institutions*, in dependence on that Spirit, who alone can give them their proper effect?

It is hoped, that the above remarks will sufficiently protect us from the charge of unbelief in the efficacy of God’s word and Spirit, for the purposes for which they have been granted to the church. And they will tend to shew, who it is that interferes with the prescribed functions of these divine agents. For if church government be an ordinance of the Saviour, authorized in his word, those who would set it aside, detract from the word, and interfere with its operation, in one of those ways prescribed by infinite wisdom. But does the rejection of Creeds, involve the rejection of church government? It appears to us, to amount to this. For if, as we have shewn you, the church cannot administer her government, for the purposes for which it has been instituted, without a Creed, or which is substantially

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\* Reply, p. p. 68, 69.



the same thing, without granting her the power of interpreting the scriptures against heretics, and other offenders ; then those who deny to the church this power, do virtually subvert her government. And subverting her government, they derogate from the word of God, by refusing to place the church under one of those institutions, which the word authorizes. And we do not hesitate to affirm, that any system, which diminishes the amount of means instituted by the Saviour, for the protection and purity of the church, and circumscribes the operations of the Spirit within narrower limits than those indicated in the holy scriptures, is radically defective, and will fail of securing the church from the inroads of error and corruption. And such a system, we do verily believe, is that which we are, at present, opposing.

I doubt not, but many will think that we have taken very elevated ground, and some may, perhaps, consider us as making Creeds of equal authority with the Bible, because we have alleged that the church has a *divine, or scriptural warrant* for making and using them. But surely a divine warrant, granted to human, fallible agents, does not necessarily impart infallibility to the acts and decisions of such agents, when exercising their functions under it. It is true, that so far as these acts, and decisions, correspond with the word of God, they are binding on the conscience, in virtue of the authority which is inherent in the scriptures, and God will ratify them, agreeably to his own promise.\* But men may have a divine warrant for doing a particular duty, and

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\* Matt. 16. 19.—18. 18.



yet in the performance of that duty, they may greatly err. Thus, we have a divine warrant for preaching the gospel, and yet no one concludes from this, that all that the preacher advances, must, of necessity, be infallible. It does not follow, therefore, that because we have a divine warrant for Creeds and Confessions, that these Creeds and Confessions must necessarily be infallible, and of equal authority with the word of God. I am aware, that this may be considered, as a concession of the principle in question. If the church may err, in the interpretation of the scriptures, and her Confessions of Faith may be erroneous, it may be alleged that she has no divine warrant for them, unless the Saviour has given men a warrant to publish error.\* But this objection proves too much. For it would prove that because men sometimes preach error, that, therefore, we have no divine warrant for the preaching of the gospel, and that it ought not to be employed in the service of the church. It would, in short, frustrate all human attempts at compliance with the injunctions of the word of God, because in all, there is a liability to error. The objection, therefore, destroys itself.

On the very ground, however, of the fallibility of these Creeds, an objection of a different kind has been urged against them. Through the errors of those who frame, and employ them, a devout child of God, even a christian minister, may be denied admission to, or cast out from the fellowship of his brethren. And under the operation of these fallible instruments, Mr. D. has given us a mournful picture of the rejection of "an ami-

\* Remarks on Creeds and Confessions, p. 149.



able, consecrated young servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, sent out into the wide world, that waste, howling wilderness, without a christian companion, and as much alone as Elijah among the idolaters of Israel :” to “ wail his fate like David, when the sparrows nestled over the altars of God, whence he was driven by those of his own house.”\* But why all this lamentation about his “ young Appollos who so dearly loves the scriptures,” seeing he is only separated from those whom Mr. D. charges with *idolatry*; represents, as “ virtually the legates of a power that would dethrone the Redeemer;” who are engaged in a “ contest for thrones;” and who, the names being changed, are the “ Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes,” of the New Testament?† One would have thought, that, even according to Mr. D’s own shewing, this young saint would be quite as comfortable among idolaters in the world, as *idolaters in the church*. And I know not why such an one should wish to remain in fellowship with this compound of ambition, corruption, and tyranny, when excluded from them, he could serve his Master, without restraint. For it will be recollected, that Mr. D. himself has decided, that “ the ecclesiastical courts cannot shut us out of the church of God, if we be found obeying our Master’s commandments.”‡

But to answer directly to the objection. If some evils of the kind alleged do result from the operation of Creeds and Confessions, it is nothing but what occurs in connection with every thing, in which human agency is

\* Remarks, p. p. 49—53. † Ib. p. p. 20, 21, 234, 248. Sermon at Princeton, p. 59. ‡ Remarks, p. 230.



concerned. Imperfection is an attribute of all human beings ; and liability to mistake, is incidental to all human actions. But must men, on this account, cease to act ? Must they renounce their social relations ? Must they never attempt the discharge of social duties, or obligations, lest through the weakness and fallibility of their judgments, they might encroach on the rights of others, or deprive them of some of their inestimable privileges ? Surely nothing of this kind will be pretended. Yet to this length they must go, to render the objection of any force. The truth, however, is, that with all their imperfections, men are accountable beings. They have been made the subjects of law. These laws they must, in the exercise of their best powers, and in dependence on the grace of God, endeavour to understand, and interpret, not only for their individual, but also for their social government. And if, through the fallibility of human nature, errors should be committed, affecting the rights or privileges of their fellow-men, the guilt of these errors, reaches not to those whose rights or privileges are hereby impaired. And whatever external deprivations they may suffer, they cannot be kept from holding communion with their God, if they are really his children, though in the wilderness, in the midst of savage men.

And what security have we, that under the operation of Mr. D's *social Creed*, no evils of this kind would occur ? Is there so much certainty in the evolutions of human thought, and their approximation for the purposes of social action, that by the common consent of those with whom he stood connected, no young Apollos



would ever be in danger of being driven into the howling wilderness? Is there such a degree of perfection in the *tacit* operations of human mind, when employed for the purpose of detecting and censuring heretics, that no godly man, or minister, need ever be afraid of submitting himself unreservedly to their decisions? We doubt not but that Mr. D. thinks so. Others, however, may hesitate in admitting the infallibility of his pretensions,\* and the perfect security from mistake, and oppression, which his system offers. For ourselves, we must be permitted to say, that we believe, so far from affording protection and security to individual rights, it would place them at the mercy of a blind and capricious power, whose decisions being tacitly formed, could never be known, until they were felt in the weight and severity of her oppressions. The objection, therefore, against Creeds and Confessions, because of the mistakes which may be committed in their application, comes badly from those whose system is equally fallible, and which, if brought extensively into operation, would be the fruitful parent of a multitudinous progeny of evils, such as the church has rarely witnessed.

A little reflection will convince you, that our fears on this subject are not imaginary. Look at the operation of this new system. "*Public opinion*" tacitly formed,

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\* "*Infallibility of his pretensions.*" Those who were present in the Synod of Philadelphia, when Mr. D. withdrew from his connection with the Presbyterian Church, will not think this language altogether unwarranted. For, it will, doubtless, be distinctly within their recollection, that, in the course of his parting remarks, he made the following emphatical declaration, in relation to *his Book*, and the principles which it advocates: "*I know that I am right! Yes, Moderator, I know that I am right!*"



is made the umpire in matters of faith and practice, and by *it*, according to *its* decisions, men are to be admonished, rebuked, admitted, or rejected from the privileges of the church. Now who does not see that a wide door is hereby opened, for the exercise of intrigue and corruption, and the usurpation of the people's rights? For example, when a minister wishes to get rid of some member of his church, who, perhaps, may have stood in the way of his ambition, or ventured to reprove him for his deviation from sound principles, all he has to do, according to this plan, is to raise an excitement against him, and render him odious in public estimation. In this way, he may soon put him down, there being no written, accredited standards, under which he can find protection and security against the distempered excitement of the public mind. In like manner, a private individual may create excitement against his minister. He may begin by insinuating something to his detriment, and by availing himself of favourable circumstances, may ultimately succeed in poisoning the public mind so effectually, as to drive him from his sacred office. Against such a result, there is no remedy. Public opinion being the only umpire in the case, its decisions, let them be ever so erroneous, must be submitted to, until, by some contrary impulse, they are thrown in a different direction.

*The people*, however, are in much greater danger from the operation of this "no creed system," than their ministers. From the character and circumstances of their office, ministers have a more extensive influence over the public mind, in all matters connected



with religion, than can easily be exerted by private individuals. *They*, in fact, can do more to give form and tone to public opinion on these subjects, than any other class of men in society. Now, how easy would it be for a minister of ambitious designs, who was not pledged to the church by the adoption of her accredited standards of scriptural truth, and who might be heterodox in his principles, to mould public opinion according to *his own particular views*, and having thus gained the public mind, to bring it into operation against all who did not accord with him, and hunt them out of the church? In this way, a single minister might usurp the rights of a whole community; individuals might be driven from the enjoyment of their just privileges; and the church be corrupted by the introduction of the most destructive heresies. And all this might be done under the ostensible cover of making God, “the only Lord of conscience,” and the Bible, the “only rule of faith and practice.” For if any, who might feel themselves aggrieved by the operation of public sentiment, thus enlisted against them, should venture to complain, how could they obtain redress? Could they do it, by referring to the Bible, and pleading its decisions in their favour? Would not such a reference be in vain? Would they not be told, that “enlightened public opinion,” formed under the direction of God’s word and Spirit, had pronounced upon their case, and that from *it* there could be no appeal? Where then, would be the blessings of religious liberty? Where, the church’s ground of exultation in her freedom from the operation of Creeds and Confessions of Faith? They would be merged and lost



amidst the wreck of human rights, and the triumphs of a fickle and merciless despotism.

This brief statement may be sufficient to shew you, that the objection against Creeds and Confessions, because of the evils connected with their operation, lies with still greater force against the contrary system. For who would not rather risk his liberty and character on the operation of a written Creed, than on that which is liable to be moulded into so many forms, "by the slight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive?" There is obviously greater security to individual rights in the former, than in the latter case. Where a Creed has been formed and adopted by the church, in the exercise of her deliberate judgment, it assumes a fixed and stable character. The church, by her own act, appropriates it as her interpretation of scriptural truth, and her code of scriptural law, by which, both her minister and people are to be tried. Under the operation of this instrument, thus formed and adopted, there is not the same liability to mistake and oppression, arising from circumstances of excitement, and the influence of designing men. On the contrary, it serves as a shield against evils of this kind, and furnishes protection against the lawless attempts of those who would seek, by giving a wrong direction to the public mind, to rise upon the ruins of individual liberty and human right.

But it is not my design, to notice all the objections which have been urged against the use of Creeds and Confessions in the church of God. This is the less ne-



cessary, since the whole subject has been so ably canvassed by the *Rev. Dr. Miller*, of the Theological Seminary, at Princeton, in his "*Introductory Lecture*," which I would take the liberty of recommending to your perusal. Nor is it my intention to go into a detailed examination of every thing that Mr. D. has written on this subject. This would require more patience and strength, than the very feeble state of my health can bring to the task. I have deemed it important, however, in giving you my views of church order, to bring before you, and endeavour to settle the radical question in relation to Creeds and Confessions, which is at present occupying so large a share of the public attention; and to answer such objections as have been most commonly urged among ourselves. If I have been successful in settling the main question, and establishing *the right* of the church to employ such Creeds, for the purposes which have been indicated, no objections, however specious, can be admitted to destroy that right. And, if the foundation, on which the adversaries of Creeds have erected their system, has been destroyed, the superstructure must fall, of course. How far I have been successful in my attempt, is cheerfully submitted to your judgments, which I never wish to see trammelled in their legitimate exercises, by the operation of any Creed, either tacitly or publicly formed.

Before closing this Letter, however, already much longer than was at first intended, you will permit me to remark, that, if Creeds and Confessions of Faith are authorized by the Head of the church, and are of such indispensable necessity in the administration of her gov-



ernment, the rejection of these instruments, as the offspring of human ambition, is not so trifling and inconsiderable a matter as many would have us to believe. It is an error which cuts deep and wide. It saps the very foundations of that system of ecclesiastical order which God has established. Its tendency is to annihilate all distinctions between the holy, and the profane, and to remove government from the church of Christ. Those who reject Creeds may not intend this much. But to this, their error unquestionably leads ; and their system fairly carried out, would inevitably be productive of these results. While, therefore, we would deprecate the prostration of evangelical order in the church of God, let us hold fast that ecclesiastical constitution, which, having been formed under the direction of scriptural principles, furnishes, under God, an efficient guaranty for its protection.

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## LETTER VII.

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*CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,*

IN the preceding discussions, the right of the Church to deal with, and cast out of her communion, offenders against her purity and laws, has been established, and the principles and rules of her procedure ascertained. It yet remains to be inquired, how the church should act in relation to those who have been excluded from sealing ordinances, and according to what principles she should proceed in restoring them to her fellowship. These are points which are not, perhaps, sufficiently understood by all, or if understood, do not receive that share of attention which their importance demands.

As one leading design of discipline is to promote the good of offenders, by bringing them to repentance, it would seem evident, that the church should not consider herself as divested of all responsibility in relation to such, when she has suspended or excluded them from her communion. These acts of discipline should be followed by other appropriate efforts, for the accomplishment of the desired end. What kind of agency should



be employed by the church in such cases, the scriptures indicate with sufficient plainness.

To us it appears very obvious, that when persons have been authoritatively excluded from church privileges, upon sufficient grounds, *the members of the church should avoid familiar intercourse with them*, farther than may be necessary to the discharge of the duties arising out of their relation to them as members of domestic and civil society. This has already been incidentally noticed, in sustaining the right of the church to exclude from her communion obstinate offenders, who might resist more lenient measures of bringing them to a sense of their sins. The passages of scripture which bear more directly on the subject, are the following: “If he neglect to hear the church, *let him be unto thee as an heathen man, and a publican.*”\* “I wrote unto you in an epistle, *not to keep company with fornicators*: yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters: for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you, *not to keep company*, if any man *that is called a brother*, be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; *with such an one, no not to eat.*”† To the same purpose, is the direction of Paul to the Thessalonians. “And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, *and have no company with him*, that he may be ashamed.”‡

Now it is manifest, we think, that in all these places,

\* Matt. 18. 17.

† I. Cor. 5. 9—11.

‡ II. Thess. 3. 14.



a suspension of *familiar intercourse* with the persons described, is enjoined. On this point, there can be no difficulty. Nor can there be much hazard in saying, that it is private intercourse, and not church fellowship, which is here *primarily* intended. Both the terms and the connection prove this. The principal difficulty pertains to the relation sustained by those from whom familiar intercourse is to be withheld: whether it be that of members *in communion*, or, of persons *excluded* from the special privileges of the church. That it is the latter, and not the former, appears to us demonstrably evident. And nothing short of the most decisive scriptural testimony could induce us to believe, that the members of the church are authorized to treat "as heathens and publicans," and "keep no company" with their fellow-members, who have never been officially and regularly excluded from the communion of the Saints.

I am aware that a very respectable writer has decided, that the person with whom the members of the church at Thessalonica were directed to "have no company," "was still in communion."\* But against this opinion there are several objections. 1. It constitutes each individual member, the judge of his brother's conduct, and that too, without the formality of a trial. 2. It lays a foundation for a collision of practice among the members of the church, in relation to offenders, as it is evident that all would not judge alike of his offence. Of course, their treatment of him would be different. 3. It breaks in upon the vital principles of church fellowship and brotherly love, which ought to bind the



members of the church together, and affords a shelter, under which malevolence may cover her most nefarious efforts against the peace and order of the church. For what kind of fellowship would there be between members who were not allowed to have any familiar intercourse with each other? Or, how would this practical reserve and separation, comport with the scriptural idea of "*brethren dwelling together in unity*."\* And who does not see, that men of irritable tempers would be continually finding an excuse for their alienation from their brethren, by alleging that their conduct was "disorderly," and that they had the Apostle's authority for "keeping no company with them?" Besides, as was intimated in another place, in connection with this subject, there would be a manifest incongruity in prohibiting private intercourse between persons, who were allowed to sit together at the same communion table. On these grounds, it seems quite incredible, that the command to "have no company" with offending brethren, should be applicable to them, while in communion with the church. The result, therefore, is, that this direction is to be applied to them, as persons who have been regularly excluded from church privileges, and who are under censure for their crimes. While in this state, the members of the church must have no familiar intercourse with them. Such is the law of Christ.

Against this view of the subject, none of the foregoing objections can be fairly urged. The church, in the exercise of her authorized judicial powers, has formally excluded them from her communion. Her judgment,

\* Ps. 133, 1.



which is supposed to be scriptural, until otherwise demonstrated, lays a foundation for uniformity of conduct, and prevents collision on the part of the members of the church, in their treatment of the brethren thus excluded. Sacramental fellowship, also, being denied them, there is a perfect consistency in withholding from them familiar intercourse in the private walks of life. In short, the whole is in accordance with the recognized principles of christian duty, and scriptural law.

That such a mode of treatment is well calculated to bring offenders to a sense of their sins, and to promote their reformation, cannot be readily doubted. Men must be far gone in moral turpitude, whose sensibilities are not awakened by the cold and distant reserve of former acquaintances and friends ; whose hearts are not wrung with anguish, at the recollection of the crimes which have been the means of forfeiting for them some of the sweetest enjoyments of social life ; and whose faces are not suffused with shame, when they see themselves shunned by their brethren, with whom they were wont. "to take sweet counsel together, and walk in company to the house of God." Surely these things are calculated to touch some of the tenderest cords of nature, and, under the direction of divine grace, to lead to repentance and amendment of life.

Will it be said, that it is cruel thus to cast off offenders, from the benefits and comforts of social life ? Nothing of this kind can be reasonably alleged, when we have the authority of Christ for our conduct, and when the highest good of those who are thus excluded,



is hereby sought. The parent who would reclaim a profligate child, must not always permit him to lean upon his arm, to fondle upon his bosom, or to enjoy all the sweets of familiar intercourse with him. Nor is it deemed cruel, or inconsistent with the warmest parental regard, to keep him at a distance, and by his frowns, to let him know, that without a change of conduct, he cannot hope to be restored to his favour. Nay, for want of this prudent and timely reserve, many a youth who might thus have been reclaimed, has been permitted to advance in wickedness, until placed beyond the reach of the most coercive measures which could be employed for his reformation. There is, therefore, no cruelty in “withdrawing from,” and “having no company” with, offending brethren, who, for their offences, have been shut out from the special privileges of the church. Their good requires this mode of treatment, and the Saviour, who never directed to the use of inappropriate means, has enjoined it.

There is no doubt but the tender sympathies of the christian community, often lead them to a violation of this rule. Nor do we blame their sympathy for a fallen brother. For who can avoid feeling tenderly in such a case? But how often do they permit their sympathies to bring them into collision with the command of Christ, in relation to offenders? When members have been excluded from the church for their crimes, how many, instead of treating them as directed by Christ and his Apostles, form more intimate associations with them than before, and thus encourage and harden them in their sins? For persons will not be apt to suspect that



they are wrong, let their conduct be ever so abominable, when they find no diminution, but rather an increase in the expressions of friendly regard, which they have been in the habit of receiving from the members of the church. On the contrary, they will be confirmed in their iniquities, and rendered proof against every effort which may be made for their reformation. On this subject, christians should recollect, that the command of Christ, and not the sympathies of their nature, constitutes their rule of action.

We are fully sensible that this direction, to "have no company" with persons under church censure, may be abused by carrying it beyond its proper limits. It is not presumed, as has been already intimated, that it is to be extended so far as to break in upon the domestic and civil relations of life. With these, the statutes of Christ's kingdom were never designed to interfere. The duties arising out of these relations must be discharged ; and so far as familiar intercourse is necessary to this end, it must be maintained, but no farther. Persons are not at liberty, therefore, to plead this *positive* statute against offenders, so as to exonerate them from the *moral* obligations which they are under to them, as members of domestic and civil society. An offending husband, for example, must not be abandoned by his wife, who may be a member of the church ; nor a suspended wife, by her husband, unless the crime be such as to dissolve the marriage relation. There are duties of a moral and paramount nature, which these owe to one another, and which cannot be superceded by any positive statutes relating to the incidental circum-



stances of their condition. The same may be said of the various other domestic and civil relations which exist in society, and which are interwoven with its nature. The company, therefore, which is here forbidden, is that which is not required by any of the necessary relative duties of life, and which may be dispensed with, without the infraction of any moral obligation.

In carrying this statute into effect against an offender, no unkind or malignant feeling should be indulged. "Have no company with him," says the Apostle, "*yet count him not an enemy.*" There is here no sanctuary for revenge. The fallen brother is not to be set up as a mark, at which to shoot the envenomed shafts of malice. Although he must be treated with manifest reserve, it must be from higher principles than those which are the offspring of hatred. It must be from a regard to the authority of Christ, and with a view to subserve the high interests of his immortal part. "Keep no company with him, *that he may be ashamed.*"

Farther, when persons have been excluded from privileges, and are under censure for their sins, it is the duty of the church *affectionately to admonish them*, with a view to their repentance and reformation.— "Count him not an enemy, *but admonish him as a brother.*"\* This direction relates to the same person, whom the Apostle had commanded them to "note," by inflicting on him some censure of the church, and with whom they must "have no company." From his calling him "*a brother,*" it may be thought, perhaps, that he

\* II. Thess. 3. 15.



contemplated him as still in communion. This, however, does not necessarily follow. A child under discipline, is a child still. Even when excluded from the *special* privileges of his father's family, for his misconduct, he is not to be treated *as an enemy*, but admonished *as a child*, with a view to his reformation. So it ought to be in relation to offending members of the church, who are under censure for their crimes. They should be admonished *as brethren*, for the purpose of bringing them to repentance, and restoring them to the full possession of their forfeited privileges.

I am not certain, however, that the term "brother," is at all intended here, as characteristic of *the person* to be admonished, but of *the manner* in which the admonition ought to be applied. "Treat him not, *as you would do* one who is your enemy, but tell him of his sin, *in the same affectionate manner*, that you would use towards your near friend, even *your brother*." Indeed this appears to be the most obvious sense of the passage. The Apostle well knew the tendency of human nature to triumph over a fallen brother, and treat him with undue severity. Such a disposition must not be indulged. The mild spirit of the gospel must reign in the conduct of christians, even when called to perform the sterner offices of religion towards their fellow-men. While they must admonish, they must do it in the spirit of fraternal kindness, avoiding every thing which would savour of a malignant or revengeful temper. Nor is this mild, fraternal spirit, at all inconsistent with the greatest plainness, and pungency of rebuke. On the contrary, it gives weight and force to



reproof. It opens a way to the heart of the offender, disarms him of his opposition, and cuts off occasions of cavilling and offence. With such a spirit, admonition should always be administered.

It is, doubtless, especially incumbent on the officers of the church, to admonish those who have been excluded from her communion. As the constituted organs and representatives of the church, they are, perhaps, more immediately concerned to seek the reformation of such persons, by affectionately reminding them of their transgressions. But as the direction to have no familiar intercourse with them, extends to the private members of the church, as well as to her officers, it is not doubted, but that there is an obligation resting on all the members, privately to admonish them, as opportunity may offer, and prudence dictate. We would not, indeed, encourage that obtrusiveness which is ever placing itself in the censor's chair, and provoking to resistance, by its impertinence. But we would have christians to feel a deep interest in those who have fallen, and "with meekness of wisdom," to seek their recovery, by tenderly and affectionately expostulating with them about their sins. The instrumentality of private christians may be owned and blessed by the Head of the church, as well as that of her officers. "Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know that he which converteth a sinner from the error of his ways, shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins."\*

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\* James 5. 19, 20,



It is to be lamented, that persons under censure, so often discourage the attempts of those whose duty it is to admonish them, with a view to their reformation. They are too apt to consider such attempts, as the result of a persecuting spirit, which takes pleasure in adding insult to injury. Impressions of this kind, however, ought not to be too hastily admitted. Unless a vindictive spirit is apparent, it ought to be presumed that such efforts are dictated by a desire to do them good. Indeed, it cannot be reasonably supposed, that men would seek to persecute others by admonishing them *in a kind and fraternal manner*, for their sins. This is not the way in which persons are accustomed to indulge their revengeful feelings. And where admonition is given in this affectionate manner, agreeably to the injunctions of the word of God, it ought to be kindly received, and carefully improved. “*Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness; and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head; for yet my prayer also shall be in their calamities.*”\*

Again, I would remark, that the church should make those who are under censure for their crimes, *the objects of special prayer to God*. Paul exhorts that “supplications and prayers be made for all men.”† Special importunity should be employed in relation to persons in difficult and dangerous situations, either from the malice of enemies, or from their own crimes. Accordingly, we find, that “prayer was made without ceasing of the church, for Peter,” when imprisoned by the mandate of Herod.‡ And to the convicted and terrified Israelites,

\* Ps. 141. 5.    † 1. Tim. 2. 1.    ‡ Acts 12. 5.



Samuel said, "God forbid that I should sin against the Lord, in ceasing to pray for you."\* If, then, such cases called forth the special prayers of the people of God, doubtless, the situation of those whose sins have excluded them from the sealing ordinances of God's house, demands the importunate prayers of all who desire the honour of religion, and the welfare of souls. Nor ought it to be deemed improper that the church should, on special occasions, offer up prayers in a public manner to God, on their behalf. Did the people of Israel "lift up their voices, in the house of God, and weep sore, and lament before the Lord their God—that there should be one tribe lacking in Israel?"† And will it be deemed a departure from christian duty, for the church publicly to mourn and pray for those *who are lacking from amongst the number of Christ's professing people?* It would rather appear strange that she should not. But on the duty of christians to pray for their fallen brethren, it is unnecessary to multiply remarks. It is, doubtless, generally conceded.

The reader will bear in mind, that these duties which we have enumerated as belonging to the church towards those who are under censure for their crimes, have reference to a particular end to be attained. This end, is the restoration of the offender to the fellowship of the church. But how is he to be restored? According to what principles ought the church to proceed in this matter?

On this point, it is believed, that serious mistakes ex-

\* 1. Sam. 12. 23.

† Judges 21. 2, 3.



ist. It is too common to consider the discipline of the church in the light of *punishment*, the demands of which are to be satisfied by a certain course of subjection to it. Hence, many submit to it, simply as *the penalty* of their transgressions. The idea of its being intended for their *amendment*, never enters into their minds. From these views of the nature and design of discipline, arise others of a similar character, with regard to its removal. Considering it as a mere *penal infliction*, they imagine that when they have endured it for a certain, definite period, it ought to be removed, as a matter of course. Having borne the penalty, they suppose themselves entitled to their forfeited privileges, irrespective of any change of character, or conduct. Such views, however, of the nature of discipline, appear to be entirely erroneous; and to restore persons to the communion of the church according to such principles, would be to defeat some of the leading objects for which discipline has been instituted.

The principles according to which the church should act, in the restoration of offenders, will be obvious, if we recollect that the ground on which such persons were originally excluded from privileges, was that of the credibility of their profession having been destroyed, by their transgressions. As long, therefore, as these transgressions are unrepented of, they are, of course, approved, and there is still a want of credible religion. Hence, until the church has some credible evidence of their repentance for their crimes, she cannot, on correct principles, restore them to her fellowship. The fact of their having passed through a certain course of



discipline for any definite period of time, cannot furnish this evidence. Mere suffering, is no proof of repentance. There must be a profession of sorrow, accompanied by correspondent acts of reformation, before the church can admit them to their former standing, as members in communion.

The reformation of the offenders, is noticed in a very prominent manner in the scriptures, as one of the principal ends to be attained by the infliction of discipline. "*For the destruction of the flesh ;*"—"that they may be ashamed ;"—and "*that they may learn not to blaspheme,*"\* are the purposes for which persons are represented as being subjected to the discipline of the church. Now, unless the church has some satisfactory evidence that these ends are attained, by the operation of her discipline, it does not appear that she is warranted in its removal. To pursue such a course, would be to withdraw the remedy, while the disease remained. It would also, be a practical admission, that *the punishment*, and not *the amendment* of the offenders, was the sole object for which they had been subjected to discipline ; an idea which receives no countenance from the scriptures. Besides, it might be inquired, if persons are to be restored to the privileges of the church, without any regard to their reformation, what has been gained by excluding them ? Certainly very little. It is true, that during the period of their exclusion, the church has been freed from their corrupting influence, but being restored without repentance, her purity again becomes defiled by an additional amount of guilt, and the persons them-

\* I. Cor. 5. 5. II. Thess. 3. 14. I. Tim. 1. 20.



selves, instead of being profited, are encouraged and hardened in their transgressions.

In restoring persons to the fellowship of the church, the same kind and affectionate spirit should obtain, as in their treatment while under censure. “Brethren, if any man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, *restore such an one in the spirit of meekness*; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.”\* It is not presumed that the Apostle intended by this direction, that a fallen brother should be restored, without any regard to his repentance. This would have been to contradict other scriptural intimations, already noticed. But he doubtless intended to remind us, that the whole process which should be employed in relation to such an one, until consummated by his restoration to his former standing in the church, should be conducted with a meek and lenient temper. Unnecessary harshness should be avoided. And as a motive to such a mode of treatment, professing christians should recollect that they themselves are liable to similar temptations with those, which have proved victorious over others. They should, therefore, sympathize with a fallen brother. And while careful to guard the church against injury, by refusing to restore him while he gives no evidence of his repentance, they should kindly receive him, as soon as they have credible evidence of his sorrow for his sins.

It is not uncommon for those who have subjected themselves to the discipline of the church, to charge their brethren with undue severity in refusing to restore

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\* Gal. 6. 1.



them, without evidence of their repentance. For this, there is, perhaps, no remedy. Such ought to reflect, however, that the Master's law must be regarded in this, as well as in other cases. And where would be the kindness of admitting them to their former standing in the church, while they remained devoted to their sinful practices? Would these outward privileges redeem their characters, or their souls? Or, would they not rather prove to them "a savour of death unto death," through their abuse of them? There is no improper severity, therefore, in refusing to restore a fallen brother, while he continues in the indulgence of his evil habits, and evinces no sorrow for having dishonoured the name, and the cause of Christ. It would, on the contrary, be treating him with a false tenderness, highly dangerous to his eternal interests, to open the door for his return to privileges, which, without a change of disposition, he would certainly abuse. Indeed, it is the part of genuine christian kindness to pursue that course towards him, which the laws of Christ's spiritual kingdom require, and which, under the direction of divine grace, may prove instrumental in recovering him from the ways of the Destroyer.

Now, brethren, if the foregoing views be correct, it will readily be perceived, that the church is placed on delicate and difficult ground. She has duties assigned her, the performance of which is always painful to the tender sensibilities of the christian's heart, and frequently offensive to others. Yet they must not be declined. The members of the church must never be found compromising her interests, by conniving at ex-



rouer and vice, even in those with whom they have been accustomed to "take sweet counsel together," and own as brethren in the Lord." Nor must they abandon to destruction a brother, who has fallen into sin. On the contrary, they must exert every means which the scriptures authorize, to raise him from threatened ruin, and restore him to the fellowship of the saints. How necessary are wisdom, and meekness, and patient fortitude, to the proper discharge of these incumbent duties ! And where shall these virtues be obtained, but at the throne of grace, from Him who is the author of "every good, and every perfect gift ?" Hence, it is the duty of the church, to be much in prayer, not only for those whose reformation is sought, but also for her own officers and members, that they may be wise and successful in the execution of the delicate and arduous duties required at their hands.

In the treatment of erring brethren, we are exposed to temptation from two quarters : from our *tender affections*, and from our *evil passions*. The former would lead us to connive at their faults, by declining the use of those measures which the scriptures enjoin ; and the latter would prompt us to undue severity in the application of the appointed means for their recovery. Against both these, we must be on our guard, looking to God to give us strength to be faithful in carrying into effect the Saviour's statutes, and to endow us with "the spirit of meekness," that we may apply them in a proper manner.

In the scriptural representations which have been submitted, those who have been excluded from the commu-



nion of the church, are also furnished with matter for the most serious reflection. Their situation is one of mortification, and peril. Of *mortification*; as being cut off from all familiar, as well as religious intercourse with the people of God—and of *peril*; as being cast out into the visible kingdom of Satan, without the benefit of those “green pastures,” by which the children of God are strengthened in their resistance to the great adversary of souls. And what renders their peril greater is, that their exclusion from sealing ordinances, with its appended duties, is *the last resort* of the church for their good, and which, if resisted, leaves them without the advantage of *her* agency for their recovery. There is very great danger, therefore, that they be given up of God, and left under the dominion of those sins which they have delighted to cherish, at the expense of all the precious privileges of his sanctuary.

Could I gain the ear of such persons, I would awaken them to a sense of their mournful, perilous condition. I would admonish, and entreat them as brethren, to reflect on that course of conduct, which has reduced them to their present forlorn situation. Ah! brethren! is it not enough that you have been cast out of the church on earth? Will you, by perseverance in your impenitent and sinful courses, provoke God to deny your admission to his church triumphant in heaven? It will then be too late to repent, and you may have to weep forever over the ruins of your immortal souls, degraded and lost, by sensual indulgencies. If it must be so; if you have resolved upon resistance to every attempt to win you back to the fold of Christ, we must refuse our



assent to your determination, and must claim the mournful privilege of crying after you, saying, "*Why will ye die! O, why will ye die!*"

Perhaps there are few persons who have more powerful motives to repentance and amendment of life, than those who are excluded from the communion of the church. Besides the mortification and danger, from which they are called upon to escape, they have the whole church enlisted in seeking their recovery. The discipline itself which has been inflicted upon them, is designed to promote the same end. Ample provision, also, has been made, in the event of their repentance, for their restoration to their former standing in the church, in the manner most congenial to the wishes of a wounded spirit. No harsh and haughty censor is permitted to stand at the door, to reproach the trembling penitents as they pass; but "the spirit of meekness," is directed to wipe away their tears, and lead them back to "the banqueting house" of the Saviour, that they may eat, and be refreshed, and wander no more forever.

Let none then, who have been subjected to the discipline of the church, and deprived of her special privileges, abandon the hope of reformation, and of recovering their former standing. On the other hand, let them be urged to prompt and vigorous efforts for the attainment of these ends. The greater their degradation, and the more imminent their peril, the higher will be their glory, when the victory shall be achieved. And let them recollect for their encouragement, that they



“have not an high priest, who cannot be touched with the feeling of their infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as they are, *yet without sin.*” To *his* compassions, let them direct their faith; in *his* name, let them lift up their banner; and let them resolve, that in *his* service they will conquer or die!



## LETTER VIII.

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CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,

THE practical utility of a system is always considered the surest test of its correctness. On this ground, many superficial observers form strong prejudices against church government. They doubt its practical utility. They have, as they imagine, seen much evil, and little or no good, resulting from its operation. This, it must be admitted, is a very formidable objection, if it be founded in fact. If, instead of good, it produces nothing but evil, its scriptural origin ought to be seriously doubted, since God cannot be the author of any system, which is practically injurious to the best interests of his spiritual kingdom on earth. It deserves to be considered how far this objection is founded in truth; and whether, notwithstanding the evils incidental to church government, it is not productive of great good to the church. To this subject, the present Letter shall be devoted.

I presume it will be admitted by every reflecting mind, that evils may be associated with a system, which do not *really* belong to it, and with which the system



itself is not fairly chargeable. Even allowing, therefore, that there are some evils connected with the operations of church government, (and we are far from denying that there are,) these evils do not, of necessity, belong to the system itself, nor ought they, as a matter of course, to be placed to its account. For what is there in our wretched world, let it be ever so excellent, with which evil of some kind does not stand connected? The preaching of the ever glorious gospel itself, has often been the occasion of numerous evils, which have greatly distracted society. But will any one say, that these evils are justly chargeable to the sacred messages of grace; or, that they are the native fruits of that gospel which proclaims "peace on earth, and good will towards men?" No reasonable man who is acquainted with the principles of evangelical truth, can believe this. What evils, also, associate themselves with the very best political institutions? But, because in the application of the most equitable and salutary statutes of civil government, evils arise, and society is often greatly distracted, are these statutes to be abrogated, and the whole structure of the government to be impugned, as injurious and detrimental to the public peace? Surely none but factionists and libertines, who expect to be profited by such a result, ever think of reasoning in this manner. And is it not easy to conceive of evils arising in connection with the operations of church government, which ought not, in fairness, to be ascribed to it, as its legitimate products, any more than the evils which are associated with the preaching of the gospel, and the operations of civil government, can with propriety be laid to their charge?



With regard to the evils which are connected with church government, I would remark, that they may arise, either from the errors and corruptions of those who administer it, or of those who are its subjects, or from both. For it is not difficult to conceive how a system, which in itself is really good and excellent, and which, if carried into effect, according to its native design, would be productive of the most beneficial results, may become the occasion of the most destructive evils, through the errors and corruptions of those concerned. And, no doubt, this is frequently the case with the system of church government. Through the ignorance, or wickedness of men, it is often greatly perverted and abused, and thus becomes the fruitful source of many evils. And these evils, which are really generated by other causes, are placed to its account, and operate to its detriment.

But allowing the government of the church to be administered according to the best lights which the church is able to obtain from the scriptures, it is not believed that any evils which may arise from the application of her laws and discipline, are to be brought into comparison with the great good which will result. For what, I would ask, are the character and amount of the evils which, according to this view of the subject, arise in the church, from the operations of her government? They are something like the following: Individuals become offended—They create an excitement in the minds of others, and thus disturb the peace of the church—or, perhaps, they withdraw from the church altogether, and thus impair her numerical strength and ability to sup-

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port a preached gospel—and, finally, in the view of these disastrous results, “those who are without,” are prejudiced against the truth, and driven farther from the church. Such are the evils which are most generally designated, and most frequently urged against the exercise of discipline in the church, by men who admit the scriptural character of her government, and the integrity and competency of those who are engaged in its administration. Let us briefly examine how far they should be admitted as an objection against the regular and legitimate operations of church government.

In relation to the first of these evils—that *individuals will become offended*, I would observe, that it is nothing but what is to be expected from the scriptural application of any evangelical institution: “*for it must needs be that offences come*; but wo to that man by whom the offence cometh.”\* If the government of the church be a divine institution, and its application be according to scriptural rules, the offence which may be taken by those who are subjected to its operation, can never be admitted as a substantial reason for suspending its functions. If this were the case, no government on earth could be long administered, as it is notorious that offences are daily occurring, in relation to all. But, in the present case, perhaps it may be alleged, that the person offended is a christian. And is it not a very serious matter, that a christian brother should be offended? True; if he has *just* cause of offence. But if he has not, the evil, and its guilt, rest entirely with himself. Besides, if he be a real christian, he will, in

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\* Matt. 18. 7.



due time, repent of his offence, and be restored “in the spirit of meekness.” All the Apostles were “*offended*” with the Saviour, when he was betrayed into the hands of his enemies. But the guilt was their own. The offence, however, did not always continue. Time and reflection, under the direction of that grace which was within their hearts, brought them to a sense of their error; and they were again restored to the friendship of their risen Lord. But in cases where the offended person is not a child of God, his opposition to the institutions of the Saviour, is greatly to be preferred, to the sacrifice of these institutions to obtain his friendship. “*If ye were of the world, the world would love his own; but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.*”\*

But, perhaps, those who are offended *will create an excitement in the minds of others, and thus the peace of the church will be disturbed.* And is not this an evil, greatly to be deprecated? With regard to this, I would say, that if any true christian should be so far left to the influence of his sinful passions, as to enter upon, and prosecute such an unhallowed enterprise, there is no doubt, but that when he “comes to himself,” he will weep and repent in the bitterness of his soul, and be as active in his endeavours to restore the peace of the church, as he had been before, in striving to disturb it. But if he be a false, unsound professor, his career of influence will be but short, as good men will soon detect his character, and cease to yield themselves a prey to

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\* John 15. 19.



his mischievous designs. So that in either case, the evil is not one of such great and uncontrollable dimensions, as it would appear to be at first sight.

I would remark, however, that it may be doubted, how far the cause of real religion in the church of God, sustains injury, by those excitements which proceed from opposition to the legitimate claims of gospel principle, and church government. There is often a *dead calm* in the church, which arises from a want of sensibility, in relation to the great interests of vital godliness, and the absorption of the church's spiritual activities by "the spirit of slumber," or the pursuits of the world. Such a state, however peaceful, is above all things to be deprecated. And whatever disturbs this calm, can hardly be considered as an evil to the church. The minds of men are awakened from their slumber, and arrested to the concerns of religion. And while some may "suffer loss," by yielding to the influence of sinful passions, and others may perish in the conflict, having never built upon the right foundation ; the church herself will come forth from the midst of the troubled waters, washed and purified, and strengthened for the Master's use, and for the attainment of farther victories. Indeed, the whole voice of ecclesiastical history bears testimony to the fact, that the church has never been so effectually purged of her dross, or improved in spiritual soundness, as when suffering under some pressing trial from the wrath of her enemies, or some excitement occasioned by the mischievous efforts of false friends. Peace, therefore, on unscriptural grounds, and by a compromise with worldly men, is not to be desired



by the church. It is only that peace which comports with the regular operation of those principles of order which Christ has established for the good of his church, which she should be solicitous to maintain ; and which, where it prevails, will not easily suffer itself to be disturbed by the intrusions, and artifices of those who delight in mischief.

Another evil, however, may arise, though the peace of the church should not be greatly impaired. *Persons may withdraw from the church, and thus her numerical strength and ability to support the gospel be diminished.* And why, it may be asked, should the church seek to exercise government and discipline, when her very existence may be hereby endangered ? Were the church a commercial establishment, and her officers a monied aristocracy, this objection would be a very powerful one. But viewing the church as a spiritual community, associated for the attainment of spiritual objects, it has neither relevancy nor force. The church has the authority of her Saviour for the exercise of government and discipline, as a means of her spiritual prosperity. In the use of these means, she is not at liberty to enter into a calculation, how far they may tend to prevent her numerical increase, or diminish contributions to her treasury. Her concern is, not how much money she may accumulate, or how many rotten, worthless professors may be induced to crowd her gates : but how many souls she may win to Christ, by the use of all the means and institutions, which he has been pleased to commit to her hands. And believing that the system of government with which he has entrusted her, was in-



tended for her spiritual edification, she will endeavour to administer it for this purpose, regardless of its effect on her external prosperity. These incidental things, she is willing to leave to the disposal of her divine Master, being fully persuaded that her fidelity to him shall be amply rewarded, if not by an increase of numbers and of wealth, by more copious effusions of the Spirit of God, which is the church's best treasure.

But will not "*those who are without*," form unfavourable views of religion, when they observe the distractions which obtain in the church in connection with her government? Would it not be better to lay it aside, than, by enforcing it, *to prejudice the world against religion, and drive them farther from the church*? In answer to this, I would observe, that it might, perhaps, admit of a question, whether worldly men are more prejudiced against religion by the *strictness*, or the *laxity* with which the church administers her government. But waving this, and allowing that from the disorders which obtain, in connection with the rigid administration of her government, prejudices are created in the minds of some of those who are yet without, could the church be justified, on this ground, in parting with her scriptural forms of order? Certainly in no other way, than by maintaining, that the prejudices of the world, let them be ever so unwarranted, constitute the rule of action to the church of Christ. For according to the spirit of the objection, it matters not what Christ has said, or what the judgment or conscience of the church may plead in favour of her government, all must be made to yield to the opinions and prejudices of ungodly



men, who have never, perhaps, instituted one serious inquiry on the subject. And would not this, at once, be merging the church in the world, and sacrificing religious liberty at the shrine of carnal policy? Besides, does not every person see the absurdity of demanding the relinquishment of church government, to meet the prejudices of those who have no connection with the church? We all know what prejudices are entertained on the other side of the Atlantic, against our political institutions, because of the noise and excitement which often occur in connection with their operation. Yet who would venture to urge the abandonment of our excellent system of civil polity, because, by the unhappy distractions which occasionally attend its developement, the subjects of foreign and despotic governments are rendered more hostile to our republican forms, and driven still farther from their adoption? The argument, however, would be just as good in the one case, as in the other.

But still, it may be asked, is it not a real evil that those who have not yet made a profession of religion, and whose spiritual good we are bound to seek, should be thus prejudiced against the church, by the unhappy operations of her government? Doubtless it is. But where does the evil originate? And who is to blame? Is the church fairly chargeable with guilt in this matter, because she endeavours honestly to maintain the government which Christ has committed to her hands? And because men will not take the trouble to distinguish between the scriptural operation of church government, and those evils which are incidental to it, is the church



to be loaded with all the disagreeable results which may arise, in connection with her agency, while carrying into effect this ordinance of God? Surely, it cannot be reasonably pretended. The truth is, that the prejudices of men, on this subject, arise from other causes than the regular administration of church government. They proceed from their own corruptions, which are at variance with every thing that is associated with religion, and from their ignorantly and carelessly confounding things which are entirely distinct. For these, there appears to be no remedy but the Spirit of God, changing the heart, and giving them just perceptions of scriptural truth.

Having thus noticed some of the evils which are alleged to arise from the exercise of government and discipline in the church, and endeavoured to dispose of the objections arising from this source, let us now proceed to a consideration of some of its advantages. We have often heard it affirmed, that *no good* ever resulted from the exercise of church discipline. And we doubt not, but such are the honest impressions of many who have never taken the pains to examine the subject for themselves. We would bespeak the candid attention of such, while we attempt to unfold some of the benefits accruing from the regular administration of that system of government and discipline, which Christ has established in his own house. For that it has its advantages, may, we think, be satisfactorily demonstrated.

The advantages resulting from the exercise of church government and discipline, may be considered either in relation to individuals; to the church; or to the world



at large. With regard to *individuals* who offend against her order, and require to be dealt with according to her laws, the exercise of discipline is well calculated to *bring them to a sense of their sin, and restore them to the favour of God.* Their sin is thus distinctly brought before them: its guilt is fastened upon them, by the exhibition of sufficient testimony: and they are roused to conviction and repentance, by the solemn admonitions of the church. And if they have a spark of the grace of God in them, their exclusion from the high privileges of the church, will lead them to “weep in secret places” for their sins, and like David, when in the wilderness of Judea, to thirst for a renewal of the sacred visions of Jehovah’s power and glory, in the sanctuary.

It will not avail to say, that this effect is not always produced. Such an allegation only proves that some men are so hardened in sin, that the most appropriate means fail of accomplishing their reformation. Nor is this ever considered as a valid objection against the exercise of parental government and discipline. No one ever thinks of alleging that a father, or mother should abandon the exercise of discipline in their family, because a froward child has resisted all such attempts to reduce him to obedience, and engage him to do his duty. Nor is it any certain evidence, that the exertion of their authority has not been both reasonable and just. It may not have been so; but the resistance of the child does not prove it. And if it has been reasonable and just, the fault is not in the nature of the authority exerted, whose native tendency is to reform, but in the temper and character of the child, who has re-



sisted its legitimate claims. Why then should not the discipline of the church be allowed to be a salutary means of reformation? Or, why should its failing of this effect, in the case of hardened transgressors, be brought in argument against its tendency to reclaim, or the propriety of its application for this purpose? Besides, do not the scriptures, as already intimated, recognize the exertion of church authority, by acts of discipline, as tending to the spiritual benefit of the person who is their subject? Did not Paul direct the expulsion of the incestuous person from the Corinthian church, for the very purposes of his reformation and salvation? "*To deliver such an one unto Satan, for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*"\* And in writing to the Thessalonians, he says, "If any man obey not our word, by this epistle, note that man,† and have no company with him, *that he may be ashamed.*"‡ But why seek to make him *ashamed*, unless that he might thus be brought to repentance, and "restored in the spirit of meekness?"§ Such, then, being the scriptural ends of discipline, in relation to offenders themselves, as indicated by the finger of inspiration, who will pretend to affirm, that it has no adaptation for these purposes, or that it never has been, nor never will be, the means of bringing any to repentance

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\* I. Cor. 5. 5. By *delivering unto Satan*, in this place, most obviously means, his expulsion from the visible church, into the world, of which Satan is the prince and ruler. Perhaps some extraordinary chastisement might have been added, by God himself, in the case of the incestuous person.

† "*Note him by some censure of the church.*" Scott in loco.

‡ II. Thess. 3. 14. § This end of discipline is recognized in our Directory for Worship—chap. x. s. s. 1, 2, 4, 7.



for their sins? And if but one soul that is wandering from the path of duty, should be thus reclaimed and brought back to Christ, "the Shepherd and Bishop of souls," it would be a result of sufficient magnitude and value, to outweigh all the evils which have been noticed as incidental to its application.

But it is not offenders only, whose profit is sought in the administration of church government. It operates favourably on *the church*. Among the most obvious benefits which the church derives from the disciplinary acts of her government, is *the preservation of her purity*. That the purity of the church, is an object at which she should aim, in the application of her laws, will hardly be doubted. This was one of the high ends, for the attainment of which, the Saviour laid down his life. "He gave himself for it, *that he might sanctify and cleanse it, with the washing of water by the word.*"\* And surely the church should co-operate with him for the attainment of this result, by the faithful development of his word, through every appointed channel. And as government and discipline are amongst these appointed channels, his laws, as contained in his word, should be thus unfolded and applied to their appropriate objects, with a view to the preservation and maintenance of her purity.

And will it not be deemed favourable to the purity of the church, when gross and scandalous offenders are cast out of her communion? Or, will it be alleged, that the purity of the church can consist with the retention

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\* Eph. 5, 25, 26.



of such members in her fellowship? Why then, was the church at Pergamos blamed for retaining them who held “the doctrine of Balaam?” Or, that in Thyatira, for “suffering that woman Jezebel” to retain her standing and influence among them? For it is obvious, that the opinions and conduct of these persons were such as *corrupted the purity* of the churches, in which they were tolerated; and that it was on this very ground, that the churches in question were blamed for suffering them to “cast stumbling blocks,” and “seduce the servants of God” into idolatrous and licentious practices, without molestation or censure.\* Had the continuance of such persons, in the bosom of the church, been consistent with the maintainance of her purity, surely “the Son of man,” who is always “in the midst of the golden candlesticks,” would never have reprimanded the churches for retaining them. But the purity of the church required that they be cast out. Doubtless, then, the authoritative exclusion of such, is favourable to the promotion of purity in the church, and ought to be employed, agreeably to the directions of God’s word, for this purpose.

I know it has been said, that if persons are sincere and correct, in their own views and deportment, the presence of unworthy members cannot interfere with, nor injure *their* fellowship with God. This, doubtless, is true, where the crimes of such members are not known; or, if known, opportunities have not been afforded to remove them, by those private means, which their nature, and the word of God, authorize. But un-

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\* Rev. 2. 12—14. 20—23.



der other circumstances, I doubt the correctness of the position. We have just seen that suffering unworthy members in the church, when known, affects her purity, and subjects her to the divine rebuke. And if this be true of the church, it is true of all her members, for it is of such, that the church is constituted. As far, therefore, as the characters of such palpable offenders are known to any of the members of the church, and no measures are taken to have them removed, so far their moral purity becomes contaminated by connivance at their guilt, and they suffer injury in their fellowship with him who "cannot even look on iniquity." For let it be recollected, that every member of the church is concerned, in his appropriate station, to have the purity of the church maintained, as much as those to whom its government is more immediately confided. And so far as any neglect to lend their aid, agreeably to the requirements of the gospel, to sustain the purity of the church, in the same proportion do they stand chargeable with the guilt of sacrificing her interests to some selfish principle of their corrupt nature, and thus incurring the displeasure of Jehovah. As long, therefore, as persons connive at the crimes of others in the church, without striving to have them removed, in the appointed way, so long do the crimes of such interfere with, and mar their communion with the Saviour. But if, after having made the necessary efforts towards their removal, in the stations which they occupy, the offender should remain, the guilt must rest elsewhere; and they, having done their duty, will suffer no interruption in their christian communion, on account of the presence of such an offender.

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Another advantage resulting to the church from the careful administration of her government and discipline is, *the promotion of her moral unity*. There may be the appearance of union in the church, arising from the compromise of the principles of her order, with the corruptions of her members. Corrupt members have but little temptation to invade the visible unity of the church, by promoting open schism, while they are permitted to remain in the free indulgence of their licentious appetites and passions. But such a unity as this, must necessarily be of a sickly and fragile character. Being founded on false principles, it is no real blessing to the church, and will be easily impaired by every adverse occurrence. The only kind of unity which is of any actual benefit to the church, is that which is founded on the spiritual principles of the gospel, and the rigid adherence of all her members to these principles. It is, in short, *a moral unity*, arising out of the moral conformity of her different parts to each other, and to the laws and institutions of the Saviour.

Now, I apprehend, it must be very obvious, that a faithful attention on the part of the church, to promote conformity to the divine institutions, by the exercise of discipline upon all who invade, or impair their sanctity, by open immoralities of conduct, will be highly favourable to the attainment and promotion of this moral unity. By such a course, those who have “left their first love,” will be reminded “from whence they have fallen, and repent, and do their first works;” and those who have wholly “denied the faith,” and although “space has been given them to repent, have repented not,” will



be removed from the fellowship of the saints, and no longer permitted to mar their communion. Others, through fear, will be deterred from transgression.\* In this way, the unity of the church will be preserved in its integrity, free from the contagion of bad example, and the dissolving influence of internal corruption. And is not such a union as this greatly to be desired? a union, based upon the principles of truth and good order? Would it not be a great, and lasting blessing to the church? None can doubt it. And if a faithful and scriptural discipline contributes so largely to the promotion of such a result, who would not yield his cordial assent and support, to its legitimate administration?

It may be farther remarked, that *the strength and stability of the church* will be promoted by the faithful application of her government and discipline. It is admitted on all hands, that *moral force* is superior to *physical*; and that the real strength of a community does not consist so much in *the number*, as in *the character* of those who compose it. This, I conceive, is emphatically true of the church, which is a spiritual community, associated for the attainment of spiritual objects. Her chief *strength* lies in the character of her members, and the spirituality of her principles. If these are scriptural, she possesses that moral strength which will render her powerful, for the accomplishment of those objects for which she has been constituted, though her numbers should be but few. Of her, it may then be said, as of the inhabitants of Jerusalem: "He that

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\* I. Tim. 5. 20.



is feeble among them, in that day, shall be as David ; and the house of David shall be as God, as the angel of the Lord before them.”\*

Her *stability* also, will stand associated with her moral strength. On what is it that we calculate for the stability of our political institutions ? Is it not on the excellence of the principles on which they are constructed, and the virtuous character of our citizens ? And every sober politician admits, that whenever these shall have become deeply corrupted by the prevalence of crime in the state, the stability of our institutions will not only be problematical, but altogether out of the question, without a reform. And shall we calculate on the stability of the church, on different grounds ? or, must we not look, under God, for our religious institutions to be sustained, by the spirituality of the principles which they involve, and the moral and religious character of those who compose the church ? To expect their stability upon any other grounds, would be as visionary as to calculate that our Republic would live and flourish through ages to come, when the virtue of her citizens was sacrificed at the shrine of profligacy ; and vice, like an imperial despot, directed and controled all her movements.

But will the exercise of church government and discipline, have a favourable tendency in promoting these great ends—the strength and stability of the church ? The famous Calvin thought so. For he has affirmed, “that the church would never stand upon a *firm and*

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\* Zech. 12, 8.



*solid foundation*, until discipline and excommunication were used to purge it, to give a stop to licentiousness, to banish vice, and to mend manners ; and that whosoever rejected the lawful and moderate use of excommunication, shewed himself to be none of Christ's sheep."\* And Bucer, his contemporary, ascribes the prevalence of crimes in the church, to the want of an efficient discipline. "Because there are neither censures, nor corrections, nor public confessions, nor excommunications in the church, even for the greatest crimes, who can deny that on this account, the people and youth are encouraged to commit all manner of sins?"† Neither of these great reformers, although disagreeing in some points,‡ ever thought of raising the church from the wretched state into which she had been sunk by Popish superstition, and imparting strength and stability to her character, without the aid of a scriptural government and discipline. Nor can they be fairly chargeable with ambition in this matter ; for such sentiments were just as unpopular then, as they are now ; and in pleading for them, they had to encounter not only the weight of Papal influence, but the opposition of some who, while they rejected the authority of the Pope, "preached a gospel without discipline, and introduced licentiousness instead of christian liberty."§

But does not the history of the famous Asiatic church-

\* Calv. Epist. et Responsa. p. 336, quoted by Ostervald. See also Speech to his flock, on his return from banishment, in 1541. Ely's Quarterly Review, vol. 1, p. 392.

† Bucerus de animarum cura, p. 171, quoted by Ostervald.

‡ Bucer was a Lutheran, though of the moderate party.

§ Capit. in Calv. Epist. p. 7, quoted by Ostervald.



es, already referred to, furnish us with instruction on this subject? They were blamed for "suffering" among them those who corrupted their purity; from which circumstance, and the injunctions laid upon them, it would seem evident, that they were required authoritatively to exclude such from their communion, as well as to discourage their licentiousness, by every other mode in their power. Had they acted upon the suggestions of the Saviour, can we doubt but that they would have been restored to their pristine vigour, and their permanence have been secured? But they declined the exertion of the power with which they were invested, as well as other means of reformation; and the consequence was, that they sunk down into a state of decrepitude and ruin. One of them is now wholly extinct, and the other nearly so. This fact furnishes an impressive lesson to the church in every age, to beware of suffering unworthy and heretical members in her communion, by the neglect of that discipline which Christ has appointed, as a means of her growth and stability.

I add farther, that a faithful application of church government and discipline, will be *a means of securing the divine blessing on the church, and reviving pure and undefiled religion*. God has never failed to acknowledge his own institutions. Thus the preaching of the gospel has been made "mighty, through God, to the pulling down of strong holds." The prayers of the saints, too, have been owned, by rich returns of blessings from on high. Being the appointments of Jehovah, he has shewn that he will regard them, by rendering them efficient for the purposes for which they were in-



stituted. And why should we not, on the same principle, calculate on the blessing of God to attend the administration of church government? It is his own appointment. And is it not reflecting on the wisdom of God to allege, that he would institute government in the church, and refuse to own its faithful application, by withholding his blessing? When has he ever been known thus to desert his own institutions? And if God bless the means of his appointment, may we not look for a revival of religion? It is not presumed, indeed, that without the use of other appropriate means, this alone will answer the purpose. But where the church is faithful in the observance of the other institutions of the Saviour, this will be an important auxiliary, without which we cannot expect the divine blessing. For, I apprehend, that what is affirmed of individuals, that he who "offends in one point, is guilty of all,"\* is equally true of the church. While on the other hand, the faithful observance of all the divine institutions, will not fail of securing distinguished tokens of God's favour and love.

It is believed that the history of the church will attest the truth of these remarks. On this subject, we are not prepared, at present, to go into extensive details. But so far as our reading and observation extend, we have no hesitation in saying, that a flourishing state of religion, and a faithful administration of church government and discipline, have always went hand in hand. And we have the testimony of some of those who have been much conversant in revivals of re-

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\* James 2. 10.



ligion, that an efficient discipline has been regarded by the church where they have obtained, as an important means of securing those copious effusions of the Spirit of God, which have issued in the conversion and salvation of so many souls. Indeed, it has sometimes been immediately followed by peculiar tokens of the divine favour; and those who have been faithful in the execution of their Master's injunctions, have found *him* faithful to his promises in "opening the windows of heaven, and pouring out on them a blessing, until there has not been room enough to receive it."\*

And may it not be worth while to inquire into the result of your own observations on the subject? Look around upon the churches with which you are acquainted. Where does vital, practical godliness obtain to the greatest extent? Is it where discipline is prostrate, and church government is exploded as a relic of the dark ages? Or is it where government and discipline are rigidly maintained and enforced?

I am aware that in making this survey, the understanding is liable to imposition, from the noise and opposition which are often incident to the exercise of church authority. These seize upon the mind, and prevent it from making a fair estimate of the amount of good which obtains in the midst of them. The good is overlooked, while the evils are magnified, and being brought into contrast with the monotonous calm, which sometimes prevails in parts of the church where there is no discipline, are charged to her account, and urged to her

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\* Mal. 3. 10.



detriment. But it ought to be recollected, that it is neither the noiseless current of undisturbed corruption, nor the ebullitions of excited passion, that determine the true character of a church. You must look farther, if you would not suffer yourselves to be deceived by superficial appearances. External quietness may obtain, where there is a total indifference to religion ; and a state of great external excitement may consist with a high degree of practical godliness among the real disciples of Christ. The true point of inquiry then is, where is the greatest amount of real, practical piety, regardless of the incidental circumstances which may be connected with it ? Let this question be fairly resolved, by a faithful examination and comparison of facts, and we doubt not, but the result will be favourable to the claims of church government, as a means of promoting the interests of vital, practical godliness.

Such are some of the advantages which accrue to *the church*, from the operations of her government and discipline. But we proceed a step farther, and observe, that even *the world at large* is profited by the faithful administration of church government. Will you ask how can this be ? I answer, in the first place, that worldly men are hereby taught that there is *a real distinction between the church and the world*, and that, by the arrangement of the Saviour, even his earthly sanctuary, must not be polluted by the fellowship of ungodly men. This is a matter of real importance, as it regards the effect to be produced upon those “who are without.” Ungodly men often labour under a fatal mistake on this very point. They view the church and



the world as so nearly connected, that they may, at any time, pass from the one to the other. And, no doubt, their mistake on this subject, sometimes originates, and is often greatly confirmed, from their observing the most notorious transgressors in the full enjoyment of the highest privileges of the church. This encourages them in their sins, and leads them to neglect all connection with the church, believing themselves to be as safe in their present situation. Or if they should attach any importance to church privileges, they imagine that these can be easily obtained at all times, without any change of character, and on this ground, they defer the business of religion, until death cuts them off, and they perish in their sins.

But the faithful application of church government is calculated to rectify these unhappy mistakes. By the discipline which is inflicted on those who dishonour their profession, by their disorderly and immoral conduct, the men of the world are taught that religion is a sacred thing ; that its sealing ordinances are not to be profaned by the approaches of the ungodly ; and that if they would rise to the scriptural standard of professors in the church of Christ, their characters and conduct must be changed. And is it not important that ungodly men be taught such lessons as these ? It will not avail to say, that they may learn them from the reading and preaching of the word. If the church be found contradicting the scriptural requirements on these subjects, in her practice, they will plead her conduct as the test of scriptural principle, and remain unaffected. Besides, it is well known, that those of whom we are,



at present, speaking, are rarely found reading the scriptures with attention, and too often neglect their exposition from the pulpit. Their notions of religion, and of religious men are almost all formed *from what they see in the church*—in the character of her members—the nature of her laws—and the operations of her government. If these hold out a false light to them, they will be almost sure to be led astray by it, and their highest interests endangered. But if the church maintains a strict watch over her own members, and preserves her laws in their integrity, the practical lesson which will be thus furnished to the world, will do more for their conviction, than volumes of barren speculation on the subject. Nor will it alter the case, that some will be prejudiced and offended, as has already been admitted. It is impossible to attain any thing good, without some incidental evils arising in connection with it. And whatever prejudices may be created in the minds of some who do not belong to the church, it is believed that the great mass of those, whose circumstances have not thrown them into collision with church authority, will judge more favourably of its character and its claims; and that, upon the whole, the world at large will be profited by the faithful administration of her laws and discipline.

But there is another respect, in which the exercise of church government and discipline contributes to the general interests of mankind. Christians are “*the salt of the earth.*”<sup>\*</sup> They preserve the world from dissolution and ruin. And what is true, in this respect, of

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<sup>\*</sup> Matt. 5. 13.



christians, in their individual characters, is emphatically true of the church, which is composed of all the followers of the Lamb. She is eminently "the salt of the earth." To her, under God, the world owes her protracted existence, and all her numberless mercies. But that she may answer this high end to which she has been appointed, she must retain her conservative principles entire. She herself must not become corrupted. For, "if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men."\*

We have seen, however, that government and discipline are necessary to the preservation of the church's *purity*. Without these, error and crime would soon pollute her sanctuary, and impair her character, as it happened to the Asiatic churches, and to those degenerate churches, over which the distinguished reformers just now referred to, were called to mourn. Hence, the exercise of church government and discipline exerts a favourable influence upon the world, as it tends to promote the purity and integrity of the church, and thus maintains within her those incorruptible principles which preserve the world from dissolution, and ungodly men from a premature perdition. And on this account, as well as others, it is entitled to the respect and support of all who wish well to the human family.

I have thus, brethren, examined the practical utility of that system of government which Christ has established in the church, and endeavoured to shew you, that while the evils of which it is supposed to be pro-

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\* Matt. 5. 13.



ductive, are incidental, and of little moment, its advantages, both to individuals, to the church, and to the world at large, are of an extended and paramount character. You will judge how far these results have been made out from the word of God, and the principles of fair investigation. And you will permit me, in the conclusion of this Letter, to remind you, that the subject of church government, as unfolded in the scriptures, is one which demands your serious attention and examination. The present age, we rejoice to say, is one of free and independent thought. In our own happy country, especially, the freedom and liberality of our political institutions have imparted an elasticity to the mind, highly favourable to full and thorough investigation. There is no blessing, however, which we are permitted to enjoy upon earth, without its associated temptations. Liberty stands on the verge of licentiousness ; and the free and uncontrolled exercise of intellectual power, approaches the confines of lawless scepticism and anarchy. Hence, there is danger, lest the very enjoyment of our liberty and privileges proves a snare to us.

In claiming your attention, therefore, to the subject of church government, I would guard you against the indulgence of that intellectual extravagance, which, to meet the supposed spirit of the age and country in which we live, would mould and fashion the divine institutions into a creature of human device ; and which would be the patron of government, or no government in the church, according to the external circumstances of our condition. It is admitted indeed, that some smaller matters of detail may have been left to the

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control of such incidental circumstances. But the substantial parts of the system are imbodyed in the word of God, and must remain always the same. There is no option left us whether we shall maintain government in the church, or not. This is a matter, which has been fixed by the Master himself. Neither the freedom of our institutions, nor the gigantic march of human intellect under their genial influences, can authorize a dissolution of the established system of order which God himself has erected in his house, and over which the great Mediator presides. The free-born sons of America are just as much under the control of those salutary restraints, which the discipline of the church imposes, as those who have been born under the shade of royalty, or on the less favoured shores of despotism.

We wish you then to examine this subject under the conviction, that the institutions of the Lord Jesus are not to be fashioned according to the fancy of every new artificer who may spring up in the church, and who may claim to have made some new improvement, more congenial to the spirit of the age, than those which have gone before. The system of church government and order, is as old as the Bible. It has been recognized and sustained by the purest churches, and the most devoted servants of God, in every age. And it is not now to be exploded under the plea "that the spiritual institutions of America must not be regulated by religious precedents derived from England, Ireland, or Scotland."\* No one pleads for such a prescriptive control, in favour of foreign precedents in the church.

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\* Remarks on Creeds and Confessions, p. 77.



But would it not be something worse than folly to part with scriptural forms of government and discipline, because they may have been adopted by the English, Irish, or Scotch churches? Are all precedents necessarily bad, because they come from abroad? If so, then the structure of our Republican government should be exploded, because there were Republics beyond the Atlantic, before ours; and every principle of common and statute law which has ever been acted on in England, should be proscribed as unsuitable to the genius and soil of America! But the idea is too extravagant. The liberality of our institutions cannot alter the nature of things. Truth is the same in Europe as in America. And whatever pre-eminence we may claim in our freedom from tyrannical restraints, both in church and state, it is vain to imagine that we should reject the salutary restrictions of scriptural discipline, to get rid of European precedents, and to screen ourselves from the charge of "hanging behind the changes of our own age." This is not necessary. We may keep pace with the current of moral and religious improvement, without dissolving the bonds of ecclesiastical fellowship, or tearing down those constitutions which have long been found to impart strength and stability to the church, both at home and abroad. We are lovers of liberty, and would rejoice to give accelerated progress to the spirit of improvement. But we love to see liberty regulated by law, and improvement advancing on principles which experience has proved to be practical and sound. And we believe, that both the liberty and improvement of the church have, after a full experiment, been so well secur-



ed, and so amply promoted, by the operations of her government, that they are not to be placed in jeopardy, by the novel theories of every bold speculator, or visionary projector.

In closing these Letters, I have only to add, that the topics which they embrace are believed to be closely connected with the highest interests of the church, and of real religion. If such had not been our solemn convictions, we should never have submitted to the labour of preparing them for the press. They are now, christian brethren, committed to your hands, with earnest prayers to God, that he would make them profitable to your spiritual interests, both as individuals and as a church. As individuals, you must answer for the opinions you form, and the part you take in the affairs of the Redeemer's kingdom. As an ecclesiastical community also, you are accountable to God for the improvement of your privileges. Let no one, then, pass over the subject, as that in which he is not concerned. Examine, and judge for yourselves. And if, after a full examination, you are convinced that the views which we have advanced, have been sustained from the scriptures, let them receive your firm, and decided support. If not, let them be rejected. In either case, let your researches be conducted in the spirit of christian kindness, and the exercise of prayer. And whatever may be the result of your inquiries, in regard to the principles of church order, let me entreat you to hold fast your relation to him who is the church's Lord, and "the head of all principality and power." He is the Sa-



viour of sinners. His blood cleanseth from all sin. Let your souls rest on the merit of his atoning sacrifice. And let it be our mutual prayer, that when we shall be taken from our stations in the visible church on earth, we may meet in heaven, where present forms of order shall be known no more, but where **CHRIST** shall be **ALL IN ALL**.







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## ERRATA.

- Page 19, line 18th—for "*to their*," read "*to exercise their*."  
 " 41, " 3d—for "*and*," read "*an*."  
 " 47, " 14th—for "*Peitharhein*," read "*peitharhein*."  
 " 71, " 19th—for "*there*," read "*these*."  
 " 105, " 13th—for "*eminent*," read "*imminent*."  
 " 109,               Reference at bottom of the page, for "*pas-*  
                               *sive*," read "*passim*."  
 " 130, " 6th—for "*scriptural*," read "*spiritual*."  
 " 132, " 14th—for "*it*," read "*his notions*."  
 " 142, " 21st—for "*progency*," read "*progeny*."  
 " 145, " 18th—for "*minister*," read "*ministers*."  
 " 166, " 25th—for "*your*," read "*you*."







