



*Library of the Theological Seminary,*  
PRINCETON, N. J.

Presented by Mr. Samuel Agnew of Philadelphia, Pa.

*Division*

*Section*

*Number*

SCC  
857







Joseph Lathrop.  
A church of God described  
Hartford, Hudson and Co.

THE NATURE AND DESIGN OF A CHRISTIAN  
CHURCH.



I CORIN. i. 2.

*Unto the Church of God, which is at Corinth; to them who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.*

**T**HAT we may better understand the apostle's idea of a church of God, we must bear in mind that the Corinthians, before the gospel was preached among them, were *gentiles carried away unto dumb idols, even as they were led.* Those of them who received the doctrine preached by the apostles, renounced the idolatrous forms and places of worship, and united together to worship God through Jesus Christ, in the manner which the gospel prescribes. *These are called a church,* which in the original language, properly signifies a *select company,* or an assembly called forth from the rest of mankind for some particular purpose, more especially for the purpose of religious worship. The church in Corinth was that number of persons, who had come out from among their idolatrous fellow-citizens for the true worship of God in Christ.

THE apostle describes them, *as sanctified in Christ Jesus, and called to be saints.* We cannot suppose, that, by this description, he intended to represent *all* the

members of the Corinthian church to be *gracious, godly* persons : many passages, in this and his second epistle to them, import that he thought otherwise ; but these phrases rather signify, that they had been called out of the world, and separated from others, that they might be a peculiar people to God. *They were called to be holy.* The words, *sanctified, saints, and holy,* applied to bodies of men, are usually to be taken in the same general sense, as *christians, disciples, and brethren* ; to express their *visible* relation and *professed* character, rather than a certain judgment concerning their habitual temper. The sabbath, the temple, its utensils, and the ground on which it stood, are called *holy,* and said to be *sanctified,* because they were separated from a common to a sacred use. The nation of the Jews, in which, at its best state, were great numbers of ungodly men, is called *holy,* as being separated from other nations, for the service of the true God. Moses says—*Ye are a holy people to the Lord, a peculiar treasure, a kingdom of priests.* So the christian church is called a *chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people.* The word *saints,* in many places stands opposed, not to unsound Christians, but to the heathen world, particularly in the passages, which speak of persecution against the *saints,* of ministering to the *saints,* and of distributing to the necessities of the *saints* ; and in that remarkable passage which denominates the children of a believer *holy,* in distinction from the children of the unbelieving, who are called *unclean.*

THE apostle farther describes the Corinthian church, as consisting of those who *call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ* ; who own him to be their Lord and Saviour, profess to hope for salvation through him and worship God in his name.

HE directs his epistle to *all, who, in every place, call on the name of Christ Jesus the Lord, both theirs, and ours.* In this address, he signifies, that there is a sacred re-

lation subsisting among all Christians in every place, and that, as they profess subjection to one common Lord, so they ought to maintain communion one with another.

THE words of our text will naturally lead us to consider,

I. THE *nature* of a church of God.

II. THE *end* of its institution.

III. THE relation which *children* bear to it.

IV. THE *qualifications* requisite for admission into it. And,

V. THE *fellowship*, which ought to subsist among its members.

I. WE are to consider the *nature* of a church of God.

ITS general nature, as a select company, called forth from the world, for the worship and service of God, we have already stated in the opening of our text. Some further illustrations, however, will be necessary.

THE church is sometimes distinguished into the *invisible*, and the *visible* church. By the *invisible* church, is intended the whole number of real saints in all places and ages; the whole family in Heaven and earth; those whom Christ will gather together in one body in Heaven. This is that MOUNT SION, the CITY OF THE LIVING GOD, the HEAVENLY JERUSALEM, which consists of an innumerable company of angels, the spirits of just men made perfect, and the general assembly and church of the first-born, who were enrolled in Heaven. By the *visible* church are meant all those who have been visibly dedicated to God in Christ, and have not, by infidelity, heresy, or scandal, cut themselves off from the society of Christians; or, in the words of our

apostle, *all who, in every place, call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.*

THE visible church is again distinguished into the *catholic* or *general* church, and into *local* or *particular* churches. The word is often used to denote all the *professed* people of God in all nations and ages. In this large sense it is to be understood, when Christ is said to be made head of the church, and the church is described as subject to him. The whole Jewish nation, which was chosen of God, to be a peculiar people to himself, is called *the church*. It is said of Moses—*He was in the church in the wilderness.*

WHEN this people, by their great and increasing corruption, were ripening apace for destruction, God sent his own Son, the promised Redeemer to rescue from ruin his sinking church, and place it on a larger and surer establishment. By his teaching, and the ministry of his apostles, who were trained up under his immediate discipline, a considerable number of subjects were gained over to his kingdom, while he was on earth. Just before his ascension, he gave these apostles a commission to go forth, and spread his doctrine, and collect subjects among all nations. His church, which before stood on the foundation of the prophets, now stands on the foundation of the apostles also, he himself being the corner stone, in which both parts of the foundation meet and are united. The church was formerly limited to one nation, but now it is indiscriminately extended to all. In the city of Jerusalem there were many, who, before the descent of the Holy Ghost, conformed for the worship of God in Christ. To these were soon added multitudes, who continued in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread and in prayers. They were called *the church*. After the gospel was spread to such an extent, that it was no longer possible for all the believers to attend the worship of God in the same place, particu-



lar religious societies, in divers places, were formed for the convenience of worship, each of which had the name of *a church*.

THESE societies of Christians, united in different places for mutual edification in the joint worship of God, are what we mean by *particular churches*, in distinction from the *catholic* or *universal church*. Thus the Christians in Corinth, those in Galatia, those in Ephesus, those in Theffalonica, are called *a church*. But as all these particular churches received the same gospel, maintained the same form of worship, and professed subjection to the same Lord, so they are often considered as *one church*. Though we read of many churches, yet these are only so many different parts of the same universal church—They are members of the same great body, apartments of the same house, provinces of the same empire. With regard to their several jurisdictions and places of worship, they are distinct; but yet one in the main, as they call on the same Jesus, their common Saviour and Lord.

As there was in the apostolic times, so there is now, frequent occasion for new churches to be formed: but from the preceding observations, it appears, that whenever a new church is erected, careful regard should be had to her communion with other churches, as well as to the communion of her own members among themselves; otherwise the body of Christ is divided, and the bond of peace is broken.

AMONG the members of every particular church, there is always supposed to be a solemn covenant and agreement to walk together in the commands and ordinances of Christ, to watch over one another in meekness and love, and to be fellow-helpers to the kingdom of God. The church in Corinth is said to *come together into one place*. The church in Jerusalem is cautioned *not to forsake the assembling of themselves to-*

gether; and required, to *exhort one another, and to consider one another, that they may provoke to love and to good works.* And Christians are enjoined to *be subject one to another.*

THE COVENANT between the members of a particular church, to walk together in the ordinances of Christ, is of sacred obligation; and when any of them have occasion to remove to another church, they should do it in a manner consistent with Christian order, peace and communion. When a number of Christians unite in a new church, still they must consider themselves as members of the general body, and seek, not merely their own profit but the profit of many.

II. THE *end* for which a church was instituted, and the purpose for which we are called into it, is what we proposed, in the second place, to consider.

CHRIST'S kingdom is not of this world. As the nature, so the design of it is purely spiritual; it is, that in the enjoyment of suitable means we may be trained up in knowledge and holiness; and thus formed to a meetness for future glory.

IT is said, *the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.* This is not to be understood as importing, that all who joined themselves to the church were finally saved. There were in that, as there are in all ages, many who call Christ their Lord, and eat and drink in his presence, but still are workers of iniquity. But they are called *the saved*, because they are admitted to the offers and means of salvation. In this sense also, baptism is said to *save* us; not as conveying an immediate right to salvation, but as being the appointed way of introduction into the visible church, where the means of salvation are afforded. In the same sense we are to understand those passages, where salvation is promised to whole families on the faith of the head. Not that *his* faith entitles *them* to eternal life; but that

it brings them into the visible church, and to the enjoyment of the means of salvation. *Noah, by faith, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; the like figure whereunto, even baptism doth now save us.*

As without holiness, none can be admitted into God's heavenly kingdom, *Christ gave himself for the church, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.* The church, in our text, is described, as consisting of those who are called to be holy. Christ has set in his church teachers for her edification, *that we might all come in the unity of faith and knowledge, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; and professing the truth in love, might grow up into him in all things.*

LOVE is a most important branch of gospel holiness. *Christians are chosen in Christ, that they might be holy and without blame before him in love; and might purify their souls in obeying the truth, through the spirit, unto unfeigned love of the brethren.* Christ has, therefore, appointed that his disciples, dwelling together in social connection, and maintaining fellowship in religious duties, should increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men. They are directed to *forbear one another in love, and keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, because there is one body, or church, of which they are all members, and one spirit, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism.* In order to their enjoying the grace of God, for their increase and edification, they must, like the parts of a building, be *fitly framed into each other, and be builded together for an habitation of God through the spirit.*

HAVING illustrated the nature and design of a church of God, we will now attend to the next proposed enquiry.

III. WHAT relation children bear to the church?

THIS will be necessary, previously to our stating the qualifications of adult profelytes.

WHEN first the apostles went forth to preach the gospel, and erect churches in the world, mankind in general were in a state of *heathenism*, or *judaism*; and, either had not heard of the gospel, or did not believe it to be divine. From among these, were they to make profelytes to Christianity.

WHAT they required of the profelytes, whom they admitted into the church of God, was a professed belief that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. This profession of faith in Christ necessarily implied a promise of obedience to him.

Now as the apostles admitted adult profelytes into the church by baptism, so there is sufficient ground to believe, that they admitted to this ordinance the children of profelytes, in token of God's merciful regard to them, and of their parents' obligation to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. In this general sense, the baptised offspring of believers are within the church; having God's covenant-seal upon them, and being under the care of those who have covenanted to bring them up for him.

As many as are comprehended within God's covenant, and are the subjects of its gracious promises, undeniably belong to the church; for this is founded on the covenant. That the children of professed believers are within the covenant, is evident from passages of scripture, too numerous to be here particularly recited. The promise to Abraham was made also to his infant seed, who were to receive the seal and token of the promise, as well as he; and as many as received it not, were said to have broken God's covenant; and these were to be cut off, or excluded from among their people. Had they not been within the covenant, and

among the people of God, their want of the seal could not have been a breach of the covenant, or an exclusion from the people. Moses says to the congregation of Israel, *Ye stand all of you before the Lord your God—all the men of Israel, your little ones and your wives—that thou shouldst enter into covenant with the Lord thy God, that he may establish thee for a people to himself, as he hath sworn to Abraham.* Express promises are made to children, as the seed of those who are in covenant; particularly the promise of God's word, and of his spirit. *God established a testimony in Jacob, which he commanded the fathers, that they should make it known to their children, that the generation to come might also know it. Circumcision has much the advantage every way, chiefly because to them are committed the oracles of God. To Jacob his servant, and to Israel his chosen, God promises, I will pour my spirit on thy seed, and my blessing on thine offspring, and they shall spring up as among the grass, and as willows by the water-courses.* This is God's covenant with them who turn from transgression in Jacob. *My spirit which is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed.* Infants are called the children of the church; and the gentiles are described in prophecy, as coming to the church with their children in their arms. *All these gather themselves together and come to thee; to Zion, God's church, they shall bring thy sons in their arms, and thy daughters shall be carried on their shoulders.* The children of those who are in covenant, are distinguished from others as God's children, born unto him. God says to his ancient church, *I entered into covenant with thee, and thou becamest mine—but thou hast taken thy sons and thy daughters, which thou hast born unto me, and hast sacrificed them: thou hast slain my children.* It is foretold, that in the time of the church's prosperity, *the people shall not labor in vain, nor bring forth for trouble, for they are the seed of the blessed of the Lord, and their offspring with them.* The Redeemer is described by Isaiah, as one *who shall feed his flock*

like a shepherd, and shall gather the lambs with his arms, and carry them in his bosom. When he appeared on earth, he commanded that children should be brought to him: those who were brought, he took into his arms, and blessed, declaring them subjects to his kingdom. But in what sense are they such, if they belong not to his church, but to the kingdom of Satan? When Christ instituted the ordinance of baptism, he pointed out the subjects of it in such general terms, as might naturally be supposed to include children; and his apostles, who knew how he had ever treated children, who had heard his directions concerning them, and who could not be ignorant, that, under former dispensations of the covenant, children were comprehended with their parents, must understand them to be included in this instruction, *disciple all nations, baptizing them*. Accordingly, in the first instance of their administering baptism, after this commission, they placed the reason of it, and the right to it, on a basis which alike supports the baptism of believers, and of their children. *Repent and be baptized for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, for the promise is to you and to your children*. They considered the children of believers as holy, in distinction from the children of unbelievers. And it appears to have been their practice, when they baptized a believing householder, to baptize also his household—those who were *his*, and under his government. And it is observable, that among all the instances of baptism, mentioned in the New Testament, we find not one baptized at adult age, who appears to have been born of Christian parents; but they were all profelytes from judaism, or from heathenism.

OUR English word CHURCH, signifies the house, or family of the Lord. It is a well-chosen word; for the church is often called a *family* or *household*. But who needs to be told, that children are members of the family in which they are born? It is often called

a city, a nation, a people. But who ever imagined that these terms excluded children? If a city is incorporated, are not children members of the corporation, as well as their parents? If a privilege is granted to a people, do not children become intitled to it? If a form of government is settled in a nation, do not children come under the form.

You will ask, how can children be brought within the church without their own consent? But as well may you ask, how should they be born under the gospel; or how should they be created rational beings, without their own consent? If it is a privilege to enjoy the example, instruction and prayers of good men, and to be placed under the care of those who are solemnly bound to give them a pious education, then it is a privilege to be born within the church, and to receive in childhood the seal of the covenant. And will any complain, that God bestows on them mercies, before they had consented to take them.

CERTAIN religious duties are incumbent on children, as soon as they arrive to a natural capacity to perform them. But has not God a right to enjoin such duties as his wisdom sees fit? Must he consult his creatures, to know what laws he may make for them? Was not the covenant in the plains of Moab, made with little ones, as well as with the men of Israel? With those who are not, as well as with those who were then present? Are there not moral obligations which result from our rational nature, and from our place in the creation as well as from our special covenant relation to God? Shall we conclude that all these obligations are void, for want of our previous consent? To the validity of contracts between man and man, who stand on the foot of equality, mutual consent is necessary: But God is a sovereign, and 'his covenant he *commands* us.' When he promises us blessings, and enjoins duties as conditions of the blessings, he states

to us the tenor of his covenant, and, by his supreme authority, brings us under the obligations of it, whether we have consented to it, or not.

Now if the children of believers are under the covenant, and within the church of God, they ought to receive the seal and token of their relation to him; to be taught, as soon as they are able to understand, the nature of religion; and to be considered, when they come forward in life, as under the watch of the church. They should be nursed at her side; and, when they have competency of knowledge, should be invited to her actual communion. If they behave in a manner unworthy of their relation, they should be treated with, and exhorted to repentance. If they prove contumacious and incorrigible, they are, after due patience to be cut off from their people. Such appears to be the state of children.

IV. WE proceed to enquire, what qualifications are requisite for the admission of adults into the church, and for their enjoyment of all gospel ordinances?

THE question is twofold: *First*, What a church ought to require of those whom she admits to her communion? And, *Secondly*, What qualifications a person must find in himself to justify his coming to the communion?

THE first question is, What a church ought to require of those whom she admits to her communion?

THE answer in general is, She is to require the same as the apostles required.

THOSE whom the apostles admitted to fellowship with them in breaking of bread, and in prayer, being first instructed in the doctrines and evidences of Christianity, professed to believe, that *this* was a divine religion.



THE Jews, who were baptized on the day of pentecost, gladly received the word of the gospel. The eunuch, who was baptized by Philip, declared his belief, that Jesus was the Son of God. The heart of Lydia was opened to attend to the doctrine of Paul ; and she was judged faithful to the Lord. The jailor is said to have believed in God. When the people of Samaria believed Philip, preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, they were baptized, both men and women.

THE churches were enjoined to put away from among them, those wicked persons who would not be reclaimed. We may, therefore, conclude, that such were not received without a profession of repentance.

A Christian church is, then, to require of those, whom she admits to her communion, these three things ; a competent knowledge of the essential doctrines and precepts of religion ; a professed belief of, and subjection to them ; and a blameless conversation ; or, where this had been wanting, a profession of repentance. These things are, in the nature of the case, necessary ; for it is palpably absurd for a man to join himself to a Christian church, and attend upon its ordinances, unless he understands the nature, and believes the truth of that religion on which it is founded ; and has such a sense of its importance, as to resolve that he will be governed by it. And every person of competent knowledge, a good profession, and a correspondent life, has a right, in the view of the church, to the enjoyment of gospel ordinances, whenever he claims it.

WHATEVER may be the opinion of a church, concerning the necessity of saving grace to qualify one, in the sight of God, for Christian communion, she cannot justly exclude the person we have described ; because a good profession, and a conversation agreeable to it, is all the evidence which she can have in his favor. She

can judge the heart only by visible fruits. The controversy concerning the necessity of internal holiness, in the present case, can have no reference to the real practice of the church, in admitting members; for whether she judges this to be a necessary qualification or not, still she must conduct in the same manner, and admit the same persons. Namely, those, and only those, who have sufficient knowledge of the gospel, profess a belief of, and subjection to the gospel, and contradict not that profession by an ungodly conversation. She may, perhaps, think proper to require of her members a particular relation of their Christian experiences. But be this relation ever so full, still it is but the evidence of words—of a good profession. The real sincerity of the heart, after all, is known only to him, who seeth not as man seeth.

A church has no right, *on mere jealousy*, to exclude from her communion any one who offers himself. She must first make it appear, that he is, by ignorance, heresy or wickedness, disqualified for communion. It is not incumbent on him to demonstrate his inward grace; but on the church to prove his want of it. The burden of proof, in this case, lies wholly on the church; not on the claimant. If one claims privileges, the church is not to reject him, in a sovereign, arbitrary manner, of her own will, without offering reasons: She is either to admit him, or shew cause why she refuses. If she shall convict him of any disqualification, still she is not to treat him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother: She is not to abandon him at once, but labor for his amendment. To reject claimants, in any other way, than by conviction on fair and open trial, is to set up a tyranny in the church, which Christ has no where warranted. It is to subvert that liberty with which Christ has made us free. The church ought to caution all against hypocrisy and dissimulation in their approaches to divine ordinances; but she is not to assume the judgment of men's hearts,

rashly intruding into things, which she has not seen, and which belong only to God.

WE are to aim at perfection, both as private christians, and as churches. But we are to pursue this aim in a scriptural way : not by usurping God's prerogative, or by excluding from our charity and fellowship, all who hope humbly and speak modestly ; all who cannot give the highest proof of their godly sincerity ; but by cleansing *ourselves* from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, and by considering one another to provoke unto love and good works.

AFTER all, there will be bad, as well as good, in Christian societies. *The kingdom of Heaven is like a net cast into the sea, which gather d of every kind ; and when it was full, they drew it to shore, and gathered the good into vessels and cast the bad away. So shall it be in the end of the world ; then the wicked shall be severed from among the just.*

HAVING shewn what a church is to require of those whom she admits o her communion, we proceed to the second question.

WHAT qualifications a person must find in himself to justify him in entering into the church, and attending on all gospel ordinances ?

THAT we may bring this question within a narrow compass, and reduce it to a single point, it will be necessary to remove some things, which have often been blended with it, and occasioned much confusion in thinking and arguing upon it.

I. THE question is not, Whether every person educated under the gospel, is *in duty bound* to attend on all divine ordinances in some Christian church ? For this is universally granted.

RELIGION, in all its branches, is indispensibly enjoined on all men. Christ calls all men to be his disciples, to profess themselves such, and to act accordingly, on pain of final rejection from his presence. No man can free himself from his obligation to enter into the church, any more than he can free himself from his obligation to prayer, or any other duty. His wickedness may be a *bar* in the way of his admission; but it cannot be an excuse for his voluntary neglect. It is absurd to suppose, that one's sins should vacate his obligations to obedience. They who apprehend that they have no right to the communion of saints, ought, by no means, to make themselves easy in this state. The command still extends to them; and their immediate concern should be, to repent of that sinfulness, which obstructs their compliance with it.

2. THE question is not, Whether one ought to come to the communion in an *impenitent, unconverted* state; for no man is allowed to continue in such a state. The scripture never proposes, or answers this question, Whether a man may attend on this, or that ordinance, while he remains impenitent in his sins? because it grants no man permission to remain so; but commands all men, every where, to repent. It requires them to perform every duty in a pious and holy manner. It allows no neglect of, or hypocrisy and formality in duty. The man, who calls himself a sinner, is not to imagine, that the same duties, or the same tempers, are not required of him, as of others; for all are required to be holy in all manner of conversation, and to be deeply humble for all the corruptions of their heart, and errors of their life. But,

3. IT will be said, though no man ought to remain in a sinful state, yet there are many who know themselves to be in such a state—many who evidently find, that they have no governing regard to God and his commands, but are under the prevailing love of sin

and the world : Now, ought they, while they perceive themselves to be in this state, to come into the church and attend on the holy communion ?

IF any ask this question, my answer is, it is a question in which no body is concerned. It cannot possibly be a case of conscience with any man. The person here supposed is one, who knows himself to be an habitual sinner ; one who has no governing regard to his duty ; but is prevailingly bent to wickedness ; and, therefore, he cannot be supposed to have any conscientious solicitude about his duty in this matter. It is absurd to imagine, he should be solicitous to know and do his duty here, and yet have no regard to it in any thing else. If in other external acts of duty he is influenced by unworthy motives, the same unworthy motives, and not a regard to the will of God, would influence him in coming into the church. The question is merely a matter of speculation ; it concerns no man's practice. One, who lives regardless of the will of God in general, is just as regardless of it in the case under consideration. He does not wish to be instructed in the matter, that he may conform to the divine will : if he did, he would be as careful to conform to it in things which are already plain. The scripture puts no such case, for it is not a supposable case, that a man, whose heart is set in him to do evil, should have any conscientious scruples in this point, or any other. The proper answer to such an enquirer will be, you are in a most awful state, under the power and guilt of sin. So long as you live in subjection to the flesh, you cannot please God. You are exposed to everlasting condemnation. Repent, therefore, of your wickedness, seek God's forgiveness, and henceforward walk in all his commandments and ordinances blameless.

4. THE only question which can be a case of conscience, and which it concerns us to answer, is this—  
What a *serious* person ought to do, who is in doubt concerning his spiritual state ?

He believes the gospel to be divine, has some sense of its importance, and feels a concern to obtain the salvation which it brings. It is his desire to know, and his purpose to do, the will of God. But still he finds so many corruptions in his heart, and deviations from duty in his practice, that he dares not conclude himself in a state of grace. If he has hopes, they are mingled with painful fears.—Now ought such a person to come within the church, and participate in all divine ordinances? Or is he to delay till his fears are dispelled?

THIS is the real state of the question; and can any hesitate what answer to give?

WE have before shewn, that the purpose for which men are called into a church-state is that, in the enjoyment of suitable means, they may be trained up in knowledge and holiness, to a preparation for future glory. And if we have the same end in attending on ordinances, as God had in instituting them, it cannot be doubted but we are qualified for the enjoyment of them. If then we can say, our end in coming to the communion is, that we may conform to God's will, may be in the way of his blessing, and may be directed and quickened in his service, we are undoubtedly warranted to approach it.

FOR a person to judge whether he may come to the communion, the question rather is, what are his present views, desires and purposes; than what is the habitual state of his soul? The former may be known by immediate inward reflection: the latter is to be discovered only by a course of examination and experience.

LET us now attend to the practice of the apostles.

THE Jews, who assemb'ed at the temple on the day of pentecost, to celebrate that festival, beheld with indignation, and treated with mockery, the miraculous

gifts of the spirit, then bestowed on the disciples of Jesus, in confirmation of his divine authority. Peter, on this occasion, rose up, and, in a pertinent discourse, laid before them such striking evidence of Jesus being the promised Messiah, that thousands were convinced of their great guilt in rejecting and crucifying the Lord of glory, and anxiously enquired what they must do? Being told, that they must repent and be baptized for the remission of sins, they gladly received the word, and were baptized, and admitted to the apostle's fellowship. It is the doctrine of this same Peter, that believers must make their calling and election sure, by adding to their faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and every other grace. But does Peter tell these new converts, that, because they had not had time thus to prove the sincerity of their conversion, it was not safe to receive baptism, and enter into the church? Does he advise them to wait a while till they could manifest the reality of their repentance by its fruits? No, he admits them to fellowship immediately; but with this important caution, *save yourselves from this untoward generation.*

IN the same manner the apostles conducted in the baptism of Cornelius, the people of Samaria, the Jaylor, Lydia, and the Ethiopian Eunuch.

HAD they considered assurance, as a qualification necessary to justify persons in coming into the church, would they not, on these occasions, have cautioned their proselytes against receiving baptism immediately? Would they not have advised them to a greater trial of themselves than could have been made in a few hours?

It cannot be pretended, that these proselytes had a certain knowledge of their own sincerity. Much less can it be supposed, that the apostles knew them to be sound converts. *They* knew men's hearts no otherwise, than *we* may know them, by a view of what ap-

pears in their lives. They could only, hence, form a rational judgment, a charitable presumption. The disciples at Jerufalem believed not Paul to be a disciple, nor did even the apostles venture to receive him as such, till they had evidence from the testimony of Barnabas. Yea, we find in fact, that they admitted into the Christian church many, who afterward appeared to be ungodly. Simon, the forcerer, is a remarkable instance. We learn from Paul's epistles, that in most of the churches to which he wrote, there were great numbers of unsound professors. The apostles, therefore, did not know, that all, whom they received into the church, were savingly converted; for it is manifest, that many of them were not so. And since they received new proselytes, whose sincerity must, at present, be doubtful to themselves, as well as others, without the least intimation of a necessity of delaying for the removal of doubts, we may with great safety, conclude, that a serious person, who believes the gospel, and desires to be found in the way of duty, and of the divine blessing, though still in doubt concerning the gracious sincerity of his heart, has a right to come to the communion of the church.

AND indeed, if Christians were to delay, till all their doubts were removed, I am afraid few would come to it at all. And perhaps these few would not be of the better sort. While the self-confident hypocrite drew near, the meek, the modest, the humble, would stand afar off.

THE members of the church in Corinth, as we learn from Paul's first letter to them, ran into most scandalous disorders in their attendance on the Lord's supper. They behaved in such a riotous manner, as made it evident that they discerned not the Lord's body; distinguished not this ordinance from a common meal, or even from a Pagan festival. One took before other his own supper; and one was hungry,



having eaten nothing before he came to it ; and another was drunken, having indulged to excess there ; and the poorer members were despised. This unworthy partaking the apostle rebukes in the severest terms ; and warns them, that they were eating and drinking judgment to themselves, of which they had melancholy proof in the sickness and mortality which had been sent among them.

BUT what advice does he give them in the case ? Does he direct them to withdraw from the Lord's table ? No, he shews them the danger of coming in this manner, and exhorts them to come better prepared and disposed. *Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat.* He does not say, let a man examine himself and withdraw ; but let him examine and partake. *And when ye come together, tarry for one another ; and if any man hunger, let him eat at home, that ye come not together to condemnation.* This passage, far from being a just ground of discouragement, proves the point which we have stated, that such as have a desire to comply with a divine institution, are not to delay, on account of their humble doubts concerning their conversion. If the fear of unworthy partaking were a reason for not partaking at all, as well might the fear of praying, or reading and hearing the word, in an unworthy manner, be a reason for omitting these ; for it is evident that the scripture enjoins the same temper of heart in *these* duties, as in *that*. The truth is, we are required to attend on every ordinance with godly sincerity ; and a suspicion of our insincerity is not an excuse for neglect ; but a reason for examination, repentance and amendment.

SOME perhaps will say, for some have said, we have sensible desires to approach to God in all his ordinances ; but there may be desires which are not gracious ; and we fear *ours* are such ; we, therefore, dare not approach, for we think less guilt is incurred by abstinence, than by attendance.

BUT consider, God requires your attendance ; and you must either attend or forbear—comply or refuse : There is no medium ; and certainly there can be no more grace in your *fears*, than there may be in your *desires*. If your desires to attend an ordinance are not spiritual, neither can the fears, which restrain you from attending, be called spiritual : You can, therefore, be no better accepted in your neglect, than in your compliance ; for you act on no better principles in the former, than in the latter.

IT is vain to enquire, in what way you shall contract least guilt : Your business is not to contrive how you can sin at the cheapest rate :—Your care should be not to sin at all.

If you say, you decline the communion through fear of offending God ; examine whether you are not deceived. Are you as conscientious in every thing else, as you would seem to be in this ? Are you as much afraid to offend God in other matters, as you pretend to be in this ? If you allow yourselves in any sin, or in the neglect of any duty, be assured it is not the fear of offending God, but something else, that hinders your approach to his table. But if you really have such a fear running through all your conduct, and operating in all your deliberate actions, you have a very good evidence of your right to the holy communion ; for, in all acts of worship, you serve God acceptably, when you serve him with reverence and godly fear.

THE man found at the marriage-feast without a wedding garment, fell under the awful censure of the king, who commanded that he should be bound and cast into utter darkness.

WILL you say then, it is the safer part not to come to the marriage-feast at all, lest being found unworthy, we share the fate of this guest ? Remember, they

who made light of the king's invitation, and refused to come to his son's marriage, were treated with no more lenity than the unworthy guest. He sent forth his armies and destroyed them, and burnt up their city. What then shall we conclude? Why, that a wicked man is safe no where. He who will not forsake iniquity, is secure neither in the church, nor out of it.

THE crime of this guest was, not that he was found at the *feast*; but that he was found *unsuitably attired*. The same dirt and rags would have been offensive elsewhere.

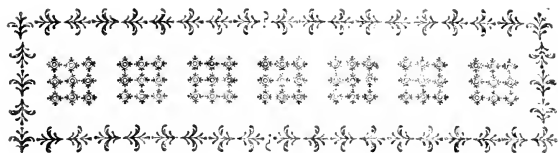
THE servants were ordered to go out into the highways, and call to the marriage as many as they found; and they accordingly gathered together both bad and good. The man, you see, was a poor beggar, called into the king's house, from out of the street. How should he obtain a wedding garment? He had none of his own. He must come to the king's house to receive one; for there was clean raiment, as well as meat and drink. Where then lay his great crime? Surely not in coming to the king's house, for he was bidden to come; and such as refused were destroyed; but in sitting among the guests in his ragged and defiled condition, and refusing to wear the pure raiment provided for him. And such will be the condemnation of false professors at the last day; not simply that they have come within God's church, and attended on his ordinances; but that, while they have sat under the gospel-dispensation, made a good profession, and enjoyed all the means of holiness, they have continued in the love and practice of their sins; that while they have heard Christ teach in their streets, and have eaten and drunk in his presence, they have been workers of iniquity. We are not to imagine that we may safely work iniquity, if we will only keep out of the church. Such will be condemned wherever they are found. The kingdom of God is come nigh to us; his word

and ordinances are given to us. We cannot place ourselves in the condition of heathens, if we would ; for God has placed us in a very different condition. The light has risen upon us ; the word of salvation is sent unto us. And now what choice shall we make ? If we treat God's ordinances with utter contempt, we are condemned ; if we attend upon them in such a manner as to receive no benefit from them, still we are condemned. Our only safety then is, to profess the gospel, and obey it ; name the name of Christ, and depart from iniquity ; this is to come to the marriage supper, and put on the wedding-garment.

LET us fear lest we receive the grace of God in vain. Let us beware lest our privileges, instead of being the means of our salvation, serve only to aggravate our final condemnation.

You see how the case stands. All are required to come within God's church, and attend on his appointed ordinances ; and none are allowed to do this in a hypocritical and ungodly manner.

YOUR duty lies plain before you ; study no evasions ; God's commands are express ; your obligation to obey is indispensable. Attend on the ordinance in question, and every other, as you have opportunity ; keep in view the end of their institution, which is the promotion of faith and purity. Imagine not that ordinances operate by a kind of charm, to do you good without making you better ; you will only be accepted in hearing Christ teach, and in eating in his presence, when you also depart from iniquity. For his kingdom is not merely *meat and drink, but righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.*



## CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP.

### I CORIN. i. 2.

*Unto the church of God, which is at Corinth; to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus; called to be saints, with all that in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.*

**W**E have already considered the *nature* of a Christian church—the *purpose* of its institution—the relation of *children* to it—and the *qualifications* necessary to an attendance on its ordinances.

WHAT now lies before us is,

V. To explain that *fellowship*, or *communion*, which does, or ought to subsist among professing Christians, whether in the same or in divers churches.

To this subject, we are led by the last clause in our text: *Grace and peace to the church of God in Corinth, with all who, in every place, call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.*

WE are here taught, that, as all Christians, in whatever place they may dwell, or may worship, are disciples of the same Lord, and call on God in the name of the same Mediator; so there is an important relation, and ought to be a sacred fellowship among them.

FOR the illustration of this matter, I would observe,

I. THERE is a *virtual* fellowship or communion among all true saints, whether near or remote : whether known or unknown to each other. They are all engaged in the same design, united in the same interest, and partakers of many of the same things.

THIS is the sense in which the word is most frequently used in scripture ; and this is analogous to the sense which it ordinarily bears in common life. Particularly,

REAL saints have *fellowship in the gospel*. They have received one and the same rule of faith and practice. Though they may differ in their opinions concerning some particular things contained in the gospel, yet their sentiments in the essential doctrines and precepts of it, are the same.

THEY have received one *common faith*—like *precious faith*. Though their faith may differ in its extent and degree, yet, in its object, nature and influence, it is one and the same. The object of it is divine truth ; the nature of it is receiving the love of the truth ; the influence of it is purifying the heart.

THEY are all formed to the same *holy temper*. They are renewed after the image of God—are joint partakers of a divine nature. There may be great variety in the time, manner and circumstances of their renovation, and in the strength and degree of the Christian temper ; but holiness, in its general nature, is the same in all. It is a conformity to God's moral character.

THEY are all partakers of the same divine *spirit*. There are diversities of gifts and operations ; but it is the same spirit that worketh all in all. Hence the apostle speaks of *the fellowship of the spirit*, and *the communion of the Holy Ghost*.

THEY are engaged in the same *good work*—in the same *great design*. They are working out their salvation, and promoting, in their respective places, the interest of Christ's kingdom. They are fellow-laborers in the same service, the service of God and their own souls. They are fellow-workers in the same holy calling. They are fellow-soldiers in the same spiritual warfare; fighting against the same enemies, sin, Satan, and the world; applying the same armour, the shield of faith, the helmet of hope, the breast-plate of righteousness, and the sword of the spirit; and they act under the same leader, Jesus the captain of their salvation.

THEY have one common *interest*. They have a joint interest in the blessed God; for there is one God and Father of all, who is above all, through all, and in them all. They bear the same relation to Jesus Christ; for there is one Lord and Saviour, by whom are all things, and they by him. There is one common salvation, in which they all are sharers. They are all justified by the same atonement, washed in the same blood, sanctified by the same grace and saved by the same intercession. They have an interest in the same promises, and a title to the same inheritance. They are called in the same hope, and are joint-heirs of the same glory. They are fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God.

IN these respects, there is a fellowship among all sincere Christians. In many of these things, saints on earth have communion with those in Heaven.

ONE cannot but remark here, how diverse this fellowship is, from that which some boast of; *a mutual sympathy, or fellow-feeling, between sincere Christians, by which one immediately perceives the grace, and knows the character of another*. The scripture never uses the word *fellowship* in this sense, nor does it speak of any such thing in other terms. It is certain, that the apostles

and first Christians were not acquainted with such a sympathetic intercourse of spirits. If they were, why did not the eleven disciples discern, that Judas was a hypocrite? Why did not the Christians of Jerusalem believe Paul to be a disciple? Why did not they feel his graces, when, after his conversion, he essayed to join himself to them? Why could not the apostles themselves be satisfied of his conversion, without the testimony of Barnabas? What occasion was there, that Christians should carry with them letters of commendation, as we find they did, when they travelled to places where they had not been known.

As the gospel knows no such correspondence of heart between Christians; and never once uses the word fellowship, or communion in any such sense, it is a perversion of scripture, as well as reason, to pretend to such a thing now, and call it by a scripture name. I proceed to observe,

2. BESIDES the *virtual* communion, before described, among sincere Christians, there is an *actual* communion among those who are known to, and have intercourse with, one another. This consists in mutual regards and good offices.

THE good Christian extends his benevolence to all, to strangers, heathens and enemies; and, from this principle, shews kindness to all, as far as their occasions require, and his circumstances permit. But for them who appear to him in the character of saints, he has a love, not only of benevolence, but also of esteem and approbation. He wishes well to all, whether good or bad; but he values men chiefly according to their virtuous conversation. While he is disposed to do good to all, he reckons himself under some superior obligations to those who are of the household of faith. He delights in the saints as the excellent of the earth, and is the companion of them who fear God. He



loves the brethren, and such he esteems all Christians, whether they belong to the same society with him, or to another. He confines not his regard to those of his own sect, or his own particular community ; but, like the apostles, extends it to all who, in every place, call on the name of Jesus Christ, *their* Lord, as well as *his*, and the common Saviour of them who believe.

IN order to the exercise of true Christian love, it is not necessary to know the sincerity of men's hearts. It is enough that, by their profession and conversation, they appear to us in the character of Christian brethren ; and by their works give us reasonable ground to think they have faith. We may, in a proper sense, have this *actual* fellowship with one who is not a sincere Christian ; and may not have it with one who is such. So long as Judas appeared in the character of a disciple, his brethren had fellowship with him ; they esteemed him, placed confidence in him, and even thought him better than themselves. But with Paul, the disciples at Jerusalem had not this *actual* fellowship ; they confided not in him, nor believed him to be a disciple, till he produced some proper evidence of a change in his sentiments and practice.

3. THERE is also a *special* communion, which does, or ought to take place among those Christians, who are united in the same particular church, or religious society.

As they have explicitly covenanted together for social worship and common edification, so they are under peculiar obligations to each other, unitedly to pursue this important purpose.

THIS *special* communion principally consists in a joint attendance on the ordinances of Christ.

It is said of those who received the word preached

by Peter, on the day of pentecost, *that they continued stedfast in the apostle's doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread and in prayers.—They were together, and continued daily with one accord in the temple—praising God.* The apostle to the Hebrews exhorts the professors of religion, *that they consider one another, to provoke to love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of themselves together.* St. Paul speaks of the Corinthian believers, *as coming together in the church, and into one place.* He represents *the whole church as coming together in one place,* for breaking of bread, for social prayer, and for attendance on the preaching of the word. These expressions teach us, that the members of a particular church ought to walk together in the ordinances, and unitedly to attend on the stated worship of God, as they are able, without unnecessary neglect. And, indeed, it is included in the very idea of a particular church, that they worship God together, at the same time, and in the same place. The apostle directs the Corinthians, *when they come together, to tarry for one another;* for which surely there could be no reason, if they might disperse here and there, and some worship in one place, and some in another, and some no where.

THE acceptableness of worship, indeed, depends not on the place where it is performed. But it much depends on a spirit of peace and union among the worshippers. For this reason, the church is to come together into one place, that there may be no schism, but all her members may with one mind, and one mouth glorify God. They must be builded together, that they may become an habitation of God through the spirit; must be fitly framed together, that they may grow into an holy temple in the Lord.

THERE may be frequent occasions for the members of the same church to meet for social worship in different places, and even in private houses. Paul, when

he abode in Ephesus, preached and taught both publicly, and from house to house. We are not to imagine a temple, or public house, so peculiarly sacred, that divine worship can no where else be useful to men, or pleasing to the Deity. The private meetings of Christians, conducted with a real view to peace and edification, are much to be commended. But when any of the members of a church withdraw from the usual place of worship, and assemble elsewhere, either with an intention to cause division, or in a manner which tends to it, they violate the order of Christ's house, and interrupt the communion which ought to subsist in it. Though Paul taught from house to house, yet he approved not those teachers, who *crept* into houses to lead the simple captive, and disturb Christian fellowship. He warns Christians to mark and avoid those who cause divisions, for such serve not the kingdom of Christ, but their own private designs. One great end of social worship is peace and union; and it ought always to be conducted in a manner which tends not to defeat, but promote this end. It is not the sacredness of one place rather than another, but the common edification, which obliges the whole church to come together in one place. The members no longer walk in fellowship, than they thus unitedly attend the sacred orders of Christ's house.

AMONG divine ordinances, the *Lord's supper* deserves particular attention; for one main design of this was to be a mean of brotherly communion. Eating and drinking together, at the same table, is a *natural* act of fellowship. Doing this at the Lord's table is an act of *Christian* fellowship. *The cup which we bless, and the bread which we break, is the communion of Christ's blood, and of his body: and by our joint participation of them, we acknowledge ourselves to be one family, the children of one parent, the disciples of one Lord. We being many are one body, and one bread, or loaf; for*

*we are all partakers of that one loaf.* This ordinance is a love-feast, and ought to be kept, *not with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.* No trifling causes should divert or detain us from it; and no evil passions accompany us in it.

AND here I cannot but take notice of a practice too common among the professors of religion; *their withdrawing from the Lord's table, because a particular brother has injured, or offended them;* for which I find no foundation in the gospel. We are, indeed, to *withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly.* But how? By breaking up the communion? No, but by *putting away the wicked person from among us; and by purging out the old leaven, that we may be a new lump.* We may think our brother unworthy of the privilege which he assumes; but shall *his* unworthiness deprive *us* of the privilege? We are, in proper season, to take the measures prescribed in the gospel, for his reformation; but, in the mean time, we are neither to absent ourselves from the table, nor to forbid his attendance; for we can justly exclude him only by conviction in a regular process. If the case is so circumstanced, that sufficient evidence for his conviction cannot be produced, he must be left to the judge of all men. Whatever our opinion may be of his guilt, we are not to withdraw on account of his attendance. Judge nothing before the time.

You will say, *Charity is necessary in our attendance at Christ's table: but with such a brother, how can we sit down in charity?* People often confound themselves in this matter, by their partial notions of charity. If by charity were intended an opinion of others as good Christians, you could not sit down in charity with those of whom you thought otherwise. "But where do you find this description of charity? or where is this good opinion of all your fellow-communicants requir-

ed, in order to your sitting at Christ's table? It is the effect, not the essence of charity, to hope all things. If you have a benevolent, meek, forgiving temper toward those whom you think not to be true Christians, you can set down in charity with them; for this is the scriptural idea of charity. If you remember a brother hath ought against you, go and be reconciled to him. If you have ought against a brother, go and tell him his fault. If he repent forgive him; if he repent not, still indulge no rancor nor hatred in your heart. Thus sit down at the feast in charity, in kind affection, to your brethren and to all men.

PERHAPS some will say, 'We withdraw from the table when a brother has injured us, because his presence awakens in us unsuitable passions.'

BUT remember, the indulgence of malevolent passions is your sin; and you are not to absent yourselves from communion, but to dismiss *them*; and so keep the feast in sincerity and love. Malice and ill-will indulged in the heart are wrong, whoever is the object, whether a brother, or a heathen. And on this plea, you might as well withdraw, when the latter, as when the former had done you an injury.'

CONSIDER also, you are required to pray, and to hear the word, with the same charity which is required in the supper. *When you stand praying, your are to forgive if you have ought against any man.* And you are to lay apart all guile, malice and envy; and thus to desire the sincere milk of the word; receiving it with meekness. Your plea, therefore, might as well be urged for neglecting public worship, or even family prayer, beside, if the offender happens to be present, as for absenting from the supper.

THE truth is, you are never to excuse yourselves from acts of duty, on account of evil passions working in you; but immediately to war against them.

It will be asked, *How can I have communion with a church, while she tolerates ungodly and scandalous members?*

BUT let me ask you, my friend, does she tolerate them? If she does, whose business is it to take the first step toward rectifying the disorder? It is yours, as much as any man's. It is yours principally. You pretend, that you see such persons in the church. Others perhaps see them not, or have not evidence against them. Have you reproved them? Have you taken a brother or two to assist you? Have you brought your complaint to the church? If you have done none of these things, you are the most reprehensible of any member; for you see the sin, and bewray it not. Go first, and do your own duty. You can have no pretence for withdrawing, till you know that the church actually tolerates vicious characters; and this you cannot know till you have taken the measures which Christ enjoins.

BUT though I may think a church to be, in the main, a true church, yet if I see errors in her, ought I not to testify against them by withdrawing from them? By no means. Your withdrawing is no testimony against her particular errors; it is only a general, indiscriminate charge. It signifies that you are displeased at something; but points out nothing. You are to commune with her; but not adopt her errors; then your conduct will speak an intelligible language. Christ testified against the errors of the Jewish church, and labored for her reformation; but still he held communion with her as a church of God. Let his example be your rule.

THIS leads me to observe farther, that special fellowship among the members of a particular church must include mutual watchfulness, reproof and exhortation.

As Christians, in the present state, are but imper-

fect, one end of their covenanting and associating together is, that they may afford mutual assistance in the great concerns of religion, and be fellow-helpers in the work of their common salvation. Accordingly they are required to consider and admonish, comfort and encourage one another, as there is occasion; to be all subject one to another, and to be clothed with humility. By virtue of our special relation, as members of one church, we are to rebuke our brethren, and not suffer sin upon them. Those who offend, we are first to address in a more private manner: them who are deaf to private exhortations, we are to bring before the church; such as contemn the counsels of the church are to be cut off from her communion; but the penitent are to be restored in the spirit of meekness. Once more.

OUR special fellowship requires mutual candor, condescension and forbearance.

WE are to consider ourselves, and our brethren, not as sinless, but imperfect beings, attended with infirmities, subject to temptations, liable to offend, and to be offended. While we are cautious not to give offence by doing things grievous to them, we should make all reasonable allowance for them, when they do things grievous to us. We should neither stiffly oppose, nor zealously urge indifferent matters. We should not severely animadvert on smaller faults, nor magnify accidental failings into heinous crimes; but give every one's conduct the most favorable turn it will bear. Such is the apostle's advice. *We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification. Him who is weak in the faith receive ye; but not to doubtful disputation. Let us not judge one another; but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block in his brother's way. Be of the same mind one toward another. Condescend to men of low estate. Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth. Fol-*

*low the things which make for peace and edification. Let all your things be done with charity.*

4. THE last branch of Christian fellowship which I shall mention, is that which ought to subsist among different churches; among all who, in every place, call on the name of our common Lord.

As all Christian churches are united under, and subject to one head, so they are members one of another, and therefore ought, like the members of the natural body, to preserve a reciprocal intercourse. The apostle says, *As the body is one and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ. For by one spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles; whether we be bond or free. Care, therefore, should be taken, that there be no schism, or division in the body, but all the members should have the same care one for another.*

A particular church ought to consider herself, not as an unconnected society, but as a part of Christ's general kingdom: her care must not be confined to herself, but extended to her sister churches: She is to seek, not merely her own profit, but the profit of many.

SOME diversity of sentiment and practice may take place in different churches, and yet all remain true churches of Christ; as there may be divers opinions among the members of the same church, and they still be real Christians. We are neither to reject a church, nor to exclude a particular Christian from our fellowship, for supposed errors, which appear not to be of such a nature and magnitude, as to subvert the foundation of Christianity. Our apostle teaches us, 'that we are to regard all as our fellow-Christians, and all churches as sister-churches, who, in every place, call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours; who profess one body, one spirit, and one hope



of their calling ; and who hold the same head from which all the body is knit together.' In a word, he cautions us, that ' we reject not those whom God has received.' If we know a particular church, in which errors are admitted, we are to afford our assistance for her amendment. But so long as we believe God owns her, by continuing to her his word and ordinances, and blessing them for her spiritual benefit ; it is arrogance—it is impiety, for us to disown her. We have no warrant to withdraw our fellowship from a church, unless she has essentially departed from the gospel ; or imposes on us terms of fellowship, which we cannot in conscience comply with.

If it be asked, in what actions different churches are to have fellowship ? I answer ;

THEY ought occasionally to commune with each other in the word, prayer, and breaking of bread ; to admit each other's members to occasional communion with them ; to recommend their own members to other churches, into whose vicinity they may remove ; and to receive members of other churches on their recommendation. When Apollos passed from Ephesus into Achaia, the brethren in Ephesus wrote to the disciples in Achaia to receive him. When Phebe went from Cenchrea to Rome, Paul wrote to the Roman church, that they should receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints.

CHURCHES are also to have fellowship, by mutual counsel and advice, when difficulties arise.

THOUGH no church, or number of churches have an absolute jurisdiction over other churches, yet they should always be ready to afford help and assistance, at the request of sister-churches, as occasions may require. We find in the history of the Acts, that the church of Antioch, on a difficulty which arose there relating to

circumcision, sent Barnabas and Paul, and certain others with them, to Jerusalem, to consult the apostles and elders of the church there, and to ask their advice upon the matter. When those messengers from Antioch came to Jerusalem, they were received by the apostles and elders, and by the church. And when the apostles had determined the matter in question, they, together with the church, sent messengers, and by them, a letter to the Antiochian and other churches in the vicinity, declaring their opinion and advice in the case referred to them.

THIS example, as well as the reason of the thing, shews the propriety and necessity of mutual assistance among churches by counsel and advice, in order to the common edification and comfort.

I have now distinctly illustrated the several matters proposed to your consideration. Permit me, before I conclude, to point out to you the proper improvement of this subject.

WE who have made an open profession of religion, and have joined ourselves to the church of God, with an explicit engagement to walk together in his commandments and ordinances, are now called upon to consider the obligations we are under, and the duties especially incumbent upon us.

I. LET us be well settled in the principles of that religion which we profess.

WE are called into a church state, that, being edified in the faith and knowledge of the Son of God, we may be no more children, carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the flight of men, and the cunning craftiness wherewith they lie in wait to deceive. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever. His gospel is ever the same; not variable like

the humors and opinions of men. Therefore, be ye not carried about with divers and strange doctrines, as if religion was sometimes one thing, and sometimes another. It is a good thing that the heart be established with grace. We ought not indeed to be stiff and inflexible in our own sentiments and usages, merely because they are our own. We should give up former opinions, and adopt others, when evidence is offered sufficient to justify the change. But then a fickleness of temper, a versatility of sentiment, a disposition to fall in with every novel opinion, and to follow every impulse of fancy, is utterly unbecoming a Christian. Such unsteadiness indicates either the want of competent knowledge, or the want of any fixed principles in religion.

AMIDST the various opinions which are propagated and maintained, an honest Christian I am sensible, may often be perplexed to determine what is truth. But then, I would observe, it is by no means necessary, that he should be able to answer every argument adduced in support of error. There are certain great and leading principles, in which every Christian must be supposed to be settled; and by these he may try the doctrines proposed to him, and judge whether they are of God.

THERE are two grand points which the gospel always keeps in view. One is the indispensable necessity of holiness in heart and life, in order to eternal happiness. The other is, our entire dependance on the grace and mercy of God, through the Redeemer, for pardon, sanctification and glory. Every man, who professes to be a Christian, must be supposed to be settled in these grand points. The man, who imagines that he is not indebted to, nor dependent on a Saviour, or that there is no need of a conformity to his holy pattern and precepts, in order to final salvation, can, with no consistency, pretend to be a Christian.

ALL such doctrines, as plainly contradict either of these principles ; such, on the one hand, as exalt men above a dependence on Jesus Christ, and the influences of the divine spirit ; and such, on the other hand, as confound the difference between virtue and vice, and obstruct the influence of the divine commands, must be rejected, whatever specious arguments may be urged in their favor.

2. LET us maintain a constant, devout attendance on the appointed ordinances of Christ.

If we carelessly neglect these, we contradict the design of a church, and our own character as members of it.

CHRISTIANS are bound to attend on all ordinances, one as well as another. The gospel makes no distinction. The primitive Christians continued stedfast in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayer.

THERE are among us some, who profess the religion of Christ, and who, by their regular attendance at the sanctuary, as well as by their general conversation, express a regard for the religion which they profess ; but yet absent themselves from the Lord's table. Such was not the practice of Christians in the apostolic times. The celebration of the supper was then a part of the stated worship of the Lord's day ; and in this, as well as in other parts, all professors joined. They continued stedfast in fellowship with the apostles, as well by breaking bread, as by prayer and doctrine. The disciples at Troas, we are told, came together, on the first day of the week, not only to hear Paul preach, but also to break bread.

I urge none to come blindly, or against his conscience, to the holy table. Every one must judge for

himself, and be persuaded in his own mind. One man cannot see with another's eyes, nor act on another's faith. But then, it is a plain fact, Christ calls all to be his disciples, and commands all his disciples to shew forth his death by an attendance on his supper. And, therefore, such as are hindered by scruples concerning their fitness, must not make themselves easy with them, but take pains for the removal of them. They must seek light, that, if they are in an error, they may rectify it; and if they are under sin, they may repent of it. They must humbly apply to God for his grace to lead them into truth, and to purify their souls; and, whatever doubts they have about a particular ordinance, they must diligently attend on all those means which they think themselves warranted to use. The meek God will guide in judgment; the meek he will teach his way.'

### 3. WE are called to brotherly love, peace and unity.

THE gospel urges love as the bond of perfectness, as a virtue of the first importance. Paul, in his epistles to the churches, never forgets to recommend to them, that they be joined together in the same mind—that they speak the same things—that they have the same love—that there be no divisions among them—that they avoid such as cause divisions and offences. To shew how essential unity is to the being of a church, he compares it to a household, which subsists by love, and in which all the members have one interest, and are guided by one head—To a building, all the parts of which are framed and compacted together—To a natural body, all whose limbs are animated by the same vital principle, and feel for each other.

BROTHERLY love is an extensive grace. It is not confined to those of our own society; but reaches to all Christians, and Christian societies in every place. The apostle wishes grace and peace to all, who, in eve-

ty place, call on the name of Jesus. We are to consider all as our brethren, who appear to hold the essentials of the Christian faith, and to maintain a practice agreeable to it; and to all such brotherly love must extend. If our love reaches no farther than to those of our own sect, or those who usually worship with us, it is only a party-spirit; it has nothing of the nature of Christian love.

AGAINST such a contracted idea of love, the apostle, in our context, carefully guards us. 'It has been declared to me,' says he, 'that there are contentions among you. Every one of you saith, I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ.' They were puffed up for one teacher against another. One admired this preacher; another that; and another a third; and, by their party-attachments, raised troublesome disputes and dangerous contentions in the church. But, says he, 'Is Christ divided? Were ye not all baptized in his name? Have ye not all professed his religion? Why then run ye into parties, as if Christ was divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Why say ye, 'we are of Paul?' Do ye expect salvation through him? He was not crucified for you. He only preaches Christ crucified; and Peter and Apollos do the same. 'Or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?' Do ye imagine that baptism was designed to form you into distinct sects? or that every one ought to follow the minister who baptized him, in opposition to others? And do ye think, that ye ought to love and esteem, as brethren, those only who are baptized by the same apostle, or in the same place and manner as ye were, as if ye were baptized into the name of the man, who baptized you? No, ye were baptized in the name of Christ, and are become members of his body, and, therefore, ye are the brethren of all Christians, by whomsoever baptized; for ye are all baptized into one body.

You see, that baptism, a Christian profession, and a relation to a particular church, are not designed to unite one company of Christians here, and another there, in opposition to each other ; but rather to unite the whole Christian world. This then, and this only, is true Christian love, which extends its good wishes to the whole household of faith ; regards, as Christ's disciples, all who, in every place, call on his name ; and pursues, not merely its own private ends, but the general interest of Christ's kingdom, and the common welfare of his subjects.

TRUE Christian love to those of our own society cannot stop short of a general love of saints. The love of the brethren, as such, is a love of their holy and virtuous character ; and if, on this account, we love our nearest brethren, for the same reason we shall love all, who exhibit the same character. The good Christian desires the prevalence of religion every where : he would rejoice that all men were virtuous and happy. He will not, therefore, pursue the religious interest of his own community, family or person, in ways prejudicial to the general interest of religion. He will not consult merely his own edification, or that of those with whom he is immediately connected ; but will seek the profit of many, that they may be saved.

THIS love of the brethren leads to a more general love of the human race. Christians are required ' to add to their brotherly kindness charity '—' to increase and abound in their love one toward another, and toward all men.

ONE who loves the brethren, because they have the temper and obey the laws of Christ, must be supposed himself to have the same temper, and to obey the same laws. Christ exemplified, and has enjoined a universal philanthropy. He did good to enemies, as well as friends ; he prayed for his crucifiers, as well as

for his disciples ; and he has enjoined on us the same extensive benevolence.

WHATEVER pretensions we make to Christian fellowship, if our love is confined to any particular community, or even to Christian professors, and does not, in suitable expressions of meekness, goodness and moderation, extend itself to others ; it is not that love of the brethren which Christ enjoins ; for where is brotherly kindness, there will be charity. The brotherly love, which Christ has taught, will make us meek and gentle toward all men. It will tame and soften the passions, correct and sweeten the temper, and dispose us to shew kindness to all men, whether they be Christians or heathens, good men or sinners.

4. As members of the church of God, we are called to an exemplary holiness.

CHRIST gave himself for the church, that he might sanctify it, and finally present it glorious. We are called to be saints ; separated from the world, that we may be a peculiar people, zealous of good works ; placed under gospel-light, that we may be the children of God without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, shining among them as lights in the world. The honor of religion, and our own profession, oblige us to walk circumspectly among men. Those, whom the apostles admitted to their fellowship, were exhorted to keep themselves from an untoward generation. The loose and unguarded conversation of Christian professors, gives occasion to others to speak reproachfully of religion itself. They are, therefore, to walk in wisdom toward them who are without ; to provide things honest in the sight of all men, that the enemies of truth may be put to silence, having no evil thing to say of them.

5. LET us exercise a mutual watchfulness in our Christian relation,



WE are called into this relation, that we may by love serve one another, and be fellow-workers to the kingdom of God. Let us be ready to receive, as well as to give, counsel and reproof, as there is occasion; and in this imperfect state occasions will be frequent. Much allowance is indeed to be made for human weakness, for misapprehension, and for wrong report. We expect such allowance from our brethren, and they are intitled to it from us. Too great forwardness to remark, and too hasty a zeal to reprove every trivial fault, and every unguarded action in our brethren, will tend rather to vex, than reform them; rather to hurt our influence, than to mend their tempers. Reproof is a delicate matter. It is not to be omitted, when occasion calls for it; but it should be given with tenderness and prudence, that it may be received with meekness and gratitude.

6. OUR subject reminds us of the duty which we owe to our youth.

IF the children of professing Christians are within God's visible church, they are entitled to our particular notice and regard. Though it should be conceded, that baptism denominates them members of the catholic church only, and they become not members of any local church, till, by their own act, they join themselves to it, yet there is a duty which that church peculiarly owes to them, in which they were publicly given up to God, of which their parents are members, and under the immediate inspection of which they live and act. If they are members of the church at large, those Christians, among whom providence places them, and who are witnesses of their conduct, are especially bound to watch over them.

WE ought then to admonish and reprove them, whenever we see them behave in a manner unsuitable to the relation, which they bear to Christ; to rebuke

their levity, impiety and profaneness, that we may restrain them from making themselves vile ; to put them in remembrance of the sacred obligations, which they are under ; and call their attention to that solemn day, when every work will be brought into judgment.

WHILE they are under the immediate government of parents or others, it becomes us, in the most tender and friendly manner, to give those, who have the care of them, information of their misbehavior, when it is gross and repeated, and appears to proceed from a perverse disposition. If Christians would thus assist each other in the government of their families, at the same time exhibiting an example worthy of their character, much service might be done to the rising generation, and to the general interest of religion.

WHEN youth have arrived to competent age, it would be proper that the church, as a body, should deal with them for open immoralities, obstinately persisted in against more private admonitions ; unless they disavow their relation to the church, and her authority over them. In this case she may, in a formal manner cut them off from among their people, and declare them no longer under her care.

7. OUR subject deserves the serious attention of the youth.

MY children ; God, in his good providence, has ordered the place of your birth and education, under the light of the gospel, within his church, and in Christian families. The most of you have been solemnly dedicated to God in baptism, and have received the visible seal of his covenant. See then, that you walk worthy of the privileges to which you are born, and of the character which you bear, as God's children, set apart to be his. Receive, with filial reverence and obedience, the instructions and counsels of your pa-

rents, who have bound themselves to God for your virtuous behavior. Attend on the appointed means of religious knowledge, converse with the holy scriptures and other instructive books, seriously regard the stated services of the sanctuary, and endeavor, in the use of these advantages, to become wise to salvation, and to furnish yourselves unto every good work. As you have been consecrated to God, live to him. *Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.* Let your hearts be impressed with a sense of your sinful and helpless condition; look to Jesus as the only Saviour of a lost and guilty world: go to God in his name, and humbly implore the renewing and sanctifying influences of his holy spirit. Make an actual dedication of yourselves to God through Jesus Christ, deliberately resolving on a course of pure religion, and let all your conversation be as becomes the gospel. Keep up a daily correspondence with God in secret. Think and speak of him with reverence, detesting and avoiding every species of profanity. Cease to hear the instructions which cause to err from the words of knowledge. Entertain no licentious opinions, such as would encourage vice or pacify the conscience under guilt. Say to evil doers, depart from us, for we will keep the commandments of our God. Flee youthful lusts, and follow after righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. And rest not till you have actually taken the covenant-bonds on yourselves, by a public profession of religion, and have come up to all gospel ordinances. Do not this rashly and thoughtlessly, but humbly and seriously in the fear of God, and in obedience to him. Think not that you have a right to live at large. You are bound to confess Christ's name before men, and to submit to the government of his church. It was foretold by the prophet, that, when God should pour out his spirit on the offspring of his people, one would say, I am the Lord's, and

another would subscribe with his hand to the Lord. Thus the church would increase by the accession of the young; her sons would come from far, and her daughters be nursed at her side. You cannot be said to have fulfilled the obligations of your baptism, so long as you live in a careless neglect of any of the ordinances of Christ. There is reason to believe, that, in the institution of the supper, Christ had a primary regard to the young, who were always the objects of his particular attention. This ordinance was instituted immediately after the celebration of the passover, which was a figure of the suffering Saviour. In allusion to that festival, Christ is called our passover, sacrificed for us. And in allusion to the manner in which the passover was eaten, we are required to *keep the feast* of the holy supper, *not with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.* Now the special reason assigned for the passover was, that *when children in time to come should enquire, what mean ye by this service?* The parent might thence take occasion to instruct them, *how the Lord saved his people from Egypt.* Accordingly the youth were to attend on the passover, in the appointed place, as soon as they were able to *bring an offering in their hand.* Now if the supper succeeds in the place of the passover, was not this one intention of it, that the young, on seeing this service, might be led to enquire, what was meant by it, and thus open the way for instruction in the glorious redemption by Jesus Christ. Come then, my children, attend a festival appointed for you. Here behold what your affectionate Saviour has done and suffered for such lost and helpless creatures as you. Behold, admire and love; smite your breasts and return with new sentiments of the evil of your sins, and new resolutions of future obedience. Remember that all ordinances, and this in particular, were instituted as means of promoting a holy life; and *let every one, who nameth the name of Christ, depart from iniquity.*

3. THE invitation given to the young shall now be addressed to others. Come, join yourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant, which shall not be forgotten.

THE Son of God has come down from Heaven, and has purchased a church with his own blood. Here he offers that salvation which guilty mortals need. He prescribes the terms on which it may become yours. He has appointed ordinances, in the use of which you may be made meet for the enjoyment of it in Heaven. He has particularly instituted the ordinance of the supper, to remind you of his dying love, and the rich blessings purchased by his blood. He has required your attendance, to awaken your remembrance of him, warm your love to him, and strengthen your faith in him.

HAVE you any sense of your guilt and unworthiness, and of his wonderful goodness and love? Any desire to become conformed to his image, attempered to his gospel, and entitled to his salvation? Any gratitude to your Divine Benefactor for all the great things which he has done and suffered for you? Any purpose of heart to honor and obey your glorious Redeemer and Lord? Any concern to promote peace and unity among his disciples, to excite and encourage them to love and good works, and to advance the general interest of his kingdom? Then come and confess his name, declare your regard to his religion, subscribe with your own hand to him, attend on the ordinances of his house, walk in fellowship with his professed disciples, join your influence to promote his cause, and shew by your holy conversation, that you really believe, and heartily love the religion which you profess.

To conclude, let us all unite our endeavors to make Christ's church glorious. Let us, as workers together with Christ, and with one another, contribute in our respective places, and according to our several abilities, to edify and enlarge it. Let us not content ourselves with appearing as members of the visible church here below; but be concerned to become real members of the invisible church above, that when the time of our departure is come, we may go to Mount Sion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, the spirits of just men made perfect, the general assembly and church of the first-born, whose names are enrolled in Heaven.











