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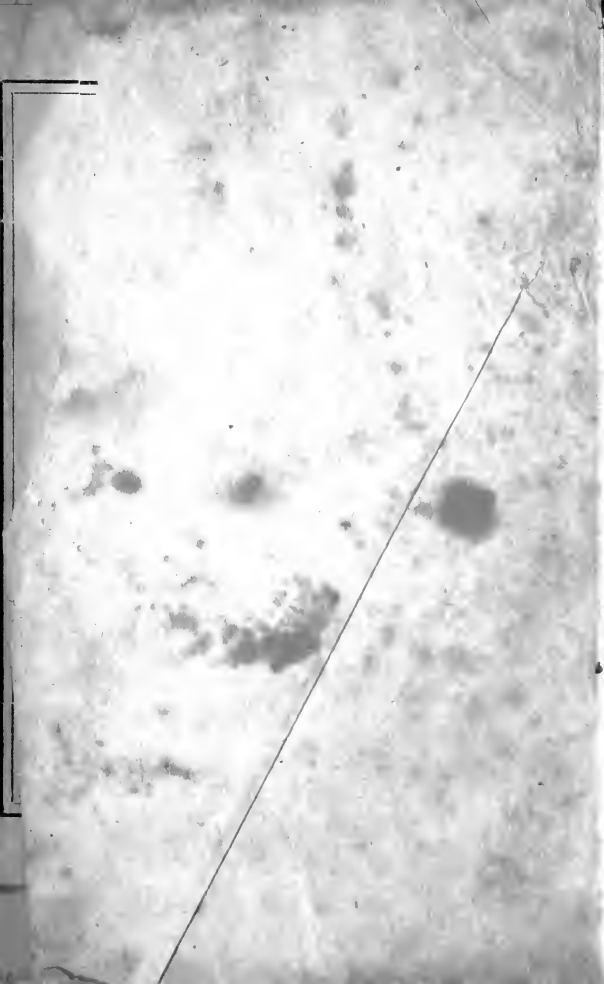
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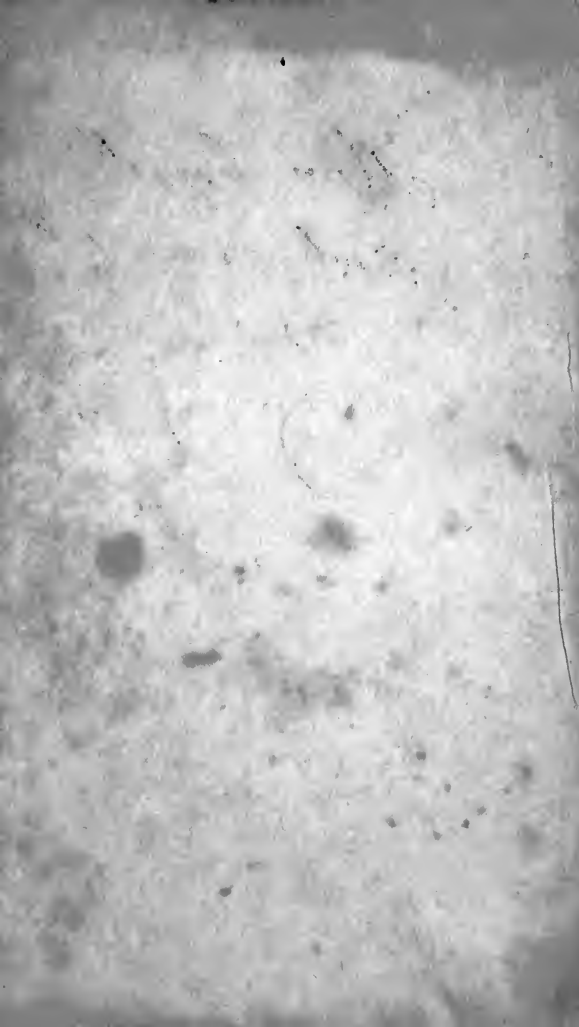
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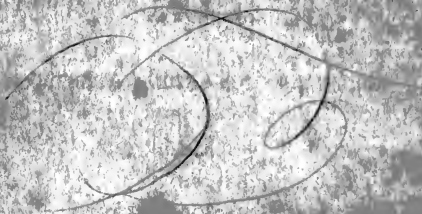






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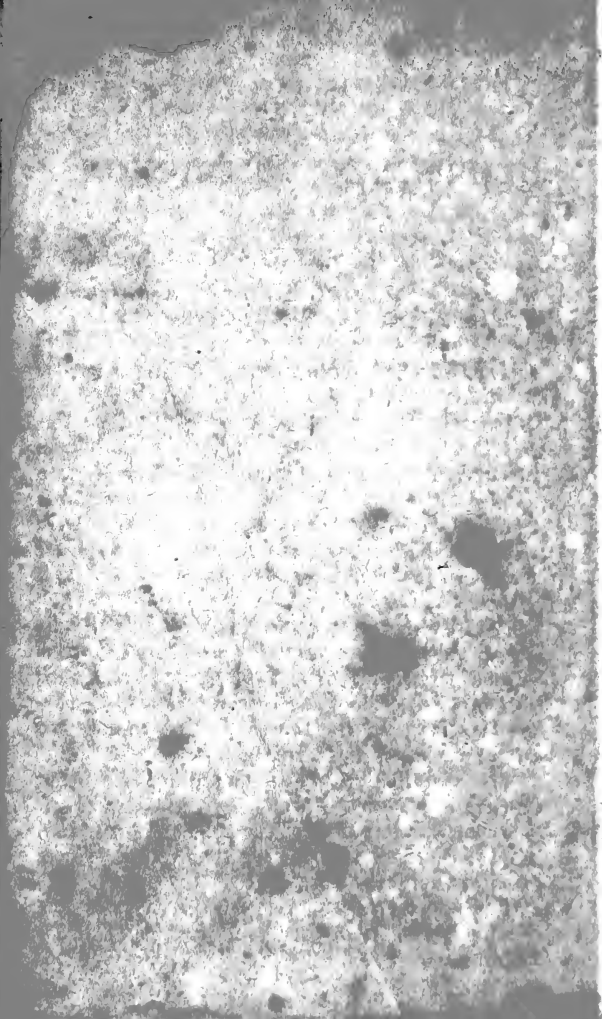
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THE
TERMS
OF
CHRISTIAN COMMUNION;
WITH THE
SOLUTION OF VARIOUS QUESTIONS
AND
CASES OF CONSCIENCE
ARISING FROM THIS SUBJECT.
BY ISAAC WATTS, D.D.

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THE
TERMS
OF
CHRISTIAN COMMUNION.

QUESTION I.

What is Christian Communion? And what are the general and agreed Terms of it?

CHRIStIAN Communion, in the sense of Scripture, is that Communion or Fellowship which Christians have with God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, or with one another; and both are joined together by the apostle, 1 John i, 3. *That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have Fellowship (or Communion) with us: and truly our Fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.*

This Communion or Fellowship in the spiritual and invisible part of it consists in a participation of the favor of God, the spiritual benefits of Christ, and the invisible and everlasting blessings of the Gospel. But this is not our present subject of discourse.

The visible Fellowship or Communion that Christians have with each other, consists chiefly in the participation of the spiritual ordinances of the Gospel, and mutual assistances for the good of each other.

The special ordinances of the Gospel are chiefly these two, Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Baptism is an ordinance appointed by Christ, for our entrance into the visible Church; and when once performed is never to be repeated.

The Lord's Supper is an ordinance appointed by Christ after we are entered into the Church, for the assistance and increase of our faith and hope, our comfort and holiness; and ought to be as often repeated as Christians have proper opportunity: It represents our Communion with the Lord Jesus Christ in his death, and the benefits which are derived from it, such as the pardon of sin through his sacrifice of atonement, &c. and it represents also our communion with one another in those benefits, or our joint participation thereof, according to the apostle's description of it, 1 Cor. x, 16, 17. *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the Communion of the blood of Christ? We are all partakers of that one bread.*

The other parts, privileges, or offices of Christian Communion, shall be mentioned, when there is need of it, in distinguishing *constant* and *occasional* Communion.

Now among all the ordinances of Worship it is in our partaking of these two, viz. Baptism and the Lord's Supper, that *special Christian Communion* chiefly consists. But when we use the words Christian Communion, we have most frequently a regard to the Lord's Supper, because our Communion with one another, and joint participation of the blessings of the Gospel, is most plainly represented thereby; and by the frequent repetition of it, our Christian Communion or Holy Fellow-

ship is maintained in a more explicit and honorable manner.

Having considered briefly the nature of Christian Communion, we must inquire now into the general terms of it.

As in order to hold an inward and spiritual Communion with Christ and his people, we must be sincere believers, or real Christians; so every person seeking visible Communion with the Church of Christ should satisfy his own conscience with nothing short of real Christianity: But Christians and churches not being able to search the heart as Christ and conscience can, the Term of our visible Communion with Christians is a credible profession of real Christianity, or a professed subjection to the Gospel of Christ, as the apostle expresses it, 2 Cor. ix, 13, that is, such an outward profession of inward and hearty Christianity, as gives just and credible evidence that this profession is sincere, and that the person thus professing is a hearty Christian: Rom. x, 9, 10. *If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.* If a man profess Christianity in any manner or form of profession soever, and yet make it plainly and openly appear by other parts of his conduct, that his profession is not sincere and hearty, he has no right to salvation according to this text, and has always been deemed unworthy of

Christian Communion in all the Scripture history, and in the best and purest ages of the church. Those that *profess they know God, but in works deny him* are to be accounted abominable amongst all Christians. Tit. i, 17.

It is not therefore real and inward Christianity in the heart that can give any man a right to Communion in outward ordinances, unless it be professed in a credible manner to the world; nor can the want of such real and inward religion exclude any person from Communion while he makes such a credible profession, for God only is the Judge of hearts, and not man, we must act according to outward appearances: There will be hypocrites in the Church of Christ in this world, and there is no help for it: The wheat and tares will grow together in the same field till the time of harvest. The day of judgment is the only time to decide the matter completely, and distinguish hypocrites for ever from real Christians; and therefore all that have the credible form and appearance of Christianity must be admitted into the Church of Christ on earth.

This is the common sentiment and practice of all the reformed churches, that a credible profession is the general Term of Communion, though they differ about some particular circumstances of this profession that go to make up the credibility of it. These things are so generally acknowledged by the most and best of the writers of our day, that I shall not stay here to prove them, and my business in this discourse is with those Christians that allow and acknowledge what I have said,

Now a credible profession of Christianity implies these two things. First, That the matter professed be of such a nature, and declared in such a manner, as may render the profession credible; and Secondly, There must also be some person or persons to whom that profession must appear credible, and who must be judges of the credibility of it.

I shall begin with the last of these and despatch it soon, because I mention it only as a needful introduction to the chief questions relating to the particular Terms of Christian Communion.

QUESTION II.

Who are the proper Judges of the Credibility of our Profession.

SECTION I. JESUS CHRIST in his word is the Supreme Judge of what is truth, and what is duty; what sort of persons ought to be admitted to Christian Communion, and who should be forbid. But as he is absent from us, and speaks not but by his word, and his word does not apply its own rules to particular persons, John, Thomas, William, &c. In every age and nation, there is a necessity that some persons must judge and determine whether John, Thomas, William, &c. have these characters of worthy Communicants, which Christ hath appointed in his word.

Every man for himself must use his own best judgment in searching his heart, and try-

ing himself by the word of God, whether he has complied with the terms of salvation, and he must judge for himself too whether it be his duty to propose himself to Christian Communion: But no man must determine for himself whether he shall be received to Communion with others, and partake of their sacreds. No man can impose himself upon a church, merely because he thinks himself qualified: This would lay all the garden of Christ waste again, throw down all the fences, and reduce it to a mere wilderness: This supposition is too wild to be admitted.

If therefore a credible profession of Christianity be the term of Communion appointed by Christ in his word, there must be some present and living Judges of the credibility of this profession; and I know not who can be so proper to judge as those persons with whom Communion is desired. This is not a matter transacted merely between a minister and a single Christian, for the Lord's Supper is not to be administered but in a community; as 1 Cor. xi, 20, 21, 33. *The Church must come together to one place, and they must tarry for one another.* There must be therefore the consent of the community or society, to admit a person to share in and partake of the sacred things in communion with them. This ordinance of Christ represents the Communion of his members in one body, by the one bread and one cup, 1 Cor. x, 16, 17. And the duties of Church-Fellowship, to which we then engage ourselves, are mutual duties between a community or society of Christians, therefore

there must be a consent on both sides; and as a person must judge concerning the society whether he will join himself to them, so the society must judge concerning him, whether they think him fit to be received as one of them.

It is into union with that society that the person proposing himself is to be admitted, either in a constant or occasional way; and they give him the leave and privilege of becoming a partner with them, or a member of their body; and surely the light of nature tells us, that every voluntary society must judge who shall be members of their society, and enjoy fellowship with them in their peculiar privileges.

It must be confessed indeed, that where this voluntary society professes a subjection to the will and law of any sovereign or superior power, and this sovereign has given them a rule whereby they are bound to admit persons into their society, in this case their own mere arbitrary will and pleasure cannot violate or neglect this rule without guilt; nor can they appoint any new rules, and make them necessary terms and conditions of such admission: And this is the case of all Christian churches. For though they are so many voluntary societies, yet Christ their common Lord and Sovereign has appointed the general rule of admitting members into his churches, viz. that all such shall be admitted who make a credible profession of Christianity.

But wheresoever there is such a superior acknowledged rule given to direct in this af-

fair, still the society itself must judge concerning the true sense and just application of this rule to particular cases. It is this society that will suffer reproach, and bear the trouble of it, if a person admitted, prove scandalous and unworthy; and it is but reasonable therefore that they should determine whether he be a person fit and worthy to come among them or no; but still according to the rules of Christ, so far as they can understand his meaning. And as this is the voice and language of common reason, so it is also the appointment of Christ in his word, and this was the practice of the primitive times, as I shall shew hereafter.

The society ought surely to have the same liberty which the proposed person has, and if he has liberty to judge whether he should seek communion with them, they ought to have liberty to judge whether they should receive him. Each has a right to judge of the sense and application of the rules of scripture to direct their own actions.

Now since there can be no regular or proper Christian Communion held and maintained but in and with a Church of Christ, we must inquire into the nature of the Christian church to find out which are the persons in, or of this church, that must judge and declare others fit for communion with it.

SECT. 2. The Church of Christ is either visible or invisible. The invisible church includes all the real saints that are in heaven or on earth. But our question has not to do with the church in this sense.

The whole visible Church of Christ upon earth, consists of all those persons in the world that make a visible and credible profession of of the Christian religion, however scattered through all nations, and whether joined together by mutual agreement in particular societies, or not. The New Testament sometimes useth the word church in this sense, Matt. xvi, 18. 1 Cor. xii, 28, and other places; and it is in this sense when a person is baptized, he is said to be received into the Christian church, for hereby he becomes a member of the Catholic Church visible on earth.

But all this vast scattered multitude can never maintain and perform acts of Christian Communion together in the Lord's supper, which is the other chief ordinance of special Communion: nor indeed can they keep up the public honor of God, a public profession of the name of Christ, nor the duties of public worship, without their being divided into particular societies, which agree at stated times and seasons to come together to one place, as the apostle expresses it, for the purposes of Christian worship, 1 Cor. xi, 18, 20, and xiv, 23.

Such a society or congregation of persons, both men and women, making a credible profession of Christianity, and united by mutual agreement or consent to meet together usually at the same time and place for the performance of Christian worship, is a Church of Christ; and this is the clearest and plainest notion that I can frame of a particular Church of Christ, according to the language of the holy scripture. Consult the book of Acts, consult the sacred

Epistles, where the word church is used at least forty or fifty times in this sense.

I will not deny but the word church (even where it does not signify the Catholic Church, visible or invisible) may in some few places be used for a larger number of Christians than could meet in one place, as the Church of Jerusalem in the very beginning of Christianity, while Christians multiplied faster than they could well be formed into regular distinct societies; yet even in some of those places perhaps it includes no more than did meet together for some special purpose. See Acts xi, 22, and xv, 22.

The word church may also in a few other places be used for a smaller collection of Christians, that might occasionally meet, or perhaps dwell together, as the church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla, 1 Cor. xiv, 19, and in the house of Philemon, Phil. v, 2.

But the most common acceptance of the word church (where it signifies a visible company of Christians) implies such a number, as met usually by common consent in one place for Christian Communion, in stated and solemn ordinances of worship, and especially the Lord's supper, as in the fore-cited texts of the Epistle to the Corinthians, and many others.

This is the church that is described in the 19th Article of the Church of England, viz. "A congregation of faithful men in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly ministered, according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same."

Yet let it be noted here, that such a society as this may be properly called a church, when their preachers, ministers, or all their officers are dead, or even before they have any minister, or any officers fixed amongst them; and without doubt they have power to receive any person that desires it, and makes credible profession of Christianity, into their society, having judged his profession credible, and declared him in their judgment fit for Christian Communion. But it would lead me too far from my present design to insist upon particular proof of these things, which has been often done, and which is now the pretty general opinion of men that are not attached to any particular party, but give themselves leave to think freely, and follow the dictates of reason and revelation.

SECT. 3. The ordinances of the Gospel must be administered in a church with decency, and honor, and spiritual advantage: But the whole body of the church cannot thus administer them; therefore it is necessary that these concerns be committed to such persons as are peculiarly fitted for those administrations by knowledge and prudence, and all proper talents; and the church ought to be furnished with such officers who should be chosen and solemnly set apart, devoted and ordained to this work. The particular forms of their choice and ordination do not enter into the present argument.

The business of receiving members into the Communion of the church, and the forbidding or excluding of them is a matter of as serious importance as the administration of other Chris-

tian ordinances; and oftentimes it is attended with great difficulty. A whole assembly of men cannot be supposed to manage this affair altogether with decency and regularity, and without confusion: Therefore it is abundantly convenient, if not necessary, to commit the first and special care of these matters also to particular persons of human and divine knowledge superior to the rest; Persons of great skill in the things of God, in serious religion, and in the affairs and tempers of men, qualified with due zeal for the honor and purity of the ordinances and churches of Christ, and filled with great tenderness and compassion to the souls of men; Persons of good judgment and discretion, of great meekness, condescension, and charity, that if possible they may not give occasion to the church to exclude any of the sheep of Christ from the visible fold, nor admit unclean animals into the flock.

The chief officers of a particular church, whether they be called Bishops, Ministers, Presbyters, or Elders, Pastors, Guides, Leaders, Governors or Rulers, &c. are the proper persons to have the first oversight and chief care of this matter; and in our churches it is committed chiefly to them, to take account of the profession of Christianity made by persons desiring Communion, to give some general notices of it to the church, or a more particular narrative where it is desired; and to receive them to Communion either with the explicit and formal vote of all the congregation, or only by their implicit and silent consent.

But if it happen that there is but one Minister or Presbyter in that church, or if the ministers are young men of small experience in the world, it is usual and proper that some of the eldest, gravest, and wisest members be deputed by the church to join with and assist the ministers in the care and management of this affair.

Those persons who have been chosen by the church, and have been solemnly devoted by the church, and have also solemnly devoted themselves to that office or service, have been usually called ruling elders. And such officers have been supposed to be described in those words of St. Paul to Timothy, 1 Tim. i, 17. *Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, i. e. respect and maintenance:* But especially if they are also preachers as well as rulers, if they labor in the word and doctrine. These are supposed to be called governments, 1 Cor. xii, 28, and Rom. xii, 8. *He that ruleth.* But if such persons are but appointed to assist a minister, especially one who is young and unexperienced in the government of the church, I will never quarrel with any man, whether he will call it a Divine order, or merely prudential, since the scripture has not determined this matter with uncontested evidence.

These ministers, officers, and persons so deputed by the church, are therefore the first proper judges of the credibility of any person professing the Christian faith, and desiring Communion with that church; for these are supposed to be qualified above others with

Christian knowledge and wisdom, and they are also appointed by the church to the care and conduct thereof.

Yet in this case they are not so absolute and supreme, but that the congregation must some way or other approve of their judgment, either by an explicit vote, or at least by a silent consent, before the proposed Communicant is received to the Communion of the church; for it is still the consent of the church that must make him a member of it. Or the congregation may for just reasons disallow of their judgment in particular cases; and if they proceed obstinately to mismanage their affairs of this kind, and especially in notorious instances, and make the terms of admission larger or narrower than Christ has appointed, or if they notoriously misapply the right rules of admission or exclusion to wrong persons, that church or society may reverse their sentence, and act according to their own judgment, and if it be needful may also call them to an account for it, and assume the judgment, exclusion, and admission of Communicants entirely and immediately into their own hands; till they shall choose other officers who shall preside in this affair, and exercise this power more agreeably to those sacred rules and terms of Communion which that society believes to be the will of Christ in his word.

SECT. 4. This conduct of affairs seems to be founded on the very nature of religious societies, and the common light of reason; and it seems also to be much countenanced by a va-

riety of scriptures in the New Testament, where the directions of the apostle concerning the receiving and excluding of members are addressed to the churches of Christ, at Rome, at Corinth, at Thessalonica, &c. I might multiply quotations to this purpose, Rom, xvi, 7, *Receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.* Rom, xvi, 1, 2. *I commend unto you Phebe our Sister, that ye receive her in the Lord as becometh saints.* 1 Cor. v, 4, *In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ when ye are gathered together, and my spirit with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ to deliver such an one unto Satan, &c.* Ver. 7, *Purge ye out therefore the old leaven.* Ver. 13, *Put away from among yourselves that wicked person.* 2 Thes. iii, 6, *Now we command you brethren, in the name of our Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly.*

Though the Apostle Paul gives directions to Timothy and Titus about the rejection of heretics, yet it must be noted that these two were extraordinary persons, evangelists divinely commissioned and endowed, and by virtue hereof might act in a superior way in every church whither they were sent; and they were to teach the churches the orders of Christ; Nor does it follow that every ordinary minister has the same power; nor indeed does it appear that Timothy and Titus were to exercise it without the church's consent. For St. Paul himself when he gave apostolical orders for excommunicating the incestuous Corinthian, would have it done when the whole church was

gathered together, and as an act of that particular community; as in the texts before cited.

Though the seven epistles in the second and third chapters of the Revelations are inscribed to the angels or ministers of those seven churches, and directions are there given about the casting out false worshippers and idolaters, yet it is evident that the contents of these epistles are plainly addressed to the whole body of Christians that made up those several societies or churches, and they were to cast out idolaters, &c. from among them, as an act of the churches by their ministers.

Though ministers and elders are sometimes called guides and rulers, &c. yet it is never to be understood in so absolute a sense, as to take all power away from the society or congregation, and leave the ministers to tyrannize as they please over the churches, and, like Diotrephes, to admit and exclude whom they will; for which usurpation the apostle John severely censures him. 3 Epist. ver. 9, 10.

Now when such a mode of admission into churches as I have described, by the ministration of the elders, and the consent of the church, has the light of nature and reason leading us into it, and the scripture gives frequent countenance to it by various rules and examples, it does not fall very short of a sacred institution.

SECT. 5. But it will be objected here, That it may happen that the ministers may be in the right, and the people in the wrong, in their judgment in particular cases: and must the

vote of the people decide such an affair, against the opinion of ministers, elders, or rulers?

I answer, in the first place, That when any person is proposed to the church, concerning whose admission the minister and people are not agreed, it is much better to persuade that person to seek communion with some other church, rather than occasion strife and debate betwixt the people and the minister. But if that cannot be conveniently, surely it is more advicable in itself, and more acceptable to God, that any single person should deny himself the benefit of special ordinances, at least for a season, than become a bone of contention, and perhaps a sword of division, in a Christian church. A person of a true Christian temper would not willingly admit a new member, nor be admitted, to the real offence and grief of any persons that were there before.

I say, in the next place, That if this method of peace cannot obtain, but admission of the person is still pressed and pursued, it is the duty of the minister to endeavor, by all proper arguments to convince and persuade the people, and lead them to practise what he esteems the mind of Christ in this case, and with much gentleness to instruct them that oppose themselves. If this will not do, then he should lay the laws of Christ before the people, with great and awful solemnity, and acquaint them with the terms of Communion which Christ has appointed, according to his own best understanding of the Gospel: he may charge them, in the name of Christ, to receive or exclude such persons only whom Christ appoints

to be received or excluded; and that as they will answer it at the bar of Christ. But if the people persist in their own judgment still, in opposition to the minister, they must be left to answer it to Christ their Judge; for Christ has left no infallible vicegerent here on earth, to govern his churches contrary to their own sense and interpretation of his written word.

It may be proper on such an occasion, that some friendly methods of private conference should be tried, and the reconciling assistance of other prudent ministers and Christians desired. But if these attempts prove vain and ineffectual, and the difference still remains, there is no power on earth (that I know) which can authoritatively determine any minister to give the sacred ordinances of Christ contrary to his conscience; nor can any power on earth command and constrain a Christian church to receive a person to their Communion, whom they in their consciences judge unworthy of it; therefore, rather than dwell together in endless contentions, the minister must peacefully resign his office in that Church.

And the same rule must be followed in many other cases, wherein a minister and people resolve to disagree, besides in this point of admission to their Communion, or exclusion from it. For it is better that the minister should leave himself to the Providence of God for further service, than that a Church of Christ should be rent in pieces by a minister's resolved continuance amongst them, and making parties and wars in so

sacred a society. There is nothing perfect in human affairs on earth, where knowledge and grace are so imperfect. We must not expect complete purity and peace, till we arrive at the blessed Communion of the Church in heaven: yet I may venture to affirm, that things would scarce ever arise to this extreme height of difference, if Christian charity and love, humility and mutual condescension, were but more universally taught and practised, and the furious and narrow spirits of men tempered and enlarged, according to the glorious pattern of the apostles of Christ.

SECT. 6. Here will occur another inquiry also; and that is, When the congregation itself is divided in their sentiments, how must any proposed question be determined? or whether a proposed communicant must be admitted?

I answer; In all such cases, the light of nature and the common usage of mankind have determined it; that the greater number should carry the question according to their sentiments, and the lesser ought to submit.

But I would take the liberty to give my opinion in point of prudence thus: That though, in questions of less moment, it is proper enough that the major vote should decide the case, yet, in an affair of considerable importance, such as the choice of a minister, or the receiving a member to constant Communion, &c. if it were possible, I would obtain an universal concurrence of all the church; for it would be better (if such a thing could be

so managed, as) that no old member of the church be made uneasy by receiving a new one; much less should a church, that will act with prudence, admit a new member contrary to the sentiments of their minister, or give occasion of grief to him, as I have before hinted. But surely, I would never determine the affair only by a majority of one or two voices; for this will be in danger of giving so great an uneasiness to a considerable number of the church, (though they happen to be the minor part,) that often times it will administer occasion for strife, division, and separation.

There is one piece of prudence that we may learn from our greatest enemies, the Pope, and the Conclave of Cardinals; who in the election of a new Pope, never appoint the person but by the vote of two thirds of the college of Cardinals; that in an affair of such importance, there may be no dangerous contention of parties after the person is elected. And I should think this so valuable a rule of prudence in the sacred affairs of a Church of Christ, that no matter of moment should ever be determined, unless two thirds or more of the congregation agree to it. And indeed, if there be a firm opposition made, but by two or three considerable members, against the admission of any new communicant, I would not be hasty to admit the person but rather persuade him to delay, or to seek communion elsewhere, than endanger the peace of a whole church.

I desire it may be noted here, that I have only delivered my private opinion concerning the distinct power of elders, ministers, and

votes of the people, in admission of members to the Communion of the Church: but whether the power of receiving or excluding be vested entirely in the people, or in the minister, or in both together; whether by a majority of votes, or universal consent of a particular church, it equally serves the purpose of my argument in most of the following questions upon this subject.

I put in this note only to secure my readers against any prejudice or hasty judgment against the following parts of the book, though they should happen to differ from me in the present question.

QUESTION III.

What are the particular terms of Christian Communion? Or, what things are necessary to make the profession of Christianity credible?

SECTION 1. HAVING inquired who are the persons that must judge of the credibility of our profession in order to Christian Communion, we proceed next to inquire, What things go to make up a credible profession; and we must take great care in this matter not to make new terms and conditions of our own, which Christ the Lord and King of his Church has not made; nor to insist upon any thing as necessary to render a profession credible, which may not be fairly deduced from the rules and examples recorded in the New Testament, and the application of them to our

present age, according to the different circumstances of times, places, and persons.

It must be granted that there are several parts of necessary conduct in Christian churches and sacred ordinances, that arise from the very nature and reason of things, from the very being of societies, and from the circumstances of all human affairs; and we must not expect that all these should be dictated by Divine revelation, and written down with all their minute particulars in express words of scripture. It would be endless for the sacred writers to have attempted it, and most unreasonable for us to expect it: for the light of nature and reason is given us by God himself for our direction, as well as the light of Revelation; and whatsoever rules may be drawn by plain reasoning, and by easy and necessary inference from the comparison of scripture times with our own, may and ought to be esteemed a part of our direction in these affairs, as well as the express words of scripture; for scripture itself often gives us but very short and imperfect hints of the whole process of civil or ecclesiastical transactions. This shall be more fully made to appear, when I come to answer an objection raised from primitive practice.

After a diligent search into the holy scripture, and careful observation of Christian churches and their affairs, these three things appear to me to be necessary, at least in our times, to make a profession of Christianity sufficiently credible for Christian Communion.

First, A confession of all the necessary articles of Christian religion.

Secondly, A professed subjection to all the necessary rules of Christian duty.

Thirdly, Such a blameless and holy practice in life, as may make the profession of the lips appear, in the common judgment of men, to be the sincere sense of the heart.

Note, under the first head, I say, a confession of all the necessary articles of Christian religion, rather than the Christian faith, that I may plainly include the practical articles of repentance and new obedience, &c. as well as the doctrinal ones.

Reason and revelation, nature and scripture, seem to make these three things necessary to a credible profession of Christianity.

For if a man makes never so fair an appearance of Christian duties in his practice, yet if in words he refuse to profess the Christian faith, or deny any necessary doctrine or duty of it, he is not worthy of Christian Communion.

Or if a man give never so good an account of his knowledge and belief of all the articles of the Christian religion, and his moral conversation and carriage towards men, has been generally blameless in the eye of the world; yet if he utterly refuse to declare his sincere intention to practise any of the plain and necessary duties of the Christian religion, he cannot be accounted worthy of Christian Communion.

Or if his words make never so full a confession of all the doctrines and duties of Christian-

ity, and profess a sincere belief of and submission to them, yet if in his constant practice he be a liar, an adulterer, a drunkard, a known cheat, or a robber, &c. his wicked practice makes his profession incredible, he is not worthy of Christian Communion.

SECT. 2. But I would deliver my thoughts more fully on these three particulars that make up the credibility of a profession, and shew what is implied in each of them.

First, a confession of all the necessary articles of Christian religion, includes in it those articles that are necessary to salvation, and those that are necessary to maintain and practise this communion; which two are certainly different from each other.

Though it has been often said in a charitable way, and with very good reason in general discourse, that there should be nothing required in order to Christian Communion which is not necessary to salvation, yet this cannot exclude the knowledge of what Christian Communion is. The very nature of the thing requires that we should know how to practise this Communion, before we can actually practise and enjoy it. Now as the Lord's supper itself is not of absolute necessity to salvation, the things necessary to communicate in the Lord's supper, must imply something more than merely the things necessary to salvation; as I shall also make plainly appear under the seventh question, which will be entirely employed on this first part of Christian profession; and therefore I proceed to the second.

SECT. 3. Secondly, a professed subjection to all the necessary rules of Christian duty, includes in it not only those duties that are necessary to salvation, but those duties also that are necessary to practise Christian Communion.

The first sort of Christian duties are those that are necessary to salvation, such as the fear, love, and worship of God; faith, love, and obedience towards our Lord Jesus Christ; repentance of sin, and an humble trust or hope in the promises of the Gospel, as shall be shewn at large under the seventh question. Now this profession does not signify a mere engagement or promise hereafter to fulfil these duties, but also a profession that we have begun to practise them already; for we are not received into a church in order to receive Jesus Christ the Lord, but upon a credible profession that we have received Jesus Christ already, Rom. xv, 7, *Receive ye one another as Christ has received us.* We must have therefore some evidence and hope that we have received Christ in all his necessary offices, as our Lord and Savior, and consequently that he has received us, before we should propose ourselves to be received by any visible church.

Now if a man professes repentance, it implies that he has been made sensible of sin, that he has been taught the evil of it, that he mourns for what is past, and is daily watching against it. If a man profess faith in Christ as a propitiation and atonement, it implies that he is acquainted with his guilt in the sight of God, that he is in danger of Divine wrath, and that he is not able to make atonement for his own

sins, and therefore he flies for refuge to Jesus Christ, that he may obtain peace with God. If he professes a hope of heaven, it implies in it that he is endeavoring to prepare for this heaven, for *every man that hath this hope purifieth himself*. If he professes to take Christ for his example, it implies a desire and attempt to imitate our blessed Lord in self-denial, patience, zeal, &c.

In order to make this profession of our faith and hope credible, it is the custom of some churches to require no more than the person's own general profession that he does believe, and repent, and hope, as in Acts viii, 37, *I believe, &c*: It is the custom of other churches to desire also some further evidences of the truth of his faith, hope, and repentance, by a more particular account of some of those things which are implied in the exercise of those graces; and this has been usually called, though not properly, the *rendering a reason of the hope that is in him*, as 1 Pet. iii, 15.

The first of these methods hath considerable advantages towards the enlargement of particular churches; and, so far as I can judge, such churches seem to require all that is absolutely necessary to the nature and being of a Church of Christ.

The second has also some valuable advantages towards the well-being of a church, and the purity and the profit thereof in the inward and experimental parts of Christianity, though some persons of extreme bashfulness may have been hereby discouraged and hindered from Christian Communion.

Both of these methods has some advantages and some inconveniences; and it is not my design at present to decide which of the two has the greatest; but this is certain, that every church must judge for itself how large, or how narrow; how general, or how particular a profession of Christianity must be, in order to render it credible to themselves; yet let each church take heed that they make not the door of admission larger or straiter than Christ has made it.

The second sort of Christian duties are those that are necessary to practise Christian Communion, (especially if constant Communion be desired) such as, to meet at the same time, and in the same place with some Church of Christ to perform Christian worship with them there, to agree to the general methods of worship, the customs, order, and discipline that are practised in that church, so far as they can find them agreeable to the will of Christ in his word, or so far as they are necessary to maintain the being, order, and peace of all religious societies. This is so much, and so plainly implied in the very nature of Communion or Fellowship, that it is always supposed to be consented to, even where it is not expressly mentioned; this will appear more evident under the next question.

This profession of consent to the worship or order of that church, does not forbid or prevent any person from attempting to reform any mismanagements in the worship or discipline of the church by argument and friendly persuasion; but only it restrains him from all

tumultuous and irregular proceedings, in order to such reformation; according to the great canon of the apostle, *let all things be done decently and in order*, 1 Cor. xiv, 40. It is upon this account he forbids the Corinthians to speak with unknown tongues without interpretation, to break in upon the public worship, or for several persons to speak all at once, &c. and such natural rules of decency as these, may, in some sense be called the *commands of our Lord*, ver. 37, to which we owe a professed subjection.

But if a man cannot consent to the most constant and essential forms of ministration, worship, and discipline, as practised in that church, it is far better that he should join himself to some other society; whose chief practices and government are more agreeable to his own sentiments.

SECT. 4. The third thing that goes to make up the credibility of our profession, is such a blameless and holy practice in life, as may make the profession of the lips appear, in the common judgment of men, to be the sincere sense of the heart: By which we are not to understand a perfection of virtue, or a freedom from every vice; for there is no man living on earth, *that does good and sins not; in many things we offend all*; and the best of men have reason to complain, that the *evil they would not do*, sometimes prevails over them, and they are *led captive to the law of sin*, Jam. iii, 2. Rom. vii, 19, 20.

But it is necessary that persons professing Christianity should be free from all gross and

scandalous sins, nor be guilty of those crimes in their allowed practice, which in many places of scripture exclude men from the kingdom of Heaven; 1 Cor. vi, 9, *Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.* 1 Cor. v, 11, *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 if this text forbids us to keep free and sociable converse with such persons, or to sit down at our tables with those who profess Christianity, and practise wickedness, much more does it become a church to exclude them from its sacred society and fellowship, and to forbid them to sit down at the table of the Lord. Common railers and slanderers, such as the apostle James describes, are to be shut out from Communion; James i, 26. *If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain;* that is, his religious performances are evidently ineffectual for his own salvation; therefore while he indulges his tongue in a scandalous liberty, his pretences and profession of Christianity are vain and incredible, and consequently he has no right to Christian Communion. The glory of God who is holy, the honor of our Lord Jesus Christ who is our pattern of holiness, the credit of the Gospel, which is a doctrine according to

godliness, as well as the common sense of mankind, exclude all such persons from societies of strict and pure religion.

In the very first dawning of the Gospel, John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, forbid the professing Pharisees from baptism, for want of *fruits of repentance* answerable to their profession, Mat. iii, 7, 8. And in following times the Ephesian converts made their faith appear by confessing what they believed, and *shewing their deeds*. Acts xix, 18, 19. And if there be not a frequent account of such instances in scripture, it is because the nature and reason of things render the necessity of it sufficiently evident without many express instances.

The inquiry of a church into the conversation of the person who desires its Communion, may be adjusted and regulated under these four heads, viz. whether he be sober, just, and good, as well as religious. So much of these four characters as lie within the public observation of the world, are necessary in order to become a member of the church.

1. Whether he be sober and temperate in some good measure; free from the vices of drunkenness, uncleanness, violent wrath, railing, revenge, &c. for otherwise it is plain he cannot belong to Christ, *they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts*, Gal. v, 24, and the foregoing scriptures I have cited run much upon this point.

2. Whether he be just and honest among his neighbors, a man of fair dealing, faithful to his word, sincere and without hypocrisy in the common affairs of life; for if a person be of a

designing, tricking, and deceitful temper and carriage among men, how can we trust his profession in the things of God? or receive it as credible? Besides, the unjust are expressly excluded the kingdom of God, 1 Cor. vi, 8. *And all liars shall have their parts in the burning lake, Rev. xxi, 8.*

3. Whether he be good, kind, charitable. Whether he hath that love to his neighbor which is the fulfilling of the duties of the second table, Rom. xiii, 8, 9. Whatsoever we profess of faith, yet *without love we are nothing*; 1 Cor. xiii, 2, and it may be inquired too what love he has to fellow Christians, for it is an appointed mark of the disciples of Christ, John xiii, 35. *Hereby shall all men know ye are my disciples if ye love one another. If a man say I love God and hateth his brother he is a liar: He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?* 1 John iv, 20. Without love, and particularly to fellow Christians, he can never be fit for such a holy fellowship, which is to be managed all in love, and whereof love is one of the greatest duties.

4. Whether he be religious and godly. Though inward piety is chiefly to be known to men by the profession of the mouth, and the two foregoing general heads in some measure answer this end, yet there should be some appearances of piety also in our conversation in the world, in order to give us a full right to Christian Communion. In such an inquiry as this, at least it must be found that such a person is not a scoffer at religion, that he does not

make a jest of things sacred, that he uses the name of God with reverence in common conversation, that he speaks honorably of Christ and his Gospel, and his ordinances upon just occasion, and that he frequents some places of religious worship; for we are to look diligently that there be no profane person in our churches, as well as no fornicator, Heb. xii, 15.

Thus I have given a particular account of those three things that join to make up the credibility of our profession, in order to be regularly admitted to the Communion of a Christian church.

SECT. 5. *Objection.* But why must there be so many things required to make a profession of Christianity credible in our day, beyond what was required in the primitive times? then they only confessed Christ to be the Messiah, the Son of God, or that he was raised from the dead in order to baptism and admission into the church. So it was when many thousands were added to the church in one day; so the eunuch when Philip baptized him, Acts viii, 37; so the Jailor and Lydia, Acts xvi, and many others; or at most, their present works were thought sufficient to confirm their confessions, Acts xix, 18. Many that believed came and confessed and shewed their deeds, without long inquiries into the whole of their faith, or the course of their conversation.

Answer 1. The account that the scripture gives of these transactions is very short, yet sufficient to inform us that there was more

discourse on both sides, in order to the baptizing their converts, than is expressly written down; for even the confessions that Lydia and the Jailor made are not written, but it is said in general, they believed; therefore we are not to take it for granted there was nothing else required, because the scripture in those places mentions no more than a word or two of short confession.

Answer. 2. In several places where such transactions are recorded in scripture, there is no mention of their works or conversation at all; and surely no minister or church in our day would imagine, that a mere confession, that Jesus is the Christ, without any further inquiry either after knowledge, faith, or works, is sufficient ground for admission to sacred ordinances; for then we must take in almost whole nations. Besides, if a man did make such a profession, that Christ was the Son of God, and his conversation were blameless to outward appearance; yet who of our ministers or which of our churches would receive him without some further inquiry into his knowledge of God, and Christ, and the Gospel? Therefore it is sufficiently plain, by the acknowledgment and practice of those who make this objection, that they themselves do not think it necessary to confine their inquiries only to such a single sentence of profession as the scripture history expresses, and seek no further.

Answer. 3. It is sufficiently evident to me, that the fundamental or necessary articles of religion are not the same in all ages and

places; but more or less knowledge is necessary, in order to salvation, according to the degrees of Divine Revelation in several nations or ages. The belief of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ was not a fundamental in Christ's own life time; for when he spake of his own death, Peter replied, far be it from thee, Lord, Mat. xvi, 22, this shall not be unto thee: And the rest of the apostles knew not certainly that Christ should rise from the dead, for some doubted even after his resurrection, Mat. xxviii, 17. Yet they were the chief of the Church of Christ upon earth at that time. So in the very first promulgation of the Gospel, before Judaism was quite destroyed, the apostles themselves had not so full a knowledge of Christianity as they afterwards, by degrees, received from the instructions of the blessed Spirit. Many passages of scripture discover this, as Acts x, and xv; and Gal. ii, &c. At this time there was scarce any thing of the New Testament written; and though the evidences of the christian religion were great, yet the opportunities of a large and extensive knowledge were exceeding few and small among the common converts if compared with our age: therefore the Messiahship of Christ, his death, and resurrection, and exaltation, with a very few alterations from natural or Jewish religion, seem to be the chief things then necessary to believe in order to salvation, or to profess in order to Communion.

But when in process of time the Jewish economy was divinely destroyed, Christianity

grown to its full perfection, the canon of scripture completed, and several Christian truths and duties more plainly and expressly revealed, it may well be supposed that where this canon of scripture is freely published, God may require something more of Christian knowledge in order to salvation, than in the very first years of the Gospel. I speak this last proposition but modestly, and as a probable opinion; but if this be true, then it clearly follows that there are more things necessary to make a profession of Christianity credible at this day in most places of England, than were necessary even in Judea in the first years of Christianity.

Ans. 4. If the essentials of any doctrine were perfectly the same in all ages, yet the credibility of its profession is exceeding different, according to different circumstances of time, place, and persons. Where hardships and sufferings attend the professors of any religion, a very slight profession of it will persuade me that a man understands it, and is very sincere in it; because he exposes himself to suffering by this means: But where there is full liberty given, or especially if external advantages attend it, there every one will be ready to profess, though he has little knowledge or sincerity.

Those first times of the Gospel, were times of reproach and persecution; the sect of Christians was every where spoken against, and death and dangers attended it on all sides. Now to confess the name of Christ amidst the reproaches of the world, against the opposition

of the wise and the foolish, the Jews and the Greeks, the threatening of kings, and violence of the people, was a more powerful and evident proof of the truth of their faith, than if they had made long speeches, and had the testimony of a continued blameless conversation in a land and age of Christians. Surely that confession, which was sufficient for martyrdom, if their enemies knew it; must be sufficient for Communion, when made known to the church. But in our age and nation where Christianity is the profession of the time, and the country, a mere acknowledgment of the name, or death and resurrection of Christ, is not sufficient to prove us knowing or sincere Christians; and there ought to be so much larger a confession, and so many more credible circumstances attending it, before we can reasonably, or upon just grounds, believe a man to be a true Christian. All these requirements which I have before mentioned being put together, do not amount to so credible a profession, as for a man to say boldly this one sentence, I am a Christian, in the face of death and martyrdom.

Ans. 5. I might add also in the last place, that a great number of the conversions of the primitive Christians, were so sudden and surprising by the extraordinary effusion of the Holy Spirit, that the very miracle of their conversion did sufficiently answer the end of a large and particular confession. The work of God on the souls of men was sometimes in an instant, and they were made believers out of unbelievers, at once; the Spirit fell on them

while they heard the word; and when they who just before professed Judaism or Heathenism, and neither knew nor loved Jesus Christ, confessed his name and his religion at once; the wonderful change was evident to all, and they had no long accounts to give either of their faith or conversion, their knowledge or conversation; nor was it required, because the miracle itself made their profession sufficiently credible. Besides, spiritual gifts were conferred on multitudes in that day as soon as they were converted, and gave sufficient evidence for acceptance unto baptism, as Acts x, 44, 46, 47; *While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then answered Peter, can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?*

He that well considers all these things, and sets the affairs of the primitive times in a due light, and thus compares them with our own, will see plainly that something more is necessary to make a profession of Christianity credible in our day, than was needful in the first age of the church. And yet still we may be said to follow the rules and examples of scripture, while we require nothing more in order to Communion than what is necessary to make our profession credible; for so much as this has been always required even in scripture times, and the word of God and the very nature of things seem to demand it.

QUESTION IV.

What is a Church Covenant? And whether it be necessary to Christian Communion?

BESIDES the things that have been already mentioned, as included in a credible profession of Christianity, it is worth our inquiry, whether any solemn covenant be needful in order to Communion. Now to answer this question we must distinguish between that Communion which is fixed and constant in one church, or that which is only occasional.

By fixed, constant, and complete Communion, I mean the joining myself to a particular church, so as to become a complete member of that religious society, engaging to perform at appointed times and places, my most usual public worship with that society rather than with others, to assist in all services necessary to support that society, and partake of all privileges of it for mutual edification and comfort, and to maintain the public honor of Christ in the world.

By occasional Communion, I understand a mere participation of the general and special ordinances of the Gospel with a particular church for a time, under the general character and claim of Christianity, and so far as occasions of Providence may make it convenient or desirable. But not to become properly a member of that particular society, nor be interested in the affairs, regulation, or management of it.

Now for this occasional Communion, there is no necessity that every such Communicant should enter solemnly into a covenant or agreement with that particular church, any farther than only to partake of those special ordinances for a season in a decent and regular way. It is sufficient for this sort of Communion, that a person make such a credible profession of Christianity as has been before described, or that he be recommended by some other church, or the elders thereof, before whom he has made such a credible profession; or that it be some way ascertained to the church whose Communion he desires, that he has done it.

But where fixed and complete fellowship with a particular society is desired, the very nature of things seems to require it, that there should be such a mutual agreement among the persons that intend to practise this constant Communion. This is part of the second thing requisite to make our profession credible, viz. a professed subjection to all the necessary duties of Christianity, as will plainly appear by what follows.

A church is composed of such persons as agree to worship and walk together in all the ordinances of Christ, viz. to attend on the ministry or preaching of the word, on praying to God together, on speaking or singing the praises of God, and celebrating all the institutions of Christ, especially that great one, the supper of the Lord, which is called Communion.

They devote themselves first to the Lord in public by their profession, as they have done before in secret; covenanting to walk with him

in all his ordinances; then they *give up themselves to one another*, and they *receive one another in the Lord*, which is the word used most frequently in the New Testament for admission into the Communion of Saints, or being solemnly acknowledged as fellow-Christians, and consequently as having a right to special ordinances. They profess their agreement or consent to worship usually together, to attend usually on the ordinances of Communion as administered in that church, and to fulfil all necessary duties of Christian-fellowship in a special manner towards one another for mutual edification, as far as God shall instruct and enable them: And this is called the church-covenant, which is in truth nothing else but a voluntary solemn agreement with some particular society, to practise those social duties of the Christian religion among them at appointed times and places, which Christ himself has required in general to be practised somewhere when opportunity is found.

Such a consent or agreement to meet at stated times and places for social worship, is not indeed formally instituted in the New Testament: But there are several passages in the New Testament which very plainly suppose it, as will appear immediately. And the reason why it was not delivered in the form of a Gospel institution is this, because it is a principle of natural religion; the light of reason teaches it, and upon this account it was not set down as an institution under the Old Testament, though doubtless the patriarchs and holy men of old practised it, ever since there was any

such thing as public worship set up in the world: So the Israelites met and read the scripture, and prayed in their synagogues without the formality of a particular Divine institution; wherever a synagogue was built, the neighboring inhabitants by consent weekly worshipped there:

I confess where magistrates take upon them to impose a religion upon the people, and national and parochial churches are appointed by some assuming powers, this free covenant or agreement degenerates into a constrained consent; but such a free and explicit agreement is more necessary among those Christians who are left to their own liberty, or who dissent from a national and established church.

This covenant has indeed been much censured both by the profane world, and by some fellow-Christians: And it must be confessed that some few ministers and churches of rigid and narrow principles, have heretofore given too just an occasion for censure, by drawing up their particular church-covenants in a long form of writing, and inserting several things into them that were by no means necessary to common Christianity, and such as savored too much of a party-spirit; but churches and ministers in our age better understand Christian liberty and true principles of charity. I know of none of these impositions in our day; and if our present practice in this matter be censured by any, I am persuaded it is merely for want of understanding it: For if it be fairly represented, as I have described it, it appears to be a piece of mere natural religion, and social wor-

ship; and is so far from being an addition to the rules of the Gospel, or an imposition on the consciences of Christians, that no voluntary religious society can possibly subsist without some such covenant. When any person therefore joins himself to, and becomes a member of a Christian church, this covenant or mutual agreement is always implied where it is not expressed; and those that have been so weak as to ridicule the forms of it, yet are so wise as to practise the substance of it.

Indeed the mere necessity and reason of the thing is so plain and convincing, that one would wonder that any man should speak against it, if he will but give himself leave to consider the following particulars.

1. How can there be a *receiving of each other in the Lord*, at the first forming of a church, if there be not a mutual agreement, or *giving up of themselves to each other* to worship the Lord together? Christians are commanded to do it, *that with one mind and one mouth they may glorify God*, Rom. xv, 6, 7. And how can any particular member afterward be received to Communion, if there be not such a society or church to receive him, and to which he may give up himself to walk with them in the Lord?

2. How can there be any social worship performed, if there be no agreement to worship together in the same place, and at the same time? If all Christians must always be at perfect liberty to worship where they will, and communicate every Lord's day at a different place, a minister may sometimes be left to

preach to the seats and the walls, if none are bound to attend on his ministrations: And on the other hand, surely the minister may take as much liberty as the people; and he may absent himself and worship elsewhere, when they are all gathered together and wait for a sermon. Thus many assemblies for worship may be without a teacher, and many teachers without an assembly, and some small assemblies have many teachers.

3. How can there be any provision made of a proper place of worship for a whole assembly, or any conveniences or decencies that are requisite for sacred actions, without such an agreement? How can a table be appointed or furnished with bread and wine, and vessels to contain them, fit to distribute the Lord's supper, unless several persons have agreed upon it?

4. How can the minister be maintained if there be no societies agreeing to attend on their ministry, and support and encourage it? Yet this is a duty incumbent on all those who are ministered unto: Gal. vi, 6; 1 Cor. ix, 13, 14. Each society is bound by the rules of the Gospel to maintain and *honor* their own Ministers *who labor among them in word and doctrine*. 1 Tim. v, 17, and 1 Thess. v, 12, 13.

5. How can the *poor of Christ be fed and clothed*, if Christians are not distributed into distinct societies, and each take care of their own poor? Eph. iv, 28. To whom should the poor Christians have applied of old, if not to their own societies? For single persons cannot, nor are they bound wholly to maintain

them. They must therefore be distributed into distinct societies, that every poor Christian may know where to apply for relief; and that each of the richer may know also to whom they should give their constant alms, and look upon themselves in a special manner bound to supply. If all the poor saints in a nation were straggling abroad, and belonged to no Christian society, how should the richer persons, or richer societies know these are God's poor, and of the *household of faith*, whom they are bound in a *special* manner to take care of, Gal. vi, 10, unless they have made a profession to some Church of Christ, and are known by this means?

So great is the necessity of these things to be done by particular settled societies, that Christian Princes and Governors, in order to have these things regularly performed, have thrown all their dominions into the form of distinct parishes, or single congregations; though they have had not much regard to any rules of the New Testament in establishing their church worship and discipline in other parts of it.

6. How can the ordinances of censure and excommunication be ever administered, if there be no societies agreeing to walk and worship together? If any person be charged with a fault or heinous crime, he will reply, "He belongs not to any society, who shall assume a right to deal with him and censure him?" And it is impossible that the whole visible Church of Christ can meet together, or take cognizance of such particular causes, and give censures, unless we set up a Pope, or

Council, or conclave of Cardinals to do all this, and constrain all particular churches to submit to their sovereign and universal dictates.

There must be therefore an agreement betwixt a company of professing Christians, giving up themselves to one another, and receiving each other in the Lord, in order to maintain the Church of Christ in the world, his Gospel, or his honor; to support his poor, or his ministers, or the purity of his church, or of any holy ordinance. Receive therefore the apostle's exhortation. Rom. xv, 6, 7, *That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, receive ye one another as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.*

QUESTION V.

When a person is once joined to a particular church, whether he may never worship with other churches occasionally, or change his fixed Communion to another church?

ANSWER, That this agreement to worship together is not so strictly to be understood, as if none of those persons should ever worship any where else; for there are various occasions in the course of life that may lead the members of one church now and then to worship with another. Since we all hold the same faith and worship in the essentials of it, we are to esteem ourselves in general Communion with the whole visible Church of Christ; and sometimes

we join in worship with others, merely to testify our charity and Christian fellowship with those that in the circumstantial of religion differ from us; sometimes to accompany a particular friend; to hear a particular minister; to attend on some special occasion of prayer, or preaching; on such occasions we may very reasonably worship with various assemblies: Or perhaps we may be called to travel from home, and to spend many seasons of worship absent from our own particular community, and then we join with those churches where Providence may cast us.

When Christians travel where they are unknown, or make any considerable stay in distant places, they should carry with them a Letter of Recommendation from the officers or members of their own church, to any Churches of Christ, where they may come; such are the letters that St. Paul speaks of. 2 Cor. iii, 1, *Do we need letters of commendation to you, or from you?* And thus he himself in his letters recommends Christians to distant churches, as Rom. xvi, 1, 2, *I commend unto you Phæbe, our sister, who is a servant of the church at Cenchræa, That ye receive her in the Lord as becometh saints, i. e. that ye receive her to the participation of Christian ordinances, as well as assist her in any civil affairs.*

This agreement or church-covenant, therefore, only obliges persons, as far as they can with tolerable conveniency of affairs and spiritual edification, to make that church, of which they are members, the usual place of their worship, and especially their participation of

the Lord's supper, whereby special Communion is maintained.

The question concerning the changing of our fixed Communion from one church to another, may be thus determined.

All church fellowship is appointed for the public honor of God, for our mutual assistance and edification in spiritual things, and for the support of the interest and kingdom of Christ among men. Whensoever therefore any member cannot attain these ends in the particular church he belongs to, after solemn consideration and prayer to God for counsel, he may desire a dismissal to some other church, and upon these reasons the church ought to give it. A brother, or a sister, is not in bondage in such cases; and the pastoral office, and all church-fellowship is for edification, and not for destruction, as St. Paul speaks, 2 Cor. xiii, 10.

Now this necessity of changing our Communion may happen several ways: As when a person removes his habitation to such a distance as that he cannot conveniently attend and perform the duties of church-fellowship in that society; or when the church falls into pernicious errors and heresies; or when upon any other account his own edification in that church is not to be attained; or when other necessary circumstances of life, or religion, make his union to another church of much more importance. But in these cases let the conscience of a man be well informed, and let him duly consider all circumstances before he put this in practice: For it argues a light and changeable temper to be running always from one

church to another, and unbecoming the spirit of the Gospel. Yet where the reasons of removing this Communion from one church to another are just and good, and after due application to the church, if they refuse to dismiss him, he may fairly depart without it, and join himself to any other church that is satisfied in his credible profession of Christianity.

QUESTION VI.

Whether fixed Communion with some particular church be a necessary duty: And whether any may be admitted to occasional Communion, who are no fixed members of any church.

IT is a natural inquiry flowing from the former question, whether any person is at liberty to content himself merely with occasional Communion, sometimes with one church and sometimes with another, without becoming a fixed member of any church at all? Or whether a church may forbid a person occasional Communion, who refuses utterly to join in any fixed Communion?

The duties of holy fellowship for the glory of God and mutual edification, which are most regularly practised in a state of fixed Communion, are so many, and so plain in scripture, and in the reason of things, that very few persons can be exempted from them: For those duties are such as these, to attend on public ministrations together, to pray and confer together about spiritual things, with a sort of ho-

ly intimacy or friendship, to encourage and support the ministry, to maintain the poor, to uphold the public worship of God by assisting in the provision of a place, and all other external things necessary for public worship, to receive members into the church, to censure and reprove, and cast out scandalous members, to watch over one another in their holy conversation, &c. to admonish and to receive admonitions.

I grant that so many of these duties as can be conveniently performed toward all fellow-Christians, should never be omitted where Providence gives just occasion; but since each Christian cannot watch over all others, worship with all others, assist towards the maintenance of all the poor, nor all the ministers, &c. those with whom he agrees to worship in a stated way, are the persons to whom he is most immediately called to fulfil these kind offices, and has fairer opportunities to do it. And as I have shewn before, that public worship could never be certainly, regularly, and comfortably maintained without such a fixed Communion, and every person that refuses such services to Christ and the church, must have very plain and constraining reasons to excuse his neglect.

Besides, the privileges of fixed fellowship are, or should be, alluring and encouraging; such as, their opportunities of serving Christ in his public interest in the world, supporting his name among men, their vote in choosing ministers or officers of the church, and their interest in the prayers, cares, and watchfulness of the church, for them, and over them, their

special right to the spiritual assistance of the ministers and elders of that church in private counsels, admonitions, and prayers with them and for them; their own temporal support, assistance and relief by the church if they fall into poverty, &c.

It is my opinion that scarce any person can be justly exempted, or excused, from fixed Communion somewhere, but those, who by reason of their different opinions, unhappy temper, or some special circumstances of life, are under some sort of incapacity of fulfilling several of those duties, and yet by their credible profession appear worthy to partake of the special ordinances of the church.

And if there be any person to be found in such circumstances, I should think it is only such as these. (1.) One that has no fixed abode, but his business of life is at all uncertainties, and calls him perpetually to change his residence: Such were the apostles and evangelists, and the itinerant preachers of the first century, together with their attendants, who seem to be settled members of no particular church. Or (2.) Such a one that differs exceedingly in his sentiments in some important doctrines, or practical points of religion, from all the churches of Christ near him, and yet may be supposed to hold all the necessary articles of the Christian faith, but may not be so fit to assist as a member in the affairs of a church of so different opinions. Or lastly, there may be such a person as may give some credible evidences of true piety in his heart, but his natural temper is so violent, his spirit

so various and inconstant, that he can scarce confine himself to the settled orders of any community, but will be more likely to divide a congregation, than to edify it in love.

Perhaps it may be lawful and proper; nay, I add further, perhaps it is a necessary duty at some seasons, and upon very good evidence of their Christianity, to receive such sort of persons as these to occasional Communion, though they have no fixed relation to any particular church; and the general rules of Christianity will oblige them to perform several relative duties towards their fellow-Christians, and to help support the external charges of those churches, with whom for a season they hold fellowship.

But after all, I must confess that the special duties, which belong to a fixed settled Communion of Christians, are so generally plain in scripture, and so necessary from the very nature of religious societies, as described under the 4th question, that in my opinion, any Church of Christ has reason to make very careful inquiry into the real Christianity of a person who desires occasional Communion only, but utterly refuses all manner of fixed Communion with any church where he has proper opportunity; unless his habitation be always unsettled, or his circumstances very peculiar, or he can give some other just reason of his refusal to the church.

I should also add in this place, that if persons should be freely and readily indulged and tolerated in this sort of loose Communion, because they may have some sort of appearance

of reason for it, others that have much less reason, or none at all, might probably demand and expect it; and these examples would tend greatly to the dissolution and confusion of churches: In such a case, though it may be barely lawful, yet it seems not to be expedient, and therefore should not be commonly practised, since it leads to the ruin of churches, rather than to their edification, 1 Cor. x, 23, except in cases extraordinary.

Another very obvious question arises here, viz. Whether a church, or religious society, may refuse a person who offers himself to become a fixed member of that church in constant and complete Communion, and makes a visible and credible profession of his faith? Whether a church can lawfully forbid such a person to become a complete member, and restrain him only to a sort of occasional or incomplete Communion.

Ans. Though it is certain that without such fixed societies or churches, public Christianity could not be well maintained, and therefore far the greatest part of Christians are certainly obliged to become members of some particular Christian society; yet as there may be some peculiar cases which may excuse a person from fixed Communion and membership, so there may be peculiar cases also which may excuse a church from receiving some persons to complete membership with them, though they may admit them to occasional Communion.

Let it be considered, that by admitting a person to fixed Communion, and making him

a member of that particular society, he not only acquires a right to join with the society in all the ordinances of the Gospel and special Communion, in public on the Lord's days, but he hath a right to be with them at any more private meetings of the whole church, and to consult and act in their special affairs: He has a right to attend on such meetings for considering of the circumstances and state of the church, for regulating things that are amiss, for altering any of their customs, for distributing monies to the poor, for choosing a pastor or other officers, for admitting members, and for exercising the discipline of the church, &c. He acquires also a right in joint-partnership to the temporal possessions of the society, suppose it be a meeting-house for public worship, vessels of plate for church Communion, or any houses, or temporal goods, or donatives, which may belong to that particular society.

Now though the laws of Christ require us to receive every visible Christian, who desires it, to Communion in public worship, and in special ordinances of the Gospel, because he is fit for it, yet those laws do not require that every such person should be admitted to the peculiar counsels and affairs of any particular society, because perhaps he is really unfit for it. Perhaps they know, or have abundant reason to believe, that his different opinions, or his unhappy temper, or his peculiar circumstances, would render him a very troublesome member of it, that he would raise parties in the choice of officers, or in admission of members, or in distributing to the poor, or in the regula-

tion of other church affairs; and therefore they allow him only occasional Communion with them, which is all that seems to be his duty with regard to that particular church, and which is all the duty which the laws of reason, or of religion, seem to demand of them toward him.

Besides, let it be further considered, that whatsoever instances of Christian fellowship in sacred things the laws of Christ may demand for such a person, yet it is certain the laws of Christ do not demand for him any share in the temporal possessions of that religious society, nor in the distribution of their temporal things, unless it be perhaps to relieve him in some degree, if he be necessitous. Therefore the laws of Christ do not require that society to receive such a person to complete Communion and membership, to introduce him into their councils and affairs, or to vest him in any of their temporal possessions, since it is evident he will become a very troublesome member, and endanger, if not destroy, the edification and peace of the particular society or church. *Let all things be done to edification: Follow those things which make for peace, and things whereby one may edify another.*

QUESTION VII.

What knowledge is necessary for Christian Communion?

SECTION 1. UNDER the third question I have shewn that the knowledge necessary to

Communion, includes in it both a knowledge of what is necessary to salvation, and a knowledge of what is further necessary to maintain and enjoy this holy Communion: The very nature of things requires this.

First, let us consider the things necessary to salvation. How many articles of the Christian faith or practice, are necessary to our salvation; or in other words, how many fundamentals are there, is not expressly determined in any part of the scripture. It is a question that has troubled the Christian churches almost two hundred years, ever since the reformation began, but has never yet been decided to the common satisfaction even of those that held the scripture to be the only and perfect rule of faith and practice. Therefore as every man must judge for himself, concerning the fundamentals of Christianity, in order to examine his own heart, and evidence to himself his hopes of salvation; so every particular church must judge for itself, which are the fundamentals, or necessary articles of Christianity, to examine those that propose themselves to Communion, and evidence their right to it.

I grant this, that in determining the nature or number of necessary articles, the Churches of Christ ought to govern their sentiments by the rules of scripture, as near as they can find them, by comparing one place with another, and form their judgment in this matter by a large and extensive charity. A general love to mankind, the dutiful imitation of God our Savior, and the exemplary practice of the blessed apostles, oblige us to make as few articles

necessary as is consistent with the great ends of the Christian religion, and to impose nothing more upon the consciences of men in this respect, than we solemnly believe our Lord Jesus Christ himself imposes in his word, as we will answer it at the great day of his appearance. Yet it is certain, and without controversy, that there are several articles both of doctrine and duty, of such importance, that a man cannot be a true Christian without them, nor have any just hope of Christian salvation according to the Gospel; and consequently, without the acknowledgment of these articles, a person may lawfully be refused Communion.

Here let me lay down this preliminary: That the fundamentals of religion (as I have proved before) are very different, in different ages and nations, according to the different degrees of revelation, and different advantages for knowing the truth: But ever since the time that the canon of scripture was finished, and where this canon is published and acknowledged, we may say in general, and with regard to church Communion, that the fundamentals of Christianity are the same to this day; especially in such places of Great-Britain, Ireland, &c. where persons enjoy so great degrees of advantage for obtaining Christian knowledge. What gracious allowances for want of capacity, or for want of means, in dark corners of England, or in India, God will make hereafter, is not my business to inquire into; but certainly we are to admit none to Christian Communion who have not the knowledge that is essential to Christianity. And though we cannot precisely

reckon up the certain number of essential or fundamental articles, yet we may lay down such characters of them, as may assist and regulate the affairs of Christian Communion.

SECT. 2. We may begin therefore with negatives, and may boldly say, those cannot be fundamentals either of faith or practice, which are not very clearly revealed, either in express words, or in very plain, easy, and obvious consequences; they must be such as the meanest Christian may be able to find by reading his Bible, with sincere desire of truth, with holy diligence, and with humble prayer: For the *way of holiness* and salvation is so plain, *that fools shall not err therein*, Isa. xxxv, 8, which may be explained by that text, 1 Cor. i, 26, 27, *Not many wise are called, but the foolish things of this world, &c.*

Those again cannot be fundamental which are only to be found in such verses of scripture, the authority whereof may have been any way dubious or reasonably suspected. For fundamentals must have the strongest authority; as well as the plainest evidence, and that for the same reason. Upon this account, I would never call that a fundamental, which is not mentioned but in one single text of scripture; for it is possible that such a single text might be contested by critics, or transcribed false, by the neglect or iniquity of men, or be falsely translated, either by ignorance or design. Fundamentals must be revealed in several parts of the Bible, and appear to be the frequent design and subject of the holy writers; that so the

faith and salvation of plain Christians might be secured against the danger of fatal mistakes, and the subtilty of critics, or cunning deceivers.

Such articles also can never be fundamental, as have no necessary influence on the honor of God, the good of our neighbor, or our own holiness and final salvation: For since the honor of God and the good of men, is the very end of the Gospel, that can never be an essential part of it, without which, these ends may be happily and gloriously attained.

SECT. 3. The plain and positive characters of true fundamental articles in Christian religion, seem to be such as these.

1. Those without which there can be no religion: Such as, that there is a God; that this God is to be worshipped, believed, and obeyed; that he governs man in this life in order to a final judgment; that there is a future state; and rewards and punishments hereafter, according to our different behaviors here.

2. Those also seem to be essential, necessary, and fundamental articles of the Christian religion, which are the chief points that raise it above natural, or distinguish it from the Jewish religion, and which are represented in scripture as the very foundation and substance, the mystery and glory of the Gospel; such are these:

That all mankind are sinners; are destitute of holiness and happiness; and sinful man cannot recover himself to the favor and image of God; and there is no way of access to God for him but by a Mediator. John xiv, 6, *No man cometh to the Father but by me:* And I take this

doctrine of the necessity and use of a Mediator, to be the groundwork of the difference betwixt natural and revealed religion.

That this Mediator is the Son of God dwelling in flesh; or, that the Son of God has taken upon him human nature for this very end, to become a Mediator: This seems to be properly the great mystery of the Gospel, and it should be acknowledged without controversy, that *God was manifest in the flesh*, 1 Tim. iii, 16.

That Jesus of Nazareth is this glorious person, this only Mediator. *There is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ*, 1 Tim. ii, 5. *If ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins*, John viii, 24.

That, in order to the salvation of man, Christ is appointed by the Father to instruct us, as a Teacher or Prophet; to make an atonement for our sins, and to intercede for us as a Priest; and to give us laws, and rule and judge us as our Lord and King: For he has given us frequent, plain, and express notices in his word, that this is the way whereby he saves us; and if we know not so much as this of the method of his salvation, how can we apply to him for it, or receive it at his hands with any degree of faith?

That the Lord Jesus Christ is to be believed, trusted in, received, and submitted to, under these several characters which he sustains, by all that would partake of this salvation: For if he be absolutely rejected in either of these his offices, we have no reason to expect him to fulfil any part of his salvation to us, or in us. *If we refuse him that speaketh from heaven as*

our Prophet,⁹ *we cannot escape*, Heb. xii, 25. If we utterly reject his proper sacrifice as a Priest, there *remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment, and fiery indignation*, Heb. x, 26, 27. And if we refuse this man as a *King to reign over us, we shall be slain before his face*, Luke xix, 27. He will *take vengeance on them that obey not his Gospel*, 2 Thess. i, 8.

That God forgives repenting sinners, and is reconciled to them, not for the merit of their repentances, but for the sake of what Jesus Christ has done and suffered. This is a very evident consequent from the former doctrines, and has a plain and necessary connexion with them. It seems to be the very substance of the Gospel, that we are *justified or saved not by our own works, but by the grace of God abounding to sinners, through the redemption which our Lord Jesus Christ hath obtained; and that Jesus Christ redeemed us from the curse, by bearing that curse for us; and that God is at peace with us for his sake; that the Gospel is the word of reconciliation; that God was in Christ reconciling sinners to himself; because he that knew no sin was made sin, or a sin-offering, for us, that we, who are sinners, might be made righteous, and accepted of God through him*, 2 Cor. v, ult. See Rom. iii, 20, to 25. Ephes. ii, 8, 9, and many other places.

That though we cannot obtain the favor of God and eternal life by the merit of our own good works, yet faith in Christ, repentance of all sin, and holiness of heart and life, are necessary, in order to our enjoyment of the final

salvation. The scripture is most express and positive in such sort of articles. He that believeth not shall be damned. Except ye repent ye shall perish. And, without holiness no man shall see the Lord. Now by this article we are bound to resist all temptations, to strive against and subdue all sinful appetites and inclinations, and to practise all known duties of fear, faith, love, and worship, towards God; and justice, faithfulness, and kindness toward men.

That the Holy Spirit of God is appointed and given to bless men with wisdom and spiritual understanding, to assist them to accept of this salvation of Christ, to sanctify them here, and fit them for the full enjoyment of it hereafter: for since the canon of scripture is completed, there is a number of such express attestations therein, to the enlightening and sanctifying operations of the Holy Spirit, that he who utterly and in all senses denies them, seems to deny that there is any thing for the blessed Spirit to do amongst men, since the day of miracles was ended. Now since the gift of the Spirit is one of the most glorious and promised blessings of the Gospel, a considerable part of the gospel seems to me to consist in the operations of the Holy Spirit; and in this sense, he that denies the work of the Holy Spirit, seems to refuse a glorious part of the appointed salvation.

Let it be considered also, that we are baptised into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: And is it not necessary that we should have some general knowledge and idea

who this Father, Son, and Spirit are, and what is their distinct concern and business in matters of our salvation, together with their divine all sufficiency to perform it?

The Ephesians, who had never heard of a Holy Ghost, and were baptized only in the baptism of John, might be true believers without this knowledge; Acts xix, 2, 3. But since we have had such abundant discoveries of him, and are baptized into his name, the case is much altered. How can we accept adult baptism, or confirm that which we passed through in infancy, at our coming into a church, if we know nothing of the Holy Spirit, nor the use of him in our religion?

It might also be added as a further argument on this head, that the Communion of the Holy Ghost is the great Gospel benediction, joined with the love of God, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ; as in 2 Cor. xiii, 14. So that our initiation into Christianity being solemnized in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, our Christian life and state being maintained by their distinct offices or transactions therein, and our hope of happiness depending on their divine benediction, we may reasonably infer, that some knowledge and faith of the blessed Trinity are necessary to Christian salvation.

That there shall be a resurrection of the body is another such article; for if the dead rise not, then is not Christ risen; and if Christ be not risen, your faith is vain, ye are yet in your sins, 1 Cor. xv, 16, 17. However this might be doubted by some Corinthians before this epis-

tle was written, yet it cannot safely be doubted now.

That there is a state of happiness hereafter prepared for the saints where Jesus Christ is, and those that refuse his Gospel shall be punished from the presence of the Lord with everlasting destruction, John xiv, 3; 2 Thess. i, 9. These seem to be necessary motives to work upon our hope and fear, and without which the Gospel could hardly be supposed to be received amongst men; and therefore I count them necessary and fundamental articles of Christianity.

Thus I have attempted to give some instances of such doctrines as seem to be necessary to a Christian profession, according to the second character of fundamentals; viz. such as raise it above natural religion, and distinguish it from Judaism, &c. and are represented in scripture as the foundation, the substance, and the glory of the Gospel.

3. A third character by which several fundamentals may be known, is this: Those doctrines or duties that are expressly made necessary to salvation in the word of God, are certainly fundamentals; though the greatest part of these are such as are either necessary to all religion under the first head, or are some of the most distinguished doctrines of the Christian religion under the second head; as, *He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him,* Heb. xi, 6. *That Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father,* John xiv, 6. *No man cometh to the Father but by*

me. That Jesus is the Christ: Who is a liar, but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is Antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son: Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father, 1 John ii, 22, 23.

The duties of believing in Christ, mortification of sins of the flesh, and perseverance in faith and holiness, I esteem fundamental and necessary duties; because the scripture expressly saith, *He that believeth not, shall be damned, Mark xvi, 16. If ye live after the flesh ye shall die, Rom. viii, 13. If any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him, Heb. x, 38.* And for the same reason this error, That justification is to be attained by the works of the law, seems to be an heresy, or fundamental error; because the scripture saith, *Christ is become of none effect to you, whosoever of you will be justified by the law, ye are fallen from grace, Gal. v, 4.* By which we are to understand such a hope of justification by the law, as made the sacrifice and atonement of Christ needless; and which was most probably the sense of the heretics in that day.

SECT. 4. But here I desire my readers to take notice of these five things.

Note 1. That I have by no means pretended to reckon up all the fundamental articles, or give a full or regular catalogue of them: There may be some which I have omitted, and and some which I have mentioned twice, and that are included in each other. I have only laid down some general tokens or marks,

whereby necessary truths and duties may be known, so far as the terms of Christian Communion are concerned therein.

Note 2. I have here joined several doctrinal and practical articles together, supposing that all those duties which the scripture makes necessary to be practised, are necessary also to be known in order to practise.

Note 3. I call these articles fundamental; and it is my opinion that they may be insisted on as necessary to Communion, because they seem to me necessary to true Christianity, in such an age and land of light as ours is. Yet, what I hinted before I repeat now, that as I will not judge all the Heathen world, and condemn them for want of Christian knowledge, so neither will I utterly condemn every poor soul in the obscurest corners of a Christian nation, for want of such degrees of knowledge as to me seem necessary to salvation, to all that know and read the New Testament. I grant that God, in his word, does not seem to give encouragement to their hope of heaven, nor allow their Communion with Christians on earth: but the final condemnation of them is alone with him. And after all that we can say, every person must judge for himself, which articles are necessary in order to his own salvation; and every church must judge for itself, to regulate its own Communion; and God alone is a superior Judge, with regard to the one or the other.

Note 4. I do not think every one of these articles necessary to be expressly insisted on, and professed by every Communicant; but so

many only as the church shall think necessary, in order to give them a reasonable satisfaction that he knows and believes the rest.

Note 5. Though I esteem it necessary that every Communicant makes known his belief of such articles as the church judges fundamental and necessary some way or other, yet I am far from confining him to any proposed human forms of expression; as I shall shew under the next question.

SECT. 5. I proceed now to the second sort of knowledge that is necessary to Christian Communion; and that is, a knowledge of all those things that are necessarily implied in the enjoyment or practice of this Communion; or, in short, thus: We must know what Communion is, and how to communicate, before we can practise this duty.

This sort of knowledge includes these particulars:

1. If I should say it is necessary to be baptized before we communicate at the Lord's table, I should have far the greatest part of Christians on my side; and if baptism be necessary, it is necessary also to know the nature of baptism, the end and design of baptism, the meaning of being baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and the manner of performing it, whether it must be done by dipping or sprinkling, or whether both be not lawful, and whether baptism in infancy be sufficient.

2. It is necessary also, that a person should know what is the nature of the Lord's Sup-

per; that it is to be performed by breaking of bread, and distributing that and the wine amongst a Christian assembly; that the bread and wine are both to be blessed, and what is the nature of that blessing; what the bread and wine represent; what is the design of breaking and distributing them; who are the persons that must do this: and a woman must know, whether women are to be admitted to the Lord's Supper.

3. That several persons, who make a credible profession of Christianity, must agree to meet together for Christian worship, at the same time, and in the same place, in order to celebrate this ordinance; and that it is not to be received alone, because it is an ordinance of Communion.

Without the knowledge of these things, I do not see how any person can communicate in the sacred and special ordinances of the Gospel in an orderly manner, or with spiritual profit.

Thus have I endeavored to open the way for persons to form their judgment upon this difficult and important question, what are those articles of the Christian religion, the knowledge of which is necessary to Communion; and I hope I have kept the middle way between a libertinism of principles, and a narrow uncharitable spirit: Wherein I have failed, I shall be glad to be set right in a spirit of meekness.

QUESTION VIII.

In what words and expressions must our faith be professed, in order to Communion? And in what manner must we profess it?

SECTION 1.

THIS has been a famous and notable question in all ages of the church. National churches, synods, assemblies or councils of bishops, Presbyters, and learned men, have established certain sets of fundamental articles and express forms of confession; and by these forms persons are to be tried, that desire admission to their Communion. Others, who have thought this yoke and burden imposed upon the conscience too heavy and intolerable, have maintained, that no forms of confession are necessary, besides the very words of scripture; and that he who agrees to these words, has a right to Christian Communion, though perhaps he may understand or explain them in a sense never so different from the church, whose Communion he desires.

Now to speak my own sentiment with freedom here, I think these are two extremes; and the best medium that I can find for all the purposes of peace and truth is, that every man should confess his faith in his own words, which I shall endeavor to make evident by a particular review of each method.

I grant, that it seems a very natural and plausible argument, that since God has written

down all needful Christian truths and duties in the holy scripture we can choose no better words to confess them in, than those which God himself has given us for our instruction in those truths and duties: but if we consider the affairs of the Christian world, the experience of mankind, the practice of heretics and deceivers, as well as the reason of things, we shall find that, though the words of scripture are sufficient to teach us all the necessary parts of Christianity, yet the mere repetition of them, or subscription to them, cannot give sufficient proof, that the person so professing, has any understanding of them; or has any true Christian knowledge. An *idiot*, or an *idle boy*, may learn twenty of the noblest and most comprehensive sentences of scripture without book; a very ignorant person, or a man of most erroneous and destructive principles may repeat any words of scripture, and profess to believe them, while the one has a quite contrary meaning under those words, and the others have no meaning at all. Now surely such sort of professions can never be counted a sufficient evidence of Christian knowledge, and consequently can never give him a right to the holy Communion.

But because this point is of great importance, I shall debate it at large as a distinct question by itself.

SECT. 2. It will be replied then immediately, if the words of scripture are not a sufficient test in this case, may not confessions of faith,

drawn up by wise and good men, be made a test of Christian knowledge?

I answer, no, by no means; and that for these three reasons: It will admit such as ought not to be admitted, it will exclude such as ought not to be excluded, and it will endanger or infringe Christian liberty.

1st. This may admit such persons as ought not to be admitted; for such forms of doctrine, drawn up by other men, will be liable to the same inconveniences that will attend any scriptural form of words: a *child* or an *idiot*, may learn and repeat them by heart; a very ignorant person, or one who is very erroneous, may profess and subscribe them in his own sense: for when such forms have continued some time in the world, men of very heretical notions and tempers, being in danger of being excluded from the church by such a test, will contrive and find how to put some perverse sense upon the words, and thus evade the force, and disappoint the design of them, as they have done in all ages with the words of scripture.

2dly. This may exclude such persons as ought not to be excluded: For if a person of a truly Christian spirit, and of a pious and unblemished character should happen to differ from this form of human articles but in one sentence, or even in one word, he cannot honestly assent to, nor subscribe the whole form, though he is perfectly of the same mind in all things, except in that minute point; and yet for this little inconsiderable difference he must

be excluded the Communion of the church, and perhaps be liable to all the immediate inconveniences of such an exclusion, as much as if he denied every article.

There are no Synods, or councils of Christian bishops or Presbyters (even though the Laity have been mingled with them) but have put into their articles and confessions some little party notions, as well as the great and necessary truths of the Gospel. They have ever had an itch to determine some questions about meats, and days, and circumstances, and ceremonies, either in faith or worship, as well as the most undoubted and fundamental points of Christianity. Mint, and Anise, and Cummin, have been ever creeping into confessions of faith among the weightier matters of faith and love. Now if subscribing to a whole set of articles be the test of Communion, then for not eating flesh or herbs, or for want of the Anise and the Cummin, a man is excluded the church as much as if he wanted faith and love; which is a most unreasonable thing, and would directly contradict that great canon of the Apostle, Rom. xiv, 1, *Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.*

3dly, It will endanger or infringe Christian liberty. The imposition of human forms, of profession has been a heavy burden and sore bondage, under which most parts of the Christian church have groaned in almost every age. It has been a sore temptation to many thousands to strain and subdue those words to new significations, to various and very for-

eign senses, in order to bend their consciences to a compliance with them; and it has oftentimes been made a hateful engine and instrument of quarrels and schisms, of reproaches and sharp persecutions to many sincere and honest souls, that could not warp their sincerity, nor subdue their consciences to such a compliance. Whence arises the severity of the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal, and the compliances of the Jews there, to profess the Roman faith? It is true, no human method is perfectly free from all inconveniences, yet I would not willingly encourage such a method which has often had such mischievous and impious effects, and has always such danger attending it.

Yet I am very much of the mind that articles of religion, confessions, catechisms, and short summaries of the Christian faith, are very useful and necessary amongst the churches of Christ for several reasons; and particularly,

1. To give a short and compendious view of the chief and most necessary points of the Christian religion, which lie scattered up and down in many distant places of scripture: And for this reason, such books are very profitable for all Christian families, to teach the young and the ignorant the sum and substance of what they must believe and practise in order to salvation; for though every thing necessary be plainly contained in the word of God, yet persons that have little time, and little knowledge, and very weak reason, would be at a great loss to collect all their faith and duty

from so large a book as the Bible is, without some teacher. They would want some instructor, who might lay these things together in an easy method, or some systems, confessions, or catechisms, wherein it is done already. Though these catechisms and confessions should be examined by the word of God, so far as every person is capable, and should be no farther received than they bear a conformity thereto by all that are capable of such examination.

2. Such articles, or summaries of the Christian religion, are useful to hold forth to the world what are in general the sentiments of such a particular church, or churches: And as this is proper on many accounts, so it is of use in order to make the way to their communion evident and easy, and that other Christians may know whether they agree with them in what is essential to Christianity, and may judge, whether they should seek or desire constant or occasional communion with them; and that other churches may judge whether they should admit their members to communion: This also may tend to encourage more zealous and hearty consultations, and mutual assistances toward the support of their common Christianity, provided that these articles are drawn up with judgment; and these things are managed with prudence and charity.

Such are, or should be, the articles of the church of England, which proclaim her doctrine and discipline to the world: Such are, or should be, the Westminster Assembly's confession of faith, or that of the Savoy, and the

two catechisms, which shew the faith and worship of the English dissenters: Such are, or should be, the confessions of the foreign reformed churches; of all which it may be said in general, they are very good summaries of the Christian religion, however they may differ in lesser points and circumstances. All these have been of unspeakable advantage in the churches of Christ, not only to train up children and families in the knowledge of Divine truths, but to hold forth to all the world upon what foundations the protestant churches are built, and to declare what their faith is, and what their practice.

I would not be understood, as though I thought such confessions of faith necessary to be drawn up and kept in all churches for these ends; for many of the primitive churches for a hundred years or more, managed their affairs without any such formal confessions, at least without any so large ones, generally approved and delivered down to posterity. The constant preaching and praying in the churches, and mutual communication of Christians, did notify to their fellow Christians and fellow churches, their consent in the most necessary and important articles of faith and worship. But it is certain, that since churches are more multiplied, and errors more abundantly increased, there are many expediences that attend such a declared and public consent, or harmony of several churches, in the same general points of doctrine and duty.

I grant that there have been some great inconveniences attending these national confes-

sions and articles, such as the nailing down certain degrees of reformation to everlasting imperfection, and the settling some mistakes for whole nations and future ages; we in Great Britain need not run far to seek for instances of this, whether we dwell in the north or south part of it.

But these inconveniences may be avoided, if we and our fathers had but observed two things. 1. That such articles need not be drawn up in the strictest terms of any particular party, but with allowance of some just degrees of latitude for different sentiments; nor let such articles descend into a determination of too many particulars in things that are of little moment in Christianity; and 2. I would have it always secured, that this precise form of words be never imposed on any person whatsoever as a test of Christianity, of Communion, of ordination, &c. to be subscribed or acknowledged by assent or consent: At least it ought never to be done without the allowance of such limitations, explications, and exceptions which might secure the consciences of pious Christians, from all unnecessary bonds and fetters.

SECT. 3. The only way therefore, that I know of to secure the just Christian liberty, both of churches and persons, is this, that every person who proposes himself to Communion must confess his faith in his own words; or by an open and friendly conference with the ministers, officers, or deputed persons of the church, he must give them satisfaction in

what sense he understands the holy scriptures, in momentous and fundamental points; and make it appear that he knows and believes all the necessary articles of Christianity: And, as I said before, they must take heed not to make more articles necessary than Christ has done by the rule of his word, and they should acknowledge themselves satisfied with such a profession, as may be sufficient to manifest a person to be a good Christian, without descending into nice particularities of opinion, and points of less importance. Whether persons of divided sentiments in lesser matters should be received to fixed or to occasional Communion only, shall be discussed afterward.

Where there is any just ground of suspicion, that a person holds such errors, as in the opinion of the church are exceeding dangerous, if not damnable, there surely the church has a right to require that he declare himself free from those errors, and give his sense of scripture in opposition to them, so far as to give satisfaction to the church: But he is not bound to do it in any form of words proposed to him, or imposed upon him by others; but only in words of his own choosing; because the design of their inquiry, and of his confession, is to profess his own sense of scripture, or his own faith, and not theirs: And the church must afterward judge, whether the declared sense of the proposed communicant, or candidate agree with their sense, sufficient for Communion in the special ordinances of the Gospel.

Hereby the truth and extent of a man's own knowledge is much better found out, than by any form of words whatsoever, human or divine, that can be proposed to him for assent or subscription. Hereby the liberty of the person desiring Communion is secured from impositions, in that he is not confined to any set of words, but has the whole range of his mother tongue to tell what he believes, and to express his own sense of scripture. Hereby the church also has its full liberty of judging the character and profession of the person admitted to their Communion, whether he believe the words of scripture in such a sense, as the church thinks necessary to salvation, and sufficient for practising and enjoying this sacred fellowship.

This is the way to deal with others, as we would think it reasonable others should deal with us, according to the rule of our blessed Savior. This is acting according to the professed protestant principle, not to impose on the conscience of others, but to let every one judge for himself concerning his own personal actions, and let the church judge for itself concerning its social actions.

Thus by the influence of the blessed Spirit, which is a spirit of truth and peace, Christians may walk together by this rule, to the glory of God and their own edification; and peace and truth may be honorably maintained, so far as we are capable in this imperfect state.

SECT. 4. An inquiry may arise here, whether a confession of faith in writing may

not serve the same purposes, as well as a conference?

It is my judgment that no confessions of faith delivered in writing, can be sufficient to give evidence of Christian knowledge, except there has been some personal conference before or after the writing of this confession, whereby it may appear that the person well understands what he has written; or at least, unless there be some other very evident and convincing proofs that the person who writes is truly sincere and would not dare to impose upon a church by any written confession, that which is not the real belief and sense both of head and heart.

And by this means that scandal and reproach will be taken away from the churches, of receiving members merely upon a written confession of faith and hope, which perhaps was drawn up by some other hand, and which has neither been the work of the head, nor heart of the person who desires Communion.

QUESTION IX.

Where the seclusion from Christian Communion carries temporal inconveniences with it, hath a particular Church the power to seclude a person merely for want of orthodoxy?

SECTION 1. SINCE I have put the test of knowledge sufficient for Christian Communion upon the final judgment of the church, and their satisfaction in the orthodoxy of a Com-

municant, it is necessary I should answer this great objection, viz. Suppose a Socinian, a professed Pelagian, or an Antinomian of the grossest kind, should declare that he has been very sincere in searching the scriptures to find the truth, should he be secluded from Communion, because he doth not appear in his confession orthodox enough to satisfy the church? And is it not somewhat like persecution, when being rejected by the church he shall lie under some reproach, and sustain temporal damage in his reputation among his neighbors?

Ans. 1. It is certain that persons who give not just evidence of true Christianity, ought not to be received to the special ordinances of Christian worship, and enjoy Christian Communion: Now those who believe not the necessary, fundamental, and essential doctrines of the Christian religion cannot properly be called true Christians, whatsoever general profession they may make of believing the Bible, or being the disciples of Christ: Therefore such are not to be received.

A man may profess to be very sincere in searching the scriptures to find out truth; but of real inward sincerity, as well as inward Christianity, God only is the judge; and how valuable a qualification soever sincerity may be, (if it could be found in any persons in England, who are not true Christians) and how far soever it may go towards acceptance with God in the secret of his mercy, yet it is not the profession of sincerity, but of Christianity, that gives a person right to the fellowship of a Christian church: For God in his revealed

word has not bid us receive all that are sincere, but all that believe or have received Christ, or all that profess to be true Christians. And in this case I know no judge on earth superior to the church, with which Communion is desired, and the officers thereof. These must determine whether the profession of Christianity be credible, or no, as I have proved before under the second question.

Ans. 2. Those temporal inconveniences that a man may happen to sustain among his neighbors, by being excluded from a particular church for want of true faith, are no part of that church's act in refusing him, nor a necessary consequent thereof; but only a mere occasional or accidental inconvenience, to which all human affairs are subject in this imperfect state. Now this is evident, because in a heathen nation the rejection of a person from a Christian church for want of such faith would be honorable, and his neighbors would like him the better for it; though it happens in a Christian nation that his neighbors may reproach him; but still this event is no part of the church's act, who ought to love him as a man, and do all due offices of kindness to him, even while they cannot receive him as a true Christian.

Ans. 3. Though we are not to do the least hurt to any person because he doth not hold the Christian faith, yet we are allowed and encouraged to love good Christians better than those that are not so: We are commanded to *love our enemies, and do good to them that hate us*, Mat. v, 44, but we are told, Mat. x, 41, 42, *that he that doth the least benefit to a prophet*

or disciple, as such, shall have a peculiar reward. We are in a special manner required to love the brotherhood, 1 Pet. ii, 17, to love one another, John xv, 12, 17, and to do good to all, but especially to the household of faith, Gal. vi, 10. Nor can the withholding that degree of love from an heathen, which belongs to a pious Christian, be justly called persecution or hardship, any more than my neighbor may complain that I persecute him, because I do not love him so well as my brother, or my father.

Give me leave to add in this place, that though the temporal inconvenience of shame or disreputation is not the necessary consequent of an exclusion from a church for want of faith, yet these inconveniences may certainly and justly attend the exclusion of a person for want of good morals. And St. Paul plainly intimates it, 1 Cor. v, 9, 10, 11, where he permits them to keep company with heathen fornicators, extortioners, or idolaters, and to eat with them if they are invited, chap. x, ver. 27. But he forbids them to allow the same degree of civility to a fornicator, extortioner, or idolater, who calls himself a brother, or a Christian, with such a one, he says, we should keep no company, not so much as to eat with him. So in 2 Thess. iii, 6, 11, 14, concerning disorderly Christians and busy-bodies, that will not work to maintain themselves, the apostle says, Withdraw yourselves from every such brother, which may signify a withdrawalment from spiritual or from civil communion with him, or perhaps include both. He forbids the Thessalonians to have any company with him,

that he may be ashamed; and the reason seems to be this: These practices are justly accounted shameful by the light of nature, and among the heathens; now when a man professes so holy a religion as Christianity is, and yet practises these shameful vices, he is guilty of a double crime, and aggravates his iniquity; he is a hypocrite and a deceiver, as well as a vicious man, and the apostle exhorts the church to make him know and feel the shame of it.

SECT. 2. Another objection a-kin to the former, seems naturally to rise here, and to want an answer too, viz. Suppose a man be a real and hearty Christian, holding all the necessary articles of the Christian faith, and he proposes himself to communion with a church of narrow and uncharitable principles, who make more fundamentals than Christ has made, shall such a man be excluded from Communion, merely for want of orthodoxy in the judgment of an unskilful church?

Answer. Without doubt it is a criminal thing in any assembly or church of Christ, to imagine and create new fundamentals, and impose them upon others, or to establish narrow and uncharitable rules of Communion; yet it is possible that such a church may act in the sincerity of their hearts, for the honor of Christ, and the purity of his ordinances; many such churches there have been in our age, and more in the age of our fathers; and though it be faulty in them to exclude true Christians, yet they must still be the visible judges of the fitness of persons for their own visible Com-

munion, and they are accountable for their conduct only to Christ, their supreme Lord and Judge.

It is better, in my opinion, therefore, that a person who is a real Christian, should join himself to some other distant church, though it may be with some inconvenience; or perhaps it may be better that he should live without ordinances of special Communion, which are not absolutely necessary to salvation, than that he should break the settled peace of a church, which walks with God in faith, and holiness, and comfort, though their principles of Communion may be a little too narrow and uncharitable, and not to be vindicated. No man ought to come into a voluntary society, and become a member thereof, without the consent of the society, though perhaps they unjustly refuse to give their consent. They must answer it to Christ, their Judge, at the great day. There is nothing in this world perfectly free from all inconveniences; prudence and Christianity ever direct us, of two evils, to choose the least.

QUESTION X.

Whether a Profession to believe the express Words of Scripture, without any Explication, be an Evidence of Knowledge sufficient for Christian Communion?

SECTION. 1. **THOUGH** what I have already said under the former Questions, might be sufficient to answer the present inquiry,

yet since in several ages of the church, and especially in times of rising error this controversy has been moved, I shall spend some time in sifting it thoroughly, and endeavor to lead my reader to such a determination of it, as may give a just satisfaction to an honest and humble inquirer.

By the express words of scripture, I here intend the words expressed in our English Bible; or the original Greek and Hebrew words translated into some other English words; for it is evident, that the Greek and Hebrew, can be of no use to admit plain Christians into English churches.

When I say without any explication, I mean, without explaining the sense of those scriptural words so translated, by other words or phrases; also without any manner of inference or consequence drawn from those words, though it lie never so plain and open. Without explication signifies, where the person proposing himself to Communion assents to the words of scripture, but refuses to explain in what sense he understands those words; and neither will own nor deny any other articles or propositions that may be offered him as terms of Communion, though deduced from the words of scripture with never so much evidence; nor will confess his faith, even in the most important and necessary points, in any other words but those of his Bible.

When I mention knowledge sufficient for Christian Communion, it is not to be understood, as if knowledge were the only thing necessary; for in order to Christian Commun-

ion, there is also required a professed subjection to all the known duties of Christianity, and a conversation answerable to this profession: But the present inquiry is, whether the express words of scripture are a sufficient test of that knowledge, which is one requisite to Communion.

Now let the question be proposed in the fullest and fairest manner thus. Whether a person professing to believe the English Bible itself, or subscribing, assenting to, or repeating any form of words expressly taken out of any English translation, without any manner of explication or inference, can be an evidence of Christian knowledge, sufficient to demand admission to the Lord's supper, with a Christian church in England?

Those that assert the affirmative in this question, are of two sorts; either persons that have entertained some sentiments in the important points of Christianity different from the common faith of the churches, and would shelter those opinions under the express words of scripture, though they explain them in their own sense; or they are persons that heartily maintain the common faith, but through an unlimited excess of charity are afraid of narrowing the terms of Christian Communion, lest they should exclude some sincere Christians out of the church; they are jealous of losing their Christian liberty, and are afraid of having conscience oppressed by an imposition of any confessions of faith, or articles of Communion, drawn up in the words of fallible men.

Those that hold the negative in this question are also of two sorts; either such as have

a narrow and uncharitable spirit, and refuse their Communion to all Christians that will not assent, consent, or subscribe to every word and expression contained in their articles, confessions, and human forms; or they are such as maintain a just and reasonable charity towards all that they can hope to be sincere Christians, and dare not exclude any persons duly qualified from the holy Communion: They would also secure Christian liberty in the full extent that Christ has given it to his people; but they are zealous for the faith once delivered to the Saints, for the purity of the Gospel, for the honor of Christ in his churches, and the true profit and pleasure of Christian Communion in holy ordinances; nor would they willingly indulge such an excessive complaisance instead of charity, and such a licentious freedom of opinions in their community, as would tend to the destruction of all that is valuable in the Communion of the churches of Christ.

I must confess myself at present to stand on the negative side, and I hope I may rank myself among the latter sort of them. I cannot yet persuade myself that a mere assent to the words of scripture, without any explication, is a sufficient rule by which churches should judge of their communicants' knowledge; and the reasons that influence and constrain me to be of this mind, I shall lay down at large in the following sections; yet I shall endeavor to shew in the end of my discourse, how a just liberty may be secured, both to single Christians and to churches, and the sacred bonds of

charity maintained, without a licentious indulgence of all sort of heresies and errors in the same church.

SECT. 2. The first argument against the confinement of churches to the express words of scripture in judging of the knowledge of their communicants, is this, that the greatest and best end that has ever been aimed at in this method, can never be attained by it. The greatest and best design of it is to secure Christians from all imposition of human forms, and from making confessions of faith drawn up in the words of fallible men, a test of knowledge in the things of God: But this method is no effectual security; for since the inspired words of Greek and Hebrew can be no test of knowledge in English churches, a confession must be made in words of English: Now all English words, into which the scripture is, or may be translated, are the words of fallible men; and no person can be infallibly sure in some difficult and controverted texts, that they do fully and truly express the sense of the sacred originals.

I grant here that for private Christians to search their English Bibles, and find the matters of their salvation, there is abundantly sufficient certainty of the truth of every translation in general, that it clearly declares all that is of such importance: Because whatsoever is necessary to salvation, is sufficiently contained and revealed, not in one or two, but in various texts of scripture, though perhaps not always in express words; and in most of

these texts learned men generally agree about the mere translation of them: This need create no manner of scruple to sincere and humble Christians in their own knowledge, faith, and practice. The English Bible is gloriously sufficient for the salvation of every humble Christian in England. The English Gospel has saved many thousands, without any skill or knowledge of other languages.

But in this controverted case, when men assert that a confession of express words of scripture shall be sufficient to purge any man from the charge of heresy, or give him a right to demand Christian Communion, even where his opinions are justly suspected, I must take notice here that some of these controverted and difficult texts may naturally come into question; such as those which seem to favor any heresies, and those which seem to guard against them. Now in such a case as this, the mere translating of the words oftentimes determines the sense of them: The translation of such a text is a sort of interpretation of the meaning of it; and then, what translation of any particular text, shall be the standard of orthodoxy for all our churches? Shall that which is public and established by the magistrate have this honor? But who gave it this authority over all the churches? Man or God? Shall any private Translation of learned and pious men met in council, determine the sense for all Communions? But whence had they this power? Much less can the Translation of any single person be a public standard.

Wandering over all nations and churches, and surveying all the various pretences to such a power, I cannot find where to fix the sole of my foot, but on the only protestant principle, viz. That as each person with regard to his own conduct in sacred things, must judge of the sense of scripture for himself, using the best helps of translators and expositors that he can obtain; so each community using the same helps, must judge for themselves of the sense of the word of God, with regard to their conduct in admitting persons to partake of sacred ordinances among them. Therefore that particular church whose Communion is desired, must determine whether any human words, in which a person's faith is confessed, are orthodox in their sense, or no; whether they do truly answer the end of such a confession, or no; and include the necessary articles of the Christian faith; and whether they give sufficient evidence of a man's knowledge in Christianity, in order to admit him to their Communion.

Suppose a modern Socinian; or a more orthodox man, should refuse the common English translation of the first chapter of St. John's Gospel, and confess his faith in words of his own translation thus. In the beginning was reason, and reason was with God, and reason was God: Suppose an Athanasian refuses the English translation of Rev. iii, 14, where Christ is called the beginning of the creation of God, and says, ἀρχὴ ought to be translated the head of God's creation, lest Christ be represented as a creature, and he will put this

text into his confession of faith. Suppose an Arian, an Antinomian, an Anthropomorphite, a Pelagian, a Calvinist, each confess their faith in words of scripture of their own translation; none of these English words, are in the strictest and properest sense, the words of God, but the words of fallible men; and the particular church whose communion is sought must necessarily interpose with their own sense of scripture, according to the best advantages they have: They must interpose, I say, so far as to judge, whether any of these persons have so interpreted those controverted texts, in which each chooses to confess his faith, as to express aright what they believe to be the necessary articles of Christianity; and though there be no necessity, that a church and all its members should agree in the sense of every text, yet there must be finally such a sense of some scriptures given or assented to by the person desiring Communion, as may satisfy that church that he has knowledge sufficient for it. Now this may be done without an imposition of any set human forms of words, as I have shewn before.

SECT. 3. My second argument is this.

To make a mere confession of express words of scripture a sufficient test of knowledge to demand Christian Communion, denies that liberty to some Christians, which it indulges to others; nay, it denies the same liberty to a whole community of Christians, or to their ministers, which it indulges to each catechumen, or to every single person that of-

fers himself to their communion. I make it appear thus.

Each single person that offers himself to Communion with a particular church, has liberty given him by this rule, to put his own sense on the commands of Christ in demanding of Communion; but the ministers or members of this church, are not allowed this liberty to put their own sense on the commands of Christ about receiving him. Perhaps they know by discourse and conversation, that this person denies some articles of the Christian faith which they think necessary, while he confesses the words of scripture, and abuses them to a pernicious sense; yet he has liberty to impose himself on their Communion, because he thinks he is fit for it in his own sense of scripture; but they cannot, according to this rule reject him, though in their sense of scripture they think him unfit.

According to his own interpretation of the Bible, he says, he owns all the fundamental articles: according to their interpretation, they say, he denies some of them; yet this test opens the door of admission to him, whensoever he demands entrance, and does not permit them to shut it.

They believe the scripture forbids them to receive such to Christian fellowship, who have not received the Christian faith, yet this rule allows them not to forbid him their fellowship, though they think he denies the faith in some necessary parts of it. They think, according to their sense of the word of God, that he has no appearing right to the kingdom of Hea-

ven, and consequently that he has no right to enter into the church or kingdom of Christ on earth; but according to this rule they are bound to admit him, even contrary to their own sentiments and consciences. He has liberty to demand, but they have none to refuse.

This seems to me like a restraint of the liberty of a multitude of professed Christians, to secure or indulge the liberty of a catechumen, which is far from impartial justice, in the very nature of things. Now certainly Christ would never impose such a rule of Communion on his churches, which should not be reconcilable to common justice, and to that great and general rule of his, do to others as you would have others do to you.

SECT. 4. My third argument is this: That a child, an idiot, or a very ignorant man, may repeat any short form of confession, drawn up in the express words of scripture, and say, he believes it; or, he may subscribe or assent to any longer form, even the whole Bible itself: But surely a child, an idiot, or an ignorant person who have not a real knowledge and understanding of the things of Christianity, are not fit to be received into a Christian church, nor admitted to the Lord's supper. There is no formal repetition of a few words by memory can give any proof of Christian knowledge in the heart; no assent or subscription to a book as big as the Bible, can make it evident that a man understands five lines of it: yet if this be the proper test, such ignorant creatures must

be received to the noblest and highest ordinance of Christ upon earth.

Suppose a poor wretch that wants bread, and knows almost nothing of Christianity, hears that such a congregation maintain their poor well, and in order to secure a good maintenance, he gets a few scripture expressions on the most important points without book; his life has been obscure, unknown, and (so far as appears) not any way scandalous; he proposes himself to Communion with this church; he repeats the creed, or (if he be desired to make a larger confession) he takes up his Bible and says, I believe every word that is contained between these two leathern covers to be true; and I resolve to live according to it. This poor wretch may demand admission according to such principles.

If you say, there must be some inquiry made, whether he understands the words of scripture, or no, then there must be some determined sense put upon those words of scripture as proposed by the church, or as assented to by the Communicant; and thereby you depart from your pretended rule, that the express words of scripture are a sufficient test of knowledge.

I grant, that after the utmost search and inquiry into Christian profession, and piety of conversation, some hypocrites will creep into the best ordered and purest churches; human affairs are so constituted: we cannot know the hearts of men: tares and wheat must grow together till harvest: but it is sufficiently plain in scripture, that they ought not to admit these

to Christian Communion, who understand not the first principles of Christianity; and therefore we ought to seek some satisfactory evidence of a thing that may so easily be found, viz. Christian knowledge, and not bind ourselves to such a rule of admission as can give no evidence, whether a Communicant has Christian knowledge, or no.

I might add under this argument also, that as a child, an idiot, or a person ignorant, or a heathen may claim Communion according to this rule; so a child or a heathen is a sufficient judge who has knowledge enough to be admitted to the fellowship of a Church of Christ; for a child, or a heathen, can tell whether the person proposing himself, subscribes his Bible, or no; whether he declares his general assent to all the scripture, or no; or whether he repeats any express words of scripture aright, or no. As there is no need of any real understanding in Communicants upon this principle, so there is no need of any judgment or prudence in the churches of Christ, in order to receive them: no need of elders or governors, men of wisdom and discretion to use the keys of the church, where the door is so wide, that half the children in a parish may go into the church at once; and it opens so easily, that a child or a fool can manage it.

SECT. 5. A fourth argument against this test of Communion is this. If a mere assent to the express words of scripture be a sufficient test of Christian knowledge to claim admission into a church, this opens the door for an end-

less variety of different and contrary opinions, and practices, to enter into the same church; multitudes of heresies that relate both to faith and practice, may swarm in the same Communion; truths and errors, fundamental, and not fundamental, will be mingled here; errors tolerable, and intolerable; extremely dangerous if not damnable and destructive, will be admitted: for all that profess them in our age and day, in protestant nations, will subscribe to the Bible as the sufficient rule of faith and practice; nay, all persons that are not Heathens, Deists, Jews, or Mahometans, may claim a place in the churches of Christ.

Now let us first recount some of those various doctrines that will hereby be encouraged in the same Communion, and then consider what will be the inconveniencies attending such a mixed community.

First, Let us recount the various doctrines and their professors, that will be encouraged in the same Communion by this rule.

1. The Anthropomorphites say, that God hath proper parts, hands and feet, and eyes and ears, and is really in the shape of a man, according to the express words of scripture taken in a plain literal sense. One of this opinion (as I am informed) lately proposed himself to Christian Communion.

2. The Allegorists, on the other hand, explain in a metaphorical and figurative sense, whatsoever expressions they find in scripture, whose literal sense does not agree with their notions. Upon this principle some that deny the proper sacrifice and satisfaction of Christ

say, that his atonement, redemption, and sacrifice, are but figurative expressions. Others believe salvation to be obtained only through Jesus Christ, but they mean Christ, or the light within them.

3. The Arians say, that Jesus Christ was a mere creature, made out of nothing, before all other creatures; and superior to angels, endued with Divine power, and called God, and that he assumed flesh without a human soul.

4. The Sabellians believe, that the blessed Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, doth by no means intend three proper distinct persons, but is a mere Trinity of names and manifestations, modes and relations in the Godhead or Divine nature, and that the Son of God was not properly a person before his incarnation.

5. The Socinians derived from the old Samosatensians and Photinians say, that there is no such Trinity of persons in the Divine nature, as the Athanasians, and the schoolmen maintain. That Jesus Christ is a mere man, and had no being before he was conceived of the blessed virgin. That Christ did not make any proper satisfaction for the sins of men. That the soul sleeps with the body and rises with it at the resurrection; and after all, they acknowledge that the light of nature is sufficient to direct men to eternal happiness; and that nothing is to be believed in the sublimest points of religion but what is to be understood and judged of by our reason.

6. Enthusiasts, on the other hand, believe that reason is of no use in things of religion. That human learning doth more hurt than

good among Christians: that there is no need at all of it for ministers of the Gospel. That our own labor for our salvation signifies nothing; and therefore they wait for sensible impressions of the Holy Spirit, to move them to the common duties of Christianity.

7. The Pelagians say, that there is no imputed or inherent original sin. That man after his fall, had a proper power and free will in himself to become truly pious, or grossly wicked; and to do either good or evil. That men may obtain the favor of God by the merit of their own good works.

8. Arminians, or Remonstrants, generally hold that there is no certain and absolute election or redemption of particular persons unto salvation, that there is no need of the almighty, sovereign, and efficacious influences of the Spirit, in order to conversion. That believers may fall and perish eternally; and that there is no certain perseverance of the saints.

9. The Antinomians hold, that all true believers were justified from eternity. That an elect person is never chargeable with sin before God. That the moral law of God is not of perpetual obligation to the consciences of believers. That sin can do a believer no real injury.

10. The strict Calvinists deny every single proposition, and peculiar sentiment, that I have here mentioned under all the foregoing heads, and call them all errors; and believe the contrary propositions to be Divine truths delivered in the scriptures.

I might here add a variety of doctrines and sects, that have in former ages troubled and divided the church, viz. the Eutychians, who supposed that the two natures of Christ were so united and blended together, that the human was lost in the Divine. The Apollinarians who taught that Christ brought his flesh from heaven, and that he had no human will, but only a Divine will. The Donatists, who required the true church to be without sin or spot. The Origenist, who deny the eternal punishment of sinners, and fancy the devils themselves shall at last be saved.

I might further reckon up a long train of wild and unaccountable opinions which have no settled name, yet all arise from various senses, that the lusts or the fancies, or humors, or mistakes of men, have put on the express words of scripture: but these are sufficient in this place.

I would not be understood here to intend that every person, to whom any of these names may be affixed by men believes or professes all the doctrines that are ranged under any of these heads: all that I mean by this catalogue is this, that under these several names in our general and common discourse, all these principles or propositions are usually comprehended and understood.

Note. I have not mentioned the Papists, because they allow not the Bible to be a perfect rule, but build part of their religion on human traditions, and the pretended infallible authority of their church.

But so many of all those sects of Christians that I have mentioned, as are found in our day, do all take the Bible for their perfect rule of faith and practice, and each of them will subscribe the whole Bible, at least in their own translation of it, and profess to believe all the express words of scripture: now if any confession of express words of scripture, be a sufficient test of Christian faith, all these persons have this qualification, and cannot be denied Christian Communion in any church to which they propose themselves, for want of true Christian knowledge.

And now I would ask, what a wretched sort of Communion is it, that could be maintained in such a church, of such widely different opinions? What fellowship could they have in hearing the same sermons, in joining in the same prayers, and in all sacred offices? What holy harmony, what order, what peace or Christian unity, can be carried on in such a mixed and disagreeing multitude? But I insist no longer on this at present.

SECT. 6. In the prosecution of the fourth argument, I come therefore in the next place to consider, what will be the inconveniencies of making such a large and wide door to the church, and of encouraging such a promiscuous Communion: for though all these can never walk and worship together in any peace or order, yet all may be admitted on this foundation.

One great inconvenience is this, viz. Some persons that deny necessary fundamental

truths and duties, without which a man cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven, may enter into a church on earth, and claim Christian Communion by this rule of admission: for it may perhaps be doubted, whether all necessary particular articles, as well as general ones, are found in express words in the Bible (which I shall afterwards have occasion to inquire into.) But if all necessary articles were found there expressly, yet the grossest heretics may consent to those expressions, and explain them only in a metaphorical sense: so the Socinians explain the expressions of scripture concerning the sacrifice and atonement of Christ, and make them all mere metaphors, to signify something of a much inferior nature: but be their explications, and their sense of scripture what it will, yet they may demand Christian Communion upon this principle, that they subscribe the Bible, and every expression in it; though they explain the fundamental and essential articles of it quite away by figures and metaphors.

Indeed this has been the practice of heretics in all ages to run to this refuge, and make the words of scripture their hiding place and defence; having learnt well from their subtle teachers, or their own cunning devices, to twist and turn the words of scripture by figures, and tropes, and distinctions, into their own pernicious sense; and this ever will be the practice of persons, grossly erroneous in the things of religion, that yet would appear to agree with the scripture, and hold the Christian faith.

They may tell you that Christ is their only hope of salvation, and their way to God the Father; but they mean a Christ within, or the remains of the light of reason, and the dictates of a natural conscience.

They may assure you, they believe the resurrection of Christ from the dead; but they mean nothing but Christ within them, in the rising or awaking of the conscience from stupid and inactive silence.

They may assent that Christ is God, but mean only a metaphorical god, because he is made a king, or governor of the church.

They may profess the whole scripture in their own sense, and in the mean time they may believe such contradictions as these, viz.

I believe, *God worketh all things after the counsel of his own will*, Ephes. i, 11. Yet I believe, that the decrees of God are nothing else but immutable fate, and the necessary connexion of second causes, as Mr. Hobbs.

I believe that *God knoweth all his works from the beginning*, Acts xv, 18. Yet I believe, this foreknowledge is nothing else but a perfect sagacity of mind, and immediate contrivance to turn all things that happen to fulfil his own designs, as effectually as if he really foreknew. So a much better man than Mr. Hobbs has explained it.

I believe, that *in the beginning was the word, and the word was God*, John i, 1. Yet I believe that Jesus Christ had no being before he was conceived, and born of the Virgin, and that truly and properly he is but a mere man.

I believe, that we must *flee fornication*, 1 Cor. vi, 18; but I believe, that nothing else is intended in all such texts, but spiritual fornication, which is idolatry.

I believe, that we must *keep ourselves from idols*, and not practise idolatry, 1 John v, ult. Yet I believe that we may worship the true God, by idols or images; for the idolatry which is forbidden in the scripture, signifies only the worship of stones, and stocks, and images, for real and true Gods.

I believe we are bound to *follow peace with all men*, Heb. xii, 14; yet I believe we may contend for the faith so earnestly, as to burn heretics.

I believe we must *follow holiness* too, *without which no man shall see the Lord*, Heb. xii, 14; yet I am persuaded sin can do no real hurt to a believer.

Now who is there that has any value for the honor of the Gospel, for the glory of Christ, for the purity of our religion, and the welfare of the church, that would establish such a test of Communion, by which all these sort of persons may claim admission? A church composed of such a variety of sects, that differ so widely in points so numerous and so important, would much more resemble the ark of Noah, with all manner of creatures in it, clean and unclean, than the fold of Christ, where none but his sheep should have admittance, or such as have the visible marks of his sheep upon them.

The other incongruities, inconveniences, and mischiefs that will necessarily attend a

church founded upon this test of admission, shall be more largely and particularly described in my Answer to the next Question, to which I refer the reader.

Perhaps it will be said by way of reply to all these arguments, that where any person professes his faith, in the mere words of scripture, and yet makes it appear that he understands them in such an erroneous sense, as is inconsistent with the Gospel of Christ, or the fundamentals of Christianity, such a person ought not to be admitted to Christian Communion, because he plainly overthrows by his explication what he asserts by his confession: but where he gives no explication at all, it should be presumed that he believes all necessary truth.

To this I answer, 1. That if a confession of faith, in the mere words of scripture, be a sufficient test for church fellowship, no man who professes those words ought to be excluded, let him explain them how he please; for if the rule of scripture does indeed require you to receive all that profess the faith in scriptural words, no particular and perverse explications whatsoever should break in upon this sacred rule, least hereby, you who exclude him, set yourself up as a judge of the sense of scripture for other folks, and instead of making the words of scripture your test, you make your own sense of it the test of Communion, which is the very thing you pretend to avoid, and which you profess to renounce.

2. I add further, if you allow that a perverse or antichristian exposition of scripture in fun-

damental points, may exclude a man who professes the words of scripture from the Communion, then a just and reasonable suspicion of any person's antichristian exposition of it, may give just ground for inquiry into his sense of it, before he be received to a Christian church; even as a just and reasonable suspicion of any man's immorality, gives just ground for a stricter inquiry into his morals; for if he hath not Christian faith he is no more fit for the Christian Communion, than one who hath not Christian practice.

Now suppose a person be a mere stranger to you in his moral life, you ought to make inquiry concerning his morality before you receive him, and not take his virtue for granted: And by the same reason, if he be a mere stranger to you in his faith, you ought to make the same inquiry concerning his sense of scripture, in order to know that he is not an heretic, or that he does not profess scriptural words in an heretical sense; and not always take it for granted, that he believes the scripture in its true sense.

Thus these two parts of the test of Communion, viz. Profession of the true faith, and a pious practice, will stand upon the same foot; and a man may be excluded even by your own concession, if he wants either of them, even though he profess the words of scripture. And there ought to be an explicit discovery of both these by the candidate in order to Christian Communion, and not merely an implicit belief of them in those who are appointed to examine him.

As I grant with you, that where a person has in general a fair moral character among those who knew him, we ought not to take up and indulge groundless and unreasonable suspicions of his virtue; so where a person, who appears to be sincere and pious, makes profession of his faith in more general language, we ought not to take up unreasonable and groundless suspicions that he is an heretic. But as in times of universal and spreading corruption of manners, there should be a more strict inquiry into the conversation of every Communicant, so in times of spreading error, where scripture words are frequently used in an heretical sense, there ought to be a more strict inquiry into his faith; and it is a very reasonable demand, that he should explain his particular sense of the general words of scripture in fundamental points, and tell what he means by them, that he may not cover gross heresies and antichristian opinions, under the confession and disguise of scriptural language, that so antichristians may not be received into a Christian church.

SECT. 7. The last argument I shall propose against making a confession of the express words of scripture a sufficient evidence of Christian knowledge is this, that the scripture itself does not directly, and in express words, contain all that knowledge of particular truths and duties that is necessary to Christian Communion. I say of particular truths and duties, for I own it contains all in general.

Under the seventh question, I have made it appear evidently, that the knowledge necessary to Christian Communion, includes in it, both a knowledge of all those things that are necessary to salvation, and a knowledge of all those things that are necessary to practise, and enjoy this Communion.

Now if we first survey all those truths and duties that are necessary to salvation, perhaps we might find particular articles either of faith or practice, that are not set down in most express language in the very words of scripture. I grant, they are all so expressed in general terms, that a mean understanding, and a slight and easy turn of thought, is sufficient to derive from scripture all the particulars that are necessary to salvation; every needful explication, or consequence, lies plain and open to the view of common reason, though it may not be directly expressed in the very letter of scripture.

But I choose rather to survey those things that are necessary to practise, and to enjoy Christian Communion; such knowledge as is needful, in order to partake of the Lord's supper in a regular manner in the Christian church: And these things are not all contained in express words of scripture, but require something of explication and consequence to make them appear. As for instance.

1. If Baptism be necessary before the Lord's supper, it is necessary also to know the nature and design of Baptism, the meaning of being baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit; and the manner of performing it,

whether it must be done by dipping or sprinkling, or whether both be not lawful; and whether Baptism in infancy be sufficient. Now all these are not written down in express words of scripture.

2. It is necessary also that a person should know what is the nature of the Lord's supper; what the bread and wine represent; what is the design of blessing, breaking, and distributing them; who are the persons that must do this: And a woman must know, whether women are to be admitted to the Lord's supper; all which things are not fully and expressly delivered in the very words of scripture.

3. That several persons, who make a credible profession of Christianity, must agree to meet together, in order to celebrate Christian worship, and partake of this ordinance; and that it is not to be received alone, because it is an ordinance of Communion.

I might instance in other things that are necessary attendants on these ordinances, considered as human actions, which the light of nature plainly dictates, and which may be drawn by the most obvious and natural consequences from the directions, or examples of scripture; but they are not found there in express words, nor indeed is there any need of it, since they lie so open to the weakest exercise of reason.

Now to sum up the last argument. If there be any articles of Christian belief, or practice, necessary to salvation, or to public Christian worship, and to a regular participation of the Lord's supper, which are not laid down and

described in the express words of scripture; then may we not conclude, that a mere declaration of the belief of the Bible, or any part of it, is not a certain evidence of knowledge sufficient to demand Christian Communion, where all explications and consequences are utterly refused?

SECT. 8. The great objection against all my discourse is this; that since the word of God is a sufficient and perfect rule to direct Christians in their faith and practice, the words of scripture are therefore a sufficient and perfect test of Christian knowledge. The scripture (say they) is certainly capable of itself to determine all our doctrines, and all our duties; it is sufficient to furnish the man of God perfectly unto all good works, and it is able to make every man wise unto salvation. It was given for this end by the inspiration of God; and it does not stand in need of the assistance of human inferences and explications, in things necessary for Christians to believe and practise, 2 Tim. iii, 15, &c. Therefore an acknowledgment of the scripture, or the most considerable articles of Christianity in the express words of it, is a sufficient test for Christian Communion.

This *argument* is very popular, and drawn out into much flowery eloquence, to persuade and captivate the unwary. The writers on this side of the question brighten and flash upon the reader, and, as it were, overwhelm him (if the eye of his judgment be weak) with such dazzling language as this. "What, are not the

words which God himself hath written, effectual for all the purposes of Christianity without the addition of the words of men? Is not God wiser than man? And can any man form for himself a better test of knowledge, than God has done? Did not Christ, and his Spirit, which spoke by the apostles, know how to express Divine truths in the best manner, and in words fittest for every use and service of the Christian church? Has our Lord Jesus Christ so little consulted the truth and security of his Gospel, as well as the peace and welfare of his churches, as not to express every matter necessary to Communion, in plain language? Can we, shall we, dare we indulge so unbecoming an opinion of the care of our blessed Lord? Can there be any other words necessary to express his doctrine by, than those which himself has chosen?" Thus the torrent of such a popular harangue drowns all distinctions of things, and carries away the assent before due consideration.

To all this flourish, I answer first by way of concession; that our blessed Lord is all-wise, and has the tenderest care of his church, in providing a sufficiency of helps for every occasion. The holy scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself to teach us all things necessary; and the instructions of it are clear, plain, and evident to every humble inquirer: There is no need of any additions of men to this perfect rule, nor are any words that men can invent fitter to express those doctrines and duties, more suitably to the occasion and purpose for which each part of scripture was written, I

am abundantly persuaded, that from the book of God every plain Christian may easily collect his own duty in the necessary affairs of his salvation, and every man may obtain knowledge enough to fit him for the Communion of a Christian church.

SECT. 9. But to give a full and direct answer to the force of the foregoing objection, I would lay down these considerations, which may help to remove those glaring rays of rhetoric that diffuse themselves round the argument, impose upon, and dazzle weaker minds, and prevent them from beholding the question in its true light, which if once seen in its proper sense, would be determined with much ease.

1st *Consideration.* It is generally agreed by Protestant writers, that not the mere words of scripture, but the sense of it is properly scripture. The words of it are but the shell in which the Divine ideas are conveyed to the mind. It is not the words of the Bible, but the sense of it, which has the proper characters of the Word of God. If any words or language might pretend to this, surely it must be the Hebrew and Greek originals: Now these have no such power upon an unlearned Dane, or Swede, a French or an English man, as is attributed in scripture to the Word of God. These words in Greek would not pierce or divide in sunder the soul and spirit of a barbarian: The Gospel in mixed Syriac language, in which Christ himself spoke, would never prove the power of God to the salvation of a Roman, or a Turk: Nor could the perfect Law

of the Lord, in Hebrew, convert the soul of a Muscovite. But when these original words are translated into each language, and convey the same Divine instruction and sense to different nations, this sense and instruction, (which is properly the Word of God) work upon the heart, and make a new creature; for the sense of scripture is the same in all languages, though the words are very different. Hence it is plain, that we do not in the least derogate from the honor of the Bible, while we declare, that it is the sense of scripture, and not the mere words of it, that must be our rule of duty and practice.

2d *Consideration.* That the mere words of scripture were never given us for a test of truth and error, but the sense of scripture is such a test; much less can we suppose the words of scripture given us for a test of every man's knowledge, in order to Christian Communion. Those that are of this opinion, profess indeed to pay a most exalted and superlative honor to the holy scripture, in making the very letters and syllables of it so effectual and powerful, to determine all controversies in the Christian church with the greatest ease, and to charm and subdue the warring tongues of men to submission and silence: For if an heretic acknowledges these letters and syllables to be Divine, no man must open his mouth against him. But surely this is such an honor, as God never designed for letters and syllables; and if I might venture to use so hard a word, I should ask whether it were not a superstitious regard paid to ink and paper? When errors are proposed, we are indeed called to examine

them by *the law and the testimony*, Isaiah. viii, 20; and it is said, *if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.* But the design of this text is not to make the very words and syllables the judges of truth, but the meaning and sense of them: I prove it thus.

Suppose I doubt whether Christ made a real and proper satisfaction to the justice of God for the offences of man; I compare this with the words of scripture, and I find there, that Christ redeemed us from the curse, he bare our sins on his body, he was made a sacrifice for sin, he is our propitiation or atonement; but I cannot find the words real and proper satisfaction in scripture; how then must I judge whether this be truth, or no? I cannot do it by the mere words, for these are different; but by its agreement in sense and meaning with those other scriptural expressions, I find it to be a Divine truth.

I prove it by another instance thus. Suppose I am told that I must subdue my pride and vanity of mind, and that I must repent of all backbiting and intemperance, of which I have been guilty, if ever I would be saved: I consult my Bible, and there I find that I must repent of sin, that I must mortify the deeds of the body, that I must crucify the flesh with its lusts, that I must pluck out my right eye, and cut off my right hand, if I would enter into the kingdom of heaven. Now how shall I know what is my duty? Surely, the literal sense of the words cannot be. How then shall I find my duty, but by explaining the spiritual sense

of these metaphors, in which scripture so much abounds? A right hand, and a right eye, signifies those sins which are beloved as those members of the body; and then I must draw such consequences as these, viz. If sin must be repented of, then backbiting and intemperance must be repented of, for they are sins; and pride and vanity of mind must be subdued for the same reason.

If the words of scripture may not be treated in this manner, and applied to solve any doubt or difficulty by explications and inferences, the scripture cannot be a sufficient test of truth and error; and if this method be allowed, then it becomes also a sufficient test of Christian knowledge in order to Communion; which is all that I contend for.

3d *Consideration.* Most of the books of scripture were written at different times, and upon very different occasions, to reprove some particular vices, to refute some special errors or heresies, to instruct in some particular affairs relating to doctrine and duty, in such expressions as were most exactly suited, and divinely proper to answer those special designs. The metaphors and figures of speech there used were well known, or well explained, in that age, and accommodated to the genius and understanding of those persons, for whose benefit they were first written: And by these Divine writings we have sufficient direction to find out all necessary truths and duties at all times, in all nations, and ages of the church; by comparison of things, and just inferences. Now though God foreknew what errors would arise

in every age, yet it is impossible that so small a book as the New Testament, could mention and refute every error that might possibly arise, or forbid every particular vice or corruption that might spring up in following ages; and all this in express words, and in terms most directly opposing those sins and errors which are almost infinite, and as yet had no being. Therefore without any derogation from the sufficiency of scripture, we may justly allow, that it is possible for wise and pious men, that live in those succeeding ages, to explain the general sense of scripture in such expressions, as may more directly and effectually guard against the sins and heresies of the age; this is certainly needful in order to instruct the ignorant; and some confession of this kind may be proper and necessary in times of error, to keep the Communion of the Churches of Christ pure and holy; yet this also may be done, as I have shewn before, without an express imposition of any set human forms; but it can never be done effectually by making the mere words of scripture a test of Communion, which in all ages heretics have learnt to pervert to their own sense.

4th Consideration. The sufficiency of scripture, for our rule of faith and practice in revealed religion, does not signify a sufficiency of the bare words and syllables of scripture, to declare every particular article of doctrine or duty in direct and express terms: But that it sufficiently includes and contains them all; so that by a most easy and obvious exercise of reason, all necessary truths and duties may be

found, either in express words, or in easy, plain, and natural consequences; and that there is no need of old traditions, nor any new inventions of men. The sufficiency of natural light, to direct innocent man in natural religion, does not signify that all the general and particular articles of it were written actually, and constantly abiding in the mind, but that they are plainly and easily deducible by natural reason. So a book is said to be sufficient to teach any art or science, if it contains all the main principles of it, so that all the parts of this art or science, may be very easily learnt thereby.

The New Testament is sufficient to teach us the holy skill of prayer, because it includes every thing necessary for that duty; and the Lord's prayer has been generally esteemed a perfect model for that part of worship; yet a child may say over all the words of the Lord's prayer, and know not at all how to pray: And if it were possible for a strong memory to repeat all the New Testament by heart, it would not be a sufficient proof, that that person was acquainted with the Divine skill of praying. So the Bible is abundantly sufficient to furnish a preacher for his work; but if he could say never so many of the words of the Bible without book, it would not be a proper test of his ability to preach. This spiritual furniture and skill for the performance of praying or preaching, is to be obtained by comparing several parts of the Bible together, by learning their sense and meaning, and by drawing proper inferences from several passages of it, and knowing how to apply them to all particular cases in sermons

and prayers: The same may be said in proportion concerning the furniture and fitness of a person to be admitted to Christian Communion. Now in order for a man to manifest that he has the spiritual skill and furniture, he must acquaint me in some other words, what he means by these words of scripture that he can repeat by memory.

It is not at all inconsistent with the clearness and perfection of scripture, that the unlearned should use their reason in finding out doctrines and duties, by comparing scripture with scripture, and drawing general inferences from the practice, example, and occasional speeches of Christ and his apostles; as it has never been counted inconsistent with the clearness and perfection of it, that learned men must translate the Greek and Hebrew into our mother-tongue: For the Bible in Greek and Hebrew, is more insufficient to lead a poor English man to heaven without translation, than an English Bible is to lead him thither, without the exercise of his reason in explications and inferences.

The plain and natural consequences of scripture, have in a larger sense been often called scripture itself; and have always been justly allowed as sufficient to determine any controversy in religion, or prove any truth, or refute any error. The example of Christ and his apostles, shew us the use and the necessity of consequences; they argued in this manner against their opponents, who did not acknowledge their Divine commission. Chillingworth himself (in that famous paragraph of his which

is so often cited) acknowledges that plain inferences from scripture make up part of our religion: The Bible, saith he with emphasis, the Bible is the religion of protestants; whatsoever else they believe besides it, and the plain irrefragable indubitable consequences of it, well may they hold it as a matter of opinion, but not as a matter of faith and religion.

Nor is it necessary to the plainness, evidence, and strength of any consequences of scripture, that all persons should own them, and none deny them; for the plainest and most open truths have been denied by some persons in all ages, through want of attention, through false education, through the prepossession of other opinions, through the attachment to a party, through obstinacy of temper, and blind zeal: But all the consequences of scripture, that are necessary to faith and practice in order to salvation, are so plain, that an honest, sincere, and diligent person, though weak in understanding, may easily find them out by reading, meditation, humble prayer, and readiness to receive the truth in the love of it.

Here let it be noted, that the necessary consequences of scripture, may be called the doctrine of scripture; though the consequences of the doctrines of Luther, Calvin, or any other man, may not be called their doctrines; because the Spirit of God, who searcheth the deep things of God, well knew all the propositions and consequences that ever could be drawn, and fairly deduced from the words of scripture, when he first inspired the sacred writers; and therefore he designed them all as certain and

Divine truths. But it is not so with men, who may hold such opinions as are attended with unhappy consequences, which yet they themselves may not be aware of, or perhaps may expressly deny.

5th Consideration. The most perfect rule always needs a proper application to every particular case; and this does not at all diminish its perfection, nor lessen its perspicuity. Scripture is still the perfect and final judge of truth and duty in things sacred, though every man must apply the words and sense of scripture to his own case, for his own instruction, edification, and salvation; and every church, for their own practice of Communion; must apply the words of scripture according to their own best judgment. The law is a perfect judge of right and wrong in things civil, though it must be applied, by the reason and wisdom of man, to particular cases. A rule, or square, is not imperfect because it requires the hand of the builder to apply it, in order to measure the house or the wall. We are not brutes that cannot reason, nor mere white paper, fit to take nothing but the express stamp of letters and syllables; reasoning is one of our noblest powers, and God demands its exercise: We are bid to search the scriptures, and compare spiritual things with spiritual. It is impossible to transfer, or apply, any general sentence of scripture to particular exhortations, reproofs, instruction, conviction, or comfort for ourselves or others, without deducing consequences, and thereby bringing the general words to our daily present occasions: Nor is it possible for any

persons to be admitted into a church of Christ, upon just and regular grounds, without comparing their personal characters, their confessions, and their practice with the word of God, by the exercise of our reason, and applying to that particular case, what we derive and infer from general rules, or parallel examples; now all this cannot be done without making use of the consequences of scripture.

6th *Consideration.* This test of Christian knowledge, this supposed rule of Communion, is not found among the express words of scripture. I might therefore ask leave of our Protestant brethren, who strenuously maintain this principle, to make an address to them, in their own language, thus: "Surely if this rule of Christian Communion be of such absolute necessity to maintain peace, and secure truth, we may wonder why it is not written down expressly in scripture. Has Jesus Christ so little consulted the peace of his churches, and the truth of his Gospel, as to neglect so necessary a rule of church Communion, without which you suppose, that neither peace nor truth can be maintained? O what a world of strife and confusion in the churches might have been prevented, by an express appointment of the words of scripture, to be the universal test of knowledge for Christian Communion? Is the scripture so careful to express all things necessary, and yet is this omitted? May I not thence infer, according to your own principles, that this rule of Communion is not necessary? Indeed, in my opinion, it is so far from being written in the Bible in express words, that by

all the exercise of my reason, I cannot derive it from my Bible, by any plain or certain consequence; I have not yet seen evidence enough to believe it to be a sufficient, or an appointed rule; much less of so absolute necessity to Christian Communion, truth, or peace."

QUESTION XI.

Whether all sorts of Protestants may join together as members of the same church?

SECTION 1. BY the name Protestant, I intend not only those that protested against the corruptions of the Roman church, and the edict of the emperor in Germany, at the beginning of the reformation, but I include also all that hold the same general principle, making the Bible the only and perfect rule of faith and manners, and giving every single person a right to judge for himself concerning the sense and meaning of the Bible in matters of religion, and to practise according to his own sentiments in things sacred.

Now if the question be put, Whether all such persons professing the same Protestant principle with all their different sentiments, may be united in the same church, I answer, 1. It is impossible, and they cannot. 2. It is unlawful, and they ought not. 3. If it were both possible and lawful, yet it is highly inexpedient, and therefore it should not be done.

First, It is impossible, and they cannot join in the same Communion. There are some actions necessary in order to Christian Communion in worship, which are appointed in general in the holy scripture, but must be performed in some particular and determinate way: now this in the very nature of things makes it necessary to determine the words of scripture to a particular sense; and different sects of Protestants determine these words in such different ways, as will often be exceeding hard, and sometimes utterly impossible, to be reconciled and made consistent in one Communion: as for instance,

1. Some cannot in conscience attend upon the ministry of a person, who has not been ordained by the imposition of the hands of a diocesan bishop, for they think him no minister of Christ; others refuse him for a minister, who has not had the hands of several presbyters imposed in his ordination; and there are a third sort again, that think either of these two ordinations to be unnecessary, if not unlawful; and believe him no minister of Christ, unless he be chosen by a congregation, and set apart to that work amongst them by fasting and prayer.

Note, That I speak here of those that are each of them strict and rigid in the extremes of their own way, honest and sincere in the main, but zealous and obstinate in their own principles; now these can never join under one ministry, unless their minister has passed through all these three sorts of ordinations, which is not to be expected.

2. Some think it utterly unlawful to pray in public without a form, lest *rash and hasty expressions be uttered before God*, Eccles. v, 2. Others think it equally unlawful to use a form of prayer, lest they *quench the spirit* which is given to teach them to pray, 1 Thess. v, 19; Eph. vi, 18; and how can these possibly join in the same prayer?

3. Some esteem the Lord's prayer so glorious, so perfect, and so universal a prayer for all times and ages, that it should never be omitted in public worship; others fancy it unlawful to be used at all as a prayer, ever since the Spirit was given to men at the ascension of Christ, because it is in their sense a confinement of the Spirit to a form of words.

4. Some think the practice of singing the praises of God, to be a necessary part of Christian worship, and cannot persuade themselves to live without it; others esteem it a mere anti-christian invention, and they dare not be present for a moment in an assembly that sings, lest they give countenance to false worship and superstition; and if any other music be joined to the voice, they count it still more heinous and abominable.

5. Some believe the Lord's supper cannot be celebrated aright at noon, because it was instituted in the evening, and is called a supper; others that live scattered at great distances in a wide country parish, can never meet to communicate in an evening, especially four or five months in the winter; and they think the Lord's supper at noon is a very lawful and

proper practice, and necessary to them, because otherwise they cannot attend it.

6. Some suppose, that it is very irreverent and unlawful to communicate in a sitting posture, and think it their duty to kneel, when they receive the seal of the greatest of blessings from the hands of God; others think no other posture of body lawful besides sitting, because it is a feast, and was instituted with the proper gestures at a table; and many foreign protestants esteem sitting to have too much familiarity and irreverence, and kneeling too much like adoration of the bread, and therefore always stand at that ordinance. And here we may suppose some narrow spirited Christians, of each sort, that dare not be present at the sacrament, where a different gesture is used, lest they seem to encourage a sinful practice by their communicating together.

7. Some are persuaded, that none have a right to the Communion that were not baptized by dipping, and that upon a profession of their faith, for they count all the rest unbaptized; and these can never join at the Lord's supper, with a minister or people that were only baptized in infancy by sprinkling, and think that sufficient.

8. Some are satisfied that there is no holy day in the week but Saturday, or the seventh, and they require public worship and the Communion on that day; others think the first day of the week is alone holy, and they demand the celebration of the Lord's supper on that day constantly; nor can they leave all the common

businesses of life to attend on the worship of Saturday.

Now every man sees how impracticable it is to bring these different sorts of protestants to the settled Communion of the same church. I confess I have represented their different sentiments in their extremes, and in the highest degrees of opposition; but it must be granted also, that several such sort of Christians are to be found, whose weaker judgments and warm zeal, have carried these matters to the same extremes of opposition in which I have represented them; therefore my argument stands good, and such a promiscuous Communion appears impossible.

Yet here I would lay down this caution; that though these sorts of protestants are necessarily excluded from mutual Communion, it is not because either of them are unworthy of it, or because it is unlawful to communicate with each other, but merely because their different and contrary forms of worship render it impossible. Let them not therefore censure or judge one another, but so far as true piety appears, let them account each other good Christians, and be ready to do all proper Christian offices for, and toward each other; and let them wait till God shall convince either of them of their excessive rigor, and unreasonable strictness, in their particular opinions, and in the mean time let them be heartily willing to join with each other in such parts of worship in which they agree, where just occasions may require it.

Secondly, if the thing were possible, and such a mingled Communion of all professed protestants could be practised, yet there are some cases wherein it would be unlawful, and ought not to be practised: For several persons may believe the Bible to be the only and perfect rule of faith and duty, and yet may put such a sense upon it, as is either dishonorable, dangerous, or destructive of the Christian faith; I have made this appear at large under the foregoing question; there I have shewn that there may be Anthropomorphite and Arian protestants, Sabellian, Socinian, and Pelagian; rational, and enthusiastic; literal and allegorical; Calvinist, Arminian, and Antinomian; there I have largely proved, that persons professing the Bible, may deny the divinity and satisfaction of Christ, the real resurrection of Christ, the operations of the Holy Spirit, the final resurrection of the body, and several other such important doctrines, by turning the expressions of scripture to a mere allegorical and figurative sense: Now as a certain author says, "If a man use the words of scripture, but impose a very different and new sense upon them, he may thereby as well bring in a new Gospel, as if he used words of his own; and so he subjects himself justly to the anathema, or curse of the apostle, Gal. i, 8, 9, *As we said before, so say I now again, if any man preach any other Gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.*" It is a very just and remarkable saying to this purpose of Doctor Reynolds, in conference with Hart: "He who believes the words of Christ,

in the sense of Antichrist, and rejects the sense of Christ, and his Spirit, is not a Christian, but is, in deed and truth, antichristian." Now with such sort of persons, Christian Communion ought not to be maintained, for they who deny the Christian faith, can have no right to the special ordinances of Christ.

Thirdly, if such a promiscuous Communion of all professing protestants were both possible and lawful, *yet it is highly inexpedient*. Now the apostle has determined it, that things which are utterly inexpedient, and such as hinder the edification of the church, should not be practised, 1 Cor. x, 2, 3.

The great and evident inexpediency, and the many inconveniences of such a Community, will appear under the following heads.

SECT. 2. 1st *Inconvenience*. What a most uncomfortable Communion would Christians have among brethren and sisters, in the same Community of such wild and distant principles, as those ten differences of Christians I have reckoned up under the former question? Read over all their opinions again, and say, how utterly inexpedient is it that these should be united in one church! *What fellowship has righteousness with unrighteousness? and what Communion has light with darkness? and what concord has Christ with Belial, or what part hath he that believeth with an Infidel? and what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?* 2 Cor. vi, 14, 15, 16. For he that disbelieves any necessary articles of the Christian faith, we may rank him among the Infidels.

Christian Communion, in the pleasure and profit of it, consists very much in an union of hearts in constant public worship, in praying occasionally with one another, and conferring together about Divine things: But what bonds of charity can unite their hearts, where one justly suspects the others' faith in points of greatest importance? How can they join with pleasure in hearing the same word of God, while their sense and meaning under those words is so extremely different, and contrary to each other, as light and darkness, as God and the creature, as heaven and earth? What pleasure in joining to address the same Savior, while one believes him to be the true and eternal God, the other thinks him but a mere man? What harmony is there in their joys and praises, while one adores this redeemer for bearing the punishment of all his sins, and dying as a sacrifice in his stead; and the other, by the same expressions of adoration, only gives him thanks for confirming his doctrine of remission of sins by becoming a martyr for it? What delight can the members of the same church take in conversing with each other, who differ so widely even in things of experimental and practical godliness? While one is relating the power and freedom of Divine grace in convincing him of sin, and shining into his heart to give him the saving knowledge of the Gospel, in turning his mind from earth to heaven, and changing his whole soul, with all the powers of it, into a Divine temper, in securing him from this and that temptation, and over-ruling his spirit

to persevere in the paths of holiness; the other believes that Divine grace and power has no hand in all this; but what is only providential, by external means and helps; and that this piety is really to be ascribed to the freedom of his own will; and perhaps a third person shall interpose, and say in Antinomian language, "There is no need you should be so solicitous about these lesser matters of freedom from temptation, or the mortification of sin, either by Divine grace, or by your own will; if you are but a believer in Christ, and your faith be strong, sin cannot do you hurt, and you shall certainly be saved." What wretched Communion in prayer, or holy conference, must be maintained among fellow-members of the same church, whose opinions are so fearfully divided?

SECT. 3. 2d *Inconvenience.* What an unhappy station must a minister have amongst such a people? How difficult to fulfil his ministrations of prayer and preaching without offence? Or rather how impossible? Surely the work of a preacher is to explain the scripture to his hearers; but he can hardly step out beyond the very express words of scripture, but he breaks in upon some of their darling sentiments: He can scarce comment upon any text, but he opposes the one side or the other of two contrary opinions, and grieves some of the flock: He can hardly speak of the person of Christ Jesus the Mediator, but he offends the Arian, the Samosatene, or Athanasian: He can scarce express any thing about the re-

demption and atonement of Christ, but he awakens either the Calvinist, or the Socinian, to jealousy, and affronts their sacred doctrines: He must not ascribe glory to the Father, Son, and Spirit, lest he displease the Unitarians in his assembly; nor must he neglect it, lest the Trinitarian take umbrage. He dares not name the word perseverance, lest the Arminian be angry; and if he should talk of falling from grace, the Calvinist trembles, and half despairs.

And as preaching would be rendered almost impracticable, unless he confined himself only to mere moral duties, such as Seneca might preach; so all his ministrations in prayer and thanksgiving would be most unhappily perplexed and confined: He must not pray for forgiveness of sins, for the Antinomian believer does not want it; nor for almighty sanctifying grace, for the remonstrant Christian knows no need of it: He must not confess original sin, for the Pelagian disowns himself guilty; nor dares he mention a word of the imputed righteousness of Christ, or justification by faith alone, lest half the assembly rise in arms against him: Nor must he venture to give thanks for the free electing love of God, least two thirds of his church shew a murmuring dissent. Surely there is little left for this man to talk of in his pulpit, but what we may borrow from Plato, Plutarch, or Epictetus.

SECT. 4. To prevent this inconvenience, the patrons of this opinion assert, that a minister ought not to impose any particular sense on

any of the controverted scriptures in his preaching; but all his business is freely and fairly to acquaint the people with those various senses of scripture, in which the different sects of Christianity have contrived to explain it: He must represent the reasons impartially on both sides, and leave them to the judgment of the hearers, without biassing of them (as one expresses it) by the needless declaration of his own opinion: and they tell us, it would be much more edifying to all Christians, if ministers in their public discourses expressly asserted no other things than such as all, who read the scripture and receive it for the rule of their faith, acknowledge to be certain.

To this I reply. 1st, What poor food would this be for hungry and thirsty souls to be treated with nothing else in a Christian church, but the mere inculcation of moral duties, or the narration of Christian controversies? What support could a weary and heavy laden sinner, bowed down and broken with a sense of guilt, obtain from such a discourse? Must a poor perishing creature, under the fears of the wrath of God, have no relief given it from a just and full explication of the sacrifice of Christ, because the Socinian does not believe it? And must a weak Christian, conflicting long with sins and temptations, have no encouragement from the doctrine of inward effectual grace, lest the Arminian take offence at it? Is this that way of preaching that Christ has ordained to save guilty and impotent creatures, by a deep silence of the true

and only relief, or a mere dubious proposal of it?

2ndly. Besides, how can a minister answer it to God, or his own conscience, if he sees errors in matters of importance growing amongst men, perhaps in his own church too, and does not attempt to prevent or refute them by his best interpretation of the word of God? Is he not *set for the defence and confirmation of the Gospel*, 1 Phil. vii, 17; is he not bound to maintain sound doctrine, and to *teach no other*, 1 Tim. i, 3; must not he *contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints?* Jude 3. How narrow is the work of a Gospel minister, and how much less useful is his labor or his office, if he be forbid this service to Christ, and the church?

There were some little points of controversy, in the apostles' days, about the lawfulness of meats, &c. which if they were never determined, would not be destructive to Christianity; concerning these, the apostle at some seasons directs to *keep our faith*, or opinion, *to ourselves*, Rom. xiv, 22. Yet at other times he bids Timothy preach his own sense of them, and declare for Christian liberty, and the free use of food. 1 Tim. iv, 6, *If thou put the brethren in mind of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, &c.* Now can we think that Timothy should publicly give his sense in such circumstantial things, and yet not give it in the most important matters of the *satisfaction and atonement of Christ*, and the doctrines of the *efficacious sanctifying grace of the Spirit?* Read 2 Tim.

ii, 14, 15, 18, 23, &c. Tit. i, 9, 10, 13; and ii, 1, 2; and judge if the apostle requires, or even indulges those young preachers to propose important doctrines in such a doubtful way, as may minister questions, and gender strifes; and in such an indifferent manner, as though it was no matter which opinion his hearers embraced: surely this would be the way to keep men ever learning, and never coming to a settled knowledge of the truth.

3dly. I might add in the third place, how can it be supposed, that every minister who has determined his own sentiments in these controverted points, should represent the different senses of scripture in just and impartial language, so as not to favor either side. Will not his own opinion give a warmth of delivery, or a brightness of expression, while he is representing the reasons of it? And will he not be tempted with a cold and languid faintness, to propose the arguments of those that differ from him? It is utterly as unreasonable to expect such an unbiassed indifference in his explications of the important points in the word of God, as it is unrighteous to require it.

4thly. In the last place I reply, that such a practice as this would kindle contentions instead of quenching them: it would raise perpetual strife in the church, instead of composing it; and by relating the opinions and arguments on all sides, would furnish every warm temper with weapons offensive and defensive, to carry on the controversial war, and fight it out at home. This thought naturally leads me

to mention the third inconvenience, of forming such a mixed and motley church.

SECT. 5. *3d Inconvenience.* This sort of Communion would be much more likely to tear itself to pieces by perpetual jangles, disputes, and quarrels, than to maintain peace and unity. Nor could this pretended bond of peace, an agreement in express words of scripture, secure it. Our Savior has already given a fair decision of this matter, when he assures us, that *a house divided against itself can never stand*, Matt. xii, 25. These persons that entertain so different opinions in religion, might agree well enough in the common affairs of life, if they were not joined in one church, and by that means brought constantly to worship together; but when they must hear continually the same sermons, attend the same prayers, and offer thanks to God together in the same words, with different meanings, it is not possible to secure them from awakening their jarring and contrary sentiments, whensoever any thing relating to those subjects is mentioned; and it is most likely too it will rouse their anger, their contempt, and their uncharitable censures of those that differ from them in points of importance. Thus the proposed bond of peace, would become a fire-brand of perpetual war, till it ended in divisions and desolation.

And this event may justly and reasonably be expected upon the election of every new officer in the church, as often as death, or removal of Communion, or incapacity, &c. give

occasion for a new choice. Will not each party be zealous to elect a person of their own sentiments? and the church by this means be crumbled into many parties, and divided amongst many candidates? Thus the passions of men will have a strong temptation to exert themselves in wrath and reproaches; nor can any of them be persuaded to yield and drop their own candidates, which might be much more easily done, if the competitors were of the same opinion.

SECT. 6. 4th *Inconvenience*. Such a principle or test of Communion, might in some few years quite change the ministers and ministrations, the whole scheme and order of a church of Christ, from moderate Calvinist or Lutheran, to Antinomian, Pelagian, or Socinian, from Christian worshippers to antichristian idolaters, and from a temple of God to a synagogue of Satan; and according to this rule, the church has no power, nor right, to prevent it. Suppose a church of pious Lutherans, or Calvinists, consisting of thirty or forty members, whereof but eleven or twelve are men; if providentially six or seven of these die in a few years, and six or seven bold Antinomians, or Socinians, are admitted on the mere profession of scripture: they become the majority, and consequently the rulers of the whole church; they choose pastors, and appoint ministrations and orders according to their own sense of scripture; what must all the twenty or thirty original members of the church do, that walked and worshipped many years together

in holiness and comfort, according to the doctrine and practice of Luther, or Calvin? Must this lesser party of men, and perhaps almost all the women of the church, sit still under such preaching, and such ministration, as an Antinomian, or a Socinian pastor would entertain them with, to their weekly public sorrow, and their mourning in secret every day? Or must they quietly depart from the Communion of the church, and each of them seek their better edification in new churches where they could find it?

Perhaps also this church might be possessed of many temporal advantages, they might have a fair and well-built place of worship, belonging to the Community, with gifts or annuities for the support of the ministry and the poor; plate and linen, and other utensils for the celebration of holy ordinances given to the church: must seven or eight professed Antinomians, or Socinians, by this means become the possessors of it? And the old members, while they seek their better edification, relinquish their first society and place of worship, and all these temporal possessions at once, which were given for the sacred uses of that Calvinist or Lutheran church? And yet they have their own poor to maintain still, who cannot find their edification in the Socinian, or Antinomian worship? Can that be a necessary rule of church Communion, which would thus injure the greatest part of the church (including the women) and rob them all of their spiritual profit, and their outward advantages at once?

The tables may be turned, and the same inconveniences would arise to a Socinian, or Antinomian church, by admitting Calvinists, or Lutherans.

Now if such a sort of mixed Communion be impracticable, unlawful, and highly inexpedient, as I think it is plainly proved beyond contradiction, the question must be determined on the negative side, and all sorts of Protestants cannot be members of one particular church.

A very natural question arises here, whether no Christians must join in Communion, but those that are in all things of the same opinion? This shall be a subject of my next inquiry.

QUESTION XII.

Whether no Christians must join in the same Communion, but those that are in all things of the same opinion?

SECTION 1. I HOPE there is nothing that I have said in the foregoing discourses can be interpreted into so narrow a sense, as to exclude all Protestants from the same Communion, but those whose sentiments are exactly alike. This would make all Communion impracticable; for it will be hard to find two persons in the world, that in every point of religion have the same sentiments: Or if here and there half a dozen, or half a score Christians were found that came very near to each other in opinion, these must every where set up distinct societies by themselves; thus the church

of Christ would be crumbled into endless divisions.

To this question therefore I answer in the first place, That as the affairs of the Christian world are found in this imperfect state, it seems generally most adviseable for every person to join in constant and fixed Communion with such a church, or be admitted members of such a particular Christian society, whose public profession comes nearest to his own sentiments, where he can possibly have opportunity to do it; this would lay a foundation for the greatest union and peace among the members of the same church; considering the folly and weakness of human nature, and how much our differences of opinion endanger our charity, certainly this would be the easiest and surest method of answering the design of those apostolical directions and wishes. Rom. xv, 5, 6, *God grant you to be like minded, that ye may with one mind, and one mouth, glorify God, &c.* 1 Cor. i, 10, *I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment.* And in order to shew their general and extensive charity, they may take proper opportunities for occasional Communion with other churches that differ from them in matters of less importance; and they should be as ready to admit the members of such churches to the same privilege of occasional Communion with themselves. Thus they might maintain the unity of the church of Christ in general, and

preserve peace, both abroad and at home, without contention or schism.

SECT. 2. But to declare my opinion particularly on this head; I would say, that there are two sorts of persons that ought never to communicate in the same sacraments; and there are three sorts of Christians that need not join as members of the same church, yet may occasionally maintain Communion with each other; and I think all other sorts of Protestants may hold constant Communion together.

The persons that should never attempt to join in the same Communion, either constant or occasional, are these:

1st. Those that differ in fundamental articles, of doctrine or practice, or such articles, as either side supposes to be fundamental and necessary to salvation; for if they can never hope to meet together in heaven upon the principles they profess, I see no reason why they should join in solemn acts of special Communion on earth; nor does the holy scripture require or encourage, but rather forbids it. *What Communion hath light with darkness? Righteousness with unrighteousness? The temple of God with idols? And he that believeth with an infidel?* 2 Cor. vi, 14, &c.

2dly. Those that are so widely divided in their opinions about some practical points of worship or discipline, which are necessary to be practised in communicating together, but are utterly inconsistent with each other: Several such I have mentioned in the beginning of the former question; as, those that think public

liturgies or singing of psalms necessary, and those that think them utterly unlawful: Such as esteem episcopal ordination of absolute necessity, and such as believe it to be sinful and antichristian, &c. These cannot hold Communion together in special worship, and hardly in the general ordinances of it.

The persons that should content themselves with occasional Communion together, are chiefly such as these, viz.

1st. Those that give evidence of serious piety, but differ in very important points of doctrine, which yet they cannot certainly call fundamental; and especially such points as continually occur in preaching, praying, or other parts of worship, and would frequently disquiet and disturb the devotion of one party, or the other. Such I may suppose the better sort of Remonstrants, or Arminians, compared with the Calvinists, and the better sort of Enthusiasts, or Antinomians.

2dly. Those that differ much in the external forms of worship or discipline, which yet are not utterly inconsistent with each other; but if fixed and united in one single Community, they might probably occasion frequent disturbances; such are the moderate Episcopalians, and Baptists, Lutherans, and Calvinists, &c.

Those I call moderate, who are not so strict and rigid in their opinions, nor run into such extremes, nor place so great a necessity in their particular modes of worship or discipline, but being persons of serious piety and of extensive charity, they think it proper to omit or alter, on particular occasions, what may be

offensive to either side; or at least they allow either side their own particular practices and forms. These may very well unite in occasional Communion, though they are fixed members of the churches of their own persuasion. A church that communicates kneeling, may allow Communion to one that stands or sits: A church baptized in infancy, or in adult age, may allow Communion to those that are of the contrary practice in baptism. A church that receives members upon a stricter profession of inward and experimental godliness, may allow Communion to one that has been admitted a member of another church, where the profession of Christianity is more large and general. A church that holds no bodily presence of Christ in the sacrament, may allow Communion with one that believes consubstantiation, or that the body of Christ is present together with the bread, &c. Such occasional instances of Communion might tend to enlarge the spirits of men into a good opinion of each other, and increase Christian charity. But if the want of opportunity to join with Christians of their own sentiments, should call or encourage them to unite as fixed members of the same Community, they should agree to some sort of articles of peace, not to disturb the quiet of that church, by breaking in upon and overturning its old and usual forms of ministration and government: For the peace of the church is more valuable than the amendment of some improper forms, where the life and power of godliness is preserved.

3dly. Those that differ in less points of Christianity, but are of unsettled and unsociable principles or humors, and cannot content themselves without shifting from church to church, nor be easy with any that differ from them, without a zealous propagation of their own opinions, contrary to the rules that the apostle has given for the peace of the church, Rom. xiv. Some learned writers suppose these to be the heretics in the scripture sense. Surely these should be contented with occasional Communion, and they should give satisfactory evidence of inward piety, before they are received to any Communion at all.

Now if these three sorts are admitted occasionally to communicate in the special ordinances of Christ, this seems to me sufficient to answer the canons of the apostle, where we are bid *to receive such as Christ has received*, and that *without doubtful disputations*, Rom. xv, 7, 8, and Rom. xiv, 1. Whereas if they should be admitted to a full and fixed membership, power, and privilege in the same church, without any limitation by articles of peace, that would so much endanger the common edification and peace of the whole body, as to run counter to other canons of the same apostle; *Let all things be done to edification*, 1 Cor. xiv, 26. *Follow the things that make for peace*, Rom. xiv, 19.

As for all other Protestants, whose differences are of less moment, notwithstanding they may be very various, and almost infinite, yet if they are of a peaceful spirit, and give evidence of hearty and sincere piety, I think they may

join, where they have opportunity, as complete and constant members of the same church, and worship the same God together, through the same Lord Jesus Christ, by the same Spirit, and fulfil all duties of Christian fellowship, to his glory, and their mutual edification.

When any such sort of difficulties happen in relation to the Communion of Christians, which cannot be determined by the plain reason and nature of things, and concerning which we have received no certain commandment from the Lord, the wisest man on earth can go no farther than to say with the apostle, *I give my judgment as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful; I suppose therefore that it is good for the present case to act in this or that manner*, 1 Cor. vii, 25, 26. If such a modesty of language became that great man St. Paul, surely every lesser minister, or Christian, would transgress the bounds of decency to assume more to himself.

SECT. 3. An illustration on the three last questions.

What I have advanced on these subjects may receive some light perhaps, and may prevail more toward the conviction of my readers by an illustration of these cases, by a parallel instance taken from a society of philosophers: For when the same case is put in new subjects of another kind, it does not meet with the same predetermined judgment, as in subjects that have been long controverted.

Suppose several Stoic philosophers join in a society, and have weekly lectures read to

them, by one or more professors whom they have chosen, and once a month hold a feast, wherein some peculiar ceremonies are performed to the honor of Zeno, the master and founder of their sect. Every person that is admitted to communicate in their feast, must profess himself a stoic philosopher, a follower of Zeno, and to receive the precepts of Zeno for his principles of doctrine and practice; and he ought to give satisfaction by conference to the members or professors of this stoical society, that he owns Zeno's precepts, and that in such a sense, as is sufficient, in their judgment to make him a good stoic.

Now if any one shall mingle some of the doctrines of Epicurus therewith, or expound Zeno so as to make happiness consist in sensual pleasures, this overthrows the stoical doctrine, which makes happiness to consist in wisdom and virtue; and such a one cannot be admitted to any Communion with them in their festivals, constant or occasional.

But if any person shall mingle much of platonism, or pythagorian philosophy with the stoic, and expound Zeno, in some part of his doctrine, in the sense of Plato, or Pythagoras, perhaps he may be invited and admitted as a guest at the stoical feast, and so hold occasional Communion with them; because he is truly a stoic, though a favorer of other sects. His notions are not ruinous and destructive to the most valuable principle of stoical philosophy; though he differs so much, that it would endanger that particular stoical society, if this

person were received as a stated member to all the powers and privileges thereof.

But as for others who hold the stoical doctrine, though one expounds it according to Epictetus, another believes it in the exposition of Antoninus, another in the exposition of Seneca, who were all stoics, these may all be admitted to constant Communion, and as members of the same society; for the great ends and designs of their society are hereby promoted and secured; their several differences are but small, and very consistent with the cultivation of Stoicism, and the benefits of the society.

In short, those who hold so little of Zeno's precepts, in the sense of the society, as neither to be consistent with its being, nor well-being, must be excluded from all Communion with it; such are Epicurus and Democritus, even though they should subscribe all the words of Zeno.

Those who hold no more of Zeno's precepts in the sense of the society, than is just consistent with the Being of the society, but may naturally prove fatal and ruinous to the well-being of it, should be admitted only to occasional Communion; such are those who admire Plato and Pythagoras, and mix their directions with the doctrine of Stoicism.

Those who hold so much of Zeno's precepts in the sense of stoical society as to be consistent with the being, well-being, and edification of the society, may be admitted as fixed members thereof, and be entitled to all its powers and privileges; such are the followers of Epictetus, Seneca, and others.

I hope such sort of parallel instances may give some light and direction in these affairs of Communion among Christians: Yet these things being not exactly delivered in the word of God, nor particular rules about them determined clearly in scripture, it is evident that our Lord Jesus Christ intended that the light of nature and reason, the common principles and rules of order and society, and the most prevailing prospect of holiness, truth, and love, should determine our actions in such cases; still keeping close to every thing that he has revealed, so far as we can find his will in scripture; and in all other things making the best use of our Christian prudence and charity, for the glory of God, and the good of men, 1 Cor. xiv, 40, 33, *Let all things be done decently, and in order, for God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.* 1 Cor. x, 31, 32, 33, *Whether therefore ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor the Gentiles, nor to the church of God: Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.*

Since it is impossible in this imperfect state, that any thing in civil or religious affairs should be free from imperfections, those methods must at all times be esteemed the best, that aim at the best ends, and are attended with the fewest inconveniencies. 1 Cor. x, 23, *All things that are lawful, are not expedient; all things that are lawful, edify not.* Rom. xiv, 17, 18, *The kingdom of God is not meat and drink;*

but righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. He that in these things serveth Christ with a humble sincerity of heart and design, is acceptable to God, and approved of men, even though he should not always hit upon the most prudent means.

But let peace and edification be ever in our eye, as our chief ends in church affairs, according to that great canon of the Apostle, Rom. xiv, 19, *Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.* Amen.

INVITATIONS
TO
CHURCH FELLOWSHIP.

A DISCOURSE,
BY ISAAC WATTS, D. D.

PSALM lxxv, 4.

Blessed is the man whom thou choosest and causest to approach unto thee, that he may dwell in thy courts: we shall be satisfied with the goodness of thy house, even of thy holy temple.

THE latter words of the verse shall be the subject of our present meditations, wherein we shall consider what is meant by dwelling in the courts of God, and what is the goodness of his house, wherewith his favorites shall be satisfied. There are three senses of this sacred phrase, dwelling in the courts of God; and the persons who are favored to inhabit the sanctuary in either of these senses, may have the blessing of the Psalmist pronounced upon them.

The first, and the most obvious meaning of the words, dwelling in the courts of God, is, a continual attendance on him in the ministrations of his temple, and the discharge of some holy office there. This was the felicity of several of the priests and the levites of old under the Jewish dispensation: and this is the happiness of the ministers of the Gospel now, who are continually employed in the things of God, and the affairs of religion; who give themselves up, as the apostles did, *to the ministry of the word and prayer*, Acts vi, 4: Whose business it is to attend to reading, to exhortation, and to doctrine, to meditate on God and Christ, and salvation, to converse with the glorious invisibles of the upper world, and give themselves wholly to them, as the apostle charges Timothy the young evangelist, 1 Tim. iv, 13, 15. Blessed is the man whom God chooses for a Christian and a minister, whose general calling, in common with the rest of Christians, is to save his own soul, and whose particular employment as a minister is to save the souls of others. This order of men are utterly unworthy of their privilege, if they do not prize it highly, set a just value upon it, and confess their own happiness.

But I have shewn elsewhere, that this sense of the words, which is limited to priests and levites, could never include the whole meaning of David; for then he had excluded himself from this blessedness, who was not of the tribe of Levi, nor capable of priesthood; and yet he declares with holy joy, that he *would*

dwell in the house of the Lord for ever, Psal. xxiii, ult.

The second sense of the words therefore, and which seems to be the very design of the Psalmist is this: Blessed are they whose habitation is near to the ark of God, and the tabernacle, and thereby they are made capable of frequenting the house of God, and of waiting upon Him with great constancy in the holy ordinances of his worship. These are the persons whom my text pronounces happy: There was but one tabernacle, and one ark in the days of David, and but one temple in succeeding ages appointed for all the inhabitants of the land of Canaan; but one place where God had recorded his name, and appointed the public sacrifices, and peculiar solemnities of worship, on which all the men of Israel, who lived at the farthest distance, were obliged to attend three times a year: But those whose habitation was near the place where the ark resided, and these solemnities were performed, had more frequent opportunities of such attendance.

The doctrine, which we may derive from this sense of the words, may be thus expressed: Happy are those persons whose circumstances and station of life, are appointed by Providence in so favorable a manner, as to give them liberty to come up constantly to the house of God, and wait upon him in all his institutions: And the instances of their happiness are evident enough. For

1. These are nearer to the visits of God, and may see him oftener than others. These

may have such a frequent sight of his power and glory, as they are to *be seen in the sanctuary*, Psal. lxxiii, 2. It is a pleasure to be near our best friend, to be near our dearest father, to be near our own God. When we have a relation dwells near us, how often we are present with them! And they that dwell near the court, have opportunity of seeing the king upon every occasion.

2. These have more external helps towards heaven, than others have. It is true, we have a glorious mercy in this respect, that the scriptures are every where in our hands, and many labors of holy men in writing, who being dead, yet speak; but the ministry of the word in the house of God, is the great ordinance for conversion and edification. It is the chief standing institution of Christ for this purpose, even to the end of the world.

3. These persons have supplies of their wants nearer at hand; and whatsoever their burden be, they are nearer to relief; whether their complaints are of a spiritual or temporal kind. How often has the soul that was in the dark and perplexed, received hints of direction in the ministry of the word! How often has the tempted Christian been strengthened and supported there! And the mourning saint has been often comforted. And even when we labor under temporal necessities and sorrows, though the sanctuary is not furnished to supply every thing of this kind, yet the words of grace and consolation that have been heard in the church, have often borne up the spirit of the poor and the afflicted; they have been led to the mercy-

seat, the spring of all supplies, and they have gone away patient under their burdens, and rejoicing in hope of deliverance here, or full salvation hereafter. We in this world are travelling through a wilderness, a dry land: Now to be near a sweet fountain, or rather to have a sweet stream flowing by us all the way, is a choice comfort; while those that are afar off die for thirst, or go many a long hour without supply: See Psal. lxxiii, 1, 2, where David being afar off from the house of God, cries out aloud after him. *O God, thou art my God, early will I seek thee; my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; to see thy power, and thy glory, &c.*

Happy those who dwell near the celebration of Divine ordinances, for these are the persons who stand fair to obtain all advantages of the house of God, and to be satisfied with the goodness of his holy temple.

Before I dismiss this second sense of the words, I shall make these two or three reflections.

1st Reflection. How much do these fellow-creatures want our pity, and our prayers, whose station places them afar off from the courts of God, and who are deprived of all the blessed advantages that are to be enjoyed in the church! Let us, whom Divine providence has favored with a nearer approach to God, fill his courts with the voice of joy and praise for our peculiar mercies; and let our hearts at the same time feel a becoming compassion towards those who are afar off. O pity those who dwell in

the lands of darkness and heathenism, and have nothing near them that looks like religion, but the courts of idolatry, and their abominable rites and ceremonies; filthy ceremonies, and fantastic or cruel rites with which they worship images of wood or stone, and their brazen or their golden gods. Pity the wretches who dwell under antichristian tyranny, where every thing sacred is over-run with superstition, and the pure ordinances of the Gospel are daubed over so thick with various painting, and so buried under a load of human inventions, as to diminish, if not utterly destroy, all their use and power. Pity the Protestants whose places of worship are demolished, and the sanctuaries are thrown down all over their land. Pity the holy confessors that are banished from the courts of God, and his beloved worship; and those who are shut up in prisons, inclosed in dungeons, under heavy bonds of iron; and those also who groan in secret in their own houses, under the terror of watchful and malicious persecutors. Let us put our souls in their soul's stead, and say then, "Would we not think ourselves fit objects for pity? And should we not desire the prayers of the saints of God?" Think then, Christians, let you and I think with ourselves, who made the dreadful and the happy difference? Happy for us indeed, but dreadful for our brethren, who endure these banishments, or heavy bonds!

2d. *Reflection.* Here let us reflect again, how much more excellent is the Gospel state, than that of the Levitical law! And how much more happy are Christians in this land, than

the Jews in Canaan! Here we have houses of God near us, churches assembling in every town. They were forced to travel three times a year to Jerusalem, many long and weary miles: It is true God refreshed them in their journies, Psal. lxxxiv, 5, 6, 7. He gave them showers of rain when they were faint or thirsty; but they travelled through Baca, that is, the Valley of Weeping; many wants and inconveniencies attended them, and the difficulties and burdens of such a dispensation, were not light nor little.

We may yet continue this reflection, concerning those who dwell in this great city, and say, how great is the privilege the Christians in London enjoy, above those who dwell in distant villages, or in little solitary cottages in the country! Here we have the Gospel preached in every street, and places of worship at our right hand, and our left: We dwell, as it were, in the courts of God, but the poor villager must travel many a mile, and perhaps through miry ways, to attend on the nearest ministrations of the word: and in the mean time the young and the feeble of the family must be confined at home. O what advances in knowledge and grace, what growth in holiness, and what approaches to heaven are to be expected from those who dwell so near the places of Divine worship, and where the provisions of heaven are brought to our very doors!

O how desirable a thing it is to enjoy all such circumstances of life, as give us liberty to frequent the courts of God! How much should we value, and how wisely should we improve

such a blessing. Have a care of neglecting due seasons of worship, and be not negligent or infrequent in your visits to the courts of God, lest he lay some heavy restraints upon you, and divide you from his sanctuary. He has bands and chains of various kinds to cast upon such slothful professors; persecution or sickness, loss of your limbs, or loss of your senses, whereby you may be cut off from the blessings of his church; or he may break up house and remove far from you, because you do not visit him; or he may place your tabernacle afar off from his own, and cut short your liberty; for it is he which *determines the bounds of your habitations*, Acts xvii, 26.

O how unhappily are some persons overloaded with the cares of this life! How are they hurried and overwhelmed in a tumult of worldly affairs! And the business of their daily calling is too often ready to entrench upon divine hours and ordinances. How sore a distress is it to a pious Christian to be confined and withheld from the courts of God, by long and tedious distempers of body! How painful is it to his spirit to lie languishing and faint on a bed of sickness, while others are made to drink of the river of pleasure, and refreshing streams of the sanctuary! They are sorrowful, while others are made joyful in the house of prayer. They are tasting the wormwood and the gall, while we feed on the pleasant things of the house of God, and are satisfied with the goodness of his holy temple.

And thus I dismiss the second sense of the words, which probably was the precise mean-

ing and chief design of the Psalmist himself, considering the dispensation under which he lived.

But when in the times of the New Testament, we apply the language of the Jewish prophets to the state and institutions of the Gospel, we have encouragement enough from the example of Christ and his apostles, to extend and further enlarge the meaning of those ancient phrases beyond the literal and Jewish sense, and thus accommodate them to Christian affairs.

The third sense of the text therefore, when enlarged and explained to evangelical purposes, may be this.

Approaching to God, in the style of the Gospel signifies, either our being brought nigh to God, and reconciled to him by the blood of Christ, and the grace of the holy Spirit, as in Eph. ii, 13, 18, *In Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were afar off are made nigh, and have access by one Spirit to the Father.* Or else it means our drawing nigh to God in spirit and in truth, in prayer, or holy meditation, &c. So Heb. x, 21, 22, *Having such an High Priest over the House of God, let us draw near with a true heart.*

Dwelling in the courts of God, may signify an union to the church of God, which is his spiritual house, upon a solemn profession of his Gospel, and a visible allowed right to all the privileges and ordinances thereof. The church is the *House of the living God*, 1 Tim. iii, 15. He dwells no longer in temples made with hands, nor confines his special presence

to any single spot of ground, or any material building: The assemblies of his saints are his courts, his dwelling places; *where two or three are gathered together in his name, there is Christ in the midst of them*, Matt. xviii, 20. Every particular church of Christ, as well as the church catholic or universal, is a *holy temple of the Lord, built up for an habitation of God through the Spirit*, Ephes. ii, 20, 21.

Now surely, if the men of Israel had a blessing pronounced upon them in my text, whose habitation was near to that material sanctuary, we may with equal assurance, and with much greater delight say, blessed is the man, O Lord, whom thou choolest and causest to draw near unto thee, that he may dwell in thy house, in the sense of the New Testament; that he may be *added to thy church*, Acts ii, 47: That *he may be joined to the disciples*, Acts ix, 26: That *he may be received in the Lord*, Phil. ii, 29: That he may be united to the Christian assemblies, and become a member of the church of Christ.

Let us again consider the Hebrew expression, *חצריך ישב*, that he may dwell in thy courts, which may with more exactness and propriety be rendered, *he shall or will dwell*, &c. and then the verse will sound thus, *Blessed is the man whom thou choolest, and causest to approach unto thee; he shall dwell in thy courts*, as a promised privilege; or he will do it as a voluntary and delightful practice; in which latter sense, the words will afford this doctrine.

Doct. He that is caused in a spiritual manner to approach or draw near to God, will have

a desire to dwell in the house of God, that is, to be united to his church.

He who has tasted that the Lord is gracious, and is brought near to God by the atoning blood of Christ, and the sanctifying influences of the Holy Spirit, will desire to be a visible fellow citizen with the saints, and to become one of the household. He who has frequented the courts of God, attending on the worship of the church, and has felt the special presence of God there, convincing, converting, and comforting his soul, will be glad to dwell there, and to join himself to the church, as a part or member of it, and that for these reasons following.

1st *Reason.* Because he finds so much delight in approaching near to God, that he desires still to be nearer. He feels that nearness to God is happiness; and he cannot have too much of that; he cannot be too near his chief good, and his soul's delight. When he has come up to the house of God, and only paid a visit there, he tasted so much sweetness in this visit, that he cannot satisfy himself to be a mere visitant, where he may be an inhabitant; he would dwell where God dwells, and be always with him.

God himself, in infinite condescension, makes a visit to families, and to closets, where prayer is performed, and comforts praying souls. But God dwells in Zion, *this is his rest for ever, for he has desired it*, Psal. cxxxii, 13, 14. Therefore holy souls would dwell there also. David would have the ark brought to Zion, that he might dwell with God: And he

often longed to *dwell in God's house*, Psal. xxvii, 4. Peter was near God on the holy mount, and he was immediately for *making tabernacles*, and dwelling there, Luke ix, 33.

He that has drawn near to God in worship, enjoys so much pleasure in common ordinances, that he breathes after special ones: With God's invitations he is pleased, and persuaded to come, and he would fain taste the entertainment. When Christ by his messengers speaks in general to mankind, he finds a sweetness in the voice, he longs therefore to have Christ speak particularly to him as a believer and a friend. When Christ publishes love to the world, it is pleasant to hear it: But he longs to hear him say to his own soul, *My beloved*. He has heard wisdom inviting the sons of men to her feast, Prov. ix, 5, *Come eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled*. He has tasted of these provisions in the spiritual sense of them, and he would partake thereof in all the sensible emblems too.

He is well pleased with the covenant of grace, and he agrees to it heartily; he would therefore set his own seal to it, and receive a seal from God. He that has a true relish of Divine privileges, will long after their increase and enlargement; he that has felt any thing of heaven, will get as near it as possible here on earth.

Now are these the breathings of our souls? Have we ever found such Divine delight in approaching to God, as makes us long after greater degrees of nearness to him? We have reason to doubt, whether our hearts ever drew

near to God in the common institutions of his worship, such as prayer, reading, and hearing the word, if we have no appetite to the special entertainments of his house, and the provisions of his holy table. We may justly question, whether our souls are brought near to God at all, if we have no desire to dwell with him.

2d Reason. He that feels grace begun in his heart by approaching to God, will be ever pursuing those methods whereby it may be carried on. The very word *οικοδομη* or *edification*, which is used in several places of the New Testament to signify the growth of grace, does properly mean building up, and seems to have a special reference to the house of God, that spiritual building to which every true Christian should belong, and that in a visible manner too. He that was convinced of sin and of righteousness, and was led into the glorious light of the Gospel, by drawing near to God in public worship, when he was before blind and ignorant, will surely seek a greater nearness to God, that he may ensure Divine Illuminations, and dwell always in the light. He that was sanctified and made a new creature, by approaching to God in the common ministrations of his temple, will lay himself under all the special advantages that the temple is furnished with, to maintain his new nature, and increase in holiness. The communion of the saints, and the fellowship of a church, is an appointed means for the increase of grace, and fruitfulness in every good work, Psal. xcii, 13, 14, *Those that be planted in the*

house of the Lord, shall flourish in the courts of our God; they shall still bring forth fruit in old age, they shall be fat and flourishing. And I think I may pronounce this truth boldly, that soul has nothing of true religion or piety begun, who is perfectly contented with any little and low degrees of it, and does not desire its increase.

The Christian who has found God in his sanctuary according to his word, longs to be satisfied with more of his special goodness. You may read his encouragements in the words of the prophet, Isa. lv, 3, 11, compared with chap. lvi, 4, 5, 6, 7. When the Lord said to him in the public ministry, *Incline your ear and come unto me, hear and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you;* he heard the invitation of mercy, and he entered into the covenant of the Lord, and he began to taste his grace: He came, he heard, and his soul lives. He has found the word of God accomplishing his good pleasure, and prospered thus far in the thing for which it was sent: Therefore he joins himself to the Lord, and takes up his place in his house, and takes hold on his covenant in a public profession; he hopes now he is brought to God's holy mountain, that he shall be made joyful in his house of prayer.

He that has found the accomplishment of some promises, would put his soul directly under the influence of all of them. He has faith, and believes that God is faithful, and will fulfil all his relations; he has trusted in several of the relations which God has assum-

ed and found them already fulfilled, as a faithful Creator, Preserver, Redeemer, &c. now he would put himself under his care as a Father of the family, and a master of the house, as the king of his Church; and when he enters into Zion, or joins himself to a Christian church, he humbly expects to find those promises made good. Psal. cxxxii, 15, 16, *I will abundantly bless her provision; I will satisfy her poor with bread. I will also clothe her priests with salvation, and her saints shall shout aloud for joy.* And Psal. xcii, 13, *Those who are planted in the courts of God shall flourish and be fruitful there.*

Now it is proper to put this question to our own souls: Do those of us who are joined in in holy fellowship take pleasure in our station in the church, as it is an appointed means to increase grace in us, and to promote universal holiness both of heart and life? Do we wait upon God in the solemn ordinances of his church, with an humble faith in his promises, that he will meet and bless us there?

And as for those of us who have not yet taken up our places in the house of God, do we desire that holiness should increase in us? And why then do we not breathe after the blessings of Zion, and an accomplishment of those promises which God has made to his Church? What sign or evidence can we have that we ever begun to receive grace from God, if we have no longing desires of soul to enjoy greater degrees of it? And how can we pretend to long after growth in grace, if we refuse the appointed means of it?

3d Reason. He that is caused to draw near to God in public worship, finds his soul softened by the approaches of Divine grace, and feels the awful impression of Divine commands to perform social worship. He reads his duty plain by the light of nature, that there ought to be religious societies, and public honor paid to God: He reads it yet plainer in the word of scripture, that the original Christians were wont to form themselves into churches, or sacred societies, to celebrate the institutions of their Lord, and are required by the apostle not to forsake these assemblies: His conscience feels the Divine authority, and he cannot resist plain duty.

It would be too large here to lay down half the reasons of church-fellowship, as a duty incumbent on those that have tasted of the grace of God; it may be proved in a typical way at least, from the practice of the Jews, and the church under the Old Testament, in their public and solemn covenanting with God: It may be further evidenced by the many prophecies and promises concerning Zion, some of which have a reference to New Testament times, and the assemblies of the saints under the dispensation of the Gospel: It may be inferred from the directions of our Lord Jesus Christ, concerning the discipline of a church, as well as from the positive institution of the Lord's Supper, which must not be celebrated but in a Christian assembly: It may be argued from the many counsels and directions which St. Paul has given concerning various offices, and forms of order and government,

which can have no place, but in a particular church: The great designs and ends of church fellowship, with regard to the public honor of God, the glory of Christ, and the spiritual benefit of men, are sufficient proofs of this duty: And all these arguments are established and confirmed by the practice of the apostles, and the primitive converts.

Now I say, a soul that has approached unto God in divine ordinances; will obey Divine commands: He that tastes sacred pleasure, will learn sacred duty. He that has received Divine mercy, will reverence Divine authority. So the saints in 2 Cor. viii, 5, *They gave their own selves first to the Lord*, and then resigned themselves to the directions and commands of the apostles, according to the will of God.

Now let us see whether we feel the influence of this command. Do we, who are joined in holy Communion, continue our stations in a Church of Christ, from the authority of a Divine institution, and love to the ordinance? Or is it because we cannot without difficulty or shame break the bonds of Christ, and cast his cords from us? And let us all examine by this rule, whether we truly approach unto God in ordinances, or no. Have we been melted by Divine love into a compliance with all the institutions of God? Or can we easily content ourselves to make a mere common profession, without ever subjecting ourselves to the ordinances of God's house? If you believe the special solemnities of the church to be a Divine appointment, and yet have no

thought or desire tending that way, you will have much ado to prove that you are sincere in any part of worship.

4th Reason. He that truly draws near to God, finds so much satisfaction in it, that he loves to lay himself under more and stronger engagements to abide near to him. Those that delight in seeking the Lord their God, will not only ask the way to Zion with their faces thitherward, but they will also agree together and say, *Come, and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten*, Jer. 1, 4, 5. In a solemn manner they will give themselves up to the Lord in the face of his church. They take pleasure to lay bonds on their souls to walk closely with God; and they believe, and rejoice that the great God engages himself at the same time to walk with them, according to his ancient promise, Lev. xxvi, 3, 12, *If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments and do them, I will walk among you, and will be your God; and ye shall be my people.*

Besides, a person that is truly brought near to God by Jesus Christ, loves to put himself under the watch and care of Christ, and that in the most express and sensible manner, by coming into his house. He takes up his place there, that he may be guarded from those temptations, whereby the world might allure him to depart from God again. He gives himself up to the care and watchfulness of the pastor, whose business it is to watch over souls: He subjects himself to the watchful eye and care of all his brethren and fellow-christians in

the church, that they may be as guards and assistants to him in his holy work. He thinks he can never lay himself under too many obligations to the Lord; and he desires that the vows of God may ever abide upon him, that his soul may be kept from all iniquity, and from wandering into forbidden ways.

Shall I entreat you now to inquire whether this be the temper of your hearts? Have you found so much pleasure in approaching God, and are you so fully persuaded that your happiness consists in it, that you are desirous to bind yourselves in the strongest manner to abide with God? Or do you think you have too many bonds upon you already? And is it for that reason you abstain from the fellowship of a church, lest ye should be tied too fast to religion, and have too many eyes and guards upon you? It is a dangerous sign that you have never been truly brought near to God, if you are willing to live at a looser rate, and are afraid of too many engagements to holiness.

5th Reason. He that draws near to God in worship, and enjoys the sweetness of the ordinances of Christ, will endeavor to maintain his public honor in the world. It is by such a public profession, Christ is honored among men, and in his house are his ordinances celebrated. Now should Christians refuse this duty, where would be a church to bear up the holy name of Christ in this sinful world? Where would be a house of God for ordinances to be administered in? It is therefore out of love to the ordinances where his soul has approached nigh to God, and out of love to

Christ, to support his glory, and confess him among men, that such a person will dwell in the courts, in the house of the Lord, and give up his name to Christ in the fellowship of his church.

And what can our consciences answer now to such an inquiry as this? What concern have we for the public honor of Christ? Can we pretend to have tasted of his grace, and have no regard for his glory? Do we plead his name before God as our only hope, and are we unwilling to confess his name before men? Are there none of you in this assembly, who hope you are brought near to God by the blood of Christ, and yet delay and refuse to give this public honor to him in the world? What would become of the profession of the name and glory of Christ among men, if all were of your mind, and took no more care to maintain it than you do? Where would any of the church of Christ be found? Where would the special ordinances of the Gospel be administered, or any such thing as the public communion of the saints? If all were so negligent in this matter as you are, churches would be lost, and the Lord's supper quite forgotten; though our Lord appointed it to continue till he come.

6th Reason. He that is brought near to God, and united to Christ, will love to look like one that is near God, like a member of Christ, and one of the body. He that is of the family of the faithful, delights to appear like one of Christ's household, and therefore will dwell in his house. Gospel visible churches are types

of the invisible: and a true Christian is not ashamed to own his relation to the church above, by his communion with the church on earth.

It is true, a person may be a child of God in secret, and of the household of Christ, and yet may not at present have taken up his place in the family, nor dwell in the house of God, nor be joined to any visible church; but then such persons look like strangers, like the children of this world, for they dwell with them in the visible kingdom of Satan: now true Christians would, or should look like themselves, and not appear like foreigners and strangers, *but as fellow-citizens with the saints*, Eph. ii, 19.

I confess there may be some seasons and circumstances, which may not only indulge, but even oblige Christians to conceal their character and profession. Piety and prudence agree well together; and we are not to expose ourselves, nor our sacred things, to a cruel and scoffing age, without an apparent call of Christ. Pearls must not be cast before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and tear us. But remember, my friends, that this can never be an excuse for a constant and universal neglect of the profession of Christ, and communion with his churches: and doubtless the guilt of such a neglect is more heinous in a day of liberty, and when there is the least temptation and danger.

7th Reason. He that approaches to God the Father, and holds communion with him, loves to be near the children, and to hold communion with the saints; for *he that loves God must love*

his brother also, 1 John iv, 21. And he must shew his love by delighting in their company, and dwelling with them, in the house of their common father. He must and will hold a visible fellowship with them, as he hopes he has a share in their invisible blessings. All their infirmities and their follies do not disgust him half so much, as the image of God in them gives him pleasure: he loves to be with them, for God is with them; and he longs to be one of them, for they are one with Christ, united to him in one spirit. There is a more intimate freedom in holy conversation among the inhabitants of one house, among the members of a Christian church. They grow into an inward acquaintance: there is an opening their bosoms and their hearts to their brethren, and a sacred friendship in spiritual affairs. See what affectionate intimacy David expresses, and what kind things he speaks concerning a fellow member of the Jewish church, though he indeed proved a false one, Psal. lv, 13, 14, *Thou my equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance; we took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company:* and fellow Christians in the same society do, or should maintain such a pious amity.

Surely we have but poor evidences that our souls approach to God in his worship, if we have mean thoughts of his family, and despise his children, as though they were not worthy to be one with us, or we ashamed to be one with them. Will God, the glorious and the holy dwell amongst them, and are they too despicable and unworthy to have our company? Let us

ask our own hearts if we are related to God by adoption, and become his children, why do we not join ourselves to the family, and hold communion with our brethren?

REFLECTIONS.

I. What further remarks shall we make now, at last, upon this doctrine, and this discourse? Surely they teach us to make a severe reflection upon ourselves and our conduct; if we find no desire to dwell in the house of God, no breathings of soul after the fellowship of saints, and the special ordinances of the church of Christ. Either we labor under some mistake, some ignorance of duty; or we are under the power of some present temptation; or else our fancied approaches to God are but deceits and delusions. Observe my words; I cannot say this is the case of all that are not joined to the disciples, and added to the visible church; but this must be the case of all that have no desires of it. They that have no inclination to get nearer to God than they are, have a just reason to think they were never brought near him.

II. There are surely some sensible defects or corruptions in that church, or there is a decay of religion in its members, where church fellowship is not still esteemed a pleasure and a privilege. Where holy communion is an insipid and tasteless thing, there must be some degrees of distance and estrangement between

God and his people; either God is in some measure withdrawn from that church, where saints delight not in their public assemblies and ordinances, or he is withdrawn from our souls, if we take not delight therein; for where God dwells among his saints, pleasure will dwell too. It is the presence of God makes heaven, where pleasures are grown up to their full perfection.

Let us ask our souls, whether we are not decaying Christians? Did we not use to come up to the house of God with joy, and worship together with delight? And that perhaps in times of difficulty too, as well as in days of greater liberty? What a blessed frame of spirit was David in, Psal. xlii, 4! And surely we have felt the same sacred pleasure too, when we went up, as it were, in multitudes to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise. Is it thus with us at present? Or have we lost the sense and savor of those days? Where is that holy desire, that impatient longing and thirsting after God, which once appeared among us? Our dwelling in the house of the Lord, has perhaps made the good things of his house familiar, common, and contemptible. O let us strive, and labor, and pray for recovering grace. Decays will grow upon us, and separate us farther from God, and from the delightful sense of his favor, unless we are watchful, and repent and renew our first love.

THE END.

BOOKS,

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SAMUEL T. ARMSTRONG,

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