

Of the Church's Toleration of Any Thing Sinful Concerning Church-communion

[from: *Essays on various subjects relative to the present state of religion* (1780)]

by John Anderson (1748-1830)

The term *Church* is frequently to be understood as comprehending all that are called out of the world *lying in wickedness* to the fellowship of Christ; all that are saved and set apart to the service of God, Eph. 5:25, 26. *Christ loved the church and gave himself for it: that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church.* Hence it is called the spouse of Christ, his spiritual temple, his body. This church, being made up of his friends only, manifests or makes herself visible by observing his commands, John 15:14. *Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.*

Indeed, the real enemies of Christ may pay him an external homage, and appear to be church-members: nevertheless, the true end and design of such homage as prescribed by Christ, is to distinguish his real friends from his real enemies; and those only are true church-members whose external homage corresponds to that end and design; others are liars and impostors, Rom. 9:6. *They are not all Israel which are of Israel: neither because they are the seed of Abraham, are they children,* 1 John 2:19. *They went out from us; but they were not of us.* Traitors may wear the badges of loyal subjects: but these badges were never designed for traitors.[1]

The enemies of Christ can no more be reckoned true church-members for being among them, than tares can be reckoned wheat for growing together with it, Matt. 13:24-30. A number of the enemies of Christ agreeing together for some carnal ends to make a fair profession of his name, might, from that profession, bear the denomination of *his church*; but in truth they would only be a

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synagogue of Satan. Rev. 2:9. I know the blasphemy of them who say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.

Society, however, as an instance of obedience to the commands of Christ, is one principal way of rendering our church-membership visible, Heb. 10:25. *Not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is. 2 Thess. 5:11. Wherefore comfort yourselves together and edify one another, even as also ye do. Acts 2:42. They continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayer.* It is a society in spiritual exercises and in spiritual privileges, that is here meant.

But we are very much limited in the enjoyment of society: it cannot have place but in proportion as nearness of situation, acquaintance, similarity of principles and views, give occasion to social intercourse. Hence as it is impossible for all the members of the church of Christ, scattered over the whole world, to hold fellowship immediately and habitually with one another in a visible church-state; it is necessary that they form themselves into various distinct societies for the worship of God and for their mutual edification. These societies are called *Churches*, Acts 15:41. *He went through Syria and Cilicia confirming the churches. Rom. 16:16. The churches of Christ salute you.* Such were the churches of Corinth, of Ephesus, of Galatia, of Thessalonica, of Philippi and of Colosse.

It is abundantly clear, that every church, in this sense of the term, should be constituted according to the pattern which Christ hath given us in his word. She should consider herself as in the same relation to Christ with his church or mystical body at large, and as under the same obligations to endeavour after conformity to him in all things. Hence the apostle Paul so often speaks to particular churches in terms that are properly applicable to the church invisible: *Feed*, says he to the Ephesian elders, *the church of God which he hath purchased with his own blood. I am confident*, says he to the Philippians, *of this very thing, that he who hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.* The more exactly a particular church is conformed to the pattern of the word, her members have the better opportunity of evidencing by their fellowship with her, that they indeed belong to Christ's mystical

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body. This is an end so important, that where it is not in some degree answered, the proper design of a visible church is utterly lost.

The question which we now propose to consider is this: Whether a church of the kind just now mentioned, may tolerate in her members the practice or profession of any thing she herself acknowledges to be sinful? *Any thing*, we say, whether, comparatively considered, it is of greater or of less importance; whether it has been or is still controverted among Christians: if it be really sinful and acknowledged by a church to be so; it is with regard to that church, what is here meant by *any thing sinful*, as being opposite to some of the truths and duties known and professed by that church; for the attainments of other churches are out of the question.

When a church condemns any thing judicially, she is justly considered as holding it to be sinful; sinful either in itself, or on account of some offensive circumstances attending it. We have a remarkable instance of this kind in the Acts of the apostles, fifteenth chapter. As the proceedings of the synod at Jerusalem are an excellent pattern for the imitation of all future synods; so, in what is said of the obligation of their decrees upon the churches, we have proper instruction as to the regard that is due to the synodical decisions that are consonant to the mind of the Holy Ghost speaking in the scriptures. These decrees are called a burden laid upon the church, Acts 15:28. *For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than those necessary things.* We cannot suppose a person would have been admitted a member of the church of Antioch, who should have refused to take upon him the common burden of the church. Besides no person in that church could reject those decrees without being in some degree liable to the charge, which the synod brought against the Judaizing teachers, of *troubling the church and subverting souls.*

It is not our present design to determine the degree of censure to be passed upon persons who are chargeable with what is meant in the question by *any thing sinful*. That subject may be considered afterward. We may only observe, that a church may

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justly be considered as tolerating what she herself owns to be sinful, if persons openly chargeable with it, and who give no evidences of being sorry for it or of desiring to forsake it, are habitually admitted to the most sacred pledges of her communion.

It is a dictate of scripture and of reason, that the discipline of a church ought to correspond with her doctrine. If she allows in her terms of communion the same thing which, in her public instructions, she acknowledges to be sinful; what does she but destroy in one way what she builds in another? Hence if a church ought, according to the Lord's express injunction, to teach her members to *observe all things whatsoever Christ hath commanded us*; she ought likewise, to make the observance of all those things as far as the visible church-state will permit, the general term of her communion; and consequently she ought not to tolerate in her members any thing in particular that she acknowledges to be contrary to Christ's command, or, in other words, to be sinful. Thus, as the practice of a church member ought to be according to his knowledge, so the discipline of a church ought to be according to her doctrine.

It is inconsistent with that watchful care which the church ought to exercise over her members, to suffer sin upon any of them, or positively to tolerate any evil in them, whether with respect to principle or practice. The duty of the church to each of her members is, in this particular, the same as that of one individual to another, Lev. 19:16. *Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy brother, and not suffer sin upon him.*

The toleration, in question, is inconsistent with the good order of any society; and therefore is contrary to the general rule, *Let all things be done decently and in order*. Suppose a particular practice is determined by any society to be wrong and utterly inconsistent with the design of its erection; to admit persons into such a society, while they are openly chargeable with that very practice, would be the destruction of policy and good order. Now, when a church declares any thing to be sinful, she declares it to be, on the matter, inconsistent with the great purpose she was designed for, with her testimony against the enemies of Christ,

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with that universal holiness which is her honourable and heavenly characteristic, Ezek. 43:12, *This is the law of the house; upon the top of the mountain, the whole limit thereof round about shall be holy. Behold, this is the law of the house.* It is therefore utterly against the law, the appointed order of the house, for any church to allow her members in what she herself acknowledges to be sinful.

This toleration is likewise contrary to the remarkable analogy between the case of the visible church and that of the particular believer. The believer is one who *hates every false way*: however weak or defective, he must not, even for a moment, give positive allowance to any sin. Nothing, indeed, is more plainly or more necessarily implied in the character of a believer than this; that he maintains a constant opposition to whatever he accounts sinful, and belonging to the old man or the kingdom of Satan. And though the opposition may sometimes be faint, or seem greatly overpowered, yet it is out of character for the Christian to drop it altogether, even in a single instance. It is no less unbecoming a church of Christ, so far to give up her opposition to any thing she acknowledges to be sinful, as to allow it openly and expressly in her members. The public character of the church in all of her proceedings, ought to be, at once, a counterpart, an example, and a help to the real Christian. Every particular church, constituted agreeably to the word, consists of such as are, or at least acknowledge they ought to be, saints or members of Christ's mystical body: and therefore though some other things may belong to the description of a church than what belongs to that of the Christian; yet we should not have any thing to say of the former *contradictory* to what we say of the latter. But that would be the case, were we to assert that a church may tolerate in her members, what no Christian can allow in his practice.

The toleration we speak of, is inconsistent with the due maintenance of a testimony for truth: which appears whether we consider whom this toleration admits to church-communion, or the truths and duties which are thereby disregarded. For, if a church admits to her communion one person who obstinately rejects something which she herself acknowledges to be a truth or a duty

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of God's word, she cannot consistently refuse admittance in the same way to ten, to twenty, to a hundred, to a thousand, or any number that may apply to her for that purpose. Hence that whole church may soon come to be made up of those who obstinately reject such a truth or duty; and who instead of holding, trample upon a testimony for it. And then, if we consider the intimate connection among the truths and duties of Christianity, not only as bearing the stamp of the same authority, but as they are mutually supported by and dependent on each other; it will appear, that, if a church allows her members in a positive rejection of any thing that she herself acknowledges to be a truth or a duty of God's word, she will soon extend her allowance, and her members their rejection to other truths and duties: because the same reason that was deemed sufficient for such a toleration in the case of one truth or duty, will be found also sufficient in the case of others. Besides, if reason drawn from the external circumstances of the church, or from the characters of particular persons are allowed to overbalance the authority of Christ in one instance, they will soon be allowed to do so in more. Thus, through the powerful tendency of depraved nature to backsliding, a relaxation of discipline, or a church's suffering her members to neglect *any* thing which Christ hath committed to her trust, being once wilfully and deliberately begun, will, in the ordinary course of things, continue on the increase, till her laxness arrives at such a pitch that she shall not retain the least appearance of faithfulness to her trust in any respect whatsoever.

Indeed, seeing church-members have no joint participation of their spiritual privileges, nor joint exercise of religious duties, or, in other words, they do not walk as church-members at all, but in so far as they are *of one heart and one way*: it is plain that they bear no suitable testimony in their united capacity against any thing sinful, but in so far as they are unanimous in their opposition to it as such. Hence the apostle gives that solemn caveat against diversity of judgment among church-members, 1 Cor. 1:10. *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.*

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For a church to admit to her communion persons who avowedly approve and practise what she herself condemns as sinful, is to invite the very thing which the apostle here solemnly charges her to guard against.

Farther, This toleration is contrary to all such texts of scripture as warrant separation from corrupt churches and disorderly walkers, 2 Cor. 6:17. *Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing: and I will receive you.* 2 Thess. 3:6. *Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly.* If we ought not to continue our fellowship with persons that walk disorderly, we ought much less to receive such into our fellowship. Surely it is as necessary to endeavour to keep infection out of the house; as to leave it after it is infected. But the toleration in question says, that endeavour is needless. Besides, the duty of a church and of particular persons in this matter is reciprocal: for it is no less incumbent on a church to withdraw from corrupt persons, than for persons to withdraw from a corrupt church.

Objection I. "Would you then have a church require perfection in her members?"

Answer. It is only meant, that she should not tolerate or *suffer sin upon them.* As her pastors must *not shun to declare the whole counsel of God;* so she must not shun to testify against and censure whatever is opposite to that counsel. Indeed her members are far from being perfect: they are spiritually diseased, like others; only while others remain insensible of their miserable condition, they profess to be convinced of it, and to want a cure. Hence the church, if she acts the part of a wise and good physician, and aims at a thorough cure, will endeavour to examine every symptom, and to spare no part of the disorder: She will not be guided by fair but deceitful appearances, or by the inclinations of her patients, but by the grand, infallible dispensatory of heaven, the Bible.

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Objection 2. “It is enough, if a church oblige her members to the essential truths and duties of Christianity; she need not be so strict with regard to circumstantials.”

Answer. Surely, the very circumstantials of Christianity, like the filings of gold, are precious; they should not be thrown away, but carefully gathered up and preserved. And pray, how may the circumstantial truths of the Bible be known from the essential?

“The circumstantial are such as we may be ignorant of, or deny, without endangering our salvation.”

Obvious enough indeed! but the question still recurs, how may these be distinguished from others?

This answer is not only unsatisfactory, but it is insnaring, as it seems to insinuate that the evil of error lies *only* in the danger to which it exposes our souls, and not in its opposition to the authority of God speaking in the word: and thus the idol of depraved nature, Self, under the refined pretext of concern for our everlasting salvation, is made the rule and reason of our faith in divine truth: for, upon this supposition, the evil of rejecting divine truth is deemed less or greater according as self is endangered by the rejection.[2] But it is unworthy of reasonable creatures, who should *do all for the glory of God*, to make self their end and aim. Self is a very doubtful rule; self, we mean, as a principle of man’s corrupted nature. It is peculiarly doubtful in the present case; as we are far from being competent judges of the comparative importance of divine truths; and as one principal danger is here entirely overlooked, that of *making God a liar*.

The truth is, we should estimate the danger of any error rather by the degree of evidence which, in the case of that error, is rejected or despised, than by our notions about the superior value and importance of one truth compared to another, John 3:19. *This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil:* Compared with verse 23. *No man receiveth this testimony.* Our danger lies not merely in rejecting such truths as we think of great importance to our salvation; but in our loving darkness rather than light; which light is God’s testimony. It is not said our condemnation is, loving errors

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more than some of the most important truths revealed in the word; but the expression is general; our condemnation is the not receiving of God's testimony; the whole of which is represented to us under the notion of light in opposition to darkness. Hence it is plain, that our rejection of any one truth belonging to what is here called, *the light that is come into the world*, or to the divine testimony in the word, is so dangerous that it may be our condemnation. It is, indeed, undeniable, that, in religion, there are truths of more importance than others: but as there is no rule laid down in the word for fixing precisely the degrees of their importance, it seems to be the only certain as well as scriptural way of estimating the evil of error, to consider the degree of light and evidence (including both external and internal evidence, both outward instruction and inward conviction) to which the error stands opposed.[3]

On this principle, it is, indeed, still evident, that there is greater guilt, for the most part, in the denial of the more important truths of Christianity, on account of the greater degree of light and evidence with which they are attended. At the same time, supposing there are two points of divine truth which, considered in themselves, appear to be, one of greater, the other of less importance: the evil of denying the latter in some circumstances, may be more aggravated than that of denying the former in other circumstances.

Thus the errors of those Judaizing teachers who were for bringing the Christians at Antioch under the yoke of circumcision, seem to have been far more blameable, than the mistaken apprehensions of the disciples, while they followed Christ in the days of his flesh, with respect to the nature and necessity of his death and resurrection; though it is plain, that the truth about the death and resurrection of Christ, is, in many respects, of more importance than the truth about the freedom of Christians from the yoke of circumcision. But here was the difference: the disciples were weak and ignorant; but they did not set themselves against the truth, like the Judaizing teachers, to the troubling of the church and the subverting of souls.

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Objection 3. “It seems better for the church to leave many things indifferent: it is enough that her members walk honestly according to the light of their conscience.”

Answer. The church ought to leave a thing indifferent, if the law of God leaves it so. Nor ought she to declare a thing sin or duty, for any other reason whatsoever, than this; because either the thing itself, or the necessary consequences of it, are plainly commanded or plainly forbidden by the law of Christ; for the business of the church is not to make laws, but to publish those of Christ.

With respect to persons acting according to the light of their consciences, it is, at best, only one part of holiness, namely, sincerity: and however excellent it is, other parts of holiness are also necessary; such as, an humbling sense of our sinfulness and misery, the saving knowledge of God in Christ, reliance on the Spirit of grace, watchfulness, spiritual strength and stedfastness, liveliness and activity in the way of the Lord. Thus, though sincerity is essentially necessary in church-members, they ought to have other qualifications than sincerity.

It is true, conscience is God’s deputy in the soul, declaring in his name one thing to be duty, and another to be sin: soothing with its approbation, if we comply with the former; and denouncing vengeance and fiery indignation, if we commit the latter. For a person to act contrary to the dictates of conscience, is to rebel against and contemn the authority of God; whose voice the person either hears or thinks he hears in the remonstrances of conscience. But this, like the other faculties and operations of the soul, is now corrupted: and though it still speaks in the name of God, and shews much of the law not yet blotted out of the heart; yet it is, in many instances, weak, mistaken or defiled. 1 Cor. 8:7. *Howbeit, there is not in every man that knowledge, or a well conformed conscience, for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol, that is, they consider their doing so as rendering them partakers of idolatry, and yet they do not abstain from it; and their conscience being weak is defiled.* As the whole man is defiled with sin, the conscience is so in particular, Tit. 1:15. *To them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure, but even their mind and conscience are*

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defiled. Here it is plain the defilement of *them that believe not*, and of *their mind* is sin; and we have no reason to put any other interpretation upon the epithet *defiled* as here applied to the conscience, than what we put upon it as applied to *them that believe not* and to *their mind*. But what is it for the conscience to be defiled with sin? Is it to accuse of sin and condemn on account of it? No, for that is only its duty: But surely the conscience is defiled, when it calls evil good, and good evil.

There is not any thing, indeed, in which the great degree of man's corruption more signally appears than in this; that the conscience itself is drawn over to the side of wickedness. Hence our Lord says, Matt. 6:23. *If the light which is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!*

Sure no one will deny that conscience is liable to error, if he considers, that it is no other than the mind of man as exercised in judging of sin and duty, and viewing the consequences of right and wrong conduct. A small acquaintance with scripture and with human nature will be sufficient to convince us that men are continually forming false judgments, on those subjects.

But to speak more directly to the objection, the rule it insinuates for the admission of persons to the communion of a church may well be rejected for this reason; that it is impracticable. A church may know in some measure, the agreement between a person's profession and his outward practice; because both the one and the other may, alike, be subjected to her examination. But in order to know whether these be agreeable to the person's conscience, the church must find means to bring that secret principle, without the help of either words or actions, under a judicial review. But can she indeed enter the person's mind, observe the moral lights as they rise, mark each conviction wrought by the word and Spirit of God, and hear the warnings of conscience before they are put into words? We can perceive the agreement or disagreement between two extremes only in so far as we know the extremes themselves. But here the church has not the least knowledge of the one, that is, the person's conscience; otherwise

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than as it is uniformly manifested by the other, that is, the person's conversation.

Objection 4. "It seems warrantable from the 14th chapter of the epistle to the Romans, for a church to receive persons that differ from her in some of their opinions and practices."

Answer. It is very unlikely, that Paul who shewed on all occasions such a concern to preserve the peace and purity of the church; who so earnestly exhorted the Thessalonians to *withdraw from every brother that walketh disorderly*; who warned the Ephesian elders to beware of ravenous wolves that would *creep in among them, not sparing the flock*; who wished to have them cut off that troubled the church of the Galatians; who withstood Peter to the face when he took part with those Judaizing teachers that were such enemies to the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free; we say, it is very unlikely that this faithful and zealous apostle would direct the church of Christ at Rome to receive into her bosom such as were open and avowed despisers of any thing that she herself acknowledged to be a command of Christ. Hear what a solemn charge he gives to this very church: *I beseech you, brethren, mark them who cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.* But who are they whom a church must consider as the causers of such divisions and offences? Those, undoubtedly, who in the eyes of that church, openly and obstinately despise any commandment of the Lord. Surely, then, the apostle would never advise the Romans to receive such into their communion.

The case concerning which the apostle here gives directions, was shortly this: Some persons who had been probably either of Jewish extraction or proselytes, having professed their faith in Christ, continued still to observe many of the usages of the ceremonial law; they abstained from certain sorts of meats; they kept certain days, such as, those of Pentecost and of the Passover. These persons had expressed their desire of being admitted into the association of Christians at Rome. They were ignorant indeed, but they wanted to grow in grace and in the saving knowledge of our

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Lord Jesus Christ: they indeed still thought it their duty to observe some parts of the ceremonial law; but they were, by no means, enemies to Christian liberty; they sought an opportunity of being farther instructed in it. The apostle directs the Romans to receive these persons into their communion; and shews how respectfully and charitably church-members ought to behave toward them, and they again, toward fellow-church-members. It is obvious, that these persons, meek, humble, teachable, desirous of getting free from their prejudices in respect of which they were rather weak than wicked, were directly the reverse of those Judaizing teachers, troublers of the church and subverters of souls, against whom the apostle cautions the Philippians in these words: *Beware of evil workers, beware of dogs, beware of the concision.*

It is necessary to enquire more particularly, what those things were, the practice of which in these weak and unexperienced church-members was to be borne with. Those usages may be considered in two lights:

First, They were things that God expressly commanded under the Old Testament. The person of whom the apostle is here speaking, was convinced of this; but he was not so much enlightened in the knowledge of the New-dispensation as to see that these things were already abrogated. We need not wonder that this was the case with private church-members, when even the apostle Peter was so much stumbled at some of the privileges of the New-dispensation, Acts 10:14; Gal. 2:11. How great was the difference between the regard these Christians had for the usages which bore the stamp of divine authority, and that superstitious attachment to certain modes of religious worship, for which no other warrant can even be pretended than the invention and authority of men? Hence the apostle says in verse 6th of this chapter, *He that regardeth the day, regardeth it to the Lord*, that is, he is influenced by the divine authority of the Old Testament precept enjoining the observation of such a day: and on the other hand, *He that regardeth not the day, to the Lord doth he not regard it*, that is, he likewise is influenced by the divine authority of the New Testament revealing our freedom from the burden of ceremonial observances.

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To the same purpose the apostle adds, *He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, and giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and he giveth God thanks.* The import of this thanksgiving is, that the one as well as the other aimed at the glory of God in what he did. But sure it is only so far as a person is swayed by a regard to God's authority that he can be said to aim at his glory in what he does; especially so to aim at it as to be worthy of the apostolic approbation. But it may be asked, how it came about that the same principle of regard to God's authority could lead some to do, and others not to do, the same things? This was owing to a peculiar circumstance of that period: the Lord saw meet that the ceremonial, which was his own law, should die gradually and be buried honourably; and that his people should get, by degrees, from under the yoke of the Old Testament, to enjoy the glorious liberty of the New. Hence the apostle represents the old dispensation, not as removed at once by an instantaneous introduction of the new, but as *decaying, waxing old and ready to vanish away.* The Lord was pleased to bear with the weakness of his people in their attachment to some of the ancient ceremonies; while they were not so fully instructed in the reasons of the abrogation of them as he designed they should be afterward by the epistle to the Hebrews and other books of the New Testament not then published; while the observation of the Old Testament worship was not rendered impracticable by the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple; and while they did not seek justification by a scrupulous adherence to the law of Moses, putting it in the place of Christ and his righteousness. Thus the Lord did not condemn them; and what are we, that we should censure them with severity? The synod of the apostles and elders of which we read in Acts 15, instead of condemning them, made a decree for preventing the Gentile converts from giving them offence. Should it still be urged, that if it was right to observe these ceremonies, then the omission of them must have been sinful: We answer, that though these usages may be considered as having been enjoined by divine authority; they also admit, as they were observed by some Christians at this time, of another consideration: viz.

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Secondly, That they were of an indifferent nature; that is, they were things which Christians were neither expressly commanded, nor expressly forbidden; things which they were or were not, to practise according to the measure of their light, and of their acquaintance with the nature and privileges of the New Testament dispensation. The observation of the ceremonial law, even under the Mosaic economy, depended upon the circumstances of time and place: circumcision was discontinued the forty years that the children of Israel sojourned in the wilderness: No sacrifices were offered during the seventy years of the Babylonish captivity. Thus compared to the superior and perpetual obligation of the moral law, the obligation of the ceremonial, even when in its highest vigour, may be said to have been only occasional, circumstantial, and subject to change. Immediately after the death and resurrection of Christ, it became indifferent; that is, the church could no longer require her members to observe it, except in so far as it was necessary for the exercise of charity toward weak brethren. Still, however, the Lord would have it honoured as his own law; nor might any one cast it off till he was so much enlightened in the knowledge of the New Testament dispensation, as to see the Lord's warrant for doing so. To be so much enlightened was far from being, at this time, the general attainment of church-members, especially of those who had been accustomed to the use of the ceremonial law, it being the Lord's usual way to carry on his work by degrees. Hence he did not permit the church at once to declare the observance of the ancient institutions unlawful, lest very many, not being duly enlightened in the knowledge of the new-dispensation, should have been tempted to trample upon the authority of God, by their ignorant manner of casting off those institutions. The church, therefore, was in the right to leave many of them indifferent. Hence the apostle says, *To him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean. The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ, is acceptable to God and approved of men.* Had the usages the apostle here speaks of, been contrary to any command of God, surely persons could not be

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said to have served Christ in them; and instead of being acceptable to God, and approved of men, they would have been despisers of the divine authority, and in the sight of men transgressors of the law. The indifferent nature of these usages appears, too, from the reason which the apostle assigns for prohibiting church-members from the open contempt and disregard of them; which is, that such contempt and disregard would offend weaker fellow-church-members. *All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence. It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.* We cannot better define an indifferent thing than by saying, That it is a thing which becomes wrong whenever it becomes offensive. We cannot say that of any thing which God hath expressly commanded or forbidden.

What we have said may help us to understand several exhortation in this chapter. *Him that is weak receive, but not to doubtful disputations.* This does not say, that we should not defend the truth by disputing against error: God's blessing has often made disputation useful to his people: It is recommended to us by the example of Stephen, of Paul, and of our Lord Jesus himself. But the disputation against which the apostle here warns the Romans, was doubtful; it was disputation which necessarily began and ended in doubt; as neither he who condemned his brother for regarding the ceremonial usages, nor he who condemned his brother for the neglect of them, had any plain declaration of God's word on his side. Besides, disputation at an unseasonable time, and in a unsuitable manner, tends to discourage and offend weak church-members, and to fill them still more with doubt and perplexity. Again, the apostle says, *Let every one be fully persuaded in his own mind.* This does not mean that a person should be very confident and obstinate in his opinion, whatever it is. That is only self conceit; it is what the Lord strictly prohibits even with respect to things that seem to be in themselves indifferent, Deut. 12:8. *Ye shall not do after all the things that we do here this day, every one whatsoever is right in his own eyes.* A person who does whatsoever is right in his own eyes, or in modern language, according to his

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conscience, is but a poor character in the Bible. But the intent of this exhortation, is, that our consciences ought to be well informed of the mind and will of God as to whatever we do; and particularly, that a due respect should be paid to the authority of God in regarding or not regarding the usages of the ceremonial law. The apostle explains his meaning by his own example in verse 14. *I know, and I am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself.* Father, the apostle says, *Who art thou that judgest another? To his own master he standeth or falleth.* We must not understand this as a warrant to overlook the conduct of our brother, or to neglect reproving him for his offensive behaviour. It was the language of Cain, *Am I my brother's keeper?* We must not only teach, but also admonish and reprove one another. We must not with-hold what the Psalmist calls *a kindness, and precious ointment that shall not break the head.* This caveat, therefore, must be understood as levelled against that evil which our Lord condemns, Matt. 7:1. *Judge not, lest ye be judged;* against either thinking or speaking uncharitably of the person or state of our brother, especially on account of a diversity of opinion and practice as to indifferent things. Once more the apostle says, *Hast thou faith? have it to thyself.* It does not follow from this, that we should not make a profession of our faith for the edifying of the church; which would be contrary to the exhortation in verse 19. *Follow the things wherewith one may edify another;* and in Heb. 10:13. *Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering.* The apostle's meaning is this: if a church-member has strong faith, he may enjoy the comfort of it before God, and bring forth the genuine fruits of it in holiness of heart and life; but he should not insult over his weak brethren, nor do any thing that may prove offensive or stumbling to them.

We have dwelt the longer on this chapter, not only because it is often quoted on the subject of church-communion, and often perverted; but also because it is a passage of scripture that is peculiarly useful for the direction of the church with regard to the receiving of such persons and the estimation of such things as the apostle here speaks of. Things that the church, in her representative or collective capacity, has never determined and cannot clearly

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determine from scripture to be sin or duty, may justly be considered in the same light as the meats and days here mentioned: and as to the matter of admission to the fellowship of a particular church, such things, whatever individuals may think of them, are still to be held indifferent: that is, neither the omission nor the performance of them should be any bar to church-communion. Besides even with respect to such things as the church has determined to be sin or duty, persons should not be utterly rejected for their ignorance of some of them, provided they are such persons as *the weak in the faith* toward whom the apostle exhorts the Romans to behave with so much tenderness and charity. Among those who apply for admission to the fellowship of any church, she ought certainly to make a difference between the weak and the wicked; between the teachable and the obstinate; between the ignorant and those who contradict and blaspheme; between those who love the light and lament their want of it, and those who hate it because their deeds are evil.

Objection 5. “Every church ought to imitate Christ her head: he holds communion with his people notwithstanding much remaining corruption: Who would partake of his fellowship, were he to exclude from it all that are chargeable with any thing he has declared to be sinful?”

Answer. We own, the communion of the saints with Christ, and their communion with a particular church may be compared together, in such respects as the following: Those who have communion with Christ are such as make it the study and business of their lives, to keep his commands 1 John 2:3. *Hereby do we know that we know him, or have union and fellowship with him, if we keep his commandments.* So it is only those whom a church judgeth to be such that she ought to admit to her fellowship. He chastises his people when they wander from his way, by various rods; particularly, by depriving them of the comfortable sense of their communion with him, Ps. 89:30, 32. *If his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments,—then will I visit their transgression*

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with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. In like manner, a church ought to censure her members when she sees them go astray.

But still it does not necessarily follow that whoever has real communion with Christ must have likewise actual communion with a particular church; for in some respects there is no comparison between the one and the other. The communion of Christ and that of a particular church cannot be compared in respect of necessity. The latter is indeed one of the appointed means of our sanctification; but the former belongs to the very essence of our sanctification. A person may be sanctified by the fellowship he has with Christ in his word and in prayer, though he should never have an opportunity of joining himself to any particular church. It is necessary for Christ to hold real communion with his people at all times, in their worst as well as in their best cases. Thus *he preserves their souls in life*, even when the overflowing of some corruption renders them rather hurtful than edifying to fellow church-members. He takes care of them even while in the hands of their enemies; restraining these enemies, and over-ruling all their deceit and violence to his own glory. Such was his gracious presence with the ark while in the hands of the Philistines, that instead of destroying it, they were obliged to do it honour. Thus Christ was with Peter to support his faith, even when Satan was permitted to sift him as wheat. Farther, the communion of the saints with Christ and their communion with a particular church cannot be compared with one another in respect of the evidence on which they proceed. Christ, as *he knows what is in man*, deals immediately with the hearts of his people; but the church can only deal with their outward profession and their outward practice. As he discerns the naughtiness of a church-member under the fairest external appearances; so, too, the reality of grace, even where the church can see nothing but evil; and such evil as appears to render him unfit for her communion. It is plain, therefore, that in some respects, we cannot draw a strict parallel between a person's invisible communion with Christ and his visible communion with a particular church. Indeed the communion of poor sinners with Christ is a mystery of incomparable grace and sovereignty. When a

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particular church receives a person into her communion, it is with this view; that such a person may be useful to her as well as that she may be so to him. But in our communion with Christ, he alone is profitable to us, not we to him; if we are enabled to make him any returns of service and of gratitude, he is himself the author and the finisher of them. *He works all our works in us.* We dare not hold communion with disorderly brethren, because being evil already, we grow worse by evil communications: But Christ may well invite them to communion with them; because he is able to render them meet for it; he *sanctifies them wholly.*

Since a church's positive allowance of any thing in the practice or profession of her members which is acknowledged by herself to be sinful, appears contrary to the ends that are common to the church with other societies; and still more so to those that are peculiar to herself: it may be useful to observe the progress and the effects of such toleration in various churches.

The most flagrant instance of it is in the church of Rome. After the fourth century, as her corruptions increased, that course of public humiliation, which, as it was first practised in the church, was only designed to evidence the repentance of public offenders, came at length to be considered as a proper commutation for offences and for crimes. When the pretensions and abuses of clerical power were carried to a great height, then the church pretended that it belonged to her alone to regulate those commutations. In consequence of that, the Pope and his council decreed various alterations with respect to them; as, that money should be accepted instead of those humiliating appearances formerly in use: In order to give weight and authority to such absolutions, they represented them as the same, or inseparably connected with those of heaven: having gone thus far, it was not difficult to go a step farther; they offered not only pardon for the past, but indulgence for future crimes: And that they might not seem to have undertaken what was beyond the compass of their power, they pretended to have discovered a treasure of merit in the church; a treasure consisting of the works of supererogation

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performed by innumerable reputed saints, together with the infinite merits of Christ. Then was a certain price put upon every crime; and a member of the church of Rome, on paying a sum of money, had all the allowance his spiritual guides could give him, to persist in the practice of the greatest villanies. No wonder that so enormous an abuse was among the first things that occasioned that concurrence of wonderful events which distinguished the era of the Reformation.

Nor have the reformed churches themselves been duly careful to keep clear of this evil. Thus if we take a view of the church of England; what with the inconsistency between her superstitious modes of worship and her testimony against the church of Rome; what with the custom of administering the Lord's Supper in order to qualify persons for civil offices; what with her dependence on the state, and her obsequious compliances with it; what, in fine, with her total neglect of church discipline, (the penalties imposed on offenders by the bishop's courts being rather a persecution of the members of civil society than the exercise of spiritual discipline on church-members as such) the church of England is deeply chargeable with this evil.

The church of England and the church of Scotland have public articles and confessions of faith directly pointed against the tenets that go under the names of Arianism, Socinianism and Arminianism: but where is the person who is now kept from their communion on account of those dangerous errors?

The opinions laid before the assembly for the judgment of that court, in the process of Messrs. Simson and Campbel, are plainly contrary to the acknowledged principles of the church of Scotland; and yet how those offenders were screened from due censure, is well known. Nothing can be more contrary to her established order and rules of discipline, than for a clergyman to be intruded into the ministry of a reclaiming congregation: And yet how many such clergymen are in her communion?

It is lamented by the serious part of those who are still in the communion of the church of Scotland as well as by others, that, in admitting persons to her sealing ordinances, there is daily less

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attention paid even to such things as are allowed by Christians in general to be sinful and immoral.

Nor are those who profess to have withdrawn from the establishment in Scotland on account of its corruptions, free from blame in this matter.

For example; those who call themselves, *The Presbytery of Relief, because they are said to relieve the Christian people from the oppressive execution of the law of patronages*, declare, by their profession of the presbyterian religion, that whatever is contrary to it, particularly Episcopacy and Independency, is to be held sinful: and yet, by a determination of their clergy,[4] they invite such as are openly chargeable with those evils, to participate in the most sacred pledges of their communion.

With respect to another set of dissenters from the Establishment, their practice in opposition to their brethren; such as their neglecting to set about public covenanting at present, their justification of the religious clause in some burgess oaths, their censuring various passages in the Judicial Act and Testimony; is, at least, plainly an allowance of what is determined to be sinful in public deeds which, by their own confession, they themselves have passed; deeds which they have never yet thought proper to repeal; and therefore deeds, under the authority and obligation of which they are standing to this day.[5]

With respect to another body of dissenters who refuse to acknowledge the present civil government in Britain, we may observe, That their principles on this head, considered as in opposition to the principles of those who are endeavouring as well as they, to testify against every thing that is really evil, or contrary to our covenanted reformation, must imply a disapprobation of all the public justice and all the preservation of peace and good order we have by means of the civil magistrate: principles which are not only unwarrantable; but which never can be carried into practice, unless we either take arms against civil society, or forsake it. This is an instance of a church declaring something to be sinful in which she must either indulge her members, or oblige them, as the apostle says in another case, *to go out of the world*. This indulgence is

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dangerous as having a tendency to the relaxation of discipline: and so much the more, that occasions daily occur, such as the paying of taxes and the summoning of persons to appear before civil courts of judicature; which can hardly fail to be attended with such compliances as, according to those principles, are doubtless at least, if not evidently sinful.

Upon the whole, when a church opposes the truth as maintained by another church; when she ceases to endeavour after more conformity to the word of God; when she is satisfied with her attainments and values herself upon them; we have reason to conclude she is in a backsliding state; a state which is not only characterized, but in a great measure constituted by this unscriptural toleration.

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Notes:

[1] A church ought, no doubt, to proceed upon visible evidences in judging particular persons to be duly qualified church members; and in consequence of such a judgment, they must be reckoned church-members with respect to all the purposes of external society. But it is plain, that the ordinances and proceedings of a church, agreeable to the word and warranted by the authority of an invisible king and head, have an immediate respect to an invisible kingdom in the hearts of men, for the erection of it in those who are to be church-members, and for the advancement of it in those who are such already: So that in the case of mere nominal Christians, these ordinances and proceedings may justly be said to want what is properly their object in church members. Hence the absurdity of any association of men imagining that, when by carnal policy they increase their numbers, they are therefore contributing to the increase of the church of Christ: Hence, too, the importance of the scriptural ordinances and the scriptural proceedings of a church of Christ to vital and practical religion: all such ordinances and proceedings having an immediate respect to, and an appointed influence upon, the invisible kingdom of God in the heart: Finally, hence no society can positively allow the contempt of such ordinances or proceedings without injury to practical religion. Whatsoever is contrary to those ordinances and proceedings, being contrary to sound doctrine, is likewise so *to the power of godliness*.

[2] A concern for our salvation, subordinate to the glory of God, is our indispensable duty; but, separated from a single regard to the glory of God, it is an abomination. We are to receive the word, in the first place, on account of its divine authority, or *as the word of God*; we are to receive it, in the second place, *that we may be saved*: The primary ground and reason of faith is, not that such truths are connected with our salvation, but that they bear the stamp of *Thus saith the Lord*.

[3] The following passage of an eminent writer in the Deistical controversy is very opposite to the loose manner in which many speak of what they call the *circumstantials* of Christianity: "As it is one of the peculiar weaknesses of human nature, when, upon a comparison of two things, one is found of greater importance than the other, to consider this other as of scarce any importance at all: it is highly necessary that we remind ourselves, how great presumption it is, to make light of any institution of divine appointment;

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that our obligations to obey all God's commands whatever, are absolute and indispensable; and that commands merely positive, admitted to be from him, lay us under a moral obligation to obey them: moral in the strictest and most proper sense." *Butler's Analogy*.

[4] See a copy of this determination in pages 30, 31, 32 of a late valuable publication, entitled, *The Relief Scheme considered*.

[5] The public deeds here meant, are these: The Act, declaration and testimony, published in 1737; The Act of the Associate Presbytery for renewing our solemn covenants in a way and manner agreeable to our situation and circumstances in this period, passed in 1743; and the act of the Associate Synod against swearing the religious clause in some Burgess Oaths, passed in 1746. The Brethren of whom we here speak, pretend to find *errors and mistakes* in the first of these acts: They deem the second, in contradiction to its title, *unseasonable and disagreeable to our present circumstances*: The *manner*, they say, in which the Synod passed the third was *rash and unfair*: Some of them are traduced as having the worst *effects*; as raising *doubts* in the minds of many persons; and as encouraging a spirit of *pride, of self-conceit and animosity*. One should think that any act justly liable to these charges ought, in reason, to be repealed; and yet, however amazingly preposterous it may seem, some of these very charges have been offered as an apology for not repealing one of the acts abovementioned.