

AN EXPLANATION AND DEFENCE
OF THE TERMS OF COMMUNION,
ADOPTED BY THE
COMMUNITY OF DISSENTERS.

By the Reformed Presbytery of Scotland, 1801.
Sabbath Afternoon Studies: Part 1.

Objectives for these Studies:

- Learn the Biblical reasons leading to Criteria for Membership in any Church.
- Attain a better understanding of the particular Criteria adopted by the R.P. Churches.
- Understand the Use, Reason, or Necessity of these Qualifications.
- Learn common Objections and Answers to Reformed Doctrine and Church Standards.

Differences of which we should seek to be Mindful:

1. Actual Church Communion is one thing, most essential;
while the Communion of the Lord's Supper is another thing.
2. The Documents Received as R.P. Church Standards are one thing;
the fact that they are used as criteria of membership is another thing.
3. Terms of Communion are often viewed as having a separating nature;
but they may also be viewed as they facilitate Union and Unity.
4. Terms of Communion may be defended as they are true & just among their adherents;
or as they are accounted necessary and required objectively by present circumstances.

EXPLANATION, &c.

INTRODUCTION:

CONTAINING SOME REMARKS ON THE PROPRIETY
OF TERMS OF COMMUNION IN GENERAL.

WERE mankind disposed to drop their prejudices, and to allow the subject a dispassionate consideration, it is presumed that the propriety of explicit terms of admission to the privileges of the church, might easily be discerned. They seem, indeed, to result from the very nature of society, in this imperfect state. By society, we understand a number of reasonable beings, accountable to God and to one another, all closely united on some general principles, in which they agree, and on which they resolve mutually to act, for the good of the whole. It is self-evident that they can never properly co-operate in the prosecution of the same great designs, unless there be a good understanding amongst them. ► But it is not easy to conceive how this can properly subsist, without a clear and distinct statement of the general principles in which they agree, and of the important ends which they have in view. Hence it is, that all societies, less or greater, civil or religious, have their respective regulations,

the approbation of which is made the condition of membership and of participating in the peculiar privileges of the society. So very powerful is the law of necessity in this case, that, in all ages of the world, its operation on the minds of men hath been uniformly felt. ► Now, in ecclesiastic society, the great object of public creeds and explicit terms of communion is, to state and explain the general principles in which the members of the association are agreed, in order to promote a good understanding and a proper harmony amongst them. The adoption of terms, therefore, seems to be highly requisite. Nor doth this mode of reasoning concerning their propriety, in the least savour of will-worship; for it must ever be remembered, that no terms in any church are warrantable, unless they be plainly sanctioned by “Thus saith Lord.” But when the matter of them is found to be scriptural, we thus prove them to be, like every other part of our holy religion, a reasonable service.

It is objected, “If terms of communion, as you grant, should always be, for the matter of them, scriptural, why state them in our own language at all: can we express them any better than they are already expressed in the Sacred Oracles?”

To this we reply, That if mankind in general properly understood the Scriptures, at first instance, and were disposed rightly to apply them, we should certainly say, Amen, to the doctrine of the objection. But it obviously proceeds on a very false supposition, namely, that all in general who apply for admission to the privileges of the church may be expected properly to understand and apply the Scriptures, without the diligent use of ordinary means, for their assistance. The mournful experience, however, of the church in every age, and daily observation, assure us that the Scriptures are very liable to abuse, and are often grossly perverted. The trumpet blown in Zion, therefore, must give a distinct sound. [1 Cor. 14.8; cp. Num. 10.4-7.] ► Were the Roman Catholic, the Episcopalian, the Independent, and the Presbyterian to be asked, if they were willing to receive the Bible as the rule of their conduct, in their church capacity, they would all answer in the affirmative. But it doth not follow that their very opposite modes of church-government are substantially the same, and equally agreeable to the revealed will of God. The Arian, the Socinian, the Arminian, the Antinomian, and the Calvinist, are all equally ready to aver that the Bible is the standard of their faith and practice. Must we hence conclude, that their several doctrines are the same? Or would there be even the shadow of consistency in such a mixed association of communicants sitting down at the same table, under the open profession of believing in the same Lord, and of holding the one faith, and the one baptism, of his prescription?

► To instance one particular, out of many: suppose a Roman Catholic and a Protestant to be both asked, If they believe in the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures, concerning the administration and reception of the Lord’s supper; none of them would hesitate to answer, Yes. They would, with equal readiness, subscribe these words in the original institution, “This is my body.” We could not certainly from this conclude, that the absurd doctrine of transubstantiation, and the Protestant doctrine, that the bread only signifies or represents Christ’s body, are much the same. Nor is it easy to see the smallest propriety or consistency, in such persons holding communion together at the Lord’s table. But if the Scriptures must be made the terms of communion, at first instance, or without any explanation and statement of truths, in our own language, we shall soon find ourselves obliged to admit persons of diametrically opposite faith and practice. Explanation is surely necessary. ► And our public creeds and terms of communion were never viewed in any other light, even by those who have been most warmly attached to them, than as subordinate helps for our right understanding and applying the Scriptures. We never formed the remotest thought of substituting them in the place of the Bible, or

putting them on a level with it. But when they are evidently “founded upon and agreeable to the Word of God,”—the manner in which all our subordinate standards are uniformly qualified—we reckon it our duty to adopt them, and faithfully to adhere unto them. It is observable that almost all the modern objections against public creeds, confessions, and explicit terms of communion, take it for granted that these confessions and the Word of God are at variance with each other. They suppose the one to require what the other forbids: and hence, they state the question, Whether we should obey God, rather than men? But if God and men require, substantially, the same thing, where is the inconsistency of obeying both in their own place? [Heb. 13.17.] A warm zeal for the Holy Scriptures and a strong attachment to sound creeds and terms of communion, are so far from implying any contradiction, that the one necessarily involves and loudly proclaims the other. He, who, in the time of danger, uses the best means in his power for the defence and protection of the injured, certainly proves the best friend. While many are perverting the Scripture to their own and others’ destruction, we should do the most we can to have them kept pure and entire. ► It will be said, “The native force of truth, and the power of God, who is the Author of the Scriptures, will keep them pure, and make them successful, independent of our creeds and confessions.” But God, in his infinite wisdom, hath been pleased to work by means adapted to the end, and to instruct us by men of like passions with ourselves. Besides, upon the principle of expressing terms of communion in the language of Scripture only, would it not follow that men were equally restricted to employ none other than the language of the Holy Spirit, in all their social acts of religion, such as offering their joint prayers to God, and administering the ordinances of the gospel? Nay, in the perusal of the Scriptures themselves, would we not be restricted to the necessity of resorting unto the original words of inspiration, without daring to use even the most just and correct translation? But it is obvious, and hath often been proved by facts, that the grand aim of this objection is, first to demolish the strong bulwarks of orthodox terms of communion distinctly ascertained; and then, by the bare sound of unexplained scriptural phrases, to establish the cause of error the more easily.

The propriety of explicit terms of admission to the privileges of the Christian Church will also appear, by turning our attention to the following, and such-like very solemn and divinely inspired injunctions: “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. Only let your conversation be as it becometh the Gospel of Christ; that, whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the Gospel.” [1 Cor. 1.10. Phil. 1.27.]

From the express words of the Holy Spirit in these passages, it is abundantly plain that the union positively required consists not merely in worshipping together, within the same walls, or in sitting down together at the same holy table of the Lord. It evidently comprehends a union in sentiment, and in the open profession of the truth as it is in Jesus. They must “be perfectly joined together in the same mind; and must speak the same things;” But, in every period of the church, false doctrines have actually been propagated—misunderstandings and divisions have taken place. How error, which the adversaries of truth have taught and propagated, in their own language, and in their own way, can be either consistently or successfully refuted, and the opposite truths fairly stated, so as to form a proper contrast, unless we meet our opponents on their own ground, and also use human language in exhibiting a faithful testimony for the truth, it is not easy to see. ► If we should simply refer them to

the Scriptures without any reasoning on the subject, they would reckon themselves secure in the possession of their erroneous opinions. Nor is it less difficult to discern how divisions can be properly prevented, or misunderstandings removed, without clearly stating and explaining our sentiments. We cannot, otherwise, consistently walk together as those who are agreed, “Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” And firmly believing “That there is one body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” [Eph. 4.3,5.]

It is purely in subserviency to this Scriptural union that we insist on having distinct terms of communion. Meanwhile, we do not, as some modern writers allege, “present to our minds a description of a society without any difference of judgment whatever in religion, and studying to believe whatever is the practice of their brethren, rather than what the Word of God enjoins concerning affection and Christian fellowship.” We are sensible that while men are in this imperfect state, some diversity of opinion may still be expected to exist, even after all the means which can be used to prevent it. But this, instead of weakening, greatly strengthens our argument; while it evidently shows the propriety of employing, at least, all the means in our power, in order to prevent this diversity. ► As to “believing whatever is the practice of our brethren,” we, indeed, wish to “Contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” [Jude 3.] And to “be followers of them, who, through faith and patience, inherit the promises.” [Heb. 6.12.] It is not, however, *the practice*, either of our reforming forefathers of old, or of our brethren in our own times, that we make the formal *reason* of our belief. We consider the law of God as obliging both them and us “to think the same things, and to speak the same things; holding fast the form of sound words, and keeping the ordinances as they have been delivered to us.” [1 Cor. 1.10; 2 Tim. 1.13; 1 Cor. 11.2.] While we study, by all means possible, to have our own and our brethren’s faith and practice harmonizing together, we constantly contend that both theirs and ours must be in unison with the infallible standard of truth and duty.

Discussion Questions

1. What simple justification may be given for the use of Terms of Communion in a church, supposing we had no direction from Scripture in the matter?
 - A. Such qualifications or criteria result from the very nature of society in its imperfect state.
2. When others object that Scriptural terms of communion must be stated in the very words of Scripture, what answer may be given to this objection?
 - A. It proceeds on the false assumption that all men understand the words of Scripture according to the same proper sense.
3. How many opposing kinds of churches are there which affirm that the Holy Scriptures are the basis for the particular doctrines and practices of their communion?
 - A. Many: Arian, Socinian, Arminian, Antinomian, Calvinist, etc.
4. How does the Presbytery say our public creeds and terms of communion should be viewed?
 - A. Not on a level with Scripture, but as subordinate helps for our right understanding and applying the Scriptures.
5. When Church Standards are presented for our faith and obedience, should we obey God or man?
 - A. We should obey God. And as God has appointed the Church, and given her the work of carrying a banner for his truth, it will often be useful to us to follow these standards as we obey and follow the Lord Jesus.