

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 2.

EXPLANATION, &c.

INTRODUCTION:

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

[Continued]

We shall likely be told, “Though the Apostle, in the above and similar passages of Scripture, required Christians assiduously to press after the exalted attainment of unanimity in the faith, yet he never can be understood as suspending the enjoyment of church-fellowship among them, on such unanimity; for he elsewhere enjoineeth upon them the duty of mutual forbearance in some matters of faith and practice wherein they might happen to disagree. Wherefore, the condition of fellowship seems rather to have been unanimity in fundamental articles of faith only; and an agreement to forbear, in lesser matters when the sentiment might be various.” But it is evident that this objection proceeds upon a capital mistake, with regard to the proper objects of the Christian forbearance intended by the Apostle. These are not matters of faith and practice to be believed and observed, but such weaknesses and infirmities of temper as are inseparable from this imperfect state, together with the personal injuries which one Christian may receive from another. ► Accordingly, applying the word to such objects, he thus exhorteth Christians—“Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any.” [Colos. 3.13.] From the frequent occurrence of these objects in social life, the Christian will find ample scope for the exercise of this forbearance. His charity, as to these, will bear all things, and cover a multitude of sins, while his well-directed zeal will prompt him to contend earnestly for all the faith once delivered to the saints. ► The doctrine of modern forbearance among persons of opposite belief, inducing them to form a compromise in which they mutually agree to differ, and never more to mention discording tenets, leads, in its native tendency, to the suppression of truth, and the lasting concealment of so many articles of faith as the jarring sentiments may happen to hinge upon. And what is the amount of this, but to banish for ever from the faith of the Church, a great number of precious truths contained in the Word of God, and designed by him for the spiritual comfort and edification of his people? And all

this to obtain a catholic union amongst professing Christians, at the expense of losing sacred truth. An agreement to divide, in matters of faith and practice, sounds ill with the injunction, “Be perfectly joined together in the same mind.” [1 Cor. 1.10.]

The argument taken from the believing Jews being allowed communion in the Christian Church, while they still retained some of the old ceremonies, will not help the matter. These ceremonies were originally of divine institution, a circumstance which never can apply to any human invention; and, besides, there was a positive permission, under certain restrictions, granted by the Church’s Head, to the believing Jews to observe, for a time, some of the ancient ceremonies respecting meats and drinks, till they should be better instructed on the subject of their total repeal, by the death of the glorious Surety. “Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him that eateth not judge him that eateth; for God hath received him.” [Rom. 14.3.]

Our Lord’s doctrine in his Epistles to the churches of Asia, evidently favours distinct and explicit terms of admission into the fellowship of the Christian Church, in all succeeding ages. As the true and faithful Witness is himself the glorious Author of these Epistles, no reason is left for disputing the truth or propriety of what they contain. And as they are all concluded with this solemn injunction, “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches;” it is equally certain that what things they inculcate were written for our learning; and, in their true spirit and scope, are no less applicable now than they were then.

But the church of Pergamos is sharply reprov’d for retaining in her communion those, “Who held the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication.” As also those “Who held the hateful doctrine of the Nicolaitans.” The Church of Thyatira, in like manner, receives very severe reprehension from Him who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, “because she suffered that woman Jezebel, who called herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce his servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols.” The meaning of which seems to be, that this church did not properly call to account, and openly exclude from her communion, some person, or class of persons, within her jurisdiction, who, in respect of extensive influence, lascivious practice, and cunning craftiness, lying in wait to deceive, remarkably resembled Jezebel of old. ► Whence the following things are abundantly obvious: 1st, That the public, and regularly installed office-bearers of the Church, though they have not, in themselves, originally any authoritative power, yet they have a ministerial power, derived from the Church’s glorious Head, in virtue of which it is their province, acting in his name, and according to the plain revelations of his will, to judge and determine concerning the doctrine, worship, discipline, and government of his house. If they were not really clothed with such a power, they could never, consistently, be blamed for not exercising it. ► 2dly, That the Church’s testimony should be clearly stated, in defence of truth and holiness; and should also be faithfully pointed, not only against all error and immorality in general, but, in a special

manner, against those errors and immoralities which more remarkably prevail where providence hath ordered her lot. The ensnaring doctrines of Balaam and of the Nicolaitans were prevalent in Pergamos and Thyatira, and should therefore have met with the most pointed opposition from these churches; while the discipline of the Lord's house should have been faithfully and impartially executed upon those who propagated them. ► *3dly*, That every true church of Christ ought to exclude from her fellowship all who hold and propagate erroneous opinions, or are chargeable with immoral practices: the Spirit of God, speaking in the Scriptures, always being the supreme judge; while "The priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts." [Mal. 2.7.] ► *4thly*, That the toleration of error and immorality, in whatever shape these may appear, is a thing expressly condemned in the Scriptures. The God of truth himself, by reason of his glorious perfection, neither can, nor will do it. For any mortal, then, to take so much upon him, must certainly argue the highest presumption. Whether he be clothed with civil or with ecclesiastic authority, it must be extremely arrogant to assume a power of defending, supporting, or maintaining, what the universal and unerring standard of right and wrong positively prohibits. The solemn charge against the ministry of the church in Thyatira, was, "Thou sufferest."

In the spirit of modern objections, we might expect to hear it said, "Why were not those persons who held the doctrines of Balaam, and of the Nicolaitans, allowed to think for themselves in matters of religion? Might it not have been granted that their lips and their consciences were their own, and that no man was lord over them?" Nay, but who art thou, O man, that repliest against the plain dictates of the Holy Spirit, speaking in the Scriptures? Though no man, or class of men, be lord of another's conscience, yet the God of truth, who hath favoured us with a very full and clear revelation of his will, is assuredly the Lord of all our consciences; and no man can ever consistently plead a right to think, speak, or act, differently from what he hath prescribed in his Word. ► And be it so, "that there is considerable difficulty in ascertaining the true meaning of Scripture, and that every one will be disposed to put his own gloss upon it, and so leave us as much in the dark as ever with respect to the path of duty." The only just inference we can draw from this is, that we have the greater need to double our diligence, and to call in the aid of expositions, confessions, explicit terms of communion, and every other rational mean, which may be helpful to remove the difficulty, and for enabling us to understand one another. ► But if, from the doctrine that we cannot easily bring men to think and speak alike concerning the meaning of the all-perfect standard, this inference were to be drawn, "that nothing should be positively fixed, but every one left to believe, and to profess, as he may find cause," we then go upon the very absurd supposition, that there is no reality in things, independent of men's opinion and fancy; nor any possibility of rightly understanding what the Spirit saith unto the churches. Which leads us, at once, into downright scepticism: a most dangerous extreme; to which many of the loose modern doctrines evidently tend. ► He must be very little acquainted with his Bible, who doth not grant that its contents, in general,

are incomparably more plain, and easy to be understood, than are the contents of the statute books in the kingdoms of this world. Yet every, the meanest and most illiterate, subject in the kingdom, must regulate his conduct according to the laws of his country, or suffer for his transgression. ► The authority of JEHOVAH is, unquestionably, superior to that of any earthly prince; while those things which immediately concern our faith and practice, as Christians and members of the gospel-church, and with regard to which the solemn authority of God is interposed, are of infinitely more importance than our temporal affairs. And, seeing the Lord hath given us a very full and clear revelation of his will, with the fairest opportunities and best means of understanding it; to plead a liberty of turning it into a thousand shapes, and accommodating it to such faith and practice as every one may choose to prescribe for himself, is certainly expressive of very little regard to the King of saints.

To the above we shall only at present add, the divinely authorized practice of the apostolic church: from which may be drawn an invincible argument to prove the propriety of explicit terms, in admitting to Christian privileges, in the house of God. When the Church's risen Lord, in virtue of having received all power in heaven and in earth, sent forth his disciples, in their public capacity, he authorized them to administer the seals of the new covenant, or testament, in his blood. He, at the same time, gave it in solemn charge, to accompany the administration of these seals with the instructing of the nations, in the knowledge of divine truth. And it is observable, that they were not to content themselves with teaching them one, or a few leading truths, which might be called fundamental; but all the different articles of his revealed will in general, so far as they had opportunity, and circumstances might require. —“Teaching them,” says he, “to observe ALL THINGS whatsoever I have commanded you.” [Matth. 28.20.] To this rule, prescribed by their adored Master, the Apostles were ever careful to conform their public administrations.

Discussion Questions

1. What objection does the Reformed Presbytery anticipate from those who oppose unanimity in the faith as a condition of church-fellowship?
2. What does the Presbytery indicate is the proper object of the Bible's commanded forbearance?
3. Putting the command of “forbearing” in context, what is a scripture-occasion for such forbearance?
4. What danger must we carefully guard against as a fruit of the compromise-policy promoted in modern times?
5. If we would look for a Scripture-direction for receiving those of weak faith, what will we find?
6. What can never be concluded from the fact that the believing Jews were for a time allowed to retain some of their old ceremonies?
7. What general offence is reproved by our Lord in some of the churches in Asia, in Revelation 2?
8. What are four things implied by this fact?
9. Though some parts of the Bible are difficult to understand, what facts, common to all men, make it reasonable that the Bible's requirements be imposed on all?
10. What observation from the Great Commission serves to warrant conditions for church privileges?