

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 5.

ON ARTICLE II: CONFESSION, &c.

THE second Article of our Terms requires an owning of the doctrines contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. On this, also, we shall endeavour to give unto those who ask us, a reason of the hope that is in us, with meekness and fear.

It is only after mature deliberation, carefully comparing them with the Word of God, and receiving full conviction in our own minds of their being wholly founded upon it, that we consider the Confession and Catechisms, or any other human composure whatever, as properly entitled to our belief, and deserving to be ranked amongst the subordinate standards of our church. But, after being convinced of their agreeableness to the infallible rule, we cheerfully receive them.

It is not with the remotest intention of supplying a defect in the Oracles of truth, which we ever consider as a complete rule in themselves; nor is it at all in the view of putting either the Confession, or any other book in the world, on the same level with the Bible, that we adopt these explanatory standards; but purely, in order to ascertain the true meaning of Scripture, help us to understand one another in our church-fellowship, and, through these mediums, to transmit a faithful testimony for truth, from generation to generation. Abundantly satisfied that they are remarkably useful for such purposes, we bless the Lord that ever we have had opportunity to adopt them.

Though the Confession and Catechisms, especially considering the distant period at which they were compiled, are, perhaps, the best guarded and the most accurately expressed composition to be found in our language; yet we do not view our general and sincere approbation of even the whole doctrines contained in them, as necessarily involving the idea that every word is the best chosen, or every expression so properly guarded as it might have been, had the authors known what objections were to be raised against them. But we do not wish to make these eminent men of God offenders for a word, or single incautious expression, when we have the fullest and plainest evidence for their real intention and leading design.

If any detached expressions in these standards should, at first sight, seem to be at variance with the doctrines taught in other parts of the same book, or with the plain and openly avowed sentiments, as well as the uniform practice of the compilers, on all other occasions, we consider

the law of Christian charity as strongly binding us to explain the dubious-like expressions, by the plain and uniform doctrines of the same men, rather than to force our own meaning on the particular expressions, at the expense of making them contradict the clear and obvious doctrines, more fully illustrated in other parts of these authors' writings. ► Unless we go to work in this manner, no human composure of any considerable extent could ever pass without severe censure. Denied the benefit of this rule, many of the modern publications in favour of Christian forbearance might, and with far less straining too, than what is often employed in torturing our Confession, be pressed into the service of absolute scepticism and confusion. Yea, by taking hold of detached expressions, and refusing or neglecting to compare one place with another, the Holy Bible itself might soon be compelled to blaspheme, as hath frequently, indeed, been the case, while it has been in the hands of infidels and gross heretics.

To these standards themselves, and to our terms of communion requiring an approbation of them, it has been objected, "That they contain a discussion of the ordinance of civil government, and require Christians to take an active part in both the erection and management of it; whereas, civil government, being an ordinance of man, and versant about the affairs of this life, properly belongs to the men of the world. Christians, therefore, being called out of the world, and sustaining the character of strangers and pilgrims, should mind objects of a spiritual nature, and never interfere with an institution of this kind." To this we answer, It is, indeed, a glorious truth that the Christian is, by the grace of God, called out of the world lying in sin, and is instructed to attend to matters of far superior importance than things terrene. But it is equally certain, that the new situation in which religion places him, neither deprives him of any rights, nor forbids the discharge of any duties which belong to him, as a man. ► It only qualifies him the better for the right management of these. In one sense, he is still a man of the world, being necessarily conversant about the affairs of this life, while obliged to form plans and labour for his temporal support. Connected in this manner with the world, and united with fellow-men, he is, of course, induced to consult for the security of his person and property; which necessarily leads him to adopt the order of civil government; and when, like a Christian, he opens his Bible, to see what instructions on a subject of this kind he may derive from it, he there finds the sacred plan clearly laid before him, the ordinance of civil government delineated, in its divine original and ends; accomplishing, at once, the great purposes of security to person and property, the cultivation of morals, and the advancement of piety, together with the sovereign command of its divine Author to act accordingly, "Thou shalt provide, out of all the people, able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them.—If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church." [Exod. 18.21; 1 Cor. 6.4.] ► Is it not to Christians that these and similar passages of Scripture are addressed? And doth not the addressing of them thus, on the great subject of civil government show the very intimate connection which they have with it, in all its concerns? But if so be the case, it can never be placed to the score of error, for these Confessions to attribute unto a Christian people the right and duty of interfering with the ordinance of civil government;

nor can their doing so be reckoned inconsistent with the character of “strangers and pilgrims on the earth.”

It hath also been objected, “That these standards do not preserve the necessary distinction between church and state; and, consequently, grant to the civil magistrate by far too much power in ecclesiastical matters. This mistake,” it is supposed, “hath arisen from not sufficiently attending to the difference between the Old and New Testament dispensations.” But it should be remembered that a sinful and improper connection between church and state could never be sanctioned by the God of infinite perfection, neither under one dispensation nor another. It will be no salvo to tell us, “That the carnal ordinances of the ceremonial law were once authorized by God himself, and yet it would be highly improper to observe them now.” These, as we have already said, were shadows of good things to come; and, therefore, whenever the substance was enjoyed, could be no longer needed. But they were all innocent. None of them, surely, were “Antichristian, sinful, and absurd in their nature,” as the connection in question is often pronounced to be.

That the church is a free and distinct religious society, independent of any civil magistrate on earth; receiving all her laws from Christ alone; required to convene, adjourn, and dissolve all her assemblies, from the highest to the lowest, in no other name than his; and taught to transact all her affairs, in virtue of that authority, which is derived from him, as her alone Head and Lord, we firmly believe. It is also our fixed persuasion that no magistrate upon earth hath any judging, prescribing, dispensing, or controlling power, either in or over the church of Christ, strictly considered in her ecclesiastic capacity. ► Nor have we yet seen any inconsistency between this, and, at the same time, teaching, as we ordinarily do, that, amongst a people favoured with the Word of God, bearing the Christian name, and having reached high attainments in state-reformation, it is requisite for the magistrate openly to profess and practice the true religion exclusively; not, indeed, as a thing to be judged by him according to his own fancy, but as already clearly judged and prescribed for him and his subjects both, by the unerring standard of that Lawgiver, who is the sovereign Lord of both his and their conscience. ► If the negligence of others, and concurring circumstances require, we reckon it also the part of the magistrate, possessing a holy zeal for the declarative glory of God, to excite the ministers of religion to do their duty, by meeting together in their assemblies, and diligently transacting the affairs of the church, according to their Lord’s prescriptions. But the magistrate must not, upon any consideration whatever, interfere with their work when met, any other way than by protecting, defending, and encouraging them in carrying it forward; and being himself present, if he please, to satisfy his own mind that they are acting according to the law of God. But judicially to pronounce any sentence, or, authoritatively to call, adjourn, or dissolve them, in his own name, he hath no power in any case whatsoever. ► We consider it also to be the magistrate’s province, formally and openly to declare his approbation of the church’s righteous decisions, and his resolution to employ the authority and influence attaching unto his exalted station, for carrying these into effect. We are likewise of opinion that the magistrate may warrantably punish gross outward acts of vice and immorality, in general, whether they be

transgressions of the first or of the second table of the moral law. Still, however, we apprehend that all this may be said and done without any improper blending of civil and religious things.

Discussion Questions

1. What must be done before a Christian disciple can express their approbation of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as founded upon the word of God?
 - A. He must be well-acquainted with the Word of God, and also exercise a mature deliberation in examining the Confession and Catechisms, and comparing them to God's word.
2. Acknowledging the sufficiency of the scriptures themselves as the Oracles of truth, what purposes or uses remain for a Confession of Faith?
 - A. They may be useful as explanatory standards to (1) ascertain the correct meaning of Scripture, (2) help us to understand one another in our church-fellowship, and (3) transmit a faithful testimony for truth from generation to generation.
3. What examples of defects does the Presbytery acknowledge might be found in the Confession and Catechisms when examined with severity?
 - A. It may be (1) not every word is the best chosen; (2) not every expression is so properly guarded as it might have been, if later objections had been known; (3) some incautious expressions may not make their intention as plain as some of their other writings.
4. If critics of our Confession of Faith would assume the liberty to write against detached expressions of our confession with no regard to the whole, or other writings of the same authors, what should be remembered about their procedure to expose it as unjust and unreliable?
 - A. This same policy (1) would also serve to make the advocates of "Christian forbearance" appear as promoting absolute skepticism, and (2) has been used by infidels and gross heretics against the Holy Scriptures themselves.
5. What complaint about the content of the Confession of faith is the first objection considered by the Presbytery?
 - A. The first objection is that the Confession contains a discussion of the ordinance of civil government, but this is a matter of the affairs of this life, and Christians should not interfere with institutions of this kind.
6. Where do Christians find instruction about the ordinance of civil government?
 - A. They find a plan for this in the Bible itself, whereby security is given to men's persons and property, and morals are cultivated in society.
7. What second objection against Reformed principles of civil government is next considered?
 - A. It is objected that these standards do not preserve the necessary distinction between Church and State.
8. In answer to this objection, what does the presbytery assert about the Church of Christ?
 - A. "The church is a free and distinct religious society, independent of any civil magistrate on earth; receiving all her laws from Christ alone; required to convene, adjourn, and dissolve all her assemblies, from the highest to the lowest, in no other name than his," etc.
9. What power does a magistrate not have?
 - A. "Judicially to pronounce any [ecclesiastical] sentence, or, authoritatively to call, adjourn, or dissolve [church assemblies], in his own name, he hath no power in any case whatsoever."