

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 7.

ON ARTICLE II: CONFESSION, &c.

continued...

Should any still venture to affirm, “that our worthy reformers had no just ideas of the distinction between church and state, but inconsiderately blended these together;” they must do it at the expense of manifesting their ignorance, or deep-rooted prejudice, or both. To teach that magistrates and ministers should both be qualified according to the Word of God, professing the true religion, and using their best endeavours, in their respective stations, to promote the declarative glory of God amongst men, is one thing; and to teach that the one of these powers may warrantably interfere with the business of the other, is quite another thing. The former was done by our forefathers; but to the latter they would never subscribe, reckoning it rather their duty to resist unto blood, striving against sin.

Nor is it inconsistent with this for them to say, “That the magistrate hath authority, and it is his duty to take order that unity and peace be preserved in the church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire,” and so on; and to grant, “That he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.”¹ Let the whole paragraph be taken in connection. It begins with positively refusing to the magistrate any right to “assume to himself administration of word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” *i.e.* He must by no means interfere with either the doctrine and worship, or the discipline and government of Christ’s house. Consequently, they never dreamed of allowing him to sit as judge upon any of these.² ► No; he is only to take particular notice, that those things which are already judged and determined by the law of the God of heaven, and, in conformity to that law agreed upon by the church’s representatives, be all faithfully observed in their proper place. Let the passages of Scripture, cited in proof, be carefully attended to, and they make the meaning clear as noon-day. In these passages, those that were over the king’s matters are expected to keep in their own sphere; while those priests and Levites, who were over the matters of the Lord, are required to observe the province which the God of the church had appointed for them. Good Jehoshaphat, on this memorable occasion, assumes no judging or legislative power, at least in church matters; but merely prompts and

¹ Westminster Confession, chap. 23, sect. 3.

² In the above mentioned Animadversions, our reformers say, “It is a great fault to a civil magistrate to JUDGE upon doctrine, errors, and heresies; he not being placed in ecclesiastical function, to interpret the Scriptures.” Calderwood, History, p. 188.

excites the whole office-bearers, in both departments, conscientiously to discharge the important duties of their respective stations, according to the rules already prescribed by God himself. In this sense, surely, a Christian magistrate may safely “take order, that whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven.” [Ezra 7.23.]

Suppose, that an honourable master, having a great number of servants, in different capacities, under his authority, were to appoint for some of them a certain piece of important work, and pointedly to prescribe the whole plan to be scrupulously observed in carrying it forward, but, at the same time, were to require another servant to take notice that they faithfully observed their lord’s prescriptions; we would not, certainly, from that, conclude that the person taking such oversight, for the time, was the proper judge how the work was to be done, or the author of the regulations to be observed by the performers of it. The application to the case before us is abundantly obvious. ► As to the magistrate’s power of calling synods, and being present at them, our reformers explain themselves in the 51st of the above mentioned Propositions: “The magistrate,” say they, “calleth together synods, not as touching those things which are proper to synods, but in respect of the things which are common to synods, with other meetings, and civil public assemblies; *i.e.* not as they are assemblies, in the name of Christ, to treat of matters spiritual, but as they are public assemblies within his territories.”

But even supposing it should be rather a stretch, for our Assembly to signify, as they do in their act at Edinburgh, Aug. 27, 1647, “That the necessity of occasional assemblies should first be remonstrate to the magistrate, by humble supplication, before the church use her intrinsic power in calling them,” Yet why torture a single unguarded expression? seeing, in the very same sentence, they plainly teach, “That it is free for the church to assemble together synodically, as well *PRO RE NATA*, as at the ordinary times, by the intrinsical power received from Christ, as often as it is necessary for the good of the church so to assemble.” Besides, it was evidently their intention by this act, to preserve, on their part, the amicable correspondence, which should ever subsist between church and state; and, at the same time, to prevent the odium which might otherwise attach to their meetings in these troublous times, as though they were designed to promote some seditious plans, which they wished to conceal from the present government.

The subordinate standards, of which we speak, especially our solemn Covenants, are also charged with favouring compulsory measures, even in matters purely religious. And hence it is supposed, that our reformers did not properly understand the rights of private judgment, nor the proper spirit of our Saviour’s doctrine, “That his kingdom is not of this world.” Neither this, nor the above mentioned, are new objections. All of them, and many others besides, were urged, if not with greater, at least, with as much plausibility as they are now, more than a hundred years ago. They were also very ably answered by the reformers themselves, though many of the publications on that subject are now to be obtained with difficulty, and some of them scarcely at all.

It is given as the character of the upright man, that he will not be readily disposed, even to take up a reproach against his neighbour. [Psalm 15.3.] But it is matter of regret, in our time, that many will swallow with greediness bold and totally unfounded assertions, in opposition to the covenants and work of reformation; while they will scarcely grant a hearing to strong and incontestable proof in their favour. If one, speaking at random, should tell them, “Our reformers were for propagating their religion by fire and sword. They went about, with the covenants in the one hand and the sword in the other, giving men their choice;” at once the malicious tale is believed; opinions and principles are formed upon it; though, all the while, a grosser calumny never existed. ► Our reformers, in the possession of their religious, as well as civil liberties, taught the propriety of DEFENDING themselves by arms, when they were wickedly attacked, and attempts made to rob them of their valuable rights; but to the doctrine of actively propagating religion by the sword they were totally strangers. Let not our law condemn any man, before it hear him, [John 7.51]; lest the Heathen themselves rise against us, in the judgment.

With regard to the National Covenant of Scotland, respectable men, of indefatigable industry and unwearied research have solemnly declared, that after a laborious investigation, they could find no proper evidence that any force was ever used in Scotland to make any take the Covenant, except in 1639, by Montrose and Monro, two military men, without any warrant from church or state.³ These two officers, whose zeal in this affair was not according to knowledge, and who acted beyond their commission, afterwards appeared in their true colours, as dangerous enemies to the work of reformation. But the unwarranted act of an individual or two can never be justly charged upon the great body, openly and honestly disavowing all such conduct.

Messrs. Henderson, Dickson, and Cant, these eminent servants of Christ, distinguished, in 1638, by their public spirit, in valiantly promoting the covenanted interest, make free to assert, “No pastors in our knowledge have been either forced to flee, or have been threatened with the want of their stipends, for refusing their subscription.—Arguments have been taken from promised augmentation of stipends to hinder subscription. Fear of worldly loss rather hinders men to subscribe, than scruples of conscience. In this day of the Lord’s power, his people have most willingly offered themselves in multitudes like the dew of the morning. Others, of no small note, have offered their subscriptions, and have been refused till time should try their sincerity from love to the cause, and not from the fear of man. No threatenings have been used, except of the deserved judgments of God, nor force, except the force of reason from the high respects which we owe to religion, to our king, to ourselves, and to our posterity.”⁴ ► Speaking of the remarkable cheerfulness with which the covenant was almost universally subscribed, in 1638, says a pious writer on the subject, “They resolved upon renewing the National Covenant, which had been almost buried for forty years before.—Being read in churches, it was heartily embraced, sworn, and subscribed by all ranks, with many tears and great joy; so that the whole

3 [John] Brown’s Letter on Toleration, page 151.

4 Answers to the Doctors of Aberdeen pages 42, 44.

land, great and small, a very few excepted, WITHOUT ANY COMPULSION FROM CHURCH OR STATE, did, in a few months, cheerfully return to their ancient principles, and subject themselves to the oath of God for reformation.”⁵ On this memorable occasion, we see, compulsory measures were neither needed nor employed.

After the treaty at Birks, in 1639, when “the king complained that the Scots still kept up unlawful meetings, who pressed the subjects daily to adhere to the covenant, Lord Loudon answered, that no meetings were kept up by them but such as were agreeable to the acts of parliament; and although they behaved to adhere to their covenant, as most necessary and lawful, yet they averred, that none had, to their knowledge, been urged to subscribe it.”⁶ ► As the king, at this time, strongly urged the abjuring of the covenant, our worthy reformers, considering its obligation as indissoluble, judged it seasonable, when necessity pointed out the duty of trying who were friends or foes, to offer the covenant for subscription to such of the lords of Session as had not already subscribed it. The result was, that the most of them refused it. Yet, even these historians who are well known to disapprove of the covenant, cannot so much as pretend that ever the least violence was offered to the recusants; “yea,” adds our author, “this had been a practical contradiction to what the covenanters had all along declared.”⁷—Are these the men who wished to propagate the religion of Jesus by the sword of steel?

Discussion Questions

1. When objectors still attempt to load our reformers with blending matters of church and state, what principles of our reformers do they seem really to be opposing, rather than the insinuated allowance for one of these institutions to interfere with the other?

A.

2. If men object that the Confession of Faith assigns to the magistrate a responsibility to “take order that unity and peace be preserved in the church,” etc., what should they be reminded?

A.

3. What does the Presbytery suggest is one underlying intention of the General Assembly in 1647 when it decided “that the necessity of occasional assemblies should first be remonstrated to the magistrate, by humble supplication, before the church use her intrinsic power in calling them”?

A.

4. When men charge our subordinate standards or covenants with supporting compulsory measures in matters of religion, are they able to show that this is how these covenants, etc. were enforced?

A.

5 Willison’s Testimony, p. 7.

6 Stevenson’s History, vol. 3, p. 761.

7 Stevenson’s History, vol. 2, p. 709.