

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 8.

ON ARTICLE II: CONFESSION, &c.

continued...

In the progress of the reformation, our noble ancestors still declare themselves the friends of that properly bounded liberty, wherewith Christ hath made his people free. The express words of the standards themselves are, “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in any thing contrary to the Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.”¹ They evidently consider God alone as the sovereign Lord of the conscience; and, at the same time, the conscience of every man as subject to his righteous law. ► Accordingly, whenever the public regulations of either church or state are actually brought to this unerring rule, fully demonstrated to be agreeable unto it, and not only so, but also solemnly ratified by the mutual consent of the representatives in either department, then all become obliged to conform: not in virtue of some men’s claim to exercise lordship over the conscience of others, but in virtue of the divine authority, speaking through the medium of scriptural regulations; in virtue of that mutual consent, by which these regulations were adopted; and in virtue of that responsibility, not only to God but also to one another, which is inseparable from the very existence of all society, whether civil or ecclesiastic. After this, for individuals or malignant factions, under the pretence of conscience and the rights of private judgment, to rise up in open rebellion against the established authorities, is evidently to fight, not only against men, but against God himself.

This was exactly the case in those troublous times, when the Confession and covenants were composed. And it is to men of this description that our worthy reformers refer, when, in the 4th section of this same chapter they say, “Because the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another; they who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God.” ► Such are the persons who, they say, “may lawfully be called to account, and proceeded against by the censures of the church, and by the power of the civil magistrate.” It is in this sense, likewise, that our Testimony is to be understood, when it approves of proceeding against some atrocious offenders, not only by church censures, but also by the power of the magistrate. That both the civil and the ecclesiastical authority of that time agreed

1 Westminster Confession, chap. 20, sect. 2.

to have the covenants enforced by civil, as well as ecclesiastical pains, is not refused. But let the case be truly stated, and it is hoped that the seeming inconsistency of this will soon vanish.

The public calamity under which the nation then groaned was twofold; strong opposition to the true reformed religion, as openly professed in the church, and malignant plotting against the fundamental laws and liberties of the state. Both these evils were combined in the malicious conduct of many restless and formidable factions in the land. The enemies, with whom the covenanters had to do, were not simply chargeable with heretical opinions, peaceably retained with themselves; but with heretical opinions, manifested, supported, and propagated, in a seditious and treasonable manner. This is attested by the preamble to the Solemn League and Covenant itself, the well authenticated histories of that period, and other unexceptionable vouchers.—“The miseries of Ireland,” says Mr. Henderson, who was personally concerned in framing the League, “and the distresses of England, and the dangers of the kingdom of Scotland growing to greater extremity,—the convention of estates, upon their meeting, received information of divers treacherous attempts of Papists, in all the three kingdoms.”² ► The Westminster Assembly, in their exhortation to the taking of the covenant, expect many cheerfully “To join in this happy Bond, for putting an end to the present miseries, and for saving both of king and kingdom from utter ruin, now so strongly and openly laboured by the POPISH FACTION, and such as have been bewitched and besotted by that viperous and bloody generation.”³ Speaking concerning false kinds of peace, Mr. Tesdale, a member of the Assembly, observes, “You may soon discover here the peace of our adversaries, The agreement of Atheists and Papists, Priests and Prelates, Irish rebels and English traitors to ruin church and commonwealth.”⁴

We see, then, that the persons, of whom the malignant factions were composed, sustained a double character: they were, at once, obstinate gainsayers of the truth as it is in Jesus, and seditious enemies to the state. The remedy behoved to be suited unto the disease. Accordingly, we find, that the Solemn League, though loosely taken, it may be considered as a religious covenant, yet, when strictly viewed, is evidently a complex oath, containing, not only a religious vow, to be for God and not for another; but also an oath of allegiance to the civil government, in the defence of the nation’s precious liberties. No wonder, then, that the censures be also twofold, civil, and ecclesiastical pains. ► But were they administered indiscriminately, and out of their proper place? By no means. Considered simply as obstinate enemies to the religion of Jesus, or as scandalous in their practice, the offenders were brought before the church, and proceeded against by her censures, sometimes even to excommunication. But proving, as many of them did, still irreclaimable, and persisting in their seditious and treasonable measures, they were also considered as rebels in the state; and were then, and not sooner, delivered over to the civil power, to be punished accordingly. Is it not still

2 A Collection of several Remarkable and Valuable Sermons, Speeches, and Exhortations, etc. pp. 103-104. Edit. Glasgow, 1741. Also included in *The Covenants & the Covenanters*. p. 155. Edited by James Kerr and published at Edinburgh, 1895.

3 Id. Edit. Glasgow, 1741. p. 374; Edit. Edin. 1895. p. 307.

4 Sermon before Parliament. August 28, 1644. p. 6.

the custom, and reckoned a warrantable custom too, to punish seditious and treasonable persons with civil pains?

It will, no doubt, be objected, “Why did our reformers give their covenant this form; could they not have framed two distinct covenants, or oaths, the one civil, and the other religious?” To this we reply, that, from the calamitous circumstances of the time, they could scarcely be considered as having proper room left for a choice in that respect. The complex evil, and the double character, were already before them; and therefore they framed their covenant so as to meet the double danger. They might, indeed, have split it into two, and sworn the one on the one day, and the other on the other. But where would have been the substantial difference? If things are kept distinct in themselves, and each observed in its own place, though they should be done by the same men, and on the same general occasion, the harm cannot be very great. Doth not the Christian, acting in character, perform both civil and religious duties every day of his life? Why, then, may he not, in the same covenant, solemnly engage to do both?

But, in order to substantiate the charge of compulsory measures in matters of religion, a character must be found exactly of the following description:—A person, in every other respect a peaceable and inoffensive member of society, propagating no opinions, nor chargeable with any practices injurious to the peace and happiness of mankind; but only found to entertain some religious scruples in his own mind about the propriety of the covenants, the Presbyterian form of ecclesiastical government, or such like: in all other respects harmless. If it can be proved, that men of this description had corporal punishments inflicted upon them, by the authority of church and state, it will be doing something to the purpose. But all arguing from the complex character, without attending to the distinctions observed by our reformers themselves, is evidently inconclusive.

As it is a subject of much discussion in our times, we crave the attention of our readers to a few additional extracts, out of many, which might be produced in defence of the ancient Covenanthers, against the charge of unwarrantable compulsion in matters purely religious.

The famous assembly at Westminster, in their exhortation to the taking of the covenant, when answering the objection about the extirpation of Prelacy, positively declare, “Nor is any man hereby bound to offer any violence to their persons, but only in his place and calling to endeavour their [i.e. popery, prelacy, superstition, etc.] extirpation in a lawful way.”⁵ This exhortation was read and approved in the English House of Commons.

Mr. Coleman, a member of the Assembly, in reply to the query, “Whether by any law, divine or human, may reformation of religion be brought in by arms?” says, “I answer negatively, It is not. The sword is not the means which God hath ordained to propagate the gospel; Go and teach all nations; not, Go and subdue all nations, is our Master’s precept.”⁶

Mr. Caryl, another member of the Assembly, and whose praise is also in the churches, in his sermon, at a public convention for the taking of the covenant, hath these very plain and

5 Collection of Sermons, Edit. Glasgow, 1741. p. 375; The Covenants and the Covenanthers, Edit. Edin. 1895, p. 308-9.

6 Id. Edit. Glasgow, 1741. p. 152; Edit. Edin. 1895. p. 187.

expressive words, “Where conscience is indeed unsatisfied, we should rather pity than impose, and labour to persuade rather than violently to obtrude.”⁷

Mr. Palmer, also a member of the Assembly, and an able advocate for the covenanted interest, thus ingenuously teacheth, “I know a difference is to be put, when we come to deal with persons tainted with dangerous opinions. Some are to be handled with all compassionate tenderness, as being scrupled through weakness and infirmity; but others, who are not only obstinate, but active to seduce and breed confusion, must be saved with fear, as pulling them out of the fire, and that they may not set others on fire also. Though still a spirit of meekness is requisite, even toward such, in regard to their persons.”⁸

Mr. Thorowgood, who also ranks in the honourable list of Westminster Divines, very honestly declares his sentiments on the subject. “Fierce and furious prosecution,” says he, “even of a good cause, is rather prejudice than promotion. We must tenaciously adhere to all divine truths ourselves, and with our wisest moderation labour to plant and propagate them in others.—Opposites, indeed, must be opposed, gainsayed, reclaimed; but all must be done in a way, and by the means appointed from heaven. ► It is one thing to show moderation to pious, peaceable, and tender consciences; it is another thing to proclaim beforehand toleration to impious, fiery, and unpeaceable opinions. Let moderation be so much awake, that discipline fall not asleep.—The Papists, indeed, expect your moderation, and surely such should be shown them as may preserve your lives, and the kingdoms, from their frauds and cruelties.—Though their religion, like Draco’s laws, be written in blood, yet none of them ever suffered death among us, merely for religion.”⁹ One extract more . . .

Discussion Questions

1. Besides all that was said on behalf of *authority* by our Reformers, what did they also say on behalf of *freedom*, which should be kept in mind when it comes to “compulsory measures in religion”?
- A. In their Confession they affirm that “God alone is Lord of the conscience” and account it as free from the doctrines and commandments of men, in matters of faith and worship.
2. If the Reformers had such high views of the *freedom* God has given to his people, why did they also attribute so much power and jurisdiction to the rulers of Church and State in religious matters?
- A. They considered the individuals and malignant factions who “under the pretense of conscience and the rights of private judgment” practiced rebellion against God’s own institutions of authority, and that no power God gave to man’s conscience was opposite to the power God gave for lawful rule.
3. What was the two-fold character of opposition felt in the time in which our Reformers labored?
- A. They faced “strong opposition to the true reformed religion” as it was professed in the church, and also “malignant plotting against the fundamental laws and liberties of the state.”
4. Given the complex or combined nature of the enemies, what had a corresponding complex nature?
- A. The Solemn League and Covenant also had a complex nature, incorporating both religious vows, and what may be considered an oath of allegiance to the civil government.
5. Do the writings of the advocates of the Solemn League evidence an inclination to use compulsion and force to bring men to adopt their covenant, join their party, or participate in their religion?
- A. A survey of Erastians, Independents, and Presbyterians, promoting the Solemn League will evidence a moderate outlook in how they would both advocate their cause and respond to opposition.

7 Id. Edit. Glasgow, 1741. p. 179; Edit. Edin. 1895. p. 205.

8 Sermon before Parliament. August 13, 1644. p. 55.

9 Sermon before Parliament. December 25, 1644. p. 15, 21.