

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 9.

ON ARTICLE II: CONFESSION, &c.

[Summary of Previous Quotations:]

Thomas Coleman: “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.”

Joseph Caryl: “Where conscience is indeed unsatisfied, we should rather pity than impose, and labour to persuade rather than violently to obtrude.”

Herbert Palmer: “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.”

Mr. Thorowgood: “Fierce and furious prosecution, 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.”

Section Continued and Completed...

One extract more shall at present suffice.

Mr. Gillespie, our young, but singularly judicious commissioner to the Westminster Assembly, meets this objection, “Why are we forced and compelled into the covenant?” “Answer (1.) If any known malignant, or complier with the rebels, or with any enemy of this cause, hath been received, either to the covenant, or sacraments, without signs of repentance, I mean such as men in charity ought to be satisfied with, for their former malignancy and scandal, it is more than ministers and elderships can answer [for], either to God, or to the acts and constitutions of this national church. I trust all faithful and conscientious ministers have laboured to keep themselves pure in such things. ►—(2.) Men are not otherwise drawn or forced into the covenant, than into other necessary duties. Nay, it ought not to be called a forcing or compelling. Are men forced to spare their neighbour’s life, because murder is severely punished? Or are men compelled to be loyal, because traitors are exemplarily punished? There may and must be a willingness and freeness in the doing of the contrary duty,

although great sins must not go unpunished. Men are not compelled to virtue because vice is punished; else virtue were not virtue. Those that refuse the covenant, reproach it, or rail against it, ought to be looked upon as enemies to it, and dealt with accordingly; yet, if any man were known to take the covenant against his will, he were not to be received.”¹

Such sentiments plainly show that our reformers were pretty well acquainted with the nature of Christ’s spiritual kingdom, Christian liberty, and the rights of conscience; and that they would suffer little, or rather nothing at all, by a comparison with the most enlightened modern writers on the subjects. It is hoped that our readers will carefully observe that the doctrines contained in the above extracts, of which kind many more can be produced, were not spoken in a corner, or amongst a few select friends: they were delivered in the most open manner, and before the most public associations, composed of all ranks and degrees of men in the kingdom. They were heard, approved, and ordered to be published, by the highest authorities in church and state; at the very time when, in their respective places and stations, they were employed in taking and enforcing the covenants.

To an unbounded liberty, for every man to think and act as he pleases, even in contempt of righteous laws, whether human or divine, these champions for truth were, indeed, strangers; but of liberty, without licentiousness, they seem to have had pretty correct ideas. A modern writer, whose sentiments in general appear to be abundantly liberal, and who will not very readily be convicted of narrow-mindedness or bigotry, says, “I denominate that a state of liberty, in which every man’s person, property, and free agency, is secured or circumscribed by laws which have been agreed to by the majority of the people at large,—either in their own persons, or by a representation primarily and tacitly, if not expressly, allowed by the people.—Salutary restraint,” he adds, “is the very principle of liberty; and they who, from their restless disposition, or from misapprehension, endeavour to throw off every species of coercion, are in reality enemies to that freedom which they pretend to promote.”² ► He is speaking chiefly of civil liberty, as circumscribed by the salutary laws of the state; but the same doctrine, substantially, will apply to religious liberty, as circumscribed by the righteous laws of Christ in the church. The covenants respect both. And, however much our reformers might have differed from this author on some other topics, it is obvious that, with respect to coercion, or legal restraint; they ordinarily acted upon the same general principle which he here recognizes. The covenants, and other corresponding public deeds of that time, were the result of general and mature deliberation. They were adopted by the mutual consent of the nation’s representatives at large, both in church and state. In obtaining this consent, our worthy forefathers insisted much and frequently on the propriety of acting from judgment and conscience. They showed much holy diligence to have all ranks of men well informed concerning the nature, the warrantableness, and the seasonableness of such covenants. If any, otherwise peaceable and inoffensive subjects, in church and state, had religious scruples in their own mind, both the open doctrine and uniform practice of our pious ancestors recommended all

1 Miscellany Questions. Question 14. p. 191, 192.

2 [Vicesimus] Knox’s Essays [Moral and Literary], Vol. I. p. 54-55.

possible tenderness, in labouring to have these removed. ► But, on the other hand, when cruel Popish factions, under the fair pretence of only claiming a liberty to serve God, in their own way, were plotting the utter ruin of both church and state, and seeking the overthrow of all laws, human and divine; in such a case, indeed, they could not help thinking that salutary restraint, and well regulated coercion, were indispensably necessary. And what nation under heaven, properly consulting her own safety and happiness in time of danger, would not find it advisable to act on the same great principle?

But after all, even though we should allow that some acts of council, of parliament, or of assembly, are expressed in terms too rigorous, and manifest rather too much keenness to have the covenants imposed on all men in the kingdom, whether reason were or none, how does that affect the cause? Whatever high opinion we may have of these acts, in general, they were never incorporated into our standards or testimonies; nor is the approbation of them ever imposed on any person, as a term of admission to the privileges of the church.³ ► We never asserted that, even in the best period of reformation, the church was perfect; or, that every particular measure, on every occasion and in every place, whether in England or Scotland, was, in all its circumstances, defensible and proper. The Confession, and Covenants themselves, are neither the better nor the worse for the manner in which they were at first enforced. ► It hath been a received maxim in all ages that, amidst great and public dangers, some severe laws have been enacted, rather with the design of striking terror into restless opposers, than with the view of being literally executed in every instance of transgression. If we be really the friends of our covenanting ancestors, how is it that we will not make the same allowances for them which have been made for all other men in similar circumstances, ever since the world began?

Should any, to excuse their opposition to our standards, say, “They have nothing to do with the above, or with any other sentiments of our reformers, in the rest of their writings, the plain language of the standards themselves warrants their objections;” it is evident this amounts to the same thing as to say, that they have nothing to do with Christian candour, or that charity which thinketh no evil, but rather teacheth us to hear even our opponent to an amen, and to allow him the liberty of explaining himself. ► Were the objectors to find detached expressions, selected from their [own] writings or speeches, and tortured in the most unmerciful manner, without admitting their connection with the other parts of the same writings, or with the uniform practice of the same men, it is presumed that they would embrace the earliest

3 This should not be mistaken as a consenting that mere age had extinguished the lawfulness of these acts, much less that the Act Rescissory, from the time of Charles II, or other such legislation, ought to be regarded as having force rather than the original Acts of Assembly and Acts of Parliament. The Reformed Presbyterian churches recognize the latter as the standing acts of Church and State in Scotland. But acquaintance with them and consent to them is not a term of church membership. In some cases their recognition was called for among the Covenanters of the post-reformation era. For example, in the Queries to be Put to Elders, adopted by the United Societies in 1732, the Acts of Assembly, 1638 to 1649, were to be adhered to by candidates for the eldership. In addition, no one should overlook the fact that several acts of Parliament from the first reformation period are more or less engrossed in the body of the National Covenant of Scotland as it was renewed in 1638.—JTKer.

opportunity of claiming that same liberty for themselves which they, very unreasonably, refuse to our reformers.

Fully satisfied, therefore, that the contents of our Westminster Confession of Faith, and Catechisms, are agreeable to the Word of God; finding such dubious-like expressions, as may seem, at first sight, rather to favour unwarrantable coercion, to be very clearly explained in other writings of the same men; and convinced that both the ancient and modern objections against them are ill founded; we reckon it still our duty, and expect it of all who wish to hold communion with us, to approve, and adhere to them, substantially, as they stand.

Discussion Questions

1. To answer the insinuation that men were compelled to swear the covenant, what did George Gillespie affirm to have been a requirement before any would be admitted to swear the covenant?
A.
2. Concerning the means used to press men to take the covenant, what comparison did George Gillespie use to put this in its proper light.
A.
3. Should or can the quotations from Mr. Gillespie, Mr. Thorowgood, Mr Caryl, and Mr. Palmer be regarded as their own private opinions, different from the general outlook of the Reformation itself?
A.
4. Is it essential, to a state of true liberty in society, that no form of coercion whatever be used in that society?
A.
5. What other aspects about the manner in which the covenants were adopted as national deeds, also demonstrate acquaintance with the principles of liberty asserted by later writers on that subject?
A.
6. Why is it no derogation or harm to the cause of our church even if some acts of council or acts of the church could be convicted as showing too much favor to the use of coercion or being too rigorous?
A.
7. What seems to be lacking on the part of those who persist in the accusation that our reformers promoted coercion, even when we limit ourselves to the Confession and Covenants?
A.