

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 12.

ON ARTICLE IV: THE OBLIGATION
OF SOLEMN COVENANTS.

Concerning these covenants, some have proposed the query, “In what sense can they be said, as they are in our Testimony, to be of divine authority or obligation?” We reply, The divine authority of heaven’s great Sovereign is, evidently, interposed, in requiring us to enter into such covenants, “Vow unto the Lord your God.” [Psalm 76.11.] And when once we have entered into them, the same divine authority binds us to performance, “Pay that which thou hast vowed.” [Eccl. 5.4.] Add to these, that the great and dreadful name, THE LORD OUR GOD, is invoked in the solemn transaction, while his declarative glory amongst men is deeply concerned in the faithful fulfillment of our engagements. ► So that, besides the intrinsic obligation of the covenants, viewed simply as human deeds, whereby men bind their souls, there is, in all such covenants, an obligation of divine authority, requiring first to make, and then to perform our covenants; from the invocation of the divine name, considering JEHOVAH as witness and avenger, and from the interfering with the divine glory, in the keeping or violating of our oath. Hence, in the Scripture, the same oath is, in one respect considered as the covenant of the man giving his hand; and, in another respect, as the Lord’s covenant, whose glory is concerned in it. [Ezek. 17.18,19.] Our Testimony, if properly attended to, explains itself; telling us, the covenants “are of divine authority, obligation, AS HAVING THEIR FOUNDATION UPON THE WORD OF GOD.”¹

Some have also questioned, “Whether or not, the covenants can, properly, lay us under any additional obligations to duty, besides what we are already under, from the divine law?” In all disputes, the explaining of our terms is highly requisite. If by additional or superadded obligation be meant something introduced to supply a defect, or to bind where we were at liberty before, it is plain that no human covenants can, in this sense, impose a superadded obligation; for God’s law is absolutely perfect, and necessarily binds to every possible duty, both as to matter and manner, according to the station which we fill. But if by superadded obligation be meant, a further and very awful consideration, which also should have a strong influence in prompting us to the faithful discharge of this duty; in this sense, the covenants

¹ p. 204. 3d Edit. [1777.] & p. 170, 4th Edit. [1797.]

undoubtedly contain an additional obligation: for, besides the authority of the divine law obliging us, we, by our own voluntary deed, likewise bind ourselves to the conscientious performance of the same things.

Those who approve of the original covenants themselves, cannot consistently deny the propriety of the Auchensaugh-renovation, which is also mentioned in this article of our Terms; seeing it must be obvious to every one who hath properly perused that deed that there is not the least substantial alteration. After omitting the designations, Noblemen, Gentlemen, &c. which could not apply to them, being only a few private Christians, with one minister and a probationer, and after adding a few short marginal notes, accommodating them to the real circumstances in which the swearers then were, the old covenants remain as they were. There are, indeed, accompanying that renovation, an enlarged Acknowledgment of sins, and an Engagement to duties. These, also, were necessary, in order to accommodate the solemn transaction unto the existing circumstances of the nation in which the swearers lived, as well as unto their own condition.

It will not be refused, that in the Engagement to duties connected with the Auchensaugh-renovation, our zealous forefathers use some remarkably strong, and perhaps rather incautious expressions, in declaring their resolution not to submit unto some of the public burdens which they particularly specify. But they evidently considered their submission unto these as necessarily implying an homologation of the present constitutions, civil and ecclesiastic; and on that footing, refused to yield. In the leading and general principle, then, that it is inconsistent for Dissenters to submit unto such things, as, strictly speaking, imply an approbation of the present constitutions, or a proper recognizing of the constituted authorities, they and we are perfectly agreed. But, as it is difficult to draw the exact line of distinction between these things which, in the very nature of them, abstracting from any question for conscience' sake, properly imply the recognizing of the existing power under which they are done, and those things which do not, we need not be surprised though there be some diversity, both in opinion and practice, concerning the yielding or not yielding to some particular specified national burdens.

It is abundantly obvious that all the taxations in general which our noble martyrs, in the late persecution, positively refused to pay, were imposed avowedly for the purpose of suppressing the very cause which these martyrs were endeavouring, at the hazard of their lives, to maintain; and not simply for the general and undefined support of the then existing government. This brought the matter closely home to their conscience, as faithful witnesses for Christ, and his persecuted cause. But as no taxations in our time are, as yet, imposed for a similar purpose, it is surely pushing the matter too far to consider the bare yielding unto them, for wrath's sake, as necessarily involving a contradiction to the martyrs' testimony. ► Even these martyrs themselves, as far as we can learn, yielded to the general burdens which were not of the description above specified; and yet they openly disowned the powers which then were.—Swearing oaths of allegiance to the existing authorities; holding places of public trust under them; praying, in the formal and unqualified manner, for a blessing, prosperity, and success unto them, in their official capacity as our rulers; and formally recognizing their several courts

of judgment, are the principal things which our Testimony specifies, as necessarily implying an approbation of the united constitution, and a direct acknowledgment of the existing power. But it does not view any thing else in the same light as matters stand at present. ► So long, therefore, as we are enabled to keep ourselves free of these, and while we do not find the general national burdens demanded as any proof of our loyalty, nor for the purpose of suppressing the cause which we are endeavouring, through grace, to maintain, we cannot consider ourselves as convicted of inconsistency, though we be obliged to allow that those who are set over us “have dominion over our bodies, and over our cattle, at their pleasure; and we are in great distress.” [Neh. 9.36-37.] What we chiefly intend by introducing the Auchensaugh Bond into our Terms, is the approbation of renewing the covenants, as it was then done, at that place, without overlooking any of the reformation attainments, either in church or state; and by giving a faithful testimony against all the defections and prevailing sins in both. But we do not reckon ourselves responsible for every unwary expression which our forefathers have used.

===== SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL =====

Excerpt from Thomas Henderson’s Introduction to
The Renewal of the Covenants at Auchensaugh.

In stating the reasons, why our church ought to retain this Deed in our Terms of Communion,² it is not intended to ascribe any improper motives to, nor to cast any injurious reflections upon, those, who wish to remove it from its present place, and to class it among the deeds of general reference. Charity obliges us to believe, that they are acting according to their views.—Nor is it meant to insinuate, that our brethren do not agree to the same truths here stated, taken abstractly. But, considered in the character of Witnesses for the Covenanted Cause and Testimony of Jesus Christ, the friends of this work think that we ought to connect the great substance of that Deed, with our religious exercise at the Lord's Supper. And I fondly hope that those, who are acquainted with the earnest struggling, and faithful contending, which our Forefathers had to get it carried through, and with the gracious discoveries of the Divine presence, which attended it, will feel disposed to retain it, for the following reasons.

1. As it was a signal attainment, and an eminent document of the church's faithfulness; a part of the faith once delivered to the saints;—and having received it into our public profession, as agreeable to the Scriptures, we ought to hold it fast without wavering, to contend earnestly for it, and, at a sacramental table, to be exercised about its contents, as it relates to the coming of Christ's kingdom and interest in the world.

2. As it brings us under formal obligation, to perform our part of the solemn Covenants, after the Nation at large has violated them, and prevents us from partaking with them in their sin of apostacy. As the Covenants were the Condition of Admission to privileges, in the

2 On this topic, the reader can also see a variety of articles from the Covenanter magazines of the 1800s edited by David Steele in America and Dr. John Cunningham in Britain, and the first item of the “Steps of Defection” published by the North Union RP Congregation in 1913. For a more thorough treatment, see the “Remarks on a Letter” published by John Dow in 1823.

Reformation Church, so we, by this Deed recognize them, as the Condition of Admission to privilege, in our church still.

3. As it adapts the National Deeds to the case of a minority, desirous to be faithful to God, and conscientious, in performing Covenant-duties to a Covenant-keeping God. However small our number, or however mean our situation in life, we may claim our marriage-relation by Covenant to him, and avouch him, over the separated symbols of bread and wine, as our own God.

7. As the breaches of Covenant specified in this Deed, are still standing grounds of God's controversy, not nationally repented of, nor turned from, we should be religiously exercised at the Lord's table, that we may have grace to keep clean garments in the midst of evil times, and be found sighing and crying on account of the abominations done in the midst of the land. . . .

9. It is a virtual condemnation of the conduct of our pious Ancestors, for making it a Term of Communion, and using it as such for a century bygone. If the Deed were proved morally evil in itself, and we were certain, that they had dishonoured God every time, that they approached a communion table, with full approbation of the spirit and scope of it, it would be a very different thing; but no person, who knows what manner of men they were, will venture to form such a judgment of them.

10. Removing this Deed has a tendency to hurt all friendly confidence in church rulers. If they remove this Deed now, they may remove another again, until none be left.—No human composition can lay claim to perfection, and all the books of our subordinate standards require to be qualified, limited, and explained. The Church of Scotland received the Westminster Confession of Faith with limitation and explanation. The martyrs did the same, and our church has all along received the whole of her subordinate standard-books in this way, and has declared, in her Testimony, the sense in which she understands them.

With these views it cannot reasonably be expected, that the genuine friends of this work could, in their judgment and with a safe conscience, give their consent, to pass sentence of perpetual banishment upon it, from our terms of communion. A majority being against it, could not change their minds. Yet for the sake of peace in the church they could agree to any reasonable qualification, explanation, or limitation, that might promote the general good.

Discussion Questions

1. In what sense are the covenants said to be of “divine authority” or “divine obligation”?
2. In what sense can the covenants bring “additional” or “superadded” obligations on Christians?
3. What kind of “alteration” may be found between the original covenants and the 1712 renovation?
4. What “line of distinction” does the Presbytery acknowledge to be difficult to define?
5. What characterized those taxations which the martyrs and witnesses of the late 1600s refused to pay?
6. Is the last of Thomas Henderson’s reasons for retaining the Auchensauth Deed in the Terms of Communion merely a matter of fear, or the appeal to a fallacious “slippery slope”?