

MESSIAH THE PRINCE,
Or, The Mediatorial Dominion of Jesus Christ.
By William Symington.
Sabbath Afternoon Studies: Part 16.

CHAPTER 7.
THE KINGLY OFFICE OF CHRIST IN
RELATION TO THE CHURCH.
(Continued.)

VI. The Lord Jesus Christ, in virtue of the mediatorial dominion with which he is invested, prescribes the qualifications of the members of the church.

He has a right to say who they are that shall enjoy the privileges of his kingdom. The church is a peculiar society; those who belong to it are, of course, a peculiar people; and it is the prerogative of Him who is its Head to determine the character of such as shall be admitted into its fellowship.

What the qualifications of church members should be, is a point of equal importance and difficulty. With respect to the invisible church, it cannot be questioned that actual regeneration and true faith in Christ are indispensable. Nor can it be doubted, even with respect to the visible church, that the possession of true and vital religion can alone qualify for fully promoting the objects of ecclesiastical communion. But, as this is a thing of which the office-bearers of the church are incompetent to judge, it would seem that the utmost they can require is *a credible profession of true religion*. Of this, intelligence and orthodoxy constitute essential elements. Philip required of the Ethiopian eunuch an avowal of his belief in the doctrine of Christ, before administering to him the initiatory rite of baptism. 'See here is water, what doth hinder me to be baptized? If thou believest with all thine heart thou mayest. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' [Acts 8.36,37] Paul instructed Titus, after a suitable trial and admonition, to reject 'a man that is an heretic.' Peter speaks of 'heresies' as being 'damnable,' and denounces, with merited severity, those false teachers who bring such into the church. From all this it appears that soundness in the faith is a requisite qualification. ► But the soundness required is not that which springs from implicit belief in the church or its ministers, as is contended for by the church of Rome. It is intelligent orthodoxy; arising from an enlightened understanding, and a careful study of the Holy Scriptures. There is a spurious knowledge of sound doctrine which may be acquired by being taught to repeat certain set phrases by rote. This consists, rather in the memory of words than the comprehension of ideas. Words, instead of being the vehicles, are, in such a case, the substitutes of thoughts. There is reason to fear that much of the orthodoxy that exists in our churches is of this description; for it

is too much the case with many, when taken off the favourite and accustomed phraseology into which they have been initiated, to display, instead of an enlightened acquaintance with Christian truth, a most deplorable and disgraceful ignorance. Such can never be regarded as intelligent church members. ► Their attachment to the church cannot be styled ‘a reasonable service;’ nor can they be said to be ‘always ready to give a reason of the hope which is in them to any man who asks them.’ Their knowledge is, at best, but a ‘*form of knowledge, and of the truth.*’ [1 Pet. 3.15; Rom. 2.20.] However worthless mere speculative knowledge is in itself, it must not be forgotten that a certain degree—we presume not to fix the extent—is indispensable; for God, who will have all men to be saved, will have all men also to come to *the knowledge of the truth*; and the apostles did not cease to pray for their people that they might be *filled with the knowledge of God’s will, in all wisdom and spiritual understanding*. The ignorant then, as well as the heterodox, are unfit for the communion of the church.¹

Full *submission to the ordinances* of Christ is another qualification of the members of the church. The disciples of Christ are required to observe all things whatsoever he has commanded; and such as refuse to follow him in this cannot claim to be regarded as his disciples. It is by the observance of these that the fellowship of the visible church is expressed; and such as refuse all or any of them are practically disqualified for membership. It is not uncommon for persons who profess religion to live in the neglect of some one ordinance;—family worship, or the Lord’s supper, for example; and yet they would fain be regarded as members of the church. But how can they? The authority which attaches to one, attaches to all; so that a refusal to submit, in any one case, is a virtual denial of the authority which sanctions the whole. A member of the church must be one who submits to all the laws and institutions of Christ’s house, not one who obeys only what is agreeable or convenient; the principle of observance being submission to the authority of Christ, and not convenience, expediency, or caprice.

Apparent *religious experience* is also indispensable. Apparent, we say, because of the reality man is incompetent to judge; appearances are all that is within the sphere of his cognizance. Whoever seeks admission to the fellowship of the Christian church, professes to have experienced something of the power of religion on his heart. And, although the rulers in the church may not be able to determine whether this profession be real, they are entitled to demand that it be made, and to apply to it certain criteria of judgment. They may not be fit, in any case, to pronounce absolutely on the presence of true religion in the soul, nor, in every case, to decide on its absence; yet the appearances of its being present or absent may be in general so marked as to form a sufficient guide in receiving or refusing persons applying for admission. An individual who knows nothing of the nature of Christian experience, or of the marks by which it is distinguished, is, of course, inadmissible. ► Nor is it a bare pretension to religious experiences, or every plausible story of feelings and ecstasies, that can form a

1 1 Tim. 2.4; Col. 1.9. The reader may also consult the *First Book of Discipline* of the Church of Scotland, from the time of the Reformation, wherein ignorance is accounted a reason to exclude men from membership in God’s Church.

sufficient ground for admitting to ecclesiastical privileges. Credible evidences of the experimental power of religion are to be required, and nothing but what is rational, sober, consistent, and holy, can ever constitute credible evidence. ‘We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God.’ [1 John 3.14, 19-21.]

To these qualifications must be added *consistent behaviour*. The rule of judging is thus explicitly laid down by the Saviour himself:—‘By their fruits ye shall know them. Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but *he that doeth the will* of my Father which is in heaven.’ [Matt. 7.20-21.] To the same purpose is his expostulation—‘And why call ye me Lord, Lord, and *do not* the things which I say? It is not enough that men ‘repent and turn to God;’ they must also ‘do works meet for repentance.’ They must be ‘zealous of good works.’ ‘Whosoever abideth in Christ sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him. He that saith he abideth in him ought himself so to walk even as he walked.’ ‘Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill? *He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart.*’²

Such are the ingredients of a credible profession of true religion,—the elements of a visible Christian character, the possession of which is necessary to qualify for admission to the church. And let it be carefully observed, that all the qualifications specified are essential. The profession in question does not exist where any one of them is wanting. Suppose a person to pretend to have felt religious experiences, to observe all the institutions of Christ, and to maintain outward regularity of conduct, at the same time that he is either ignorant of, or entertains sentiments at variance with, the grand principles of the Gospel, such a person is utterly disqualified for church membership. The same may be said of those in whom intelligent orthodoxy, submission to ordinances, and pretended experience, exist apart from consistency of outward life and conversation; or of those in whom intelligence, orthodoxy, observance of ordinances, and an unblameable moral reputation are combined, while there is a want of all evidence of the spiritual power of the Gospel. ► While we decidedly object to making actual saintship a term of admission to the visible church, we must at the same time contend for the appearance of it, and for the right of ecclesiastical rulers to judge of the evidences of its existence, the presence of some such evidences being requisite to a credible profession. We deny that the office-bearers of religion have either the power or the right to judge men’s hearts: but it were strange, indeed, if they were not warranted to require that those who are professing to believe the Gospel shall give some signs that it is exerting its proper influence on their hearts, and to inquire whether it has taught them to abjure self-righteousness, to renounce the practice of sin, and to live by faith on the Lord Jesus Christ; whether, in short, it has taught them to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in the

2 Luke 6.46; Acts 26.20; Titus 2.14; 1 John 3.6; 2.6; Psalm 15.2.

world. [Titus 2.12.] Yet, their making these inquiries, and insisting on these qualifications, are not to be considered as supposing that they are infallible judges of the signs of grace in the heart. The Lord only can search the heart and try the reins. [Jer. 17.10.] But where such evidences as we have spoken of exist, though not infallible proofs of true Christian character, they are to be regarded as sufficient to banish suspicion, and to warrant rulers to admit to the privileges of the church. We are to conclude, in the spirit of charity, that men really are what they so plainly *appear* to be.

That such things as constitute a credible profession, and not actual saintship or a positive spiritual change, are the qualifications required by Christ, may be argued on various grounds. It is visible qualifications alone that can properly be required to constitute visible membership in a visible church. It is absurd and unreasonable to require invisible qualities as essential prerequisites to visible fellowship. To the communion of the invisible church such are indispensable, but not to that of which we are speaking. Analogy may serve to throw light on this subject. In every society of whatever kind, be it scientific, or literary, or benevolent, all that is required to membership is a professed approbation of its constitution, and an apparent conformity to its rules. It is never thought necessary to scrutinize the heart, with a view to ascertain whether the person be sincere. He may not be sincere; but so long as he gives no evidence of insincerity, so long as he continues to act as if he were sincere, that is to say, so long as he makes a credible profession, he is considered as entitled to all the privileges of membership. Man, as we said before, has neither the ability nor the right to judge the heart. ► ‘I am he,’ saith the faithful and true Witness, ‘who searcheth the reins and hearts.’ [Rev. 2.23.] To do so is a divine prerogative, and no man or set of men may presume to exercise it. Nay, even the most penetrating angelic intellect is incompetent to discover, excepting by outward manifestations, what is passing within the human breast. It is well that it is so; as, were rulers in the church invested with the right to pronounce infallibly on the spiritual condition of their fellow-men, it is not difficult to see what an engine of tyranny and oppression such a power might become; besides superseding the exercise of self-examination, and making way for the most unprincipled, unfounded, arrogant, and provoking pretensions. Indeed, the principle that actual saintship is indispensable, is at variance with the exercise of that discipline which we have before seen is one of the institutions of the church. ► When a church member is suspended or excluded from the enjoyment of privileges for misconduct, it is not because he is considered not to be a saint, but because he has acted inconsistently with his profession. He may be a saint; in the spirit of charity it may be hoped that he is such; nay, there may be very good reasons for entertaining a favourable view of his state. But a real saint may act so as to incur the discipline of the church. This is supposed in the very institution of discipline, which is designed to promote the edification of the godly. David, while his sin was unrepented of, was unfit for the fellowship of a holy society. A person who departs for a time from the right path is not to be ‘counted as an enemy, but admonished as a *brother*.’ [2 Thess. 3.15.] But if a saint may be lawfully excluded from the fellowship of the visible church, even for a time, it is plain that something else than saintship is the qualification for communion.

Both Christ and his apostles appear to have acted on the principle for which we contend. Judas, who had a devil, and was known by Christ to be unconverted, was recognised and treated as a disciple, until he proved the hollowness of his profession by his conduct. Simon Magus, on a credible profession of religion, received the ordinance of baptism, although he was afterwards pronounced to be in the gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity. And, in short, there might have been less dispute on this subject, had due attention been given to the figures under which the church is represented. It is spoken of as a vine, some of the branches of which are barren, while others are fruitful; as a floor, on which there is found chaff as well as grain; as a field, in which are tares as well as wheat; as a net, which encloses bad as well as good fishes; and as a house, in which there are vessels to dishonour as well as to honour;—figures which could, with no propriety, be employed to represent the church, were actual saintship essential to her communion.

But does not this suppose that there may be hypocrites in the communion of the church? It does: but what then? The same admission will fall to be made on the supposition that actual regeneration is the qualification for church membership, as of this man can judge only by appearances, and it must be admitted that appearances may sometimes deceive. Nor is it destructive of the character of the church, as a spiritual society and the body of Christ, to suppose, that it may comprehend within it persons who are not real saints. Let it be recollected that it is of the visible church of Christ we are now speaking; and if there be only visible saintship, it is all that can be strictly required, as it is all that can be judged of by man, to the visible fellowship of such a community. Analogy may here aid our conceptions. The world is God's world, notwithstanding that there are sinful men in it. The heart of a believer is a renewed heart, notwithstanding that it is infested with manifold corruptions. Why then may not the church of Christ be supposed to contain in it some who are not real Christians, without destroying its character?

Nay, it might even be shewn that such a mixed state as we have supposed, is turned to good account in the providence of God. The quantity of moral evil in the world is thus diminished; inasmuch as the nominal members of the church are necessitated to conform to the laws of morality more strictly than they would otherwise do, in order to keep up the consistency of their assumed character. The persons themselves may not be in a whit better state, as regards God, than the openly profligate and abandoned: but, as respects their fellow-men, it is not to be doubted that it is better they should repress than that they should give full scope to their enmity of heart; better surely that they should treat the name of God with reverence than that they should blaspheme it; better that they should maintain a show of truth, probity, and respect for the ordinances of religion, than that they should lie, steal, and pour contempt on all the institutions of Christ; better, in short, that they should maintain before their families and others the common decencies of life, than that they should set before them the example of open profligacy and vice. If so, the state of things by which they are constrained to do so is not without its use. Besides, it is calculated to lessen the sum of human misery, by averting public judgments. Facts warrant us to believe, that open judgments may be restrained, where the souls

of men are not saved, out of respect to the restraints laid upon open sin: so that whatever tends to promote the latter, goes also to secure the former. Moreover, it would not be very difficult to shew that the arrangement in question is overruled for extending the resources, increasing the numbers, and promoting the protection of the church.

Not less unfortunate is the objection that the principle in question leads to the prostitution of sealing ordinances. For it must be obvious to all, that, unless the friends of the opposite scheme can pretend with infallible accuracy to judge the heart, the objection applies as much to them as to us. And, it may be added, that it overlooks the relation of the sacraments to the visible church. They have a special relation, it is true, to the church invisible; and, as signs of spiritual blessings, can be participated of with individual profit only by true believers. But they have also a relation to the visible church; and viewed as signs of the covenant character of God, certifying the doctrine of salvation by the blood of Christ, and affirming the necessity of being interested in the mediation of the Lord Jesus, the public administration of them, even where some who outwardly partake are unbelievers, may serve many important purposes to both the church and the world.

This view of the matter, if properly understood, can have no tendency to retard the exertions of the office-bearers and friends of the church in promoting her purity. It can have no effect in inducing them to receive into communion known unbelievers, or in warranting them to administer to such the sacred privileges of Christ's house. By no means. That God glorifies himself by a state of things in which good and evil are mingled together, is no reason why we should be indifferent to the existence of evil, much less why we should give encouragement to its existence. It is the prerogative of infinite wisdom, power, and grace, to bring good out of evil. But we are not warranted, on that account, to attempt any thing but what is good; we must not do evil that good may come. [Rom. 3.8.] The existence of evil in the world, as before remarked, does not destroy its relation to God; yet we are not, on this account, at liberty to encourage vice in the world, but bound to use every effort for its suppression and extirpation. The existence of depravity in the heart of a saint does not destroy his renewed character; yet is he bound to resist every known sin, to repress every evil principle, and to make no provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof. In like manner, although the existence of nominal Christians in its communion does not destroy the character of the church, this is no reason why the doors of ecclesiastical fellowship should be thrown open, and the seals of the covenant administered, to known unbelievers, or why every effort should not be made to exclude such from her membership.

Discussion Questions:

1. Are the criteria for membership in the visible church to be identified with the criteria for membership in the invisible church.
 - A. No. The latter requires election, or regeneration, but this cannot really and certainly be assessed by men.
2. What two elements are important to a credible profession of true religion?
 - A. Intelligence and orthodoxy.

3. What three additional qualifications, named by Dr. Symington, appear also to be necessary, and serve to establish the credibility of a man's profession of true religion?

A. (1) Submission to the ordinances of Christ; (2) Apparent Religious Experience; & (3) Consistent Behavior.

4. Is the Church's inability to assess actual saintship and the sincerity of its members' profession of the Church's principles in conflict with her organization, or at variance with her constitution?

A. It is a circumstances which the visible church shares in common with all human organizations, including the best nations and their governments, and the most devoted religious associations which ever existed.

5. What examples can be given of Christ or his Apostles acting on the principle that an outwardly credible profession of religion may entitle men to church privileges?

A. Our Lord admitted Judas to privileges, though he knew him to be unconverted, and Simon Magus was baptized, though his profession of Christianity was later impeached as dubious.

6. Are all of the consequences harmful, which follow from secret hypocrites being ranked among the membership of the visible church?

A. This seems to be the expectation of men, but there are many consequences which may be beneficial. (1) This may serve to diminish the quantity of moral evil in the world. (2) If their case remains dreadful for themselves, it may be comparatively beneficial to others. (3) Their example before family and others is better than what it would otherwise be. (4) Public sin being reduced by their hypocritical profession may serve to avert public judgments which would sooner visit nations if such men were all driven from their profession.

7. Does this theory or policy of Church membership weaken the efforts of office-bearers to seek the church's purity?

A. It gives them no warrant to admit to privileges those who do not appear to be believers of sincere principles and consistent life. If any office-bearers are so influenced by the circumstances and constitution of the Christian church, they should be held at fault for responding differently than Christ and his Apostles.