

THE
SPRUCE STREET LECTURES,

DELIVERED

BY SEVERAL CLERGYMEN, DURING THE AUTUMN AND
WINTER OF 1831-32.

TO WHICH IS ADDED,

A LECTURE

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS : WITH
AN APPENDIX,

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PHILADELPHIA :
RUSSELL AND MARTIEN, 9 GEORGE STREET.

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1833.

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& MARTIEN, in the Clerk's Office of the Eastern District of Penn-
sylvania.

RUSSELL AND MARTIEN, PRINTERS,
GEORGE STREET.

SPRUCE STREET LECTURES.

LECTURE VII.

*Delivered on the Evening of the 12th February, 1832, by the
Rev. Samuel Miller, D. D. of Princeton, N. J.*

ECCLESIASTICAL POLITY.

“The Elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an Elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being examples to the flock.”—1 *Peter* v. 1, 2, 3.

THE Bible knows nothing of a solitary religion. The spirit and duties of Christianity are, characteristically, *social*. Man, in his state of primitive rectitude, was made a social creature; and redeemed and restored man, when he shall reach that holy heaven which is in reserve for him hereafter, will find it to be a state of perfect and most blessed society. It is true, the Christian, in the course of the spiritual life, is required, and finds it to be as profitable as it is delightful, to be often alone with his God. But the object of this retirement is, like that of *Moses* in ascending the mount,—not that he may remain there; but

that he may come down with his face shining; his heart expanding with holy love; and all his graces refined and invigorated, and thus prepared the better to act his part in those interesting relations which he sustains to his fellow men. Accordingly, the visible Church, with which we are all bound to be connected, and which is the means of so many blessings to its members and to the world, is a social body. It is called in our text a "flock," under the care of the great "Shepherd and Bishop of souls," and under the immediate superintendence of the under-shepherds, commissioned and sent for this purpose. "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ. Feed the flock of God which is among you." The word here translated "feed," literally signifies to perform the work of a *shepherd*;—to *guard* and *govern*, as well as to *dispense food* to the flock. And, accordingly, this rendering is confirmed, not only by many other Scriptures, but also by the charge which immediately follows:—"Taking the oversight thereof;—not as lord's over God's heritage, but as examples to the flock." We have here presented, then, very distinctly, the idea of the Church, or the "flock" of God, being under GOVERNMENT. It is represented as being placed, by its great Head and Lord, under SUPERINTENDENCE and REGULATION. In all society there must be government, from a family to a nation. There *was* government in the garden of *Eden*, where human nature was perfect; and there *is* now, and ever *will be*, government in *Heaven*, where the happy inhabitants, redeemed from all the remains of sin, shall be made perfectly blessed in the full enjoyment of God to all eternity.

There have been, indeed, enthusiasts and fanatics, in

ancient as well as modern times, who taught that, in the true Church there can be no need or place for government; "because," said they, "the members of the Church being all holy persons, cannot be supposed to require either law or authority to sustain them; nothing but the evangelical law of love, by which they are all spontaneously and, of course, regulated." But the advocates of this delusive theory forgot that the members of the visible Church are not all truly sanctified persons; and that even those of their number who are the sincere friends of Christ, are sanctified only in part, and, therefore, need the salutary application of discipline. They forgot, too, that in almost every page, the New Testament recognizes, either directly or indirectly, the necessity and the actual existence of rule and authority in all the apostolic churches, even in their simplest and purest form. Nor must *we* forget that the vain theory of these fanatical teachers has been invariably found as worthless, and even mischievous in practice, as it was contrary, at once, to the principles of human nature, and to the instructions of holy Scripture. It has always resulted in disorder, licentiousness, and every evil work.

Quite as erroneous and no less pernicious in its consequences, was the doctrine of *Erastus*, the learned and ingenious contemporary of the Reformers.* He taught that the Church, as such, can possess no power, and ought not to be allowed to exercise any authority or discipline; upon the alleged principle, that "a government within a government" is a practical absurdity, and by no means admissible. His theory, of course, was, that all lawful authority

* See his work, *De Excommunicatione Ecclesiastica*.

resides only in the civil government; that the ministers of the Church may instruct, persuade and exhort, but nothing more; and that when crimes against religion occur, the offenders can be reached and punished only by the civil magistrate. In short, his doctrine was, that the civil government alone can exercise authority in any community; and, consequently, that no man, as a professor of religion, can incur any penalty, for the most serious delinquency, with regard either to faith or practice, unless he be prosecuted and convicted before the tribunal of the State. A theory more weak and fanciful, could scarcely have been proposed. It contradicts the most abundant scriptural testimony in favour of ecclesiastical government, as distinct from the civil, hereafter to be produced: and it is practically refuted by the experience of every day. The authority and discipline exercised in every family, and in every seminary of learning, plainly show that the fundamental principle on which the whole theory rests is altogether delusive; that there may be ten thousand governments within a government, without the least collision or interference.

Accordingly, in whatever direction we turn our eyes among the apostolic churches;—whether to *Jerusalem* or *Antioch*, to *Ephesus* or *Crete*, to *Corinth* or *Rome*, we find the corruption of human nature disclosing itself in various forms; we find the outbreaking of pride, ambition, heresy, and moral irregularity, disturbing the peace of the Church, and calling for the application of its wise and wholesome discipline; in other words, for the exercise of its government. Now, if such were the case in the days of inspiration and miracle, under the eyes of the apostles themselves, and when the spirit of love might be said pre-eminently to

reign in the Church; what is to be expected when these extraordinary aids are taken away, and the covenanted family of Christ left to the ordinary power of the means which he has appointed for its edification?

It is evident, then, that there is, and, from the very nature of the case, *MUST* be, ecclesiastical government; that the Church of Christ, as such, has essentially vested in her a certain kind and degree of *AUTHORITY*, which she is bound, in fidelity to her Lord and Master, to exercise for the great purposes which she was founded to accomplish.

The principal questions in relation to this subject which demand an answer, are the three following: What is the *NATURE* of this government? What are its *LIMITS*? And what is its legitimate and scriptural *END*? Let me request your serious and candid attention to some remarks intended to furnish a brief answer to each of these questions.

I. Let us begin with inquiring into the *NATURE* of that ecclesiastical government which the Word of God appears to warrant.

And in order to ascertain this with any degree of certainty and clearness, it will be necessary previously to determine what are the *purposes* for which the Church was founded: because it is manifest that all that power which is really indispensable to the attainment of these purposes, must, of course, be considered as vested in the Church; and she, as not only *at liberty*, but as *bound* to exercise.

We are taught, then, in Scripture that the visible Church is a body, called out of the world, and established under the authority of her divine Head and Lord, that she may be a faithful depository of Gospel truth, worship, and order; that she may carefully maintain, and diligently propagate the genu-

ine doctrines of our holy religion, in opposition to all heresy; that she may preserve in their simplicity and purity the ordinances which the Master has appointed, bearing testimony against all superstition and will-worship; that she may promote holy living among all her members, in the midst of a world lying in wickedness; and that she may thus be a nursery to train immortal souls for the kingdom of heaven. All this is so evident from Scripture that formal proof is unnecessary. And if this representation be correct, then it follows,

1. In the first place, that in all legitimate ecclesiastical government, *the Lord Jesus Christ is the sole Fountain of power*. By his authority the Church is instituted. He is her divine King and Head. His word is her statute-book; her only infallible rule of faith and practice. She has no power to institute other rites or ceremonies than those which he has appointed; no right to enjoin any thing which is not found in Scripture, or which cannot "by good and necessary consequence," be established by Scripture. "All power in heaven, and on earth is given to him. He is the head over all things for the Church. Call no man master, for one is your Master even Christ." All the authority, then, of ecclesiastical rulers is derived. They can exercise no power but that which is delegated to them by Him in whose name they come, and by whose commission they act.

2. The authorized government of the Church is wholly *moral* or *spiritual* in its nature. That is, it has a respect, exclusively, to *moral objects*, and is to be carried on, exclusively, by *moral means*. "My kingdom," said the Saviour, "is not of this world;" by which he meant to say, that it is wholly separate from, and independent of, all earthly governments. It is not conducted on worldly principles.

It is not maintained by "carnal weapons." Its laws, its sanctions, and its end are all spiritual. It has nothing to do with corporeal penalties, or secular coercion. No means, in a word, but those which are moral, that is, those which are addressed to the understanding, the conscience, and the heart, can be lawfully employed in that kingdom which "is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost."

3. Further; in laying down the nature of ecclesiastical authority, it is plain, from the design of the Church, that she must be considered as invested with power to *maintain, within her sacred precincts, the pure doctrines of the Gospel*. If these doctrines were delivered to her, that she might be their *keeper and guardian*, then, surely, she not only has the right, but is bound to adhere to them;—to maintain them against all opposition;—and to publish her testimony in their favour, from time to time, in the form of creeds, confessions, and other formularies, as the state of the Church and the world may demand. The Church, indeed, has no right to *compel* any one to receive her doctrines; no right to *impose* her creed or confession on the conscience of any human being. But she must, obviously, have power to do that which her Master has commanded her to do, viz. to "hold fast," for herself, "the form of sound words once delivered to the saints;" and to prevent any, within her bosom, from denying or dishonouring it. Even if the Church were a mere voluntary association, she would, of course, have the power, which all voluntary associations have, of declining to receive as members those who are hostile to her essential design; and also of excluding those who are found, after admission, to entertain and publish opinions subversive of her vital interests as a body.

But the Church is more than a mere voluntary association. She is a body organized under the authority of her divine Head and Lord; and must, of course, be vested with power to decline all fellowship with those who reject that system of holy doctrine which she is required to maintain. It is perfectly manifest that the exercise of this power is neither inconsistent with the acknowledged supremacy of Christ in his Church, nor hostile to the most perfect enjoyment of Christian liberty. It cannot be deemed inconsistent with the supreme authority of Christ; because the Church, in forming, publishing, and maintaining her creed, professes to receive no other doctrines than those which Christ has revealed; and to receive them *as being*, and *because they are taught in his Word*; and to warn all her members against opposite doctrines, for this very reason, that they are opposed to the will of Christ. Nor is the exercise of the power in question in the least degree hostile to the enjoyment of Christian liberty. Because the Church compels no one to enter her communion; she only states what she considers her divine Master as requiring her to believe, and to practice; and practically declares, that those who reject any of the important doctrines, which go to make up the substance of that Gospel which he has committed to her to keep and to propagate, cannot be admitted to her fellowship. Is this an invasion of Christian liberty? Nay, is it not rather one of the indispensable means of *protecting liberty of conscience*? Surely a body of professing Christians have a right to decide, and to profess what doctrines they consider as agreeable to the Word of God, and as represented by that Word as essential to the Gospel. And they have, quite as evidently, a further right of agreeing among themselves that none can be admitted to the number of their members,

and especially of their public teachers and rulers, who avow opinions adapted, in their view, to destroy their purity and peace. If they have not this right, there is an end of all religious liberty. If an individual, who entertains materially different views of Gospel truth and order from those received by such an associated body of Christians, can force himself, contrary to the wishes of the body, into the ranks of their instructors and guides; on whose part, I ask, are the rights of conscience in this case, invaded? Surely the individual who thus intrudes is the invader, and the Church which he enters becomes oppressed. If the rights of conscience either mean or are worth any thing, they are *mutual*; and, of course, a body of professing Christians who think alike, have as good a right to enjoy them in undisturbed peace, as any individual who differs from them, and yet wishes to join their body, can possibly have to enjoy without molestation *his* opinions. If so, every attempt on the part of the latter to intrude himself among the teachers of the former, is an invasion of that "liberty wherewith Christ came to make his people free."

4. Again; it is manifest, from the purpose for which the Church was founded, that she must be, and is vested with the power to exclude from her fellowship those who *violate the laws of practical holiness*. To deny the Church this power, would be to deny her that which is indispensable to her obeying the Master's command, to "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather to reprove them." She is said to be "the light of the world;" to be "the salt of the earth;" to be a "witness" of the holiness as well as of the truth of God, in the midst of a rebellious and unbelieving world. She is commanded to "withdraw herself from every brother that walketh disorderly," and to

“keep herself unspotted from the world.” But how are these characteristics to be realized; how are these commands to be obeyed, without the possession, and the exercise of a power to exclude from the Christian society those who are found to bear a character inconsistent with the honour of religion and the edification of the sacred family? Without this power to rebuke, to censure, and ultimately, if need be, to banish from the fellowship of the professing people of God, the Church can present no visible, effective testimony in favour of Gospel holiness; there can be no real separation between the precious and the vile; no sacred fence, inclosing the “garden of the Lord” from the world. And, without such an inclosure, there may be a CONGREGATION, but I will venture to say, there can be no CHURCH. Of course, one of the most important purposes which a visible, professing people of God were intended to answer, would be, in this case, virtually abandoned.

5. It is further manifest, that the nature of ecclesiastical government must be such as will enable the Church to regulate, agreeably to the laws of Christ, THE CHOICE AND INVESTITURE OF ALL HER OFFICERS. If the Church were, in this respect, powerless; if all that pleased, however ignorant, erroneous in doctrine, or profligate in practice, might thrust themselves into the number of her teachers and rulers, contrary to her wishes and the command of her Master, she would be destitute of the means of self-defence, and self-preservation. Corruption, dishonour, and eventual destruction must inevitably ensue. No society could exist in peace and order for a year together, without the power of regulating the choice and induction of her own officers. Accordingly, the New Testament abounds with directions in reference to this important

point of ecclesiastical order. It every where represents the Church as authorised and required to exercise a sovereign power in this matter; to examine and make trial of those who are candidates for sacred office; and to commit the great work of instruction and rule in the house of God to none but those whose knowledge, soundness in the faith, fidelity and zeal, are adapted to promote her edification.

6. It is clear also, from the nature and design of the Church, that her government, if it be of any value, must be of such a nature as will enable her to settle within *herself all the ordinary controversies and difficulties which arise within her bosom.* The members of the visible Church, even when sincere in their religious profession, are sanctified, as was before remarked, only in part. Of course, they are compassed about with many infirmities; and hence differences of opinion, variance, conflicting claims, and multiplied forms of offence and complaint often arise—between the private members of the same Church; between ministers, and the people of their respective charges; between the pastors of different churches; and between different churches of the same denomination. Now, when these complaints and controversies arise, the Church ought to be prepared to meet them; and when she is obliged, from the want of appropriate and adequate provision in her form of government, to resort, for settling them, to foreign arbitration, and even to civil courts; she undoubtedly labours under a serious defect in her ecclesiastical organization. It cannot be such an organization as the Master has appointed. The inspired Apostle expressly reprobates the practice of Christians going out of the Church to reconcile differences, and to adjust matters in controversy. He evidently teaches that the Church

ought to have tribunals of her own, by which all questions and difficulties, of an ecclesiastical kind, may be authoritatively decided. And that Church which is destitute of such tribunals—however richly and happily furnished in other respects—will undoubtedly find herself unable to carry into effect some very important provisions exhibited in the New Testament for maintaining Christian order and edification.

7. Another characteristic of ecclesiastical polity, indispensable to the attainment of the great purposes for which it was instituted is, that it *be such as will bind all the parts of the Church together in one homogeneous body*; and enable all these parts to act together with authority and efficiency, for the benefit of the whole.

There is a visible Church catholic, comprising all those of every denomination, who profess the true religion, together with their children. These, though divided from each other by oceans and continents, as well as by names and forms, are all one Church, “one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.” They do not, nay, they cannot, all worship together. Prejudices and misapprehensions, as well as local separation and numbers, prevent them from all assembling in the same edifice. But still, as they are all united to the same divine Head, so, it is delightful to remember, whether they acknowledge it or not, that, in a very important sense, they are one covenanted people, and are bound to recognize each other as such, as far as circumstances will admit. But if this be so, much more ought those Churches which bear the same name, profess the same faith, and are so situated as to admit of their being ecclesiastically connected, to make a point of sustaining this connexion with each other

in reality, as well as nominally. Now, I say, that such a Church cannot be so united as to answer all the purposes which her divine Head, as well as her own peace and edification require, without a form of polity which will enable all the several parts of the body, to meet together, by their representatives, in appropriate judicatories; to plan, consult, and decide for the benefit of the whole body; and that not merely by way of *advice*, but by *authoritative acts*, to correct abuses, redress grievances, obviate the approach of error, heal schismatic contention, promote the unity, purity, and co-operation of the whole body; and employ this co-operation in spreading the glorious Gospel for the conversion of the world. If the Church is commanded to maintain this unity; if she is required, in all her several branches, to “walk by the same rule,” and to “speak the same thing;” and if she is commanded, AS A CHURCH, to be active in sending the Gospel “to every creature;”—then, surely her Master has not withheld from her the means which are indispensable to the attainment of the end. If this principle be admitted, then the system of our Independent Brethren, who reject all authoritative Synods; all courts of review and control; labours under a defect of the most serious kind. It makes no provision for the Churches of the same denomination acting with harmony and authority as one body. And so far as Congregationalism is chargeable with the same deficiency, as it undoubtedly is in some parts of our country, as well as in Great Britain, it is altogether powerless in respect to many of those things in which the Church is called to act as a united body.

8. A farther and very important feature of that government which the Church is warranted in exercising,

is, *that it be of such a nature as that it may be carried into execution in all parts of the world, and under any and every form of civil government.* As Christ's kingdom "is not of this world;" in other words, as the government of the Church has no necessary connexion, and ought never to be in fact connected, with the government of the State; it can, of course, operate without obstruction, and accomplish all its legitimate objects, without the aid, and even in spite of the enmity of the civil government, whatever may be its form. Of this we need no stronger evidence than the *fact*, that the Christian Church, for nearly three centuries, *did* exist, and *did* exercise all the power for which we contend, while it had no connexion with the State; nay, while the State frowned and persecuted, and did all in its power to destroy the Church. Amidst all this hostility from the world, the rulers of the Church went forward, without turning to the right hand or the left, carrying the Gospel of the grace of God wherever they were permitted; instructing the people; baptizing and receiving to the fellowship of the Church those whom they thought worthy; exercising a sacred moral inspection over all their members; admonishing and censuring the disorderly; excluding those who were incorrigibly offensive, with regard either to faith or practice; and, in a word, exercising, for all moral purposes, that authority which the King of Zion had committed to them for the edification of his sacred family. Here was an undoubted example—notwithstanding the dream of *Erastus* to the contrary—of a government within a government, and each proceeding without interference; because, as long as each kept in its proper place, they could not possibly come in collision with each other. In like

manner, the Church of Christ, in all ages, as long as she adheres to the spirit of that government which alone the Saviour has warranted, may carry it into plenary execution in any land, in any state of society, and under any form of civil government; nay, though all the governments of the world should again be, as they once were, firmly leagued against her.

9. The last characteristic which I shall mention of that government which the Church is warranted by Scripture to exercise, is, that it be not, in any of its features, *adapted to promote ambition, to excite a lordly and aspiring spirit in the Church.* "Neither," says the Apostle, "as LORDS OVER GOD'S HERITAGE, but as examples to the flock." A love of pre-eminence and of power is natural to man. It is one of the earliest, strongest, and most universal principles of our nature. It reigns without control in wicked men; and has more influence than it ought to have in the minds of the most pious. And when we recollect to what complicated and deplorable mischiefs this spirit has given rise in the Church of God,—corrupting her doctrines, alienating her members and ministers, disturbing her peace, and breaking her unity;—it is surely desirable that every thing in the form of ecclesiastical polity should be, as far as possible, adapted to obviate and repress the spirit of which we speak. Accordingly, our blessed Saviour, not only while he was on earth, frowned with severity upon every thing which looked like aspiring and ambition among his followers, declaring that the question, "which shall be the greatest?" ought to have no place in his kingdom; for that all his ministers were fellow-servants, and that none of them should seek to be called "master," or "rabbi:"—but he also, as we confi-

dently believe, after his resurrection, appointed a form of ecclesiastical order, which placed all pastors upon an equality, and precluded the possibility of any one "lording it" over another in virtue of any official pre-eminence. When, therefore, I find the inspired Apostle saying to his son *Timothy*,* "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work"—I had almost said that if there were no other text in the Bible declaring against Prelacy, this alone would convince me that it was contrary to the mind of Christ. For, if we interpret the word, "bishop" in this place to mean, what Presbyterians say it means, the pastoral or ministerial office;—an office of great labour and self-denial; then the whole passage conveys an idea, the seasonableness and importance of which is obvious to every one, and the consistency of which with the rest of the Epistle, and with the spirit of the New Testament, is equally obvious. But if, by this title, we are to understand an office of pre-eminent rank and authority, above that of the ordinary authorized dispensers of the Word and Sacraments; no gloss, it appears to me, can prevent our making the Apostle *Paul* a favourer of ambition and aspiring in the holy ministry. He surely meant to encourage a "desire" for the office of a "bishop;" nay, an *earnest* and *eager desire*, as the original word undoubtedly signifies; a desire like that of a hungry person to obtain food. But if this be an office of pre-eminent ecclesiastical rank, as our Prelatical brethren say it is, then, undoubtedly, *Paul*, upon this construction, encourages every Presbyter eagerly to covet the place of his diocesan. On this supposition the inspired Apostle is set at variance with himself, in many other parts of his Epistles; at variance with his brother

* 1 *Timothy* iii. 1.

Apostle, *John*, who strongly censures one who "loved to have the pre-eminence" in the Church; at variance with his Master, who, on so many occasions, reprobated all aspiring after mastership, or priority of place among his ministers; and, indeed, at variance with the whole spirit of the Gospel.

It is by no means contended that the exercise of individual ambition is either necessarily, or in fact, precluded by the adoption of Presbyterian parity in the holy ministry. This spirit is found, in a greater or less degree, wherever there are men. But, as the constitution of our truly primitive and apostolic Church, precludes all official inequality of rank among pastors, their ambition can only take the turn of aspiring to be more learned, more pious, more diligent, and more conspicuously and extensively useful in the same office. An ambition which, in many cases, may be, no doubt, sadly unhallowed; but which is, surely, less dishonourable and corrupting in its influence, than that which exhausts itself in canvassing for titles, chief seats, and emoluments; and which is tempted, of course, to be most intent on the culture of those personal qualities which are most favourable to the attainment of official precedence.

Having endeavoured to show the real nature of that ecclesiastical polity which the Scriptures warrant, by pointing out, in detail, its essential *features*, and the specific *purposes* which it ought to be, and must be intended, and adequate to answer; let us now see whether we do not find the apostolic churches *actually exercising* their ecclesiastical power, in *the very cases* and for the *very purposes* which have been specified. If so, the testimony is irresistible, that we have not misapprehended or misapplied the foregoing principles.

We find ministers of the sanctuary, then, in various parts of the New Testament, distinguished by *titles* which plainly imply that they were invested with authority for the benefit of the Church, which they were bound to exercise in the fear of God, and under a deep sense of accountability to the great "Shepherd and Bishop of souls." They are called "rulers" in the house of God; "shepherds over the flock;" "stewards of the mysteries of God;" "overseers;" "ambassadors of Christ;"*—all implying *office* in the Church;—all implying a *delegated power*, to be exercised for the edification of that spiritual body of which He who "sits as King upon the holy hill of *Zion*" is the sovereign Head. Further: the Apostles, again and again, exhort the churches to which they wrote to "obey them that had the rule over them, and to submit themselves," remembering that those rulers "watched for their souls as they that must give account."† Our blessed Saviour himself, in giving direction to his disciples respecting offences, evidently authorizes the Church, by her proper officers, after due inquiry and evidence, to pass a judicial sentence against incorrigible offenders, cutting them off from the fellowship and privileges of the Christian body.‡ In conformity with this direction, the actual exercise of ecclesiastical power in the excision of the heretical and the immoral from the Apostolic Church, is expressly and repeatedly recorded. In several cases the Apostles enjoin that those who denied the fundamental doctrines of the Gospel, so as to preach "another gospel," should be refused admission to the Church; or, if already admitted, excluded from its

* *Rom.* xii. 8. 1 *Tim.* iii. 4. 1 *Peter* v. 1—3. 1 *Cor.* iv. 1. 1 *Peter* iv. 10. *Acts* xx. 28. 2 *Cor.* v. 20.

† *Heb.* xiii. 17. 1 *Thess.* v. 12.

‡ *Matt.* xviii. 15—19.

privileges. “The man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject.” “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences, contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.” “If any man preach any other Gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.” “Whosoever transgresseth and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God-speed:—for he that biddeth him God-speed is partaker of his evil deeds.”* Equally undoubted are the examples of judicial censure and exclusion from the Church on account of corruption in practice. In the Church of *Corinth*, the rulers are directed to assemble, and authoritatively to cast out of their communion a man who had fallen into gross immorality. “Wherefore put away from among yourselves,” says the inspired Apostle, “that wicked person.” And again, in writing to the *Thessalonians*, the same Apostle directs—“If any man obey not our word by this Epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.”† The New Testament, moreover, abounds with directions concerning the proper character, the choice, and the ordination of Church officers; prescribing those qualifications without which they ought not to be admitted to office; and committing to the rulers of the Church the arduous duty of judging of these qualifications, rejecting the unworthy, and presiding over the choice and investiture of those whom they approved. And, to crown all, we have an example in the Apostolic Church of a Synodical Assembly, brought

* *Titus* iii. 10. *Rom.* xvi. 17. *Gal.* i. 9. 2 *John* 9, 10, 11.

† 1 *Cor.* v. 1—15. 2 *Thess.* iii. 14.

together, not by the civil government, but by ecclesiastical men, for deciding matters of great importance, in the name, and for the benefit of the whole Church. I refer to the Synod of *Jerusalem*,* formed by "the Apostles and Elders," convened in that place, who decided the question concerning Jewish observances, so interesting at that time, which had been sent up for consideration from *Antioch*. And, what is no less remarkable, having authoritatively decided, they transmitted their judgment, under the name of "*decrees*," to be recorded and observed by all the Churches. In a word, ecclesiastical rulers are represented, throughout the New Testament, as entrusted with "the keys of the kingdom of God," that is, with authority in the visible Church; with the power of "binding and loosing," in the name of the King of *Zion*; with the power of superintending all the affairs of the Church, as such; of judicially directing what appears to be for edification; and seeing that all things be done decently and in order."

Such is the *nature* of that spiritual government which the Church is authorized to maintain. Our next inquiry is,

II. What are the *limits* of that authority which belongs to the Church?

And in determining these, we shall be aided essentially by keeping in mind that *nature* and *design* of this authority which we have already endeavoured to ascertain. For we may rest assured that the Church has no superfluous power; no power beyond what is absolutely necessary for the attainment of those great moral purposes for which she was formed by her divine Master. And,

1. The Church can have *no authority over any but her*

* *Acts xv.*

own members. There have been periods indeed, in which an encroaching, tyrannical Church claimed universal dominion; when she arrogated to herself the power to set up and put down whom she would; when she undertook to dispose of crowns and kingdoms at pleasure; and to make kings and emperors bow before her with ignoble homage. I need not say, that this was most presumptuous usurpation; contrary to reason and Scripture; and adapted to destroy the Church of God in her appropriate character. It follows, from the very nature and design of the Church, that she can have no authority beyond her own pale. And it was, no doubt, because she so frequently transgressed this rule, in former times, that so many adopted, without due examination, the principle before noticed, that "a government cannot exist within a government." If the Church had not so often transcended her proper limits, this principle would never have occurred to a thinking mind. Be it remembered, then, that she can judge only those who are "within" her bosom. To those who are "without," she may send missionaries. She may instruct, invite, and persuade them to come in, and accept of her privileges; but until they comply with her invitation, and become her members, she has no right to extend to them her appropriate authority.

2. Again; the Church has no power to control, even her own members, *in any other concerns than those which relate to their moral and spiritual interests.* She has no right to interfere with their political opinions; with their domestic relations; or with any department of their secular pursuits. As long as they infringe no law of Christ's kingdom, it is no part of her sacred trust to call in question or censure their course. It cannot be too fre-

quently repeated, or too constantly remembered, that Christ's "kingdom is not of this world," and can never authorize its rulers to be "judges and dividers" in the temporal concerns of men. Yet if a member of the Christian Church, in the course of his political conflicts, or his professional avocations, be visibly and palpably chargeable with a departure from purity, either in faith or practice, it is incumbent on the Church to call him to an account; not for his political partialities, or his secular employments, but solely for his moral delinquency.

3. Further; the Church has no power to hold in a state of inspection and discipline, even her own members *any longer than they choose to submit to her authority*. I am not now speaking of the right of these members in the sight of the divine and heart-searching Head of the Church. No doubt, all who depart from the body of his professing people, and refuse to submit to the just and scriptural authority of his sacred household, commit sin against him; and, however lightly they may think of it, will be held accountable at his bar for their disobedience. But still the Church has no means, and ought not to claim the power, of compelling any to remain under her "oversight" and authority an hour longer than their judgment and their conscience dispose them to remain. He that *will* depart, must be allowed to depart. The Church can only follow him with her tears, her prayers, and her parental censure.

4. Closely allied to this, or rather involved in this, is another limit to the power of the Church; and that is, that *the highest penalty she can inflict upon any one, however aggravated his offence, is exclusion from her communion*. She can exact no pecuniary fine. She can inflict no corporeal pains or penalties. She cannot confiscate the

property, or incarcerate the person, or touch a hair of the head, of the most obstinate offender. When she has shut him out from her fellowship, in other words, disowned him as a Christian brother, she has done the utmost that she has a right to do. Her power is exhausted.

5. Intimately connected with the foregoing, is the last principle of limitation which I shall mention, which is, that *the power of ecclesiastical rulers is strictly ministerial*: that is, they have only the power, *as servants, of communicating what the Master has taught them, and of doing what the Master has commanded them.* They derive their power, not from the people whom they serve, and whom they represent, but from Christ, the King and Head of the Church. In his name they come. By his authority they speak and act. Their commission is "Teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." "Preach the preaching that I bidd thee." "Hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me." Their office is "is a *ministry*, not a *dominion*." Teachers and rulers have, of course, no right to prescribe terms of communion which the Bible does not warrant; no right to denounce or condemn any thing which the Bible does not condemn; no right to enjoin that which the Bible does not enjoin. Like ambassadors at a foreign court, they cannot go one jot or tittle beyond their instructions. I am not ignorant, indeed, that ecclesiastical bodies, calling themselves Churches of Christ, have often set up other standards, both of faith and practice. Tradition, the Fathers, general Councils, and the judgment of the Church, have all been prescribed as authoritative guides both to truth and order. Every thing of this kind is an invasion of Christ's supremacy in his Church, and a practical denial of the suffi-

ciency of the Scriptures as the great code of laws of his kingdom. It is not maintained, indeed, that there must necessarily be a direct scriptural warrant for every minor detail of ecclesiastical polity. But it *is* maintained, that for every leading, governing feature in the system, there must be the warrant of either scriptural *precept*, or scriptural *example*. And, above all, it is maintained, as a radical principle on this subject, that nothing can ever be lawfully made *a term of communion* for which a warrant from the Word of God cannot be produced. It remains that we consider

III. *The legitimate and scriptural End of Church government.*

The great end of all good government is the benefit of the community over which it is exercised. For this purpose it was instituted at first by the Governor of the world; and to this end ought its whole administration, in all cases, to be supremely directed. Tyrants in the state, indeed, have taught, and acted upon the principle, that the great end of all civil government is the aggrandizement of a few at the expense of the many. Of course, they supposed that the grand design was most successfully accomplished, when the rulers were most enriched and honoured, and the ruled kept in the most abject and unresisting subjection. And it is deeply to be deplored that the same principle has been too often adopted, if not avowedly, yet really, by bodies calling themselves Churches of Christ. Hence the ecclesiastical exactions and edicts to which hood-winked and infatuated millions have so often, in past ages, and so long submitted. Hence the haughty Papal "bulls" and "interdicts," by which kings, and even kingdoms have

been frequently made to tremble. Nothing can be more opposite than these things to the spirit and law of the Redeemer. The "authority" which the inspired Apostle claims for the rulers of the Church, he represents as "given for edification and not for destruction."* Not for the purpose of creating and pampering classes of privileged orders, to "Lord it over God's heritage;" not to build up a system of polity which may minister to the pride, the cupidity, or the voluptuousness of an ambitious priesthood; not to form a body under the title of *clergy*, with separate interests from the *laity*, and making the latter mere machines and submissive instruments of the former. All this is as wicked as it is unreasonable. No office, no power is authorized by Jesus Christ in his Church, but that which is necessary to the instruction, the purity, the edification, and the happiness of the whole body. All legitimate government, here, as well as elsewhere, is to be considered as a *means*, not an *end*: not as instituted for the purpose of acquiring *dominion* over the bodies, the minds, or the property of men; but for promoting their temporal and eternal welfare; and as no further resting on divine authority than as it is adapted to propagate and maintain the truth, to restrain vice, to secure the order and well-being of society, and to build up the great family of those who profess the true religion, in knowledge, peace, and holiness, unto salvation.

Accordingly, the divine Founder of our religion himself tells us that he "came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many;" not to gratify himself, but to obey, and suffer, and die, that he

* 2 Cor. x. 8.

might "seek and save that which was lost."* And, in conformity with this declaration, the inspired Apostle, who had drunk deep into the spirit of his Master, declares, "We preach, not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your servants for Jesus sake." And again: "Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy." And again: "All things," says the same Apostle, addressing himself to the body of a Christian Church—"all things are yours, whether *Paul*, or *Apollos*, or *Cephas*, all are yours." And again: "Who is *Paul* and who is *Apollos*, but ministers by whom ye believed, as the Lord gave to every man?" Accordingly, the same inspired man reminds his son *Timothy*, and commands him to teach, that "the servants of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those who oppose themselves, if, peradventure, God will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth." Accordingly, in pleading before king *Agrrippa*, he declares that the great design of the Saviour in sending gospel ministers to the children of men, is, to "open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they might receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified, by faith in Jesus Christ." And when he tells the Ephesian Church for what purpose apostles, evangelists, pastors and teachers were sent forth, he declares it was not for any purpose of self-aggrandizement, but "for the perfecting of the saints, for the edifying of the body of Christ; till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect

* *Matt.* xx. 28. *Luke.* xix. 10.

man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”*

This subject, my friends, however dry and speculative it may have appeared to some of my hearers, is all practical. It enters more deeply into the daily walk and duties of the Christian life, than is commonly supposed. Suffer me, then, to trespass a little longer on your patience by stating, and recommending to your attention some of the many *practical inferences* which may be naturally drawn from the subject. And,

1. From what has been said, it is evident that *Church government is a very important means of grace*. To many, I know, this whole subject appears unimportant, if not repulsive. They are apt to consider and represent all exercise of ecclesiastical authority, and especially the *discipline of the Church*, which is nothing more than the application of the Church’s authority, as an officious and offensive intermeddling with Christian liberty. But I need not say to those who take their views of ecclesiastical polity from the Bible, and from the best experience, that it is not only *important*, but absolutely *essential* to the purity and edification of the body of Christ. It ought, undoubtedly, to be regarded as one of the most precious means of grace, by which offenders are humbled, softened, and brought to repentance; by which the Church is purged of unworthy members; offences removed; the honour of religion promoted; the office of the Christian ministry regulated and “magnified;” real Christians stimulated and guided in their spiritual course, faithful testimony borne against error

* 2 Cor. iv. 5. i. 24. 1 Cor. iii. 22. 1 Cor. iii. 5. 2 Tim. ii. 24. 25. Acts xxvi. 18. Ephes. iv. 2.

and crime; and the professing family of Christ rescued from disgrace, and made to appear orderly and beautiful in the view of the world. The truth is, the faithful maintenance of Church discipline; in other words, the exercise of a faithful watch and care among Christians, over the purity of each other, in doctrine, worship and life, is so important a part of the purpose for which the Church was founded, that we may say with confidence, *she cannot flourish, as to her best interests, without it.* It may be safely affirmed, that a large part of all that is holy in the Church, at the present day, either in faith or practice, may be ascribed, under God, as really to sound ecclesiastical discipline, as to the faithful preaching of the Gospel. No matter how many precious plants may be introduced into "the garden of the Lord," or how much time and labour may be expended in endeavouring to fertilize the soil, and to apply to it the most skilful and diligent culture: if there be no *fence* kept up to defend the whole from intruders, all culture will be vain; every beast of the field will devour it; and what ought to be a beautiful and productive inclosure, will be a barren and dreary common.

2. If the foregoing representation be correct, then *the plenary and constant exercise of ecclesiastical authority is not usurpation, but simple obedience to Christ.* There is extreme sensitiveness on this subject in the minds of many, who profess to be zealous for the "rights of conscience." They believe, and sometimes very clamorously assert, that all ecclesiastical censure on any one, for any moral delinquency, and especially for any departure from the true faith, is an interference with the prerogative of God, who alone is "Lord of the conscience." But if Christ, the divine Head of the Church, has solemnly en-

joined on his professing people the exercise of this authority, and the faithful infliction of this censure, there is surely an end of all controversy on the part of those who acknowledge the Scriptures to be the only infallible rule of faith and practice. Suppose the proprietor of a beautiful and valuable garden to have committed it to the entire care of servants, formally chosen and commissioned for that purpose. Suppose the master to have given them a strict and repeated charge, carefully to exclude from it all mischievous intruders, and as soon as possible to banish those who had improperly made their way into the inclosure. And suppose, when these servants faithfully obeyed their orders, any one were to denounce them as usurping power, and as presumptuously interfering with the liberty of their neighbours. What would be thought of the charge? Would it not be regarded as the most preposterous that could be conceived? Every one must see, in a moment, that if the servants had not done exactly as they did, they would have been liable to the charge of unfaithfulness and gross disobedience. Precisely so is it in the case before us. The command of Christ, to his commissioned servants, to watch over, rule, and guard the Church committed to their care; and to exclude from it all those whose principles or practice are manifestly hostile to its great design; is plain, repeated, and decisive. Can it be for a moment doubted, then, that when they obey this command, they are so far from usurping power, that a failure to obey it, strictly and faithfully, would be an act of direct rebellion against Him who is "Head over all things for the Church?"

3. From what has been said, it is plain, that *every departure from the essential principles of Gospel order,*

will be likely to exert an unhappy influence on the best interests of the Church, and may be productive of the most injurious effects. It is the habit of many to speak of the established rules of ecclesiastical order, with sneer and contempt, as if they were cold and spiritless forms, the observance of which is rather adapted to repress and hinder, than to promote the real life, the spiritual prosperity of the Church. Unless the preacher is greatly deceived, a more erroneous estimate was never made. There is no doubt, indeed, that there may be much pompous and rigid adherence to ecclesiastical form, where there is little or no life. And there is as little doubt that the rigour of Church order may be maintained at the expense of more vital interests. But the question is,—will the garden of the Lord be likely to flourish when its fences are broken down; when not only old, but important landmarks are disregarded; when rules of order, as wise as they have been long established, are set at nought? Can there be a moment's doubt what answer ought to be given to this question? "God is not the author of confusion, but of peace and order in all the Churches." Let no one imagine, then, that he will be likely to render God service, or permanently to build up the Redeemer's kingdom, by violating the order of his house; for example, by giving encouragement to "lay-preaching;" by favouring the introduction into the ministry of men with talents adapted to dazzle as meteors, but destitute of sound principles, and other prescribed qualifications; by violating wholesome scriptural rules, for the purpose of either favouring a friend, or opposing an adversary; by giving countenance to proceedings manifestly disorderly, for the purpose of carrying a point, or with the hope of gaining some temporary advantage; or by adopting measures in the

public service of the sanctuary, better fitted to inflate or intoxicate, than to enlighten the understanding, convince the conscience, or impress the heart. It is in ecclesiastical affairs, as all wise men acknowledge it to be in civil life, a single departure from some important principle of regularity, may lead, directly or indirectly, to mischievous consequences, of which a whole generation may not see the end. Such deviations may appear to do good for a while; but the appearance is delusive. Like the excitement of strong drink, they may stimulate, and even appear to strengthen, for a short time; but they only prepare the way for increased weakness and disease in the issue. It were unwise, indeed, to insist on adhering to form at the expense of substance; but it were equally unwise to cherish the hope, that the substance will long be retained, when form is abandoned. The instructions of history on this subject are most ample and decisive.

4. A further inference from what has been said is obvious and irresistible, viz: *that the Presbyterian form of ecclesiastical polity is manifestly, and by far, best adapted to strengthen, purify, and build up the Church of Christ.* If *uniformity* of faith, order, and worship, among all the Churches which bear the same denomination, and profess to walk by the same rules, be of real importance; if the maintenance of enlightened and faithful *discipline*, be essential to the purity and genuine health of the body of Christ; and if that ecclesiastical polity which shall be adapted to answer the great purposes for which the Church was founded, must be such as will authoritatively bind all the Churches which profess to receive it, in one compact and homogeneous body; then it is manifest that no other form than the Presbyterian is adapted to attain all

the purposes, and secure all the advantages which the government of the Church was intended by the Master to promote. In saying this, I have no desire to denounce, or even to depreciate, the forms of government preferred by other denominations of our fellow Christians. With the utmost cordiality can I adopt as my own the language of the framers of our excellent ecclesiastical Constitution, when they say, "We embrace in the spirit of charity those Christians who differ from us, in opinion or in practice, on these subjects." This, however, is perfectly reconcilable with the conviction, that one form of ecclesiastical government is more scriptural, and better adapted to promote good order, purity, and edification than another. On the one hand, to speak with frankness, we have no doubt that a Church formed on the plan of our Episcopal brethren, may be a true Church of Christ, and may be, and has been blessed to the everlasting welfare of many souls. Yet we are persuaded, that the peculiar features of that system, besides having no foundation in the word of God, are by no means adapted to the maintenance of a scriptural discipline in the Church, and, indeed, scarcely compatible with it. On the other hand, we are as perfectly confident that the plan of our Independent brethren, and, to a considerable extent, that of our Congregational brethren, is no less materially defective as a means of promoting the unity, and the efficient and authoritative co-operation of all the Churches of the same nominal communion. It obviously leaves them entirely powerless in regard to many points, which it would seem no friend of ecclesiastical order can deem of small importance. In both these respects, as well as in many others which might be specified, the Presbyterian system is, at once, liberal and efficient; in the highest

degree friendly to the claims of Christian liberty; and yet adapted to maintain the purest discipline, and the most entire harmony and energetic co-operation of the whole body. Much depends, it must be acknowledged, on the *spirit* with which this system is borne forward. For, although I am not prepared to adopt, in all its extent, in reference to ecclesiastical government, the sentiment which is so often repeated as an admitted maxim, that "that which is best administered is best," yet I am free to acknowledge, that the Presbyterian form of government and discipline may be administered with so little of the spirit of charity, and of zeal for the glory of God, and the extension of the Redeemer's kingdom, as to make it little more than a course of vexatious and unedifying litigation. But this is only saying, that the infirmity and corruption of man may sometimes mar the beauty, and invalidate the efficacy of the best provisions of a benevolent God. Some adequate and adapted impelling power is necessary to set the most perfect machine in motion. And when the vital spirit of the religion of Christ is present and active, here is the noblest plan of machinery in the world with which it can operate. Where this spirit habitually governs, there is no other plan of ecclesiastical polity so well adapted as the Presbyterian to secure order; to promote peace; to accomplish every thing with fraternal counsel and deliberation; to maintain impartial and equitable discipline, at once over ministers and private members; to secure the rights of the people; to protect pastors from injury and oppression; to guard, on the one hand, against the intrusions of *laymen* into the functions of the *clergy*, and, on the other, against the encroachments of clerical ambition; to promote uniformity of doctrine and worship; to afford redress in every species

of difficulty; to bring the state and proceedings of every part of the Church under the distinct and official review of the whole; and to enable the whole to act together as one body, under the authority and guidance of a common head. Are these things *desirable*? are they really *important* to the greatest strength and purity of the body? If so, I will be bold to say, they can be fully attained only by that form of ecclesiastical polity under which *we* are so happy as to live.

5. From the view which has been given of this subject, it is plain that *diversity in forms of Church government ought not to interfere with the communion of saints*. As "Christ is not divided;" as there is but "one Christ;" so all who are really united by faith to Him who is "the Head of all principality and power," are "one body in Him, and every one members one of another." We all grant, that among individual Christians there may be "diversities of operation," that is great variety in the order, intensity, and aspect of those exercises which mark the entrance as well as the progress of the divine life;—and yet that "it is the same spirit which worketh in all." Why may there not be a similar variety in the modes of organization adopted by ecclesiastical bodies, without destroying their ecclesiastical character? While, therefore, the great importance of the subject of ecclesiastical polity is maintained; and while we may safely assert, that no material departure from the scriptural order of the Church can ever occur without subjecting those who are guilty of it to a serious disadvantage; let us guard against the mistake of those who place it among the *fundamentals* of our holy religion. This, it is apprehended, is an entire and mischievous mistake. The holy Scriptures manifestly do not, like some ecclesiastical men, of

narrow views, and of more zeal than knowledge, cut off from the "covenanted mercies of God" those who reject a certain favourite form of church government;—but only those who reject the Gospel of Christ. We undoubtedly sin against the great Head of the Church, when we consider and treat as a matter of *indifference* that which he has appointed; but we may be considered as equally sinning against Him, and against "the generation of the righteous," when we attempt to place the external order of the Church among those things on which its vital character depends; on which the exercise of Jehovah's mercy is suspended.

6. If what has been said be correct, it is evident that *an honest attachment to a particular form of ecclesiastical order, does not, necessarily, deserve the name of high-church and sectarian bigotry.* There is a strong tendency, at the present day, to stigmatize with these epithets every thing that indicates a marked preference to any one denomination of Christians. If a book be written, or a plan formed for recommending any particular portion of the Christian community, as, in the estimation of the author, more conformed to Scripture, and more worthy of adoption than others, it is immediately denounced, as a "high-church" book; as an illiberal, "sectarian" plan. Nor are any more disposed to utter, and clamorously to urge this denunciation, than those who, under the pretence of a most expanded "charity," are far more exclusive and intolerant in contending for some opposite peculiarity. None are more severe on bigots and bigotry, than the most intensely bigoted. But can any thing be more unreasonable and unjust? If the visible Church exist at all, it must be organized in some particular form: and it is manifest that all forms of Church order cannot be equally agreeable to Scrip-

ture. Some one is, of course, nearer to the primitive model than the rest. And if any one honestly believes this to be the case, with the form with which he is particularly connected, and prefers, and endeavours to recommend this form accordingly; provided he do it without uncharitableness, and with due respect to the opinions of others, who has a right to complain? Surely to censure him for this course, is to abridge, instead of maintaining, Christian liberty. The truth is, the sincere and intelligent inquirer *must* prefer one form of faith and order to others. If he proclaim this preference with bitterness and rancour; if he assail those who cannot agree with him with unsparing denunciation; if he exhibit himself as a "fiery, controversial zealot, who can see no evil in his own party, and no good out of it;" let the terms "high-churchman," "bigot," "sectarian," be heaped upon him without reserve. He richly deserves them all. But, if he meekly and humbly obey those convictions of duty which he considers the Bible as warranting; if he lay no more stress upon modes of faith, and forms of order than the Bible lays upon them; if he, not merely in words, but practically, allow to others the same liberty which he claims for himself; and if he look with unfeigned and equal affection upon all who bear the image of Christ, whether they belong to his own denomination or not;—such an one, whatever opprobrious epithets the latitudinarian, or he who is "fierce for moderation" may heap upon him, has little reason to fear the abuse of men. Those who would call such an one "bigot," or "sectarian," would, undoubtedly, if they had lived in the first century, have applied the same appellation to the Saviour himself and his inspired Apostles.

7. From the foregoing discussion it is manifest, *that all*

alliance between the Church and the civil government, is unscriptural, and replete with mischief of the most serious kind. It is *unscriptural*; contrary alike to the letter and the spirit of the New Testament; and, therefore, solemnly forbidden. It is *unhallowed in its origin*, the offspring of *priestcraft*, or *statecraft*, or both, and, of course, entitled to no countenance from the real friends of the Church of Christ. And its *tendency* and *effects* are in all cases injurious; necessarily and universally injurious. All civil establishments of religion, then, ought to be opposed to the utmost by those who wish well to the cause of Zion. Whatever may be their form, or the degree of their rigour; whether they are intended to operate by force, by fear, or by bribery; whether we consider them as “a tax on error;” or as “a bounty on faith;” as a legal provision for instructing the people in what the civil magistrate, (who may be an infidel or a gross heretic) chooses to say is truth; or as a convenient engine in the hands of government for reaching and controlling the popular mind; in all cases they are corrupt in their principles, and pernicious in their influence; and adapted to generate and encourage hypocrisy; to degrade the Christian ministry; to make the care of souls an affair of secular merchandize; and to prostrate the Church of God, with all its officers and ordinances, at the feet of worldly politicians. Such *have been* the effects of religious establishments from the days of *Constantine* to the present hour; and such *will be* their effects as long as human nature remains what it now is. Every friend of Christ, then, ought to recoil with instinctive dread and horror from *every attempt to support religion, in any form, by law.* Nay, they ought to recoil from every attempt, on the part of the civil government,

to interpose in the least degree in the affairs of the Church, *even to help her*. All experience has shown that it is less, far less, injurious to the Church to be *persecuted* by the State, than to be pampered by her caresses, and laden with her treasures.

8. A further practical inference from our subject is, that *the trust committed to Church rulers is in the highest degree weighty and solemn*. To conduct the momentous affairs of the Christian Society, in which so many interests, divine and human, temporal and eternal, are involved; to sit in judgment in cases in which doctrine and order, Christian character and Christian peace and edification are all deeply concerned; to administer the laws of Christ with fidelity, and yet with prudence; with proper zeal for Gospel purity, and at the same time with a sacred regard to the Church's peace; surely requires all the wisdom, and all the grace that mortals can exercise. The trust committed to *civil* rulers is, no doubt, in a high degree important and arduous; and will be felt to be so by every thinking man. But to the *ecclesiastical* ruler are committed interests unspeakably more momentous; which put in requisition all the sagacity, discretion, meekness, benevolence, and zeal for the honour of Zion's King, which belong to the most intelligent and devoted Christian; and in the view of which, he who sustains the trust, ought, with unceasing solicitude, to implore divine aid and guidance. Into this sacred inclosure, prejudice, passion, partiality, rashness, or unhallowed feelings of any kind, ought never to be permitted to enter. The grand, and only leading question to be asked, as a guide to duty, is, not what course will tend most effectually to build up this party, or to defeat that adversary; but what course will be most likely to promote the purity, the harmony,

and the edification of the Church of God? This is a camp in which every banner that is raised, save that of the Redeemer's glory, ought to be held in the deepest abhorrence. Here, if ever, the tribunal of *conscience* ought to be consulted with the most sacred vigilance, and the *Statue Book* of the Master's kingdom studied with unceasing diligence.

9. Another plain inference from all that has been said, is, *that it is incumbent on professing Christians to make themselves acquainted with the subject of Church government.* Is every professing Christian a member of that body called the Visible Church? Does he bear, of course, intimate and most important *relations* to that body? And has he, consequently, important *duties* to that body every day devolving upon him? Can it be necessary, then, to demonstrate, that he ought to know something of the *nature* and *structure* of this body; to understand, in some good measure, the *constitution* and *laws* under which it is not only authorized, but required to act; and the various *obligations* resting upon its officers and its members? It were an insult, my friends, to your understandings, to attempt to reason on a point so perfectly self-evident. As well might I consider it as necessary formally to demonstrate, that a member of civil society ought to understand enough of the government under which he lives, to enable him intelligently to discharge the duties of a good citizen, and to avoid violating the law of the land? I have no doubt, indeed, that a man may be a *real Christian*, who is in a great measure ignorant of the subject on which I have been addressing you this evening. But a *wise* and *intelligent* Christian he cannot be. A Christian ready to *perceive*, to *appreciate*, and to *discharge* the various duties which he owes to his Master in heaven, to his brethren of the Church,

and to his own best edification, he cannot be. And the only wonder is, that so many professing Christians who would be ashamed of ignorance on a thousand other subjects, of far less importance, are willing, on this subject, to remain profoundly ignorant. Such persons, however sincere and devout, ought to know that they are in danger every hour, when they undertake to speak or ask in reference to this subject, of giving a touch to the Ark of God, the character and effect of which, if they understood the subject, they would deprecate in their inmost souls. Many a real Christian, from ignorance of the very elementary principles of this subject, has spoken and acted in such a way as to inflict wounds on the Church of God which no subsequent regret or tears could ever heal.

10. The last inference with which I shall tax your patience, is one which, in closing, I must respectfully and affectionately beg all my hearers to remember and lay to heart. It is, *that a man may be perfectly sound on the subject of Church government, and yet be utterly defective as to the essentials of Christian character.* There has been a tendency among those who called themselves Christians, in every age, to attempt a kind of commutation with God for that which his word requires; to substitute rites and forms for the religion of the heart; to cry out with confidence, “The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are we,” while their hearts were going forth after covetousness or sensuality. Hence that fury of zeal for an ecclesiastical name and connexion on which many appear to rely as a passport to heaven. Against this fatal mistake, my beloved friends, I desire to warn you. It is a mistake not confined to any particular denomination; and a mistake as insidious and dangerous as it is prevalent. It is more than possible

that a caution, in connexion with the subject which we are now considering, may be neither unseasonable, nor useless.

Be entreated, then, my friends, to lay no stress whatever, as to the great question of your acceptance with God, on the correctness of your opinions and practice as to Church government. In the religion of Jesus Christ, as in other matters, there are *outworks*, and there are *vital parts*. Real Christianity may exist without the former, but not without the latter. With respect to the former, you may be perfectly fair and faultless; while, in respect to the latter, you may be as “whited sepulchres.” It is my earnest desire to see you well informed, intelligent, thorough Presbyterians; because I verily believe, as before stated, that this form of ecclesiastical government is more closely conformed to the Apostolic model than any other; and better fitted, by far, than any other, to promote all the great ends of government in the Church of Christ. But I beseech you to remember, that you may be *zealous Presbyterians*, and yet *not real Christians*. You may contend strenuously and ably for those outward forms which Christ has established in his Church, and retain every one of them with scrupulous exactness; and yet be strangers to that “Spirit without which we are none of his.” Let no one, then, who desires to see the face of God in peace, rest in forms of ecclesiastical order, however scriptural. They are important in their place; but they are not that “holiness without which no man shall see the Lord.” They are useful as means, but they are not the foundation of that “hope which maketh not ashamed.” While, therefore, we neglect nothing which Christ has revealed; let our first and highest attention be directed to that regeneration of the heart, by which alone we can be “made meet for the inheritance of

the saints in light;" and to that vital union by faith and love to the blessed Saviour, which alone can give us an interest in his atoning blood, and a title to eternal life. Without the sanctifying and justifying power of that blood, no man is a Christian. To this great foundation of Gospel hope, then, be entreated, every one of you, my beloved brethren, first of all, and above all, to turn your eyes and your hearts. Here rest. Here live. Here rejoice, in holy hope of "the glory that shall be revealed." And to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, our God, and our father's God, be glory forever! Amen!