

A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church

Benjamin Griffith

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1743

A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church

Benjamin Griffith

Before there can be any orderly discipline among a Christian assembly, they must be orderly constituted into a church state, according to the institution of Christ in the Gospel.

1. A visible Gospel church is made by gathering divers select persons into Jesus Christ, in a spiritual body, and relation to him as their political head, Ezekiel 34:11. 2 Thess.2:1. himself being the great Shepherd that first seeks them, and prepares them by the work of renewing grace, for such spiritual building.

2. Christ as the Mediator of the new covenant, ordereth the everlasting Gospel to be preached, and accompanying it with his holy Spirit, blesseth it to the turning of men from darkness to light, working faith and love in them, Ephesians 2:17. Acts 26:18.

3. When sinners are thus wrought upon effectually, to such a suitable number, as may be an essential Church, i.e. so many as may act properly and orderly as a church, Matt. 17:15-17. that then it will be proper for them by their mutual consent, to propose to be constituted a Church or that others seeing the expediency thereof may encourage the same, Acts 11.

4. For the accomplishment of so glorious a work, it is necessary that a day of fasting and prayer be appointed by and among such believers, and that such procure such neighboring helps as they can, especially of the ministry, Act 8:14. 1 Thess. 3:2.

5. The persons being first orderly baptized, according to the command of Christ in Matt. 28:19. and being all satisfied of the graces and qualifications of each other, and being willing in the fear of God to take the laws of Christ upon them, and do by one mutual consent give up themselves to the Lord, and to one another in the Lord, 2 Cor. 8:5. solemnly submitting to the government of Christ in his Church, and being untied, they are to be declared a Gospel Church of Jesus Christ, Phil. 2: 2,3,4. Rom 15:7. and 12:1. Acts 2:41, 42.

6. A number of believers thus united under Christ their mystical head, are become a church essential; and as such is the first and proper subject of the keys, and have power and privilege to govern themselves, and to choose out their own ministerial officers, Acts 14:23, and 6:3.

CONCERNING MINISTERS, & C

1. A church thus constituted, is not yet completed, while wanting such ministerial helps, as Christ hath appointed for its growth and well-being; and wanting elders and deacons to officiate among them. Men, they must be, that are qualified for the work; their qualifications are plainly and fully set down in Holy Scripture, I Tim. 3:2-7. Titus 4:5-10. all which must be found in them, in some good degree, and it is the duty of the church to try the persons, by the rule of the word.

Objection. But what shall a church do, in case they can have none among them fit to bear office according to the rule of the word?

Answer. (1) That to expect to have officers perfect in the highest degrees of those qualifications, were to expect apostolical and extraordinary ceased gifts in ordinary time. (2) If none among the members of a church be found fit in some measure for the ministry, a neighboring church may and ought, if possible, to supply them, Canticles 8:8. (3). Let such as they have, if they have any that seem hopeful, to be awhile upon trial; and the person that the Lord shall choose, will flourish in some good measure with Aaron's rod among the rods of the tribes.

2. A church being destitute of ministerial helps may, after mature and often deliberate consultation, and serious prayers to God, pitch upon some person or persons in particular, giving him or them a solemn invitation to the work of the ministry upon trial; and if such accept of the

church's call, let such be upon trial, to see if such fear God, make godliness their business, and be addicted to the work of the ministry, seeking to further the interest of Christ and the edification of his people in sound and wholesome doctrine; and to see if any vices or immorality appear in their advances, I. Cor. 16. Phil. 2:20, 21. Read the qualifications in I. Tim. 3. And in case a church should call a person to be their minister who is a member of some sister church, and he accept their call to be their minister, he must in the first place give himself a member with the church so calling him, that so they may choose him among themselves, as Acts 6:3.

3. After having taken all due care to choose one for the work of the ministry, they are, by and with the unanimous consent or suffrage of the church, to proceed to his ordination; which is a solemn setting apart of such a person for the sacred function, in this wise, by setting apart a day of fasting and prayer, Acts 13:2,3. the whole church being present, he is to have the hands of the presbytery of that church, or of neighboring elders called and authorized by that church, whereof such a person is a member, solemnly laid upon him, I Tim. 5:22. Titus 1:5. Acts 14:23. 1Tim. 4:14, and thus such a person is to be recommended into the work of the Lord, and to take particular care of the flock whom he is thus chosen, Acts 20:28.

4. The minister being thus put upon his work, proceeds (1.) to preach the word of God unto them, thereby to feed the flock, and therein ought to be faithful and laborious, studying to show himself a workman that needeth not to be ashamed rightly dividing the word of truth, 2 Tim. 2:15. as he is a steward of God in the mysteries of the Gospel, I Cor. 4:1, 2. and therefore ought to be a man of good understanding and experience, being sound in the faith, not a novice, or a double-minded, unstable man, nor such as is light spirited or of a shallow understanding, but one that is learned in the mysteries of the kingdom, because he is to feed the people with knowledge and understanding, Jer. 3:15. He must be faithful in declaring the whole counsel of

God, Acts 20:20. He is to instruct them in all practical godliness laying before them their manifold duties, and to urge them upon their consciences, Titus 2:1-15. I Tim. 4:6. (2.) He must watch over them, as one that must give an account to God, Heb. 13:17. Such must have an eye upon every member to see how they behave in the house of God, where the presence of the Lord is more eminently, and where also the angels do always attend; and also their behavior in the families they belong to, and their conversation abroad; according to their capacities, they are not to sleep under their charge. (3.) He is to visit his flock to know their state, in order to minister suitable doctrinal relief unto them, and that he may know what disorders there may be among them, that the unruly may be reproved, Prov. 27:23, 1 Thess. 5:14, 15. (4.) He is to administer all the ordinances of Christ, amongst them: as Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, and herein he must be careful to follow the primitive pattern, thereby to hold forth the great end, wherefore they were ordained. (5.) He must be instant with God, in his prayers for and with them, as an opportunity may serve. (6.) He must show them a good example in all respects, in conversation, sobriety, charity, faith and purity, I Tim. 4:12. behaving himself impartial unto all, not preferring the rich before the poor, nor lording it over God's heritage, nor assume greater power than God hath given him, James 2:4. 1 Timothy 5:21, 1 Peter 5:3-5.

OF RULING ELDERS

Ruling Elders are such persons as are endued with gifts to assist the pastor or teacher in the government of the church; it was as a statue in Israel, Exo. 18. Deut. 1:9-13. The works of teaching and ruling belong both to the pastor; but in case he be unable; or the work of ruling belong both to the pastor; but in case he be unable; or the work of ruling too great for him, God hath provided such for his assistance, and they are called ruling elders, I Tim. 5:17, helps, I Cor. 12:28. governments, or he that ruleth, Rom. 12:8. They are qualified for, and called unto, one

part of the work: and experience teacheth us the use and benefit of such rulers in the church, in easing the pastor or teacher, and keeping up the honor of the ministry. Their qualifications are such as are requisite to rule, as knowledge, judgment, prudence, &c.; and as to the manner of their ordination, it is like ordination unto other offices in the church, with fasting and prayer, with imposition of hands. Their office only relateth to rule and order, in the church of God, and doth not include teaching; yet if the church findeth they have gifts and abilities to be useful in teaching, they may be put upon trial, and if approved, they may be called and solemnly set apart by ordination, it being wholly a distinct office from the former, which was only to rule well, and not to labor in word and doctrine.

OF DEACONS

Deacons are men called forth by the church, to serve in the outward concerns thereof whose office is to serve tables, Acts 6:2-7. They are to be instructed with the stock of the church, out of which stock they are to assist the poor members of the church, and to provide bread and wine for the Lord's table, and also to have regard to the minister's table; and moreover they should see that all the members of the church do contribute towards the proper uses of the church, that there from all necessary occasions may be supplied, as God hath given them, they to the poor, so that none be neglected, I. Cor. 16:2; by the faithful discharge of which office they shall purchase to themselves a good degree and great boldness in the faith, I. Tim. 3:13. The qualifications of these officers are laid down, I Timothy 3:8-13. Acts 6:2-8.

OF THE ADMISSION OF CHURCH MEMBERS

The Lord Jesus Christ hath committed the use and power of the keys, in matters of government, to every visible congregational church, to be used, according to the rules and directions that he hath given in his word, in his name, and to his glory. The keys are the power of Christ, which he

hath given to every particular congregation, to open and shut itself by; and to do all things in order to the great things proposed, *viz.* his glory and his people's spiritual benefit, in peace and purity, Isa. 9:7. and 22:22. Rev. 3:7. Heb. 3:6. Ephe. 2:19-22. Matt. 16:19. John 20:23.

By virtue of the charter and the power aforesaid, which Christ hath given to his church, his spiritual corporation, they are enabled to receive members in, and to exclude unworthy members as occasion may require, as may appear by divers examples, Rom. 14:1. Acts 2:41. 1 Cor. 5:4,5. Matt. 18:18. 2 Thess. 2:6, 14.

In this case, a church hath to do, either with non-members, or those that are members of other churches; as to non-members proposing for admission into the church, the pastor, teacher, and elders of the church are to be acquainted therewith, and the body of the church also, in order that they may know the intent of such person or persons. A convenient meeting is necessary. When the church is come together, and the person proposing being present, after prayer to God for direction, the minister or pastor of the church is to put several questions to the person proposing, (1.) Concerning the ground and reason of his hope. 1 Pet. 3:15. wherein is to be inquired, what experience he hath of the manifold graces of the holy Spirit, working in him repentance from dead works, as Acts 2:38. Heb. 6:2. and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom alone is salvation hoped for, Acts 20:21. Philemon 5.; for without there be some grounds, in the judgment of charity, that such a one is a new creature, the door of admission is not to be opened, for that would be abusing the privileges of the house of God. Therefore all due and regular care is to be taken, Psalm 65:16. Acts 9:27.

Secondly. What competency of knowledge, in the principal doctrines of faith and order, such hath acquired, 1 Tim. 2:4-6, or whether such person be well instructed in the knowledge of God, in his glorious attributes, in the doctrine of the Trinity, or one God in three persons: the

person, natures and offices of Christ; the nature of the law; of original sin; of the pollution of man, by reason of sin, and lost and undone estate thereby, and of his being a child of wrath by nature; of the nature of the redemption wrought by Christ, his sufficiency to satisfy divine justice; of the reconciliation of sinners to God, by the death of his Son; of our sins being imputed to Christ, and his righteousness imputed to us for justification, being received by faith alone; of the resurrection of Christ's body, and his ascension into heaven, and of his coming thence the second time, to judge the quick and the dead; and of the resurrection of the dead bodies of men; and of the eternal judgment; and of such proposing person's resolution to persevere in the profession of these truths unto the end. Such things are needful to be inquired into by reason that too many in our day do build their conversion upon their convictions, and some general notions of the Christian religion, when indeed they are utter strangers unto, and very ignorant of the great mysteries of the Gospel. Yet great care is to be taken that the weak be not discouraged, for the smoking flax is not to be quenched, nor the bruised reed to be broken, but such ignorant persons are to be taught by gentle instructions, and means ought to be used for their furtherance in knowledge of divine truths, Matt. 28:19. and where there are the beginnings of true and saving grace in the heart, such will, with a spiritual appetite, receive the sincere milk of the word, that they may grow thereby, 1 Peter 2:2. and a church ought to be careful not to reject those, whom they judge to have the least degree of the work of saving grace wrought in them, Romans 14:1.

Thirdly. Inquiry must be made whether such a person's life and conversation is answerable to such a profession, that he be likely to adorn the Gospel with a holy conversation, Titus 2:11-15. 3:8. this regular carefulness is an indispensable duty of all regular churches, to use in the admission of members; and though all due care be used, yet some unsound and rotten professors will creep in unawares, and have crept into the purest churches, Jude 4. 1 John 2:19.

Acts 5. Acts 20;29, 30. Gal. 2:4. and the fallibility of churches in this matter, is not to be urged, as an argument or ground to neglect the duty incumbent on the churches, according to the rule of the word.

And after such examination, the question is to be put to the church, whether they are all satisfied with the party's confession and conversation; and if the answer be in the affirmative, then the pastor or minister is to proceed, to ask the party proposing, if he be willingly resolved, as God shall give ability, to walk in a professed subjection to the commands and institutions of Christ revealed in the Gospel, and to give himself a member of that church in particular, Rom. 12:1. 15: 7,8,9. 2 Cor. 8:5. and to continue in the communion, faith, and order thereof, according to the gospel rules and directions; and after the person is baptized according to the institution and command of Christ, and come under the imposition of the hands of the elders of the church, according to the practice of the apostles, Acts 8:14-17. Heb. 6:2. the pastor, minister, or elders, as presiding in the acts of the church's power, do receive such a one into the communion and fellowship of that church in particular. But if the church is not satisfied with the person's confession or conversation, it is proper, if the objections be of any weight, to defer the party's admission until a more ample satisfaction can be given, that all, if possible, may receive such with freedom in love and so to discharge all gospel duties towards him, as may promote his edification in the faith, and his increase in grace, 2 Cor. 1:24. 10:8.

And concerning those that are members of sister churches, their admission is either transient or occasional admission; when any person is dismissed wholly from one church, and transmitted or recommended to another church of the same faith, order and practice. (1.) Such as are and continue members of other regular churches, may, where they are well known, be admitted into transient communion, without a letter of recommendation from the church they

belong unto: but from those a church hath no knowledge of, a testimonial letter is necessary, that a church may not be imposed on by any loose or disorderly persons. (2.) Those whose residence is removed, or place of abode is more convenient to be with another congregation than that of which they are members, are, upon their request made to the church whereof such are members, to be dismissed, and to have a letter from that church they are members of, subscribed by the officers and members, and directed to the church that the person is dismissed unto; whereby the party is discharged from his or her original relation of particular membership to that church, and is transferred to the constant communion, watch and care of the other church: such persons are to be received upon their proposal, according to the credentials they bring; except the church they apply unto have a special reason to defer or refuse.

As it appears to have been the practice of believers, in the primitive times, to give themselves members of particular churches, Acts 2:41. 5:13, 14. it appears also that, in the apostles' days, there were many distinct and distant particular churches, as 1 Cor. 1:2. Gal. 1:2. 1 Cor. 16:1. Philip. 1:1. which churches are several corporations of men professing repentance from dead works, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and incorporated by mutual consent, as before mentioned, whose end is to glorify God by obedience to his revealed will, and to their own edification in the faith, and the good of others; so it is the duty of believers to give themselves in particular membership, in such a particular church as shall appear by the word of God to be orthodox in the fundamental articles of the Christian religion, and to practice according to the mind of Christ declared in the New Testament, in all Gospel institutions and worship.

From which considerations, it appears the reasonable duty of every believer to give himself a member to such an orderly church as is most conveniently situated, that is, meeting

nighest the place of his or her residence, for which there are these apparent reasons. (1.) For men to give themselves members of a distant church, when another of the same faith and gospel order is nigher, is for such a person to put himself under a necessity of neglecting the ordinary appointed meetings of that church, whereof he is a member, and whereof the particular charge is given, Heb. 10:25. that he might attend and wait in the use of God's appointed means, for his edification by the ministry of that church. (2.) Such puts himself under a willful necessity to neglect his duty of care over, and constant communion with his fellow members, and willfully deprives himself of their care over him, advice, Christian conversing, and brotherly loving instructions and counsels, that by the blessing of God might increase his knowledge, grace and comfort. (3.) Such cannot be assistant to the church in discipline, contribution, and the like duties, nor cannot be taken care of, and be assisted, without much unnecessary trouble, by the church, in case of need. (4.) Such a practice tends directly to the confusion of churches, and all church order, and suits well with the humor of noisy, lifeless, loose, or covetous niggardly persons. (5.) It is a way that the church cannot find what useful talents such persons have to the benefit of the body of the church. (6.) It is casting great contempt upon the nearer church, in her ministry and order, and the like.

And here it is further to be considered, that as it is expedient for persons to give themselves members of such regular churches, with which they may keep the most intimate fellowship and communion in all the parts of religious worship; so it is highly reasonable that they, that are members of such regular churches, where the word is purely preached, the ordinances of the Gospel duly administered, and gospel discipline is impartially practiced, should continue their membership with such church; although there be weakness, imperfection and frailty, in the particular practical acts thereof; which, while the affairs of the church are managed

by men, even their holy things will have iniquity as of old, Exodus 28:38. It is therefore unreasonable to dismiss any member, from a church that is near to any one's residence, to a church more remote, upon disgust taken at the management of some particular case, wherewith such is not well pleased, and for such cause demands dismissal; and it is unreasonable also to grant a dismissal to such a member, who should demand a dismissal in a peremptory manner, without giving a reason for such a demand; in either of which cases, such a dismissal is not to be granted. (1.) Because by so doing the greatest confusion would be introduced; for one member would thus be dismissed to one distant church, and another distant church, and the other churches doing the like, it can end in nothing less than the confusion of every church. (2.) The same liberty that members have, pastors, ministers, ruling elders, and deacons have also, whereby any church may dismiss her members until she is unable to maintain worship and communion; for those that reside near, are become members of a remote body, and so unconcerned; and those that are members live remote and so under an impossibility to occupy their place. (3.) This, in the tendency of it, is to remove the balance of churches, which is to consist of such members as can, with the utmost conveniency, meet together in one place, for both worship and government, 1 Cor. 11:20. 14:33. (4.) This hath a tendency to alter the constitution of particular churches, from being congregational corporations, into the national or universal notion of the church; which universal church we believe to be the mystical body of Jesus Christ, which as such is not the seat of instituted worship and ordinances. Also, it is not reasonable to dismiss to the world at large, nor to dismiss a member to a church, with which the church dismissing cannot hold communion.

OF THE DUTIES OF CHURCH MEMBERS

The members of churches owe all their duties in a way of obedience to the will of God revealed in his word; and their duties are to be performed in love to our Lord Jesus Christ, John 14:15. who is the great Prophet, Priest and King of his Church, which he hath purchased with his own blood, Acts 20:28. Rev. 1:5. 2 Cor. 5:15. unto whom all power in heaven and earth is given, Matt. 28:18 and is therefore our Lord and Lawgiver, Isaiah 33:22. given, Matt. 28:18 and is therefore our Lord and Lawgiver, Isaiah 33:22. who alone is head of his church, Ephe. 1:22. his person is to be honored and all his commands are to be observed Heb. 1:2. John 5:23. all worship is to be ascribed unto him, as God blessed forever, Romans 9:5. all church members, therefore, are under the strictest obligations to do and observe whatsoever Christ enjoineeth on them, as mutual duties towards one another.

The officers of the church, whom Christ hath appointed, are to be respected. (1.) the deacons of the church, though they officiate but in the outward concerns of the church, as in the section about deacons is noted, if they are faithful, do purchase unto themselves a good degree, 1 Tim. 3:13. are therefore to be respected, seeing they are fitted of God, and called by the church to go before the church, or to preside in acts of government and rule, 1 Tim. 5:17. (3.) Ministers, who are the stewards of the mysteries of the Gospel, are in an eminent manner to be regarded, as being the ambassadors of peace, 2 Cor. 5:20. though they are not to hunt for it, as the Pharisees of old, Matt. 23:5, 6, 7. The duties of church members towards their elders, teachers, ministers and pastors, may be included in their (1.) praying for them, that God would open a door of utterance unto them, to unfold the mysteries, Ephe. 6:18, 19, 20. (2.) To obey them in the Lord, in whatsoever they admonish them, according to the word of God, Heb. 13:17, 22. (3.) In following their example and footsteps, as far as warranted by the word, 1 Cor. 4:16. 11: 1. Phil. 3:17. Heb. 13:7. (4.) In standing by them, in all their trials and afflictions, and in defending them

in all good causes, as far as in them lies; in 2 Tim. 1:15. those of Asia are blamed, for turning away, or not standing by the apostle. (5.) In not exposing their persons for their infirmities, as far as may be considering the prosperity of the Gospel much depends on their good report, Acts 23:5. (6.) In contributing towards their maintenance, that they may attend wholly on teaching and give themselves to the ministry of the word, and to prayer, Acts 6:4. the reason thereof is evident by a threefold law. (1.) The law of nature, from whence the apostle argues, 1. Cor. 9:7-11. (2.) The Levitical law, 1 Cor. 9:13. (3.) The Gospel enjoineth and requireth the same, Gal. 6:6 1 Cor. 9:14. Let these above cited places of Scripture be considered with many others of like importance, and the nature and tendency of the work of the ministry be well weighed, and it will be clear that it is a duty required of God himself; and that not in a way of alms, as to the poor, which is another standing ordinance of Christ, but it is to be performed in love to Christ, and obedience to his laws, in order to support and carry the interest of the Gospel. Yet this is not to be given to any one that may pretend to be a minister, or thrust himself upon a church, or to such as run without a mission for filthy lure's sake; but churches ought to take a special care who to call forth to the work of the ministry, according to the rule of instruction given by inspiration of God, be they learned or unlearned as to human learning, be they rich or poor as to worldly wealth.

The liberality of the people, if they be able, should surmount the necessity of the minister, so as that he may exercise those acts of love and hospitality, as is required of such, that therein he may be exemplary in good works, &c. Moreover, it is a duty on all those that attend on their ministry, to assist herein, Gal. 6:6. and as people do sow, so shall they reap, Gal. 6:7. and 8. vide *Confession of Faith*, 27,§. When people neglect their duty towards their ministers, such ministers must of necessity neglect their studies, and betake to other secular, employments to

support themselves and families, or be worse than infidels; then such people must be great spiritual losers in their edification. Yet when and where a church is not able to raise a comfortable maintenance for to support their minister, there it is not only lawful, but the duty of such ministers to labor with their hands; for to leave such a congregation destitute, to languish without the ministry, would be very uncharitable, and smell very much of filthy lucre; and to expect from a people, more than they are able, would be oppression or extortion.

OF THE MANIFOLD DUTIES OF CHRISTIANS, ESPECIALLY TO THE HOUSEHOLD OF FAITH

Some of them are these. (1.) Love unfeigned and without dissimulation, for all their things ought to be done in love, John 13:34, 35. Rom. 12:9,10. 13:8,9,10. (2.) To labor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, Ephe. 4:3. (3.) Endeavor for the edification and spiritual benefit of the whole body, that they all may grow up to be a holy temple in and for the Lord, 1 Cor. 14: 12, 26. Ephe. 4:12. 29. 2:21, 22. (4.) That they all watch over one another for good, Philip. 2:3,4. (5.) That they do pray with and for one another, James 5:16. (6.) That they neglect not the assembling of themselves together, for the celebrating of divine worship, and so promote one another's spiritual benefit, Heb. 10:25. Acts 2:42. (7.) That they use all means to keep the house of God in due order and cleanness walking inoffensive towards one another, and all others, with conscientious diligence, and so unanimously to contend for the faith and truth once delivered to the saints, in the purity thereof, according to the holy scripture, Psalm 93:5. Zech. 14:21. 1 Cor. 14:33, 40. 11:2.

OF CHURCH SENSURES

Having spoken of the gathering together of a particular gospel church, and its officers, and the rules whereby we are able to be guided in choosing and ordaining of them, and of the admission

of members, &c. it is meet to give a short view of a church's duties and authority, in respect of censures upon offenders.

First, of Admonition

(1.) Admonition is a holy, tender, and wise endeavor, to convince a brother, that hath offended in matte of fact, or else is fallen into a way, wherein to continue is like to be prejudicial to the party himself, or some others; where the matter, whatever it be, and the sinfulness thereof, with the aggravating circumstances attending it, is to be charged on his conscience, in the sight of God, with due application of the word of God, which concerns his condition: thereby leading him to his duty and true reformation. (2.) Admonition is private by one or more of the brethren, or more public by the whole church. (1.) When one brother trespasses against another, the offended brother is not to divulge the offence, but to go in a gospel way to the offender, and to use his endeavor to reclaim his brother; and if he repents, the offended brother ought to forgive him, Matt. 18:15. Luke 17:3. But if the offending brother will not hear, then the offended brother ought to take two or three other brethren, and they such as may be the most likely to gain upon the offender; but if this admonition also takes no effect, it is to be brought before the church Matt. 18:16,17. (2.) The church, when matters come thus before them, shall admonish and endeavor to reclaim the offender, in the spirit of meekness; and if the brother that offended continues obstinate and impenitent, the church is directed to exclude him, Matthew 18:17.

(1.) From whence it follows every church member has somewhat to do in his place, Heb. 12:15. (2.) In case of private offenses it is preposterous to publish them, or acquaint the church or the elders thereof therewith, before the two lower degrees of admonition are duly accomplished, and the offender has neglected to hear. (3.) That when matters are thus regularly brought to the church, then private proceedings may cease. (4.) That when private offences are brought to the

church without such proper private procedure, that the church may and ought to refuse it, as not coming according to gospel rule aforesaid, in Matt. 18. (5) But when those things that begin in private are thus regularly brought into the church, they must be received and adjudged according to the said rule, Matt. 18. So that it may and doth oftentimes fall out, that those things that begin with private admonition, do end in public excommunication.

Secondly, of Suspension.

(1.) A suspension may be, when the church is informed that a member hath acted amiss, either in matters of faith or practice, and not having satisfactory proof whether the information is true or false, and the case requiring time to inquire therein, it is expedient to suspend such a person from communion at the Lord's table, until the elders of the church can make suitable inquiry; as might be signified by the law in the case of leprosy, Lev. 13th and 14th chapters.

(2.) Suspension is rather to be looked upon to be, when a church doth debar a member from communion for some irregularity that he may be guilty of, which yet doth not amount so high as to be ripe for the great sentence of excommunication; but that the person, for such irregularity, ought to be debarred of the privilege of special communion and exercise of office, in order to his humiliation, 2 Thess. 3:6,7,10,11,14,15. Such is not to be accounted as an enemy, but to be exhorted as a brother in union, though not in communion: but if such a one remain impenitent and incorrigible, the church, after due waiting for his reformation, is to proceed to excommunication, Matt. 18:17. for that would be a not hearing the church in the highest degree.

Thirdly, of Excommunication

Excommunication is a judicial act or censure of the church, upon an offender, by the authority of Jesus Christ, and by his direction, delivered to his church by himself or his apostles, in the New

Testament, which a gospel church ought to put in practice, when matters of fact require, according to Gospel rule; as first, when a member, after all due admonition, continues obstinate, and will hear no reproof, Matt. 18:17. *Secondly*, when a member hath committed a gross sin, which is directly against the moral law, and being notorious and scandalous, and proved beyond dispute, 1 Cor. 5:4, 5. 1 Tim. 5:24. 2 Cor. 10:6, then a church is immediately to proceed unto censure, notwithstanding any present signs of conviction or remorse, for the necessary vindication of the glory of God, the vindication of the church also, and their holy profession: and to manifest their just indignation and abhorrence against such wickedness, 1 Cor. 5:1-13. *Thirdly*, when a member is found to be erroneous, defective, or heretical in some fundamental point, or to swerve from the right faith, in the principles of the Christian religion, 1 Timothy 1: 19, 20.

The manner of proceeding unto this great and awful instituted ordinance, is: the church being gathered together, the offender also having notice to come to make his answer and defense (if he comes not, he aggravates his offense by despising the authority of Christ in his church) the body of the church is to have knowledge of the offender's crime fully, and the full proof thereof as of plain matter of fact; and after mature deliberate consideration, and consulting the rules of direction given in the word of God, whether the offender be present or absent, the minister or elder puts the question to the whole church, whether they judge the person guilty of such crime now proved upon him is worthy of the censure of the church for the same? To which the members in general give their judgment; which, if it be in the affirmative then the judgment of the members in general being had, or the majority of them, the pastor, minister, or elder, sums up the sentence of the church, opens the nature of the crime, with the suitableness of the censure, according to Gospel rule; and having thus proceeded, a proper time is fixed to put the sentence in

execution, at which time the pastor, minister or elder of the church, as his place and duty requires, is to lay open the heinousness of such sin, with all the aggravating circumstances thereof, and showing what an abominable scandal such an offender is become to religion, what dishonor it is to God, &c, applying the particular places of Scripture that are proper to the case, in order to charge the offence home upon the conscience of the offender if present, that others also may fear; showing also the awful nature of this great censure, and the main end thereof, for the salvation and not the destruction of the soul, and with much solemnity in the whole society, calling upon God for his gracious presence, and his blessing upon this his sacred ordinance; that the great end thereof may be obtained; still expressing the deep sense the church hath of the fall of this brother, with the great humiliation of the church, and great sorrow for, and detestation of the sin committed. The said pastor, minister, or elder, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, in the presence of the congregation, and by and with the consent and according to the judicial sentence of the church, cuts off, and secludes such an offender by name, from the union and communion of the church, because of his offences: so that such a person is not thenceforth to be looked on, deemed or accounted as a brother or member of such a church, until God shall restore him again by repentance.

Which exclusion carries in it the full sense of our Lord's words, Matt. 18:17. *Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican;* or of the apostle, 1 Cor. 5:5. *to deliver such a one to Satan;* which is an authoritative putting of such a person out of the communion of the church, the kingdom of heaven, into the world, the kingdom of Satan, the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience, in order to his being humbled and broken under a sight and sense of his sins, which is meant by the destruction of the flesh, and to the end that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

Amongst the many disorders which church members may be guilty of, and for the obstinate continuance therein, a church may and ought to use the power that Christ hath given to exclude them from her communion, that is one, which is when a member doth seclude himself, and that not in any regular way, but contrary to all rule and order; for when a church member, by reason of some offence he hath taken at the church, or some of the members thereof, and hath not done his duty according to the rule of the word, or else is a dying away in religion, by one means or another, as by the love of the world, change of condition in marriage, or not having his expected preferment in the church, or he like, doth, as it were excommunicate himself, the church according to their duty, ought to use their endeavors to reclaim such; which endeavors, if they prove fruitless, and the party obstinate, the church ought not to acquiesce in his irregular departure from them, as if all their bonds of relation and duty were over, and no more was to be done, seeing the party has usurped the power of the keys to himself: the church, therefore, must maintain the power of the keys to himself: the church, therefore, must maintain the power that Christ hath committed unto it, though it cannot hinder the inordinate and unruly passions of such a one, if God leaves him to it. He will run away from the church rending himself schismatically off, breaking through all order and covenant obligations, in opposition to brotherly endeavors to hinder him, and to stay him in his place; the church is to proceed judicially to turn the key upon such a sinful, disorderly departure; and publicly declare, that as such a one by name hath been guilty of such a thing, naming his disorders, he is no longer in their communion, nor under their watch and care, &c. and that such a person is not to return to their communion until he hath given satisfaction to the church, Rom. 16:17. Such a separation or departure is very sinful, for these and the like reasons. (1.) Because the church is a corporation privileged with laws and rules for admittance and dimittance, which ought to be observed, Matt. 18. Rom. 12: 4,5. (2.) Such a

departure is rude and indecent, therefore dishonorable, 1 Cor. 14:40. (3.) Because, if members may take this liberty, all the offices of the church, ministers, ruling elders and deacons may take the same liberty, which would soon unchurch any church, or at least be destructive to its beauty, comfort and edification, John 6:67. (4.) All members do covenant the contrary, Isa. 44:5. and therefore it is a breach of covenant, which is a black character, 2 Tim. 3:3. (5.) It destroys totally the relation between elders and people, which God hath ordained, Matt. 9:36. (6.) It is a usurping of the keys, or rather stealing of them, Amos 6:13. (7.) It is schism: if there is such a thing in the world, it is of particular churches, 1 Cor. 11:18. 12:25. (8.) It is high contempt of Christ in the government of his church, Jude 18, 19, 2 Peter 2:10, 11. (9.) It is to break the staff of beauty (*covenant*) and of bands and brotherhood too, Zechariah 11: 10. 14. (10.) It argues either some great undiscovered guilt lying on the party, or some by-ends in his first seeking admission into such a church. All which put together, it declares the great unity of a congregational gospel church, and the sinfulness of such disorderly persons in breaking off without a just cause: but if any church becomes heretical in principles, or idolatrous in worship, or immoral in life, it is lawful for persons, after they have discharged their conscience and duty in reproof and bearing witness against such gross defections, to depart, 2 Cor. 6:17,18.

Other disorders and causes of discords in churches are these, and many of the like: (1.) When members of churches, by their ignorance of the rules of discipline and right government of the church of Christ do not act according to their duty; particularly when that rule, Matt. 18:15, 16. is not observed; and that is, either (1.) When offended members instead of going to the offender to tell him his fault, will be divulging it disorderly to others, whether members or non-members. (2.) When offended members instead of acting according to the said rule, do conceal the matter from the offender and everybody else, lest they should be looked upon as contentious

persons: and thereby they suffer sin upon their brother, and are become guilty of other men's sins, and thereby they suffer the name of God, their holy profession, and the church, to lie under a reproach by their neglect; either of which ways is very sinful, as being contrary to the express rule given by our Lord Jesus Christ; and such ought, as being thereby become offenders themselves, to be in a gospel way dealt with.

(2.) When an elder or a church do know that some of the members are immoral and scandalous in life, or heretical in matters of faith and judgment, and yet bear with them, or connive at them.

(3.) When members of churches take liberty to go to hear at other places, when the church is assembled to worship God, which is directly contrary to Hebrews 10:25, and is no less than breaking covenant with the church they belong unto, and may soon dissolve and unchurch any particular church; for, by the same rule that one member takes such liberty, another may, yea, all the members may, until their assembling entirely cease. And, moreover, it is casting great contempt on the ministry of such a church, and may cause other to be disaffected to the doctrine taught in such, though sound and orthodox. Yet no restraint ought to be laid on members going to hear at other places where sound doctrine is taught, at other times.

(4.) When members take liberty to go to hear men that are corrupt in doctrine, and so suck in some unsound notions of religion, and endeavor to corrupt others with what they have imbibed themselves. And, alas! How many in our unhappy days are corrupted with *Arminianism*, *Socinianism*, and what not? Such cause trouble and great disorders.

(5.) Another disorder that may cause discord, is, when members are received without the general and unanimous consent of the church; or when any are admitted, with whose confession,

or life and conversation, the generality of the members are not satisfied: or when elders and ministers, or leaders of the church, are remiss and careless in reception of members.

(6.) When a church shall receive a charge against a member, it being an offence given by one brother to another brother, before an orderly procedure has been made by the offended brother, according to the rule, Matthew 18.

(7.) When judgment passes with partiality, or some are connived at out of favor or affection, and others censured out of envy without due conviction. Levi was not to know his father, mother or children in judgment, Deuteronomy 33:9.

(8.) When the charges of a church are not equally borne by the members according to their several abilities, but some are burthened when others do little or nothing.

(9.) When accusations are received against an elder contrary to the rule, 1 Timothy 5:16, which requires two or three witnesses as to matter of fact.

(10.) When any member shall divulge to persons not of the congregation, nor concerned in those matters, what is done in the church meetings: the church in this respect, as well as in others, is to be a garden enclosed, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed, Canticles 4:12. This often occasions great grief and trouble, and therefore such disorderly persons should be detected. Is it not a shame to any to divulge the secrets of a family? But far greater shame do such persons expose themselves unto.

(11.) When days of prayer, fasting or thanksgiving, or days of discipline appointed by the church, are not carefully observed and kept.

In all these, and many other things of like nature, the members of particular churches ought to give all diligence to walk worthy of their vocation, and according to the rule and

direction of the word of God, that disorders may be prevented, and that church communion may be maintained in peace and purity, to the edifying of the body of the church of Christ in love.

OF THE COMMUNION OF CHURCHES

Every particular congregational church incorporated by and according to the institution of Christ in the Gospel, and duly organized according to the pattern of the primitive churches, hath sufficient power from Christ to call and ordain its own officers; so that no man, or set of men, have authority to choose officers for them, or impose any officers on them, without their previous knowledge and voluntary consent, Acts 6:3. Deacons are to be chosen by the multitude, Acts 14:23. Elders were ordained in every church by election or suffrage of the church; and every particular church, as such, assembled with her proper elders, hath sufficient power to receive members, Acts 2:41. Romans 14:7. And in the exercise of any acts of discipline, such a church being convened with her own officers or elders in the name of Christ, may act according to gospel rule in any case, even to excommunicate such members as are found to be obstinate in disorders, or heretical in principles, after due admonition, or such as are guilty of gross and scandalous immoralities in conversation, &c. independent on any other church power superior to itself, or higher judicatory lodged in any man or any set of men, by any institution of Christ: and therefore, the elders of a church, meeting in the absence of the members, or convened with the elders of other churches, are not intrusted with a power to act for a church in admission of members, ordination, or censures, &c. and it is the duty of such a church to admonish any of her members or officers, their teacher or pastor, Colossians 4:17. and exclude any too, when their crimes require, according to the rule of the Gospel.

And such particular congregational churches, constituted and organized according to the mind of Christ revealed in the New Testament, are all equal in power and dignity, and we read of

no disparity between them, or subordination among them, that should make a difference between the acts of their mutual communion, so as the acts of one church should be acts of authority, and the acts of others should be acts of obedience or subjection, although they may vastly differ in gifts, abilities and usefulness.

Such particular distinct churches, agreeing in gospel doctrine and practice, may and ought to maintain communion together in many duties, which may tend to the mutual benefit and edification of the whole: and thereby one church that hath plenty of gifts, may and ought, if possible, to supply another that lacketh, Canticles 8:8. They may have mutual giving and receiving, Philippians 4:15. and mutual translation, recommendation or dismissal of members from one church to another, as occasion may require. It is to be noted that persons called to office are not to be dismissed as officers but as members; though another church may call such to the same office again.

By virtue also of such communion, the members of one such church may, where they are known, occasionally partake at the Lord's table with a sister church. Yet notwithstanding such communion of churches, by voluntary consent and confederation, the officers of one particular church, may not act as officers in another church, in any act of government, without a particular call thereunto from the other church where they occasionally come.

It is expedient that particular churches constituted in the way and manner, and for the ends declared in the former part of this narrative, when they are planted by the providence of God, so as they may have opportunity and advantage so to do, should, by their mutual agreement, appoint proper times and places, to meet by their respective messengers or delegates, to consider of such things as may be for the common benefit of all such churches, for their peace,

prosperity, and mutual edification, and what may be for the furtherance of the Gospel, and the interest of Christ in the world.

And forasmuch as it falls out many times that particular churches have to do with doubtful and difficult matters, or differences in point of doctrine or administration, like the church of Antioch of old, wherein either of the churches in general are concerned, or any one church in their peace, union or edification; or any member or members of a church are injured, in or by any proceeding in censures not agreeable to gospel rule and order; it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, should meet by their messengers and delegates to consider of and to give advice in or about such matters in difference; and their sentiments to be reported to all the churches concerned; and such messengers and delegates convened in the name of Christ, by the voluntary consent of the several churches in such mutual communion, may declare and determine of the mind of the Holy Ghost revealed in Scripture, concerning things in difference; and may decree the observation of things that are true and necessary, because revealed and appointed in the Scripture. And the churches will do well to receive, own and observe such determinations, on the evidence and authority of the mind of the Holy Ghost in them, as in Acts 15:29. Yet such delegates thus assembled, are not intrusted or armed with any coercive power, or any superior jurisdiction over the churches concerned, so as to impose their determinations on them or their officers, under the penalty of excommunication, or the like.—See the *Confession*, Chap. 26. § 14, 15. See also Dr. Owen *On the Nature of the Gospel Church*, Chap. 11, and Dr. Goodwin, Vol. IV. Chap. 8,9,10. &c. *Of the Government of the Churches of Christ*.