
THE BLUE BANNER

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For Christ's Crown & Covenant

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In this Issue.

Letters On Frequent Communion by John M. Mason

By Christopher Coldwell

 *he Blue Banner* staff would like to apologize for the tardiness of our newsletters this year. We have been pressed more than usual with other duties and projects, and the pieces we have chosen to run in 2002 require more attention as well. Also, Dr. Bacon is in Myanmar again this year for the month of August. We hope to return to John Owen's *Precursory Considerations of Justification* (see v11#1) in future issues (D.V.). In the meantime we have chosen to run in this issue the full text of John M. Mason's *Letters on Frequent Communion*.

More frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper has been a concern in the Presbyterian churches from the beginning of the First Reformation in Scotland. Dr. Mason's position is that of the Westminster Assembly expressed in their *Directory for the Public Worship of God* (see Dr. Bacon's article "The Westminster Standards and the Frequency of the Lord's Supper" in *Blue Banner* v9#1-3): "The Communion, or Supper of the Lord, is frequently to be celebrated; but how often, may be considered and determined by the ministers, and other church-governors of each congregation, as they shall find most convenient for the comfort and edification of the people committed to their charge."

It would appear that since the time of the Westminster Assembly, rather than increasing in frequency, as was their desire, the observance of the Lord's Supper had become less frequent in Presbyterian churches. By the end of the eighteenth century in this country, several customs had so attached themselves to Communion observance as to hinder its frequent and simple celebration. In the denomination to which Mason belonged it was customary to celebrate it no more than once, or possibly twice a year. In his *Letters*, he reasons persuasively against these customs and the arguments put forth defending them. He maintains well the original position of the Westminster Assembly.

We trust *Blue Banner* readers will profit from John Mason's *Letters*, even if infrequency of Communion may not be as serious a problem in our day. Though they are now over two hundred years old, his arguments remain relevant whenever or wherever customs unnecessarily hinder the frequent and unencumbered celebration of the Supper of our Lord. ❀



Letters on Frequent Communion.

“Letters on Frequent Communion: Addressed Originally to the Members of the Associate-Reformed Church in North America, 1798.” *The Complete Works of John M. Mason, D. D. in Four Volumes, edited by his son, Ebenezer Mason* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1849) 1.373-500.

By John M. Mason

LETTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Christian Brethren,



e should greatly undervalue our spiritual mercies, were we insensible that “the lines have fallen unto us in pleasant places; yea, that we have a goodly heritage.” The unadulterated faith once delivered to the saints; that religious polity which Christ has instituted for his Church; and a worship, on the whole, scriptural; are benefits which God bestowed on our fathers, and which by his grace they have transmitted unto us. To insure our peaceful enjoyment of them they underwent no ordinary trials. It is the fruit of their labors, their tears, and their blood, which merit from their posterity an everlasting remembrance.

But, brethren, we should prove ourselves unworthy of such an ancestry, if, under the pretext of prizing *their* attainments, we become indifferent about our own; if we lose their spirit while we boast of their names: much more, if, falling short of their excellence, we do not endeavor to regain and surpass it. Magnanimous men! they not only cherished their light, but applied it to expose delusion, and to explore the paths of forgotten truth. Far from being satisfied with previous reformation, they inquired if any corruption had been retained, any error unnoticed, any duty overlooked; and exerted themselves to supply the defect, both by condemning what was wrong and by performing what was right. No favorite prepossessions, no inveterate habits, either appalled their courage or paralyzed their efforts. According to their knowledge they cheerfully sacrificed whatever is contrary to the simple and spiritual ordinations of their Lord. Accompanied herein with his blessing, they were eminently successful, and have left us an example, which it is our glory to imitate. And

we are to imitate it by comparing with the scriptural pattern that branch of the church to which we belong, that we may discover whether there yet remains aught which needs correction. No opinion can be more dishonorable or dangerous than this, that reformation being already achieved, we have nothing to do but to tread quietly on in the track of precedent. Godliness is not the nursling of tradition. If we have no better reason for our sentiments and practice than that they were the sentiments and practice of our fathers before us, our religion is not a rational but a mechanical service. Christianity allows no implicit faith, except in the divine testimony. It is not enough that a point of doctrine or worship has the sanction of venerable names and ancient custom: these may command respect, but can neither obligate conscience nor relieve us from the trouble of examining for ourselves, because there is no believing by proxy. Like the Bereans, in whom the gospel excited a spirit of noble inquiry, we are to *search the scriptures* for the warrant both of our religious profession and our religious observances. We are charged to PROVE *all things*, and to HOLD FAST *that which is good*. The charge embraces not merely such things as we have not hitherto adopted, but whatever we already possess. “Try ALL,” saith the Holy Ghost, “hold fast that which abides the trial, and let go the rest.” And we shall answer, then, to our Master in heaven, we are bound to review our religious order and usages; and if we shall find them in any particular at variance with his appointments, thankfully to own our mistake and faithfully to amend it. No plea can justify our refusal; for whatever purity we may really enjoy, none of us have the vanity to claim an exemption from error, nor to suppose that the furnace of the sanctuary can detect no dross in our gold. A church may in her leading characters be sound



and evangelical, and yet in some parts of her conduct go exceedingly astray.

The duty now recommended appears to be peculiarly seasonable and urgent.

1. We profess to be Jehovah's witnesses; to maintain his truths against corruption; and for this end to keep up a distinct communion. If we expect our testimony to make a desirable impression upon others, we should ascertain whether we ought not to begin with reformation at home. It will be superlative happiness, indeed, if we be able, after the conscientious discharge of this duty, to lift up our heads and say, we are clean. Let us not be too confident that such would be the issue; for,

2. A number of ourselves more than suspect, that in one of the most interesting parts of public worship, we have deviated far from propriety. They see in our commemorations of the REDEEMER'S DEATH neither *that frequency* nor *simplicity*, which were the delight and the ornament of primitive churches. In their estimation, the supper of the Lord is treated with a neglect which we would tremble to show towards any other of his institutions. Instead of pressing to it through every difficulty and with holy joy, we approach it in general as seldom as can at all consist with the decency of Christian profession. *Once in twelve months, or once in six, is commonly deemed a sufficient remembrance of him "who loved us and gave himself for us."*

They see, moreover, our sacramental feasts loaded with encumbrances for which they cannot discover any scriptural warrant, and that to these encumbrances is owing in a great measure the evil of which they complain.

These things they deplore: they are deeply convinced that the authority of the Lord Jesus; the purity of his ordinances; the very design of the holy supper; and the good of languishing Zion, require a speedy and an effectual remedy.

On this momentous topic do the following letters, brethren, address you. They are intended to urge the great duty of frequent communicating; to sift the objections by which it is opposed; and to place in the light of truth some of those observances which obtain among us. However unworthy of their subject, they claim attention for their subject's sake. In the boldness of the gospel, they not only solicit but *demand* an impartial

hearing. You owe it to yourselves, to the truth, to God. You owe it likewise to your brethren, who, against the torrent of prejudice, have adventured to put more marked honor upon the blessed Jesus by more frequent, and, as they conceive, more evangelical commemorations of his love, than have been usual. And if it shall appear that they are right; that we have been criminally remiss in celebrating that death which is the spring of every living hope; that all apologies for our neglect are lighter than vanity; and that any of our customs want the approbation of the Holy Ghost, and really stand in the way of our obedience; the question will be decided with all who love Jesus Christ more than fashion, and they will unite in a reform as general as it will be glorious.

LETTER 2: FREQUENT COMMUNION AN INDISPENSABLE DUTY

Christian Brethren,

OUR obligation to keep the sacramental feast is the dying command of our LORD JESUS CHRIST. *I have received of the Lord, saith the Apostle Paul, that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus, the same night in which he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body which is broken for you; this do in remembrance of me." After the same manner also, he took the cup when he had supped, saying, "This cup is the New Testament in my blood; this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show forth the Lord's death till he come."*

This institute, being drawn up with some latitude, does not ascertain precisely *how* often the supper is to be celebrated. Something is, no doubt, committed to Christian prudence. The situation of a church, or of her members, may occasionally render communicating inexpedient, or even impracticable. By not restricting it to certain periods, which it would then be clearly sinful to omit, Christ has preserved his people from the embarrassments which incidental hindrances would otherwise have created.

But in providing for lawful impediment, he has given no sanction to carelessness. It would be a strange inference from the words of the Apostle,



and a profligate abuse of gospel liberty, to conclude, that, as the Lord has prescribed no *stated times* of communicating, we may innocently abstain as often and as long as we please. Some, indeed, appear to act upon this notion. Whether they communicate twice in a year, or once; or only every other year, is to them indifferent. But whoever justifies this irregularity from the indefinite terms of the institution, ought to reflect, that the same apology will justify a professor who should communicate but once in his whole life. With such carnal sophists, however, I have nothing to do. The real disciple who loves his Master, will not permit himself to shuffle. He will candidly confess, that the very phraseology of the text implies *frequency*. The words *as often*, occurring twice in two lines, can signify nothing less, if they signify anything at all. Whence it follows, that frequent communicating is positively enjoined; and, consequently, that infrequent communion is a violation of the commandment which the Savior delivered with his departing breath.

It may be asked, how are we to mark, in this case, the limit between duty and sin? Where does the one terminate, and the other commence? I answer, that the indefiniteness of the command will obviate the difficulty on the one hand; and fervent love to Christ on the other. There is little wisdom, and less tenderness, in anxiety to tread as near to forbidden ground as we possibly can, without crossing the boundary. This is perilous casuistry, as many of the godly have found to their cost. In an hour of worldly prudence, they have made experiments, with great safety, as they thought; but which issued in agony of conscience, and a broken heart. On the subject before us, as well as on every other which is liable to doubts, spiritual caution will teach us to remove from danger. But wherever the line be drawn, it is pretty evident that our ordinary practice lies far on the wrong side. Considering the *place* which the supper holds in the Christian life, and the *ease* with which it may be celebrated; it is a satire on language to call yearly or half-yearly communions, frequent. Every believer's heart will tell him so. And here, while meditating on the command often to show forth the Lord's death, he is entreated to ponder a few considerations which ought to awaken sensibility and to influence conduct.

Although it cannot be disputed, that the very words of institution require frequent communion, yet their emphasis is mostly overlooked. An accurate inspection will convince us that they are more happily adapted to the nature and ends of the ordinance, than any other mode of expression; and contain an argument which should thrill our very souls. They hold out the memorial of Emmanuel's death, as a test not merely of obedience, but of love; and the frequency of our acts of obedience as the measure of our love. This do in remembrance of ME: For AS OFTEN as ye eat this bread, and drink this CUP, YE DO SHOW FORTH THE LORD'S DEATH. As if he had said, "In this bread and wine, O my people, I leave you my memorial. Here is the symbol of my broken body, and here of my streaming blood. In my deepest sorrows you were not forgotten by me; and I require you to keep this feast as a proof that I am not forgotten by you. Realize, O my people, that it is YOUR LORD'S DEATH which ye show forth *every time* you eat this bread and drink this wine. As ye love me I charge you; as I have loved you, I charge you; THIS DO IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME."

Say, then, O thou whom JESUS hath delivered from the wrath to come, doth he not here fix a standard of thy gratitude to his grace? If thou art in this manner to testify thy remembrance of him, wilt thou not do it oftener, the more thou rememberest him? If this is the mean by which thou art to show forth his death, will not thy use of it be regulated by thy sense of thine obligations to his death? And does not the tenor of this command teach thee, that the *frequency* of thy sacramental commemorations of him will be in proportion to the *ardor* of thy love? Alas, brethren, if *this* is a criterion of love to our Lord, the pretensions of most of us are low indeed.

That the foregoing view of the Redeemer's precept is not erroneous, will be evident from a delineation of the principal features of his supper.

1. The sacrament of the supper is an important part of our practical testimony to the cross.

This holy ordinance contributes as much, if not more than any other, to keep alive in the earth the memory of that sacrifice which, through the eternal SPIRIT, our High Priest offered up unto God. In a powerful appeal to the senses, it arrests attention, and strikes with awe, while the scenes of Gethsemane and Calvary pass along in symbolical review. In this holy ordinance, we



proclaim to the surrounding spectators, that we are not ashamed to confess the despised JESUS before a crooked and perverse generation. We proclaim to the carnal world, that we have renounced their master, their idols, their hope; and have “avouched the LORD to be our God.” We cry with the apostle, “God forbid that we should glory, save in the cross of our LORD JESUS CHRIST.” This, indeed, is the only ordinance in which, *as* believers, we make a public, social, and separate confession of his name. In other services of the sanctuary, we are mingled with the crowd: our profession, though public and social, is not *separate*, and does not distinguish us from others. In the worship of a godly family at home, it is, indeed, social and separate, but not *public*. In holy baptism, it is separate, and public, but not *social*, or at most very imperfectly so. It is only in the supper of the Lord, that these three characters of the church’s practical confession completely unite. One humble commemoration of his death is a better testimony to his grace, and sinks a deeper conviction into the breasts of the profane, than years of empty profession, or angry controversy.

2. The supper is an affecting representation of the communion which believers have with CHRIST JESUS.

They appear at the sacramental table as members of a family of whom CHRIST is the head: the federal head by *legal*, and the spiritual head by *vital* union. This double relation establishes between them and their Lord a *common interest*, which is recognized and sealed in the holy supper. On the one hand, they, in worthily receiving the symbols of his body and blood, receive him by faith as a crucified Savior, vow adherence to his cause, and claim the right of communicants in the benefits of his covenant. On the other hand, he accepts the vow and admits the claim, divinely sanctioning their title to all the blessings which he hath to confer. The peace of God, which passeth understanding; access to him as a reconciled Father; grace to help in every time of need; in a word, life, light, strength, consolation, victory; his presence, his Spirit, his fullness, his kingdom, his glory — all these he owns to be their portion; all these he promises to give them. So that the sacramental seal of their being “planted together in the likeness of his death,” bespeaks, at the same time, the preparation and earnest of their being “planted also in the likeness of his resurrection.”

3. The supper exhibits the union and communion of believers with each other in CHRIST.

They are citizens of the New Jerusalem, enjoying equal privileges under a common charter — children of the same family, sitting down to a feast provided by paternal love. They do “all eat the same spiritual meat, and do all drink the same spiritual drink.” If there is aught in religion to make them feel that “they being many are *one* body;” that they are the purchase of the same blood, and monuments of the same grace; that they are combating in a common warfare, are partakers of a common salvation, and heirs of a common inheritance; that they have one faith, one calling, one hope — it is the communion of the body and blood of the Lord. Thrice blessed ordinance! which clothes spiritual principle with visible form, and repeats to the senses what the scripture hath solemnly addressed to the heart, that in the nations of the saved *there is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither bond nor free; there is neither male nor female* for they are all *ONE in Christ Jesus*.

4. The death of Christ, commemorated in the supper, is the point in which the leading doctrines of redemption concentrate their rays, and where they shine with united luster.

Draw nigh, O Christian, and by faith contemplate in the cross of Jesus *the infinite evil of sin*. Nothing less than a sacrifice of infinite value can procure its pardon. To expiate its guilt, God manifested in the flesh becomes a curse; to wash away its stain, his precious blood is poured out. See in the agonies of Him who is JEHOVAH’S fellow; see in the sword of vengeance that cleaves his heart the accursed sinfulness of the sin which thou hast committed; and which, without his interposition, would have sunk thee forever into the lowest hell!

Draw nigh, and contemplate the rigors of Jehovah’s justice in the *punishment* of sin.

He hath sworn in his holiness, and by many infallible signs he hath demonstrated, that it shall not escape. The waters of his flood have swept from the earth a whole generation of rebels. Fire from heaven consumed the sinners of Sodom. Sword, and famine, and pestilence, have repeatedly avenged his quarrel. Nay, “the damnation of hell” is prepared for apostate angels and the impenitent among men. But neither the



flood of waters nor the flood of fire; nor famine, nor pestilence, nor sword; nor that everlasting destruction from his presence; no, not even hell with all its terrors; not any of these, not all of them combined, ascertain so dreadfully Jehovah's determination to punish sin, as his "not sparing his own Son." Oh how should *we* have supported the weight of that wrath, which bowed down to the earth and laid low in death the WORD incarnate!

Draw nigh, and contemplate the richness of the Father's grace in our salvation.

Apostates from his favor and rebels against his government, we were objects of his just and sore displeasure. Without the least impeachment of his righteousness, he might have sworn in his wrath that we should never enter into his rest. But in the multitude of his mercies he provides for us, even for us, a ransom that delivers from going down into the pit. *God so loved — how mighty the emphasis! — so loved the world that he GAVE —* not an angel, nor a host of angels — but *his ONLY BEGOTTEN SON, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

Draw nigh, and contemplate the love of CHRIST; a love without parallel, and beyond comprehension. Though he was in the form of God, and thought it not robbery to be equal with God, yet he made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men. Source of eternal wonder! Lo "the Creator of the ends of the earth" descends into a tabernacle of flesh, and sojourns among men! And whence, blessed Lord, whence this condescension? It was for "the good of his chosen." He assumed their nature that he might occupy their place; might take their guilt; might become a curse for them that they might be made the righteousness of God in him. Yes, dear Christian, he put his soul in thy soul's stead; he drank for thee the cup of trembling; it was thy guilt which nailed him to the ignominious tree; thy guilt which rolled the billows of wrath in upon his sinless soul. It was in bearing thine iniquity that hell's blackest midnight thickened upon his spirit, and wrung from him that agonizing cry, MY GOD, MY GOD, why hast THOU forsaken me? Hath he passed through the fires of the pit to save thee? and doth he "stake all the glories of his crown to keep thee?" and wilt thou, canst thou, darest thou be backward in promoting the frequent

commemoration of his love? O Savior, if we forget thee, let our right hand forget her cunning!

Draw nigh once more, and contemplate the harmony of the divine attributes in the recovery of sinners.

In this astonishing death, *mercy and truth are met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other.* While the blood of expiation flows, and fire from above consumes the sacrifice, a cloud of incense, rising up from the altar, announces at the throne of God an offering of a sweet-smelling savor. Now *God can be just, and the justifier of him who believeth in Jesus.* Into this plan of grace and truth the angels desire to look. They see, with admiration, the prince of this world cast out; his prey torn from his hands; his kingdom of darkness rent to its foundation. They see God's threatening fulfilled; his government exalted; transgression punished; and yet his name glorified in the salvation of the transgressor. JUSTICE, appeased, puts up her sword, while MERCY lifts the wretch from the abyss of his pollutions and his crimes. *O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!* Yea, it BECAME *him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the Captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.*

These are considerations which render the death of Christ infinitely interesting to a believer, on which he cannot meditate too often nor too intensely. The very life of his soul lies in experiencing their power. The more his faith is exercised upon them, the more will he imbibe of their virtue, and be conformed to his crucified Head. In proportion, then, as it is his duty to be under the influence of those evangelical principles, which a sanctified view of the death of Christ begets and cherishes, it is also his duty to be engaged in the frequent commemorations of his death. And hence I add, that:

5. As the death of the Lord Jesus is thus inseparably connected with the great *doctrines* of godliness, so, in the fifth place, it has a *mighty efficacy in quickening the graces and mortifying the corruptions of believers.* Those who are best acquainted with themselves, know that nothing but communion with Christ in his death can conquer their depravity. Their old man is *crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that hence forth they should not serve sin.* Let



them declare *when* it is that sin, in every shape, is most detestable in their eyes; *when* their desires for perfect deliverance from it are most ardent; *when* the emotions of lust expire within them. Is it not *when* they obtain a commanding view of their Lord Jesus, as bearing their sins in his own body on the tree? Yes, one believing glimpse of Christ crucified does infinitely more in “subduing their iniquities,” than all their resolutions, their watchfulness, their struggles, without it. Let them declare, also, *when* the adversary gets the advantage over them; *when* the “law in their members, warring against the law of their mind, brings them” most easily “into captivity to the law of sin and death;” is it not *when* their views of his cross are beclouded, and “faith in his blood” enfeebled?

On the other hand, *when* is every holy grace most lively and flourishing? If “the peace of God rule in their hearts,” and his love be “shed abroad therein by the Holy Ghost” — if they be “clothed with humility” — if “patience have her perfect work” — if hope tower, and faith triumph, and love to the brethren glow — if, trampling on this miserable world, they “set their affections on things above,” and “press towards the mark for the prize of their high calling of God in, Christ Jesus;” it is because they are “crucified with Christ;” it is in *bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus is made manifest in their mortal flesh*. If such, then, is the connection between the cross of Christ and the life of faith; if such its influence on a believer’s peace, and holiness, and comfort, and preparation for “an abundant entrance into the kingdom” of his Father; how important the duty of retaining the spiritual impressions of it; how strong the necessity of frequent and *very* frequent recurrence to that ordinance which is destined to recall it afresh to our memories, and which, by sensible tokens, so evidently sets forth Christ crucified!

6. In the holy supper believers are often admitted to *near intercourse with the GOD of the spirits of all flesh*.

Communion is one of the most prominent features of the ordinance. *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?* It is here seen that the fellowship of believers is *with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ*. And here

the Lord not only attests its reality, but is often pleased to give them a sweet and powerful sense of it. Covered with celestial food, food such as angels never tasted, how often has the sacramental table been to the children of promise a scene of delight ineffable! The kind invitation, *Eat, O friends! drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved!* hath thrilled their very souls. They can well remember how bountifully their God hath dealt with them, while they were endeavoring to honor him by showing forth the death of his Son. They came hungry, and he hath set them down to *a feast of fat things*, and hath *satisfied them with the goodness of his house, even of his holy place*. They came disconsolate, and he hath given them beauty for ashes; the oil of Joy for mourning; the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. They came with feeble and with fainting steps, and he hath strengthened them with might by his Spirit in the inner man. They came bowed down under the weight of the body of death, and groaning beneath the oppressions of unbelief, and he hath “removed the burden from their shoulders.” The spirit of bondage hath fled before the spirit of adoption: *Abba, Father! was their gracious aspiration. In the liberty of the gospel they have cried out, O Lord, truly I am thy servant I am thy servant; thou hast loosed my bonds!* In a word, he hath disappointed all their apprehensions; he hath dried up their tears; hath stilled the inward tumult; hath dissipated their darkness; hath poured his consolations into their hearts; hath enabled them to “enter with boldness into the holiest by the blood of Jesus;” caused them to “see his power and his glory; sealed them up by the Holy Ghost unto the day of redemption,” and sent them away encompassed with these “songs of salvation:” *Because thy loving kindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee: thus will I bless thee while I live: I will lift up my hands in thy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits! who forgiveth all thine iniquities; Who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with loving-kindness and tender mercies; who satisfieth thy mouth with good things, so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle’s.*

This, indeed, hath not been the happiness of *every* believer; nor is it always the happiness of *any* believer. But it certainly hath been, and yet is



often enjoyed at the table of the Lord: perhaps more often, proportionably, than in any other exercise. And this, not because it is in itself more holy than the rest, or because access to God therein is in itself more near; but he will put a special honor upon it and upon them who love it, because it is that ordinance, which, in a special manner, puts honor upon his Son Jesus.

And now, Christian, interrogate thine own heart. Say, as in the sight of thy beloved, is it not thy duty and thy privilege *often* to keep the feast in remembrance of him? Wilt thou refuse to display before the world a bold and generous testimony for his name? Is it to thee unprofitable or unpleasant to recognize, at short intervals, thy union and communion with him and in him with all the household of faith? Art thou in danger of entertaining, from the frequent commemoration of his death, too deep an abhorrence for sin? Of realizing, too sensibly, its eternal opposition to Jehovah's purity? Of esteeming too highly his pardoning grace? Of being unduly affected with the love of Jesus? Of admiring to excess that holy plan by which God is infinitely magnified and thou hast escaped the wrath to come? Canst thou not find frequent employment for a *sanctifying* Savior? Hast thou no lust to subdue? no grace to quicken? no mercy to ask? Hast thou won the crown? all thine adversaries slain, and all thy conflicts over? Art thou indifferent about meeting with thy God? Are his consolations small with thee? or the light of his countenance a thing of naught? But why rend thy bosom with questions like these? No believer can think thus. And can he apologize to his own conscience? Can he apologize to his Lord, for infrequent, very infrequent, attendance upon that ordinance in which his self and all the benefits of his covenant are represented, sealed, and applied? Did he intend, suppose ye, that this memorial of his death should be thrust into a corner of the year? Or could they who heard the tender and piercing words, *This do in remembrance of me*, have believed that any who love his name would treat it with such indignity? No never, never! Were Paul to rise from his rest and to visit our churches, one of the first things he would miss is the communion-table. What would be our confusion, should he address us in inquiries like these: "How often do you remember your Redeemer in the sacramental feast? every Sabbath? every other Sabbath? every third Sabbath? every month?" Alas! no. This was

never heard or thought of among us. "How often, then?" Oh! I feel the rising blush — but the shameful trust [sic truth] must come out: "Generally, not more than twice in the year." What astonishment would seize the apostle! He would hardly own us for disciples. Is this, Christian brethren, our kindness to our Friend? This our reverence for his injunction, our return for his love? We are verily guilty concerning our Brother. It becomes us to rouse from our lethargy; to throw ourselves abashed at his feet; to implore his forgiveness; to evince our sincerity by correcting our fault; and no longer disobey him and forsake our own mercies.

LETTER 3: OBJECTIONS ANSWERED — INNOVATION

Christian Brethren,

THE duty of frequent communion is so undeniable, and the argument by which it is enforced appeals with such power to every gracious principle, that there seems no room for objection. But objections are made; and by those, too, who, we must hope, desire to walk in all the commandments of the Lord blameless. Experience teaches us that prejudice, even in upright minds, is sufficient to obscure the most luminous truths, and to magnify the most trifling difficulty into an impassable mountain. I shall, therefore, attempt to obviate those objections, which appear, from their popularity, to be thought most important.

I. It is said that the measure proposed would innovate upon the established order of the church.

To this I reply, that if it be, *indeed*, an innovation, and if, as it has been proved, it is nevertheless our duty, then it is high time the innovation was made, and the habits of old transgression removed. Let not the terror of an ill-sounding epithet defeat a needful and scriptural alteration. The cry of innovation is no proof that a measure is not both lawful and wise. It was raised by the prelatists against our venerable ancestors; by the apostates of Rome against the illustrious reformers; by the Scribes and Pharisees against Christ himself. But happily the fact is otherwise. Frequent communion is *not* an innovation. The odium of this charge lies upon our present practice. Many consider as a part of the good way,



whatever is older than themselves. But when we speak of innovation in the church of Christ, we are not to inquire merely what was done by our fathers, or grandfathers, or their sires: but what was the order of the church *from the beginning*? How did Christ ordain? How did his Apostles conduct? In what state did *they* leave the church? Now it is notorious, that during the first three centuries of the Christian era, communions were held with a frequency of which, among us, we have neither example nor resemblance. It is also notorious, that the original frequency of communions declined as carnality and corruption gained ground: and it is no less notorious, that it has been urged as a weighty duty, by the best of men, and the best of churches, in the best of times.

A brief illustration of these points, may not be unacceptable to the reader —

As to the *first*; it is demonstrable that among the primitive Christians, the celebration of the supper was a part of the *ordinary sanctification of the Lord's Day*.

To begin with the Apostles. We learn from Acts 20:7, that *on the first day of the week — the disciples came together to break bread*. Hence it is evident, not only that Christians assembled on the Lord's Day for public worship, but that they did not part without commemorating his death. What else can be meant by *breaking of bread*? It is a phrase, borrowed from Christ himself, to signify the communion of the supper. And most assuredly his people did not assemble on his day for any common or carnal purposes. Nay, it is intimated that sacramental communion was a *principal*, if not *the principal* object of their meeting. Prayer, praise, and preaching of the word, were, doubtless, their stated exercises; but of such moment was the supper considered, that in recording their employment on the Sabbath, the sacred historian mentions nothing else; they came together *to break bread*. The argument must be decisive with all who allege this place to prove that the Apostolic churches sanctified the first, instead of the seventh day of the week. For the historian does not more positively say that they *came together*, than that they came together *to break bread*. Indeed, the strength of the argument, drawn from this passage, to prove the change of the Sabbath, lies in the supposition that this “breaking of bread” signifies the

sacrament of the supper; because it is the only expression from which we gather that the meeting of the disciples was both a *stated* one, and for *religious* ends. It is plain that they were not called together to hear the Apostle preach; but that he preached to them on the first day of the week, because they then came together, of course, *to break bread*: for he arrived at Troas the Monday preceding; and instead of assembling them, as he might easily have done, he appears to have *waited six days*, that he might meet them on the *seventh*, which was the Lord's Day. And designing to depart on the morrow, or Monday, he was so pressed for time that he protracted his sermon till midnight. All which difficulty he would have avoided by summoning the church in the foregoing week; but he chose rather to undergo it, than not to give his Apostolical sanction to the sanctification of the Lord's Day, or lose the pleasure of joining with the brethren in commemorating his death. You must, therefore, admit either that this celebrated passage¹ contains no proof that the primitive Christians habitually sanctified the Lord's Day; or that weekly communions were their constant practice.

To the same purpose is the testimony of Paul (1 Cor. 11:20). He had reproved the Corinthians for their scandalous dissensions in the place, and at the time of public worship. *You come together*, he says, *not for the better, but for the worse. For when ye come together IN THE CHURCH, I hear that there be divisions* (schisms) *among you*. Ver. 17-18. That these “schisms” occurred in their indecent manner of communicating is undeniable. For, with reference to them the apostle proceeds, v. 20: *When ye come together, therefore, into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's Supper*. “By your shameful behavior, the ordinance is so prostituted

¹ Its true meaning, and the strong argument which it affords for the change of the Sabbath, are ably stated in that learned work, entitled, *Sabbatum redivivum*, part 2, p. 517-520. [Ed. This is a reference to *Sabbatum Redivivum: or the Christian Sabbath Vindicated; in a Full discourse concerning the Sabbath, and the Lord's Day ... By Daniel Cawdrey, and Herbert Palmer: members of the [Westminster] Assembly of Divines, divided into four parts* (London: 1645-1652). Parts 2-4 were promised in 1645, but delayed at that time because the authors wished to perfect them. They proceeded with the publication of part one, as it was foundational to the rest. These parts were published in one volume in 1652 and have their own pagination; hence the author's reference to that section as part 2. The seven year delay was mainly due to the passing of Mr. Palmer in 1647 at age 46, devolving the work of perfecting the remaining parts on Mr. Cawdrey, as he explains in the preface to the second volume.]

that it resembles nothing less than the supper of the Lord." The apostle tells us, that their irregularities happened, *when they came together in the church*, and that the scene of them was the *table of the Lord*. Whence it follows, that the celebration of the supper was a regular concomitant of their stated meetings for public worship; and these, we know, were held at least *every Lord's Day*. The conclusion results necessarily from the tenor of the apostle's argument, "which evidently supposes, that whenever they assembled together, they came to eat the Lord's Supper; for otherwise their coming together so as not to eat the Lord's Supper, would be no proof that their coming together was for the worse."²

Weekly communions did not die with the apostles and their contemporaries. There is a cloud of witnesses to testify that they were kept up, by succeeding Christians, with great care and tenderness, for above two centuries. It is not necessary to swell these pages with quotations. The fact is indisputable.³ It was even common to communicate *three and four times* a week, and in some place *every day*. Communion every Lord's Day, however, was universal; and was preserved in the Greek church till the seventh century; "and such as neglected *three weeks* together were excommunicated."⁴

In this manner did the spirit of ancient piety cherish the memory of a Savior's love. There was no need of reproof, remonstrance, or entreaty. No trifling excuses for neglect were ever heard from the lips of a Christian; for *such* a neglect had not yet degraded the Christian's name. He carried in his own bosom sufficient inducements to obey, without reluctance, the precept of his Lord. It was

his choice, his consolation, his joy. These were days of life and glory; but days of dishonor and death were shortly to succeed; nor was there a more ominous symptom of their approach, than the decline of frequent communicating. For as the power of religion appears in a solicitude to magnify the Lord Jesus continually; so the decay of it is first detected by the encroachments of indifference. It was in the *fourth* century, that the church began very discernibly to forsake her first love. The ardor of primitive zeal gave way to a cold formality, and the Supper of the Lord, sooner perhaps than any other institution, fell a prey to its malignant influence. "About the year 324, it was decreed at a council held at Illiberis, in Spain, that no offerings should be received from such as did not receive the Lord's Supper: which shows that some, who called themselves Christians, were beginning to neglect the dying command of their professed Lord."⁵

"About the year 341, a council at Antioch decreed, that all who came to church, and heard the scriptures read, but afterwards joined not in prayer and receiving the sacrament, should be cast out of the church, till such time as they gave public proof of their repentance."⁶

"Towards *the close* of the fourth century, men grew more and more cold and indifferent about the Lord's Supper; so that the elegant Chrysostom complains, 'In vain we stand at the altar; none care to receive.'⁷

"At length, communicating weekly, or even monthly begins to appear burdensome. The greater part received the sacrament only three times a year; and some not so often. This occasioned the council of Agde, or Agatha, in Languedoc, met in the year 506, to decree, that none should be esteemed good Christians who did not communicate, at least, at the *three* great festivals, Christmas, Easter, and Whitsunday:⁸ and accordingly, from that time forward, those of the church of Rome esteemed themselves, in so far, good enough Christians, if they communicated thrice a year; and that it was presumption to receive oftener."⁹ And, mark it

² Erskine's *Theological Dissertations*, p. 262. [Ed. John Erskine, Scottish Presbyterian divine (1721-1803), "Frequent Communicating," *Theological Dissertations* (London, 1765; second edition corrected with Life, London: 1809; and Edinburgh, 1808).]

³ Plin. *Epist.* lib. 10. ep. 97. p. 724. ed. Veenhusii. Just. Martyr. *Apol.* 2da. opp. p. 98. D. Paris. 1636. Tertull. *de orat.* p. 135-136. ed. Rigaltii. —Whoever wishes to see these, and numerous other testimonies to the same effect, cited at large, may consult Erskine's *Dissertation on Frequent Communicating* [See *Theological Dissertations*]; and especially Bingham's *Origines Ecclesiasticae*, Book 15. Chap. 2, where a multitude of authorities are collected and elucidated [Joseph Bingham (1668-1723), *Origines ecclesiasticae: The antiquities of the Christian church* (London, 1878). See also, *Works* (London, 1829).]

⁴ Erskine's *Dissertations*, p. 271.

⁵ Concil. Illiberit. Can. 28.

⁶ Concil. Antioch. Can. 2.

⁷ Chrysostom, Hom. III. in Ephes.

⁸ Concil. Agath. Can. 18.

⁹ Erskine's *Dissertations*, p. 267, 268, 271.

well, reader; their sense of the necessity of frequent communions decreased, in proportion as they became addicted to *will-worship*; and the superstition of *un-commanded holidays*.

From such an outset, matters proceeded, very naturally, from bad to worse, till the unblushing degeneracy had nearly discarded sacramental communion altogether. The council of Lateran under Pope Innocent III in 1215; that very council which established the accursed tenet of auricular confession; and the more accursed tenet of transubstantiation, decided a yearly communion at Easter, to be sufficient:¹⁰ The decision was not more unscriptural, than it was crafty and impious. For by removing this sacrament from ordinary view, and connecting it with the pomp of *Easter*, it augmented the artificial devotion of an ignorant and deluded age, and signally promoted the idolatry of the *host*.

Here, then, we have traced infrequent communion to its source — the example, traditions, and enactments of apostate Rome. So firmly was this conviction riveted in Calvin's breast, that he scrupled not to term annual communions, a contrivance of the devil.¹¹ The authority of Rome is surely not so venerable, nor her bequests so precious, that we need be over-nice in departing from her precedents. Certain it is, that the best of men and the purest of churches, have been so far from considering frequent communion as a rash and hurtful innovation, that they have both desired and urged it as a most blessed reformation. A few

testimonies to this purpose, may be gratifying to the reader.

The excellent Calvin complains, that in his day, professors, conceiting they had fully discharged their duty by a single communion, resigned themselves for the rest of the year to supineness and sloth. "It ought to have been," he says, "far otherwise. *Every week*, at least, the table of the Lord should have been spread for Christian assemblies; and the promises declared, by which, in partaking of it, we might be spiritually fed."

Entirely with Calvin agrees his cotemporary, that able defender of the reformation, Martin Chemnitz. He closes a series of judicious remarks with the following strong expression: "they are neither true nor faithful ministers of Christ, who, *by any means whatever*, either lead away or deter the people from the *frequent* use of sacramental communion." And what he understood by *frequency* is clear from the very next words, in which he feelingly extols the "most *lovely examples* of genuine antiquity."

The admirable Witsius, after a short detail of the original frequency of communicating, and of its decline with the "increase of numbers and the decrease of zeal," exclaims,

"Alas! how far are we at this day from the sanctity and zeal of the ancients?" It is true, he was not without apprehension, that, in a general corruption of manners, a too great frequency might depreciate the ordinance. There was little reason, as we shall shortly see, for the good man's fear, and less for his precaution. Modern Christianity is in no danger of running into an extreme by emulating, on this subject, the ardor of an apostle.

Calderwood, in his elaborate controversy with the prelatists, lays the blame of infrequent communion on the want of zeal and love which throws us so far behind the primitive church, but insists that this should be no obstacle to its restoration.

Had I intended, or did the limits of this discussion permit, it would be easy to adduce on the same side of the question a long list of illustrious names, not more graceful to my page than savory to the church of Christ. The general sentiment of those who have thought most profoundly as well as piously on the subject, accords perfectly with the preceding. Nor is it the

¹⁰ Bingham's *Origines Eccles.* Book 15. ch. 9. 6. Mosheim, vol. 3. p. 250. Fleury, *Historie Ecclesiastique*, tom, 11 p. 279-280 (4to). This eminent popish historian, compelled to own that yearly communications were the effect of "the remissness and lukewarmness of Christians," seems himself a little scandalized at the decree of Innocent's council. The only apology, which his ingenuity could suggest, is as severe a censure as a Protestant would desire. They did nothing more "than conform to the practice already tolerated by the church." "Dans l'usage introduit par *le relâchement et la tiédeur* des Chrétiens, la plupart ne communioient plus *qu'une fois l'an*, a Pâques — Ainsi le concile de Latran ne fit — que se conformer a l'usage déjà toléré par l'église." Ibid. p. 281, i.e. The council only sanctioned "remissness and lukewarmness," out of respect to an *old custom*. Ah Popery! [Ed. Claude Fleury (1784-1723), *Historie Ecclésiastique* (Paris, 1840, 6 vols.).

¹¹ The very words of Calvin are, "And truly, this custom, which enjoins communicating once every year, is a *most evident contrivance of the devil*; by whose instrumentality soever it may have been determined." "Et sane haec consuetudo quae semel quotannis communicare jubet, *certissimum est diaboli inventum*; cujusunque tandem ministerio invecta fuerit." Calvin, *Instit.* lib. iv., cap. 17, 46.



sentiment of individuals merely; it has been expressed in the most solemn manner by the purest churches of the reformation.

The constitution of the Belgic or Dutch church of 1581 appointed the supper to be celebrated *every other month*.¹²

The discipline of the Reformed churches of France, after noticing that it had not been usual with them to celebrate the holy supper oftener than *four times* a year, recommends a *greater frequency*; (the due respect being preserved), that believers, treading in the footsteps of the primitive church, may be exercised, *and may increase in faith by the frequent use of the sacraments*.¹³

The church of Scotland, at her first reformation, insisted upon *four* communions in the year;¹⁴ and there is every probability that she would have gone farther, but from an opinion that the people, just emerging from the darkness and bondage of popery, were unable to bear it. This conjecture is founded upon what actually took place at the modeling of that plan of doctrine, worship, etc, by the Westminster Assembly, which united in one most evangelical communion the churches of England, Scotland, and Ireland. The directory for public worship prescribes the frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper: nay, it supposes that it should be so frequent as to supersede the necessity even of a *previous intimation*. "Where this sacrament cannot with convenience be *frequently* administered, it is requisite that public warning be given the sabbath day before the administration thereof." How often should it be administered to render this warning needless? Let this question be pondered by those who think semi-annual communions sufficient; yet that very

directory have we adopted and affect to admire. Alas! what a flagrant contradiction between our profession and practice!

As an instructive comment on this part of the directory, it may be added, that several of the ministers who assisted in its compilation, and a great part of those who were ejected in the time of Charles II for non-conformity, are *certainly known* to have celebrated the holy supper every month in their own congregations.¹⁵ Before this, in the days of Laud's corruption and tyranny, those eminent men of God, Mr. Robert Blair and Mr. Cunningham of Holywood, made such mutual arrangements as afforded their people opportunities of communicating *eight* times in the year.¹⁶

The foregoing facts will convince every honest inquirer, that frequent communion is not an *innovation*. It will be hard, indeed, if the combined suffrages of Apostles and reformers, of the best of men and the purest of churches, cannot wipe off the imputation. But it attaches, with an indelible stain, to our existing custom, which can boast of no such authority. This, which we are so afraid of altering, is a real innovation on Christian order, and an unhappy desertion of Christian principle. If innovation is, *in truth*, our abhorrence, let us endeavor to get out of its labyrinth; and, retracing our wandering steps, let us return to the *old way* in which the first confessors of the cross have walked before us, and where we may expect to find much rest unto our souls.

LETTER 4: THE SUBJECT CONTINUED – IRREVERENCE – WANT OF PREPARATION

Christian Brethren,

ATTEMPTS to restore frequent communion have been charged, not only with innovation, but with *disrespect* to the ordinance of the supper: for it is objected,

II. That "by rendering the duty *too* common, it would deaden affection, destroy solemnity, banish reverence, and thus be injurious to the religion which it is designed to aid."

¹² Voetii *disputat.* Tom. iv. p. 761.

¹³ Bien qu'on n'ait pas accoutumé de célébrer dans nos Eglises la sainte Cene, plus souvent que *quatre fois l'an*; toutefois il seroit *bien a désirer*, qu'elle se celebrast *plus souvent*, le respect qui y est requis étant gardé; parceque il est tres utile que le peuple fidele soit exercé, et qu'il *croisse en la foi*, par l'usage *frequent des sacramens*, comme aussi l'exemple de l'eglise primitive nous y convie. *Discipline des Eglises Reformées*, chap. xii. 14. On this canon, Mr. L'Arroque observes, that at the synod of Orleans, in 1562, a minister of *Picardy*, who used to celebrate the supper *every month*, was advised to follow the custom of the other churches, merely for the sake of uniformity. It seems, however, that they had thought better of the matter, as the canon in its present form was drawn up by the synod of Paris in 1565. L'Arroque, *Defence de la Discipline des Eglises Reformées de France*, p. 290 (4to).

¹⁴ *First Book of Discipline*, Art. XIII.

¹⁵ Erskine's *Dissertations*, p. 274.

¹⁶ Erskine, p. 279.



That such an objection should be made by a formalist, who goes to the communion-table once or twice a year to save appearances, or to quiet conscience, is nothing strange. But that it should ever be proposed by a living Christian is truly astonishing.

On what is it, on what *can* it be founded? Is it countenanced by the word of God, by the nature of the exercise, or by the experience of believers? Did Jesus when he said, *This do in remembrance of me*, caution us not to do it too frequently, lest we should lose our veneration? Did he bid us to show our reverence to his institution by trampling on his command? or our gratitude for his love by slighting his memorial? The same objection was made by some at the reformation, and was treated with the utmost indignation. A *wonderful reverence, truly, for the sacrament*, cries Bucer,¹⁷ *by which it is contemned, and the saving communion therein offered with the Son of God rejected!* But let us appeal to fact. Do *other* duties grow contemptible by their frequency? Is the *Sabbath* vile because of its weekly return? Are the divine scriptures, is family religion, are secret and ejaculatory prayer, insipid to those who are most conversant with them? Pray *without ceasing*, saith the Holy Ghost. “Pray but *seldom*,” replies the objection we are combating; “You will be too bold and familiar with holy things if you often meddle with them. Frequent prayer will end in profaning the presence of God, because it will diminish your sense of his majesty.” How does this language sound in pious ears? The heart of a believer revolts: his blood runs cold. The testimony in his own breast refutes, as he goes along, these impious suggestions. And can any man conceive why frequent prayer, meditation, etc., should promote the spiritual life, and frequent communicating hinder it? Will increased faith produce unbelief, or renewed love indifference? Will melting views of divine grace harden the heart, or a commanding sense of the divine glory generate pride? Will “fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” abate heavenly mindedness, or the sealing of the Spirit of promise nurture carnal confidence? Oh! — tell it not in Gath! Let not the rumor reach an uncircumcised ear, that believers in Jesus, who profess to love

him supremely, proclaim his excellence to others, and declare that the more they know and enjoy of him, the more they desire to know and to enjoy — that, even believers in Jesus, when invited to frequent an ordinance which he hath left as a seal of their covenant-mercies, a mean of intercourse with himself, a pledge of his eternal kingdom, should not only *refuse*, but *justify* their refusal, by pleading that it would *diminish their reverence!!*

No, Christian reader; carelessness and carnality keep pace with neglect. The new man is deprived of his food, while the old man, “corrupt according to the deceitful lusts,” gains strength, and thus aversion from duty is doubled with remissness. This is a lesson of universal experience. Never were there more devout and humble, and reverential communions, than in the days of primitive purity. No where, at this hour, do they more deeply interest pious affection, or exert a benigner influence, than where they most resemble, both in frequency and simplicity, the apostolic pattern.

III. It is objected, that “very frequent communicating is unfriendly to suitable preparation, as we could not always afford the time necessary to be spent in it.”

Far, infinitely far, be it from me to encourage levity or sloth in a service so spiritual. Woe to him whose profane approach makes him “guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.” But in many, there is reason to fear, the objection arises from no such scruple. It cannot but be a favorite with those, who “having the form of godliness without the power,” find it useful in palliating their inattention to a duty which they secretly hate, and from which they would gladly be exempted. Miserable men! They need preparation indeed, but such as they will never acquire by the farce of “hanging down their heads like a bulrush” [Isa. 58:5], and assuming once in six months, or once in twelve, the austerity of a monk, and the precision of a Pharisee; while, during the rest of the year, they sacrifice at the shrine of mammon or of lust.

In what, however, does preparation for the table of the Lord consist? In a multitude of outward performances? In devoting a great part of the preceding week to various exercises of public worship? Alas! all this may be done, and the heart remain as unprepared as ever. The religionist, who, besides giving tithes of all that he possessed, *fasted twice in the week*, was not thereby fitted for

¹⁷ *Mira sanè sacramenti reverentia, qua contemnitur, et salvifica in eo oblata filii Dei communicatio repudiatur! apud CALDERWOOD in Altar. Damasc. p. 536. [Ed. David Calderwood (1575-1650), Altare Damascenum (1623; 1708)].*



communion with his Maker. One hour, one minute, of genuine humiliation before God — one tear of gracious contrition for sin — one groan unutterable of the spirit of adoption, is of more value in his sight than the most splendid round of formalities. If we trample on manifest duty under the notion that by performing it *seldomer* we shall perform it *better*, he will not accept a host of uncommanded offerings as an equivalent for the disobedience. He hath said, *I hate robbery for burnt offering*. “Burnt offering you must bring, but you shall not plunder your neighbor’s fold to replenish my altar.” Preparation for the holy supper is indispensable. But we may not withhold from our Redeemer the sacramental tribute on pretence, that, when we do pay it, we will make up the deficiency by our superior qualification. It is the most perverse of all perversions to *displace* a duty by *preparing* for it.

But why must so much time be consumed in extraordinary preparation for the Lord’s Supper as to hinder its frequent celebration? It is said, that “we therein make a *nearer* approach to God than in other duties, and therefore need more cautious and thorough preparation.”

This mode of arguing is common; but is it just? Is it scriptural? Let us examine it. Briefly, it amounts to this, that the Lord requires more holiness from us in sacramental than in other services; i.e. allows us to be *less holy* in the latter than in the former. I might excuse myself from saying another word about it: a simple statement is a refutation. But to sift it a little more — is God more holy on sacramental than on other occasions? Is an irreverent mind or a polluted heart less offensive to him on these than on those? Does communicating possess either more inherent or more accidental sanctity than any other act of spiritual worship? Let the living God plead his own cause. He hath said, *I will be sanctified in them that COME NIGH me*. Again: *Having boldness*, saith his apostle, *to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus — let us DRAW NIGH*. It will not be disputed that these embrace *every act* of worship. God has, therefore, imprinted the *same* character upon them *all*; and as *he* has not discriminated between them on account of their greater or less degree of sacredness, let us beware how *we* do it. He is as jealous of his honor in prayer, in praise, etc., as in communicating. Were we rightly affected, as deep solemnity would rest on our spirits in asking a

blessing at our meals, as in breaking the sacramental bread. And it betrays either much ignorance, or much carnality, if a communion-season fills us with awe, while the other offices of piety find us and leave us cold or unconcerned.

I am so far from questioning a believer’s sweet and joyous communion with his God in the sacramental feast, that this is one of my principal arguments for its frequent celebration. But that it is, *in itself*, a *nearer* approach to him than others, or that *equal* nearness is not attainable in others, can never be admitted. Such an opinion is neither founded in the scripture nor supported by fact. What is communion with God in the usual acceptance of that phrase? Is it not the reciprocation of love between him and his people? *His* love “shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Ghost;” and *their* love flowing, out to him in return? What is nearness to God? Is it not a realizing view by faith of his most glorious perfections, accompanied with a sense of his favor as *our* reconciled God in Christ? And will any pretend that believers may not at times enjoy these privileges as largely in the retirements of the closet, or in the other parts of public worship, as in communicating? Nay, is it not evident, that if you except the social acts of eating and drinking the symbolical bread and wine, the exercises of a communion-table are or ought to be the very same with those which should mark other duties of devotion? Godly sorrow for sin — triumph in the merits and grace of the Lord Jesus — self-dedication to him — appropriation of his covenant-mercies, etc., form the essence of worthy communicating; and they equally form the essence of every other part of acceptable worship. The tenet here opposed is therefore utterly groundless; and it is pernicious also, for it exalts one divine institution at the expense of the rest. And in its operation it may engender idolatrous notions of the supper, but will never promote a sound and evangelical piety.

An habitual frame for any duty to which we may be called, would be our unspeakable happiness. But on our present plan, one communion is forgotten, and its impressions worn out, before the next arrives. A due frequency would bring on a new one, while the favor [sic savor?] of the last is yet fresh and cheering. It would foster the spirit of communion-sabbaths, and keep our Lord’s death in a manner always before our eyes. And whether this would not be a more effectual



preparative for the sacramental supper, than a crowd of week-day services, let Christians judge.

The last two objections lead to consequences as forbidding as they are natural. If frequency of communion breeds irreverence, then reverence is befriended by infrequent communion. If the former deprives us of leisure for preparation, then the latter must be highly favorable to it. The conclusion, on the whole, is, *the seldomer we communicate, the better*: and we would be far more reverentially impressed, and might be far better prepared, if, instead of twice in one year, the Lord's death were celebrated only once in two years, or once in ten. We should then have abundance of time for every prerequisite. We might have tenfold the present employment, and tenfold the pomp: if a week were too little, we could afford a month; and the supper of the Lord would be immensely honored. Hither the plea which I have been considering, conducts us at last. But, O thou that lovest a crucified Savior, avoid its snare. This smiling vizard conceals a fiend. Beneath this garb of piety lurks a dagger for thy life; and ere thou art aware, it will stab thee to the heart, and put thy Redeemer to an open shame.

LETTER 5: OF THE CUSTOMARY APPENDAGES TO THE LORD'S SUPPER; PARTICULARLY PUBLIC FASTS AND THANKSGIVINGS

Christian Brethren,

A FEAR is entertained, that a frequency of communion, much greater than ordinary, would involve the abolition of the previous fast-day, and the subsequent day of thanksgiving; — and this forms, with many conscientious people, a

IV. fourth and very formidable objection.

The consequence is not dissembled. These observances cannot consist with a proper regard to the command of the Lord Jesus. And if we mean to obey it "in simplicity and godly sincerity," they *must* be laid aside.

The writer of these letters is very sensible that he here enters on the most delicate and difficult part of his undertaking; that, on this subject, the prejudices even of the truly pious are both strong and irritable; and that, if a well-meant attempt to promote a *scriptural* commemoration of the love of

Jesus Christ should fail, this is the rock on which it will perish. But being fully assured that the general attachment to these observances results less from conviction than from habit; and that a fair representation, candidly weighed, will remove every scruple, he deems it his duty to discuss them with openness and freedom. Let no upright man be alarmed for the issue. Truth cannot lose by inquiry. Error only shrinks back from the light, lest her "deeds should be reprov'd."

Bear with me then, Christian brethren, while, in reviewing our sacramental fast and thanksgiving days, I endeavor to show,

First, That they have no warrant in the book of God.

Secondly, That they are contrary to the judgment of almost the whole Christian church.

Thirdly, That they are attended with great and serious evils.

To prevent mistake, the reader is admonished that a day of fasting before, and of thanksgiving after, the communion, are not condemned as *in themselves unlawful*, or in every connection improper. The object of animadversion is that *system* which either inculcates their necessity, or perpetuates their observance. With this explanation, then I say,

FIRST, That they have no warrant in the book of God.

That the scripture is a perfect revelation, containing everything necessary for the instruction and edification of the church; that nothing which it does not expressly appoint, or fairly imply, can be admitted into her doctrine, discipline, or worship; and that all opinions and practices, fathers, canons, and councils, are to be tried at its bar; are fundamental principles of Protestantism. Whatever cannot abide the furnace of "the law and the testimony," though recommended by numbers, tradition, antiquity, or aught else, must be rejected as "reprobate silver." This maxim was the two-edged sword which hewed down the legions of Antichrist before the victorious reformers. It is stated, with equal strength and precision, in our confession of faith ([WCF] Chapter I:10), and is received as an axiom in religious controversy, by all whom the subject in hand more immediately interests.



In applying this maxim to the case of the fast and thanksgiving days attached to the Lord's supper, it will readily occur, that this part of Christian worship, if any, requires, in all its circumstances, to be distinctly marked. Is it, therefore, creditable, that God should couple it with a day of fasting and thanksgiving, and not even mention this in his word? And yet the scripture is silent. When Jesus Christ instituted the supper, he simply said, *Take, eat; this is my body — This cup is the New Testament in my blood: drink ye all of it.* When Paul interposed, with his apostolical authority, to correct the abuses which had crept into the church at Corinth, he detailed the nature, ends, and manner of communicating. He even speaks, most pointedly, of preparation for it. *Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.* But not a syllable of fast-days. Now, can any judicious Christian imagine, that neither Christ himself, in the institution of the supper, nor his apostle, in restoring its decayed purity, should hint at observances which both knew to be connected with it? Could such an omission have been suffered, when the Lord foresaw that, for a series of ages, his church would in this very particular go universally and uniformly astray?

It is not, indeed, as far as I know, maintained by any, that he has *explicitly* enjoined these days; but many plead that they are, nevertheless, *deducible* from scriptural declarations and appointments.

They find that on the great day of expiation, a *solemn fast* was kept in Israel: and hence infer, that as a public fast preceded the offering up of the typical sacrifice for sin, so it ought to precede the commemoration of the *real* sacrifice, which is already offered. "Is not sin as evil and as bitter now as it was then, and humiliation for it as pressing a duty? Should not the memorial of Emmanuel's suffering, excite as much compunction as the prospect of it?" No doubt. Believers will never disagree in this. It is perfectly just: and yet the argument drawn from it utterly inconclusive. In tracing the *analogy* of the two cases, it overlooks an essential difference, viz. the divine precept in the one, which is wanting in the other: and in laboring to bring the Jewish *example* to bear, it presents no point of attack where it is not mortally vulnerable.

1. The Jewish fast was peculiar to the old dispensation, and so cannot establish a precedent for the new.

2. It ceased with the law of Moses; and it is certainly singular reasoning, that an ordinance which God himself hath *abolished*, infers his will, that a similar one should be *perpetuated*.

3. Our fast-days are *preparative* to the supper: but the Jewish fast bore no such relation to the sacrifice on the day of atonement. It was not a preparative, but an accompanying exercise.

4. The supper has not succeeded to the sacrifice of the day of expiation; but to the feast of the Passover: it is from this institution therefore, if from any in the Old Testament, that we are to derive the manner of celebrating it. But the Passover was not preceded by a day of fasting, though it was followed by a holy convocation, and a week of unleavened bread. Here, then, is a much stronger reason from analogy, *against* our sacramental fast, than the day of expiation can furnish *for* it. And whoever finds the Monday thanksgiving in the "holy convocation" after the Passover, must also find something to correspond with the "seven days of unleavened bread."

5. As the good faith of argument requires us to admit the legitimate consequences of our principles, let us see whither the plea that the fast on the day of expiation warrants a fast before the supper, will lead us.

On the same ground you must maintain that the supper should be celebrated but *once a year*; and this would be equally repugnant to its own nature, and the example of the Apostles, who certainly understood the will of Christ as well as we can pretend to do.

But now, if one Jewish institution furnish a precedent for imitation, it is hard to tell why another may not; the *daily sacrifice* for instance; seeing it as really typified the atonement of Christ, as the sacrifices of annual expiation did. Thus we should be reduced to a curious dilemma; the argument from one ordinance, limiting us to a *yearly* communion, while the argument just as good, from another, would oblige us to communicate *twice a day*.

This sample of inconsistency and contradiction is enough to show how cautiously inferences are to be drawn from institutions under the law, to



duties under the gospel. Error here has been one of the most fruitful sources of corruption; and an inlet to all the rabble of the Anti-christian hierarchy.

There have not been wanting some to allege the four fasts mentioned by Zechariah, which the Jews kept on account of their calamities, as countenancing our sacramental fasts. But the notion is so extravagant, that it would be worse than trifling to spend a moment in refuting it.

Should these refuges fail, there is one left; viz. that religious fasting, before special duties, has ever been deemed by the church of God both suitable and necessary; and that it becomes us to act upon this principle when we are about to join in the communion of “the body and blood of the Lord.” Here a large column of texts is displayed, some containing the doctrine, and some examples of fasting. But after they are collected with so much pain, and propounded with so much zeal, what do they prove? Nothing more than that fasting, on particular occasions, is a moral duty. This is mere “beating the air.” Nobody denies it.

The question is not whether fasting is a divine ordinance, but whether it is a divine ordinance *preparative to the holy supper*? Now it is obvious, that the application of a principle to particular circumstances cannot be grounded upon texts, which speak of it only in general, without any reference to those circumstances. Such is the nature of the passages alluded to. If in this question they prove anything, they equally prove the necessity of fasting before baptism; before the Sabbath; before family worship, or craving a blessing to our meat, as before the sacrament of the supper; because they have no more coupled it with the latter than with the former. “These things,” you will say, “are absurd.” Absurd enough, I own. And one would think that the argument which begets them cannot be much better.

In order, therefore, to work up your quotations into proofs, you must resort to those scriptural examples in which the principle of fasting is reduced to practice. But the success here will be little better. It would be no difficult task to show that none of the instances which the scripture has recorded of social or solitary fasting, lend the least aid to the service into which they are pressed. Who can bear such reasoning as this? David fasted when the prophet Nathan charged upon

him the guilt of adultery and murder — Ezra and his company at their return from captivity — Nehemiah with the Jews at the restitution of Jehovah’s worship, and the solemn recognition of his covenant — the apostles at the ordination of ministers — therefore we must have a fast-day before the sacrament of the supper!! An apostle cautions against “wresting the scriptures;” and they are always wrested when they are brought to prove what they *will not* prove. High indignity is offered to them and to their Author when men are determined to force out of them, at all events, a testimony according to their wishes; and rather than fail, will adjudge them to the tortures of licentious criticism. Be it remembered, they are sworn witnesses for the King Eternal; let their deposition be heard; but if it do not accord with our prejudices, let us beware how we presume to order them to the rack.

It will still, however, be insisted, that scriptural precept, together with the example of the saints, establish this position, *That on the approach of special duty, and in the expectation of special blessings, we are to humble ourselves before God in religious fasting; and that the supper being an occasion on which we perform the one and look for the other, a preparatory fast is highly necessary.* The plea accosts us here in its most imposing form. But, notwithstanding, there are weighty reasons for refusing our assent.

1. The cases are not parallel. All the scriptural instances of public fasting are founded in circumstances *out of the ordinary course of providence*; and therefore leave precedents for such circumstances *only*. But the sacrament of the supper is an *ordinary* part of divine worship; or if it be in any respect otherwise, our own negligence and not God’s word has made it so.

2. If the scriptural doctrine and examples of fasting oblige us to that exercise as preparative to the Lord’s table, it is beyond measure astonishing that this was never thought of till the other day; that it should not be heard of among Christians for near seventeen hundred years; nor then, except in a corner of the church; nor even in that corner till men were driven to invent a defense of a custom which they had observed, without asking whether it was right or wrong. Nay, that a principle of practical religion which involves a serious question of duty and sin should be overlooked by the very apostles under the plenary



inspiration of the Holy Ghost, and by Christ Jesus himself! If the reader can credit all this, it is time to lay aside this discussion. It is vain to contend with prejudice impenetrable to everything but Omnipotence.

3. The force of the plea we are examining lies in assuming, that the Lord's Supper is one of those special occasions to which the above principle strictly applies. But this is taking for granted the very thing in dispute. That the Lord's Supper is such an occasion is peremptorily denied; and the proof of the affirmative lies upon the affirmers. However, not to take the advantage of so material an error, it may be remarked, that *special* occasions of duty being such as are out of the line of God's *ordinary providence*, the special duties adapted to them must be such as depart from the line of his *ordinary worship*. As we cannot determine beforehand the period of their arrival, so we cannot beforehand determine the season of the duties attached to them. With regard to societies, they may not occur perhaps once in two or three years; and the larger the society, and the more complex the social relations, the longer in all probability will be their intervals; yet they *may* occur half a dozen times in one year. It is plain, then, that none of the ordinary institutions of the gospel can furnish any such special occasions, and so cannot obligate to any such special duties. Now the Lord's Supper is one of the most important of these ordinary institutions (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, XXI:5); it equally belongs to times of prosperity and of adversity, of joy and of sorrow.

Farther, as it is not in itself an extraordinary duty, so the blessings which we are to seek in performing it do not come under the description of special blessings; i.e. blessings *appropriated* to special occasions as already defined. If, in controverting this sentiment, any use the term "special" more vaguely, he will only destroy his own argument, since its very existence depends on the supper being in a restricted sense a special occasion of duty. I would therefore beg the Christian to point out a single blessing to be supplicated or expected at the holy communion, which he does not, or at least ought not, to supplicate and expect in *every* approach to God through the faith of Jesus. Till this be done, all that has been and all that can be said about the *specialty* of the blessings connected with the sacrament of the supper, is mere illusion. It is

not, no, it is not, a just regard for that precious ordinance, which, both in opinion and practice, has put the prodigious difference between it and others; but *these* are not duly improved; *these* are undervalued, and men seek to compensate their fault by idolizing the other.

On the whole it appears, that our sacramental fast and thanksgiving days are destitute of Christ's authority.¹⁸ The utmost that can be alleged for them, amounting with the most liberal indulgence to no more than a *presumption* from analogy; a presumption opposed by a thousand contrary presumptions; a presumption which violates every law of analogical inference; which cuts instead of untying the knot of difficulty; attempts to browbeat facts, and flies in the face of apostolical precedent.

LETTER 6: [PUBLIC FASTS AND THANKSGIVINGS CONTINUED]

Christian Brethren,

MY second proposition relative to days of public fasting and thanksgiving at the celebration of the Lord's Supper, is, that *they are contrary to the judgment of almost the whole Christian church*.

By the Christian church, I understand the body of visible believers, from the resurrection of Christ until now.

The only way of ascertaining their judgment on this point is to inquire into their practice, compared with their known and established principles. It would be idle to demand any other kind of proof: for no man in his senses will look for express and formal condemnation of what was never heard nor thought of. The argument, therefore, is this; that *if days of public fasting and thanksgiving at the sacrament of the supper, as now in use among us, were unknown in the church for a long series of ages; then, for a long series of ages, it was not her judgment that they should be observed*. And this, if duly considered, will demonstrate that they never were appointed by Christ, and have no claim on our regard. For

¹⁸ Even the soberer *papists* confess that "it does not appear by his own practice, or any commands which he gave to his disciples, that he instituted any particular fasts, or enjoined any to be kept *out of pure devotion*." Calmet's *Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, p. 556. Art. Fasting.



although the existence of a custom in the church is no proof that it was instituted by Christ, yet the non-existence of it in the times of primitive purity, is proof decisive that he did not institute it. Man may have added to his worship many uncommanded and superstitious rites; but it cannot be pretended, that the church has lost any part of her testimony; because she has not lost the Bible. A custom, then, affecting in any manner, the vitals of duty and of worship, and of which no traces are to be discovered in the apostolic church, nor in any part of the church at all, for a great number of centuries, is both unscriptural and anti-scriptural, and ought to be laid aside.

As to the apostolic church, viz., that which was founded by the ministry of the Apostles, and is described in their writings, every man, by reading his Bible, may decide for himself. Here all is plain and simple: not the most distant hint of our numerous observances.

When we descend to the succeeding ages, we see the inventions of men obtruded upon every department of the church's worship: her beauty disfigured by meretricious embellishment; and her appointments buried under a load of carnal rubbish. Fasts, feasts, and a monstrous assemblage of trinkets and trumpery, debauched men's minds from the "simplicity that is in Christ," turned his house into a puppet show, and marked the swift approach of the "man of sin." All these things were adopted, and justified, not on the authority of the written word: but on the pretext of decency, devotion, and especially of tradition. Then, indeed, there were fastings in abundance: forty days at once in Lent: four times more at stated seasons, and afterwards twice a week.

At these times, it is true, the custom was to communicate fasting. But still a fast-day, as preparative to it, was not known. When the communion happened on the Lord's Day (and amidst all the corruption it was yet common every Lord's Day) it was celebrated early in the morning, and the fast was merely an abstinence from meat till it was over, when they fell to feasting. This is evident, not only because the feasts called *agape*, or love-feasts, usually accompanied the communion; but because solemn decrees of council had pronounced fasting on the Lord's Day, excepting Easter, a high offence. It was also frequent to communicate on fast-days through the

week. But fasting, in both these cases, arose from a very different cause, than a conviction of its necessity as a preparative for the communion. It originated in rank and pitiable superstition. On the Wednesday and Friday, both the one and the other were intended to honor the supposed sanctity of the days. And the reason of communicating fasting on the Lord's Day was a notion that no meaner food ought to enter the communicant's mouth before the consecrated bread and wine. The great Augustine, speaking of this practice, says, "thus it hath pleased the Holy Ghost." But with all deference to this worthy father, we would rather have his proofs than his opinion; and must be excused, if, in appeals to unerring truth, we allow the Bible to speak for itself. It is true, indeed, that some of the ancients, as well as of the moderns, have quoted, in support of Augustine's assertion, 1 Cor. 11:34. *The rest will I set in order when I come*. From which, say they, "we are given to understand, that the Apostle then appointed this custom of receiving fasting."¹⁹ How they came at the inference is not quite so clear. To tell people that *if they were hungry they should eat at home*, is rather an odd way of enjoining a fast; and hardly to be discovered without the penetration of the sage who spied a whole book of common prayer in the text, *Let all things be done to edifying*.

I am under no temptation to conceal what some may suppose inconsistent with the foregoing representation, that among the causes assigned for the observance of Lent, this was one, that persons who communicated but *once a year*, might, by great fastings and austerities, be purified from their sins, and qualified for the communion on *Easter Sunday* — Mark — once a year — on Easter Sunday. For that day was a high day, and was signalized, as well as the week proceeding, with prodigious parade. I grievously mistake, if any to whom these pages are addressed, will chose to refer to this as a precedent; and if they should, it will only prove a serpent that will turn and bite them. For,

1. It was not preparation for the Lord's Table, so much as preparation for it at *Easter*, that occasioned the previous fasting. The homage was paid to the day, not to the *ordinance*.

¹⁹ Bingham, vol. 1, p. 808. Folio.



2. The reason, as far as it went, embraced two fast-days, viz. Friday and Saturday, and even extended to all the silly penances of Lent.

3. It was alleged only by a few who communicated but once a year, which, with the multitude of their rites, they thought a full equivalent for the want of frequent communions. But this was the subject of severe and pointed crimination, by those who retained something of the Spirit of Peter and of Paul. And is it not strange that the very principle which 1400 years ago was lamented by the best men in the church, as a sinful defection, should *now* be considered as a substantial part of a *reformation-testimony*?

4. The men least remarkable for their piety, were the most distinguished for these temporary rigors. None so filled with reverence for the sacrament as they: none so fearful of unhallowed approaches. But the truth is, they cast the spirituality of their profession behind their backs for the rest of the year, and Lent was the time of settling their accounts current with the church.

Thus far our researches for solid examples of our sacramental fasts and thanksgivings have been fruitless. No one, surely, will hunt for them in the ages that follow. Degeneracy succeeded degeneracy: the genius of Christianity was forgotten by the multitude: Church services swelled into an enormous bulk: but the living spirit was fled and the mass of putrescence which remained behind, served only to nurture and bring to his full size, "the son of perdition."

Passing by, therefore, the long and dreary reign of darkness and idolatry, we resume our inquiries at the era of the reformation. But we shall be as much puzzled to find precedents here, as in the days of the Apostles. The pretensions of the Pope, and the corruptions of popery, were manfully rejected: the worship of God freed from profane encumbrances: the stupid blasphemy of *deified bread*, and all its mountebank superstition, exploded: every punctilio of the sacramental doctrine and rites severely discussed: but of a day of preparatory fasting and subsequent thanksgiving no body dreamed. They were unknown to the good Waldenses; to Luther, to Calvin, to Melancthon, to Bucer, to Beza, and all the rest of the worthies who espoused the quarrel of the Lord against the mighty. There is not a vestige of them in those illustrious compends of evangelical doctrine, which were framed when the

lamp of reformation began to shine the brightest; and the churches were eminently favored with the spirit of judgment, and the spirit of burning. The HELVETIC, GALLICAN, ENGLISH, SCOTTISH, BELGIC, STRASBOURG, AUGSBOURG, SAXON, BOHEMIC, confessions, all treat of the supper, and almost all of fasting; they were drawn up with the express design of separating the precious from the vile; they speak particularly of self-examination, in order to worthy communicating; they explain the nature, and point out the *seasons* of religious fasting; but not a lisp of it as a needful preparative to the table of the Lord. Nay, the Belgic confession asserts roundly, "all the abuses and accursed inventions which men have added to the sacraments, and mingled with them, we justly reject as a real profanation; and affirm, that all the godly are to be contented with that order, and those rites *alone*, which Christ and his Apostles have left us." So that, in the view of these bold witnesses for truth, everything added as a necessary appendage to the manner which Christ and his Apostles have delivered to us of celebrating the sacraments, is an *abuse*, a *profanation*, an *accursed invention*. What would these honest disciples say, could they lift up their heads and see whole bodies of Christians professing to walk in the track of the written word, and to preserve the best spirit of the reformation, stickling for observances, and those too, as obligatory on conscience, which have no more authority from Christ or his Apostles, than the feast of Purim, or the fast of Lent?

But what is still more in point, because it comes nearer home, and may, therefore, have greater weight, is that our numerous services about the holy supper are diametrically opposed to the current of public sentiment in the church of Scotland; and to her solemn, repeated enactments, from the commencement of the reformation, down to the establishment of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

This may startle some serious people who have not thoroughly examined the matter; but the fact is incontestable. For,

1. The confession of the English church at GENEVA, speaking of the sacraments (Art. IV) says, "neither must we, in the administration of these sacraments, follow man's fancy; but as Christ himself hath ordained, so must they be

ministered.”²⁰ This confession was received and approved by the Church of Scotland.

2. The confession of faith of the Protestants in Scotland, drawn up in 1560, declares (Art. XXII) “that the sacraments be rightly ministrate, we judge two things are requisite: the one that they be ministrate by lawful ministers — the other, that they be ministrate in such elements, and in such *sort* (form or manner) as God hath appointed; else we affirm that they cease to be the right sacraments of Christ Jesus.”²¹

3. The first book of discipline, composed in 1560 by several reformers, of whom JOHN KNOX was one, presented to the great council on the 20th of May that same year; signed by all the first reformers, January 17th, 1561,²² speaks only of the “*preaching of the word*,” to “precede the ministration of the sacraments.” And enjoins, that “in the due administration of the sacraments, *all things* should be done according to the word: nothing being added nor yet diminished. The sacrament should be ministered *after the order of the kirk of Geneva*. All ceremonies and rites invented by men should be abolished; and the simple word followed in *all points*.” (Art. II.)²³

Nor were these views entertained only in that remote and difficult period. They have again and again been formally avowed by the Church of Scotland when she was in the zenith of her spiritual prosperity and glory. For,

4. The national covenant, as approved by the General Assembly in 1638, and 1639; and subscribed by persons of all ranks in 1639, adopts the confession of 1560, and declares all who “refuse the administration of the holy sacraments as they were then ministered, (1560) to be no members of the true and holy kirk of Christ Jesus, within the realm of SCOTLAND.”²⁴

5. An act of the Assembly passed [in] 1638, after referring to several public instruments, finds that “whatever gesture or *rite* cannot stand with the administration of the sacraments as they were administered in 1567, and were ministered ever since the reformation till the year 1618, must be

condemned as a rite *added* to the true ministration of the sacraments, without the word of God; and as a rite or *tradition*, brought in without, or against the word of God, or doctrine of this reformed kirk.”²⁵

It is very true, that these acts are leveled immediately against corruptions which had taken place in the manner of distributing and receiving the sacramental elements; but it is evident that they lay down an universal rule condemning the imposition of rites and observances in divine worship, which have no foundation in the word of God; and thus conclude, with great energy, against those corruptions as particular instances contravening the general principle.

From these facts it appears that the church of Scotland, from the dawn of the reformation till 1638, indulged but one sentiment as to the administration of the sacraments, viz. that it is not to be encumbered with any rites or traditions contrary to, or beside the written word. And what was in her eyes the scriptural mode of administering them, is sufficiently ascertained by her prescribing conformity in this matter with the church of Geneva. *But in that church, a day of fasting before, and of thanksgiving after the sacrament of the supper, were never heard of.* And hence it is clear, that the prohibitions of the acts quoted above, extend, in their spirit, to these no less than to other un-commanded observances.

But we have not yet done. The General Assembly in 1645, directing the method of procedure in dispensing the Lord’s supper, positively precluded these days: enacting that there be one sermon of preparation, delivered in the ordinary place of public worship, upon the day immediately preceding. That before the serving of the tables, there be only one sermon delivered to those who are to communicate, and that in the same kirk there be one sermon of thanksgiving after the communion is ended.”²⁶ This last sermon could not have been intended for a weekday; because the assembly evidently passed their act to accommodate their manner of celebrating the supper to the directory which they had just before

²⁰ Collection of Confessions. 8vo. 14.

²¹ Ibid, p. 36.

²² Erskine, p. 276.

²³ Collection of Confessions, p. 43.

²⁴ Collection of Confessions, p. 99.

²⁵ Ibid, 200.

²⁶ Erskine, p. 281.

adopted, and which knows nothing of such a service.²⁷

If we now repair to the Westminster Confession of Faith, and Directory for Public Worship, we shall meet with evidence enough to destroy every surviving doubt.

The directory, on the head of the supper, and the preparatory service, not only does not enjoin a fast-day, but does not even insist on a weekday sermon. Its words are, "Where this sacrament cannot with convenience be frequently administered, it is requisite that public warning be given the Sabbath day before the administration thereof: and that either then, or on some day of that week, something concerning that ordinance, and the due preparation thereunto, and participation thereof, be taught." Nothing is here required, but that something concerning the ordinance and preparation for it be taught; and it is left discretionary whether this shall be spoken on the Sabbath preceding, or at any other time in the course of that week.²⁸ It is, indeed, pretended that the directory does, by implication at least, suppose the necessity of the previous fast-day; because it declares public solemn fasting to be a duty which God requires when special blessings are to be sought and obtained; and because it considers the administration of the sacraments as a special occasion, which affords matter of special petitions and thanksgivings; whence it is inferred, that the directory contemplates the holy supper as one of those occasions on which God requires public solemn fasting.

Had not this argument been used often, and not without an air of triumph, time would have been worse than misspent in giving it an answer; but as the case stands, it must be seriously examined and put to silence and to shame. This will be effectually done by quoting *fairly* the passages to which it alludes, and adding one or two observations.

Concerning fasting, the directory says, "when some great and notable judgments are either inflicted upon a people, or apparently imminent; or by some extraordinary provocations notoriously

deserved: as also when some special blessing is to be sought and obtained; public solemn fasting (which is to continue the whole day) is a duty that God expecteth from that nation or people."

Under the head of *prayer after sermon*, it says, "whereas, at the administration of the sacraments, the holding public fasts and days of thanksgiving, and other special occasions which may afford matter of special petitions and thanksgivings, it is requisite to express somewhat in our public prayers — every minister is herein to apply himself in his prayer, before or after sermon, to those occasions."

Whoever finds, in either of these passages or in both of them, an injunction of our sacramental fast, certainly finds in the kernel what never was in the shell. Can any man persuade himself, that the Westminster divines would have taken such a crooked method of inculcating it, and not utter a syllable about it, either in the directory, confession, or catechisms, when expressly treating of the supper, and of the due preparation?

But, beside this general reflection, which one would think sufficient, I say,

1st. That the words "special blessing," "special occasion," "special petitions," on which the whole stress of the argument is laid, prove nothing at all: because the term "special" is indefinite. Its precise meaning must be ascertained from its relation to the subject of discourse. When applied to the Lord's Supper, it merely distinguishes this from other duties: when applied to the occasions of fasting or thanksgivings, it distinguishes them from the ordinary occurrences of providence. Accordingly, the supper, with regard to its peculiar character, is called a "special occasion," but when compared with the occasions of public fasting and thanksgiving, is reckoned a part of *ordinary* worship (Conf. Ch. XXI). The paragraph last cited from the directory no more determines the supper to be an occasion of public fasting, than a public fast to be an occasion of communicating; but mentions both as occasions of special prayer: that is, of prayer *adapted* to the nature of these exercises. And in what sense the word special is used in its connection with public fasting, the appendix to the directory has made plain enough. "It is lawful and necessary, upon *special emergent occasions*, to separate a day or days for public fasting or thanksgiving, as the

²⁷ The directory was adopted in their 10th session, and the above act passed in the 14th.

²⁸ In strict compliance with the directory, the preparatory discourse is delivered to the congregation at New York, on the Friday evening preceding the communion.



several *eminent* and *extraordinary* dispensations of God's providence shall administer cause and opportunity to his people." No one, surely, will call the administration of the supper, an "eminent and extraordinary dispensation" of providence.

2d. In one of the places cited from the directory, there happens to be a small letter which completely ruins the cause the citation was intended to support. It does not say, "in the administration of the sacrament," but "sacraments" including baptism, and making this to be an occasion no less special than the supper. So that if the argument, shape it as you please, proves anything, it proves that the directory prescribes a public fast as often as a child is baptized. Unless this be admitted, the foundation is swept away, and the fabric reared upon it, tumbles to the ground. So much for the DIRECTORY.

The CONFESSION OF FAITH, which treats in chapter XXIX of the Lord's Supper; and the LARGER CATECHISM, which points out, with great care, the various exercises that should precede and follow it (Ques. 171, 175), do neither of them contain an iota of the doctrine of a previous fast, or a subsequent day of thanksgiving.

But the matter is decisively settled by the twenty-first chapter of the confession, which treats of religious worship. In section V., "the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments," are classed with reading the scriptures, preaching and hearing of the word and singing of psalms; and are declared to be, equally with them, "parts of the *ordinary* religious worship of God;" whereas "solemn fasts and thanksgivings" are classed with "religious oaths and vows," are declared to belong to "special occasions," and are thus entirely separated from any immediate connection with the Lord's Supper. There is no getting over this. You must either pronounce the Lord's Supper an extraordinary duty, or public fasting and thanksgiving ordinary ones; and, in both cases, you overthrow the doctrine of the confession. It is needless to say more; the contradiction is direct and full; nor has the most ingenious sophistry one subterfuge left.

It is, therefore, a stubborn fact, however illy it may be received, that the Lord's Supper, dispensed without fast-day, thanksgiving day, or weekday sermon, would comply not only with the spirit, but with the letter of that very directory,

which we ourselves have solemnly approved, as being substantially founded in the word of God; and that our present sacramental fast and thanksgiving days are in open hostility with the decision of that system, which we hold up to the world as exhibiting our genuine faith. And yet the least attempt to lay any of them aside, that is, to act up to our *own avowed principles* to conform to *that* order which we profess to believe *according to the divine will*, is reproached as innovation and defection!!

But if these days are so destitute of every just authority, how were they introduced? Like all other unwarranted rites — by stealth. They originate, perhaps, in accident; they are continued without design; the popularity of a name recommends them to respect; one imitates another; and thus, or [ere] ever we are aware, they glide into the worship of God, and usurp the dignity of his institutions. This is the ordinary progress of corruption. The readiness with which men leave divine appointments for their own fancies, is proportioned to their reluctance in leaving their own fancies for divine appointments.

But in whatever manner the sacramental fasts and thanksgivings came into use, they are clearly of *modern* date. We have already seen that no traces of them can be found in the apostolical churches, or in those of the reformation. Their existence in Scotland is certainly later than 1645, as is manifest from the directory for worship, and from the act of the general assembly quoted above. It even appears that there was no fast-day as low down as the year 1657, ten years after the adoption of the confession, and twelve after that of the directory. It is not denied that weekday sermons had sometimes been preached after the communion. That glorious one of the renowned JOHN LIVINGSTON, from which near five hundred persons reckoned their conversion to God, or their establishment in his ways, was delivered on a Monday after the sacrament, in 1630. But these were entirely *occasional*; and the event at the Kirk of Shots was "the more remarkable, that one, after much reluctance, *by a special and unexpected providence*, was called to preach that sermon on the Monday, which *then was not usually practiced*."²⁹

²⁹ Fleming's *Fulfilling of the Scripture*, vol. 1, p. 400.



It is also true, that in 1657, although the fast-day had not yet come into fashion, services accompanying the communion were enormously multiplied: But this was with many, and very justly, a source of serious discontent. As the account is little known, and may be useful, the chief of it is here given from Dr. Erskine's dissertation, as he took it from the author of "*Dan in Beersheba*."³⁰ "The general assembly, in the year 1645, did establish an order for preventing confusion in the celebration of the sacrament, with which *the whole church* were satisfied. Yet, since our divisions, our dissenting brethren³¹ have taken up a new and irregular way of dispensing the holy supper, whereby they have turned it either into a theatrical pomp or into the Popish error of *opus operatum*. They have a great many ministers assisting them; six or seven; nay, sometimes double that number, whose congregations are generally left destitute of preaching that day. Every day of their meeting, viz., Saturday, the Lord's Day, and Monday, (N.B. *they had then no fast days*) many of these ministers do preach successively one after another; so that three or four, or sometimes more, do preach at their *preparation*, and as many on the Monday following. And on the Sabbath, sometimes three or four preach before they go to the action, besides those who preach to the multitude of the people who cannot be contained in the church. Never before were there so many sermons in any church, in so short a time. These practices, as they are a clear violation of the order unanimously established in the church, and do occasion great animosity and alienation of simple people against those ministers who will not imitate those irregular courses; so disinterested observers perceive a clear design in all this, to set up themselves as the only zealous and pious people, worthy to be trusted and followed in our public differences: which, if it be not an injury to that sacred ordinance, and an improving that which should be a bond of unity and communion, to be a wedge to drive and fix a rent, let the judicious and sober judge."³²

How far some of these reflections are applicable to our own circumstances, is left to the reader. But as to the narrative, it may not be unworthy of remark, *first*, that the *whole church* was satisfied with the order established by the assembly in 1645; that is, *without either fast or thanksgiving days*. Secondly, that the multitude of weekday services shortly after introduced, were opposed both as *new and irregular*. Thirdly, that they were considered as turning the celebration of the holy communion into a kind of *theatrical pomp* — and, *fourthly*, that their effects were most baneful. There are few so hardy as not to condemn these abuses: and yet they are not more indefensible than some usages which are now viewed as sacred. Nor is there a doubt, that had they continued to our day, it would have been quite as difficult to get rid of them. On the whole, from the obscurity which covers the rise of the sacramental fasts, and the disorder which at first reigned in the other extraordinary services, it seems evident that they crept into the church *by degrees*; that *custom*, regardless of the reason of things, and equally tenacious of the wrong as of the right, transmitted them to posterity; and that undistinguishing habit, and the belief of the cradle, have numbered them with the ordinances of JESUS CHRIST.³³

LETTER 7: THE EVILS OCCASIONED BY SACRAMENTAL FASTS AND THANKSGIVINGS

Christian Brethren,

MY *last* proposition concerning our sacramental fasts and thanksgivings is, that *they are attended with great and serious evils*.

1. They establish a term of religious communion, which has no scriptural sanction.

Christ Jesus hath specified in his word the principles, duties, and conduct of those to whom the privileges of his house belong. His decisions, then, are the only rule of appreciating character, and ascertaining the conditions of Christian fellowship; and it is high presumption in any man,

³⁰ This writer's authorities are two books published in London, 1657, and entitled, *Uldericus, Veridicus, sive de Statu Ecclesiae Scoticae*, and a *True Representation of the Rise, Progress, and State of the Divisions in the Church of Scotland*.

³¹ It refers to the dispute between the Resolutioners and Protesters.

³² Erskine's Diss. p. 282-283.

³³ When the Scottish confession of 1560 was publicly discussed and approved, three Popish noblemen, the Earl of Athol, and Lords Somerville and Bothwick, dissented upon this ground, *we will believe as our forefatheris belevit*. Knox's *Historie*, p. 253, fol. There is too much of this Popish leaven fermenting in every corner of the reformation.



or society of men, to extend or abridge them. Now, as he hath not enjoined, either directly or by implication, a day of fasting before, or of thanksgiving after, the commemoration of his death, no churches under heaven have a right to require them. Yet they *are* required, for they are judged *necessary*, and to omit them is deemed *censurable*. This is to erect them, at once, into laws of conscience and laws of Christ; for nothing is necessary in his church but what he has commanded, nor any thing censurable but what he has forbidden. They are, therefore, to all intents and purposes, made terms of communion, and will deprive of the privileges of his house those who cannot feel themselves bound in conscience to observe them. And what is this? It is nothing less than to impeach the wisdom, and usurp the authority, of the Lord our lawgiver. If he will resent the unfaithfulness of those who throw down the hedge of his vineyard, and lay it open to the beasts of the field, he will equally resent the arrogance of those, who, by additions of their own, so narrow the door as to exclude his sheep.

2. As the evangelical institution of the supper does not contain our customary appendages, the insisting upon them is reprehensible as an unwarranted addition to that part of divine worship.

The ordinance, as Christ left it, is simplicity itself; but we have made it a very different thing from what the gospel describes it. We have encumbered it with a pompous ceremonial which the "Lord never commanded, neither came it into his mind."

It may, perhaps, be said, that this is a rash and unreasonable charge; that both fasting and thanksgiving are duties which God hath prescribed; and, therefore, that we do not *add* to his worship.

This is a mere evasion, and a miserable one. God, indeed, requires the observance of days of fasting and thanksgiving, but does he require it whenever the supper is to be dispensed? We are no more authorized to join what he has not joined, than to coin new modes of worship. The *connection* between the supper and the fast and thanksgiving days is a *human device*, and the *compound* is as real an addition to God's appointments as ever human presumption ventured upon. Let me not, however, be misunderstood. I have already conceded that

duties, which have no necessary connection, *may* occasionally coincide in point of *time*. But if the coincidence result not from God's providence, but from man's pleasure; if it then be held up as a *rule* of conduct; if it set aside any part of scriptural obedience; if it be employed as an engine of superstition; it becomes, in the strictest sense of the word, a *corruption*, and a corruption of which it is impossible to calculate the effects. The same principle which justifies one deviation from the simplicity of evangelical worship, will justify a thousand; and it is of small moment in what *form* the deviation presents itself. An arbitrary connection between duties is as exceptionable and dangerous as any other; because, independently on its mischief as a precedent, there is no defining its extent. Whenever men assume this power, they set an engine to work, which, without increasing or diminishing the *number of God's* institutions, may deface every part of his worship, and render it as ridiculous and contemptible as infidels or devils could wish it.

3. The multiplicity of our weekday services is incompatible with such a frequency of communion as is our indispensable duty.

If just regard were shown in this particular to the dying precept of our dear Lord Jesus, and all the extra days of worship kept up, no congregations either would or should submit to the burden. The tribute of time, which would be withdrawn from their ordinary occupations, would be much too great for any who "eat their bread in the sweat of their brow." This alone might convince that these days cannot be agreeable to the divine will, for they would render the New Testament worship more oppressive than the Jewish ritual. Yet they may not be touched. And the consequence is exactly what might be expected; the memorial of the love of Jesus is a rare occurrence. These very days have invariably defeated every exertion to bring back the usages of the church to Apostolical simplicity. Had it not been for them, communions would have been much more frequent, both in the Church of Scotland and in the denominations which have sprung from it. The best of men have lamented, and entreated, and struggled, but all in vain. These observances repressed the spirit of generous and scriptural reform. Prejudice took the alarm; steeled her heart against conviction; stopped her ears to expostulation; drowned the



voice of reason and scripture in the cry of innovation and defection; the genius of the gospel may be violated; the commands of Christ may be trodden under foot; the monument of his great sacrifice pushed out of sight; but these days which he never appointed; to which the church, founded by his Apostles, was an entire stranger; these must not lose an atom of their importance or their pomp. And can men have the hardihood to call over this adulterine zeal the name of Jesus, and palm it on the world for *faithfulness* to his cross?

4. Through the accumulation of weekday services, the dispensation of the supper, seldom as it happens, is *almost impracticable to any minister without the aid of some of his brethren*.

Is it credible that Jesus Christ hath imposed on his ministers a labor which usual health and strength are unable to sustain? Is there a text, a line, a word, in the whole Bible, to show that one part of his family should be deprived of their food, because another part are celebrating their feast? Let none plead necessity, and the duty of consulting each other's comfort. Convenience, I know, must yield to necessity. But we must first be sure the necessity is *real*. In the present case, it is obviously one of our own seeking; and the evil is only aggravated by sanctifying it with the name of a providential call. We would show our wisdom by leaving God's providence in his own hand.

5. Our sacramental fasts and thanksgivings not only destroy, as hath been proved, the sound distinction between ordinary and extraordinary duties, but *tend to banish altogether both the principal and practice of scriptural fasting and thanksgiving*.

As to the *principle*. By wedding these exercises with the sacrament of the supper, you tie down to certain periods, what the Bible has tied down to *no* periods. You attempt to fix the "times which the Father hath put in his own power." You regulate the seasons of fasting and thanksgiving, not, as your directory has wisely done, by providential dispensations, but by human agreements. You lift yourselves up into the throne of God, and determine for him, instead of allowing him to determine for you, when those duties are proper. Now, this is directly subversive of their very principle and use. In the common acts of his government, and the stated ordinances of his worship, Jehovah hath established a permanent

testimony for his supremacy and our dependence. But to quicken our sense of his continual agency, of his sovereign rule, and of our accountableness to him, he is pleased occasionally to make bare his holy arm, and, by special interpositions, to proclaim a present God. This revives our languid sensibility, awakens our slumbering cares, and leads directly either to solemn humiliation or exceeding joy before him. To join these exercises, stately, with any stated part of worship, is to disregard the very thing which *makes* them duties at all; to cherish in the rising generation an ignorance, and to breed in the risen one an oblivion of their primary end, is to wrest from the ETERNAL a means which he employs to teach the rebellious that he "sitteth King forever," and of which he hath reserved the application to himself. In vain do you pretend to explain the nature and occasions of fasting. Mankind will never profit from doctrine which is a visible and perpetual contradiction to practice.

If the principle of extraordinary duties be overlooked, the scriptural performance of them cannot be preserved. Between them and their occasions, God hath created a beautiful correspondence, to which man cannot furnish a substitute. If *you* call us to such duties, and *Divine Providence* does not, we cannot enter into their spirit; because the occasion of them does not exist. And as you cannot command the latter, you cannot infuse the former. You can hardly expect anything else than dull formality. And the Lord knoweth that this is too sadly the character of many of our sacramental fasts. Instead of deep meltings of heart, they are little better than dry and sapless ceremony. Not to mention, that, being fasts in name more than in truth, they are not seldom a mockery of the Holy One of Israel.

But this is not all. Our custom at the communion may operate as a prohibition to fasting and thanksgiving on their proper occasions. The providence of God may call to them, but the supper is in prospect, and they must be deferred till then. On the other hand, the supper may be scarcely over, before a necessity for them occurs, and then, they cannot be attended to, because we have just been engaged in them. This is no fiction: it has actually happened, and that not once or twice. And it deserves any other name than reverence to God's institutions; for it is saying, upon the matter, "We will have our own way; we *will* fast when he does



not require us; and we will *not* fast when he *does*.” Can we lift our eyes to heaven and look for a blessing, while we are guilty of such preposterous and headstrong disobedience?

6. Our numerous services about the holy supper create a pernicious distinction between the sacraments.

Being seals of the same covenant; representing the same blessings; and ordained by the same authority; one would suppose that they are to be approached with equal reverence and equal preparation. Yet we must have a public fast before, and a public thanksgiving after the one; while nobody dreams of either in connection with the other. Who taught us to make this difference? It is not in the word of God. From Genesis to the Revelation, not a passage can be alleged for public fastings and thanksgivings at the administration of the supper, which is not equally friendly to them at the administration of baptism. It does not arise from the nature of these ordinances: the approach to God in both, is equally near, and equally solemn.³⁴

Christian reader, do we not lament the ignorant and sinful conduct of many professors towards the sacraments? They refuse to glorify Jesus by commemorating his death, but are offended if they be not allowed to present their children in baptism. They startle at the thought of the one, but rush without concern to the other. Whence proceeds the profanation? From various causes, no doubt. But it merits consideration, whether we have not materially contributed to it by our unscriptural appendages to the holy supper. These, by throwing around it an air of superior sacredness and awe, have depreciated baptism in the eyes of men, and have led them to view it as less serious in itself, and less dangerous to be sported with. They suppose much to be requisite for the former, and little, if anything, for the latter. Hence they demand the one with great confidence; and when questioned about their neglect of the other, tell you they are unprepared.

³⁴ If any should argue that these exercises are proper in one case, and not in the other, because the members of the congregation at large, are in the one engaged, and in the other, only a very few at most, they are requested to solve the problem, How many communicants are requisite to a public fast? If this be a duty at all, the number of communicants is of no importance. It is as necessary in a communion of two, as of ten thousand.

While this distinction emboldens the careless, it disheartens the feeble-minded. Not a few who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, are afraid to touch the symbols of his body and blood. They would go to his table; but when they think of attempting it, their courage fails: the spirit of bondage bows them down; and instead of feeling like children drawing nigh to a most compassionate father, they feel like criminals dragged to the tribunal of a judge. Why this unhappiness? Beyond dispute, in part from the trappings which have been hung around the table of love, and from the unwarranted manner in which even good men have permitted themselves to speak of it. Between both, it has been made an object of dread. Its tender persuasions, its rich consolations, have been too little regarded; and even to believers, it has been arrayed in terrors, and fenced with thunder. Nay, Christian reader, we have exalted one sacrament at the expense of the other; we have thrown a stumbling block before a carnal world; and have countenanced a ruinous departure from equal and vigorous discipline.

7. Let not the assertion be deemed too hardy, that our manner of celebrating the supper is *unfriendly to pure and evangelical devotion*.

Ordinances are desirable, not on their own account, but as means by which communion with Christ Jesus is promoted, and his covenant-mercies enjoyed. Believers know that they grow in grace in proportion as they live by faith upon their divine Redeemer: and that nothing is more fatal to their peace, nor casts them down more rapidly from holy attainments, than a legal dependence on duties. Now the question is certainly worth asking, and worth answering, whether the pomp of our communions does not bear strong marks of legality, and has not a tendency to engender and nurture it in the minds of men? Else, why this pomp at all? Why not the same simplicity here, as in other ordinances? The grace of Jesus is quite as sufficient for this as for those. But the language of our supernumerary days of worship is, that, however sufficient it may be, it is not so free as on other occasions. Nor is the opinion of their legal tendency mere surmise. Would to God it were! Every one who is not grossly ignorant of himself will own the proneness of corruption to rest in frames, duties, anything but the grace that is in Christ Jesus: and especially, to idolize whatever has “a show of will-worship and



humility.” That this has been the fruit of our additions to the scriptural mode of celebrating the Lord’s Supper, daily facts make but too apparent. What means this religious parade, when that blessed exercise draws near? Whence this unusual sternness? these sudden austerities? Whence that mortified air which vanishes like a phantom, and never returns but with a returning communion? Why do so many plead for infrequent communion, on the pretext that they cannot otherwise be suitably prepared? Why do so many abstain from communicating, even at the periods which themselves approve, if they happen to be prevented from keeping the fast day? The plain interpretation of it is, “had I kept the fast, I had been well qualified: but now I am altogether unfit.” But why not communicate without it? “The service is peculiarly holy: great preparation is very necessary, and very difficult.” And *what* is the obvious inference? *We must work the harder.* Ah! is there no legality in all this? Yes verily. And so powerful is it in many, that not all their love to Jesus Christ, not all their zeal for his name, not all the allurements of his grace, not all the majesty of his authority, will preserve them from the deliberate violation of his command, lest they should transgress — the tradition of the elders!

8. Our sacramental fasts and thanksgivings *involve us perpetually in self-contradiction.*

We speak with great confidence, of lifting up a banner for truth; of not believing every spirit, but trying the spirits whether they are of God. We reject, in a mass, the corruptions of Popery and prelacy. We renounce the religious observance of Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Ascension, etc, and the festivals in honor of saints and saintesses, as superstitious and inconsistent with gospel-worship, how graceful soever to the anti-Christian calendar. The reason of their being laid aside by the Westminster Assembly, and of their being disowned by ourselves, is their want of divine authority. “Festival-days, vulgarly called *holy-days*, HAVING NO WARRANT IN THE WORD OF GOD, are not to be continued.”³⁵ The reason is sound and irresistible: but the mortification is, that with this profession in our mouths, we gravely declare by our practice, and especially by justifying it, that sacramental fast and thanksgiving days, *which*

have no warrant in the word of God, ARE to be continued.

Talk no more, then, to a Papist or an Episcopalian, of his un-commanded holy-days. He will reply that you have no objection to holy-days, provided they be of your own appointing. Question him not about the fast on Good Friday, before Easter Sunday. He will question you in his turn, about your Thursday or Friday fast before, what he would call, Sacrament Sunday. Ask not for *his* warrant from the Bible. He will retort, by asking for *yours*. He will produce quite as many, and quite as good proofs for *Lent*, as you can for your fast days; and infinitely more examples. On the ground of *decency*, he will keep up with you: on the ground of *devotion*, outstrip you: and on the ground of *antiquity*, leave you out of sight. Here, then, you are reduced to a dilemma. You must either allow his days, or give up your own. They stand and fall together. It is superlative inconsistency to inveigh against the one, and defend the other. In vain do you quirk and shuffle: the absurdity is glaring. You are fastened down, nor can you disentangle yourself by all the arts of controversial chicanery. If, therefore, we venture to attack corruptions of divine worship among others, a skillful adversary will combat us with our own weapons, and turn the edge of our testimony against our own bowels. We shall be incessantly rebuffed by the stinging, but merited taunt: “Physician! heal thyself. Hypocrite! first cast out the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.” In such humiliating circumstances, it is a poor subterfuge to exclaim against the defections and incorrigibleness of the times; and to console ourselves as being reproached for Christ. This is not witnessing for truth; but putting a cheat upon ourselves. The religion of Christ is not answerable for our folly: nor hath his reproach any affinity with reproach for inconsistency. The alternative, Christian brethren, is decisive: We must either act up to our profession, or sit down self-condemned, and silently bear our shame.

If we would have a good conscience, and an unblushing face; if we would present an invulnerable front to every foe, let us dare to acknowledge and to rectify what is amiss in ourselves. Let us not shrink from the scriptural test. If anything which custom has taught us to value as fine gold, should prove to be dross — to

³⁵ [Ed. Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God. An Appendix, Touching Days and Places for Public Worship.]



the dross with it! Let us have the Christian magnanimity to say, PERISH THE TRADITIONS OF MEN! THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD BE HONORED! Then may we expect his blessing; and we shall no longer injure his truth, nor expose our profession to ridicule.³⁶

LETTER 8: SOME POPULAR PLEAS FOR SACRAMENTAL FASTS AND THANKSGIVINGS, BRIEFLY CONSIDERED

Christian Brethren,

AFTER all that has been said, will any still advocate our sacramental fasts and thanksgivings, by pleading that “they are of long standing in the church — are a laudable custom — are well meant — have been practiced by great and good men — are helpful to devotion — are either sin or duty; and if not the former, then certainly the latter?”

A word or two to each of these pretenses. As to their *antiquity*, I remark,

1. It is not true: we have already proved them to be quite modern; an innovation of yesterday.

2. Antiquity is a wretched standard of truth; the abominations of popery are more ancient than they, by several centuries.

That they are a *laudable* custom is begging the question, for it is the very thing in dispute. Beside, custom is not to be the rule of worship. Many bad customs have crept into the church of God: and if their being *once* customs is a reason for their being *always* customs, the reformers acted very foolishly in throwing so many of them away. If it be not a scriptural custom, the longer it has stood the worse; the more mischief it has

³⁶ Should it be demanded, how a weekday service of any kind, preparatory to the supper, is more defensible than public fasts and thanksgivings, or more consistent with the foregoing reasonings? I answer, Preaching the word, unlike those exercises, is an *ordinary* part of God's worship; and, if it do not displace any other duty, can never be *unseasonable*. But should any assert a previous weekday sermon to be essential, either to the right administration of the supper, or the right preparation for it — should it be considered as obligatory, *by divine authority*, on the conscience — should it jostle other duties out of their places — should it be a pillar of will-worship — should it lead to erroneous notions of the sacraments, breeding a *false* reverence for the one, and sinful slight of the other. Could it be proved to have all, or any of these effects, the author would be the first to condemn and reject it.

done; and the greater need for its immediate abolition. The injury done by custom to purity is the subject of old and heavy complaint. “Our Lord Christ called himself truth, not custom,” saith Tertullian.

Their being *well-meant* is no better apology than the former. Good intentions do not sanctify a fault. The worst of things have sometimes been done with the best design. Zeal for God, not according to knowledge, has been a greater pest to his church than all the openly wicked schemes of Satan and his agents.

But *great and good men have practiced them* — And the argument will be conclusive whenever it is proved that great and good men never do wrong. Till then, we must look more at God's word than at their example. Great and good men have observed “days, and months, and times, and years;” and have used rites and ceremonies, the very mention of which, as parts or appendages of worship, would excite among us just and universal indignation. Their errors were not so much their own as the errors of their day and place. They followed the fashion merely because it was the fashion, without serious examination, or perhaps any examination at all. This is undoubtedly the fact with respect to our sacramental fasts and thanksgivings; not one in a hundred of those who keep them having ever inquired into their reason and obligation. And this is the best apology for those worthies whose conduct is now held up as a model for ours.

But the principle of this argument is utterly intolerable. It puts an everlasting stop to reformation. Had our ancestors acted upon it, we would have been still within the precincts of that synagogue of Satan, the Church of Rome. They were more enlightened. Could they hear us allege their example in vindication of an unscriptural usage, they would be the first to resent the impiety. Not wishing us to be followers of them farther than they were of Christ, they would disown us as a spurious brood, and not the genuine sons of the Reformation. We have made miserable proficiency if we have not yet learned that maxim of Christian independence, not to call any man our master upon earth.

Will it be pretended that the days in question are *helpful to devotion*? This very pretext is urged in behalf of Christmas, and Good Friday, and Whitsunday, and Lent. This very pretext has been



an inlet to a multitude of those abuses, which in the most profligate times inundated the church of God. Nothing so ridiculous, so monstrous, so profane, as to be denied its sanction. Pictures, penances, saint worship, crosses, images, and all the rest of the ungodly trumpery, find a sanctuary here. Devotion, forsooth, cannot be maintained by means which the Lord hath appointed; but when to these men have added a host of their own inventions, they become wonderfully devout! What rashness! what presumption! As if the great God were less concerned about his own worship than we! As if he did not thoroughly know our frame, and what is necessary to cherish devout affection! As if he had left his institutions imperfect, and we must mend them!

But, says an objector, the observance of these days is *either sin or duty*; and if not the former, then certainly the latter.

As this argument appears to be a favorite with some, and one which, by involving their opponent in a perplexing dilemma, issues, they imagine, in their own certain and decisive triumph; it demands a more particular animadversion.

1. Then, the proposition that an act must be either sin or duty, is false and absurd. It is, no doubt, sinful to omit what is our duty to do, and duty to omit what is sinful to do. This, however, is nothing to the purpose; for it is only saying that duty is duty, and sin is sin. But it is not true what the proposition asserts, that if a thing be not sin, it is necessarily duty. By this mode of arguing, you must own everything to be duty which you cannot prove to be sin. For example; you will not maintain that it would have been sin in the apostle Paul to have taken wages from the church of Corinth; for he peremptorily affirms his right to it from the ordinance of God. Then it must have been his duty; and in declining pecuniary support, he was chargeable with a breach of duty.

This same mode of arguing will convict not only the apostle of sin, but the Bible of error. Let us instance, in the vows spoken of [in] Deut. 23:21, 23. These vows, the argument says, were either sin or duty; not sin, most assuredly, therefore duty; and *not to* vow would have been *sinful*, because an omission of duty. But, saith the Lord, "If thou forbear to vow, it shall be *no sin* in thee." On the other hand, we might equally argue, *Not to* vow was either sin or duty. Sin it could not be, for God said so; therefore duty; so that vowing, being

the opposite of duty, would have been sinful; whereas the Lord declared it lawful, and sin not to pay it. This argument has now done its work. It has proved the apostle a fool; the word of God a contradiction; and the same act to be, at the same time, and under the same circumstances, both sin and duty, and yet neither one nor the other.

2. Were the argument in itself a good one, it would do no service, but much harm, to the cause which it is brought to aid. The sacramental fasts and thanksgivings, you allege, are either duty or sin. That they are duty will not be granted. Then, says the terrible dilemma, they are *sin*. And what then? Why, my practice, and the practice of my forefathers, in this particular, have all along been *sinful*. Ay, there's the rub. That the practice of *others* who differ from you is sinful you can readily admit, and perhaps warmly contend. But, that such a charge should be laid at your *own door*, you cannot endure; and at the very idea of extending it to your fathers, your displeasure kindles, and you exclaim, "Shall those godly men, the Bostons, the Moncrieffs, the Erskines, and the multitude of the faithful both in the church of Scotland and in the secession, who have uniformly kept the fast and the thanksgiving days, be accused of conniving at a corruption of the Lord's worship? Away with such an unworthy reflection!"

But recollect, my friend. The position that these days must be either sin or duty is not *mine*; it is *your own*. As you never can prove them to be duty, the consequence of your principle is, that both yourself and others have sinned in observing them. It is only your own argument recoiling with the weight of a millstone upon yourself.

But taking it for granted that they cannot be sinful, as your pious ancestors observed them, and contending that they must be duty, you pronounce the omission of them to be sin; for that is not a *duty* which may be innocently neglected. Now this renders the matter unspeakably worse.

For, in order to remove an imputation from your forefathers, you throw it upon all the holy men of God who have lived in every age of the Christian church, till a little more than a century ago [i.e. before 1700]; and in every part of the globe excepting the spots of Great Britain and Ireland. For they never observed the sacramental fasts, and thanksgivings on which you insist. If you are resolved, then, to adhere to the principle of their



being either sin or duty, you have your choice whether you will own the sin to have been in your father's skirts, or will charge it on the whole church beside, with the apostles of Christ Jesus at their head.

This argument, therefore, embarrasses none but those who use it; and as for the others, they ought never to be heard out of the mouth of a Protestant; far less of any who have embraced the Westminster Confessions and Catechisms. With what eyes do men read these admirable composites? or with what conscience avow them as containing their own faith? Could a stranger believe that the identical pretexts on which they vindicate their sacramental fasts and thanksgivings, are enumerated in a part of this very system, which they profess to receive as founded on the word of God, and are there marked with the most unqualified reprobation? Yet such is the fact! Among the sins forbidden in the second commandment, as explained in the larger catechism, are "all superstitious devices, corrupting the worship of God, *adding to it*, or taking from it, whether invented and taken up of ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of *antiquity, custom, devotion, good intent*, or ANY OTHER PRETENCE WHATSOEVER. (Q&A 109)

Let us never forget, Christian brethren, that our notions of propriety, or the examples of men, though they seem to be pillars, have nothing to do in modeling Jehovah's worship. A jealous God, he will curse innovations, and overwhelm their apologists with the terror of that challenge, "Who hath REQUIRED this at your hands?"

Considering, therefore, that our sacramental fasts and thanksgivings have no divine warrant; that they are strangers in the church; that they are inconsistent with our profession; that they establish an unscriptural term of communion; that they tend to destroy the principle of public fasting and thanksgiving; to create a pernicious distinction between the sacraments; to cherish legal tempers in devotional exercises; and that they stand in the way of that great duty, the duty of frequently showing forth the death of our Redeemer — does it not become you, Christian brethren, to make a solemn pause, and to search whether in this matter, there *be not with YOU, even with YOU, sins against the Lord your God?*

LETTER 9: BENEFITS OF SCRIPTURAL COMMUNION

Christian Brethren,

THOSE who confound the idea of change with that of innovation, or whose convictions are overpowered by their fears, view the proposal for frequent communion as pregnant with alarming consequences. Their apprehensions, however sincere, are certainly ill-founded. On the contrary, we have reason to anticipate, from this very measure, the most desirable and salutary effects.

1. We shall enjoy the consolation of having performed a duty much and long neglected.

In the hour of retirement and reflection, an exercised believer can hardly persuade himself, in the face of all the considerations which have been set before him, that one or two communions in the year correspond with the will of Christ, with the end of his memorial, or with his own profession. His heart, in spite of apologies, will smite him; it will tell him, that a Savior's death merits not such forgetfulness; nor will all the weekday pageantry silence its murmurs. Unable to show a clear warrant for his appendages to the supper, and conscious that they supplant an obedience, otherwise easy, to his Lord's command, his confidence will waver, and a shade pass over his cheerfulness.

By communicating after the primitive model, in reviving its frequency and lopping off the redundancies of human fancy, this source of disquietude will be dried up. Our Master's memorial restored to its just respect; the reproach of disregard to his dying precept wiped away; the excellence of his *simple* institutions *practically* asserted; our "keeping of the feast" more pure, because more scriptural — will be sublime attainments. They will repay, a thousand fold, the sacrifice of adverse prejudice and habit. Singleness of heart, in conforming to the obvious intentions of our Lord Jesus, will infuse into our obedience a vigor, and into our privileges a delight, which are vainly expected from conformity to the devices of men, and which can be appreciated by those alone who have smarted from the sting of a misgiving conscience.

2. A harmony, at present impossible; will be established in our system of public worship.



God is the God of order; and his word, which is the rule of Christian order, hath referred every duty to its proper place; ordinary duties to ordinary occasions; and duties extraordinary to occasions extraordinary. But our sacramental fast and thanksgiving days have reversed this order, by wedding extraordinary duties with ordinary occasions. Now, if our arrangement be right, that of the Bible must be wrong. But as no Christian can impeach the latter, it must be admitted, not only that the former is faulty, but that dissolving the unnatural union between ordinary occasions and extraordinary duties, and reserving public fasting and thanksgiving for the seasons to which the scripture hath assigned them, viz. *providential emergencies*, will be a needful and a great reform. This will indeed curtail, by more than two-thirds, the existing week day observances, and reduce the supper of the Lord to a very simple thing. Exactly what it should be! Christ left it a very simple thing. By making it otherwise, men have only spoiled it; and be it remembered, that simplicity is the glory of *all* evangelical worship. It may have few charms for carnal professors; it may appear to them ignoble and sordid: but in proportion as it characterizes a church is “the beauty of the Lord our God upon” her. And who will not count *that* beauty our honor and our blessedness?

3. Our judicial profession will be rescued from charges which it is now difficult, if not impossible, to repel.

While we maintain that the feast of the supper is *frequently* to be celebrated, and keep it only *twice in a year* — that communicating is an ordinary, and fasting an extraordinary duty, and yet blend them in our practice — that holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be observed, and insist upon the religious observance of days which have no such warrant — it requires uncommon assurance, or betrays contemptible weakness, to vaunt our own steadfastness, and bewail the departure of others from their avowed principles. This may render us objects of derision or of pity, but not of respect. We must lie under the suspicion, if not the reproach of hypocrisy, because our pretensions are unsupported by our conduct. But if, in the hope of teaching others, we set out with teaching ourselves — if we *exemplify* our doctrines by the severe application of them to our own church, rectifying *her* mistakes and banishing *her*

corruptions — it will be manifest to the world that we contend not for the preeminence of party, but for the claims of truth. Such honesty will throw a luster round our character, and imprint a majesty upon our testimony, for which the usual clamor and acrimony would be too much honored in being called a miserable substitute. Passion would be soothed and prejudice allured. Men would listen with candor to the expostulations of conscience. We should have the praise of consistency, if not of success. And though we might fail to convince an opponent, we should at least command his esteem.

4. Frequent and simple communions will probably purge the church of unworthy members.

There is not a greater nuisance to Christianity than men who usurp its name without its influence; who give to Christ the vapor of the lips, and to mammon the solid homage of the heart. They are a perpetual mildew on the blossoms, a death-frost about the roots of social piety. In any denomination, one such professor is one too many; though entire freedom from them never has been, and never may be, the happiness of any earthly connection. In the little family of the Master himself, a devil occupied the seat of an apostle. Highly favored the church which has the fewest of them, and in which their numbers are diminishing! Perhaps there could not be devised a more effectual expedient for getting rid of them, than employing them in spiritual work. With abundance of formality, they may attend to the notorious *externals* of religion: and as a bribe to conscience, and a set-off to character, they may have no objection to the communion, *if it be not too often*. Once or twice a year will do. But strip this precious ordinance of the additions which nurture legality, or flatter pride: let it be as plain as the Bible made it, and as frequent as a believer needs it: let there be nothing to render it impressive, but its subject; or alluring, but its spirituality; and mark the consequence. The formal zealot will cool. Novelty, decency, example, may secure his compliance for a while; but it will be strange if his impatience do not at last get the ascendancy. Without affection to Jesus Christ, he will grow tired of his supper. Without a principle of spiritual life, he will count spiritual worship intolerable: the more spiritual, the more intolerable: and the holy communion most intolerable of all. His soul will loathe the heavenly manna, and by degrees he will drop off. It is not



asserted that this would be the course of every formalist. Of some it more than probably would. And every one who should thus become a self-detector, would be a clear deduction from the mass of enmity, in a particular church, to the interest of truth and holiness.

5. A blessed fruit of frequent communions would be the promotion of brotherly love.

In nothing is the religion of Jesus more dishonored, than in the want of that kind affection which ought to subsist between the heirs of a common salvation. No trait of moral character is in itself more amiable or excellent; none more ornamental to the gospel of Christ; none more powerfully recommended by his example; more peremptorily enjoined by his authority; more solemnly insisted upon in his word, as a test of profession; than the grace of love. And the time *has been*, when it formed the chief distinction of a disciple. In those days of primitive glory which we commend so much, and imitate so little, the mortified, yet admiring pagan, could not forbear to exclaim, "Behold, how these Christians love one another!" Alas! the sad reverse! Professors of every name, should they agree in nothing else, agree in forgetting the lesson of love. To judge from facts, one would suppose that we are commanded not to "put away," but to cherish, "all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, with all malice." For it is too evident, that amid the lust of preeminence, and the strife of party, the meekness of the gospel is banished, its charities stifled, and the most sacred appellations bestowed on wranglings which nurture malignant corruption, and scatter infernal pestilence. The infidel stands by, a spectator of these guilty scenes, and scoffingly remarks, that Christians "have just religion enough to make them hate one another heartily." This departure from the *spirit* of the gospel, among those who retain its *doctrines*, is a common, and a GRAND APOSTASY. The Holy One of Israel cannot suffer it to pass with impunity; and it is doubtless a principal cause of the controversy which he is now pleading with us, by restraining his gracious influence, and permitting the adversary to triumph.

In searching for the reasons of this difference, so little to our credit, between ourselves and the first believers, their attention, compared with our inattention, to the table of the Lord, is too remarkable to be overlooked. At this holy

ordinance *they* were incessantly together. Between our communions is an interval of several months. When *they* rose from the sacramental bread, it was their joy, that in a few days they should mingle their friendship, and renew their vows, in the same spiritual covenant. With *us*, after one feast is over, it is so long before another come, that we almost forget we are brethren. The monument of a Savior's death, with us a rarity, being continually before their eyes, kept their faith steady; awakened the most tender emotions; and preached to their hearts the duty of mutual love. Could it be otherwise? If reiterated meditation fix the evanescent impression; if the object of warm attachment stir the soul; if society, in an exercise purified by grace, and elevated by devotion, beget reciprocal endearment; then must frequent communion have an auspicious influence on Christian charity. Love is inscribed on every object, every action, every circumstance, connected with it. No admittance here for diabolical tempers. A son of malice may thrust himself outwardly among the children, but he is no child; nor does he partake of the children's food. The bread of earth he may eat, and the wine of earth he may drink: but he has no communion in the body and blood of crucified Jesus. He is, therefore, out of the question. It relates to none but living disciples.

Now, is it possible that believers should indulge a sentiment of *pride*, when they are at once reminded that they were *lifted from the dunghill*, and receive the pledge of a celestial crown? A sentiment of *revenge*, when they realize that God is in Christ *reconciling* them to himself? A sentiment of *enmity*, when he is saying to them, I am *pacified* towards *thee* FOR ALL THAT THOU HAST DONE; and thy sins and thine iniquities will I remember no more? When they feel themselves infinite debtors to the love of Jesus, can they disobey his commandment enforced by this argument from his own gracious lips, as I *have loved you, so do ye also love one another*? Let Christians declare from their own experience whether they have not often felt, on sacramental occasions, a more than usual interest and complacency in each other? Whether suspicion and coldness, contention and revilings, among brethren, ever appear to them more indecent and detestable; whether they are ever more ashamed of themselves and of others for the want of mutual love, than when they have risen with spiritual



mindedness from the table spread for the household of faith? Indeed, if it is a mean of exciting our love to the Lord Jesus, it must be a mean, and a powerful one too, of exciting love to one another; for in proportion as we love him, we will love his image, and be governed by his Spirit. And it is no less clear that this is one of the ends of its institution. For, being the memorial of our Redeemer's love to us, it sets before us the amiable pattern of our love to each other. It is almost impossible to contemplate it in the former light, and not in the latter; and altogether so, to condemn it in the latter without profaning it in the former.

The result is, that spiritual communions having a natural and necessary effect in cherishing Christian love, their *frequency* must have a proportional effect in *augmenting it*. An appeal to facts will justify the inference. The whole weight of primitive example is in its favor. And at this hour, no churches, in point of harmony and love, exhibit so fair a copy of that example as those in which communions are most frequent and most simple.

Would you, then, dear brethren, contribute to banish the animosities which are but too prevalent in the family of faith, and to revive the love of former days, repair *often* to your sacramental table: there learn that "in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature." There pray with the apostle, and with him embody in your actions the spirit of the prayer, "AS MANY as walk according to THIS RULE, peace be on them, and mercy even upon the Israel of God."

6. It is by no means improbable, that the restoration of scriptural communions may usher in a time of refreshing from the presence of the Lord.

It has just been shown, that no mean will more effectually conduce to the revival of love; and with the grace of love every other grace flourishes. In that sweet confidence and endearment which are inseparable from it, believers strengthen each other's faith; and are helpers of each other's joy; nor is there, in the whole circle of social graces and duties, any which the Lord more delighteth to honor.

Beside, the nearer a church approaches in her worship to the institutions of the Lord Jesus, the

more solid ground has she to implore and to expect his countenance. Christians, the strength of whose judgment was exceeded only by the fervor of their piety, have complained that a damp has settled on their spirits, and the liberty of God's children been remarkably denied them, on the sacramental fasts and thanksgivings. The only reason they could assign for the fact is, that they could not say they had God's warrant for them. Laying them aside, and retaining his appointments, faith can plead both his warrant and his promise. He hath sufficiently taught us, and often "by terrible things in righteousness," that he will not sanctify the liberties which men take with his worship. If they throw it into a different from [sic form] than which he hath prescribed, they have no right to look for his blessing. And if at any time they enjoy it notwithstanding, it is an act of mere sovereignty condescending to their infirmities. Historical testimony may be confirmed by our own observation, that the power of godliness declines in a church as the inventions of men prevail. And on the contrary, that in those churches which are freest from them, the life of religion, and the presence of the Lord with his ordinances, are most conspicuous. It demands, indeed, no small degree of spiritual mindedness, and of reliance on his wisdom and truth, to be satisfied with them exactly as he has left them. They are so plain, so noiseless, so unlike every carnal notion of importance, that when compared with their destined effects, unsanctified reason stands astonished, and cries, how can it be? Yet Israel's King hath chosen to work in a manner, and by means, which shall mortify human pride, and exalt his name. It is the highest attainment of any Christian society to "receive, observe, and keep pure and entire all such religious worship and ordinances as he hath appointed in his word;" humbly committing their success to himself, and, steadily resisting the encroachment of human officiousness. The fear that discarding all uncommanded observances, and bringing back our sacramental feast to the simplicity and frequency from which it has swerved, would destroy reverence and breed carelessness, proceeds from unbelief in his providence and promise. The protection of this blessed ordinance would then be placed where it ought to be, in the hands of its Author; and our attendance on it would be distinguished by greater power and glory, because it would have more of God and less of man. A




church casting off her errors in a day of coldness, declension, and blasphemy — doing homage to truth by sacrificing her prejudices, her habits, her traditions — setting at defiance the scoff of the worldling, and the clamor of the formalist, in order to conform more perfectly to scriptural establishments, and honor more pointedly the love of Jesus, would be a spectacle not more singular than magnificent. It would bespeak the doing of the Lord; and would be a token, such as we have never had, that he is about to revive his work in the midst of the years, to build up our Zion, and appear to us in his glory. And in the hope thereof, when we see this, our heart shall rejoice, and our bones shall flourish as an herb.

Lastly. The proposed reform will be a preparative for trial.

With trials we may, at all events, lay our account. They even commonly precede a revival. The messenger of the covenant, when he comes into his temple, is, “like a refiner’s fire, and like fuller’s soap.” And the less stubble to be consumed, the fewer stains to be washed out, the better, as the preliminary discipline will be gentler. And while he shakes the nations, should he also, as appearances indicate, sift the churches, they will suffer the least in whose skirts are the fewest abominations. Un-commanded observances will then be found to be a serious evil, and the zeal that defended them will be rewarded with stripes.

If we would be ready, O brethren, to meet our God, let us give all diligence that our public order, as well as our personal hope, be built upon the naked rock; and in the day of the tempest both will stand fabrics fair and immovable, when the rubbish of human devices and of human flatteries are swept away, and made the sport of the whirlwind.

“Now may the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.” 

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