

THE
SPRUCE STREET LECTURES,

DELIVERED

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

TO WHICH IS ADDED,

A LECTURE

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

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SPRUCE STREET LECTURES.

LECTURE IV.

*Delivered on the Evening of the 22d January, 1832, by the
Rev. Alexander M'Farlane, of Carlisle.*

OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.—
1 Cor. v. 13.

A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject.—
Tit. iii. 10.

THE Church of God is a regularly constituted society, possessing laws and government, adapted to secure her purity and permanence, and to manifest and vindicate the honour of her Lord. The glorious Mediator, being exalted to the right hand of the Majesty on high, and having received all power in heaven and on earth, promulgates laws and institutes ordinances, establishes government in his Church, and appoints officers for its administration. “And he gave some apostles; and some prophets; and some evangelists; and some pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” The language of the Lord Jesus, addressed at first to his apostles, applies in a subordinate sense to all the ministers and rulers of the Church; “What-

soever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven." The pastors and elders were authorized and required, by divine institution, to teach and to rule in the Churches. "Take heed, therefore, unto yourselves," says the apostle Paul to the elders of Ephesus, "and to all the flock over which the Holy Spirit hath made you *overseers*." "The elders which are among you I exhort," says the apostle Peter, "feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the *oversight* thereof." On the other hand, the people were required to render obedience and honour, to those appointed to rule over them. "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves." "Let the elders that rule well, be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine."

In every society, government of some kind is indispensable. No community can exist among men without laws, and an adequate power to put them in execution. What would become of the family circle, sacred to order and harmony, if the parental authority were prostrated? How could public tranquillity, or private security, be maintained, if none were empowered to assert the majesty of the laws? The Church is distinguished from other societies, not by being without law and government, but by possessing them from divine appointment. The Lord Jesus has ordained officers in his Church, whose duty it is to teach and to rule; to make known the laws of his kingdom, and to secure their observance by all its subjects. The government of the Church, therefore, is established by the wisdom and authority of her glorious head; and whatever acts are done according to the instructions which he has given, receive his sanction and ratification.

But here perhaps it may be inquired, is there no uncertainty about the laws of Scripture? Do not different denominations of Christians understand the doctrines and institutions of revelation very differently? Does not this fact prove our liability to mistake in this matter? Is it not possible, that whilst we are claiming to be administering the laws of Christ, we are in reality enforcing nothing better than the inventions of men?

To these inquiries we reply, the Holy Scriptures give no intimation that the laws of God are ambiguous or uncertain. If they were so, the Church would be left without laws; for laws that are doubtful or incomprehensible, are of no validity where righteousness directs the administration. On the contrary, it is invariably assumed, that the doctrines and ordinances of the Bible are, to the humble and teachable, easy of comprehension, and remote from all uncertainty. It is true, Christians differ in their interpretation of Scripture; but where is the denomination of Christians who will impute this diversity, in matters of importance, to the ambiguity or uncertainty of the sacred record, or will admit that there is no fault in those who differ from their interpretation? We are not entitled to the name of Christians, if we be not prepared to affirm the perfect plainness of Scripture, in all things essential to faith and godliness; and the obligation resting upon all, to understand aright its doctrines and precepts, its commands and institutions. No man can be innocent, whilst pretending to deduce from the inspired volume a system of error; or whilst maintaining opinions in opposition to the pure doctrines of Divine revelation. It is absurd to object that the Bible is a communication from heaven, and yet unintelligible; that the laws of God are so obscure or ambiguous, that they

may be misunderstood or disregarded with impunity. We therefore consider ourselves as chargeable with neither presumption nor usurpation, whilst interpreting the doctrines and institutions of the Gospel, and applying them for the perfecting of the saints, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

The officers appointed by the Lord Jesus in his Church, are invested with authority to prevent the entrance of the unworthy; to exercise salutary discipline upon offending members; and to exclude the contumacious and impenitent.

I. It belongs to the officers of the Church, to prevent the admission of unworthy persons to her fellowship.

We cheerfully and readily recognize the obligation of our Saviour's command, "Go ye, therefore, and make disciples of all nations." We acknowledge it to be the sacred duty of the Christian ministry to preach the Gospel to all, to inculcate upon men universally, the duty of believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, and to make known to them the encouraging and gracious promise, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." We rejoice in the new and animating prospects furnished by the favour of Providence, for the promulgation of the glad tidings of salvation, to the remote and destitute. We rejoice to hear of multitudes, who having received Christian instruction, and having given credible evidence of faith and piety, are admitted into the bosom of the Church. We take pleasure in believing that exertions to evangelize the world will not cease, or be relaxed, whilst any portion of the human family remains estranged from the household of God. It is our joyful anticipation, as it is our constant prayer, that the righteous and benignant reign of Immanuel will soon extend over the whole earth, bless all the nations, and continue to the end of time.

It is lamentable, however, to observe how many, to whom the Gospel is published, remain unqualified for membership in the Church. Look upon the population of our cities, towns, and country at large; you will find immense numbers, who think so little of Christ and his salvation, that they have never been baptized in his name. They give no evidence that the message of heavenly grace has ever engaged their serious attention. They hear the Gospel, at least occasionally, and witness the solemnities of our holy religion; yet they show an utter aversion to the sacred obligations and duties of the Christian profession. We deeply deplore, whilst we state, the melancholy fact. We lament the insensibility, and criminal apathy, of so many who hear the Gospel; and we pray that the Holy Spirit, by his efficacious influence, may incline the hearts of men universally to hear, believe, and obey the words of eternal life.

But are the doors of the Church to be opened wide for the reception of all who, for any reason, may seek to enter? Is every restriction, upon the indiscriminate and unlimited admission of members, to be removed? Most assuredly not. In every age, and in every condition of the Church, some corrupt and vicious men have been willing to assume the name and profession of Christianity; and even to undertake the sacred functions of the Christian ministry. To the officers of Christ's kingdom it belongs to judge of the qualifications of applicants for admission; and fidelity to their Lord requires them to prevent the entrance of the ignorant, the profane and licentious. To admit the wicked and irreligious to the privileges of Church membership, would be a grievous violation of the command of Christ, "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs." "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God:" he cannot

understand the nature, perform the duties, or participate in the enjoyments, of the kingdom of grace upon earth, or of the kingdom of glory in heaven. "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men." Under every dispensation of the Church, God commands his ministers to "put a difference between holy and unholy, between unclean and clean."

The existence and purity of the Church require this discrimination. The promiscuous introduction of men of every character would destroy its essential and appropriate nature. Of whom does the Church consist? of them certainly who know and believe the truth; who give evidence of repentance for sin, union to Christ, and conformity to his image; who, being delivered from the delusions and corruptions of this world, manifest by a life of holiness that they are partakers of the divine nature, and of the righteousness of our Lord Jesus; who, by a diligent obedience to the commands and institutions of Christ, and by the sanctifying operations of his Spirit, are made meet for the inheritance of the saints in glory. Are the ignorant and erroneous, the profligate and profane, to be received into such a society as this? Nothing so incongruous would be tolerated in any other case. Would you admit the declared enemies of your country, and of all the liberal and equitable institutions, to the rights and privileges of citizens? Would any society receive to its fellowship men whose opinions and conduct are in manifest hostility to its primary design and fundamental principles? It surely requires no labour to prove, that the unholy and profane are not qualified for membership in a community whose grand

characteristic is holiness to the Lord; that the enemies of truth and righteousness ought not to be admitted into the Church, to dishonour the doctrine of Christ, and the profession of his name.

The officers of the Church are required to guard with assiduous care against the admission of the ignorant and unsanctified. From the desire prevalent, in most Christian communities, to increase their numbers, to extend their influence, and to gratify those who evince a prepossession in their favour, there is reason to fear that sufficient caution will not be employed to exclude the unworthy; and especially to prevent the sacred ministry from being profaned, by the conceited novice, the corrupt worldling, and the equivocating heretic. Hence the danger of filling the Church with men who neither know nor obey the truth, and of admitting to the sacred office those who have never learned the distinguishing doctrines of Christianity. There is cause for apprehension, where large numbers are hurried into the Church, upon the feeling and impulse of a moment; and many are added to its ministry, who are not at the pains of concealing their hostility to its peculiar and acknowledged principles.

It is undeniable, that within a few years a great change has taken place in the theological opinions of many of the teachers of our denomination. Are we expected to find, in every Presbyterian minister, a lover and defender of the venerable standards of our Church; one who zealously inculcates upon the people the doctrines which they contain, and which we believe to be faithfully derived from the Holy Scriptures. Now it has become no uncommon thing to hear of Presbyterian ministers sneering at the Confession and Catechisms of the Presbyterian Church; pronouncing

the very idea of a creed an absurdity; and, as might be expected, industriously setting forth a system of opinions as different from that of our standards as darkness from day. This state of things the revered fathers of our Church could scarcely have anticipated. The language of the standards which they adopted, is remarkable for precision and perspicuity. It is not possible to mistake the system of doctrine which they were designed to teach. Could it be thought, therefore, that any would seek a connexion with a Church, without believing her articles of faith? Might it not have been supposed, that every feeling of candour, honour, and uprightness, would deter men from solemnly professing to receive and adopt a system of doctrine which they do not believe, and which they consider themselves required to contradict and repudiate?

Our Presbyteries are bound to watch, with vigilance and fidelity, against the entrance of unsound men into the ministry. Whatever might have been anticipated, the history of the Church abundantly shows, that the matter cannot be safely left to the honour and conscience of the applicants themselves. If permitted, every kind and degree of error will gain admission into the Church. The doctrines of our standards will be forgotten, or calumniated; and purity and peace will be estranged from our borders. A tide of innovation and error, will sweep away all the landmarks of truth and order, erected in the early and purer times of the Church. As watchmen on the walls of Zion, it belongs to us to see that no enemy, whatever disguise he may put on, be permitted to enter our gates; as constituted guardians of the public welfare, we must beware of committing the direction of affairs to men who are hostile to our best interests. A man who is not cordially and thoroughly at-

tached to our system, ought not to obtrude himself upon us; and if he should attempt it, the Presbytery must abhor the thought of participating in the guilt of his prevarication and falsehood.

The present distracted state of the Presbyterian Church is owing, in a great degree, to the facility with which men of almost every shade of opinion have been admitted to preach among us. Some Presbyteries, it is said, have dispensed with the Constitutional questions required to be proposed to every candidate at his ordination; and others have not considered opinions, the most remote from our standards, a sufficient cause for rejection. Perhaps I may say with truth, that none have been duly alert in guarding the entrance to the holy ministry. We are now suffering the deplorable consequences of such unconstitutional and culpable remissness.

Some departures from truth are far more pernicious in their nature and tendency than others: against such it becomes us to guard with special care and diligence. An error may be of such a nature, and lead to such consequences, as to be incompatible with a sound and scriptural system of divinity. Any material error in respect to the all important doctrine of atonement, is of this character. Such an error, we hesitate not to say, is committed, whenever the atonement of Christ is represented as *indefinite* in regard to its objects; and as not insuring the salvation of those for whom it was made. Indeed it is nothing better than an abuse of language, to denominate any thing an *atonement*, which does not make an effectual satisfaction for the offences of him or them, in behalf of whom it is offered; and insure, as its consequence, the reconciliation of the parties previously at variance. The inconceivable suffer-

ings of our Lord Jesus Christ may be called an *exhibition*, or a *display*, or a *symbolical representation*, or whatever else you please, except *an atonement*; but *an atonement* they can with no propriety be denominated, if they did not fully satisfy the divine justice for the sins of men, and make certain the reconciliation with God, of all those for whom the atoning Redeemer became the substitute and surety.

An error here never remains solitary; it will soon be found in company with a denial of the doctrine of original sin, of the vicarious nature, altogether, of the sufferings of Christ, of the imputation of his righteousness to believers for justification, and of the necessity and reality of the Spirit's operations, in regenerating and sanctifying the soul. Did time permit, it would be easy to show how all these pernicious errors are naturally, and almost unavoidably, connected with each other; but it is enough to know that in fact they are usually seen associated. How extremely hazardous is it then, to admit any man who holds one of them, to be a teacher in the Presbyterian Church? One of these errors admitted, we must expect to find a host of others following in its train.

Let those, then, who are appointed to guard the avenues to Church membership, and to the office of the ministry, justly appreciate the high and responsible trust reposed in them. Let them beware of receiving into the Church of Christ the ignorant, the scandalous and irreligious; let them beware of admitting to the office of teaching and ruling in the Church, men who, they have reason to believe, do not accord in judgment or practice with its authorized principles. An increase of numbers will be a poor compensation for the introduction of unsoundness and irreligion into the Church.

2. The officers of the Church are required to exercise discipline upon offending members. In every society, whose members are imperfect, discipline is necessary. If one of your children do wrong, you admonish, reprove, or chasten him, as the case may require. In seats of learning, from the village school to the dignified university, the disorderly are reclaimed, and a healthful state of the institution maintained, by the application of suitable discipline. The Lord Jesus has appointed discipline as the means of restoring his erring children, and of promoting the purity and welfare of his Church. Warnings, admonitions, rebukes, and even separation from the communion of the saints, are to be employed for these purposes.

In the reception of members to the Church, the ministers and elders are not exempt from mistake. Notwithstanding the utmost caution, some unworthy persons gain admission; and even the real disciples of Christ are imperfect, and liable to error and transgression. In what manner then shall the honour of Christ, and the authority of his laws, be vindicated? How shall the erring disciple be restored, and the Church preserved from the contamination of the wicked? The Scriptures point out discipline as the proper means. No discredit can be incurred by the Church from the misconduct of its members, if the salutary rules of discipline be promptly applied. No encouragement is given to transgress, if there be reason to expect that transgression will be followed by adequate correction.

3. The rules of the Church possess the power to exclude the contumacious and impenitent. If every means employed to reclaim an offending member be found insufficient, he must be separated from the communion of the Church. The Scriptures prefixed to this discourse leave

no room for doubt on this subject: "Put away from among yourselves that wicked person." "A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject." Other quotations might be made to the same purpose. "If he neglect to hear the Church, says our Saviour, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican;" an apostle commands the Thessalonians to "withdraw themselves from every brother that walketh disorderly." Every society must possess power to exclude those whose membership is found incompatible with the chief design of the institution. The Church can be no exception to this. Its members associate upon the basis of certain recognized principles, and for the attainment of certain important ends. If the connexion of any one be found to infringe these principles, and to frustrate these ends, it is within the province of the constituted authorities of the Church to declare him to be no longer in its fellowship. The exercise of this power, when a proper occasion calls for it, is an indispensable and very important duty. However unpleasant to our feelings, a due regard to the command and glory of God, to the purity, peace and welfare of the Church, requires that we should not shrink from the performance of it.

But here the question will arise, by whom is the discipline of the church to be administered? Who are authorized to judge of the qualifications of members, to apply the laws of Christ for the correction of what is wrong in them, and to exclude the scandalous and contumacious offender? I have no disposition to enter into an argument in relation to ecclesiastical polity; whether the government of the Church belongs, by divine right, to pastors in conjunction with ruling elders, or to the congregation at large. You are satisfied with the doctrine and practice of the Presby-

terian Church on this subject. You have no disposition to renounce the system approved by Calvin and Knox, and by the able and pious founders of our religious community. The Waldenses, those famous witnesses for God and truth, retained the simple and scriptural form of Presbyterianism, when all the world was corrupted by the abominations of the Romish hierarchy. Under the influence of this system, the most glorious triumphs of the Reformation were achieved. When strictly maintained, it has ever been found most effectual in checking the aberrations of heretics; in purifying the Church from error and licentiousness; and in promoting sound doctrine and pure religion.

Shall the degenerate Church of Geneva, the corrupted Presbyterian Churches of England, or even the present condition of our own Church, be adduced to prove that Presbyterianism is not adequate to prevent the entrance of baneful error, or the prevalence of pernicious practices? We deeply lament the degeneracy of churches planted and watered by the labours of Calvin, and Beza, and Turretin. We are grieved to learn that places of worship, dedicated to the honour of the Son of God, by the pious and orthodox Presbyterians of England, are polluted by the blasphemies of Socinianism. And we are no less grieved to learn that, in our own beloved community, opinions have gained a currency, which are more in harmony with the creed of Pelagius, than with that of the excellent men who founded our Church, or framed its standards.

Whilst we admit and lament these departures from the purity of the Gospel, we are far from conceding that they can be fairly imputed to any defect in the Presbyterian form of church government: or that the rules and discipline of Presbyterianism, if faithfully applied, would have been

found insufficient to prevent them. The noblest ship that ever floated on the bosom of the deep, must have her efficient commander, her able and faithful crew; if these be wanting, the ill-fated vessel will soon run upon the shoals, or be dashed against the rocks. The constitution and laws of the country may be wise and excellent; but if the administration become corrupt, and the execution of the laws be neglected, it is preposterous to suppose that the commonwealth can escape detriment.

If the discipline of the Church be relaxed, or wholly neglected; if no pains be taken to prevent the entrance of men whose adverse propensities and foreign attachments are notorious; if public teachers be permitted to declare themselves in opposition to the acknowledged doctrine and order of the Church, whilst the appointed guardians of her purity and peace make no effort to repress their presumption, and punish their treachery; ought it to be looked upon as a matter of astonishment, that the floodgates of error and delusion should be opened upon us, that orthodoxy should become a term of reproach, and a strict adherence to our standards be branded as illiberal and sectarian? If the majority of pastors and elders become corrupt or remiss, it cannot be expected that care will be taken to preserve inviolate the pure and scriptural doctrines of the Church, or to inflict deserved censure upon treachery and licentiousness. In such a state of things, corruption and error of every kind will not be slow in making their appearance.

But if, whilst the Church is substantially sound, whilst the pure doctrines of the Gospel are venerated, and the duties it enjoins generally practised, heresy and immorality show their hated front, there is no system of government

which possesses superior facilities for checking and extirpating them. A church session can act with incomparably greater promptness, decision, and energy, than the entire body of the congregation. Its members are, in general, more exempt from the influence of passions and prejudices, adverse to the right discharge of duty; they are less likely to be deceived by the wily arts of heresy, or the imposing pretensions of specious iniquity; and from their superior intelligence, and deeper sense of responsibility, they are better qualified, as well as more anxious, to do what is just and right.

The advantages of the Presbyterian organization for the support and defence of truth, and for the suppression of error, are great and obvious. The members of the Presbytery, after full examination, judge of the qualifications of the candidate for the ministry, and if they find him deficient in ability, soundness, or piety, they have the power, as it is their duty, to reject him. The avenue to the sacred office is, by this arrangement, guarded in the best possible manner.

To the Presbytery it also belongs to watch with solicitude over the reputation and conduct of all its members; to arrest those who abandon the safe course marked out by our standards, and launch into the sea of novelty and error; and to preserve the churches under their care from the contagion of wickedness and false doctrine. The happiest effects, it may be expected, will follow from a faithful adherence to our ecclesiastical standards, and a firm determination to assert their authority. It will be found that a decided movement in condemnation of erroneous opinions, will operate effectually to cool the ardour of heretical enthusiasts, and to check their presumptuous career into the wild regions of delusion and fanaticism.

To the higher judicatories, to our Synods and General Assembly, it pertains, to superintend the concerns of the Church more at large, to correct what is amiss in the lower courts, to defend the sacred cause of evangelical truth and piety, to guard the churches against the approaches of pestilent error and to devise and execute measures, for the more general prevalence of truth and holiness in the world.

Here, then, is a system of ecclesiastical government, harmonious, compact, energetic. According to it, the united wisdom and piety of the Church may be exerted for the correction of what is wrong in any part; and on the other hand, whatever is judged useful can, in an orderly and authoritative manner, be established for the common benefit of the whole. Whether we contemplate this system in theory or practice, or in regard to scriptural evidence and authority, we can see no reason why it may not compare to advantage with any other.

When the Lord Jesus organized his Church, he imparted the keys of the kingdom, not to all the people, but to the apostles whom he had chosen. And the apostles, acting by the authority of their Master, committed the power of government and discipline to the elders, whom they ordained in every city. The people having exercised their right of choosing, in the case of the seven deacons, were afterwards to obey, not to rule. The administration of ecclesiastical authority by the people at large, is an assumption, not countenanced in the New Testament.

The uses of discipline are various and important.

1. It is necessary to prevent the anger of God from resting on his Church; which must be the case, if sin be allowed in its members. The ancient Church were commanded to put a difference between the clean and unclean,

between the holy and unholy; and to remove far from them every cause of pollution and guilt. When they neglected to do so, they were soon visited with the manifestations of God's displeasure. The same obligation rests upon the New Testament Church. "Be ye holy; for I am holy." Sin, at all times, and wherever found, is offensive to the Divine Majesty. The wicked he reserves to the day of judgment, and perdition of ungodly men. He will then make it evident, that his forbearance is by no means inconsistent with the strongest disapprobation of sin, and an unchangeable determination to punish it. His chosen and redeemed people are, indeed, delivered from condemnation and the wrath to come. Yet, whilst in this life, they are liable to faults and imperfections. If, therefore, sin be allowed in them without admonition or correction, Christ will rebuke and chasten them; and if corrupt doctrines and practices be tolerated in the Church, he will come and fight against it, and remove its candlestick out of his place, except they repent. To avoid, therefore, or remove the Divine displeasure, discipline must be faithfully applied. The faults of God's children must be corrected, and the heretical and abominable must be excluded from the communion of the faithful.

2. Discipline is necessary to promote the sanctification of believers, and to reclaim them from what is offensive and sinful. For these important purposes, the ordinary dispensation of the word and ordinances are of great and indispensable utility. The ambassador of Christ must show unto the people their transgressions and sins; and by a faithful exhibition of the admonitions and reproofs of the Divine word, as well as by the sweet accents of the Gospel, he must call them to repentance and amendment. But if an

offending member be not reclaimed by the common ministrations of the Gospel, and if the private means enjoined by our Saviour have been used without effect, the Church must have recourse to discipline, properly so called. Public admonition, rebuke, suspension, or separation, must be employed as the case may require. If milder remedies be found insufficient, we must not neglect the use of the more severe. There is hope that the erring brother will be brought to wise reflection, and humble penitence. "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." Discipline, among its other uses, ought to be regarded as a means, appointed by our Lord for the recovery of his straying children. When, therefore, the conduct of any of the members requires the salutary correction of discipline, the rulers of the Church ought not to permit an ill-judged tenderness to lead them to withhold it.

3. Discipline is necessary to preserve the purity and peace of the Church. The greatest defections which have taken place, from the purity and simplicity of the Gospel, have proceeded from small beginnings; from deviations, slight at first, from the authorized language and approved customs of the Church. These, under the notion of *improvements*, the young and unstable are too often ready to adopt. If permitted to pass without animadversion, or rebuke, something more decisive, and still more dangerous, will soon follow. The standard doctrines of the Church will be

assailed; pernicious errors will be embraced and propagated; and licentiousness, and every enormity, will come in like a flood. Look at the degenerate Churches of the old and the new world; you will find that such has been the progress of things among them. No sound community becomes wholly corrupt at once. From slight beginnings, and by little and little, the most dreadful and ruinous apostacies have been brought about. We ought not, therefore, to account any departure from sound doctrine and evangelical practice, as void of danger. Some may, perhaps, in judging from the supposed greater light of the present age, and from the apparent piety of those who are given to change, consider our Church secure from the catastrophe which has befallen others. To such I would say, in the language of the apostle, "Your glorying is not good. Know ye not, that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out, therefore, the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump."

The peace of the Church will be endangered and destroyed, if discipline be neglected. Unless unscriptural innovations be discountenanced and suppressed by the judicial acts of the Church, disputes and distractions must be perpetual; at least, as long as there remains in the community any regard to truth and piety. Are we charged with disturbing the peace of the Church? There is no good reason why we should be discomposed under such an accusation. The charge applies with much more propriety to those who have given us sufficient cause to sound the alarm of danger; who have brought into jeopardy the doctrines and institutions which we are under the most solemn obligations to cherish and defend. Disturbers of the peace of the Church! Sweet peace! heavenly peace! much as we love thee, we are willing to dispense with thy presence, whilst a hostile banner waves over our Zion, and her bulwarks are assailed by

an invading foe. Whilst opinions and practices, unknown to our standards, and abhorrent to the judgment of the Church in every age, possess credit and currency within our ecclesiastical limits, we neither expect nor desire peace. Changes cannot be introduced into any religious community without producing disturbances and contentions. The evil, if these changes be unscriptural, must be charged upon those who attempt to introduce them. Opposition to them is matter of praise, not of censure. To preserve the tranquillity of the Church, therefore, and to promote its highest permanent welfare, the correction of errors and abuses by discipline is often indispensable.

4. Discipline is necessary to vindicate the honour of Christ and of religion, by separating from the Church whatever is offensive and scandalous. "Now, I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences, contrary to the doctrines which ye have learned, and avoid them." "Now, we command you brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly." What will become of the honour of Christ, the sacredness of the Christian profession, and the veneration due to the holy institutions of the Gospel, if the ignorant and heretical, the vicious and profane, be allowed to participate in the sacramental solemnities, and still more, in the functions of the sacred ministry? Before the world, the Church must put a difference between truth and error, between holiness and sin. By the authority of Christ, for the glory of his name, for the reputation of religion in the world, the licentious and disorderly, the blasphemer and the heretic, must be excluded from the fellowship of the saints.

Discipline, to accomplish its purposes, must be exercised

with tenderness, impartiality, and solemnity; and, when the case demands it, with promptness and vigour. The rules laid down in the constitution of the Church, in conformity with Scripture, must be scrupulously followed. There must be no appearance of personal hostility, or private revenge, or a disposition to seek an occasion for discipline. It must be evident that the officers of the Church, are influenced by upright intentions, and conscientious motives; by a solemn regard to the authority of Christ, and a sincere desire to promote the welfare of the Church, and of the offender himself. If the case be otherwise, if there be a manifest exhibition of passion and prejudice, of partiality and injustice, it would be vain to expect that discipline should produce a favourable impression upon the Church, or upon the world.

In this age of affected liberality, but of real licentiousness in religious belief, the ordinance of discipline is divested of much of the weight and solemnity which it ought to possess. It is not unfrequently contemned and set at defiance, by men who justly incur its inflictions. This cannot be done, however, without extreme peril. He that despises the discipline of the Church, despises the institution and authority of the Son of God. The impenitent and presumptuous offender, will find the sentence of the Church confirmed by the Supreme Judge, at the day of final account. "Whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained." The man who has fallen under the righteous censures of the Church, is bound to practise submission, humiliation, repentance, and amendment. If he do not, his abuse and contempt of this Divine institution, will aggravate his condemnation and punishment, when Christ shall judge the world.

It is not possible, perhaps, nor is it of importance, to mention every occasion upon which the exercise of discipline is proper and necessary. Whatever is proved to be wrong by the sacred Scriptures, and by the authorized standards of the Church, may, in certain circumstances, require the correction which discipline alone can furnish. It is the intention of discipline to encourage and promote every thing that is pure, and lovely, and of good report; to remove every stain and imperfection from the Christian character; and to banish from the Church every cause of offence, dishonour, and guilt. If any professor of religion be guilty of neglecting the worship of God, of profaneness, or Sabbath breaking; if he be grossly deficient in the performance of relative duties, if he be chargeable with fraud, falsehood, covetousness, malignity, or licentiousness; if he be intemperate, or a promoter of intemperance in others; he is certainly a proper subject for discipline. The private means for reclaiming offenders having been found insufficient, the Church must resort to public censure, or excommunication. The command and honour of God, the purity and tranquillity of the Church, the welfare of the offender himself, render the employment of discipline, in such cases, an imperative duty.

The discipline of the Church must be used, when occasion requires, to maintain and vindicate the truths of the Gospel, and to suppress heretical innovations.

The maintenance of evangelical doctrine, is of the highest possible importance. It is by the manifestation of the truth that God is glorified, the Church preserved and extended, sinners converted, and believers prepared for celestial blessedness. On the contrary, false doctrine tends necessarily to dishonour the divine perfections, to corrupt the

Church, and to ruin the souls of men. It is possible that error may be employed successfully in catching the attention and exciting the feelings of the ignorant; but after all, a counterfeit Gospel can produce nothing better than a counterfeit religion. We must be able to furnish more authentic proofs of the correctness of our opinions, than that they are adapted to arrest the attention, to alarm the fears, and to agitate the passions of the hearers. "To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." The transcendent value of truth will be in some measure appreciated, if we remember that it is only in connexion with it that God is pleased to exert his power, for the conversion, sanctification, and salvation of men. Beyond the limits of Christian instruction, there is no indication of divine influence descending to renew the nature of man, and to qualify him for the holiness of heaven. The history of the Church also shows, that a perversion or abandonment of the truth, is soon followed by an interruption of the refreshing showers of heavenly mercy. Surely, then, the Churches redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, have the highest interest in the preservation of the truths of the blessed Gospel; and no zeal, however ardent, no exertions, however strenuous, directed to this object, can be considered disproportionate to its importance.

It might perhaps have been thought that the exercise of discipline would, on no occasion, be necessary for the defence of the truth; that no man would seek to obtrude himself upon a community, whose religious faith was not in harmony with his own; and that no minister, of any denomination, would venture to contradict the established principles of the Society of which he is a member. But

these anticipations, however reasonable, are contradicted by ample experience, both of the past and the present. Too often has the Church been surprised and outraged, by finding her ministers acting in direct contravention to the obligations they assumed, and the professions which they made, at the time of their ordination.

Most of the communities into which the Church of God is divided, have published to the world a Confession of Faith, exhibiting the doctrines believed, and the rules practised among them. The design of this exhibition is to give information to all whom it may concern, of the principles upon which any particular association of professed Christians is founded; and to provide a common ground of agreement among the members of the same society. This conduct is frank, upright, and honourable. The world has a right to know the principles upon which any religious society is constituted. Concealment is disingenuous, illiberal, and a just ground of suspicion. How indeed can any thing deserving the name of a society exist, unless there be some basis of agreement, some principles which are recognized by all as true and important? In this there is no encroachment upon the rights of others. We have unquestionably the right of choosing our associates; of settling the rules of our intercourse, and the terms upon which we are willing to admit others to our fellowship.

Some professed Christians have indeed opposed all creeds and confessions of human composition. The Bible, say they, is our creed: and they speak, in no measured terms, of the presumption, folly, and danger, of introducing any other creed into the Church. The plan which they propose would answer every purpose, if all who profess to believe the Scriptures concurred in the same interpretation of

them. The profession of faith in the Bible would then secure an agreement, about the truths contained in the Bible. But this is so far from being the case, that we find every shade and variety of opinion, among men who equally profess to believe the Bible—from the pure doctrines of salvation, down to the rejection of all that is peculiar and essential to revealed religion. It is evident therefore, that this profession alone cannot secure sound doctrine in any Church, nor exclude the most destructive errors; that there can be no agreement, no harmony, among men differing so widely as they do, who are equally ready to make this profession.

In fact, every religious denomination have some standard of belief among them, besides the Bible; some creed, avowed or understood, which expresses their judgment respecting the chief articles of faith. Perceiving this to be the case, some object, not so much to a creed or confession, as to one so extended and particular as those are, which the churches have thought proper to adopt. The creed of the Church, say they, ought to be confined to a few simple principles, in which all Christians can unite. But here it is obvious to inquire, who shall ascertain these few simple principles, in which all Christians can unite? or rather how shall we settle the preliminary question, Who are Christians? Is there no difficulty in answering these inquiries, to the satisfaction of all who may be interested in them?

What remains, then, but that men, agreeing about the chief principles of religion, form themselves into a society upon the basis of this agreement, upon the profession of their common faith; and that they commit their principles to writing, for the information and satisfaction of all concerned. Heretical departures from the truths of the Gospel, gave occasion to the formation of creeds and confes-

sions; and the number of articles to which they are extended is regulated, in a great measure, by the number of errors to which men are exposed.

A few simple principles, however, do in reality determine the whole extent of the theological creed of every denomination of Christians. The details which fill up the volume, are either held in common by all, or are logically deduced from the cardinal principles of the system. The opposers of our Confession of Faith object, not so much to its details, as to its fundamental doctrines. They may profess to find fault with it as too minute, too particular, too far extended; but when they come to explain themselves, it is soon discovered that their hostility is directed against its *principal* doctrines, its *essential* characteristics. This will be apparent from an enumeration of some of the grand principles of our theological standards.

These venerable instruments teach the doctrines of divine predestination and eternal decrees, that "God hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass," and in particular, that "some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death." "Yet, so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established." See Confession of Faith, chap. iii. sec. i. iii. vii. Larg. Cat. 12.

They teach the complete representative character of Adam, "that the covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but for his posterity, all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him and fell with him, in his first transgression;" that in consequence of the imputation of Adam's sin, all men are

by nature in a state of condemnation, depravity, and helplessness, “utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good: so that having wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good, and being dead in sin, man is not able by his own strength to convert himself.”

They teach that “the Lord Jesus, the eternal Son of God, was made the Substitute and Surety of his people; that by his vicarious obedience and sufferings, he hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father, and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance, for all those whom the Father hath given unto him. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified and saved, but the elect only.”

They teach that believers are justified on account of the satisfaction and righteousness of Christ, imputed to them, and received by faith alone.

They instruct us to believe that effectual calling, or regeneration, is the work of God’s almighty power and grace, in which man is altogether passive; and that by the immediate, internal, and effectual operations of the Holy Spirit, believers are enlightened, sanctified, and sealed, to eternal redemption.

They show that holiness and good works are the proper fruit and evidence of eternal election, and that without them there can be no well-founded hope of everlasting life.

They instruct us, that all who are brought into a state of acceptance and sanctification shall, from the unchangeable love of God, the efficacy of the death and intercession of Christ, and the inhabitation of the Holy Spirit, certainly persevere to the end and be eternally saved.

These are some of the essential and characteristic princi-

ples of our religious system. If any man believe them, there is no danger of his quarrelling with our Confession of Faith; of his objecting to its extent, or the minuteness of its details. It is against what we deem the essential truths of Divine revelation, the very basis of our religious system, that the enemies of our Confession take exception. Before satisfaction could be given to them, we must cast away what we consider the chief excellence and glory of scriptural Divinity; we must change our system to a form as remote from pure Christianity, as the wanderings of the human imagination are from the infallible dictates of Divine inspiration.

In framing the standards of the Church, every reasonable allowance ought to be made for the weakness of the human understanding; and for the diversities of opinion which are unavoidable among men of independent minds. A determination ought not to be attempted of questions of no importance, or of doubtful disputation, concerning which there may be a difference among men who agree in the main points of Christianity. It is highly expedient, however, that every religious society should furnish an exhibition of the principal articles of their faith, and of the rules and practices prevalent among them. By these symbols of the Church, a bond of association, a basis of agreement and communion, is provided among the members; a fair and liberal disclosure is made to the world; and useful aids are furnished in subserviency to the Scriptures, for the instruction of believers and of their children.

But the most important ends of a Confession of Faith are not to be attained, unless it be strictly regarded by the community in which it is adopted. Will the creed of a Church indicate to the world the opinions of its members,

if every man allow himself an unlimited license in the reception and interpretation of theological doctrines? Can any harmony of judgment or sentiment exist in such a community? Is not the bond of union and fellowship virtually and necessarily broken, by such unwarrantable liberties?

We have often heard of such a state of things in the secularized Church establishments of Europe; of men embracing every opportunity to impugn the very doctrines which the standards of their Church pronounced true and sacred: and we have heard of it with amazement. We never considered it short of insincerity and treachery of the most malignant kind. What judgment, then, shall we form of the same conduct when found among ourselves? Shall we pronounce it a flagrant breach of faith, a scandalous dishonesty in the Churches of Europe, but quite innocent and reputable in the Presbyterian Church of America? It is not to be denied, that there are among us men who have embraced a scheme subversive of the known and established profession of the community to which they belong; who do not hesitate to use the language of disapprobation and contempt, when speaking of the doctrines, which, at their ordination, they solemnly declared to be agreeable to the Holy Scriptures. However this conduct may appear to others, to me, it seems an outrage upon the rights and feelings of their fellow members, a violation of the fundamental principle of the association, and a gross imposition upon the world.

It may indeed be alleged by these men, that the system of doctrine which they once professed to believe, has fallen far behind the improvements of the age; that new light has lately burst upon their astonished minds; and that it is unreasonable and impossible to cramp the expansive energies

of their original and powerful genius, by the framework of creeds and confessions.

If it be true, that the new light, of which they boast, has enabled them to detect the errors of all former times, and to make improvements in divinity far beyond the attainments of their fathers; if it be admitted, that their masterly intellects have proved the old system to be essentially erroneous, and that some new scheme is alone worthy of their high approbation, what is the consequence? What course of conduct would a due regard to sincerity and integrity dictate? A continuance in the Church, to contradict and vilify its acknowledged doctrines? Certainly not. Every manly and honourable sentiment, every principle of consistency and duty, requires them to withdraw from a community whose doctrines they think proper to repudiate, and attempt to bring into reproach. They may advance high pretensions to new light, and an improved system of theology; but these claims cannot be made whilst they retain their connexion with the Church, whose doctrines they reject, except at the expense of every title to fairness and honesty. We admire the ingenuousness of a man who, at every hazard, separates himself from a community, when dissatisfied with its principles; we detest the baseness which can convert office and standing, in any society, to the destruction of its vital interests. Such a course deserves the indignant rebuke of an offended community, and the severe disapprobation of all honourable men. Every religious denomination has an interest in stamping the mark of condemnation upon a procedure so remote from all fair and honourable dealing. The common sentiments of mankind pronounce it uncandid, offensive, and wrong. If any man disapprove the constitution of his Church, let him, be-

fore he permits himself to impugn it, renounce a profession which he knows to be neither cordial nor sincere.

It is well known that opinions are entertained in some portions of our Church, very different from what we are taught in our sound and scriptural standards. These differences are neither few nor unimportant. If adopted, they would be fatal to the venerable system of truth, which we have received from our fathers, and which we believe to be founded on the word of God. The covenant made with Adam, is exploded. The doctrines of redemption and justification are moulded into a form, in which we can discern scarcely a lineament of their former perfection and glory. The ability of fallen, sinful man, is maintained to be ample and universal; whilst the agency of the Holy Spirit is limited to the presentation of truth to the mind, by the external instrumentalities of the Gospel. These are some of the changes, which are so zealously recommended to our acceptance, and which are so confidently pronounced improvements in theology. When such innovations are attempted, the duty of all who know and love the truth, cannot be a matter of uncertainty. Has the Lord Jesus made us acquainted with the glorious and precious doctrines of his word? and can we be indifferent about their reception and success in the world? Shall we have no zeal for the suppression of baleful error? Shall we do nothing to discountenance a presumptuous and dishonest departure from the acknowledged doctrines of the Church to which we belong, by those, who, above all others, are bound to be faithful?

The attachment of the Presbyterian Churches of Scotland and Ireland to the genuine doctrines of their ecclesiastical standards, has proved to be powerful and most salutary. It has done much to purify these communities

from the pestilent influence of heresy. The former unsoundness of some of their ministers is well known: and nothing has contributed more to preserve those churches from total corruption and apostacy, than their firm adherence to their excellent and scriptural standards. A determination has been evinced, to assert the authority of the doctrines of the Church, and to compel the patrons of different schemes to seek their sphere of action elsewhere.

American Presbyterians! Here are examples worthy of your imitation. It is becoming and right to emulate the commendable fidelity and zeal of others, in behalf of the truth; and the happy success which has crowned the efforts of your transatlantic brethren, may well serve to stimulate your exertions. It is animating, it is delightful, to behold the noble stand taken by some of the British churches, in defence of truth, and in opposition to error and delusion. May we not hope, that at length the same spirit will be awakened in our Church; that a determination will be manifested to preserve inviolate the pure doctrines of Scripture and of our Confession; and that a state of things will soon exist, in which heresies, whether old or new, can no longer be avowed and propagated with impunity by men, who, to the sin of disseminating false doctrine, superadd that of contradicting their profession, and infringing their solemn engagements.

Nothing operates more powerfully to destroy the peace and prosperity of the Church, and to excite wrath, and strife, and every evil work, than heretical departure from the truths of the Gospel. Would it not be strange, if the guardians of the purity and welfare of the Church had no authority to arrest an evil so formidable and ruinous? The Scriptures recognize this authority; and not only so, they

enjoin its exercise as an indispensable duty. We are commanded to avoid, to reject, to cut off, those who corrupt and trouble the Church, by the propagation of false doctrine. We are not permitted to bestow upon them the least countenance, much less to receive them to our fellowship, or to retain them in it. "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds."

In the infliction of discipline, on account of error, the judicatories of the Church must be regulated by her established standards. We maintain, indeed, that the Scriptures are the supreme and ultimate rule of truth and duty, and that the subordinate standards of the Church ought to be framed in strict accordance with the suggestions of Inspiration. If they be not, they ought to be thrown aside, or corrected. But whilst the Confession of Faith retains its authority, no member of our community is permitted to appeal from its decision. It is the proper and immediate criterion of truth and error, in the Presbyterian Church. No man has a right to complain, if he be judged by the law under which he has placed himself. If he become dissatisfied with it, he is at perfect liberty to withdraw beyond the reach of its jurisdiction. We must pronounce that to be truth which accords with our standards, and that to be error which contradicts them.

The most consummate address has always been employed by the advocates of error, to cover their advance, and to screen themselves from deserved rebuke. At one time, you will find them attempting to bring forward their new divinity, during the heat and tumult of a religious awakening; at another time, they are seen

labouring to recommend it, by subtle argument and metaphysical reasoning. If one of these men be called to an account for his heretical opinions, he is found ready to defend himself with a world of *explanations*. He positively asserts, that he differs from you only in words, or in points not essential. He declares that he believes the same doctrines which others believe, and that he differs only in his explanation of them: although it is evident, that what he calls his explanation, is a flat contradiction of the doctrine. Much is heard of the spirit and improvements of the age, of new light, and more liberal ideas in religion; of the importance of being divested of prejudice and a servile dependence upon authority. It is enough to excite our amazement, if not our indignation, to see a youth whose attention has been directed to religious subjects only a few years, perhaps months, undertaking to depreciate the attainments of the Church in all former times; and to set himself in advance of the most learned and able divines which the world has ever known. But surely to talk about the improvements of the age, will not cover the arrogance and absurdity of such pretensions. Improvements of the age! Improvements in divinity! Has any new revelation been received from heaven? Can any important truth be named, to which the Church, in former ages, has been a stranger? Nothing of the kind. In what, then, consist the boasted improvements in divinity, of which we hear so much? I answer, in the revival of old and exploded errors, upon which the Church has long since, and repeatedly, placed the mark of reprobation. Our modern discoveries are derived, not from the lively oracles, but from the graves of Pelagius, Socinus, and other heretics.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, we call upon all

the members of our Church, deeply and solemnly to consider the present state of things among us. At no time in the history of our community, has the aspect of affairs appeared so dark and appalling. The tide of delusion and innovation has been advancing upon us with portentous impetuosity, threatening to sweep away all that we venerate as excellent, and lovely, and scriptural, in our doctrines and institutions. We beseech every Presbyterian, therefore, to awake to the dangers which threaten the purity, the peace, and the highest welfare of our denomination; and to repel every attempt which may be made, to set aside, or mutilate, the genuine and approved system which we at present enjoy. We ought to, and I hope we do, love and revere the established principles of our standards. We know that under their influence, our society has greatly prospered; and it should be our ardent wish, that they may be transmitted unimpaired to our children. How then can any be unconcerned, whilst many among us are labouring to bring them into disrepute, and to substitute another, and, in many essential respects, an opposite system, in their place? We entreat you, then, for your own sakes, for the sake of your children, for the regard you have for the honour of Christ, the advancement of truth, and the prosperity of the Church, to beware of giving encouragement, in any way, to the promulgation of notions unknown to our orthodox and scriptural Confession of Faith. The indignant rebukes of the churches, ought to meet every attempt to introduce another Gospel, in the place of that which you have learned from the revelation of Jesus Christ.

We call upon the ruling elders, the guardians of the purity and welfare of our churches, duly to reflect upon the high obligations which devolve upon them at this eventful juncture. Beloved brethren, it is your province and duty

to see that the people under your care be instructed in the pure doctrines of the word of God, and that the acknowledged principles of our Church be respected and maintained. It belongs to you to prevent, so far as your authority extends, the propagation of a system of opinions unknown to our standards, disowned by the Church of God in all past ages, essentially repugnant to the Holy Scriptures, and destructive to all true and scriptural religion. Much is expected from your firmness, your soundness in the faith, and your just sense of the duties which belong to your station. We look to you as most likely, under God, to sustain the cause of evangelical truth, and to arrest the tide of novelty and delusion, which, for some time past, has been advancing within our limits.

Ministers of the everlasting Gospel, we call upon you to exert the authority, which you have received from the Lord Jesus, in defence of the truth, and for the prevention of error, delusion, and discord, in the Churches. To you, especially, it pertains to provide that the people be fed with knowledge and understanding; and to see that the poison of heresy be not administered to them, instead of the bread of life. When men corrupt the Gospel, and distract the Church by their pernicious innovations, you are under obligation to stay the plague, and to restore the body to a sound state, by the use of discipline, the remedy which Divine wisdom has appointed. In the discharge of this high obligation, you are required, it is true, to act in the exercise of Christian meekness, forbearance, and kindness: but you must not permit a feeling of tenderness, or a dread of opposition and censure, to deter you from the performance of an indispensable, although an unpleasant duty. You may expect to incur odium, suspicion and reproach.

But, being actuated by a pure regard to the honour and command of God, the glorious truths of the Gospel, and the best interests of the Church, you can well endure them. To the sincerity and uprightness of your intentions, you will have a witness in your own hearts—you will have a witness in heaven. May the great Head of the Church give you light and direction in all things; and enable you, with fidelity and firmness, to stand for God and truth; and to resist the progress of unscriptural novelties, and the encroachment of mischievous errors.

And let us all, my beloved hearers, be assured that we possess a spiritual discernment of the excellence and glory of divine truth; and that the truth has made us free from the predominance of corrupt desires and affections. Unless we have come to Christ, in consequence of our having heard and learned of the Father; unless we are sanctified by the Holy Spirit through the truth, a mere speculative understanding of the doctrines of religion will not accomplish our salvation. Let us endeavour, by a life and conversation becoming the Gospel, to adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things, that when he shall appear, we may also appear with him in glory.