

THE OBLIGATION OF COVENANTS.

A DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED,

Monday, June 27, 1803,

AFTER THE DISPENSATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER,
IN
THE REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CONGREGATION, GLASGOW.

BY

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Brethren, I speak after the manner of men ; Though it be but a man's covenant ;
yet, if it be confirmed, no man disannulleth, or addeth thereto. GAL. iii. 15.
—But first give their ownelves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of
God. 2 Cor. viii. 5.

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A DISCOURSE.



NAHUM i. 15. *Behold upon the mountains the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; O Judah, keep thy solemn feasts, perform thy vows: for the wicked shall no more pass through thee; he is utterly cut off.*

The text is, *PERFORM THY VOWS.*

MAN is a dependant being. He has his existence from God; and every thing calculated to render life comfortable is derived from the same source, Acts xvii. 28. "For in him we live, and move, and have our being."—This dependence necessarily supposes obligation to that being from whom he holds his all. The rule whereby his relation to the Supreme Governor is regulated is the moral law. All its commands he is bound to obey. The substance of these is love to God and our neighbour. To assist in the fulfilment of these important requisitions, God has instituted various auxiliary means, in the diligent use of which, the end is more likely to be obtained. Among these we find *vowing* or *covenanting* unto God, solemnly enjoined by his divine authority, Psalm lxxvi. 11. "Vow, and pay unto the LORD your God."

Vowing and *covenanting* are, in scripture, often used indiscriminately. They both imply an obligation which the vower or covenanter, imposes upon himself, by his own solemn act. *Vowing*, however, may be considered as differing from *covenanting*, in this, that the former does not necessarily suppose more than one party coming under obligation; whereas the latter necessarily supposes two. With respect to religious obligations, these terms may be, and often are, used indiscriminately. In the constitution of the everlasting covenant, God has become a party, in all the religious obligations, into which he commands his people to enter. In this transaction, God the Father, representing the Trinity,

stood as one of the high contracting parties, bound by the solemnity of an oath, Heb. vi. 17, 18. where we are informed, that for evidencing the immutability of his counsel, and for the consolation of his people, "He confirmed it" (*the covenant*) "by an oath." Hence ALEIM (from ALE which signifies an oath) is a name assumed by the Trinity, whereby they represent themselves as bound under the obligation of an oath, to the performance of certain conditions, stipulated by covenant. In allusion to the eternity of the engagement on the part of the Trinity, it is predicated of them, previously to the creation. Hence the first mention of Deity in holy writ, is in the plural number, under the character of the *swearers* or the *covenanters*, Gen. i. 1. In the beginning ALEIM, the *swearers* or the *covenanters* created the heavens and the earth. God the Son, as mediator, representing elect sinners, stands as the other party. He, in their name, has fulfilled the conditionary part of the covenant, and sealed it with his precious blood. When the representees covenant with God, they only say Amen, to what Jesus has done, and solemnly engage in the strength of grace, to a conscientious performance of all commanded duties. Hence all these engagements of the people of God, are grafted upon the mediatory fulfilment of the covenant of grace, and every duty unto which they engage, respects the law only as a rule of life in the Mediator's hand. All evangelical obedience must be considered as flowing from, and evidential of, a vital relation to the covenant Head. Hence Isai. lvi. 6. God calls it a taking hold of *his* covenant. This new covenant instrument, therefore, is already subscribed by the Trinity, and *vowing*, or solemnly binding ourselves, to the performance of what it requires, is only appending our signature to that eternal deed. Vowing, therefore, is only another name for covenanting, and consequently these words shall be used indiscriminately, in the following discourse.

The matter of which covenants ought to consist, is, every duty which God requires of man. And as the solemn feasts of the Mosaic economy constituted a considerable part of

the Jewish ritual, they are figuratively put for the whole; and the nation called to the observance of them, as duties unto which they were bound, not only by the command of God, but also by their own covenant-obligation. Hence in the words of the text, "O Judah keep thy solemn feasts, perform thy vows."

In the prosecution of this subject it is intended,

I. To make some preliminary observations.

1. Jehovah, Father Son and Spirit, is the Supreme Governor of the universe, Rev. xix. 6. "—The Lord God omnipotent reigneth."

2. All power, whether physical or moral, is naturally, necessarily, and independently in him.

3. He has delegated a subordinate, physical power to his creatures, in the different parts of his vast dominions, to perform all necessary functions, in the spheres assigned them. To rational beings, he has delegated, besides, a moral authority. This is common to angels and men. Our business at present, however, is only with those of our own kind. To them he has given power in the various departments of life, to perform acts of self-government corresponding to their respective relations. We find the exercise of this deputed authority, commended by the Spirit of God, Prov. xvi. 32. "—He that *ruleth* his spirit, is better than he that taketh a city." In the exercise of his power, every adult may lawfully engage, bind, and oblige himself, by promise, vow, oath, or covenant, to act as becomes one in his circumstances.

4. The subjects of this delegated power are, *first*, persons or individuals, in their personal or individual capacities: *second*, corporations or societies, in their corporate or social capacities. As in the human body there are various members fitted for the performance of various functions, according to the laws of their natural organization, all subordinate to the good of the whole: so in a corporation, there are various individuals, engaged in different pursuits, organized into a corporate capacity, regulated by laws, subservient to the mutual interest and advantage of the whole society. Thus the apostle, 1 Cor. xii. 12. "For as the body

is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ." In the last clause of this verse, Christ mystical, or the church, is represented as being such a corporation. Moreover, in Eph. i. 23. the Church is expressly styled "His body."

5. This delegated authority cannot interfere with the obligation of the moral law. It would be impious and absurd to suppose that God gave men a law, suspended his eternal happiness or misery upon the observance or violation of it, and at the same time authorized him to violate it, and wage war against the throne of the Omnipotent! See the words of the Divine Legislator, Deut. xii. 32. "What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it."

6. As no command of God can increase that infinite authority which he has in himself; so no obligation, under which a rational being can lay himself, can increase the infinite obligation of the divine law, or make a moral duty of itself more obligatory than it was before. We cannot make our natural relation to the Supreme Governor more intimate than it is already; consequently we cannot draw the ties of the rule which regulates that relation closer than God has made them: yet all lawful engagements have a super-added, voluntary self-obligation in them, rendering the omission of duty, and the commission of sin more criminal than otherwise they would have been.

7. In the law of God we find the institution of covenanting. This law requires of us the performance of certain duties. It has appointed means for facilitating that performance. It requires the diligent use of these. And among others, it requires solemn covenanting with God as a noted mean of holiness and sanctification of life, Psalm lxxvi. 11. "Vow, and pay unto the Lord your God." The obligation of the divine law or the morality of the duty is not, however, the formal reason of covenant obligation. It is the personal act of the covenantor, which constitutes the formal reason, why a duty when sworn to, is binding as

a covenant duty. Were the morality of the duty the reason of covenant obligation, then all mankind would be formally covenanters, because the reason extends unto all, in as much as the moral law binds every man. Thus covenanting would be indeed a mere cypher, and carry no obligation in it at all; for it does not affect the morality of the duty, that being the same before as after covenanting.

8. There is therefore in covenants an intrinsic obligation, distinct, though inseparable from the obligation of the moral law. Every moral obligation is inseparable from the moral law: moral obligation respects us as moral subjects: as such the moral law recognizes us in every relation in which we stand, as bound by every obligation under which we come, and requires the performance of every duty to God, to society, and to ourselves. But though this obligation is inseparable from that of the divine law yet it is distinct from it, and belongs to the very essence of a covenant. Had a covenant no intrinsic obligation in itself, the law of God could never require us to pay it. Pay what? Payment supposes that a debt has been contracted. But what is it? According to the hypothesis it is nothing!!! Would not this be trifling with the divine law? But this suggests a

II. HEAD, which shall consist in an investigation of the distinction which exists between the intrinsic obligation of a covenant, and the previous obligation of the moral law. And

1. God in his law binds us by his own supreme authoritative command, Deut. xii. 32. "What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it." Here God as the Supreme Legislator, binds us to the performance of duty—But in our vows we bind ourselves by our own voluntary engagement, See Numb. xxx. throughout. They are called *our* vows, *our* covenants, *our* oaths, &c. because *we* make them in the exercise of that delegated authority which we hold of God, the Supreme Governor, to be employed by us, in subordination to his glory.

2. Both the matter and manner of covenants ought to be candidly examined, and the rectitude thereof clearly ascer-

tained, 1 Thess. v. 21. we are commanded to "prove all things." This examination ought to be conducted by the moral law, the touch-stone of all equity, Isai. viii. 20. "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, *it is because there is no light in them.*"—But to examine that which we *know* to be the *law of God*, that we may determine whether it be right or wrong, would be the greatest presumption. To question its rectitude would be to arraign the Governor of the universe at the tribunal of carnal reason.

3. The divine law binds all men to complete perfection in holiness, be they ever so incapable of it. It would be absurd to suppose that their inability, into which they criminally plunged themselves, should set aside God's right to perfect obedience from them as his moral subjects. Thus by their wicked apostacy from God, they would have procured an indulgence to violate his law with impunity. The law still binds to perfection. Hence the command of our Lord, Matth. v. 48. "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father who is in heaven is perfect."—But vows bind only to a conscientious performance of that which is in our power. Neither may any man bind himself to complete perfection, for this would be binding himself to what he knew he could not perform, Eccl. vii. 20. "*For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good and sinneth not.*" Would it not be actual perjury for a man to swear to do what the scripture declares he cannot do? No vow, therefore, ought to be made, which cannot fully be kept, by the assistance of the grace of God, in our present imperfect state: Psalm xliv. 17. the church declares "All this is come upon us; yet have we not forgotten thee, neither have we dealt falsely in thy covenant." Now had covenants bound to complete perfection, neither the church, nor any individual in any period of the world could ever, with propriety, have made such a declaration.

4. The divine law binds to perfection for ever. It will be the rule of rectitude, eternally regulating our relation to God the moral Governor, Psalm cxi. 7, 8: "All his com-

commandments are surer. They stand fast for ever and ever." The sum and substance of them, viz. love to God and our neighbour, will continue obligatory even in the mansions of immortality.—But vows are binding only in this present life. They are intended as auxiliaries in promoting holiness and sanctification. But as at death these arrive at perfection, in the realms of bliss, auxiliary means are unnecessary. In hell they can be of no utility. From thence, there is no redemption, Eccl. xi. 9. "—In the place where the tree falleth there it shall be."

5. The divine law is the *rule* of action. By it all our thoughts, words and actions are to be regulated. Hence, Psalm cxix. 96. we are informed that the "commandment is exceeding broad." Vows and covenants are only a *bond* whereby we solemnly engage to adhere to this unerring rule. We owe a debt of obedience unto God. His law is the rule by which the payment is to be regulated as well as the register wherein the various items of the debt are specified. Our covenants are the bonds wherein we recognize the obligation and solemnly engage to be conscientious in paying it. Thus says the Psalmist, Psal. cxix. 106. "I have sworn, and I will perform it, that I will keep thy righteous judgments."

6. The divine law binds all men, whether they will or not. All men are the moral subjects of heaven's mighty Ruler. They can no more evade the obligation of his law, than they can elope from his dominions—But vows and covenants bind only such as enter into them, either personally or by representation. I suppose the obligation of vows and covenants, upon such as enter into them personally, will be generally admitted. It remains therefore in the

III. HEAD, to prove the transmission of the obligation of religious covenants to posterity, or those who enter into them representatively. In doing this we shall select some of the scripture passages which establish the point most clearly.

1. We find posterity recognized in the transaction between God and Jacob, in Beth-el, Gen. xxviii. 13. where the good old patriarch, travelling to Padan-aram, in the visions of the night, had a remarkable interview with God.

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He engages to give unto Jacob and his seed all the land of Canaan. More than a thousand years from that time, this engagement is pleaded by his posterity, as having been made with them. Hos. xii. 4. In allusion to this transaction, they say, "He found him" (Jacob) "in Beth-el, and there he spake with us." There he covenanted with us in the booms of our father Jacob.

2. We have another remarkable instance of the transmission of covenant obligation to posterity, in Deut. v. 2, 3. "The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. The LORD made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, *even with us, who are all of us here alive this day.*" There are several things connected with this passage, peculiarly deserving notice.

(1.) The covenant here alluded to, was made about eight or nine weeks after Israel's departure from Egypt. Compare Exod. xii. 6. with xix. 1.

(2.) It is now the eleventh month of the fortieth year, since they began their journey, Deut. i. 1. They are in the plains of Moab by Jordan near Jericho, attending to the rehearsal of the law.

(3.) All who had actually and personally for themselves entered into this covenant are now dead save three, viz. Moses, Caleb and Joshua, Num. xxvi. 64, 65. "But among these there was not a man of them whom Moses and Aaron the priest numbered, when they numbered the children of Israel, in the wilderness of Sinai. For the LORD had said of them, They shall surely die in the wilderness. And there was not left a man of them, save Caleb the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua the son of Nun."

(4.) All the persons now addressed, save Caleb and Joshua, must either be such as were minors at the making of this covenant, and so not able to engage for themselves; or such as were born after that period. Yet mark how Moses addresses them. He declares, the LORD made not this covenant with our fathers, that is, with our fathers only, but also with *us, even with us who are all of us here alive this day.* Can words be more explicit in demonstrating the transmission of covenant obligation to posterity?

3. We have another example of the same kind full in point, Deut. xxix 10—15. which respects the renovation of the Sinaic covenant. Here Moses addresses the whole congregation. “Ye stand this day, all of you before the Lord your God; your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, *with* all the men of Israel, Your little ones, your wives, and thy stranger that *is* in thy camp, from the bower of thy wood unto the drawer of thy water; That thou shouldest enter into covenant with the Lord thy God, and into his oath, which the Lord thy God maketh with thee this day,”

To this important duty they are exhorted, from the consideration, that it would be an excellent mean of establishing them in the land whither they went. “Neither,” saith he, “with you only do I make this covenant and this oath; but *with* him that standeth here with us this day before the Lord our God, and also with *him* that *is* not here with us this day.” The covenant is here made with persons of three different descriptions. One of them is addressed or spoken to. “Neither with *you* only,” &c. intimating that the covenant was made with *them* but not exclusively: others are comprehended. Two descriptions are spoken of. One of these is present, represented by the words, “Him that standeth here with us,” &c. which evidently point out minors, who were yet incapable of covenanting for themselves. The other is absent, namely, “*Him* that *is* not here with us this day,” This could have no reference to any of the Israelites then in existence, as they were all present. It must therefore include posterity, yet to be begotten, together with all future accessions to their community, of those *then* considered strangers and aliens from the common-wealth of Israel. With them, Moses informs us the covenant was made, as well as with those who *actually* entered into it, in the plains of Moab.

4. Another instance, in which posterity is recognized in covenant obligation, is found in Josh. ix. 15. This covenant was made between the children of Israel, and the Gibeonites. Between four and five hundred years after that

time, the children of Israel are visited with a very severe famine, in the days of David, 2 Sam. xxi. 1. And it is expressly declared by the LORD that "*It is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites.*" And at the same time, ver. 2. that very covenant is recognized, and the breach of it stated, as being the formal reason of the Divine displeasure. Now, had it not been for this covenant, the extirpation of the Gibeonites would not have been imputed to Israel as a thing criminal; for they were comprehended in the Canaanitish nations, which God had commanded them to root out.

It may here be thought singular, seeing the LORD had expressly forbidden Israel to make any league with the inhabitants of the land of Canaan, that, notwithstanding, when they sinfully entered into covenant with them contrary to his command, this deed should be held valid by God, and they punished for the violation of it.

Perhaps this difficulty may be solved, by distinguishing the commands of God, into moral *natural* and moral *positive*. The former, God commands, because they are necessarily right, and their contrary inconsistent with the perfections of his nature. The latter are right, because God commands them. For any thing we know, they flow from his arbitrary will, and, had it pleased him, commands different or contrary would have been equally right. These commands, of course, he may reverse whenever he chooses. God's moral subjects have no right of this kind. They are bound to obey every one, even the least of his commandments. The violation of them is highly criminal. Neither ought we to come under any obligation to do what they forbid. But if any man, or community of men, should ignorantly engage to do what is contrary to a command which is only moral *positive*, provided God recognizes the deed, the person or persons are bound, however criminal they were in coming under the obligation. This we presume was the situation of things, in the point before us. Israel was criminal in entering into a league with the Gibeonites, contrary to the command of God. But there was nothing, in the matter

of this deed, inconsistent with the divine perfections, or contrary to the moral natural law of God. He could never recognize or sanction an oath, whereby his subjects would be bound to act inconsistently with his divine attributes.

5. Another passage of scripture full in point is found in Jer. xi. 10. God brings a charge against his people in these words. "The house of Israel, and the house of Judah have broken my covenant, which I made with their fathers." Now it would be inconsistent to suppose, that, God would charge any with breach of covenant obligation, except those who had really covenanted; but he charges the house of Israel, and the house of Judah, with breach of covenant obligation; therefore they had really covenanted. But the covenant was "made with their fathers," and yet they are considered as really bound, as if it had been actually entered into by themselves.

6. This doctrine is proved also by infant baptism. It would be foreign from the point in hand, to enter upon a probation of the propriety of baptising infants. This at present I take for granted. To those who admit it, the argument will have the same force, as if it had been proved.

Our Westminster Divines very justly observe that "Baptism seals our ingrafting into Christ,—and engagement to be the Lord's." Baptism, like circumcision, is a seal of the righteousness of the faith. Rom. iv. 11. But seals are confirmatory of the deeds to which they are appended, and necessarily involve an obligation. Now when the person baptised, in infancy, comes to maturity he is either bound agreeably to the tenor of the obligation, or he is not. If he is bound, whence does his obligation arise? Not from his own act, for he was merely passive in the whole matter. It must arise from the connexion established by divine institution, between him and his parent in this particular act. Between the parent and the child there is a representative identification, so that, whatever is *actually* done by the father in this representative capacity, is *virtually* done by the child, and thus the deed of the one becomes obligatory upon the other.—But supposing the child is not bound, when he arrives at

maturity, then his baptism in infancy was useless. It was a mere form and cypher. He wants what was essential to the ordinance, viz. obligation to resist the devil, the world and the flesh, and to be for Christ alone. He ought now to be baptized, as having never before received this holy ordinance.

7. The truth of this doctrine may be further illustrated from the common practice of *wills*, or testamentary deeds among men. By these the heirs of the testator are bound. It may be here objected, that the example is not to the point, because the legatees are bound only in consequence of their coming into the possession of the deceased's inheritance, but should they disclaim all interest in the estate, the obligation would not extend to them. Be it so, Then it will at least follow, that those who choose to enter upon the religious inheritance of their ancestors, are bound by their deeds. But is it a mere optional thing, whether they receive the inheritance or not? In whatever our ancestors erred, their deeds could neither bind themselves nor us. But, so far as they were right, we are bound to enter upon the inheritance, and endeavour to transmit it, with all possible improvements to posterity. See Psalm lxxviii. 1.—Having thus endeavoured to prove the transmission of covenant obligation to posterity, it may be proper in the

IV. HEAD, to inquire into the reason of this obligation. How does it come, that a man is bound by a deed, done a thousand years before he was in existence?

1. God will have it so. It is fixed by his divine appointment, Psalm lxxvi. 11. He commands his people to enter into covenant. "Vow, and pay unto the Lord your God." And, in the preceding head of this discourse, we have endeavoured to prove that God considers posterity bound, by the covenants of their ancestors. Though we could assign no other reason than the divine authority, this would be sufficient. God has a right to appoint any ordinance in his house that he thinks proper. We have no right to be curious about the reason of *this*, more than about any of his other institutions, unless he is pleased to tell us. But we can give other reasons.

2. Another reason arises from the permanency of the subject coming under obligation. It was already hinted, that the subjects of delegated power were, *first*, persons in their personal capacities: and *second*, corporations in their corporate capacities. For distinction sake, we shall denominate the former a *physical*, and the latter a *legal* individual.

Suppose the first has come under the obligation of a personal covenant, binding him to a conscientious performance of all commanded duties, though his system be daily losing and gaining, both in a corporeal and mental point of view, agreeably to the laws by which his physical constitution is regulated, yet he still continues the same individual, and consequently lies under the same obligation to duty. All the accessions, which his body and mind are constantly receiving, are still enlisted in the service of Jesus. The moral law recognizes him as bound to exercise every acquirement of body and mind, in subserviency to the religion of Messiah. Through all his changes and vicissitudes, his personal identity continues, and consequently his personal obligation.

This holds equally true with a corporation or *legal* individual. It is constantly gaining and losing constituent members, but still remains the same corporation, though not even one of those who were its original members continue to exist. Such *legal* individuals are not chimerical things. God himself has instituted them. The whole human family is one great corporation. It existed in Adam. To him the charter was given in the name of all his posterity, Gen. ii. 17. All are born under its influence, and subjected to all its requisitions. The language of its sanction is recorded Gal. iii. 10.—“Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.” At present this is all the inheritance of its constituent members; for God has concluded all under sin. Rom. iii. 10. “There is none righteous, no, not one.”

Out of the shattered fragments of this old corporation, God has organized a new one. This is his church. Her charter is the everlasting covenant, the first enunciation of which, we have Gen. iii. 15. “It shall bruise thy head, and

thou shalt bruise his heel." The permanency of this corporation is secured by the stipulation of the everlasting covenant, Isai. liii. 11. "He shall see of the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied." And Psalm lxxii. 5. its duration is guaranteed by the promise of the Father, "They shall fear thee, as long as the sun and moon endure, throughout all generations." The indestructibility of this corporation being thus established, it follows, that every constitutional obligation, under which it laid itself, to the performance of duties, in their nature moral, still binds this permanent society, in the same manner as a physical individual is bound, by a personal covenant, to God, as long as he lives. Every thing in the Jewish covenants, of this description, viz. in its nature moral, and not belonging to their ceremonial, ritual or judicial policy, still continues obligatory on the Christian church, in all its multiplied ramifications. The corporation is the same. The charter is the same. The Governor the same. The administration has never experienced any interregnum. The temporary institutions, whereby Jesus was adumbrated under the Old Testament, have been abrogated, the shadows have given way to the substance, and the types to the anti-type. But the corporation is indestructible. It is now the same church that was in Egypt, and that travelled through the wilderness. The Christian church becomes the seed of Abraham, and is entitled to all the privileges of the Abrahamic covenant, Gal. iii. 29. "If ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." This idea of continuity of the church, under the Old and New Testament dispensations, is beautifully illustrated, Rom. xi. 17. Here the continuity of the church is introduced under the emblem of a tree, having first natural, and secondly ingrafted branches. It is still the same tree, though the former be replaced by the latter. "And if some of the branches be broken off, and thou, being a wild olive-tree, wert grafted in amongst them, and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the olive-tree." The church therefore, remaining the same, we, by our junction with it, are become Abraham's seed, and heirs of all the promises and

obligations of the Abrahamic corporation. If this be denied, I confess I am wholly unable to prove, upon rational grounds, the transmission of covenant obligation to posterity.

The general sense of mankind may be brought as a corroboration of this idea: The debts lawfully contracted by the government of a nation, continue obligatory upon the said nation (if not liquidated) though all the people living when they were contracted should be extinct. The national debt incurred in the reign of William III. attaches to the British nation at this day, though not one of the persons who constituted the nation, when this debt was contracted, is now alive. If this be denied, there is an end to all national confidence.

If this idea be admitted, then it will follow, that all *Christians* are covenanters, in virtue of being component parts of that same church which covenanted in Horeb.

In this corporation smaller ones are included, such as particular churches and nations, which may also lawfully covenant unto God. These covenants differ from those of the Jewish church, in as much as the latter bind all Christian churches, whereas the former bind only the particular churches or nations which enter into them.

5. Another reason of the transmission of obligation from preceding to succeeding generations of the same corporation, arises from sameness of relation to the moral Governor of the universe. The corporation collectively, and all its members individually, must necessarily be related to God, as moral subjects to a rightful sovereign. It has been already observed, that the rule of this relation, is the moral law. By this law they are naturally and necessarily bound. And as in religious covenants, they bind themselves to a conscientious observance of what it requires, the obligation must be perpetual, because the thing required is always substantially the same. Obligation to God may, and does, accumulate upon moral subjects, but it cannot be diminished. To-day I swear to a conscientious performance of duty to God; whatever superadded obligation this oath may lay me under, is equally binding to-morrow, and no reason can be assigned

for its dissolution, on any succeeding day of my life, any more than on to-morrow. The parties are the same. The relation is the same. The rule of this relation identically the same. And what circumstance can be supposed to occur which can possibly loose me, from the obligation under which I have laid myself, to perform the duties required by this rule? The same holds good with a corporation or society while it continues to exist. Hence, the advocate in behalf of his client will plead an act passed in the time of Henry VIII. He is right in doing so. The act, if moral, bound the national society at the time it was passed. The society is still the same.

4. There is another reason for the descending obligation of covenants, which arises from the impossibility of liquidating the debt, contracted by covenanting, in such a manner, that none of the contents of the bond, shall still remain due. It must indeed be acknowledged, that there are various debts due to men, which may be completely discharged, and the obligation of payment ceases with their liquidation. But the debt we owe to God, namely, obedience to the moral law, even though *perfectly* paid, remains *perfectly* obligatory. This arises from the nature of the relation, which moral subjects must necessarily hold to the supreme Governor, and the law by which that relation behoves to be regulated. A debt of obedience arises out of this relation. The law regulates its payment. Both of these are permanent. If I give my bond for the payment of a debt, does not this bind me, either as long as the debt remains due, or till such security becomes unnecessary? Religious covenants are bonds, by which individuals and societies bind themselves unto God. They continue obligatory while the subjects of them respectively remain in life. For, seeing the debt remains constantly the same, no proper reason can be given for diminishing my obligation to payment.

5. The transmission of covenant obligation appears from the permanency of the reason, on account of which the covenant was originally entered into. Covenanting is considered as a mean of holiness and uniform regularity of life,

Where is the man who with propriety can say, "Yesterday such a mean was advantageous;—to-day I have no need of it?" Would not this be inconsistent with the imperfect state of sanctification in the present life? The obligation of the covenant must therefore continue as long as this mean is necessary.

6. The example of the flock which has gone before us, and which we are commanded to follow, carries in it an obligation. So far as the saints who have gone before us, have followed Christ, we are bound to follow them. Thus the command of the Lord Jesus Christ to his spouse;—"Go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock." To whatever attainments in reformation, they may have reached, we are bound to adhere, Phil. iii. 16. "Whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing." Their faithful contendings for, and diligent investigations of truth, which have come to our knowledge, carry with them an obligation to "Go and do likewise." It is a feature of our moral nature, that obligation increases with light and information. This is evident from the declaration of our Lord, Luke xii. 47. 48. "And that servant which knew his lord's will, and prepared not *himself* neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few *stripes*. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more."

Having thus endeavoured to investigate some of the reasons why covenant obligation is transmitted from generation to generation, we shall in the

V. HEAD, endeavour to show the morality of the duty in New Testament times.

1. It was expressly commanded under the Old Testament dispensation, Psalm lxxvi. 11. "Vow, and pay unto the LORD your God." It behoves those, who deny its obligation in New Testament times, to prove that it was not, in its nature, a moral duty, but belonging to the ceremonial law, or judicial policy of the Jews. But this I presume, will

not be easily done. If it was a type, where is its antitype? What peculiarity was there, in the circumstances of the Jews, rendering it expedient for them, to bind themselves to serve the Lord, while Christians are exempted from every such obligation?

It seems to be the bent of the present generation, to get rid of all the obligations contained in the Old Testament. These deistical Christians (if I may be allowed the expression) resemble the children of old, who spoke half in the language of Canaan, and half in the language of Ashdod. But the Old and New Testaments ought to be considered as the two Statute-books of Heaven. All the statutes contained in the former book, remain binding upon the conscience, if not repealed in the latter, either by express precept, necessary deduction, or approved example. Therefore, before the doctrine of covenanting be rejected, it ought to be proved, that it has been abrogated by the authority of that divine Legislator who first appointed it. It would be but reasonable to allow us the same privilege, in quoting the statutes of Heaven, that every lawyer has in referring to acts of Parliament. Though these were made in the reign of Alfred the Great, and thirty folio volumes intervened between that in which these acts are contained, and the one in which those of the present age are recorded, yet, if they are not repealed by some subsequent act, they remain obligatory on the nation. By these the most important suits will be decided. Why should we deny the same authority to the unrepealed statutes of the King of nations?

2. Scripture prophecies evidently referring to New Testament times, mention its approbation, Isaiah ~~xix.~~ 18. "In that day," (viz. the gospel day or New Testament times) "shall five cities in the land of Egypt speak the language of Canaan, and swear to the LORD of hosts." And in the 21st verse, we are told, "The LORD shall be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians shall know the LORD—and shall do sacrifice and oblation." A collateral or, at least, a consequential part of their character is, that, "they shall vow a vow unto the Lord, and perform it." This is predicated of them

as a *national* deed, done in a collective, social or corporate capacity. Its general practice among the Christianized Gentiles, their mutual co-operation in the cause of God, and the smile of divine approbation which they shall enjoy in so doing, are beautifully painted out in the 23, 24, and 25 verses. "In that day shall there be a high-way out of Egypt to Assyria; and the Assyrian shall come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria: and the Egyptians shall serve with the Assyrians. In that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, even a blessing in the midst of the land. Whom the Lord of hosts shall bless, saying, Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance."

2. The New Testament itself seems to recognize the duty, 2 Cor. viii. 1.—The apostle speaks highly to the commendation of the liberality of the church in Macedonia; and their willingness to contribute to the assistance of the poor saints at Jerusalem, and in verse 5th he declares, "*And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God.*" Here we have the language of covenanting, and every reason to believe that the thing existed also. What can be meant by this twofold surrender of themselves, *first* unto God and *afterwards* unto the saints? It cannot, as some think, refer to their junction with the church, for they were organized into a church capacity, previously to their solemn surrender. In the 1st verse they are called the *churches* of Macedonia, which implies their ecclesiastical organization. Neither can this passage, as others allege, refer to the celebration of the sacramental feast. If it did, is it not strange, that this act should exceed the apostles' *hopes* and *expectations* of them? Was it not rather a thing which he had full reason to expect? The neglect of the duty in these circumstances, might hereby have disappointed his expectations. Lately organized in a church state, possessing the glow and ardour, which almost universally animate the hearts of new converts, they would long after, and earnestly desire the sacramental feast. This act, whereby they gave themselves unto God, &c.

must therefore, in all probability, be solemn, social covenanting.

4. It was one of the distinguishing privileges of the Jews, to be in covenant with God. "I am married unto you," saith the Lord. The privileges of the Christian church are increased, and not diminished. The Old Testament dispensation, compared to the New, is denominated a system of "beggarly elements." In the present system, there is no abridgment of privileges. Every immunity in the old, either continues to exist, or is superadded by another more valuable, and more adapted to the spirituality of the new order of things, in which the shadows have given place to the substance, Heb. xii. 18. "For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire," &c. "But" (verse 22) "ye are come unto mount Sion," &c.

5. This duty is involved in the church's relation to God. The language in which he recognizes this relation, includes so much, Hos. ii. 19, 20. "I will betroth thee unto me," &c. All real believers are united, by this marriage covenant to Christ, and to one another. They are closely connected with him as their head, and joined to one another as members of the same body, actuated by the same spirit, Eph. v. 30. & iv. 25. Covenanting is only a solemn recognition of this relation, and engagement to evidence this by a life and conversation becoming the gospel. In Isaiah lxii. 4. a passage which alluded to New Testament times, as is evident from the two verses immediately preceding, where the calling of the Gentiles and the latter-day-glory are clearly intimated, national covenanting is signified under the notion of marriage relation, "Thou shalt no more be termed forsaken," &c. By the *marriage* of a land unto God, we are not to understand, that the trees of the forest, the mountains or plains, come under engagements. Surely it must be the notion inhabiting the land. National marriage implies a national deed, whereby the inhabitants, in their national capacity, solemnly covenant unto the Lord.

6. God has on various occasions, signally countenanced his people, in coming under their social engagements. Wit-

ness the Reformation in Scotland, during the 16th century. The zealous Scots engaged heartily in this work, renewed their bonds again and again, in adaption to their circumstances, and God wonderfully countenanced their efforts, and crowned them with success, notwithstanding the secret stratagems, and open opposition of the blind votaries of the church of Rome. And in the 17th century, when God began to sift the house of Jacob, he did not suffer the least grain of the wheat to be lost, Amos ix. 9. He performed to them his promise, Isaiah xliii. 4. To the happy experience of the renowned sufferers, he supported them amidst the most excruciating agonies, to which they were subjected by the satellites of the man of sin, to the astonishment even of their persecutors. It was abundantly evident they enjoyed the smiles of the Divine approbation. The Son of God was with them in the fiery furnace. He sent them help out of the sanctuary, and strengthened them from Zion. He remembered their offerings, and accepted their sacrifices; Psalm xx. 2, 3.

Having attempted to show the morality of this duty, under the New Testament dispensation, we will in the

VI. HEAD, endeavour to ascertain the times and seasons when a church or nation is more particularly called to engage in it.

It is clear from scripture, that covenanting is not a stated or ordinary, but an occasional and extraordinary duty. To ascertain the proper season for the performance of this duty, we must keep our eyes fixed upon the ark of Divine providence, and carefully observe all its motions. These movements of providence, we are carefully to compare with those, under which the church of old existed, when she, with divine approbation, entered into covenant. Then they became examples unto us. Similar seasons will require similar duties. Whether the present time is a proper season for covenanting, or whether proper seasons have passed over our heads, since the last renovation of our solemn covenants, and have been neglected, I shall not pretend to determine. I leave this to the decision of the church judicative. All I

shall do, is, to mention some of the times and seasons when the Jewish church, with the approbation of God, engaged in this duty. Every man may compare the present time with these, and judge for himself.

1. Times of public humiliation for apostasy from God, seem to be proper seasons, Jer. i. 4, 5. "In those days, and in that time, saith the Lord, the children of Israel shall come, they and the children of Judah together, going and weeping: they shall go, and seek the Lord their God. They shall ask the way to Zion, with their faces thitherward, saying, Come, and let us join ourselves to the Lord, in a perpetual covenant *that* shall not be forgotten." This passage evidently refers to New Testament times. Deep humiliation and fasting before God are concomitants of this duty. See Neh. ix. 1, 38.

2. This duty was essayed by the church also in times of public reformation. Thus in the reign of Josiah, the illustrious Jewish reformer, the nation engaged in public covenanting, 2 Kings xxiii. 1—3. In the first and second verses, all the people of the land are convened, and the book of the law, found in the temple by Hilkiah the priest, is publicly read to the congregation. In the third verse we are informed of the covenant, its matter, and the people's resolution to adhere to it. "And the king stood by a pillar, and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord, and to keep his commandments, and his testimonies, and his statutes, with all *their* heart, and all *their* soul, to perform the words of this covenant, *that were* written in this book: and all the people stood to the covenant." This example was carefully imitated by our ancestors in the 16th century.

3. The church of old engaged in this duty, in times of public thanksgiving, for special deliverance. Thus in 2 Kings xi. when the reins of government were wrenched out of the hands of the wicked Athaliah, and the young prince Joash crowned and anointed king, we are informed, verse 17, that "Jehoiada made a covenant between the Lord and the king and the people, that they should be the Lord's people;

between the king and the people." And verse 20, "all the people of the land rejoiced, and the city was in quiet." To the same purpose in Psalm lxxvi. which was penned on the deliverance of Jerusalem, from Sennacherib's army, in the days of Hezekiah, the Spirit of God calls upon the church and nation of the Jews, to covenant unto the Lord in testimony of their thankfulness. Verse 11. "Vow, and pay unto the LORD your God."

4. Another season for public covenanting, sanctioned by the example of the Old Testament church, is, when the hearts of God's professed people seem bent on backsliding, and apostasy from him. Thus Moses, finding the children of Israel of a backsliding disposition, and fearing that they would apostatize after his death, calls upon them to a renovation of covenant with God, that their hearts might thus be established and fortified against iniquity, Dent. xxix. 10—15. In like manner, Joshua seeing the rebellious disposition of the tribes of Israel, shortly before his death called them together to Shechem, and made them give bond for their good behaviour, when he would be gone to his fathers, Josh. xxiv. 25. "So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and set them a statute, and an ordinance, in Shechem."

5. Times of great effusion of the divine Spirit, seem to be proper seasons for covenanting. When God promises times of refreshing from his own presence, we find this important duty essayed with great alacrity. Thus Isaiah xlv. 3—5. "I will pour water on him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my Spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring." In consequence of this effusion of the waters of the upper sanctuary, "they shall spring up as among the grass, as willows by the water-courses." Feeling in their souls those blessed influences of the Holy Ghost, they give themselves away unto God, in a covenant not to be forgotten. "One shall say, I *am* the LORD's; and another shall call *himself* by the name of Jacob; and another shall subscribe *with* his hand unto the LORD and surname *himself* by the name of Israel." To call one's self "the LORD's" implies a surrender of person and service unto him.

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To designate one's self by "the name of Jacob," and to surname one's self by "the name of Israel," imply connection with the church of Christ, the New Testament Jacob. To "subscribe with the hand unto the Lord" seems to involve in it, entering into a covenant bond, to be faithful in the performance of duty.

6. Another season for public social covenanting with God, is, when we commemorate the death of Jesus in our sacramental feast. It is generally known that the word *sacrament* signifies an oath. It is a military term borrowed from the Romans. Those who were enlisted soldiers in the army, swore fidelity to their general, and this oath, was by them called *sacramentum*. This term has been, very properly, transferred from the military to the theological department; and is only another name for baptism or the Lord's supper. The reason of this is evident. In these ordinances, we are considered as swearing allegiance to the Captain of salvation. The supper, being a social institution, is that with which we are concerned at present. As Jesus confirmed the covenant by his death, and commanded this to be commemorated by the symbolical representation of bread and wine, we, by participating of them, solemnly say Amen to that glorious transaction, and engage to fight valiantly under his banner. Hence the supper is called the New Testament in his blood, and partaking of the feast, a shewing forth his death till he come. In this ordinance, therefore, the church publicly covenants with God, and engages, through the strength of grace, to resist the devil, the world and the flesh. But that covenanting, in this way, does not supersede the necessity of entering into a formal bond, will appear more fully in the

VII. HEAD, which shall consist in answering some of the objections, made against the doctrine of covenanting, as handled in the preceding part of this discourse.

1. OBJECTION. Since covenants, &c. bind only to those duties, to which we are previously bound by the moral law, they are unnecessary. The matter of any promise, or engagement, must be either right, wrong, or indifferent; if

right, we are bound to it independently of any act of ours; if wrong, no act of ours can bind us to it; if indifferent, to these there can be no obligation.

Not to mention that this objection is deistical, with a witness, for the scripture expressly says, "Vow, and pay," &c. and declares, that an oath for confirmation is the end of strife; it may be observed that it is repugnant to the common sense of mankind. Among all nations, an oath or covenant, constitutes the highest security, which a man can give for his veracity and integrity. When a person is summoned as a witness, before a court of justice, he is necessarily bound by the moral law to tell the truth between man and man. See the ninth precept of the decalogue, Exod. xx. 16. "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour." By the objection under consideration, an oath then would be useless. The propriety of superadded self-obligation was already illustrated. It shall not now be resumed. I would only observe, that, when the witness is tested, he recognizes the obligation of the moral law, and, by his own act, solemnly binds himself to do conscientiously what it requires. In like manner, in covenanting to God, we acknowledge ourselves previously bound, by the moral law, to obey and serve him with all our heart, &c. and solemnly bind ourselves to a conscientious performance of the duties therein commanded. And as the witness after swearing, if he tell what is not true, is guilty not only of a lie, in violating the moral law, but also of perjury, in breaking his oath; so an ungodly covenantant, is guilty, not only of a breach of the moral law, but also of perfidiousness in covenant engagements. And as it is more likely, that the witness will tell the truth when sworn to do so, as is evident by the common sense of mankind, so when we solemnly bind ourselves by an oath unto God, it is probable, that we will be more conscientious in performance.

With respect to matters of mere indifference, they ought not to constitute the substance of a religious covenant. Whatever enters into the matter of such an engagement, must either be, in its nature, a moral duty, or, though in

itself indifferent, yet, from accidental circumstances, be calculated to promote sanctification of life. In virtue of these very circumstances, the thing may cease to be indifferent, and become obligatory, independently of covenant engagement. Perhaps the Rechabites' abstinence from wine, mentioned with divine approbation, Jer. xxxv. is a case of this kind. Probably the abuse of this liquor was such, that it became a duty, not only to abstain from it, but also to engage to abstinence, till by so doing, they got the mastery of that vitiated habit. In other circumstances, the use of wine, was not only lawful but even recommended as medicinal. Paul says to Timothy, "Drink no longer water, but use a little wine," &c.

That a thing, in itself indifferent, may, by accidental circumstances cease to be so, is perhaps well illustrated, by the obligation under which the children of Israel came, Gen. l. 25. concerning Joseph's bones. After a lapse of two hundred years, when about to leave Egypt, they considered themselves bound by their engagement to Joseph, Exod. xiii. 19. Though it be a matter of no moment, where a man's bones are after his death, yet the circumstances of Joseph's being an eminent type of Jesus, and the saviour of his father's house, rendered it necessary, that his be carefully kept, and in due time deposited in the land of promise. They were to the poor brick-makers a certain pledge of deliverance from bondage, and an earnest of the covenanted inheritance. Hence Joseph says, "God will surely visit you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence." These circumstances, therefore, stript this thing of its indifference, and made it a ground of encouragement, and mean of holiness. Accordingly we read, Heb. xi. 22: "By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones."

2. OBJECT. The British covenants were only oaths of allegiance to a particular sovereign or family, and were nullified by the new order of things at the revolution settlement. Their obligation ceased with the house of Stewart, unto which they were sworn.

It will readily be admitted, they were oaths of allegiance. But to whom? Primarily to the Ruler of the skies; and to the government only, while continuing to prosecute the interests of the King of kings. If they were oaths of allegiance to God, let us examine whether any thing has happened, which can dissolve their obligation. There are three things, which, when they happen, may dissolve the obligation of oaths of allegiance.

(1.) The dissolution of the dynasty or government unto which they were sworn. One of the parties then becomes extinct, and the other of course loosed from the obligation.

(2.) Emigration from the realm, where allegiance was sworn. Protection and allegiance being reciprocal; when the former is neither sought nor needed, the latter ceases to exist.

(3.) When there occur breaches of the mutual compact entered into between the ruler and the people, they are loosed from all obligation of allegiance to him. He has not implemented the condition, and consequently has no right to the obedience promised upon the fulfilment thereof. None of all these supposed cases can take place to dissolve our allegiance to the most high God. His government cannot be dissolved. It never did, or can, experience the smallest interregnum, Dan. vii. 27.—“Whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom.”—It is impossible to elope from his dominions, Psalm xlvii. 7. “For God is the King of all the earth.”—He can never prove unfaithful to his engagements. This would be inconsistent with his immutability, as we read, Mal. iii. 6, “For I *am* the LORD, I change not.” The mountains shall depart, and the hills remove, but he shall never fail to implement his covenant to his people, Isaiah liv. 10.

3. OBJECT. “In the British covenants civil and religious things are blended together in the same bond. These ought to be kept entirely distinct.”

It would be inconsistent with the nature of this discourse, to consider in what things church and state agree, and in what they differ. There is a just distinction between them. They ought never to be confounded. But does it follow, that, be-

either civil and religious duties are both contained in the same bond, they are therefore confounded, or criminally blended together? Must the instrument on this account be rejected as reprobate silver? If this be the case, what will we then do with the sacred volume of divine revelation? It contains both religious and civil duties. It is equally peremptory in enjoining both. 1. Pet. ii. 13. 14. "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to kings, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evil-doers, and for the praise of them that do well." And Heb. xiii. 17. "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account; that they may do it with joy, and not with grief; for that is unprofitable for you." But we find them even in the same verse. "Fear God. Honour the king." The example of the saints in these bonds, are yet upon record, Neh. ix. 38. When the princes, priests, Levites, and all the people sealed the covenant, all, in their respective relations, bind themselves to the performance of all duties, civil and religious, contained in the divine law. See Chapter x. 28, 29.

4. OBJECT. "Since you deny that the present powers have any rightful claim to allegiance from the British covenants, there is at least part of these bonds, which in their present form, has no obligation. The form then is changed. But as matter and form are both necessary to the existence of any thing, destroy the form and the thing ceases to exist in that predicament in which it formerly existed. The form of these covenants is destroyed by your own principles, therefore their existence as covenants ceases."

There are, to be sure, some people, in other respects judicious, who rigidly contend for the covenants precisely in their present form. As in their present form they comprehend all ranks, "We noblemen," &c. some think that though the government, and great majority of the nation have reiled from their engagements, yet in their present form their friends can find language sufficiently precise, and adapted to their rank and situation. However well meant

this may be, it is doubtless a mistake. When taken in connection with the pious views of its advocates, it may perhaps be properly denominated a right hand extreme. They are afraid of infringing upon sacred deeds. Such a disposition is laudable. Let it, however, be subjected to the dominion of reason. A contempt for the deeds of ancestors, on the one hand, and a superstitious veneration for them, on the other, are extremes equally to be avoided. The former is impious, the latter is idolatrous. What is there in human composition, which may not admit of alteration? The fluctuation of living languages clearly demonstrates this. The language of our ancestors five hundred years ago, however suitable to those times, is barely intelligible at present, and in several instances, scarcely decent. Take the venerable Wickliffe's translation of the *Bible* as a proof of this. This is not meant as a reflection on our forefathers, but is owing to that constant flux, which is found in the mode of phraseology of all living languages.

But it may be farther observed, that circumstances also often vary. Much of the forms of covenants, depends upon these circumstances. The form of course ought to vary, with the circumstances which produced it. For instance, our covenants could not be renewed in their present form, without many explanations and marginal references. What valuable purpose would this serve? What is there so sacred in the bare phraseology of these covenants, that, when explanations are necessary, we may not substitute these for the original text? If there be, I confess I cannot see it. Let every moral duty in these sacred deeds, be carefully gathered up, and put into a form and phraseology, adapted to our existing circumstances. To these we are already bound, not only as *moral*, but also as covenant duties. We are bound to them, not only by the divine law, but also by our representation in our fathers, which we consider equally obligatory as our own solemn act. — That the forms of covenants are only circumstantial, and may be lawfully altered as circumstances require, is abundantly evident from the history of covenanting in the Old Testament.

But admitting, as I have done, an alteration in the form of these covenants, this does not destroy their validity or nullify their covenant obligation. It might be asked, how much of the present form of any thing is essential, to its specific existence. Legs, feet and toes, arms, hands and fingers all belong to the present form of human beings; but should a finger, or toe, or even an arm or leg be cut off, the form would be somewhat altered. Would this amputation destroy the essentials of humanity? Suppose a man, who has a wife and family, enters into the ministerial office, part of his ordination vow is, that he shall faithfully discharge the duties of the conjugal relation. Should his wife and children die, and he stand no longer in a family capacity, this part of the vow being circumstantial, ceases with this change in his circumstances. Does this destroy, or in the least invalidate his ordination oath? Certainly not. He has no less ministerial authority on this account. In like manner the obligation of the moral duties contained in these covenants, not only as *moral*, but also as *covenant* duties, still remains, though the form and phraseology may undergo considerable alterations. The example of the reformers in the 16th century is full in point.

5. OBJECT. "We covenant with God in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper. Any thing more is unnecessary."

This proves too much, and consequently, by a well known rule in reasoning, proves nothing. According to this, covenanting in Old Testament times was unnecessary. The church then covenanted with God, in the institutions of circumcision and the passover, which were substantially the same with baptism and the Lord's supper in New Testament times. This however did not render public social covenanting unnecessary then, neither does it now.

6. OBJECT. "To make adherence to these covenants, and an unlimited approbation of every tenet and act of the reformers, in entering into and maintaining them, necessary to admission to church privileges, renders your terms of communion very complex and unwieldy. And as many of the

documents are now involved in obscurity, through the lapse of time, and the inaccuracy of records, a considerable part must be believed implicitly, and rested upon the fallible testimony of men."

Perhaps it may be admitted, that our terms of church communion could well enough bear some simplification, and amendment. We never believed them to be perfect.—With respect to an unlimited approbation of our venerable reformers, this we never require. We would wish to be followers of them as far as they were followers of Christ. We would call no man master, with regard to the articles of our faith. To the law and to the testimony of God, we would look for the sanction of all our religious principles, and approve of our ancestors, only as far as their conduct was agreeable to that unerring rule. We adhere to our present religious system, not because it was adopted by our ancestors, but because we believe it to be agreeable to the word of God, and consequently *ought* to be adopted by all nations, wherever the scriptures have been revealed. We admire their faithfulness and valiant contendings, and hold ourselves bound to go and do likewise—As to the charge of implicit faith, it will, I trust, appear unfounded. Some knowledge of the history of any society, is necessary previous to a junction with it. Upon the man who would connect himself with any particular society of men, independently of this knowledge, the charge of implicit faith may justly devolve. This is necessary to form an accurate view of the ground on which the society stands. Particular parts of its history may be so interwoven with its constitution and laws, that the knowledge of the former is necessary to appreciate the value of the latter. With these, it is the business of every one, who intends connecting himself with the society, to be acquainted. Just so in our church admissions. We do not make any thing a term of communion, but what is founded on the word of God. And when we find a man totally ignorant of our ecclesiastical history, we consider him unqualified to be an accurate judge of our church standing.

I shall now conclude this subject with a few inferences.

From the text and doctrine, we may see that all our rights are limited by the divine law. What it commands we have a right to perform. What it forbids we have no right to do.

It was already observed that God has delegated moral power to rational agents. This is the origin of all our rights. That men have a right to worship God, whatever way their conscience may dictate, is, with the present generation, a very popular doctrine. It has insinuated itself, into the

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creeds of almost all denominations of professing Christians. The man who denies it, is accounted an enemy to society, and is branded as maintaining persecuting principles. We maintain that men have no right to worship God, any other way than he himself has prescribed, and that every deviation, therefrom, is a violation of his law, and rebellion against his sovereign majesty.

But if conscience have any such right, it may not be improper to enquire how it came by it. It must have it, either inherently in itself independently of God, or it must have it by derivation from him. The former supposition is blasphemous. It strikes at the independence of Deity, and vests the creature with one of his incommunicable attributes. The latter is absurd. To allow that God has delegated to his moral subjects, a right of rebelling against himself, implies a contradiction. That which we have a right to do, we may do lawfully, and without blame. But God has enjoined obedience to his law, under pain of eternal damnation, yet by the hypothesis, we may, if our conscience dictate so, *lawfully* violate this law, for we have a right to do it. But God can delegate no such right to his creatures. It would be inconsistent with his nature and perfections.

Either the divine law has some precise meaning, or it has not. If the latter, it is useless. It would be gross imposition to give a law which has no meaning and at the same time punish the violation of it with eternal misery.——If it have any precise meaning, when it says one thing, and conscience the opposite, which of the two is to be considered as paramount? If conscience have a negative over the divine law, then it is superior not only to the law, but also to the Legislator, in as much as it authorizes as right, that which he has forbidden.

The law of God, as revealed in the scriptures of truth, is therefore the only unerring rule by which all our rights are limited, and by which *all* our conduct ought uniformly to be regulated. This extends to things civil as well as religious. How strange that the glimmering rays of Nature's light should be preferred to the splendid illuminations of the holy Oracles! It is indeed strange, passing strange, that Christians should deny their obligation to take the divine law, for the rule of every part of their conduct! Are not they the moral subjects of the King of heaven? If so, are not they bound to adhere to all his institutions? Will not their refusal be accounted rebellion? Let us try it, for a moment, by the laws which regulate the relation between earthly rulers, and their subjects. Suppose an earthly monarch sends

his deputy to take the government of a distant province. He gives him a schedule of the laws by which the government is to be conducted. Suppose him to lose it in a fit of debauchery, on his way to the place of destination. His sovereign gets word of it. Though capitally punishable for his criminal conduct, yet in his clemency, instead of executing justice, he remembers mercy, and sends him a new copy for the rule of his administrations. He refuses to receive it. He remembers some scattered hints of the old one, and arrogantly proposes to govern thereby. In what light is such an one to be viewed? Is he not to be considered a rebel against his lawful sovereign? Let this be applied to our relation to God. The application is so obvious that it is unnecessary to condescend upon particulars. When the Lord in goodness has sent his law to any nation or people, they are bound to receive it with thankfulness, and make it the rule of their civil as well as religious institutions. Should they refuse it, either in whole or in part, are they not to be considered rebels against the King of nations? Can any political deed of a nation, which has the revealed word, and yet despises it, refusing to graft its laws and regulations upon it, bind the conscience? Is not that nation still worse, which, though it has recognized the law as its rule, and solemnly sworn allegiance to God agreeably to its requisitions, casts all behind its back, and persists in rebellion against the Omnipotent? The deed of a society constituted upon such a basis cannot bind the conscience.

2. From this text and doctrine, we may see that it is the duty of a church or nation, to covenant with God. He has expressly commanded it. When done, he has recognized the obligation. The example of the saints in Old Testament times, and of our ancestors in reforming periods, ought not to be lightly esteemed. Though dead, they yet speak to us, by their example, saying, "Go ye and do likewise."

3. Hence we may see the great sin of covenant breaking. It is in direct opposition to the divine law, pours contempt on the authority of heaven's eternal Sovereign, is rebellion against his government, and justly exposes to the awful vengeance of his wrath. Hence we find the scriptures abounding with dreadful denunciations of wrath, against those who are chargeable with this sin. Various instances might easily be adduced. See Deut. xxix. 25—28. "Then men shall say, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord God of their fathers, which he made with them, when he brought them forth out of the land of Egypt: For they went and served other gods, and worshipped them, gods whom they knew

not, and *whom* he had not given unto them: And the anger of the LORD was kindled against this land, to bring upon it all the curses *that are* written in this book. And the LORD rooted them out of their land in anger, and in wrath, and in great indignation, and cast them into another land, as *it is* this day." Could language represent in stronger terms the awful vengeance of God, on those guilty of this highly aggravated sin? With the above passage consult Jer. xxii. 8, 9. Ezek. xvii. 15—22.

Lastly. From this subject we may see the great advantage of keeping covenant with God. It is an excellent mean of holiness, and well adapted to our spiritual and religious improvement. The consideration of self-obligation, involved in the very nature of covenants, is calculated to impress the mind, and becomes a new incitement to the performance of duty, Psalm cxix. 106. "I have sworn, and will perform *it*; that I will keep thy righteous judgments." Fidelity to our covenant engagements with God, is an excellent mean for obtaining mercies. Both temporal and spiritual blessings are promised, Isaiah lvi. 4, 6. In Deut. v. 33. after mentioning the covenant of the children of Israel, and stating the duties contained in it, we find obedience urged and expected, by the powerful argument of self-interest, "Ye shall walk in all the ways which the LORD your God hath commanded you, that ye may live, and *that it may be* well with you, and *that ye may prolong your* days in the land which ye shall possess." By keeping covenant with God, we maintain with him, the most honourable relation, Isaiah lxii. 4. "Thou shalt be called Hephzi-bah, and thy land Beulah; for the LORD delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married." Can any relation be more honourable than this? Will not the very consideration of it, actuate as a new principle of activity in duty, and give vigour to the spring of evangelical obedience?—By conscientious adherence to covenant engagement, vice and immorality, so offensive to God and disgraceful to our kind, are greatly discouraged, and the state of society gradually ameliorated. And, finally, by steadiness to covenant engagements to regulate every part of our conduct by the moral law, we contribute our mite to the glory of God, and approach nearer and nearer to that ground on which the church is commanded to stand, and which she shall occupy, when Jesus shall reign in Jerusalem, in mount Zion, and before his ancients gloriously.