

THE LAY-MAN'S REASONS

FOR HIS

JOINING IN STATED COMMUNION WITH

A CONGREGATION OF MODERATE DISSENTERS.

My case, in short, is this. I am born in a Christian nation, and baptized into the Christian faith; and I reckon it my unspeakable honour and happiness that I am so, and that I live in the times of reformation. In this nation, wherever I am, I find public assemblies for religious worship, all agreeing to worship the same God, in the name of the same Mediator, under the conduct and influence of the same Spirit, according to the rule of the same Scriptures, holding communion with the universal church in faith, hope, and love, under the presidency of gospel ministers, by the same ordinances of the word, sacraments, and prayer, looking for the same blessed hope. All these assemblies concur, in their testimony, not only against Jews, Pagans, and Mahometans abroad, but against atheists, infidels, and profane at home; and likewise in their protestation against the tyranny and idolatry of the church and court of Rome.

But I find there is some difference among these Christian assemblies. Though all good Christians are one in Christ by faith, and one with each other by holy love, yet in outward and lesser things I observe they do not all agree. And it is no surprise to me that they do not; for I know that the best are imperfect in this world. I find some of these assemblies, and, indeed, far the greatest number, established and appointed by an act of parliament at the time of the happy restoration, 14 Car. 2. The ministers presiding in these assemblies, ordained by bishops, usually presented by lay-patrons, and to the great advantage of their ministry, dignified, and honourably provided for, by the civil government. The ordinances administered in these assemblies according to the book of Common Prayer, and the discipline managed by the chancellor of the diocese, and his court.

I find some few of these assemblies permitted and

allowed by another act of parliament, twenty-seven years after the former, at the time of the late glorious revolution, 1 William and Mary. The ministers presiding in them ordained by presbyters, chosen by the people, and though taken under the protection, yet destitute of the authority and support, of the civil powers. The ordinances administered in them not by a set, prescribed, constant form, but by the rule of the Scripture in general, and according to the measure of the gift given to him that ministers. The discipline managed by the minister himself, who presides in other ordinances, with the advice and concurrence of the congregation. Providence has so cast my lot, and appointed the bounds of my habitation, that assemblies of both these kinds are within my reach.

And, through the grace of God, I think I can truly say, this is my character. I am heartily concerned about my soul, and my everlasting condition: it is my care and desire to please God, and to work out my salvation. All other interests and concerns are nothing to me, in comparison with this. I seriously profess I am afraid of sin, and am solicitous to be found in the way of my duty, and to get all the help I can to forward me toward heaven, and to fit me for it. Hereunto I can add this further protestation, that, through the grace of God, I have a catholic charity for all good Christians. I cannot monopolize the church; it is narrow enough, I dare not make it narrower: I love a good man, whatever party he belongs to, and him who follows Christ, though he does not follow with me. *He that fears God, and works righteousness, is accepted of God,* and shall be accepted by me. My practice is this. I join myself sometimes with the assemblies of the public establishment, if any opportunity offers itself on a week day; or if I happen on the Lord's day to be out of the reach of such assemblies as I choose

statedly to join with, I freely and cheerfully attend the divine service of the church, knowing nothing in the prayers but what I can heartily say Amen to, which I choose rather to do, than to answer aloud after the minister. And this I do, that I may testify the catholic charity, and my communion with, and affection to, all good Christians, though I be not in every thing of their mind. Hereby, likewise, I endeavour to fulfil all righteousness, and, in my place, I bear my testimony to that which is of God in the public establishment, wherein I do rejoice, and will rejoice.

But I constantly join in all the ordinances with a congregation of moderate and sober dissenters: with them I hold stated communion; and with them, after many serious and impartial thoughts, have put myself under the ministerial conduct and inspection of a preacher or teacher allowed, though not authorized by the law of the land; but one who is manifested in my conscience to be a true and faithful minister of Jesus Christ.

The reasons why I choose my settled communion with the dissenters, are these six, which abundantly satisfy my own conscience at present, not judging other men's consciences, nor knowing what further light God may hereafter give me in this matter.

1. I think it is my duty to own and adhere to that ministry which seems to me to be wrongfully and injuriously excluded from the public establishment; and the exclusion of which was professedly intended and designed by the Act of Uniformity. By making such oaths, declarations, and subscriptions, the indispensable terms of their admission into the ministry, or continuance in it, as they could not comply with, without sinning against their consciences, they were and are effectually shut out from the public establishment. This I take to be a wrong both to them who are well worthy of the church's double honours, and to the church which stands in need of, and would be greatly benefited by, their useful labours. I therefore think that I ought, in my place, both to bear my testimony against the exclusion of them, (lest I should partake with other men's sins, and should be found to have laid a confederacy with those who put so many burning shining lights under a bushel,) and also to aid, assist, and encourage those who are so excluded; putting my soul into their soul's stead, and then doing as I would be done by. Were I a minister, I must be shut out as they are, and should expect to be countenanced in suffering for conscience sake; and therefore cannot but countenance them. And this is that which I verily believe most men will do when it comes to be their own case, whatever they talk when they are uppermost. Those who, at any time, have thought themselves unjustly restrained from the public exercise of their ministry, have ever yet thought themselves obliged to exercise it in private as they could,

and their friends obliged to stand by them in it; and so I believe they ever will.

2. I think it is my duty to choose rather statedly to join in those administrations, which come nearest to the divine institution, than in those which have in them an unnecessary mixture of human invention. How far men may lawfully devise and use ceremonies of their own, under pretence of beautifying God's ordinances, and edifying themselves and others, I pretend not to be a competent judge: but to me it seems very plain, that the ordinances of Christ are purer, and look better, without them; and that those who make the Scripture only their rule, and admit nothing into their worship but what is warranted by it, are to be preferred much before those who practise many things in their stated public worship, which they do not produce any ground or warrant for in the Holy Scripture. To me it seems much better in baptism, only to wash a child with water, in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, in token that he shall not be ashamed to confess Christ crucified, which is Christ's institution, than, besides that, in token of the same thing, to sign him with the sign of the cross; and in the Lord's supper, to use the gesture Christ's disciples used, rather than another devised by men. Having chosen the Scripture for the standing rule of my faith and practice, I choose to have communion with those who seem to me to keep most closely to it.

3. I think it is my duty to choose rather statedly to join with those who assert and maintain the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, than with those who willingly submit to the impositions of men in the things of God, and justify those impositions. I am very well satisfied, that when my Redeemer, in kindness to his church, broke the yoke of that ceremonial law, which was given by Moses, he did not leave it in the power of any man, or company of men, in the world, to make another like yoke, and lay that upon the necks of the disciples. I doubt not but there is a power in the Christian magistrates, or other governors of the church, to restrain and correct natural indecencies in any of the necessary circumstances of public worship; as time, place, habit, or gesture: and that, in any of these, which unavoidably renders the administration of the ordinances either despicable, or inconvenient, or unprofitable, to those who attend upon them. But I see nothing in the gospel which warrants any governors, civil or sacred, to impose such habits and gestures as they please (because they think them decent) upon those who think them incongruous; and then, to make the use of them the indispensable condition of their communion. In the religious assemblies of the dissenters I observe, that generally every thing is done with the gravity and decorum that becomes the solemnity there performed: I see no uncouth habits, I hear no noisy responses, but all

things are managed decently, and in order, with reverence, and to edification: and yet no ceremonies are imposed, no terms of communion made, which Christ has not made; no days made holy, but that which God has made so; no stress laid upon the holiness of places, which the New Testament gives not the least hint of since the destruction of the temple; and therefore I choose to join with them; for *where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty*. Their ministers are not tied up to any one prescribed form of prayer, but are at liberty to vary and enlarge according to the improvements of their knowledge, and warmth of their devotion, and the case of those whose mouth they are in prayer: And, as I think, every minister ought to have some competent measure of the gift of prayer, as well as preaching; and that otherwise he is not duly qualified; so, I think, having that ability, he ought not to be abridged of his liberty to use it; especially not in the administration of sacraments. *All things are lawful for me; but I will not be brought under the power of any.*^a

4. I think it is my duty to choose rather to join with those, who refuse to admit into the communion with them such as are openly vicious and profane, than with those who, being under an unhappy obligation to administer the Lord's supper to all in office, and to transfer the trial of all suspensions to the bishop's court, cannot possibly use so strict a discipline. Not that I think I am ever the worse for bad people's joining with me in the Lord's supper, but perhaps they are the worse for my joining with them; and I would not be accessory to the hardening of them in their impieties. I do not expect to meet with any society of Christians perfectly pure on this side heaven; there are spots, I know, in our feasts of charity; but I must prefer those who appear to me either to be more pure from the mixture of corrupt members, or at least more solicitous and desirous to be so, and more capable of being so by their own constitution. I have seen, with much satisfaction, many of the church of England zealous against vice and profaneness, and active for the suppressing of it, and have a mighty value and veneration for them upon that account; and wish their constitution would allow them to do more, by church-censures, in prosecution of that worthy design than I apprehend it will. But for that pious zeal of theirs, I have so often heard them called presbyterians by those who are bigots for episcopacy and the ceremonies, that I confess it has made me love the presbyterians the better, since zeal against profaneness enters so much into their character, even their enemies themselves being judges.

5. I think it is my duty to choose rather to join with those churches, whose constitution leaves room for a catholic and comprehensive charity, than with

those whose avowed principles and sentiments force them to monopolize the church in England to themselves, and forbid them to own the dissenting ministers as true ministers, and their churches as true churches. This, I confess, has a mighty influence on me. The sober dissenting ministers, as I am acquainted with them, are manifest in my conscience to be faithful ministers of Jesus Christ; and in their administrations I cannot but see the institution of ordinances observed, and every thing well fitted to answer the end of them. I know many who constantly attend in their assemblies, and have observed them to be sound in their principles, sober in their lives, honest in their dealings, constant in their devotions, and in all instances to have given undeniable proof of their being sincere good Christians. When, therefore, in the books and sermons that plead for the church of England, I find these ministers censured and condemned as usurpers, impostors, and lay-intruders; all their administrations nulled, their assemblies denied to be parts of the catholic church, all who join with them sentenced as schismatics to the pit of hell, and no hopes of salvation given them, but what God's general mercy allows to moral heathens; and all the reformed churches, that have no bishops, falling so far under the same censure, that their ministers cannot be admitted ministers of the church of England, unless they be re-ordained, while those who have been popish priests may; and all these harsh censures excused from uncharitableness with this, that they cannot help it, their principles lead them to it: then, think I, the Lord deliver me from such principles, and from that pretended unity, which is destructive of real charity. On the other side, I find the dissenters willingly owning the established churches as true churches, their ministers as true ministers, their principles leading them to do so. I often hear them, in their public assemblies, pray for them, and for their success in their ministry, and profess their communion with them in faith, hope, and love; and in their common conversation, I hear them speak of them with love and respect. My judgment and inclination lead me to the charitable side, as the best and safest; and by all I have read and heard in this controversy, that appears to me to be the side of the dissenters.

6. I think it is my duty to attend on those administrations which I find to be most for my edification in faith, holiness, and comfort, and best (with me) to answer the ends of holy ordinances. Herein I hope I may be allowed to judge for myself. I have often tried both; and if I know my own heart, without prejudice or partiality, I must say, that I have found my heart more affected and enlarged in those confessions, prayers, and thanksgivings, which have been offered up without a stated prescribed form,

than ever it was in those that have been invariably tied up to certain words. Far be it from me to make comparison of men's abilities and performances: I greatly honour and value the gifts and labours of many who are in the public establishment; but, to my capacity, the dissenters' praying and preaching is most adapted, and most profitable; and those I am to reckon the best gifts, and to covet earnestly, which I find by experience best for me. Sabbath-time is precious; and I would willingly improve it so as will be most for my advantage in keeping my communion with God, and preparing for heaven. If it be owing to my own weakness that these administrations are most agreeable to me, yet while I sincerely design God's glory, and my own spiritual benefit therein, I trust, through Christ, that God will not only forgive me, but accept me, and that they also who are strong, will bear with my infirmities.

These are the principles I go upon, and from them I conclude,

(1.) That if the present dictate of my conscience and practical judgment be, that it is my duty to choose my stated communion with the congregations of dissenters, then it is my sin if I do not do it; for *to him that knows to do good, and doth it not, to him it is sin.*

(2.) Then, by occasional communion with the

church of England, whereby I design to testify my charity and catholic communion, and my approbation of that in it which is good, I do not in the least condemn my stated communion with the dissenters; for though I am not convinced that it is a sin of commission at any time to join with the established church, nor that any thing in itself unlawful is required as the condition of lay-communion, yet, upon the grounds aforesaid, I am fully convinced it would be a sin of omission not to join with the dissenters. I will not condemn any thing that is good, when a better is not in my reach; but when it is, I think I am obliged, in duty to God, and in concern for my own soul, to prefer it. *All things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.*

(3.) Then, in all this, I am far from judging and censuring those who differ from me. I walk according to my present light, preferring that which I think and find to be best; and I verily believe those good Christians who, I know, constantly join with the public establishment do so too, preferring that which they think and find to be the best; and both they and I (I trust) are accepted of God. To those who condemn me herein, I shall only offer that reasonable demand of St. Paul: *If any man trust to himself that he is Christ's, let him of himself think this again, that as he is Christ's, even so are we Christ's.*^b

^b 2 Cor. x. 7.