

A  
**LETTER**  
CONCERNING  
MATTER OF THE PRESENT  
EXCOMMUNICATIONS.

BY  
JOHN OWEN

## A LETTER,

&c.

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SIR,

YOU judge aright, that at my last being in London, I did consider the unusual hurry of excommunications against those called dissenters; and because of the novelty of the proceedings therein, I did moreover endeavour my own satisfaction, as unto the design, causes, and ends of them; and I find it a thing easily attainable, without difficulty, or curiosity of inquiry. For whereas there is no covering of religion, nor any thing appertaining thereunto, save only a name or title cast upon them, they openly discover themselves of what sort they are, and what they belong unto; and among many other indecencies wherewith they are accompanied, one seemed to me to be very notable, and this is, the collection of whole droves together by summons and citations; then dealing with them in such a clamorous manner, as makes a representation of a public market or fair for chaffering about souls. But that, I found, which did principally affect the minds of men, was the event which these proceedings do tend unto and will produce; and they generally concluded, that they would be highly prejudicial, if not ruinous, unto all trust and trade, among the peaceable subjects of the kingdom; for they said, that if the commissaries would do as in the old Roman proscriptions in the time of Sylla, and of the triumvirate afterward, and set up the names of all that were to be proceeded against in public tables, to be exposed to the view of all, those concerned might shift for themselves as well as they could, and the residue of mankind might be at liberty to follow their own occasions; but whilst they retain an unreasonable reserve in their own breasts, as unto persons to be ruined by them, so as that they know not whose names, their own or of those with whom they are concerned, they shall see the next day affixed on the church doors, in order unto excommunication, it deprives them of all repose in the law of the land or public

justice, and breaks all their measures about the disposal of their affairs. How far this is already come to pass, you, that are in the place, know better than I; but sure I am, that the very rumour of it gives a general discomposure unto the minds of men.

Hearing no other discourse of these things, I was somewhat surprised with your letter, wherein you required my thoughts, what influence these excommunications may have on the consciences of them who are so excommunicated; for I did not think there would have any question been made about it: but since you are pleased to make the inquiry, I shall, for the satisfaction of my respects unto you (though as unto any other end I judge it needless), give you a brief account of my judgment concerning these proceedings, which is the same, for the substance of it, with that of all sober persons with whom I ever conversed.

Excommunication is the name of a divine institution of Christ, wherein, and in whose due and just administration, the consciences of Christians are, or ought to be, highly concerned; and this, as for other causes, so principally because it is the only sure representation of the future judgment of Christ himself, he did appoint it for this end, that so it might be. Providential dispensations are various, and no certain judgment can be made on them, as unto the final and eternal determination of things and causes; 'No man knoweth love or hatred by the things' of that nature 'that are before him;' but this is ordained by the law of Christ to be a just representation of his future judgment, with a recognition of the cause which he will proceed upon. Therefore it is divinely instructive, in what he himself will do in the great day; it is 'futurae judicii praejudicium:' but he will scarcely be thought well advised, who shall send men to Doctors' Commons to learn the way and manner of Christ's judgment of his church, with the causes which he will proceed upon. He giveth himself another account of it, Matt. xxv. 32. unto the end of the chapter; of what he there declares, there is neither name nor thing found among men of these practices, which we treat about. The mentioning of them would be looked on as a sedition against their authority, or else make them ashamed as a thief when he is found; but for any sort of person to undertake the administration

and execution of the sentence of excommunication against others, not making it their design to represent the judgment of Christ towards impenitent sinners, is to bid defiance to him and his gospel. Wherefore no person whatever, wise or unwise, good or bad, can be concerned in the excommunication in conscience, or on a religious account; I speak not only of them who are forced to suffer by them, but of them also by whom they are administered and denounced. For it is impossible that men should be so far forsaken of all understanding, as to imagine that the proceedings therein do belong unto the gospel, or Christian religion, any otherwise but as a debasement and corruption of it; neither is any man ever the less of the communion of the church of England, by these excommunications, though he may by force be debarred from some advantages that belong thereunto. Neither is the communion of any church to be valued, from which a man may be really and effectually expelled by such means; for this excommunication is not only null as to the efficacy of its sentence, on the account of its maladministration; but it is not in any sense that which it is called, and which it pretends to be. Idols are called gods, but we know they are nothing in the world; so is this proceeding called excommunication, but is no such thing at all. If a man should paint a rat or an hedge-hog, and write over it that it is a lion, no man would believe it so to be, because of its magnificent title. All that it can pretend unto is a political engine, used to apply the displeasure of some, upon an accidental advantage, unto them whose ruin they design; and therein a satisfaction unto revenge, for discountenancing their supposed interest. That there is any acting in it of the authority of Christ, any representation of his love, care, and tenderness towards his church, any thing that is instructive in his mind or will, any 'prælude' of the future judgment, no man I suppose does pretend, nor I am sure can do so, without reflecting the highest dishonour imaginable on Christ himself, and the gospel.

To make these things yet more evident, and to shew how remote the present excommunications are from all possibility of affecting the consciences of any, I shall briefly pass through the consideration of those things which principally belong unto them, and whereunto all their efficacy is re-

solved ; and that which first offereth itself is, the persons by whom they are administered. The truth is, there is such a variety of scenes in this tragedy, and such different actors in it, from apparitor, with whom it begins, unto the jailor with whom it ends, that it seems not easy whom to ascribe the animating power and authority that is in it unto ; but yet on a little consideration the matter is plain enough. The ministers of the parishes wherein the excommunicated persons are supposed to dwell, by whom the sentence of excommunication is rehearsed out of a paper from the court, have no concernment herein ; for they know nothing of the causes or reasons of it, nor of the process therein, nor do pretend unto any right for the cognizance of them ; nor do for the most part know the persons at all, on whose qualifications alone the validity or invalidity of the sentence doth depend ; nor can give an account to God or man of what is done, as to right and equity ; and therefore I no way doubt, but that those who are learned and pious among them, do hardly bear the yoke of being made such properties in those acts and duties, which appertain unto their ministerial function : but it is known who they are who begin the work, and carry on the process of it until its final execution ; and I shall say no more concerning them, but this alone, that how meet soever they may be for the transaction of civil affairs, or for the skilful managing of that work herein, which they suppose committed unto them ; yet as unto any thing wherein conscience may be affected with the authority of Jesus Christ, they can be of no consideration in it. If any man can but pretend to believe that our Lord Jesus, by an act, grant, law, or institution of his, by any signification of his mind or will, hath committed or doth commit, the keys of the kingdom of heaven, the power of binding and loosing, of expelling out of, and admitting into, his church, unto these or such persons, he hath assuredly confidence enough to pretend unto a persuasion of whatever he pleases. They do not believe it themselves, nor among themselves pretend unto any such thing, but only a power to execute their own laws or canons. They do not judge that any personal, moral, or spiritual qualifications are required unto ecclesiastical administrations ; which yet to deny, is to undermine all religion, without which they may be fit for all church duties,

who are no better than that archdeacon of Oxford, who being charged with immoralities in his conversation, justified himself by the soundness of his faith, affirming that he believed three Gods in one Person, and besides, he believed all that God himself did believe. Let a man out of interest, or fear, or ignorant superstition, strive never so much to affect his conscience with the excommunications of such men, he will never be able to effect it.

But be the personal qualifications of those intended what they please, the question is, how they came by that power and authority herein, which they pretend unto? They are chancellors, archdeacons, commissaries, officials, with their court attendants, of whom we speak. I confess these horrid names, with the reports concerning them, and their power, are enough to terrify poor harmless men, and make them fear some evil from them. But excommunication is that which no man knows on what grounds to fear, from these names, titles, and offices: for that is the name of a divine ordinance instituted by Christ in the gospel, to be administered according to the rule and law thereof; but these names, and those unto whom they do belong, are utterly foreign unto the Scriptures, and, as unto the work, to the practice of the church for a thousand years; what therefore is done by them of this kind, must of necessity be utterly null, seeing that, as such, they have no place in the church themselves by the authority of Christ. But however it be undeniably evident, that they have no relation unto the Scripture, nor can have any authority from Christ, by virtue of any law or institution of his, nor countenance given unto them by any practice of the primitive church; yet what they do in this kind, being pretended acts of power and authority, an authority for them must be pleaded by them. But then it may be justly demanded of them, what it is; of what nature and kind? how it is communicated unto them, or derived by them from others? This is that which those who are excommunicated by them are principally concerned to inquire into, and which themselves in the first place are obliged to declare and evince. Unless men are satisfied in conscience, that those who act against them have just authority so to do, or in what they do, it is utterly impossible they should be concerned in conscience in what is done against them, or

be any ways obliged thereby. Here therefore they abide until they are satisfied in this just and necessary demand.

But here all things are in confusion; they can declare neither what authority is required unto what they do, nor how they come to possess that which they pretend unto. If it be from Christ, how comes it to operate on the outward concerns of men, their liberties and estates? If it be merely of man, whence do they give the name and pretence of a divine ordinance unto what they do? If any should follow the clue in this labyrinth, it is to be feared that it would lead them into the abyss of papal omnipotency.

As they exercise this power in courts of external jurisdiction and forms of law, they will not deny, I suppose, but that it is from the king: but why do they not then act that power in the king's name? for what is not done by his name, is not done by his authority. Ministers do not preach nor administer sacraments in the name of the king, for they do it not by his authority, or by virtue of authority derived from him; nor do parents govern their children or families in his name, but their own; because authority for it is their own, by the law of God and nature: but that exercise of power which externally affects the civil rights and liberties of men, must be in the king's name, or the foundations of the government of the nation are shaken. But I make it not my concernment what name or style they use in their courts. Let it be granted, for their own security, that they have all their power and authority from the king, it must be therewithal granted of what nature it is, namely, civil, and not spiritual: but why then doth what they do not go under the name of a civil order, constitution, or penalty, but of an ordinance or institution of Jesus Christ? Are not these things in their own nature everlastingly distinct? and is not conscience hereby fully absolved from any respect unto it, as such an ordinance, which in this supposition it neither is, nor can be? It is easily discernable, how these things tend unto the utter confusion of all things in religion.

If it be said that the power of it, as it is excommunication, is originally seated in the prelates, by virtue of their office, and is communicated unto these sort of persons by commission, delegation, or deputation, under their seals, it will yield no relief; for this fiction of the delegation of office

power, or the power of office, unto any, without giving them the office itself whereunto that power belongs, is gross and intolerable. Let it be tried, whether the bishops can delegate the power of ministerial preaching the word, and administration of the sacraments, unto any persons, without giving them the office of the ministry. If excommunication be an act of office power, authority to administer it cannot be delegated unto any without the office itself whereunto it doth belong; for these things are inseparable. I certainly believe it is the duty and concernment of some men to state proceedings of this nature on better foundations, that the exercise of such solemn duties of Christian religion be not exposed to utter contempt, nor men led, by a discovery of false pretences of divine institutions, to despise the things themselves that are so abused.

It were easy, from many other considerations, to demonstrate the nullity of these men's pretended authority, with respect unto excommunication, as it is an ordinance of the gospel, in which respect alone the consciences of men are concerned; and as unto their power over the civil rights and interests of men, those troubled by them must shift as well as they can.

But yet further, the manner of the administration of the present excommunications doth evidence their invalidity and nullity. That which they pretend unto, as hath been said, is a divine ordinance, an institution of Jesus Christ; and this declares in general how it ought to be administered by them who have authority for it, and are called thereunto. For it hence followeth, that it ought to be accompanied with an humble reverence of him and his authority, diligent attendance unto his law and the rule of his word in all things, with solemn, reiterated invocation of his holy name, for his presence, guidance, and assistance: where these things are neglected in the administration of any divine ordinances, it is nothing but the taking the name of God in vain, and the profanation of his worship. It may be some will despise these considerations; I cannot help it, they do it at their utmost peril: it is conscience alone which I respect in this discourse; they who have any such thing, will think these things reasonable.

Again, the especial nature of this institution doth require



an especial frame of mind in its administration; for it is the cutting off of a member of the same body with them, which cannot be without sense and sorrow. To cut off any from a church, who was never a member of it by his own consent, nor doth judge himself so to be, is ridiculous; hence St. Paul calls the execution of this censure, 'bewailing,' 2 Cor. xii. 21. denominating the whole action from the frame of mind wherewith it ought to be performed; and he that shall dare to decree or denounce this sentence, without sorrow and compassion for the sin, and on the person of him that is excommunicated, plays a game with things sacred for his advantage, and shall answer for his presumption.

Besides, as was before observed, it is an instituted representation of the Lord Christ, and his judgment in and of the church at the last day. If the consideration hereof be once out of the minds of them by whom it is administered, they must unavoidably err in all that they do; much more if it be never once in them; but this they ought to take on their souls and consciences, that what they do, Christ himself, if present, would do, and will do the same at the last day; for so he will deal with all impenitent sinners, he will denounce them accursed, and deliver them to Satan. There is undoubtedly required from hence a reverential care and circumspection in all that is done here: to make a false representation of Christ in these things, that is, his wisdom, authority, holiness, love, and care towards the church, is the worst and most deformed image that can be set up. What higher indignity can be offered to his gracious holiness, than to act and represent him as furious, proud, passionate, unmerciful, and delighting in the ruin of those that openly profess faith in him, and love unto him? God forbid that we should think that he hath any concern in such ways and proceedings.

Whereas also the next end of this censure is not destruction, but edification, or the repentance and recovery of lapsed sinners, it ought to be accompanied with continual fervent prayers for this end. This the nature of the thing itself requireth, this the Scripture directs unto, and such was the practice of the primitive church.

If we are Christians, we are concerned in these things as much as we are in the glory of Christ and the salvation of

our own souls. If we only make a pretence of religious duties, if we only erect an image of them for our own advantage, we may despise them, but at our peril. How well these things are observed in the present excommunications, is notorious. Once to mention them, is to deserve a second thunderbolt. An account of them, as to matter of fact, will be shortly given; at present I shall only say, that there is not any transaction of affairs in any kind amongst men civilized, wherein there is a greater appearance and evidence of turbulent passions, acting themselves in all manner of irregularities, more profaneness of expression, more insolent insultations, more brawling, litigious proceedings, more open mixtures of money demanded in pretended administrations of right and equity, than there are in the public proceedings about them. Shall any Christian suppose that the Holy Spirit of God, on whom alone depends the efficacy of all divine ordinances unto their proper end, will immix his holy operations in or with this furious exertion of the lusts of men? If this be looked on as the complement of Christian discipline, or the last and utmost actings of this authority of Christ towards men in this world, it must needs be a temptation unto men of atheistical inclinations: certainly greater scandal cannot be given; and it is the interest of some, at least for the preservation of a veneration to their office, to dispose of proceedings in this case in such a way and manner, as may administer occasion of consideration unto them concerned, and not be carried on, as at present, with laughter, indignation, and confusion; and if dissenters are to be destroyed, it is desired, that the work were left unto the penal statutes, which as now prosecuted and interpreted, are sufficient for it; rather than that the name of religion and a divine ordinance should merely for that end be exposed to contempt.

The last thing that I shall trouble you with at present is, the consideration of the persons against whom the present excommunications are blustered, with the pretended causes of them. These are they whom they call dissenters, concerning whom we may inquire what they are, and the cause of this pretended ecclesiastical severity towards them. And as unto the first part of the inquiry, they are such as believe and make open profession of all the articles of the Christian

faith; they do so, as they are declared in the Scripture; nor is the contrary charged on them. There is nothing determined by the ancient councils to belong unto Christian faith, which they disbelieve; nor do they own any doctrine condemned by them. They profess an equal interest of consent in the harmony of Protestant confessions, with any other Protestants whatever. They own the doctrine of the church of England as established by law, in nothing receding from it; nor have they any novel or uncatholic opinion of their own.

It is therefore utterly impossible to separate them from the communion of the catholic church in faith, or to cast them from that rock whereon they are built thereby. They do also attend unto divine worship in their own assemblies; and herein they do practise all that is agreed on by all Christians in the world, and nothing else; for they do not only make the Scripture the sole rule of their worship, so as to omit nothing prescribed therein to that purpose, nor to observe any thing prohibited thereby; but their worship is the very same with that of the catholic church in all ages; nothing do they omit that was ever used by it, nothing do they observe that was ever condemned by it; and this must be the principle and measure of catholic union in worship, if ever there be any such thing in the earth; to expect it in any other observances, is vain and foolish. Offering prayers and praises to God in the name of Jesus Christ, reading the holy Scripture, and expounding of it, singing of psalms to God, preaching of the word, with the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper, in a religious observation of the Lord's day, unto these ends; all according as God doth enable them by his Spirit, is the sum and substance of the worship of the catholic church, wherein all Christians are agreed. These things the Scripture doth prescribe, and these things the church in all ages hath observed. All differences about this worship, which have filled the world with inhuman contentions, arose from men's arbitrary addition of forms, rites, modes, ceremonies, languages, cringings, adorations, which they would have observed in it, whereof the Scripture is silent, and primitive antiquity utterly ignorant. And it may be it will be one day understood, that the due observance of this catholic

worship, according as God enableth any thereunto, leaving others at liberty to use such helps unto their devotion as they shall think meet, is the only communion of worship in the church which the Scripture requires, or which is possible to be attained. About the imposition of other things, there ever were, since they were, and ever will be, endless contentions. Wherefore these dissenters practising nothing in the worship of God but what is approved by all Christians, particularly by the church of England, omitting nothing that either the Scripture or catholic tradition directs unto, they are, notwithstanding this pretended excommunication, secure of communion with the catholic church in evangelical worship.

Moreover, they plead that their conversation is unblamable; that they are peaceable in the civil government, and useful among their neighbours; if they do evil in these things, let them that prosecute them bear witness of the evil; but if they do well, why are they smitten? If they can be charged with any immoralities, with any disobedience unto the rule and precept of the gospel; those by whom they are thus prosecuted are highly concerned, if not in conscience, yet in honour and interest, to manage the charge against them, that some countenance may be given unto their proceedings. For 'the law is not made,' as penal, 'for a righteous man, but for the lawless, and disobedient; for the ungodly, and for sinners; for unholy, and profane;' and if it be otherwise with the laws about these excommunications, they neither belong to, nor are derived from, the law of God.

There are indeed great clamours against them, that they are schismatics, and separatists, and things of the like nature; that is, that they are dissenters: but in this case, the whole force of any inference from hence is built on this supposition, That it is the will of Christ, that those who profess faith in him, and obedience unto him unblamably, should be excluded from an interest in and participation of these ordinances of divine worship which are of his own institution, who will not comply with and observe such rights and practices in that worship as are not so, but confessedly of human invention. But no colour of proof can be given hereunto; for it is directly contrary unto express Scripture rule, to the example of the apostolical churches,

and unheard of in the world, before the branded usurpation of Victor, bishop of Rome. An assertion of it, is to prostitute the wisdom, authority, and love of Christ towards his disciples, unto the wills of men, oftentimes prepossessed with darkness, ignorance, and superstition, and other lusts, as shall be more fully manifested, if there be occasion. Let any colour be given unto this supposition from Scripture or antiquity, and the whole cause shall be given up; yet thus is it, and no otherwise, in the matter of the present excommunications; persons of all sorts, every way sound in the faith, unprovable in the catholic worship of the gospel, professing love and obedience unto Jesus Christ, without blame, are excluded, what lies in them, who manage these ordinances of divine worship, which the Lord Christ hath appointed and enjoined, without pretence of any other cause or reason, but only their not observance, in that worship, of what he hath not appointed. He that can believe this to be the will of Christ, neither knoweth him, nor his will, as it is revealed in his word; and the consciences of men are sufficiently secure from being concerned in that, wherein such an open defiance is bid unto evangelical precepts and rules, with apostolical examples.

And farther, to manifest the iniquity of these proceedings, whilst these dissenters are thus dealt withal, all sorts of persons, ignorant, profane, haters of godliness, and openly wicked in their lives, are allowed in the full communion of the church, without any disciplinary admonition or control. But as this serves to acquit them from any concernment in what is done against them, so nothing can be invented that tends more directly to harden men in their sins and impenitency; for whilst there is a pretence of church censures, they will be apt to think that they are sufficiently approved of Christ and the church, seeing their displeasure is no way declared against them; so they are not dissenters, they have reason to judge that they are safe here, and shall be so to eternity; let them look to themselves who deserve to be excommunicated. Is this the rule of the gospel? Is this the discipline of Christ? Is this the representation of his future judgment? Is this the way and manner of the exercise of his authority in the church, a declaration of what he owns, and what alone he disavows?

God forbid that such thoughts should have any countenance given unto them. Ecclesiastical laws have been always looked on as cobwebs, that catch the smaller flies, whilst the greater break them at their pleasure; but amongst those lesser, to spare those that are noxious or poisonous, and to cast the net over the innocent and harmless, is that which the spider gives no pattern of, nor can imitate.

I shall not mention the avowed end and design of these present excommunications; only I shall say, they are such, as many good men tremble to consider the horrible profanation of things sacred which they manifest to be in them.

There are also many other things which evidence the nullity of these proceedings, which may be pleaded if there be occasion; what hath already been spoken, is abundantly sufficient to satisfy my engagement unto you, namely, that the consciences of men are not at all concerned in the present excommunications.

It may be it will be said, that all this while we have been doing just nothing, or that which is to no purpose at all, as not concerning the present case; for these of whom we treat, pretend no power in 'foro interiori,' or the court of conscience, or unto nothing that should immediately affect it. Their authority is only in 'foro exteriori,' in the court of the church, which it seems is at Doctors' Commons: wherefore by their sentence of excommunication they oblige men only unto their outward concernments; as unto what concerns conscience, they leave that unto the preachers of the word. It may be, it will be so pleaded; but before they quit their hands well of this business, they will understand, that excommunication itself is nothing but an especial way of the application of the word unto the consciences of sinners, unto their edification; and that which is not so, pretend what it will, is nothing at all; unto the dispensers, therefore, of the word it doth alone belong: and whereas the apostle tell us, that the weapons of our Christian warfare are not carnal, but mighty, through God, to bring into captivity every thought unto the obedience of Christ; they seem herein to say, that the weapons of their warfare are carnal and mighty, through the aid of some body, to cast men into prison, or to bring their persons into captivity. And indeed this outward court of theirs, is part of that court without the temple,

which is trodden down by the Gentiles, and shall not be measured in the restoration of the worship of God ; yea, the distinction itself is silly, if any thing be intended by this outward court, but only the outward declaration of what is, or is supposed to be, effected in the inward, or the mind and consciences of men. But let it be what it will, those who have neither name, nor place, nor office in the church by divine institution, who attend not at all in what they do unto any rule of the Scripture ; nor can, nor do pretend any authority from Christ, in and for what they do, are no way to be heeded in this matter, but only as the instruments of external compulsion, which, for the sake of the public peace, is to be submitted unto with quietness and patience.

I find, I confess, by the books with me, sent us weekly into the country, that in this state of things some of the reverend clergy do manifest great compassion towards the dissenters, in writing and publishing many discourses containing persuasives unto, and arguments for conformity, whereby they may be freed from their troublesome circumstances ; but I must needs commend their prudence in the choice of the season for this work, as much as their charity in the work itself. For the conformity they press need no other commendation at this time ; nor need they use any other arguments for it, but only that it is better than being hanged, or kept in perpetual durance, or stifled in prisons, or beggared, they and their families, or be starved in exile. And it hath been always observed, that arguments which march with halberts, bills, staves, serjeants, bailiffs, writs, warrants, and capiases, are very forcible and prevalent.

But I have done, and shall leave it unto others to declare what mischiefs do ensue on these proceedings, on civil accounts, and what an inroad is made by them on the government of the kingdom. For a new tenure is erected by them, whereon all men must hold their birthright privileges, especially that which is the root whereon they all do grow, namely, their personal liberty. They hold them no longer by the law of the land, nor can pretend unto security, whilst they forfeit them not by that law ; they are all put into the power of chancellors, archdeacons, commissaries, and officials ; they may deprive them of them all at their pleasure, against the protection of that law under which they are born,

and which hath been looked on as the only rule and measure of the subject's liberties, privileges, and possessions. These things tend not only to the disturbance, but the ruin of all peace and trust among men, and of all good government in the world.

And if they should excommunicate all that by the law of Christ are to be excommunicated on the one hand, and all that are to be so by their own law on the other, and then procure *capias's* for them all, it is to be feared, the king might want subjects to defend his realms against his enemies, unless he should do as they did of old at Rome in great distresses, open the gaols, and arm the prisoners ; or, it may be, the lesser part would at length find it troublesome to keep the greater in prison. But these things concern not you nor me. I beg your excuse, as not knowing whether you will judge this hasty writing too little for the cause, or too much for a letter. As it is, accept it from, Sir,

Your, &c.

J. O.