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THE NATURE AND UNITY

OF THE

CHURCH OF CHRIST.

“And ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their Lord.” Luke xiii. 36.

I cannot doubt that much of the moral truth on which the following considerations depend, has been realized in the minds of many Believers, who have sought into the divine Word ; but I have felt (in the little communion, though great intercourse, which such have ordinarily with each other,) that the expression of these thoughts might, by the blessing of God, direct the attention of Believers, and more explicitly manifest to the Church from the divine Word its just objects ; and consequently, by their reception, determine its character and conduct ; ensuring, under God's blessing, more consistency of operation ; and thus stablish, strengthen, settle it, in its own hopes, and make it exhibit, with more clearness and power, the grace of God to the world ; lead Believers to more explicit reliance on the operations of the divine Spirit ; to look less to the plans of men and human co-operation, or to what will be found, in the end, to be human interests. While the aims and purposes of Believers are very mixed in their nature, and fall far below the standard for which God has gathered them, and which He proposes as the influential object of their faith, and consequently as the motive of their conduct, division and sectarianism are, even in the mercy of God's providence, the necessary result, whether it assume the character of Establishment or of Dissent. I am supposing here, of course, that the great truths of the gospel are the professed faith of the Churches, as they are in all the genuine Protestant Churches. For the just consequence of the reception of Gospel facts by faith, and its end in man, is the purification of the desires in love,—a life to Him, who died for us, and rose again,—a life of hope in His glory. To suppose therefore, Unity, where the Church falls entirely short of the just consequences of its faith, is to suppose that the Spirit of God would acquiesce in the moral inconsistency of degenerate man, and

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that God would be satisfied that His Church should sink below the glory of its Great Head, without even a testimony that He was dishonored by it.—In truth it has ever been so: judgments from without for a good while marked His displeasure while it was sinking, and when it was utterly sunk in Apostasy, He raised His witnesses, who should sigh and cry for the abominations that were done in it; who in much darkness of spiritual understanding, bore testimony against the moral corruption that had overwhelmed the Church; and who in the acknowledgement of redemption by the Lord Jesus, out of this present evil world, testified that the professing Church was Apostate. When it pleased God to raise this testimony into the place of public sanction, while doctrinal truth (we may believe) was much developed for the foundation and edification of the faith of Believers, it by no means followed that the Church, thereupon, emerged wholly in spirit and power from its depression, and assumed the character which it has in the purpose of its Author, and became an adequate and distinctive witness of His thoughts to the world. Such indeed, however blessed, as we are all bound most thankfully to acknowledge the Reformation to have been, was not the case: it was manifestly united with much of what was merely human agency; and though the exhibition of the Word, as that on which the soul could rest itself, was graciously afforded, still there was much of the old system which remained in the constitution of the Churches, and which was in no way the result of the development of the mind of Christ, produced by setting up the light and authority of the word. This gave to the general state and practice of the Church (whatever the excellence of individuals may have been) a character which many discerned to be short of that which was acceptable to God; and the authority of the Word having been recognized as the basis of the Reformation, they sought to follow it, as they supposed, more perfectly. Hence arose all the branches of Nonconformity and Dissent, which prevailed when the Spirit of God was poured out, in proportion to the secularity or alienation from God, of the body publicly recognized as *the Church*. For it must be observed, that since the time when Popery prevailed over the nations, till lately, among those who have taken a share in the revival of religion, that has in general been called *the Church*, which has been received as such by the rulers of this world, not those who were delivered from the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son; who were come to the "general assembly and Church of the first born, whose names are written in heaven." These observations are in some measure applicable to all the great national Protestant bodies, since the time when the outward form and constitution became so prominent a matter, which was not the case originally, while deliverance from Popery was in question.

From all this has followed an anomalous and trying consequence; namely, that the true Church of God has no avowed communion at

all. There are, I suppose, none of its members who would not now acknowledge, that individuals of the children of God are to be found in all the different denominations, who profess the same pure faith; but where is their bond of union? It is not that unbelieving professors are mixed with the people of God in their communion, but that the bond of communion is not the *unity* of the people of God, but really (in point of fact) their *differences*.

The bonds of nominal union are such as separate the children of God from each other; so that instead of (itself an imperfect state) unbelievers being found mixed up with them, the people of God are found as individuals, among bodies of professing Christians, joined in communion upon other and different grounds; not in fact as the people of God at all. The truth of this I think, cannot be denied, and surely it is a very extraordinary state for the Church to be in.—I think the study of the history of the Church, (bearing in mind what the true Church of God is,) will enable us to account for it. Such is not my present purpose, as writing merely on the principle of that inquiry, in which they that feared the Lord, spake often one to another. But it must surely form a practical matter of great importance to the judgment of those, who (being partakers of the Spirit, and therefore identified, however weakly, with the Lord Christ in His sympathies with the Church,) grieve over its inconsistency with His love, and who desire the order of the house as those who wait for their Lord. I do believe indeed, that there will be a gradual development of the children of God, by a separation from the world; of which many of them perhaps now think little. The Lord will be present with His people in the hour of their temptation, and hide them secretly in the tabernacle of His presence; but it is not my purpose to follow presumptuously my own thoughts about this. We may remark that the people of God have found, since the increased outpouring of His Spirit, a sort of remedy for this disunion, (manifestly an imperfect, though not an untrue one) in the Bible Society,* and in Missionary exertions; which gave the one a sort of vague unity in the common acknowledgment of the Word, which, if investigated, will be found to have, partially inherent in it, though not recognized in its power, the germ of true unity; the other an unity of desire and action, which tended in thought towards that kingdom, the want of the power of which was felt. And in this they found some relief for that sense of want, which the workings of the Divine Spirit had produced in them. From the state of things of which I have spoken, have resulted other efforts,† either of the energies of knowledge, or

* The writer is not agreeing with the mixture of Socinians or Infidels in the Bible Society, for he thinks it a great sin. He merely refers to the exhibition of the *effort* at union in principles, not involving sectarian opinions.

† Efforts far more numerous than are supposed, and which have extended, in unconnected instances, over much of the Continent, where it was possible; shewing it not to have resulted from individual fancy, but from the working of some great general principle; and to which (accompanied as it has been by practical holiness and a growing devotedness of purpose,) the presence of the Spirit cannot be denied.

the desires of spiritual life. The spirit and desire in which much of this was carried on, was, doubtless, in many instances, the cravings of a mind actuated by the Spirit of God; but it has often been defective, in not practically waiting upon His will, nor has it been framed upon that largeness of mind and purpose of which it was the evidence; in many cases assuming, perhaps, the particular views of one by whom it was locally originated; and therefore merging in the mass of ordinary Dissent, or becoming a special sect. This has arisen from so little community of the Spirit in Believers, and such want of dependence upon it; and I must be forgiven if I add in faithfulness, that while the effects have been charged upon those who have thus acted, the cause is found in the state of that which they have just left, where they have been habitually accustomed to lean on any thing rather than on the Spirit. Hence, though these efforts have doubtless afforded so much testimony as to what is the proper character of the Church, as corresponded with the infirmity of our nature, and what the actual position in which Believers are, yet often, even when of the highest order as to personal religion, they have failed for the purposes of God, for the reasons mentioned, since in act they ran before the general progress of the divine counsels, or did not by their largeness meet the exigency of the Church of God below. This painful sense of our immense distance from that genuine exhibition of the purpose of God in His Church,—this looking after His power and glory, ought to lead us to thankfulness that He still thus deals with us, and to receive it as a pledge of that faithfulness which shall make the people of God, in due time, shine in the glory of the Lord. It should lead us also assiduously to seek what is the mind of Christ, as to the path of Believers in the present day; that it may be though not exactly according to their own desires, yet perfectly according to what His present will concerning them is. We know that it was the purpose of God in Christ, to gather in one, all things in heaven and on earth; reconciled unto Himself in Him; and that the Church should be, though necessarily imperfect in His absence, yet by the energy of the Spirit, the witness of this on earth, by gathering the children of God, which were scattered abroad. Believers know that all who are born of the Spirit, have substantial unity of mind, so as to know each other, and love each other as brethren. But this is not all, even if it were fulfilled in practice, which it is not; for they were so to be all one, as that the *world* might know that Jesus was sent of God;—in this we must all confess our sad failure. I shall not attempt so much to propose measures here for the children of God, as to establish healthful principles: for it is manifest to me, that it must flow from the growing influence of the Spirit of God, and His unseen teaching; but we may observe what are positive hindrances, and in what that union consisted.

In the first place, it is not a formal union of the outward professing

bodies that is desirable; indeed it is surprising that reflecting Protestants should desire it: far from doing good, I conceive it would be impossible that such a body could be at all recognized as the Church of God. It would be a counterpart to Romish unity; we should have the life of the Church and the power of the Word lost, and the unity of spiritual life utterly excluded. Whatever plans may be in the order of Providence, we can only act upon the principles of grace; and true unity is the unity of the Spirit, and it must be wrought by the operation of the Spirit. In the great darkness of the Church hitherto, outward division has been a main support, not only of zeal, (as is very generally admitted,) but also of the authority of the Word, which is instrumentally the life of the Church; and the Reformation consisted not, as has been commonly said, in the institution of a pure form of Church, but in setting up the Word, and the great Christian foundation and corner stone of "Justification by Faith," in which Believers might find life. But further, if the view that has been taken of the state of the Church be correct, we may adjudge that he is an enemy to the work of the Spirit of God who seeks the interests of any particular denomination; and that those who believe in "the power and coming of the Lord Jesus Christ," ought carefully to keep from such a spirit; for it is drawing back the Church to a state occasioned by ignorance and non-subjection to the word, and making a duty of its worst and most Antichristian results. This is a most subtle and prevailing mental disease, "*he followeth not us,*" even when men are really Christians. Let the people of God see if they be not hindering the manifestation of the Church by this spirit. I believe there is scarcely a public act of Christian men, (at any rate of the higher orders, or of those who are active in the nominal Churches,) which is not infected with this; but its tendency is manifestly hostile to the spiritual interests of the people of God, and the manifestation of the glory of Christ.—It must grieve the Spirit of God. Christians are little aware how this prevails in their minds; how they seek their own, not the things of Jesus Christ; and how it dries up the springs of grace and spiritual communion; how it precludes that order to which blessing is attached—the gathering together in the Lord's name. No meeting, which is not framed to embrace all the children of God in the full basis of the kingdom of the Son, can find the fulness of blessing, because it does not contemplate its—because its faith does not embrace it.

Where two or three are gathered together in His name, His name is recorded there for blessing; because they are met in the fulness of the power of the unchangeable interests of that everlasting kingdom in which it has pleased the glorious Jehovah to glorify Himself, and to make His name and saving health known in the person of the Son, by the power of the Spirit. In the name of Christ, therefore, they

enter (in whatever measure of faith) into the full counsels of God, and are *συνεργοὶ Θεοῦ* fellow-workers under God. Thus whatever they ask is done, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. But the very foundation on which these promises rest, is broken up, and its consistency destroyed, by bonds of communion, not formed on the scope of the purposes of God in Christ. I say not, indeed, that they may not find a feeble measure of spiritual food; which, though generally partial in its character, may be suited to strengthen their personal hope of eternal life. But the glory of the Lord is very near the believing soul, and in proportion as we seek it, will personal blessing be found. It puts me in mind indeed, (as all doubtless have some separate portion of the form of the Church) of those who parted the Saviour's garments among them; while that inner vest, which could not be rended, which was inseparably one with its nature, was cast lots for whose it should be; but in the meanwhile, the name of Him, the presence of the power of whose life would unite them all in appropriate order, is left exposed and dishonoured. Indeed, I fear that these have fallen too much into the hands of those who care not for Him, and that the Lord will never clothe Himself with them again, viewed in their present state. Indeed, it could not be when He appears in His glory. I say it not in presumption or dislike, for the reproach of it is a grievous burden, it is an humbling—most afflicting thought: but that second temple, which had been raised by the mercy of God after the long Babylonish captivity, we have learned to trust in too much as “the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these;” we have been haughty because of the Lord's holy mountain; we have looked at it as adorned with goodly stones and gifts; and have ceased to look to the Lord of the temple,—have ceased almost to walk by faith, or to have communion in the hope of the return of the messenger of the covenant, to be the glory of this latter house. The unclean spirit of idolatry may have been purged out; but the great question still remains, is there the effectual presence of the Spirit of the Lord, or it is merely empty, swept, and garnished? If we have been at all blessed, are we not disregarding Him from whom it came, by pride, and self-complacency, and seeking to turn it to our own, instead of going on to His glory? Let us then pass, brethren beloved of the Lord—ye who love Him in sincerity, and would rejoice in His voice—to the practical exigency of our present situation. Let us weigh His mind concerning us. The Lord has made known His purpose in Him, and how those purposes are affected. “He hath made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He hath purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fulness of times, He should gather together in one all things in Christ, whether they be things in heaven, or things on earth, even in Him, in whom we also have received an inheritance.”

In one, and in Christ. In *Him* alone therefore can we find this unity; but the blessed word (who can be thankful enough for it) will inform us further.—It is as to its earthly members “gathering together in one, the children of God who are scattered abroad.” And how is this? “That one man should die for them.” As our Lord in the vision of the fruit of the travail of His soul declares, “I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me: this He said signifying what death He should die.” It is then Christ who will draw, will draw to *Himself*, and nothing short of, or less than this can produce unity. “He that gathereth not with *Him*, scattereth.” And draw to himself *by being lifted up from the earth*. In a word, we find *His* death is the centre of communion till His coming again, and in this rests the whole power of truth. Accordingly, the outward symbol and instrument of unity is the partaking of the Lord’s supper,—“for we being many are one body, for we are all partakers of that one bread.” And what does St. Paul declare to be the true intent and testimony of that rite? That “whosoever we eat of that bread and drink of that cup, we do shew the Lord’s death *till He come*.” Here then are found the character and life of the Church,—that into which it is called,—that in which the truth of its existence subsists, and in which alone is true unity. It is “shewing forth the Lord’s death,” by the efficiency of which they were gathered, and which is the fruitful seed of the Lord’s own glory; which is indeed the gathering of His body, “the fulness of Him that filleth all in all;” and shewing it forth in the assurance of His coming, “when He shall come to be glorified in His saints, and to be admired in all them that believe.” Accordingly the essence and substance of unity which will appear in glory at His coming, is conformity to His death, by which that glory was all wrought. And it will be found in result, that conformity to His death will be our frame for glory with Him at His appearing, as the Apostle desires, “that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable to His death, if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.” Have we faith in these things? How shall we show it? By acting on these directions of our Lord, which are founded on His divine knowledge of the objects of faith. What follows upon our Lord’s declaration, in the view of His glory, that it must be by His death? “He that loveth his life shall lose it, and he that hateth his life in this world, shall keep it unto life eternal. If any man serve me let him follow me, and where I am there shall also my servant be; if any man serve me, him will my Father honor.” The servant is he who is to be honored. If we would be servants, we must be so in following Him who died for us. And in following Him, our honor will be to be with Him in “His glory, and the glory of His Father, and of the holy angels.” It is matter of great thankfulness that not-

withstanding the scattering of the Church, by its becoming of this world as a body, and its most imperfect revival by the discovery of the free hope of glory, Believers have a way before them marked in the word; that if we are not given to see as yet the glory of the children of God, the path of that glory in the wilderness should be revealed to us. We are assured, in doctrine, that the death of the Lord, in whom the free gift came, is the sole foundation on which a soul is built for eternal glory. In truth it is only to Believers in this that I address myself. Our duty as Believers, is to be witnesses of what we believe. "Ye," says God, of the Jews, by the prophet Isaiah, "are my witnesses," in His challenge to the false gods; and as Christ is the faithful and true witness, such ought the Church to be. "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, that ye may shew forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvellous light."

Of what then is the Church to be a witness against the idolatrous glory of the world? Even of that glory into which Christ has risen, by their practical conformity to His death; of their true belief in the cross, by their being crucified to the world, and the world to them. Unity, the unity of the Church, to which "the Lord added daily such as should be saved," (*the saved, τους σωζομενους*) was when none said any thing was his own, and "their conversation was in heaven;" for they could not be divided in the common hope of that. It knit men's hearts together by necessity. The Spirit of God has left it upon record, that division began about the goods of the Church, even in their best use, on the part of those interested in them, for *there* could be division, *there* could be selfish interests. Am I desiring Believers to correct the Churches? I am beseeching them to correct themselves, by living up, in some measure, to the hope of their calling. I beseech them to shew their faith in the death of the Lord Jesus, and their boast in the glorious assurance which they have obtained by it, by conformity to it;—to shew their faith in His coming, and practically to look for it by a life suitable to desires fixed upon it. Let them testify against the secularity and blindness of the Church, but let them be consistent in their own conduct. "Let their moderation be known to all men." While the spirit of the world prevails, (and how much it prevails I am persuaded few Believers are at all aware) spiritual union cannot subsist. Few Believers are at all aware how the spirit which gradually opened the door to the dominion of Apostasy, still sheds its wasting and baneful influence over the professing Church. They think, because they were delivered from its secular dominion, that they are free from the practical spirit which gave rise to it; and because God has wrought much deliverance, therefore they are to be content. Nothing could be a testimony of greater alienation of the mind from the Spirit of promise, which, having the prize of the high calling of God set before it, ever

presses towards it, ever seeks conformity to death, that it may attain to the resurrection of the dead. It waits for the Lord, and beholding His glory in unvailed face, "is changed into the same image, from glory to glory." For let us ask, is the Church of God as Believers would have it? Do we not believe that it was, as a body, utterly departed from Him? Is it restored so that He would be glorified in it at His appearing? Is the union of Believers such as He marks to be their peculiar characteristic? Are there not unre-moved hindrances? Is there not a practical spirit of worldliness in *essential variance with the true termini of the gospel, the death and coming again of the Lord Jesus the Saviour?* Can Believers say they act on the precept of their "moderation being known unto all men?" I do believe that God is working by means and in ways little thought of, in "preparing the way of the Lord, and making His paths straght,"—doing by a mixture of Providence and testimony the work of Elias. I am persuaded that He will put men to shame exactly in the things in which they have boasted. I am persuaded that He will stain the pride of human glory, "and the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of man shall be brought low, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day; for the day of the Lord of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up, and he shall be brought low; and upon all the cedars of Lebanon, that are high and lifted up, and upon all the oaks of Bashan, and upon all the high mountains, and upon all the hills that are lifted up, and upon every high tower, and upon every fenced wall, and upon all the ships of Tarshish, and upon all pleasant pictures. And the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of man shall be made low; and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day, and the idols He shall utterly abolish; and they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of His Majesty, when He ariseth to shake terribly the earth. In that day a man shall cast his idols of silver, and his idols of gold, which they made each one for himself to worship, to the moles and to the bats; to go into the clefts of the rocks, and into the tops of the ragged rocks, for the fear of the Lord, and of the glory of His Majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth. Cease ye from man; whose breath is in his nostrils, for wherein is he to be accounted of?"

But there is a present part for Believers to act; they can lay their hand upon many things in themselves *practically inconsistent with the power of that day*;—things which shew that their hope is not in it;—*conformity to the world, which shews that the Cross has not its proper glory in their eyes.* These things let them weigh. These are but desultory suggestions: but are they the testimony of the Spirit or not? Let them be tried by the word. Let the Almighty doctrine of the Cross be testified to all men, and let the eye of the Believer be directed to the coming of the Lord. But let us not

defraud our souls of all the glory which accompanied that hope, by setting our affections on things which will be proved to have had their origin in this world, and to end in it. Will they abide His coming ?

Farther, unity is the glory of the Church ; but unity to secure and promote *our own interests*, is not the unity of the Church, but *confederacy*, and denial of the nature and hope of the Church. Unity, that is of the Church, is the unity of the Spirit, and can only be in the things of the Spirit, and therefore can be perfected only in spiritual persons. It is indeed the essential character of the Church, and this strongly testifies to the Believer its present state. But, I ask, if the professing Church seek worldly interests, and if the Spirit of God be amongst us, will it then be the minister of unity in such pursuits as these ? If the various professing Churches seek it, each for itself, no answer need be given. But if they unite in seeking a common interest, let us not be deceived ; it is no better if it be not the work of the Lord. There are two things which we have to consider : first, are our objects in our work exclusively the Lord's objects, and no other ? If they have not been such in bodies separate from each other, they will not be in any union of them together. Let the Lord's people weigh this. Secondly, let our conduct be the witness of our objects. If we are not living in the power of the Lord's kingdom, we certainly shall not be consistent in seeking its ends. Let it enter our minds, while we are all thinking what good thing we may do to inherit eternal life, to sell all that we have, take up our cross, and follow Christ. Does not this go very close to the hearts of many ? Let us bear in mind then strongly the following truths,—that what are called communions, are, (as to the mind of the Lord about His Church,) disunion ; and, in fact, a disavowal of Christ and the Word. “ Are ye not carnal, and walk as men ? ” Is Christ divided ? Is He *not*, as far as our disobedient hearts are concerned ? I ask Believers, “ whereas there are divisions among you, are ye not carnal, and walk as men ? ”

Yea, there is no professed unity among you at all. So far as men pride themselves on being Established, Presbyterian, Baptist, Independent, or any thing else, they are Antichristian. How then are we to be united ? I answer, it must be the work of the Spirit of God. Do *you* follow the testimony of that Spirit in the Word as is practically applicable to your consciences, lest that day take you unawares ? “ Whereunto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing ; and if in any thing we be otherwise (i. e. differently) minded, God shall reveal this also unto us,” and shew us the right path. Let us rest on this promise of Him who cannot lie. Let the strong bear the infirmity of the weak, and not please themselves. Professed Churches, (especially those Established,) have sinned greatly in insisting on things indifferent, and hindering the union of Believers. Certainly order is necessary ;

but where they said, "the things are indifferent and nothing in themselves, therefore you must use them for our pleasure's sake," the word of the Spirit of Christ says, "they are indifferent, therefore we will yield to your weakness, and not offend a brother for whom Christ died." St. Paul would have eaten no meat while the world endured, if it had hurt the conscience of a weak brother, though the weak brother was in the wrong. And why insisted on? Because they gave distinction and place in the world. If the pride of authority and the pride of separation were dissolved (neither of which are of the Spirit of Christ) and the word of the Lord taken as the sole practical guide, and sought to be acted up to by Believers, we shall be spared much judgment, though we shall not perhaps find altogether the glory of the Lord, and many a poor Believer, on whom the eye of the Lord is set for blessing, would find comfort and rest. Yet to such I say, Fear not, you know in whom you have believed, and if judgments do come, dearest brethren, ye may lift up your heads, "for your redemption draweth nigh." But for the Churches, if yet the Lord might have mercy, for sanction them in their present state He cannot, as they must own, let them judge themselves by the Word. Let Believers remove the hindrances to the Lord's glory, which their own inconsistencies present, and by which they are joined to the world, and their judgments perverted. Let them commune one with another, seeking His will from the Word, and see if a blessing do not attend it; at any rate it will attend themselves; they will meet the Lord as those that have waited for Him, and can rejoice unfeignedly in His salvation. Let them begin by studying the 12th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, if they think they are partakers of the unspeakable redemption wrought by the cross.

Let me ask the professing Churches, in all love, one question.—They have often professed to the Roman Catholics, and truly too, their unity in doctrinal faith; why then is there not an actual unity? If they see error in each other, ought they not to be humbled for each other? Why not, as far as was attained, mind the same rule, speak the same thing; and if, in any thing, there was diversity of mind, (instead of disputing on the footing of ignorance,) wait in prayer, that God might reveal this also unto them. Ought not those who love the Lord amongst them, to see if they could not discern a cause? Yet I well know that, till the spirit of the world be purged from amongst them, unity cannot be, nor Believers find safe rest. I fear lest it should be by the "spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning." The children of God can but follow one thing—the glory of the Lord's name, and that according to the way marked in the Word; if the professing Church be proud of itself, and neglect this, they have nothing else left, but as He, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, "suffered without the gate, to go forth to Him without the camp, bearing His reproach." It were well to weigh deeply

the 2nd and 3rd chapters of Zephaniah. What is going on in England at this moment, a moment of anxiety and distress of judgment among her political and thinking men? Why, we see the Dissenting Churches using the advocacy of actual unbelievers, and the Established Church of practical unbelievers, (I say it in no scorn to them) to obtain a share in, or keep to themselves the secular advantages and honours of that world out of which the Lord came to redeem us. Is this like His peculiar people? What have I to do with these things?—nothing. But as there are brethren connected both with one and the other, every one who thinks of it, has to testify with his whole strength, that some how or other he may keep himself clear of it, that he be not ashamed in the day of the Lord's coming. And many whom the people of God have trusted in, and relied upon, as they that have understanding, go on in the train; and the simple, as they that followed Absalom, go after them, not knowing whither they are going.

For my own part I cannot doubt the progress of events. That we are in the course of revolution, moral as well as political, no person of any perception can doubt. Not closing as to judgment, *that* is in God's own time; but closing in its principles—in its moral character,—the ripening of the tares and wheat for harvest. The question is as to the character of these events, and how they affect the real Christian—God's servant. This is matter of spiritual discernment; and above all it shews the intrinsic value of prophecy, "the light in a dark place, till the day dawn." The Dissenters have sought—have joined the world; and if the Establishment has been amalgamated with it, the eagerness of actual pursuit has marked the steps of the Dissenters. Both will be joined in it together; and the world is the sphere of judgment. They have sought the world and the world they will have, but the world in its infidel state. In a word, till the Lord be King, the saints cannot *have*, or *desire*, or *seek* it. Worship, answering no worldly purpose, and yet not spiritual, will soon be too foolish a thing; and a general attendance at present upon it, without any influence, only directly tends to this result. There is no one thing which so neutralizes the the power of Christianity as a Chapel or a Church, where the individual is not brought to the Lord by it; it fits him for the heart indifference of leaving religion to the clergy, which is but Popery; or the systematic indifference of leaving it to any body that likes it, which is just the character of infidelity. And when the principles are fully ripened they will be manifest, and manifest in all that are not saints. And this will speedily have a full characteristic development, and then, coming under its proper head (and developing itself in its details) will sink into its final corporate arrangement in evil, "for God hath put it into their hearts."

Meanwhile, what are the saints to do? I have no doubt at all in saying that the present arrangements (ecclesiastical I mean) of the

country, are being undermined; we have the present evidence in principle, in the worldliness of the Established system, and the stronger eagerness of the Dissenters after power and influence in the world. That many saints will be gathered out of all these, when they assume this evil character, I have not the least doubt. But I say farther, there are principles working which show moral revolution and dissatisfaction within these bodies with their own system, which are loosening their ties, while they will subject them to more energetic agency of the great master principles over evil human nature, but this bye and bye. But "a house divided against a house cannot stand," and this will be found in Dissent as well as in the form of the Church establishment, and in this those who least expect it, will be themselves involved I do not doubt. But if it be thus worldly, does any body doubt they are seeking worldly power, as others seek to keep it? The path of the saints is most simple; their portion is heavenly; to be not of the world, as Christ is not of the world; to be clear from all their plans, which will result only in the confusion of Antichrist's power when they have lost all *their* principles, and know not where they are. If the saint knows *his* intrinsically, his path is very clear; to wit, the spirit of separation from the world, through the knowledge of the death, and power, and glory, and coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. And if the Church (so called) be mixed up with the world in its objects, it only closes in the last form of the truth, "Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, all is vanity," in *the* truth—"I looked in the place of judgment, and behold wickedness; and in the place of righteousness, and behold iniquity"—and hence *growing positive separation from them all.*

The only other point which it is important to notice, is the direct and undoubted title of Christians (inasmuch as it then ceases to be schism, and is schism only from what is worldly, which is a Christian's duty) to meet together and break bread, if they wish it, or feel its need; not leaning upon ministry, or assuming any thing, or pretending to set up Churches, but simply (upon the ground that "where two or three are gathered together, there is Christ in the midst of them,") as individuals, merely separating from present evil. The charge of disorder and presumption will be easily bandied against such; the best refutation is holiness and meekness, with utter separation from the world; and it might very soon be proved (were it desirable) that there is more disorder, and if they please presumption too, in the assumption of those who make the charge, than in the quiet deportment of those who seek godliness, and who flee from evil, which those who thus charge them prevent their getting rid of. But Christ has provided in the Gospel for such a case, and while evil has confessedly grown up in the corporate system of the Church, and ministry may be valued, where it is sound, and be nothing where its form or name may exist,—"*neither in this mountain, nor at Jerusalem, do men*

worship the Father, but true worshippers worship the Father in Spirit and in truth," in the liberty of sons. "The Father seeketh such to worship Him," and where such are, His worship is : and "where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name," there His name is recorded to bless ; this is the essence of this dispensation, whatever arrangements may have resulted from other truths or ministrations. If schism be charged, schism from the world is always right, and is now above all a duty to Christ, and the dishonor of His Church is the chief dishonor to Him. If pride be in them who do it, it will soon come to nought, and is evil wherever it is.—The Father seeketh not such to worship Him.

On the other hand there is a warning to be noticed. It is just when the Lord had said it was a broad way, as the nominal Church is which leads to destruction, and charges them to "enter in at the strait gate," that He, the Lord, adds, "beware of false prophets." If the sheep are led out of the fold where they were, because the glory of the Lord abideth not upon it, it is exactly then the enemy would wait to seize them alone, if he could. The sheep of Christ shall surely be finally kept ; but humbleness of mind is a great means of being kept in the way, for it leans ever on the shepherd's arm. We are not the more safe for staying where judgment is coming. Let a saint use the means God has provided, by which he may escape the snare ; "Let him prove all things, and hold fast that which is good ;" let him delight in fellowship with other Christians in whom there is the same grace, who are seeking holiness for the sake of Christ,— "He that believeth shall not make haste." "Ye shall know them by their fruits,"—not merely in themselves, but much more in their disciples—the fruits produced by their doctrine, not merely the form necessarily maintained by themselves ; this is not the fruit of their doctrine, save as it is hypocrisy. So in desiring the Hebrews to follow the faith of their rulers, he refers them to the result of their conversation, above all remembering that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever : " so that they should not be "carried about with divers, and strange doctrines." Perfect liberty of heart from man, but perfect subjection of it to God, which will honor His grace, wherever it is seen, and above all will hold fast, by its experimental knowledge of the Holy One of God, communion with whom is the great safeguard against the snares of Satan in our walk, and the instrument of that fellowship with saints, which, in subjection one to another, ministers to the safeguard and security of all. And while having most perfect liberty, (as the Scriptures affirm, and indeed experience has abundantly proved, in personal blessing,) to hold full fellowship in communion one with another, let them take heed of building again the things they have destroyed, in forming Churches, in resting upon individual influence, which shall but pave the way for a result common to all that exist, though they may honor the grace which may be given to

any to help. Individual leading I believe to be the destruction of the Church now, because it is not the Spirit's leading, (though if the Spirit be in the individual, there will be its measure of power)—whilst universal subjection to the Spirit is our great, peculiar, and proposed safeguard and strength ; in a word, the Spirit of personal humbleness, holding fast by Christ, and proving all things by virtue of that communion, fed in knowledge by the word of God, and whose estimate of holiness will reach as far as the windings of the human intellect, or the vainer subtleties of human passions or affections if unsubdued. And let us remember, “if we walk in the light as God is in the light, we have fellowship one with another.” And if judgment be coming, as it surely is, (though men shall not see it, till it does come, saying, “peace and safety,”) I warn with this word, “Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world to try *them that dwell upon the earth*”—not the *dwellers in heaven*. And if they feel they have only a little strength, they will find that the Lord has set before them an open door which no man shuts, which the Lord has opened ; and they, adoring His hand, have only to walk in with this honor of blessing, (oh ! how undeservedly put upon us,) “Because thou hast kept the word of my patience !”

The Lord give us grace to walk in His ways.

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