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John Gill's

A BODY OF PRACTICAL DIVINITY

Book 2—Chapter 6

**OF THE DISCIPLINE OF A CHURCH
OF CHRIST**

Though the light of nature, and the laws and rules of civil society, may be very assisting in the affair of church discipline; and may in many things serve to illustrate and confirm it; yet it does not stand upon human, but divine authority. By the light of nature it may be known, man being a sociable creature, that men may form themselves into societies for mutual good; that they have a right to make laws and rules binding on each other, which are not contrary to justice and truth; to admit such into their societies who have a right to dispose of themselves, and assent to the rules of the society, and to keep out or expel such who refuse to be subject to them; and to choose and appoint whom they think fit to preside over them, to see that their laws and rules are put into execution; with other things of like nature. But Christ is sole head, king, and lawgiver in his house and kingdom; and no man, nor set of men, have a power to set up a church society, but what is by direction and according to the rule of his word, and the pattern of his house; nor to make laws and rules, but what he has made; nor to appoint any other sort of officers in his house, but whom he has appointed and directed to, and described the qualifications of; to whom he gives gifts and abilities, office power and authority to rule under him in his church: nor are any to be admitted into it, nor excluded from it, but according to his directions and orders; hence Ezekiel, after he had described the gospel church in its purity, as it will be in the latter day, is ordered to “show the house to the house of Israel;” the form, fashion, laws, and ordinances of it, to be copied after, and observed by them (Ezek. 43:10, 11). Now whereas there are various passages of scripture, which are taken for rules of church discipline, which are misunderstood and misapplied, it will be proper to mark them, that none may be misled by them.
As,

1. First, the words of our Lord to Peter, after he had made such a noble confession of his faith in him, as the Son of God; and Christ had declared, that upon that rock he professed faith in, he would build his church, against which the gates of hell should not prevail; he adds, "And I will give thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven," &c. (Matthew 16:19) which are usually understood of the admission of members into a church, and the exclusion of them; and of laying on of censures, and of taking them off. But they have respect, not at all to discipline, but to doctrine. The keys have made a great noise and rattling in the world, and many contests have been raised about them; what they are, and the power of them, in whose hands they are lodged, and who has the right to the use and exercise of them; when, after all, they relate not to church discipline, but to gospel doctrine. By "the kingdom of heaven" is not meant, neither the church in heaven, nor the gospel church state on earth; nor do the keys signify any lordly power and domination in it; which Christ never gave to Peter, nor to any of the apostles, and much less to ordinary ministers and elders of churches, who are not allowed to lord it over God's heritage; Christ keeps the key in his own hand, the key of the house of David: but the gospel itself is meant; hence we read of "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven;" that is, of the doctrines of the gospel: this kingdom of heaven was "shut up against men" in the Jewish world, through the wickedness or ignorance of the scribes and Pharisees, who took away the "key of knowledge" from the people (Matthew 23:13; Luke 11:52), and in the Gentile world, through the blindness, and ignorance, and want of divine revelation, they were left unto (Acts 17:30). Now a mission and commission to preach the gospel, and gifts and abilities for the same, are the keys by which the treasures of grace are unlocked, the stores of it opened and displayed, the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven explained, and clearly held forth to the view of others; now though these were given, not to Peter alone, but to all the apostles at the same time, yet Peter was the first who had the use and exercise of them; and with these he opened the "door of faith," that is, the gospel; first to the Jews, on the day of Pentecost, which was the first sermon after the commission was given, and proved the conversion of three thousand souls: and he was the first who preached the gospel to the Gentiles, to Cornelius and his family, to which first ministration of his to them, both he and James have a respect in the synod at Jerusalem (Acts 15:7, 14), and that these keys, and the use of them, belonged to all the apostles, as well as to Peter, appears from hence, that to whomsoever the keys, and the use of them, belonged, the same had the power of binding and loosing conferred upon them; and that all the apostles had the latter, is manifest from Matthew 18:18 which words are also misunderstood of, and misapplied to binding men with censures laid upon them, till they repent, and of loosing them from them when they do; but the words are spoken, not of persons, but of things; it is not said, "whomsoever ye bind;" but, "whatsoever ye bind," &c. and signify no other than declarations of what is unlawful or lawful; of what is forbidden or free of use; in which sense the words "binding" and "loosing" are used in thousands of instances in Jewish writings; and our Lord expresses himself in a manner which the Jews thoroughly understood, and his apostles must; and his meaning is, that whatsoever they bound, prohibited, declared as unlawful to be used, was so, though before lawful; and whatsoever they loosed, declared to be lawful, and free of use, was so; though before the death of

Christ, and their commission, was unlawful: thus for instance, they “bound,” prohibited circumcision, and declared it unlawful; though it was of the fathers, and was enjoined Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their male seed, to the coming of the Messiah; but since his death, and their commission to preach the gospel, they declared it to be nothing at all, no more to be used and practised; yea, that it was pernicious and hurtful; that Christ profited them nothing who used it, and was of no effect to them (Gal. 5:1-4, 6, 6:15), they “bound,” or forbid, the observance of days, and months, and times, and years, and declared them weak and beggarly elements, and that no man was to be judged or condemned for the disuse of them, though they had been, for ages past, used in the Jewish church; as the first day of the year, and of every month, the feasts of passover, pentecost, and tabernacles, the jubilee year, the sabbatical year, and the seventh day sabbath (Gal. 4:9-11; Col. 2:16, 17). On the other hand, they “loosed,” or declared lawful and free of use, civil correspondence between Jews and Gentiles; which before had been unlawful, at least according to the traditions of the Jews; and Peter was the first who had light into it, by the vision of the four footed beasts, which was given him; for before he thought it was an unlawful thing for a man that was a Jew to come into or keep company with one of another nation; but by that vision God showed him that he was not to call any man common or unclean (see Acts 10:28, 11:2, 3, 18); and so they all afterwards understood, that under the gospel dispensation there was neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, nor male nor female; but they were all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28), likewise they “loosed,” or declared lawful and free of use, the eating of any sort of food, of which there was a distinction under the old law, and was bid; but now they saw, from the words of Christ (Matthew 15:11), and Peter, by the above vision; and Paul, by Christ, that there was nothing common and unclean of itself; and that the kingdom of God did not lie in meat and drink, but that every creature of God was good, and nothing to be refused, if received with thanksgiving (Rom. 14:14, 17; 1 Tim. 4:4). And this power of binding and loosing reached not only to practices, but to doctrines; for as the apostles were infallibly guided into all truth; whatever they bound or forbid, and declared as false doctrine, was so; and whatever they “loosed,” or declared to be truth, was so to be accounted; hence the anathema of the apostle Paul (Gal. 1:8). They had the whole counsel of God, the whole system of gospel truths made known to them; and which they have declared in their writings; and are to be observed as the rule of faith to the end of the world, being delivered under divine inspiration; of which our Lord’s breathing upon them after his resurrection, and their commission from him, was an emblem, when the following words were delivered by him, “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted to them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained,” (John 20:23) which respect not any discipline of the apostles in laying on, binding, and retaining censures on persons; and of loosing, remitting, and taking them off, according to their behaviour; but of the doctrine of remission of sins, preached by them: for this cannot be meant of remission of sins by them in an absolute and authoritative way; for none can forgive sins but God, and Christ, who is God; and who yet never gave any such power to his apostles; nor did they ever, assume this to themselves; this is the mark of who sits in the temple of God, and shows himself to be god, or to assume such a character, by taking upon him to dispense pardons and indulgences: but this

is to be understood of the apostles, as ministerially and doctrinally preaching the forgiveness of sins; declaring, that such who repent of their sins, and believe in Christ, shall receive the remission of them; but that whoever do not repent of their sins, and do not believe in him, shall perish eternally, according to Mark 16:16 and by this doctrine of the apostles God and Christ will stand; and sooner or later will appear the validity, truth, and certainty of their declarations.

2. Secondly, there are various passages of scripture, which are thought to respect excommunication, or exclusion from church communion; which seem to have nothing to do with it, and are not to be considered as rules to proceed by, with respect unto it. As,

2a. First, the words in Matthew 18:17 “Let him, be unto thee as an heathen man, and a publican;” which was no form of excommunication, neither with Jews nor with Christians. Not with Jews, for that with them was expressed by casting out of the synagogue, especially in the times of Christ: nor with Christians, with whom it was after signified by putting away wicked men from among them; between an excommunicated person, and an heathen man and publican, there was no agreement; for an heathen man and a publican, however considered by the Jews, were very familiarly conversed with by Christ and his apostles; with whom they frequently eat and drank, and Christ is called a friend of such; whereas, with an excommunicate person it was not allowed to eat, nor indeed to have any familiar conversation with them, as little as possible. Moreover, the words are not a rule to the church, how that was to proceed towards a person who behaved in the manner described; for it is not said, “If he neglect to hear the church, let him be to the church as an heathen man and a publican;” but it is a rule to the offended person how he should behave to the offender, under such circumstances; “Let him be to thee,” &c. and the design of the whole is to justify the offended party, that when he has taken all the steps directed to; as to reprove the offending party privately, and then with two or more, who would be witnesses of his obstinacy, and then lay the whole affair before the church or congregation, which, with the Jews, never consisted of less than ten persons; so that he would be abundantly vindicated in behaving towards such a man as **חבר פהור** a worthless neighbour, as the Jews used to call such, and to look upon himself as freed from all brotherly and neighbourly offices towards him.

2b. Secondly, nor is excommunication expressed by the “delivery” of a man “to Satan;” for though that sometimes accompanied excommunication, yet they are very different and distinct things; the delivery of the incestuous person to Satan was the apostle’s own act and deed; “I verily,” says the apostle, “as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged,” or determined within myself, “already, concerning him that hath done this deed,” committed the incest before mentioned, “to deliver such an one unto Satan,” (1 Cor. 5:3, 5) for the fourth verse is to be read in a parenthesis, and the third and fifth connected together; which shows it to be a pure act of the apostle; as the like is elsewhere asserted by him, concerning Hymeneus and Alexander; “Whom,” says he, “I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn

not to blaspheme,” (1 Tim. 1:20) whereas, excommunication is called a punishment, or censure inflicted by many, on the incestuous person; whom the church at Corinth were directed to purge themselves from, and to put away from among them, that wicked person; by which the excommunication of him from them as a church is expressed (1 Cor. 5:7, 13; see 2 Cor. 2:6), as a distinct thing from the delivery of him to Satan; which was a miraculous action, as appears from 1 Corinthians 5:4 included in a parenthesis; “in the name of our Lord Jesus;” a way of speaking when a miracle being performed (see Acts 3:6); “when ye are gathered together,” not to perform this miraculous actions, but to be witnesses of it, and my spirit; for though in body he was absent from them, yet his spirit would be with them, to perform the miraculous operation; as the heart or spirit of Elisha was with Gehazi in a wonderful manner, when the man turned again to him from his chariot to meet him (2 King 5:26), the apostle adds, “with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ,” to which all miraculous operations are to be ascribed, and so this; for it never was used, nor never ought to be, as a form of excommunication; it was not in the primitive churches; nay, it was cautioned against by the ancients, in one of their synods; nor never was, until excommunication was used as an engine of the church’s, or rather of the priest’s power to terrify and distress; this was only used in the apostles’ time and then ceased; it was the apostolic rod, with which they sometimes smote wicked persons with death, as Ananias and Sapphira were smitten by Peter; and Elymas the sorcerer with blindness, by the apostle Paul; and others with diseases of body, and with violent agitations of it, and with terrors of mind; and it is remarkable that the words of the Lord concerning Job; “Behold, he is in thine hand,” are rendered in the Septuagint version, “Behold, I deliver him unto thee;” that is, to smite him with boils (Job 2:6), and such a corporal punishment, or temporal chastisement, cannot be reckoned a severity, as inflicted on the incestuous person; for excommunication was too mild a punishment for him, who had been guilty of a crime not to be named among the Gentiles; as to have his father’s wife! which was death, or cutting off by the hand of heaven, according to the law of Moses (Lev. 18:1-30), and so the blasphemy of Hymeneus and Alexander, by the same law, was deserving of death. It is commonly said, that this delivery of a man to Satan is only a redelivery of him into the kingdom of Satan, the world, out of which he was taken; and so is only a putting him “in statu quo;” but this is to allow the world to be the kingdom of Satan; whereas he has no true and proper right to it; it is only his by usurpation; the world is the Lord’s: nor is it fact, that when a man is received into a church, he is received out of the world; for it is supposed by the church, that he is previously called by the grace of God out of it; and is by faith a partaker of Christ, and of the blessings of his grace, and is a member of the invisible church; and very often so it is, that when a person is dealt with by a church for sin; which, for the honour of Christ and his gospel, they are obliged to do, yet at the same time they cannot but hope, that he is not a man of the world, but a partaker of the grace of God; and therefore do not account him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

2c. Thirdly, the passage in Titus 3:10 “A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject;” is usually thought, and so has been by myself, to be a

rule for the ejection or casting out of church communion, a person so described; but not only the word used, is never used of excommunication, nor indeed any other word in the singular number; it is not said, “reject ye,” but “reject thou”; and so is no direction to a church, but to a single person: now let Titus be who he may, an extraordinary person, an evangelist, as he seems to be, or a bishop of Crete, as the subscription of the epistle suggests, which is not to be depended upon, or an ordinary pastor and elder of a church, which is not probable; but be he what he may, an extraordinary or ordinary minister, he had no power nor right of himself to reject or eject any person from church communion; this would be to act the part of Diotrephes, who cast out the brethren, condemned by the apostle John; and the apostle Paul would never have advised Titus to act a part so unjustifiable; besides, could such a sense of the text be established, it would prove what the papists, prelates, and presbyterians produce it for, namely, that the power of excommunication lies in the hands of a bishop, or prelate, or presbyter, elder or pastor of a church, and not in the church itself; and it would not be easy to rescue such a proof out of their hands; whereas, not single persons, but churches, are always addressed and exhorted to perform the act of excommunication on persons deserving of it (see Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:7, 13; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14). Nor were admonitions ever directed to be given to persons deserving of excommunication; in cases of private offences, admonitions were to be given; and so long as an affair lies between a person and a church, respecting either doctrine or practice, and is not known to the world and other churches, admonitions may be given and repeated as long as there are any hopes of good being done by them; but in case of atrocious public crimes, and notorious heresies, subversive of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, no time should be lost, or trifled away with admonitions; but for the honour of Christ, the credit of religion, and for the removal of the odium brought on Christianity, such a person should be removed from communion at once; nay, even, as some think, though he may seem to have some sense of his evil, and repentance for it. We have but one instance of excommunication from a Christian church in the whole New Testament, and that is of the incestuous person; and we are sure he had no admonitions from the church before the apostle had heard of the affair; so far were they from it, that they were puffed up, when they should rather have mourned, that he that had done the deed might be taken away from them; and we are sure he had none afterwards, for the apostle immediately orders the excommunication of him. And though there are orders given to several of the churches, as before observed, for the excommunication of such and such persons, yet no directions given for the admonition of any of them, previous to their ejection: sometimes admonition is directed to be given after a person is withdrawn from, when it is not on account of any notorious crime, of a public and scandalous nature; but idleness, an unwillingness to work; and such an one cannot be looked upon as all enemy to Christ and his gospel, and may be admonished as one who had been a brother, and it may be hoped will be restored again (2 Thess. 3:14, 15). The case of Titus was a personal one, and respects a man he had been in connection with, or supposed to have been, and now fallen into heresy; when, having reprov'd him again and again, and endeavoured to convince him of his error, but to no purpose; he is then directed to have nothing more to say unto him or do with him, to have no society with him,

nor admit him to a familiar conversation with him, lest he should be hardened in his error, and weak Christians should be stumbled. Much such advice is given by the apostle John to private Christians, not to receive such persons into their houses, nor wish them God speed (2 John 1:10).

But though the above passages are not proper and pertinent to church discipline; yet there are rules and directions which do belong to it, and are to be observed with respect unto it: and as I have considered the materials, the form and fashion of the house or church of God, both as essential and as organized; I shall now proceed to consider the rules of admission into it, or the comings in thereof, and the laws and ordinances to be observed by those who are in it, and the rules concerning the goings out of it, whether by dismissal or excommunication.

2d. First, the rules concerning the comings in, or admission of members into a gospel church.

2d1. The doors of it are not to be set wide open for anyone to come in at pleasure; porters were set at the gates of the house of the Lord, that no unclean person should enter in; and in Ezekiel's temple, a figure of the gospel church in the latter day, orders are given, that no stranger, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, should enter into the sanctuary of the Lord; no materials were admitted to be laid in Solomon's temple, but what were hewn and squared before brought thither.

2d2. Persons should voluntarily propose themselves to the church for communion with it; for this should be a free act of their own, and not by the force or persuasion of others; or they should be proposed by the minister or elder, with whom a previous conversation should be had, and an inquiry made of their experience and knowledge of divine things; so Saul, when converted, "essayed to join himself to the disciples;" that is, he tried, he attempted, he proposed himself to them, to become a member of them, and to have communion with them, as one of them (Acts 9:26).

2d3. In order to admission to communion, satisfaction must be given as to a work of grace upon the soul; when. Saul desired communion with the church, "they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple;" a real converted person, a true believer in Christ, because he had been so lately a persecutor of the saints; until it was declared to them, how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how boldly he had preached in his name; and then he was admitted, and was with them coming in and going out: and it is but fit and proper that such should give a reason of the hope that is in them, to the satisfaction of those with whom they desire to walk in fellowship; it was an early practice of the saints, to tell one another what God had done for their souls; the poor man whom Christ had dispossessed of a legion of devils, was bid to go home to his friends, and tell them how great things the Lord had done for him, and had had compassion on him; and this is best done by a man himself, than by the report of others; and better by a verbal declaration than by writing; for though the former may be made in a broken manner, yet it may best discover the true affection of the heart, and the savouriness

of a man's spirit, and tend more to knit and unite the hearts of the Lord's people to him

2d4. The way of entrance into a church is by a profession of faith in Christ; for as with the heart man believes unto righteousness, so with the mouth confession is made unto salvation; the church is the sheepfold, and Christ is the door into it; and whoever climbs up another way than by faith in him, and profession of it, is a thief and a robber. The three thousand converts first professed repentance of their sins, faith in Christ for the remission of them, and their joyful reception of the gospel, and then were baptized and added to the church.

2d5. It is necessary that such who enter into a church state, should have knowledge of the truths of the gospel, and confess them, and not be ashamed of Christ, and his words, before men; their soundness in the doctrine of faith should be inquired into, and this be testified by their assent to the articles of faith held and maintained by the church; "Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in," (Isa. 26:1).

2d6. Allowances should be made for weaknesses and infirmities of men, both in their gracious experiences, and in their gospel light and knowledge; the day of small things is not to be despised; the bruised reed is not to be broken, nor the smoking flax to be quenched; the tender lambs are gathered into Christ's arms, and carried in his bosom; the weak in faith are to be received, and not to doubtful disputations.

2d7. Testimony should be given of their becoming life and conversation; when the disciples demurred upon receiving Saul, because of his former conduct and behaviour, Barnabas informed them of the change that was in him, and that of a violent persecutor, he was become a bold and zealous preacher of the gospel, they gladly received him.

2d8. The reception of a member into church communion must be by mutual consent; the person received must give up him or herself to walk with the church in holy fellowship; and the church must readily receive such in the Lord; it must be a voluntary act on both sides; and if there is a pastor, the person must be received by him, in the name and with the consent of the church; and if not, by a brother appointed by the church for that purpose, the token of which is by giving the right hand of fellowship (Gal. 2:9). I proceed,

2e. Secondly, to consider the ordinances, laws, and rules to be kept and observed by those who are admitted into the church.

2e1. There are "ordinances" they are directed to the observation of. Show them "all the ordinances" of the house, that they may "do" them; so Christ ordered his disciples to teach those they baptized to observe all things whatsoever he commanded them. Besides the ordinance of baptism, which is preparatory to church communion, there are the ordinances of public prayer and praise, and the public

ministry of the word, which are constantly to be attended on; and it is very unbecoming members of churches to forsake the assembling of themselves together for public worship: it is observed, to the honour of the primitive Christians, that “they continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine,” in a constant attendance on the ministration of it; and in holy “fellowship” with one another; and “in prayer,” in public prayers put up to God by the minister, as the mouth of the church; and particularly in “breaking of bread,” or in the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper, which is to be frequently administered; “As often as ye eat this bread,” &c. which shows it is to be often done; and as often as it is, it should be attended on. But of these ordinances more hereafter, in their proper course.

2e2. There are also "the laws of" the house, which are to be shown to members of churches, and to be observed by them; Christ is Lawgiver in it, and his commands are to be kept from a principle of love to him, even all that he has commanded. There is the moral law, which is still in force, and binding upon Christians; for Christ came not to destroy it, but to fulfil it; and his people are "under the law to him", and should be obedient to it: such who are regardless of morality are not fit to be members of churches, and are not to be continued in them. There is likewise the law of Christ, which is the law of love, the new commandment Christ has given to his disciples, by the observance of which it is known that they are his disciples. There are, moreover, various duties to be performed by members of churches, mutually towards each other; they are to submit themselves to one another in the fear of the Lord; to have the same love one for another, both with respect to things temporal and spiritual, and to watch over one another in the Lord; but these, with other incumbent duties, have been treated of in a preceding chapter.

2e3. There are certain rules respecting private admonitions of church members, which deserve special regard; both such as are given by ministers and elders of churches, who have not only power of admonishing those they have the rule over, and of rebuking publicly and with authority; but also in a private manner, as they go from house to house, and as they see occasion for it; which private admonitions are not to be slighted; and also those given by members, who are to admonish and rebuke one another, in a private manner, as there may be a necessity for it. The rule in Matthew 18:15-17 “If thy brother shall trespass against thee,” &c. is an excellent good one, and may be accommodated to all cases in difference between two persons; whether between one neighbour and another, or between one member of a church and another; the former seems to be the original foundation of this rule, for neighbour and brother are synonymous; the passage which the rule seems to have respect unto, and is the rise of it, is in Leviticus 19:17 “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart; thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour;” where a brother is explained by a neighbour: and when there is a difference between one neighbour and another, this rule should be observed; the neighbour offended, against whom the trespass is committed, and to whom the injury is done, is to go privately to the offender, lay the evil before him, and reprove him for it, in a gentle manner; if he pays a proper regard to it, takes the reproof kindly, acknowledges the offence, and declares repentance for it, it is all very well; he is to be forgiven, no

mention hereafter is to be made of the matter; but if not, if he denies the fact, or extenuates or defends it, and shows no repentance, then the offended party is to take “one or two” neighbours, and lay the case before him in their presence, who will be witnesses of the charge, and of the proof of it, and join in the admonition; but if he still remains incorrigible, then it must be told to “the church,” τη εκκλησια, the same with עֵדָה “the congregation,” which consisted at least of ten persons; and when such a number were made acquainted with the whole affair, and the offender would make no acknowledgment, the offended person would be justified by all men, in treating him for the future as a worthless friend or neighbour, as the Jews used to call such an one, and take no more notice of him than of an heathen man and a publican. The rule also maybe accommodated to any difference between one member of a church and another; between a brother and a brother, who are in the same spiritual relation; and this rule must be observed in case of a private trespass only known to them, a secret fault which they are only privy to; and not a public sin, known to the whole church and to the world; for then another method must be taken: and it must be a “trespass,” a sin, that the offender is guilty of; yet not a sin of infirmity, common to human nature, and which all are encompassed with; a man is not to be made an offender for a word, a small trifling thing; and yet it must not be a very atrocious and public one, which requires more than admonition, even excommunication at once; such as was the sin of the incestuous person; but a sin of a lesser nature, yet a fault, and which gives just cause of offence; and in such a case the offended brother must give the offending one private reproof, tell him his fault, between themselves alone; and if he can bring him to an acknowledgment of his fault, and he declares his sorrow for it, then the brother is gained, is restored from the error he has been guilty of; and it is to be buried in oblivion, and no more said of it to anyone; but if not, he must take another brother or two with him, and admonish him again; and if he pays no regard to it, as strengthened by the conjunction of the brethren with him, then the direction is, “tell the church”: but what is meant by is not easy to say, whether the Jewish sanhedrin or Jewish synagogue; since at that time there was no congregational church in being, unless the twelve disciples may be so called; wherefore this can only at most respect a church in future time, when such a rule should take place; however, so far as it concerns a private admonition, it is clear and manifest, and deserves attention; for which reason only it is produced.

3. Thirdly, the next thing to be inquired into is what concerns “the goings out of” the house or church of God, and what may be meant by them. There are but two ways of going out of a church; either by a dismissal from it, or by an excommunication out of it. There are, indeed, letters of recommendation, which are wanting in some cases, though the apostle needed them not (2 Cor. 3:1), such as were given to Apollos (Acts 18:27) to Phebe (Rom. 16:1, 2), and to Marcus (Col. 4:10). But these do not give membership; only transient communion; the person recommended still remains a member from whence he is recommended; the design of such letters is only to certify, that the person whose name is mentioned in them, is a member in full communion with the church which recommends him, and may be safely admitted to transient communion with the church to which he is

recommended: but such letters ought not to continue long; for if a person takes up his residence in a place where he is in providence brought, he should send for his dismissal, and be received upon it into full communion; a letter of dismissal, when approved of, and the person dismissed is received, he is in all respects a member, and then his membership ceases in the church by which he is dismissed, and not before: there are cases in which a man may desire his dismissal to another church; as distance of habitation, non-edification, and when a church is become corrupt in doctrine and practice, that he cannot conscientiously abide with them. The other way of going out of a church is excommunication, concerning which it will be necessary to consider various things.

3a. What excommunication is.

3a1. It is not a being reckoned as an heathen man and a publican; nor a delivery of one to Satan, as has been shown.

3a2. Nor does it affect the temporal estate and civil affairs of a man; it does not subject him to fines, imprisonment, or death; it does not interfere with the business of the civil magistrate; nor does it break in upon the natural and civil relations between man and wife, parents and children, masters and servants; nor forbid attendance on the external ministry of the word.

3a3. Nor does it admit of degrees; the Jews had three sorts of excommunication, which proceeded gradually^[4]; but there is but one among Christians. Some talk indeed of a lesser and a greater excommunication, but without any foundation from the word of God. Some think a suspension from the Lord's table is in some cases necessary; when a case is dubious, and there is not time thoroughly to inquire into it, and yet offence and scandal arises upon it: a person, indeed, may be desired to abstain from the Lord's table, and a man that seeks the peace of the church will consent to it; but he cannot be obliged to abstain; if he is obstinate and refractory, there is no other way but to expel him; for a man is either in communion with a church or he is not; there is no middle state; to withdraw from a disorderly person, or to withdraw and separate him from communion, are the same thing.

But though the above passages are not proper and pertinent to church discipline; yet there are rules and directions which do belong to it, and are to be observed with respect unto it: and as I have considered the materials, the form and fashion of the house or church of God, both as essential and as organized; I shall now proceed to consider the rules of admission into it, or the comings in thereof, and the laws and ordinances to be observed by those who are in it, and the rules concerning the goings out of it, whether by dismissal or excommunication.

2d. First, the rules concerning the comings in, or admission of members into a gospel church.

2d1. The doors of it are not to be set wide open for anyone to come in at pleasure; porters were set at the gates of the house of the Lord, that no unclean person should enter in; and in Ezekiel's temple, a figure of the gospel church in the latter day, orders are given, that no stranger, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, should enter into the sanctuary of the Lord; no materials were admitted to be laid in Solomon's temple, but what were hewn and squared before brought thither.

2d2. Persons should voluntarily propose themselves to the church for communion with it; for this should be a free act of their own, and not by the force or persuasion of others; or they should be proposed by the minister or elder, with whom a previous conversation should be had, and an inquiry made of their experience and knowledge of divine things; so Saul, when converted, "essayed to join himself to the disciples;" that is, he tried, he attempted, he proposed himself to them, to become a member of them, and to have communion with them, as one of them (Acts 9:26).

2d3. In order to admission to communion, satisfaction must be given as to a work of grace upon the soul; when. Saul desired communion with the church, "they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple;" a real converted person, a true believer in Christ, because he had been so lately a persecutor of the saints; until it was declared to them, how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how boldly he had preached in his name; and then he was admitted, and was with them coming in and going out: and it is but fit and proper that such should give a reason of the hope that is in them, to the satisfaction of those with whom they desire to walk in fellowship; it was an early practice of the saints, to tell one another what God had done for their souls; the poor man whom Christ had dispossessed of a legion of devils, was bid to go home to his friends, and tell them how great things the Lord had done for him, and had had compassion on him; and this is best done by a man himself, than by the report of others; and better by a verbal declaration than by writing; for though the former may be made in a broken manner, yet it may best discover the true affection of the heart, and the savouriness of a man's spirit, and tend more to knit and unite the hearts of the Lord's people to him

2d4. The way of entrance into a church is by a profession of faith in Christ; for as with the heart man believes unto righteousness, so with the mouth confession is made unto salvation; the church is the sheepfold, and Christ is the door into it; and whoever climbs up another way than by faith in him, and profession of it, is a thief and a robber. The three thousand converts first professed repentance of their sins, faith in Christ for the remission of them, and their joyful reception of the gospel, and then were baptized and added to the church.

2d5. It is necessary that such who enter into a church state, should have knowledge of the truths of the gospel, and confess them, and not be ashamed of Christ, and his words, before men; their soundness in the doctrine of faith should be inquired into, and this be testified by their assent to the articles of faith held and maintained by

the church; “Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in,” (Isa. 26:1).

2d6. Allowances should be made for weaknesses and infirmities of men, both in their gracious experiences, and in their gospel light and knowledge; the day of small things is not to be despised; the bruised reed is not to be broken, nor the smoking flax to be quenched; the tender lambs are gathered into Christ’s arms, and carried in his bosom; the weak in faith are to be received, and not to doubtful disputations.

2d7. Testimony should be given of their becoming life and conversation; when the disciples demurred upon receiving Saul, because of his former conduct and behaviour, Barnabas informed them of the change that was in him, and that of a violent persecutor, he was become a bold and zealous preacher of the gospel, they gladly received him.

2d8. The reception of a member into church communion must be by mutual consent; the person received must give up him or herself to walk with the church in holy fellowship; and the church must readily receive such in the Lord; it must be a voluntary act on both sides; and if there is a pastor, the person must be received by him, in the name and with the consent of the church; and if not, by a brother appointed by the church for that purpose, the token of which is by giving the right hand of fellowship (Gal. 2:9). I proceed,

2e. Secondly, to consider the ordinances, laws, and rules to be kept and observed by those who are admitted into the church.

2e1. There are “ordinances” they are directed to the observation of. Show them “all the ordinances” of the house, that they may “do” them; so Christ ordered his disciples to teach those they baptized to observe all things whatsoever he commanded them. Besides the ordinance of baptism, which is preparatory to church communion, there are the ordinances of public prayer and praise, and the public ministry of the word, which are constantly to be attended on; and it is very unbecoming members of churches to forsake the assembling of themselves together for public worship: it is observed, to the honour of the primitive Christians, that “they continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine,” in a constant attendance on the ministration of it; and in holy “fellowship” with one another; and “in prayer,” in public prayers put up to God by the minister, as the mouth of the church; and particularly in “breaking of bread,” or in the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper, which is to be frequently administered; “As often as ye eat this bread,” &c. which shows it is to be often done; and as often as it is, it should be attended on. But of these ordinances more hereafter, in their proper course.

3a4. Excommunication is no other than a removal of a man from the communion of the church, and from all privileges dependent upon it; it is a disfranchising him from all the immunities of a fellow citizen with the saints, and taking from him a

place and a name in the house of God; for a church can take no more from him than what it first gave him.

3a5. This act is pressed by various phrases; as by avoiding familiar conversation with such; by not keeping company with them; and by not eating with them at the Lord's table; by purging out from them the old leaven; and by putting away the wicked from among them; by withdrawing from disorderly persons, and cutting them off from fellowship with them.

3b. Who they are that are to be excommunicated.

3b1. Such who are disturbers of the church's peace, who cause divisions and offences, who are litigious and quarrelsome (1 Cor. 11:16). Such who are troublers of God's Israel ought to be cut off from his people (Gal. 5:12).

3b2. Who do not keep their places in the church, do not attend when the church assembles together for religious worship, but forsake the assembling of themselves together, and in a sense forsake the church; whose places are empty, as David's was at supper time, and who do in a sort cut off themselves from the communion of the church (Jude 1:19).

3b3. All such who walk disorderly, as the above persons do, are irregular in their lives and conversations, guilty of immoralities, though it may be thought of a lesser kind, which they continue and indulge themselves in: as sloth and idleness, not working at all, busybodies, going from house to house, doing mischief, and living upon others; from such the apostle commands us to withdraw ourselves (2 Thess. 3:6, 11, 14).

3b4. All such who commit atrocious crimes, unrepented of, and continued in; as fornicators, covetous, idolaters, railers, drunkards, extortioners, &c. "with such" we are bid "not to eat," especially at the Lord's table; for such ought to have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God, that is, in the church of God (1 Cor. 5:11; Eph. 5:5).

3b5. All erroneous and heretical persons, who hold and propagate doctrines contrary to what has been learnt from the word of God, and in the churches of Christ; such are to be avoided and declined from (Rom. 16:17), all such who bring in "damnable heresies," as the apostle calls them; denying the Trinity of Persons in the Godhead, the Deity of Christ, &c. (2 Peter 2:1), who bring not with them, but oppose the doctrine of Christ, concerning his person and grace; these, as they are not to have a place in the private houses of the saints, ought to have none in the church of God; which is commended for not bearing them that are evil, either unsound in principle, or immoral in life (2 John 1:9-11; Rev. 2:2).

3c. By whom excommunication is to be performed.

3c1. Not by a member himself; no man has a right to cut off himself; such a man is a “felo de se;” as a man cannot come into a church without the consent of it; so neither can he go out of it, without its consent; for a man to depart of himself, is not standing fast in one spirit, but is a cowardly running away from a church; and to go without giving a reason, without asking leave, or desiring a dismissal, to say the least of it, is a rude and unmannerly way of departure; and such churches who receive such persons, do not as they would be done by: yea, such men are covenant breakers with a church, which is a great evil, and breakers up of churches, as much as in them lies; for what one member may do, others may; yea, if a member may leave a church at pleasure, a pastor may do the same: in a word, notwithstanding such departure, such persons may be proceeded against by direct excommunication; or, which amounts to much the same, should be declared by a vote of the church, non-members, and no longer under its watch and care; which is by some called indirect excommunication.

3c2. Nor is it to be performed by any single person of himself, whether an ordinary or an extraordinary minister; it never was done by an apostle, an evangelist, or any other one man; for it is a punishment inflicted by many.

3c3. Nor is it to be done by the elders of a church separately; much less by the elders of other churches; but by the elders of churches, with the consent of the members of them; for they have a right to do this previous to their having elders, and they have none, as to receive members, so to expel them; the power of it originally lies in the church; the authority of executing it lies in the elders, with the consent and by the order of the church; as the directions to the churches concerning this matter testify.

3d. What are the ends of excommunication.

3d1. The glory of God, which is the ultimate end of it; for as his name is dishonoured by the evil practices or principles of church members, so this is the most open and most effectual way of removing that dishonour that is brought upon it; this ought to be always the chief aim and the sincere view in the administration of it; though sometimes this is only pretence, and under the cover of it, churches gratify sinful passions and resentments; as the Jews of old, in a similar case (Isa. 66:5).

3d2. Another end is to purge the church, and preserve it from infection; a little leaven leavens the whole lump, and therefore the old leaven must be purged out, that a church may become a new lump; evil communications corrupt good manners, and therefore evil men must be put away from among the saints, (1 Cor. 5:7, 13) lepers were to be put out of the camp, that they might not infect others; and erroneous persons, whose words do eat as a canker, must be removed from the communion of churches.

3d3. A church of Christ is like a garden or vineyard, which, if not taken care of, and this ordinance of excommunication not made use of, will be like the vineyard of the

slothful, over run with thorns and nettles and other weeds; but by means of this it is cleared of the weeds of immoralities, and the bitter roots of false doctrines are plucked up and eradicated, and withered branches are gathered and cast out.

3d4. The good of persons excommunicated is another end, and is sometimes effected by it, God blessing his own institution when rightly performed, which is for edification, and not destruction; for the saving of the souls of men; and who are hereby brought to shame and repentance for their sins, and an acknowledgment of them; when they are to be received again with all love and tenderness, and to be comforted, that they might not be swallowed up with over much sorrow (Jude 1:23; 2 Thess. 3:14; 2 Cor. 2:7.)