

A
HUMBLE ADDRESS

T O T H E

Churches of *Christ*:

OR,

An Earnest Exhortation to Christian Professors,
NOT TO FORSAKE THE ASSEMBLING OF THEMSELVES TO-
GETHER; but to be faithful and diligent in the Discharge of all
the personal and relative Duties they owe to that DIVINE IN-
STITUTION in the Churches they respectively belong to.

The *Lord our God made a Breach upon us, for that we Sought him not after
the due Order.* 1 Chr. xv. 13.

LONDON:

Printed for J, Ward at the *Kings-Arms* in *Cornhill*.

1750.

A
H U M B L E
ADDRESS
TO THE
Churches of *CHRIST*, &C.

BELOVED BRETHREN,

It is justly lamented by the *Faithful* in our Days, that Godliness, and consequently the Glory of the Churches in these Nations, is daily decaying! Melancholy Prospect indeed, especially as it regards the rising Generation. However, let not those who fear the Lord be discouraged, or give up their Hopes of a Recovery. The Eye of God is upon all things; and with him all things are possible. He is able, and will in his Time revive our dry Bones; as with him is the Residue of the Spirit; and as in all Ages he hath been the Hope of *Israel*, and the Saviour thereof in the Day of Trouble. In the mean Time, it becomes them to exert themselves in the Use of all appointed Means, waiting in Hope to see what God will do.

Prayer, we know, is one great and sure ordinance for Relief in all Circumstances of Distress, whether public or private. Blessed be God, this is not wholly laid aside; though the Truth is, by many Professors it is too visibly neglected. But to our Supplications at the Throne of Grace, it is expedient we should join a close and impartial Examination into the Cause of this sad Decay. Without the Knowledge of this, there is no Probability of our Recovery.

The Sins of the Multitude, in our degenerate Nation, are so very grievous, and so just a Cause of Humiliation and Sorrow, that not to be deeply affected with it would argue an Insensibility unworthy the Character of the People of God. But it is not sufficient, that We bewail the Aboundings of Infidelity and Profaneness among the Common People. When the Inhabitants of a Place, where the Light of Revelation shines, grow bold in Vice and Impiety, they often become an Occasion of Trouble to the Churches of Christ by infecting some of their Members. And the greatest Injury to these religious Communities arises from the loose, and disorderly Conduct of some who have a Name among the Saints, but who, notwithstanding all their sacred Engagements, make no Conscience to discharge the Duties of their Profession.

Now, I apprehend, Persons in such a Relation can indulge no Disorder more prejudicial to the Welfare of *Zion*, nor, indeed, to themselves, than that of a willful and allowed Omission of Attendance in the appointed Assemblies of the Churches to which they belong. And that this great Blame lies upon many Professors in our Days is too obvious to be denied! They are many who offend this Way; and their Advocates are not a few. And things in this Respect are come to such a Pass, that to condemn a Practice so destructive of Gospel Order, and, of all the blessed Privileges designed by that gracious Institution, *the Fellowship of the Saints*, is to hazard the Esteem, and expose one's self to the Anger and Scorn of some, from whom a different Treatment might reasonably be expected. Nevertheless, as I look on this unwarrantable Conduct to be one principal Cause of the melancholy declensions so universally complained of in the Churches, I shall here

attempt a brief Representation of it, entreating the Reader's unprejudiced Attention to what I offer; which, I hope, flows from a disinterested Concern for the Honour of the Redeemer, the Prosperity of his Churches, and the Comfort of all those who love him in Sincerity and Truth.

Our Lord and Saviour, in his Wisdom and Goodness, hath ordained the Fellowship of his Disciples for the magnifying his Kingly Office, and for their common Edification: For which great and glorious Ends all his Institutions are, without Dispute, excellently adapted.

I persuade myself, that none, to whom I make this Address, are such Strangers to the Kingdom of Christ, as not to understand and believe, that his catholic visible Church upon Earth is constituted of particular Societies, denominated *Churches* in Sacred Writ. Such were the Churches in *Judea* and *Galatia*, and the seven Churches in *Asia*. And nothing can be more obvious than that these particular Churches are composed of individual Persons; who have given themselves up to, and engaged with each other, by the Will of the Lord, to walk together in all his Ordinances blameless.

Saints, thus incorporated into a Church-State, and duly organized with a Pastor and Deacons (whom they, having been graciously directed to have freely chosen, and solemnly set apart to Office) must necessarily have frequent and stated Assemblies for the Exercise of the several Duties they owe to each other, in order to the Edification of the whole Body; such as Joint Prayer, the Ministration of the Word, and Other Ordinances; the Maintaining of Discipline, the Contributing to the Support of the Ministry and

the Relief of the Poor, and for Other Fruits of Love: In a Word, for the Discharge of all the Duties, and the Enjoyment of all the Privileges, of the House of God.

Persons, thus united, stand in a special Relation, and are under a special Obligation to each other in the Lord; a Relation and Obligation peculiar to themselves, and distinct from, though in no wise destructive of, their Relation and Obligation to every other Church and particular Believer. This special Relation, in particular Church-Communion, as it is rational and necessary, so it is no less plainly revealed. See *1 Cor. xii. 27.* compared with *Rom. xii. 5.* *Now ye are the Body of Christ, and Members in particular. So we being many are one Body in Christ, and every one Members one of another.* Which Passages, considered with their neighbouring Verses, are, I apprehend, a sufficient Proof of it. Many others might be mentioned; but, for the Sake of Brevity, I omit them.

From this special Relation, ariseth an Obligation, which lies on every Church-Member, to various Duties which he oweth the Body, namely, the Church and each particular Member of it; which it becomes him diligently and faithfully to discharge; and in the Discharge of which he may be assured of a Blessing, and to obtain great Honour when the chief Shepherd shall appear; who will graciously account every thing his People do for each other, at his Direction, and his Name's Sake, as done to himself. *Matt. xxv.*

Now who cannot see, that, in order to carry this glorious Design into Execution, it is requisite the People of God, thus incorporated, should know and love each other, and be in some good

Measure acquainted with each other's Necessities and Temptations. As in the natural, so in the spiritual Body, the Wisdom and Grace of the great Architect are abundantly conspicuous. He hath so constituted the Body, that the Members should have the same Care one for another. 1 *Cor.* xii. 5. Now this Love plainly comprehends a mutual Concern and Endeavour in every Member, according to his Station and Capacity in the Body, that each Fellow Member should be in a comfortable, honourable and useful Way in the House of God, and persevere to Eternal Life. This Obligation clearly shews the Necessity of Acquaintance with and Affection for one another; it being impossible to exercise such Love and Care for Persons unknown, and for those for whom we have no Esteem or Concern. This is farther evident from the many particular Duties enjoined, in Order to the exercise of this mutual Love and Care; such as bearing one another's Burdens, in Honour preferring one another, watching over each other, admonishing upon Errors committed, and restoring, in a Spirit of Meekness, those, on their Repentance, who have been overtaken; finally, contributing in equal Proportion, according to their different Circumstances and Capacities, to the common Charge and Pains necessary for the Support of the Church, and the Relief of those who are related to it: These Duties, and others of the like Nature, are appointed for, and necessary to, Church-Fellowship. But must not every one allow, that these Things are impracticable without personal Acquaintance and sincere Affection.

This being the State of the Case, is it not of great Importance, that the Members of a Church be conscientious and diligent to

keep up an Attendance on all her Assemblies, whether public or private? Frequent Interviews are absolutely necessary to the promoting of personal Knowledge and Affection; for it is impossible, that intimate Acquaintance should be maintained, where Persons rarely come together, and are backward to converse with each other. And who is so ignorant as not to know, that such Conduct naturally brings on greater Degrees of Coldness, and so gradually, but too effectually, alienates the Affections of those who stand in any Relation to each other. And thus that relation becomes formal and useless. When Members of Churches, therefore, forsake the Assembling of themselves together, as the Manner of some is, they forsake the natural and necessary Means of that Knowledge and Love without which all Opportunities and Springs of Action are lost, and the End of Christ, in this Institution of particular Church-Fellowship, is defeated.

The Danger of these fatal Omissions lies chiefly among Professors who are stationed by Providence where two or more Churches are near to each other; and it increases according to the Number of these Churches. Temptations of this Sort are, therefore, very numerous in and about this great Metropolis: To the Professors residing in which, who are at this Day so numerous and notoriously fallen into and captivated by these Temptations, I would address myself in a particular Manner. And as I am persuaded, that many, if not most of these unhappy Offenders, are insensible of the Dangers that threaten them, I am not without Hopes, that this Address will prevail for the Reclaiming of some.

Let not any, on this Occasion, entertain a Prejudice against me, under an Apprehension, that I take upon me to censure every

Church Member who is not always present, when the Church to which he belongs is gathered together. I am sensible of the Variety of Events and Occurrences that from Time to Time break in upon Professors, and necessarily interrupt and hinder their Attendance. It would be very weak and uncharitable not to remember the bodily Infirmities, the Turns and Events of Life, and many other Things that fall out in every Station, and from Time to Time interrupt Christians in this Privilege and Duty. The Practice condemned is an allowed Neglect of Church-Assemblies through Sloth, Caprice, Love of the World, or any other carnal or delusive Motive, whereby the Institutions of Christ are rendered fruitless; a Neglect which, I will venture to say, is no other than a Breach of Fellowship. It is not only what every Offender in this Kind ought to be ashamed of, but a Crime for which he may justly stand in Fear of the Displeasure of his Lord and Master, the King of Saints. As a Means of Conviction, I entreat those, who are fallen into this unreasonable and destructive Conduct, seriously to consider the Consequences I shall now set down as naturally attending it.

By this Neglect, one main Design of a Standing Ministry of the Word is subverted, or rendered in a great Measure fruitless; one great Business of a Gospel-Minister, with respect to the Flock over which the Holy Ghost hath made him Overseer, being to dispense the Word, not in a formal Manner, or merely as a System of Doctrine, but as it may suit the Condition and Circumstances of his People. On this Ground the Duty enjoined on him is Care over them, Converse with them, and Attention to them, the End

that, seeing their Frames, and considering the various Temptations one or other of his Members, or the whole Body, is fallen into, he may bring a Word in Season. A wise and faithful Minister is, therefore, careful to observe all the Dispensations of Providence and Grace which may affect the People under his Care: And when he discerns and understands their particular Cases, he is earnest at the Throne of Grace, studies the Scriptures, and endeavours, by all the Means in his Power, to form his Discourses for their Warning and Comfort. But in vain are all a Minister's Watchfulness, Prayer, Meditation and Labour in such a View, if his People be inconstant and careless in attending at the appointed Seasons of Ministration. Affectionate and painful Laborer's in the Lord's Vineyard meet, in our Day, with many sore and grievous Disappointments of this Nature, through the Unsteadiness of some who have chosen them for their Pastors; Disappointments which, as they are in no wise pleasing to Christ, so are they highly detrimental to all who occasion them: For it is not a little Guilt they contrast, or a small Provocation they give to the Lord, when, by their willful or careless Neglects, they oppose and defeat the End of that Ministry he hath appointed and they have chosen.

Again, in Proportion to those Neglects, the Prayers of the Church are hindered. One great Exercise, in a Church-State, is the Supplication of the Saints, whereby they are to build up one another in their most holy Faith. This is appointed for the obtaining of every needful Blessing, and to the End the Members may have Communion with God and with one another. But this Service falls when such Assemblies are forsaken. So that by this Means a Church becomes defective in a principal Means of

Edification. The Apostle compares the Church to a natural Body. Now as it is a Symptom of Declension and approaching Dissolution when the natural Body wants Breath; so it is in the spiritual Body. A Church is under threatening Symptoms when her Prayers are obstructed by the Negligence of her Members. Prayer is, as it were, the Breath of a Church. When this comes to be wanting, it soon becomes formal and lifeless. And a prayerless Church is fitly resembled to a breathless Corps. Yet a Reduction to this fearful State is the natural Consequence of forsaking the assembling ourselves together.

Moreover, by this Custom the Discipline of God's House is slackened, if not wholly subverted. The due Exercise of Discipline is of great importance to the preservation, purity, strength and fruitfulness of a church; as the Scriptures and reason abundantly show. Now this exercise, as you to whom I address myself acknowledge, lies in the general Body: As the Punishment of the incestuous Person at *Corinth* was inflicted by *many*; *i. e.* by the Members of the Church; who were directed by the Apostle to gather together, in order to put away that wicked Person. You allow it to be incumbent on a Church of Christ to *Warn, Censure and Restore..* She is to hear and judge in Cases of Difference between her Members, when applied to according to Gospel-Rule: She is to be satisfied in the Experience and Meetness of those who offer themselves for Communion with her, and to receive into or reject Persons from her Fellowship according to the Word of Christ. But how can these Things be done by a Church, if her Members straggle away from one another, and make no Conscience to be found together at her appointed Assemblies. By

what other Way are these Things to be done? When the Generality of Persons in Communion forsake the Assemblies, it tends to bring every Act of Discipline into Contempt. And it is too often seen, that Offenders, being left of God, take Occasion, from the small Appearance of a Church, to harden themselves against her Proceedings. Nay, the Truth is, when such a Practice becomes general, the Execution of Discipline becomes utterly impracticable. He must be blind indeed, who cannot see, that these fatal Consequences naturally follow an Indulgence of the great Evil against which I am writing.

Another injurious Effect of omitting this Relative Duty, is, that by this Means the Expense of a Church-State becomes unequal and burdensome. The Apostle is very express, that in this Point there should be an Equality, *2 Cor. viii. 13. 14.* Christ intends not, that some Members should be eased, and others burdened; But this is the Consequence of neglecting Church Assemblies; particularly so far as the Contributions are made by stated Collections; an ancient Custom for supplying the Poor. These Contributions cannot be equal, unless there be a steady Attendance on all Church Assemblies. Through a Neglect of this Attendance the Poor at this Day are indeed poorly provided for; or occasional Hearers perform, in this Respect, the Duty of Church-Members, to the Shame of those who stand in that Relation and do not; or else a few faithful Members are burdened with Expense, to make up the Deficiency occasioned by their disorderly Brethren. 'Tis true, the Members thus aggrieved shall not lose their Reward: But those who, by their Negligence, lay the Burden upon them, would do well to consider how they will answer it at the Day of Account.

Some Professors are so deeply in Debt to the Church of Christ and his Poor on this Article, that it is highly probable they will never be able to get out of it. I have, indeed, known some conscientiously supply a Deficiency, which an occasional Absence hath obliged them to make, by an Addition to their next Contribution, or some other Way. But Instances of this Nature are surely rare among such as willfully Omit their Duty. Would to God, a Sense of the Deficiencies they have made may engage them to a Constancy in their Duty for the Time to come, and prevent the farther Enhancement of a Score so unworthy their Relation and Character.

This disorderly Conduct is likewise a fatal Bar to the increase of Gifts and Graces in the Members of a Church, and likewise to the Increase of the Church itself. For who that hath any Concern for the Honour of Christ, or any Care for his own Comfort and Advantage, can be persuaded to enter into Fellowship with a Community in which there is scarce any Opportunity, for the Discharge of those Duties, on the Performance of which the manifestative Glory of the Redeemer and the Benefits of Communion depend? And how can those, who thus abandon the Order of Christ's House, expect he will pour out his Spirit upon them, or add to their Number of such as shall be saved.

Nor is there a more melancholy consideration than this, that when those who call Christ Lord, Lord, thus openly and constantly neglect his Commands, they harden many, who observe them, in Profaneness and Infidelity. When Men, who are Strangers to the Fear of God, see those, who profess a Regard for Christ and his Ordinances, neglect and disregard the plain and

positive Institutions of his House, and the necessary Means of supporting it, they are easily led to conclude, that all this Profession is only Grimace; the Effect of Craft and Polity for the World on the Side of those who make it not good, and of downright Enthusiasm on the Side of those who do, and that there is nothing in that religious Regard to Christ as their King, and to one another as Members of the same Church, which they talk of.

But farther, young Converts, when, they see Professors walk after this loose Manner, are heavily and sorely discouraged: For, upon this Appearance of Things, they are confounded and fall into many Temptations and Distresses, as might easily be shown, and as they, who know anything of the tender State of such Persons, may easily conceive. It is very affecting to a serious Mind to consider the ill Effect which this Disorder of a Church-Member hath on such Persons. Thus, whether those who view this Disorder be in an obdurate Condition or under Conviction, Satan hath by this Means a great Advantage against them: A Consideration that must needs touch the Hearts of every Lover of Christ, and of the Souls of Men. It would, indeed, be endless to give a Detail of the dreadful Consequences attending this Disorder. For when all the proper and established Means of Edification are thus laid aside, such Professors being forsaken of the Lord, whom they have provoked by their Disobedience, what can be expected but that Heresies and Licentiousness should prevail without Control, there being nothing left to check the Impetuosity of the Lusts of Men? What can be expected but that Hypocrites, Apostates, formal and disorderly Professors should come in like a Flood, and sweep

away, as they often do, the Purity of Gospel Truth and godly Conversation.

Blessed be God, Things are not yet come altogether to this Pass among us. But is there not great Danger of it, when it becomes more and more customary for Professors to forsake the assembling of themselves together? Is not this a threatening Symptom upon us? And is it not high Time to be plain and faithful in Warning each other against it?

These things considered, who can justify that Coldness and Indifference for, and that Neglect of attending Church-Assemblies, into which the Professors of our Day are so universally fallen? 'Tis, surely, irrational and unnatural to indulge a Habit by which we are continually shaking off the Homage and Obedience we owe our Sovereign, and our Obligations to discharge the known Duties we owe to those to whom we stand in a particular and special Relation; Duties which, if faithfully discharged, would always have such happy Consequences and Effects for ourselves. If this be apparent in the Relation Men stand in to one another in Families, and in all Societies natural and civil, must it not be so in the sacred Society of a Church? For a Church is a Body Corporate, the Members of which are in as real a Relation to each other, as the Members are of any other Corporation whatever, and for much nobler Ends. Must not Persons, then, be very criminal, or under great Delusion, who indulge a Practice so evidently destructive of the Beauty, Strength and Prosperity, and even the very Being, of the Churches to which they belong? A Practice by which the Redeemer is disobeyed and offended, his Honour sullied in the Sight of Men, and his faithful Ministers. and People

grieved, while Satan and all the Enemies of Christ and his Gospel are gratified, insult and triumph.

It follows, then, that all Church-Members, whether rich or poor, whether of a longer or a Shorter Standing, who are fallen into this perverse Habit of neglecting Church Assemblies, are Enemies to the Christian Societies to which they belong, and consequently to the whole Church and Kingdom of Christ. This is what, I suppose, many, who have given into this pernicious Practice, have not perceived: But, surely, every impartial Man will, after what hath been said, allow it to be the Truth. And I heartily wish, that every stragglng Professor would, for his own Sake, take it into serious Consideration: They are certainly as real Enemies to a Body Corporate, who occasion the Declension or Dissolution of it by a willful Neglect of their Duty to it, as they who bring those Evils upon it by direct Opposition and Violence. And Experience shows, that the former are more instrumental to the Ruin of a Church of Christ than the latter. In this View of Things, I need not say what Temper becomes such Professors, nor what the Duty is the Churches owe them to which they belong. But this is certain, that if Christian Assemblies be not duly kept up, that is, if the modern Practice of neglecting and forsaking them be not reformed, it will be vain and absurd to hope to see the Churches of Christ in a flourishing Condition about us.

One would think, nothing could induce Persons in the exercise of Reason to argue against their Endeavouring, as the Lord shall enable them, to do all their Duty in all the Relations they stand in to others, but particularly in a Relation of the highest Consequence; and there is none higher than this we are considering. To

reason in Defense of a Practice which disables a Professor from answering his Engagements to the Church he belongs to, what is it but to stand up against Common Sense, Honesty and Honour. If Truth and Faithfulness be not found in the House of God, and in the mutual Engagements of Christians to maintain the Honour of the Redeemer, and promote the Salvation of Souls, where may we hope to find it upon Earth? And yet so it is, that many now-a-days not only violate their Vows to God and one another by the Disorder complained of, but some among them are so hardy as to stand up in Defense of it. It is requisite, therefore, to examine what they say for themselves, and what they urge against the Obligation that lies on them to do a plain and necessary Duty.

They who take Occasion from their affluent Circumstances to live at a Distance from the Churches they belong to, and on that Account neglect their Assemblies (a Practice too common in our Days) would do well to consider how they will answer for this Conduct. A constant and allowed Omission of the Ordinance of the Redeemer, for the Sake of an agreeable Situation in the World, and the Enjoyments and Gratifications attending it, is surely very unbecoming the Character of those who profess to be risen with Christ, and to be crucified to the World with its Affections and Lusts. It is amazing, that any should imagine, as some seem to do, that the Goodness of the Lord to them in the Kingdom of his Providence, exempts them from their Duty to him as King of Saints. But most of those, who are thus at Ease in *Zion*, I apprehend, are so taken up with their worldly Delights and Amusements as to allow themselves little or no Leisure for Reflections of this Nature. Certain it is, they are not a little tempted to put away such

Thoughts far from them. O that such Professors were awakened out of their Sleep, to live more like those who are looking for the blessed Hope and the glorious Appearance of Jesus Christ. How melancholy is it to see, as we do at this Day, many, who, by their Example and Talents, might become a Credit and Advantage to the Churches of Christ, so given up to the Gratifications and Amusements of Sense, as to become not only a Stumbling Block and Grief to their Brethren, but a Hardening likewise to the unbelieving World about them.

I shall pass over a Number of private Excuses too commonly made by Professors on the Ground of their special Affairs. The Lord knows, and will hereafter make known, every secret Indulgence of the Flesh to the Prejudice of his manifestative Glory. My Business shall be to make some Reply to the popular Arguments that are brought to justify the Omission of this important Duty.

And here I am sorry to observe, that there are not wanting some, who pretend they see no Need of their Attendance at Church-Assemblies, and insinuate, that private Interest is the Motive of the Minister's Zeal in calling on them to fill up their Places. But the Number of these, I trust, is but small.

'Tis, doubtless, for the Credit and Comfort of a Minister, that the People under his Care be steadfast in the Order of the Gospel. It must likewise be acknowledged, that the constant Attendance of the Members of a Church would be a good Means for uniting their Hearts in Favour of their Minister, and lay a good Ground for his reaping one Fruit of his Labour. But can any good Reason

be assigned why a Professor should grudge that Support and Encouragement which the Lord hath thought necessary for his faithful Labourers?

However, nothing can be more unreasonable than this Insinuation. Does the Minister plead for any other Obedience and Constancy than what Christ and their relative Obligations require? If he does so, let it be shown, and his Reproofs for Negligence will soon be at an End. If it be not so, Persons would do well to consider whose Will they oppose. I deny not but there have been Men, under the Character of Gospel-Ministers, who have appeared to be of a selfish, covetous Spirit. But to fasten such an Imputation on Ministers without sufficient Evidence, or to put such a Construction on their earnest Exhortations to a plain Duty, is it not perverse, indecent and uncharitable?

It is to be feared, some are too much disposed to look on their Ministers with Contempt, instead of holding them in such Reputation and high Esteem, for their Work's Sake, as the Scriptures direct. Why, else, are they disposed to treat them, as often they do, with Coldness and Indifference? A bad or mean Opinion of a Minister is, to the Person who entertains it, almost an insuperable Objection against his Ministry, and must of Necessity greatly, indispose a Man for receiving any Comfort or Advantage from it. But as they, who consult their own Edification, will guard against this Evil; so to others, who give into it, I shall only say, that it behoves them to look well, that they have just Grounds for the Imputations they fasten on their Ministers, or the ill Sentiments they entertain of them, lest they be found Despisers of him whose

Servants they are. But I stay no longer on so disagreeable a Matter.

Others plead their Christian Liberty. A Church, say they, is no Prison; and, therefore, they will not confine themselves to a constant Attendance with any Christian Community. Strange Language from those who have, in the Sight of God, Angels and Men, given themselves up, in a special Relation, to the Churches they respectively belong to. In answer to this, I say likewise, that a Church of Christ is no Prison; no, it is rather to be regarded as a Palace, a spiritual Palace, not only on Account of the divine Pleasures and Privileges to be enjoyed in it, but as it is the Habitation of the King of Saints and Glory, where he often manifests his gracious Presence to those that love him. A Prison is a Place of Confinement and Disgrace, in which Persons are detained against their Will: But it is an Honour to have a Name and a Place in the House of God; an Honour of which his faithful People are so sensible, that it lays them under all the Constraints of Duty and Love. And none are compelled against their Will. So far from it, that, I apprehend, Willingness of Mind is a necessary Qualification for Church-Membership. For he, who discerns the Heart, accepts of nothing short of a Free-Will-Offering from those who pretend to worship him. And, indeed, that Declaration of a willing Mind, made by all who enter into this Relation, is an Aggravation of their willful Disorder.

Besides, the Door is open for every Church Member, on any sufficient Cause, to remove his Communion; A Liberty, by the Way, which renders every Neglect of Duty in it utterly inexcusa-

ble. Persons, indeed, should take Heed of wavering in their Profession, and of abusing this Liberty to the gratifying of Humor and Passion. But while they act as those whose Wills are sanctified and resolved into the Will of Christ, I see no Restraint upon them from the Word of God.

But if by the Church not being a Prison be meant, that those who stand related to it are under no Obligation to Duty in it, nothing can be more manifestly perverse and absurd. The Duties, for the Observance of which I am pleading, are enjoined of Christ. It is expressly commanded, that Believers in Fellowship should not forsake the Assembling of themselves together and 'tis evident, that a Neglect of this Duty is destructive of the End, and strikes at the Essence of a Church. To complain, therefore, and argue against any Obligation to this Duty, what is it but to groan under the Yoke of Christ as grievous, and reject his Appointments? And what Testimony is this of Christian Wisdom and Obedience? Shall Persons, who stand in the Relation of Church-Members, complain, that they are not connived at and indulged in neglecting the Duties of that Relation, and cherished in a Practice that directly tends to the Ruin of the Churches they belong to? What Ground can they alledge for this? Or what of the Love of Christ can they show in it? It must be strange Delusion that shall make a Man fancy, he enjoys no Christian Liberty, if he be not allowed to neglect, as he pleases, and set his own Rate on the Duties and Privileges of the House of God.

But there are others of these irregular Professors, of another Stamp, who endeavour to justify themselves in the Conduct I am blaming, by alledging, that, notwithstanding they wander from

the Churches they immediately belong to, they still, where they go, sit down with the Children of God, and under a sound Gospel-Ministry; and that this Conduct testifies their Love to all Saints. This, they say, is walking in a catholic Spirit, and with the Mark of universal Charity. And this, they apprehend, sufficiently covers them from Blame.

It may not be amiss to observe here, that it is one continual Labour of the Enemy of Mankind against Christ and his Gospel, to dissolve the Union by which, in particular Churches, Christians are joined in a special and immediate Relation to each other. And this he does, among other Things, by insinuating, that a zealous and firm Attachment to the Duties of that special Relation favours of Bigotry and a Party-Spirit. The Serpent knows, that an Indifferency in this Matter, as it brings on a Neglect of all Order, is the ready Way to bring a Church to Ruin.

But, to answer this Allegation more directly, either a particular Church-State, and that special Relation in it which Believers stand in to each other, is of divine Appointment, or it is not. If it be not, why do these Persons, by a solemn Act of Union and Fellowship with it, support and countenance, in the Church of God, a Form of human Invention? But if this Constitution be of the Lord, will they answer for neglecting the Duties they owe to it?

But, on the other Hand, is the close Attachment of a Christian to all his Duty, in the Church he immediately belongs to, inconsistent with a catholic Spirit? They who think so must know very little of what concerns the Kingdom of Christ. Every particular Church is a constituent Part of the Catholic Church. The Strength, Fruitfulness and Glory of the latter will always advance or decline

in Proportion to the Number and Condition of the former. And hence it may easily be seen, that they who, by Disorder and Negligence, bring Injury and Decay on the Christian Community they immediately belong to, do, by this Means, endamage and endanger the whole Body. And thus the Persons, I am now particularly answering, do, under the specious Colour of a catholic Spirit, injure, and indeed betray the Catholic Church. For if their Example should be universally followed, universal Confusion would follow likewise, and Christ would have no Appearance of a Church on Earth. But Satan, we know, with all his Stratagems, shall never be able to bring things to that Pass. The Church is securely established against all the Power and Policy of that Adversary. *The Gates of Hell shall not prevail against her.*

But, after all the Talk of universal Charity among such People, Experience shows, (what it is so reasonable and natural to expect) that they who are the most resolved and assiduous to fill up their Places in the Churches to which they are particularly related, best witness their Concern for, and best promote the Honour and Interest of the Catholic Body. And can it be supposed, that he, in whom are all the Treasures of Wisdom, hath so constituted his Church, and settled all that concerns it, as that, the Neglect of Duty in a particular Part of it, shall become a necessary Testimony of a Christian's Love and Zeal for the whole? Nothing is more contrary to Reason and the Word and Honour of the Redeemer.

But, among these unhappy, irregular Professors, there are some who endeavour to justify their Conduct by Something more specious still. These alledge, that they greatly edify, and enjoy more spiritual Comfort and sensible Communion with God, when

they go elsewhere, than when they join the Assemblies they belong to. This Account of things they look upon as setting them out of the Reach of Censure; for who, say they, can contradict their Experience, or oppose the Liberty of Seeking after the Enjoyment of God? And, accordingly, none are more confident in their Negligence than they.

Against this plausible, and, as some think, unanswerable Allegation, I offer the following things.

First, this is making the special Favours of Christ the Reward of Disobedience to his Laws. If the Constitution and Order of a Gospel-Church be such as I have represented it, and as these Persons in the Act of their Profession have allowed, then their Conduct amounts to this, that because Christ manifests his Love to them, therefore they neglect their Duty and break his Commandments. And what can be more disingenuous? Can any Reasoning have a worse Countenance? To argue from the Grace of God for Rebellion against him hath always been justly accounted the most hateful Ingratitude. How far it may have pleased the Lord to withdraw himself from these Persons, and give them up to Delusion, for their willful Neglect of Duty, I know not: But under Delusion I think, they manifestly are; and that this is the Fruit of their Folly.

In the second Place, this is making, under a Profession, our own private Advantage the sole or governing View of our Conduct; which is contrary to the noble and generous Principles of true Christianity. If *self* were the only or principal Consideration on which Believers might enter into this spiritual Relation, there might be Force in what they urge. But it appears to me, that Saints

do not join in Fellowship with each other, or ought not to do it, merely with a View to their own personal Edification, but likewise to magnify the Kingly Office of Christ, (yielding all Obedience to him by putting themselves under all his Ordinances) and to be instrumental to the Maintenance of a Church-State, and to the Joy and Salvation of others. These are some of the noble Designs of Church-Fellowship; and whatever opposeth them is contrary to the Genius of Christianity. It is not, therefore, sufficient, that we are pleased, and think we are profited too, under this or that Ministry, since this can never make void our Obligations to labour for the great Ends I have mentioned, and which can only be obtained by our keeping to the Churches we respectively belong to. The dutiful Children of God are of a more royal Spirit, seeking not their own, but the things of Jesus Christ.

In the third Place, to neglect, on this Ground, the Ministration of the Word in the Churches we immediately belong to, is a manifest Dependance on Instruments. If the Minister of a Church be not grossly ignorant, and there be in it any tolerable Means of Edification, what is the Neglect of the Word, in the Order of the Gospel, to run after other Teachers, less than trusting to an Arm of Flesh, and in Effect denying, that Christ can or will make his own Institutions profitable to them. 'Tis not to follow Christ, but the Creature, and to forget or disown the Grace, Power and Faithfulness of the Lord.

But farther, to give my Answer to this Allegation another Turn, there is great and just Ground to question the Truth of what

these Persons alledge touching their greater Edification and Enjoyment of God, when they repair elsewhere than to the Churches to which they belong. For this Allegation sets forth Christ as counteracting his own Appointments, and blessing his People when they desert them. It represents the Lord as pleased with Disorder, and finding on his People in and for Irregularities, that are injurious to themselves, and ruinous of his Church in the World. But as this can never be true, so what these Persons alledge for themselves should never be admitted to be so. *If we say, that we have Fellowship with him and walk in Darkness, we lie, and do not the truth.* 1 John i. 6.

Alas, our vain Minds are subject to spiritual Vapors; and Satan, to deceive us, often transforms himself into an Angel of Light. Whence it sometimes happens, that what we take for a divine Impression is nothing but a Satanical Delusion. If any should ask, how, then, shall the one be distinguished from the other, I answer, by comparing them with the written Word. If what is taken for a divine Manifestation or Impression correspond not with the Word, and promote not a humble, holy and spiritual Frame; if it dispose you not to universal Obedience to the Laws of Christ, you may be very certain, it comes from no other than the Enemy of Mankind. If we are not careful to bring our Experience, as well as our Faith, to the Touch-Stone of Revelation, Satan and our own treacherous Hearts will often deceive us.

According to the general Report of Experience, the Lord hath rarely manifested his Love to his Children otherwise than as he hath found them in the Way of their Duty; and when he hath vouchsafed to do otherwise, it hath been to reclaim, them. All this

is consonant with strict Reason and the Nature of things; but the Allegation of these Persons is contrary to both, as it is saying in Effect, that the Favours of Christ are bestowed in a Way subversive of his own Institutions. But he is the God of Order, and will not deny himself; and, according to what I have just now said from Reported Experience, it can only be to the End he may reclaim his Children and restore them to Order, when, finding them careless and in the Way of Disorder, he takes that Opportunity to manifest his Love to them. And, on such an undeserved Discovery, the Heart of a Believer is always deeply smitten with a Sense of his own Ingratitude, and filled with Admiration at the Goodness and Condescension of his gracious Redeemer. He takes up, in the Strength of divine Grace, Resolutions to be found, for the Time to come, in all the Ways of Obedience to the Lord, who hath shown him such Compassion and Love, and crowns these Resolutions with real Amendment. All this is a Measure and an Effect worthy of the Perfections of Christ; a Measure and an Effect which have the strongest and most manifest Tendency to the Increase and Propagation of Faith, the Establishment and Security of Gospel-Order, and the Edification of the Church. The Saints are never so humble, never so touched with a Sense of Shame, and never in such Confusion, for their Neglects and Omissions, as when under the Impressions of divine Love. And no Wonder; for if Communion with God will not make a Man humble, obedient and fruitful, nothing will. But they who argue against Duty from the Manifestation of Christ's Love to them in the Neglect of it, are Strangers to all this, and manifestly under Delusion.

I have now replied to the principal things, urged among Professors in Favour of a Practice that is subversive of the End of Church-Fellowship, and threatens the Dissolution of every Church it prevails in. How I have succeeded, the Reader will judge.

But there is another Cause of Separation and Disorder in the Churches, which, though not found among the general Pleas of irregular Professors, I must by all Means a little consider: And that is, the hearing of new or celebrated Teachers. By this Motive many are led to break Order, who, in other Respects, labour to walk without Blame. And, doubtless, in their first Sallies, they are apt to look on it not only as innocent but laudable, as it stands on the Ground of a very natural Curiosity, (often not easy to be resisted) promises something on the Side of Knowledge and Edification, and only presents itself now and then.

What I have already said by Way of Reply to the Pleas of irregular Professors, will, without Doubt, be admitted by these Persons to be of good Use towards informing the Judgment and adjusting the Conduct of a Christian in the Matter in Question. What I shall add for their farther Information shall be gathered from the Experience of old Christians, who have, in their Minority in the Christian Life, been led by the like Motive, and made the like Sallies. And these have found themselves at Length in the Way of Disorder, and in the Snares of Deceit and Vanity. They have found, that Names and Talents, and every Gift and Advantage, are Nothing in themselves, and worse than Nothing when a Christian becomes irregular in order to enjoy them. They have found one Irregularity tempting to another, and leading the

Way to all Disorders. They have found themselves going backward and not forward in the divine Life. They have found the Spirit grieved, their Hearts reproaching them, and consequently their Peace, Hope and Joy abated. They have, therefore, returned *to the good old Way*, and confined themselves to their Places, and are not induced by any ordinary Motive to quit them again.

For a Close: If no civil Society can flourish or continue, when its constituent Members fall into a general Neglect of their Relative Duties; neither can a Church of Christ. 'Tis morally impossible. Everything, therefore, how specious so ever it may be, that cools and slackens the Zeal and Diligence of Professors, in the Matter of Attending in the Assemblies of their respective Churches, should be guarded against as an Evil bringing all other Evils after it, that are destructive of the Order, the Privileges, and the Being of a Church-Community.

Let the Importance of the Subject and the Increase among us of the Evil I complain of, plead for the Freedom and Plainness I have used on this Occasion. I look upon this Evil as the Bane of our Comfort and Honour, and the Cause of that Disorder and Confusion into which, in the Churches, we are generally fallen. No Wonder, that Christ hath withdrawn his Presence, and that there are upon us so many Marks of his Displeasure, when his Ordinances are so much despised, and the Constitution and Order of his House so little regarded. So true it is at this Day, that Christ's Enemies are those of his own Household.

I beseech, therefore, those who are tempted to fall into, or continue, the Practice of forsaking the Assemblies they belong to, to consider the Inconsistency and Danger of handing in the Relation

of a Church-Member, and living at the same Time in a constant and allowed Neglect of the Duties of it; Duties so necessary to the Edification, Safety and Prosperity of a Christian-Community. How irrational and destructive would any like Conduct be found to be in your Families, and in any other Societies into which you are incorporated for Ends of the present life! And shall Men behave themselves orderly and with Understanding anywhere but in the Church of Christ? God forbid.

Consider the primitive Christians. They continued steadfastly in Fellowship, Breaking of Bread and social Prayers: By which Means the Church was upheld, and they themselves were preserved from Apostasy, in the midst of the Rage of cruel and bloody Prosecutors. Then their Ministers rejoiced over them; and Ministers and People were mutual Instruments for the Increase of each other's Faith and consolation. Let me entreat you, therefore, in the Words of the Apostle: *Phil, i. 1, 2. If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any Comfort of Love, if any Fellowship of the Spirit, if any Bowels and Mercies, be ye likeminded, having the same Love, being of one Accord, of one Mind, and conform yourselves in all Things, to the Faith and Order of the Gospel. This would be laying a sure Ground to expect the Blessing of the great Shepherd among us, and make our Churches again look forth as the Morning, fair as the Moon, clear as the Sun, and terrible as an Army with Banners. Cant. vi. 10.*

I have now to add only two Things. One is, that no private View hath induced me to offer this Word of Advice; nor have I intended any Reflection on particular Persons or Communities: The Practice I lament is too general to countenance any Charge

of that Nature. The other is, my Subject is so very copious, that though, in the Length of this Piece, I have exceeded my Intention, I am sensible it comes very short of what might be said upon it. And I should be glad, therefore, to find this imperfect Thing prove a Means to excite some proper Person to handle so important a Subject, and so necessary at this Day, more pertinently and largely. In the mean Time, as I have thought it my Duty humbly to offer this Remonstrance upon it, and what I offer is the Fruit of Love, it will, I hope, be accepted in Love by all who love the Kingdom of God.

It is the Comfort of the *Faithful* to know, that whatever threatening Symptoms may at any Time be found in the Churches, as the Effects of the growing Evil I complain of, *nevertheless, the Foundation of God standeth sure; the Lord knoweth them that are his*. Let all who name the Name of Christ depart from Iniquity; especially from this heinous and fatal one of *forsaking the Assembling of themselves together*. Let them kindly, on this Occasion, receive from my Hands the Judgment and Advice of a celebrated *English* Divine of the last Age; which he hath left in such Words as these. “The Sins of God’s Children, their Coldness, their forsaking their first Love, and their Conforming to evil Times, help to bring Judgments on the Land, it may be, more than those of gross Sinners. And they should especially stir up themselves to prevent the Mischief, contending with God in Prayer, with the Adversary by Resistance, and with cold and lukewarm Men by provoking one another to Love and good Works.” And to this End, that the holy Spirit may be poured out on all the Churches and Ministers of Christ, is the sincere and fervent Prayer of

*Your affectionate brother
in the Order of the Gospel.*