

CIRCULAR LETTER,

OF THE

DOVER BAPTIST ASSOCIATION,

VIRGINIA.

October 10, 1814.

DEAR BRETHREN,

THROUGH the indulgence of Heaven, we have had one more annual meeting. We trust our national troubles will never be named by us, as an apology for the neglect of our religious privileges: while Providence shall grant us the means of grace and an opportunity to attend them. We have had a good season, and our hearts have been made joyful and thankful in the house of Prayer. Several of our Churches have had pleasing additions to their number, all express their delight in religion, and that in the midst of the ravages of war in our land, they live in love and peace among themselves.

The subject appointed for our present Epistle, is *Close Communion*. We sincerely regret, that necessity urges the investigation of a subject, in which, we, and some of our christian brethren, entertain different opinions.

We are unwilling to wound the feelings of any who differ from us, or merely to gratify the prejudice of those, whose views correspond with our own. We hope we are influenced by better motives. A supreme regard to our divine Master, the great King of Zion, a love to the established order of his house, and a desire to promote the peace and prosperity of religious society in general, are, we trust, the principal springs of action in the present undertaking. Moreover, as the Corinthians compelled the Apostle Paul to a course of conduct, which, otherwise he would not have adopted; so suffer us to remark, that our Christian Brethren who dissent from us, have, by their severe censures, compelled us to defend our conduct, relative to the subject of Communion. We believe, brethren, in the communion of Saints. We also consider, that this term is very properly used, in a comprehensive way, to represent the whole intercourse or divine communion that Christians have, with each other, in the fellowship of the Gospel; or in their participation of divine things. But even this communion, free and general as it is, has, in the present state, its limits, or bounds. For we cannot exclude from the number of christians, all who differ from us, in their views of what we deem christian sentiment and practice; and yet on the other hand, it is impossible we can have communion or fellowship with each other, in those sentiments and practices, wherein we differ from, and even oppose one another.

The dissensions among christians, have been gratifying to infidels, and painful to the friends of christianity; and it must be acknowledged, as it respects these things, that there is utterly a fault amongst us. But to whom, brethren, shall this fault be imputed? To what sect or party, shall the blame be attached? Let those who are infallible in judgment, who are absolutely perfect in all their religious sentiments and conduct, "cast the first stone." Until such a society can be found, it behoves all, to exercise mutual forbearance and christian charity towards each other; even with respect to those things in which we can have no communion: and as the period is not far distant when we shall be all of one way, let us endeavour previous to that happy season, to be all of one heart.

But you are aware, brethren, the term *Communion*, is sometimes used in a more limited sense. All denominations of christians who attend to Gospel ordinances, agree in applying it to the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. Indeed the Scripture so applies it. Read 1 Cor. x. 16. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" The word thus taken, is expressive of the intercourse or communion, that experimental christians have, with Christ, and with each other, in this ordinance. It is to this view of the subject, your attention is now invited.

The majority of churches of our denomination have, ever since the days

the Apostles, held and maintained the sentiment and practice, commonly called *close communion*; or the communion of baptized persons only, in the Lord's Supper.

On this account they have been very liberally reproached by their enemies, and greatly blamed by some of their best friends, among unbaptized persons. Their conduct has been censured, as *uncharitable, unchristian and cruel*.

Uncharitable, in that they would not exercise forbearance and christian love to those who could not see (as it has been said) with *their eyes*.

Unchristian, in that as Christ received persons unbaptized to spiritual communion with him, no one without acting contrary to Christ, can refuse them communion at his table.

Cruel, in that they would compel persons to be baptized according to their notion of that ordinance, or refuse them the privileges of church-membership, church-ordinances, and even (as some have said) the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Baptists reply, that the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, is not in their judgment a test of christian love, or internal communion, between christians of different denominations: so far from it, that we have uniformly expressed the utmost christian affection, for multitudes, with whom, we could not feel perfectly justifiable, in partaking that ordinance.

We have ever manifested, the greatest confidence, in the christian piety of our dissenting brethren, and would not debar them from one christian privilege, but would freely say, respecting every ordinance and blessing; "come in thou blessed of the Lord, wherefore standest thou without?"

But if no confidence be placed in our most sincere declarations of christian regard to our unbaptized brethren, we feel a consolation in adopting the language of the Apostle, 2 Cor. i. 12. *Our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to youwards.*

We shall now offer an apology for our noncompliance with open communion, and then our reasons for a close communion will lie before you.

Open or unrestrained communion at the table of the Lord, we deem improper for christian society in general; because it is *impolitic, injurious, & impracticable*.

It is *impolitic*. There is certainly such a thing as ecclesiastical, as well as civil policy. Different denominations of christians, have their different laws, ordinances, and rules, for the regulation of their own internal and relative concerns. And there surely must be a manifest impropriety, when any one of those societies shall adopt measures, and pursue a course of conduct, tending to subvert or render abortive their own mode of discipline; and at the same time to sanction other modes of government, contrary to their own view, of what is proper, for a gospel church. For instance, suppose some denominations of christians continue in their communion, persons, who allow themselves in certain amusements, called *innocent*, as cards, dice, backgammon, &c. followed not by way of gambling, but merely as amusements. Suppose others to fellowship those who send their children to a dancing school, and who, perhaps, occasionally visit the ball room themselves. Suppose other churches to have drunkards enrolled in their number, and yet their frequent intoxication forms no obstruction to their communion. On the other hand, as is certainly the case, suppose churches or societies whose moral discipline is so strict that they will not suffer those things in their members, but on pain of excommunication. Let it be farther supposed, for it is possible, and in the present imperfect state, highly probable, that certain members of the churches last alluded to, have indulged themselves in the fore-mentioned practices. They have been accused, brought to trial, and expelled by their brethren, in their own respective communions; and yet those very brethren who united in the sentence of the church against them, will go and commune with those in other societies, who are constantly living in the habitual practice of the same offences. How must these excommunicants feel, when they behold their brethren who have censured them, countenancing others, more guilty than themselves, and sanctioning vices worse than theirs, because habitually sisted in! Is not this to partake of other mens' sins? Justify in our practice,

what we condemn in principle. Harden the hearts of habitual offenders? Create suspicion in the minds of our excommunicated brethren, of our sincerity in opposing sin, and thus arm them against the censure of the church, under which they are laid?

But free or open communion is improper, because it is *injurious*. It is injurious to the peace of christian society, and even to the existence of christian friendship. As men, we feel ourselves citizens of the world, and feel we are bound, by this relation, to love all mankind.

This sentiment glows with equal ardour in the breasts of Europeans, Asiaticks, Africans and Americans, and yet who is there, that is not aware of the injurious tendency of mingling these together in the same civil society, each possessing all his national prejudices in favour of his own particular manners, customs, laws, government, &c? We love the subjects of European governments while they form no part of the community to which we belong; but should they come and form a settlement amongst us, with all their national prejudices, we should immediately feel the injurious tendency of such an association. It would wound our feelings in time of peace, to hear sentiments advanced in opposition to our own government; but in a state of warfare we should view such citizens, as far more injurious than the invading foe. We are pleased with the British, in Britain, the French, in France, but are persuaded that neither without a change of sentiment, would ever make good citizens of our country, or agreeable neighbours to us. Thus as christians, we love christians of every name and society. But who does not know that an attempt to force them to an unnatural communion and intercourse with each other, has proved a means of jealousy, contention, and animosity, that has occasioned mutual pain and uneasiness. Envy and strife have ensued, and where these are (saith the Apostle) there is confusion and every evil work. So that while it has the name of communion, the true nature of the thing is destroyed, which leads us

To observe, that free or open communion is improper, because it is *impracticable*. It never yet could be established. Different societies have attempted it; but how long has it continued? Declarations are made that all are welcome to come. But how many are influenced by them? A vast a-do has been made about it, and great reproach has fallen on some christians, because they will not join in the great design of uniting all societies in one community. But where are the mighty effects of this great stir? Let our brethren give us a sample of this blessed union; we see it not! The fact is, no such union has been established. So that setting aside the Baptist Society altogether, we ask, where is the union or communion of other societies. It exists in conversation, but not in action, in profession but not in practice. Like human life, *it is a vapour that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.*

But some friendly disposed persons of different congregations have thought there might be established a *select communion*. Or a communion of those only in the different churches, whose life and conversation must be acknowledged unexceptionable. This plan, however plausible it may appear, would introduce such invidious distinctions as would inevitably disturb the minds of a number of individuals, of every community. Communities being composed of individuals, that which would wound the feelings and reputation of one, would unquestionably have a very unpleasant effect on the minds of all. Churches consequently would feel themselves slighted and disrespected, in the slight and disrespect shown to some of their members, supposed to be disorderly at such communion seasons. Mutual discontent would unavoidably arise, that a conduct should be pursued, on these occasions, evidently tending to swell the minds of communicants one against another, and so by this general union, destroy that particular communion which the members of individual churches, should ever maintain among themselves, in their own respective societies. Nor is it easy to discover how disagreeable circumstances, of this nature, can be prevented; unless it be, by throwing open our doors to an universal communion; in which case we shall abolish the distinction between the church and the world, and annihilate both.

The church will be lost in the world, and it will be impossible to distinguish the world from the church.

In addition to this, let it be remarked, that the members of churches are admonished to exercise a watch-care and strict discipline among themselves. See Lev. xix. 17. Matth. xviii. 15, 16, 17. 1 Cor. iii. 16, 17. Also the whole of the fifth chapter, of the same epistle, and 2 Thess. iii. 6. Turn to these passages, carefully read them, and then say, if the necessary regulations and duties there recommended, can, with propriety be exercised towards any, excepting those who have given themselves members to particular churches for those godly purposes. According to our view of the subject, which we also think corresponds with the scriptures; one church has no more authority over the members of another, than one of our states has a right to hold dominion in, and over the citizens of another. Of course our wisest and most religious conduct will be, to study the regulations and duties of the particular churches to which we belong, that we may live in peace and love among ourselves; and not attempt that which has hitherto been found impracticable; lest while keepers of the vineyards of others, we shall have to lament, that our own vineyard we have not kept.

Once more. An unrestrained free communion, consisting of a number of persons of different religious sentiments, &c. must be spiritually a breach of the regulations laid down for God's ancient professing people, which as the Apostle remarks with regard to muzzling the ox, were not *written for their sakes alone, but for us also* 1. Cor. ix. 9. 10. "For whatsoever was written aforetime, was written for our learning." Thus saith the Lord, Lev. xix. 19. "Thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed: neither shall a garment mingled of linen and woollen come upon thee."

Dent. xxii. 10. "Thou shalt not plough with an ox, and an ass together. And what saith the new Testament? "Be ye not unequally yoked together."

Where unions or communions take place among persons of religious sentiments so strangely different as those of many professed christians, a strange language must be produced, neither distinctly that of Israel or Ashdod, not the Jews language, but according to the language of each people, as Neh. xiii. 23, 24.—This confusion of sentiment has hitherto precluded the possibility of any durable communion even among those christian congregations that profess to be decidedly in favour of the plan and who severely censure the Baptists for a non-compliance. But why should we be censured for standing at a distance, and not engaging in the work when we see that the builders of this mighty fabric cannot for any length of time even understand one another. Let us see their professed principle reduced to practice among themselves, that we may be admonished not only by word, but by the more powerful influence of their example.

It is well known that some of the most zealous advocates for free or open communion at the Lord's table, have accused some christian societies, of holding principles horrible to reflect on, which as some have warmly said originated in hell, and would lead thither those who embrace and are influenced by them. Such as, God's appointing persons to salvation and damnation, from all eternity irrespective of their characters, dispositions, and behaviour; that Christ died but for a part of mankind, and that those for whom he died, have nothing to do, because Christ hath, for their salvation done all for them, that was needful. Now admitting that our opponents believe these charges are founded in truth, how can they be sincere in desiring us to commune with them? If they certainly believe their own statement to be correct, one would suppose it must be highly gratifying to them, to have nothing to do with a set of people so frightfully erroneous. But the Baptists hold no such sentiments. They are as far from believing them, as they are from believing that any happy communion, at the Lord's table, can result, from an association of persons, maintaining such various, and such opposite opinions, as are found among many religious societies, who profess to be friendly to this practice. "Can we walk together except they be agreed." Amos. iii. 3.

Hitherto we have only endeavoured to shew the impropriety of open communion, as it respects Christian Societies in general. We shall now exhibit that impropriety with regard to the Baptists in particular. This will appear

1. By reflecting on the nature and design of the mission of John the Baptist: viz. to make ready a people prepared for the Lord, Luke i. 17. or to make ready a people for the Kingdom of Christ, or for the Gospel Church. How was this design accomplished? See Matt. iii. 1, 5, 7. "In those days came John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, repent, ye: for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins." This is called the beginning of the Gospel, Mark, i. 1, 2, 3, 4. This was the original pattern given for preparing persons for a Gospel Church state; and the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, being confessedly a church ordinance; the baptists, of course, entertaining this view of things, must act extremely improper were they to practice open communion. For, in such a communion persons are received who were never made ready for the Lord, or for a Gospel Church according to the original plan; hence in their reception there must be a violation of the well known rule, "see that thou do all things according to the pattern shown thee in the mount;" which precept will apply to the law from Mount Zion, equally as to that of Mount Sinai,

2. The impropriety of Baptists uniting in an open or general communion will appear by considering how Christ received his disciples. In John iv. 1. it is said he made them disciples and then baptized them. See this confirmed by John, iii. 22, 23, 25, 26. Hence we infer, if our Saviour received persons to communion with himself by the administration of this ordinance, it cannot be improper for the baptists to adopt the same mode. and follow the same unerring example in receiving persons to communion in the Church of Christ, now, in the present day. "For hereunto are ye called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example that ye should follow his steps." 1 Pet. ii. 21.

3. It is improper for the baptists to practice open communion because "in the beginning it was not so." These were the words of our Lord when the Jews enquired, if it were lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? Our Saviour replied, Moses, for the hardness of your hearts, suffered you to put them away, but "in the beginning it was not so," bringing them back to the first institution of marriage. The question is now asked, is it lawful for persons baptized and unbaptized to break bread together at the table of the Lord? We reply that a number of pious persons have submitted to it, "But in the beginning it was not so."

1. In the beginning it was not so in the original institution of this ordinance. The best institutions are liable in the course of time to suffer some of the most injurious alterations or changes from their original design.

It is therefore necessary frequently to recur to their first establishment in order to preserve their purity according to their original intention. This is remarkably true in the present case:—At the first institution of the Lord's Supper, it is presumable that there were none present but baptists or baptized persons. It has been made a question with some people whether the disciples of our saviour were baptized. We offer our reasons for believing that they were not unbaptized.

1. If they were not baptized, they were not prepared for the Lord according to the ministry of his forerunner or messenger, John the baptist. See the remark above.

2. If they were not baptized, they did not follow the footsteps of their divine master.—See Matt. iii. 13, 14, 15, 16, 17.

3. If they were not baptized, the ministry of Christ had not the same effect on them that it had on others. See Luke, vii. 29. "And all the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John."

Query. Were not the disciples among those obedient ones that heard him? And if so, were they not baptized at this, or at some other period of his ministry?

4. If they were not baptized, how are we to understand the paragraph, in John, iii. After these things came Jesus and his *disciples* into the land of Judea, and there he tarried with them, and he baptized. And John also was baptizing in Enon, near to Salim, because there was much water there; and they came, and were baptized; for John was not yet cast into prison.

5. If the disciples were not baptized, then the Apostle Peter did not give a correct account of their case and conduct, in Acts, i. 21, 22. Wherefore of these men which have accompanied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained, to be a witness with us of his resurrection. From this address it is demonstrably clear that the immediate disciples of Christ, Peter and the rest, began with our Saviour at the baptism of John; and among those baptized persons was the ordinance of the Lord's Supper in the beginning instituted. Therefore to conform in our present practice to the ancient institution, the communicants should be all baptized persons. Then why should the Baptists be blamed for making this requisition?

2. In the beginning it was not so, in the gospel commission, Matt. xxviii. 19, 20. "Go teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.—These words to answer the purpose of open communionists should read, go teach all nations communing or breaking bread with them; but they read otherwise. Go teach all nations baptizing them, and THEN, teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you; one of which things was, "do this in remembrance of me," alluding to the ordinance of the supper. With this commission of their risen saviour, the baptists are solicitous their conduct may correspond; and why should blame be attached to them on this account?—Are we therefore become the enemies of our brethren because we walk in the truth? In the beginning it was not so.

3. In the beginning it was not so, in the first gospel church. It appears none thought of entering or were received without baptism.—See Acts, ii. 41, 42. Then they that gladly received the word were baptized: and the same day there were added three thousand souls.—And they continued stedfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. It is not said they that gladly received the word broke bread, but that they were baptized and then broke bread, the very order of things which the baptists at the present time wish to preserve. And who shall harm you brethren if ye become followers of that which is good.

Finally. In the beginning it was not so as to admit unbaptized persons to communion, according to the custom of the Apostles and the primitive churches. The Apostle Paul speaking on a certain subject observes, "we have no such custom, nor the churches of God," plainly implying that, what was a custom with them, might be safely followed, but on the contrary, that which was not a custom with them, and the primitive churches, of God, ought not to be regarded as an example worthy of imitation. The custom of the Apostles with respect to communion, we have already had occasion to mention, in giving an account of the church at Jerusalem; as in the second of Acts. The customs of the ancient churches of God may be gathered by consulting the book of Acts, and the Epistles addressed to these churches. From these it appears that the Lord's Supper was celebrated as a church ordinance, and that their church members who partook were baptized persons. See Rom. vi. 1. Cor. 1. Col. ii.

Thus have we in simplicity given our reasons for a non-compliance with free or open communion; and by reflecting on those plain and unadorned remarks, you may gather our reasons for the opposite practice. We can discover no sound substantial argument in favour of the former, but on behalf of the latter, we have the ministry of John the Baptist the ministry of our Saviour, the original institution of the supper, the gospel commission, the order of the first gospel church, the customs of the Apostles and the first churches of God.

Notwithstanding we thus give our reasons with christian candour and affection, still the demand is kept up for open communion. Some of our christian brethren will not commune with such as they deem unbaptized, and yet they complain that we are cruel in not communing with them. On which side the cruelty lies, let the impartial judge. Our brethren know that we esteem nothing christian baptism, that falls short of burying a believer in water, in the name of the sacred Trinity. And yet they demand of us to do that which they themselves will not, viz. that we should break bread in communion with unbaptized persons.

Some will reply, but we have been baptized as well as you. We ask when were you baptized? They reply, in our infancy. We answer this is the point in debate, and which must be settled before ever we can commune together. You affirm, we deny, only prove from the New Testament the existence of any baptism, before a profession of faith and repentance, and the debate is at an end. This has never yet been done, and we are confident never will. The ancient reformers in the Protestant Episcopal church, having proposed the following question, "what is required of persons to be baptized?" and having replied according to the scripture "repentance whereby they forsake sin and faith, whereby they steadfastly believe," immediately felt their difficulty, "why then said they, are infants baptized when by reason of their tender age they cannot perform them?" That is, when by reason of their tender age they cannot perform *faith and repentance*. The only reply that appeared to them in any way consistent with the scripture was, "because they promise them both by their sureties," clearly proving that in their view repentance and faith were indispensable in this ordinance. In this we perfectly agree with that church and the New Testament supports us both. The only difficulty between us is, whether the prerequisites of repentance and faith must not be personally exercised? or whether they can be admitted by proxy?

The church having explained the ordinance of baptism immediately enters on the Lord's Supper, fully proving what we contend for, that according to the order of the gospel, baptism is first to be submitted to, and then the communion to be received.

It has long been lamented by some of the most pious prelates of the church of England, that the sacred ordinance of the Lord's Supper, has been prostituted into a civil oath. It is also to be lamented, that many dissenters from us, and from that church have overlooked the true intention of baptism according to the new testament and have changed it into a kind of an oath or vow made by parents to bring up their children, in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. A duty towards our offspring, that we sincerely wish both they and ourselves, may perform with greater strictness than ever we have yet done.

But why must the sacred ordinance of baptism, be thus changed and prostituted, to lay parents under an obligation, that they are equally under, without such an oath or vow? They speak of the advantages and blessings attending the baptism of infants, but where is the blessedness they speak of? Are not all parents equally bound by the laws of Christ, thus to bring up their children? Can an oath or vow not required, add any thing to the obligation? Our law requires honesty and condemns theft. Would any person add to the obligation he is under to keep this law, by voluntarily going to a magistrate, and making oath that he will not steal, but that he will conduct himself honestly, towards his neighbours, and the community to which he belongs? Would not this unrequired service betray a suspicion in himself, of his own honesty, in that he would invent new methods of obligation, not found in the law. "Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility." Col. ii. 13. "Who hath required this at your hand? Isa. i."

We now repeat once more where is the cruelty between us? Is it in us, who candidly say, that, though we love our christian brethren of every name, and can exercise forbearance with them, yet cannot commune with them, by breaking bread, until they follow the order of the gospel, or is it in those who would compel us to acknowledge, that their prostitution of baptism is christian baptism itself, and who censure us, because we will not sacrifice our principle and conscience to gratify them?

But some of our dissenting christian brethren, remark, it is the Lord's table, and therefore you have no right to refuse. We reply, it is for this very reason we do refuse. Were it our table all would be welcome, but as it is the Lord's table, we must abide by the laws of his house, and have respect to those prerequisites in the guests that are included in the invitation. Remember, brethren, one is represented present, not having on the wedding garment. He is not called an enemy or traitor, and yet the master of the house, says "friend how comest thou in hither, not having on the wedding garment." There is a preparation necessary for the church below, as well as for that above, and we must learn how to behave ourselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth. 1. Tim. iii. 15. Some of our brethren have said, we will not differ with you about baptism, only let us commune together, and you may perform baptism as you please. This is surely very accommodating. But it reminds us of a certain Lady of this accommodating turn, 1. Kings iii. 16—27. "and she was willing to have the child *divided*." But it must not be forgotten that the true legitimate parent would agree to no such accommodations. She regarded the life of the child.

Some will still repeat, are we not christians as well as you? Why then, will you not eat and drink with us, at the table of the Lord? We repeat also, because we do not find in the scripture any communion previous to baptism. The language of that prophet, was very plausible and very kind. "Come," said he, (or to this amount) "I am a prophet of the Lord as well as you, and the Lord hath shewn me, that you may eat and drink with me." 1. Kings xiii.

But the other had received his orders from a higher source, and ought not to have departed from them.

Finally, we wish you brethren to keep the ordinances of the Lord's house, as they are delivered to us. Reflect therefore, frequently on the nature and design of those ordinances, baptism points out our spiritual death, burial and resurrection, with Christ our Lord, and keeps in memory the relations of deity to the human family, as a Father to bless, a Redeemer to save, and a Spirit to sanctify poor enslaved and polluted sinners, and the ordinance of the supper keeps in memory the whole character of Jesus, with all he undertook and executed for guilty man, "do this (said he) in remembrance of me, for as oft as you take of this bread, and drink of this cup, ye do shew forth the Lord's till he come."

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