

On the Nature and Importance  
Of a Christian Profession

Rev. Joseph G. Shepperson

**ON THE NATURE AND IMPORTANCE OF A CHRISTIAN  
PROFESSION,  
AND ITS CONNECTION WITH MEMBERSHIP IN THE VISIBLE  
CHURCH.**

Rev. J.G. Shepperson

*Southern Presbyterian Review*, Volume 6, Number 4, April 1853.

What is a Christian profession? What is implied in membership in the visible Church? These are solemn and important questions; but few, perhaps, have studied them with the attention they deserve. To most of our readers the views now to be presented will probably seem novel and objectionable.[\[Footnote\]](#) They have not, however, been adopted hastily, or on slight grounds; and whatever maybe their merits, should the exhibition of them lead to thorough investigation, we shall not have labored in vain.

As there will be frequent occasion to refer to the following passages of Scripture, we deem it expedient to introduce them here.

*Luke 12:8, 9*—Also I say unto you, whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of Man also confess before the angels of God: but he that denieth me before men, shall be denied before the angels of God. *Romans 10:8-10*—The word is nigh thee, even in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach; that if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shall believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. *Hebrews 10:23*—Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised.) *Mark 16:16*—He that believeth, and is baptized, shall be saved but he that believeth not shall be damned. *Acts 2:37-47*—Now, when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the Apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call. And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation. Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the ‘Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the Apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved. *Matthew 28:19, 20*—Go ye, therefore, and 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. *Genesis 17:7*—And I will establish my covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee, in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. *Verses 9-11*—And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant, therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations. This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you, and thy seed after thee; Every man-child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be the token of the covenant betwixt me and you. *Exodus 12:48*—And when a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as one that is born in the land. *Isaiah 56:6, 7*—Also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the Lord, to serve him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be his servants, every one that keepeth the Sabbath from polluting it, and taketh hold of my covenant; even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar: for mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people.

From the first five of these passages we shall now deduce a series of observations, which will serve as a foundation for much of our subsequent reasoning, and to which the careful attention of the reader is earnestly solicited.

1. The *confession of Christ*, enjoined in the first and second of these texts, is evidently identical with *the profession of our faith*, mentioned in the third—and is that Christian profession which we are to consider. This, it is presumed, will be admitted without an argument.
2. The first of these passages teaches us that the confession, or profession in question, is an infallible test, by which to distinguish the heirs of salvation from the heirs of perdition; all who make it, belong to the former class; all who *refuse*, to the latter.
3. From the third of these texts it is evident that the profession must be permanent. Though made, *originally*, by a single act, it must be adhered to, *under all circumstances*, to the end of life.
4. In the case of persons not previously baptized, the divinely appointed mode of making this profession is in baptism. We are not representing confession and baptism as the same thing. The one is the duty of which we speak; the other we affirm to be the divinely appointed mode of performing that duty; and what would be the effect of an involuntary mistake as to the mode, we are not now inquiring. So explained, the truth of our observation is established by a comparison of the second and fourth of the texts quoted. In both, the terms of salvation are professedly and formally stated; and as there can be no contradiction between them, it follows that in both the same duties are enjoined. In the one, they are to believe and *confess*; in the other, to believe and *be baptized*. Of course, the command to confess, and the command to be baptized, relate to the same duty. A Baptist, we know, would object to the limitation which we have mentioned. That question need not be here discussed. If the observation is admitted as true of all the cases to which we have applied it, our reasoning will not be invalidated, even though it be extended to others.
5. It is by baptism one becomes a member of the visible Church. This is evident from the fifth of the passages quoted. The last sentence in this passage, let it be observed, relates to persons not previously mentioned. Here, for the first time, is

anything said about admission to the Church; and here is not one word about baptism. If; then, our observation be incorrect, the following consequences will follow: On the one hand, we have no account of the admission of the three thousand into the Church, though they evidently enjoyed all the privileges of membership; and on the other, as to those who are recorded to have been added to the Church, notwithstanding the emphasis with which baptism was enjoined on others, we have no evidence that they ever received that ordinance.

6. From the truths now stated, it follows that the profession to which the promise of salvation is annexed, is the same which an adult is divinely required to make in baptism, and the same that he is divinely required to make in becoming a member of the visible Church.

Our materials are now collected, and we proceed to use them. Our first position, then, is this:

***I. A Christian profession does not consist, either wholly or in part, in a declaration that he who makes it either is, or believes himself to be, a regenerate person.***

That every unregenerate person is absolutely disqualified for making that profession, is certain; the reason for this will be given hereafter. But there are those who believe that, according to the will of God, the Church is to consist solely of regenerate persons; that her peculiar privileges are designed exclusively for *edification*—not at all for *conversion*—and that should one of her members be duly ascertained to be still unconverted, his connection with her ought, *on that account alone*, to be dissolved.

To these views we oppose—

### ***1. Infant baptism.***

So far as external ordinances are concerned, our Savior has instituted but *one baptism*. It may, indeed, be administered in different circumstances; and these may vary the consequences *incidentally* connected with it. But to imagine a difference as to its primary design—its direct meaning and effect, is to imagine a plurality of baptisms. But an infant is not baptized in the character of a regenerate person. The reason for baptizing him rests not at all on any supposition of his having experienced that change. Of course, in the case of an adult receiving the same ordinance, a declaration on that subject cannot be the direct meaning and design.

The argument will appear still stronger, if we reflect on the ecclesiastical effect of baptism. The party baptized, whether infant or adult, is thereby constituted a member of the Church. Is that relation intended solely for the edification of believers, and not at all for the conversion of sinners? Why, then, are infants admitted? On this hypothesis, it must be absolutely useless till they are converted. Why not wait, then, as in the case of those who are born of unbelieving parents? That an infant may be regenerated, we have no doubt; and in such a case, should life be continued, the evidences of piety would be exhibited just as soon as the evidences of capacity for moral action. But such instances are, at best, *extremely rare*; and it surely will not be contended that God has established the general law of infant baptism merely as a provision for such rare exceptions.

Besides, it will hardly be contended that, in all ordinary cases, persons baptized in infancy ought to be excommunicated as soon as they exhibit satisfactory evidence

of having arrived at years of discretion. A position so paradoxical, so manifestly unsupported by the word of God, and repugnant to the dictates of common sense, need not be examined, unless it should be distinctly affirmed. But if this idea be rejected, the doctrine we are opposing will lead to another conclusion, equally strange and unreasonable. It will require a distinction to be made in the administration of ecclesiastical censures; the delinquent, if born of pious parents, must be dealt with on one principle; and if his connection with the Church was formed by his own act, on a different and harsher principle. When this conclusion shall have found an advocate, we shall be prepared to discuss its merits.

## ***2. The original Constitution of the Church.***

In common with Pedo-Baptists generally, we regard the covenant with Abraham (already cited) as the charter under which the Church exists at the present moment. The token of the covenant has, indeed, been changed; but it by no means follows that the covenant itself has been abrogated. Paul expressly affirms that, *by circumcision*, Abraham became the father of all believers, whether circumcised or uncircumcised. See Romans 4:11, 12. The terms of membership, no doubt, have been more clearly illustrated since the time of Abraham; but to suppose that they have been essentially altered, is to suppose that the original charter has been revoked, and a new one granted—which would be a surrender of the foundation on which infant baptism rests. What, then, was necessary to constitute one who had been born of Gentile parents a member of the Jewish Church? Our quotations from Genesis, Exodus, and Isaiah, are intended to throw light on that question, and will be used for this purpose hereafter. At present our inquiry relates to a single point: Was such a person required, as a condition of admission, to avow a persuasion that he was already in the enjoyment of Jehovah's favor? Let the reader examine the texts which we have quoted, and judge for himself. So far as we now recollect, that idea has never yet found an advocate.

The arguments hitherto offered, we are aware, would have no weight with a Baptist; the same is not true of those which remain to be adduced.

## ***3. The principle that Christian baptism is not to be administered to the same person more than once.***

This may be safely assumed; and we have only to inquire how far it is consistent with the theory under discussion. Suppose an adult baptized on a profession of faith. This, according to the theory, is a public declaration that his sins are pardoned, and his nature is renewed. It is afterwards proved by sufficient evidence, and even declared by himself; that the fact is otherwise. As to the present argument, it is quite indifferent whether he deceived himself or intended to deceive others. We ask, does the effect of his baptism continue? Is he still to be numbered among baptized persons? Answer in the affirmative, and you have the singular assertion, that a claim which a man has once set up in his own favor, remains in force after it has been deliberately, publicly, and formally retracted. Answer in the negative, and the conclusion is inevitable, should he be truly converted at a subsequent period, there will be precisely the same reason for declaring that fact in baptism as if he never had been baptized. In short, if, in the case of adults, to be baptized is to claim the character of regenerate persons, then to retract the claim is to nullify the ordinance and all who now disclaim the character are, with respect to baptism, on the same level—whence it follows that, if on conversion, it becomes the duty of any to be baptized, the same, in like circumstances, becomes the duty of all, without any distinction between those who have and those who have not been baptized at an earlier period.

#### ***4. Apostolic teaching and practice in reference to baptism.***

The ordinance now in force was first administered on the day of Pentecost; and no instruction necessary to a proper reception of it, we may be assured, was omitted on that occasion. Did Peter, then, require of his hearers a persuasion that they were already in favor with God, as a necessary qualification? Did he intimate that baptism was an expression of such a persuasion? Assuredly he did not. The whole passage has already been quoted and, in reference to this point, is now commended to the careful examination of the reader. It is utterly impossible to gather from it that baptism is an avowal of any sentiment or state of mind not included in the repentance with which it is connected. *Repent and be baptized, &c.* Could the three thousand learn from this that before being baptized they must receive an assurance, or entertain a persuasion that their sins were already pardoned? Here it may be proper to mention another passage in which the qualifications for baptism, in the case of an adult, are formally stated: Acts 8: 36-38. "And as they went on their way, they came to a certain water and the eunuch said, see, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? and Philip said, if thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered, and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still; and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him." Here, it is evident, the profession made related solely to the Lord Jesus; the applicant expressed his views and feelings in reference to *him*—but neither gave, nor was required to give, any expression of opinion, as to himself as a pardoned or unpardoned sinner. And we may add, there is not an instance recorded in the New Testament where a candidate for baptism was required to express any opinion on that subject. The question, uniformly, is not *what think ye of yourselves?* but, *what think ye of Christ?*

Self-examination is the principal means for determining whether our sins are forgiven or not; and in this view it is frequently enjoined in the New Testament. But the injunction is uniformly addressed to those who are already members of the Church. Nowhere is the candidate commanded to examine himself, in order that he may know whether he is qualified for admission; and in no instance is it recorded that baptism was delayed in order to give opportunity for such self-examination. The danger of inconsiderate haste is, indeed, brought distinctly to view but the remedy prescribed by the Redeemer is not *examine yourselves*, but *count the cost*. Consider the life you must live, the sacrifices you will be required to make. When a scribe proposed to follow him, he said not a word about self-examination. His answer was of a different kind: "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." "You propose to follow a Master who is poorer than birds or foxes; and *the disciple is not above his Master*. Will you be my disciple on these terms." And the means he employed for this purpose were uniformly of the same kind.

#### ***5. The requirement of steadfastness in the Christian profession.***

When the Apostle says, *Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering*, he surely does not mean that we must, under all circumstances, persist in the declaration that our sins are pardoned, and we are heirs of glory. Such an interpretation is utterly irreconcilable with the injunction: *Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith*. It follows that the profession of our faith does not include the declaration specified. There is not a passage in the word of God which *so much as seems to suggest* that the question, whether a man's connection with the Church shall be continued or dissolved, must be decided by self-examination. There are, we know, some who believe that a right to membership in the Church

necessarily involves a right to the Lord's table; and it is sometimes asserted that a member of the Church who, in consequence of doubts as to his own piety, abstains from the sacred supper, commits a disciplinable offence, which, if persisted in, ought to draw down upon him a sentence of excommunication. This whole theory we unhesitatingly pronounce unfounded and unscriptural. And a single text ought to dislodge it forever from every Christian mind. 1 Cor. 11:26-29: "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till he come. Wherefore, whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But, let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself; not discerning the Lord's body."

From this passage we learn that a spiritual qualification is indispensable to an authorized approach to the Lord's table—that the communicant not thus qualified incurs all the guilt of neglecting that ordinance, with the additional guilt of profaning it—and that self-examination is necessary, because to eat and drink unworthily is worse than to abstain entirely. But when do we read of withdrawing from the Church because self-examination has detected the want of that spiritual qualification? This passage, assuredly, contains not a syllable that ingenuity can torture into such a meaning.

If a member of the Church evinces by his outward conduct that he is not qualified for an acceptable approach to the Lord's table, the spiritual officers of the Church ought to forbid his approach. But if; while his behavior is in other respects such as becometh the Gospel, he refrains in consequence of apprehensions in his own mind that he is unqualified, the matter lies between his own conscience and his God; and his fellow creatures may not interfere, except by simply giving him such instruction as may aid in self-examination. For what purpose can discipline be applied? To induce him to communicate, without reference to the question whether, in his own judgment, he is qualified or disqualified? According to the scripture just quoted, for him to do so, would be daring impiety. Shall he be censured, merely because he judges unfavorably of his own case—doubts his own piety? How is the remedy suited to the disease? or where has God prescribed it? The Scriptures, then, require a man to examine himself, in order to ascertain whether he is in the faith, and whether he is qualified for the Lord's supper; but they do not require him to determine by self-examination whether he shall continue in the Church, or whether he shall retain his Christian profession. Let the reader draw his own conclusion.

### ***6. The connection between a Christian profession and salvation.***

See Luke 12:8, 9—already quoted. Did the Savior make it a condition of salvation, that we should declare before men that we are already heirs of salvation? If not, the theory under discussion is irreconcilable with this passage.

## **II. We proceed to state what we conceive to be the true theory.**

*The Church is the visible kingdom of God, distinguished from every other society by this important circumstance, that all her members, and no others, are bound by a solemn and public covenant to the evangelical service of Jehovah. That obligation may be described in other words, thus: They are bound by such a covenant, to trust and love, to serve and glorify the Mediator, in the character in which he is revealed, as Lord and Savior. As it is by baptism one is made a member of the Church, it is, of course, by that ordinance he is brought into this*

*covenant. And a Christian profession is simply a cordial and open acknowledgement of the obligation which the covenant imposes.* By saying, the acknowledgement must be cordial, we mean simply that it must be prompted by a state of heart corresponding with its nature. It is not needful to dwell on the distinction between entering into this covenant by baptism, which, in the case of those not baptized in infancy, is the prescribed mode of originally making this profession, and the subsequent acts by which the obligation of the covenant is recognized. There is evidently no such difference as can affect the nature of the profession.

Hoping that this statement of our views will be found to be sufficiently clear and explicit, we proceed to exhibit our proofs.

Here we lay much stress on *the connection between a Christian profession and salvation.* Notice the first of the passages quoted at the outset (Luke 12: 8, 9). It will, of course, be admitted that the *confession* here required must be cordial, that it must be connected with a state of heart corresponding with its nature; but this is only saying in other words that it must spring from a heart that recognizes Christ as Savior and Sovereign. And such a recognition is the faith to which the promise of eternal life is uniformly annexed. *He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life.* And as it is a living faith that is required, the believer cannot, of course, be either afraid or ashamed to acknowledge his obligation to the Redeemer. Understood as now explained, the text referred to is in full accordance with the uniform teachings of the word of God; but the same will not be true, if we attach any other meaning to the term *confess*.

Let this passage be compared with the second which we quoted (Romans 10: 8-10). In the one, no duty is specified but *confession*; in the other, both *faith and confession*. On our principle, the difference is easily explained. It will not be imagined that a hypocritical profession will meet the Redeemer's requirement; but such is the nature of the thing to be *confessed*, that without faith the *confession* cannot be sincere. The mention of faith in the latter text, therefore, explains the nature of the confession required. In the same paragraph which contains this latter passage, faith is described by its immediate effect—calling on the name of the Lord. *Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.* The state of heart involved in a Christian profession is, therefore, identical with that which is implied in a sincere application to Christ for his salvation; and he who is qualified for the latter is qualified for the former.

Our theory removes every appearance of difficulty from the inspired exhortation: *Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering.* Whether a man may claim before his fellow men the character of an heir of salvation, depends on the results of self-examination; but whether he shall recognize and acknowledge his obligation to trust, serve, and glorify the Lord Jesus, is a question about which he may not hesitate for a single moment, or under any circumstances; and such is the duty to which that exhortation relates.

Our next argument is drawn from *the Savior's manner of treating those who proposed to become his disciples.*

The general direction to *count the cost*, has already been noticed. We have mentioned, too, his reply to the scribe who proposed to follow him. One more passage of the same class will suffice. Luke 14 : 25-27: "And there went great multitudes with him; and he turned and said unto them: If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and

sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.”

What means, then, did the Savior employ to prevent unsuitable persons from enrolling themselves among his disciples? Did he tell them to examine themselves? Did he require an account of their past religious experience? Did he give a particular statement of what that experience ought to have been? Nothing of the kind. He simply stated the terms of discipleship, and called on them to decide whether they would be his disciples on these terms. In other words, he set before them the obligation of the covenant into which they proposed to enter, and demanded neither more nor less than their hearty consent to that covenant.

We have already promised to state the reason why every unregenerate person is incapable of making a Christian profession, and disqualified for uniting himself, by his own act, with the Church of God. We now fulfill that promise: *No such person sincerely consents to God's covenant*. That covenant requires a cordial recognition of Jesus as Lord and Savior, in the sense in which these characters are ascribed to him in the sacred volume. But, *No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost* (1 Cor. 12:3). If, then, a man heartily consents to this covenant, it follows that the spirit of Christ dwells in him and, of course, that he is Christ's. (See Romans 8:9.) But, let it be observed, his consent to the covenant is the evidence of his Christian character—not his Christian character the evidence of his consent to the covenant—and he who can sincerely signify his consent to the covenant is, therefore, qualified for admission into the Church—no matter whether he has or has not drawn the delightful inference that he is a child of God, and an heir of glory.

*Our next argument is drawn from the original Constitution of the Church—the Abrahamic covenant.*

At the outset, we quoted, from the seventeenth chapter of Genesis, the covenant, and the appointment of circumcision as its token. Here, for the first time, did Jehovah authorize mortals to speak of him as the God of Abraham; and whenever this title is applied to Him, the reference is to this covenant. In whatever sense, then, He is the God of Abraham, in the same sense is He the God of all who are reckoned, according to the covenant, as the seed the seed of Abraham. This, however does not include all who are bound by the covenant, or whose visible relation it determines: For they are not all Israel which are of Israel; neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but in Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed” (Rom. 9:6-8). The next passage which we quoted (Exodus 12:48) provides for the admission of strangers (persons who were Gentiles by birth) into this Church, or covenant relation; and *that*, in the case of males, was by circumcision. We have already referred to Romans 4:11 and 12. Let the reader examine it attentively, and he can hardly fail to perceive that *Abraham “received the sign of circumcision” in the specific character of a believer; and furthermore, that circumcision constituted him the father of all believers, whether circumcised or uncircumcised*. But this latter proposition is only expressed in terms slightly varied, when we affirm, that Abraham was constituted the *father of believers, by the covenant of which circumcision was the token*; and that is to say, it is by faith one becomes a child of Abraham in the sense of the covenant. Of course, every person included in that covenant, as to visible relation, is bound thereby to the exercise of a faith like Abraham's—an evangelical, living, active, obedient faith.



If further information on this point be required, we have only to refer to the last of the passages quoted at the commencement of this discussion (Isaiah 56:6 and 7). The last sentence, we conceive, contains a promise, the fulfillment of which belongs to the Christian dispensation, though the language is accommodated, as in many other instances, to the dispensation then in force. The rest of the passage announces a general principle, applicable, as we think, to the Church, under all dispensations—certainly applicable to the Jewish dispensation. The candidate was required to enter into covenant with God; or, in the emphatic language of inspiration, to “*take hold of my covenant.*” The meaning is, he must heartily consent to the covenant, and signify his consent in the prescribed form, which then was by circumcision. And the following are specified as the duties to which he bound himself by that act—to love the name of the Lord, to be his servant, and serve him, and to keep the Sabbath from polluting it. The Abrahamic covenant, then, bound all who were comprehended under it to the evangelical service of God; and all who were prepared to enter into such an engagement (and, so far as adults were concerned, no others) were prepared for admission into the visible Church. That the same principle is still in force, is the precise doctrine of this article. We proceed, then, to notice, as our next argument,

*The teachings of the New Testament in reference to Christian baptism.*

Among the texts which we quoted at the commencement, is Matthew 25:19 and 20, to which the serious attention of the reader is now requested. The nations are to be baptized *in* (or into *eis*) *the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*—thus bought into that visible family of which the Most High is the acknowledged Father and sovereign—and solemnly and publicly devoted to his service. This view is corroborated by the following words: *Teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you.* It is natural to understand this direction in reference especially to persons already baptized; and the meaning will then be, “illustrate, in all its extent, the obligation of the covenant into which they have entered; inculcate the duties involved with the utmost zeal, and enforce obedience by all the means which I have appointed.” If this is the true interpretation, (and to us it seems indisputable that it is,) this passage establishes the proposition, that the party baptized is thereby brought into a covenant with God, precisely similar to, or rather identical with, the Abrahamic covenant already noticed; nor is it any objection that the three Divine Persons are expressly mentioned in one passage, but not in the other; in each, he is solemnly bound to the evangelical service of the same God, and the corresponding blessings which he is authorized to expect are the same.

Let us next turn to the passage which was quoted from the second chapter of Acts. The clause most material to our purpose is, *Repent, and be baptized, &c.* Few will need to be informed that the word translated *repent*, means to change one’s mind; and whether a general or a particular change is meant, can be determined only by the connection. In this instance, as appears from the context, Peter was replying to an inquiry extorted from his hearers by the overwhelming charge, made and proved against them, that they had rejected Him whom *God had made both Lord and Christ*, and had horribly signaled that rejection by procuring his crucifixion. When in connection with this subject, Peter said, *Repent, and be baptized*, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, what could they understand but this: that they must so change their minds, as to receive as Lord and Christ him whom they had hitherto rejected, and, as a public acknowledgment of him, must be baptized in his name? So explained, this text accords with all those passages which connect faith with baptism, as saving faith consists in receiving Christ. It receives him as

both Deliverer and Sovereign; nor can he be received in either character, unless he is received in both; but it may be proper to observe that, in this instance, the latter, but not the former, is expressly mentioned. Such is a fair specimen of the uniform teaching of the sacred writers. They represent Christian baptism as an oath of allegiance—a solemn acknowledgement of the supremacy of the mediatorial King. Hence the obligation to a holy life, which they connect with that ordinance. *How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so, we also should walk in newness of life.*

Before leaving this part of the subject, it seems proper to mention two additional considerations, which the reader is at liberty to take for arguments, or not, according to his own pleasure. One is, that

*Our theory gives a clear and consistent view of the meaning and effect of baptism, as administered to an infant.*

Whether it is administered to an adult, or to an infant, the rite is the same, and its symbolical meaning the same; moreover, it seals the same promises, and imposes the same obligation. Of course, it is the same ordinance. The difference is purely circumstantial, and it is this: In the one case the person enters into this relation by his own voluntary act; in the other, he is brought into it through his connection with others. A foreigner arrives on our shore, and in due time takes the oath of allegiance; his children born afterwards are born citizens—brought into that relation, not by their own act, but through their connection with him—and are as strictly bound to all the duties of allegiance, as if they had taken the obligation by their own act. They are not, indeed, subjected to any rite corresponding with the oath administered to their father. But, though the parallel does not hold in every particular, here is the principle upon which infant baptism rests—the child brought into a covenant relation through his connection with his parent. We pass to the other consideration:

*Our theory suggests the reason why baptism may not be repeated.* That ordinance is designed to bring the subject under the obligation of God's covenant; of course, it is presupposed that he is not already under that obligation. But, the relation once formed, the obligation is perpetual, and can no more be canceled than the soul can be annihilated.

But, we shall be asked, Would you retain a man in the Church, when it is evident that, were he not already a member, he must be judged utterly unqualified for admission? Undoubtedly. In taking an oath of allegiance, a man ought to act sincerely and advisedly; but he who has taken it, no matter in what state of moral feeling, is truly a citizen; nor can he be permitted to plead, in answer to a charge of treason, that he took that oath rashly, or in jest, or that at the moment of taking it he meditated treasonable designs.

Thus we have endeavored to explain the nature of a Christian profession, and its connection with membership in the Church of God. Let us proceed to consider,

### **III. *The importance of such a profession.***

This the Son of God has exhibited in the strongest light, in the memorable declaration: *Whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man*

*also confess before the angels of God; but he that denieth me before men, shall be denied before the angels of God.*

In the case of those who have not been baptized already, this *confession*, as we have seen, is required to be made by connecting themselves with the Church of Christ; of persons who have been baptized in infancy is demanded a cordial, solemn, and public recognition of the baptismal obligation, to be given in the specific character of members of the Church. To every reader who has not already done so, we say: This is your duty; you are bound to embrace the earliest opportunity for performing it; and for the consequences of neglecting it, you are referred to the awful words of your final Judge, which have just been quoted.

You ask, then, can no man be saved who does not place himself in the condition of a communicant? Undoubtedly, if God, in his providence, denies him the opportunity. The opportunity being supposed, the question resolves itself into this: Whether any person, supremely desirous to do the will of Christ, is ever left to mistake that will in reference to this matter? and this can never be a practical question with any man, in reference to his own case. The denunciation is leveled, not against invincible ignorance, involuntary error, or a failure to do what Providence has rendered impracticable; but against resisting the Savior's authority, and willfully neglecting to render him the honor which he claims. Every man shall be saved who believes in Jesus with the *faith that worketh by love*; but where there is affectionate faith, there is submission to His authority—there is the spirit of unconditional obedience to all his known requirements.

The obligation rests on the revealed will of Christ. Still the reasonableness of the requirement is, in several views, exceedingly obvious; and devout meditation on this subject is both proper and profitable.

The Church is the kingdom of Christ—all without it, the kingdom of the devil. If, then, you heartily submit to Christ, can you wish to remain, formally and visibly, in the kingdom of Satan?

Piety, necessarily, spreads its influence over the whole character of its possessor. It must control every part of your conduct—that which is open and visible, as well as that which is secret. Now, if ashamed or afraid openly to acknowledge Christ as your Lord, will you not be ashamed or afraid openly to do His will in other respects?

If a believer, you regard the Lord Jesus with supreme reverence and love. But, entertaining these sentiments, you cannot possibly be reluctant to honor Him and acknowledge your obligation to Him, in the boldest and most open manner.

Many of the most formidable difficulties that attend a life of piety, arise from the influence of the ungodly. Let it be known, then, that you belong to a different class—are actuated by other motives, guided by opposite principles, and bound by the most solemn vows to the service of another Master. Nothing can tend more obviously to diminish the number and force of the temptations arising from that quarter, or to facilitate the work of resistance.

Intercourse with the pious, in the specific character of a fellow-disciple, is a divinely appointed and most precious means of grace; and the same is true of that official supervision, government, and discipline, which God has established in his Church. But these you cannot enjoy, unless you are connected with the Church.

*God, only wise*, has instituted the Church for the most important of all ends—the glory of his own name, the honor of his Son, the salvation of a lost world. To decline connection with the Church is, therefore, palpably inconsistent with sincere attachment to these momentous interests.

Say not, I doubt the reality of my own conversion. You are not required to make any declaration on that subject; but you are required to declare, in sincerity and truth, the following things: That you regard Jesus as the only and all-sufficient Savior of lost sinners, and therefore rely exclusively on his atoning blood, his perfect obedience, his prevalent intercession, and his boundless mercy, for your own salvation; that you regard him as supreme and rightful Lord of all—and therefore, relying on his grace, are resolved to devote yourself henceforth to his service. And the evidence on which all this is to be declared, is your own consciousness. Do you still refuse? Then observe the true nature of the controversy between the Redeemer and yourself. He commands you to seek assurance of his favor by doing his will; and you answer that you will not do his will, till assured of his favor. Will you yield? or do you think he will?

Another excuse relates to the division of the Church into various denominations. But can you find no particular society which you can conscientiously recognize as really a Church of Christ, and which does not require, as a term of membership, anything that you deem sinful? If you can find one such society, your duty is plain; if more than one, it is still plain: form that connection which at present you judge to be most conducive to your spiritual welfare; and should you ever perceive it to be your duty to transfer your membership to a Church of a different denomination, there can be no real difficulty in doing so. *It is better to be in any part of the kingdom of Christ, than in the kingdom of Satan.* (Our views on this topic will probably be more fully developed in a future article.)

**IV.** It cannot be expected that we should attempt to develop all the consequences that flow from our doctrine but on two subjects its bearings are too important to be passed over in silence.

#### ***1. The duty of ecclesiastical officers as to receiving persons into the communion of the Church.***

There is a duty required of every hearer of the gospel, to be performed by *their* assistance; and the only question for their consideration is, whether what the candidate proposes to do is really the duty enjoined by Christ. Here is no room for consulting either their own wishes, or the dictates of human prudence. A definite profession is to be made, and they have only to inquire whether the profession offered is such as the law requires. They may not administer the oath of Christian allegiance to one who does not understand its nature; or who gives them reason to think he is in sport, seeking to deceive; or acting under the influence of caprice or momentary excitement. But these seem to be all the grounds on which they are authorized to reject an applicant.

There are, in the opinion of many persons, serious objections against receiving very young persons into the communion of the Church; and ecclesiastical officers, there is reason to think, have often felt some difficulty on that subject. Let it be remembered, no one is required to believe in Christ who is not likewise required to confess him before men. Hence it cannot be consistently maintained concerning any human being, that he is too young to become a communicant, unless it is maintained that he is likewise too young to become an evangelical believer; and that the command to believe has, as yet, no application to his case. A child, we

know, is peculiarly prone to act hastily. But it is not more difficult to distinguish a deliberate act from a mere ebullition of excited feeling in his case than in that of an older person. Nor is there any peculiar difficulty in judging of his sincerity, or of the degree of his religious knowledge.

But much may be said of the immaturity of judgment, and unsteadiness of purpose, which mark that tender age. We shall perhaps be reminded, that to become a communicant is a transaction of the utmost solemnity and importance; and that, according to the common sense of mankind, a child is not competent to transact serious business. We answer: As to maturity of judgment, a child is capable of deciding, which is preferable, the service of Christ, or the service of Satan. As to steadiness of purpose, the perseverance of the oldest Christian depends solely on the grace of Christ; and that grace is as sufficient for a little child as for any other. Besides it is *in the Church* we enjoy those means which the Savior has appointed for *confirming the souls of the disciples*; hence the more pressing the danger, the more urgent the necessity for such a connection. And finally, the Redeemer's command to believe in His name, and to confess Him before men, is attended with no limitation as to age. To defer on this account, or to require or advise others to do so, is, therefore, at once to question his wisdom, and to violate his law.

## ***2. The nature and proper grounds of excommunication.***

A member of the Church is one who stands in the public and visible relation of a servant of Christ. How far he is an obedient servant, is a very different matter. He is bound by the baptismal covenant, and if capable of acting for himself, acknowledges the obligation. Excommunication transfers his public and visible relation to the kingdom of Satan. It is the act described by Paul in the awful phrase, *to deliver such an one unto Satan*. This differs widely from mere suspension. The suspended member is still regarded as a citizen of Christ's kingdom; but a disorderly citizen. He is still under ecclesiastical government; and the power of that government is exerted for the special purpose of bringing him to repentance therefore he is debarred from some of those privileges to which, if an orderly citizen, he would be entitled. *We count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother*. Excommunication, on the contrary, is thus described by our Savior: *Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican*. The excommunicated person is an enemy, not a brother. To him, as to other sinners, the gospel must be preached; but he is not under ecclesiastical government. He has assumed such an attitude of daring rebellion, that, in this sense, the Church can interfere no farther. She leaves the controversy to be settled between the rebel and the eternal Sovereign whom he has defied. He is without: and, *What have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person*.

In view of these truths, we may easily discover what is the only lawful ground of excommunication. It is that the person concerned has renounced the baptismal covenant in other words, has renounced his allegiance to the Lord Jesus. This crime may be committed in various ways; it may be done either directly or indirectly; but to warrant the sentence in question, it must have been done unequivocally. On no other ground can the sentence be valid. He who has been brought into the baptismal covenant, is still in the visible kingdom of Christ; nor is it in the power of creatures to transfer him to the visible kingdom of Satan.

The covenant may be renounced by resisting ecclesiastical authority when properly exercised. This is evident from Matthew 18:17. While the Church is doing only what her Lord has required her to do, to resist her is to rebel against him. Before proceeding on this ground, however, it must be satisfactorily ascertained that the resistance relates not to a doubtful matter, springs not from involuntary error, or even from a momentary excitement; but can be rationally ascribed to nothing short of contempt for the Redeemer's authority.

Suppose one not previously charged with any disciplinable offence shall signify to the Session a wish to be regarded no longer as a member of the Church; how ought such an application to be treated? To this question, with which many have been perplexed, our doctrine furnishes, as we conceive, the true solution. All will agree that the Session ought, in the first place, to satisfy themselves that the application is made intelligently and deliberately. The applicant ought to be carefully instructed in the true nature of the step he proposes to take, and ample time afforded him for reflection. And we now add that if, after this, his intentions remain unchanged, he must be excommunicated. Excommunication is simply an official declaration, that the party concerned has renounced the baptismal covenant; and, in this case, the declaration is based, not on an inference, but on the explicit avowal of the person excommunicated.

Such an avowal places him who makes it in the attitude of an avowed enemy of God, and of his Son, and of his Church—differing from other avowed enemies only in this; that to the common guilt of daring impiety he super-adds the peculiar aggravation of the basest perfidy. Before God, and angels, and men, he declares that, preferring the service of Satan to the service of Christ, he will submit to no government administered in the name of the latter. He is an apostate; and, as to the nature of the crime, it makes no essential difference whether he serves the devil in the form of mere godlessness, or in some form of Pagan idolatry. Against no other sin are the denunciations of the word of God so awful as against this. *Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. If we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking-for of judgment and fiery indignation which shall devour the adversaries. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb: The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.* The Scriptures contain not a solitary intimation, that he who has once been a member of the Church, can either withdraw, or be lawfully excommunicated, without placing himself in the condition these passages describe.

---

**Footnote:** From the days of Pres. Edwards till now, they have had little currency in this country. That distinguished man, as is well known, contended that none but those who give satisfactory evidence of true conversion should be admitted to full communion in the visible Church; and this view, which caused his rejection by his people at Northampton, after having served them faithfully for twenty-three years, though it met with strenuous opposition in quarters hardly to be expected, has long prevailed in the Presbyterian Church in the United States. The arguments of Edwards, in his "Enquiry concerning qualifications for Communion," and in his reply to Williams, have never yet been satisfactorily answered. The Church of Scotland, and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, however, practice on a different

principle, and though dissenting from them, and the author of this article, it is but right that we should allow the discussion as he has ingeniously conducted it, a place on our pages.—Eds. *So. Pres. Review*.