

A Spiritual Church

Editor's Introduction: The following article is an excerpt from William Dell's work, *The Way of True Peace & Unity* (1649), included in a compilation of the "Army Debates" (1647-1649), and published by University of Chicago Press under the title of *Puritanism and Liberty*. Dell, who at various times served as secretary to William Laud of Canterbury, as chaplain to General Fairfax, and as Master of Gonville and Caius College, was an intense "enthusiast" and a vocal foe of rationalism and intellectualism as it imposed itself on spiritual matters and life of the Christian Church. At the time of this writing, the Civil War is over, Charles I has been tried and condemned by the Rump Parliament, and executed. The Monarchy is dissolved, and Oliver Cromwell is coming to power. The Army Debates are considering how to replace the Episcopacy with a free church, and Dell is signaling them that they do not need to do that, that Christ is quite capable of ordering His own kingdom without the help or supervision of the powers of this world. I have not seen from a Puritan pen so powerful, comprehensive, thorough-going, singularly and primitively Biblical, a work on the nature and characteristics of the true Christian Church. Dell pulls no punches about anything. It is doubtful that such a frank and unmitigated exposure of church abuse, along side such an affirmation of its divine powers and liberties could have made it to the presses at any other time in seventeenth century England than in this narrow window that God providentially opened before Cromwell's death and the Monarchy and Royal Episcopacy were restored in 1660. Nor are the abuses addressed peculiar to that time. Dell's words are quite relevant today. For the digging out of this priceless literary jewel we are indebted to John Sweezy of Lafayette LA, who is ever rummaging through old books and manuscripts for this sort of treasure. - C. M.

A SPIRITUAL CHURCH

By

William Dell

Now, that he that reads may understand, it is necessary for me, speaking of the unity and peace of the Church, to tell you now, at first, that I intend not to propound any way of peace either between the Church and the world, or between the carnal and spiritual children of the Church, as having learned no such thing out of the word of God.

First, not between the Church and the world: for the Lord never intended any reconciliation and agreement between these in the spiritual and eternal things of the kingdom of God. For these are two distinct seeds and sorts of people; the one from beneath, the other from above; the one the seed of the woman, the other the seed of the serpent; and between these two God hath put such an enmity that no man can take away. Wherefore they, who never minding these two different seeds between whom God hath put such irreconcilable enmity, would make all the people of one or more whole kingdoms a church at once, and would reconcile all of them together in the things of God, and in the ways of his worship, according to devices and methods of their own: these men know not what they do, for they walk in the darkness of their own hearts, and not in the light of the Word; which shows us clearly that it is as possible to reconcile Michael and the devil, as the angels of both.

Neither, secondly do I find any way in the Word to reconcile all those together, who are commonly called the Visible Church, seeing even among these there are two distinct sorts of children, as Paul teacheth us: one sort of those that are born after the flesh, as Ishmael and Esau, and another of those who are born after the Spirit, as Isaac and Jacob; and there is as great enmity between these in the church as between the former in the world; for they that are born after the flesh, are always persecuting them that are born after the Spirit, but never agreeing with them

The right Church then is not the whole multitude of the people whether good or bad, that join together in an outward form or way of worship. And therefore I shall not speak of this church. But the church I shall speak of is the true Church of the New Testament, which I say, is not any outward or visible society, gathered together into the consent or use of outward things, forms, ceremonies, worship, as the churches of men are; neither is it known by seeing or feeling, or the help of any outward sense, as the society of mercers, or drapers, or the like; but it is a spiritual and invisible fellowship, gathered together in the unity of faith, hope, and love, and so into the unity of the Son, and of the Father by the Spirit; wherefore it is wholly hid from carnal eyes, neither hath the world any knowledge of judgment of it.

This true Church is the communion of saints, which is the communion believers have with one another; not in the things of the world, or in the things of man, but in the things of God. For as believers have their union in the Son, and in the Father, so in them also they have their communion; and the communion they have with one another in God cannot be in their own things, but in the things, even in his light, life, righteousness, wisdom, truth, love, power, peace, joy. This is the true communion of saints, and this communion of saints is the true Church of God.

Now this true church of God differs from the churches of men in very many particulars, as follows.

In the churches of men members are admitted through an outward confession of doctrine; but none are admitted into this true Church but through a new birth from God and his Spirit (John 3:3). Except a man be born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God, which is the right Church of the New Testament.

The churches of men knit themselves together into such societies by some outward covenant or agreement among themselves. But the true Church is knit into their society among themselves by being first knit unto Christ, their head; and as soon as ever they are

one with him; and are not first one among themselves, and then after one with Christ. So that the true Church is a spiritual society knit unto Christ by faith, and knit to one another in Christ by the Spirit and love; and this makes them infinitely more one than any outward covenant they can engage themselves in, the union wherein God makes us one, passing all the unions wherein we can make ourselves one. And so when some believers perceive the grace that is give to other, they presently fall into one communion, without any more ado, Wherefore they that are of the Church, the body, cannot deny communion to them that are in true union with Christ, the head, when they do perceive this grace. For this is considerable in this matter, that we are not first one with the Church, and then after one with Christ; but we are first one with Christ, and then one with the Church, and our union with the Church flows from our union with Christ, and not our union with Christ, from our union with the Church. Christ prays (John 17:21), that they all (that is, believers) may be one is us; so that our union is not first among ourselves, and then with the Son, and with the father, but it is first with the Son, and with the father, and then with one another in them. And Christ is the door through which we enter into the Church, and not the Church the door through which we enter into Christ. For men may join themselves to believers in the use of all outward ordinances, and yet never be joined to Christ, not to that communion which believers have in Christ; but a man cannot be joined to Christ but he is joined to all believers in the world, in the communion they have with Christ and with one another in him; which upon all occasions he enjoys with them wherever he meets with them. So that the true Church is knit up together into one body and society by one faith and Spirit; the churches of men by an outward covenant or agreement only.

The churches of men have human officers, who act in the strength of natural or acquise parts, who do all by the help of study, learning, and the like. But in the true Church, Christ and the Spirit are the only officers, and men only so far as Christ and the Spirit dwell and manifest themselves in them. And so when they do anything in the Church, it is not they that do it, but Christ and his Spirit in them.

The churches of men have the government of them laid on men's shoulders...But the true Church hath its government laid only on Christ's shoulders. For if the Church be gathered together in Christ, as the true Church is, Christ is always in the midst of them, and if Christ is ever present with them, his own self, how cometh it to pass that Christ may not reign immediately over them? Wherefore the true Church reckons it sufficient authority that they have Christ and his word for the ground of their practice; and whatever they find in the Word, they presently set upon the practice of it, and never ask leave either of civil or ecclesiastical powers. But the churches of men will do nothing without the authority of the magistrate or assembly, though, it be never so clear in the word of God. For in their religion they regard the authority of men more than the authority of God. The churches of men are still setting themselves one above another, but the assemblies of the true Church are all equal, having Christ and the Spirit equally present with them and in them. And therefore the believers of one congregation cannot say they have power over the believers of another congregation, seeing all the congregations have Christ and his Spirit alike among them. And Christ hath not anywhere promised that he will be more with one than with another. And so Christ and the Spirit in one congregation do not subject, neither are subjected to Christ and the Spirit in another congregation, as if Christ and the Spirit in several places should be above and under themselves. But Christ in each assembly of the faithful is their head, and this head they dare not leave, and set up a fleshy head to themselves whether it consist of one or many men, seeing Antichrist doth as strongly invade Christ's headship in many as in one man, in a council, as in a pope.

And thus having declared what the true Church of Christ is, and rectified some ancient and general mistakes touching it, I shall now proceed to make known from the clear and evident the true and only bonds of the Church's union, peace, and agreement, as the Apostle hath delivered them to us by the Spirit. Ephesians 4:4. "There is one body and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all". Where note, in general, that among all those bonds of the Church's unity, the Apostle makes not so much as any mention of uniformity. But it will appear...by the Apostle's doctrine, that no conformity or uniformity are any bonds of the true Church's peace and union, seeing the Church is such a kingdom as is not preserved in its peace by any outward forms and orders, as the kingdoms of the world are, but by inward principles.

In this true Church or one body of Christ, notwithstanding diversity of members and offices, there is still an equality among them all, seeing all alike make up one body. In which regard one member is as necessary to the body as another; and no member can say to another, I contribute more to the making up of the body than thou. The most honourable members cannot say thus to the most mean...not the Apostles themselves to believers among the Gentiles; for we are the body of Christ as well as they, and they are the body of Christ no more than we. Wherefore no member, for diversity of office, is to lift up himself above another member who is a necessary as itself to the making up of the body, and also is every whit as useful in its place.

They that do content themselves in joining to some outward and visible society and corporation of men, though called a church, and think that by being knit to them in ways of outward worship and ordinances, they live in the unity of the Church, when as yet all this while they live out of that one body that is born of the Spirit, which is the only true Church and body of Christ. He that lives out of this spiritual body, though he live in the most excellent society in the world, yet he breaks the unity of the Church, not living in one body with it. And thus many break the Church's unity, that never think on it.

Again they break this bond of the Church's unity that live in this one body, but not as members. And such are they who, having got the advantage of the magistrate's power, will needs lift themselves up above their fellow-member, and exercise authoritative, coercive, domineering power over them; whereas the very Apostles themselves were not lords of the Church, but fellow members with the faithful living in one body and under one head with them, as so did all by love and persuasion, and nothing by force and violence.

They that labour to join men into one body with the Church that are not one spirit with it, do mar the peace of it. For as unity of spirit in the Church is the bond of peace, so diversity of spirit is the breach of peace, and therefore to preserve the peace of the Church, none are to join themselves to this one body that are not of this one spirit.

As all believers are called by one calling (which is the inward and effectual voice of God to the soul, by his Spirit through the Gospel), so they are called into one blessed hope of obtaining the kingdom and glory of God. And no one is called to this hope more than another, or hath more interest or share in it than another. Fishes that live in the sea, though some be greater and some less, yet none hath more interest or share in it than another, but all, being alike produced in it, enjoy it alike. The creatures that live on the earth, though some be greater and some less, yet all enjoy the sun and air alike.

Now the government of the Church is twofold. (1) There is that government which God exercises immediately by himself; and (2) that government which he exercises mediately and by the faithful. The first of these again, that is God's immediate government is twofold: (1) the government of his special providence; (2) the government of his spiritual presence.

Now besides this immediate government of God there is another sort of government of the Church, which Christ exercises mediately by the Church. And this also is Christ's government, and not man's; and men who have not known nor understood the former government of Christ, have mistaken this also through the same unbelief. Wherefore they, not so much as minding the former government of Christ, have mistaken this also through the same unbelief. Wherefore they, not so much as minding the former government of Christ, which is immediate and by himself, have made this mediate government of the church by man to be all. And this also I say, they have understood most grossly and carnally, and not according to the Word, but according to their own ignorant and seduced hearts.

This mediate government then of Christ in the true Church (which, it may be, may better be called order and decency than government) I conceive to be nothing but this, Christ's ordering all things by the faithful, among the faithful, in reference to the communion of Saints.

The first thing then is: To whom Christ hath committed the power of ordering and managing all things in the true Church, in reference to the communion of saints? I answer, he hath given it to the true Church itself, as formerly described, even to each and all the members of it. For as natural power belongs to all natural men alike, so spiritual power (which is the true church-power) to all spiritual men alike. Christ in a believer is the root of true church-power; and because Christ dwells in all believers alike, through unity of faith, therefore all believers partake alike of spiritual and supernatural power; and no one partakes of this power more than another, any more than he partakes of Christ more than another; but Christ in them all is the self-same power of God to do all things that are to be done in the kingdom of God.

But what are these keys about which there hath been so great ado in the Church? I answer, they are not any outward ecclesiastical power whatever, that men have devised to serve their own turns withal. But to pass by the many false conceits, wherewith many former and present writers have and do still trouble the Church. John doth tell us plainly (John 20:22) what Matthew means by the keys of the Church. Christ (saith he) appearing to his disciples after his resurrection, breathing on them, said Receive the Holy Spirit (here are the keys of the kingdom of Heaven), and then adds, Whose sins ye remit, they are remitted, and whose sins ye retain, they are retained. That is, when ye have received the Spirit, then you have received the keys, to bind and to loose, to remit and retain sin, and that not according to your wills, but wholly according to the mind and will and direction of the Spirit.

What is the extent of this true church-power? I answer that this power extends itself full as far as the Church, but no further. For what hath the Church to do with those that are not of the Church? What have we to do (saith Paul) with them that are without? For church-power, which is spiritual, is no more suitable to the world than worldly power, which is flesh, is suitable to the Church. The power of the Church, which is Christ's power, only reaches so far as Christ's kingdom; that is, the people that are born of God and his Spirit. True church-government reaches as far as Christ's and the Spirit's effectual influence and operation, but no further; that is to all that are willing, but to none that are unwilling. As nothing hath more troubled the Church than to govern it and give it laws, after the manner of the world, by secular force and power; so nothing hath more troubled the world than to govern it and give it laws after the manner of the Church, by the aforesaid compulsion. Wherefore as the government of the world is not to be spread over the Church, so neither is the government of the Church to be spread over the world. But as the world and the Church are distinct things in themselves, so they are to be contented with their distinct governments.

What is the outward instrument of this power? I answer, the Word only, which is the only sceptre and sword of Christ's kingdom, to govern his people and subdue his enemies. And so the true Church doth all in itself only by the Gospel; by the Gospel it bindeth and looseth; by the Gospel it remits and retains sin, by the Gospel it quickens to life and wounds to death; by the gospel it receives in, and casts out; by the Gospel it works faith, renews the life, acts, orders, guides and governs all things.

What the true Church can do by virtue of this power.

Now the true Church by the power it hath received from Christ can gather itself together when, and as often as, it pleaseth. The company of believers have power to gather themselves together for their mutual good, instruction, preservation, edification, and for the avoiding or preventing of evil, and that without the consent or authority of any extrinsical and foreign power whatever; else Christ were not a sufficient founder of his Church. And if every free society, not subjected to tyranny, hath power in itself to congregate and come together as conveniency and necessity shall require, as is evident in all civil corporations, and in all fraternities and meetings of love; much more hath the Church of Christ, which is the freest society in the world, power to meet together into a communion of saints, though it be without and against the consent and authority of the powers of the world.

As the church of the faithful hath power from Christ to meet together, so also to appoint its own outward orders. And these things each church or communion of saints may order by itself, according to the wisdom of the Spirit, so it observe these rules. That they do all things in love, seeing all laws without love are tyranny; and so whatsoever is not from, and for, love, is not to be appointed; and if it be, it is again to be abolished; seeing no text of the scripture itself, if it build not up love is rightly interpreted. They are to do all things for peace. They must appoint nothing as of necessity; for there is no more pestilent doctrine in the Church than to make those things necessary which are not necessary. For thus the liberty of faith is extinguished, and the consciences of men are ensnared. They may persuade their orders (if they see cause) by the spirit of love and meekness, but must not enforce them upon pain of secular

punishment or church-censure, as those use to do that make themselves lords and tyrants in the Church. For these outward things the Church can order only for the willing, but not for the unwilling.

Now one thing more I shall add touching the Church's power to appoint its own orders: That the true Church hath power to appoint these outward orders, not for itself only, but also for its officers (which also are part of itself), and it is not to suffer its officers to frame or impose such on it. For the Church is not the officer's but the officers are the Church's. The true Church hath power to choose its officers, and if there be cause, to reform them or depose them.

More particularly in this matter we shall inquire after these three things: (1) What officers are to be chosen? (2) Out of whom they are to be chosen? (3) By whom they are to be chosen?

For the first, Paul teaches us, they must be faithful men, apt, and able to teach others. For as among natural men in the world, they that have most natural power and abilities, are fittest to be the officers; so among spiritual men in the Church, they are fittest to be the officers, that have most spiritual power, that is, such in whom Christ and the Spirit are most manifest; and this the faithful of all sort are judges. Wherefore no natural parts and abilities, nor no human learning and degrees in the schools or universities, nor no ecclesiastical ordination or orders, are to be reckoned sufficient to make any man a minister, but only the teaching of God, and gifts received of Christ, by the Spirit, for the work of the ministry, which the faithful are able to discern and judge of.

Out of whom these officers are to be chosen? That is out of the flock of Christ, and nowhere else. By whom are they to be chosen? That is by the congregation or community of believers. For if every free society hath power to choose its own officers, much more hath the true Church this power, being (as is said) the freest society under heaven. And so the true Church is not to have officers thrust over them by others, but is to choose them itself.

The true Church hath power to call its councils. Now I said, the Church, if it need a council, may call one; because the Church of believers now seldom needs a council, seeing all things are so clear in the word of God, with which the faithful are so well acquainted. For it is not dead laws and orders, written by men will do the true Church any good; but the living Law of God, written in their hearts by the Spirit, as God hath promised to do, saying, I will write my Law in their hearts, and put it in their inward parts. For as the law of sin hath been written in our natures, to corrupt us, so the law of the Spirit of Life must be written also in our natures, to reform us.

The Church hath power to judge of all doctrines, and that both of its officers and councils. The clergy and ecclesiastical men have been wont to challenge to themselves the knowledge and judgment of doctrines, and have excluded ordinary Christians from it; whereas in truth, the judgment of doctrine belongeth to the people, and not to the ministers. The Apostle commands them, to try the spirits, whether they be of God, and hath said, Let one or two speak, and the rest judge (I Cor. 14:29). By which, with many other scriptures, it is evident that the ministers are not to judge of doctrine for the people, but the people are to judge of the doctrine of the ministers, and according as they find it to be of God, or not of God, to receive it, or reject it. For every one is to be saved by his own faith, and not by another man's. And Paul gives this liberty to Christians...yea, we have it from Christ himself whether Paul had allowed it or not: Try the very Apostles themselves and the very angels of heaven, whether they bring the right word or no.

Among the things which are to be done to procure and preserve the peace of the Church these things that follow have not the least place: The true Church is to preserve itself distinct from the world, and is neither to mingle itself with the world, nor to suffer the world to mingle itself with it. For if the Church and the world be mingled together in one society, the same common laws will no more agree to them who are of such different natures, principles and ends, than the same common laws will agree to light and darkness, life and death, sin and righteousness, flesh and Spirit. Wherefore it is not the way of peace to mingle the Church and the world, but to separate them, and to keep them distinct; that those that are of one nature and spirit may be of one communion among themselves. And this way of peace God himself teacheth us by Paul (2 Cor. 6:17) saying, Come out from among them, my people, and be ye separate. For to separate the Church from the world, in its communion of saints, is the only way to preserve peace in both; seeing the Church will best agree with itself and the world with itself.

The Church being thus distinct from the world is to be contented with its own power for its own affairs, and is not to introduce or entertain any power in it that is not of it. Wherefore the true Church being such a kingdom as is not of this world, stands in need of no worldly power, and being a spiritual and heavenly kingdom, is only to have and exercise a spiritual and heavenly power, seeing this power alone, and by itself, is able to accomplish the whole good pleasure of God in the Church, and to work all the works in it that God hath to do.

The third rule is, not to bring or force men into the Church against their wills.

The fourth rule is, to make void the distinction of clergy and laity among Christians. For the clergy or ecclesiastical men have all along, under the reign of Antichrist, distinguished themselves from other Christians, who they call the laity, and separated themselves from the lay in all things, and called themselves by the name of the Church, and reckoned other Christians but as common and unclean in respect of themselves; whereas in the true Church of Christ there are no distinctions, nor difference of persons; no clergy or laity; but they are all, as Peter describes them (I Pet. 2:9), a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, to show forth the virtues of him that called them out of darkness into his marvelous light. And so all Christians, through the baptism of the Spirit, are made priests alike unto God; and every one hath right and power alike to speak the Word; and so there is among them no clergy or laity, but the ministers are such who are chosen by Christians from among themselves, to speak the Word to all in the name and right of all; and they have no right nor authority at all to this office but by the consent of the Church. And so presbyters and bishops, or (which is all one) elders and overseers in the Church, differ nothing from other Christians, but only in the office of the Word which is committed to them by the Church; as an alderman or common-council man in the city differs nothing from the rest of the citizens, but only in their office, which they have not of themselves neither, but by the city's choice; or as the Speaker in the House of Commons differs nothing from the rest of the Commons, but only in his office which he hath also by the choice of the House. And thus, and no otherwise, doth a minister differ from other Christians.

The fifth rule is, to keep equality between Christians. For though according to our first nativity, whereby we are born of men, there is great inequality, some being born high, some low, some honorable, some mean, some kings, some subjects etc; yet according to our new or second birth, whereby we are born of God, there is exact equality, for there are none better or worse, higher or lower, but all have the same faith, hope, love, the same God, Christ, Spirit, the same divine nature, the same precious promises, the same incorruptible crown and inheritance of saints in light.

The sixth rule is, to keep the officers of the Church in subordination to the whole Church or community; and not to suffer them to get head over it; seeing the very nature of ruling the Church is not dominion, but service.

Now if any say, by what means may the Church be able to keep out error? I answer, it may certainly keep out error by these means:

Let the Church suffer none to teach among them, that are not themselves taught of God; though they have never so great natural parts, and never so much human learning.

Let the faithful examine everything taught by the word of God, and not receive doctrines upon trust from their teachers.

And though, through God's especial goodness, the doctrine of the Gospel be again revived among us at this present time, yet ought we not to sit down content with the present state of things, but to search and see if our present doctrine do not yet err from the primitive purity and brightness of the Gospel, and that in many considerable points, and whether some or many corruptions do not yet remain among us, to be purged out by the light and truth of the Apostles' doctrine. Wherefore to conclude this thing, let us know that the Church cannot possibly keep out error longer than it precisely keeps itself to the bare and naked word of God, and tries all doctrines of their teachers by it.

The Church, that it may be able to keep out errors, must desire of God, the Spirit which he hath promised; that this Spirit of Truth may lead them into the true and spiritual knowledge of the Word, and understanding of the mind of Christ. For no man can make any right judgment of the Word he hears or reads, without the teaching of the Spirit. But believers must know that the gift of the Spirit only, without all human learning is sufficient to teach us perfectly which is truth and which error, and to make us able to judge of all doctrines of men and angels; and that all human learning in the world, without the Spirit, is not able to do this. And so a poor, plain countryman, by the Spirit which he hath received, is better able to judge of truth and error, touching the things of God, than the greatest philosopher, scholar, or doctor in the world, that is destitute of it.

Another notable means to keep error out of the Church, is to restore in it that most ancient Gospel ordinance of prophesying, which howmuchsoever it hath been out of use during the reign of Antichrist, yet is no other than the very commandment of the Lord as Paul witnesseth (I Cor. 14:31). When one man only speaks and the doctrine he preaches proves to be erroneous, error is not only preached but also goes away uncontrolled, and no way is left for the restraining of error proportionable to that of propagating it, nobody being permitted to speak to keep the people from the poison of it. But now when the right or power of prophesying is allowed to the whole Church, the minister can no sooner vent any error, but there is some believer or other, whose heart God shall move, ready to convince it by the word of God. And so error is as soon discovered and detected as it is published; and as soon destroyed as detected; the word of God, though from a private Christian, being more mighty to destroy error than error can be to uphold itself against the Word.

If they that publish doctrine should also be judges of it, and the people be bound to subscribe to their judgment, error would not only, by this means, have opportunity to be vented, but would also be established and confirmed without the least contradiction. But now God hath appointed it otherwise in the Church; for whoever speaks there, the hearers are to judge of the truth of the doctrine, and accordingly are either to receive it or reject it, having power to do either as they see occasion; and so error cannot prevail in that church where the faithful have liberty to judge of all doctrines, and do exercise that liberty.

But here now a great question will be moved...Whether the magistrate hath not power to suppress error by the sword, and whether the Church may not use this remedy against error as well as all those before named?

I answer that many men of great eminency have attributed such a power to the magistrate, thinking that religion would soon be lost if he should not uphold it. And to make this good they have produced many scriptures of the Old Testament, which seem to arm the magistrate against the authors and spreaders of errors. But I desire the wise-hearted to consider whether as clear scriptures may not be produced out of the Old Testament to prove that temporal power in the world belongs to ecclesiastical men, as that spiritual power in the Church belongs to worldly magistrates.

The putting power into the magistrate's hands to suppress error by the sword, give him full opportunity to destroy and slay the true children of God, if at any time he shall mistake and judge them heretics. For what power men ignorantly allow a godly magistrate against true heretics, the same power will all magistrates arrogate to themselves as their just due, against all that differ from themselves in matters of religion though their judgment be never so true. And thus the magistrate, who is a most fallible judge in these things, instead of tares may pluck up the wheat, and kill the faithful instead of the heretic, at his own pleasure, till he have destroyed all the faithful in the land.

If any shall yet demand whether the magistrate can do nothing at all towards the suppression of errors; I answer, this he may do: He may and ought, and if he be a godly man he will, countenance and encourage faithful ministers (that are called of God, and anointed by the Spirit) to this work of the Gospel; and having done this, he need not trouble himself any further, for the Word preached will do all the rest. and let it not be doubted but if the truth of God do enter the lists against error, it will be infinitely able to prevail of itself alone without calling in any power, or borrowing any weapons, from the world.

Now if they be very truths wherein Christians differ, yet such wherein they may err without danger of salvation, then these rules are of use. (1) To hear them speak their judgments with freedom, and not to condemn them unheard; for thus mayst thou soon condemn the innocent and make thyself guilty. (2) To understand fully what thy adversary means before thou contend against him; lest, if thou want this wisdom and patience, thou oppose not so much his judgment as to thy own conceit. If thou canst but have

patience to hear him relate his own mind, perhaps in the end thou shalt understand it differs little from thy own in substance. (3) Reproach not anything thy adversary speaks with this, that thou never heardst it before. For this may not so much discover his error as thy ignorance; and that which seems to thee a new error, if it be truly examined by the Word, may prove an old truth. And if thou wilt needs condemn whatever savours of novelty, how shall the truths we yet know not be brought in, or the errors that yet remain with us be purged out? (4) Be not over-confident in what thou holdest upon thy own judgment, or other men's strengthened from multitude, custom and antiquity. For men have erred most grossly, even in those things wherein they have thought themselves most certain. And therefore, prove all things, that thou mayest hold fast that which is good. (5) In these differences make the Word the judge, and not men. The word of God is the sole and perfect judge in all the things of God. Now though all have the same outward Word, yet all are not of one mind except they attain to one spirit; for Paul saith (I Cor. 2) that only the Spirit of God knows the things of God. Neither doth man's sense or reason understand the things of the Spirit, but the spiritual man judgeth all things. And hence it follows that we can only judge aright of divine truths by the Word, and we can only judge aright of the Word if we have the Spirit to be the interpreter of it to us.

Now in case the doctrine wherein we differ be such as is absolutely necessary to salvation, and without believing which men can have no interest in Christ; yet even in this case hear them speak, and be rather confident that the truth of God will prevail over their error than fearful that their error will prevail against truth. And so strive not for secular power to shut up men's mouths and to restrain men's writings, though they speak and print things that seem never so contrary to the truth of God and doctrine of the Gospel. For if men vent errors publicly, if there be as public liberty to preach the truth I doubt not the success of the truth against it at any time with all that belongs to God. And it is the only Gospel way, to conquer error by the truth, and all human, yea and devilish doctrines, by the Gospel, which is the ministration of the Spirit and therefore so mighty that all false teachers and false doctrines must need fall down before it; seeing, stronger is that Spirit that is in it, than that spirit that is in the world, which is its own spirit and the devil's.

Now if upon hearing and debating things by the Word, it shall clearly appear that our adversaries hold such things which are so false and erroneous that they cannot be reckoned believers and members of Christ, nor retain those doctrines without unavoidable damnation, then in this case the true Church hath authority from the Word to do these things: To condemn the doctrine; to excommunicate their persons.

Now these things have I spoken and propounded to the faithful and churches of Christ wherever the Providence of God shall cast this book, which may travel farther on this errand than weak flesh can do, and I so propound them all as being most ready myself to hear from any what they can propound in more light and evidence of the Word.

- C. M.