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THE CHURCH
CHRIST'S BODY AND FULNESS :

A SERMON

PREACHED BEFORE THE FREE CHURCH SYNOD
OF ABERDEEN,

AND PUBLISHED AT ITS REQUEST

BY

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THE CHURCH

WRESTLE WITH THE DEVIL

A SERMON

PREACHED AT THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY'S, ABERDEEN,
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S E R M O N.

“And gave Him to be the head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.”—*Eph. i. 22, 23.*

It is surely not without significance that the Apostle, after stating that God “hath set Christ far above all principality and power, and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come, and hath put all things under His feet,” immediately adds, “and gave Him to be the head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.”

The exaltation of Christ to the sovereignty of the universe is something very glorious and full of consolation to believers. But if this were all that could be said, that Christ is endowed with universal sovereignty, then should He be sovereign of the Church, just as He is sovereign of the universe. The Church should be put under His feet, as “all things” are put under His feet.

But it is not so. The Church is not included in the “all things.” She is distinctly excepted; and she is not put under His feet. But Him, gloriously exalted, and gifted with universal sovereignty, all things being put under His feet, she has for her head. Let the language be marked. God exalted Him above all, and put all things under His feet; and Him, thus exalted and endowed with universal sovereignty, God gave to be head over all things to the Church. The Church has received from God the gift of a head, and that head none else than Christ, in all the glory of His exaltation and universal sovereignty; so that what-

ever glory, whatever power, whatever resources pertain to this universal sovereignty, might be turned to account by Him for the Church's good.

God "put all things under His feet;" gave Him universal sovereignty. Of the universe He is king or sovereign. But of the Church alone, is He, in the word of God, said to be the head—"the head over all things." Clearly His headship over the Church is not the same as His sovereignty over all things. Or He is head of the Church in a sense in which He cannot be said to be head of aught else. The reason is that the relation between Him and the Church is special and gracious. There is nothing like it in his relation to the "all things." For the Church is "His body," and she is also "His fulness."

Thus glorious is the head of the Church, and thus glorious the Church in her relation to such a head—"His body, His fulness, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all."

I.—The Church is the body of Christ. He and the Church together form one mystical body. We here perceive what the Church is—who the persons are that constitute the Church.

A body consists of many members, with the seat of vital power in the head. From the head the vital power is distributed through all the members. Or, one spirit or soul dwells in it, and is life to every member of it. So also there is a body with many members, having Christ for its head, the head of vital power. They are all in an intimate, a vital connection, with Christ. One Spirit, the Spirit of Him who is the head, dwells in that body, and is life to every member of it. This is the unity of the body of Christ. "For by one spirit we are all baptized into one body."*

Who, then, are the persons who are in this vital connexion with Christ, who have His Spirit dwelling in them, who have one life with Him? They are true believers, and none else; so that the Church consists of all who are in vital union with Christ, or who have the Spirit of Christ dwelling in them—in a word, of all true believers.

* 1 Cor. xii. 13.

This is plain from the way in which the Church is described. See 1 Cor. i. 2 ; 2 Cor. i. 11 ; Eph. i. 1 ; Phil. i. 1 ; Col. i. 2, &c. These are descriptions of true believers, and none else. Without faith, without union with Christ, without the possession of the Holy Spirit, no man can be a member of the Church. But who ever really believes, is in union with Christ, or has the Spirit dwelling in him, is a member of the body of Christ, and, therefore, of the Church.

Certainly, if "the body of Christ" be a true definition of the Church, all that is essential to constitute membership of the Church is the possession of the Spirit of Christ ; for as all that partakes of the vital influence which has its seat in my head is part of my body, so whoever partakes of vital influence from Christ, or has Christ's Spirit in him, is in very deed part of the body of Christ. So far as this definition of the Church is concerned, the Church might have had no external organization at all. She might have consisted of the whole multitude of believers, inwardly and spiritually one, by the indwelling of the same Spirit of Christ. Without such organization she would have been in very deed the body of Christ.

But there *is* such an organization given to her by her Head. She has ordinances of worship, discipline, government, and by means of these she takes a visible form. But whenever we have this visible form or society, men attach themselves to it, professing to have the essential requisite—faith—seeming to have it, and thinking, perhaps, that they have it, who, nevertheless, have it not. They are taken into the visible society on a credible profession of their faith. And except ability had been given to Church office-bearers infallibly to know the hearts of men, and to admit to the Church on a judgment of their state before God, we do not see how it could be otherwise. Men are added to the visible society who profess to have faith, and seem to have it, but who have it not, who, therefore, are destitute of the Spirit of Christ. But are they members of the Church ? Of the visible form or visible Church, but, certainly, not of the true Church—that Church which is the body of Christ ; for how can they be members of His body

when they are destitute of His Spirit? Partaking of the benefits of the visible organization granted to the body of Christ, regarded and treated with all affection by that body, so long as they walk consistently, their state God-ward remains the same. They are not members of the body of Christ, and are not, therefore, members of the Church. They are certain accretions hanging by the skirts of it, but not partaking at all of its life, and outside real fellowship with it; within the visible Church, but unsanctified, unsaved; close by the region of life, and touching the living, yet themselves dead.

The possession of the Spirit of Christ is the all essential thing to constitute membership of the Church. No doubt whoever has that ought to join himself to the visible organized society. But it is not his connexion with the visible organization that constitutes him a member of the Church. And were all visible organization put down, none daring, as in the days of Ahab, to assemble together for the worship of God, yet, wherever there were men having the Spirit of Christ dwelling in them, there there would be members of Christ's Church, which is His body. The Church is not dependent for her existence on any outward organization. According to the well-known words of Irenæus, "Where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church."

This view of the Church was maintained by the Reformers, and it was necessary in order to meet the deadly teaching of the Church of Rome regarding the Church. It is necessary in our own day in order to meet not only the Church of Rome, but those also in another Church, professedly Protestant, whose teaching is substantially that of the Church of Rome. Papists and Ritualists here run almost quite parallel. We say "all the members of the Church possess the Spirit." They say, "Yes! all the members of the Church possess the Spirit." But here is the difference—here is the dangerous error. We mean that all the members of the Church which is the body of Christ possess the Spirit. *They* mean all the members of the visible organized society—the visible Church. We mean that a man receives direct from Christ the Holy Spirit, and thereby is

made a member of the body of Christ, and so of His Church. *They* mean that a man, by becoming a member of the visible Church—their own particular form of the visible Church—is put in possession of the Holy Spirit. We mean that a man must first, by simple faith, be in union with Christ, and that he is thereby made a member of the Church, which is Christ's body. *They* mean that a man must first become a member of the visible Church—the Church with pastors in regular apostolic succession—and that thereby he comes into saving connexion with Christ. It is destructive error. It introduces the Church between a sinner and Christ. It makes the Church the highway to Christ. It puts an earthly priest between a sinner and the great High Priest, Christ; and tells the sinner that he cannot transact directly with Christ—that he can reach Christ only through an earthly priest and connexion with the visible Church.

And although the priestly theory may have no footing in our Church, yet we cannot but be sensible that there is a strong tendency in men to think that there is some secret virtue in mere connexion with the visible Church, to sink the difference between the visible and the invisible Church, to imagine that the invisible Church is something so impalpable that they can take no account of it—can scarce even be expected to know whether even themselves belong to it, and thus to rest satisfied with membership only in the visible Church. This, too, is dangerous error. Let us hold fast and hold forth the truth taught in the text, that all saving connexion with Christ is by faith alone; that by faith, uniting us to Christ, we have His Spirit dwelling in us; and that thus, and by nothing less, we become members of His Church, which is His body.

II.—The Church is the fulness of Christ, “The fulness of Him that filleth all in all.” Rather, “That filleth all with all, that filleth all things with all that with which they are filled.” “To fill all things” is ascribed only to God. The true divinity of the Church's head is here signified, and this besides, viz., that the fulness of the Church is nothing

less than the fulness of God. This glorious divine head, who filleth all with all, fills also his body, the Church; fills her with His Presence, with the energy of His power, with light and life, with gifts, graces, blessings. Whatever light, life, mercy, grace, is enjoyed by the Church; whatever excellence, whatever beauty or worth is to be found in her; is something which has been supplied to her out of the allfulness of Christ. So that the Church which is His body, is also His fulness, His embodied fulness, His communicated fulness. And though He filleth all with all, continually throughout the universe, putting forth the strength of His might to uphold all things, and pouring forth a wealth of goodness, and scattering abroad innumerable beauties, and meeting us ever and anon with profound mysteries, there is nought in all this to be compared with the wisdom, power, goodness, grace, love, holy mysteries, and manifold wonders, which He exhibits in the Church.

Now all this fulness was originally in God. It was first communicated by God to Christ, as the head of the Church. It was the communications from it by Christ, the head, that ever made the Church what she was or is. And in all time and eternity too, there will be no beauty or excellence in the Church, no light, life, holiness, love, joy, experienced by any one of her members, but such as shall be communicated from Christ, the head. It is this fulness, communicated to Him by the Father, and dwelling in Him in infinite measure, as the head, that he communicates to the Church, and as it were, embodies in her. Let us glance at this fulness of Christ in the Church.

1. *There is a fulness of divine wisdom and grace in the constitution of the Church.* All order, rule, government, is of God. "The powers that be are ordained of God." Men may associate together for carrying on trade, for making a railway, for banking purposes, &c. All such associations are voluntary. No one thinks of seeking Scripture warrant for them. Whoever chooses may join them, and whoever chooses may refuse. There is no Scripture obligation to do the one or the other.

But it is different with the Church. She is not a

voluntary association, but a society formed by Christ Himself. He has given her ordinances of worship, discipline, and government. He has associated her members for certain purposes. They are associated by a divine warrant. They are a divinely constituted society. When they meet for worship, discipline, government, they meet by a divine warrant. Neither civil court, nor king, nor Parliament has any right to prevent them. In this the Church differs from every other society on earth. A people may choose for themselves whatever form of civil government they please, and when they please they may change it; they do not think of appealing to Scripture to determine whether their government ought to be regal or republican. But again in the Church there is, in this respect, a peculiar fulness of Christ's gifts. For He has signified the kind of rulers who are to rule in the Church, the kind of government set up in it. And His will is law. Who shall presume to alter this government? What is more blessed, Christ Himself still rules the Church. It is by the will of the head that all the members are moved, controlled, ruled. Church office-bearers are set up, not to carry out, in the management of the Church their own will, but the will of Christ. Prayerfully and conscientiously must they seek to arrive at the knowledge of His mind or will; and when they think they have, in this way, come to the knowledge of it, they are bound to carry it out in the discipline or government of the Church. No civil power has any right to prevent them. As the kings of Israel had to rule Israel only according to God's will, and for God, who was the real king of Israel, so Church rulers have to rule the Church, only according to the mind of Christ and for Christ, who is really the king and head of the Church.

This view of the Church meets with strong opposition. Many refuse to regard the Church as anything higher than a voluntary association. She is a mere human institution, on the same footing as a banking or insurance company. If this is the case, all her distinctive rights and privileges fall at once to the ground. She is not distinct from the State, and she must be as open to interference and subjec-

tion by the civil courts, as any society or corporation in the land. To this view, legislators of all shades of opinion, and our civil judges strongly incline. There was indeed an interference with the Church's liberty, grounded on the fact that the Church, being by law established, could not prevent the interference of the civil courts; but there was subsequently an interference grounded not on the State connexion of the Church, but on the *want* of it. The Church was held to have no special divine gift of a government, and jurisdiction exclusively her own; but to be a voluntary association or corporation, subject, like every such association or corporation, to the law of the land. The tendency in the present day is all in the direction of reducing the Church to this. In one of His parables, Christ compares the Church to a widow—a lone and desolate widow,* suffering because a judge would not do her justice. It is easy to conceive what trials may yet await the Church, should the unscriptural view to which we are referring, be attempted to be carried out by our rulers and judges, with anything like a high hand.

It is the high prerogative of the Church to receive from her Divine Head an exclusive jurisdiction in spiritual matters. By direct gift from her Head she has the right to administer her spiritual affairs according to what she believes to be the mind of her Head; and she must claim the right, and exercise it too, in the name of her Head. To no earthly king or court must she be beholden for this. She enjoys it as her birthright, and she must keep it and use it in its entirety, let kings and judges of the earth say what they list.

Was it not by truth such as this that Scotland was purged from Popery and Prelacy, from the supremacy of the Pope, and the supremacy also of the king over the Church? Our Reformers firmly held and wielded with effect the truth that the Church is a divinely constituted society, having Christ for her head; that Christ rules her; that her office-bearers can have no lordship over her, and are invested with no priestly powers; and that according to His

* Luke xviii. 12.

word alone all her affairs are to be regulated. It would be difficult to over-estimate the service which they rendered to the Church and the country. Worthy to be held in perpetual remembrance are these men of the first and second Reformations. Not narrow-minded—not bigots, as some in these days persist in affirming—but large-minded, large-hearted men, who wrought out both the civil and religious liberty of their country. Where would have been either the civil or religious liberty, without those views of the Church and her relation to Christ, as her head, to which we are referring? When John Knox said to Lethington, “Tak’ from us the liberty of assemblies, and tak’ from us the evangel,” he expressed the truth that the right to meet for discipline and government the Church held from Christ, her Head, as much as her right to preach the gospel; so that, were they to allow the right of the Queen to prevent them meeting in assemblies (which was what the Court party wanted), they would be giving up the headship of Christ. With that they would have been giving up the entire liberty of the Church. For if the Queen could take a part of what Christ had given them, what could hinder her from taking the whole? There was no different or higher authority to be subverted in taking away the liberty to preach the gospel, than would have been already subverted in taking away the liberty to meet in assemblies. It was because the same truth was firmly established in the minds of the people, that on wild moors and in lonely glens, with sentinels on the watch, they met, at the risk of their lives, for the worship of God. “They wandered in deserts and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.” They were imprisoned: they were tortured: they were banished. Some were sold for slaves; some ended their days on the scaffold; many were hunted and shot down and watered the earth with their blood. But their testimony was clear and uniform. It was for the freedom of the Church that they suffered. It was that the Church might not be subjected to the civil power.

It was the same truth that was maintained in our Ten Years’ Conflict. How the civil courts invaded the province

of the Church is well known, and we must forbear entering on it here. But what did it come to? Referring to some of the decisions of the Court of Session, one of the Judges at the time says, "The practical result of all this is, that *as a separate and independent power*, the Church is *altogether superseded*. It is difficult to fancy any act which it can do, or can refrain from doing, without being liable to the review of the Court of Session; so that the great problem has been solved of having a perfectly powerless Church."* Again, referring to the Culsalmond case, "It is vain to attempt to disguise that the principle of this judgment does *expressly and directly* subject the Church, *in every sentence it can pronounce*, to the review of the civil court."† Again, in the Stewarton case, "The principle is that wherever the Church commits what the Court of Session thinks an error in law, or at least an abuse, the Court has jurisdiction to correct that error or abuse; in other words, the Church has no independent jurisdiction whatever."‡

Now the Legislature, by rejecting the Church's Claim of Rights, affirmed and adopted the principles on which these judgments were given. And the Established Church *consented* to be an Established Church on these terms—with the law as interpreted by the Law Courts, and affirmed by the Legislature. *No subsequent Legislation has altered this position*. We have read the following utterance of one who is a leader in the Established Church, viz.:—"That they now enjoyed an independence greater than was ever enjoyed by any ecclesiastical body, Established or Non-Established, most certainly greater than could be enjoyed in a Non-Established Church." This is astounding. For, whence came this surplus of independence in the Established Church? Not from Christ, the Head, because it is affirmed, it is not possible for any Non-Established Church to possess it. Not from Christ, but from State-Establishment. Whatever it is, it flows from the civil power, not the Church's Head. And so the Church has not received from Christ the gift of complete independence! She must in

* Lord Cockburn's Journal, vol. 1, p. 289. † *Id.* p. 314. ‡ *Id.* p. 348.

every case be indebted for it to the State! Is then the Church the fulness of Christ?

It is to no purpose to tell us that the Established Church enjoys as much freedom as we do. She *consented* to be Established on the terms before explained—to be bound by Acts of Parliament interpreted on principles subversive of the Church's independence. It is as little to the purpose to tell us that the civil courts claim power over us, even power which they do not in the meantime claim over the Established Church. The question is not as to what the civil power may *claim* of us, but what we *consent* to. No doubt it may claim power over us as having no exclusive spiritual jurisdiction. But we did not *consent* to the claim, and by the grace of God we never will.

2. *There is a fulness of His gracious presence.* "I will set My tabernacle among you, and I will walk among you,"* the Lord said to Israel. In the tabernacle He dwelt in grace in the midst of His people. It was full of His gracious presence, and all Israel experienced the benefit of it. They dwelt in His gracious presence, or in His house, which was filled with His gracious presence. True it was but partially they did so, representatively, by the priests their representatives. The substance, truth, or reality of this, the fulness of it, was among the better things provided for us under the gospel. The Christian Church is the fulness of His gracious presence.

He dwells with His Church. He dwells *in* each individual member of it. Not with His grace veiled, as under the old dispensation, for the veil is removed. The glory of God's mercy, grace, and love, shining resplendently in the face of Christ, does not drive us back with fear as the glory shining in Moses' face did the children of Israel. We draw nigh, we admire, we love, we praise, we are ourselves transformed into the blessed likeness. "We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."†

* Lev. xxvi. 11, 12. † 2 Cor. iii. 18.

The Church which is the body of Christ and His followers
is not a mere organization of men and women, but a living
entity, a body of living members, which is to be
built up by the work of the Holy Spirit, and which
is to be the instrument of His power in the world.

It is not a mere organization of men and women, but a living
entity, a body of living members, which is to be
built up by the work of the Holy Spirit, and which
is to be the instrument of His power in the world.

Finally, as a Church, we are called to witness the power
of the Holy Spirit in the lives of men and women, and
to be the instrument of His power in the world.

THE CHURCH



