

tutional free agency, his voluntary disobedience and consequent demerit, and the moral and physical evils thus entailed on his posterity, are facts pertaining to the history of our race, cognizable by observation, distinctly stated in Holy Scripture, and involved in the divine plan and purpose of redemption.

This purpose was announced and that plan partially unfolded to our first fallen parents before their ignominious and judicial expulsion from paradise—progressively developed by succeeding revelations—and at length accomplished by the incarnation of the Son of God—his divine nature giving to his voluntary obedience even unto death, virtue sufficient to compensate for the guilt, avert the ruin, and secure the restoration to purity and peace of all who, from the commencement to the close of time, have trusted, or shall yet trust in Him as their gracious substitute, their almighty Saviour. As He died for their sins, so he rose for their justification, and now sits at the right hand of God, crowned with glory and honour, having all judgment in heaven and on earth, controlling all agencies and all events, and carrying forward,—amidst the heedlessness of men and the wakeful hostility of wicked spirits—the mighty and magnificent design of subduing all nations to His peaceful sway, and of spreading throughout our world the grace and glory of His great salvation.

THE NATURE AND CONSTITUTION OF A CHRISTIAN CHURCH.

(Delivered at the ordination of the Rev. D. Gibb, Russelltown.)

It now devolves on me to lay before you as introductory to the peculiar and appropriate solemnity of this day, a few remarks in reference to the constitution and order of a Christian Church. In doing this, it is essential that at the very outset I should distinctly state, and you should clearly understand, that, on this and on other subjects of a religious kind, we the avowed Ministers and members of the body, usually denominated *Congregationalists*, are accustomed to refer to the Word of God, as the only rule of judgment—the only authorized and conclusive standard of opinion and of practice. We unequivocally assert not only the *right*, but the *bounden duty* of every man to "search the Scriptures," that he may know what is the mind of the Spirit, and that his "faith may not stand in the wisdom of man, but in the power of God." We maintain that, although in the scheme of Revelation—in the economy of Redemption, there be mysteries which no human sagacity can explain, and which are to be received in the exercise of unquestioning and implicit confidence in Him who cannot lie, yet no man who "sires to learn the will of God, and for this purpose reads with attention the sacred page—compares spiritual things with spiritual—and sincerely

and earnestly implores Divine guidance and direction, can long remain in doubt as to what, in matters of religion, is either to be believed or to be done. We hold it to be presumptuous and sinful to claim or to exercise dominion over the consciences of our fellow men. This dominion belongs exclusively to God; it is ours, simply to urge and support His claim to confidence and credit, and pointing to His Word as the test of truth—the sovereign antidote to error—to say with the Saviour, "search the Scriptures," and with the Apostle, "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind."

Looking then to the Book of God, for a solution of the question, what is a Christian Church?—We cannot for a moment hesitate, either as to the character of its essential elements, or as to the principles and design of its peculiar constitution. There is a difference between "The Christian Church," and a "Church of Christ." *The Christian Church*, is the whole community of Christians, mutually connected by their adherence to the same principles, their indulgence of the same hopes, their possession and manifestation of the same distinctive elements of individual character. Their number may be so large, as not to admit of their assemblage in one place—or even in many places;—they may be locally divided—separated by intervening distance;—but this does not affect the oneness of their faith—of their hope—of their spiritual baptism—of their relationship to God, as the Father of all—and to Heaven as the place of universal convocation. In their collective and aggregate capacity, they constitute the "Church of the first-born"—"the Church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." To this Church, all belong, who have "believed on Christ" who "love him in sincerity"—who "obey from the heart the gospel which they have received." However mutually distinguished by subordinate diversities of opinion and practice, and whatever by their varied designations amongst men, they are "all one in Christ." They may dwell in *Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, Thessalonica*. They may be "scattered abroad," "having no certain dwelling place"—still they constitute, in the sight of God, and in the view of eternity, one family. A moral likeness pervades the whole,—all live under the same "well known laws of love and righteousness"—all enjoy the same privileges, and entertain the same gladdening prospects.

A Church of Christ is just a part of this great whole, consisting of as many as can conveniently assemble together, and hold communion with each other in the ordinances and exercises of social religion. The part is distinguished from the whole, only by *degree*. Viewed as a whole, they may be called "the Church of the living God." Viewed separately, they may be designated "the Churches which are in Galatia"—"the seven Churches which are in Asia"—"the Churches" throughout all Judea, and Galilee, and Samaria; and each of these, consisting of true Christians, is a Church of Christ. In such a community, none but such as are *Christians indeed*, can be included. The primitive Churches are addressed as "saints"—as "faithful"—they are described as having "believed through grace"—as having been "born again"—"quicken'd together with Christ"—"alive unto God"—"new creatures in Christ Jesus"—"a peculiar people, zealous of good works." They occupy a relation of contrast and of influence to the rest of mankind. If these are "in darkness," they are "the children of the light and of the day;" if these