

of divine grace, and such great and unavoidable sufferings of professors, &c. And the Apostles knowing those facts, might properly speak to, and of the churches, as if they were societies of truly gracious persons, because there was just ground on such accounts, to think the greater part of them to be so; although no profession or visibility of this was requisite in their members by the constitution of those churches, and the door of admission was as open for others as for such.

But it will appear, this cannot be a satisfactory nor true account of the matter, if we consider the following things.

(1.) The Apostles in the very superscription or direction of their letters to these churches, and in their salutations at the beginning of their Epistles, speak of them as gracious persons. For instance, the Apostle Peter, in the direction of his First Letter to all professing Jewish Christians through many countries, says thus, "To the strangers scattered through Pontus, &c. elect, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit unto obedience, and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ." And in directing his Second Epistle to the same persons, he says thus, "Simon Peter, a servant and an Apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained like precious faith with us." &c. And the Apostle Paul directs his Epistle to the Romans thus, "To them that be at Rome, beloved of God." So he directs his First Epistle to the Corinthians thus, "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus." In what sense he means sanctified, his following words show, verses 4, 7, 8, 9. The same was before observed of words annexed to the Apostle's salutations, in the beginning of several of the Epistles. This shews, that the Apostles extend this character as far as they do the Epistles themselves. Which surely would be very improper, and not agreeable to truth, if the Apostles at the same time knew very well that such a character did not belong to members of churches, as such, and that they were not received into those churches with any regard to such a character, or upon the account of any right they had to be esteemed such manner of persons. In the superscription of letters to societies of men, we are wont to give them that title or denomination which properly belongs to them as members of such a body. Thus, if one should write to the Royal Society in London, or the Royal Academy of Sciences at Paris, it would be proper and natural to give them the title of Learned; for whether every one of the members truly deserve the epithet, or not, yet the title is agreeable to their profession, and what is known to be aimed at, and is professedly insisted on, in the admission of members. But if one should write to the House of Commons, or to the East India Company, and in his superscription give them the title of Learned, this would be very improper and ill-judged; because that character does not belong to their profession as members of that body, and learning is not a qualification looked at or insisted on in their admission of members: Nor would it excuse the impropriety, though the writer might, from his special acquaintance, know it to be fact, that the greater part of them were men of learning. If one man should once happen thus to inscribe a letter to them, it would be something strange; but more strange, if he should do it from time to time, or if it should appear, by various instances, to be a custom so to direct letters to such societies; as it seems to be the manner of the Apostles, in their Epistles to Christian churches, to address them under titles which imply a profession and visibility of true holiness.

(2.) The Apostle John, in his general Epistle, does very plainly manifest, that all whom he wrote to were supposed to have true grace, in as much as he declares this the qualification he has respect to in writing to

them, and lets them know he writes to them for that reason, because they are supposed to be persons of the character of such as have known God, overcome the wicked one, and have had their sins forgiven them. 1 John ii. 12, 13, 14, 21.

(3.) The Apostles, when speaking of such as they write to, viz. visible Christians, as a society, and representing what belongs to such a kind or sort of society as the visible church is, they speak of it as visibly (i. e., in profession and reputation) a society of gracious persons. So the Apostle Peter speaks of them as a spiritual house, an holy and royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people, a chosen or elect generation, called out of darkness into marvellous light. 1 Pet. ii.—The Apostle Paul also speaks of them as the family of God. Eph. ii. 19. And in the next chapter he explains himself to mean that family a part of which is in heaven; i. e., they were by profession and in visibility a part of that heavenly and divine family.

(4.) The Apostle Paul speaks expressly, and from time to time, of the members of the church he wrote to, as all of them in esteem and visibility truly gracious persons. Philip. i. 6, "being confident of this very thing, that he which has begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of the Lord Jesus Christ: Even as it is meet for me to think this of you ALL" (that is, all singly taken, not collectively, according to the distinction before observed). So Gal. iv. 26, "Jerusalem which is above, which is the mother of us ALL" Rom. vi. "As many of us as have been baptized into Christ, have been baptized into his death." Here he speaks of all that have been baptized; and in the continuation of the discourse, explaining what is here said, he speaks of their being "dead to sin; no longer under the law, but under grace; having obeyed the form of doctrine from the heart, being made free from sin, and become the servants of righteousness," &c. Rom. xiv. 7, 8. None of us liveth to himself, and no man "dieth to himself" (taken together with the context); 2 Cor. iii. 18, "We ALL with open face beholding as in a glass," &c.; and Gal. iii. "Ye are ALL the children of God by faith."

(5.) It is evident that even in those churches where the greater part of the members were not true saints, as in those degenerate churches of Sardis and Laodicea, which we may suppose were become very lax in their admissions and discipline; yet they looked upon themselves as truly gracious persons, and had with others the reputation of such.

(6.) If we should suppose, that by reason of the extraordinary state of things in that day, the Apostles had reason to think the greater part of the members of churches to be true Christians, yet unless profession and appearance of true Christianity was their proper qualification and the ground of their admission, and unless it was supposed that all of them esteemed themselves true Christians, it is altogether unaccountable that the Apostles in their Epistles to them never make any express particular distinction between those different sorts of members. If the churches were made up of persons who the Apostles knew looked on themselves in so exceeding different a state, some the children of God, and others the children of the devil, some the high favorites of heaven and heirs of eternal glory, others the children of wrath, being under condemnation to eternal death, and every moment in danger of dropping into hell: I say, if this was the case, why do the Apostles make no distinction in what they say to them or of them, in their manner of addressing them, in the things they set before them, and in the counsels, reproofs and warnings they gave them? Why do the Apostles in their Epistles never apply themselves or direct their speech to the unconverted members of the churches, in particular, in a manner tending to awaken them, and make them sensible of the miserable condition they were in, and press them to seek the converting