

## BOOK II Of Dr. John Gills Body Of Practical Divinity

### Chapter 2

#### OF THE DUTIES OF THE MEMBER OF A CHURCH TO EACH OTHER

A church thus confederated and united by consent and agreement, there are various duties incumbent on its members; which, both for their own comfort, credit, and edification, and for the glory of God, it is highly necessary to observe. As,

*1. First*, and which is a principal one, to love one another; “Owe no man anything, but to love one another,” is an apostolical advice, and good advice; this is a debt which every man owes to another, and should be always paying, especially Christians and members of churches (Rom. 13:8, 12:10).

1. This is the great law of Christ, as King in his church, his royal commandment, which he enjoins on all his subjects, and frequently repeats (John 13:34, 15:12, 17).

2. The example of Christ should influence and engage unto it (John 13:34, 15:12, 1 John 3:16).

3. The relations that members of churches stand in to each other oblige to love; being fellow citizens of the same family, are brethren to each other, and make one fraternity, or “brotherhood,” which they should “love,” (1 Peter 2:17, 3:8) and are members one of another (1 Cor. 12:13, 25-27).

4. Mutual love is an evidence of being the disciples of Christ (John 13:35).

5. It is this which makes communion in a church state delightful and comfortable, as well as honourable; “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” it is as pleasing and refreshing as the fragrant oil poured on Aaron’s head, and as the dew that fell on mount Hermon (Ps. 133:1-3), when, on the contrary, nothing is more uncomfortable and dishonourable, as well as nothing is more pernicious and ruinous to a church state, than want of love (Gal. 5:15).

This love of members one to another ought to be “fervent,” and it should be “unfeigned,” and without dissimulation (1 Peter 4:8, 1:22), and it should be universal, love to all the saints, weaker as well as stronger, poor as well as rich (Eph. 1:15). [80]

*Secondly*, it is incumbent on church members, as much as in them lies, to endeavour to “keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace;” to press to which the apostle uses various arguments in Ephesians 4:3-6.

1. Care should be taken to promote and preserve unity, of affection; so as to be of “one heart, and of one soul, having the same love;” as the apostle advises to (Phil. 2:9). But this falls in much with the first duty, before inculcated.

2. There should be, as much as may be, an unity of mind and judgment in the doctrines of the gospel; being, as the apostle in the above place directs, “of one accord and of one mind;” or as he elsewhere says, that “all speak the same thing;” and that they “be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment,” or otherwise there is danger of schism, divisions, and contentions (1 Cor. 1:10, 11).

3. And which is much the same an “unity of faith;” for there is but one faith (Eph. 4:5, 13), one doctrine of faith, or scheme and system of divine truths to be believed; and church members should “stand fast in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27).

4. There should be a zealous concern for unity of worship, and that nothing be introduced into it contrary to the pattern showed and directed to in the word of God; and that they “serve the Lord with one consent, and with one mind, and with one mouth glorify God,” (Zeph. 3:9; Rom. 15:6) and to prevent discord in affection, judgment, and worship, and to secure peace, all strife should be avoided, and even checked at the beginning of it; the advice of the wise man is good (Prov. 17:14), and equally good is the advice of the apostle, “Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory” (Phil. 2:3). Proud and contentious men, who seek to promote strife and division, are not to be encouraged in Christian communities (1 Cor. 11:16), the peace of a church is to be laboured after by its members, and by all means to be pursued; the comfort of saints in fellowship with each other is a strong argument for peace and unity (Phil. 2:1, 2), and above all, as saints would be desirous of having the price of God with them, they should be concerned to “be of one mind, and live in peace;” and then may they expect, and not otherwise, that “the God of love and peace shall be with them” (2 Cor. 13:11).

*Thirdly*, it is the duty of members of churches to sympathize with each other in all conditions and circumstances they come into (Rom. 12:15), and upon this their membership with one another cannot but have a considerable influence (1 Cor. 12:26), this sympathy should be with respect to things outward and temporal; any calamity, affliction, and distress, of whatsoever kind; they “that are in bonds;” especially for the sake of religion, should be remembered as “bound with them;” as if in the same circumstances,

and should pity and relieve them as much as may be; and “them which suffer adversity” in body, family, or estate, “as being themselves in the body,” and liable to the same adversities (Heb. 12:3), and therefore should visit, comfort, and assist them; so Job’s three friends, when they heard of his afflictions in his person, family, and substance, though they lived at a distance from him, by appointment met together, “to come, to mourn with him, and to comfort him,” (Job 2:11) and much more should members of churches act such a part to one another. Likewise when in inward trouble and distress of soul, through the hidings of God’s face, the temptations of Satan, the weakness of grace, and the strength of corruptions; it becomes fellow members to “comfort the feeble minded, support the weak, and bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ,” which is the law of love and sympathy (1 Thess. 5:14; Gal. 6:2), and the sympathy of God with his people in their afflictions, and also of Christ, who is “touched with the feeling of the infirmities” of his people, should direct to such a temper and carriage (Isa. 63:9; Heb. 4:15).

*Fourthly*, it is the duty of church members to communicate to each other in such circumstances.

1. In outward things, to such as are in want of them (Rom. 12:13; Gal. 6:10), hence in the times of the apostles, the churches had orders to make collections on the first day of the week for the poor saints, that thereby they might be relieved who were in necessitous circumstances (1 Cor. 16:1, 2), brotherly love demands such a conduct in church members to their brethren in distress; for, “how dwelleth the love of God in” such, who, having a portion of worldly things, shut up their bowels of compassion from their brethren in need? (1 John 3:17) besides, to communicate to such persons is well pleasing in the sight of God, and will be taken notice of in the great day of account when forgotten by the saints (Heb. 13:16; Matthew 25:40).

2. It is their duty to communicate in spiritual things, to mutual comfort and edification; to speak often one to another about divine things; to impart spiritual experiences, and to declare to each other what God has done for their souls; to communicate spiritual light and knowledge in the mysteries of grace; and according to the gift one has received, be it more or less, to minister it to one another, and to build up one another in their most holy faith, by Christian conference and praying together; and through the word dwelling richly in them, to teach and admonish one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; and care should be taken that no communication proceeds out of the mouth but what is for edification, and ministers grace to the hearers.

*Fifthly*, it is the duty of church members to watch over one another; that

they do not indulge to sinful lusts and pleasures, and make provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof; and so bring a reproach on the good ways of God, and the doctrines of Christ; and to warn them that are unruly, or err from the rule of the word, and recover them from any evil way they seem to be going into; as also to watch over them, lest they receive any notion contrary to the gospel of Christ; for not only pastors of churches are to watch over them for this purpose, but members of churches are to look “diligently,” or act the part of a bishop or overseer in some respect, [81] “lest any man fail of the grace of God,” or fall from the doctrine of grace, (Heb. 12:15) they should not suffer sin to lie upon a brother; but rebuke and admonish him for it, according to the gospel rule, first alone, and then, if such rebuke succeeds not, to do it with, and before others; and such rebukes and admonitions should be in love, and with much tenderness, as well as faithfulness; for such only are like to be kindly received, and to be successful; such that are fallen, whether into immorality or error, should be endeavoured to be restored by those who are spiritual, in the spirit of meekness (Lev. 19:17; Ps. 141:5; Gal. 6:1).

*Sixthly*, it is incumbent on members of churches to bear with one another; the strong to bear the infirmities of the weak; and to bear one another's burdens, and to forbear with each other, and not bear hard on one another, considering the patience, forbearance, and longsuffering of God to them; and it becomes them to forgive one another, as Christ, and God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven them; and especially when repentance is declared and discovered, then forgiveness should be extended, not only to seven times, but to seventy times seven; for if we forgive not, neither will our heavenly Father forgive our trespasses (Rom. 15:1; Gal. 6:2; Col. 3:12; Matthew 18:21, 22; Mark 11:26).

*Seventhly*, it is the duty of members of churches to pray for one another; as they have all one common Father, who is attentive to their supplications, and is able and willing to help them in their times of need, they are directed to address him in this manner, saying, “Our Father, which art in heaven;” and are thereby instructed to pray for others as for themselves, to whom he stands in the same relation as to themselves, even for all saints, as the apostle intimates, (Eph. 6:18 and especially for such who are in the same church state; and particularly when they are in any distress, inward or outward; and not for ministers of the gospel only; though members should never be forgetful of their own pastors, who are set over them in the Lord, that they may be fitted for their work, be assisted in it, and be made useful to their souls; but for each of the members of the church, that they may have their various wants supplied; that they may grow in grace and spiritual

knowledge; be kept faithful, and preserved blameless, to the coming of Christ; it becomes them in general to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, and in particular for the hill of Zion, to which they belong, that peace may be within its walls, and prosperity in its dwellings.

*Eighthly*, it becomes church members to separate themselves from the men of the world, and not touch persons and things which are defiling; they are in a church state, which is as a “garden inclosed;” they are a separate people, and should dwell alone, and not be reckoned among the nations or the people of a vain and carnal world; they are called out of the world, and therefore should not be unequally yoked with the men of it; with men unrighteous, ignorant, lawless, disobedient, dead, and profane sinners, with whom they can have no profitable communion; and, indeed, from all such in their own societies who walk disorderly they are directed to withdraw themselves.

1. In conversation they are to abstain from sinful men; not that they are to have no commerce nor correspondence with them in civil things, for then, as the apostle says, they “must needs go out of the world;” but that they are not to join with them in their sinful practices, but bear a testimony against them; they are not to walk, as other Gentiles do, in the vanity of their minds; nor to walk with them in the same paths of sin and folly; nor to keep up any intimate and familiar converse with them; knowing, that “evil communications corrupt good manners”.

2. Nor should they keep company with erroneous persons, with men of unsound principles; for such, who cause divisions and offences, contrary to the gospel of Christ, are to be avoided, and their conversation shunned; and such who cavil at, and consent not unto the wholesome words of Christ, and the doctrine according to godliness, are to be withdrawn from; and such who have imbibed heretical notions, repugnant to the sacred Trinity, and to the person of Christ, and the grace of the Spirit, are to be rejected; and such who bring not the doctrine of Christ with them, are not to be bid Godspeed, nor received into the houses of God’s people (Rom. 16:17; 1 Tim. 6:3-5; Titus 3:10; 2 John 1:10, 11).

*Ninthly*, church members should be constant in assembling together for religious worship; it is remarked of the members of the first Christian church, to their honour, that they “continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread and in prayer,” (Acts 2:42) that is, they constantly attended on hearing the doctrines of the apostles, which they gladly received and persevered in; and kept up their communion with them and one another, and were not missing at the Lord’s Supper, and at times of public prayer; though in after times, an evil manner, a bad custom prevailed

among some of those Christian Hebrews; as to “forsake the assembling of themselves together,” which the apostle takes notice of to their dishonour (Heb. 10:25), a custom of bad consequence, both to communities and particular persons; for what one may do, every one may do, and in course public worship cease, and churches break up; and such a practice is very prejudicial and harmful to individuals; it is not known what may be lost by missing an opportunity or an ordinance; and what trouble and distress of soul may follow upon it, as the case of Thomas shows, who was not with the rest of the disciples when Christ first appeared to them; it is dangerous to indulge to an indifference to, and to any degree of neglect of the service of God in his house; the evil may grow, and at last issue in apostasy, as in the stony ground hearers.

*Tenthly*, there should be no respect of persons among members of churches in their assemblies, and when met together on church affairs, with regard to rich or poor, greater or lesser gifts; there should be no overbearing, no browbeating, nor any supercilious airs used; no affectation of superiority one over another, they being on an equal footing, in the same relation to one another, abating the difference of offices (Matthew 20:26, 27) all the strife should be “in honour to prefer one another;” and such who are highest, with respect to spiritual gifts or worldly riches, should “condescend to men of low estates” (Rom. 12:10, 16).

*Eleventhly*, it behooves them to strive together for the faith of the gospel, and earnestly to contend for it; and not part with any of the truths of Christ and doctrines of grace; and should be careful to keep the ordinances as they were delivered, and not suffer any innovation in them, neither as to the matter and substance of them, nor as to the manner in which they are to be observed; and they should walk in them all with great unanimity and constancy, and should stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made them free, and not be entangled with any yoke of bondage, nor suffer any human inventions and unwarranted practices to be imposed upon them.

*Twelfthly*, it becomes them to be examples to each other in a holy walk and conversation, and in an observance of all the duties of religion. Holiness becomes the house of God, and the members in it; their light should shine both in the church and in the world, that others beholding their good works, may imitate them, and glorify God: they that name the name of Christ, and profess to be his, should depart from all iniquity, doctrinal and practical; they should be concerned to walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, and show out of a good conversation their works with meekness of wisdom; they should endeavour to fill up in a becoming manner all stations and relations in life, civil or economical, in the world and family; as of magistrates and

subjects, of husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants; as well as in the church, as pastors, deacons, and private members, and be careful to perform all duties relative to them; that so their fellow members may not be grieved nor stumbled; nor the good ways of God be evil spoken of; nor the name of God, and his doctrine, be blasphemed; nor any occasion given to the adversary to speak reproachfully; and by a strict attention to these several duties of religion, they will show that they behave themselves in the house of God as they ought to do.

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[80] Of this see more in Book 1. ch. 9.

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