

The Nature and End of Excommunication

A Sermon by Jonathan Edwards

1 COR. v. 11. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.

The apostle reproves the church at Corinth for not excommunicating an offending person; and directs them speedily to cast him out from among them; thus delivering him to Satan. He orders them to purge out such scandalous persons, as the Jews were wont to purge leaven out of their houses when they kept the Passover. In the text and two foregoing verses he more particularly explains their duty with respect to such vicious persons, and enjoins it on them not to keep company with such. But then shows the difference they ought to observe in their carriage towards those who were vicious among the heathen, who had never joined with the church, and towards those of the same vicious character who had been their professed brethren; see ver. 9-12. "I wrote unto you, not to company with fornicators. Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters, for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you, not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat."

In the words of the text we may observe,

1. The *duty enjoined*; including the behaviour required, negatively expressed, *not to keep company*; and the manner or degree, *no not to eat*.

1. The *object*; a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner.

We are not to understand merely these particular vices, but also any other gross sins, or visible wickedness. It is evident, that the apostle here, and in the context, intends that we should exclude out of our company all those who are visibly wicked men. For in the foregoing verses he expresses his meaning by this, that we should purge out the old leaven; and, explaining what he means by leaven, he includes all visible wickedness; as in ver. 8.

“Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and *wickedness*, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

Another thing by which the object of this behaviour or dealing is characterized, is, that he be one *that is called a brother*, or one that hath been a professed Christian, and a member of the church.

Doctrine

Those members of the visible Christian church who are become visibly wicked, ought not to be tolerated in the church, but should be excommunicated.

In handling this subject, I shall speak, (1.) Of the nature of excommunication; (2.) Of the subject; and, (3.) Of the ends of it.

I. I shall say something of the *nature* of excommunication. It is a punishment executed in the name and according to the will of Christ, whereby a person who hath heretofore enjoyed the privileges of a member of the visible church of Christ, is cast out of the church and delivered unto Satan. It is a punishment inflicted; it is expressly called a punishment by the apostle, in 2 Cor. ii. 6. Speaking of the excommunicated Corinthian, he says, 2 Cor. ii. 6. “Sufficient to such a man is this punishment.” For though it be not designed by man for the destruction of the person, but for his correction, and so is of the nature of a castigatory punishment, at least so far as it is inflicted by men; yet it is in itself a great and dreadful calamity, and the most severe punishment that Christ hath appointed in the visible church. Although in it the church is to seek only the good of the person and his recovery from sin—there appearing, upon proper trial, no reason to hope for his recovery by gentler means—yet it is at God’s sovereign disposal, whether it shall issue in his humiliation and repentance, or in his dreadful and eternal destruction; as it always doth issue in the one or the other. In the definition of excommunication now given, two things are chiefly worthy of consideration; *viz.* Wherein this punishment *consists*, and by *whom* it is inflicted.

First, I would show wherein this punishment consists; and it is observable that there is in it something *privative*, and something *positive*.

First, there is something privative in excommunication, which consists in being deprived of a benefit heretofore enjoyed. This part of the punishment, in the Jewish church, was called *putting out of the synagogue*, John xvi. 2. The word *synagogue* is of the same signification as the word *church*. So this punishment in the Christian church *is called casting out of the church*. The apostle John, blaming Diotrephes for inflicting this punishment without cause, says, 3 John 10. “He casteth them out of the church.” It is sometimes expressed by the church’s withdrawing from a member, 2 Thess. iii. 6. “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that ye *withdraw* yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly.”

The privative part of excommunication consists in being *cut off* from the enjoyment of the privileges of God’s visible people. The whole world of mankind is divided into these two sorts, those that are God’s visible people; and those that are of the visible kingdom of Satan. Now it is a great privilege to be *within* the visible church of Christ. On the other hand, it is very doleful to be *without* this visible kingdom, to be cut off from its privileges, treated as belonging to the visible kingdom of Satan. For,

1. They are cut off from being the objects of that *charity* of God’s people which is due to Christian brethren. They are not indeed cut off from all the charity of God’s people, for all men ought to be the objects of their love. But I speak of the brotherly charity due to visible saints.—Charity, as the apostle represents it, is the bond by which the several members of the church of Christ are united together: and therefore he calls it the bond of perfectness; Col. iii. 14.

“Put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness.” But when a person is justly excommunicated, it is like a physician’s cutting off a diseased member from the body; and then the bond which before united it to the body is cut or broken.—A scandal is the same as a stumbling-block; and therefore while the scandal remains, it obstructs the charity of others: and if it finally remain after proper endeavours to remove it, then it breaks their charity, and so the offender is cut off from the charitable opinion and esteem of the church. It cannot any longer look upon him as a Christian, and so rejects him; therefore excommunication is called a rejection, Tit. iii. 10. “A man that is a heretic, after the first and second admonition, *reject*.” This implies that the church disapproves the person as a Christian: if cannot any longer charitably look upon him as a saint, or fellow-worshipper of

God, and can do no other than, on the contrary, esteem him an enemy of God; and so doth openly withdraw its charity from him, ceasing to acknowledge him as a fellow-Christian, any more than the heathens.

He is also cut off from that honour which is due to brethren and fellow-Christians. To be a visible Christian is an honourable character; but excommunicated persons forfeit this honour. Christians ought not to pay that honour and respect to them which they pay to others; but should treat them as unworthy of such honour, that they may be ashamed. Christ tells us, they should (Matt. xviii. 17.) “be unto us as heathen men and publicans,” which implies a withdrawing from them that common respect which we pay to others. We ought to treat them so as to let them plainly see that we do not count them worthy of it, to put them to shame.

Much love and complacency is due to those whom we are obliged in charity to receive as saints, because they are visible Christians. But this complacency excommunicated persons forfeit. We should still wish well to them, and seek their good. Excommunication itself is to be performed as an act of benevolence. We should seek their good by it; and it is to be used as a means of their eternal salvation. But complacency and delight in them as visible Christians is to be withdrawn; and on the contrary they are to be the objects of displacency, as visibly and apparently wicked. We are to cast them out as an unclean thing which denies the church of God.—In this sense the Psalmist professes a hatred of those who were the visible enemies of God. Psal. cxxxix. 21, 22. “Do I not hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? And am I not grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred.” Not that he hated them with a hatred of malice or ill-will, but with displacency and abhorrence of their wickedness. In this respect we ought to be the children of our Father who is in heaven, who, though he loves many wicked men with a love of benevolence, yet cannot love them with a love of complacency. Thus excommunicated persons are cut off from the charity of the church.

2. They are cut off also from the *society* which Christians have together as brethren. Thus we are commanded to *withdraw* from such; 2 Thess. iii, 6. To *avoid* them; Rom. xvi. 17. To *have no company* with them; 2 Thess. iii. 14. And to *treat them as heathens and publicans*; Matt. xviii. 17. The people of God are, as much as may be, to withdraw from them as to that

common society which is proper to subsist among Christians.? Not that they should avoid speaking to them on any occasion.

All manner and all degrees of society are not forbidden; but all unnecessary society, or such as is wont to be among those who delight in the company of each other. We should not associate ourselves with them so as to make them our companions. Yea, there ought to be such an avoiding of their company as may show great dislike.

Particularly, we are forbidden such a degree of associating ourselves with them, as there is in making them *our guests* at our tables, or in being *their guests* at their tables; as is manifest in the text, where we are commanded to have no company with them, *no not to eat*. That this respects not eating with them at the Lord's supper, but a common eating, is evident by the words, that the eating here forbidden, is one of the *lowest degrees* of keeping company, which are forbidden. Keep no company with such an one, saith the apostle, *no not to eat*: as much as to say, no not in so low a degree as to eat with him. But eating with him at the Lord's supper, is the very highest degree of visible Christian communion. Who can suppose that the apostle meant this, Take heed and have no company with a man, no not so much as in the highest degree of communion that you can have?

Besides, the apostle mentions this eating as a way of keeping company which, however, they *might* hold with the heathen. He tells them, not to keep company with fornicators; then he informs them, he means not with fornicators of this world, that is, the heathens; but, saith he, "if any man that is called a *brother* be a fornicator, &c. with such an one keep no company, *no not to eat*." This makes it most apparent, that the apostle doth not mean eating at the Lord's table; for so, they might not keep company with the heathens, any more than with an excommunicated person. Here naturally arise two questions.

Quest. I. How far are the church to treat excommunicated persons as they would those who never have been of the visible church? I answer, they are to treat them as heathens, excepting in these two things, in. which there is a difference to be observed.

1. They are to have a greater concern for their welfare still, than if they never had been brethren, and therefore ought to take more pains, by admonitions and otherwise, to reclaim and save them, than they are obliged to take towards those who have been always

heathens. This seems manifest by that of the apostle, 2 Thess. iii. 14, 15. "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. "The consideration that he hath been a brother heretofore, and that we have not finally cast him off from that relation, but that we are still hoping and using means for his recovery, obliges us to concern ourselves more for the good of his soul than for those with whom we never had any such connexion; and so to pray for him, and to take pains by admonishing him.—the very reason of the thing shows the same. For this very ordinance of excommunication is used for this end, that we may thereby obtain the good of the person excommunicated. And surely we should be more concerned for the good of those who have been our brethren, and who are now under the operation of means used by us for their good, than for those with whom we never had any special connexion. Thus, there should be more of the love of benevolence exercised towards persons excommunicated, than towards those whenever were members of the church.—But then, 2. On the other hand, as to what relates to the love of complacency, they ought to be treated with greater displacency and disrespect than the heathen. This is plain by the text and context. For the apostle plainly doth not require of us to avoid the company of the heathen, or the fornicators of the world, but expressly requires us to avoid the company of any brother who shall be guilty of any of the vices pointed out in the text, or any other like them.—This is also plain by the reason of the thing. For those who have once been visible Christians and have apostatized and cast off that visibility, deserve to be treated with more abhorrence than those who have never made any pretensions to Christianity. The sin of such, in apostatizing from their profession, is more aggravated, than the sin of those who never made any profession. They for more dishonour religion, and are much more abhorred of God. Therefore when Christ says, Matt. xviii. 17. "Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican, "it is not meant that we should treat an excommunicated brother as Christians ought to treat heathens and publicans; for they might eat with them, as Christ himself did; and the apostle gives leave to eat with such, 1 Cor. x. 27. and in the context gives leave to keep company with such; yet forbids to eat with an excommunicated person.—Christ's meaning must be, that we should treat an excommunicated person as the Jews were wont to treat the heathens and publicans; and as the disciples had been always taught among the Jews, and brought up, and used to treat them. They would by no means eat with publicans and sinners; they would not eat with the

Gentiles, or with the Samaritans. Therefore Peter durst not eat with the Gentiles when the Jews were present; Gal. ii. 12.

Quest. II. What kindness and respect may and ought to be shown to such persons?—I answer, there are some things by which the members of the church are obliged to show kindness to them; and these things are chiefly, to pray for them, and to admonish them.—And the common duties and offices of humanity ought to be performed towards them; such as relieving them when they are sick, or under any other distress; allowing them those benefits of human society, and that help, which are needful for the support and defence of their lives and property.—The duties of natural and civil relations are still to be performed towards them. Excommunication doth not release children from the obligation of duty to their parents, nor parents from parental affection and care toward their children. Nor are husbands and wives released from the duties proper to their relation.

And so of all other less relations, whether natural, domestic, or civil.

3. They are cut off from the *fellowship* of the Christian church. The true notion of the *visible church* of Christ, is that part of mankind, which, as his people, is united in upholding his appointed worship. And the notion of a *particular* visible church of Christ, is a particular society of worshippers, or of visible saints, united for the social worship of God according to his institutions or ordinances. One great and main privilege then, which the members of such a church enjoy, is fellowship in the worship which God hath appointed in his church. But they that are excommunicated are cut off from this privilege, they have no fellowship, no communion with the people of God in any part of their worship.

He who is the mouth of the worshipping congregation in offering up public prayers, is the mouth only of the worshipping society; but the excommunicated are cast out of that society. The church may and ought to pray *for* such; but they cannot have *fellowship* with such in prayer. The minister, when speaking in prayer, doth not speak in *their* name; he speaks only in the name of the *united society* of visible saints or worshippers. If the people of God were to put up prayers in their name, it would imply a receiving of them into charity, or that they charitably looked upon them as the servants or worshippers of God. But, as was observed before, excommunicated persons are in this respect cast out of the charity of the church, and it looks upon them as wicked men and enemies of God, and treats them as such.

So when a congregation of visible saints join in singing the praises of God, as the Psalmist says, Psal. xxxiv. 3. "Let us extol his name together;" they do it only as joining with those who are, in their charitable estimation, fellow-servants and fellow-worshippers of God. They do it not as joining with heathens; nor do the people of God say to the open enemies of God, remaining such, Psal. xxxiv. 3. "Let us extol his name together;" but they say it to their brethren in God's service. If we ought not to join with excommunicated persons in familiar society, much less ought we to hold fellowship with them in solemn worship, though they may be present.

4. There are privileges of a more *internal* nature, which those who are members of the visible church enjoy, from which excommunicated persons are cut off. They being God's covenant-people, are in the way of covenant-blessings: and therefore have more encouragement to come to God by prayer for any mercy they need. The visible church is the people among whom God hath set his tabernacle, and among whom he is wont to bestow his blessings. But the excommunicated are, in a sense, cast out of God's sight, into a land of banishment, as Cain was, though not debarred from common means Gen. iv. 14, 16. They are not in the way of those smiles of providence, those tokens of God's favour, and that light of God's countenance, like those who are within Nor, as they are cast out from among God's covenant people, have they the divine covenant to plead, as the members of the church have.—Thus far I have considered the *privative* part of the punishment of excommunication.—I now proceed, *Secondly*, to the *positive* part, which is expressed by being delivered to Satan, in verse 5. By which two things seem to be signified:

1. A being delivered over to the *calamities* to which they are subject, who belong to the visible kingdom of the devil. As they who are excommunicated are thrust out from among the visible people of God; so they are to be looked upon, in most respects at least, as being in the miserable, deplorable circumstances in which those are who are under the visible tyranny of the devil, as the heathens are. And in many respects they doubtless suffer the cruel tyranny of the devil, in a manner agreeable to their condition, being cast out into his visible kingdom.

2. It is reasonable to suppose that God is wont to make the devil the *instrument* of those peculiar, severe chastisements which their apostasy deserves. As they deserve more severe chastisement than the heathens, and are delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh;

so we may well suppose, either that God is wont to let Satan loose, sorely to molest them outwardly or inwardly, and by such severe means to destroy the flesh, and to humble them; or that he suffers the devil to take possession of them dreadfully to harden them, and so to destroy them for ever. For although what men are to aim at, is only the destruction of the flesh, yet whether it shall prove the destruction of the flesh, or the eternal and more dreadful destruction of themselves, is at God's sovereign disposal.—So much for the nature of excommunication.

Secondly, I come to show by whom the punishment is to be inflicted.

1. When it is regularly and duly inflicted, it is to be looked upon as done by *Christ himself*. That is imported in the definition, that it is *according to his will*, and to the directions of his word.

And therefore he is to be looked upon as *principal* in it, and we ought to esteem it as really and truly from him, as if he were on earth personally inflicting it.

2. As it is inflicted by men, it is only done *ministerially*. They do not act of themselves in this, any more than in preaching the word. When the word is preached, it is the word of Christ which is spoken, as the preacher speaks in the name of Christ, as his ambassador. So when a church excommunicates a member, the church acts in the name of Christ, and by his authority, not by its own. It is governed by his will, not by its own. Indeed it is only a particular application of the word of Christ.—Therefore it is promised, that when it is duly done, it shall be continued in heaven; *i.e.* Christ will confirm it, by acknowledging it to be his own act; and he will, in his future providence, have regard to what is done thus as done by himself: he will look on the person, and treat him as cast out and delivered to Satan by himself; and if he repent not, will for ever reject him: Matt. xviii. 18. "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven." John xx. 23. "Whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."—I shall now, as was proposed,

II. Endeavour to show who are the proper *subjects* of excommunication. They are those members of the church who are now become visibly wicked; for the very name and nature of the visible church show, that it is a society of visible saints, or visibly holy persons. When any of these visible saints become visibly wicked men, they ought to be cast out of the church. Now, the members of the church become visibly wicked by these two things:

1. By *gross sin*. Saints may be guilty of other sins, and very often are, without throwing any just stumbling-block in the way of public charity, or of the charity of their Christian brethren. The common failures of humanity, and the daily short-comings of the best of men, do not ordinarily obstruct the charity of their brethren; but when they fall into any gross sin, this effect follows; for we naturally argue, that he who hath committed some gross sin hath doubtless much more practised less and more secret sins; and so we doubt concerning the soundness and sincerity of his heart.

Therefore all those who commit any gross sin, as they obstruct the charity of their brethren, are proper subjects of discipline: and unless they confess their sin, and manifest their repentance, are proper subjects of excommunication.—this leads me to say,

2. That the members of the church do especially become visibly wicked, when they remain *impenitent* in their sins, after proper means used to reclaim them. Merely being guilty of any gross sin, is a stumbling-block to charity, unless repentance immediately succeed; but especially when the guilty person remains obstinate and contumacious; in such a case he is most clearly a visibly wicked person, and therefore to be dealt with as such; to be cast out into the wicked world, the kingdom of Satan, where he appears to belong.—Nor is contumacy in *gross* sins only a sufficient ground of excommunication. In the text the apostle commands us to inflict this censure, not only on those who are guilty of the gross sins of fornication, idolatry, and drunkenness, but also on those who are guilty of covetousness, railing, and extortion, which, at least in some degrees of them, are too generally esteemed no very heinous crimes. And in Rom. xvi. 17. the same apostle commands the church to excommunicate “them who cause divisions and offences, contrary to the doctrine they had learned;” and in 2 Thess. iii. 14. to excommunicate everyone who should “not obey his word by that epistle.” Now, according to these precepts, everyone who doth not observe the doctrine of the apostles, and their word contained in their epistles, and so, by purity of reason, the divine instructions contained in the other parts of Scripture, is to be excommunicated, provided he continue impenitent and contumacious. So that *contumacy* and *impenitence* in any real and manifest sin whatsoever, deserve excommunication.

III. I come to speak of the *ends* of this ecclesiastical censure. The special ends of it are these three.

1. That the church may be kept *pure*, and the ordinances of God not be defiled. This end is mentioned in the context, verse 6,. &c. “Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?

Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. Therefor let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”—When the ordinances of God are defiled by the toleration of wicked men in the church, God the Father, Jesus Christ the head and founder of the church, the religion of the gospel, and the church itself, are dishonoured and exposed to contempt.—And that the other members themselves may not be defiled, it is necessary that they bear a testimony against sin, by censuring it whenever it appears among them, especially in the grosser acts of wickedness. If they neglect so to do, they contract guilt by the very neglect; and not only so, but they expose themselves to learn the same vices which they tolerate in others; for “a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.” Hence that earnest caution of the apostle, Heb. xii. 15.

“Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up, trouble you, and *thereby many be defiled.*”

2. That others may be *deterred* from wickedness. As the neglect of proper censure, with respect to visibly wicked church-members, tends to lead and encourage others to commit the same wickedness; so the infliction of proper censure tends to restrain others, not only from the same wickedness, but from sin in general. This therefore is repeatedly mentioned as one end of the punishments appointed to be inflicted by the law of Moses: Deut. xiii. 11. “And all Israel shall hear, and fear, and shall do no more such wickedness as this is among you.”

3. That the persons themselves may be *reclaimed*, and that their souls may be saved. When other more gentle means have been used in vain, then it is the duty of the church to use this, which is more severe, in order to bring them to conviction, shame, and humiliation: and that, by being rejected and avoided by the church, and treated with disrespect, they may be convinced how they deserve to be for ever disowned of God; that by being delivered unto Satan, they may learn how they deserve for ever to be delivered up to him; that by his being made the instrument of their chastisement, they may learn how they deserve to be tormented by him, without any rest day or night, for ever and ever.—This, with the counsels

and admonitions by which it is to be followed, is the last mean that the church is to use, in order to reclaim those members which are become visibly wicked. If this be ineffectual, what is next to be expected is destruction without remedy.

Application

I shall apply this subject in a brief use of exhortation to this church, to maintain strictly the proper discipline of the gospel in general, and particularly that part of it which consists in excommunication. To this end I shall just suggest to you the following motives.

1. That if you tolerate visible wickedness in your members, you will greatly *dishonour* God, our Lord Jesus Christ, the religion which you profess, the church in general, and yourselves in particular. As those members of the church who practise wickedness, bring dishonour upon the whole body, so do those who tolerate them in it. The language of it is, that God doth not require holiness in his servants; that Christ doth not require it in his disciples; that the religion of the gospel is not a holy religion; that the church is not a body of holy servants of God; and that this church, in particular, hath no regard to holiness or true virtue.

2. Your *own good* loudly calls you to the same thing. From what hath been already said, you see how liable you, as individuals, will be to catch the contagion, which is easily communicated by reason of the natural depravity, in a degree at least, remaining in the best of men.—Beside, if strict discipline be maintained among you, it will not only tend to prevent the spread of wickedness, but to make you more fruitful in holiness. If you know that the eyes of your brethren observe all your conduct, it will not only make you more guarded against sin, but more careful “to maintain good works, ” and to abound in “the fruits of the Spirit.” Thus you will have more abundant joy and peace in believing.

3. The good of those who are *without* should be another motive. What the apostle saith with reference to another subject,¹ Cor. xiv. 24, 25. is perfectly applicable to the case before us: “But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all; and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face, he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth. ” If strict discipline, and thereby strict morals, were maintained in the church it would in all

probability be one of the most powerful means of conviction and conversion towards those who are without.

4. *Benevolence* towards your offending brethren themselves, calls upon you to maintain discipline in all its parts. Surely, if we love our brethren, it will grieve us to see them wandering from the path of truth and duty; and in proportion as our compassion is moved, shall we be disposed to use all proper means to reclaim and bring them back to the right way. Now, the rules of discipline contained in the gospel are the most proper, and best adapted to this end, that infinite wisdom itself could devise. Even excommunication is instituted for this very end, *the destruction of the flesh*, and *the salvation of the spirit*. If, therefore, we have any love of benevolence to our offending and erring brethren, it becomes us to manifest it, in executing strictly the rules of gospel-discipline, and even excommunication itself, whenever it is necessary.

5. But the absolute *authority of Christ* ought to be sufficient in this case, if there were no other motive. Our text is only one of many passages in the Scripture, wherein strict discipline is expressly commanded, and peremptorily enjoined. Now, how can you be the true disciples of Christ, if you live in the neglect of these plain positive commands? “If ye love me,” saith Christ, “keep my commandments;” and, “Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I have commanded you.”

But, “he that loveth me not, keepeth not my sayings.” “And why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” If you strictly follow the rules of discipline instituted by Christ, you have reason to hope for his blessing; for he is wont to bless his own institutions, and to smile upon the means of grace which he hath appointed.