

ESSAYS ON THE CHURCH OF GOD

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Essays on the church of God by John M. Mason

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JOHN M. MASON

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CHURCH OF GOD**

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BY

JOHN M. MASON, D. D.

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INTRODUCTION.

THE following Essays originally appeared in a periodical, entitled the "Christian Magazine," edited by the late Dr. Mason, in the year 1808—10, and in 1832 were incorporated in an edition of his works. At their first publication they were much valued, and they have been ever since constantly demanded by the religious public. Their re-publication in their present form is in answer to repeated calls. The reasons, which rendered their preparation needful, exist in resuscitated freshness at the present moment; and with some additional peculiarities. The community, for whose predecessors they were written, encounter the same obstacles, are annoyed by the same perplexities, and need the same direction and instruction, their fathers received. The present edition of the essays has been published at a low price in comparison with its style, that its circulation may be the more extensive.

It may not be improper to observe furthermore, that these Essays are not controversial. They seek rather the establishment of truth, than the refutation of error; the confirmation of its friends, rather than the overthrow of its enemies; the lucid exhibition of divine institution, rather than the unwelcome labour of dispelling the mists of human inventions, and notions.

Their language may not be mistaken; it is as plain as it is forcible, and the arguments as cogent as direct. The doctrine of the *nature* of the Church is presented in such a manner as to guard men from yielding themselves up to the dominion of certain exclusive opinions, now urged under high and somewhat imposing ecclesiastical sanctions;—opinions, too, which if admitted would invest forms of religion, of whatever kind they may be, with a life inspiring vitality, and lead men into the delusions of superstition and desolation of ruin.

The doctrine of the *Unity* and *Visibility* of the Church is most strikingly presented. Overstepping all natural boundaries of space, and all artificial ones of human creation, preserving a strict analogy with the divine arrangements over men as social beings, it makes its direct and powerful appeal to every christian heart; it identifies him with the people of God in all ages, and in all places; concentrates their energies of prayer, and faith, and hope—they move not isolated—forsaken—or despairing; but every uplifted hand nerves every other hand; and every warm heart sends its purifying savour over every other heart,—the mutual pledges of sustained conflict, and certain success. The doctrine delivers from the dilemma of good and honest men, the contracting notion of an perfectly pure Church, elect and holy; and the loose notion of a Church exposed to the "devouring of every ravening beast and the pollution of every unclean bird." The Church is suited to the nature of men, and is possessed of those inherent and essential properties of government, of protection, rewards and punishments, which every organized society requires.

Perhaps, the most important, and certainly the most interesting part of the Essays, is to be found in the demonstration of the *Oneness* of the Church under the Old and New Testament economies. In it, is discussed with the peculiar force and luminousness of the author, the whole question of the relation of the children of believers to the Church; and their right

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CHURCH OF GOD.

No. I.

It is our intention to lay before our readers in a series of numbers, a detailed but succinct account of the Church of God, embracing the chief questions concerning its nature, members, officers, order, worship, and the points directly connected with them. As we shall proceed upon a regular plan, the reader is requested not to form his judgment of the whole from an inspection of a part; and not to disjoin in his reflections those parts, which precede from those which follow; but to recur to the former as he meets with the latter, that the series of thought may be preserved unbroken in his mind; and that he may not accuse us hereafter with being superficial or negligent, when the blame ought possibly to be attached to his own memory. For having proved a point once, we shall not repeat the proof afterwards, unless for very particular reasons, and in a very summary way. We begin with

An inquiry into the meaning of the term CHURCH.

A community which has subsisted for ages, must always possess a number of usages and terms peculiar to itself. And although their origin may be remote, and their force unknown to many of its members, they suggest general ideas which serve the purposes of common conversation and common life. The fact may appear extraordinary, but it is nevertheless true; for the proportion of men in any society who analyze the words and phrases which they have been accustomed to utter ever since they were able to speak, is comparatively small. The reader can bring this matter to an easy test by interrogating himself concerning expressions which are coeval with his earliest recollection; and he will probably be surprised to find that, in thousands of instances, they have passed and repassed through his mind without his attempting to arrest them long enough to satisfy himself as to their appropriate sense. This want of precision is accompanied with no bad effect, till something occur to touch an institution, a privilege, or an observance, when the inconvenience may be sensibly felt. A popular notion is often overturned by the interpretation of a word; and the multitude are astonished either at their own mistake, or at the effrontery of those who charge them with committing it.

That which happens to all other durable com-

binations of men, must happen to the Christian Society. We need go no further for an example than its very name. "Church," "Christian Church," "Church of God," are familiar to the mouths of millions. They talk of "the Church" upon all occasions, without suspecting that perhaps they understand not what they say. They possibly never asked *what is the Church?* Possibly, they may think it too plain to deserve an answer. Possibly, also, the more they revolve it, the more they may be puzzled. Try the experiment. Put the question successively to several decent, intelligent men, and their replies, various as their previous religious habits, will convince you that their acquaintance with the subject is slight indeed. It is therefore necessary to go to first principles.

The word "Church," derived from the Greek *κυριακόν*, signifies "the house of the Lord;" and marks the *property* which he has in it. But the original words which it is employed to translate, signify a different thing. The Hebrew words קהל (*cahal*) and עדה (*gheda*) in the Old Testament; and the corresponding one ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) in the New, all signify *an assembly*, especially one convened by invitation or appointment. That this is their generic sense, no scholar will deny; nor that their particular applications are ultimately resolvable into it. Hence it is evident, that from the terms themselves nothing can be concluded