

**A DECLARATION OF THE
VIEWS OF THE SOCIETY
OF FRIENDS IN RELATION
TO CHURCH GOVERNMENT**

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A Declaration of the Views of the Society of Friends in Relation to Church Government by
Various

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VIEWS ON CHURCH GOVERNMENT.

To the Quarterly, Monthly and Preparative Meetings and individual members of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends.

It is we trust under a feeling of religious concern and in gospel love that we are engaged to address you, and to express our earnest desire for your preservation and growth in the unchangeable truth.— We would thankfully commemorate the name of Him who, for purposes of His wisdom, and by the fresh outpourings of His own Holy Spirit, first called and gathered us as a people, and who hath hitherto been pleased to preserve us—to Him be the praise.

But, dear friends, it is not for us to expect the continuance of this preservation and gracious help unless we abide faithful unto Him—looking unto Him as our Leader, our Bishop, and adorable High Priest, who is Head over all things unto His church.

It was, we believe, by the direct, immediate visitations of His spirit, and by a remarkable manifestation of His power, that our forefathers were led to take that spiritual view of the gospel dispensation, and to sustain it under much persecution, which we doubt not was designed by its author, and embraced by his immediate followers, and the primitive believers; and it is only as we are made partakers of

the same Divine influence and abide under it, as we acknowledge it as they acknowledged it—as we yield unto it even as they did, that we shall be walking faithfully in the footsteps of those who were our predecessors and fathers in the truth. And it is with a view to encourage in faithful dedication and consistent walking as members of our religious Society, that we are now concerned briefly to revive some of the measures that were taken by our early Friends, under the guidance, as we fully believe, of best Wisdom, for the maintenance of right order in the Church, in the establishment of our Christian Discipline, and in the inculcation of that subordination which is due from inferior to superior meetings, and from individual members to the body.

From the history of our Society, it appears that at a very early period, George Fox was actively engaged to promote the establishment of men's and women's meetings for Discipline, and the power and authority in which he was concerned that they should be maintained, may be gathered from the emphatic words often repeated in his Epistles:—“Let all your men's and women's meetings be held in the power of the Lord.” And it should be instructively remembered that this concern of George Fox and other Friends for the introduction of a system of Church Discipline, was the cause of much disturbance to some, who claimed for themselves an extent of individual liberty inconsistent with that subordination which is essential to the prosperity of the body. It is thus noticed in the Book of Disci-

pline and Advices of London Yearly Meeting :—

“The persevering efforts of George Fox to establish a regular Discipline, a work in which he was assisted by nearly all those who had been instrumental in gathering the Society, proved a great trial of spirits: to a large proportion of the members the arrangements appear to have been quite satisfactory; there was, however, a considerable number of objectors—the self-willed and lawless opposed it with vehemence; and it must be admitted that not a few of a very different class were drawn aside by specious arguments, to oppose what was represented as an encroachment upon individual spiritual liberty. Certain it is that a schism to some extent took place on this occasion; which, however, there is reason to believe, left the Society in a more healthy state than it found it. The general meeting of 1677 issued a strong declaration on the subject. Robert Barclay wrote upon this occasion, his “Anarchy of the Ranters;” William Penn his “Liberty Spiritual,” and Stephen Crisp an excellent tract; all of them endeavoring to prove the necessity of established order and discipline in the Church of Christ. This very conflict, and the close examination to which it led of the true limits of Church authority, tended, there is reason to believe, under Divine direction, to establish the Discipline at once more firmly and safely throughout the Society than might otherwise have been the case.

Thus was a system of order and government, in conformity with the spirit of christianity and the

practice of the primitive Churches, established amongst us in early times; and thus a field was opened for the exercise of the various gifts by which the Church, the body of Christ, is edified. It is very observable in the history of our Society, that the declension or revival of religious zeal has ever been accompanied by a corresponding relaxation or increase of care in the exercise of the Discipline."

Stephen Crisp thus describes the concern he early felt after his conviction and the state of mind he believed necessary in order to the right discharge of his duty to others:—"The more," says he, "I came to feel and perceive the love of God and his goodness to me, the more was I humbled and bowed in my mind to serve him, and to serve the least of his people among whom I walked; and as the word of wisdom begun to spring in me, and the knowledge of God grew, so I became a counsellor of those that were tempted in like manner as I had been; yet was kept so low that I waited to receive counsel daily from God, and from those that were over me in the Lord, and were in Christ before me, against whom I never rebelled, nor was stubborn; but the more I was kept in subjection myself, the more I was enabled to help the weak and feeble ones."

In our weak and erring condition as men and creatures, "it must needs be that offences will come," and among the ends aimed at in the institution of Disciplinary regulations, are the preservation of the individual members of the Society, and the reformation and restoration of offenders, or where this is imprac-

ticable, a separation of them from the body ; that thus the blessed Truth may be preserved from reproach. Our Lord has not left us without directions as to the course to be pursued with such as depart from the right way, and the Discipline of our Society is designed to be, and we believe is, in conformity to these divine instructions. "If," says he, "thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone. If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the Church ; but if he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." And the promise given to the Church in the performance of its duties is calculated to sustain every dependent member. "Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father who is in Heaven ; for where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

In order to experience this divine blessing, it is indispensably necessary that we should be really gathered in the name and power of the Lord Jesus, whether for the purpose of Worship or for the transaction of the affairs of the Church, and the necessity of the immediate direction and presence of the one Great Head is essential to the right performance of

to "feed the flock of God, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint but willingly; not for filthy lucre but of a ready mind, neither as being lords over God's heritage, but ensamples to the flock"—and adds the consolatory assurance that, "when the Chief Shepherd shall appear, they shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away."

Among the provisions of our Discipline which we would now revive, and especially to the consideration of our younger friends, is that in relation to the care that is to be maintained with respect to the Ministry. While the solemn and important service of preaching the gospel is not to be exercised by any, except under the immediate direction and anointing of the Holy Ghost, neither is it to be *judged of*, but by those who have been dipped, in measure, into the same spirit, and have received a qualification therefor from the same source. A disposition to cavil and to criticise, or in any way to speak lightly of the Ministry, is dangerous to him who indulges it, as tending to self-exaltation, and to the lessening of his regard for sacred things, as well as the source from whence they spring. And it is to preserve the right order and harmony of the Church that Elders are appointed, whose delegated duty it is to judge in these matters, and to extend assistance or caution as it is required; and let none, in the forwardness of their spirits, presume to assume to themselves this office, or attempt to exercise its duties.

The following extracts from the writings of wor-

thy and experienced Friends, expressive of their concern for the preservation of the Church, we deem pertinent and instructive, and commend them to the careful consideration of all. We commence with some extracts from the advices of George Fox, of whom William Penn testifies that "he was a man that God endowed with a clear and wonderful depth, a discerner of others' spirits, and very much a master of his own."

"Friends, live in the power of the Lord God, and in his truth, light and life, that by it you may all, with one heart and mind, keep dominion and do true judgment and justice, truth and righteousness in all your men and women's meetings without favor or affection, to relations, kindred or acquaintances, or any respect of persons.

For if you do not so, judgment will come on you from God, to put you down from your places. For the power of God, his light and truth, respects not any, but justice, truth, righteousness and equity.

Let mercy overshadow the judgment-seat, and let mercy be mixed with judgment.

Take heed of foolish pity; and if you be not diligent against all profaneness, sin, iniquity and uncleanness, looseness and debauchery, and that which dishonoreth God, then you let those things come upon you, which you should be atop of and subdue and keep down, with righteousness and the truth and power of God.

And in all your men and women's meetings let all things be done in love, which doth edify the