

ARTICLE VI.

CLOSE COMMUNION.¹

BY A BAPTIST DIVINE.

IT is unfortunate when popular interest in a subject is worn out before the truth is reached. Possibly this may be the case with close communion. But I am so thoroughly convinced that the untenableness of the practice as it stands has not been sufficiently exposed, that I am inclined to incur the risk of a doubtful welcome for the sake of getting at the truth of the matter.

The proposition I undertake to establish is, that close communion, as represented by its ablest apologists, is a jumble of false assumptions and bad logic; and that self-consistency, reason, and Scripture require Baptists, either to abandon the practice in favor of open communion, or else to withdraw Christian fellowship from pedobaptists;—which, I would not presume to suggest. This proposition I shall argue from the Baptist point of view. That is to say, I shall assume the scripturalness of Baptist tenets on all other points but this one. I shall take my stand with Baptists and endeavor to show that the fundamental postulates of their own faith are totally incompatible with the present practice of close communion.

NATURE OF THE PRACTICE.

The word “communion,” as employed in the discussion of this subject, is embarrassed by an ambiguity of meaning. Etymologically and primarily it signifies the spiritual state of

¹ [To be followed, in the April number, by a presentation of the reasons for restricted communion.—EDS.]

those persons who have something in "common" (Latin *communio*, from *communis*, common); a state characterized by feelings of mutual sympathy and good will, and by a tendency to harmonious co-operation and unity of action. In this sense it is synonymous with "fellowship," or the spiritual state arising from being "fellows," or comrades. Christian communion or fellowship is the spiritual state of those who have a common religious faith and experience; who are fellow-disciples of Christ. But communion is also another name for the Lord's Supper. And herein is an ambiguity upon which many a specious argument has gone to pieces. To avoid this ambiguity I shall discard this use of the word, and speak of communion only in the sense of fellowship.

The predominant idea of communion is a spiritual sympathy. That held in common, whatever its nature and whether it be in spiritual or in temporal things, gives rise to feelings of mutual appreciation and regard and to a consciousness of spiritual oneness, which are the essence of communion. But communion seeks to express itself, and the normal expression is in common action,—co-operation, affiliation, union, organization. This formal expression of communion is itself, in strict literalism, also a communion.¹ Thus there are two concurrent communions,—the spiritual and the formal;—or, perhaps better, two elements,—a soul and a body,—of the one communion. We are more or less conscious of the spiritual side of Christian communion; but we are chiefly conversant with its formal element, its co-operative activities. The former is a spontaneous impulse of the soul begotten below consciousness under favoring circumstances by the operation of natural laws. We do not directly deal with or control it. But for whatever we may *do* in conjunction with others we are directly responsible. Of communion as expressed in action we are divinely put in trust. And to this primarily all scriptural regulations of communion refer. In connection with

¹ Century Dict., Communion, def. 4; Fellowship, def. 3.

this alone do we mention "terms." Our voluntary affiliations and co-operative activities are the subject-matter of the communion controversy. And the fact that our earthly fellowship has a voluntary element, and that the best of men are liable to error in judgment and in action, places the discussion of this fellowship upon a distinctly different basis from that of our anticipated communion in heaven.

The adjective "close" does not mend the ambiguity above noticed in the word communion. Close communion is an expression that may mean, either generally a restricted fellowship, or more particularly a restricted observance of the Lord's Supper. The conceptions are different; and, while the nature of the practice indicated is sufficiently obvious, the popular title of it has not only two distinct meanings, but also an uncertain tendency to oscillate to and fro between them. To illustrate:—Good Baptist writers make statements like the following: "We have Christian fellowship for pedobaptists, but not church fellowship"; and, "It is not our communion, but our baptism, that is close." According to the first of these statements, Close Communion is a withholding of church fellowship; according to the second, it is non co-operation at the Supper. The significance of this difference of conceptions will appear further on. Meantime I shall evade the ambiguity by using the title close communion only as a *quasi* proper name, and in connections where the meaning of the terms composing it has no bearing upon the argument.

The word "church" is a translation of the Greek *ἐκκλησία*, *assembly*, and, like it, is used to express two leading Christian concepts: first, the spiritual body of Christ, embracing in its membership the whole number of the redeemed,—the universal, invisible church; and, secondly, a company of persons who profess to have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and who, thinking they discover in one another the scriptural marks of discipleship, affiliate themselves together in obedience to the commands of Christ for Christian work

and worship,—the visible, local church. “Besides these two significations of the term church,” says Dr. Strong,¹ “there are properly in the New Testament no others.” “The prevailing usage of the New Testament gives to the term *ἐκκλησία* the second of these two significations. It is this local church only which has definite and temporal existence.”² No other sense of this word is employed by Baptists in the discussion of close communion. They do not use it to designate any association or organization of local churches or of their members or representatives, or any other earthly body but the local church.

As baptism is enjoined in immediate connection with conversion, and as in its nature it is the formal announcement and beginning of the Christian life, the church may rightly be conceived of as a company of baptized believers. Baptism, however, is no more essential to Christian discipleship or to church membership than is obedience to any other divine command; and obedience in general, or an “orderly walk,” is with Baptists as indispensable to the continuance, as baptism is to the beginning, of church relations.

I may now indicate the nature of close communion, in outline, as follows:—

Baptists decline to unite with pedobaptists (not to mention others) in the observance of the Lord's Supper, for the reason that the Supper is a church ordinance, and therefore none but persons maintaining an orderly walk as members of a New Testament church are entitled to partake; and pedobaptists, not having been baptized (immersed), are not duly qualified for church membership; and the churches composed of such unbaptized persons are not, strictly speaking, New Testament organizations. Sister Baptist churches, however, are scripturally constituted, and their members in good standing are duly qualified, and are admitted to the communion table. But this signifies only that there is no church

¹ Theology, Part vii. chap. ii. ² *Ibid.*

fellowship for pedobaptists. Christian fellowship is always freely offered.

I have not deemed it necessary to justify this statement by quotations from Baptist authors. No Baptist will question the correctness of my representations, so far as they go; and in so far as they are defective, the gaps will be closed as the demands of the argument may suggest.

OBJECTIONS.

The doctrine thus outlined is weak in facts and in logic.

1. In logic. The advocates of close communion are unanimous in basing it upon the doctrine that the Lord's Supper is a church ordinance; that is, an ordinance of the local church. Baptism belongs to the beginning, and the Supper to the maintenance, of the Christian life. There are slight variations in the methods of statement, but none in the theory.

That the Lord's Supper is a church ordinance I admit. But Baptists are mistaken in supposing that this is the determining principle, the justification, of close communion, even to their own minds.

The church ordinance theory of the Supper would furnish a specious explanation (but not a true one; not a justification) of close communion on one hypothesis. If Baptists admitted to the ordinance none but members of the church observing it, the theory and the practice would be consistent. A church ordinance is naturally for members of the church, and no others. If close communion is based on the church ordinance theory, as it purports to be, then it ought to correspond to it, and admit none but the members of the local church. If others are to be admitted, it will not be because the Supper is a church ordinance, but rather in spite of the fact, and because of some other, higher, and dominant principle that prevails against the local narrowness of the church ordinance theory. This theory does not touch upon any

inter-church or extra-church relation. If it must be regarded as either definitely permitting or definitely forbidding the welcoming of outsiders to the table, then it must be regarded as an absolute prohibition. The fact that the Supper is a church ordinance cannot possibly authorize the admission of persons not members of the church. But Baptists admit persons not members, namely, the members of sister Baptist churches; and the admission of this class of persons is universal, and characteristic of the denomination. Close communion exists, therefore, not because of, but in defiance of, the church ordinance theory.

Baptist writers all recognize the insufficiency of this theory of the Supper to justify close communion. Says Dr. Hovey,¹ "As the eucharist is a church ordinance, they [Baptists] hold that none but members of the church observing it are strictly entitled to partake." But a little reflection must convince any one that, in abandoning the strict requirements of the church ordinance theory, Baptists have moved to other ground. They do not simply supplement that doctrine by some logical corollary or closely related principle. They adopt an entirely new and different principle, and one totally inconsistent with the other. The main theory asserts that only local church members may be received. The addendum freely admits outsiders. And the addendum, and that alone, controls the practice of the denomination. The church ordinance theory is not merely insufficient to justify close communion; it is irrelevant. It does not account for any part of the practice. Even the exclusion of pedobaptists is not explained by it, but by the new principle. That which admits fellow Baptists for reasons independent of and paramount to the church ordinance doctrine is, as a matter of fact, the same independent and paramount principle that excludes pedobaptists; insomuch that, if the church ordinance doctrine were dropped out of sight as a reason for close

¹ Bib. Sac., 1862, p. 162.

communion, the reason actually assigned by Baptists for the practice would remain intact. The truth is, Baptists are mistaken in their own mental processes. They think they deduce close communion from the doctrine that the Lord's Supper is a church ordinance, and that they merely supplement that doctrine by other considerations to account for the admission of outsiders of the same faith and order; when in reality their minds, unconsciously perceiving the irrelevancy of the church ordinance theory, have passed it by and rested the whole case of close communion upon the supplementary considerations alone. A glance at the nature of this supplementary reasoning will show the truth of these remarks.

Baptists as a denomination have no formulated and authoritative statement on this point. There is, however, substantial agreement in the variously expressed views of individuals. "Courtesy," "consistency," and "loyalty to principle," are samples of expressions by which Baptist writers voice the conviction that *identity of church usages justifies, and a lack of it forbids, inter-communion at the Lord's table*.¹ This statement, considered with reference to the essentials of Christian faith and obedience, is the one and only real foundation principle of close communion. Baptists talk and think the church ordinance theory, but they build on the intuitively perceived principle that *community of interests is the true foundation for communion*. Notice the reasoning. "Courtesy" may justify overriding the exclusiveness of the church ordinance theory in the case of fellow-Baptists. Why? Because fellow-Baptists are scriptural in faith and practice, i. e., they agree with us. And pedobaptists may not be received,—why? Simply, of course, because they lack the qualifications that Baptists have;—they are not scriptural—they do not agree with us. Dr. Hovey, in the article above quoted, after stating the church ordinance theory in the standard fashion, drops it out of sight and states the reasons

¹ See Hovey in Bib. Sac., *ubi supra*; Theodosia Ernest; etc.

for close communion, as follows: "None can properly be invited to join with us in the service, who could not be welcomed without change of views to full membership." "Those who are giving, and pledged to give, the weight of their influence against what is believed to be essential in doctrine and practice, cannot properly be received into its [the church's] fellowship" (p. 162). There is fellowship between those who are true "fellows"—that is all.

Baptists are evidently groping after a theory of inter-church communion. They fail to find, because, partly perhaps from a taint of sacramentalism, they confound the Lord's Supper with communion, and suppose that when they have settled the doctrine that the Supper is a church ordinance they have gone a long way toward settling the communion controversy, when in fact they have not touched it. The fault is one of logic—premise and conclusion erroneously conjoined.

2. Close communion is weak in its facts, in assuming that church fellowship is expressed by the union of churches or of their members in the observance of the Supper, and not otherwise. The maxim is, "We grant Christian fellowship, and withhold church fellowship." But under the head of Christian fellowship, so avowed, there is included almost every conceivable form of *church* union. Baptist churches dismiss their regular services to unite with pedobaptist churches in all manner of religious meetings; there is free interchange of pulpits; and pedobaptist ministers are invited to participate in the recognition of Baptist churches, the ordination of ministers, and what not. Only they must not sit with them at the Lord's table, since that would involve an expression of church fellowship for the unbaptized.

And what, pray, is church fellowship? We have seen that fellowship is the spiritual sympathy, or the outward affiliation, that results from our being "fellows" in the possession of some "common" interest. The affiliation is the natural and

normal expression of the spiritual oneness. Those who unite in any common cause thereby express fellowship for each other with respect to the matter in hand; and that, not accidentally and capriciously, but uniformly and by a necessity of divine law. It is always true that a voluntary affiliation based upon a community of interests is the voicing of a real spiritual fellowship. And this is equally true if the parties to the union are associations of people instead of individuals. It is the union, nothing else, that constitutes the expression of fellowship. And when churches as such unite in any Christian work or service, then and there you will find all there ever is anywhere of church fellowship. There is inter-church fellowship at the Lord's table, not because the Supper has been divinely elected and adapted to be the sole vehicle of church fellowship, for it has not, but for the single reason that churches as such are actually or representatively in union there. That is what constitutes church fellowship—churches acting as fellows. And to assert, as the standard argument for close communion does, that a union of churches at the Supper gives rise to church fellowship, but that a union of churches as such in other religious meetings does not express church fellowship, but something different, namely, Christian fellowship,—shows, to say the least, an astonishing misapprehension as to the nature and determining principles of church fellowship.

Close communion avows a withholding of church fellowship from pedobaptists. The practice is consistent with that profession in one case out of a hundred, namely, at the Lord's table. In the other ninety nine cases, namely, in all other church unions, there is inconsistency.

3. There is no valid and scriptural distinction, like that supposed in close communion, between church fellowship and Christian fellowship. They are but different conceptions of one and the same thing. Christian fellowship, regarded not as a spiritual fact but as a principle of co-operation among Christians, is fellowship based upon a mutual recognition of

discipleship; and it is this recognition of each by all as Christians that constitutes the suggestion and basis of church organization. The church is naught else but a company of people united in the bonds of Christian fellowship. Organization adds nothing to the responsibility of the individual members, and the church as a whole is under no higher or different obligation in any respect from that which would rest upon the aggregate of its membership if they were not organized. We owe organization, as well as all else that we can do for Christ, simply as matter of Christian duty.

Baptists should be the last to deny these propositions. Nothing could be more in harmony with the genius of the denomination than the identification of church fellowship with Christian fellowship. Nothing could more aptly suggest the fundamental ideas by which Baptists seek to justify themselves before the world. Nothing could more pointedly or more favorably emphasize the doctrine of a regenerate church membership, or the principles underlying the discipline of Baptist churches. The Baptist rule and practice are to receive as members all whose Christian profession is, in their opinion, attested by a life of obedience to the law of Christ. The attestation of discipleship is the title to membership. And the title holds good so long as the attestation of discipleship remains intact. The fellowship of the church for its members is simply the fellowship of scripturally attested Christians for another scripturally attested Christian. It is church fellowship, and it is also nothing else but Christian fellowship. The two are one, and that one is Christian fellowship.

The desire and attempt to establish a difference in kind and terms between church fellowship and Christian fellowship arises, and has an existence, only in connection with close communion. It is a marked instance of special pleading, and the result is a notable specimen of unreason and inconsistency. It gives rise, for example, to a double standard in the attestation of Christian discipleship, and in Christian fellowship.

Baptists fellowship as Christians, in their own churches, only those whom they profess to regard as obedient in the matter of baptism; but for those in the membership of other denominations whom they regard as disobedient, they still avow Christian fellowship. In the one case they insist upon a duly attested discipleship; in the other they dispense with the attestation. Or, rather, they grant the fellowship while denying the attestation. Do Baptists then think disobedience no compromise of Christian discipleship? Or have they a conviction, unformulated but potent, that their traditional views as to what constitutes obedience in baptism are too rigidly literal to be true and practical? There is, at least, a question as to what Baptists mean by Christian fellowship; and it is doubtful if that which we may grant to those we regard as disobedient is what inspired writers would characterize as *Christian* fellowship. Again the query suggests itself, why, if they must withhold church fellowship at all, they do not do it consistently by refraining from all church unions with the disobedient? And again, why the obligation to discountenance disobedience does not rest as fully upon individual Christians as upon churches? The ethics of close communion are badly mixed. The practice itself is badly mixed, as I think its advocates will find, if (as they are not accustomed to do) they will explain precisely what is meant by the expressions church fellowship and Christian fellowship, and then make the alleged distinction practical by showing under just what circumstances the fellowship is Christian, and just when there is church fellowship.

THE FUNDAMENTAL ERROR.

The fundamental error of Baptists in close communion, if I mistake not, is in maintaining one or the other of two inconsistent opinions: namely, first, that pedobaptists are disobedient in baptism;¹ and, secondly, that it is right to fel-

¹ Strong's Theology, Part. vii. chap. ii. II. 5.

lowship pedobaptists as Christians. One or the other of these propositions must be false. Disobedience is sin, and it cannot be right to fellowship sin as Christian. And the difficulties of close communion, to some of which I have referred, are an offspring of the attempt to ingraft the falsehood (whichever of the above propositions it may be that is false) upon the Baptist system. The falsehood will not harmonize, and until it is ejected the system will be borne down with a burden of absurdities and inconsistencies. As in line with this diagnosis, the following considerations deserve attention:—

1. To fellowship the disobedient as Christians is to fellowship their disobedience as Christian conduct. Of course this is not saying that I indorse a man's conduct as right in all respects if I fellowship him in any public capacity. As a member of a temperance society, for example, I might without inconsistency fellowship a man whose business methods, or even his personal habits, are known to be morally bad. These faults are not in the sphere of our fellowship as advocates of temperance, and therefore I may fellowship him as a temperance man without indorsing his faults. Taking an occasional glass of beer is in itself a comparatively trifling offence; but it is in the sphere of the fellowship, and therefore may not be condoned. But all morality is in the sphere of religion. All disobedience to divine commands is sin. It is therefore incompatible with Christian fellowship. For this reason, and because they think the Scriptures so require, Baptist churches "withdraw" from such of their members as "walk disorderly" and "obey not" the divine "tradition." The sinner and the sin are identified and inseparable. To fellowship the one is to fellowship the other. And hence it is written, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with *unbelievers*: for what fellowship hath *righteousness with unrighteousness?*"

2. If pedobaptists are disobedient in the matter of baptism, their offence is not a venial one. It is not a mere irregularity or informality in church organization. Disobedi-

ence is always sin, and always to be disallowed as unchristian. At the same time, none are perfect. There are always faults to be found. And we cannot regard a microscopic legalism, that should exhaust itself with ferreting out and judging the faults of our fellows, as a very high order of Christianity. Much better is it to be so filled with the Master's work, and with love for the souls of men, that time and strength shall fail us to take cognizance of any but the most serious and really notable offences. But if the pedobaptist practice as to baptism is really disobedient, then it is a sin of such prominence and obtrusiveness that only an antinomian indifferentism could overlook it or tolerate it as Christian. It is the essence of pedobaptism. If the pedobaptist were to adopt Baptist views as to baptism, he would no longer be a pedobaptist, but a Baptist, though not necessarily a close communionist. To the sin of disobedience, therefore, he adds the sin of schism—the violation of Christian unity. I might pursue this indictment further, and add many serious counts; but I will only remind our Baptist brethren that the word disobedience in this connection is a very serious one—so serious, indeed, that it seems very doubtful if they have adequately apprehended its practical bearings with reference to their own conduct.

3. If Baptists must regard the pedobaptist practice in baptism as disobedient, then they are definitely forbidden to fellowship pedobaptists as Christians. Baptists should read their own proof-texts a little more carefully,—2 Thess. iii. 6, 14, for example. These texts are used by them as authority for the maintenance of church discipline. But if they authorize withdrawal from one professed disciple because of his disobedience, they equally authorize withdrawal from all who disobey. Note the language: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every"—member of the local church? No,—"*from every brother that walketh disorderly*, and not

after the tradition which he received of us." The same comprehensiveness of statement is found in the fourteenth verse: "If *any man* obey not," etc. Why should not these commands apply to "brethren" outside the local church, as well as within its membership? Baptists should certainly feel constrained to a consistent withdrawal of church fellowship from the disobedient, which means abstinence from all church unions with them. And why is not Christian fellowship, as well as church fellowship, forbidden? The commands are general in form; and, like many another command addressed to a church, are as obviously adapted for the guidance of individual members as of the body; the idea of Christian fellowship is much more conspicuous in the New Testament than is that single phase of it called church fellowship; and disobedience is much more frequently represented as incompatible with Christian discipleship than as a breach of church order. We read many statements similar in doctrinal import to that of 1 John ii. 4: "He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him." And where do we find an intimation that church fellowship should ever be withdrawn for reasons that are consistent with a continuance of Christian fellowship? When we bear these facts in mind, and reflect further that the context in 2 Thess. iii. is wholly made up of exhortations to personal duties, rather than to church action; the evidence seems to be satisfactory that the command to "withdraw" from "every brother"—"any man"—who does not "obey," means that the attestation of the disobedient brother's discipleship is compromised by his disobedience, and that he is, therefore, no longer entitled to recognition as a Christian. Will Baptists deliberately repudiate this conclusion? Will they, in one breath, proclaim the doctrine of a regenerate church membership attested by an orderly walk; and, in the next, assert that disobedience is compatible with discipleship? Will they aver that disobedience, even when it rises to the

enormity of schismatic and organized resistance to the commandments of God, is Christian, and to be fellowshipped as Christian? Is high treason against heaven no breach of Christian fellowship? But precisely this is what they say, when they pronounce pedobaptists disobedient in baptism, and yet fellowship them as Christians. Against such monstrous doctrine we may well quote the command to withdraw from the disobedient. And, even if church fellowship were not (as it is) demonstrably identical in nature with Christian fellowship, we should yet find in the whole spirit of the gospel, as well as in many particular commands, admonitions to "have no fellowship," whether church or Christian, with the sin of disobedience (Eph. v. 11).

THE ALTERNATIVE.

Two possible courses of perfect consistency, and only two, are open to Baptists. Perhaps there is but one. That will depend upon precisely what the convictions of Baptists are on certain points. But apparently two courses are open, in either one of which they may go consistently. They may disfellowship pedobaptists as not offering the scriptural attestation of discipleship, which is obedience; or they may abandon the idea that conscientious pedobaptists are disobedient to the commands of Christ respecting baptism. They may be consistent close communionists or consistent open communionists. At present they are half and half, and therefore neither. They never can be self-consistent, or occupy a rationally intelligent position, until they become wholly either one thing or the other.

Baptists as a denomination have no recognized theory of communion. Their doctrine as to the Supper is nothing of the sort, and has no direct relation to any such thing; the statements respecting fellowship, which they append to that doctrine, having no logical connection with it, and being evidently regarded as supplementary to it, rather than as an in-

dependent and self-centred theory. But these fragmentary and isolated suggestions, false as they all are in some respects, and thrown into a wrong light by their misalliance and unnatural subordination to an alien dogma, are practically all that Baptists can show looking towards a theory of communion. The misconception as to the true relation of the Supper to the communion controversy has diverted their attention from the real communion question, so that they have not seriously grappled with it, but have laid out their strength on a side issue, important in itself, but irrelevant. But if consistency is an object, it is time they adopted a theory of communion and squared their denominational usages to correspond.

It is no part of my plan to pave the way for Baptists to either horn of the dilemma I have thus pointed out; and it is useless to speculate as to which of the two they may most easily and most conscientiously choose. If they are as firmly convinced as they sometimes say they are that pedobaptists are disobedient, they would find it difficult to abandon that idea; and it would be easier for them to exchange their present Christian fellowship for pedobaptists (which at the best is but a travesty of Christian fellowship) for a consistent close communion. But I have often noticed, in the course of a somewhat extended experience, that, where the Baptist cause is not established or is languishing, most Baptists find it comparatively easy to unite with pedobaptist churches. Their principles do not prove to be so inflexible as they had thought. And this suggests the inquiry, Do not Baptists as a denomination have a sufficiently tangible doubt as to the Christianity of their stern arraignment of pedobaptists to justify them in abandoning it for the sake of becoming consistent, even though it were to be consistently open, in their communion?