

CONFESSION OF FAITH.

CHAPTER 31.-Of Synods and Councils.

III. It belongeth to Synods and Councils, ministerially to determine Controversies of Faith, and cases of Conscience, to set down Rules and Directions for the better Ordering of the publique Worship of God, and Government of his Church; to receive Complaints, in cases of Male-administration, and, authoritatively, to Determine the same: which Decrees, and Determinations, if consonant to the word of God, are to be received with reverence, and submission; not only, for their agreement with the Word, but also for the Power, whereby they are made, as being an Ordinance of God appointed thereunto in his Word¹.

Question 1.—*Does it belong to Synods and Councils, ministerially to determine controversies of Faith, and cases of conscience, to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of his Church, to receive complaints, in cases of mal-administration, and, authoritatively, to determine the same?*

Answer.—Yes. Acts 15:5, 6; 1 Cor. 14:40; Matt. 18:17-20. The power of the Church consists in these three things: respecting articles of faith or doctrine; respecting the enacting of laws or making constitutions and canons conducing to good order; respecting jurisdiction or the exercise of discipline. Thus do the Papists err maintaining a power in the Church that is magisterial and not ministerial only. They are confuted for what is taught respecting the power of the Church, ought to have reference to the end for which Paul declares, 2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10; that it was given—namely, for edification, and not for destruction, those who use it lawfully deeming themselves to be nothing more than servants of Christ, and, at the same time, servants of the people in Christ, 2 Cor. 1:24. Moreover, the only mode by which ministers can edify the Church is, by studying to maintain the authority of Christ, which cannot be unimpaired, unless that which he received of the Father is left to him—*viz.* to be the only Master of the Church, Ps. 2:6. For it was not said of any other but of himself alone, “Hear him,” Matt. 17:5. In regard to doctrine, there are two divisions—*viz.* the authority of delivering dogmas, and the interpretation of them, Acts 15:5, 28, 29. Against the Papists, we say negatively: 1.) It does not consist in the church conciliating authority to the word, either as to itself or as to us, since on the contrary all the authority of the church is suspended on the word of God and rests upon it, Eph. 2:20. 2.) It does not consist in making new articles of faith, because as nothing ought to be taken away from the Scriptures, so neither ought anything to be added to them, Gal. 1:8. 3.) It does not consist in that it should interpret the Scriptures absolutely and infallibly at pleasure, because the supreme right of infallible interpretation can be ascribed to no other than the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures, who is his own best interpreter in and by the Scriptures, 1 Pet. 4:11; who on this account orders us to depart from all private interpretations, 2 Pet. 1:20. 4.) It does not consist in that the church is the supreme judge of controversies, because this supreme power belongs to Christ alone, the infallible teacher, and can no more be transferred to another than his prophetic office, Isa. 28:16. Also the Holy Spirit directs us to the Scriptures as

¹ Acts 15:15, 19, 24, 27-31; 16:4; Matt. 18:17-20.

the judge and wishes all spirits and doctrines preached by them tried by it, Isa. 8:20; John 5:39; 1 Thess. 5:20, 21; 1 John 4:1; Heb. 4:12. Regarding the enacting of laws, we maintain against the Papist, negatively, that the church has no law making power, 2 Cor. 13:8; Gal. 1:1. This is seen in these considerations: 1.) There is only one lawgiver, James 4:12. 2.) It is not lawful to add to or take anything away from the divine law, Deut. 4:2; 12:32. 3.) All human commandments are forbidden, Isa. 29:13; Matt. 15:9. 4.) Pastors and teachers are bounded by the laws set down for them by Christ, Matt. 28:19, 20. 5.) Believers once delivered by Christ ought not to be brought back under the yoke or made servants of men, Gal. 5:1; 1 Cor. 7:23. The last power of jurisdiction or exercising discipline was discussed under Church Censures.

Likewise, do the Independents, Anabaptists and other Sectaries err maintaining that there does not belong unto Synods and Councils authoritatively to determine such matters. In regard to church power in the matter of doctrine, we affirm against these errorists: 1.) It consists in the custody of the Scriptures as a sacred deposit entrusted to her, Rom. 3:2. 2.) It consists in its interpretation and vindication, that its legitimate meaning may be sought, disclosed from the Scriptures themselves and vindicated against the sophistries of errorists, 1 Tim. 3:15; 2 Tim. 1:13. Regarding the power of enacting laws, we affirm positively against the Sectaries: 1.) That it is a part of the ecclesiastical government, which is occupied in constituting the external polity or good order, that all things be set in good order in the house of God, 1 Cor. 14:40; 11:34; 16:1. 2.) This directive power concerns not matters of faith and worship (which rests upon the word of God alone), but other things not directly addressed but which are merely indifferent and free or ambiguous and doubtful, such as that spoken by the apostle, 1 Cor. 7:10, 12. 3.) Though the church enact in matters, the nature of things themselves is not changed, only their being matters of legislation are accommodated to the necessary order of the church and judged by the rule of Paul, 1 Cor. 10:23.

Question 2.—*Are these decrees, and determinations, if consonant to the word of God, to be received with reverence, and submission; not only, for their agreement with the Word, but also for the Power, whereby they are made, as being an Ordinance of God appointed thereunto in his Word?*

Answer.—Yes. Acts 15:15, 19, 24, 27-31; 16:4. Thus do the Independents, and other Sectaries err maintaining that these decrees and determinations are no more than intrinsically lawful. We see very clearly in the synod at Jerusalem, this matter of deciding of controversies in matters of doctrine tying the churches, and laying a burden on them, Acts 15:28. This tied them to the very keeping of these decrees, Acts 16:4; 21:25. Also, Ephesus is commended for using the keys of ministerial condemning and judging, whereas Pergamos and Thyatira were rebuked for their failure in this regard, Rev. 2:2, 14, 20. Things which have been appointed according to this rule, it is the duty of the Christian people to observe with a free conscience indeed, and without superstition, but also with a pious and ready inclination to obey, Tit. 1:5. They are not to hold them in contempt, nor pass them by with careless indifference, far less openly to violate them in pride and contumacy, Col. 2:5. You will ask, What liberty of conscience will there be in such cautious observances? Nay, this liberty will admirably appear when we shall hold that these are not fixed and perpetual obligations to which we are astricted, but external rudiments for human infirmity, which, though we do not all need, we, however, all use, because we are bound to cherish mutual charity towards each other, 1 Cor. 9:19; 10:23.