

HERESY OR SCHISM: DO WE REALLY NEED TO CHOOSE?

*A Response to Alexander Shields' Invalid Arguments For Unity With the
Revolution Church of Scotland*

Enquiry Refutation

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The Episcopal Church in the United States has been losing members for the last few years because of its ordination of an openly homosexual bishop. Even people who have long been members of that theologically liberal denomination understand that allowing homosexual church officers is contrary to the Bible. However, Peter James Lee, the Episcopal bishop of Virginia and a supporter of homosexual leadership in the church, advised people not to leave saying, "If you must make a choice between heresy and schism, always choose heresy."

Strangely, some conservative Presbyterians seem to use arguments not too far removed from Bishop Lee. They see maintaining unity as more important than defending the truth, at least in some situations. Presbyterians who support the Revolution Church of Scotland and its numerous daughter churches around the English-speaking world have accused Covenanters of "schism" because Covenanters will not join with them. At the time of its formation in 1690, the Revolution Church embraced deficient terms of communion and also embraced many of the opponents of the Covenanters among its ranks of ministers. These ministers were men who had supported the anti-Christian tyranny that persecuted Scotland's most faithful Christians for many years. They were not required to repent of their sin. So to be faithful to God, the Covenanters rightfully believed that they could not join the Revolution Church.

The Revolution Church gets its name from the Glorious Revolution of 1689. From 1685 until the time of that Revolution, Britain was under the wicked rule of King James II. His unbridled tyranny prompted a popular uprising leading to the successful Revolution of 1689. With the overthrow of James, the Church of Scotland was in a position to be re-established. It had been usurped and corrupted under the rule of Charles II, James' brother and the previous king of Britain.

The faithful Covenanters in 1689 had three remaining ministers: Alexander Shields, Thomas Lining, and William Boyd. Shields, Lining and Boyd presented the Scriptural concerns of the Covenanters to a meeting of Church leaders who were re-establishing the Church of Scotland in the post-Revolution period. However, these ecclesiastical leaders were not interested in the Covenanters' just demands. Basically, the Covenanters' concerns were simply brushed off. Surprisingly, at that point Shields, Lining and Boyd simply abandoned their Covenanter testimonies and joined the new Church. The Covenanters were left without any ministers of their own.

A Book Justifying Unlawful Union

Later, Shields wrote a small book arguing that it was necessary for the Covenanters to join the Revolution Church rather than remain as a separate group. Shields said that remaining separate would amount to "schism." After Shields died, his colleague in compromise, Thomas Lining, edited and published this manuscript.

It's important to note that "schism" is an unlawful separation from the church, a division that cannot be Scripturally justified. However, there can also be a lawful separation that is not a schism. This is because the Bible requires separation from ungodly doctrines and practices (Romans 16:17). The Covenanters were lawfully separated from the Revolution Church, so their situation cannot reasonably be called schism, as Shields falsely charges.

Shields' book is entitled *An Enquiry Into Church-Communion Or, a Treatise Against Separation from the Revolution-Settlement of This National Church, as It Was Settled Anno 1689 and 1690*. The copy referred to in this article is the second edition, printed in Edinburgh by William Gray in 1747.

In this book Shields deals primarily with the issue of Covenanters joining in fellowship with the compromised ministers of the Revolution Church. It focuses on the alleged necessity of union with the Revolution Church rather than other issues. There are many problems with the overall Revolution Settlement that are not addressed in the book.

Shields acknowledges that many of the Revolution Church ministers had been unfaithful before the Glorious Revolution of 1689. In his words, many of the ministers "did indeed comply with the wicked Establishments of the Times, and were involved in the Defections of the Church" (p. 39). Furthermore, he admits that those ministers were unwilling to repent of their wicked behavior. The sins of the past were water under the bridge that people were expected to overlook. So a serious issue had to be resolved, as Shields notes: "the Question is, Whether we shall join in Union and Communion with these Ministers, that albeit they will not confess them to be Defections, or sinful Compliances, yet do allow us to keep our Opinion, and to protest against them?" (p. 40). He answers unequivocally "yes," saying that the wicked ministers "may be joined with in Union and Communion, notwithstanding former Provocations not confessed" (p. 42). The purpose of his book is to justify this position.

The Church of Scotland in Its Infancy?

In the Covenanter book *Informatory Vindication* published in 1687, James Renwick and Alexander Shields had made a distinction between a church in its infancy and a church in adulthood. As they put it, "In the former many things may be tolerated, which may not in the latter; & therefore our Fathers might have born with many things in Ministers, which we cannot, because we have been Reformed from these things, which they were not." In the early period of the Reformation, Christians were rightfully willing to put up with improper practices that had not yet been Reformed. Later, however, those same practices were no longer to be tolerated. Once a practice had been Reformed according to the Bible, its previous defective form was discarded and not to be attempted again.

Shields tries to justify acceptance of the wicked ministers by saying that the Revolution Church was an infant church rather than an adult church: "But now in the present State, the Church is not to be looked upon as adult, or in a manly Estate, as it was in the Times of the purest Reformation or in a decrepit Estate, as in the Times of Defection and Division, but in an infant State to be anew settled over again, planted over again, and purged over again, contending to recover what Reformation it lost, and to preserve what it can recover" (pp. 33-34).

Again he argues, "But now she is growing and coming forward out of Darkness, and advancing, though weakly, in Reformation, and therefore now, sure it must be born with to hear Presbyterian Ministers, though formerly guilty of Defections, as much as in former Times to hear Prelatical Men" (p. 34).

Shields is here arguing that deficient ministers can be accepted in the Revolution Church of Scotland just like deficient ministers were accepted in Protestant churches during the early years of the Reformation.

However, this is clearly an invalid argument. The Church of Scotland was not in its infancy in the late seventeenth century as Shields alleges. It was arguably the most adult church in the world. It had the most detailed and faithful confession, catechisms and other doctrinal statements as well as Biblical covenants. The problem was not that the Church of Scotland had not been sufficiently Reformed. Instead, the problem was that the Revolution Church was unwilling to uphold the faithful covenants and doctrinal standards of the Church of Scotland that had already been adopted a few decades earlier. It was not an issue of infancy versus adulthood, but an issue of obedience to God versus catering to the whims of unfaithful men. Shields was on the wrong side of this issue.

Join Them To Win Them

Another major argument employed by Shields is that Covenanters would best be able to win over the wicked ministers by first joining the Revolution Church. The ministers would not be willing to listen to “schismatics,” so the only way to convince them of the truth would be to join the Church and engage them from within: “The Way to induce them to return, and to remove these Stumblings, and to redintegrate their levitical Purity, is not to separate from them, except we were in unavoidable Hazard of their Sin, which we are not, but to unite, and wrestle, and witness, against their former Departings, Stumblings, and Corruptions, and their present Impenitency” (p. 73).

Again he argues, “By Division and Separation, many of the Godly in the Land, in neighbouring Churches, and the Posterity will be stumbled and tempted, to think our Testimonies and Contendings against these Defections, have been nothing but Schism. This will also make these Ministers themselves despise all our witnessing against them, and encourage them to say, none in the Land oppose their course, but Schismatics, and it will open the Mouths of Malignants, and it will make the Popish and Prelatical Parties rejoice and triumph. Our joining in the present Circumstances, cannot have any Tendency to harden them, if we continue pleading and protesting against them, but rather to oblige them to consider their Ways, when they see that these that witness against them are not Dividers, and Protesters are no Subverters, and that it is Reformation not Schism or Separation we design” (p. 95).

Shields then undermines his own argument, however, by saying that if after joining the Revolution Church the Covenanters fail to convince the wicked ministers, the Covenanters nevertheless cannot lawfully separate from them: “But it is to be endeavoured by peaceable Conferences, managed with all mutual Condescension possible, without Janglings, Recriminations and irritating Exprobations or Reproaches, to the End one Party may be convinced, and brought over to the other, or both agree in one Sentiment. Or, if that cannot be obtained, Union is to be endeavoured, notwithstanding, by mutual Forbearance in Things controverted, forbearing to engage judicially in Sentences of Judicatories, abstaining from pressing or propogating Differences, or putting Restraint on others Light or Practices according to it. But if this Union cannot be obtained, there may be Communion, and must be no Separation or Withdrawing upon the Account of such Differences” (p. 43).

The Covenanters must join the Revolution Church, Shields says, and then peaceably attempt to convince the wicked ministers to repent. If the Covenanters are unsuccessful in this, however, they are simply to give up and remain in the Revolution Church. Shields argues that joining the Revolution Church is the best way to bring about reform, but if the attempt at reform fails, tough luck.

People who fall for this line of reasoning have been duped. It leads to surrender, not reform. If failure to reform the Church is simply to be passively accepted, then failure is certain because the Covenanters would have nothing to bargain with. The Revolution Church would know that it could maintain its unfaithfulness without any fear of repercussions, such as the loss of members.

Protesting From Within Is Sufficient

Another major argument offered by Shields is that Covenanters can maintain a faithful stand for the truth by joining the Revolution Church and protesting against its defections from within. He says that the sins of the wicked ministers are personal scandals that don't provide a legitimate basis for separation. That being so, "if Scandals personal be not a Ground of Withdrawing, then we may have Communion with the Presbyterian Ministers of Scotland, concerning whom the Debate is. For these Scandals are now past, not abiding to be Snares or Stumbling blocks; not involving us in the Guilt of them, if we protest against them, and mourn for them" (p. 56).

It is not sinful to join with the wicked ministers, Shields says, because the Covenanters would protest against their sins: "So in the Body of the Church, we may repent, though Ministers and others will not, we may mourn over their Defections, lay it over upon Christ to remove them, and protest against them, and then be exonerated, and have Peace of Conscience, in joining not with their Corruptions, but in Duty" (p. 66).

At one point Shields appeals to Scripture to justify his argument. Speaking of Hosea 2:2, "Plead with your mother, plead: for she [is] not my wife, neither [am] I her husband: let her therefore put away her whoredoms out of her sight, and her adulteries from between her breasts," he says, "That our pleading with the Church, and protesting against her whorish Defections will be a sufficient Exoneration from Guilt; nothing is here required but to plead" (p. 82).

But making a formal protest against error in a church is not enough. When someone joins a church he or she is committing himself/herself to obey its elders and support its ministry. If the church was founded on a sinful basis, like the Revolution Church was, he or she is committing himself/herself to uphold that sin through his or her support of the church. Simply making a formal protest against the sin when joining (and perhaps a few other protests afterwards) is wholly insufficient since it leaves the member in a situation of being a "partaker of other men's sins" (1 Timothy 5:22).

If someone truly opposes the sin within a church, he or she would need to constantly strive to uproot the sin until the church has been reformed according to the Scriptures. Shields (and others) would likely consider this to be "divisive" behavior and such a member would at some point presumably fall under discipline. In the end, the effect is likely to be the same as if he or she never joined in the first place: any conscientious Covenanter will end up separated from the unfaithful church body. The leaders and members of the Revolution Church (and its daughter churches) actively oppose the Covenanted Reformation, so that Church (and its daughters) will not receive the message of rebuke from Covenanters, whether or not they are members.

In Matthew 18, if one Christian confronts another Christian about a sin and the sinning Christian refuses to repent, the other Christian is expected to take further measures to bring about a resolution. In a worst case scenario, after an extended process, the offending brother is excommunicated.

Shields' procedure is quite different, however. In his scheme, at least with regards to the sins of the Revolution Church, the conscientious Christian is expected to drop the matter after the leaders of the Church fail to make any effort to resolve their sinful activities and doctrinal stances. According to Shields, a Covenanter is to make his protest and then say, "oh well, I made my protest, I guess there's nothing more I can do," and then go on as if everything is okay. But it's not okay and the Covenanter has not fulfilled his duty at that point.

Schism Is The Greatest Evil?

Ultimately, it seems Shields' position is basically that "schism" is a greater evil than tolerating wickedness and false doctrine. "Yea when Union comes in Competition with the censuring of unfaithful Men, and both cannot be obtained together, Union is to be preferred; as we find the Apostle doth, when the Evils and Inconveniences of Schism be greater and more hurtful to the Church than the Evil of such an Union" (p. 52).

For the most part, Shields' argument boils down to the idea that unity is more important than the truth. In this respect he sounds much like Bishop Lee of the Episcopal Church who was referred to previously. But Christians shouldn't be fooled by such rhetoric about the evils of schism and the importance of unity. Schism is evil and unity is important, but the real issue here is not schism and unity but faithfulness to God and His truth. On judgment day no one will stand before a bunch of unfaithful church officers; everyone will stand before God. So the most important thing to keep in mind when dealing with these issues is, who do you want to please, men or God? Is God calling Christians to surrender their commitment to His truth in order to have unity in a church? No, He is not.

The most important point here is that Shields' arguments all fail. He does not demonstrate that Covenanters should join an unfaithful church, in this case the Revolution Church of Scotland. But it's also pertinent, now that we are about 300 years past the time of Shields' defection, to take a look at how successful his method has been in practice.

Many Covenanters followed Shields' advice and joined the Revolution Church while making a protest. How successful were they in bringing the Revolution Church out of its alleged infancy? How successful were they in convincing the wicked ministers to repent? They had no success whatsoever. The Revolution Church of Scotland today is worse than in 1690. It was bad in 1690, and basically it's gone downhill since then. Shields' followers didn't even make a dent, it would seem. They and their descendants just got swallowed up in the defection--unless they were part of some of the subsequent separations from the Church of Scotland, such as the Seceders. But any who were part of the subsequent separations violated Shields' clear teaching against separation anyway, so that just proves the point being argued here, namely, Shields' was wrong.

Clearly, Shields counseled capitulation to the errors of the Revolution Church. Sadly, a minister who had once stood firmly for the truths of the Covenanted Reformation stumbled at the end, much to his shame. At one point he had fought a good fight, but he did not finish his course. May the same never be said of us.