

A Summary Platform  
of the Heads of a Body of Practical Divinity

which the Ministers of the Protestant Churches abroad have sued for and  
which is further enlarged in a Treatise entitled,  
*An Earnest Plea for Gospel-Communion...*

John Dury

(1596-1680)

London

1654

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# The Copy of a Letter

written by Dr. Usher,<sup>1</sup> the primate of Armach, to Master Dury,  
concerning the publishing of this body of practical divinity  
according to the premised model.

Master Dury,

I am glad that you are still willing to take some pains about the procuring of a body of practical divinity, a work which I have long wished for and which formerly my heart was in, and my hand would have been in, if God had been pleased to continue our peace; for when you brought over the letters from the foreign churches wherein they made it their request unto us to gratify their churches with some endeavors about the compliment of this work, which were seconded by a letter from the ministers in and about London unto me when I was in Ireland many years ago, I was very glad of the motion and laid it seriously to heart and conferred with some of my brethren about it that we might bring the work to some perfection.

Doctor Downam,<sup>2</sup> the then bishop of London-Derry, was a man whose studies were much bent that way, for which cause it was referred to him; and he readily did undertake the task to draw up a model or platform according to which that system or body might be compiled, that the ministers who had written to me might be able to choose their tasks and set themselves awork about it. This model he promised to send unto me to revise it before it should be imparted to the foresaid ministers, that in our joint name it might be sent unto them. But he either for want [lack] of health, or some other impediments, did not expedite the work before his death; and when the troubles of Scotland did begin, which had some reflection upon us in Ireland and I being come over hither, he, the bishop of Derry, being dead, the troubles of Ireland taking fire at the proceedings of the then parliament here, and the great distractions of this and the other two nations increasing ever since, I could not do what was desired of me and what I

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<sup>1</sup> [This letter is from the famed Biblical scholar, James Ussher (1580-1656) of Ireland and was written only a few years before his death.]

<sup>2</sup> [George Downname (d. 1634) the learned English divine.]

heartily desired might have been done, and wish yet may be done: for it will never be too late or unseasonable to set upon such an enterprise.

If therefore by your solicitation and pains you can oblige those that in the universities, or in and about this city, are able and willing to undertake it, I think you will do a work very acceptable to all that are godly and profitable to all the churches at home and abroad. Let me therefore entreat you to proceed, that whiles there is any appearance of doing good to our generation, we may not neglect the opportunity. As for the model of the heads which you have showed unto me, I shall advise this:

That the precognitions [presuppositions] may not be insisted upon largely, but as briefly and substantially as may be; and if some references be made unto such authors as handle the heads of the precognitions more at large, it may give satisfaction to such as will be more curious and desirous to see things amply handled.

Secondly, my advice is that the work may be contracted to as few hands as may be who may meet and confer together about it when they are perfecting their tasks.

Thirdly, I would not have the work too large and voluminous, for several reasons, yet as full of matter as can be; and where enlargements may be thought useful, references may be made to such authors as use them most effectually.

Lastly, concerning the cases of conscience which should be handled in this body, I think they may be brought in and inserted under every head of matter whereunto they belong.

This is for the present that which I would suggest. I pray God direct and assist you and all those that go about it; and what I shall be able to do towards the encouragement of able workmen therein, you may be confident shall not be wanting [lacking] from

Your loving friend,

Ja. Armachanus<sup>3</sup>

From my study, the 14<sup>th</sup> of Dec. 1653

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<sup>3</sup> [James of Armach]

# A Summary Platform of the Heads of a Body of Practical Divinity

By the body of practical divinity is meant a full and orderly collection of all divine truths relating to the practice of piety, to be digested into a system or some other kind of book. The scope then of this book should be to hold forth the whole doctrine of the life of godliness in an exact description of all the precognitions [presuppositions], principles and parts thereof, with a resolution of the material doubts which may be incident thereunto. This doctrine may be delivered two ways:

One way positively, by holding forth the undoubted truths as they are demonstrable from their proper grounds;

Another way doubtfully, by resolving all the cases of conscience which are raised thereupon.

The positive doctrine will be complete if it deliver three things:

First, the precognitions which are to be presupposed that it may be acknowledged that there is a life of godliness;

Secondly, the principles which are to be received and believed that the life of godliness may have a being and be entertained in the soul;

Thirdly, the parts which are to be wrought out in the whole man that the life of godliness may be powerfully effectual in all his faculties and ways.

## Of the Precognitions

The precognitions are certain truths which presuppose a man only to be rational and are to be made out unto him as such. Therefore they must not be deduced and

offered unto him as Scriptural oracles, but as conclusions evinced [derived] from the grounds of sound reason, and may be referred to six heads:

1. That there is a Supreme Power over all things visible and invisible, which amongst all men is called God.
2. That this Supreme Power is to be feared, worshipped, and glorified by man.
3. That this Supreme Power is a rewarder of those that seek after Him with fear, to worship and glorify him.
4. That the writings of the prophets, evangelists and apostles in the Old and New Testament are the Word of God.
5. That these writings were given to teach men the true way to seek after God by fearing, worshipping and glorifying Him.
6. That there shall be a time wherein God will judge men according to the works wherein they have or have not feared, worshipped and glorified Him.

### Of the Principles

The principles are certain truths which presuppose a man to believe that the Scriptures are God's Word, and upon this supposal this fundamental position is to be made out, which is the root of all the principles of godliness, that is, that in the Scriptures God does hold forth a Covenant to be entertained between Himself and men, which being believed, two things are afterward to be delivered from the Scriptures:

- I. First, how the Covenant is revealed therein;
- II. Secondly, how it is made and confirmed with men.

I. Concerning the revealing of the Covenant in the Scriptures, the doctrine of the canonical books (which are the only true instrument of the Covenant), as they are

distinguishable from the apocryphal, is to be delivered; where two things are to be made out:

First, what the true characters of canonical Scripture are, and that the apocryphal books have them not.

Secondly, that in the canonical books, the truth and Covenant of God is held forth by divine authority infallibly, perfectly and evidently.

II. Concerning the making of the Covenant, two things are to be held forth from the Scriptures:

1. First, what the tenor of the Covenant is which God does make with men.
2. Secondly, what the motives are which oblige men in conscience to entertain it.

1. Concerning the tenor of the Covenant three things are to be opened:

(1) First, who the persons are concerned in the Covenant;

(2) Secondly, what the form of the contract and the terms of the agreement are between these persons;

(3) Thirdly, what the performance and accomplishment is of that which is contracted and agreed upon.

(1) The persons concerned in the Covenant are God, mankind and Jesus Christ.

God is considered here as He is the author of the Covenant and, as such, only revealed and to be known by us.

Mankind is considered as he is bound to depend upon God by a Covenant.

Jesus Christ is considered as he is the alone mediator between God and man by a Covenant, in respect:

Of his twofold nature, as being both God and man in one person and consequently a true medium and center of all God and man's properties.

Of his threefold offices, as being the great Prophet, the High Priest and the only King of all saints in heaven and in earth.

Of his twofold state of life: the first of humiliation on earth; the second of exaltation in heaven and the works of his mediation between God and man in both estates.

(2) The form of the contract and the terms of the agreement are to be opened in showing two things:

1. That the manner of God's contracting is with none directly and properly, but with his only begotten Son, and with mankind only in, by and through Him.

2. That the things promised by God and the terms upon which they are promised are distinguishable:

First, as the promises are made to Christ;

Secondly, as they are made to the believers in Him;

Lastly, as they are made to the professors of his name.

(3) The performance and accomplishment of that which is promised and agreed upon to be done on all sides is to be opened in two things:

1. How Christ by his obedience and sufferings, having performed all that he did undertake towards God for mankind, did by his death make over all the promises of the Covenant by way of testament unto such as believe and profess in his name, that from Him by faith they might become heirs directly and properly.

2. How the Father, by his power and glory, made good unto Christ all his promises, by raising Him from the dead, by setting Him at his

right hand and by giving Him all power in heaven and earth to administer his own testament by sending forth the Holy Ghost. For through, in, and by the preaching of the Gospel, and in this administration of the testament of Christ by the Spirit in the Gospel, there is to be opened:

1. A general call given, and an offer of grace made by Christ on God's part, unto all that hear the gospel;
2. A particular application of grace dispensed according to God's own will, whereby the terms of the Covenant are made good:

To all believers, by their effectual calling and conversion unto God, and by their constant perseverance in grace unto the end;

To all professors, by their gathering of themselves together into one body and by their mutual edification and growth through the unity of the Spirit and the communion of holy duties.

2. The tenor of the Covenant being thus opened, the motives which are powerful to oblige men's consciences to entertain the offer and keep the tenor thereof, are to be delivered; and [these] may be reduced to three heads:

- (1) To the happiness which in this life befalls to those who are in Covenant with God. See Ps. 25:10.<sup>4</sup>
- (2) To the obligation which lies upon the consciences of men to obey God's Commandments and his calls.
- (3) To the condition wherein men shall be at the Day of Judgement.

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<sup>4</sup> ["All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto such as keep his covenant and his testimonies."]



When these heads are handled which concern the making of the Covenant, then the truth concerning the confirmation of the Covenant is to be opened, to which head does belong the doctrine of the signs annexed unto the administration thereof amongst the professors; where two things are chiefly to be insisted upon:

- I. How they are instituted and appointed by God to be outward means to assure us of his meaning and to seal up the reality of his working and effecting the tenor of the Covenant in the inward man.
- II. How they are to be used by us, that we may be confirmed in grace thereby and receive the effect of that for which God has appointed them.

Hitherto the doctrines have been mentioned which relate unto the principle of the life of godliness, which is the Covenant of Grace. Now follow the heads of doctrine which contain the parts of this life, which are two:

- I. The one containing the substantial; the other
- II. The circumstantial life of godliness.

I. The substantial life is the power and practice of all the truth whereby God is enjoyed in the Covenant. The doctrine thereof may contain two parts:

1. The first should hold forth the material parts of the life of godliness distinctly.
2. The second, the formal union of these parts in the whole man conjointly.

1. The material parts of the substantial life of godliness make up the inward and the outward man of God.

(1) The inward man of God is the new creature, whereof the doctrine to be delivered should contain these heads:

- i. What the regenerate state of the soul is, and how it is wrought by the Spirit of God.
- ii. How it is discerned and differenced from the unregenerate state of the soul.

iii. What the acts and motions of the spiritual life are wherein the regenerate soul has secret fellowship with God.

iv. What the deceits are of natural imaginations, of superstitious practices, and of Satanical delusions mixing himself therewith, whereby he does transform himself into an angel of light and whereby the soul is bewitched and possessed with an unclean spirit, instead of being renewed by the Holy Ghost.

(2) The outward man of God is the state of life wherein all our ways are through the inward principle made conformable unto the heavenly calling. Here the doctrines are to be delivered:

i. Of self-denial, in respect of ungodliness and worldly lusts which, cleaving to our nature, are fomented [instigated] from without in our flesh.

ii. Of self-resignation, or of offering up our ways to walk after the Spirit; by:

The life of sobriety in respect of ourselves;

The life of righteousness in respect of our neighbors.

The life of religiousness in respect of God.

2. The formal union of these parts stands in the life of universal obedience, whereby the whole man in all his acts is inwardly and outwardly subordinate unto the will of God according to the tenor of his Law; where the doctrine of the Ten Commandments should be delivered in three things.

(1) In the rules of interpreting the commandments;

(2) In the abstract of duties, showing how all virtues commanded and vices forbidden are to be referred to the Ten Words of the Law given upon Mount Sinai;

(3) In the spiritual watch to be kept over one's self and over others, where the means and helps to duties and the signs and causes of sins are to be laid

open.

II. The circumstantial life of godliness is the state of the life wherein we walk circumspectly before God in respect of our several relations and callings, where the duties relating to the circumstances of our 1. Natural, and of our 2. Spiritual states and callings severally, and to both jointly, are to be opened.

1. Our natural states and callings are differences by (1) the properties of sexes, (2) by the several kinds of human societies and the relations arising between the members thereof.

(1) The sexes being male and female. The works proper to each of them are to be described, and the limits of their power and authority in their employments set forth, from the preeminency of the properties which are in the one above the other.

(2) The natural societies of men arise either from the unity of blood or of outward interests.

i. From the unity of blood there is:

The society of man and wife to propagate mankind;  
The society of parents and children;  
The society of brethren and sisters, of kindred and allies.

ii. From the unity of outward interests there is:

The society of master and servant;  
The society of magistrate and subject;  
The society of proprietor and tenant.

2. The spiritual societies arise in the Church from the several conditions and joint relations:

- (1) Of members to each other, and to their officers.
- (2) Of officers to each other, and to their members.

Of all these states and relations the duties should be laid open as they are prescribed in the Word distinctly.

Then the state and calling which has a respect to all sorts of societies jointly (as being the seed-plot and seminary of all the virtues to be exercised therein) is the state of schools; where ought to be delivered:

1. What kinds of schools ought to be constituted suitable to the principles and life of Christianity;
2. To whom the care of erecting and reforming of schools does belong, and what necessity there is of this work;
3. What the peculiar duties are of school masters and mistresses, and of scholars of both sexes.

Hitherto the first and positive part of the body of practical divinity has been delineated. The other part, which should contain the cases of conscience, may be divided into two parts; whereof the first should be a general direction how all cases ought to be resolved; the second should be a special collection of the most considerable cases, which ought to be resolved distinctly by themselves. In the general direction, two things should be taught:

1. How all believers should endeavor to resolve their own doubts according to the analogy of faith, hope and charity, by the general principles of the Covenant and the fundamental rules of duties pertaining to godliness.
2. How teachers or experienced Christians should endeavor to help the weak and doubting professors to resolve their cases, by reflecting upon the nature of the subject whereunto the doubt does belong and by considering the capacity of the person who makes the scruple and the occasion upon which it is raised.

In the special collection of particular cases, the chief thing advisable is concerning the ordering of them, that they should be ranked in the method whereby they relate unto the parts of the positive doctrine and as they may from thence arise in the mind of a weak Christian, so that whether the cases be collected and put into one distinct part of the body

by themselves or divided severally and dispersed into the whole body under the heads of the matter whereunto they belong, the method may still be the same: to find them out upon all occasions when a resolution is to be sought after.

The End