DOCTRINE RESUMED.

[The text we are upon is] Matthew 25:1-12.¹

The first words in this chapter evidently refer to something foregoing: "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins." The second "then" refers to some time that Christ had just before been speaking of; and in order to know what time that is, we must look into the preceding chapter: and there we shall find that the time Christ speaks of, is the time of his coming to judgment. You may see, in the 30th verse: "then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." And so he goes on to speak of that day, to the end of the chapter. V. 36, "But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only." [Vv.] 40-41, "Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left." [V.] 42, "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come." [V.] 50, "The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of." So that this is the time referred to, when it is said here, "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom."

In the parable that I have now read, I would at this time observe two things in general:

1. That the company that goes forth to meet the bridegroom, is made up of two sorts of virgins.

2. That these two sorts of virgins agree in some things, and in others do exceedingly differ. They agree in that they go forth together; they are of the same company; they all take their lamps; they go forth together all upon the same design, viz., to meet the bridegroom.
And they agree in this, that while the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. They all heard the midnight cry, wherein they were told that the bridegroom was coming; they were all called upon to go out to meet him, and accordingly all arise and trim their lamps.

But they greatly differ in other things. They greatly differ in what they are: some of them are wise, and others foolish.

They greatly differ in what they do: the one sort takes oil in their vessels with their lamps, and the other takes lamps and no oil with them. And they also greatly differ in the event and issue of things respecting them. They differ in that when the midnight cry was heard, the lamps of one sort were gone out, but the lamps of the other continued burning still. And so they greatly differed: the one were ready to meet the bridegroom, and the other were not.

And this occasioned a great difference in their behavior on occasion of that cry, “Behold, the bridegroom cometh.” One are much more put into a fright than the other. One is put into a woeful hurry to seek oil out of season, while the other are prepared for that which is the proper business of the time, viz., not to buy oil, but to go forth to meet the bridegroom, and enter in with him into the marriage.

The one enters in with the bridegroom into the marriage, and the other are shut [out]. The one are enjoying the entertainment of the wedding, where the other came and had the door shut, and cry, “Lord, Lord, open to us,” and that in vain, receiving no other answer from the bridegroom but, “Verily I say unto you, I know you not” [Matt. 25:12].

And therefore, from this parable I would raise these two general observations or propositions:

I. That the visible church of Christ is made up of true and false Christians.

II. Those two sorts of Christians do in many things agree, and yet in many other things do greatly differ.
I. The visible church of Christ is made up of true and false Christians. There is a mystical and invisible church of Christ that is only of true saints; ’tis this church, is the spouse of Christ. This is she that is the bride, with reference to which Christ in the context is called the bridegroom. This is that church that Christ loved and gave himself for, that he might sanctify {her}.

And there is a visible church of Christ in the world. This is that outward church, made up of those [who] have the profession and outward appearance of Christians.

This is that church of Christ in which the external public Christian worship, and the ordinary officers [and] ordinances of Christian worship, are upheld.

And this is of larger extent than the other. In this are contained not only true Christians, but many that are not Christians indeed, but only in appearance.

This is signified in the parable we are upon, of the two sorts of virgins that went forth to meet the bridegroom.

The same is signified in the following parable, beginning with the 14th verse, in which the visible church is compared to a company of servants to whom their master commits his good, in which company are two sorts of servants: the one faithful, and the other unfaithful [Matt. 25:14-30].

The same is represented in the latter part of the chapter, in the description of the day of judgment, where the visible church seems to be compared to a shepherd’s flock, wherein are two different kinds of creatures: the one sheep, and the other goats [Matt. 25:25-36].

The same is represented in the 13th chapter of Matthew, by the wheat and the tares that both grow together in one field.

The same is represented in the words of John the Baptist, [in the]
3rd [chapter] of Matthew, [v.] 12, where the visible church is compared to a [threshing] floor, in which both wheat and chaff lie together.

And again, the same is represented by the Apostle in II Tim. 2:20, where the visible church is compared to a great house in which there are various sorts of vessels, some of gold and silver, and others of wood and earth; and some to honor, and others to dishonor.

So that this is abundantly held forth to us, not only in the parable of the ten virgins, but elsewhere, that the visible church of Christ is made of those two sorts, viz., true and false Christians.

First. 'Tis evermore so with respect to the universal visible church. That is, if we take the visible church of Christ, in all parts of it through the world, 'tis always so, in all ages and at all times, that 'tis made up of these two sorts. Here,

1. There never yet has been a time, but that there was a number of true saints in the visible church of Christ. It has been so, ever since God first set up his church in this fallen world. God ever has had, and ever will have, a church.

Satan hath long endeavored to extirpate the church. The dragon hath persecuted the woman, and hath cast water out of his mouth as a flood to destroy her [Rev. 12:15].

And oftentimes, God hath in his providence suffered him to prevail against it, so far as to bring her to the very brink of ruin; but God always hath stood on her side, and hath not suffered Satan to swallow her up. Ps. 124:1-3, "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, many a time may Israel say; If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose up against us: then they had swallowed us up quick, when their wrath was kindled against us." But the church is built on Christ, that is an immoveable rock, and therefore “the gates of hell never could prevail against it,” nor ever shall. Matt. 16:18, “on this rock will I build my church.”
Even in the most corrupt times of the church, when there seems to be the greatest appearance of the church’s being destroyed, yet God has reserved a number of true worshippers. As it was in the corrupt times in Israel, when Elijah thought that there was none but he of God’s worshippers left: God tells him, “Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him,” I Kgs. 19:18.

And so it was in the times of the greatest popish darkness, when all the world seemed to wonder after the beast [Rev. 13:3]. Yet there were always a number that opposed the corruptions and abomination of the church of Rome, and a great number, though they appeared very small in comparison of the rest.

The number of God’s sealed ones in that time of great apostasy, while others followed the beast, followed the Lamb wheresoever he went. While others were defiled, these were virgins that were not defiled; where others were corrupted and ruined, these were redeemed from amongst men, as in the beginning of the 14th chapter of Revelation.

God always has a holy seed in his visible church, whereby religion is kept from wholly dying in the world, even in the most degenerate times. Is. 6:13, “But yet in it shall be a tenth, that shall be eaten: as a teil tree, and as an oak, whose substance is in them, when they cast [their leaves]: so the holy seed shall be the substance thereof.” But,

2. There are ever more false professors with the true. Very commonly, these make the far greater part; and here Christ tells us that though many are called, yet few are chosen, Matt. 20:16. The number of true saints in the visible church, are commonly but a small remnant out of a great multitude. Rom. 9:27, “Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, yet a remnant shall be saved.”

Indeed, at sometimes the proportion of true professors to false ones in the visible church, is much greater than others. Sometimes religion is
in much more flourishing circumstances in the church than at others, and then the number of true saints is great.

So it was in the primitive times of the gospel. True piety greatly flourished under the preaching of the apostles, and there were multitudes of true saints; and the churches planted by the apostles were in great part real Christians. And so again, in the time of the first Reformation from popery, religion greatly flourished, and there were many true saints. But yet, even in the most flourishing circumstances of the church, there are a great many false Christians with the true; as we know it was in the apostles’ times.

Second. ‘Tis commonly so in particular churches. ‘Tis rarely so in particular societies of visible Christians, where God’s ordinances are upheld and the gospel is preached in its purity, but that there are some godly persons, and that, even in places that are very corrupt. There was a Lot even in Sodom; and in Jerusalem of old, when it was exceeding corrupt and the city was so overspread with abomination that it was ripe for destruction, there was a number that sighed and cried. Ezek. 9:4, “and the Lord said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.”

And on the other hand, in the most pure churches, where the doctrines of the gospel are preached in their greatest purity, and delivered in the most powerful and convincing manner, and vital religion is in the most flourishing circumstances, there will be some false professors mixed [in]. Thus there was a Judas even among the twelve disciples that went about Christ as his family of children.

REASONS.

There is a threefold reason may be given of this, or reasons of three kinds: one on the part of false professors that are members of the
visible church; and another on the part of true Christians that are members of the mystical church; and another on the part of Christ, the head of the church.

[1.] The first reason, which respects the false members of the church, is the dreadful proneness there naturally is in the heart of man to hypocrisy. We are told, Jer. 17:9, that “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?”

Men are naturally exceeding prone to deceive themselves in their opinion they have of themselves, and that from their pride and self-love.

Their pride makes ‘em prone to entertain high thoughts of themselves, to look on themselves through a magnifying glass, to give honorable appellations to themselves, to think themselves virtuous and religious. And as they have a high thought of themselves, so they are ready to think God has a high thought of themselves: and hence, those that are indeed no Christians look on themselves as Christians, and profess themselves to be such.

And their self-love makes them exceeding prone to flatter themselves, that they have the necessary qualifications of an happy state. They are very ready to think themselves free from what they heard inevitably exposes them to ruin.

For every man would feign flatter himself that he is not like to be miserable, and he has a great deal of strong prejudice to blend into a thought that he has what is necessary to make him happy.

And hence, many men that hear the threatenings and promises of God’s Word, and live in places of light, think themselves Christians, when they ben’t Christian, and so make a false profession of Christianity.

And hence it is that false professors do abound everywhere where the light of the gospel comes, as it comes everywhere where the visible church is.

And then there is an exceeding proneness in men naturally, not only
to deceive themselves, but to deceive others also. There is a seed or principle of pharisaism in every man, whereby he is prone to do things and to say things, to be seen of men, to make false pretenses and professions to deceive them, and to beget an high opinion of ‘em in others.

Men naturally seek the honor that is of man, more than that which is of God, and to regard more how they appear in the eyes of men than in God’s eyes. And to be a Christian is credible in the church of God; and this is another reason why false professors do abound in the visible church of Christ.

But besides this, there is a proneness in the heart of man to endeavor to deceive God himself. Man naturally is prone to be putting on a mask and disguise, even [when] he comes to appear before God, and to make false pretenses to him. And ’tis exceeding difficult to get men wholly off from a notion of God’s being pleased with their fair outside; and many hope for acceptance with God from nothing else but a good outside.

These things are the reason why false professors abound in the church, as to what pertains to such false professors.

2. The second reason I would give of it, is on the part of the true professors of Christianity. And the reason as to what pertains to them, is that they can’t search the hearts of others. Those that are indeed members of the mystical body of Christ, they can’t look into others’ hearts, and certainly determine who are of their society and who are not, so as to refuse to admit or receive any to be of their company, or to partake with them in their external privileges, but only such as are truly godly.

And Christ, in the rules that he has given for the reception of persons into the visible church, has wisely accommodated himself to the nature and state of his people here in this world. He has given ‘em no power to search others’ hearts, for that he has reserved to himself as his own prerogative. Rev. 2:23, “and all the churches shall know that I am he
which searcheth hearts and the reins."

To go to make them judges of other hearts, would be not only to exalt ‘em above their natures, but also to enstate ‘em in his throne, and to invest ‘em with that which belongs in proper to God only.

They are fellow servants, and Christ never committed to them power of judging their fellow servants.

Other men ben’t their servants, but Christ and they have no business to judge another man’s servant. Rom. 14:4, “Who art thou, that [judgest another man's servant?]”

If they do so, they are not doers of the law, but judges, as the apostle James say, Jas. 4:11.

Therefore, the rule that Christ has given his church to proceed by in admitting others to external privileges with them, is to proceed only by what is visible and external: for ‘tis only that that is liable to our observation. As to the heart, that is invisible; that belongs to God to judge of, and not us.

The officers and rulers of the church, they are none of them searchers of men’s hearts. And though some of them may be well-skilled in experimental religion and soul concerns, yet Christ has not seen fit to make their private judgment of the state of men’s souls, their rule in admission of members into the church of Christ.

For they are but poor, fallible men at best, and if they should reject all that they think ben’t truly godly, they may reject many that are truly godly. And therefore, Christ has given to none of his ministers power to separate wheat and tares in this world as judges, lest while they go about to root up the tares, they should root up the wheat also. Therefore, he would have both grow together till the harvest, till he comes as judge to separate them, who alone is equal to the business, Matt. 13:29-30.

So that nothing is left to the church as their rule with respect to
admission or exclusion of members, but those things that are visible to the eye of the public, and not those things that appear to the private opinions of men. But such a public visibility won’t exclude false professors; hence it comes to pass that false Christians are at all times, and everywhere, mixed with true in the visible church.

3. The last kind of reasons respect Christ, the head of the church, why he so orders the state of the visible church in this world, that many false professors shall be in it. And two reasons may be given of it:

   (1) Christ would not anticipate the work of the day of judgment, and do the work of that day, before the time. If Christ should now so order it, that true and false Christians should be precisely distinguished and separated, he therein would do the work of the day of judgment beforehand: for the business of that day, is to make such a separation. But Christ would not anticipate the work of that day.

   For everything there is a season, and a time for every business, and purpose [Eccles. 3:1]. But the present time is not the time of judgment; it don’t appear in God’s sight a proper time.

   The present time is a time of probation, and a future time, a time of judgment. To do the work of judgment now, would be to confound a day of probation and a day of judgment together.

   There is a certain appointed time for judgment, a day for separating sheep from goats, wheat from chaff. The appointed day shall declare these things. The harvest is the proper time for separating wheat from tares; and therefore Christ says, “Let both grow together then till the harvest,” Matt. 13:30.

   And therefore Christ himself, while on earth, in acting as the head of the visible church, did not separate true professors from hypocrites, but admitted Judas among the disciples to like external privileges with them—though he knew that he was a devil—because he would not do the work of the day of judgment beforehand.
(2) There are wise ends why Christ so orders the state of the visible church, that many false professors shall be in it. Particularly these two:

1. As a means of gathering in the elect. By means of such a state of things, many natural men are in the visible church of Christ, whereby they enjoy external privileges of visible Christians, and are the constant subjects of the means of grace; which proves a means of many of them being afterwards brought savingly home to Christ, and into the invisible church.

And this is a principal means of upholding the church of Christ in the world, from age to age.

If no natural men were in the visible church of Christ, then no natural men would be the adoring subjects of the appointed means of grace, and so wouldn’t enjoy those means of their conversion that now they do. But one end of the ordinary dispensation of the ordinances of Christ, is the conversion of sinners.

2. For the rendering of reprobates more inexcusable, and the greater manifestation of divine justice in their condemnation. Wicked men are rendered abundantly the more inexcusable for being members of the visible church, for living under such light, such advantages; and their guilt becomes the greater for their sinning as they do against the light and their profession.

And this, the Scripture teaches us, is one end why ‘tis ordered that some men live under means of grace. Isaiah was sent to preach to some in Israel for this end, Is. 6. Christ gives this reason why he preached to the unbelieving, obstinate Jews, Matt 13:14. And therefore it is said that Christ “is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel” [Luke 2:34], and that he shall be a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation to sinners [Is. 25:16]. So to others he is set for “a stone of stumbling,” I Pet. 2:8.
APPLICATION.

I. Hence, we need not wonder when we find it so. Many professors come in.

II. Hence, they do greatly err that go about to make a separation between true and false Christians in the world, as though they had power of discerning and certainly distinguishing between godly and ungodly, and so will venture positively and absolutely to decide concerning the state of others’ souls.

They do err that will positively determine for persons that they are converted, but more especially they who are positive and peremptory in determining against ‘em, being forward to say of one and another that they never were converted, and that they han’t a jot of true grace in their hearts.

By such censoriousness, persons do certainly do that which is not agreeable to the state and circumstances of the church in this world. If men in the present state had been endowed with such power, Christ never would have so ordered it, that true and false Christians should evermore be mixed together in the world. Such persons take upon them the part of the judge, and anticipate the work of the day of judgment.

III. If it be so, {that the visible church is made up of true and false Christians}, hence we may assuredly gather that the present state of the church is not its last state. {It will be} succeeded by another {state}. A state of such mixture is a state of confusion, {and cannot last}. Godly and ungodly are most contrary in their natures and state. {They are} as contrary as sheep and wolves. Can it be believed that a shepherd will never separate such, but always will suffer sheep and wolves {to dwell together}? Can it be imagined that a prudent husbandman, however he may suffer wheat and chaff to be together for a while, yet will always sift {them together}?

This is a strong argument for a future state as a day of judgment.
Doubtless, there will come a time when there shall a pure church, {composed of} only saints. Christ’s bride shall be pure, “not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing” [Eph. 5:27].

IV. If {the visible church is made of true and false Christians}, then let us all look to ourselves, and see to it that we are true Christians.

We have reason to think, from what has been said, that true and false professors are mixed here amongst us, as ‘tis all over the visible church {of Christ}.

We live when we hope there are many true Christians, but yet there are wise virgins and foolish mixed {together}. Don’t let any of us content ourselves with being accepted in the visible church.

Let us consider what has been said, viz., that one end why it is thus ordered {that the visible church is made of true and false Christians}, is that it may render the state of those that live and die false Christians the more inexcusable.

Both now have been of the visible church. If [you are] a false Christian, better be none at all. Better [to] have been a heathen, {for false Christians are} more inexcusable, [their] guilt [is] greater. “I know thy works, that thou art neither cold not hot” [Rev. 3:15].

False Christians in the visible church, of all mankind, will be those that will be lowest in [hell].

Therefore, let us see to it that we are not of that number.
Notes

1 MS: "NO 1 decem 1737."
2 MS: "endeavour."
3 MS: "Xs."
4 In revising for repreaching, JE deleted this sentence.
5 MS: "concerns."