



**THE  
RULING  
ELDER**

**SAMUEL MILLER**

THE WARRANT, NATURE, AND DUTIES,  
OF THE OFFICE OF  
**THE RULING ELDER**  
IN THE  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

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WITH AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY, BY THE  
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## PREFACE

TO  
THE MINISTERS AND ELDERS  
OF THE  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
IN THE  
UNITED STATES.

Reverend and Respected Brethren,

The substance of the following Essay was delivered from the pulpit, in the form of a sermon, more than twenty years ago, and subsequently published. In consequence of repeated solicitation from some individuals of your number, I have thought proper to alter its form, to enlarge its limits, and to adapt it, according to my best judgment, to more general utility. It has long appeared to me, that a more ample discussion of this subject than I have previously seen, is really needed. And if the present volume should be considered as, in any tolerable degree, answering the desired purpose, I will feel myself richly rewarded for the labour which has attended its preparation.

Such as it is, my venerated friends, I inscribe it most respectfully to you. My first prayer in regard to it is that it may be the means of doing some good; my next, that it may be received by those whom I have so much reason to respect and love, as a well-intended effort to benefit the church of God.

I am aware that some of my brethren do not concur with me in maintaining the divine authority of the office of the ruling elder, and probably in several other opinions respecting this office advanced in the following pages. In reference to these points, I can only say that as the original publication, of which this is an enlargement, was made without the remotest thought of controversy, and even without adverting in my own mind to the fact that I differed materially from any of my brethren, so nothing is more foreign from my wishes in the republication, than to assail the opinions or feelings of any brother. I have carefully re-examined the whole subject, and although in doing this I have been led to modify some of my former opinions in relation to a few minor points, yet in reference to the divine warrant and the great importance of the office for which I plead, my convictions have become stronger than ever. The following sheets exhibit those views, and that testimony in support of them, which at present satisfy my own mind, and which I feel confident may be firmly sustained. How far, however, the considerations which have satisfied me may impress more impartial judges, I cannot venture to foretell. All that I dare to ask in their behalf is that they may be seriously and candidly weighed.

But there is one point in regard to which I anticipate no diversity of opinion. If the statement given in the following Essay concerning the duties incumbent on ruling elders is correct, it is certain that very inadequate views of those duties have too often been taken both by those who conferred and those who sustained the office, and that there is a manifest and loud call for an attempt to raise the standard of public sentiment in reference to the whole subject. That we make so little of this office, compared with what we might do, and ought to do, really appears to me one of the deepest deficiencies of our beloved church. That a reform in this respect is desirable, is to express but half the truth. It is *necessary*: it is *vital*. It has pleased the Sovereign Disposer to cast our lot in a period of mighty plans and of high moral effort for the benefit of the world. In the subject of this volume, I am inclined to think, is wrapped up one of those means which are destined,

under his blessing, to be richly productive of moral energy in the enterprises of Christian benevolence, which appear to be every day gathering strength. When the rulers of the church will, in the genuine spirit of the humble, faithful, and laborious Paul, “magnify their office; when they will be found cordially and diligently cooperating with those who ‘labour in the word and doctrine,’” in inspecting, counselling, and watching over the “flocks” respectively committed to their “oversight in the Lord;” and when they will be suitably honoured and employed in their various appropriate functions, both by pastors and people — this change will, I believe, be at once one of the surest precursors, and one of the most efficient means of the introduction of brighter days in the church of God.

So far as we can anticipate events, this important change must begin with the teachers and rulers of the church themselves. On every one of you, therefore, if my estimate of the subject is correct, devolves a high and most interesting responsibility. That you may have grace given you to acquit yourselves of this responsibility in a manner acceptable to our common Master, and conducive to the signal advancement of his kingdom, and that future generations, both in the church and out of it, may have reason to “rise up and call you blessed,” is the fervent prayer of,

Reverend and Respected Brethren,  
Your friend and Fellow-servant  
In the House of God,  
SAMUEL MILLER.

PRINCETON, *April 20th*, 1831.

## INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

*By William Lindsay*

The prosperity of the kingdom of Christ is an object which the genuine Christian will ever assiduously labour to promote. It is the prevalence of the Christian faith alone which can effectually destroy the numberless evils which afflict society, and direct to a beneficial result the improvements and discoveries which are made in the arts and sciences. The great end for which the human race was first brought into existence, was to show forth the glory of God; and the highest perfection of which our nature is susceptible, consists in the entire devotion of our powers to the service of Heaven. The world in which we dwell may be viewed as one great temple, in which adoration and praise are to be paid to the Sovereign Ruler; and those who busy themselves with the things which are seen and temporal, to the exclusion of those which are unseen and eternal, are chargeable with the folly of preferring the decorations of the building to the presiding Deity whose glory it illustrates. Love to God should be the paramount feeling in every human breast, and obedience to the sacred laws of Heaven the lofty object to which all our exertions are directed.

The object of the mission of Christ to this world was to restore the wretched sons of Adam to the original dignity of their nature, and to place them in circumstances in which they might be enabled to fulfil the purposes of their being. In accomplishing this glorious end, the Saviour did not merely, like many of those who have aspired to be the teachers and guides of mankind, diffuse through society information respecting the duties of life; but he appointed that all those persons who would be brought to concur with the designs of God in the gospel, should be formed into one body or association; and his followers are required, by the love which he cherished towards them, and which his death so strikingly displayed, to regard each other with the tenderest sentiments of affection. Christians are forbidden by the very spirit of their religion to act as if they were isolated individuals, scattered through society, and like particles of sand, held together by no bond of union. It is their duty to regard each other as all one in Christ, and they should be strongly united together by the cement of Christian affection. And though certainly the Church of God does not destroy our connection with other societies, such as families and kingdoms, yet because its objects and the interests involved in it are immeasurably more important than those of any other connection, we are required in all cases of competition to give it the preference. We must regard our union with the Christian church as the loftiest privilege which we possess; and we must cling to it with unyielding tenacity, whatever sacrifices our perseverance in the service of Christ may require at our hands. "If any man comes to me," says the Saviour, "and does not hate his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yes and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." Every earthly affection must dwindle into nothing when compared with the love which we cherish to the Son of God.

The Kingdom of Christ, then, comprehends under its sway all those persons who are renewed in the spirit of their minds, and united to the Saviour by faith. Its subjects, though living among the men of the world, and united to them by the ties of kindred and country, are a separate people, invested with privileges to which others are strangers. They are mechanically, but not chemically combined with the rest of mankind. And their interest as a peculiar people requires that they should ever be careful to keep themselves

distinct from the world — mingling in its scenes only so far as the business of life may require, and making all their intercourse with the wicked, subservient to the design of bringing them to a knowledge of the truth.

One of the means which Christ, the Head of the Church, has appointed for preserving his people from the corruptions which abound in the world, is the system of control or of government which he has established in his kingdom. Living in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, even the saints themselves are liable to be seduced into sin. And too frequently, besides, it happens that persons who have never been truly converted, find their way into the communion of the church. And therefore it was indispensably necessary that means should be appointed for ensuring the expulsion of unworthy and irreclaimable members, and for restraining and confirming those whose conduct might be in any measure suspicious or wavering. It must, indeed, be evident to every person who reflects upon the subject, that government is as necessary to the prosperity of the church, as it is to the welfare of civil society. Numbers of men cannot act together unless their proceedings are regulated by some known and acknowledged principles; and in all cases of cooperation, the power must be vested somewhere, of enforcing upon individuals compliance with the fundamental principles by which they are associated together.

There is a prejudice, we are aware, entertained by many against the very idea of the power of the church. And it must be acknowledged that some ground has been furnished for it by the proceedings of persons who have borne the Christian name. During the period when the sway of the Papal power was undisputed, the censures of the church were stripped entirely of their spiritual character; and instead of being employed to reclaim the erring, and to confirm the unstable, they were prostituted to the advancement of worldly schemes. Frequently, even monarchs, when they opposed the will of the haughty Pontiff, were made to tremble on their thrones. And though they might persevere for a time in asserting their independence, they were generally compelled at last with loss both of honour and influence, to submit to the spiritual tyranny which they had rashly dared to encounter. Excommunication was one of the most dreadful calamities which could befall either prince or subject, for it excluded its unhappy victim from the most common offices of humanity, and placed him beyond the protection of law. Nor were the rulers of the Romish church the only persons who fell into the dangerous error of connecting civil punishments with disobedience to spiritual authority. The Protestants followed the fatal example which the adherents of Rome had set them, and for a long series of years their conduct was such as too clearly to show that they had deeply drunk of the cup which bigotry and intolerance had filled. The opinion, it is manifest from history, indeed universally prevailed at the period referred to, that penal statutes were the proper weapons by which uniformity of religious belief should be secured. And as every party, of course, believed themselves to be in the right, and all who differed from them to be in the wrong, the first attempt of each, whenever the opportunity occurred, was to force others to confess their supposed errors, and to publicly recant them. The whole history of England teems with proofs of the justice of these observations. Need we mention the long-continued and cruel persecutions carried on by the Protestant Church of England against the Puritans, which were more atrocious, if possible, than any of the Popish persecutions, inasmuch as the difference between the Church of England and the Puritans, in the first instance at least, was trifling compared with the difference between *both* and the Church of Rome. Nor were the Puritans themselves free from the foul stain of persecuting for



conscience' sake. Whatever opinion we may form of them from their early history, their conduct after the Great Rebellion makes it exceedingly manifest that they had been slow to learn the lesson which the bitter experience of so many years might have taught them. Many were the complaints thrown out against the Government, especially by the Presbyterians, for the slowness with which they proceeded to bring the other parties to order, or as the expression translated into modern English signifies, to compel them to renounce their religious opinions. And there can be no doubt, when the unsettled and excited state of the kingdom is duly considered, that if Cromwell had not been a man of uncommon energy, and advanced far before the age in which he lived in his notions of religious liberty, there would have raged in England as fierce a persecution as any of which we read in history. But though truth thus compels us to confess that the Puritans themselves were tainted with the spirit of persecution, justice at the same time requires us to state that they have the signal honour of being the first who renounced the abominable and pernicious principle that one man has a right to constitute himself the judge of his neighbour's faith.

When these facts are considered, it will readily be acknowledged that the prejudice which many entertain against the power of the church, is exceedingly natural. In the hands of worldly and designing men, that power was converted into a weapon which proved the bane alike of the temporal and of the spiritual interests of mankind; and it need not excite our wonder, that men should dread the recurrence of similar scenes. But widely different is the view which we entertain of the power of the church. We regard the slightest approach to the employment of civil pains and penalties for the defence or support of religion, most unscriptural as well as most unreasonable. The power which is vested in the office-bearers of the Christian church is derived solely from the authority of Christ; and it is entirely of a *spiritual* nature, not extending to the *persons*, but simply to the *consciences* of men. When any member of a Christian society is walking in a disorderly manner, whatever may be the nature of his fault — whether a neglect of the ordinances of religion, or impurity of conduct, or a refusal to contribute of his substance for the support of the gospel — it is the duty of the office-bearers to wait upon him, and in a spirit of kindness to admonish him of his error, and to urge him to repentance and amendment of life. But if he should refuse to listen to their reproof, despise their authority, yes, even proceed to the fearful extent of blaspheming the name of Christ, then the utmost length to which they are warranted to go, is to declare that he can no longer be recognised as one of their body. No power on earth may legitimately add to this sentence. The excommunicated individual retains all his civil rights, enjoys his property without disturbance, and is as safe in his person as if he were sovereign of the world. No civil disabilities, or bodily inflictions, or loss of property should be connected with the sentence of excommunication. The punishment of spiritual offences is reserved by the Almighty in his own hands. We are members of civil society by the very condition of our birth; we become members of the Church by receiving Christ in faith — two conditions of membership which are fundamentally and radically distinct. And therefore, to make the privileges of the worldly community hinge upon the privileges of the spiritual, is to join together things which have no natural connection.

But here it may be said that, although the *church* confessedly has no right to inflict upon any of her members a greater punishment than exclusion from her communion, yet the *nation* may and ought to exclude from civil privileges all persons who fall under the

displeasure of the church. This is the old doctrine that dominion is founded in grace, a doctrine which has been the source of nearly all the persecutions that have happened in the world. The principle proposed bears a most striking resemblance to the principle on which the church of Rome defends her conduct. That church, according to the pleading of her own friends, was never guilty of inflicting temporal punishments upon any whom she had declared heretics. She only pronounced the scriptural sentence of excommunication, and then handed the delinquents over to the secular arm of the law. And it was the magistrate who kindled the flames, while the hypocritical priests with seeming earnestness, implored him upon their bended knees to have mercy upon the wretched sufferers. But most people will be inclined to think that there is no difference of any real importance between this representation of the case, and the view which is commonly received. If I am to be excluded from civil privileges and consigned to the flames, it matters little to me whether it is by the direct sentence of the church, or by the state founding its proceedings upon the excommunication previously pronounced by the church.

Do we then deny the right of a nation to fix the qualifications of its own rulers? By no means. The principle which we uphold is that every nation has a right to settle the form of its own government; indeed, that the legitimacy of any government depends, not upon the length of time during which it may have existed, but simply upon the fact of its being in accordance with the national will. And the principle *opposed* to this is that dominion is founded in grace, or that certain descriptions of persons have a right to rule independently of the nation's consent. The persons who have a right to sit in the legislative assembly of a nation are those who are fairly chosen by the electors, unrestricted in their choice, and voting for whom they please. The character of Parliament must be determined by the character of the nation. Any attempt to regulate by previous law, independently of the national will, what the prevailing sentiments of the supreme assembly will be, must prove highly pernicious. For infallibly, it will either happen that the resentment of the proscribed classes will be roused, and disorganization introduced into the framework of society; or the required oaths and tests will degenerate by tacit agreement, into matters of mere form. And thus the foundations of the public morals will be destroyed, while at the same time, the end for which this tremendous sacrifice is made is not attained. If there are any individuals who think that certain descriptions of persons alone are qualified to rule, the course which they should adopt is not to advocate the enactment of laws confining political privileges to men of their views, but to labour with all their might for the diffusion of what they esteem sound principles throughout society, so that the electors may be converted to their opinions, and induced to support them. We are as deeply convinced as any persons can be, that genuine Evangelical Christians, men who have passed from death to life, will always prove the most upright rulers. But we would regard as utterly futile and unjust, every attempt which might be made to confine to them political privileges by positive enactment. Such a system may be practicable under a despotic government, but where the elective franchise is enjoyed, the only course which remains is to diffuse the principles of pure and undefiled religion throughout every corner of the land; and then it will infallibly happen, sooner or later, that the governing power will receive a large infusion of practical Christianity. The electors are the fountain of Parliament: make the fountain pure and the stream will be pure also. And as it is only by the diffusion of correct principles through the mass of society, that a right government can be established; so it is only by the preservation of a right tone of feeling among the

electors, that the continued existence of such a government can be secured. The favourite method to which parties have ever been prone to resort, when they have risen to power — *namely*, the exclusion, by positive enactment, of all who differ from them — is wrong in principle, seeking fruit where the seed has not been sown. And it must prove utterly unavailing to stem the torrent which a constituency, altered by the lapse of time, will pour in upon the constitution. It is in vain that one generation of men endeavours by the use of tests and prohibitions, to make any human institution bear the impress of their own sentiments to the end of time; for each generation retains all the rights which any preceding generation ever possessed. And therefore, whenever it happens that any institutions have ceased to be in unison with the spirit of the age, they must of necessity give way — brought down by the rude hand of violence, where exclusive laws enacted in their favour have been obstinately adhered to — or fading imperceptibly away like the snow before the increasing power of the sun, where no test has prevented the governing body from gradually adapting itself to the changes of society.

Let those persons therefore, who are impressed with the importance of having the reins of government placed in the hands of genuine Christians, instead of deploring the lack of exclusive laws to shut out Catholics and Infidels, labour to leaven the mass of society with the knowledge of the truth. Christianity, in reforming the institutions and manners of a country, does not begin with the government. It commences with individuals, generally in the lower ranks of life: its influence extends from one person to another; imperceptibly the number of its adherents increases; the little leaven leavens at last the whole lump. Christians thus gradually acquire more extensive influence, till at last their principles begin to control the measures of government. But all the while, their power depends upon the hold which true religion has upon the affections of the inhabitants. And any attempt to build it upon the essentially different foundation of an exclusive test, destroys the moral influence of its character, and leads to the fatal idea that the Christianity of the statute book, may be regarded as a sufficient substitute for the Christianity of the country. The kingdom of Christ does not come with observation; it is within men, and there is more or less of religion in a country — it is partly Christian, and it is partly Infidel, whatever acts of Parliament may say — just according to the proportion which the genuine followers of the Redeemer bear to the rest of the inhabitants.

In perfect accordance with these principles, and leading indeed directly to them, is the doctrine of excommunication as laid down in the word of God. It imports exclusion simply from the religious privileges of the society whose fundamental laws have been despised; but it does not imply any deprivation of civil or political rights, any loss of property, or any bodily suffering. The individual who has been expelled from the church, as well as the individual who has never been a member of it, retains every right which might belong to him as a member of the community. And any evil or inconvenience which he may suffer, is altogether of an indirect kind, not forming part of his sentence, but resulting out of the diminished confidence which his fellow men (if Christianity is widely diffused) will naturally feel disposed to place in him.

From the account which we have given of the nature of ecclesiastical authority, and of the limits beyond which it is never permitted to go, it must be apparent that the prejudices which many have entertained against it, are altogether unfounded. The power of the church is indeed nothing more than the right which every voluntary society possesses, of excluding from its membership those persons who despise and trample upon its

fundamental laws. It is the power of enforcing, not by carnal weapons, but by the sanctions of the spiritual world, by the prospect of a future judgment, by the terrors of the Lord, the laws which Christ has laid down for the regulation of the conduct of Christians. And though some persons might be disposed to think that the addition of a little temporal suffering — either in person, or property, or rights — could not hinder, but might rather tend to aid the effect of the sentence of the church; yet the very nature of the case stamps the seal of folly upon such an idea. The value of the sentence of excommunication depends on the preservation of its spiritual character. If any ingredients of an earthly kind are thrown into the cup which the offender is required to drink, the consequence inevitably is that a wrong motive is brought to bear upon his mind; and for the sake of avoiding the temporal suffering, he may be strongly tempted to make professions of a sorrow of which there is no trace in his heart. But when the power of the church, shorn of all those base and earthly accompaniments which the wisdom of man has added to it, rises in simple majesty, and addresses the conscience of the offender by appealing to the future world, and to that God who though unseen by us yet sees us all — it is eminently calculated to produce a deep impression on the mind. And the manner in which the final decision is received, will furnish an excellent criterion by which the spiritual state of the individual may be determined. Every person who is brought under discipline by the church, should be made to feel — and if visited with the sentence of excommunication, should be sent away with the impression upon his mind — that it is not his degradation or temporal ruin which is sought, but solely the welfare of his immortal soul. Temporal suffering, it is true, if it comes in the course of God's providence, and is associated with the sentence of excommunication, may produce the happiest results. But if it is inflicted by the hand of man, and forms part of the sentence pronounced by the rulers of the church, it will either lead to hypocrisy, or to increased open profanity.

Such is the nature of the authority which Christ has established in his church; and such are the only sanctions which *men* are permitted to employ for the purpose of securing attention to the institutions of religion. In Presbyterian churches, the power of carrying these laws into effect, and of bringing these sanctions to bear on the consciences of men, is vested in the sessions of particular congregations, and in the associated office-bearers of all the congregations of a district.

The Presbyterian form of Church government appears to us to be founded in scripture, and to be admirably calculated to promote the prosperity of the body of Christ. The pastoral equality which it establishes, the representative character of its elders, and the subordination of its courts, are excellent safeguards against injustice and tyranny; and these furnish the best means of preserving from encroachment the rights of all the parties concerned. Presbytery differs from Episcopacy in this: that while the latter recognises different orders of teachers (the inferior deriving their power from the superior, and placed under their control), the former places all Christian ministers on a level, and requires the designation to the sacred office to be made by those who have themselves been previously appointed to it. The difference, again, between the Presbyterian and the Independent forms of church government is this: that among the Independents there is no association of neighbouring churches for the purposes of government, but each congregation is the ultimate tribunal with reference to all the disputes which originate in itself; while among the Presbyterians, all the churches of a neighbourhood are associated

together, and their office-bearers or representatives are formed into a judicature, to which there lies an appeal from the decision of each particular church.

But there is another feature peculiar to Presbytery, which distinguishes it both from Episcopacy on the one hand, and from Independency on the other, and which is indeed the most remarkable characteristic of that form of government: we refer to the office of the ruling elder. Among the Episcopalians, the ordinary members of the church have no share in its government: the bishop is the fountain of all power in his own diocese, and the inferior clergy derive their authority from him. Among the Independents, on the other hand, the government of the church is vested in the members themselves; and there is no distinction between the rulers and the ruled: they are identically the same body. But the Presbyterians take a middle and wiser course. They avoid the dangerous extreme of investing any one man with uncontrolled authority, and they avoid the no less hazardous measure of elevating all to the rank of rulers. They place the government of the church not in the pastor alone, nor yet in the members indiscriminately, but in persons chosen by the members, and acting as their representatives. Episcopacy is a system of despotic tyranny; Independency is a pure democracy; while Presbytery is that happy medium which places the management of affairs in which all have an interest, in the hands of representatives, in whose election all have a voice. Presbytery, in a word, is founded upon that very principle — *namely*, the principle of representation — which is now universally regarded as the cornerstone of freedom, and which experience has shown to be the only principle which can enable bodies of men to act, at once with promptitude and in accordance with the mind of the majority.

But whatever might be the advantages of the Presbyterian form of church government, and however great the analogy between it and the principles which experience has shown to be the best in conducting the civil affairs of a nation, we at once acknowledge that, unless it could be shown from scripture that a foundation existed for it there, all such considerations would be insufficient to prove its propriety, or its lawfulness in the Church of Christ. The constitution and laws of the Redeemer's kingdom are laid down in the sacred writings; and nothing is binding upon Christians which cannot be deduced from the precepts of the gospel. In all controversies, the appeal must be made *to the Law and to the Testimony* (Isa 8.20). The grand inquiry must ever be, *What says the Scripture?*

The distinguishing features, then, of the Presbyterian form of church government, are the equality of its teachers, and the existence of a separate class, styled ruling elders, whose office it is to manage the spiritual affairs of the church.

In maintaining the equality of Christian teachers, it is with the Episcopalians alone that we have any controversy. For the Independents allow, as well as the Presbyterians, that there is only one permanent order of religious teachers authorized by the sacred Scriptures. But the Episcopalians have several orders, *namely*, archbishops, bishops, archdeacons, deans, rectors, etc. It is proper, however, to remark that the Episcopalians themselves do not maintain that all their different orders are to be found in the Bible. There are only two which they pretend to find there, namely bishops and presbyters, though they imagine that once the principle of subordination is established, there is no harm in carrying it out to a further extent, and creating as many different orders as the circumstances of the case may seem to require. Is it true, then, that there were two classes of Christian teachers appointed by Christ to exist permanently in the church, the one

subordinate to the other? We believe the very reverse to be the case. A small degree of examination will make it apparent that the bishop of the word of God is the pastor of a single congregation, and not, like the bishop of the Church of England, the superintendent of all the teachers residing in a large district of country. The main argument which the Episcopalians employ in defence of their views, is founded upon the fact that the ministers appointed by the apostles are styled in scripture, sometimes bishops, and sometimes presbyters. From this they hastily infer that since these names are different, they were intended to designate two different classes, or orders of teachers. But every person who has read the sacred writings with care, must be sensible that the names in question are applied in numerous passages to the very same individuals, and are frequently interchanged without any restriction. From this it plainly follows that they were intended to designate not two different classes, but one and the same class of religious instructors. It is sufficient to refer to the portions of scripture which contain the evidence of these statements. The following may be consulted: Act 20.17-28; Tit 1.5-7; 1Pet 5.1-2; Phi 1.1. 1Tim 3.1. In these passages, the attentive reader will find *in the first place*, that the very same individuals who are styled presbyters or elders, are likewise styled bishops or overseers, or persons taking the oversight of the church, which latter phrases are all translations of the same original term. And *secondly*, that when exhortations are given to persons holding office in the church, bishops and deacons alone are mentioned, making it clear beyond reach of doubt, that the teaching elders, or the pastors of single congregations, are either addressed as bishops, or have not been supposed by the apostles to stand in need of any charge at all.

The second characteristic of Presbytery, which distinguishes it equally from Episcopacy, and from Independency, is its recognition of a class styled *ruling elders*, whose office it is, not to preach the word publicly, but to aid the preaching elder in conducting the spiritual affairs of the church. There was a time when this class of office-bearers was very extensively acknowledged to be scriptural, both by the Episcopalians and by the Independents, but it is now confined to the Presbyterians; and experience has amply shown that it is of immense importance to the welfare of the Christian community. But it is unnecessary that we should enter into any discussion respecting the office of the ruling elder; for this is the very subject to the consideration of which the following treatise is devoted. Overlooking the first branch of the general question, of which we have taken a hasty view, the author confines his attention entirely to the second branch, *namely*, the office of the *ruling elder*. And in our estimation, he establishes the scriptural warrant for this office, and its vast utility, with a variety and force of evidence which it is impossible to resist. The whole treatise, indeed, is excellent, and it cannot fail to be of essential service to the Christian world. The men especially who have been ordained to the office of the eldership should be familiar with its contents. The perusal of its pages would greatly elevate their views of the sacred office to which they have been called, and lead to increased conscientiousness in the discharge of its duties.

Such is the system or framework of government which Christ has appointed as the means of dispensing and applying that power of the church, whose purposes we have described, and whose nature and limits we have endeavoured to define. The elders, both teaching and ruling associated together, are the persons whom the Redeemer has invested with the power of carrying into effect the laws of his kingdom. On them is devolved the task of preserving the purity of the church; to them are given the opportunity and the means of

exerting a salutary control over all professing Christians; their duty it is to instruct the ignorant, to reclaim the backsliding, to confirm the unstable, and to console the afflicted; and according to their decision, persons are both to be received into membership with the church, and expelled from her communion. The highest sentence which the Scripture warrants, together with all the inferior steps of discipline, the Head of the Church has placed in their hands, as the means of counteracting and expelling any leaven of wickedness whose presence may be observed, and whose unchecked growth might endanger the welfare of the whole body.

These are duties, the bare enumeration of which is sufficient to demonstrate the vast importance of the office of the eldership, and the high responsibility which devolves upon those who undertake to act as the spiritual overseers of the church. On their fidelity, under God, depends the purity of the body of Christ; on the right discharge of their duties is suspended the fate of thousands. If they are negligent of the spiritual functions which devolve upon them, and careless of their own private conduct, they may be the means of introducing a total degeneracy of manners into the church, both by the admission of improper members, and by the malign influence of their own example. And thus the very name of Jesus may be brought into discredit, and the prevalence of the principles of infidelity be greatly accelerated. There can be no question that the improper conduct of professing Christians is the means of inflicting a deeper wound upon Christianity, than all the malice and opposition of the most powerful avowed enemies. And that wound, it is as little to be doubted, will be much more deadly and severe, if the very hands which should be prompt to apply to it the healing balsam, lend their assistance to urge forward the weapon which inflicts it. How can the office-bearers of the church expect that if *they*, who should be patterns to others, live in carelessness and folly, the *ordinary* professors of Christianity will be distinguished for piety, and a diligent and faithful discharge of their religious duties? Is it not a fact that all who make a profession of religion, are strictly watched by the world? Is it not a fact that those persons who take office in the church are made the objects of a peculiarly close and searching scrutiny? Are not all their actions observed? Is their example not appealed to in every house? Is not their misconduct employed by the dissolute to encourage each other in their evil courses? Yes, their sins are seeds peculiarly quick to grow which, falling upon a soil entirely congenial to their nature, produce a most abundant harvest. While they themselves are quietly reposing upon their pillows at home, their example does not sleep with them. Their inconsistencies may be filling the bowl of madness around which the midnight revellers sit; or they may be employed to give point to the argument with which the unbeliever assails Christianity. It is generally allowed that the low state to which religion was reduced in France by the negligence and errors of the Popish establishment, was the main cause of that extensive and fatal triumph which infidelity enjoyed for so long a period in that kingdom; and every corruption of Christianity, and every inconsistency of its adherents, tends in a greater or less degree to produce the very same results.

But, on the other hand, let the office-bearers of the church be sedulous and faithful in the discharge of their important duties, admitting members with caution, and counselling with unremitting watchfulness and affection those who are already in communion — and how salutary and enduring may the results of their labours be! A high tone of moral feeling will be produced and sustained in the church; a holy emulation will be excited in the bosoms of the faithful; the self-denial and devotion of the office-bearers will transfuse

themselves into the breasts of the members; heavenly sympathy will bind together the hearts of all. And when at any time the rulers of the church may be driven to the dire necessity of exerting the full stretch of their authority, their hands will be strengthened by the countenance and approbation of those who are under their care: and even in cases of difficulty and doubt, where there may be room for misconstruction, the experience which the members have had of their former prudence and zeal, will inspire them with confidence in the wisdom and integrity of their present proceedings. The elders indeed of a Presbyterian church, occupy a peculiarly favourable position for exerting a salutary influence over the minds of their fellow Christians, and form an admirable instrument for preserving the purity of the church, and administering its laws. Chosen by the communicants on account of their superior worth and attainments, they enjoy the confidence of those over whom they preside, and are regarded by them with that powerful sympathy which voluntary choice never fails to inspire, unless the objects of it are guilty of egregious misconduct.

Is it not then apparent that elders are men in whose hands there is placed a moral instrument of powerful efficiency? And should they not therefore make it their daily endeavour to wield that instrument in such a manner that it may be productive of good to the Church of Christ? Should they not labour to cultivate personal religion, and to exhibit a walk and conversation becoming the gospel, that others seeing their good works, may be stimulated to the cultivation of similar graces? In vain they will reprove the backsliding if their own piety is of a questionable kind. Should they not study to acquire an accurate and extensive knowledge of the sacred writings, that they may be able to instruct the ignorant, and to resolve the doubts of those who are involved in perplexity? Should they not take a deep interest in the diffusion of Christian knowledge, and the enlargement of the Redeemer's kingdom, giving their countenance to every plan of usefulness — both that they themselves may be the honoured instruments of increasing the glory of the Redeemer's name, and that the energies of those who are committed to their care may be directed aright, and prevented from sinking into a state of listless inactivity? Should they not strive to act with prudence, and circumspection in all the affairs which come under their consideration, ever looking with a single eye to the glory of their Master's name, that they may acquire a larger share of the confidence of the Christian people, and be enabled to exert over them the greater moral influence? Should they not labour to avoid even the appearance of evil, living in all godliness and honesty, lest any actions of theirs, however innocent in themselves, should in consequence of unfavourable circumstances, be converted by the wicked — who are ever prone to judge harshly the conduct of professing Christians — into weapons of attack against the pure and holy religion of Christ? Should they not, in a word, regard themselves as the *guides* of the people of God, stationed over them for the purpose of exciting them, both by precept and example, to the diligent and faithful discharge of their duties, and therefore, responsible in a certain degree for *their* improvement, as well as for their *own*? To them indeed, as well as to the preaching elders, may be applied most justly that striking passage in the book of Ezekiel 3.17:

“Son of man, I have made you a watchman to the house of Israel; therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, you shall surely die; and you do not give him warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but I will require his blood at your hand. Yet if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from



his wickedness nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul.”

Such are the duties which the very nature of the case demonstrates to be binding upon those who have assumed the office of the eldership; and such are the fatal, and such the salutary results which the careless or the diligent discharge of these duties is calculated to produce. What ground there is then for serious reflection, and what motives to unsparing self-examination these considerations suggest! How fervent should be the prayers which the elder of the church presents to God, for strength to enable him to walk uprightly, and for grace to guard him from every course which might prove a stumbling-block to others! Should not the duty which he owes to Christ, and to the members of the church be ever present to his mind? The man who knows that he is wielding a weapon which may prove fatal to the lives of others, should certainly give especial heed to his movements. And the servant of Jesus, who knows that the gospel is a double-edged sword — with the one edge powerful to heal, but where its healing virtue is despised, powerful with the other edge to destroy — should use his utmost efforts to bring its salutary edge into contact with the consciences of men. It is an awful responsibility which rests upon the heads of those who undertake the spiritual oversight of the Church of Christ. Stewards of the mysteries of God, they are engaged in a task of the most momentous kind; and their labours are productive of consequences which extend through the duration of eternity. Their employments have reference, not to the fleeting interests of this world, but to the immortal destinies of the soul. And when they neglect or abuse their spiritual functions, they are pursuing a course which may involve thousands in a ruin beyond the reach of remedy. Theirs is not the negligence of the men who bring misery upon themselves alone. Theirs is the negligence of the guide, whose dying groans are mingled with the groans of the victims whom he has led astray. Like the general whose unskilfulness or folly has consigned his men to the sword of the foe, they commingle their blood with the blood of others; and the sting of their own death must carry the concentrated venom of a thousand dissolutions.

W. L. <sup>1</sup>

14th November 1834.

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<sup>1</sup> William Lindsay (1802–1866) Scottish minister of the United Presbyterian Church. In 1841 he was appointed professor of exegetical theology and biblical criticism by the Relief Synod. He moved with his congregation from Dovehill to a new church in Cathedral Street, Glasgow, in 1844, as the *Cathedral Street Relief Church*. He served there until his death in 1866. The degree of D.D. was conferred on him by the University of Glasgow in 1844.

## CHAPTER 1.

### INTRODUCTORY.

Our once crucified, but now exalted Redeemer, has erected in this world a kingdom which is his church. this church is either visible or invisible.

By the invisible church, we mean the whole body of sincere believers, of every age and nation, “that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ, the glorious Head of it.”<sup>1</sup> Part of these are already made perfect in heaven. Another portion are at present scattered over the earth in different denominations of professing Christians, though not certainly distinguishable from others by the human eye. And the remainder are in the future to be gathered in by the grace of God — when the whole number of the “redeemed from among men,” will be united in one holy assembly, which is the “spouse,” the “body of Christ, the fulness of Him who fills all in all.”

By the visible church is meant the body of those who profess the true religion, together with their children. It is that body which is called out of the world, and united under the authority of Christ, the Head, for the purpose of maintaining Gospel Truth and Order, and promoting the knowledge, purity, comfort, and edification of all the members. When we use the term *church*, as expressive of a visible, professing body, we either mean the whole visible church of God throughout the world, or a particular congregation of professing Christians, who have agreed to unite together for the purpose of mutual instruction, inspection, and edification.<sup>2</sup>

The word *church* is also employed in Scripture to designate a church judicatory; that is, the church assembled and acting by her representatives, the elders, chosen to inspect, and bear rule over the whole body. This, it is believed, will be evident to those who impartially consult Mat 18.15-18; and compare the language of the original here, with that of the original, and the Greek translation of the Seventy (LXX), of Deu 31.28-30.

The visible church is a spiritual body. That is, it is not secular or worldly, either in its nature or objects. The kingdom of Christ “is not of this world.” Its Head, laws, ordinances, discipline, penalties, and end are all spiritual. There can be no departure from this principle. In other words, there can be no connection between the church and the State; no enforcement of ecclesiastical laws by the power of the secular arm, or by “carnal weapons,” without departing from “the simplicity that is in Christ.” and invading both the purity and safety of his sacred body.

This great visible church is one, in all ages, and throughout the world. From its first formation in the family of Adam, through all the changes of the Patriarchal, Mosaic, and

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<sup>1</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. 25.

<sup>2</sup> It has been asserted by some that the term *Church* not only means, strictly, a religious assembly — a body of professing people; but that it cannot be applied, with propriety, to anything else; and that it is altogether improper to apply it, as is often done, to the building in which the assembly usually convenes for worship. This is, undoubtedly, a groundless scruple. Under the Old Testament economy, it is plain that the word *synagogue* was indiscriminately applied both to the public assembly, and to the edifice in which they worshipped. Besides, the word *Church* is evidently derived from the Greek words, κυρίου οίκος (*kuriou oikos*), “the house of the Lord;” and therefore, may be considered as pointing quite as distinctly to the edifice as to the worshippers. Indeed, it is highly probable that the word in its original use, had a primary reference to the house rather than to the assembly. And even if it were not so, still the understanding and use of the word in this double sense, if once agreed upon, cannot be considered as liable, so far as is perceived, to any particular objection or abuse.

Christian dispensations, it has been one and the same; having the same divine Head, the same ground of Hope, the same essential characters, and the same great design. Diversity of denomination does not destroy this unity. All who profess the true religion, together with their offspring, however divided by place, by names, or by forms, are to be considered as equally belonging to that great family denominated *the Church*. The Presbyterian, the Episcopalian, the Methodist, the Baptist, and the Independent, who hold the fundamentals of our holy religion, in whatever part of the globe they may reside, are all equally members of the same visible community; and if they are sincere, they will all finally be made partakers of its eternal blessings. They cannot indeed, all worship together in the same solemn assembly, even if they were disposed to do so — and the sin and folly of men have separated into different bodies those who ought to “walk together.” Still, the visible church is one. All who “hold the Head,” of course, belong to the body of Christ. “We, being many,” says the inspired Apostle, “are one body in Christ, and every one, members of one another.” Those who are united by a sound profession to the same Almighty Head; who embrace the same “precious faith;” who are sanctified by the same Spirit; who eat the same spiritual food; who drink the same spiritual drink; who repose and rejoice in the same promises; and who are travelling to the same eternal rest, are surely *one body* — in a sense more richly significant than can be ascribed to millions who sustain a mere nominal unity.

This unity is very distinctly recognized, and very happily expressed by Cyprian, a distinguished Christian Father of the third century:

“The church,” he says, “is one which, by its fruitful increase, is enlarged into a multitude. As the rays of the sun, though many, are yet one luminary; as the branches of a tree, though numerous, are all established on one firmly rooted trunk; and as many streams springing from the same fountain, though apparently dispersed abroad by their overflowing abundance, yet have their unity preserved by one common origin — so the church, though it extends its rays throughout the world, is one light. Though everywhere diffused, its unity is not broken. By the abundance of its increase, it extends its branches through the whole earth. It spreads far and wide its flowing streams; yet it has one Head, one Fountain, one Parent, and is enriched and enlarged by the issues of its own fruitfulness.”<sup>3</sup>

It is ever also to be borne in mind that the church is not a mere voluntary association, with which men are at liberty to connect themselves or not, as they please. For although the service which God requires of us is throughout a voluntary one; although no one can properly come into the church but as a matter of voluntary choice; although the idea of either secular or ecclesiastical compulsion is, here, at once unreasonable and contrary to Scripture — yet as the church is Christ’s institution and not men’s; and as the same divine authority which requires us to repent of sin and believe in Christ, also requires us to “confess him before men,” and to join ourselves to his professing people — it is evident that no one is at liberty, in the sight of God, to neglect uniting himself with the church. Man cannot, and ought not, to compel him; but if he refuses to fulfil this duty when it is in his power, he rejects the authority of God. He, of course, refuses at his peril.

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<sup>3</sup> *De Unitate Ecclesiae*. Sect. iv.

Of this body, Christ alone, as intimated before, is the Head. He alone has a right to give laws to his church, or to institute rites and ordinances for her observance. His will is the supreme guide of his professing people; his Word their code of laws; and his glory their ultimate end. The authority of church officers is not original, but subordinate and delegated. That is, as they are his servants, and act under his commission and in his name, they have power only to declare what the Scriptures reveal as his will, and to pronounce sentence accordingly. If they attempt to establish any terms of communion other than those which his word warrants; or to undertake to exercise authority in a manner which He has not authorised, they incur guilt, and have no right to exact obedience.

In this sacred community, government is absolutely necessary. Even in the perfectly holy and harmonious society of heaven, there is government. That is, there is law and authority under which the whole celestial family is united in perfect love and unmingled enjoyment. Much more important and indispensable is government among fallen depraved men, among whom “it is impossible but that offences will come,” and to whom the discipline of scriptural and pure ecclesiastical rule, is one of the most precious means of grace. To think of maintaining any society, ecclesiastical or civil, without government, in this depraved world, would be to contradict every principle of reason and experience, as well as of Scripture. And to think of supporting government without officers, to whom its functions may be entrusted, would be to embrace the absurd hope of obtaining an end without the requisite means.

The question whether any particular form of church government is so laid down in Scripture, as that the claim of divine right may be advanced on its behalf, and that in consequence, the church is bound in all ages to adopt and act upon it — will not now be formally discussed. It has been made the subject of too much extended and ardent controversy, to be brought within the compass of a few sentences, or even a few pages. It may not be improper, however, to briefly say that it would indeed have been singular, if a community called out of the world, and organized under the peculiar authority of the all-wise Redeemer, had been left entirely without any direction as to its government:

- that the Scriptures, undoubtedly, exhibit to us a form of ecclesiastical organization and rule which was, in fact, instituted by the Apostles, under the direction of infinite Wisdom;
- that this form was evidently taken, with very little alteration, from the preceding economy, thus giving additional presumption in its favor;
- that we find the same plan closely copied by the churches for a considerable time after the apostolic age;
- that it continued to be, in substance, the chosen and universal form of government in the church, until corruption, both in doctrine and practice, had gained a melancholy prevalence through the ambition and degeneracy of ecclesiastics;
- and that the same form was also substantially maintained by the most faithful witnesses for the truth during the dark ages;
- until the great body of the Reformers took it from their hands, and established it in their respective ecclesiastical connections.

These premises would appear to abundantly warrant the conclusion that the form of Government which answers this description, is the wisest and best; that it is adapted to

all ages and states of society; and that it is agreeable to the will of Christ that it be universally received in his church. All this the writer of the following Essay fully believes may be established in favor of Presbyterianism. There seems no reason, however, to believe, with some zealous votaries of the hierarchy, that any particular form of government is in so rigorous a sense of divine right, as to be essential to the existence of the church; so that where this form is lacking, there can be no church. To adopt this opinion, is to take a very narrow and unscriptural view of the covenant of grace. After yielding to the visible church and its ordinances, all the importance which the word of God warrants, it cannot still be doubted that, on the one hand, men in regular external membership with the purest church on earth, may be hypocrites and perish; and on the other, that all who heartily repent of sin, and receive the Saviour in spirit and in truth, will assuredly obtain eternal life, even if they never enjoyed the privilege of a connection with any portion of the visible church on earth. The tenor of the Gospel covenant is, “He that believes in the Son of God has eternal life, and shall not come into condemnation, but has passed from death to life; but he that does not believe the Son, shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

Still it is plain, from the word of God, as well as from uniform experience, that the government of the church is a matter of great importance; that the form as well as the administration of that government is more vitally connected with the peace, purity and edification of the church, than many Christians appear to believe; and in consequence, that it is no small part of fidelity to our Master in heaven to “hold fast” the form of ecclesiastical order, as well as the “form of sound words” which He has delivered to the saints.

The existence of ecclesiastical *rulers* presupposes the existence and exercise of ecclesiastical *power*. A few remarks on the nature, source, and limits of this power, may not be irrelevant as a part of this preliminary discussion.

When we speak of ecclesiastical power, then, we speak of that which — as much as it is misunderstood, and as deplorably as it has been perverted and abused — is plainly warranted, both by reason and Scripture. In fact, it is a prerogative which common sense assigns and secures to all organized society, from a family to a nation. The doctrine attempted to be maintained by the celebrated Erastus, in “De Excommunicatione,” namely, that the exercise of all church power, however modified, is to be rejected as forming an *imperium in imperio*,<sup>4</sup> is one of the weakest and most untenable of all positions. The same argument would preclude all authority or government subordinate to that of the State, whether domestic, academic, or financial. The truth is, there not only *may be*, but there actually *are* thousands of *imperia in imperio*, in every civil community in the world. And all this is without the least danger or inconvenience, as long as the smaller or subordinate governments maintain their proper place, and do not claim, or attempt to exercise, powers which come in collision with those of the State.

Now, the power exercised by the church is of this character. Christ is the Sovereign. His kingdom is spiritual. It does not interfere with civil government. It may exist and flourish under any form of political administration; and it always fares best when entirely left to itself, without the interference of the civil magistrate. Accordingly, it is notorious that the

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<sup>4</sup> That is, a *government within a government*.

power of which we speak, was exercised by the church in the days of the Apostles, and during the first three centuries of the Christian era — not only without any aid from the secular arm, but while all the civil governments of the world were firmly leagued against her, and followed her with the bitterest persecution. But the moment the church became allied with the State, in *that* moment, the influence of each on the other became manifestly mischievous. The State enriched, pampered, and corrupted the church. And the church, in her turn, gradually extended her power over the State, until she claimed, and in some instances gained, a haughty supremacy over all rulers and governments. This is an ecclesiastical power which the Bible nowhere recognizes or allows. It is the essence of spiritual usurpation; and it can never have a place except where the essential character of the religion of Jesus Christ is misapprehended or forgotten. This abominable tyranny, so long and so wickedly maintained in the name of the meek and lowly Saviour who, instead of countenancing it, always condemned it — has prejudiced the minds of many against ecclesiastical power in any form. On account of this prejudice, it is judged proper to state with some degree of distinctness, what we mean when we speak of the church of Christ as being invested with power for the benefit of her members, and for the glory of her almighty Head.

It is evident that even if the church were a mere voluntary association, which neither possessed nor claimed any divine warrant, it would have the same powers which are universally conceded to all other voluntary associations — that is, the power of forming its own rules, of judging the qualifications of its own members, and of admitting or excluding, as the essential principles and interests of the body might require. And all this is as long as neither the rules themselves, nor the execution of them, infringed the laws of the State, or violated any public or private rights. When a literary, philosophical, or agricultural society claims and exercises powers of this kind, all reflecting people consider it as both reasonable and safe; and they would no more think of denying them the right to do so, than they would think of denying that the father of a family had a right to govern his own household, as long as he neither transgressed any law of the State, nor invaded the peace of his neighbors.

But the Christian church is by no means to be considered as a mere voluntary association. It is a body called out of the world, created by divine institution, and created, as its members believe, for the express purpose of bearing testimony for Christ, in the midst of a revolted and rebellious world, and maintaining in their purity the truth and ordinances which He has appointed. The members of this body, therefore, by the act of uniting themselves with it, profess to believe certain doctrines, to be under obligation to perform certain duties, and to be bound to possess a certain character. Of course, the very purpose *for which*, and the very terms *on which* the Master has formed this body, and bound its members together, necessarily imply, not only the right, but the duty, of refusing to admit those who are manifestly hostile to the essential principles of its institution; and of casting out those who, after their admission, manifestly depart from those principles. To suppose less than this, would be to suppose that a God of infinite wisdom has withheld from a body, formed for a certain purpose, that which is absolutely necessary for its defence against intrusion, insult, and perversion; in other words, for its own preservation.

Hence the Apostle Paul, after the New Testament church was erected, speaks (1Cor 12.28) of “governments” [or *administrations*] as well as “teachers” being “set in it” by the authority of God. He expressly claims (2Cor 10.8) an “authority” which God had given to

his servants as rulers in the church, “for edification and not for destruction.” And he exemplifies this authority by representing it as properly exercised in casting out of the church, anyone who was immoral, or profane (1Cor 5). Hence the officers of the church are spoken of as “guides” (ηγουμενοι *egoumenoi*), “overseers” or “bishops” (επισκοποι *episkopoi*) and “rulers,” (προεστωτες *proestootes*)<sup>5</sup> – and it is declared to be their duty, not only to instruct, warn, and entreat, but also to “rebuke,” or to authoritatively admonish and censure. They were commanded by the authority of the Head of the church (1Cor 5; Tit 3.10) to “reject,” to “put away from them,” after using proper admonition, those who were grossly heretical or immoral. In short, in that period of gospel simplicity and purity, the church claimed no authority over any but her own members; and even over them, no other authority than that which related to their character, duties, and interests as members, and was deemed essential to her own well-being.

And as this power of the church is not self-created or self-assumed, but derived from her gracious and almighty Head; and as it is, and can, of right only be exercised over her own members, so it is merely spiritual in its nature; in other words, it claims no right whatever to inflict temporal pains or penalties. It cannot touch the persons or property of those to whom it is directed. It addresses itself only to their judgments and consciences. It includes only a right to instruct, warn, rebuke, censure, and cast out; that is, to exclude from the privileges of the body. This last step is the utmost length to which it can go, when the church has excluded from her pale those toward whom this power is directed. In other words, when she has declared them out of her communion or fellowship, she has done everything to which her power extends. All beyond this is usurpation and oppression. The great end of church government is not to employ physical force, but moral weapons only. It can never invade the right of private judgment. It can never exert its power over any but those who voluntarily submit to it. And it prescribes no sanctions but those which have for their object, the moral benefit of the body itself, and also of the individuals to whom they are awarded. The gospel knows nothing of delivering men over to the secular arm, to be punished for offences against the church. The church might, therefore, exert her whole power, in its plenary extent, even if all the governments of the world were arrayed against her in the bitterest hostility, as they have once been, and as they may again be found.

And as all the power of the church is derived, not from the civil government, but from Christ, the almighty King of Zion; and as it is purely spiritual in its nature and sanctions; so the power of church officers is merely ministerial. They are, strictly, servants, who are to be governed in all things by the pleasure of their employer. They only have authority to announce what the Master has said, and to decide agreeably to that will which he has made known in his word. Like ambassadors at a foreign court, they cannot go one jot or tittle beyond their instructions. Of course, they have no right to set up a law of their own. The Bible is the great statute book of the body of which we speak; the only infallible rule of faith and practice. And nothing can be rightfully inculcated on the members of the church as truth, or demanded of them as duty, but that which is found in that great charter of the privileges as well as the obligations of Christians.

To complete the view of that ecclesiastical power which we consider as implied in church government, it is only necessary to add that it is given solely for the benefit of the church,

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<sup>5</sup> or *proistemi*, 1Tim 5.17.

and not for the aggrandizement of church officers. Tyrants in civil government have taught and acted upon the principle that the great end of all political establishments is the exaltation of a few at the expense of the many. And it is deeply to be deplored that the same principle has too often been apparently adopted by bodies calling themselves churches of Christ. Nothing can be more opposite than this, to the spirit and law of the Redeemer. The “authority” which the Apostle claims as existing, and to be exercised in the church, he represents (2Cor 10.8) as given “for edification, and not for destruction;” not for the purpose of creating and pampering classes of “privileged orders” to “lord it over God’s heritage;” not to build up a system of polity which may minister to the pride or the cupidity of an ambitious priesthood; not to form a body under the title of clergy, with separate interests from the laity of the church. All this is as wicked as it is unreasonable. No office, no power is appointed by Jesus Christ in his church, but that which is necessary to the instruction, the purity, and the happiness of the whole body. All legitimate government here, as well as elsewhere, is to be considered as a *means*, not an *end*; and as no further resting on divine authority than we can say in support of all its claims and acts, “thus saith the Lord;” than it is adapted to build up the great family of those who profess the true religion, in knowledge, peace and holiness unto salvation.

The summary of the doctrine of Presbyterians, then, concerning ecclesiastical power, may be considered as comprehended in the following propositions:

1. That the Lord Jesus Christ is the only King and Head of the church, the fountain of all power; and that no man or set of men have any right to consider themselves as holding the place of his vicar, or representative.
2. That the Bible contains the code of laws which Christ has enacted and given for the government of his church; and that it is the only infallible rule of faith and practice.
3. That his kingdom is not of this world; and of course, that the church can take no cognizance of any other concerns than those which relate to the spiritual interests of men.
4. That the power of church officers is not original, or inherent, but altogether derived and ministerial. They have no other authority than as his servants, and in his name, to proclaim the truth which he has declared, and to urge to the performance of those duties which he has commanded.
5. That nothing can be lawfully required of anyone as a member of the church, except what is expressly taught in Scripture; or by good and necessary consequence to be inferred from what is expressly taught there. <sup>6</sup>
6. That the church being instituted by Christ for the chief purpose of maintaining in their purity the doctrines and ordinances of Christ, is authorized and bound by Him to refuse admission to her fellowship those who are known to be hostile to this purpose, and to exclude those who are found to offend against this purpose after admission.
7. That the discipline and penalties of the church are wholly of a moral kind, consisting of admonition, entreaty, warning, suspension, and excommunication; and that exclusion from the fellowship of the body, is the highest penalty that can be inflicted on any delinquent.

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<sup>6</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), chap. 1, par. 6.



8. That the apostolic church, though under the bitterest persecution, was instructed by the inspired apostles, to exercise the power mentioned, and actually exercised the same; and is to be considered in this, as exemplifying and teaching the principles which ought to regulate the church in all ages.

9. That the church can exercise no authority over any others than her own members.

10. That none can be compelled to be members, or to submit to her authority any longer than they choose to do so.

11. That the authority of the church cannot be lawfully exercised for any other purpose than to promote the purity, order, and edification of the whole body; and that, of course, any exertion of church power which has for its object the aggrandizement of ecclesiastics at the expense of the body of the church, is an unscriptural abuse. And,

12. Finally; that all civil establishments of religion, in any form or under any denomination, are wrong; contrary to the spirit of Christianity; injurious to the best interests of the church; and really more to be deprecated by the enlightened friends of piety, than the most sanguinary persecution that can be inflicted by the arm of power.

In every church completely organized, that is, furnished with all the officers which Christ has instituted, and which are necessary for carrying into full effect the laws of his kingdom, there ought to be three classes of officers, namely, at least one teaching elder, bishop, or pastor — a bench of ruling elders — and deacons. The first to “minister in the word and doctrine,” and to dispense the sacraments; the second to assist in the inspection and government of the church; and the third to “serve tables;” that is, to take care of the church’s funds destined for the support of the poor, and sometimes to manage whatever relates to the temporal support of the gospel and its ministers.

The following essay will be devoted to the consideration of the second class of these officers, namely, *ruling elders*; and the points which it is proposed more particularly to discuss, are the following:

- the church’s warrant for this class of officers
- the nature, design, and duties of the office itself
- the qualifications proper for those who bear it
- the distinction between this office, and that of deacons
- by whom ruling elders ought to be elected
- in what manner they should be ordained
- the principles which ought to regulate their withdrawing or being deposed from office, moving from one church to another, etc.
- and finally, the advantages attending this form of government in the church.

The question whether the church has any warrant for this class of officers, will have different degrees of importance attached to it by different persons. Those who believe that no form of church government whatever can justly claim to be, in any sense, of divine right, will of course consider this inquiry as of small moment. If the church is at perfect liberty, at all times, to adopt whatever form of government she pleases, and to modify or entirely change the same at pleasure, then no other warrant than her own convenience or will ought to be required. But if the writer of the following pages is correct in believing

that there is a form of government for the family of God laid down in Scripture, to which it is the duty of the church, in all ages, to conform, then the inquiry which it is the purpose of several of the succeeding chapters to pursue, is plainly important, and it demands our serious attention.

It is believed, then, that the following positions, in reference to the office now under consideration may be firmly maintained; namely, that under the Old Testament economy in general, and especially in the synagogue service, elders were invariably appointed to exercise authority and bear rule in ecclesiastical society; that similar elders, after the model of the synagogue, were appointed in the primitive church, under the direction of inspired apostles; that we find in the writings of some of the early Fathers, evident traces of the same office as existing in their times; that the Waldenses and other pious witnesses for the truth, during the dark ages, retained this class of officers in the church, as a divine institution; that the reformers, with very few exceptions, when they separated from the corruptions of popery, restored this office to the church; that a number of distinguished divines and churches (not otherwise presbyterian) who have flourished since the Reformation, have remarkably concurred in declaring for the same office; and finally, that ruling elders, or officers of a similar kind, are indispensably necessary in every well ordered congregation. Each of these topics of argument is entitled to separate consideration.

**CHAPTER 2.**  
**TESTIMONY FROM THE ORDER OF THE  
OLD TESTAMENT.**

It is impossible fully to understand either the spirit, the facts, or the nomenclature of the New Testament, without going back to the Old. The Christian religion is founded upon that of the Jews; or rather it is the completion of it. The latter was the infancy and adolescence of that body of which the former is the manhood. And it is remarkable that no class of theologians more strenuously contend for the connection between the Jewish and Christian economies, and the impracticability of taking intelligent views of the one, without some previous knowledge of the other, than most of those who deny the apostolic origin of the class of officers now under consideration. With all such persons, then, we join issue. And as a very large part of the titles and functions of ecclesiastical officers were evidently transmitted from the *ceremonial* to the *spiritual* economy, it is indispensably necessary, in order fully to understand their character, to go back to their source.

The term *Elder*, corresponding with זָקֵן (*zaqen*) in Hebrew, πρεσβυτερος (*presbuteros*) in Greek, literally signifies *an aged person*. Among the Jews, and the eastern nations generally, persons *advanced in life* were commonly selected to fill stations of dignity and authority, because they were supposed to most possess wisdom, gravity, prudence, and experience. From this circumstance, the term *Elder* became, in the process of time, and by a natural association of ideas, an established title of office.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the Jews gave this title to most of their offices, civil as well as ecclesiastical, long before synagogues were established. From the time of Moses, they had elders over the nation, as well as over every city and smaller community. These are repeatedly represented as inspectors and rulers of the people; as “officers set over them;” and indeed, throughout their history, there is every reason to believe the body of the people never exercised governmental acts themselves, but chose their elders, to whom all the details of judicial and executive authority, under their Divine Legislator and Sovereign, were constantly committed.

The following specimen of the representation given on this subject, in various parts of the Old Testament, will suffice at once to illustrate and establish what is here advanced. Even while the children of Israel in Egypt, they seem to have had elders, in the official sense of the word. For Jehovah, in sending Moses to deliver them, said, “Go, and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them, The Lord has visited you, and has seen what is done to you in Egypt,” Exo 3.16. In the wilderness, the elders of Israel are spoken of as called together by Moses, appealed to by Moses, and officially acting under that divinely commissioned leader on almost innumerable occasions. These elders appear to have been of different grades, and endowed, of course, with different powers (Exo 17.5; 18.12; 24.1, 9; Num 11.16; Deu 25.7-9; 29.10; 31.9, 28). From these and other passages, it would seem they had seventy elders over the nation; and besides these, elders over thousands, over hundreds, over fifties, and over tens, who were all charged with inspection and rule in

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<sup>1</sup> It has often been remarked that the ancient official use of the word, as implying wisdom and experience, is still preserved in many modern languages, in which Seigneur, Signior, Senator, and other similar words, are used to express both dignity and authority. It is evident that all these words, and some others which might be mentioned, are derivatives from the Latin word, *senior*. It is no less plain, that the title of the magistrates of cities and boroughs, who are called aldermen or eldermen, is from the same origin with our modern term *elder*. Many of the titles of respect, both in the eastern and western world, were it proper to take time for the purpose, might be traced beyond all doubt to a similar source.

their respective spheres. Again, we find inspectors and rulers of the people, under the name of *elders*, existing and on all public occasions, *acting* in their official character — in the time of Joshua; during the period of the judges; under the kings, especially during the most favored and happy season of their kingly dominion; probably during the captivity in Babylon; and beyond all doubt, as soon as they returned from captivity and became settled in their own land; until the Synagogue system was regularly established as the stated means of popular instruction and worship.

When the synagogue service was instituted, is a question which has been so much controverted, and is of so much real uncertainty, that the discussion of it will not be attempted in this place, especially as it is a question of no sort of importance in the inquiry now before us. All that it is necessary for us to assume is that it existed at the time of our Lord's advent, and for a considerable time before; and that the Jews had been long accustomed to its order and worship — which no one, it is presumed, will think of questioning. Now, whatever might have been its origin, nothing can be more certain than this: that from the earliest notices we have of the institution, and through its whole history, its leading officers consisted of a bench of elders who were appointed to bear rule in the congregation. They formed a kind of consistory, or ecclesiastical judicatory, to receive applicants for admission into the church; to watch over the people in reference to their morals, as well as their obedience to ceremonial and ecclesiastical order; to administer discipline when necessary; and in short, as the representatives of the church or congregation, to act in their name and behalf; to “bind” and “loose” and to see that everything was “done decently and in order.”

It is not forgotten that a few eminent writers, following the celebrated German errorist,<sup>2</sup> Erastus, have contended that there was no ecclesiastical government among the Jews distinct from the civil; and of course, there were no rulers of the synagogue, separate from the civil judges. Those who wish to see this error satisfactorily refuted, and the existence of a distinct ecclesiastical government among that people clearly established, may consult what has been written on the subject by the learned Gillespie,<sup>3</sup> by professor Rutherford,<sup>4</sup> by Bishop Stillingfleet,<sup>5</sup> and others. From their writings they will be convinced beyond all reasonable doubt, that the civil and ecclesiastical judicatories really were distinct; that the persons composing each, as well as their respective spheres of judgment, were peculiar; and that the ecclesiastical judicatories existed long after the civil sovereignty of the Jewish people was taken away.

There has indeed been much diversity of opinion among learned men, concerning a variety of questions which arise in reference to these elders of the synagogue. As for example, whether there was a difference of rank among them? Whether some were teachers as well as rulers, and others were rulers only? Whether there was any diversity in their ordination, etc., etc.? But while eminent writers on Jewish antiquities have differed and continue to differ in relation to these points, they are all perfectly agreed on one point, namely, that in every synagogue there was a bench of elders, consisting of at least three persons, who were charged with the whole inspection, government, and

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<sup>2</sup> *Errorist*: one who encourages and propagates error, or holds onto an erroneous belief.

<sup>3</sup> *Aaron's Rod*, etc. Lond. 4to. 1646.

<sup>4</sup> *Divine Right of Church Government*, etc. London. 4to. 1646.

<sup>5</sup> *Irenicum*. Part 2. chapter 6.

discipline of the synagogue; who as a court or bench of rulers, received, judged, censured, excluded, and in a word, performed every judicial act necessary to the regularity and welfare of the congregation. In this general fact, Vitranga, Selden, Voetius, Marck, Grotius, Lightfoot, Blondel, Salmasius, and indeed, so far as I can now recollect, *all* the writers on this subject, those who deserve to be represented as high authorities, substantially agree. And in support of this fact, they quote Philo, Josephus, Maimonides, Benjamin of Tudela, and the great mass of other Jewish witnesses, who are considered as holding the first rank among Rabbinical authorities. Indeed, they speak of the fact as too unquestionable to demand any formal array of testimony for its confirmation. <sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, we find various passages in the New Testament history, which refer to these ruling elders as belonging to the old economy, then drawing to a close, and which admit, it would appear, of no other interpretation than that which supposes their existence. The following specimen will suffice: Mar 5.22, “And behold, there comes one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name; and when he saw him, he fell at his feet.” Act 13.15, “And after the reading of the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on.” On this latter passage, Dr. Gill, an eminent master of oriental, and especially of rabbinical learning, writes thus in his Commentary: “‘The rulers of the Synagogue sent to them;’ that is, those who were the principal men in the synagogue; the ruler of it, together with the elders; for there was but one ruler in a synagogue, though there were more elders; and so the Syriac version here renders it, the ‘elders of the synagogue.’” By this language, as I understand the Doctor, he does not mean to intimate that the other elders of whom he speaks here, did not bear rule in the synagogue; but there was only one who, by way of eminence, was called “the ruler of the synagogue;” that is, who presided at their meetings for official business. It is plain, however, that even in this assertion, he is in some degree in error; for more than once we find a plurality of persons in single synagogues spoken of as “rulers.”

The learned Vitranga, who undoubtedly is entitled to a very high place in the list of authorities on this subject, is of the opinion that all who occupied a place with the bench of elders in the synagogue, were of one and the same rank or order; that they all received one and the same ordination; and they were of course equally authorised to *preach* (when duty or inclination called them to this part of the public service) as well as to *rule*. And he is joined in this opinion by some others whose judgment is worthy of the highest respect. But at the same time, this eminent man freely grants that a majority of the Elders of the Synagogue were not, in fact, ordinarily employed in teaching or preaching. This part of the public service, he says, was principally under the direction of the chief ruler, or head of each synagogue, who attended to it himself. Or he called on one of the other elders, or even any other learned Doctor who might be present, and who was deemed capable of addressing the people in an instructive and acceptable manner. And he grants that the chief business of the mass of the elders was *to rule*. <sup>7</sup> The correctness of this opinion has been questioned. A number of other writers, quite his equals in both talents and learning, and especially quite as conversant with Jewish authorities, have maintained that a

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<sup>6</sup> When the unanimous agreement of these learned writers is asserted, it is not meant to be alleged that they all entertain the same views of the elders of the synagogue, as to all particulars; but simply that they all unite in maintaining that there was, in every synagogue, such a bench of elders, who conducted its discipline, and managed its affairs.

<sup>7</sup> *De Synagoga Vetere*. Lib. iii. par. i. cap. 7.

majority of the elders in the synagogue were neither chosen nor set apart to the function of teaching, but to that of ruling only. But in the lack of absolute certainty which exists on this subject, and for the sake of argument, I am willing to acquiesce in Vitringa's opinion. Suppose it to have been as he alleges: This is quite sufficient for our purpose. If it is conceded that there was, in every synagogue, a bench of elders who, as a judicial body, were entrusted with the whole government and discipline of the congregation; and that a majority of these elders seldom or never preached but were, in fact (whatever right they might have had) chiefly occupied as ecclesiastical rulers; and that all ecclesiastical matters, instead of being discussed and decided by the congregation at large, were constantly committed to the judicial deliberation and decision of this eldership. If these things are granted — and they are granted in substance by every writer entitled to be referred to as an authority, with whom I am acquainted — it is all that can be considered as material to the purpose of our argument. This will appear more fully in the sequel.

These officers of the Synagogue were called by different names, as we learn from the New Testament and from the most respectable Jewish authorities. The most common and familiar name perhaps, was that of *elders*, as stated at large before. They were also called rulers of the synagogue — a title of frequent occurrence in the New Testament, as applied to the whole bench of the elders in question. But this would seem, from some passages, to have been at least sometimes applied by way of eminence, to the principal ruler in each synagogue. This principal ruler appears, however, to have been of the same general rank, or order, with the rest, and to have had no other precedence than that which consisted in presiding and taking the lead in the public service. These officers were further called heads of the synagogue; overseers or bishops; presidents; orderers or regulators of the affairs of the synagogue; guides, etc. etc. These titles are given at length by Vitringa,<sup>8</sup> Selden,<sup>9</sup> and others, with the original vouchers and exemplifications of each; showing that they all imply bearing rule, as well as the enjoyment of pre-eminence and dignity.

And as these elders were distinguished from the common members of the synagogue by appropriate titles, indicating official honor and power, so they also had distinct and honorable seats assigned to them when the congregation over which they ruled was convened. The place of sitting usually appropriated to them, was a semi-circular bench, in the middle of which the chief ruler was placed, and his colleagues on each side of him, with their faces toward the assembly — and in a certain position with respect to the ark, the principal door, and the cardinal points of the compass. This statement is confirmed by the learned Thorndike, a distinguished Episcopal divine of the 17th century. In speaking of the consistory, or bench of elders in the synagogue, and describing their manner of sitting in public worship, he makes the following statement, in the form of a quotation from Maimonides; and he confirms it abundantly from other sources:

“How do the people sit in the synagogue? The elders sit with their faces towards the people, and their backs towards the *Hecall* (the place where they lay the copy of the law). And all the people sit rank before rank, the face of every rank towards the back of the rank before it; so the faces of all the people are towards the sanctuary, and towards the elders, and towards the ark. And when the minister of the synagogue stands up to

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<sup>8</sup> *De Synagoga Vetere*. lib. iii. par. i. cap. 1, 2, 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Discourse of the Service of God in Religious Assemblies*. Chap. 3. p. 56.

prayer, he stands on the ground before the ark, with his face toward the sanctuary, like the rest of the people.”<sup>10</sup>

The number of the elders in each synagogue was not governed by any absolute rule. In large cities, according to certain Jewish authorities quoted by Vitranga, the number was frequently very large. But even in the smallest synagogue, as mentioned on a former page, we are assured that there were never less than three, so that the judicatory might never be equally divided.

Such were the arrangements for maintaining purity and order in the synagogues, or parish churches of the old economy, anterior to the advent of the Messiah. It would seem to be impossible for anyone to contemplate this statement, so amply supported by all sound authority, without recognising a striking likeness to the arrangements afterwards adopted in the New Testament church. The following short extracts will sufficiently establish that this likeness is real, and it has been maintained by some of the ablest writers on the subject.

The first quotation will be taken from Bishop Burnet.

“Among the Jews,” he says, “the one who was the chief of the synagogue was called *Chazan Hakeneseth*, that is, the *bishop of the congregation*, and *Sheliach Tsibbor*, the *angel of the church*. And the Christian church being modelled as near the form of the synagogue as could be, as they retained many of the rites, so the form of their government was continued, and the names remained the same.”

And again;

“In the Synagogues there was, first, one that was called the Bishop of the Congregation. Next the three Orderers and Judges of everything about the Synagogue, who were called Tsekenim, and by the Greeks, *πρεσβυτεροι* (*presbuteroi*) or *γεροντες* (*gerontes*). These ordered and determined everything that concerned the synagogue or the persons in it. Next to them were the three *Parnassin*, or deacons, whose charge was to gather the collections of the rich and to distribute them to the poor. The term *elder* was generally given to all their judges, but chiefly to those of the great sanhedrim. So we have it in Mat 16.21; Mar 8.31; 14.43 & 15.1; and Act 23.14.”

“A great deal might be said to prove that the apostles, in their first constitutions, took things to their hand as they had been modelled in the synagogue. And they did this both because it was not their design to innovate, except where the nature of the Gospel dispensation obliged them to do it. And also because they took all means possible to gain the Jews, who we find were zealous adherers to the traditions of their fathers, and not easily weaned from those precepts of Moses which were evacuated by Christ’s death. And if the apostles went to so great a length in complying with them in greater matters, such as circumcision and other legal observances (which appears from the Acts and Epistles), we have good grounds to suppose that they would have yielded to them in what was more innocent and less important. Besides, there appears in both our Lord himself and his Apostles, a great inclination to symbolize with them as far as possible. Now, the nature of the Christian worship shows evidently that it came in the place of the synagogue, which was *moral*; and not of the temple worship, which was *typical* and

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<sup>10</sup> *De Synedriis – passim* (throughout).

*ceremonial*. Likewise, this parity of customs between the Jews and Christians was such, that the Romans and other more casual observers took them for one sect of religion. And finally, any who impartially read the New Testament, will find that when the forms of government or worship are treated, it is not done with such architectonic exactness as would be necessary if a *new thing* had been instituted, than what we find practised by Moses. But the apostles rather speak as those who give rules for the ordering and directing what was already in being. From all this, it seems well grounded and rational to assume that the first constitution of the Christian churches was taken from the model of the synagogue, in which these elders were separated for the discharge of their employments, by an imposition of hands, as all Jewish writers clearly witness.”<sup>11</sup>

The second testimony will be that of the Rev. Dr. Thomas Godwin, an English divine of great erudition, especially in oriental learning. In his well-known work entitled, “Moses and Aaron,” we find the following passage:

“There were in Israel distinct courts, consisting of distinct persons; the one principally for church business; the other for affairs in the commonwealth; the one an ecclesiastical consistory; the other a civil judicatory. The secular consistory was named a sanhedrim, or Council; the spiritual was named a synagogue. The office of the ecclesiastical court was to differentiate between holy and unholy things, and to determine appeals in controversies of difficulty. It was a representative church. Hence is that *Die Ecclesiae*, Mat 18.16.”<sup>12</sup>

The next quotation will be taken from Dr. Lightfoot, another Episcopal divine, still more distinguished, for his oriental and rabbinical learning.

“The Apostle,” he says, “calls the minister *Episcopus* (or Bishop), from the common and known title of the *Chazan* or *Overseer* in the Synagogue.”

And again —

“Besides these, there was the public minister of the Synagogue, who prayed publicly, and took care about reading the law, and sometimes preached, if there were not some other to discharge this office. This person was called, שליה יבור, the *angel* of the church, and חזן הכנרת the *Chazan*, or Bishop of the congregation. The *Aruch* gives the reason for the name. The *Chazan* he says, is שליה יבור the angel of the church (or the public minister), and the *Targum* renders the word רואה by the word תווה, one who *oversees*. For it is incumbent on him to oversee how the reader reads, and whom he may call out to read in the law. The public minister of the synagogue did not himself read the law publicly; but every Sabbath he called out seven of the synagogue (on other days fewer) who he judged fit to read. He stood by the one who read, with great care, observing that he read nothing either falsely or improperly, and called him back, and corrected him, if he had failed in anything. And hence he was called *Chazan*, that is, Επισκοπος (*Episkopos*), *Bishop*, or *Overseer*.”

Certainly the signification of the words *bishop* and *angel of the church*, would have been determined with less noise, if recourse had been had to the proper fountains, and men had not vainly disputed about the signification of words taken from I know not where.

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<sup>11</sup> *Observations on the First and Second Canons, etc.* pp. 2, 83, 84, 85. Glasgow. 12mo. 1673.

<sup>12</sup> *Moses and Aaron*, book 5, chapter i.



The service and worship of the temple being abolished, as being ceremonial, God transplanted the worship and public adoration of God used in the synagogues, which was *moral*, into the Christian church; namely, the public ministry, public prayers, reading God's word, and preaching, etc. Hence the names of the ministers of the gospel were the very same — the *angel of the church* and the *bishop* — which belonged to the ministers in the synagogues.

“There was in every synagogue, a bench of three. This bench consisted of three elders, rightly and by imposition of hands preferred to the Eldership.”

“There were also three deacons, or almoners, on which was the care of the poor.”<sup>13</sup>

In another place, the same learned orientalist says, describing the worship in the Jewish synagogue:

“In the body of the church, the congregation met, and prayed, and heard the law. And the manner of their sitting was this — The elders sat near the chancel, with their faces down the church: and the people sat one form behind another, with their faces up the church, toward the chancel and the elders. Of these elders, there were some who had rule and office in the synagogue, and some who did not. And this distinction the Apostle seems to allude to, in that much disputed text, 1Tim 5.18, ‘*The elders who rule well,*’ etc.; where ‘the elders who ruled well’ are set not only in opposition to those that ruled *ill*, but to those who did not rule *at all*. We may see, then, from where these titles and epithets in the New Testament are taken, namely, from the common platform and constitution of the synagogues, where *Angelus Ecclesiae*, and *Episcopus* were terms of such ordinary use and knowledge. And we may observe from where the Apostle takes his expressions when he speaks of some elders ruling and laboring in word and doctrine, and some not; namely, from the same platform and constitution of the synagogue, where ‘the ruler of the synagogue’ was more singularly for ruling the affairs of the synagogue, and ‘the minister of the congregation,’ laboring in the word, and reading the law, and in doctrine about the preaching of it. Both these together are sometimes called jointly, ‘the rulers of the synagogue;’ Acts 13.15; Mar 5.22, both being *elders that ruled*; but the title is more singularly given to the first of them.”<sup>14</sup>

Again, he says:

“In all the Jews’ synagogues there were *Parnasin*, deacons, or those who had care of the poor, whose work it was to gather alms for them from the congregation, and to distribute it to them. That needful office is here (Acts 6) translated into the Christian church.”<sup>15</sup>

The fourth quotation shall be taken from Dr. (afterwards Bishop) Stillingfleet who, in his *Irenicum*, maintains a similar position with confidence and zeal. The following is a specimen of his language:

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<sup>13</sup> *Lightfoot's Works*, Vol. 1. p. 308. Vol. ii. pp. 133, 755.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* vol. i. 611, 612.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* i. 279.

“That which we lay, then, as a foundation by which to clear what apostolic practice was, is that the apostles, in forming churches, observed the customs of the Jewish Synagogue.”<sup>16</sup>

And in support of this position, particularly in reference to the eldership of the synagogue, he quotes a large number of the most distinguished writers, both Jewish and Christian. It is due to candor, indeed, to state that Stillingfleet does not admit that any of the elders, either of the synagogue, or of the primitive church, were lay elders, but thinks they were all invested with some kind of clerical character. This, however, as remarked before, does not at all affect the value of his testimony to the general fact that in every synagogue there was a consistory, or judicatory, of elders, and that the same class of officers was adopted, both name and thing, in the apostolic church, which he unequivocally asserts and proves.

Grotius and Salmasius of Holland decisively concur in the same general doctrine. The following strong and unqualified language is used by Grotius: “The whole polity or order (regimen) of the churches of Christ, was conformed to the model of the Jewish synagogue.” And again, speaking of ordination by the imposition of hands, he says, “This method was observed in setting apart the rulers and elders of the synagogue; and from there the custom passed into the Christian church.”<sup>17</sup> Salmasius also, and other writers of equally profound learning, might be quoted as unequivocally deciding that the synagogue had a bench of ruling elders, and that a similar bench, following that model, was constituted in the Christian church. He especially contends that the elders of the church were, beyond all doubt, taken from the eldership in the synagogue.<sup>18</sup>

The learned Spencer, a divine of the church of England in the seventeenth century, teaches the same general doctrine when he says:

“The apostles also, that this reformation (the change from the Old to the New Testament dispensation) might proceed gently, and without noise, received into the Christian church many of those institutions which had long been in use among the Jews. Among the number of these may be reckoned the imposition of hands; bishops, elders, and deacons; excommunication, ordination, and other things familiar to learned men.”<sup>19</sup>

The Rev. Dr. Adam Clarke, whose eminent learning no competent judge will question, also bears testimony that in every Jewish synagogue at the time of the coming of Christ, and before, there was an ecclesiastical judicatory, or little court, whose duty it was to conduct the spiritual government of each congregation. Among several places in which he makes this statement, the following is decisive. In his Commentary on Jas 2.2, he says:

“In ancient times petty courts of judicature were held in the synagogue, as Vitranga has sufficiently proved, *De Vet. Syn.* 1. 3; and it is probable that the case adduced here was one of a judicial kind, where of the two parties, one was rich and the other poor; and the master or ruler of the synagogue, or whoever presided in this court, paid particular deference to the rich man, and neglected the poor person; though as plaintiff and defendant, they were equal in the eye of justice.”

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<sup>16</sup> *Irenicum*. Part 2, chapter 6.

<sup>17</sup> Grotii *Annotationes in Act. Apost.* vi. xi.

<sup>18</sup> *De Primatu Papae*. cap. i. (Claudius Salmasius, 1645).

<sup>19</sup> *De Legibus Hebraeorum*, Lib. iii. Dissert. 1. cap. 2. sect. 4.

I will cite on this subject only one more authority, that of the celebrated Augustus Neander, Professor in the University of Berlin, generally considered as perhaps more profoundly skilled in Christian antiquities than any other man now living. He is, moreover, a minister of the Lutheran church, and of course has no sectarian spirit to gratify in vindicating Presbyterianism. And (what is not unworthy of notice) being himself of Jewish extraction, he has enjoyed the highest advantages for exploring the peculiar polity of that people. After showing at some length that the government of the primitive church was not monarchical or prelatical, but dictated throughout by a spirit of mutual love, counsel, and prayer, he goes on to express himself thus:

“We may suppose that where any thing could be found in the way of church forms, which was consistent with this spirit, it would be willingly appropriated by the Christian community. Now there happened to be in the Jewish Synagogue, a system of government of this nature; not monarchical, but rather aristocratical (or a government of the most venerable and excellent.) A council of elders, ἐκκλησία πρεσβυτεροι, conducted all the affairs of that body. It seemed most natural that Christianity, developing itself from the Jewish religion, should take this form of government. This form must also have appeared natural and appropriate to the Roman citizens, since their nation had from the earliest times, been to some extent under the control of a Senate, composed of senators, or elders. When the church was placed under a council of elders, they did not always happen to be the oldest in reference to years; but the term expressive of age here was, as in the Latin *Senatus*, and in the Greek *γερονσια* (*geronsia*), expressive of worth or merit. Besides the common name of these overseers of the church, to wit, πρεσβυτεροι (*presbuteroi*), there were many other names given, according to the peculiar situation occupied by the individual, or rather his peculiar field of labor — such as ποιμενες (*poimenes*), shepherds; ηγουμενοι (*egoumenoi*), leaders; προεστωτες των αδελφων (*proestootes toon adelphoon*), rulers of the brethren; and επισκοποι (*episkopoi*), overseers.”<sup>20</sup>

Now, if the government of the congregation was not vested in the ancient Jewish synagogue, neither in the people at large, nor in any single individual, but in a bench of elders — if this is acknowledged on all hands, as one of the clearest and most indubitable facts in Jewish antiquity — and if, in the judgment of the most learned and pious divines that ever lived, both episcopal and non-episcopal, the New Testament church was formed after the model of the Jewish synagogue, and not after the pattern of the temple service — then we may, of course, expect to find some evidence of this in the history of the apostolic churches. How far this expectation is realized, will be seen in the next chapter.

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<sup>20</sup> Kirchengeschichte, vol. i., pp. 283, 285.

## CHAPTER 3.

### ***EVIDENCE IN FAVOR OF THE OFFICE FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES.***

In this chapter it is proposed to show that the office in question is mentioned in the New Testament, as existing in the apostolic church; that it was adopted from the synagogue; and that it occupied, in substance, the same place in the days of the apostles, that it now occupies in our truly primitive and Scriptural church.

The first assertion is that this class of officers was adopted in the church of Christ under its New Testament form, following the model of the Synagogue. Some have said, indeed, that in the organization of the church, the apostles adopted the model of the temple, and not of the synagogue service. But the slightest impartial attention to facts will be sufficient, it is believed, to disprove this assertion. If we compare the titles, the powers, the duties, and the ordination of the officers of the Christian church, as well as the nature and order of its public service as established by the Apostles, with the temple and the synagogue systems respectively, we will find the organization and service of the church to resemble the temple in scarcely anything, while they resemble the synagogue in almost everything. There were bishops, elders, and deacons in the synagogue; but no officers bearing these titles or performing similar functions in the temple. There was ordination by the imposition of hands in the synagogue; but no such ordination in the temple. There were reading the Scriptures, expounding them, and public prayers, every Sabbath day in the synagogue; while the body of the people went up to the temple only three times a year, and even then, to attend a very different service. In the synagogue, there was a system established which included a weekly provision, not only for the instruction and devotions of the people, but also for the maintenance of discipline, and the care of the poor; while scarcely anything of this kind was to be found in the temple. Now, in all these respects, and in many more which might be mentioned, the Christian church followed the synagogue model, and departed from that of the temple. If we could trace a resemblance only in one or a few points, it might be considered accidental; but the resemblance is so close, so striking, and extends to so many particulars, as to arrest the attention of the most careless inquirer. Indeed, it was notoriously so great in the early ages, that the heathen frequently suspected Christian churches of being Jewish synagogues in disguise, and accordingly stigmatized them as such.

And when it is considered that all the first converts to Christianity were Jews; that they had been accustomed to the offices and service of the synagogue during their whole lives; that they came into the church with all the feelings and habits connected with their old institutions strongly prevalent; and that the organization and service of the synagogue were of a moral nature in all their leading characteristics, proper to be adopted under *any* dispensation; while the typical and ceremonial service of the temple was then done away — when these things are considered, will it not appear perfectly natural that the apostles, who were themselves native Jews, should be disposed to make as little change in converting synagogues into Christian churches, as was consistent with the spirituality of the new dispensation? That the synagogue model should therefore be adopted, would seem beforehand, to be the most probable of all events. Nor is this a new or sectarian notion. Whoever looks into the writings of some of the early Fathers, of the reformers, and of a large portion of the most learned men who have adorned the church of Christ

subsequent to the Reformation, will find a very remarkable concurrence of opinion that such was the model really adopted in the organization of the apostolic church. Most of the distinguished writers whose names were mentioned in the preceding chapter are, as we have seen, unanimous and zealous in maintaining this position.

Accordingly, as soon as we begin to read of the Apostles organizing churches on the New Testament plan, we find them instituting officers of precisely the same nature, and bestowing on them (for the most part) the very same titles to which they had been accustomed in the ordinary sabbatical service under the preceding economy. We find bishops, elders, and deacons everywhere appointed. We find a plurality of elders ordained in every church. And we find the elders represented as “overseers,” or inspectors of the church; as “rulers” in the house of God; and the members of the church exhorted to “obey them,” and “submit” to them as to persons charged with their spiritual interests, and entitled to their affectionate and dutiful reverence.

The following passages may be considered as a specimen of the New Testament representations on this subject.

“And when they had ordained *elders* in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed,” Act 14.23.

“And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church, and by the apostles and *elders*. And the apostles and *elders* came together to consider this matter,” Act 15.4, 6.

“And from Miletus, he (Paul) sent to Ephesus, and called the *elders* of the church; and when they had come to him, he said to them, take heed to yourselves, and to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost has made you *overseers*,” Act 20.20, 28.

“Is any sick among you? Let him call for the *elders* of the church; and let them pray over him,” etc., Jas 5.14.

“The *elders* which are among you I exhort, I who am also an *elder*, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed. Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking *oversight of it*, not by constraint but willingly; not for filthy lucre but of a ready mind; not as being lords over God’s heritage, but being examples to the flock,” 1Pet 5.1-3.

“For this cause I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and ordain *elders* in every city, as I have appointed you,” Tit 1.5.

“Obey those who *have the rule over you*, and submit yourselves, for they watch for your souls as those who must give account,” Heb 13.17.

“And we beseech you, brethren, to know those who labor among you, and are *over you* in the Lord, and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their works’ sake,” 1The 5.12-13.

“Let the Elders who rule well be accounted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine,” 1Tim 5.17.

To whatever church our attention is directed in the inspired history, we find in it a plurality of Elders; we find the mass of the church members spoken of as under their authority; and while the people are exhorted to submit to their rule with all readiness and

affection, these rulers are commanded in the name of Christ, to exercise the power vested in them by the great Head of the church, with firmness and fidelity — and yet, with disinterestedness and moderation, so as to most effectually promote the purity and order of the flock.

The circumstance of our finding it so uniformly stated that there was a plurality of elders ordained in every church, is certainly worthy of particular attention here. If there had been a plurality of these officers appointed only in some of the more populous cities where there were probably several worshipping assemblies; where the congregations may be supposed to have been unusually large; and where it was important, of course, to have more than a single preacher; then we might consider this fact as very well reconcilable with the doctrine of those who assert that all the elders in the apostolic church, were official teachers. But as both the direction and the practice were to ordain elders — that is, more than one at least, in every church, small as well as great — there is evidently a very strong presumption that it was intended to conform to the synagogue model. And if so, the whole of the number so ordained could not be necessary for the purpose of public instruction; but rather that some were *rulers* who, as in the Synagogue, formed a kind of congregational presbytery, or consistory, for the government of the church. The idea that it was considered as necessary at such a time, that every church should have two, three, or four pastors or ministers, in the modern popular sense of those terms, is manifestly altogether inadmissible. But if a majority of these elders, whatever their ordination or authority might be, were in fact employed, not in *teaching* but in *ruling*, then all difficulty vanishes at once.

Accordingly, the learned Vitringa, mentioned before, whose authority is much relied upon to disprove the existence of the office of ruling elder in the primitive church, explicitly acknowledges, not only that there was then a plurality of elders in every church, but that as in the synagogue, the greater part of these were in fact employed in *ruling only*. And he acknowledges that, although all of them were set apart to their office in the same manner, and were ecclesiastically of the same rank, yet a majority of them (from lack of suitable qualifications), were not fitted to be public preachers; and they seldom or never attempted this part of the service. <sup>1</sup>

But there are distinct passages of Scripture which have been deemed, by some of the most impartial and competent interpreters, to point out very plainly the class of elders now under consideration.

In Rom 12.6-8, the apostle exhorts as follows:

“Having then gifts differing according to the grace given to us: if prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teaches, on teaching; or he that exhorts, on exhortation; he that gives, let him do it with simplicity; *he that rules*, with diligence; he that shows mercy, with cheerfulness.”

With this passage may be connected another of similar character, and to be interpreted on the same principles. In 1Cor 12.28, we are told, “God has set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healing,

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<sup>1</sup> Vitringa, *De Synagoga Vetere*. Lib. ii. chap. ii.

helps, *governments*, diversities of tongues.” In both these passages there is a reference to the different offices and gifts bestowed on the church by her divine King and Head; in both of them there is a plain designation of an *office* for ruling or government, distinct from that of teaching; and in both passages also, this office evidently has a place assigned to it below that of pastors and teachers. Now, by whatever name it may be called, or whatever doubts may be started as to some minor questions respecting its powers and investiture, this office is substantially the same with that which Presbyterians distinguish by the title of *ruling elder*.

Some, indeed, have said that the Apostle is not speaking of distinct *offices* in 1Cor 12.28, but of different *duties* devolving on the church as a body. But no one, it is believed, who impartially considers the whole passage, can adopt this opinion. In the whole of the context, from the 12th verse, the Apostle is speaking of the church of God under the emblem of a *body*, and he affirms that in this body, there is a variety of members adapted to the comfort and convenience of the whole body.

“For the body,” he says, “is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body, is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body, is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, every one of them, in the body as it has pleased him. And if they were all one member, where would be the body?”

Plainly implying that in every *ecclesiastical*, as well as in every *natural* body, there are different functions and offices — that all cannot be teachers; that all cannot be governors, or governments; but that to each and every functionary is assigned his proper work and duty.

Nor is this interpretation of the Apostle confined to Presbyterians. Peter Martyr, the learned Italian reformer, interprets the passage before us just as we have done. In his Commentary on 1Cor 12.28, he speaks thus:

“*Governments* — Those who are honored with this function, are such as were fitted for the work of government, and who know how to conduct everything relating to discipline righteously and prudently. For the church of Christ had its government. And because a single pastor was not able to accomplish everything himself, there were joined with him, in the ancient church, certain elders, chosen from among the people, well-informed and skilled in spiritual things, who formed a kind of parochial senate. These, with the pastor, deliberated on every matter relating to the care and edification of the church. Ambrose mentions this in writing on the Epistle to Timothy. The Pastor took the lead among these elders, not as a tyrant, but rather as a consul presiding in a council of senators.”

Many Episcopalians and others find the same sense in the passage. The Reverend Herbert Thorndike, quoted before, a learned divine of the church of England, who lived in the reign of Charles I, speaks thus of the passage last cited.

“There is no reason to doubt that the men whom the Apostle, 1Cor 12.28 and Eph 4.11, called *doctors*, or *teachers*, are those of the presbyters who had the abilities of preaching and teaching the people at their assemblies. Those of the Presbyters who did not preach, are here called by the Apostle, *governments*; and the deacons, ἀντιληψεις (*antileyeis*)

— that is, *helps*, or assistants to the government of presbyters; so that it is not to be translated *helps in governments*, but *helps, governments*, etc. There were two parts of the Presbyter's office, namely *teaching* and *governing*, one of which some did not attain even in the apostles' times." <sup>2</sup>

But there is a still more pointed reference to this class of elders in 1Tim 5.17. "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine." It would seem that every person of plain common sense, who had never heard of any diversity of opinion on the subject, would conclude without hesitation, upon reading this passage, that at the period in which it was written, there were two kinds of elders — one whose duty it was to labor in the word and doctrine, and another who did not thus labor, but only ruled in the church. The Apostle declares that elders who rule well are worthy of double honor, but *especially* those who labor in the word and doctrine. Now, if we suppose that there was only one class of elders then in the church, and that they were *all* teachers, or laborers in the word and doctrine, we make the inspired apostle speak in a manner utterly unworthy of his high character. Therefore, there was a class of elders in the apostolic church, who did not in fact, or at any rate, *ordinarily* preach or administer sacraments, but assisted in *government* — in other words, ruling elders.

For this construction of the passage, Dr. Whitaker, a zealous and learned Episcopal divine, and Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge — of whom Bishop Hall remarks that "no man ever saw him without reverence, or heard him without wonder" — very warmly contends this:

"By these words," he says, "the apostle evidently distinguishes between the bishops and the inspectors of the church. If all who rule well are worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine, it is plain that there were some who did not so labor; for if *all* had been of this description, the meaning would have been absurd; but the word especially points out a *difference*. If I should say that all who study well at the University are worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the study of theology, I must either mean that all do not apply themselves to the study of Theology, or else I should speak nonsense. Therefore I confess that to be the most genuine sense, by which pastors and teachers are distinguished from those who only governed, Rom 12.8. Ambrose speaks of this class of elders, in his Commentary on 1Tim 5.1." <sup>3</sup>

The learned and venerable Dr. Owen gives his opinion of the import of this passage, in still more pointed language.

"This is a text," he says, "of incontrollable evidence, if it had anything to conflict with but prejudice and interest. A rational man who is unprejudiced, who never heard of the controversy about ruling elders, can hardly avoid an apprehension that there are two sorts of elders, some who labor in the word and doctrine, and some who do not. The truth is, it was interest and prejudice which first caused some learned men to strain their wits to find evasions from the evidence of this testimony. Being found out, some others of meaner abilities, have been entangled by them. There are elders, then, in the church.

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<sup>2</sup> *Discourse of Religious Assemblies*. Chap. iv. p. 117.

<sup>3</sup> *Praelectiones*, as quoted in Calderwood's *Altere Damascenum*, p. 681.



There are, or ought to be so in *every* church. With these elders *the whole rule of the church* is entrusted. All of these, and *only* these, rule in it.”<sup>4</sup>

Equally to our purpose is the judgment of that acute and learned Episcopal divine, Dr. Whitby, in his Commentary on this passage:

“The Elders of the Jews,” he says, “were of two sorts; 1st, those who governed in the synagogue, and 2dly, those who ministered in reading and expounding their scriptures and traditions — and from them, pronouncing what bound or loosed, or what was forbidden and what was lawful to be done. For when, partly by their captivity, and partly through increase of traffic, they were dispersed in considerable bodies throughout diverse regions of the world, it was necessary that they should have governors or magistrates to keep them in their duty, and judge criminal causes; and also rabbins, to teach them the law and the tradition of their fathers. The first sort were ordained *ad judicandum, sed non ad docendum de licitis et vetitis, i.e.* to judge and govern, but not to teach. The second, *ad docendum, sed non ad judicandum, i.e.* to teach, but not to judge or govern.” “And here the Apostle declares these to be the most honorable, and worthy of the highest reward. Accordingly, the apostle, reckoning up the officers God had appointed in the church, places *teachers* before *governments*; 1Cor 12.28.”

I am aware that a number of glosses have been adopted to set aside the testimony of this cogent text in favor of ruling elders. To enumerate and show the invalidity of them all, would be inconsistent with the limits to which this manual is restricted, But a few of the most plausible and popular may be deemed worthy of notice.

Some, for example, have said that “the elders who rule well” in this passage, intends civil magistrates; while “those who labor in the word and doctrine,” points out ministers of the gospel. But it will occur to every reflecting reader, that at the time when the passage of Scripture under consideration was addressed to Timothy, and for several centuries afterwards, there were no Christian magistrates in the Church. And to suppose that the church is exhorted to choose heathen judges or magistrates, to settle differences and maintain order among the followers of Christ, is in the highest degree improbable, not to say altogether absurd.

Others have alleged that “the elders who rule well” meant deacons. It is enough to reply to this suggestion, that it has never been shown, or can be shown, that deacons are anywhere in the New Testament distinguished by the title of elders; and further, that the function of *ruling* is nowhere represented as belonging to their office. They were appointed Διακονεῖν τραπεζαῖς, (*Diakonein trapezais*) to serve tables, Act 6.2-3; but not to act as rulers in the house of God. However, more about this in a subsequent chapter.

A third class of objectors contend that the word μαλιστα (*malista*), which our translators have rendered “especially” ought to be translated “much.” That it is not to be considered as distinguishing one class of elders from another; but as marking the intensity of degree. In other words, they say, it is meant to be exegetical of those who rule *well*, namely, those who labor *much*, or with peculiar diligence, in the word and doctrine. On this plan, the verse in question would read thus: ‘Let the elders who rule well, that is, who labor *much* in the word and doctrine, be accounted worthy of double honor.’ If this were adopted as

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<sup>4</sup> *True Nature of a Gospel Church*. Chapter vii. pp. 141, 142, 143.

the meaning of the passage, it would go to show that it is for *preaching alone*, and not for *ruling well*, that elders are entitled to honor. But is it rational or consistent with other parts of Scripture, to suppose that no honor is due to the latter? It has also been contended by excellent Greek critics, that the structure of the sentence will not naturally bear this interpretation. It is not said, οἱ μαλιστα κοπιωντες, which would have been the proper order of the words if that had been the meaning intended to be conveyed; but μαλιστα οἱ κοπιωντες: not *those who labor with especial diligence and exertion*; but *especially those who labor*, etc. But the most decisive consideration is that not a single case can be found in the New Testament, in which the word μαλιστα (*malista*) has the signification attributed to it here. It is so generally used to distinguish one class of objects from another, that we may safely venture to say, it cannot possibly have a different meaning in the passage before us. A few decisive examples will be sufficient.

In the same chapter from which the passage under consideration is taken (1Tim 5.8), it is said: “If any man does not provide for his own, and especially (μαλιστα) for those of his own house, he has denied the faith,” etc. Again, Gal 4.10: “Let us do good to all men, but especially (μαλιστα) to those who are of the household of faith.” Again, Phi 4.22: “All the saints salute you, chiefly (μαλιστα) those of Caesar’s household. Thus, also, 2Tim 4.13, When you come, bring with you the books, but especially (μαλιστα) the parchments.” Further, 1Tim 4.10: “Who is the Saviour of all men, especially (μαλιστα) of those who believe.” Again, Tit 1.10: “For there are many unruly and vain talkers, especially (μαλιστα) those of the circumcision.” Now, in all these cases, there are two classes of objects intended to be distinguished from each other. Some of the saints were of Caesar’s household, and others were not. Good was to be done to all men; but all were not believers. There were many vain and unruly talkers alluded to, but not all were of the circumcision; and so too of the rest.

A fourth class of objectors to our construction of this passage, are certain prelatists, who allege that the Apostle intends “the elders who rule well,” to designate superannuated bishops,<sup>5</sup> who though too old to labor in the word and doctrine, were still able to assist in ruling. To this it is sufficient to reply that, whether we understand the “honor” (τιμης) to which the Apostle refers, as intended to designate pecuniary support, or rank and dignity, it would seem contrary to every principle, both of reason and Scripture, that younger and more vigorous laborers in the word and doctrine, would have a portion of this honor awarded to them, superior to that which is yielded to those who have become worn out in the same kind of service. These aged, venerable, and exhausted dignitaries, according to this construction, are indeed to be much honored, but less than their junior brethren whose strength for labor still continues.

A further objection made to our construction of this passage is that when the Apostle speaks of double honor (διπλης τιμης) as due to those who rule well, he does not refer to respect and regard, but to temporal support. <sup>6</sup> Now, says this class of objectors, as

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<sup>5</sup> *Superannuated*: too old to be useful.

<sup>6</sup> It is worthy of notice that Calvin, in his Commentary on this place, gives the following view of the apostle’s meaning when he speaks of double honor. “When Chrysostom interprets the phrase *double honor*, as importing support and reverence, I do not impugn his opinion. Let those adopt it who think proper. But to me it appears more probable that a comparison is here intended between widows and elders. Paul had just before commanded to hold widows in honor. But elders are still more worthy of honor than they. Therefore double honor is to be given to these.” This interpretation is natural, and consistent. “Honor widows, says the apostle, who are widows indeed;” but “let the elders who rule well

Presbyterians never give salaries to their ruling elders, they cannot be the kind of officers contemplated by the sacred writer in this place. But is it certain that the original term, here translated “honor,” salary, or maintenance, is really intended? Why not assign to the word τιμη (*timh*) its more common signification, namely honor, high respect, reverence? It is common to say that the illustration contained in the 18th verse, “You must not muzzle the ox that treads out the corn; and the laborer is worthy of his reward,” seem to fix the meaning to *temporal* support. But those illustrations only carry with them the general idea of reward; and surely a reward may be of the *moral* as well as of the *pecuniary* kind. But supposing the inspired apostle really meant *double*, that is, *liberal maintenance*, still this interpretation does not at all militate against our doctrine. It might have been very proper in the days of Paul, to give all the elders a decent temporal support, as a reward for their services. But if any elders chose to decline receiving a regular stipend, as Paul himself seems to have done, he surely did not, by this disinterestedness, forfeit his office. It may be that ruling elders should now receive a compensation for their services, especially when they devote to the church a large part of their time and talents. But if any are willing to render their services gratuitously, whether they are ruling or preaching elders, everyone sees that this cannot destroy, or even impair their official standing.

Accordingly, it will be seen in the sequel, that there is a concurrence of sentiment in favor of our construction of this celebrated passage in Timothy, among the most distinguished divines of all denominations, Protestant and Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed — truly remarkable; and it affords a very strong presumptive argument in favor of its correctness.

There is another class of passages, already quoted in a former part of this chapter, which is entitled to more formal consideration. I mean such as that found in 1The 5.12-13: “And we beseech you brethren, to know those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their works sake.” Also such as that found in Heb 13.17. “Obey those who have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls as those who must give account,” etc. Here the inspired writer is evidently speaking of particular churches. He represents them as each having a body of rulers “set over them in the Lord,” who “watch over them,” and whom they are bound to “obey.” In short, we find a set of officers spoken of, who are not merely to instruct and exhort, but to exercise official authority in the church. Now this representation can be made to agree with no other form of government than that of the Presbyterian church. Not with Prelacy; for that presents no ruler in any single church except the Rector. It knows nothing of a parochial council, or senate, who conduct discipline and perform all the duties of spiritual rule. Not with Independency, for according to the essential principles of that system, the body of the communicants are all equally rulers, and even the pastor is only the chairman or president, not properly the Ruler of the church. But it agrees perfectly with the Presbyterian form of church government in which every congregation is furnished with a bench of spiritual rulers whom the people are bound to reverence and obey.

There is only one passage more which will be adduced in support of the class of elders before us. This is found in Mat 18.15-17. Here it is believed that the 17th verse, which enjoins, “Tell it to the church,” is evidently a reference to the plan of discipline known to

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be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.” The same word is used to express honor in both cases.

have been pursued in the Jewish synagogue; and the meaning is, “Tell it to that consistory or judicatory which is the church acting by its representatives.” It is true, indeed, that some Independents, having more zeal than caution, have confidently quoted this passage as being decisively in favor of their scheme of popular government. But when carefully examined, it will be found not only to by no means answer their purpose; but rather to support the Presbyterian cause. We must always interpret language agreeably to the well-known understanding and habit of the time and the country in which it is delivered. Now, it is perfectly certain that the phrase, “Tell it to the church,” was constantly in use among the Jews to express carrying a complaint to the eldership or representatives of the church. And it is quite as certain, that actual cases occur in the Old Testament in which the term *church* (ἐκκλησία, *ecclesia*) is applied to the body of elders. See as an example of this, Deu 31.28, 30, comparing our translation with that of the Seventy (LXX), as alluded to in a preceding chapter. We can scarcely avoid the conclusion then, that our blessed Lord meant to teach his disciples that, as it had been in the Jewish Synagogue, so it would be in the Christian church — that the sacred community should be governed by a bench of rulers regularly chosen and set apart for this purpose.

In support of this construction of the passage before us, we have the concurring judgment of a large majority of Protestant divines, of all denominations. We have not only the opinion of Calvin, Beza, Paraeus, and a great number of distinguished writers on the continent of Europe; but also of Lightfoot, Goodwin, and many others, both ministers of the church of England, and the Independents of that country. It is worthy of remark, too, that Chrysostom, known to be an eminently learned and accomplished Father of the fourth century, evidently understands this passage in the Gospel according to Matthew, as substantially agreeing with the views of Presbyterians; or at any rate, as totally rejecting the Independent doctrine. Zanchius, (in *Quart. Praecept.*) and Junius (*Controv.* iii. lib. ii. cap. vi.), quote him as asserting in his Commentary on this place, that by *the church to which the offence was to be told*, we are to understand the προεδροι και πρωεστωτες, *proedroi* (leaders) and *proestootes* (rulers) of the church.

It may not be improper, before taking leave of the Scriptural testimony in favor of ruling elders, to take some notice of an objection which has been advanced with much confidence, but which when examined, will be found manifestly destitute of the smallest force. It has been said that great reliance is placed on the word προεστωτες, (*proestootes*) found in 1Tim 5.17, as expressive of the *ruling* character of the office under consideration; whereas these objectors say this very word, as is universally known and acknowledged, is applied by several of the early Fathers to *teaching* elders, to those who evidently bore the office of *pastors* of churches, and who were, of course, not mere rulers but also “laborers in the word and doctrine.” If this title is therefore applied to those who were confessedly *teachers*, then what evidence do we have that it is intended, in any case, to designate a different class? This objection is founded on a total misrepresentation of the argument which it is supposed to refute. The advocates of the office of ruling elder do *not* contend or believe that the function of ruling is confined to this class of officers. On the contrary, they suppose and teach that one class of elders both rule and teach, while the other class rule only. Both, according to the doctrine of the Presbyterian church, are προεστωτες; but one only “labors in the word and doctrine.” Therefore, when cases are found in the early records of the church in which the presiding elder, or pastor is styled προεστως, the fact is in perfect harmony with the usual argument from 1Tim 5.17, the import of which we

maintain to be this: ‘Let all the elders who rule well, be counted worthy of double honor, especially those of their number who, besides ruling, besides acting as προεστωτες in common with the others, also labor in the word and doctrine.’

It has also been contended that the whole doctrine of the *ruling*, as distinct from the *teaching* elder, tends to weaken, if not wholly destroy, the Presbyterian argument in favor of parity in the Gospel ministry. This is drawn from the fact that both Scripture and early Christian antiquity represent bishop and presbyter as convertible titles for the same office. Presbyterians maintain, and I have no doubt, with perfect truth, that in the language of the New Testament, a bishop means the pastor, or overseer of a single church or parish; that Bishop and Presbyter are not titles which imply different grades of office; but that a presbyter or elder who has a pastoral charge, who is the overseer of a flock, is a Scriptural bishop, and holds the highest office that Christ has instituted in his church. Now, it has been alleged by the opponents of ruling elders, that to represent the Scriptures as holding forth two classes of Elders, one class as both teaching and ruling, and the other as ruling only — and consequently, the latter as holding a station not exactly identical with the former — amounts to a virtual surrender of the argument derived from the identity of bishop and presbyter.

This objection, however, is totally groundless. If we suppose *elder*, as used in Scripture, is a generic term comprehending all who bore rule in the church; and if we consider the term bishop, also as a generic term, including all who sustained the relation of official inspectors or overseers of a flock — then it is plain that all bishops were Scriptural elders. And it is plain that all elders — whether both teachers and rulers, or rulers only, provided they were placed over a parish as inspectors or overseers — were Scriptural bishops. Now, I have no doubt this was the fact. Therefore, when the Apostle Paul, in writing to the church at Philippi, addresses the bishops and deacons; and when in his conference with the elders of the church of Ephesus, at Miletus, he speaks of them all equally as overseers; or as it is in the original, *bishops* (Επισκοπους *Episkopous*) of that church, I take it for granted that he included the rulers as well as the teachers, in both instances. In a word, I suppose that in every truly primitive and apostolic church, there was a bench of elders, or overseers, who presided over all the spiritual interests of the congregation. I suppose that generally, only a small part of these, and perhaps seldom more than one, stately (regularly) preached; and that the rest, though probably ordained in the same manner with their colleagues, very rarely if ever taught publicly, but were employed as inspectors and rulers; and maybe also in visiting, catechizing, and instructing from house to house.

If this were the case, and every part of the New Testament history favors the supposition, then nothing can be more natural than the language of the inspired writers in reference to this whole subject. And then we readily understand why the apostle would say to Titus: “For this cause left I you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and ordain *elders* in every city, as I have appointed you. If any are blameless, etc.; for a *bishop* must be blameless, as the steward of God,” etc. We may then perceive why he speaks of a number of bishops at Philippi, and also a number at Ephesus; and in the same breath, calls the latter alternately bishops and elders. And on this principle, we may see no less plainly, why the apostle Peter said,

“The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed. Feed the flock

of God that is among you, taking oversight of it (ἐπισκοτοῦντες *episkotountes*) — acting as bishops among them, not by constraint but willingly; not for filthy lucre but of a ready mind; not as being lords over God’s heritage, but being examples to the flock.”

And accordingly, it is remarkable that the word ποιμανατε (*poimante*), used in the second verse of the last quotation, is derived from a word signifying a *shepherd*, and carries with it the ideas of guiding, protecting, and ruling, as well as feeding in appropriate spiritual pastures. See Mat 2.6 and Rev 7.17.

This view of the subject takes away all embarrassment and difficulty in reference to the titles given to the primitive officers of the church. There is abundant evidence that every class of elders, those who commonly officiated as rulers only, as well as those who both ruled and taught, bore the names of bishops, inspectors, overseers, during the apostolic age and for some time afterwards. This was a name most significantly expressive of their appropriate function, which was to overlook, direct, and rule each particular church for its edification. How long this title continued to be applied to all the elders indiscriminately, is not easy to say. It was probably in the church, as it was known to have been in the synagogue. All the rulers of the synagogue were popularly called *archisynagogi*, as is evident from several passages in the New Testament. But sometimes, as we learn from the same source, this title was applied by way of eminence, to the presiding or principal ruler of each synagogue. So with regard to the title of inspector, overseer, or bishop, we know that all the elders of Ephesus (Act 20.17, 28) were indiscriminately called *bishops* by the inspired Paul. We know too that the same apostle recognizes a plurality of bishops, or overseers, in the church at Philippi (chap. 1.1) who could not possibly have been prelates, as Episcopalians themselves allow. We find, moreover, the same “chiefest of the Apostles” (2Cor 11.5) giving the titles of *bishop* and *elder*, without discrimination, to all the church rulers directed to be ordained in Ephesus and Crete, as the epistles to Timothy and Titus plainly evince.

In those pure and simple times, no difficulty arose from this general application of a plain and expressive title. For more than a hundred years after the apostolic age, this title continued to be frequently applied in the same manner, as the writings of Clemens Romanus, Hermas, Irenaeus, and others, amply testify. We find them not only speaking of the elders as bearing rule in each church; but also calling the same men, alternately, bishops and elders, as was evidently done in apostolic times. In the process of time, however, this title which was originally considered as expressive of duty and labor, rather than of honor, became gradually appropriated to the principal elder, who usually presided in preaching and ordering the course of the public service. Not only so, but as a worldly and ambitious spirit gained ground, whoever bore this title began to advance certain peculiar claims; first those of a stated chairman, president, or moderator; and finally, those of a new order, or grade of office.

That there was an entire change in the application of the title of *bishop* not long after the apostolic age, a majority of our Episcopal brethren themselves allow. They grant that in the New Testament this title is given indiscriminately to all who were entrusted with the instruction and care of the church. But that, in the succeeding period, it was gradually reserved to the highest order. In other words, they grant that the title *bishop* had a very different meaning in the second and third centuries, from that which it had borne in the first. Now, even conceding to them that this change took place earlier than the best

records give us reason to believe, it may be asked, why make such a change at all? Why not continue to get along with the language which the inspired apostles had authorised by their use? Why insidiously make an old title, which was familiar to the popular ear, signify something very different from what it had usually signified from the beginning; and thus palm off a new office on the people, with an old name? If there were no other fact established by the early writers than this, it would be quite sufficient to convince us that the apostolic government of the church was early on corrupted by human ambition.

## CHAPTER 4.

### *TESTIMONY OF THE CHRISTIAN FATHERS.*

That which is not found in the Bible, however fully and strongly it may be enjoined elsewhere, cannot be considered as binding on the church. On the other hand, what is plainly found in the word of God, though it is taught nowhere else, we are bound to receive. Accordingly, if we find ruling elders in the New Testament, as it is firmly believed we have done — it does not matter as to their substantial warrant, how soon after the apostolic age they fell into disuse. Still, if we can discover traces of them in the early uninspired writings of the Christian church, it will certainly add something to the chain of proof which we possess in their favor. It will add strong presumption to that which is our decisive rule. Let us then see whether the early Fathers say anything which can be fairly considered as alluding to this class of church officers.

But before we proceed to examine these witnesses in detail, it may not be improper to make two general remarks, which ought to be kept steadily in view throughout the whole of this branch of our subject.

The first is that we must be on our guard against the ambiguous use of the title *elder*, as it is expressed in different languages. When we look into the writings of the Christian Fathers who lived during the first two hundred years after Christ — all of whom, if we except Tertullian, wrote in Greek — we find them generally using the word *πρεσβυτερος* to designate an elder. Now this is precisely the same word which the advocates of Prelacy apply to the “second order” (as they express it) of their “clergy,” always called “presbyters” by them. And when Presbyterians translate this word by the term *elder*,<sup>1</sup> and consider it as used (at least in many cases) to designate that class of officers which forms the subject of this essay, they are considered and represented by some illiterate and narrow-minded persons, as being chargeable with an unfair if not deceptive use of a term. This charge is manifestly unjust. It will never be repeated by any candid individual who is acquainted with the Greek language. This is the very word which is almost invariably used by the translators of the Septuagint, all through the Old Testament, to designate elders who confessedly had nothing to do with preaching.

In truth, it was a general title of office among the Jews, and it was a general title of office among the early Christians, as anyone will immediately perceive by a candid perusal of the New Testament. And the fact is, that if Presbyterians wrote in Greek, they would of course employ this very term to express their ruling elder. The word “elder” is the natural, literal, and we may almost say, the *only* proper term by which to express the meaning of the Greek title *πρεσβυτερος* (*presbuteros*). And even in some of the early Fathers, when we meet with passages in which the officers of the church are enumerated as consisting of *επισκοποι, πρεσβυτεροι, και διακονοι* (*episkopoi, presbuteroi, and diakonoi*) it may be said with perfect truth, that if Presbyterians at the present day, were called upon to enumerate the standing officers in all their churches, which are completely organized agreeably to their public standards, they would, beyond all doubt, if they used the Greek language, represent their regular ecclesiastical officers as everywhere consisting of *επισκοποι, πρεσβυτεροι, και διακονοι*. By *επισκοποι* (*episkopoi*), they mean a parochial

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<sup>1</sup> It is worthy of notice that whenever the word *πρεσβυτερος* (*presbuteros*) occurs in the New Testament, our translation (when an ecclesiastical officer is meant) always renders it *elder*. So far as recollected, this is invariably done.



pastor or overseer, in which sense prelatists themselves acknowledge the title to have been generally used in the apostolic age; and by the title πρεσβυτερος (*presbuteros*), they mean a ruling elder. We have no doubt this has been shown, and will be further shown to be, in many cases, the proper interpretation of the word. Therefore, when we thus translate the word in some of the following quotations, let no one feel as if we were taking an unwarrantable liberty. No imputation of this kind, assuredly, will be made by any reader of competent learning to judge in the case.

The second preliminary remark is that perhaps no class of church officers would be, on the whole, so likely to fall into disrepute after the apostolic age, and be discontinued, as that which is now under consideration. We know that the purity of the church began to decline immediately after the apostolic age. Indeed, while the Apostles were still alive, “the mystery of iniquity” had already begun “to work.” Corruption, both in faith and practice, had crept in, and in some places, to an alarming and most distressing extent. And after their departure, it soon “came in like a flood.” The discipline of the church became relaxed, and after a while, in a great measure prostrated. The hints dropped by several writers in the second century, and the strongly colored and revolting pictures given by Origen and Cyprian of the state of the church in their own times, present a view of this subject which needs no comment. Now, in such a state of things, was it not natural that the office of those whose peculiar duty it was to inspect the members of the church, to take cognizance of all their aberrations; and to maintain a pure and scriptural discipline — that their office should become unpopular, and finally (as much as possible) crowded out of public view, discredited, and gradually laid aside?

But this is not all. Shortly after the apostolic age, several ecclesiastical officers, as is confessed on all hands, were either invented or modified, so as to suit the declining spirituality of the times. To mention but a single example, the deacons began to claim higher dignity and powers. Sub-deacons were introduced to perform some of those functions which had originally belonged to deacons, but which they had become too proud to perform. Was it then either unnatural or improbable — since things of a similar kind actually took place — that in the course of the undeniable degeneracy which was now reigning, the ruling elders of the church should find the employment to which they had been originally destined, irksome both to themselves and others? Or that it was by no means adapted to gratify either the love of gain, or the love of pleasure which seemed to be the order of the day? Or that both parties gradually united in dropping the inspection and discipline once committed to their hands, and in turning their attention to objects more adapted to the taste of ambitious, worldly minded churchmen? And this result would be at once *more likely to occur*, and might have occurred with *less opposition and noise*, if we suppose (as some learned men have done) that from the beginning, both ruling and teaching elders not only bore the general name of *elders*, but both were set apart to their office with the same formalities. If this were the case, then there was nothing to change in virtually discarding the office of ruling elder, except to gradually neglect all their appropriate duties, and in an equally gradual manner, to slide into the assumption of duties — especially that of public preaching — which in the primitive church, they had not been expected to perform.

Keeping these things in mind, let us examine whether some, both of the early and the late Fathers, do not express themselves in a manner which renders it probable, or rather *certain*, that they had in view the class of elders of which we are speaking.

Clemens Romanus lived toward the close of the first century. In his epistle of to the church at Corinth, we find the worthy father remonstrating with the members of that church for having risen up against their elders, and thrust them out of office — perhaps for the very reason just hinted at, that they found their inspection and rule uncomfortable. Accordingly, Clemens addresses the Corinthian Christians in the following manner: “It is a shame, my beloved, yes, a very great shame, to hear that the most firm and ancient church of the Corinthians should be led by one or two persons, to rise up against their Elders.” — (πρεσβυτερους). Again, “Let the flock of Christ enjoy peace with the elders (πρεσβυτερων) who are set over it.” Again, “You, therefore, who first laid the foundation of this sedition, *submit yourselves to your elders*, and be instructed into repentance, bending the knee of your hearts;” Epist. 47, 54, 57.

In these extracts we find an entire coincidence with the language of the New Testament; a plain indication that in every church there was a plurality of elders; and a distinct recognition of the idea that these elders were rulers — in other words, they held a station of authority and government over “the flock” of which they were officers.

Ignatius lived at the close of the first, and the beginning of the second century. In his epistles, we may find much said about elders (πρεσβυτεροι). The following is a specimen of the manner in which he speaks of them in connection with the other classes of church officers.

“Obey your bishop and the presbytery (the eldership) with an entire affection;” Epistle to the Ephesians, 20. “I exhort you that you study to do all things in a divine concord: your bishop presiding in the place of God, your elders in the place of the council of the apostles, and your deacons, most dear to me, being entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ.” Again, “Do nothing without your bishop and elders;” Epistle to the Magnesians, 6, 7. “It is therefore necessary that as you should do nothing without your bishop, so also be subject to your elders, as the apostles of Jesus Christ our hope.” Again, “Let all reverence the deacons as Jesus Christ, and the Bishop as the Father, and the elders as the sanhedrim of God, and the college of the apostles.” Again, “Fare well in Jesus Christ, being subject to your bishop as to the command of God, and so likewise to the presbytery (or eldership);” Epistle to the Trallians, 2, 3, 13. “Which also I salute in the blood of Jesus Christ, who is our eternal and undefiled joy; especially if they are at unity with the bishop and elders who are with him, and the deacons appointed according to the mind of Jesus Christ.” Again, “There is one cup, and one altar, and also one bishop, together with his eldership, and the deacons, my fellow-servants.” Again, “I cried while I was among you; I spoke with a loud voice, attend to the bishop, to the eldership, and to the deacons;” Epistle to the Philadelphians, Pref. 4, 7. See that you all follow your bishop, as Jesus Christ the Father, and the presbytery (or eldership) as the apostles; and reverence the deacons as the command of God.” Again, “It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize, or to celebrate the holy communion.” Again, “I salute your very worthy bishop; and your venerable eldership, and your deacons, my fellow- servants;” Epistle to the Smyrneans, 8, 12. “My soul be security for those who submit to their bishop, with their elders and deacons;” epistle to Polycarp, 6.

The friends of Prelacy have long been in the habit of insisting much on these and similar quotations from Ignatius, as affording decisive support for their system. But I must think

that their confidence in this witness does not have the smallest solid ground. <sup>2</sup> For let it be remembered that these several epistles were directed, not to large prelatial dioceses, but to single parishes or congregations; that each of these churches are represented as having a bishop, a presbytery or bench of elders, and a plurality of deacons. And therefore, what is described here is a *parochial* episcopacy, not diocesan or prelatial. Accordingly, we learn from different parts of these epistles, that in the time of Ignatius, each bishop had under his pastoral charge, but “one altar,” “one cup,” “one loaf,” *i.e.* one communion table; and that the people under his care habitually came together to “one place” — in other words, they formed “one assembly.”

Agreeably to this view of the subject, it is worthy of notice that Ignatius calls the presbyters or elders of each church which he addresses, the *συνεδριον θεου* (*sunedrion Theos*), that is the Sanhedrim, or council of God. But with what propriety could he designate them by this title — the popular title of a well known Jewish ecclesiastical court — if they did not constitute a corresponding court in the Christian church, and if the whole body of ecclesiastical officers which he addressed from time to time were not the rulers of a single flock? The truth is, the whole language of Ignatius, in reference to the officers of whom he speaks is *strictly Presbyterian*, and cannot be considered as affording countenance to any other system, without doing violence to its natural import.

Accordingly, it is worthy of notice, that the learned Mr. Joseph Mede, a very able and zealous divine of the church of England, and a decisive advocate of diocesan Episcopacy, gives a representation of the state of things in the time of Ignatius, which in substance, falls in with our account of the character of the churches addressed by that Father.

“It should seem,” he says, “that in those first times, before dioceses were divided into those lesser and subordinate churches, which we call *parishes*, and presbyters assigned to them, they had only one altar to a church — taking *church* for the company or corporation of the faithful, united under one bishop or pastor. And that was in the city or place where the bishop had his see and residence. Unless this were so, where else did it come from, that a schismatical bishop was said, *constituere*, or *collocare aliud altare*? <sup>3</sup>And that a bishop and an altar are made correlatives?” <sup>4</sup>

The same fact is asserted by Bishop Stillingfleet, in his sermon against separation. “Though, when the churches increased,” he says, “the occasional meetings were frequent in several places; yet still there was but one church, and one altar, and one baptistery, and one bishop, with many presbyters attending him.” This is so plain in antiquity, as to the churches planted by the apostles themselves, that none but a great stranger to the history of the church can call it in question. It is true, after some time, in the great cities, they had distinct places allotted, and presbyters fixed among them — and such allotments were called *Tituli* at Rome, *Laurae* at Alexandria,<sup>5</sup> and *parishes* in other places. But these were never thought then to be new churches, or to have any independent government in themselves; but they were all in subjection to the bishop, and his college of presbyters.

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<sup>2</sup> Intelligent readers are no doubt, aware that the genuineness of the epistles of Ignatius has been called in question by a great majority of Protestant divines, and is not only really but deeply questionable. All inquiry, however, on this subject is waived for the present.

<sup>3</sup> Was said to be *constituted*, or to *set up another altar*. — WHG

<sup>4</sup> *Discourse on Church Government*, p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> *Tituli*, groups with a titular head; *Laurae*, neighborhoods under one head (as with a *laurel*). — WHG

Multitudes of examples of these might be brought from the most authentic testimonies of antiquity, if a thing so evident needed any proof at all. And yet this distribution (into distinct *Tituli*) even in cities, was looked on as so uncommon in those elder times, that Epiphanius takes notice of it as an extraordinary thing at Alexandria. And therefore it is probably supposed that there was no such thing in all the cities of Crete in his time.

That the elders spoken of so frequently by Ignatius, were all the officers of a single parish or congregation, is also evident, not only from the title which he gives to the body of elders, but also from the duties which he represents as incumbent on the bishop with whom these elders were connected. It is represented as the duty of the bishop to be present with his flock whenever they came together, to conduct their prayers and to preside in all their religious assemblies. He is spoken of as the only person who was authorized, in ordinary cases, to administer baptism and the Lord's Supper; as the person by whom all marriages among the people of his charge were celebrated; whose duty it was to be personally acquainted with all his flock; who was bound to take notice with his own eye, of those who were absent from public worship; to attend to the wants of the widows and all the poor of his congregation; to seek out all by name, and not to overlook even the servant men and maids under his care; to instruct the children; to reconcile differences and, in short, to attend to all those objects, in detail, which are considered as devolving on every faithful parish minister. Now, all these representations so plainly apply to the pastor of a single church, and are so evidently impossible to be realized by any other person, that it would be a waste of time, and an insult to common sense, to attempt a more formal establishment of the position.

But if the bishop of Ignatius is a simple parochial bishop (in other words, the ordinary pastor of a congregation); and if the presbytery or bench of elders of which he so frequently speaks, are to be considered as all belonging to a single parish; then we can scarcely avoid the conclusion that not all of them were employed in public preaching. But their principal employment was as assistants of the pastor, and in union with him, to discharge the duties of inspectors and rulers of the church.

Again, Polycarp, writing to the church of Philippi, most evidently and unequivocally conveys the idea that there was a plurality of presbyters (or elders) not only in his own church, but also in that to which he wrote; and that they were the regularly appointed ecclesiastical rulers. He addressed them thus:

“Let the Elders be tender and merciful, compassionate towards all, reclaiming those who have fallen into errors; visiting all who are weak; not negligent of the widow and the orphan, and of him who is poor; but ever providing what is honest in the sight of God and men; abstaining from all wrath, respect of persons, and unrighteous judgment; avoiding covetousness; not hastily believing a report against any man; not rigid in judgment; knowing that we are all faulty, and liable to judgment.”<sup>6</sup>

Cyprian, in his 29th Epistle, directed “to his brethren, the elders and deacons, expresses himself in the following terms:

“You are to take notice that I have ordained Saturus a reader, and the confessor Optatus a sub-deacon, whom we had all agreed before to place in the rank and degree next to

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<sup>6</sup> *Epistle to the Philippians*, Sect. 6.

that of the clergy. On Easter day, we made one or two trials of Saturus, in reading, when we were approving our readers before the teaching presbyters; and then we appointed Optatus from among the readers, to be a teacher of the hearers.”<sup>7</sup>

On this passage, the Rev. Mr. Marshall, the Episcopal translator and commentator of Cyprian, remarks: “I think it is apparent from this, that all presbyters were not teachers, but assisted the bishop in other parts of his office.” And Bishop Fell, another editor and commentator of Cyprian, remarks on the same passage in the following words: “*Inter Presbyteros rectores et doctores olim distinxisse videtur divus Paulus;*” 1Tim 5.17 — *i.e.* St. Paul appears to have made a distinction, in ancient times, between teaching and ruling elders in 1Tim 5.17.—Here two learned Episcopal divines explicitly acknowledged the distinction between teaching and ruling elders in the primitive church. And one of them, an eminent bishop, not only allows that Cyprian referred to this distinction, but also quotes as an authority for it the principal text which Presbyterians adduce for the same purpose.

There is another passage in Cyprian’s 40th Epistle, which the very learned authors of the *Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici*<sup>8</sup> consider as containing an allusion to the office in question, and which may not be unworthy of notice. At the time when Cyprian wrote this letter, he was in a state of exile from his church. It is directed to the elders, deacons, and people at large, of his congregation; and it contains an expression of his wish that one Numidicus should be reckoned, or have a place assigned him with the presbyters, or elders of that church, and sit with the clergy. And yet it would appear that this was only as a ruling elder, and not as a teaching elder that he was to be received by them. For Cyprian subjoins: “He will be promoted, if God permits, to a more distinguished place in his religion (or his religious function) when, by the protection of Providence, I shall return.” Here it seems the presbytery or eldership in that church were directed to immediately receive, or set apart, this man to the office of elder among them; and their absent pastor or bishop, promises that when he returns, Numidicus will be promoted to a still higher office. Now the only supposable promotion in this case was to the office of a teaching elder. That the passage is very naturally susceptible to this construction, none will deny. At any rate, it is adopted by some of the most mature divines and scholars in England, of the seventeenth century; however unceremoniously it may have since been rejected by less competent judges.

Accordingly, it is worthy of notice that the famous Henry Dodwell (one of the most learned and zealous Episcopal writers of the seventeenth century in the British empire), notwithstanding his determined opposition to everything peculiarly Presbyterian, yet in his celebrated *Dissertations on Cyprian*, freely grants that in the days of that Father, there were elders or presbyters in the Christian church, who did not preach. He represents this fact as undoubtedly taught by Cyprian in his Epistles, and he particularly refers for proof, to the first of the passages cited on a preceding page. Indeed, he expresses a full persuasion that a similar fact existed in the apostolic church, and quotes 1Tim 5.17 as a

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<sup>7</sup> Optatus was bishop of Milevis, in Numidia, in the fourth century. Augustine writes, “Do we not see with how great a booty of gold and silver and garments Cyprian, *doctor suavissimus*, came forth out of Egypt, and likewise Lactantius, Victorinus, Optatus, Hilary?” (*De Doctrina Christ.*, xl). He authored a treatise, *Against the Donatists*, to which was appended *Gesta Purgationis Caeciliani et Felicis*, mentioned below. — WHG

<sup>8</sup> *Jus Divinum*, etc. p. 171, 172.

decisive confirmation of his opinion. <sup>9</sup> The notion, then, that all testimony supposed to be derived from Cyprian in favor of non-preaching Elders, is a dream of modern sectaries for the purpose of carrying a favorite point in church government, is plainly not tenable. Some of the best talents and most mature learning in the Christian church, without any leaning to Presbyterian opinions, have decisively interpreted that Father, as setting forth such a class of Elders.

Hippolytus, who was nearly contemporary with Cyprian, repeatedly speaks of these elders as existing, and as exercising authority in his day. In his tract “Against the Heresy of a certain Noetus,” he states in the beginning of the work, that Noetus being charged with certain heretical opinions, the “elders (πρεσβυτεροι) cited him to appear, and examined him in the presence of the church.” Noetus having at first denied, but afterwards openly avowed the opinions imputed to him, “the elders summoned him a second time, condemned him, and cast him out of the church.” It seems, then, that in the third century, there were elders whose duty it was to examine, try, and excommunicate such members of the church as were found delinquent with respect to either doctrine or morals. In this case, at least a part of the trial seems to have been conducted “in the presence of the church,” of which they were rulers. But still, the trial, conviction, and excommunication were by the elders.

In the following passage, Origen — who it is well known flourished a little more than two hundred years after Christ — has a plain reference to the class of officers under consideration. “There are some rulers appointed whose duty it is to inquire concerning the manners and conversation of those who are admitted, that they may debar from the congregation those who commit filthiness.” <sup>10</sup> This passage is replete with important and conclusive testimony. It not only proves that, in the time of Origen, there were rulers in the Christian church, but that the chief and peculiar business of these rulers was precisely that which we assign to ruling elders, *namely*: inspecting the members of the church; watching over all its spiritual interests; admitting to its communion those who, upon inquiry, were found worthy, and debarring those who were in any way immoral. It is perfectly evident from this passage alone, that in the days of this learned Father, the government and discipline of the church were not conducted by the body of the communicants at large, but by a bench of rulers.

The same important fact is also indubitably implied in the language of Origen in another place. In his seventh *Homily on Joshua*, he speaks of one who, having been thrice admonished, and being unwilling to repent, was cut off from the church by its rulers.” In the time of Origen, those who cut off from the communion of the church, and restored the penitent, were not the body of the communicants, but a bench of elders. This great historical fact is, moreover, explicitly established as having existed in the third century (the age of Origen) by the Magdeburgh Centuriators, a body of very learned Lutheran Divines, contemporary with Melancthon. Their authority as ecclesiastical historians is deservedly high. “The right” they say “of deciding respecting those who were to be

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<sup>9</sup> *Dissertationes Cyprianicae*, vi. sect. 4, 5, 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Contra Celsum*. Lib. iii. p. 142. Edit. Cantab. 1677.

excommunicated, or of receiving back upon their repentance, those who had fallen, was vested in the elders of the church. <sup>11</sup>

In the *Gesta Purgationis Caeciliani et Felicis*, preserved at the end of Optatus, and commonly referred to the beginning of the fourth century, we meet with the following enumeration of church officers: “*Presbyteri, Diaconi et Seniores*,” *i.e.* “The presbyters, the deacons and the elders.” And a little after is added: “*Adhibite conclericos, et Seniores plebis, ecclesiasticos viros, et inquirant diligenter quae sint istae dissentiones*,” *i.e.* “Call the fellow clergymen and elders of the people, ecclesiastical men, and let them inquire diligently what are these dissentions.” In that assembly, likewise, several letters were produced and read; one addressed, *Clero et Senioribus*, *i.e.* “to the clergy and the elders;” and another, *Clericis et Senioribus*, *i.e.* “to the clergymen and the elders.” Here, then, is a class of men expressly recognized as ecclesiastical men, or church officers; who are styled *elders*; who were constituent members of a solemn ecclesiastical assembly, or judicatory; who are expressly charged with inquiring into matters connected with the discipline of the church; and yet they are carefully distinguished from the clergy with whom they met and were officially united in the transaction of business. If these are not the elders of whom we are in search, we may give up all the rules of evidence.

Some have indeed said that the phrase *ecclesiasticos viros*, in one of the passages last cited, was not intended to designate church officers at all; that this phrase was early introduced to distinguish “men of the church,” *i.e.* to distinguish Christians from Pagans, and other enemies of Christ; and that it probably had some such meaning, and nothing more, in the ancient records from which the foregoing extracts are made. It is freely granted that the phrase, *ecclesiastici viri*, was employed for a time in the Christian church, as well as by the surrounding heathen, in the sense and for the purpose just mentioned. That is, when Christians were spoken of as distinguished from Jews, infidels, heretics, etc., they were called *ecclesiastical men* – importing, that they did not belong to Jewish synagogues, or to the heathen temples, or to heretical sects; but they were adherents, or members of the church of Christ. But it is well known that this language was never employed in this sense among Christians themselves, when distinguishing one class of their own body from another. When used in this case, it always designated men in ecclesiastical office. <sup>12</sup> Besides, in the passage before us, there can be no doubt that the phrase under consideration was used in the latter sense, and not in the former. For the ecclesiastical men in these passages are represented as joined with the clergy in ecclesiastical functions; especially as directed to investigate and settle ecclesiastical dissentions. Surely this could neither be required or expected of men who sustained no office, and were of course, invested with no authority in the church.

Another objection which has been confidently urged against that construction which we have put upon the extracts from the *Gesta Purgationis*, etc. is that the seniors or elders of which they speak, are mentioned *after deacons*; and therefore they are to be considered as inferior to them. “Now,” say these objectors, “the ruling elders of the presbyterian church are always considered and represented, by the advocates of that denomination, as above deacons rather than below them, on the scale of ecclesiastical precedence. Of course, the *senior* spoken of here cannot belong to the class of officers for which they

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<sup>11</sup> *Cent. iii. Cap. vii. p. 151.*

<sup>12</sup> Bingham’s *Origines Ecclesiasticae*, Book i. chapter i. section 8.

contend.” It is sufficient to reply to this objection, that the mere *order* in which titles are arranged, cannot be considered as decisive of the relative *rank* with which these titles are connected. To at once illustrate and confirm this remark, a single example will suffice. In the epistles of Ignatius, when he speaks of bishops, or pastors, elders and deacons, no intelligent reader supposes that he means to represent the second and third of these classes of offices as inferior to the first. Yet, in his epistle to the Trallians he speaks thus: “Let all reverence the deacons as Jesus Christ; and the bishop as the Father; and the presbyters as the Sanhedrim of God, and the college of the apostles.” This may argue carelessness or haste in writing; or it may argue a mind in the writer, that is less intent on ecclesiastical precedence than on more important matters; but it surely cannot be considered as deciding the relative standing of the different officers of whom he speaks.

Besides, let it be recollected that the date of these *Gesta* (events) was about the year of Christ 303, when the office of ruling elder was going gradually out of use — if we may credit the very explicit testimony of Ambrose, which will be stated presently. If so, nothing was more natural than that the writers and speakers of that day should be disposed to throw it in the background, and degrade rather than advance its appropriate rank in the scale of ecclesiastical honor.

There is also a passage in Optatus, of the African church, who flourished a little after the middle of the fourth century, which corroborates the foregoing quotations. It is as follows:

“The church had many ornaments of gold and silver, which she could neither bury in the earth, nor carry away with her, which she committed to the elders (*Senioribus*) as to faithful persons.”<sup>13</sup>

There can scarcely be a doubt that these were not mere aged persons, but official men. And as we know, especially from the writings of Cyprian (who resided in the same country), that there were such officers in the African church, a few years before.

Ambrose lived in the fourth century.<sup>14</sup> In his commentary on 1Tim 5.1, is the following passage:

“For indeed, among all nations, old age is honorable. Hence it is that the synagogue, and afterwards the church, had elders without whose counsel nothing was done in the church. By what negligence this grew into disuse I do not know, unless perhaps by the sloth, or rather by the pride of the teachers, while they alone wished to appear to be something.”

The great body of the Prelatists, as well as some others, have labored hard to divest this passage of its plain and pointed testimony in favor of the office of ruling elder. They insist upon it, that the pious Father had no reference whatever to ecclesiastical officers, but only to aged persons; and that he meant to say nothing more than that, formerly in the synagogue, and afterwards in the church, there were old men whom it was customary to consult; this practice, however, at the time in which he wrote, was generally laid aside.

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<sup>13</sup> Optat, Lib. i. p 41. edit. Paris, 1631.

<sup>14</sup> It is not forgotten that learned men have generally considered the real name of this writer as Hilary. Yet as the name of Ambrose is more frequently given to him, especially by many writers to be quoted hereafter, the latter name will be more intelligible, and therefore, more convenient.



This perversion of an obvious meaning is really so strange and extravagant that the formality of a serious refutation seems scarcely necessary. Can any reflecting man believe that Hilary designed only to inform his readers that in the Jewish synagogues, there were actually persons who had attained a considerable age; and that this was also the case afterwards in the Christian church; and that these aged persons were generally consulted? This would have been a sage remark indeed! Was there ever a community of any extent, either ecclesiastical or civil, which did not include some aged persons? Or was there ever a state of society, or an age of the world, in which the practice of consulting the aged and experienced had fallen into disuse? Thinking that candid minds should be able to satisfy themselves with such a gloss, is truly wonderful. It is certainly no argument in favor of this construction of the language of Ambrose, that he prefaces his statement respecting the synagogue and the church, by remarking that “among all nations, old age is honorable.” Surely no remark could be more natural or appropriate when he was about to state that from the earliest period of the Christian church, and long before in the synagogue, all their affairs had been managed by colleges of elders (a title importing a kind of homage to age and experience), without whose council nothing was done.

But there is a clause in this extract from Ambrose, which precludes all doubt that he intended to allude to a class of *church officers*, and not merely to *old age*. It is this: “By what negligence it grew into disuse, I do not know, unless perhaps by the sloth, or rather by the pride of the teachers, who wished alone to appear to be something.” It is very conceivable and obvious that both the pride and the sloth of the teachers, or teaching elders, should render them willing to get rid of a bench of officers of equal power with themselves, as rulers in the church; and consequently, able to control their wishes in cases of discipline. But it cannot easily be conceived why either sloth or pride should render any so particularly averse to all consultation with the aged and experienced, in preference to the young, on the affairs of the church — especially if these aged persons bore no office, and there was of course no official obligation to be governed by their advice, as the gloss under consideration supposes. It being evident then, that a class of officers was intended here, the question arises, what class of presbyters or elders was that which had grown into disuse in the fourth century? Surely not *teaching* presbyters; for everyone knows that *that* class of presbyters had not become obsolete in Ambrose’s time. His own writings amply attest the reverse. And everyone also knows that this class of church officers has never been laid aside, or even diminished in number, to the present day.

It is worthy of very particular notice here also, as no small confirmation of the construction which we put on the words of Ambrose, that all the most learned and able of the reformers, and a great number of others, the most competent judges in such matters, from the Reformation to the present time, have concurred in adopting the same construction; and they have considered the worthy Father as referring to a class of elders who held the place of inspectors and rulers in the church. Learned Lutherans, and Episcopalians, as well as Calvinists, almost without number, have united in the interpretation which we have given of this Father, with a degree of harmony that would be truly wonderful, if that interpretation is entirely erroneous. Is it less likely that Luther, Melancthon, Bucer, Whitgift, Zanchius, and Peter Martyr — who had no sectarian or private views to serve — should be able to correctly read and understand Ambrose, than that modern and more superficial scholars should be betrayed into a mistaken construction, in favor of the side on which their feelings were strongly enlisted? No

disrespect whatever is intended to the latter; but it cannot be doubted that a great preponderance of testimony, both as to numbers and competency, is on the side of the former.

Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, who also lived toward the close of the fourth century, often refers to this class of officers in his writings. Thus in his work, *Contra Cresconium Grammaticum*, Lib. iii. Cap. 56, he speaks of “*Peregrinus, Presbyter, et Seniores Ecclesiae Musticanae regionis;*” *i.e.* “Peregrine the presbyter, and the elders of the church of the Mustacan district.” And again, he addresses one of his epistles intended for his church at Hippo, in the following manner: “*Dilectissimis Fratribus, Clero, Senioribus et universae Plebi Ecclesiae Hipponensis;*” Epist. 137; — *i.e.* “To the beloved brethren, the clergy, the elders and all the people of the church at Hippo.” “There were some elders then, in the time of Augustine, whom he distinguishes from other presbyters, and whom he also distinguishes from the clergy. And lest any suppose that the elders spoken of here were not officers, but mere private members of the church, he distinguishes them from the *plebs universa* (people generally) of the church.

Augustine, in another place (*De Verb. Dom. Serm.* 19) also speaks thus: “*Cum ob errorem aliquem a Senioribus arguuntur, et imputatur alicui de illis, cur ebrius fuerit? cur res alienas pervaserit?*” etc. — *i.e.* “When they are reprehended for any error by the elders, and are upbraided with having been drunk, or with having been guilty of theft, etc.” Can anyone doubt that Augustine is speaking here, not of mere aged persons, but of church officers whose duty it was to inspect the morals of the members of the church, and to “upbraid,” or reprove those who had been reprehensible in their deportment? It would be easy to produce from the same Father, a number of other quotations equally to our purpose. But Bingham, in his *Origines Ecclesiasticae*, Bishop Taylor, in his *Episcopacy Asserted*, and other learned Prelatists, have rendered this unnecessary, by making an explicit acknowledgment that Augustine repeatedly mentions these *seniors* or *elders* as belonging to other churches, as well as his own, in his time. And that the same kind of elders are frequently referred to by other writers, both before and after Augustine, as then existing in the church; and as holding some kind of official station in it, and yet as distinguished from clergymen. It is true, indeed, that Bingham insists that these were not *ruling elders* in our sense of the word; but he explicitly grants that they held some kind of office in the church, and yet were not public preachers. We ask nothing more. This is quite sufficient for our purpose.

The ancient work entitled *Apostolic Constitutions* (although by no means of apostolic origin) was probably composed sometime between the second and fifth centuries.<sup>15</sup> The following significant and pointed rule, extracted from that work, will be considered by the intelligent reader as by no means equivocal in its aspect: “To presbyters also, when they labor assiduously in the word and doctrine, let a double portion be assigned.”<sup>16</sup> Here is obviously a distinction between presbyters who are employed in teaching, and those who are not so employed. To what duties the others devoted themselves is not stated; but it is evident that teaching made no part of their ordinary occupation. We may take for granted that their duty was to assist in the other spiritual concerns of the church, namely, in

<sup>15</sup> The *Apostolic Constitutions*, c. 375-380 AD, Lat. *Constitutiones Apostolorum*; eight treatises prescribing moral conduct, liturgy, and organization for the churches. It probably originated in Antioch, Syria. — WHG

<sup>16</sup> *Apostol. Constit.* lib. ii. cap. 28.

maintaining good order and discipline. This is precisely the distinction which presbyterians make, and which they believe to have been made in the primitive church. Accordingly the presbyters, in the same relic of Christian antiquity, and in a subsequent part of the same chapter, are called “the counsellors of the bishop, or pastor; and the Sanhedrim or senate of the church.” These expressions entirely harmonize with our views of the office of elder in the ancient church.

Isodore of Hispala, who flourished in the sixth century, seems to allude to the same class of officers when, in giving directions as to the manner in which pastors should conduct their official instructions, he says: *Prius docendi sunt Seniores plebis, ut per eos infra positi facilius doceantur;*” — *i.e.* “The elders of the people are first to be taught, that those who are placed under them may be more easily instructed by them.” Here again, these *Seniores* are evidently spoken of as church officers who were set over the people, and yet they occupied a station inferior to that of the pastors, or public preachers.

Nor does this class of officers appear to have entirely ceased in the church, as late as the period of Gregory the Great, who wrote in the latter part of the sixth century. In one of his epistles he gives the following direction:

“If anything should come to your ears concerning any clergyman, which may be justly considered as a matter of offence, do not easily believe it; but let truth be diligently investigated by the elders of the church who may be at hand; and then, if the character of the act demands it, let the proper punishment fall on the offender.”<sup>17</sup>

Here there is evidently a very distinct reference to such a class of officers as that of which we are speaking. They are distinguished from *clergymen*; and yet they are represented as *ecclesiastical officers* to whom it properly pertained to investigate ecclesiastical offences, and to give advice and direction in peculiarly delicate cases of discipline. At an earlier period of the church, indeed, these elders, as well as all other classes of ecclesiastical men, were styled *clergymen*, as we will have occasion to show more fully hereafter. But from the fourth century and onward, elders of this class declined in numbers and in popularity; and not long afterwards, they were in great measure laid aside, except by the humble and devoted witnesses of the truth, whose testimony we will speak of in the next chapter.

There is another species of evidence here, that is worthy of notice. The representation which the Fathers give of the manner in which the bishop or pastor and his elders were commonly seated when the church was assembled, and during the solemnities of public worship, afford very strong evidence that the mass of the elders were such as it is the object of this essay to establish. We are told by several of the early Fathers, that when the church was convened for public worship, the bishop or pastor, was commonly seated at one end of the church, on the middle of a raised bench, or long semi-circular seat; that his elders were seated on each side of him on the same seat, or on seats immediately adjoining and commonly a little lower; and that the deacons commonly stood in front of this bench, ready to give any notice, to execute any order, or to perform any service which the pastor or elders might think proper to direct. This practice was evidently drawn from the Jewish synagogue. And indeed, the order of assembling, sitting, and worship in the Christian assemblies, for the first two or three centuries, so strikingly resembled that of the

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<sup>17</sup> *Epistolae*, lib. ii. epist. 19 -- quoted from the *Politicae Ecclesiasticae* of Voetius, par. ii. lib. ii., tract. iii.

synagogue, that Christian churches were frequently contemned and opposed as “synagogues in disguise.”<sup>18</sup>

This general fact is so well attested by the early Christian writers, that it is unnecessary to detain the reader by any formal proof of it. Now, if in every church, when assembled in ordinary circumstances, there were present a pastor, overseer, or bishop, and a body of elders sitting with him, and counselling and aiding him in the inspection and discipline of the church — then it is hardly necessary to say that these elders could not all have been such presbyters as the friends of Prelacy contend for, as their “second order of clergy.” Their supposition is absurd. They could only have been such a bench of pious and venerable men as were chiefly employed in overseeing and ruling; and substantially corresponding with the elders of the presbyterian church. It is true, indeed, the advocates of Prelacy endeavor to persuade us that these presbyters were the stated preachers in the several congregations or worshipping assemblies which were comprehended in the bishop’s charge, as they suppose. But this supposition is wholly unsupported. No, it is directly *contrary* to the whole current of early testimony on this subject. The very same writers who inform us that there were any presbyters at all in the Christian church within the first three hundred years, represent a plurality of them as sitting with the bishop or pastor, and present in every worshipping assembly. There is no system with which this statement can be made to essentially agree, except that system which is received among presbyterians.

Another strong argument in support of the doctrine of ruling elders, as drawn from the early Fathers, is found in the abundant evidence which their writings furnish, that during the first three or four centuries after Christ, the great body of the Christian presbyters did not ordinarily preach — indeed *never*, except by the special permission of the bishop or pastor. The following statement by the learned Bingham, in his *Origines Ecclesiastae*, book ii. chapter iii. section 4. will be found conclusive on this point:

“The like observation may be made upon the office of preaching. This was in the first place the bishop’s office, which they commonly discharged themselves, especially in the African churches. This is the reason we so frequently meet with the phrase, *Tractante Episcopo*, the bishop preaching, in the writings of Cyprian. For then it was so much the office and custom of bishops to preach, that no presbyter was permitted to preach in their presence, till the time of St. Austin (Augustine of Hippo). While he was a presbyter, he was authorized by Valerius, his bishop, to preach before him. But as Possidius, the writer of his life observes, that was so contrary to the use and custom of the African churches, that many bishops were highly offended at it, and spoke against it — till the consequences proved that such a permission was of good use and service to the church. And then several other bishops granted their presbyters power and privilege to preach before them. So that it was then a *favor* for the presbyters to preach in the presence of the bishops, and wholly at the bishop’s discretion, whether they would permit them or not. And when they *did* preach, it was wholly *potestate accepta*, by the power and authority of the bishops who appointed them.

“In the eastern churches, presbyters were more commonly employed to preach, as Possidius observes when he says Valerius brought the custom into Africa from their

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<sup>18</sup> *Thorndike’s Discourse on Religious Assemblies*. p. 57.

example. And St. Jerome intimates as much, when he complains of it as an ill custom only in *some* churches to forbid presbyters to preach. Chrysostom preached several of his elaborate discourses at Antioch, while he was but a presbyter; and so did Atticus at Constantinople: and the same is observed to have been granted to the presbyters of Alexandria and Caesarea, in Cappadocia, and Cyprus, and other places. But still it was but a grant of the bishops; and presbyters did it by their authority and commission. And whenever Bishops saw just reason to forbid them, they had power to limit or withdraw their commission again — as both Socrates and Sozomen testify, who say that at Alexandria presbyters were forbidden to preach from the time that Arius raised a disturbance in the church. Thus we see what a power bishops anciently claimed and exercised over presbyters in the common and ordinary offices of the church. Particularly for preaching, bishops always esteemed it *their office* as much as any other.”

This statement is amply illustrated and confirmed by the learned author (Bingham), by numerous references to early writers of the highest reputation, which it is altogether unnecessary to recite, on account of the notoriety of the fact alleged.

Can such a statement be contemplated a moment without perceiving that the mass of the presbyters or elders during the times spoken of here, were a very different class of officers from those commonly styled “presbyters” in the papacy afterwards, and in more modern prelatical churches? The very circumstance of preaching making no part of their ordinary function — *no*, that in ordinary cases they were *never* allowed to do it, but by virtue of a special permission, which is evidently the import of the whole account, unless we make nonsense of it — places it beyond all doubt that the authority which they received at ordination did not really commission them to preach at all; but that the bishop alone was the commissioned preacher. This is exactly what presbyterians say. And if ever ruling elders or deacons among us conduct social worship, and address the people in public, it is always under the direction of the bishop or pastor, who may encourage or arrest it as he pleases. It is vain to say that presbyters in the Protestant Episcopal church at the present day cannot preach or perform any ecclesiastical act without the bishop’s permission. This is an idle evasion. The fact is, that everyone knows that their original ordination as presbyters, or “priests” (as they are called), conveys the full power to preach, administer sacraments, and perform every duty of the ordinary parochial ministration, stately, and without any further let or impediment. The cases then, are wholly unlike. There were evidently in the days of Ignatius and Cyprian, of Chrysostom and Augustine, of Socrates and Sozomen, some elders who did not ordinarily preach, and were not considered as authorized to engage in this part of the public service, without a special permission. And they stood — not exactly, indeed, but very much on the same ground as to this matter — with the elders of our denomination.

The truth is, some of the very same writers who inform us that elders and deacons were not ordinarily allowed to preach during the first three or four centuries, also inform us that laymen, in cases of necessity, might preach by the bishop’s permission. This at once illustrates and strengthens the presbyterian argument. For the same authority which might give a special permission in each case, or a general permission for a time, to an elder or deacon to preach— which permission, it seems, might be revoked at pleasure, without touching the official standing of the individual, much less deposing him from office — might also authorize the merest layman in the whole parish to perform the same service, whenever it was judged expedient to give the license.

The truth of the matter seems to have been this: a large majority of the officers called *elders*, in the three first centuries, were no doubt *ruling* elders — ordained, it is probable, in the same manner as the *teaching* elders, *i.e.*, with “the laying on of hands,” and the same external solemnity in every respect. They were not qualified, and when ordained, were not expected to be preachers; but they were selected on account of their piety, gravity, prudence, and experience to assist in inspection and government. When, however, the bishop or pastor, who was the stated preacher, was sick, or absent, he might direct a ruling elder to take his place on a single occasion, or for a few sabbaths. But this function made no part of their stated work; and they seldom engaged in it. After a while, however, these elders, like the bishops on the one hand, and the deacons on the other, began to aspire. They were more and more frequently permitted to preach until, at length, non-preaching elders were chiefly banished from the church. As this was a gradual thing, they were of course retained in *some* churches longer than *others*. They were probably first laid aside in large cities, where ambition was most prevalent, laxity of morals most indulged, and strict discipline most unpopular. Things proceeded in this way until this class of officers was almost wholly lost sight of in the Christian community.

One more testimony, by no means unimportant, of the existence of this office in the primitive church, is to be found in the Rev. Dr. Buchanan’s account of the Syrian Christians, contained in his *Asiatic Researches*. It will be borne in mind that the learned and pious author considers those Christians as having settled in the East, within the first three centuries after Christ — before the corruptions of the church of Rome had been introduced, and when the original simplicity of gospel order had been invaded in but a small degree. Separating from the Western church at that early period, and remaining for many centuries almost wholly secluded from the rest of the world, they were found in a great measure free from the innovations and superstitions of the papacy. Now, if ruling elders had any existence in the Christian church within the first three hundred years, as Ambrose expressly declares they had, we might expect to find the Syrian Christians, in their seclusion, retaining at least some traces of this office in their churches. Accordingly, Dr. Buchanan in describing the circumstances of a visit he paid to one of the churches of this simple and highly interesting people, speaks as follows:

“When we arrived, I was received at the door of the church by three Kasheeshas, that is presbyters, or priests, who were habited in like manner in white vestments. Their names were Jesu, Zecharias, and Urias, which they wrote down in my journal, each of them adding to his name the title *Kasheesha*. There were also present two Shumshanas, or deacons. The elder priest was a very intelligent man, of reverend appearance, having a long white beard, and of an affable and engaging deportment. The three principal Christians, or lay elders, belonging to the church, were named Abraham, Thomas, and Alexandros.”<sup>19</sup>

This remarkable fact, it is believed, belongs most properly to the present chapter. For if these simple Syrian Christians were really settled in the East, as early as Dr. Buchanan seems to suppose, with good reason, and were for many centuries entirely secluded from all foreign influence — we may consider them as having substantially in operation among them, that ecclesiastical system which existed through the greater part of the Christian church at the close of the third, and the beginning of the fourth century. This is a kind of

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<sup>19</sup> *Christian Researches in Asia*, p. 75. N. Y. Edit. 12mo. 1812.

testimony which, of course, falls in with our purpose in examining the testimony of the early ages of the church.

Such then, is the amount of the testimony from the Christian Fathers. They tell us with a truly remarkable unanimity and frequency, that in every church there was a bench or college of elders:

- that they sat with the bishop or pastor, as an ecclesiastical judicatory, and ruled the church with him;
- that this bench or body of rulers was called by various names in different parts of the world, such as *Ecclesiae Consessus* (the Session or Consistory of the church); τῶν πρεσβυτέρων συνέδριον, the court or Sanhedrim of the elders; *Ecclesiae Senatus*, the senate of the church; βουλή ἐκκλησια, the council of the church, etc., etc.;
- that they were always present with the bishop or pastor when he presided in public worship;
- that he did nothing of importance without consulting them;
- that they seldom or never preached unless in cases of necessity, or when specially requested to do so by the pastor;
- that they were more frequently than otherwise called *clergymen*, like the elders who “labored in the word and doctrine,” but sometimes distinguished from the clergy;
- that whether called clergymen or not, they were “ecclesiastical men;” that is, set apart for ecclesiastical purposes, devoted to the spiritual rule and edification of the church;
- that all questions of discipline, such as admitting members into the church, inspecting their Christian deportment, and censuring, suspending, and excommunicating, were decided by these elders;
- and finally, from all this it is apparent that as discipline became unpopular, and ecclesiastics more aspiring, the *ruling* part of the elder’s office was gradually laid aside, and the *teaching* part alone retained.

## CHAPTER 5.

### ***TESTIMONY OF THE WITNESSES FOR THE TRUTH, DURING THE DARK AGES.***

It has been the habit of zealous and high-toned Prelatists, for more than two centuries past, as well as some Independents, to assert that ruling elders were unknown in the Christian church until about the year 1541; that then Calvin invented the order, and introduced it into the church of Geneva. And some worthy men of other denominations have allowed themselves, with more haste than good advisement, to adopt and repeat the assertion. It is an assertion which undoubtedly cannot be made good, as the following testimonies will probably satisfy every impartial reader.

At how early a period the Old Waldenses took their rise is uncertain. In some of their Confessions of Faith and other ecclesiastical documents, dated at, or soon after the commencement of the Reformation by *Luther*, they speak of their doctrine and order as having been handed down from father to son for more than *five hundred years*. But *Reinerius*, who himself lived about two hundred and fifty years before *Luther*, who had once resided among the *Waldenses*, but afterwards became one of their bitterest persecutors, seems to ascribe a much earlier origin to that people.

“They are more pernicious,” he says, “to the church of Rome, than any other set of heretics. This is for three reasons:

“1. Because they are older than any other sect; for some say that they have been ever since the time of Pope Sylvester (who was raised to the Papal chair in 314); and others say, from the time of the Apostles. <sup>1</sup>

“2. Because they are more extensively spread than any other sect; there being scarcely a country into which they have not crept.

“3. Because other sects are abominable to God for their blasphemies; but the Waldenses are more pious than any other heretics; they believe truly of God, live justly before men, and receive all the articles of the creed; only they hate the church of *Rome*.”

Now, *John Paul Perrin*, the well-known historian of the *Waldenses*, and who was himself one of the ministers of that people, in a number of places recognizes the office of *elder*, distinguished from that of pastor, or teacher, as retained in their churches. He expressly and repeatedly represents their *Synods* as composed of ministers and elders. The same writer tells us that in the year 1476, the Hussites, being engaged in separating and reforming their churches from the church of Rome, understood that there were some churches of the ancient Waldenses in Austria, in which the purity of the gospel was retained, and in which there were many eminent pastors. In order to ascertain the truth of this account, they (the Hussites) sent two of their ministers, with two elders, to inquire and ascertain what those flocks or congregations were. <sup>2</sup>

The same historian, in the same work, speaks of the ministers and elders of the Bohemian churches.<sup>3</sup> Now the Bohemian Brethren, it is well known, were a branch of the same

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<sup>1</sup> *Reinerius* flourished about A. D. 1250, more than 250 years before the Reformation; and at that time, he speaks of the Waldenses as an *ancient people*, of too remote an origin to be traced with distinctness and certainty.

<sup>2</sup> *History of the Old Waldenses*, part ii. book 1, chap. 10. book 2, chap. 4. book 5, chap. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Part ii. book 2. chapter 9, 10.



people called Waldenses. <sup>4</sup> They had removed from Picardy, in the north of France, about two hundred years before the time of Huss and Jerome, to Bohemia; and there, in conjunction with many natives of the country, whom they brought over to their opinions, established a number of pure churches, which long maintained the simplicity of the gospel. The undoubted existence of ruling elders then, among the Bohemian Brethren, affords in itself, strong presumptive proof that the same class of officers existed in other branches of the same body. And accordingly, a Synod, of which we have an account, as held in Piedmont in Italy in 1570, is represented repeatedly as made up of “pastors and elders.” Again, in the form of Government of the same people, in the chapter on Excommunication, we find the following direction respecting the disorderly, who refuse to listen to private admonition: “Tell it to the church,” that is, to the “guides by which the church is ruled;” and that we may be at no loss who these “rulers” were, we are told in a preceding chapter, that they were elders chosen from among the people for the purpose of governing; and informed that they were distinct from the pastors.

The testimony of Perrin and others is supported by that of M. Gillis, another historian of the Waldenses, and also one of their pastors. In the Confession of Faith of that people, inserted at length in the “Addition” to this work, and stated by the historian to have been the Confession of the ancient, as well as of the modern Waldenses, it is declared (p. 490, art. 31,) that “it is necessary for the church to have pastors to preach God’s word, to administer the sacraments, and to watch over the sheep of Jesus Christ; and also elders and deacons according to the rules of good and holy church discipline, and the practice of the primitive church.”

Sir Samuel Moreland, who visited the Waldenses in the year 1656, and took unwearied pains to learn from themselves their history, as well as their doctrine and order, informs us that besides their Synodical meetings, which took place once a year, when all candidates for the pastoral office were commonly ordained, they had also consistories in their respective churches, by means of which pure discipline was constantly maintained.<sup>5</sup>

Accordingly, the Rev. Dr. Ranken, in his laboriously learned *History of France*, gives the following account of the Waldenses and Albigenses, whom he very properly represents as the same people.

“Their government and discipline were extremely simple. The youth intended for the ministry among them, were placed under the inspection of some of the elder barbes, or pastors, who trained them chiefly to the knowledge of the Scriptures; and when satisfied of their proficiency, they received them as preachers, with imposition of hands. Their pastors were maintained by the voluntary offerings of the people. The whole church assembled once a year to treat their general affairs. Contributions were then obtained; and the common fund was divided for the year, among not only the fixed pastors, but those who were itinerant, and had no particular district or charge. If any of them had fallen into scandal or sin, they were prohibited from preaching, and thrown out of the society. The pastors were assisted in their inspection of the people’s morals, by elders whom probably both pastors and people elected, and set apart for that purpose.” <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *History of the Waldenses*, 4to. 1655, published by order of Cromwell.

<sup>5</sup> *History of the Evangelical Churches of Piedmont*, book i. chapter viii.

<sup>6</sup> *History of France*, vol. iii. pp. 203, 204.

Further, not only does Perrin speak of the ministers and elders of the Bohemian churches — thereby plainly intimating that they had a class of elders distinct from their pastors, or preachers — but the same thing is placed beyond the possibility of doubt or question by the Bohemian Brethren themselves. In the year 1535, they presented a Confession of their Faith, to Ferdinand, king of Hungary and Bohemia, with a friendly and highly commendatory preface by Luther. A number of years afterward, he published their “Plan of Government and Discipline” which contains the following paragraph:

“Elders (*Presbyteri, seu Censores morum*) are honest, grave, pious men, chosen out of the whole congregation, that they may act as guardians of all the rest. To them authority is given (either alone, or in connection with the pastor) to admonish and rebuke those who transgress the prescribed rules, also to reconcile those who are at variance, and to restore to order whatever irregularity they may have noticed. Likewise in secular matters, relating to domestic concerns, the younger men and youths are in the habit of asking their counsel, and of being faithfully advised by them. From the example and practice of the ancient church, we believe that this should always be done; See Exo 18.21; Deu 1.13; 1Cor 6.2, 4, 5; 1Tim 5.17.”

This, they say at the close, “is the ecclesiastical order which they and their forefathers had had established among them for two hundred years; <sup>7</sup> which they derived from the word of God; which they maintained through much persecution and with much patience; and which they observed with much happy fruit to themselves, and to the people of God.” <sup>8</sup>

And that all mistake might be precluded respecting the real import of the above stated classes, the Bohemian historian and commentator, Comenius, makes the following remarks on the elders in question:

“*Presbyter*, a Greek term signifying the same as *Senior* in Latin (an *Elder*), is applied by the apostles both to the pastors of the church, and to those who assisted them in taking care of the flock, who do not labor in the word and doctrine; 1Tim v. 17. Such are our elders; they are styled judges of the congregation, or censors of the people, and also ruling elders. I am not ignorant, indeed, that Hugo Grotius, has labored hard to prove that, in the apostles’ days, there were no other presbyters than pastors; and that he assigns a different meaning to the passage in 1Tim 5.17. Yet, inasmuch as he finally confesses that although such elders of the church as sit with the pastors in ecclesiastical judicatories, is an institution of human prudence, they are nevertheless very useful, and should by all means be retained: I hope no one will easily find any reasonable objection. To guard against abuses, he subjoins very judicious cautions at the close of chapter xi. of the book which he entitled, *De Imperio Summarum Protestatum circa Sacra*.” <sup>9</sup>

In precisely the same manner are both the theory and practice of the Bohemian Brethren understood by the celebrated *Martin Bucer*, a very learned Lutheran divine, whose fame throughout Europe induced Archbishop *Cranmer* to invite him to *England* during the progress of the Reformation in that country. There he received patronage and preferment,

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<sup>7</sup> The “Plan of Government and Discipline,” from which the above extracts are made, was drawn up by their “General Synod” in 1616, and printed in 1632. When, therefore, they declare that they and their forefathers had enjoyed the same order for two hundred years, it carries back the date of this system to 1416; that is, to the time of John Huss; and of course, nearly a century before the birth of Calvin.

<sup>8</sup> Jo. Amos Comenii *Historia Fratrum Bohemorum Ratio Disciplinae Ordinisque*, etc. 11, 56, 68.

<sup>9</sup> *Annotationes ad Rationem Ordinis Fratrum Bohemorum*, ad cap. i. p. 68.

and was held in high estimation. Bucer was a contemporary of the Bohemian worthies who published the exhibition of their faith and practice quoted above; and of course, he had every opportunity of knowing both its letter and spirit. He speaks of it in the following terms:

“The Bohemian Brethren (Picardi),<sup>10</sup> who published a Confession of their faith in the year 1535, with a Preface by Luther, and who almost alone preserved in the world the purity of the doctrine, and the vigor of the discipline of Christ, observed an excellent rule for which we are compelled to give them credit, and especially to praise that God who thus wrought by them. Notwithstanding, those brethren are preposterously despised by some learned men. The rule which they observe was this: besides ministers of the Word and Sacraments, they had in each church, a bench or college of men, excelling in gravity and prudence, who performed the duties of admonishing and correcting offenders, settling differences, and judicially deciding in cases of dispute. Of this kind of elders, Hilary (Ambrose) wrote, when he said, ”Therefore the synagogue and afterwards the church had elders, without whose counsel nothing was done.”<sup>11</sup>

It would seem difficult to deny or resist this testimony that the Bohemian Brethren held to ruling elders, and actually maintained this class of officers in their churches. Could Bucer, whom Mr. Middleton, in his *Biographia Evangelica*, represents as “a man of immense learning,” and who is spoken of by Bishop Burnet as “perhaps inferior to none of all the Reformers for learning;” — could he have been ignorant either of the real meaning of a public document put forth in his own time, or of the public and uniform practice of a body of pious people whom he seems to have regarded with so much respect and affection, as witnesses for God in a dark world? It cannot be imagined. And what gives additional weight to the testimony of this illustrious man, is that he seems to have had no interest whatever in vindicating this class of church officers. For it is not known that he ever had any special inducement from a sense of reputation, or any other cause, to exert himself in maintaining them. And the latter part of his life was spent in England, in the service of the established church of that kingdom, in the bosom of which he died.

As a further confirmation of Bucer’s judgment in reference to the Bohemian Brethren, we have the celebrated John Francis Buddaeus, an eminently learned 17th century Lutheran divine of Germany. He gave an edition, with a large preface, of the work of Comenius, in which the history of the Bohemian Brethren, and their form of Government, are published. He evidently understands their plan in reference to the office of ruling elder, precisely as Bucer and other learned men have understood it. He employs the greater part of his preface in recommending this office. And although he does not seem prepared to allow that it existed as a separate office in the apostolic church, yet he thinks that virtually, and in substance, it did make a part of the apostolic system of supervision and order. He thinks, moreover, that without some such office, it is wholly impossible to maintain pure morals, and sound discipline in the church of God; and that the Bohemian Brethren

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<sup>10</sup> Bucer styles these worthy people *Fratres Picardi*, in reference to their origin from the Waldenses, or rather the branch called *Albigenses* in France, to which those who migrated to Bohemia belonged. But the people to whom he refers are ascertained with unerring certainty by the “Confession of Faith” which he so precisely describes.

<sup>11</sup> *Scripta duo Adversaria Latomi, etc. in Cap. De Ecclesiae Autoritate*, p. 159.

rendered a most important service to the cause of truth and piety, in maintaining it in their ecclesiastical system.<sup>12</sup>

Luther in some of his early writings, had expressed an unfavorable opinion of the Bohemian Brethren; but upon being more fully informed of their doctrine and order, and more especially of their provision for maintaining sound discipline by means of their eldership in each congregation, he changed his opinion, and became willing both to speak and to write strongly in their favor. Hence his highly commendatory preface to their “Confession of Faith,” of which mention has been already made. And hence, at a still later period, the following strong expressions in favor of the same people:

“There has not arisen any people since the times of the apostles, whose church has come nearer to the apostolic doctrine and order than the Brethren of Bohemia.”

And again;

“Although these Brethren do not excel us in purity of doctrine (all the articles of faith with us being sincerely and purely taken out of the Word of God), yet in the ordinary discipline of the church which they use, and by which they happily govern the churches, they go far beyond us, and in this respect, they are far more praiseworthy. And we cannot but acknowledge and yield this to them, for the glory of God, and of his truth. Whereas our people of Germany cannot be persuaded to be willing to take the yoke of discipline upon them.”<sup>13</sup>

It is presumed that no one, after impartially weighing the foregoing testimonies, will listen for one moment with any respect to the allegation that the plan of a bench of elders for ruling the church and conducting its discipline, was invented by Calvin. But we may go further. The truth is, that instead of the Waldenses or Bohemian Brethren taking this order of officers from Calvin, it may be affirmed that precisely the reverse was the fact. We have satisfactory evidence that Calvin took the hint from the Bohemian Brethren; and that the system which he afterwards established in Geneva, was really suggested and prompted by the example of those pious sufferers and witnesses for the truth, who had this class of officers in their churches long before Calvin’s day. This will be made to clearly appear from the following statement.

When Calvin first settled in *Geneva*, in 1536, he found the Reformed religion already introduced, and to a considerable extent, supported under the ministry of Farel and Viret, two bold and faithful advocates of evangelical truth. Such, however, was the opposition made to the doctrines which they preached, and especially to the purity of discipline which they struggled hard to establish, by the licentious part of the inhabitants, among whom were some of the leading magistrates, that in 1538, Calvin and his colleagues were expelled from their places in the Genevan church, because they refused to administer the Lord’s Supper to the vilest of the population who chose to *demand* the privilege. In a paroxysm of popular fury, those faithful ministers of Christ were commanded to leave the city within two days. During this temporary triumph of error and profligacy, Calvin retired to Strasburg, where he was appointed Professor of Divinity and Pastor of a church, and where he remained nearly four years.

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<sup>12</sup> Jo. Francisici Buddaei, Praefatio *de instauranda Disciplina Ecclesiastica* – passim (throughout).

<sup>13</sup> Joh. A. Comenii *Historia Bohem. Frat. sect.* 82.

In 1540, the year before he was recalled to *Geneva*, he corresponded with the Bohemian Brethren, and made himself particularly acquainted with their plan of church government, which he regarded with deep interest. It was an interest no doubt greatly augmented by the sufferings which he had recently undergone in fruitless efforts to maintain the purity of ecclesiastical discipline. In those efforts he had been baffled chiefly by the lack of such an efficient system as the Bohemian churches possessed. In the course of this correspondence, while yet in exile for his fidelity, *Calvin* addressed the Bohemian pastors in the following pointed terms:

“I heartily congratulate your churches, upon which, besides sound doctrine, God has bestowed so many excellent gifts. Of these gifts, it is none of the least, to have such pastors to govern and order them; to have a people themselves so well affected and disposed — to be constituted under so noble a form of government — to be adorned with the most excellent discipline, which we justly call *most excellent*, and indeed, the only bond by which obedience can be preserved. I am sure we find with us, by woeful experience, what the worth of it is, by the lack of it. Nor yet can we by any means attain to it. It is on this account that I am often faint in my mind, and feeble in the discharge of the duties of my office. Indeed I should quite despair, if this did not comfort me, that the edification of the church is always the work of the Lord, which He himself will carry on by his own power, though all help beside should fail. Yet, still it is a great and rare blessing to be aided by so necessary a help. Therefore I will not consider our church as properly strengthened, until they can be bound together by that bond.”

And the pious historian, after giving this extract from the venerable Reformer, adds:

“It so happened, in the course of divine providence, that not long afterwards, this eminent man was recalled to minister in the church of Geneva, where he established the very same kind of discipline which is now famed throughout the world.”<sup>14</sup>

Testimony more direct and conclusive could scarcely be desired. Comenius, himself a Bishop of the Bohemian Brethren, surely knew what kind of eldership it was which was established among the churches of his own denomination. He says it was the very same as that which Calvin afterwards established in Geneva. We know, too, that this venerable man, before he was expelled from Geneva in 1538, and while he was struggling and suffering so much want of an efficient discipline, made no attempt to introduce the institution in question. But during his painful exile, his attention is forcibly turned to the Bohemian plan. He is greatly pleased with it; he speaks in the strongest terms of its excellence; declares that he has no hope of any church prospering until it is introduced; and the very next year, on his return, makes it one of the conditions of his resuming his pastoral charge — that this plan of conducting the discipline of the church by a bench of elders, shall be received *with* him, and thus causes it to be adopted in Geneva.

And yet the historian of the Waldenses, John Paul Perrin, has been reproached, and insinuations made unfavorable to his honesty, because he has represented the Bohemian Brethren as having ecclesiastical elders distinct from their ministers of the gospel. Everyone *must* now see how utterly unjust such reproaches are. If there were ever elders in Geneva, they were found in the churches of Bohemia. Nor is it any solid objection to the fact, as we have stated it, that they had some other features in their system of church

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<sup>14</sup> Joh. A. Comenii *Historia Bohem. Frat. sect.* 80.

order, which were not strictly presbyterian. All that the historian has to deal with is facts. Having stated these, he is answerable for nothing more. That those churches gave the title of *Seniors*, but more frequently of *Antistites* (overseers) to certain elderly clergyman who were peculiarly venerable in their character, and who chiefly took the lead in all ordinations, is no doubt true; that in their plan of church government, they distinguished their *Diaconi* (deacons) from their *Eleemosynarii* (almoners); and that they include in the list of their ecclesiastical offices, some which are strictly *secular*, is also manifest. But surely none of these invalidate the fact that they had *ruling elders*; a fact stated in a manner which it is impossible either to doubt or mistake.

Thus we have good evidence that *all* the most distinguished and faithful witnesses for the truth, during the dark ages, with whose faith and order we have any minute acquaintance, carefully maintained the office for which we are contending; that *some* of them at least considered it as of divine appointment, and accordingly quote Scriptural authority in its support; and that with good reason, they appear to have regarded it as one of the most efficient means under the divine blessing, of promoting the spiritual order and edification of the church.

**CHAPTER 6.**  
**TESTIMONY OF THE REFORMERS**  
**&**  
**OTHER LEARNED AND DISINTERESTED**  
**WITNESSES, NEARLY CONTEMPORARY WITH THEM.**

We have seen how utterly groundless is the assertion that ruling elders were invented and first introduced by Calvin at Geneva. If there is any truth in history, they were in use long before Calvin was born, and in the purest churches on earth, to say nothing of their apostolic origin. Nor is this all. It may further be maintained that a great majority of the Reformers, in organizing those churches which separated from the church of Rome, either actually introduced this class of officers, or in their published writings, freely and fully declared in its favor. And this was the case, as we will presently see, not merely on the part of those who followed Calvin (both as to time and opinion), but also on the part of those who either preceded, or had no ecclesiastical connection whatever with that illustrious man; and who were far from agreeing with him in many other particulars. Now, this is surely a marvellous fact if, as some respectable writers would persuade us to believe, the office in question is a mere figment of Genevan contrivance toward the middle of the sixteenth century.

The first Reformer whose testimony I will adduce in favor of this office, is Ulrich Zwingli, the celebrated leader in the work of Reformation in Switzerland. And I mention him first because, as he never was connected with Calvin, he cannot be suspected of speaking as the humble imitator of that justly honored individual. Indeed, he was removed by death in 1531, five years before Calvin ever saw Geneva, or appeared in the ranks of the Reformers; and ten years before the introduction of ruling elders into that city,

On the subject of ruling elders, Zwingli speaks thus:

“The title of *presbyter* or *elder*, as used in Scripture, is not rightly understood by those who consider it as applicable only to those who preside in preaching. For it is evident that the term is also sometimes used to designate elders of another kind, that is, senators, leaders, or counsellors. So we read in Acts 15, where it is said, ‘the apostles and elders come together to consider of this matter.’ Here we see that the elders spoken of are to be considered as senators or counsellors. It is evident that the *πρεσβυτεροι* mentioned in this place were not ministers of the word; but that they were aged, prudent, and venerable men who, in directing and managing the affairs of the church, were the same thing as the senators in our cities. And the title *elder* is used in the same sense in many other places in the Acts of the Apostles.”<sup>1</sup>

Again, Oecolampadius, who also died before Calvin appeared as an active Reformer, and of course before the introduction of ruling elders in the church of Geneva, speaks as follows, in an Oration which he pronounced before the Senate of Basil in 1530, about a year before his death.

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation from Zwingli, is taken from the *Politicae Ecclesiasticae* of Voetius, in which it is cited for the same purpose as here; a copy of the works of the Swiss Reformer not being at present within the reach of the writer of the Essay.

“But it is evident that those which are intended here, are certain seniors or elders such as were in the apostle’s days, and who of old were called πρεσβυτεροι, whose judgment, being that of the most prudent part of the church, was considered as the decision of the whole church.”

Here again is the testimony of a man who could not have been influenced by any knowledge of the opinions of Calvin — for Calvin, as yet, had published no opinions on the subject — and who yet speaks in very unequivocal terms of a class of officers, as not only existing afterwards, but as of apostolic institution. According to some, these were not known in the church, either in theory or practice, for ten years after the decease of this distinguished reformer.

The testimony of Martin Bucer, as one of the most venerable and active of the Reformers, properly belongs to this branch of the subject. But as his sentiments were so fully detailed in the quotation from him, presented in the preceding chapter, it is not deemed necessary to repeat the statement here. From that extract it is evident, not only that he approved of the office of ruling elder, as of eminent use in the church, but also that he considered Ambrose as asserting that officers of this class were found in the primitive church; and that he agreed with the pious Father in maintaining this assertion. Here was another eminently learned man, and a contemporary of Calvin, who bears testimony that ruling elders were in use in the purest portion of the Christian church, as a laudable and scriptural institution, centuries before the Reformer of Geneva was born.

Peter Martyr was a celebrated Protestant divine of Italy. His character and high reputation induced Edward VI to invite him to England, where he was made Professor of Divinity at Oxford, and Canon of Christ church. He speaks of ruling elders in the following decisive terms:

“The church” (speaking of the primitive church) “had its elders, or, if I may so speak, its senate, who consulted about things which were for edification for the time being. Paul describes this kind of ministry, not only in the 12th chapter of the epistle to the Romans, but also in the first epistle to Timothy, where he thus writes: ‘Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.’ These words appear to me to signify that there were then some elders who taught and preached the word of God, and another class of elders who did not teach, but only ruled in the church. Ambrose speaks concerning these, when he expounds this passage in Timothy. Indeed, he inquires whether it was owing to the pride or the sloth of the sacerdotal order <sup>2</sup> that they had then almost ceased in the church.” <sup>3</sup>

The celebrated John Alasco,<sup>4</sup> a devoted and eminently useful reformer, is also a decisive witness on the same side. Alasco was a Polish nobleman, of excellent education, and great learning. He was offered two Bishoprics, one in Poland, and another in Hungary. But he forsook his native country, and all the secular and ecclesiastical honors which awaited him, from love for the Reformed religion. In his youth he enjoyed the special friendship of Erasmus, who speaks of him in one of his letters (*Erasmi Epist. Lib. 28. Ep. 3.*) as a man of uncommon excellence and worth. The Protestant churches in the low countries

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<sup>2</sup> *Sacerdotalism*: the belief that priests can act as mediators between human beings and God.

<sup>3</sup> *P. Martyris Loci Communes*. Class. iv. Cap. 1. Sect. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Also known as Jan Łaski or Johannes à Lasco (1499-1560). – WHG



(*Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg*) being scattered in consequence of the agitation produced by the celebrated ordinance called the *Interim*, published by Charles V.,<sup>5</sup> Alasco was invited to England by King Edward VI., at the instance of Archbishop Cranmer. He accepted the invitation, and was chosen Superintendent <sup>6</sup> of the German, French and Italian congregations erected in London, which are said to have consisted of more than three thousand souls in the aggregate. He afterwards published an account of the form of government and worship adopted in those congregations. The affairs of each, it is distinctly stated in that account, were managed by a Pastor, ruling elders, and Deacons, and each of these classes of officers was considered as of divine appointment. We also learn, from his statement, that the ruling elders and Deacons of these churches, as well as the Pastors, were ordained by the imposition of hands. He further informs us, that, in the administration of the Lord's Supper, in the churches under his superintendency, the communicants sat at the table; and he occupies a number of pages in showing that this posture ought to be preferred to kneeling. He declares in short, "We have laid aside all the relics of Popery, with its mummeries, and we have studied the greatest possible simplicity in ceremonies."

Notwithstanding the publication of these sentiments, and the establishment of these practices marking so great a non-conformity with the church of England, Alasco was highly esteemed, and warmly patronized by Archbishop Cranmer, and also by the King. He granted him *letters patent*, constituting him and the other ministers of the foreign congregations, a body corporate, and giving them important privileges and powers. These letters may be seen among the original records subjoined to Burnet's *History of the Reformation*, ii. 202. The following remarks by Alasco himself, will serve at once to explain the design of the King in granting his royal sanction to these people, and also his own view of the principles upon which he and his brethren acted in founding the churches in question.

"When I was called by the king, and when certain laws of the country stood in the way, so that the public rites of divine worship used under the Papacy could not be immediately purged out (which the king himself greatly desired), and when I was anxious and earnest in my solicitations for the foreign churches, it was at length his pleasure that the public rites of the English churches should be reformed by degrees, as far as could be accomplished by the laws of the country; but that foreigners, who were not strictly and to the same extent bound by these laws, should have churches granted to them, in which they might freely regulate all things wholly according to apostolic doctrine and practice, without any regard to the rites of the country; that by this means the English churches also might be excited to embrace apostolic purity, by the unanimous consent of all the estates of the kingdom. Of this project, the king himself, from his great piety, was both the chief author and the defender. For although it was almost universally acceptable to the King's Council, and the Archbishop of Canterbury

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<sup>5</sup> Charles V (1500-1558), Catholic King of Spain and successor to the Austrian Habsburg dynasty. The Augsburg Interim was his imperial decree issued at the 1548 Diet of Augsburg. He had just defeated the Protestant Schmalkaldic League. Although the Interim ordered Protestants to readopt traditional Catholic beliefs and practices, it allowed Protestant clergymen to marry, and the laity to receive both bread and wine in the communion. – WHG

<sup>6</sup> It is worthy of notice here that although a superintendent was regarded by Alasco as one who had the inspection of several congregations; yet "he was greater than his brethren only in respect of his greater trouble and care, not having more authority than the other elders, either as to the ministry of the word and sacraments, or as to the exercise of ecclesiastical discipline, to which he was subject equally with the rest."

promoted it with all his might, there were not lacking some who took it badly, and would have opposed it if his majesty had not checked them by his authority, and by the reasons which he adduced in favor of the design.”

Again, in the Appendix to the same book, p. 649, he says:

“The care of our church was committed to us chiefly with this view, that in the administration of it we should follow the rules of the divine word, and apostolic observance, rather than any rites of other churches. In fine, we were admonished, both by the king himself, and his chief nobility, to use this great liberty granted to us in our ministry, rightly and faithfully; not to please men, but for the glory of God, by promoting the reformation of his worship.” <sup>7</sup>

On the whole, we have in this case a witness as unexceptionable and weighty as can well be desired. A man of eminent learning, piety, and devotedness. A man formed, not in the school of Calvin, but of Zwingli. A man who, when the transactions and publications alluded to above, occurred, lived in England where ruling elders were unknown. And who yet in these circumstances, declared himself in favor of this class of officers, as of divine appointment, and as important to the purity and edification of the church.

But there is a still more conclusive fact in reference to this stage of the Reformation in England. Alasco, it will be observed, asserts that both king Edward and Archbishop Cranmer were strongly favorable to the plan of discipline which he and others had introduced into the churches of foreign Protestants in England. In confirmation of this statement, there is evidence that Cranmer and the rest of the Commissioners in Edward’s reign, directly proposed the introduction of ruling elders in the national church. They drew up a body of laws which, though not finally ratified — partly on account of opposing influence, and partly from the premature decease of the monarch — yet clearly show the opinion and wishes of Cranmer and his associates. One of the proposed laws is as follows:

“After evening prayers, on which all shall attend in their own parish churches, the principal minister or parson, and the deacon, if they are present: or, in case of their absence, the curate and the elders, shall consider how the money given for pious uses had best be laid out; and then let discipline be exercised. For those whose sin has been public, and given offence to the whole church, should be brought to a sense of it, and publicly undergo the punishment of it, so that the church may be the better for their correction. After that, the minister shall withdraw with some of the elders, and consult how all other persons who are disorderly in their life and conversation may be conversed with; *first*, by some sober and good men in a brotherly manner, according to the direction of Christ in the Gospel; and if they hearken to their advice, God is to be praised for it; but if they go on in their wickedness, *then* they are to be restrained by that severe punishment which is prescribed in the Gospel for such obstinacy.” <sup>8</sup>

The testimony of Calvin will next be introduced. As he is charged with being the inventor of this class of officers, the weight of his opinion as a witness in its favor, will probably be

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<sup>7</sup> See M’Crie’s *Life of Knox*, vol. i. p. 392-396. See also, Gisberti Voetti *Politicae Ecclesiasticae*. Tom. i. 420-422. See also, *Forma et Ratio totius Ecclesiasticae ministerii* Edvardi Secti in *Peregrinorum, maxime Germanorum Eccles.* Also, *De Ordinatione Ecclesiarum Peregrinarum in Anglia. Epist. Dedicat.*, et. p. 649.

<sup>8</sup> Peirce’s *Vindication of the Dissenters*, p. 23. Baxter’s *Treatise of Episcopacy*, part. ii. p. 112. *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum, ex autoritate Regis, Hen. viii. et. Edv. vi. 4to. 1640.*

deemed small by its opposers. But there is one point of view in which his testimony will surely be regarded with deep respect, and may I not add, as decisive? That he was a man of mature and profound learning, no one can doubt. Joseph Scaliger, himself a prodigy of erudition, pronounced him to have been the most learned man in Europe in his day; and particularly, “that no man understood ecclesiastical history so well.” Now, it is certain that Calvin did not consider the office of ruling elder as originating with himself; but that he regarded it as an apostolic institution; that he refers to Scripture for its support; and that he quotes Ambrose (whose testimony has been so often referred to) as an unquestionable witness for the existence of the office under consideration in the primitive church. The following extracts from his *Commentary* and his *Institutions*, will fully establish what is here asserted.

In his exposition of 1Tim 5.17, he speaks thus:

“From this passage we may gather that there were then two kinds of presbyters, because they were not all ordained to the work of teaching. For the words plainly mean that some ruled well, to whom no part of the public instruction was committed. And verily there were chosen from among the people, grave and approved men, who, in common council, and joint authority with the pastors, administered the discipline of the church, and acted the part of censors for the correction of morals. This practice Ambrose complains, had fallen into disuse, through the indolence, or rather the pride of the teaching elders, who wished alone to, be distinguished.”

In his *Institutions* (book iv. chapter iii.) he has the following passage, equally explicit.

“In calling those who preside over churches by the appellations of ‘bishops,’ ‘elders,’ and ‘pastors,’ without any distinction, I have followed the usage of the Scriptures, which apply all these terms to express the same meaning. For to all who discharge the ministry of the word, they give the title of ‘bishops.’ So when Paul enjoins Titus to ‘ordain elders in every city,’ he immediately adds, ‘For a bishop must be blameless.’ So in another place, he salutes more than one bishop in one church. And in the Acts of the Apostles, he is declared to have sent for the elders of the church of Ephesus, whom in his address to them, he calls ‘bishops.’ Here it must be observed that we have enumerated only those offices which consist in the ministry of the word; nor does Paul mention any other in the fourth chapter of the epistle to the Ephesians, which we have quoted. But in the epistle to the Romans, and the first epistle to the Corinthians, he enumerates others, such as ‘powers,’ ‘gifts of healing,’ ‘interpretation of tongues,’ ‘governments,’ ‘care of the poor.’ Those functions which are merely temporary, I omit as foreign to our present subject. But there are two which perpetually remain, ‘governments,’ and ‘the care of the poor.’ ‘Governors,’ I apprehend to have been persons of advanced years, selected from the people, to unite with the bishops in giving admonitions and exercising discipline. For no other interpretation can be given of that injunction, ‘He that rules, let him do it with diligence.’ For from the beginning, every church has had its senate, or council composed of pious, grave, and holy men, who were invested with that jurisdiction, for the correction of vices, of which we will soon treat. Now, that this was not the regulation of a single age, experience itself demonstrates. This office of government is necessary, therefore, in every age.”

I ask, was Calvin honest or dishonest in these declarations? If he had invented and introduced the office himself, could he have been ignorant of the fact? And whether it was

so or not, who may reasonably be considered as best able to judge — himself, or those who live nearly three hundred years after him? And who would be most likely to know whether it was of ancient or modern origin — the most learned man then, perhaps, in the world — or men with not a tenth part of his erudition, at the present day? The truth is, these passages, considered in connection with that quoted in a former chapter, in which he speaks of himself in reference to this office, as following the example of the pious witnesses of the truth who preceded him — prove either that Calvin did not consider himself as the inventor of the office, but believed that it had been in the church in all ages — or that he was gratuitously and profligately regardless of the truth, to a degree never laid to his charge.

Nor is the testimony to the primitive existence of the class of officers confined to those of the reformers who were favorable to their continuance in the church. Some, by no means friendly to their restoration, were yet constrained to acknowledge their early origin. That there were ruling elders in the primitive church, is explicitly granted by Archbishop Whitgift, a warm and learned friend of diocesan Episcopacy.

“I know,” he says, “that in the primitive church, they had in every church certain seniors, to whom the government of the congregation was committed; but that was before there was any Christian prince or magistrate who openly professed the gospel; and before there was any church established by public authority.”

And again:

“Both the name and office of seniors were extinguished before Ambrose’s time, as he himself testifies, writing on the fifth of the first epistle to Timothy. Indeed, as Ambrose says, the synagogue, and afterwards the church, had seniors, without whose counsel nothing was done in the church; but that was before his time, and before there was any Christian magistrate, or any church established.”<sup>9</sup>

The learned and acute Archbishop, it seems, was not only convinced that there were ruling elders, distinct from preaching elders, in the primitive church, but with all his erudition and discernment, he understood Ambrose just as the friends of this class of officers now understand him.

There is another testimony on this subject, from one of the most conspicuous and active friends of the Reformation in England, which is worthy of particular notice. I refer to that of the Rev. Dean Nowell, who flourished in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and whose celebrated catechism, drawn up in 1562, obtained, perhaps as much currency and respect as any publication of that period. Nor are we to consider it as expressing the sentiments of the illustrious divine whose name it bears, alone. For it was unanimously approved and sanctioned by the same lower house of Convocation which passed the 39 Articles of the Church of England, and directed it be published and used as containing the true doctrine of that church. In this catechism, toward the close, when speaking of the evils of retaining unworthy members in the church, the following questions and answers occur:

“**Q.** What remedy for this evil heart can be devised and applied?”

“**A.** In churches well constituted and governed, there was, as I said before, a certain plan and order of government appointed and observed. Elders were chosen — that is,

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<sup>9</sup> *Defence against Cartwright*, p. 638, 651.

ecclesiastical rulers, who conducted and maintained the discipline of the church. To these pertained authority, reproof, and chastisement; and they, with the concurrence of the Pastor, if they knew any who, by false opinions, troublesome errors, foolish superstitions, or vicious and profligate lives, were likely to bring a great public scandal on the church of God, and who could not approach the Lord's Supper without a manifest profanation, repelled them from the communion, and no longer admitted them until, by public penitence, they gave satisfaction to the church."

**“Q.** What is to be done?” (when those who have been excluded from the church, repent, and desire to be restored to its communion.)

**“A.** That they may be received again into the church, and to the enjoyment of its holy mysteries from which they have been deservedly cast out, they should humbly supplicate and pray. And on the whole there ought to be such moderation used in administering public penance, that neither by too much severity the offender may be reduced to despondency; nor by too much lenity, the discipline of the church relaxed, its authority diminished, and others encouraged and incited to similar offences. But when, in the judgment of the elders and of the pastor, proper satisfaction is made by the chastisement of the offender for an example to others, he may be admitted again to the communion of the church.” <sup>10</sup>

Nothing can be more unequivocal or decisive than this testimony. In the opinion not only of the writer of the catechism before us, but also of the leading clergy of the church of England who sanctioned it and enjoined its general use, there ought to be, in every church, besides the pastor, a bench of elders or ecclesiastical rulers, whose duty it should be to preside over the discipline, and in conjunction with the pastor, to receive, admonish, suspend, excommunicate, and restore members — in a manner precisely agreeable to the well-known practice of the presbyterian church. In truth, Dr. Nowell could scarcely have expressed in more distinct and unqualified terms his approbation of this part of our system, than in telling us what, in his judgment and that of his brethren, every well regulated church ought to have.

Ursinus, a learned German divine, contemporary with Luther and Melancthon, speaks a language still more to our purpose.

“Ministers,” he says, “are either immediately called of God, or mediately called through the instrumentality of the church. Of the former class, were prophets and apostles. Of the latter class there are five kinds: *namely*, evangelists, bishops or pastors, teachers, ruling elders, and deacons. Evangelists are ministers appointed to go forth and preach the gospel to a number of churches. Bishops are ministers ordained to preach the word of God, and administer the sacraments, in particular churches. Teachers are ministers appointed merely to fulfil the function of teaching in particular churches. Ruling elders are ministers elected by the voice of the church, to assist in conducting discipline and to order a variety of necessary matters in the church. Deacons are ministers elected by the church to take care of the poor and distribute alms.” <sup>11</sup>

In the Confession of Saxony, drawn up by Melancthon in 1551, and subscribed by a large number of Lutheran divines and churches, we find this class of officers recognized and

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<sup>10</sup> See Bishop Randolph's *Enchiridion Theologicum*. vol. i. 326, 327. third Edition.

<sup>11</sup> Ursini *Corpus Doctrinae*. par. iii. p. 721.

represented as in use in those churches. Speaking of the exercise of discipline in its various branches, they say: “That these things may be done orderly, there are also consistories appointed in our churches.” Of these consistories, a majority of members, it is well known, were ruling elders.

Szegeden, a very eminent Lutheran divine of Hungary, contemporary with Luther, also speaks very decisively of the apostolic institution of ruling elders. The following passage is sufficient to exhibit his sentiments.

“The ancient church had Presbyters, or Elders, of which the Apostle speaks, 1Cor 5.4. And these Elders were of two kinds. One class of them preached the gospel, administered the sacraments, and governed the church, the same as bishops; for bishops and presbyters are the same order. But another class of elders consisted of grave and upright men, taken from among the laity, who together with the preaching elders mentioned before, consulted respecting the affairs of the church, and devoted their labor to admonishing, correcting, and taking care of the flock of Christ.”<sup>12</sup>

The Magdeburgh centuriators, who were eminently learned Lutheran divines, contemporary with Melancthon, and who have been regarded for three hundred years, as among the highest authorities on questions of ecclesiastical history, speak in the following decisive terms with regard to the office in question. And although the extract has been given on a former page; yet as it is brief and pointed, it may not be improper to assign it a place in this connection. Speaking of the third century, they say: “The right of deciding respecting those who were to be excommunicated, or of receiving back, upon their repentance, those who had fallen, was vested in the elders of the church.”<sup>13</sup>

The learned Francis Junius, a distinguished divine and professor of theology of the church of Holland, lived at the commencement of the Reformation in that country, and was, of course, contemporary with Martyr, Bucer, Melancthon, etc. He wrote very fully and explicitly in favor of the office of ruling elder. In his work entitled *Ecclesiastici*, he decisively, and with great learning, maintains that pastors, ruling elders, and deacons, are the only three spiritual orders of church officers; that pastors, or ministers of the word and sacraments, are the highest order, and of course are invested with the power of ordaining; that the second class are men of distinguished piety and prudence, chosen from among the members of the church to assist the pastor in the government of the church; and that the deacons are appointed to collect and distribute the alms of the church. He affirms that these three orders are set forth in Scripture, and existed in the primitive church; and that the disuse of ruling elders, as well as the introduction of prelacy, is a departure from the primitive model.<sup>14</sup>

The Protestant churches of Hungary and Transylvania, although in organizing their churches, they did not actually adopt and introduce the office of ruling elder; yet in the preface, and other statements, published with their ecclesiastical formularies, they spoke in the most unequivocal terms, both of the value, and the early origin of this class of officers. The following extract may be considered as a fair specimen of their testimony on this subject.

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<sup>12</sup> Szegedeni *Loci Communes*. p. 197. edit. quint. folio—Basil. 1608.

<sup>13</sup> *Cent.* iii. cap. vii. p. 151.

<sup>14</sup> *Ecclesiastici, sive de nat. et administrat. Ecclesiae*, etc. Lib. ii. cap. 2, 3, 4.

“Most other nations, belonging to the evangelical confession, have been in the habit of choosing and constituting elders in every village and city, agreeably to the practice of the old church, and also of the New Testament — men sound in the faith, blameless, the husbands of one wife, having faithful children, chargeable with no crime, grave, prudent, etc. It is made the official duty of these men to diligently watch over the lives and conversation of all the members of the church, to rebuke the dissolute, and if need be, to refer their case to the pastors and to the whole eldership, etc.”

Here they make a clear distinction between these elders and the pastors of the churches, and represent the former as assistants to the latter in the spiritual concerns of the church. They then proceed to state why a class of officers, so useful, in most cases so necessary, and which they also considered as having existed in the apostolic church, was not received among them.<sup>15</sup>

The character of Jerome Zanchius, a learned divine of Italy in the sixteenth century, who greatly distinguished himself among the Reformers, is so well known that a detailed account of his great accomplishments and reputation is unnecessary. On the subject before us, he speaks thus:

“The whole ministry of the Christian church may be divided into three classes. The first consists of those who dispense the word and sacraments, corresponding with those who, under the Old Testament, were called priests and Levites; and under the New Testament are called apostles, pastors, and teachers. The second consists of those whose peculiar office it is to take care of the discipline of the church, to inspect the lives and conversation of all, and to take care that all live in a manner becoming Christians; and also, if there should at any time be a necessity for it, in the absence of the pastor, to instruct the people. There were such, under the Old Testament in the synagogue; and such also were the senators who were added to the bishop in the administration of the New Testament church. These officers are styled presbyters (*presbyteri*,) and elders (*seniores*) of which the apostle speaks, besides other places, in 1Tim 5.17: ‘Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.’ In this passage, the Apostle manifestly speaks of two sorts or classes of elders, as he was understood by Ambrose and others among the ancients, and by almost all our modern Protestant divines, such as Bullinger, Peter Martyr, etc., etc.<sup>16</sup>

The most cursory reader of this extract will not fail to take notice, not only that Zanchius evidently approved of this office, but that he thought it of divine appointment; that he interpreted as we do the famous passage in Ambrose, which the opposers of ruling elders have expended so much ingenuity in laboring to explain away; and that he considered almost all the reformed divines as being of the same opinion with himself.

The high reputation of Paraeus, a learned and pious German divine, contemporary with Melancthon and Zanchius, is also well known. His testimony respecting the office under consideration is very explicit. In his Commentary on Rom 12.8, he observes:

“Here the apostle understands the function of that class of elders who, united with the pastors, watch over and correct the morals and discipline of the church. For there were two classes of elders, as may be gathered from 1Tim 5.17. Some who labored in the word

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<sup>15</sup> See G. Voetii *Polit. Eccles.* par. ii. lib. ii. tract. iii.

<sup>16</sup> Zanchii *Opera*. Tom. iv. In *Quartum Praeceptum*, p. 727.

and doctrine, who were to be accounted worthy of double honor; such as teachers, pastors, or bishops; the others who labored in conducting discipline, who are here called *governments*.”

And in his Commentary on 1Cor 12.28, he says:

“The Apostle here, undoubtedly, speaks of the elders who presided in the administration of discipline. For the primitive church had its senate, who attended to the morals of the congregation, while the apostles and teachers were left at leisure to preach. This the apostle indicates very clearly in the first Epistle to 1Tim 5.17, where two classes of Presbyters are represented as constituted. The governments spoken of here were not of princes or praetors, armed with the sword, but grave, experienced men, exercising authority over others, chosen out of the church by the consent of the church, to assist the pastors in conducting discipline, and to alleviate their burdens.”

The celebrated Piscator, who held a distinguished place among the divines who adorned Germany, and maintained the Protestant cause in the sixteenth century, is equally decisive as an advocate of the office under consideration. In his Commentary on 1Tim 5.17, he says:

“The Apostle distributes elders into two classes — those who preside in maintaining ecclesiastical discipline, but did not publicly teach; and those who both taught and cooperated in ruling, and were therefore worthy of a great honor, and a more liberal support than the others.”

Few ministers of the church of England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, were more distinguished for talents, learning, and piety, than Thomas Cartwright, Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, the opponent of the high prelatial claims of Archbishop Whitgift, and concerning whom the celebrated Beza pronounced that he thought “the sun did not shine upon a more learned man.” This eminent divine, commenting on Mat 18.17, “Tell it unto the church,” etc., thus remarks:

“Theophylact upon this place, interprets, *Tell the church*, that is many, because this assembly takes knowledge of this and other things by their mouths, that is, their *governors*. Chrysostom also says that to *tell the church* is to *tell the governors of it*. It is therefore to be understood, that these governors of the church, who were set over every several assembly in the time of the law, were of two sorts. For some had the handling of the word; some others, watching against the offences of the church, by common council with the ministers of the word, took order against the same. Those governing elders are mentioned at diverse times in the story of the gospel, under the title of ‘rulers of the synagogue.’ And this manner of government, because it was to be translated into the church of Christ under the gospel, our Saviour, by the order at that time used among the Jews, declares what later should be done in his church. Agreeably to this, the Apostle both declared the Lord’s ordinance in his behalf, and put the same in practice, in ordaining to every several church, beside the ministry of the word, certain of the chiefest men who should assist the work of the Lord’s building. This was also faithfully practised by the churches after the apostles’ times, as long as they remained in any good and allowable soundness of doctrine. And being fallen from the churches,



especially from certain of them, the lack of this is sharply and bitterly cast into the teeth of the church's teachers — by whose ambition that came to pass.”<sup>17</sup>

And as proof of this, the author (Cartwright) quotes in the margin that very passage of Ambrose, cited in the preceding section, and which has always given so much trouble to Prelatists and Independents.

The same writer, in his second reply to Whitgift, speaking of the class of elders under consideration, expresses himself thus:

“For proof of these church elders, which being occupied in the government, had nothing to do with the word, the testimony of Ambrose is so clear and open that whoever does not give way to it, must be thought a bat, or an owl, or some other nightbird, to delight in darkness. His saying is that the elders fell away by the ambition of the doctors; by thus opposing the elders to doctors, who taught, he plainly declares that they had nothing to do with the word. Upon which it is manifest that it was usual, in the best reformed churches, certainly a hundred years after the times of the apostles, to have an eldership which did not meddle with the word, nor administration of sacraments.”<sup>18</sup>

The Rev. Richard Greenham, a divine of the church of England, flourished in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and was greatly revered both for his learning and piety. He is very unequivocal and pointed on this subject. It is in these words:

“The Apostle St. Paul notably amplifies the honor due to the true and faithful minister. The elders who rule well (he says), let them have double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine, 1Tim 5.17. As if to say, let those elders who are appointed to watch and look to the manners and behaviour of the children of God, if they execute this charge faithfully, have double honor; but above all, let the faithful ministers, who as labor in the word, be honored. But why? The others are overseers of your *outward* behaviour, but these have another manner of office. They watch over your souls which tends to the salvation both of body and soul.”

And again:

“The rulers of the church are called the church, to whom discipline pertains. Not the whole company of the Jews, but the rulers of the synagogue, are called the church of the Jews.”<sup>19</sup>

The celebrated Estius, the learned Popish expositor and Professor at Douay, in his Commentary on 1Tim 5.17, delivers the following opinion:

“From this passage it may be gathered that, in the time of the apostles, there were certain presbyters in the church who ruled well, and were worthy of double honor, and yet who did not labor in the word and doctrine; nor do the heretics of the present day (meaning the Protestants) deny this.”

And in speaking of the establishment of this class of elders in Geneva, about half a century before he wrote, he seems to blame only Calvin for considering and styling them *laymen*. He expresses a decisive opinion that the elders spoken of by Paul in this place, were

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<sup>17</sup> Cartwright's Commentary on the New Testament—against the Rhemists.

<sup>18</sup> *Second Reply*. Part second, p. 44. 4to. 1577.

<sup>19</sup> *Works*. pp. 352, 842. fol. 1612.

ecclesiastical men, set apart by ecclesiastical rites, and devoted to ecclesiastical duties; but they did not preach. And he explicitly acknowledges that Ambrose, in the fourth century, speaks of such elders as having existed long before his day. It is worthy of remark, that the same learned Romanist, in another work, not only avows in the most distinct manner, his belief in the apostolic appointment of non-preaching elders, and quotes 1Tim 5.17 in support of his opinion — but he also refers to Jerome and Augustine as witnesses to the same fact. <sup>20</sup>

The learned Professor Whitaker, a divine of the church of England, flourished in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. His opinion as to the true meaning of 1Tim 5.17 was given at length on a preceding page. The same distinguished divine, in writing against Dury, expresses himself thus concerning the office under consideration: “Are you so ignorant as not to know that in the church of Christ there ought to be elders who should devote themselves to the work of government alone, and not to the administration of the word or sacraments, as we are taught in 1Tim 5.17?” <sup>21</sup>

To these testimonies might be added many more from learned men of the same distinguished character as those already mentioned, and to the same effect. Chemnitius of Germany; Salmasius of Holland; Marloratus and Danaeus of France; Hemmingius of Denmark <sup>22</sup> — with a long list of similar names, might all be cited as warm advocates of the class of elders under consideration, and almost all of them decisive advocates of its divine authority.

Nor are these individual suffrages, though numerous and unequivocal, all that can be alleged in favor of our cause. The great body of the Protestant churches, when they came to organize their several systems in a state of separation from the Papacy, and from each other, differing, as they did in many other respects, were almost unanimous in adopting and maintaining the office of ruling elder. Instead of this office being confined, as many appear to suppose, to the ecclesiastical establishments of Geneva and Scotland, it was generally introduced with the Reformation, by Lutherans as well as Calvinists; and it is generally retained to the present day in almost all the Protestant churches, except that of England. Those of France, Germany, Holland, Switzerland, etc., received this class of elders early, and expressly represented them in their public confessions, as founded on the word of God. It is probably safe to affirm that at the period of the Reformation, more than three-fourths of the whole Protestant world declared in favor of this office, not merely as expedient, but as warranted by Scripture, and as necessary to the order and edification of the church.

It may be confidently asked, Does all this look like the office in question being a mere Genevan innovation? How will we reconcile with this extraordinary position, the undoubted fact that Lutherans and Reformed in every part of Europe are found among the decisive, zealous advocates of the office in question? They include those who never saw Calvin, as well as those who were within the sphere of his acquaintance and influence — indeed, some died before the illustrious Reformer of Geneva ever appeared at all, either as a writer or preacher. And they quote as conclusive authority in its favor, the principal

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<sup>20</sup> Estii *Sententiarum Commentaria*. Lib. iv. par. 2. sect. 21.

<sup>21</sup> *Contra Duraeum*, Lib. ix. p. 807.

<sup>22</sup> See these writers, as well as a number of others, referred to in the *Politicae Ecclesiasticae* of Voetius. par. ii. lib. ii. tract. iii.

passages of Scripture, and the principal Father relied on by Presbyterians, to establish its apostolic warrant and its actual existence in the early ages of the ancient church. Truly, it is difficult to conceive how anyone who seriously and impartially weighs these facts, can resist the impression that such an institution must have some solid foundation both in the inspired volume, and in the nature and necessities of the church. For on behalf of it, so many eminently learned and pious men of different and distant countries, without concert with each other, and without any common interest to serve in reference to this matter, have so remarkably concurred in this opinion.

## CHAPTER 7.

### **TESTIMONY OF EMINENT DIVINES SINCE THE TIME OF THE REFORMERS.**

While we justly attach so much importance to the persons and services of the Reformers, and recur with the deepest reverence to their opinions, we owe scarcely less respect to the judgment of a number of other men who have lived since their time, and of whom the world was not worthy. Men whose testimony can never be quoted except with veneration, and whose characters give an ample pledge of research at once profound and honest. To the decision of a few of these illustrious men on the subject before us, the attention of the reader is respectfully requested.

The decisive opinion of Dr. Owen, undoubtedly one of the greatest divines that ever adorned the British nation, in favor of the scriptural warrant of the office of ruling elder, was given in a preceding section, and need not be repeated now. I may, however, add that more weight ought to be attached to this opinion on account of Dr. Owen's ecclesiastical connections which, as is well known, were by no means adapted to give him a bias on the side of Presbyterian order.

The venerable and eminently pious Richard Baxter was no Presbyterian. Yet he expresses himself in the following very unequivocal language, on the subject under consideration.

“When I plead, that the order of subject presbyters (or lay elders) was not instituted in Scripture times, and consequently that it is not of divine institution, I mean that as a *distinct office* or *species* of church ministers, it is not a divine institution, nor a lawful institution of man. But among men in the *same office*, some might prudentially be chosen to an eminence of degree as to the exercise of that office. And according to the difference in their advantages, there might be a disparity in the use of their authority and gifts. I think that was done in Scripture times, and might have been after, if not then. And my judgment is that ordinarily, every particular church (such as our parish churches) had more elders than one, but not such a store of men of eminent gifts as that *all* these elders could be such. But if half a dozen of the most judicious persons of this parish were ordained to be elders of the same office with myself, because they are not equally fit for public preaching, most should employ themselves in the rest of the oversight, consenting that the public preaching should lie most upon me, and that I be the moderator of them, for order in the circumstantials. *This* I think was the true Episcopacy and Presbytery of the first times.”<sup>1</sup>

Although it may be doubted whether this venerable man is correct in his whole view of this subject, yet it will be observed by every attentive reader, that in maintaining the existence of a plurality of elders in each church in primitive times, and that a great part of these elders were not in fact employed in preaching, but in inspecting and ruling, he concedes everything that can be deemed essential in relation to the office which we are considering.

The Puritan Congregationalists of England, about the year 1605, in the summary of their faith and order entitled *English Puritanism* — drawn up by the venerable Mr. Bradshaw, translated into Latin for the benefit of the foreign Protestants by the learned Dr. Ames,

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<sup>1</sup> *Disputations of Church Government*. — Advertisement, pp. 4, 5, 4to. 1659.

and intended to express the sense of the general body of the Puritans — speak thus on the subject of ruling elders:

“Since even in the best constituted churches, they know that not a few enormous offences will arise which, if not timely met, will do injury both to those who believe and those who are inquiring — while at the same time, they see that the authority of a single person in a parish (resembling the papal) is contrary to the will of Christ — they think, as the case itself requires and as appointed by God, that others also should be selected from the church as officers, who may be associated with the ministers in the spiritual government.”

“These are inspectors, *επιτιμηται epitimetai*, censors of a kind, whose duty it is — together with the ministers of the word — to watch over the conduct of all the brethren, as well as to judge between them. And they think that this office is instituted so that each may take more heed to himself and his ways, while the ministers enjoy more leisure for study and devotion, and obtain through the assistance of their co-adjutors, a more accurate view of the state of the flock; since it is the *peculiar duty* of the inspectors to be always watchful over the manners and conduct of all the members of the church.”

“They think that none should be preferred to this office, but men very eminent for gravity and prudence; established in the faith; of tried integrity; whose sanctity of life and upright example are well known to the whole society.”

“In the choice of these elders, respect should always be had to their outward circumstances. They should be able to support themselves in some respectable manner — though it will not be an objection to them, that they pursue some mechanical art, provided they are morally qualified.”<sup>2</sup>

Nor were these venerable men the only Independents who declared in the most decisive manner, in favor of this class of officers. The celebrated Dr. Thomas Goodwin was one of the Westminster Assembly of divines. He is styled by Anthony A. Wood, a very “atlas and patriarch of Independency.” He is well known to have been one of the most learned and influential Independents of the seventeenth century, and one of the most voluminous and instructive writers of his class. In his “Church Order explained in a way of Catechism,” the following passage occurs:

*Question.* “What sort of Bishops has God set in his church?”

*Answer.* Two; some pastors and teachers; some ruling elders, under two heads; some labor in word and doctrine, and of those, some are pastors, some teachers, others *rule only*, and do not labor in the word and doctrine.”

Again,

*Question.* “What is the office and work of the ruling elder?”

*Answer.* Seeing the kingdom of God is not of this world, but heavenly and spiritual, and the government of his kingdom is not lordly, but stewardly and ministerial; and to labor in the ministry of exhortation and doctrine is the proper work of the pastors and teachers. It remains, therefore, to be the office and work of the *ruling elders* to assist the pastors and teachers in diligent attendance to all other aids of rule besides

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<sup>2</sup> Neal's *History of the Puritans*, vol. i. p. 449. 4to. edit.

exhortation and doctrine, as becomes good stewards of the household of God. Such as,

“*First*, to open and shut the doors of God’s house, by admission of members, by ordination of officers, by excommunication of notorious and obstinate offenders.

“*Secondly*, to see that none live in the church inordinately, without a calling, or idle in their calling.

“*Thirdly*, to prevent and heal offences, whether in life or doctrine, that might corrupt their own church, or other churches.

“*Fourthly*, to prepare matters for the church’s consideration, and to moderate the carriage of all matters in the church assemblies.

“*Finally*, to feed the flock of God by a word of admonition, and as they are called, to visit and pray with their sick brethren.

“The ground of all this is laid down in Rom 12.8 where the Apostle, besides the one who exhorts and teaches, mentions another officer who rules with diligence, and is distinct from the pastors and teachers, and that the sum of his work is to rule with diligence. Thus you see the whole duty of these ruling elders, and how they are to assist the Pastors and Teachers in all other acts of rule besides word and doctrine.

“*Use 1*. From this, observe the great bounty of God to pastors and teachers, that God has not left them alone in the church, as Martha complains to Christ that Mary had left her alone to serve. The ministers of the church have no such cause to complain; for, as He gave the Levites to the priests to help them in their service, so he has given ruling elders to those who labor in the word and doctrine, that they might have assistance from them in ruling the church of God.

“*Use 2*. It may serve to answer a cavil that some have against this office, who say that if God has given these officers to the church, then He would have set down the limits of these officers, and not have sent them forth with unlimited power. To which it is answered that their power is *strongly* limited as a stewardly or ministerial power and office. It is the *power of the keys*, which Christ has expressed in his word. And it consists in those things that have been spoken of God’s house, to open and shut the doors of God’s house by admission of members, etc. This is such a rule as is no small help to the spirits and hearts of those who labor in doctrine; and it is also no small help to the whole church of God. And when they are lacking, many evils will grow without the possibility of redress and amendment, with much idleness, much confusion, and many offences. Though other ministers have been in the church, we may see how much the churches have been corrupted in the *lack* of these officers.”<sup>3</sup>

The character of the Rev. Thomas Hooker, one of the most learned and pious Fathers of New England, and a distinguished advocate of Independency, is too well known to require remark. In his work entitled “A Survey (of the Sum) of Church Discipline,” etc., he speaks thus of the office under consideration:

“We begin with the ruling elder’s place, for that carries a kind of simplicity with it. There are more ingredients required to make up the office of pastor and doctor, and therefore we will take leave to deal with the first, *quo simplicius ac prius*.<sup>4</sup> There is such an office

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<sup>3</sup> *Church Order Explained*, etc., pages 16, 19, 22; to be found in the 4th vol. of his *Works*, four vols. fol. London, 1697.

<sup>4</sup> The simplest takes priority. – WHG

and officer appointed by Christ, as the Scriptures are plain to him whose spirit and apprehension is not possessed and forestalled with prejudice. The first argument for it, we have from Rom 12.7, which gives in witness to this truth, where all these officers are numbered and named expressly. The second argument is taken from 1Cor 12.28. The scope of the place, and the Apostle's intent, is to lay open the several offices and officers that the Lord has set in his church, and so many chief members, out of which the church is constituted as an entire body."

And, after making some other remarks for the right discovery of the apostle's proceeding and purpose, he adds:

"From these premises, the dispute issues thus — As apostles, prophets, and teachers are distinct, so are helps and governments distinct. For the Spirit puts them in the *same ranks*, as having a parity of reason which pertains to them all. But they were *distinct offices*, and found in persons as *distinct officers*, as in verse 30: 'Are all Apostles? Are all Teachers?' Therefore, the same is true of governors.

"A third argument is taken from the famous place, 1Tim 5.17, which is full to our purpose in hand, and intended by the Holy Spirit of the Lord, to make evident the station and office of ruling elders, to the end of the world." <sup>5</sup>

The praise of the Rev. John Cotton was in all the churches in his time. He was one of the most distinguished of the first ministers of New England. In a small work entitled, "Questions and Answers on Church Government, begun 25th Nov. 1634," the following passages occur:

"*Quest.* What sorts of ministers or officers has God set in his church?

"*Answer.* The ministers and officers of the church are some of them extraordinary, as apostles, prophets, evangelists; some ordinary, as bishops and deacons.

"*Quest.* What sorts of bishops has God ordained in his church?

"*Answer.* There are three sorts of them, as there are three sorts of elders in the church, though under two heads: some pastors, some teachers, some ruling elders. That is to say, those elders who labor in the word and doctrine, and those who rule in the church of God; 1Tim 3.1; 1Cor 12.28; Rom 12.7-8; 1Tim 5.17.

"*Quest.* What is the work of a ruling elder?

"*Answer.* Seeing the kingdom of Christ is not of this world, but heavenly and spiritual; and the government of his kingdom is not lordly, but stewardly and ministerial; and to labor in the administration of exhortation and doctrine is the proper work of pastor and teacher; it remains to be the office of the ruling elder to assist the pastor and teacher in all other acts of rule besides, as becomes good stewards of the household of God. And therefore, to put instances as,

"*First,* To open and shut the doors of God's house, by admission of members, by ordination of officers, by excommunication of notorious and obstinate offenders.

"*Secondly,* To see that none live in the church inordinately, without a calling, or idly in their calling.

"*Thirdly,* To prevent or heal offences.

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<sup>5</sup> *Survey*, etc., part ii. pp. 6, 8, 10, 11; 4to London, 1648.

*“Fourthly, To prepare matters for the church’s consideration, and to moderate the carriage of all things in the church assemblies.*

*“Fifthly, To feed the flock of God with the word of admonition, and as they are called, to visit and pray over the sick brethren.”*<sup>6</sup>

The venerable John Davenport, it is well known, held a distinguished place among the early lights of the Massachusetts and Connecticut churches. In a treatise entitled “The Power of Congregational Churches asserted and vindicated, etc.,” although his plan did not require or even admit that he should treat expressly and at length the *officers* of the church; yet he repeatedly, and in the most unequivocal manner, alludes to the office of *ruling elder*, as belonging to the church by divine appointment; as altogether *distinct* from the office of both teaching elder and deacon; and as being of indispensable importance to the edification of the church.<sup>7</sup>

Nor are these merely the sentiments of detached individuals. They were adopted and published about the same time, by public bodies, in the most solemn manner. In a treatise entitled “Church Government, and Church Covenant discussed, in an answer of the elders of the several churches of New England, to thirty-two questions sent over to them by diverse ministers in England, to declare their judgment thereon.” In this treatise, ruling elders are spoken of as of divine institution, and as actually existing at the time in the churches of New England.

The fifteenth question is:

*Question.* “Do you give the exercise of all church power of government to the *whole* church, or to its *presbyters* alone?”

To which it is answered:

*Answer.* “We believe that Christ ordained that there should be a presbytery or eldership, 1Tim 4.14; and *that* in every church, Tit 1.5; Act 14.28; 1Cor 11.28; whose work is to teach and rule the church by the word and laws of Christ, 1Tim 5.17; and to whom, as teaching and ruling, all the people ought to be obedient, and submit themselves, Heb. 13.17. And therefore, a government that is merely popular or democratic (which divines and orthodox writers so much condemn, in Morillius and others), is far from the practice of *these* churches, and we believe, far from the mind of Christ.”

The twenty-third question is,

*Question.* “What authority or eminency have your preaching Elders above your sole ruling elders; or are they both equal?”

*Answer.* It is not the manner of elders among us, whether ruling only, or ruling and teaching also, to strive for authority or pre-eminence one above another. As for the people’s duty toward their elders, it is taught them plainly in 1The 5.12-13, and also in 1Tim 5.17; and this word “especially” shows them that, as they are to account all their

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<sup>6</sup> A Treatise, 1. Of Faith. 2. Twelve Fundamental Articles of Christian Religion. 3. A Doctrinal Conclusion. 4. Questions and Answers on Church Government. – pp. 20, 21.

<sup>7</sup> The power of Congregational Churches, etc. p. 56, 81, 94, 115. 12mo. London, 1672.



elders worthy of double honor, so in a special manner their teaching or preaching elders.”<sup>8</sup>

But there is another testimony of the same class, of still higher authority. In a volume entitled, “The Result of three Synods, held by the Elders, and Messengers of the Churches of Massachusetts Province, New England,” there is abundant evidence to the same effect. These Synods met in 1648, 1662, and 1679: Each of them was called by the general court, or legislature of the province, and the results published by the court, with their sanction.

The Synod of 1648, consisting of the divines of Massachusetts and Connecticut, and which drew up what is commonly known as the Cambridge Platform, distinctly recognized the office under consideration as of divine appointment. It speaks as follows, (chapter vii.)

“The ruling elder’s office is distinct from the office of pastor and teacher. Ruling elders are not so called to exclude the pastors and teachers from ruling, because ruling and government is common to these with the other. Whereas attending to teach and preach the word is peculiar to the former, Rom 12.7-9; 1Tim 5.17; 1Cor 12.28; Heb 13.17.”

The Synod of 1679 gave its sanction most unequivocally to the same doctrine; not only by unanimously renewing their approbation of the Platform of 1648, but also by new acts of the most decisive character. Two questions proposed to the Synod of 1679 were, *First*, “What are the evils that have provoked the Lord to bring his judgments on New England?” *Secondly*, “What is to be done, that so many evils may be removed?” In their answer to the second question, the Synod say:

“It is requisite that the utmost endeavours should be used in order to a full supply of officers in the church, according to Christ’s institution. The defect of these churches, on this account, is very lamentable — there being, in most of the churches, only one teaching officer for the burdens of the whole congregation to lie upon. The Lord Christ would not have instituted pastors, teachers, and ruling elders (nor the apostles ordained elders in every church), if He had not seen that there was need of them for the good of his people. And therefore, for men to think they can do well enough without them, is both to break the second commandment, and to reflect on the wisdom of Christ, as if he appointed unnecessary offices in his church.”<sup>9</sup>

It may not be improper to add that this Synod, assembled in consequence of the “general court of the colony having called upon all the churches in it to send their elders and messengers, that they might meet in the form of a synod, in order for a most serious inquiry into the questions propounded to them; and that the result, when proposed, was read once and again, each paragraph being duly and distinctly weighed in ‘the balance of the sanctuary,’ and then, upon mature deliberation, the whole unanimously voted, as to the substance and scope of it.”<sup>10</sup>

It is well known that in the Westminster Assembly of divines there was a small number of learned and zealous Independents, who opposed some of the most prominent features in the Presbyterian form of government with much ardor and pertinacity, and who protracted the debates respecting them for many weeks. But it is equally well known that

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<sup>8</sup> The Power of Congregational Churches, etc. p. 47, 48, 76.

<sup>9</sup> Result of Three Synods, etc., p. 109.

<sup>10</sup> *Preface*, pp. 5, 6.

all the most able of those divines were warm advocates of the office of ruling elder, not only as a *useful* office, but as of *divine institution*. The recorded opinion of one of them, the Rev. Dr. Goodwin, has been already stated. No less pointed in maintaining the same opinion, were Messieurs Bridge, Burroughs, and Nye, forming with Dr. Goodwin, a majority of the whole number. And accordingly, in their “Reasons against the Third Proposition concerning Presbyterian Government,” they admit that “the Scripture says much about two sorts of elders — teaching and ruling; and in some places, it is so plain, as if to distinguish them on purpose; and further, that the whole of Reformed churches had these different elders.”<sup>11</sup>

The following very explicit extract from the well-known work of the learned Herbert Thorndike (a divine of the Church of England) on “Religious Assemblies,” chap. iv. p. 117, will show his opinion on the subject before us. Speaking of the language of the apostle in 1Cor 12.28, he says:

“There is no reason to doubt that the men whom the Apostle here calls doctors, are those of the Presbyters which had the abilities of preaching and teaching the people at their assemblies; that those of the Presbyters that did not preach, are here called by the apostle *governments*.”

The following remarks of the Rev. Cotton Mather, well known as an eminent Congregationalist of Massachusetts, and author of the *Magnalia Christi Americana*, have too much point, and convey too much instruction, to be omitted in this list of testimonies.

“There are some who cannot see any such officer as what we call a ruling elder, directed and appointed in the word of God. And partly through a prejudice against the office; and partly, indeed *chiefly*, through a penury of men well-qualified for the discharge of it, as it has been up to now understood and applied, our churches are now generally destitute of such helps in government. But unless a church has diverse elders, the church government must become *pedantic*, or *popular*. And that a church’s needing but one elder, is an opinion contrary not only to the sense of the faithful in all ages, but also to the Law of the Scriptures, where there can be nothing plainer than *elders who rule well*, and are *worthy of double honor*, though they *do not labor in the word and doctrine*. Whereas, if there were any teaching elders, who do not labor in the word and doctrine, they would be so far from worthy of double honor, that they would not be worthy of any honor at all. Towards adjusting the difference which has thus been in the judgments of judicious men, some essays have been made, and one particularly in such terms as these.

“Let it be first recognized that all the other church officers are the *assistants* of the pastor, who was himself entrusted with the whole care of all, until the further pity and kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ joined other officers to him for his assistance in it. I suppose none will be so absurd as to deny *this* at least: that all the church officers are to take the advice of the pastor with them. Upon which I subjoin that a man may be a distinct officer from his pastor, and yet not have a distinct office from him. The Pastor may be the ruling elder, and yet he may have elders to assist him in ruling, and in the actual discharge of some things in which they are able and proper to be serviceable to him.

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<sup>11</sup> *Reasons*, etc. pp. 3, 40.

“This consideration being laid, I will persuade myself, that every pastor among us will allow me that there is much work to be done for God in preparing what belongs to the admission and exclusion of church members; in carefully inspecting the way and walk of them all, and the first appearance of evil with them; in preventing the very beginnings of ill blood among them; instructing all from house to house, more privately; warning all persons as to the things more peculiarly incumbent on them; visiting all the afflicted, and informing of, and consulting with the ministers, for the welfare of the whole flock. And they must allow me, that this work is too heavy for any one man; and that more than one man, indeed all our churches suffer beyond measure, because no more of this work is thoroughly performed. Moreover, they will acknowledge to me, that it is a usual thing with a prudent and faithful pastor himself, to single out some of the more grave, solid, aged brethren in his congregation, to assist him in many parts of this work, on many occasions in a year. Nor will such a pastor, ordinarily, do any important thing in his government, without having first heard the counsels of such brethren.

“In short, there are few discreet pastors who do not make many occasional ruling elders every year. I say, then, suppose the church by a vote, recommends some such brethren — the fittest they have, and always more than one — to the stated assistance of their pastor in the church rule, in which they may be helps to him. — I do not propose that they be biennial or triennial only, though I know very famous churches throughout Europe that have them so. Yes, and what if they should by solemn fasting and prayer, be commended to the benediction of God in whatever service they have to do. What objection can be made against the lawfulness of it? I think none can be made against the usefulness of such a thing. Truly, for my part — if the fifth chapter of the first epistle to Timothy would not bear me out, when conscience, both of my duty and my weakness, made me *desire* such assistance, I would see whether the first chapter of Deuteronomy would not bear me out.”<sup>12</sup>

After these strong attestations in favor of the office of ruling elder from the most pious and learned of the early Independents or Congregationalists of New England, it will naturally occur to every reader, as an interesting question, how it came to pass that churches which once unanimously held such opinions, laid so much stress on them, and practised accordingly for about three-fourths of a century, should have long since, just as unanimously, *discontinued* the office? The first company of emigrants in 1620 brought a ruling elder with them; and the office was universally retained for many years afterwards. Yet in 1702, when Dr. Cotton Mather published the first edition of his *Magnalia*, it had been in great measure laid aside, as it would seem from the quotation just made. And before the middle of the eighteenth century, it had entirely disappeared from the churches of New England.

A well-informed and discerning friend has suggested that the chief reason for this remarkable fact, is probably to be traced to another fact alluded to in the following extract. In a small volume printed in Boston in 1700, entitled, “The Order of the Gospel, professed and practised by the churches of Christ in New England,” etc., by Increase Mather, President of Harvard College, and Teacher of a church in Boston. In this work, one of the questions discussed is: “Whether or not our *brethren*, and not the *elders* of the churches

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<sup>12</sup> *Magnalia*, etc. Book v. part ii, p. 206, 207. 8vo. edition, 1820.

only, are to judge concerning the qualifications and fitness of those who are admitted into their communion?” In answering it, he says:

“If only elders have power to judge who are fit to come to the sacrament, or to join to the churches, then, in case there is but one elder in a church (as there are very few churches in New England that have more elders than one), the sole power will reside in that one man’s hands.”<sup>13</sup>

On this passage, the friend referred to above remarks,

“I am inclined to think that here he means *ruling elders*; for, 1. Several churches (whether in consequence of the recommendation of the Synod of 1679, I do not know) then had two ministers. 2. This question and answer of Dr. I. Mather’s, is annexed to a reprint in Boston (now lying before me) of “A Vindication of the divine authority of ruling elders in the Church of Christ asserted by the ministers and elders met together in a provincial assembly, Nov. 2d. 1649, and printed in London, 1650.” But whether this was his meaning or not, it is abundantly evident from various other sources, that the churches of New England, while they retained the office of ruling elder, had but one such elder at a time, and his business was especially to attend to discipline. The office was of course an unwelcome one; and it became more and more difficult to find men willing to assume it.”

It appears, then, that our excellent brethren, the Puritan Independents, while they zealously maintained the divine warrant and the great importance of the ruling elder’s office, misapprehended its real nature, and placed it under an aspect before the churches, evidently adapted to discredit and destroy it. Instead of appointing a *plurality* of these ruling elders, they seldom or never had more than one in each church. And instead of uniting the pastor with him, and forming a regular judicial bench for regulating the affairs of the church, they seemed to have placed each in a sphere entirely separate and independent of each other; indeed, to have made the offices of teacher and ruler wear an appearance of being *rivals* for influence and power. It is certain that the views entertained by each, of his proper department of duty, often in fact brought them into *collision*, and made the situation of the ruler both uncomfortable and useless. Can it be a matter of surprise that in these circumstances, the office of ruling elder in the congregational churches of New England, gained but little favor with the body of the people; that it came to be considered at once odious and useless; that it would be undertaken by few; and at length, fell into entire disuse?

The testimony of the Rev. Dr. John Edwards, an eminently pious and learned divine of the church of England, who flourished during the latter half of the seventeenth century, is equally decisive in favor of this office. His language is as follows:

“This office of a ruling elder is according to the practice of the church of God among the Jews, his own people. It is certain that there was this kind of elders under that economy. There were two sorts of elders among the Jews: the ruling ones, who governed in their assemblies and synagogues, and the teaching ones who read and expounded the Scriptures. Accordingly, Dr. Lightfoot, in his harmony of the New Testament, inclines to interpret 1Tim 5.17, of the elders in the Christian congregations, who correspond to

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<sup>13</sup> *Order of the Gospel*, etc. p. 25.

the lay elders in the Jewish synagogue. For this learned writer, who was well versed in the Jewish customs and practices, tells us that in every synagogue among the Jews, there were elders who ruled chiefly in the affairs of the synagogue, and other elders who labored in the word and doctrine.”

“And so it was in the Christian church. There was a mixture of clergy and laity in their consults about church matters, as we see frequently in the Acts of the Apostles. The Christian church retained this usage, for which they quote St. Augustine’s 137th Epistle, where he mentions the clergy and the elders, and the people. So in his third book against Cresconius, he mentions deacons and seniors, that is lay elders, for he distinguishes them from other presbyters. One of his epistles to his church in Hippo is thus superscribed, ‘To the Clergy and the Elders.’ See the 56th chapter in the fore-named book against Cresconius, where he mentions Peregrinus, the Presbyter, and the Elders (Seniores,) <sup>14</sup> And nothing can be plainer than that of St. Ambrose — ‘Both the synagogue, and afterwards the church, had their elders, without whose counsel nothing was done in the church, etc.’ Further, we read of these seniors in the writings of Optatus, p. 41, and in the epistles annexed to him, which the reader may consult. Thus it appears that this was an ancient office in the church, and not invented by Calvin, as some have thought and writ.” <sup>15</sup>

“And then as to the reason for the thing, there should be no ground of quarrelling with this office in the church, seeing that it is useful. It was instituted for the ease of the preaching elders, that they might not be overburdened with business, and that they might more conveniently apply themselves to that employment which is purely ecclesiastical and spiritual. Truly, if there was no such office mentioned in the Scripture, we might reasonably wish for such a one, it being so useful and serviceable to the great purposes of religion. What can be more desirable than that there should be one or more appointed to observe the conversation of the flock, in order to exercise discipline. The pastor himself cannot be supposed to have an eye on every one of his charge; and therefore it is fitting that those who are fellow-members, and daily converse with one another, and therefore, are capable of acquainting themselves with their manners and behaviour, there should be chosen these elders that I am speaking of, to inspect the carriage and deportment of the flock.” <sup>16</sup>

The Rev. Dr. Jerome Kromayer was a very learned Lutheran divine, and Professor of Divinity in the University of Leipsic, who lived in the seventeenth century. His judgment is very decisive in favor of the apostolic institution of ruling elders.

“Of Presbyters, or Elders,” he says, “there were formerly two kinds: those who taught, and those who exercised the office of rulers in the church. This is taught in 1Tim 5.17. *Let the elders who rule well be accounted worthy of double honor, especially those who*

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<sup>14</sup> It will not escape the notice of the discerning reader that these testimonies from *Augustine, Ambrose, and Optatus*, which some have ventured, very unceremoniously, to treat with contempt, when brought forward on this subject, are regarded by this very learned Episcopalian, as evidence of the most conclusive character.

<sup>15</sup> The old and hackneyed allegation, which has been the theme of high-toned Episcopalian and Independents for more than two hundred years, that Calvin invented and first introduced Ruling Elders, it will be observed is confidently rejected by this truly learned Episcopal Divine who, from his ecclesiastical connection, cannot be supposed to have had any other inducement to adopt the opinion which he has expressed, than his love of truth.

<sup>16</sup> *Theologica Reformata*, vol. i. *Ninth Article of the Creed*, pp. 526, 528.

*labor in the word and doctrine*. The latter were the same as our ministers; the former were like the members of our consistories. <sup>17</sup>

A similar testimony may be adduced from Frederick Baldwin, another distinguished Lutheran divine and Professor of the same century, who is no less decisive in favor of the class of officers under consideration. <sup>18</sup>

The celebrated John Casper Suicer was an eminently learned German divine and professor. In his *Thesaurus Ecclesiasticus*, after speaking particularly about teaching presbyters or elders in the first place, he proceeds to speak of another class of elders —

“chosen from among the people (or laity), are united with the pastors, or ministers of the word, that they may be guardians of the discipline of the church. To these the Apostle Paul refers in 1Tim 5.17 where, by the *elders who labor in the word and doctrine*, he evidently understands that class of elders of which we have spoken in the preceding section. And by *those who rule well*, he plainly refers to the class of which we now speak. For if he had intended to speak of only one class, why did he add, *especially those who labor in the word and doctrine*? This class are also designated by the term προισταμενους (*proistamenous*) in Rom 12.8, and by the term κυβερνησεις (*kuberneseis*) in 1Cor 12.29.” <sup>19</sup>

The very explicit testimony of Dr. Whitby, of the church of England, was produced in a preceding chapter, when we were discussing the scriptural evidence in favor of the office under consideration. It need not, therefore, be repeated here except simply to remind the reader of its decisive character. The concessions also of Bishop Fell, the Rev. Mr. Marshall, and the celebrated Mr. Dodwell, of the same church, will also be borne in mind in this connection. They may be found in the fourth chapter, in connection with the testimony from the Fathers.

The pious and excellent Dr. Watts, though not a Presbyterian, must be considered as indirectly doing homage to this part of the Presbyterian system, when he says (in his *Treatise on the Foundation of the Christian church*, p. 125),

“If it happens that there is but one minister or presbyter in a church, or if the ministers are young men of small experience in the world, it is useful and proper that some of the eldest, gravest, and wisest members be deputed by the church, to join with and assist the ministers in the care and management of that affair (the admission and exclusion of members).”

The Rev. Dr. Doddridge is universally known as an eminently learned and pious divine of England, of the Independent denomination. In reference to the office in question, he speaks thus:

“It seems to be solidly argued, from 1Tim 5.17, that there were in the primitive church, some elders who did not usually preach. Nothing very express is said concerning them; only it seems to be intimated by Jas 5.14, that they prayed with the sick. It may be very expedient, even on the principles of human prudence, to appoint some of the more grave and honorable members of the society to join with the pastor in the oversight of it, who

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<sup>17</sup> *Historia Ecclesiastica*, auctore Hieronymo Kromayero, D.D. S.S. T.D. in *Acad. Leips.* 4to. p. 59.

<sup>18</sup> Fred. Balduini, *Institut. Ministrorum Verbi*. cap. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Suiceri *Thesaurus Ecclesiasticus*, Art. Πρεσβυτερος

may constitute a kind of council with him, to deliberate on affairs in which the society is concerned, and prepare them for being brought before the church for its decision, to pray with the sick, to reconcile differences, etc.”<sup>20</sup>

The same distinguished writer, in his Commentary on 1Tim 5.17, has the following remark:

“*Especially those who labor*, etc. This seems to intimate there were some who, though they presided in the church, were not employed in preaching. Limborch is indeed of the opinion that *κοπιωντες* (*kopioontes*) signifies those who even fatigued themselves with their extraordinary labors, which some might not do, who yet in general presided well, supposing preaching to be a part of their work. But it seems to me much more natural to follow the former interpretation.”

The celebrated Professor Neander, of Berlin, was mentioned in a preceding chapter as probably the most profoundly learned Christian antiquarian now living. In addition to the quotation from him presented in that chapter, the following, from the same work, is worthy of notice:

“That the name *επισκοπος* (*episkopos*) was of the same signification with *πρεσβυτερος* (*presbuteros*), is manifest from those places in the New Testament where these words are exchanged one for the other: Acts 20.17, 28; Tit 1.5, 7; and from those passages where, after the office of bishop, that of deacon is mentioned; so that no other office can be imagined between them. If the name *episkopos* had been used to distinguish any of these elders from the rest, as a ruler in the church senate, a *primus inter pares*,<sup>21</sup> this use of it interchangeably with *presbuteros* would not have obtained.”

“These presbyters, or bishops, had the oversight of the whole church, in all its general concerns; but the office of *teaching* was not appropriated exclusively to them; for as we have remarked above, all Christians had a right to speak in their meetings for the edification of the members. It does not follow from this, however, that all the church members were capable of giving instruction. And it is important to distinguish a faculty for instruction which was under the command of an individual, from the miraculous and sudden impulse of inspiration — as in prophesy and the gift of tongues — and which might be bestowed on those not remarkably favored by natural gifts. The care of the churches, the preservation and extension of pure evangelical truth, and the defence of it against the various forms of error which early appeared, could not be left entirely to depend on these extraordinary and often transient impulses. The weakness of human nature to which was committed the treasure of the gospel, as in ‘earthen vessels,’ seemed to render it necessary that there should be, in every church, some possessed of the natural endowments necessary to instruct their brethren in the truth, to warn and exhort them against error, and to lead them forward in the way of life. Such endowments presuppose a previous course of instruction, clearness and acuteness of thought, and a power to communicate their ideas. And when these were present, and the Spirit of God was imparted to animate and sanctify, the man became possessed of the *χαρισμα διδασκαλιας* (*charisma didiaskalias*). Those possessed of this *charisma* were, on this account, calculated for all the purposes alluded to above, without excluding the

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<sup>20</sup> *Lectures on Divinity*, Proposition 150, Scholium 5th.

<sup>21</sup> *primus inter pares* – first among equals. – WHG

remainder from exercising the gift imparted to them, of whatever kind it might be. On this account, the *charisma didaskalias*, and the situation of teachers, διδασκαλοι (*didaskaloi*), who were distinguished by this gift, was represented as something entirely distinct and peculiar. (1Cor 12.28; 14.6; Eph 4.11.) All members of a church could at times speak before their brethren, either to call upon God, or to praise him, when so inclined; but only a few were *didaskaloi*, in the full sense of that term.”

“It is very clear, too, that this talent for teaching, was different from that of governing *i.e.*, χαρισμα κυβερνησεως (*charisma kuberneseoos*), which was especially necessary for someone who took his seat in the council of the church, that is for a *presbuteros* or *episkopos*. One might possess the knowledge of external matters — the tact, the Christian prudence necessary for this duty, without the mental qualities so peculiarly desirable in a teacher. In the first apostolic church, from which everything like mere arbitrary arrangements concerning rank were very distant, and all offices were looked upon only as they promised the attainment of the great end of the Christian faith, the offices of teacher and ruler, διδασκαλος (*didaskalos*) and ποιμην (*poimen*) were separated. For this distinction, see Rom 12.7-8. In noticing this well-defined distinction, we may be led to the opinion that originally, those called by way of preference, *teachers*, did not belong to the class of rulers, or overseers. Also, it is not clearly proved that they always belonged to the class of πρεσβυτεροι (*presbuteroi*). Only this is certain — that it was considered as desirable that among the rulers, there should be those capable of teaching also. When it is enjoined upon the presbyters in general, as in the farewell of Paul to the church of Ephesus (Acts 20) to watch over the church and preserve its doctrine pure, it does not necessarily follow that the duty of teaching, in its strict sense, was insisted on; but rather a general superintendence of the affairs of that body. But when, in the epistle to Titus, it is demanded in a bishop, an *episkopos*, that he not only ‘hold fast the form of sound words’ in his private capacity, but that he should be able to strengthen others in it; to overcome opposers, and ‘convince opposers,’ it seems to be implied that he should possess the ‘gift of teaching.’ This must have been highly desirable in many situations of the churches, exposed as they were to errors of every kind. And on this account, in 1Tim 5.17, those among the *presbuteroi*, who united the gift of teaching (*didaskalia*) with that of governing (*kubernesis*) were to be especially honored. This distinction of the two gifts shows that they were not constantly or necessarily united.”<sup>22</sup>

The same writer says:

“We find another office in the apostolic times — that of deacons. The duties of this office were from the first only external (Act 6), as it seems to have taken its rise for the sole purpose of attending to the distribution of alms. The care of the poor, however, and of the sick, and many other external duties were, in the process of time, imposed upon those in this station. Besides the deacons, there were also deaconesses appointed, who could have free access to the female part of the church which was, on account of the peculiar manners of the east, denied to a great extent to men. Here the female had an opportunity to exercise her powers for the extension of the true faith, without

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<sup>22</sup> It is worthy of notice that this profound ecclesiastical historian, in another place, quotes Hilary (Ambrose) as speaking of the ruling elders, in the synagogue and in the Church, and interprets him as plainly teaching the distinction made here between teaching and ruling elders, substantially as we have done in a preceding chapter.



overstepping the bounds of modesty and propriety, and in a field otherwise inaccessible. It was their duty, too, as experienced Christian mothers, to give advice and support to the younger women, as seems to have been the case from Tertullian, *De Virgin. Veland.* chap. 9.”<sup>23</sup>

Only one authority more will be adduced on this subject, and that will be from the pen of our venerable and eloquent countryman, the Rev. Dr. Dwight,<sup>24</sup> whose character for learning, talents, and piety, needs no attestation from the writer of this Essay. Though himself a Congregationalist, and without any other inducement to declare in favor of ruling elders than what the force of truth presented, he expresses himself concerning their office in the following unequivocal terms:

“Ruling elders are, in my apprehension, *scriptural officers of the Christian church*; and I cannot but think our *defection*, with respect to these officers, from the practice of the first settlers of New England, an *error in ecclesiastical government*.”<sup>25</sup>

This array of witnesses might be greatly extended, were it proper to detain the reader with further extracts. But it is presumed that those which have been produced are abundantly sufficient. It will be observed that no presbyterian has been cited as an authority in this case. The names, indeed, of multitudes of that denomination, might have been produced, equal to any others that can be shown on the catalogue of piety, talents, and learning. But the testimony of more impartial witnesses may be preferred. Recourse has been had, then, to those who could not possibly have been swayed by a presbyterian bias. And a sufficiency of such witnesses has been produced, it is hoped, to make a deep impression on candid minds. Romanists, Protestant Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Independents, have all most remarkably concurred in vindicating an office, the due admission and scriptural use of which are perhaps of more importance to the best interests of the church of God, than this or any other single volume can fully display.

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<sup>23</sup> *Kirchengeschichte*.

<sup>24</sup> Timothy Dwight (1752-1817), grandson of Jonathan Edwards, and President of Yale University.

<sup>25</sup> *Theology Explained and Defended*, vol. iv. p. 399.

## CHAPTER 8.

### ***RULING ELDERS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY IN THE CHURCH.***

By this is meant, that the laws which Christ has appointed for the government and edification of his people, cannot possibly be executed without such a class of officers in fact, whatever *name* they may bear. But that which is the necessary result of a divine institution, is of equal authority with the institution itself. All powers or instruments really indispensable to the faithful and plenary execution of laws which an infinitely wise Governor has enacted, must be considered as implied in those laws, even if they were not formally specified.

Now, all serious impartial readers of the Bible believe that besides the preaching of the gospel, and the administration of the sacraments, there is very much to be done for promoting the order, purity, and edification of the church, by the maintenance of scriptural discipline. They believe that the best interest of every ecclesiastical community requires that there be a constant and faithful inspection of all the members and families of the church; that the negligent be admonished; that wanderers be reclaimed; that scandals be removed; that irregularities be corrected; that differences be reconciled; and every proper measure adopted to bind the whole body together by the ties of Christian purity and charity. They consider it as vitally important that there be added to the labors of the Pulpit, those of teaching “from house to house,” visiting the sick, conversing with serious inquirers, catechizing children, learning as far as possible the character and state of every member, even the poorest and most obscure of the flock, and endeavoring by all scriptural means, to promote the knowledge, holiness, comfort, and spiritual welfare of every individual. They believe, in fine, that none ought to be admitted to the communion of the church, without a careful examination in reference to their knowledge, orthodoxy, good moral character, and hopeful piety; that none ought to be permitted to remain in the bosom of the church without maintaining, in some tolerable degree, a character proper for professing Christians; that none ought to be suspended from the enjoyment of church privileges except after a fair trial; and that none should be finally excommunicated from the covenanted family of Christ, without the most patient inquiry, and every suitable effort to bring them to repentance and reformation.

It is no doubt true that the very suggestion of the necessity and importance of discipline in the church is odious to many who bear the Christian name. The worldly and careless portion of every church consider the interposition of ecclesiastical inspection and authority in reference to the lives and conversation of its members, as officious and offensive meddling with private concerns. They would much rather retain their external standing as professors of religion, and at the same time pursue their unhallowed pleasures without control. They never wish to see a minister, as such, except in the Pulpit; or any church officer in any other place than his seat in the sanctuary. To such persons, the entire *absence* of the class of officers for which we are pleading, together with the exercise of all their appropriate functions, would be a matter of felicitation rather than regret. Hence the violent opposition made to the introduction of ruling elders into the church of Geneva, by the worldly and licentious part of her members. And hence the insuperable repugnance to the establishment of sound and scriptural discipline manifested so repeatedly to this day, by some of the largest national churches of Europe.

But I need not say to those who take their views of the Christian church and its real prosperity from the Bible, and from the best experience, that enlightened and faithful discipline is not only important, but absolutely essential to the purity and edification of the body of Christ. It ought to be regarded as one of the most precious means of grace by which offenders are humbled, softened, and brought to repentance; the church purged of unworthy members; offences removed; the honor of Christ promoted; real Christians stimulated and improved in their spiritual course; faithful testimony borne against error and crime; and the professing family of Christ made to appear holy and beautiful in the view of the world. Without wholesome discipline for removing offences and excluding the corrupt and profane, there may be an *assembly*, but there cannot be a *church*. The truth is, the exercise of a faithful watch and care over the purity of each other in doctrine, worship, and life, is one of the principal purposes for which the Christian church was established, and on account of which it is highly prized by every enlightened believer. And I have no doubt, it may be safely affirmed that a large part of all that is holy in the church at the present day, either in faith or practice, may be ascribed, under God, as much to sound ecclesiastical discipline as to the faithful preaching of the gospel.

And if the maintenance of discipline is all important to the interests of true religion, it is a matter of no less importance that it be conducted with mildness, prudence, and wisdom. Rashness, precipitancy, undue severity, malice, partiality, popular fury, and attempting to enforce rules which Christ never gave, are among the many evils which have too often marked the dispensation of authority in the church, and not infrequently defeated the great purpose of discipline. To conduct it aright is, undoubtedly, one of the most delicate and arduous parts of ecclesiastical administration, requiring all the piety, judgment, patience, gentleness, maturity of counsel, and prayerfulness which can be brought to bear upon the subject.

Now the question is, by whom shall all these multiplied, weighty, and indispensable services be performed? Besides the arduous work of public instruction and exhortation, who will attend to all the numberless and ever-recurring details of inspection, warning, and visitation, which are so needful in every Christian community? Will any say it is the duty of the pastor of each church to perform them all? The very suggestion is absurd. It is physically impossible for him to do it. He cannot be everywhere, and know everything. He cannot perform what is expected from him, and at the same time so watch over his whole flock as to fulfil every duty which the interest of the church demands. He must “give himself to reading;” he must prepare for the services of the pulpit; he must discharge his various public labors; he must employ much time in private, in instructing and counselling those who apply to him for instruction and advice; and he must act his part in the concerns of the whole church with which he is connected. Now, is it practicable for any man, however diligent and active, to do all this, and at the same time to perform the whole work of inspection and government over a congregation of the ordinary size? We might as well expect and demand any impossibility; and the great and merciful Head of the church requires impossibilities of no man.

But even if it were reasonable or possible that a pastor should, alone, perform all these duties, should he be willing to undertake them; or should the church be willing to commit them to him alone? We know that ministers are subject to the same frailties and imperfections as other men. We know, too, that a love of pre-eminence and of power is not only natural to them, in common with others, but very early after the days of the

apostles, this principle began to manifest itself as the reigning sin of ecclesiastics. It produced first Prelacy, and afterwards Popery, which has so long and so ignobly enslaved the church of Christ. Does this not plainly show the folly and danger of yielding undefined power to pastors alone? Is it wise or safe to constitute one man to be a despot over a whole church? Is it proper to entrust to a single individual the weighty and complicated work of inspecting, trying, judging, admitting, condemning, excluding, and restoring, without control? Should the members of a church consent that all their rights and privileges in reference to Christian communion, be subject to the will of a single man — as his partiality, kindness, and favoritism, on the one hand, or his caprice, prejudice, or passion, on the other, might dictate? Such a mode of conducting the government of the church, to say nothing of its unscriptural character, is in the highest degree, unreasonable and dangerous. It can hardly fail to exert an influence of the most injurious character, both on the clergy and laity. It tends to nurture in the former a spirit of selfishness, pride, and ambition; instead of ministers of holiness, love, and mercy, it tends to transform them into ecclesiastical tyrants. While its tendency with regard to the latter, is to gradually beget in them a blind, implicit submission to clerical domination. The ecclesiastical encroachments and despotism of former times, already alluded to, read us a most instructive lesson on this subject. The fact is, committing the whole government of the church into the hands of pastors alone, may be affirmed to carry in it some of the worst seeds of Popery. Though under the administration of good men, they may not at once lead to palpable mischief, they will seldom fail to produce in the end, the most serious evils, both to those who govern, and those who obey.

Accordingly, as was intimated in a preceding chapter, we have no example in Scripture of a church being committed to the government of a single individual. Such a thing was unknown in the Jewish synagogue. It was unknown in the apostolic age. And it continued to be unknown until ecclesiastical pride and ambition introduced it, and with it a host of mischiefs to the body of Christ. In all the primitive churches we find a plurality of “elders,” and we read enough in the early records, in some particular cases, to perceive that these “elders” were not only chosen by the members of the church, out of their own number, as their *representatives*, to exercise over them the functions of inspection and ruling; but that, whenever they ceased to discharge the duties of their office acceptably, they might be removed from its actual exercise at the pleasure of those by whom they were chosen. Thus plainly evincing that the constitution of the primitive church was eminently adapted to guard against ecclesiastical tyranny; and that if that constitution had been preserved, the evils of clerical encroachment would have been avoided. Accordingly, it is remarkable that the pious Ambrose, a venerable Father of the fourth century, quoted in a former chapter, expressly conveys an intimation of this kind, when speaking of the gradual disuse of the office of ruling elder. “This order,” he says, “by what negligence it grew into disuse, I do not know, unless perhaps by the sloth, or rather by the pride of the teachers who alone wished to appear to be something.”

The venerable Dr. Owen says,

“It is a vain apprehension to suppose that one or two teaching officers in a church, who are obliged to give themselves to the word and prayer, to labor in the word and doctrine, to preach in and out of season — would be able to take care of, and attend with diligence to, all those things that evidently belong to the rule of the church. And this is why churches at this day live on the preaching of the word, and are very little sensible of the

wisdom, goodness, love, and care of Christ in the institution of this rule in the church; nor are they partakers of the benefits of it to their edification. And the supply which many have previously made in this, by persons either unacquainted with their duty, or insensible of their own authority, or cold if not *negligent* in their work, does not answer the end of their institution. And this is why the authority of government, and the benefit of it, are ready to be lost in most churches. And it is both vainly and presumptuously pleaded to countenance a neglect of their order, that some churches walk in love and peace, and are edified without it; supplying some defects by the prudent aid of some of their members. For it is nothing but a preference for our own wisdom, to the wisdom and authority of Christ; or at best, an unwillingness to make a venture on the warranty of His rule, for fear of some disadvantages that may ensue upon it.”<sup>1</sup>

If in order to avoid the evils of the pastor standing alone in the inspection and government of his church, it is alleged that the whole body of the church members may be his auxiliaries in this arduous work, *still* the difficulties are neither removed nor diminished.

For in the first place, we may confidently say a great majority of all church members are altogether unqualified for rendering the aid to the Pastor which is contemplated here. They have neither the knowledge, the wisdom, nor the prudence necessary for the purpose. To imagine a case of ecclesiastical regimen in which every weak, childish, and indiscreet individual who, though serious and well-meaning enough to enjoy the privilege of Christian communion, is wholly unfit to be an inspector and ruler of others, should be associated with the pastor in conducting the delicate and arduous work of parochial regulation, is too preposterous to be regarded with favor by any judicious mind. Can it be believed for a moment that the all-wise Head of the church has appointed a form of government for his people in which ignorance, weakness, and total unfitness for the duty assigned them, should always, and almost necessarily, characterize a great majority of those to whom the oversight and guidance of the church were committed? Surely this is altogether incredible.

And if this consideration possesses weight in regard to old and settled churches, established in countries which have been long favored with the light and order of the Gospel, how much more in regard to Pagan lands, and to churches recently gathered from the wilds of Africa, the degraded inhabitants of the Sandwich Islands, or the miserable devotees of Hindu idolatry? If in the best instructed and best regulated churches in Christendom, a majority of the members are utterly unqualified to participate in the government of the sacred family, then what can be expected of those recent and necessarily dubious converts from blind heathenism, who must of course be babes in knowledge and experience; who are surrounded with ignorance and brutality, and have just been snatched themselves from the same degradation? Surely, if we may say with propriety of some nations who have recently thrown off the chains of slavery, to which they had long been accustomed, that they were not prepared for a republican form of government — then with still more confidence we can maintain that whoever may be prepared to take part in the government of the church, the poor novices in the situation supposed, are totally unqualified. Even if the popular form of ecclesiastical polity could be considered as well-adapted to the case of a people of more enlightened and elevated character (which may well be questioned), it must be pronounced altogether unfit for a

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<sup>1</sup> *True Nature of a Gospel Church*, pp. 177, 178.

church made up of such materials. Now, it is the glory of the Gospel that it is adapted to all people, and all states of society. Of course, that form of ecclesiastical government which is not of a similar stamp, affords much ground for suspicion that it is not of God, and ought to be rejected.

But further, if the greater part of the members of the church were much better qualified than they commonly are for cooperating in its government, would their cooperation likely be really obtained in a prompt, steady, and faithful manner? All experience pronounces that it would not. We know that there are few things in the government and regulation of the church, more irksome to our natural feelings, than doing what fidelity requires in cases of discipline. When the ministers of religion are called upon to dispense truth, to instruct, to exhort, and to administer sacraments, they engage in what we may suppose pious men habitually delight, and are always ready to proceed with alacrity. But we may say of the business of ecclesiastical discipline, that it is the “strange work” even of the pious and faithful. It is, in its own nature, an unacceptable and unwelcome employment. To take cognizance of delinquencies in faith or practice; to admonish offenders; to call them, when necessary, before the proper tribunal; to seek out and array proof with fidelity; to drag insidious error and artful wickedness from their hiding places; and to suspend or excommunicate from the privileges of the church, when the honor of religion, and the best interests of the body of Christ call for these measures — is painful work to every benevolent mind. It is work in which no man is willing to engage, unless constrained by a sense of duty.

Even those who are bound by official obligation to undertake the task, are too apt to shrink from it. But where there is no particular obligation lying on any one member of the church more than another to take an active interest in this work, the consequence will probably be that few will be disposed to engage in the self-denying duty. Where all are equally bound, all may be equally backward, or negligent, without feeling themselves chargeable with any special delinquency. And what is worthy of notice, those who will be most apt to go forward in this work, and to proffer their aid with most readiness, will generally be the bold, the vain, the ardent, the rash, the impetuous — precisely those who are, of all persons living, the most *unfit* for such an employment. But even if it were otherwise — if all the members of the church were equally forward and active — what might be expected in a religious community, when every member of that community was equally a ruler; and when the most ignorant and childish busybody among them might continually tamper with its government, and foment disturbances with as much potency as the most intelligent and wise? The truth is, in such a community, tranquility, order, and peace could scarcely be expected to have any place together for long.

We could scarcely have a more instructive comment on these remarks than the practice of those churches which reject ruling elders. Our Episcopal brethren reject them. But they are obliged to have their vestrymen and churchwardens. Though no divine warrant is claimed for them, and they are not set apart in the same manner, or formally invested with the same powers as our ruling elders, yet they perform many of the same functions in substance, and are in fact official counsellors and helps. True indeed, these officers are not clothed with the power, and seldom perform any acts of ecclesiastical discipline (properly so called); and yet they may be, and perhaps sometimes are, consulted on subjects of this nature. And where this is not the case, we may say without impropriety, that in churches of that denomination, no discipline is exercised. In the Church of

England, as is confessed on all hands, no scriptural discipline exists. The most profligate and vile are not excluded from the communion of the establishment. This is deeply lamented by many of the pious members of that establishment. And at an early period, after the commencement of the Reformation in that country, it was earnestly wished and proposed, as we have seen in a preceding chapter, to introduce ruling elders as a principal means of restoring and maintaining discipline. And although the absence of discipline does not exist to the same extent in the churches of the Protestant Episcopal denomination in the United States, yet it may be altogether lacking (as to any pure and efficient exercise) in all those Episcopal churches in which some leading pious *laymen* are not habitually consulted and employed in maintaining it. A pious minister of that denomination may indeed, and *does*, conform to his rubrics in giving the people proper instruction and warning as to a suitable approach to the communion which he dispenses. But here he is commonly obliged to stop; or at any rate, he does in practice usually stop. All efficient inspection of the moral condition of the whole church — admonishing the careless, bringing back the wanderers, and causing those who persist in error or vice, to feel the discipline of ecclesiastical correction — is notoriously almost unknown in the churches of the denomination to which we refer. And this deficiency is manifestly not owing to the lack of intelligent and conscientious piety in many of the ministers of those churches; but beyond all doubt, it is owing to the entire lack of an organization which alone renders the exercise of a faithful and impartial discipline at all practicable.

Our Congregational brethren also reject ruling elders. Yet it is well known, that while they adopt a form of government which in theory allows to every member of the church an equal share in the exercise of discipline, their most judicious pastors — warned by painful experience of the troublesome character and uncertain issues of popular management in delicate and difficult cases which involve Christian character — are careful to have a committee of the most pious, intelligent, and prudent of their church members, who consider each case of discipline beforehand in private, and prepare it for a public decision. And thus they perform, in fact, some of the most important of the duties of ruling elders. This is what the venerable Dr. Cotton Mather doubtless means when he says, as quoted in a preceding chapter, that “there are few *discreet* pastors who do not make many occasional ruling elders every year;” and when he gives it as his opinion, in the same connection, that without something of this kind, churches must suffer unspeakably with respect to discipline. And where nothing of this kind is done, the experience of Independent and Congregational churches in conducting discipline, it is well known, is often such as is calculated to give deep and lasting pain to those who love the peace and order of the church. Strife, tumult, and division of the most distressing kind, are often the consequence of attempting to rid the church of one corrupt member.

But perhaps it will be said, let the Pastor habitually call to his aid, in conducting the discipline of the church, a few of the most judicious and pious of his communicants; those whom he knows to be most conscientious and wise in counsel. But neither is this an adequate remedy. The Pastor may consult such men if he pleases. But he may choose to omit it, and be governed entirely by his own counsels. Or if he consults any, he may always select his particular friends who he knows will encourage and support him in his favorite measures; thus furnishing no real relief in the end. How much better to have a bench of assistant rulers, regularly chosen by the people, and with whom he will be bound to take counsel in all important measures.

Thus it is that those churches which reject the class of officers which it is the object of this Essay to recommend, practically bear witness that it is impossible to conduct discipline in a satisfactory manner, without having a set of individuals, virtually, if not formally, vested with similar powers. Where no such efficient substitute is employed, discipline is either neglected in a great measure; or its maintenance is attended with inconveniences of the most serious kind. In other words, the opponents of ruling elders are obliged either to neglect discipline altogether, or for maintaining it, to have recourse to auxiliaries of similar character and power, while they deny that there is any divine warrant for them. Now, is it probable, is it *credible*, that our blessed Lord, and all-wise King and Head of his church, and his apostles, guided by his own Spirit, should entirely overlook this necessity, and make no provision for it? It is *not* credible. We must, then, either suppose that some such officers as those in question were divinely appointed, or that means which are acknowledged by the practice of all to be indispensable in conducting the best interests of the church, were forgotten or neglected by her divine Head and Lord. Surely the latter cannot be imputed to infinite wisdom.

There are some, however, who acknowledge that there ought to be, and *must* be a plurality of elders in every church, in order for the efficient maintenance of discipline. They confess that such a body or bench of elders was found in the Jewish synagogue; that a similar eldership existed in the primitive church; and that the scriptural government of a Christian congregation cannot be conducted to advantage without it. But they contend that these presbyters or elders, should all be of the *teaching* class; that there is no ground for the distinction between teaching and ruling elders; that every church ought to be furnished with three or more ministers, all equally authorized to preach, to administer the sacraments, and to bear rule.

It requires little discernment to see that this plan is wholly impracticable; and that if attempted to be carried into execution, the effect must be either to destroy the church, or to degrade and ultimately to prostrate the ministry. It is with no small difficulty that most churches are enabled to procure and support *one* qualified and acceptable minister. Very few would be able to afford suitable support for *two*; and none but those of extraordinary wealth could think seriously of undertaking to sustain *three or more*. If the principle of a plurality of teaching elders in each church were therefore deemed indispensable; and if regular and adequate training for the sacred office were also as now insisted on; and if it were at the same time considered necessary that every minister should receive competent pecuniary support — the consequence, as it is perfectly manifest, would be that nineteen out of twenty of our churches would be utterly unable to maintain the requisite organization, and must of course become extinct. No, the regular establishment of gospel ordinances in pastoral churches, would be physically possible only in a very few great cities or wealthy neighborhoods. Surely this cannot be the system enjoined by that Saviour who said, “the Gospel is preached to the poor.”

The only remedy for this difficulty would be to reduce the preparation and acquirements for the ministry; to make choice of plain, illiterate men for this office; men of small intellectual and theological furniture; dependent on secular employments for a subsistence; and therefore needing little or no support from the churches which they serve. This is the plan upon which several sects of Christians proceed. And it is easy to see that on this plan the feeblest churches may have a plurality of such ministers as these, and indeed, any number of them without being burdened by their pecuniary support. But



then, it is equally evident that the execution of this plan must result in degrading the ministerial character, and in finally banishing all well-qualified ministers from the church. They could no longer be “able ministers of the New Testament — workmen who need not be ashamed.” They could no longer “give themselves wholly” to the labors of the sacred office. They could no longer “give themselves to reading,” as well as to exhortation and teaching. In short, the inevitable consequence of maintaining, as some do, that there must be a bench, that is, a plurality of elders in every church, for the purpose of inspection and government, as well as of teaching; and at the same time, that all these elders must be of the same class — that is, that they must all be equally set apart for teaching and ruling — cannot fail to bring the ministerial character, and of course ultimately the religion which the ministry is destined to explain and recommend, into general contempt. The Sandemanians, and a few other sects, have substantially held the opinion, and made the experiment stated here. And invariably, it is believed, with the result which has been represented as unavoidable.

To obviate these difficulties, some have said, let deacons (whom all agree to be scriptural officers) be employed to assist the pastor in conducting the government and discipline of the church. This proposal, together with some principles connected with it, will be considered in a subsequent chapter. All that it is deemed necessary or proper to say in this place, is that an entirely different sphere of duty is assigned to deacons in the New Testament. No hint is given of their being employed in the government of the church. For this proposal, therefore, there is not the shadow of a divine warrant. Besides, if we assign to deacons the real office (in other words, the appropriate functions of ruling elders), what is this but granting the *thing*, and only disputing about the *title*? If it is granted that there ought to be a plurality of officers in every church, whose appropriate duty it is to assist the pastor in inspecting and ruling the flock of Christ, it is the essence of what is contended for. Their proper title is not worth a contest, except so far as it may be proper to imitate the language of Scripture.

If, then, the maintenance of discipline is essential to the purity and edification of the church; if enlightened, impartial, and efficient inspection and discipline (especially over a large congregation) cannot possibly be maintained by the pastor alone; if it would be unsafe, and probably mischievous in its influence on all concerned, to devolve the whole authority and responsibility of conducting the government of a church on a single individual; if it would, *especially*, in all probability essentially injure the clerical character to be thus systematically made the depository of so much power, without control and without appeal; if every other mode of furnishing each church with a plurality of rulers besides that for which we contend would either deprive a great majority of our churches of the means of grace altogether, or by bringing ministers within their reach, reduce and degrade the ministerial office far below the standard which the Scriptures require — *if these things are so* — then we are unavoidably conducted to the conclusion that such officers as those for which we contend, are absolutely necessary; that although a church may exist and flourish without them for a time, yet the best interests of the church cannot be systematically and steadfastly pursued without *those*, or some other officers of equivalent powers and duties.

But all the difficulties which have been supposed are obviated, and all the advantages referred to are attained, by the plan of employing a judicious class of ruling elders in each church to assist in counsel and in government. In this plan we have provided a body of

grave, pious, and prudent men, associated with the pastor, chosen out of the body of the church members, carrying with them in some measure, the feelings and views of their constituents. They capable of counselling the pastor in all delicate and doubtful cases; counteracting any undue influence or course of measures into which his partiality, prejudice, or lack of information might betray him; exonerating him at once from the odium and temptation of having all the power of the church in his own hands; conducting the difficult cases which often arise in the exercise of discipline with the intelligence, calmness, and wisdom which cannot be expected to prevail in a promiscuous body of communicants; and in a word, securing to each church all the principal advantages which might be expected to result from being under the pastoral care of four or five ministers, vested with plenary preaching as well as ruling power; without at the same time burdening the church with the pecuniary support of such a number of ordinary pastors.

In a word, the insuperable difficulty of doing without this class of officers on the one hand; the great and manifest advantages of having them on the other; and the perfect accordance of the plan which includes them with that great representative system which has pervaded all well-regulated society from its earliest existence, and received the stamp of divine approbation — form a mass of testimony in favor of the office before us which, independently of other considerations, seems amply sufficient to support its claims.

I will close this chapter with the following extract from Dr. Owen, when speaking of the importance and necessity of the office of ruling elders in the church.

“It is evident,” he says, “that neither the purity nor the order, nor the beauty or glory of the churches of Christ, nor the representation of His own majesty and authority in the government of them, can long be preserved without a multiplication of elders in them, according to the proportion of their respective members, for their rule and guidance. And for lack of this, churches of old, and of late, have either degenerated into anarchy and confusion — their self-rule being managed with vain disputes and janglings unto their division and ruin — or else have given themselves up to the domination of some prelatical teachers, to rule them at their pleasure, which proved the bane and poison of all the primitive churches; and they will and must do so in the neglect of this order for the future.”<sup>2</sup>

We have thus completed our view of the first part of the inquiry before us; *namely*, our warrant for the office of ruling elders. If this office were found in the Old Testament economy; if it plainly had a place in the apostolic church; if a number of the early Fathers evidently recognize its existence in their day; if the witnesses for the truth in the darkest times, and the great body of the Reformers, sanctioned and retained it as of divine appointment; if some of the most learned Episcopal and Independent divines since the Reformation, have borne decisive testimony to this office as being of apostolic authority; and if some such office is manifestly indispensable to the purity and order of the church — then we may confidently conclude that our warrant for it is complete.

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<sup>2</sup> Owen's *True Nature of a Gospel Church*, 4to. p. 178.

## CHAPTER 9.

### ***THE NATURE AND DUTY OF THE OFFICE***

Having considered so much at large, the warrant for the office of ruling elder (chiefly because there is no part of the subject more contested), we now proceed to other points connected with the general inquiry. And the first of these which presents itself, is the Nature and Duties of the office in question.

The essential character of the officer of whom we speak is that of an ecclesiastical ruler. *He that rules, let him do it with diligence*, is the summary of his appropriate functions as laid down in Scripture. The teaching elder is indeed *also* a ruler. In addition to this however, he is called to preach the gospel, and administer sacraments. But the particular department assigned to the ruling elder is to cooperate with the pastor in spiritual inspection and government. The Scriptures, as we have seen, speak not only of “pastors and teachers” but also of “governments” — of “elders who rule well, but do not labor in the word and doctrine.”

There is an obvious analogy between the office of ruler in the *church*, and in the *civil* community. A Justice of the Peace in the civil realm has a wide and important range of duties. Besides the function which he discharges when called to take his part on the bench of the judicial court in which he presides, he may be, and often is, employed every day, though less publicly — in correcting abuses; compelling the fraudulent to do justice; restraining, arresting, and punishing criminals; and in general, carrying into execution the laws formed to promote public tranquility and order, which he has sworn to faithfully administer.

Strikingly analogous to this are the duties of the ecclesiastical ruler. He has no power, indeed, to employ the secular arm in restraining or punishing offenders against the laws of Christ. The kingdom under which he acts, and the authority which he administers, are *not of this world*. Of course, he has no right to fine, imprison, or to externally molest the most profligate offenders against the church’s purity or peace — unless they are guilty of what is technically called “breaking the peace;” that is, violating the civil rights of others, and thus rendering themselves liable to the penalty of the civil law. And even when this occurs, the ecclesiastical ruler, as such, has no right to proceed against the offender. He has no power other than moral power. He must apply to the civil magistrate for redress, who can only punish for breaking the civil law. Still, there is an obvious analogy between his office and that of the civil magistrate. Both are alike an ordinance of God — both are necessary to social order and comfort — and both are regulated by principles which commend themselves to the good sense and the conscience of those who wish well to social happiness.

The ruling elder, no less than the teaching elder, or pastor, is to be considered as acting under the authority of Christ in all that he rightfully does. If the office of which we speak was appointed in the apostolic church by infinite wisdom; if it is an ordinance of Jesus Christ, just as much as that of the *minister* of the gospel; then the former, equally with the latter, is Christ’s officer. He has a right to speak and act in His name. Though elected by the members of the church, and representing them in the exercise of ecclesiastical rule, yet he is not to be considered as deriving his authority to rule from them — any more than he who “labors in the word and doctrine” derives his authority to preach and administer

other ordinances, from the people who choose him as their teacher and guide. There is reason to believe that some, even in the Presbyterian church, take a different view of this subject. They regard the teaching elder as an officer of Christ, and listen to his official instructions as to those of a man appointed by Him, and coming in His name. But with respect to the *ruling* elder, they are prone to regard him as one who holds an office instituted by human prudence alone, and therefore as standing on very different ground in the discharge of his official duties from that which is occupied by the “ambassador of Christ.” This is undoubtedly an *erroneous* view of the subject, and a view which, so far as it prevails, is adapted to exert the most mischievous influence. The truth is, if the office of which we speak is of apostolic authority, then we are just as much bound to sustain, honor, and obey the individual who fills it, and discharges its duties according to the Scriptures, as we are to submit to any other officer or institution of our Divine Redeemer.

We are by no means, then, to consider ruling elders as a mere ecclesiastical convenience, or as a set of counsellors whom the wisdom of man alone has chosen, and who may therefore be revered and obeyed as little, or as much, as human caprice may think proper. But we are to consider them as bearing an office of divine appointment — as the “ministers of God for good” to his church — and whose lawful and regular acts ought to command our conscientious obedience.

The ruling elders of each church are called to attend either to a public and formal sphere of duty, or to a more private one.

With regard to the first — the public and formal duties of their office — they form a bench or judicial Court in the church to which they belong. It is called among us, the “church session,” and in some other Presbyterian denominations, the “consistory.” Both expressions import a body of ecclesiastical men, sitting and acting together as the *representatives*, and for the *benefit* of the church. This body of elders, with the pastor at their head and presiding at their meetings, form a judicial assembly by which all the spiritual interests of the congregation are to be watched over, regulated, and authoritatively determined. Accordingly, it is declared in the ninth chapter of our Form of Government —

“The church Session is charged with maintaining the spiritual government of the congregation, for which purpose they have power to inquire into the knowledge and Christian conduct of the members of the church, to call before them offenders and witnesses, being members of their own congregation, and to introduce other witnesses, where it may be necessary to bring the process to issue and when they can be procured to attend; to receive members into the church; to admonish, to rebuke, to suspend, or exclude from the sacraments, those who are found to deserve censure; to concert the best measures for promoting the spiritual interests of the congregation, and to appoint delegates to the higher judicatories of the church.”

This general statement of the powers and duties of the church session, it will be perceived, takes in a wide range. Or rather, to speak more properly, it embraces the whole of that authority and duty with which the great Head of the church has been pleased to invest the governing powers of each particular congregation for the instruction, edification, and comfort of the whole body. *It belongs to the church session* to bind and loose; to admit to the communion of the church, with all its privileges; to take cognizance of all departure from the purity of faith or practice; to try, censure, acquit, or excommunicate those who

are charged with offences; to consult and determine upon all matters relating to the time, place, and circumstances of worship, and other spiritual concerns; to take order about catechizing children, congregational fasts or thanksgiving days, and all other observances, stated or occasional; to correct, as far as possible, everything that may tend to disorder, or is contrary to edification; and to digest and execute plans for promoting a spirit of inquiry, of reading, of prayer, of order, and of universal holiness among the members of the church. It is also incumbent on them, when the church over which they preside is destitute of a pastor, to take the lead in those measures which may conduce to a choice of a suitable candidate, by calling the people together for the purpose of an election, when they consider them as prepared to make it with advantage.

In ordinary cases, the pastor of the church may be considered as vested with the right to decide whom he will invite to occupy his pulpit, either when he is present, or occasionally absent. Yet, in cases of difficulty or delicacy, and especially when ministers of other denominations apply for the use of the pulpit, it is the prerogative of the church session to consider and decide on the application. And if there is any fixed difference of opinion between the pastor and the other members of the session, in reference to this matter, it is the privilege and duty of either party to request the advice of their presbytery in the case.

In the church session, whether the pastor is present and presiding or not, every member has an equal voice. The vote of the most humble and retiring ruling elder, is of the same avail as that of his minister. So that no pastor can carry any measure unless he can obtain the concurrence of a majority of the eldership. And as the whole spiritual government of each church is committed to its bench of elders, the session is competent to regulate every concern, and to correct everything which they consider as amiss in the arrangements or affairs of the church, which admits of correction. Every individual of the session is, of course, competent to propose any new service, plan, or measure, which he believes will be for the benefit of the congregation; and if a majority of the elders concur with him in opinion, it may be adopted. However, if there should be a difference of opinion in any case between the pastor and the elders, as to the propriety or practicability of any measure proposed and insisted on by the elders, there is an obvious and effectual constitutional remedy. It is a remedy, however, which ought to be resorted to with prudence, caution, and prayer. The opinions and wishes of the pastor should undoubtedly be treated with the most respectful delicacy. Still, they should not be suffered, when it is possible to avoid it, to stand in the way of a great and manifest good. When such an alternative occurs, the remedy alluded to may be applied. On an amicable reference to the presbytery, *that* body may decide the case between the parties.

And as the members of the church session, whether assembled in their judicial capacity or not, are the pastor's counsellor's and colleagues in all matters relating to the spiritual rule of the church, so it is their official duty to encourage, sustain, and defend him in the faithful discharge of his duty. It is deplorable when a minister is assailed for his fidelity, by the profane or the worldly, if any portion of the eldership either takes part against him, or shrinks from his active and determined defence. It is not meant of course, that they are to consider themselves bound to sustain him in everything he may say or do, whether right or wrong. But when they really believe him to be faithful, both to truth and duty, they should feel it is their duty to stand by him, to shield him from the arrows of the wicked, and to encourage him as far as he obeys Christ.

But besides those duties which pertain to ruling elders with the pastor, in their *collective* capacity as a judicatory of the church, there are other duties which are incumbent on them at all times, in the intervals of their judicial meetings, by the due discharge of which they may be constantly edifying the body of Christ.

It is their duty to have an eye of inspection and care over all the members of the congregation. And for this purpose, to cultivate a universal and intimate acquaintance, as far as possible, with every family in the flock of which they are made “overseers.”

They are bound to watch over the children and youth, and especially baptized children, with paternal vigilance — recognizing and affectionately addressing them on all proper occasions; giving them, and their parents in reference to them, seasonable counsel; and putting in the Lord’s claim to their hearts and lives as the children of the church.

It is their duty to attend to the case of those who are serious, and disposed to inquire concerning their eternal interest; to converse with them, and from time to time, to give information concerning them to the pastor.

It is their duty to take notice of, and admonish in private, those who appear to be growing careless, or falling into habits that are in any respect criminal, suspicious, or unpromising.

It is their duty to visit and pray with the sick as far as their circumstances allow, and to request the attendance of the pastor on the sick and the dying when it may be seasonable or desired.

It is incumbent on them to assist the pastor in maintaining meetings for social prayer, to take part in conducting the devotional exercises in those meetings; to preside in them when the pastor is absent; and if they are endowed with suitable gifts, under his direction to occasionally drop a word of instruction and exhortation to the people in those social meetings. If the officers of the church neglect these meetings (the importance of which cannot be estimated) there is every reason to apprehend that they will not be duly honored or attended by the body of the people.

It is also the duty of ruling elders to visit the members of the church and their families with the pastor, if he requests it; or without him if he does not; to converse with them, to instruct the ignorant, to confirm the wavering, to caution the unwary, to reclaim the wandering, to encourage the timid, and to excite and animate all classes to a faithful and exemplary discharge of duty.

It is incumbent on them to consult frequently and freely with their pastor on the interests of the flock committed to their charge; to aid him in forming and executing plans for the welfare of the church; to give him from time to time such information as he may need, to enable him to rightly perform his various and momentous duties; to impart their advice to him with affectionate respect; to support him with their influence; to defend his reputation; to enforce his just admonitions; and in a word, by every means in their power to promote the comfort, and extend the usefulness of his labors.

Although the church session is not competent to try the pastor in case of his falling into any delinquency either of doctrine or practice; yet, if the members observe any such delinquency, it is not only their privilege, but their duty to admonish him, tenderly and respectfully, yet faithfully, in private; and if necessary, from time to time. And if the admonition is without effect, and they think the edification of the church permits and

demands a public remedy, they ought to represent the case to the presbytery, as suggested before in other cases, and request a redress of the grievance.

But the functions of the ruling elder are not confined to the congregation of which he is one of the rulers. It is his duty at such times, and in such order as the constitution of the church requires, to take his seat in the higher judicatories of the church, and there to exercise his official share of counsel and authority. In every Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly of the Presbyterian church, at least as many ruling as teaching elders are entitled to a place. And in all, the former as well as the latter, have an opportunity to exert an important influence in the great concerns of Zion. Every congregation, whether provided with a pastor or vacant, is entitled besides the pastor (where there is one), to be represented by one ruling elder, in all meetings of the Presbytery and Synod. And as in those bodies, vacant congregations and those which are supplied with pastors, are equally represented, each by an elder, it is manifest that if the theory of our ecclesiastical constitution is carried into effect, there will always be present a greater number of ruling elders than of pastors. In the General Assembly according to our constitutional plan, the numbers of each are precisely equal.

In these several judicatories, the *ruling elder* has an equal vote, and the same power in every respect as the *pastors*. He has the same privilege of originating plans and measures, and of carrying them, provided he can induce a majority of the body to concur in his views. And thus it may become the means of imparting his impressions, and producing an influence greatly beyond the particular congregation with which he is connected, and indeed, throughout the bounds of the Presbyterian church in the United States. This consideration serves to place the nature and the importance of the office in the strongest light. He who bears it, has the interest of the church as a spiritual trust, as really and solemnly committed to him, as the Elder who “labors in the word and doctrine” — though not in all respects to the same extent. He not only has it in his power, but is daily called in the discharge of his official duties, to watch over, inspect, regulate, and edify the body of Christ; to enlighten the ignorant; to admonish the disorderly; to reconcile differences; to correct every moral irregularity and abuse within the bounds of his charge; and to labor without ceasing for the promotion of the cause of truth, piety, and universal righteousness in the church to which he belongs, and wherever else he has an opportunity to raise his voice and exert an influence.

But when it is considered that those who bear the office in question are called upon in their turn to sit in the highest judicatories of the church, and there to take their part in deliberating and deciding on the most momentous questions which can arise in conducting ecclesiastical affairs — when we reflect that they are called to deliberate and decide on the conformity of doctrines to the word of God; to assist, as judges in the trial of heretics, and every class of offenders against the purity of the Gospel; and to take care in their respective spheres, that all the ordinances of Christ’s house are preserved pure and entire — when, in a word, we recollect that they are ordained for the express purpose of overseeing and guarding the most precious concerns of the church on earth — concerns which may have a bearing, not merely on the welfare of a single individual or congregation; but on the great interests of orthodoxy and piety among millions, then we may surely conclude without hesitation, that the importance of the office which they sustain, is one which can scarcely be over-rated; and that the estimate which is commonly made of its nature, duties, and responsibility, is far, *very* far from being adequate.

If this view of the nature and importance of the office before us is admitted, the question very naturally arises, whether it is correct to call this class of elders *lay elders*; or whether they have such a strictly ecclesiastical character as to prevent the use of that language in speaking of them? This is one of the points in the present discussion, concerning which the writer of this essay frankly confesses that he has, in some measure, altered his opinion. Once he was disposed to confine the epithet “clerical” to *teaching elders*, and to designate those who ruled only, and did not teach, as *lay elders*. But more mature inquiry and reflection have led him first to doubt the correctness of this opinion, and finally to persuade him that so far as the distinction between clergy and laity is proper at all, it should not be made the point of distinction between these two classes of elders; and that when we speak of the one as clergymen, and the other as laymen, we are apt to convey an idea that is altogether erroneous, if not seriously mischievous.

Some judicious and pious men have indeed expressed serious doubts whether the terms clergy and laity should ever have been introduced into our theological nomenclature. But it is not easy to see any solid reason for this doubt. Is it wise to contend about terms when the things intended to be expressed by them are fully understood and generally admitted? The only question, then, of real importance to be decided here is this: Does the New Testament draw any distinct line between those who hold spiritual offices in the church, and those who do not? Does it represent the functions pertaining to those offices as confined to them, or as common to all Christians? Now, it seems impossible to read the Acts of the Apostles, and the several apostolic epistles, especially those to Timothy and Titus, and to examine in connection with these, the writings of the “Apostolic Fathers,” without perceiving that the distinction between those who bore office in the church, and private Christians, was *clearly made, and uniformly maintained*, from the very origin of the church. That the terms *clergy* and *laity* are not found in the New Testament, nor in some of the earliest uninspired writers, is freely granted. But is the distinction intended to be expressed by these terms not evidently found in Scripture and in all the early Fathers? nothing can be more indubitably clear. The title of “rulers” in the house of God, “Ambassadors of Christ,” “stewards of the mysteries of God;” “bishops, leaders, overseers, elders, shepherds, guides, ministers,” etc., — as distinguished from those to whom they ministered — are so familiar to all readers of the New Testament, that it would be a waste of time to attempt to illustrate or establish a point so unquestionable. If the inspired writers everywhere represent certain spiritual offices in the church as appointed by God; if they represent those who sustain these offices, as solely authorized to perform certain sacred functions; and teach us to consider all others who attempt to perform them, as criminal invaders of a divine ordinance — then surely the whole distinction intended to be expressed by the terms *clergy* and *laity* is evidently and most distinctly laid down by the same authority which founded the church.

The word κληρος (*kleros*), properly signifies *a lot*. And as the land of Canaan (the inheritance of the Israelites) was divided among them *by lot*, the word, in the process of time, came to signify an *inheritance*. The term is evidently employed in 1Pet 5.3 in this figurative or secondary sense (“alotted to you”). Under the Old Testament dispensation, the peculiar people of God were called (Septuagint translation) His *kleros*, or *inheritance*. We have examples of this in Deu 4.20, and 9.29. The term in both these passages is manifestly applied to the whole body of the nation of Israel, as God’s inheritance, or peculiar people. Clemens Romanus, one of the “Apostolic Fathers,” speaking of the Jewish



economy, and having occasion to distinguish between the priests and the common people, calls the latter *λαϊκοί* (*laikoi*). Clemens Alexandrinus, towards the close of the second century, speaks of the Apostle John as having set apart such persons for “clergymen,” *κληροί* (*kleroi*), as were signified to him by the Holy Ghost. And in the writings of Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian, the terms “clergy” and “laity” occur with a frequency which shows that they were then in general use. Jerome observes that ministers are called *clerici*, either because they are peculiarly the lot and portion of the Lord; or because the Lord is their lot; that is, their inheritance. Hence that learned and pious Father takes occasion to infer that, “He who is God’s portion ought to so exhibit himself, that he may be truly said to possess God, and to be possessed by Him.”<sup>1</sup>

And as we have abundant evidence that ecclesiastical men were familiarly called *clerici*, or “clergymen,” from the second century, so we have the same evidence that this term was employed to designate all ecclesiastical men. That is, all persons who had any spiritual office in the church, were called by the common name of *clerici*, or “clergymen.” It was applied continually to elders and deacons, as well as to bishops or pastors. Indeed, in the third century, when not only the inceptive steps of Prelacy became visible, but when the same spirit of innovation had also brought in a number of inferior orders — such as sub-deacons, readers, acolytes, etc., these interior orders were all *clerici*. Cyprian, speaking of a sub-deacon, and also of a reader, calls them both *clerici*. The ordination of such persons (for it seems they were all formally ordained) he calls *ordinationes clericæ*; and the letters which he transmitted by them, he styles *literæ clericæ*. The same fact may be clearly established from the writings of Ambrose, Hilary, and Epiphanius, and from the canons of the Council of Nice. Indeed, there seems reason to believe that in the fourth and fifth centuries, and subsequently, the title of *clerici* was not only given to all the inferior orders of ecclesiastical men, but was more frequently and punctiliously applied to them than to their superiors — who were generally addressed by their more distinctive and honorable titles. Those who recollect that learning, during the dark ages, was chiefly confined to the ministers of religion; that few except persons of that profession were able to read and write; and that the whimsical privilege, commonly called “benefit of clergy,” grew out of the rare accomplishment of being able to read — will be at no loss to trace the etymology of the word clerk (*clericus*,) or secretary, as used to designate one who officiates as the reader and writer of a public body.

To distinguish the mass of private Christians from those who bore office in the church, they were designated by several names. They were sometimes called *λαϊκοί* — *laici*, laymen, from *λαός* (*laos*), *populus*; sometimes *ιδῶται* (*idootai*), “private men,” from *ιδίος* (*idios*), *privatus* (Act 4.13); sometimes *βιωτικοί* (*Biootikoi*), *i.e.* “seculars,” from *βίος* (*Bios*), which signifies a secular life. Soon after the apostolic age, common Christians were frequently called *ἄνδρες ἐκκλησιαστικοί* (*andres ekklesiastikoi*), “men of the church,” *i.e.*, persons not belonging either to Jewish synagogues, or Pagan temples, or heretical bodies, but members of the church of Christ. Afterwards, however, the title “ecclesiastics” gradually became appropriated to persons *in office* in the church.<sup>2</sup>

The quotations from Augustine made in a former chapter, and the writings of some other Fathers about his time, in which they seem to distinguish between the clergy and the

<sup>1</sup> *Epist. 2d. ad. Nepotian. 5.*

<sup>2</sup> See Stephani *Thesaurus*, and Bingham’s *Origenes Ecclesiasticae*.

elders, may seem to militate with the foregoing statement. But in reference to these passages, the learned Voetius, while he quotes them as decisive of the general fact of the early existence of the elders under consideration, supposes that the office, in the fourth and fifth centuries, was beginning to fall into disuse; and of course, though it was still found in some churches, it began to be spoken of with less respect, and sometimes to be denied a place among the strictly clerical offices.<sup>3</sup>

But after all, there is no real difficulty as to this point. For although the terms “clergy” and “clerical” were pretty generally applied in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries to all classes of church officers, even the lowest, yet this was not always the case. Thus in the Apostolic Canons, which were probably composed in the fourth or fifth centuries, there is an express distinction made between the deacons and the clergy. In the third and fourth Canons, having ordered what sorts of first-fruits should be sent to the church, and what to the home of the bishop and presbyters, it ordains as follows: “Now it is manifest that they are to be divided by them among the deacons and the clergy.” From cases of this kind we may evidently infer that, although all kinds of ecclesiastical officers were generally ranked among the clergy during the period just mentioned, yet this was not invariably so; and of course no inference can be drawn from occasional diversity of expression as to this matter.

Now, if this historical deduction of the titles *clergy* and *laity* are correct, it is plain that, according to early and general usage, ruling elders should not be styled laymen, or lay elders. They are as really *in office* — they as really bear an office of divine appointment — an office of a high and spiritual nature — and an office, the functions of which cannot be rightfully performed except by those who are regularly set apart to it — as any other officer of the Christian church. They are as really a portion of God’s lot — as really set over the laity or body of the people — as the most distinguished and venerated minister of Jesus can be. Therefore, whether we refer to early usage, or to strict philological import, ruling elders are as truly entitled to the name of *clergy*, in the only legitimate sense of that term — that is, they are as truly ecclesiastical officers — as those who “labor in the word and doctrine.”

The scope of the foregoing remarks will not, it is hoped, be mistaken. The author of this Essay has no zeal either for retaining or using the terms *clergy* and *laity*. So far as the former term has been used up to now, or may now be intended, to convey the idea of a “privileged order” in the church — a dignified body lifted up in rank and claim above the mass of the Church members — in a word, as designating a set of men claiming to be vicars of Christ, keepers of the human conscience, and the only channels of grace — he disclaims and abhors it. He is a believer in no such meaning or men. But so far as it is intended to designate those who are clothed with ecclesiastical office under the authority of Christ, and authorised to discharge some important spiritual functions which the body of the church members are not authorized to perform, and to mark the distinction between these two classes, the writer is of the opinion that the language may be defended, and either that, or some other of equivalent import, ought to be used — no, *must* be used — if we would be faithful to the New Testament view of ecclesiastical office as an ordinance of Jesus Christ. And if the term *clergy*, in this humble Christian and only becoming sense, is applied to those who preside in the dispensation of public ordinances,

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<sup>3</sup> *Politicae Ecclesiasticae*, par. ii. lib. ii. tract. iii.

it may with equal propriety be applied to those who preside with pastors in the inspection and rule of the church.

If any should be disposed to remark on this subject, that the use of the term *clergy* is so appropriated by long established public habit, to a particular class of ecclesiastical officers, and that there can be no hope that the mass of the community will be reconciled to an extension of the title to ruling elders — the answer is, let it be so. The writer of this volume is neither vain enough to expect, nor ambitious enough to attempt, a change in the popular language to the amount supposed here. But he protests against the continued use of the term *lay elder*, as really adapted to make an impression. Let the class of officers in question be called *ruling elders*. Let all necessary distinction be made by saying: “Ministers or pastors, ruling elders, deacons, and the laity or body of the people.” This will be in conformity with ancient usage. This will be maintaining every important principle. This can offend none; and nothing more will be desired by any.

If the foregoing views of the nature and duties of the elder’s office were generally adopted, duly appreciated, and faithfully carried out in practice, what a mighty change would be effected in our Zion! With what a different estimate of the obligations and responsibilities which rest upon them, would the candidates for this office enter on their sacred work! And with what different feelings would the mass of the people, and especially all who love the cause of Christ, regard these spiritual counsellors and guides in their daily walks, and particularly in their friendly and official visits! This is a change most devoutly to be desired. The interests of the church are more involved in the prevalence of just opinions and practice in reference to *this* office, than almost any other that can be named. If every congregation, besides a wise, pious, and faithful Pastor, were furnished with eight or ten elders to cooperate with him in all his parochial labors on the plan which has been sketched — men of wisdom, faith, prayer, and Christian activity; men willing to deny and exert themselves for the welfare of Zion; men alive to the importance of everything that relates to the orthodoxy, purity, order and spirituality of the church, and ever on the watch for opportunities of doing good; men, in a word, willing to “take the oversight of the flock in the Lord, and to labor without ceasing for the promotion of its best interests — if every church were furnished with a body of such elders, can anyone doubt that knowledge, order, piety, and growth in grace as well as in numbers, would be as common in our churches as the reverse is now the prevailing state of things, in consequence of the lack of fidelity on the part of those who are nominally the overseers and guides of the flock?

While discussing the nature of this office, and the duties which pertain to it, it seems natural to offer a few remarks on the manner in which those who bear it ought to be treated by the members of the church; in other words, on *the duties which the church owes to her ruling elders*.

And here the discerning and pious mind will be at no loss to perceive that these duties are correlative to those which the rulers owe to the church. That is, if they are the spiritual rulers of the church, and bound to perform daily, and with fidelity and zeal, the duties which belong to this station; it is evident that the members of the church are bound to recognize them in the same character, and to honor and treat them as their spiritual guides. If then, it was in the power of the writer of this volume to address the members of every Presbyterian church in the United States, he would speak to them in some such language as the following:

*Christian Brethren,*

Every consideration which has been urged to show the importance and duties belonging to the office of ruling elders, ought to remind you of the important duties which *you* owe to *them*. Remember at all times, that they are your ecclesiastical rulers; rulers of your own choice yet by no means coming to you by virtue of mere human authority, but in the name and by the appointment of the great Head of the Church, and of course, the “ministers of God to you for good.”

In all your views and treatment of them, then, recognize this character. Obey them “in the Lord;” that is, *for His sake*, and as far as they bear rule agreeably to his word. “Esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake.” And follow them daily with your prayers, that God would bless them, and make them a blessing. Reverence them as your leaders. Bear in mind the importance of their office, the arduousness of their duties, and the difficulties with which they have to contend. Countenance and sustain them in every act of fidelity. Make allowance for their infirmities. And do not be unreasonable in your expectations from them.

Many are ready to criminate the elders of the church for not taking notice of particular offences as speedily, or in such manner, as they expect. And this disposition to find fault is sometimes indulged by persons who have never been so faithful themselves as to give that information which they possessed respecting the alleged offences; or who, when called upon publicly to substantiate what they have privately disclosed, have drawn back, unwilling to encounter the odium or the pain of appearing as accusers, or even as witnesses. Such persons ought to be the last to criminate church officers for supposed negligence of discipline. Can your rulers take notice of that which never comes to their knowledge? Or can you expect them, as prudent men, to rashly set afoot judicial and public investigation of things, concerning which many are ready to whisper in private, but none willing to speak with frankness before a court of Christ? Besides, let it be recollected that the session of almost every church is sometimes actually engaged in investigating cases, in removing offences, and in settling differences which many suppose they are utterly neglecting, merely because they do not judge it to be for edification in all cases to proclaim what they have done, or are doing, to the congregation at large.

Your elders will sometimes be called — God grant that it may seldom occur! — but they will sometimes be called to the painful exercise of discipline. Do not be offended with them for the performance of this duty. Rather, make the language of the Psalmist your own: “Let the righteous strike me, it will be a kindness: and let him reprove me, it will be an excellent oil, which will not break my head.” Do not add to the bitterness of their official task by revealing a resentful temper, or by indulging in reproachful language, in return for their fidelity. Surely the nature of the duty is sufficiently self-denying and distressing without rendering it more so by unfriendly treatment. Receive their private warnings and admonitions with candor and affectionate submission. Treat their public acts, however contrary to your wishes, with respect and reverence. If they are honest and pious men, can they do less than exercise the discipline of Christ’s house against those of you who walk disorderly? Indeed, if you are honest and pious yourselves, can you do less than approve of their faithfulness in exercising that discipline? If you were aware of all the difficulties which attend this part of the duty of your eldership, you would feel for them more tenderly, and judge concerning them more candidly and indulgently than you are

often disposed to do. Here you have it in your power, in a very important degree, to lessen their burdens and to strengthen their hands.

When your elders visit your families for the purpose of becoming acquainted with them, and of aiding the pastor in ascertaining the spiritual state of the flock, remember that it is not “officious intrusion.” It is nothing more than their duty. Receive them, not as if you suspected them of having come as spies or busy intruders, but with respect and cordiality. Convince them, by your treatment, that you are glad to see them, that you wish to encourage them in promoting the best interests of the church; and that you honor them for their fidelity. Give them an opportunity to see your children, and ascertain whether your households are making progress in the Christian life. Even encourage your children to put themselves in the way of the elders, that they may be personally known to them, and may become the objects of their affectionate notice, their occasional exhortation, and their pious prayers. Converse with the elders freely, as with fathers who “have no greater joy than to see you walking in the truth.” And ever give them cause to retire under the pleasing persuasion that their office is honored, that their benevolent designs are daily appreciated, and that their labors “are not in vain in the Lord.” In short, as every good citizen will conscientiously vindicate the fidelity, and hold up the hand of the faithful magistrate who firmly and impartially executes the law of the land, so every good Christian ought to feel himself bound in conscience and honor, as well as in duty to his Lord, to strengthen the hands and encourage the heart of the spiritual ruler, who evidently seeks, in the fear of God, to promote the purity and edification of the church.

The nature of the office before us also leads to another remark with which the present chapter will be closed. It is, that there seems to be a peculiar propriety in the ruling elders (and the same principle will apply to the deacons, if there are any of this class of officers in a congregation) having a seat assigned to them, for sitting together in a conspicuous part of the church, near the pulpit during the public service, where they can overlook the whole worshipping assembly, and be seen by all. The considerations which recommend this, are numerous. It was invariably so in the Jewish synagogue. The same practice, as we have seen in the former chapter, was adopted in the early church as soon as Christians began to erect houses for public worship. This official and conspicuous accommodation for the elders is constantly provided in the Dutch Reformed church in this country, and it is believed by most of the Reformed Churches on the Continent of Europe. It is adapted to keep the congregation habitually reminded who their elders are, and of their official authority; and also to remind the elders themselves of their functions and duties. And it furnishes a convenient opportunity for the pastor to consult them on any question which may occur, either before he ascends the pulpit or at the close of the service.

**CHAPTER 10.**  
***DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE OFFICES***  
***OF***  
***THE RULING ELDER AND DEACON***

These two offices of ruling elder and deacon have been so often confounded, and opinions attempted to be maintained which tend to merge the former in the latter, that it is judged proper to make the difference between them the subject of distinct consideration.

The only account that we have in Scripture of the origin of the deacon's office is found in the following passage, in the Acts of the Apostles 6.1-6.

“And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples to them, and said, ‘It is not reasonable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, look out for seven men among you, of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch, whom they set before the Apostles. And when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.”

Various opinions have been entertained on this plain passage. It will be to our purpose to notice a few of them.

**I.** Some have doubted whether these were the first deacons chosen by the direction of the inspired Apostles. The learned Dr. Mosheim supposes that the church of Jerusalem, from its first organization, had its inferior ministers (in other words, its deacons); and that there is a reference to these in the fifth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, under the title of *young men*, νεωτεροι and νεανισκοι (*newteroi* and *neaniskoi*), who assisted in the interment of Ananias and Sapphira. He is confident that the seven deacons spoken of in the passage just cited, were added to the original number; and that they were intentionally selected from the foreign Jews, in order to silence the complaints on the part of the Grecians of partiality in the distribution of the offerings made for the relief of the poor. There seems to be no good reason for acceding to this opinion. The objections to it are the following:

1. It is by no means probable that a class of officers of great importance to the comfort and prosperity of the church, should have been instituted by divine authority, and yet that the original institution should have been passed over by all the inspired writers in entire silence.
2. In this narrative of the election and ordination of the seven deacons, there is not the most distant allusion to any pre-existing officers of the same character or functions. The murmuring spoken of seems to have proceeded from the body of the Grecian, or foreign Christians, and to have been directed against the body of the native, or Hebrew Christians.
3. It is evident, from the spirit of the narrative, that the appointment of these deacons was expressly designed to relieve the apostles themselves of a laborious service, with which

they had been encumbered before, but which interfered with their discharge of higher and more important duties. Surely the address of the apostles would have been strange, if not unmeaning, if there had already been a body of officers who were entrusted with the whole of this business; and they had only been solicited to appoint an additional number, or to put a more impartial set in place of the old incumbents.

4. It is plain that these officers were not chosen from among the young men of the church, as Dr. Mosheim seems to imagine; nor was the office itself one of small trust or dignity. The multitude were directed to “look for seven men of honest report,” or established reputation, “full of the Holy Ghost and of wisdom.” And when the Apostle Paul afterwards writes to Timothy, and points out the character of those who ought to be selected for this office, he speaks of them as married men, fathers of families, distinguished for their gravity, men who had been “first proved” and found “blameless,” as orthodox, just, temperate, holy men, regulating their own households with firmness and prudence.

5. Dr. Mosheim is not borne out by the best authorities in his interpretation of the words *newteroi* and *neaniskoi*. The most skilful lexicographers assign to them no such official meaning. Besides, the nature and responsibility of the office, and the high qualifications for it pointed out by the apostles at the time of this first choice, and required by the Apostle Paul afterwards, when writing to Timothy respecting proper persons to be chosen and set apart as deacons; by no means correspond to the view which Dr. Mosheim takes of the inferiority of the office, or the propriety of bestowing it on young men, as the church’s servants.

6. Finally, it may be doubted whether there had been any real need of the deacon’s office until the time arrived and the events occurred which are recorded in the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Only a short time had elapsed since the church had been organized on the New Testament plan. At its first organization, the number of the poor connected with it was probably small. But very shortly after the day of Pentecost the number of foreigners who had come up to the feast, and been converted there to the Christian faith, was so great, and the number of these who, being at a distance from all their usual pecuniary resources and their friends, stood in need of pecuniary aid, had also become so considerable, that the task of “imparting to those who had need,” became suddenly a most arduous employment. However, this had been accomplished for a short time under the direction of the Apostles, and without appointing a particular class of officers for the purpose. But when the foreign Jews came forward and complained of partiality in this business, the apostles, under the direction of heavenly wisdom, called upon the “multitude” to choose competent persons whom they might appoint over this branch of Christian ministrations. This appears to be a plain history of the case; and to resort to Dr. Mosheim’s supposition is to throw a strange and perplexed aspect over the whole narrative.

**II.** There are others who have doubted whether the “seven” whose election and ordination are recorded in the 6th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, were deacons at all. They allege that the office to which they were chosen and set apart was a mere *temporary* function, not designed to be a permanent one in the Christian Church, and which probably did not last much if any longer than what is commonly called “the community of goods,” which existed sometime after the day of Pentecost.

Against this supposition, the following reasons are, in my view, conclusive.

1. If this supposition were admitted, then it would follow that there is no account whatever in the Scriptures of the origin or nature of the deacon's office. The office is mentioned again and again in the New Testament; but if the narrative in the beginning of the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles is not a statement of its origin, nature, and duties, we have no account of them anywhere. Can this be considered probable?
2. Is it likely, judging on the principles and from the analogy of Scripture, that a short occasional trust, a mere temporary trusteeship (if I may so speak) would be appointed with so much formality and solemnity — marked not only by a formal election of the people, but also by the prayers and “the laying on of the hands” of the apostles? What greater solemnities attended an investiture with the highest and most permanent offices in the Christian Church?
3. It is a well-known fact that in the Jewish synagogue, which was assumed as the model of the primitive church, there was a class of officers to whom the collection and distribution of alms for the poor were regularly committed. We may venture to presume, then, that the appointment of similar officers in the church would be altogether likely.
4. When it is considered what an important and arduous part of the church's duty it was in the apostolic age, and for some time afterwards, to provide for the very numerous poor who looked to her for aid, it is incredible that there should be no class of officers specifically set apart for this purpose. Yet if the “seven” are not of this class, there is no account of any such appointment in the New Testament.
5. The language of some of the earlier, as well as the later Christian Fathers on this subject, clearly evinces that *they* considered the appointment recorded in the chapter of the Acts of the Apostles now under consideration, as the appointment of Christian deacons, and as exhibiting the nature of that office, and the great purpose for which it was instituted. A small specimen of the manner in which they speak on the subject will be sufficient to establish this position.

*Hermas*, one of the apostolic Fathers, in his *Similitude*, ix. 27, expresses himself thus: “For what concerns the tenth mountain, in which the trees were covering the cattle, they are those who have believed, and some of them have been bishops, that is, presidents of the churches. Then those who have been set over inferior ministries, and have protected the poor and the widows.”

*Origen* (*Tract.* 16, in *Matt.*) evidently considered the deacons as charged with the pecuniary concerns of the church. “The Deacons,” he says, “preside over the *money tables* of the church.” And again, “those deacons who do not manage well the money of the churches committed to their care, but act a fraudulent part, and dispense it, not according to justice, but for the purpose of enriching themselves, these act the part of money-changers, and keepers of those tables which our Lord overturned. For the Deacons were appointed to preside over the tables of the church, as we are taught in the Acts of the Apostles.”

*Cyprian* speaks (*Epist.* 25.) of a certain deacon who had been deposed from his “sacred diaconate on account of his fraudulent and sacrilegious misapplication of the church's money to his own private use; and for his denial of the *widows'* and *orphans'* pledges deposited with him.” And, in another place (*Epist.* 3, *ad rogatianum*) he refers the appointment of the first deacons to this choice and ordination at Jerusalem.



It seems, then, that the deacons, in the days of *Cyprian*, were entrusted with the care of *widows* and *orphans*, and the funds of the church destined for their relief. It is incidentally stated in the account of the persecution under the Emperor Decius in the third century, that by order of the Emperor, *Laurentius*, one of the deacons of Rome, was seized under the expectation of finding the money of the church, collected for the use of the poor, in his possession. It is further stated that this money had really been in his possession but that, expecting the storm of persecution, he had distributed it before his seizure.

*Eusebius* (lib. ii. cap. 1,) says, “There were also seven approved men ordained deacons, through prayer and the imposition of the Apostle’s hands,” and he immediately afterwards speaks of *Stephen* as one of the number. *Dorotheus*, bishop of *Tyre*, contemporary with *Eusebius*, also says (Lives of the Prophets, etc.) “*Stephen*, the first Martyr, and one of the seven Deacons, was stoned by the Jews at Jerusalem, as Luke testifies in the Acts of the Apostles.”

*Ambrose*, in speaking of the fourth century, the time in which he lived, says (*Comment. on Ephes. 4*) “The Deacons do not publicly preach.”

*Chrysostom*, who lived in the same century, in his commentary on this very passage in Acts 6, observes that “the deacons had need of great wisdom, although the preaching of the word was not committed to them;” and he remarks further that, “it is absurd to suppose that they should have both the offices of preaching and taking care of the poor committed to them, seeing that it is impossible for them to discharge both functions adequately.”

*Sozomen*, the ecclesiastical historian who lived in the fifth century, says (*lib. v. cap. 8.*) that “the deacon’s office was to keep the church’s goods.”

In the *Apostolical Constitutions*, which may be referred to the fourth or fifth centuries (though undoubtedly spurious as an apostolic work), it is recorded (*lib. viii. cap. 28.*) “It is not lawful for the deacons to baptize, or to administer the Eucharist, or to pronounce the greater or smaller benediction.”

*Jerome*, in his letter to *Evagrius*, calls deacons “ministers of tables and widows.”

*Oecumenius*, a learned commentator who lived several centuries after *Jerome*, in his commentary on Acts 6, expresses himself thus: “The Apostles laid their hands on those who were chosen deacons, not to confer on them that rank which they now hold in the church, but that they might, with all diligence and attention, distribute the necessaries of life to widows and orphans.”

And the *Council of Trullo*, in the sixth century, expressly asserts (*can. 16*) that the seven deacons spoken of in the Acts of the Apostles, are not to be understood of those who ministered in divine service or in sacred mysteries, but only those who served tables and attended the poor.

Another consideration, which shows beyond controversy that the early Christians universally considered the “seven” spoken of in the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles as the proper New Testament deacons, is that for several centuries, many of the largest and most respectable churches in the world considered themselves as bound, in selecting their deacons, to confine themselves to the exact number seven, whatever might

be their extent and their exigencies, on the avowed principle of conformity to the number of this class of officers first appointed in the mother church at Jerusalem.

The *Council of Neocaesarea* (c. 313-321) enacted it into a canon that there should be but seven deacons in any city, however great, because this was according to the rule laid down in the Acts of the Apostles. And the church of Rome, both before and after this Council, seems also to have looked upon that example as binding; for it is evident from the epistles of Cornelius, written in the middle of the third century, that there were but seven deacons in the church of Rome at that time, though there were forty-six Presbyters.

*Prudentius* intimates that it was so in the time of Sixtus, also in the year 261; for speaking of Laurentius the deacon, he terms him the chief of those “seven men” who had their station near the altar, meaning the deacons of the church. Even in the fourth and fifth centuries, the custom in that city continued the same, as we learn both from *Sozomen* and *Hilary*, the Roman deacon who wrote under the name of *Ambrose*.<sup>1</sup>

6. The current opinion of all the most learned and judicious Christian divines of all denominations, for several centuries past, is decisively in favor of considering the passage in Acts 6 as recording the first appointment of the New Testament deacons. Among all classes of theologians, Catholic and Protestant, Lutheran and Calvinistic, Presbyterian and Episcopal, this concurrence of opinion approaches so near to unanimity, that we may, without injustice to any other opinion, consider it as the deliberate and harmonious judgment of the Christian church.

The very learned *Suicer*, a German Professor of the seventeenth century, in his *Thesaurus Ecclesiasticus* (Art. *Diakonos*) makes the following statement on this subject: “In the apostolic church, *Deacons* were those who distributed alms to the poor, and took care of them. In other words, they were the treasurers of the church’s charity. The original institution of this class of officers is set forth in the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.”

With respect to them, the 16th canon of the Council of *Constantine* (in Trullo) says: “They are those to whom the common administering to poverty is committed; not those who administer the sacraments.”

And *Aristinus*, in his Synopsis of the Canons of the same Council, Canon 18th, says: “Let him who alleges that the *seven*, of whom mention is made in the Acts of the Apostles, were deacons, know that the account there given is not of those who administer the sacraments, but of those who ‘served tables.’”

*Zonaras*, ad Canon 16, *Trullanum*. p. 145, says those who were appointed by the apostles to the diaconate, were not ministers of spiritual things, but ministers and dispensers of foods.

*Oecumenius* also, on the 6th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, says: “They laid their hands on the deacons who had been elected, which office was by no means the same with that which obtains at the present day in the church, (*i.e.* under the same name); but that with the utmost care and diligence, they might distribute what was necessary to the sustenance of orphans and widows.”

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<sup>1</sup> Bingham’s *Origenes Ecclesiasticae*, b. ii. ch. 20, sect. 19.

From these considerations, I feel myself warranted in concluding with confidence, that the “seven” chosen at Jerusalem to “serve tables,” were scriptural deacons, and the first deacons; and that, of course, every attempt to evade the necessary consequence of admitting this fact, is wholly destitute of support.

**III.** A third opinion held by some on this subject is that, although the passage recorded in the beginning of the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, is an account of the first appointment of New Testament deacons; and though their primary function was to take care of the poor, and “serve tables;” yet the appropriate duties of their office were afterwards enlarged. Thus the Prelatists say that Philip, one of the “seven,” is soon after his appointment as deacon, found preaching and baptizing. Hence, they infer that these functions of right pertain to the deacon’s office, and have belonged to it from the beginning. On the other hand, some Independents say that the word *deacon*, according to its Greek etymology, means *minister* or *servant*; that this general term may cover a large field of ecclesiastical service; and that New Testament Deacons were probably at first intended, and now ought to be employed, to assist the pastor in counsel and government, as well as in serving the Lord’s table, and attending to the relief of the poor. And even some Presbyterians have expressed the opinion that our ruling elders were a kind of deacons in disguise, and ought to be so considered and called; and there should not, and cannot be consistently with Scripture, any office bearer charged with the duty of assisting the pastor in counsel and rule, other than the deacon.

I am fully persuaded that this is an erroneous opinion. It appears manifest to me, not only that it is inconsistent with the form of government of the Presbyterian church, but what is a much more serious difficulty, is that it is altogether irreconcilable with the New Testament. For,

1. An attentive and impartial perusal of the record of this first institution of deacons must convince anyone that preaching, baptizing, or partaking in the spiritual rule and government of the church would be so far from being embraced in the original destination of the New Testament deacon, that they were all absolutely precluded by the very terms, and the whole spirit of the representation given by the inspired historian. The things complained of by the Grecian believers are not that the preaching was defective, or that the government and discipline of the church were badly managed. Not a hint of this kind is given. The only complaint was that the poor “widows had been neglected;” in other words, they did not have the due share of attention to their wants, and of relief from the church’s bounty. To remove all cause of complaint on this score, the “seven” were chosen and set apart. The sphere of duty to which they were appointed was one which the apostles declared they could not fulfil without “leaving the word of God to serve tables.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore they say to the members of the church, “look for seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and of wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business,” *i.e.*, over “serving tables.” “And we will give ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.” Now, to suppose that these very deacons were appointed to officiate in “the ministry of the word

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<sup>2</sup> It has been supposed by many that the phrase, “serving tables,” in the history of the institution of the deacon’s office, had a reference either to the Lord’s table, or to overseeing and supplying the tables of the poor, or perhaps both. But I am inclined to believe that this is an entire mistake. The word *τραπεζα* (*trapeza*) indeed signifies a *table*; but in this connection, it seems obviously to mean a money-table, or a counter on which money was laid. Hence *τραπεζετης* a money-changer, or money merchant. See *Mat* 21.12; 25.27; *Mar* 11.15; *Luk* 19.23. The plain meaning, then, of *Acts* 6 seems to be this: “It is not suitable that we should leave the word of God, and devote ourselves to *pecuniary affairs*.”

and prayer,” is an inconsistency, no, an *absurdity*, so glaring that the only wonder is how anyone can possibly adopt it after reading the passage in question. If the object had been to adopt a supposition fitted to exhibit the apostles, and the “multitude” too, as acting like insane men, or children, one more directly adapted to answer the end could not have been thought of.

2. The circumstance of Philip, sometime after his appointment as deacon, being found preaching and baptizing in Samaria and other places, does not afford the smallest presumptive evidence against this conclusion. Soon after his appointment to the diaconate in Jerusalem, the members of the church in that city were mostly “scattered abroad by persecution.” Philip was of course driven from his residence. Now, the probability is that about this time — seeing that he was a man “full of the Holy Ghost and of wisdom,” and therefore eminently qualified to be useful in preaching the gospel — he received a new ordination as an Evangelist, and in this character he went forth to preach and baptize. He is expressly called an “Evangelist,” by the same inspired writer who gives us an account of his appointment as a deacon (Act 21.8). Until it can be proved, then, that he preached and baptized as a deacon and not as an Evangelist, the supposition is utterly improbable and altogether worthless. It is really an imposition on credulity to urge it. And that certainly never can be proved as long as the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles remains a part of the inspired volume. As to Stephen, another of the “seven,” disputing with opponents in private, and defending himself before the council, it was not official preaching at all. It was nothing more than every professing Christian is at all times not only *at liberty* to do, but under an *obligation* to do when assailed by unbelievers, or when brought before an unjust tribunal.

The truth is, the practice of connecting the functions of preaching and baptizing with the deacon’s office, is one of the various human inventions which early began to spring up in the church, and which turned almost every ecclesiastical office which had been divinely instituted, more or less away from its primitive character. “But from the beginning it was not so.” It is a departure from the apostolic model. We find, indeed, in several of the writers of the first three or four centuries, frequent intimations of deacons being permitted to preach and administer the ordinance of baptism. But in almost every instance, it is represented as done by virtue of a specific permission from the pastor or bishop in each case, and as entirely unlawful *without* such permission — a very different thing from a function inherent in an office, and always lawful when a proper occasion for its exercise occurred! In fact, I believe ecclesiastical history will bear me out in saying that within the first three centuries, it would be just as correct to assert that private Christians in general had a right to preach and baptize, as to maintain that deacons had this right by virtue of their office as such, because we meet with some instances of their being both called upon to do so in cases of supposed necessity, or when specially permitted by superior ecclesiastics. Mr. Bingham, the learned Episcopal antiquary, explicitly tells us, on the authority of several early writers, that private Christians who sustained no office whatever in the church, were sometimes called upon to address the people in the absence, or at the special request, of the one whose official duty it was to preach. The same learned author goes on to state that in the apostolic age, or as long as the special gifts of the Holy Spirit continued enabling men to prophesy, all who possessed such special gifts, whether in office or not, might use “the word of exhortation” in the church.

“But then,” he adds, “as such extraordinary gifts of the Spirit of prophecy were in a manner peculiar to the apostolic age, this could not be a rule to the following ages of the church. And therefore, once these gifts were ceased, the church went prudently by another rule, to allow none but those who were called by an ordinary commission to perform this office, except where some extraordinary natural endowments (such as were in Origen before his ordination) corresponding in some measure to those special gifts, made it proper to grant a license to laymen to exercise their talents for the benefit of the church. Or else, when necessity imposed the duty on deacons to perform the office of preaching, when the bishop and presbyters were debarred from it by sickness or other means. For the aforesaid author (Ambrose) plainly says that deacons in his time, were not ordinarily allowed *praedicare in populo*, *i.e.* to preach to the people, as being an office to which they had no ordinary commission. And the same is said by the author of the *Apostolic Constitutions*, and many others. Therefore, since deacons were not allowed this power, except in some special cases, it is less to be wondered at, after the ceasing of spiritual gifts, that it should generally be denied to laymen.”<sup>3</sup>

A mistake on this point, in reference to the deacon’s office, has arisen from misinterpreting certain terms which are used by some of the early writers to express their public service. The words κηρυγμα, κηρυξ, κηρυσσω (*kerugma, kerux, kerussoo*), etc. are frequently used in the New Testament to express the public preacher, and preaching of the gospel. Now, when the same words are applied by some of the earlier Greek Fathers to the deacon’s office, and the corresponding words *praeco, praedicatio* and *praedicare* applied by the Latins, it has been hastily concluded that they were habitually preachers in the New Testament sense of the term. But the truth is, as everyone in the least degree acquainted with those writers knows, these terms when used by the Fathers, signify an entirely different thing. The deacons in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries are everywhere represented as the common heralds or criers of the church. That is, when any public notice was to be given — when the catechumens or the penitents were to be called aloud to come forward, or to withdraw; or when any public proclamation was to be made in the course of the service in the church — it belonged to the deacon’s office to perform this duty. Hence he was called the κηρυξ (*kerux*), or crier, and was said to κηρυσσειν (*khrussein*), to cry aloud or make a proclamation.

It also belonged to the deacons to keep order at the doors when the service was beginning — to see that the worshippers were seated in a quiet and orderly manner; to stand around the communion table when it was spread, and with fans made either of dried skins or peacock’s feathers, to keep the flies from the consecrated elements; and after the consecration of the sacramental elements, to bear them to the communicants. These and a variety of subordinate duties were considered as pertaining to their office, and hence they were regarded not as having any part of the *priesthood*, according to the language of that day; but as being the “church’s servants.” All this is so explicitly acknowledged and so abundantly proved by the learned *Bingham* (*Origines Ecclesiasticae*, book ii. chap. 20, and book xiv. chap. 4), that any further enlargement on the subject is altogether unnecessary. The original office of the deacon was one of high trust and dignity, requiring much piety, wisdom, prudence, and diligence. But when the purity of the church declined, both in doctrine and practice, and especially when the ardor of her charity to the poor had

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<sup>3</sup> Bingham’s *Origines Ecclesiasticae*, b. 14. ch. 4. sect. 4.

greatly slackened, that officer, having little to do in his appropriate department, sunk for a time into a kind of ecclesiastical menial.

3. The directions afterwards given by Paul to Timothy (1Tim 3), respecting the proper qualifications of candidates for the deacon's office, are decisively opposed to the view of the subject which I am now examining. When the Apostle speaks of the qualifications that are indispensable in a teaching elder, or bishop, he says he must not only be grave, pious, and of good report, but also "apt to teach," etc. But he prescribes no such condition in the choice of deacons. He gives no intimation that teaching made any part of their official work. It is said, indeed, that they ought to be men "holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience;" by which I understand they must be men holding the true faith in sincerity. In other words, they must be orthodox and pious; qualifications which ought to be found in all who bear office in the church of God.

4. We have not the least evidence from any source, that the function of government was ever connected with the deacon's office. We read of ruling elders, but never of ruling deacons. Among all the multiplied witnesses drawn from the synagogue and the church, and from almost all denominations of Christians, ancient and modern, in favor of a bench of elders in each congregation for conducting its government and discipline, I recollect no example of the members of that bench being called deacons, or of deacons having any place among them. No, it is perfectly manifest that if, according to the scriptural model, there ought to be a bench or college made up of a plurality of elders in each church, to be entrusted with the inspection and rule of the whole body, then there is not a shadow of evidence to support the claim of the deacons to a seat in that body. But if such a bench of rulers, under the name of elders or presbyters, is given up, then I will venture to assert there is not a shred of evidence, either in or out of the Bible, that similar powers were ever assigned to deacons as such. We may, indeed, call our ruling elders by the name of *deacons* if we please. And so we may call them *dervishes* or *imams* as with the Turks, and say that by these titles we mean to designate the members of the parochial presbytery or consistory in each church.

But the real questions which present themselves for solution are such as these: Is it agreeable to the New Testament model, that in every Christian congregation there be a plurality of pious and prudent men, invested with the office of inspection and government in the church? Or should all ecclesiastical authority and discipline be exercised by the pastor alone? If the former is admitted, then should the body of spiritual rulers be styled *elders*, or *deacons*? If the latter name is contended for, as the more scriptural, then what passage of Scripture or early uninspired history can be mentioned, which countenances the application of this title to ecclesiastical rulers as such? The truth is, it is not perceived how anyone can consistently maintain that the officers whom the Presbyterians usually call ruling elders, are really deacons, and ought to be so designated, without abandoning the church session as destitute of all scriptural warrant. Whoever does this, however, must hold either that the pastor of each church has the whole government and discipline in his own hands, and that the persons called *elders* or *deacons* are only a set of convenient advisers, without any rightful judicial authority; or else that all authority ought to be exercised by the body of the communicants, and every question of admission or discipline submitted to their vote. In the latter case, he may be a very pious and excellent Independent; but he has no claim to the character of a Presbyterian.

It is deeply to be regretted that the office of deacon in its true nature, and highly important and scriptural character, is not to be found in many Presbyterian churches. In some, this office is wholly dropped. Neither the name nor the thing is to be found in them. In others, the ruling elders, or the members of the church session, are constantly styled *deacons*, and scarcely ever designated by any other title; while the office really indicated in Scripture by that title is not retained. And in a third class of our churches, those who are meant for real deacons (that is, who are chosen and set apart as such, as well as called by that name), are employed in functions for which the office of deacon was never instituted. It is feared that the cases are few in which the offices of elder and deacon are *both* retained, and the appropriate functions of each distinctly maintained.

Perhaps in a majority of our churches, the office of deacon, strictly so called, is entirely dropped. This, it is believed, is also virtually the case to a considerable extent in the Church of Scotland, and among the large and respectable body of Presbyterians in the North of Ireland. The origin of this extensive disuse of an unquestionable scriptural office, is probably to be traced to the peculiar form of the provision made in some countries for the support of the poor; it was supposed to render the deaconship as a separate office, unnecessary. Deacons had a place in the original organization of the Protestant church of Scotland, and for many years after the Reformation were universally retained and much employed in that church as a distinct class of officers. But in later times the office has either been allowed to fall into disuse altogether, or as is more common, it has been united with that of ruling elder, in the same individuals. So that the ruling elders in the church of Scotland are generally expected, and undertake to act as deacons also. The same arrangement, it is believed, is also generally adopted among the Presbyterians in Ireland.

As to those churches in our own country in which the office of deacon has been allowed to fall into disuse altogether, this event is certainly to be regretted on a variety of accounts; among others, for the following reasons:

1. Every scriptural precedent is worthy of serious regard. The office of deacon was evidently brought into the church by inspired men. It is not contended that it is *essential* to an organized church to have officers of this class inasmuch as the church undoubtedly did without them for a short time after its first organization. Yet as the office is an institution of infinite wisdom, and necessary to a full array of all the officers which belong to the visible church, it seems expedient to retain it in all cases in which it is possible.
2. We know that in every Jewish synagogue, before the coming of Christ, there was a class of officers whose peculiar duty it was to collect and dispense the monies contributed for the support of the poor. This seems to have been an invariable part of the synagogue system. And as that system was evidently the model on which the Christian church was formed, we may presume that a feature of it which is so strongly recommended by age and experience, is worthy of adoption.
3. Although some churches may plead as an excuse for discontinuing the use of this office, that they have no church poor, and therefore no occasion for the appropriate services of deacons, yet the question is, should they allow this to be the case? What, even if the laws of the state make provision of a decent kind for all the poor? Are there not generally found a greater or lesser number of persons who have seen more comfortable days, but are now reduced in means? They are commonly within the bounds, and even among the communicants of every church of any extent, and of ordinary standing in point of age.

These include aged widows, persons of delicate retiring spirits, who are struggling with the most severe privations of poverty in secret, but cannot bring themselves to apply to the civil officer for aid as paupers. They would at the same time, be made comparatively comfortable by a pittance now and then administered in the tender and affectionate spirit of the gospel. Now, should the church take no measures for searching out such members who are not and cannot be reached by the legal provision, and kindly ministering to their comfort? But if there is no class of officers whose appropriate duty it is to make this whole concern an object of their attention, it will too often be neglected, and thus the interest of Christian charity will seriously suffer. It is not a sufficient answer to this argument to say, as those who philosophize on the subject of pauperism say, and to a certain extent with great truth, that this very provision would probably *invite application*, and perhaps, in some instances, induce improper *reliance* upon it, to the neglect of economy and diligence. Supposing this is the case in some decree; would it not be better to relieve some portion of the poverty brought on by improvidence, than to allow humble, tender piety to pine in secret, unpitied, and unrelieved, under the pressure of that helpless penury which was induced by the hand of a sovereign God? Is no pity, no active sympathy due from the church, even to indigence notoriously induced by sin?

The considerations which have been suggested, indeed furnish a good argument for having deacons of suitable character — men of piety, wisdom, benevolence, practical acquaintance with the world and with human nature, who would be likely to perform their duty with discernment, prudence, and unfeigned Christian charity, cautiously guarding against the evils to which the relief they are commissioned to bear is exposed. But there no argument at all against affording such relief when it is really needed.

4. It is a great error to suppose that deacons cannot be appropriately and profitably employed in various other ways besides ministering to the poor of the church. They might, with great propriety, be made the managers of all the money-tables, or fiscal concerns of each congregation. And for this purpose, it might be incorporated (if it were thought necessary by law), so that they might be enabled to regularly hold and employ all the property of the church, real and personal. But, even if it were thought inexpedient that boards of deacons should allowed to thus supersede the boards of “trustees,” which are, commonly employed at present to manage each ecclesiastical treasury — *still*, there are very important services in reference to pecuniary concerns, which they might manage. And it is believed this would be greatly beneficial to the church if they were considered as bound to manage this property at all times, and should actually manage with wisdom, energy, and zeal. I refer to the church’s contributions to the various great objects of Christian enterprise which distinguish the present day. No one who looks into the Bible, or who knows anything of the Christian spirit, can for a moment doubt that these contributions to the cause of the Bible ought to be continued, and greatly increased — of foreign and domestic missions; of Sabbath schools; and of the various other Christian and benevolent undertakings for promoting knowledge, virtue, and happiness among men, both temporal and eternal.

It is quite evident, too, that these contributions ought to be perfectly *voluntary*, and that any attempt to render them otherwise, would be both unscriptural and mischievous. But would it not tend to render the whole business of liberality to the cause of Christ easier, more regular, more abundant, and ultimately more productive, if it were placed under the enlightened advice and wise management of six or eight deacons in each church? Suppose



the pastor and the elders of every congregation were animated with a proper spirit on this subject, and to be habitually uttering and diffusing proper sentiments. And suppose the whole business of collecting the contributions, and paying them over to the respective treasuries for which they were destined, were devolved on the deacons, as an executive board, who might call to their aid, and would really *confer* as well as *receive* a benefit, by calling to their aid in the details of collection, a number of active, pious sub-agents? Can anyone doubt that the contributions of the churches would be more systematic, more regular, more conveniently received, better proportioned; and that a part, at least, and in some cases a *large* part of the expenses paid to travelling agents, would be saved for the cause of Christ? The truth is, an enlightened, active, pious board of deacons might place this whole subject on such a footing. And when they had gotten it fairly arranged and underway, they might manage it in such a manner that, without adding in the least degree to the burdens of the people, would render their contributions more productive, as well as easier and more economical in every part of their management.

With respect to the mode of disposing of the deacon's office adopted extensively in our sister churches of Scotland and Ireland, <sup>4</sup> and in a few instances in *this* country — namely, laying it on the ruling elders, and uniting both offices in the same individual — it is undoubtedly liable to very strong objections, as it will appear from the following considerations.

1. One office is quite enough to be borne by the same person — especially an office so important, so responsible, and so abundantly sufficient to employ the heart, hands, and time of the most active and zealous, as that of the ruling elder. However pious, wise, and unwearied he may be, he will find the work pertaining to his office as elder enough, and more than enough, to requisition all his powers — especially in this day of enlarged Christian activity. Why then add another office to one already occupied, if he is faithful to the utmost extent of his faculties? Similar remarks may be made to a considerable extent concerning the deacon's office. It is enough when faithfully discharged, to occupy all the leisure time of the most active and faithful incumbent. *Both* certainly cannot be undertaken by the same individual, without some of the duties pertaining to one or the other being neglected.

2. Where there are suitable candidates for office among the communicants of a church, it is commonly wise to distribute offices as extensively among them as circumstances will conveniently allow. If indeed there is a dearth of proper materials (gifted men) for making ecclesiastical officers, the difficulty must be surmounted in the best way that is practicable. But if there are individuals enough to sustain it, the diffusion of office power among a considerable number, is so far from being an evil, that it is manifestly, and maybe *highly* advantageous. It brings a greater number to take an interest in the affairs of the church. It makes a greater number intimately acquainted with the concerns of the church. And by calling a greater number to pray, and speak, and act on behalf of the church, it tends to promote the spiritual and maybe the everlasting benefit of them and their children. Why then heap a plurality of offices upon a single person? It is depriving the church of a manifest advantage; and it may be the means of depriving the individuals themselves of both comfort and edification.

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<sup>4</sup> The same mixture of offices has also long existed, it is believed, in the Church in Geneva. See Le Mercier's, Ch. Hist. of Gen. p. 214.

3. If there is not an absolute *incompatibility* between the offices of ruling elder and deacon, there is at least such an *interference* between their respective duties, that it is certainly undesirable, and should by all means be avoided. There is a collision in this case analogous to that which takes place when a man visits the sick in the double character of a physician and a minister of the Gospel. For although in many cases, the duties and services of each character may happily harmonize and help one another, yet perhaps in many more, it will appear to the discerning eye that they had better be separated. When an elder, as such, goes forth to discharge his official duties, it is to promote the spiritual interest of the flock of which he is made one of the “overseers.” To this purpose it is important that he have the most unreserved and confidential access to all the members of the flock and their children, and that nothing should be allowed to intervene which was adapted to disguise the feelings, to divide the attention, or to clog the operations of either party. But when this elder visits the poor for the sake of benefitting their souls, they may receive him with smiles, with apparent cordiality, and with much pious talk — chiefly for the concealed purpose of increasing the allowance which, as *deacon*, he may be disposed to minister to them. Or when he visits them as a Deacon, they may feel jealous or alienated on account of some supposed deficiency in their allowance, and will of course in some measure close their minds against him as their spiritual guide. Or when the mind of the Presbyterian-Deacon himself becomes divided and perplexed between the rival claims of these two classes of duties, less good is done, less pure unmingled feeling is exercised, and less comfort is enjoyed on either side. <sup>5</sup>

On all these accounts, the two offices in question, because they are entirely different in their nature, should undoubtedly be separated in practice, to be discharged by different persons, and to be carefully guarded against that interference which is adapted to render both less useful.

We are led, then, by the foregoing facts and arguments, to the following conclusions:

1. That the deacon is a divinely instituted officer, and ought to be retained in the church.
2. That the function to which the deacon was appointed by the apostles, was to manage the *pecuniary affairs* of the church, and especially to preside over the collections and disbursements for the poor.
3. That deacons should therefore not only be men of piety, but also of judgment, prudence, knowledge of the world, and weight of character.
4. That in the primitive church, preaching was not any part of the deacon’s duty, but came in among other human innovations, as corruption gained ground.
5. That there is no warrant whatever for assigning to deacons the function of government in the church; and their undertaking any such function, is nothing less than ecclesiastical usurpation.
6. That confounding the office of deacon with that of ruling elder, is an unwarranted confusion, both of names and offices, which are entirely distinct.

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<sup>5</sup> See this subject treated in a striking manner, and at considerable length, in Dr. Chalmer’s *Christian and Civic Economy of Large Towns*. Vol. i. chapter vii.

7. That even uniting these two offices in the same person is by no means advisable, and tends to materially impair the comfort and usefulness of both.

8. That deacons ought to be ordained by the imposition of hands. In this ordination, the hands of the pastor and of the eldership ought to be laid on. I do not know the shadow of a reason why this solemnity should be omitted. The venerable Dr. Dwight, in his System of Theology, when treating the office of deacons, unequivocally declares his conviction that the laying on of hands should always be employed in setting them apart; and he pronounces the omission of it to be “incapable, so far as he knows, of any defence.” The disregard of scriptural example in the omission, is as painful as it is obvious and unquestionable.

9. That the deacons, though they should always, if possible, be present at the meetings of the church session for the sake of giving information and aiding in counsel, can have no vote as church rulers; and therefore cannot give their vote in the admission or exclusion of members, or in any case of ecclesiastical discipline.

## CHAPTER 11.

### ***THE PROPER QUALIFICATIONS FOR RULING ELDER.***

The account which has been given of the nature and duties of the office of ruling elder, is adapted to reflect much light on the qualifications by which the one who bears it ought to be distinguished. Those who are called to such extensive, interesting, and highly important spiritual duties — duties which enter so deeply into the comfort and edification of the church of God — it surely requires no formal argument to show that they ought to possess a character in some degree corresponding with the sphere in which they are appointed to move. There cannot be a plainer dictate of common sense. Yet to attempt a brief sketch of the more important of the qualifications demanded for this office, may not be altogether unprofitable.

And here it may be observed, at the outset, that it is by no means necessary that ruling elders be aged persons. For although it cannot be doubted that the title is literally expressive of age; and although it is equally certain that originally the office was generally conferred on men somewhat advanced in life, as being most likely (other things being equal) to possess wisdom, prudence, experience, and weight of character — yet from a very early period, the term came to be a mere *title* of office, without any respect to the *years* of the individual who bore it. This is evident, not only from the history of Jewish practice, but also from the statements of the New Testament. If Timothy was not merely a ruling but also a teaching elder, though so young a man that the Apostle said to him, *Let no man despise your youth*; and if in every age of the church, young men have been considered as qualified on the score of age, to be elders who labor in the word and doctrine as well as rule; then there can be no doubt that young men (if otherwise well qualified) may with propriety be appointed elders to assist in ruling the church of God. Indeed, where such persons are to be found, with other suitable qualifications, it is expedient to introduce some in younger life into the eldership of every church. This is not only that there may be individuals in the body fitted for more active duties, but also that some of the number may have that kind of official training, and that familiarity with ecclesiastical business, which early experience and long habit alone can give.

It may be remarked, however, that although neither Scripture nor the constitution of the Presbyterian church, prescribes any absolute rule with respect to the age of those who may be considered as candidates for the eldership, yet it is very manifest that those who are either minors in age, or “novices” in the Christian character and profession, should by no means be elected to this office in ordinary circumstances. In the church of Scotland, the rule is that no one can be chosen an elder who is not twenty-one years of age. A similar regulation, it is believed, exists in some other foreign churches; and it may be considered as a dictate of common prudence.

But though the circumstance of age, as a general rule, does not enter into the essential qualifications of ruling elders, there are other qualifications which are highly important, and indeed indispensable. These are stated by the inspired apostle in writing to Timothy in the following comprehensive and pointed language:

“An elder must be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children; one who rules well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; not accused of riot, or unruly; not self-willed; not soon angry; not given to wine; no striker; not given

to filthy lucre; but a lover of hospitality; a lover of good men; sober, just, holy, temperate, sound in the faith, in charity, in patience.”

See 1Tim 3.1-7 compared with Tit 1.6-8 and 2.2; these passages evidently appear (on tracing the connection) to be equally applicable to teaching and ruling.

The design of appointing persons to the office of ruling elder is not to pay them a compliment; not to give them an opportunity of figuring as speakers in judicatories; not to create the pageants of ecclesiastical ceremony — but to secure able, faithful, and truly devoted counsellors and rulers of the church; to obtain wise and efficient guides who will not only go along with the flock in their journey heavenward, but go before them in everything that pertains to Christian duty.

It cannot indeed be doubted that *every* member of the Christian church is bound to exhibit a holy, devout, and exemplary life; to have his mind well stored with religious knowledge; to *be able to give an answer to everyone who asks a reason for the hope that is in him*; and to avoid everything that is criminal in itself, that may be just cause of offence to his brethren, or that may have even the appearance of evil. But it is equally manifest that all these qualifications are still *more important*, and required in a still *higher degree*, in those who are entrusted with the spiritual inspection and regulation of the church. As they occupy a place of more honor and authority than the other members of the church, so they also occupy a station of greater responsibility. The eyes of hundreds will be upon them as elders, which were not upon them as private Christians. Their brethren and sisters over whom they are placed in the Lord, will naturally look up to them for advice, for instruction, for aid in the spiritual life, and for a shining example. The expectation is reasonable, and should not be disappointed. The qualifications of elders should therefore correspond with it in some good measure.

1. An elder, then, should first of all be a man of unfeigned and approved piety. It is to be regretted when the piety of any member of the church is doubtful, or evidently feeble and wavering. It is deplorable when any who name the name of Christ manifest so much indecision in their profession; so much timidity and unsteadiness in their resistance to error and sin; so much conformity to the world; and so little of that undaunted, ardent, and thorough adherence to their professed principles — as to leave it dubious with many, whether they are “on the Lord’s side” or not. But how much more deplorable it is when anything of this kind appears in those who are appointed to watch, to preside, and to exert an extensive influence over a portion of the family of Christ! What is to be expected when “watchmen on the walls of Zion” (for ruling elders are undoubtedly to be regarded as such) appear merely as *beacons* to warn private Christians of what ought to be avoided, rather than as *models* to guide, to attract, and to cheer them on to all that is spiritual, and holy, and becoming the gospel?

Can he who is either destitute of piety, or who has but a small portion of it, engage in the arduous and deeply spiritual duties of the ruling elder with comfort to himself, or with any reasonable hope of success? It *cannot* be supposed. To fit ecclesiastical rulers for acting in their appropriate character, and for performing the work which pertains to it, with cordial diligence, faithfulness, and perseverance, will require cordial and decisive attachment to the service of the church; minds intent upon the work; hearts filled with love to Jesus and to the souls of men; and “preferring Jerusalem above their chief joy.” Unless they are animated with this affectionate interest in their work; unless they are

habitually impelled by an enlightened and cordial attachment to the great cause in which they are engaged, they will soon become weary of their arduous and self-denying labors. They will find waiting on the flock, visiting and praying with the sick, instructing the serious and inquiring, correcting the disorderly, watching over the spiritual interests of all, and attending the various judicatories of the church, an irksome task. But with such a zeal as has been described, they will be ready to contend for the truth, to engage in the most self-denying duties, indeed, to “spend and be spent,” for Christ. To promote the best interests of Zion will be their “food and drink.” No labors, no trials, no difficulties will move them; nor will they “count their lives dear to themselves, so that they may finish their course with joy, and accomplish the work which they have received from the Lord Jesus.” A few such elders in every church would, with the divine blessing, do more to silence infidelity; to strike even the scorner dumb; to promote the triumph of gospel truth; and to rouse, sustain and bear forward the cause of vital piety, than hundreds of those ministers and elders who act as if they supposed that supplying the little details of an ecclesiastical formality was the whole purpose of their official appointment. And in truth, we have no reason to expect, in general, that the piety of the mass of members in any church, will rise much higher than that of their rulers and guides. Where the latter are either lifeless formalists, or at best, but “babes in Christ,” we will rarely find many under their care with more vitality or a superior stature to theirs.

2. Next to piety, it is important that a ruling elder be possessed of good sense and sound judgment. Without this he will be wholly unfit to act in the various difficult and delicate cases which may arise in the discharge of his duty. A man of weak and childish mind, however fervent his piety, is by no means adapted to the station of an ecclesiastical ruler, counsellor, and guide. He who bears the office in question, is called to have intercourse with all classes of people; to engage in the most arduous and trying duties; and to deliberate and decide on some of the most perplexing questions that can come before the human mind. Can it be doubted that good sense and solid judgment are indispensable to the due discharge of such official work as this? How would a judge on the bench, or a magistrate in his office, be likely to get along without this qualification? It is much *more* important, if possible, that the *ecclesiastical ruler* be enlightened and judicious; because he deliberates and decides on more momentous subjects; and because he has no other than moral power with which to enforce his decisions. Moses therefore spoke the language of good sense, as well as of inspired wisdom, when he said to the people of Israel, “Choose wise and understanding men, known among your tribes, and I will make them rulers over you,” Deu 1.13. This point indeed, it would seem, can scarcely be made plainer than common sense makes it; and it might therefore be considered as foreclosing all illustration, if some churches did not appear disposed to test how far Infinite Wisdom is to be believed, when it pronounces by the prophet, a woe against those who choose “babes to rule over them.” (Isa 3.4)

3. A ruling elder ought to be sound in the faith, and well-informed in relation to gospel truth. The elder who is not orthodox in his creed, instead of contributing as he should to build up the church in the knowledge and love of the truth, will of course be the means of scattering error, as far as his influence extends. And whoever is not well informed on the subject of Christian doctrine, will not know whether he is promoting the one or the other. Accordingly, when this class of officers is ordained in our church, we call upon them to do what we do not require from the private members of the church — namely, to solemnly

and publicly adopt the Confession of Faith “as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.” When this is considered, and also that they are expected, to a certain extent, to be instructors and guides in divine things to many of those committed to their oversight; and above all, that they will often be called to deliberate on charges of heresy as well as immorality; and to sit in judgment on the doctrinal belief not only of candidates for admission into the church as private members, but also on cases of alleged aberration from the truth in ministers of the gospel — then the necessity of their being “sound in the faith,” and of their having enlightened and clear views of the system of revealed truth, is too plain to need argument for its support.

The truth is, the ruling elder who is active, zealous, and faithful, will have occasion almost every day, to discriminate between truth and error; to act as a guardian of the church’s orthodoxy; to pass his judgment, either privately or judicially, on real or supposed departures from it; and to instruct the inexperienced and the doubting in the great doctrines of our holy religion. All elders are not expected to be profound theologians, anymore than all ministers are. Yet the former as well as the latter should have a general and accurate acquaintance with the gospel system, and be ready to defend its leading doctrines by a ready, pertinent, and conclusive reference to scriptural testimony; and thus be able to “separate between the precious and the vile,” in theory as well as in practice. Surely this is as little as can possibly be demanded of those who are placed as leaders and guides in the house of God.

4. Again, an elder ought to be a man of eminent prudence. Of course, *prudence* here does not mean that spurious characteristic which calls itself by this name, but which should rather be called *timidity*, or a criminal shrinking from duty, on the plea that “there is a lion in the way.” Yet while we condemn this as unworthy of a Christian, and especially unworthy of a Christian counsellor and ruler, there is a prudence which is genuine, and greatly to be coveted. This is no other than *practical Christian wisdom* which not only discerns what is right, but also adopts the best mode of doing it; which is not at all inconsistent with firmness, and the highest moral courage, but which happily regulates and directs it. It has been often observed that there is a right and a wrong way of doing the best things. The thing done may be excellent in itself; but it may be done in a manner, at a time, and attended with circumstances, which will be likely to disgust and repel, and thus prevent all benefit. Hence a man who is characteristically eccentric, undignified, rash, precipitate, or indiscreetly talkative, should by no means be selected as an ecclesiastical ruler. He will probably do more mischief than good; he will generally create more divisions than he heals; and he will *generate* offences rather than *remove* them. Perhaps there is no situation in human society which more imperiously calls for delicacy, caution, reserve, and the most vigilant discretion, than that of an ecclesiastical ruler.

Say popular rumor begins to charge a church member with some delinquency, either in faith or practice. If one of the elders, under the notion of being “faithful,” implicitly credits the story, and goes about making inquiries respecting its truth, winking and insinuating, and thus contributing to extend its circulation — however pure his motives, before he is aware, he may implicate himself in the charge of slander. He may become so situated in respect to the supposed culprit, as to render it altogether improper that he should sit in judgment on his case. The maxim of the wise man, “be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath,” Jas 1.19, applies to every human being, especially to every professing Christian.

But *above all*, it applies to every one who is appointed to maintain truth, order, purity, peace, and love in the Church of God.

It requires much prudence to judge when it is proper to commence the exercise of discipline against a supposed offender. Discipline is an important, no, a *vital* matter in the Christian church. But it may be commenced indiscreetly, vexatiously, when that which is alleged cannot be shown to be an offence against the divine law; or when, though it is a really censurable offence, there is no probability that it can be proved. To attempt the exercise of discipline in such cases, is to disgrace it; to convert it from one of the most important means of grace, into an instrument of rashness, petulance, and childish precipitancy. Often, *very* often, the very name of discipline has been rendered odious, the peace of families and neighborhoods grievously disturbed, the influence of ecclesiastical judicatories destroyed, and the cause of religion deeply wounded, by judicial proceedings which either should never have been commenced, or to which the smallest measure of prudence would have given a very different direction.

The importance of the subject constrains me to add that prudence, *much* prudence, is also imperiously demanded in the exercise of a dignified and cautious reserve while an ecclesiastical process is pending. One great reason why it is thought better by Presbyterians to exercise discipline by a bench of wise and pious ecclesiastical senators, rather than by the vote of the whole body of church members, is that the public discussion and decision of many things concerning personal character, which the exercise of discipline necessarily discloses respecting *others*, as well as the *culprit*, is adapted in many cases to do more harm than good, especially before the process is closed. To guard against this evil, it is very important that the elders carefully avoid all unseasonable disclosures in respect to the business which may be at any time before the Session. Until they have done what will be deemed proper in a delicate case, it is surely unwise, by thoughtless blabbing, to throw obstacles in their own way, and perhaps to defeat the whole purpose which they have in view. Yet how often, by one *imprudent* violation of this plain rule, has the discipline of the church been degraded or frustrated, and the character of those who administered it exposed to ridicule?

These and similar considerations, serve to clearly show that no degree of piety can supersede the necessity of prudence in ecclesiastical rulers; and that of *all* characters in a congregation, an indiscreet, meddling, garrulous, gossiping, tattling elder, is one of the most pestiferous.<sup>1</sup>

5. It is important that an elder be “of good report among those who are outside,” 1Tim 3.7. The circumstance of his being chosen to the office by the members of the church does, indeed, afford a strong presumption that he sustains among them an unexceptionable character. But it is also of great importance that this class of officers, as well as those who “labor in the word and doctrine,” should stand well with those who are *without*, as well as those who are *within* the pale of the Christian community. In discharging his official duties, the ecclesiastical ruler may often be called to converse with the worldly and profane, who have no particular regard either for his Master or his office. Indeed, he must be almost every day that he lives, the object of the scrutiny of such men. In this case, it is particularly desirable that his personal character be such as to command universal respect

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<sup>1</sup> *Pestiferous*: a contaminating and infectious pest; likely to spread disease and cause an epidemic. – WHG



and confidence; that it be not liable to any particular suspicion or imputation; but that, on the contrary, it possesses such weight and respectability in the community that it will render him an aid and a blessing to his ecclesiastical connection. To this end, his unbending integrity in all the walks of life; his spotless probity and honor in every pecuniary transaction; his gravity and dignity in all the intercourse of society; his exemplary government of his own family; his abstraction from all unhallowed conformity to the world — these ought to present, in some good measure, a *pattern* of Christian consistency. It is saying little in favor of a church officer, to allege that his reputation is such that he *does no harm* to the ecclesiastical body with which he is connected. It is to be regretted if he does not *promote its benefit* every day by his active services, and extend its influence by the lustre of his example.

6. A ruling elder ought to be a man of public spirit and enlarged views. The one who is called by his official duty to plan and labor for the extension of the Redeemer’s kingdom, surely should not, of all men, have a narrow and illiberal mind; to be sparing of labor, parsimonious in feeling and habit, or content with small attainments. It is eminently desirable, then, that a ruling elder be a man of expanded heart toward other denominations, as far as is consistent with entire fidelity to scriptural truth and order; that he aim high in spiritual attainment and progress; that he be willing to *give* much, to *labor* much, and to *make sacrifices* for the cause of Christ; and that he continually look and pray for the further enlargement and prosperity of Zion. Such a man will not be willing to see the church fall asleep, or stagnate. Such a man’s mind will be teeming with desires, plans, and prayers for the advancement of the Saviour’s cause. Such a man will not content himself, nor be satisfied to see others contenting themselves with a little round of frigid formalities, or with the interests of a single parish. But the aspirations of his heart, and the active efforts of his life, will be directed to the extension and prosperity of the church in all its borders, and to the universal establishment and triumph of that gospel which is “the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes,” Rom 1.16.

The qualification of which we speak has been in all ages (and from the nature of the case, it must *ever be*) of inestimable importance in every ruler and guide of the church. But we may venture to pronounce that it was never so important to the church that she should have such rulers, as it is at the present day. Now that she is awaking from her slumber, and arousing to a sense of her long-forgotten obligations <sup>2</sup> — now that she is, as we hope, arising from the dust, and “putting on her beautiful garments,” and looking abroad in the length and breadth of those conquests which have been promised her by her Almighty Head — now that all her resources, physical and moral, are called for in every direction, with an emphasis and a solemnity never before equalled — is it not *manifest* that in such a stage of her course, all who undertake to be her counsellors and guides, ought to be neither drones nor cowards, neither parsimonious of labor and sacrifice, nor disposed to sit down contented with small acquisitions? Ruling elders at the present day have perhaps an opportunity to serve the church more extensively and effectually than ever before. How desirable and important is it then, that they have a heart in some measure commensurate with the calls and opportunities of the day in which their lot is cast! How desirable that they cherish those enlarged and liberal views, both of duty and of effort, which become

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<sup>2</sup> Miller is writing this during the Second Great Awakening in America, and an age of Missions. What he does not and cannot know, is that this same age will give birth to numerous cults and heresies; and later the Industrial Age will issue in rampant materialism. It makes this plea even more poignant and timely. — WHG

those who are called to a conspicuous and interesting part in a cause which is dear to all holy beings! So important is this, that it is probable we will generally find that in liberality of contribution to the various objects of Christian effort, and in enlargement of mind to desire and seek the extension of the Redeemer's kingdom, the mass of the members of any church may commonly be graduated by the character of their elders. If the leaders and guides of the church are destitute of public spirit, and are not found taking the lead in large plans, labors, and sacrifices for extending the reign of knowledge, truth, and righteousness, then it will be strange indeed if a more enlarged spirit is found prevailing among the generality of their fellow members.

7. The last qualification on which I will dwell, as important to the office before us, is *ardent zeal*, and a spirit of *importunate prayer*. Large views, and liberal plans and donations, will not be sufficient without this. The truth is, the church of God has the most serious and unceasing obstacles to encounter in every step of her progress. *As long as she is faithful, her course is never smooth or unobstructed*. In maintaining truth, in guarding the claims of gospel holiness, and in sustaining discipline, the enmity of the human heart will not fail to manifest itself, and to offer more or less resistance to that which is good. The worldly and profane will ever be found in the ranks of determined opposition. And alas! that some who bear the name of Christ, are not infrequently found in the same ranks – thus grieving the hearts and trying the patience of those who are called to act as the representatives and leaders of the church. To meet and overcome difficulties of this kind, requires all the fixedness of purpose, and all the zeal in the service of Christ, which his most devoted servants can bring to their work.

Besides all this, there is much in the daily duties of the ruling elder which puts to a very serious test all his devotedness to the cause of his Master. He is called to live like a minister of the gospel, in the very atmosphere of prayer and religious conversation. In the chamber of the sick and dying; in conversing with the anxious inquirer, and the perplexed or desponding believer; in the private circle, and in the social meeting for prayer; abroad and at home; in the house and by the way – it must be “his food and drink” to be found ministering to the best interests of his fellow men. So that if he has but little zeal, but little taste for prayer, but little anxiety for the welfare of immortal souls, then he will not, he *cannot* enter with proper feeling into his appropriate employments. But if he is animated with a proper spirit, he will find it pleasant to be thus employed. Instead of shunning scenes and opportunities of usefulness, he will diligently seek them. And instead of finding them wearisome, he will feel no happiness purer and richer than that which he experiences in such occupations as these.

It is evident, then, not only that the ecclesiastical ruler ought to have unfeigned piety, but that his piety should be of that decisive character, and accompanied with that fervent zeal, which bears its possessor forward without weariness in the discharge of self-denying duties. The higher the degree in which he possesses this characteristic, provided it is accompanied with wisdom, prudence, and a knowledge of human nature, the greater his usefulness will probably be in the church which he serves; and assuredly, the greater his own personal enjoyment will be in rendering that service.

It is more than possible that this view of the qualifications that are proper for the office which we are considering, may cause some, when solicited to undertake it, to draw back under the conscientious impression that they do not have the characteristics which are

essential to the faithful discharge of its duties. And it would be wrong to say that there are not some cases in which such an impression ought to be admitted. There can be no doubt that there are those who bear this office who should never have accepted it. To this class unquestionably belong all those who have no taste for the appropriate duties of the office, and who do not resolve to perform them sedulously and faithfully. But let no humble devoted follower of Jesus Christ, who truly desires to serve and glorify him, and who is willing from the heart to do all that God will enable him to do for the promotion of the Redeemer's kingdom — let that man not be deterred by the representation which has been given, from accepting the office if called to it by his Christian brethren. The deeper his sense of his own unfitness, the more likely he will be to apply unceasingly and importunately for heavenly aid. And the nearer he lives to the throne of grace, the more largely he will partake of that wisdom and strength which he needs. There are no doubt some, as was said, who are really unqualified for this office. But in general, it may be maintained that those who have the deepest impression of the importance and arduousness of its duties, and of their own lack of adequate qualifications, are far better prepared for those duties than those who advance to the discharge of them with unwavering confidence and self-complacency.

## CHAPTER 12.

### ***THE ELECTION OF RULING ELDERS.***

Under this general head a variety of questions occur, the solution of which is important.

I. In the first place, who are the proper *electors* of ruling elders? This question is not definitely resolved by the “Form of Government” of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. Its language is as follows:

“Every congregation shall elect persons to the office of ruling elder, and to the office of deacon, or either of them, in the mode most approved and in use in that congregation; but in all cases, the persons elected must be male members in full communion in the church in which they are to exercise their office.”

When a new church is to be organized, and when, of course, there are no elders already in office, application ought to be made to the Presbytery, stating the wishes of those who contemplate forming the church, requesting their sanction, and also the appointment of one or more of their number to preside in the election and ordination of the candidates for the respective offices of elders and deacons. The person or persons thus appointed by the presbytery to act in the case, after causing due and regular notice of their appointment and its object to be given, ought to meet with the members of the congregation: to preach on the subject which occasions the meeting; to explain the nature and importance of the office; and having done this, to call upon those who may be qualified as electors to give their votes for those of their number that they wish to have as their spiritual rulers. Having done this openly in the face of the congregation, the ordination of the elders elect may either take place on the spot before the assembly separates; or it may be postponed to a future time, as may be judged most expedient. By this is meant, that the election in this case, being made immediately by a popular vote of the members of the church, there is no need to postpone the ordination for the purpose of propounding from the pulpit the names of the persons elected, as is necessary and practised in other cases. In the case supposed, the full concurrence of the persons entitled to vote in the choice made, has already been ascertained by their suffrages. <sup>1</sup>

In this choice, the votes may be given either *viva voce* (by voice), or by ballot. The latter method, however, is by far the most common, and is evidently the most proper for a variety of reasons, some of which will readily occur to every enlightened and delicate mind.

Concerning the persons who are properly entitled to vote in such an election, there has been some diversity of opinion. There can be no question that all the male members of the church in what is called “full communion” have this right. In this all are agreed. But it has been maintained, not indeed with the same unanimity, yet it is believed by a large majority of the most judicious and enlightened judges, and probably on the most correct principles, that all baptized members of the church — who must of course be regarded as subject to the government and discipline administered by these rulers — are entitled to a voice in their election. And where there are female heads of families, who bear the relation of membership to the church in either of the senses just mentioned, and who are not represented by some qualified male relative on the occasion, it has been judged proper to

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<sup>1</sup> *Suffrage*: the right to vote; presumably *adult membership* in the church, and not mere attendance. – WHG

allow them to vote in the choice of ruling elders, as is generally the case in the choice of a pastor.

However, there seems, to be some good reason for restricting the right to vote for ruling elders within narrower bounds than are commonly assigned in the choice of a pastor. In that choice, in most congregations, all pew-holders,<sup>2</sup> and all stated (regular) worshippers who are stated contributors to the support of the pastor, in their just proportion — whether baptized or not, whether willing to submit to the exercise of discipline or not, and whether of fair moral character or not — are considered as entitled to a vote. But in the election of a *pastor*, there is one security against an improper choice which does not exist in the case of a *ruling elder*; namely, that the call must be submitted to the presbytery, and receive the sanction of that body before it can be prosecuted. Whereas no such security exists in the case of a ruling elder. Of course, if all pew-holders and pecuniary supporters, without any reference to membership or character, were allowed to vote in the election of the latter class of officers, they might choose persons to the last degree unsuitable for the office, and adapted to destroy rather than benefit the church. Besides, everyone, however heterodox or immoral, may be a stated attendee at public worship; and every stated attendee at the worship of any church, may be said to have an interest in the character of the pastor, and a right, as far as possible, to be pleased in the choice. But no one can be said to have any part or particular interest in the *discipline* of the church, except those who are subject to its operation. This can be the case with none but those who are *members* of the church.

Accordingly, the General Assembly of the church, which met in 1829, in answer to a question solemnly referred to it by one of the western presbyteries,<sup>3</sup> adopted and sent to the churches the following judgment in relation to the subject before us.

“It is the opinion of this General Assembly, that the office of ruling elder is an office in the church of Christ; that ruling elders, as such, according to our Confession of Faith, book I. on Government, chapter v., are the representatives of the people, by whom they are chosen for the purpose of exercising government and discipline in the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ; that the discipline lawfully exercised by them, is the discipline exercised through them by their constituents, in whose name, and by whose authority they act in all that they do. <sup>4</sup> To suppose, therefore, that an unbaptized person, not belonging to the visible kingdom of the Redeemer, might vote at the election of ruling elders, would be to establish the principle that the children of this world might, through their representatives, exercise discipline in the church of God — which is manifestly unscriptural, and contrary to the standards of our church. RESOLVED, therefore, that the question in the said overture be answered in the negative.”

Where there is already an existing church session, and the object is to add to the number of its members, in this case the election of new elders may be made in any one of several

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<sup>2</sup> *Pew-holder*: someone who has “paid for a pew” — meaning a substantial financial supporter. — WHG

<sup>3</sup> The question submitted was in these words — “Ought an unbaptized person, who yet pays his proportion for the support of a congregation, to be permitted to vote for ruling elders?”

<sup>4</sup> It is well known that the General Assembly, in this clause of their judgment, did not mean to deny that ruling elders, in the rightful discharge of their duties, act in the name and by the authority of Christ. This great truth is plainly recognized in a preceding clause. But it is merely to say that they act as the representatives, and on behalf of the members of the church at large; so that when a complaint is brought to the eldership, it is, strictly speaking, according to the ancient language, “telling it to the Church.”

methods: either by the vote of the members of the church at large, as already stated; or by a nomination on the part of the existing elders, proposed to the church, and considered as their choice if not objected to; or by the nomination of double the number proposed to be chosen by the session, and a choice by the members of the church out of the list so nominated.

In the church of Scotland, “New elders are chosen by the voice of the session.<sup>5</sup> After their election has been agreed upon, their names are read from the pulpit in a paper called an *edict*, appointing a day, at the distance of not less than ten days, for their ordination. If no member of the congregation offers any objection on that day; or if the session finds the objections that are offered frivolous, or unsupported by evidence, the minister proceeds, in the face of the congregation, to ordain the new elders.”<sup>6</sup>

The same method of adding new elders to existing church sessions is adopted, in substance, by many Presbyterian churches in the United States. The church sessions in these congregations judge when it is proper to make an addition to the number of elders;<sup>7</sup> deliberate on the proper candidates; ascertain privately whether they will serve if appointed; and after completing their lists with due consideration and care, cause them to be announced by their moderator from the pulpit on several successive sabbaths — after which, at the proper time, their ordination takes place. This plan of choosing has some real advantages. When wisely executed, it may be supposed likely to lead to a calmer, more judicious and happy choice, than would probably result from a popular vote; especially where no consultation and understanding had taken place among the more pious, grave, and prudent of the church members. And therefore, where this plan has long been in use, and unanimously acquiesced in, perhaps it had better not be changed. Yet it seems to be more in harmony with the general spirit of Presbyterian church government, and certainly with the prevailing character of our institutions, to refer the choice to the suffrages of the members of the church, where it can be done conveniently, after due consultation and care.

Accordingly, the General Assembly of our Church, which convened in 1827, in reply to a complaint made respecting the mode of electing elders adopted in one of the churches under the care of the presbytery of Philadelphia, pronounced the following judgment:

“While the assembly would recognize the undoubted right of each congregation to elect their elders in the mode most approved and in use among them, they would recommend that in all cases where any dissatisfaction appears to exist, the congregation be promptly convened to decide on their future mode of election. And they are inclined to believe that the spirit of our constitution would be most fully sustained by having, in all cases, a direct vote of the congregation in the appointment of their elders.”

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<sup>5</sup> In the infancy of the Reformed Church in Scotland, the mode of electing ruling elders was by no means uniform. In some churches, the existing session made a nomination to the church members, out of which a choice was made by the latter. In other churches, the choice was made directly by the communicants at large. In some churches, the session appointed electors; and in others, they acted as electors themselves. It was a number of years before the practice stated above as the prevalent one, became general. M'Crie's *Life of Melville*, ii. pp. 477, 478.

<sup>6</sup> Hill's *Institutes*. Part ii. Section 4th, pp. 212, 213.

<sup>7</sup> It is hardly necessary to say that when the church session in any such congregation is considered as unduly delaying to make a suitable addition of new elders to their number, it is the privilege of the members of the church, after due application to the presbytery for the redress of their alleged grievance.

In the Church of Holland, the following is the general rule in regard to the election of this class of officers:

“The elders shall be chosen by the suffrages of the consistory, and of the deacons. In making this choice, it shall be lawful, as shall best suit the situation of each church, either to nominate as many elders as shall be judged necessary for the approbation of the members in full communion, and upon their being approved, and found acceptable, to confirm them with public prayers and engagements; or to propose a double number, that one half of those nominated may be chosen by the members, and in the same manner, confirmed in their office.”

Accordingly, in that country, although an election by the members of the church sometimes takes place, yet the common method, it is believed, is for the consistory, or eldership of the church, together with the deacons, to choose new elders and deacons; in other words, to form a list of proper candidates for the office, to nominate them to the church, agreeably to a certain rule, and if no objection is made, to consider the person so nominated as the choice of the church.

In the “explanatory articles” of government adopted by the Reformed Dutch Church in the United States, the following article explains the practice of that church in this country:

“The manner of choosing elders and deacons is not rigidly detailed. A double number may be nominated by the consistory, out of which the members of the church may choose those who shall serve. Or, all the members of the church may unite in nominating and choosing the whole number, without the interference of the consistory. Or, the consistory, for the time being, as representing all the members, may choose the whole, and refer the persons thus chosen, by publishing them in the church, for the approbation of the people. The last method has been found most convenient, especially in large churches, and has long been generally adopted. But where that, or either of the other modes, has for many years been followed in any church, there shall be no variation or change, but by previous application to the classis, and express leave first obtained for altering such custom.”<sup>8</sup>

In the church of Geneva, the choice of elders and deacons is made in the manner which the foregoing article declares to be most common in the Dutch churches in the United States — namely, by a selection and nomination to the consistorial assembly, which if not opposed, is final and followed by the usual ordination, without the “laying on of hands.”<sup>9</sup>

The same method also of electing elders and deacons was early established in the Protestant churches of France. The consistory nominated, and the nomination was announced from the pulpit, for the approbation of the people.<sup>10</sup>

**II.** The next question which arises, is *how often* should this election be made? Is it for life, or for a limited time?

According to the original constitution of the Reformed church of Scotland, the elders and deacons were chosen but for one year. This was the arrangement adopted in the “First Book of Discipline” formed in 1560, and also in the “Second Book of Discipline” drawn up

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<sup>8</sup> See the *Constitution of the Reformed Dutch Church in the United States*.

<sup>9</sup> See Mercier’s *Church History of Geneva*, p. 209.

<sup>10</sup> Quick’s *Synodicon*, i. p. 27.

in 1578, and which continued for a number of years in the Scottish church. This plan seems to have been suggested by the earnest wish of the first elders themselves, who finding the office burdensome, as it then involved much care and labor, begged permission to resign it to others after a single year. But although the election, at that time, was made annually, and a large portion of the incumbents of the office were actually changed every year, yet the same men might be elected from year to year if they were willing to serve. And it sometimes happened, in fact, that a few whose piety and leisure rendered due attention to the duties of the office easy and pleasant, were re-elected for many successive years. The same form of ordination seems to have been repeated after every annual election, as well with respect to those who had often been ordained before, as to those who had never submitted to this solemnity. This practice, however, has been long since laid aside in the Church of Scotland; and for many years, the office of the ruling elder has been regarded as an office for life, as much as that of the ministry of the Gospel.

In the Protestant churches of France also, the office in question was from the beginning and it is believed still is temporary. The rule on this subject, found in the “Book of Discipline of the Reformed Churches of France,” as drawn up by the first national Synod in 1559, is in these remarkable words: “The office of elders and deacons, as it is now in use among us, is not perpetual; yet because changes are not commodious, they shall be exhorted to continue in their offices as long as they can; and they shall not lay them down without having first obtained leave from their churches.”<sup>11</sup>

The Reformed Dutch Church in the United States, after the example of her parent Church in Europe, adopts the following plan for the election of elders and deacons:

“In order to lessen the burden of a perpetual attendance upon ecclesiastical duties, and by a rotation in office to bring forward deserving members, it is the established custom in the Reformed Dutch church, that elders and deacons remain only two years in service, after which they retire from their respective offices, and others are chosen in their places; the rotation being always conducted in such a manner that only one half of the whole number retire each year. (See Syn. Dort. Art. 27.) But this does not forbid the liberty of immediately choosing the same persons again, if from any circumstances it may be judged expedient to continue them in office by a re-election.”<sup>12</sup>

Yet, notwithstanding this annual election, those who have ever borne the office of elder or deacon in the Dutch Church, are still considered while they live, even if never re-elected, as bearing a certain relation to the offices which they have sustained respectively. This appears from the following additional article, found in the same code.

“When matters of peculiar importance occur, particularly in calling a minister, building of churches, or whatever relates immediately to the peace and welfare of the whole congregation, it is usual (and it is strongly recommended on such occasions always) for the consistory to call together all those who have ever served as elders or deacons, that by their advice and counsel they may assist the members of the consistory. When assembled, these constitute what is called the ‘Great Consistory.’ From the object or design of their assembling, the respective powers of each are easily ascertained. Those who are out of office have only an advisory or counselling voice; and as they are not

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<sup>11</sup> Quick’s *Synodicon*, i. p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> *Constitution of the Reformed Dutch Church in the United States*.



actual members of the board or corporation, cannot have a decisive vote. After obtaining their advice, it rests with the members of the consistory to follow the counsel given them or not, as they shall judge proper.”

But in the Presbyterian Church in the United States, the office of ruling elder is now, and has been from the beginning, perpetual. The election to it is once for all. It of course continues through life, unless the individual is deposed from office. Like a minister of the gospel, he cannot lay aside his office at pleasure.<sup>13</sup> He may, indeed, from ill health or for other reasons, if he thinks it proper, cease to perform the active duties of the office. But he is still an elder; and if he recovers his health, or the reason which induced him to withdraw is removed, he may resume the duties of the office without a new ordination. More of this, however, in a subsequent chapter.

**III.** A third question which arises under this head is, *How many* elders ought to be elected in each church? In answer to this question, little more than considerations of expediency can be suggested. No absolute rule can be laid down.

In the Jewish Synagogue, we are told there were commonly at east three ruling elders found in each ecclesiastical senate. In the time of Cyprian in the third century, there were in the single church of Carthage, of which he was bishop or pastor, eight elders, of whom five were opposed to his being received as their pastor. Soon after the opening of the Reformation in Scotland, and while there was only a single Protestant congregation in the city of Edinburgh, there were twelve elders and sixteen deacons belonging to that church. *Dunlop*, ii. 638. In the year 1560, four years before the decease of Calvin, there were twelve ruling elders in the Church of Geneva. *Calv. Epist. Gaspari Oleviano*.

The Form of Government of the Presbyterian Church in the United States does not define the proper number of elders in each church. Speaking of the church session, it declares (chapter 9, sect. 2) that of this judicatory, “two elders, if there are as many in the congregation, with the pastor, shall be necessary to constitute a quorum.” From this rule it seems to be a legitimate inference that if there is only one elder in the congregation, he with the Pastor may constitute a regular session for the transaction of business. The existence of so small a number as even two, however, is greatly to be regretted, and should by no means be submitted to, if proper candidates for the office can be found. **In the smallest church**, it is desirable that there should be it least from *five to seven elders*. Without some such number, there cannot be that weight in their judicial counsels, and that influence drawn from every part of the congregation in aid of the pastor, and the best interests of the whole body, which a well selected bench of officers of that number would be likely to impart. **In large churches**, there ought to be *at least ten or twelve*. And in churches much beyond the usual size, fourteen or fifteen would not be more than enough to gain all the advantages which the best arrangement with regard to this office might be expected to secure.

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<sup>13</sup> The writer is here stating what is the actual constitution of the Presbyterian church as to this point. He does not suppose, however, that there is any infringement of Presbyterian principle in the annual elections of ruling elders, formerly practised in the Church of *Scotland*, and still practised in the Dutch and French Churches. Where a Church is large, containing a sufficient number of grave, pious, and prudent members, to furnish an advantageous rotation, and where the duties of the office are many and arduous, it may not be without its advantages to keep up some change of incumbency in this office. But in general, it seems manifest that the spiritual interests of a congregation will be likely to be managed most steadily and to edification by permanent officers, who are never even temporarily withdrawn from the sphere of duty in which they move, and who are daily gaining more knowledge of the church, and more experience.

It ought to be borne in mind, however, that there is no advantage whatever to be gained by electing unsuitable men to this office, for the sake of adding mere numbers to the church session. It is much better to get along with three or four pious, wise, and prudent elders, than to add two or three dozen men of an opposite stamp to their ranks, who by their lack of piety and wisdom, might be a nuisance instead of a comfort, a curse instead of a blessing. Pastors, then, and their churches, instead of making haste to fill up the ranks of their congregational senators with unsuitable members, had better wait patiently until the Head of the church provides candidates who are in some measure “after his own heart.”

**IV.** The last question which will be proposed for solution is, Who may be considered as *eligible* to this office?

The proper personal qualifications for this office have been considered in a preceding chapter. These are not intended to be brought into view here. All that is designed is a reference to two or three points of legal qualification, which are necessary to render a candidate eligible in the view of the ecclesiastical casuist.<sup>14</sup>

And first, no one can be elected an elder in any church, who is not a member in full communion in the church of which he is to be chosen an officer. The extreme impropriety of choosing men to represent the members of the church, and to sit in judgment on the standing, deportment, and church membership of others who were not themselves in full communion with the body of Christ, is so glaring as to need no comment.

But the eligible candidate for this choice must be a *male* member. Some indeed have seriously doubted whether there were not female elders or elderesses in the apostolic church; and also whether there should not be a similar class of elders in every church at the present day. However, a great majority of those who have addressed this subject, believe that the female officers apparently referred to in Tit 2.3 and a few other passages in the New Testament, were intended to be merely a temporary appointment. It arose out of that state of seclusion in which females lived, and still live in the eastern world, but not at all necessary in those countries where females may be approached and instructed without the intervention of individuals of their own sex. The Presbyterian church has judged and acted in conformity with this view of the subject.<sup>15</sup>

It has been queried whether a person who is an acting ruling elder in one church, may be chosen to the same office in another church, and thus be an acting member of two church sessions at the same time? This question should undoubtedly be answered in the negative. An elder can no more be a member of two different sessions, and responsible of course to both at the same time, than a private Christian can be enrolled as a member in two different churches at the same time, and equally amenable to both; or than a minister of the Gospel can be a member of two Presbyteries at the same time, and liable to be called to account by both simultaneously, and to have entirely inconsistent requisitions made by each. An elder in one church, then, is not eligible for eldership in another, unless on the principle of his taking a dismissal from the former, for the purpose of forming a regular and official relation to the latter.

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<sup>14</sup> *Casuist*: someone who specifies exact and precise rules for every circumstance. – WHG

<sup>15</sup> The Moravians or United Brethren, and the society of Friends or Quakers, are the only ecclesiastical bodies in Protestant Christendom, so far as recollected, in whose system of church order female elders actually have a place.

## CHAPTER 13.

### OF THE ORDINATION OF RULING ELDERS.

By *ordination* is meant that solemn rite or act by which a candidate for any office in the church of Christ is authoritatively designated to that office, by those who are clothed with power for the purpose.

It cannot require formal argument to prove that this rite or something analogous and equivalent to it, is indispensable in conducting all regular ecclesiastical government. If certain officers have been appointed in the church by Jesus Christ, her King and Head; if certain qualifications have been declared by Him to be indispensable to fit men for serving the church in these offices, without which they should not be permitted to occupy them; and if an extraordinary and immediate designation to office by Jesus Christ himself is not now to be expected in any case — if these things are so, then it inevitably follows that some person or persons must have power committed to them by the Head of the church, to examine or try candidates for these offices, to judge their qualifications; and if approved, to invest them with office. The idea that with such directions as the New Testament contains on this subject, men should be left at liberty to take these offices upon themselves by their own act, and at their own pleasure, is full of absurdity. And if realized, it would undoubtedly lead to endless disorder and mischief. Only suppose the secular offices of a nation to be thus assumed by men at will; and by none more readily than the vain, the ignorant, the self-sufficient, and the ambitious — as would inevitably be the case if such were the path of access to office — and there would be an end of all order. But if it is neither safe nor permitted for men to intrude into official stations *uncalled*; and if an immediate investiture by the Master himself is out of the question; then we are driven to the conclusion that all regular and lawful introduction to office must be through the medium of human ordainers, acting in the name of Christ, and governing themselves by his declared will.

Accordingly, while the Saviour himself, in the days of his flesh, immediately invested with office the twelve apostles, and all others whom he personally called and sent forth, no sooner had He ascended to heaven, than the practice of introducing to office by the instrumentality of men began, and so far as we are informed, was uniformly continued. Then the ministers of Christ began to act upon the principle afterwards so explicitly communicated to Timothy and enjoined upon him: “That which you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also,” 2Tim 2.2. Here we are plainly taught that men are not to seize upon the sacred office themselves. It is to be “committed to them;” and that is not by everyone, but only by those who have regularly “received” it themselves. We find, too, that the method of ordination which had been in use in the Jewish Synagogue, and to which all the first Christians had been accustomed, was transferred to the church, and became a stated part of ecclesiastical order. Paul and Barnabas were set apart to a particular service, by a plurality of ecclesiastical men, with prayer, imposition of hands, and fasting. When they in turn went forth to execute the work to which they had been called, we find them, wherever they went, “ordaining elders,” and committing to them the care of the church. Timothy was invested with office “by the laying on of the hands of the presbytery,” 1Tim 4.14. And even the deacons were called to their office in the same manner. It was referred to the people to “look for” and elect the candidates; but having done so, they brought them to the

apostles, who “laid their hands upon them,” and conferred on them the important office to which they were appointed.

It is no part of the belief of Presbyterians that ordination imparts any direct influence, either physical or moral, to the one who receives it. They have no idea that in this act, by a kind of *opus operatum*, according to the Romanists, an “indelible character” is communicated.<sup>1</sup> They do not suppose that any hallowed energy proceeds from the hands of the ordainers to the one on whose head they lay them in the act of imposition. But they regard it simply as that official act by which a man is pronounced, declared, and manifested to be actually put in possession of the office to which he has been chosen. It is, in one word, the actual *induction* into office of someone elected to fill it. The case is precisely analogous to that of civil rulers. The man who is appointed to the office of judge on a secular bench, has no real addition made either to his intellect, his learning, or his moral excellence, by taking the oath of office, and complying with those formalities which actually introduce him to his official station. And yet, so important are these formalities, that his power to lawfully act as judge absolutely depends upon them. Before they take place, he is not really in office; and after they take place, he is clothed with that plenary power which qualifies him for the regular discharge of every official duty; so with every other civil officer in the land. Thus it is in the church. Ordination is the essence of a lawful *external* call to ecclesiastical office. It is that act, before which, the ecclesiastical officer is not prepared, regularly, to discharge a single function appropriated to the station to which he is elected; but after which, he is prepared for their regular and valid performance.

That ruling elders, besides being regularly *chosen* to office, should be *ordained* — that is, publicly and solemnly designated and introduced to office by appropriate formalities — our ecclesiastical constitution requires and prescribes a form for the purpose, concerning which I will only say that, as far as it goes, it is well-devised, impressive, and excellent. I say, “as far as it goes,” for it has been my settled conviction for many years, that the ordination service in question — in not making the imposition of hands a stated constituent part of it — is chargeable with an omission which, though not essential, and therefore not a matter for which it is proper to interrupt the peace of the church, yet it appears to me incapable of a satisfactory defence. It is my earnest hope that it may not continue to be much longer, as I know it is for many, a matter of serious lamentation.

The “imposition of hands,” as a constituent part of ordination, in an old and impressive rite. It was, notoriously, a familiar mode of designation to office, through the whole of the Old Testament economy. It is, if I am not mistaken, universally acknowledged to have been employed in ordaining all the elders of the Jewish synagogue. We find it is used in every ordination without exception, the particulars of which are detailed in the New Testament history. And even in setting apart the deacons, nothing can be more explicit than the statement that it was done with the “imposition of hands.” So far, then, as we are bound to reverence and follow ancient, primitive, and uniform usage, I know of no solid reason why it should be omitted in any case.

Some, indeed, have attempted to defend the omission of this rite by alleging that the imposition of hands in the days of the apostles, was connected with the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit, which were then common; and that with those special gifts, it ought to

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<sup>1</sup> *opus operatum*: lit. *the work wrought*; meaning a religious rite is effectual in and of itself. — WHG

have ceased. In support of this allegation, they commonly adduce such passages as those recorded in Acts 8.17-18; 19.6; Heb 6.2, etc. This argument however, if it had any force, ought to banish the imposition of hands from *all* ordinations, but can never justify the omission of it in ordaining ruling elders and deacons while it is retained in the ordination of those who “labor in the word and doctrine.” But the validity of the whole argument, it is believed, may be set aside without difficulty.

We read in the New Testament of four cases or kinds of “laying on of hands.” The first by Christ himself, to express an authoritative benediction (Mat 19.15; Mar 10.16); the second, in the healing of diseases (Mar 16.18; Act 28.8); the third, in conferring extraordinary gifts of the Spirit (Act 8.17, 19.6); and the fourth, in setting apart persons to sacred office (Act 6.6, 13.3; 1Tim 4.14.) The venerable Dr. Owen, in his Commentary on Heb 6.2, expresses the opinion that the “laying on of hands” mentioned in that passage, is to be considered as belonging to the third kind or class of cases, and of course, as referring to the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit. Others have supposed that it rather belongs to the fourth example enumerated here; and therefore it applies to the ordination of ministers. On this point I decide nothing. But my reasons for supposing that the imposition of hands in the ordination of church officers had no reference to imparting supernatural gifts, and consequently should not be deemed an extraordinary and temporary rite, are such reasons as these —

1. This rite has been employed in all ages of the church in setting apart persons to ecclesiastical office.
2. It is one of the most natural and significant modes of designating a person who is intended to be consecrated or devoted to a particular service.
3. It was manifestly employed in a number of cases which occur in the sacred history, where no special gifts were intended to be conveyed; and therefore, though sometimes connected with those gifts, yet we are sure it was not connected thus in all cases. <sup>2</sup>
4. When hands were laid on Paul and Barnabas, at Antioch, it was not that they might receive these gifts, for they were possessed of them prior to this solemnity.
5. In this case, too, it is remarkable that they seem to have been ordinary pastors and teachers who laid their hands on at least *one* of extraordinary gifts and character.
6. And, finally, in 1Tim 5.22, the whole rite of ordination seems to be comprehended in this act — “Lay hands on no man suddenly,” etc. And if we consider the act of laying hands on the head of the candidate for sacred office, as intended at once to solemnly designate his person; to express an official benediction; and to indicate his entire consecration to the service of God, then we could scarcely conceive of an act that is simpler, and yet more appropriate and full of meaning. And although those who lay on hands in this transaction altogether disclaim (as stated before) the power of conveying the Holy Ghost to the

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<sup>2</sup> “Imposition of hands was a Jewish ceremony, introduced not by any divine authority, but by custom; it being the practice among those people, whenever they prayed to God for any person, to lay their hands on his head. Our Saviour observed the same custom, both when he conferred his blessings on children, and when he healed the sick, adding prayers to the ceremony. The Apostles likewise laid hands on those upon whom they bestowed the Holy Ghost. The priests observed the same custom when anyone was received into their body. And the Apostles themselves underwent the imposition of hands afresh, when they entered upon any new design. In the ancient church imposition of hands was even practised on persons when they were married; which custom the Abyssinians still observe.” Burder’s *Oriental Customs*. ii. 25.

individual ordained, yet as an emblem of what he needs, and should unceasingly seek, and of what his brethren desire and pray for on his behalf, it is surely expressive in a high degree, and by no means open to the charge of either presumption or superstition. I would say, therefore, concerning this part of the solemnity of ordination, in the language of the venerable Calvin:

“Although there is no express precept for the imposition of hands, yet since we find it to have been constantly used by the apostles, such a punctual observance of it by them ought to have the force of a precept with us. And certainly this ceremony is highly useful both to recommend to the people the dignity of the ministry, and to admonish the person ordained, that he is no longer his own master, but devoted to the service of God and the church. Besides, it will not be an unmeaning sign, if it is restored to its true origin. For if the Spirit of God institutes nothing in the church in vain, we will perceive that this ceremony which proceeded from Him, is not without its use, provided it is not perverted by a superstitious abuse.”<sup>3</sup>

But if this rite is so reasonable, so scriptural, so expressive, and so generally adopted by almost all Christian denominations, in ordaining those elders who “labor in the word and doctrine,” then how does it come to pass that it should be so generally, if not universally omitted in the ordination of ruling elders? I have long deplored this omission,<sup>4</sup> and cannot help believing that the restoration of so appropriate and impressive a part of the ordaining service would, in all probability, be attended with beneficial effects.

It is not easy to ascertain the origin of the omission in question. The apostolic office of ruling elder was preserved, as we have seen, by the witnesses of the truth during the dark ages. Whether the pious Waldenses and Bohemian Brethren were in the habit of setting apart this class of officers with the imposition of hands, cannot now, so far as I know, be determined. The Reformers received the office under consideration from those pious Waldenses; and were well aware as their writings evince, that all ordinations in the Synagogue and in the primitive church, had been accompanied with the laying on of hands. Still however, while they with one accord retained this rite in the ordination of teaching elders, they seem quite as unanimously to have discarded it in the ordination of ruling elders.<sup>5</sup> Their writings give us no intimation of the cause of this, nor has it ever been my lot to hear from any quarter, a single reason for the omission which was in the least degree satisfactory. To be told that the omission has “long been established;” that while all the Protestant churches in the world except that of England receive this class of officers in one form or another, they are “nowhere ordained by the imposition of hands;”

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<sup>3</sup> *Institutiones*, Lib. iv. Cap. iii. 16.

<sup>4</sup> More than twenty years ago, the author of this volume, under the deep and unwavering conviction that he had scriptural authority to sustain him, when called upon to ordain elders and deacons in a vacant church, added to the usual solemnity on such occasions, the act of “laying on hands” in the ordaining prayer. Finding, however, that many of his Brethren considered it as an innovation, and were by no means prepared to introduce the practice; believing that diversity of practice in relation to this matter would be very undesirable; and persuaded, moreover, that the act in question ought not to be deemed an essential in any ordination – he resolved not to repeat it until it could be used without offence, and with better prospects of edification to the church.

<sup>5</sup> It is worthy of remark that our Independent brethren, at early periods of their history, adhered more closely to the scriptural methods of ordaining ruling elders and deacons, than even Presbyterians. See the *Cambridge Platform*, chapters vii. and ix. See also a *Confession of Faith*, adopted by some Anti-paedobaptists, (to the amount of 100 congregations) in England and Wales in 1689; and ratified and adopted by a Baptist Association, met at Philadelphia in 1742; chapter 27. Also a “Short Treatise on Church Discipline,” appended to it by the latter, chapters 3, 4.

that this is “the custom of the church;” that to depart from it would be “to innovate” and “give offence,” etc.; that this rite “may be omitted without injury, not being an essential part of ordination,” etc. — all this is surely little adapted to satisfy an inquiring mind, desirous to receive as well as to be able to give a reason for every practice.

But although, as has been already said, no reason is formally assigned, or even hinted at in the writings of the Reformers, for laying aside the imposition of hands in the ordination of ruling elders, it is perhaps not difficult to conjecture how it happened. One mistake I suspect naturally led to another. They began by considering the office as a *temporary* one; or rather, allowing those who bore it, if they saw fit, to decline it sustaining it for more than a single year. There was a new election of these elders annually. Indeed, if they were acceptable to the people, and willing to continue to serve the church, the same individuals might be reelected for a series of years, or if they consented, even for life. But this seldom occurred. There was, for the most part, a considerable change in the individuals annually, and a new ordination annually. The tenure of the office being thus temporary, and in many cases but for a single year, no wonder there should seem to the discerning and pious men who took the lead in organizing the Reformed churches, to be some incongruity between this annual renewal of the official investiture and obligation, and setting apart men to the office in question, with the very same formalities each time which attended the ordination of ministers of the gospel, whose tenure of office was for life. This incongruity, it is probable, struck them with so much force, that they could not reconcile it with their feelings to set apart to their office these temporary incumbents, with the same rites and solemnity which they employed in ordaining ministers of the word and sacraments.<sup>6</sup> Nor is it matter of wonder that such feelings should have had an influence on their minds. Those who take such a view of the tenure of the office in question as they did, will never be very cordial or decisive either in addressing those who bear it, or in setting them apart, as men consecrated for life to the service of the church. But in the church of Scotland,<sup>7</sup> and in the Presbyterian church in this country, where it is believed correct views of the office of ruling elder as *perpetual* are universally received, that the scriptural mode of setting apart to this office should have been so long and so generally disused, is a fact for which it is not easy to assign a satisfactory reason.

We are now prepared to take a brief survey of the arguments by which the propriety of ordaining elders by the imposition of hands may be maintained. They are such as the following:

1. We find, throughout the whole Jewish history, that solemnly laying the hands on the head of a person who was intended to be particularly honored, blessed, or devoted to sacred functions, was a rite of frequent, not to say constant use; and even in cases in which the conveyance of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit could not possibly have been designed.

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<sup>6</sup> This representation is not wholly gratuitous. It appears from the *Compendium Theologiae Christianae* of Marck, and from the opinion of Frederick Spanheim, quoted with approbation by De Moor, the Commentator on Marck, that all three of these divines of the reformed church had no other objection to the laying on of hands in the ordination of ruling elders, than that which I have suggested. De Moori *Com. Perpet.* vol. vi. p. 330.

<sup>7</sup> At what period in the History of the Church of Scotland it was that the annual election of elders was laid aside, and the office made permanent, it has not fallen in the author’s way to obtain information. He is disposed to believe, however, that the change took place either late in the sixteenth, or early in the seventeenth century.

2. The inspired apostles, in organizing the New Testament Church, took as their model the synagogue system of government, to which the first Christians had been accustomed all their lives.

3. It is certain that in every Jewish synagogue there was a bench of ruling elders; and it is just as certain that these elders were always ordained by the imposition of hands.

4. There is not a single instance of an ordination to any ecclesiastical office whatever, of which we have any account in the New Testament, in which the ceremony of the laying on of hands does not appear to have been used.

5. The first deacons, though not entrusted with an office so purely spiritual or so arduous as that of ruling elder, were yet, as all acknowledge, set apart to the diaconate by the imposition of hands. Of course those who bear a superior office should not be introduced to it with less solemnity.

6. To imagine that there is any peculiar meaning or mystical influence in the laying on of hands, which is above the dignity of the ruling elder's office, involves at once a superstitious estimate of a simple emblematic act, and an unworthy degradation of an important order in the Christian family.

Accordingly, it is observable that almost all classes of writers whose judgment in reference to this matter is worthy of particular notice, freely concede the propriety of setting apart both ruling elders and deacons in the manner for which I contend. And they scarcely offer any other reason for omitting it, than it has "long been the custom" of the reformed churches, and that the ceremony is not "essential" to a valid ordination. The following specimen of the manner in which the subject is treated by such writers, will be quite sufficient to establish my position.

The very learned authors of the "Theses Leydenses," who were zealous Presbyterians, in speaking of the biennial election of ruling elders and deacons in the church of Holland, acknowledge that in the Apostolic church those offices were *both* perpetual, and concede that the different plan adopted among themselves was an imperfection<sup>8</sup> — plainly intimating that their mode of ordaining these officers had grown out of this imperfection.

The foreign Protestants who established themselves in London during the reign of Edward the sixth, not only had ruling elders and deacons in all their churches, but also uniformly ordained them by the imposition of hands, as we have seen in the preceding chapter.

The Rev. John Anderson of Scotland, the able and zealous defender of Presbyterianism against Thomas Rhind, who lived a little more than a century ago, speaking of the ordination of ruling elders by the imposition of hands, has the following passage. "Nobody doubts it is very lawful; and, for my own part, *I heartily wish it were practiced*; but I deny that it is absolutely necessary, there being no precept enjoining it."<sup>9</sup>

The Rev. Archibald Hall, also of Great Britain, and a thorough-going advocate for Presbyterian order, speaks on the same subject in the following terms. "The call of ruling elders, like the call of the elders who 'labor in the word and doctrine,' consists in two

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<sup>8</sup> *Synopsis Purioris Theologicae*. Disput. 42. p. 621.

<sup>9</sup> *Defence*, etc. Chap. ii. Sect. vi. p. 179.



things, namely *election* and *ordination*. Their election should be popular, and their ordination judicial, and performed with laying on of hands.” And, in a subsequent page, he expresses an opinion that deacons ought to be ordained in the same manner.<sup>10</sup>

The venerable John Brown of Haddington, one of the most decisive, consistent, and devoted Presbyterians who ever lived, after giving an account of the nature and warrant of the office of ruling elders, observes, “Their ordination ought to be transacted in much the same manner as that of teaching elders or pastors.”<sup>11</sup>

The learned and pious Dr. Cotton Mather delivers the following opinion on the subject before us.

“The imposition of hands in the ordination of a church officer, is a rite not only lawful to be retained, but it seems directed and required by divine institution; so that although the call of a person to church office may not become null and void where that rite may have been omitted (as it is in the seniors and deacons in most of the reformed churches), yet we cannot approve the omission of it. A ceremonial defect may be blameworthy.”<sup>12</sup>

Our excellent and eloquent countryman, the Rev. President Dwight, gives an opinion concerning the ordination of deacons, which is decisive of his opinion concerning that of ruling elders, in favor of which latter class of officers, he very explicitly declares his judgment, as we have seen before. He speaks thus:

“Deacons are to be ordained by the imposition of hands, and by prayer.”

“When the brethren had set these men before the Apostles, St. Luke informs us, ‘they prayed, and laid their hands upon them.’”

“This also is an authoritative example of the manner in which deacons are to be introduced into every church. It is the example of inspired men; and was therefore the pleasure of the Spirit of God. There is no hint in the New Testament, nor even in ecclesiastical history, that they were ever introduced in any other manner. At the same time, there is no precept revoking or altering the authority or influence of this example. It stands, therefore, in full force; and requires that all persons chosen by the church to this office, should be consecrated to the duties of it in the same manner.”

“It is to be observed, further, that if any such alteration had existed in periods subsequent to the apostolic age, it would have been totally destitute of any authority to us. This mode of consecration has in fact been disused in New England to a considerable extent. For this, however, there seems to have been no reason of any value. So far as I have been able to gain information on the subject, the disuse originated at first and has been gradually extended, by mere inattention; nor is it capable, so far as I know, of any defence.”<sup>13</sup>

These are a few of the authorities which might be quoted in favor of the same general position. In fact, I have met with no Presbyterian or Independent writer who believed in the propriety of the imposition of hands in any case of ordination, who did not either

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<sup>10</sup> *Scriptural View of the Gospel Church*, chapters 12 and 15. p. 67, 102.

<sup>11</sup> *Compendous View*, Book vii. chap. ii. p. 640.

<sup>12</sup> *Magnalia*, vol. ii. p. 218.

<sup>13</sup> *Theology Explained and Defended*. vol. iv. p. 291.

explicitly or virtually grant, that there was no reason for withholding this ceremony in the case of ruling elders, except the custom of the church, or some similar consideration.

On the supposition, then, that the imposition of hands should *always* be employed in the ordination of ruling elders, the question naturally arises, *Whose hands* ought to be laid on in such ordinations? And here, if we attend to the simplest principles of all government, it would seem that we could scarcely be at loss for a satisfactory answer.

It seems to be a fundamental principle in every department, both of the natural and moral world, that everything must be considered as capable of begetting its like. If this is so, does it not follow as a plain dictate of common sense, that in ordaining ruling elders, the members of the session already in office should lay on hands with the pastor, in setting apart an additional number to the same office? In other words, if there is such a body already in existence in the church, the hands of the *parochial* presbytery ought to be laid on in adding to its own number; and the “right hand of fellowship” ought to be given at the close of the service, by every member of the session, to each of his newly ordained brethren. This appears to me equally agreeable to reason and Scripture, and highly adapted to edification. And if there be no eldership already in the church in which the ordination takes place, then the Presbytery, upon proper application being made to them, ought to appoint at least one minister and two or more ruling elders to attend, at the time and place most convenient, to perform the ordination. How much more impressive and acceptable would such a scene be, than the cold and naked manner in which this service is too often performed!

A question may arise here in the minds of some, whether those elders who, when they were ordained, had no hands laid on them, may without impropriety join in the imposition of hands on the heads of their younger brethren who may be ordained in this manner? To this question, beyond all doubt, we may confidently return an affirmative answer. They may unite in the imposition of hands, without the least scruple, and with the utmost propriety. All reasonable men grant that the rite in question, though rational and scriptural, is not essential to a valid ordination. Our venerable fathers of the Scotch Reformation did not deem the imposition of hands necessary, even in the ordination of ministers of the gospel, and therefore did not prescribe it their First Book of Discipline. Therefore, elders who have been regularly set apart to their office, agreeably to the formula prescribed in the presbyterian church, have received a completely valid ordination. They are fully invested with the office, and with all the powers and privileges which it includes. It is contrary to the whole genius of the gospel to make a mere ceremonial defect fatal to the substance of an otherwise regular investiture. If elders who have been thus ordained are deemed competent to *any* part of their official work, then they are competent to *every* part; and of course to partake in the solemnity which I am endeavoring to recommend here.

If the foregoing principles are correct, then ruling elders ought also to lay on hands with the pastor in the ordination of deacons — their office as rulers vesting them with full power for this act, and rendering it strictly proper. But inasmuch as deacons make no part of the parochial presbytery, and are not vested with any portion of the function of spiritual government; it does not seem proper that they should lay on hands in any case of ordination. In that of ruling elders, it would be manifestly incongruous, since their office is altogether unlike. But even in the ordination of deacons, it would be inconsistent with

regular order. Ordination is an act that is not only official, but also authoritative. It is an act of *government*; but deacons are appointed to no participation in this. This office, as we have seen, is highly important, and it requires much, wisdom, piety, prudence, and diligence. But their sphere of duty is entirely different from that of those who are “set over the flock in the Lord,” and who are appointed to “watch for souls as those who must give account.”

After this whole discussion, if any should be disposed to ask what additional advantage may be expected to flow from ordaining our elders by the imposition of hands, and with similar external solemnities, to those which are employed in setting apart ministers of the gospel? — I answer, it will be a return to scriptural example and primitive usage, which is always right; and, we have reason to hope, by the grace of God, that it will be connected with a blessing. It will be doing warranted and appropriate honor to a class of officers too long deprived of their due estimation and authority. When the people see those they have elected to this office, devoutly kneeling before the Lord, and the hands of the parochial Presbytery laid on their heads, with fervent prayer, and with a solemn charge and benediction, they will naturally attach more importance to the office itself, and more reverence to those who bear it. Indeed, perhaps it is not unreasonable to believe that such solemnities may be made the means of salutary impressions on the minds even of their immediate subjects. If the writer of these lines does not greatly mistake, he has known the solemnities attending the ordination of pastors productive of deep and lasting impressions, both on the ordained and the spectators. But he has no recollection of ever witnessing any such result from our comparatively cold and lifeless mode of setting apart the official rulers in Christ’s house. “This is a lamentation, and shall be for a lamentation.”

## CHAPTER 14.

### **OF THE RESIGNATION OF RULING ELDERS — THEIR REMOVAL FROM ONE CHURCH OFFICE TO ANOTHER; AND THE METHOD OF CONDUCTING DISCIPLINE AGAINST THEM.**

It is a fundamental principle of the presbyterian church, that the office of ruling elder is *permanent* — that once a man is set apart to it, he is always an elder while he lives, unless deposed by regular constitutional process. A variety of questions, naturally resulting from this principle, claim our notice. Among these, some of the more obvious and important will be briefly considered in the present chapter.

A ruling elder, after being regularly and solemnly set apart to his office, with perhaps as full an intention of faithfully performing its duties to his life's end as ever man had — may lose his health, and thus become physically and permanently unable to perform those duties. Or he may unavoidably become so situated with regard to his temporal business, as to render the regular fulfilment of his duties altogether impracticable. In this case, the individual supposed, may resign his place in the session. In other words, he may cease to be an acting overseer, or inspector and ruler of that church. He will, of course, still retain his place and privileges as a regular member of the church; but he will no longer take any part in its spiritual government. This is so reasonable a provision, that it can scarcely be thought to require either illustration or defence. We all know that a teaching elder, or minister of the word and sacraments, after being a pastor for a time, if the state of his health or any other circumstance should imperiously demand it, may resign his pastoral charge, and retire to private life for as long as the cause of his resignation continues to operate. Whoever does this, it is well known, though he ceases to be a pastor, still continues to be a minister, fully invested with the powers of an “ambassador of Christ.” He may still, if he thinks it proper, reside within the bounds of the congregation which he formerly served; and if mutually convenient and agreeable, he may occasionally minister to them in sacred things. But he is no longer *their* minister; and he may never again think it proper to take a pastoral charge.

All these same principles apply to the ruling elder. If he truly thinks that he cannot any longer perform the duties of his office in a manner acceptable either to the Head of the church, or to his people, he may withdraw from active service. When he does this, however, he does not lay down his office — he does not cease to be an elder; he only ceases to be an *acting* elder. If his health should ever be restored, or his temporal circumstances undergo a favorable alteration, he may resume the duties of his office, and again take his place in the session from which he withdrew, or some other, without a new ordination. When an elder thus wishes to resign his station, he is to give official notice of his desire to the session — they are to declare, if they think it proper, their acceptance of his resignation — the whole transaction is to be distinctly recorded in the sessional book — and a report made to the presbytery that the individual in question has ceased to be an acting member of that session.

Again, an elder may become wholly incapable of serving the church with which he is connected, by the entire loss of his popularity. He may not have become either heterodox in his theological opinions, or so irregular in any part of his practice, as to render himself liable to process or deposition from office. And yet he may, by indiscretions, or by undignified conduct, so lose the respect and confidence of the people — or in a moment

of prejudice or passion, without any just ground of blame on his part, the popular feeling may be so strong against him, that he may be no longer able to serve the church either acceptably or to edification, as a spiritual ruler. In either of these cases, he ought voluntarily to resign his place in the session, as stated in the preceding paragraph. And the session, after taking a vote of acceptance on the resignation, ought to distinctly record the same in the minutes of their proceedings, and make a regular report of it for the information of the presbytery. In all of this there will be recognized an almost exact similarity to the usual course of proceeding when a pastor is sensible that he has become unpopular, and wishes to resign his charge.

It may be, however, that the elder whose popularity is thus prostrated, may not be sensible of his real situation. He may be unwilling to believe that he is not popular; and he may therefore refuse to resign his station, even when requested. In this case, the course prescribed in our Form of Government, is that the session duly reports the whole matter to the presbytery, giving due notice to the elder in question of the time and place at which it is intended to make the report; and that the presbytery decide, after due inquiry and deliberation, whether he ought to resign or continue his connection with the Session. On the one hand, no church ought to be burdened by the incumbency of an unpopular and obstinate elder who, instead of edifying, is injuring it. And on the other hand, no innocent and really exemplary elder ought to be abandoned to the fury of popular prejudice, and permitted to be trampled under feet, when perhaps he ought to be sustained and honored for his fidelity.

Further — ruling elders, like other church members, may find it their duty to move their residence from the bounds of the church which called them to office, to another. Such cases not infrequently arise. The question is, when they do occur, how is the official standing of such a moving elder to be disposed of? Of course, when he goes, he ought to take with him a regular certificate of good standing as a private Christian, and a dismissal and recommendation to the church to which he moves. The certificate should also bear an attestation of his regular standing as an elder, and of his official as well as personal dismissal from his former church. With this certificate he will repair to the church to which he is recommended, and will of course be received as a private member in good standing. If the existing eldership and members of the church to which he moves think it for their edification that he be introduced into their session, he may be elected in the manner “most approved and in use in that congregation” — that is, either by a nomination by the session, or by a popular vote of the church members. And if thus elected, he is introduced to an official relation to that people, not by a new ordination, which should never be repeated, but by being regularly installed as their elder. This is effected by the candidate appearing in the face of the congregation, as one who is about to be ordained — answering in the affirmative the fourth question directed to be put to candidates for the eldership at their ordination — the members of the congregation publicly professing to receive him as their spiritual ruler, agreeably to the last question in the same formula; declaring him one of the ruling elders of that church; and closing with prayer for the divine blessing on the transaction.

It may be, however, that when an individual who has served one congregation as an elder, moves into the bounds of another, that other one may not, on the whole, think it best to elect him as one of their elders. They may already have as many as they think there ought to be in one church. Or his character, though unexceptionably good, may not be such as

to promise great benefit by taking him into their parochial presbytery. In this case, they are under no obligation to elect him one of their elders. And if they do not think best to employ him in his character, he may live among them as a private member of the church. He ought to take no offence at this. It would be a hard case, indeed, if churches were not left at liberty to act agreeably to their own views of propriety and duty in such cases. If a preaching elder or pastor is liberated from his pastoral charge, and moves his residence within the bounds of another church, however excellent his character, that church is not bound to employ him. To suppose it is bound, would indeed be ecclesiastical slavery. A preacher inferior to him in every respect might be preferred. Every church must be left to its own unbiassed choice. Still, the elder as well as the minister in the case supposed, though in retirement, and without official employment, retains his office, and is capable of being employed in that office whenever the judicatories of the church think it proper to avail themselves of his services.

When ruling elders become chargeable with heresy or immorality, and, of course, liable to the discipline of the church, they are amenable to the bar of the church session. They are to be arraigned and tried by that body. Process against them is to be conducted according to the same general rules which regulate the trial of private members of the church — except that, as their character is in some respects more important and their example more influential than the character and example of those who bear no office in the church, there ought to be particular caution, tenderness, and care in receiving accusations and in commencing process against them. “Do not receive an accusation against an elder,” says the inspired Paul, “except from two or three witnesses,” 1Tim 5.19. Therefore, if any person observes or hears of anything in a ruling elder which he considers as rendering him justly liable to censure, he should by no means immediately spread it abroad. But he should communicate what he has observed or heard to the pastor of the church, and take his advice as to the proper course to be pursued. And if the pastor cannot be seen and consulted, then similar consultation and advice should be had with at least one of the brother elders of the supposed delinquent. And all of this is before any hint respecting the alleged delinquency is lispd to any other human being.

As the church session is the tribunal to which the ruling elder is always amenable, at least in the first instance, so it is generally proper that he should be tried by that judicatory. Yet where there is anything peculiar or delicate in the case of process against an elder, a presbytery should be consulted.

There are cases, however, so very peculiar as to preclude the possibility of an impartial trial — and sometimes, indeed, of any trial at all before the session. A few such cases may be specified.

An instance occurred, a few years ago, in which there were only two elders in a certain church session, and the moral conduct of both these elders became impeached. It was, of course, impossible to try them in the usual manner.

In another case, the session was composed of two elders beside the pastor. These elders were brothers. One of them was charged with immoral conduct, and it was judged altogether improper that any attempt should be made to try the delinquent in that session.

In a third class of cases, when process against members of church sessions had been commenced, it was found that so many of the brother elders of the delinquents were cited

as witnesses, that there was no prospect of a dispassionate and impartial trial by the remainder.

In all these cases, it was wisely judged proper to apply immediately to the presbytery, to take the several causes in hand, and to commence and issue process.

It has sometimes been proposed, in exigencies similar to those which have been stated, without applying to the Presbytery, to call in the aid of the eldership of a neighboring church, and to submit the case to their decision. There are two objections to this course. First, the Constitution of the Presbyterian church knows of no such body. It has nowhere provided for the formation of a parochial tribunal in such a manner. And secondly, the adoption of this plan would be to set one church as a judge over a neighboring sister church.

To avoid this incongruity, it has sometimes been proposed to form a tribunal for the trial of delinquent elders, by selecting one or two of the same class of officers from each of several neighboring sessions. This was intended as an expedient to avoid the impropriety of setting one church in judgment over another. But besides being unauthorized by any constitutional provision, this expedient is liable to the charge of a selection of judges who may not always be fair and impartial. It is far better on every account, and especially more in harmony with the nature of the case, and with the spirit of our general principles, to go immediately to the Presbytery. That body is the natural resort in all cases in which the church session is unable, in its ordinary structure and situation, to perform the contemplated work.

**CHAPTER 15.**

***ADVANTAGES OF CONDUCTING DISCIPLINE  
ON THE PRESBYTERIAN PLAN.***

It is not forgotten in entering on this chapter, that most denominations of Christians are so far prejudiced, and sometimes so blindly prejudiced in favor of their own particular government and formularies, that their judgment in reference to this matter can seldom be regarded as impartial. The writer of this essay, though he does not allow himself to indulge in such prejudices, yet he does not claim to be wholly free from them. Therefore, instead of troubling the reader with his bare impressions and preferences in regard to the Presbyterian mode of conducting discipline, which would of course go for nothing; it is proposed to present such a series of principles and reasonings as will enable the intelligent inquirer to judge for himself, how far the conclusions of the writer are sustained by solid argument.

**I.** And in the first place, the plan of discipline for which we plead, is founded essentially on the principle of *representation*, which in a greater or lesser degree, pervades all human society. When a community of any extent wishes to frame laws for its own government, by whom is this service usually performed? By the whole body of citizens, both wise and unwise, orderly and disorderly, coming together and debating on the propriety and the form of every proposed enactment? *No, never.* An attempt of this kind would soon show the plan to be equally foolish and impracticable. Again, when a court is to be formed for applying the laws already in force as to human actions, of what materials is this tribunal commonly composed? Does anyone ever think of summoning the whole mass of the male population to come together and decide on the case — all except the culprit or the complainant whose cause is to be tried? Who would ever expect either a tranquil or a wise decision from such a judicial assembly? In both these cases, the good sense of men in all civilized society, dictates the choice of a select number of individuals, representatives of the whole body, who are supposed to possess a competent share of knowledge, wisdom, and integrity, to form the laws of the community. And another body — smaller indeed, but constituted upon similar principles — to judicially apply them when enacted. And so it is in every department of society. The representative system was one of the earliest that appeared in the progress of mankind. It is recommended by its reasonableness, its convenience, its wisdom, and its efficiency. In fact, the more deeply we look into the history and state of the world, the more clearly we see that large bodies of men cannot take a step without it.

As this system pervades all of civil society, so we may say without fear of contradiction, that it equally pervades the whole economy of redemption and grace. Is it not reasonable then, that we should find it in the visible church? If we did not, it would indeed be a strange departure from a general principle of Jehovah's kingdom.

The Presbyterian plan then, of conducting the government of each congregation, is recommended by its conformity with this almost universal principle. It deposits the power of applying the laws which Christ has enacted and given to his people, not with the whole professing population of the church, but with a select body of the communicants most distinguished for their piety, knowledge, judgment, and experience. It does not make judges indiscriminately of the young and old, the enlightened and the ignorant, the wise and the unwise. It selects the exemplary, the pious, the prudent, the grave, and the



experienced, for this important work. “It sets those to judge who are most esteemed in the house of God.” This is the theory, and in most cases, we may suppose the actual practice. And where it is really so, who does not see that there is every security which the nature of the case admits, that the judgment will be the most calm, judicious, and edifying, that the amount of wisdom and of piety in that church could pronounce?

The inconvenience, no, the positive *mischiefs* of committing the judgment in the most delicate and difficult cases of implicated Christian character, to the whole mass of Christian professors, have been alluded to in a preceding chapter. And the more closely they are examined, the more serious will they appear. No confidential precaution, no calm, retired inquiry, no deliberate consultation of sensitive feelings, with fidelity and yet with fraternal delicacy, can possibly take place in ordinary cases, except by the adoption of an expedient which amounts to the temporary appointment of elders. On the contrary, upon any *other* plan, the door is wide open for tale-bearing, for partisan heat, for the violation of all those nicer sensibilities which are of so much value in Christian society, and in the end, for a decision which perhaps no one is satisfied with. It would truly be surpassing strange, if a sober, wise, and consistent decision were pronounced by such a tribunal. We are surely then warranted in setting it down as one of the manifest advantages of conducting discipline on the Presbyterian plan, that by the adoption of the representative system, it provides in all ordinary cases, for the purest, the wisest, and the most edifying decisions of which the nature of the case admits.

**II.** Further, as was hinted in a preceding chapter, this method of conducting discipline presents one of the firmest conceivable barriers against the ambition and encroachments of the clergy. It is not intended to again enlarge the liableness of ministers of the gospel to feel that love of power which is natural to man. Very few of them, it is believed, in this land of religious liberty, have ever really aimed at ecclesiastical encroachment. But as laws are made for the disobedient, and as ministers are but men, so that system of ecclesiastical polity may be considered as the best which — while it is attended with the greatest amount of positive advantage — is adapted most effectually to obviate those evils to which human nature is exposed.

Now, it is evident that the method of conducting discipline that is under consideration at present, assigns to every pastor a council, or a senate of pious, wise, prudent men, chosen from among the body of the communicants. And though not strictly laymen, they are commonly so viewed, and at any rate, carry with them the feelings of the mass of their brethren. The pastor is simply the chairman of this body of six, eight, or ten men, who are charged with the whole spiritual rule, and “without whose counsel nothing is done in the church.” He can carry no measure without their consent. He can neither admit nor exclude a single member, without their concurrence. If he engages in any sinister or foul plan, as many are fond of supposing the clergy are inclined to attempt, he certainly cannot accomplish it either in his own church, or in neighboring churches, unless he can prevail on these men to join with him in conspiring to elevate himself at their own expense. Will he be likely to work such a wonder as this? At any rate, there seems to be the best barrier against it, that the nature of human society admits.

The same general safeguard pervades all the judicatories of the Presbyterian church. In all of them ruling elders have a place; and in all of them except the General Assembly, the elders (if the theory of our system were carried into perfect execution) would be a

majority. In the General Assembly alone, if completely full, they would stand on an equality in votes with the pastors. And these ruling elders are not merely present in all these bodies. They mingle in all the business; are appointed on all committees; and have every possible opportunity to become acquainted in the most intimate manner, with all that is proposed or done. There can be no concealment. The proceedings of all our judicatories except the church session, where the elders form an overwhelming majority, are open and public as the light of day. And every ruling elder has at his disposal a vote as potent as that of his most eloquent and learned neighboring Pastor.

It may be asked then whether there is not a barrier here against clerical ambition and encroachment as fixed and firm as can well be conceived or desired? It is undoubtedly a far firmer barrier than is presented by the popular plan in use among our Independent brethren. For as in every church, a majority of the members have but little discernment, and are of course easily influenced and led, so an artful designing pastor, if such a one should appear in a church thus constituted, might generally succeed in conciliating a majority of the votes to his own person and schemes, to the utter discomfiture of the more wise, pious, and prudent portion of the members. But upon the Presbyterian plan, it is precisely this best class of his church members who are associated with him in authority and counsel — who are with him, ecclesiastically speaking, abroad and at home, in the house and by the way, in going out and in coming in — from whose notice he cannot escape, and without whose cooperation he can do nothing. Truly, this is the very *last* method that designing ambitious ministers would adopt to forward their projects! Nothing could be conceived more unfriendly to corrupt schemes than such a band of official colleagues. And accordingly, as we have more than once seen in the foregoing chapters, the honest and pious old Ambrose, of the fourth century, expressly tells us that it was a wish to get rid of such colleagues on the part of the teaching elders, that first led to the gradual disuse of ruling elders in the church after the first three centuries.

**III.** Again, as the Presbyterian plan of administering discipline is adapted to present one of the strongest conceivable barriers against clerical ambition, so it also furnishes one of the best securities for preserving the rights of the people. And here nothing will be said on the supposed congeniality between the Presbyterian form of church government, and the republican representative systems under which we live; and on the alleged tendency of the former to prepare men for understanding, prizing, and maintaining the latter. I say I will not dwell on these allegations, not because I do not consider both as perfectly well founded, but because the discussion might be deemed invidious (biased) by some readers, and because it forms no necessary part of my argument. Independently of these considerations, it may be confidently maintained that the Presbyterian plan of administering discipline furnishes far better security for preserving *unimpaired* the rights of private Christians, than any plan with which we are acquainted. It is not forgotten that this assertion will appear a paradox to many; but nevertheless, it rests on the most solid grounds.

There is no oppression heavier, no tyranny more unrelenting, than that of an excited, infuriated popular assembly — no body with which the rights and privileges of an accused individual are less safe. This is especially so, when headed and controlled by an eloquent, artful, and highly popular pastor who has taken part against that individual. Suppose, then, as the annals of Independency have too often exemplified, that a member is on trial for some alleged delinquency before a church of that denomination. Suppose the alleged

offence is one which has deeply alienated his pastor from him, *and* all the particular friends of the pastor. Suppose these as one man rise up against him, and resolve to crush him. And suppose this Pastor is so generally admired and beloved by his people, that he is able to command an overwhelming majority of their votes in support of all his favorite measures. What chance would such an accused person stand of getting an impartial trial before such a tribunal? Not the smallest. He might be guilty indeed, and *deserve* the heaviest sentence; but even if innocent, his acquittal in such circumstances could be anticipated by none. He must become the victim of popular resentment; and if he thus falls, he has no remedy — there is no tribunal to which he can appeal. He must lie down under the oppressive sentence; and there he must lie as long as he lives. He cannot regularly (that is, according to that ecclesiastical rule which pervades all religious denominations) go to another church. For the supposition is that he is *excommunicated*, and cannot be recommended as being in “good standing” to any other ecclesiastical body. He must submit to the operation of the sentence, however unjust, until the excited and impassioned body which laid it upon him is disposed to relent, and consent to remove the deadly weight.

It is not denied that there may be moments of prejudice and passion in the Presbyterian church, in which even the grave and experienced elders may be so worked on by different sorts of influence, as to dispense justice very imperfectly, or even in a particular case, to refuse it entirely. But then, in every such case, upon the Presbyterian plan, there is an immediate and perfect remedy. An individual who supposes himself to be wronged, may appeal to a higher tribunal, where his cause will be heard by judicious, enlightened, impartial men, who had no concern in its origin, and who, if wrong have been done, may be expected to afford prompt and complete redress. The oppressive sentence may be reversed — he may be reinstated in all his Christian privileges, in spite of popular excitement. And even where his own reluctance, or that of his former connections, may forbid his return to the bosom of the same congregation in which he recently received such treatment, yet he may easily and regularly be attached to a neighboring one of the same denomination, and thus find the whole difficulty satisfactorily removed.

It is not asserted that other churches, in the exercise of discipline, in fact more frequently injure and oppress the subjects of their discipline than the Presbyterian church. Such an assertion might indeed be made, perhaps without invidiousness, inasmuch as decisions formed and pronounced by the popular voice may be deemed (without disparagement to the individuals who form them) less likely to be wise and impartial than when formed by a select body of enlightened and pious judges. But on this point, no comparative estimate will be attempted. It is, however, confidently asserted that when such a wrong as that of which we speak unhappily occurs, the Presbyterian system affords more complete relief from oppression; and therefore it furnishes more fixed security for the rights of the people than is found in any other denomination. No single man in our church, whatever title he may bear, can by his single and perhaps capricious veto, deprive a professing Christian of his privileges as a church member. Nor can it be done by a feverish popular assembly, impelled by its own prejudice or passion, or held under the sovereign control of one man. The best array of piety, wisdom, and knowledge which the society affords, must sit in judgment in the case. And even if this judicatory should give an unjust sentence, the religious rights of the individual are not prostrated or foreclosed, but may be reviewed by an impartial tribunal, and every privilege which he ought to enjoy, secured.

**IV.** Further; the plan of conducting church government with the aid of ruling elders, secures to ministers of the Word and sacraments, counsel and support of the best possible kind, in all their official proceedings. Supposing ministers of the gospel are honest, pious, disinterested, and zealous in their appropriate work; that they have no dispositions at any time to encroach on the rights of others; and that they are above the reach of that passion and prejudice which are so apt to assail even the honest, and which need a check in *all*; even suppose that ministers of the gospel are above the reach of these evils —they still need counsel, information, and support in a multitude of cases. And they cannot, with either safety or advantage, proceed without them. In all the affairs of the church, it is of the utmost importance that the interests of the whole body be constantly consulted, and that the whole body act an appropriate part in conducting its affairs. As there are no privileged orders to be aggrandized and elevated, so there are no ecclesiastical secrets to be kept, and no private or selfish schemes to be tolerated. The more completely every plan is laid open to public view, understood and appreciated by every member, sustained by unanimous and willing effort, and made to promote the knowledge, purity, and order of the whole, the better. Of course, that plan of ecclesiastical regimen which is best adapted to attain these ends, and to attain them in the most certain, direct, quiet, and comfortable manner, is most worthy of our choice.

Such a plan, it is firmly believed, is the presbyterian. In every department of official duty, the pastor of this denomination has associated with him, a body of pious, wise, and disinterested counsellors, taken from among the people; acquainted with their views; participating in their feelings; able to give sound advice as to the wisdom and practicability of plans which require general cooperation for carrying them into effect; and also able, after having aided in the formation of such plans, to return to their constituents, and so to advocate and recommend them, so as to secure general concurrence in their favor.

This is an advantage, strictly speaking, peculiar to Presbyterianism. For although other forms of church government provide for associating laymen with the clergy in ecclesiastical business; yet according to them, there is no divine warrant for it. It is a mere human expedient to meet an acknowledged exigency, for which those who make this acknowledgment, suppose that the law of Christ makes no provision. And the human provision which they thus make, is manifestly liable to many objections. It consists either in constituting the whole body of the communicants to be the pastor's counsellors (which is liable to all the objections stated at large in a former chapter); or in providing for him a committee, or small delegation of laymen, who may be changed every year, or oftener, and of course may have very little experience. In some churches these lay delegates are not required to be communicants, or even baptized persons; and consequently, they may have no real ecclesiastical responsibility for their conduct.

**V.** The method of conducting discipline under consideration also has the advantage on the score of dispatch and energy, as well as of wisdom and the security of equal rights.

Where all the discipline that is exercised is in the hands of a single individual, without appeal, it must be confessed that in this case provision for dispatch and energy cannot be more perfect, at least in theory. But where it is in the hands of the whole body of the church members, there is no saying how long litigation may be protracted, or in what perplexities and delays the plainest case may be involved. There are so many minds to be

consulted, and every case on this plan is so open to capricious or malignant interposition, that it is impossible, in ordinary circumstances, to calculate results or to foresee an end.

Even on the Presbyterian plan, there is no doubt that delay and perplexities may arise in some cases. But where the whole management of discipline, from its inceptive steps to the consummation of each case, is entirely committed to a select body of pious, intelligent, prudent, and experienced men, accustomed to the work, and aware of the dangers to which their course is exposed — then we may reasonably expect their decisions to be as speedy, as unembarrassed, and as much lifted above the temporizing<sup>1</sup> feebleness or the tempestuous irregularity and confusion that are incident to *popular management*, as human infirmity will allow. <sup>2</sup>

**VI.** The plan of conducting discipline by means of a succession of judicatories, allowing for appeal, provides for redressing many grievances which do not otherwise appear to permit a remedy. According to the Independent, or strictly congregational system, as suggested in a preceding page, when a member of a church has been unjustly censured or cast out, he has no appeal; there is no tribunal to which he can apply for relief. Yet his case may be an exceedingly hard one, loudly calling for redress. The cause of religion in his neighborhood may be suffering severely by the situation in which he is placed. Should there not be some regular and adequate method of meeting and removing such a difficulty? In those churches of Connecticut which entered into a plan of consociational union, such a method has been provided to a certain extent. But it has been by adopting, to precisely the same extent, a leading principle of Presbyterianism. When difficulties arise in a particular church, a tribunal is formed by a number of neighboring ministers, together with one or more lay delegates from each of the churches represented, who may review and, if need be, redress the alleged grievance. This is a Presbyterian feature in their system; and so far as it goes, it is excellent and effectual. However, in the judgement of the venerable President Dwight, this plan is still defective, and defective precisely at the point at which it stops short of Presbyterianism. The opinion which this distinguished Congregational Minister has expressed, in reference to the subject before us, will best appear by presenting it in its connection. It is as follows:

“There are many cases in which individuals are dissatisfied on reasonable grounds with the judgment a church. It is perfectly obvious that in a debate between two members of the same church, the parties may in many respects stand on unequal ground. One of them may be ignorant, without family connections, in humble circumstances, and possessed of little or no personal influence. The other may be a person of distinction, opulent, powerfully connected, of superior understanding, and of great personal influence — not only in the church, but also in the country at large. As things are in this world, it is impossible that these persons should possess equal advantages in any controversy between them. Beyond all this, the church itself may be one party, and a poor and powerless member the other. In this case also, it is unnecessary to observe that the individual must labor under every supposable disadvantage to which a righteous cause can be subjected. To bring the parties in these or any similar circumstances as near to a state of equality as human affairs will permit, it seems absolutely necessary

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<sup>1</sup> *Temporizing*: drawing out a discussion or process in order to gain time (foot-dragging). – WHG

<sup>2</sup> Miller contrasts the representative plan he laid out, against a committee of the whole (or mob rule). The founders of the American republic feared the tyranny of the majority, as much as the tyranny of the one, or the few. – WHG

that every ecclesiastical body should have its tribunal of appeals — a superior judicature, established by common consent, and vested with authority to issue finally all those causes which, before a single church, are obviously liable to a partisan decision.”

“Such a tribunal, in all the New England states except this one (Connecticut), is formed by what is called a *select council*; that is, a council mutually chosen by the contending parties. This has long appeared to me a judicatory that is most unhappily constituted. The parties of course choose those persons they suppose most likely to favor themselves. Therefore, if they commit no mistake in the choice, the Council may be considered as divided in opinion even before it assembles; and as furnishing every reason to believe that it will not be less divided afterwards. Its proceeding will frequently be marked with strong partialities; and its decision, if made at all, will not infrequently be those of a bare majority. Coming from different parts of the country, it will have no common rules of proceedings — after its decisions, its existence ceases. Its responsibility vanishes with its existence, as does also the sense of its authority. As the members frequently come from a distance, it can have no knowledge concerning those numerous particulars which respect the transactions to be judged; nor the characters, interests, views, and contrivances of those who are immediately concerned. As individuals, these members may in some instances have much weight; and in certain circumstances, they may by their wisdom and piety do much good. But all this must arise solely from their personal character. As a council, as a judicatory, they can scarcely have any weight at all. For as they disappear when the trial is ended, they are forgotten in their united character; and having no permanent existence, they are regarded with no habitual respect, and even with no prejudice in their favor. As they are chosen on partisan principles, very often they are also led, of course, to partisan decisions, and leave behind them very unhappy opinions concerning ecclesiastical government at large.”

“In this state (Connecticut), a much happier mode has been resorted to for the accomplishment of this object: the tribunal of appeal here is a *consociation* — a standing body composed of the settled ministers within an associational district, and delegates from the churches in the same district. It is a body always existing, of acknowledged authority, of great weight, possessed of all the impartiality incident to human affairs, feeling its responsibility as a thing of course. It is a court of record, having a regular system of precedents; and from being frequently called to business of this nature, it is skilled to a good degree in the proper modes of proceeding.”

“The greatest defect in this system, it seems to me, is the lack of a still superior tribunal to receive appeals in cases where they are obviously necessary. It is unnecessary for me to particularize these. Every person extensively acquainted with ecclesiastical affairs, knows that such cases exist. The only remedy provided by the system of discipline established in this state for those who feel aggrieved by a consociational judgment, is to introduce a neighboring consociation as *assessors* with that consociation which has given the judgment, at a new hearing of the cause. The provision of this partial, imperfect tribunal of appeals, is clear proof that those who formed the system perceived the absolute necessity of some appellate jurisdiction. The judicatory which they have furnished of this nature is perhaps the best which the churches of the state would at that, or any succeeding period, have consented to establish. Yet it is easy to see that were they disposed, they might easily institute one which would be incomparably better.”

“The only instance found in the Scriptures of an appeal actually made for the decision of an ecclesiastical debate, is that recorded in the fifteenth chapter of the Acts, and mentioned for another purpose in a former discourse. A number of the Jews in the church at Antioch insisted that the Gentile converts should be circumcised and be obliged to keep the law of Moses. Paul and Barnabas strenuously controverted this point with them. As no harmonious termination of the debate he could be had at Antioch, an appeal was made “to the Apostles and Elders at Jerusalem.” But as I observed in the discouragement mentioned, it was heard and determined by the apostles, elders, and brethren. As this judicatory was formed under the direction of the apostles themselves, it must be admitted as a precedent for succeeding churches. And it teaches us, on the one hand, that an appellate jurisdiction is both lawful and necessary in the church; and on the other hand, that it is to be composed of both ministers and brethren, necessarily acting at the present time by delegation.”<sup>3</sup>

In this quotation and in the preceding remarks, it will be perceived that a reference is principally had to cases in which individual private members have considered themselves as aggrieved by the decisions of particular churches. But the same remarks, in substance, are applicable to those cases in which difficulties arise between ministers and their congregations, or between two neighboring congregations of the same name. No form of church government provides for the settlement of such difficulties so promptly or so well as the Presbyterian. Independency strictly so called (that is, Independency in strict adherence to its essential principles) furnishes no remedy whatever for such evils. Other sects furnish a nominal or partial remedy by investing some official individual with power to constitute a tribunal for settling such controversies. But the choice of the members of this tribunal is usually committed entirely to that individual. And it is, of course, in his power to make it a mere instrument of oppression, like a “packed jury” in the hands of a corrupt returning officer. But in the Presbyterian church, every difficulty of this kind is committed for adjustment to a permanent, responsible body — a body whose proceedings may be reviewed and examined, whose organization or members cannot be changed at the will of a corrupt individual who may choose to tamper with them, and whose decisions are not merely advisory, but authoritative.

**VII.** Finally, the Presbyterian method of conducting the government of the church is most friendly to the spread of the gospel, and furnishes peculiar facilities for union and efficiency of action, in promoting the great objects of Christian benevolence.

It has indeed sometimes been alleged in opposition to this, that Presbyterianism is naturally, and almost necessarily cold and formal; and that Congregationalism has in fact been found more favorable to zeal and activity in spreading the gospel. It is by no means intended to depreciate either the zeal or the activity of our congregational brethren. Justice demands that much be said in commendation of both. And it will be no small praise to any other denomination to be found successfully emulating the intelligence, enterprise, and perseverance which they have often manifested in pursuing the best interests of the Redeemer’s kingdom. But when the organization of the Presbyterian church is examined, one would think that prejudice itself could scarcely deny its peculiar

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<sup>3</sup> *Theology Explained and Defended*, vol. iv. 399, 401.

adaptedness for united, harmonious, and efficient action in everything which it might become convinced was worthy of pursuit.

In order to enable this church to act with the utmost energy and uniformity throughout its entire extent, there is no need for any new organization. It is organized already, and in a manner that would seem as perfect as possible for united and harmonious action. A delegation from every church meet and confer several times each year in Presbytery, as a matter of course. What opportunity could be imagined more favorable for forming and executing plans of cooperation among all the churches thus united and stately convening? They have the same opportunity and every advantage of meeting at pleasure that can be enjoyed by a voluntary association — with the additional advantage that they act under a system of ecclesiastical rules and authority which enable them to go forward with more energy and uniformity in their adopted course. If a more extended union of Presbyterian churches than of those which belong to a single Presbytery is desired for any particular purpose, the regular meetings of the synods, each comprising a number of Presbyteries, afford the happiest opportunity to effect the object, without any new or extra combination. The representatives of perhaps one hundred and fifty churches assembled in their ecclesiastical capacity, and in the name of Christ, could hardly be conceived to convene in circumstances more perfectly favorable to their cooperating in any worthy and hallowed cause, with one heart, and with the most perfect concentration of effort. And when we extend our thoughts to the General Assembly, the bond of union, counsel, and cooperation, for more than two thousand churches, all represented and combined in the same cause — we see a plan which in theory at least, would seem difficult to adapt more completely to union of heart and hand in any good work. The most admirable combination, with every possible advantage, exists beforehand. Nothing is wanting in any case, except the animating spirit necessary for applying it to the proper objects. The machinery, in all its perfection, is already constructed and ready to be set in motion. Only let the impelling principle be present and operate with due power — which is necessary to set all moral combinations into vigorous movement — and it may be asserted that a more advantageous system for ecclesiastical enterprise was never devised.

It is not a sufficient reply to this statement to say that the Congregational Churches of New England have in fact done more in the last thirty years, in the way of contribution and effort, for extending the Redeemer's kingdom, than any equal number of churches of the Presbyterian denomination in the United States. It is impossible to contemplate the intelligence, harmony of feeling, and pious enterprise of the mass of our congregational brethren without sentiments at once of respect and gratitude. But is not the general fact alluded to, chiefly referable to other causes than the form of their church government? No one, it is believed, can doubt for a moment that this is the case. Their church government is manifestly less adapted to promote union and effective cooperation than most others. But their intelligence, their piety, their common origin, their homogenous character, their compact situation, and the sameness of the instruction, the excitements, and the agencies which they enjoy, have all tended to prepare them for united and harmonious cooperation. Only give to the members of churches organized on the Presbyterian plan, the same advantages, the same natural principles of cohesion, the same intellectual and moral stimulants, and the same pervading spirit, and can anyone believe that there would be found less union and less energy in pursuing the best interests of man? We must deny the connection between cause and effect, before we can doubt that there would be more



of both. It has indeed sometimes been said as a supposed example of the unfavorable influence of Presbyterianism, that the churches called Presbyterian in South Britain have generally declined, both in orthodoxy and piety, within the last hundred years; while the Independents have generally and happily maintained their character for both. But the fact is that when the English Presbyterians gradually fell into those errors for which most of them are now distinguished, they at the same time gradually renounced the Presbyterian form of government, although they retained the name. There are not now, and have not been for many years, any real Presbyterians in England, except those who are directly or indirectly connected with churches in Scotland. After all, it is not pretended that the Presbyterian form of church government can of itself infuse spiritual life and activity into an ecclesiastical body; but that where vitality, and zeal, and resources exist, there is no form of ecclesiastical organization in the world so well adapted to unite counsels, and to invigorate efforts, as that under which we are so happy as to live.

However, it makes no part of the design of the author of this volume to assail or to depreciate the ecclesiastical order of other denominations. On the contrary, wherever he finds those who evidently bear the image of Christ, and who appear to be engaged in advancing his kingdom — whatever form of church order they may prefer — he can hail them with unqualified affection as Christian brethren. The truth is, he would not have alluded to any other portion of the Christian church than that with which he is more immediately connected, had it appeared possible without doing so, to fully illustrate the character and advantages of our own form of government. His ardent wish is not to alienate by high claims, or unkind language; but rather to conciliate and bind together by everything that can minister to brotherly love. And his daily prayer is that all the Evangelical churches in our land may be more and more united in principle and effort, for extending that “kingdom which is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.”