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The Eldership.

THREE distinct theories have been advanced by parties well qualified to sift the scriptural evidence for the office of the eldership as it now exists in the Presbyterian Church. The *first* is, that while the New Testament recognises but one order of Presbyters, in it there are two degrees or classes—the Teaching and the Ruling Elder. In support of this it is usual to quote 1 Timothy 5: 17. “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the Word and doctrine.” This it may be remarked is the only passage which gives any reasonable colouring to the theory. The *second* is, that the modern Ruling Elder is not, and is not designed to be a reproduction of the New Testament elder: that it is a misnomer to call him by the name: that he is nothing but a layman, chosen to *represent* the laity in the church courts; and that he has no other duties than to assist the minister in the *government* of the church. The *third* theory does not attempt to reconcile the differences between the modern elder and the New Testament one. It lays upon arbitrary ecclesiastical enactments, use and wont, and popular prejudice the charge of drawing an unwarranted line of distinction, and takes the broad ground that the office of the elder is one of divine appointment. It holds to the absolute equality or “parity” of what we call “elders” and “ministers,” conceding to all elders, as such, equal rights to teach, rule, administer the sacraments, to take part in ordinations and to preside in church courts; in short, that no act may be legally done by the one that cannot be properly done by the other. The polity of all the Presbyterian Churches of the present day most nearly accords with the first named theory. The “Form of Government” of the Church of Scotland speaks in this wise:—

“As there were in the Jewish Church elders of the people joined with the priests and Levites in the Government of the Church; so Christ, who hath instituted government and governors ecclesiastical in the Church, hath furnished some, beside the ministers of the Word, with gifts of government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereunto, who are to join with the minister in the government of the Church. Which officers reformed churches commonly call elders.”

Touching their office and election the “Book of Common Order” has the following:—

“The elders must be men of good life and godly conversation; without blame and all suspicion; careful for the flock, wise, and above all things fearing God. Whose office standeth in governing with the rest of the ministers; in consulting, admonishing, correcting and ordering all things appertaining to the state of the congregation. And they differ from the minister in that they preach not the Word, nor minister the sacraments. In assembling the people, neither they without the minister, nor the minister without them, may attempt anything. And if any of the just number want, the minister, by the consent of the rest, warneth the people thereof, and finally admonisheth them to observe the same order which was used in choosing the ministers, as far forth as their vocation requireth.”

By common consent, the modern elder is a “presbyter,” *i.e.*, he is a constituent member of the Presbytery, and it is declared in the “Form of Church Government” that “the power of ordering the whole work of ordination is in the whole presbytery.” But again, it is stated that “*preaching presbyters only* are those to whom the imposition of hands doth appertain.”

Upon the principle that the greater includes the lesser office, the Scottish Churches, and also the Presbyterian Church in Canada, allow that ministers without charge may be elected as representative elders to the General Assembly. The American churches, with greater consistency, say that a minister cannot serve as an elder.

These extracts are samples of many that might be adduced to shew the difficulty of reconciling the present practice and theory of the Presbyterian Churches in the matter of the eldership. On the one hand it is admitted that but one order of Presbyters is men-