

The apostolic societies were, in the fullest sense of the word, *COMMUNITIES*; not indeed chaotic assemblages, liable to the confusions that attend unrestrained democracy, but *organized* bodies, constituted of head, and heart, and members, concurring, according to their several powers, in the same acts, and bound together by a vital sympathy. The principle of apostolic church polity would, as we assume, have been violated in an equal degree, either by any attempt of the people to bring their pastors into a subservient condition, as their stipendiaries; or by any endeavour of the clergy to sustain and extend their prerogatives by secret conspiracy. The two great rudiments of ecclesiastical polity, namely, the sacerdotal origin of sacerdotal powers; and the presence and concurrence of the people in acts of discipline and in the enactment of regulations, and especially in the management of pecuniary affairs, are correlative, and the worst evils arise from parting them, or from practically nullifying either. The one is not worth contending for, apart from the other; and the one is essential to the complete operation of the other. Which ever party aims to compromise the privileges and rights of the other, is blind to its own.

We have already spoken of the first of these two principles: and nothing is easier than to establish the second. As matter of history the fact of the concurrence of the mass of the Church in deliberations and decisions stands on the face of the apostolic writings. The multitude came together, and took their part in the most important constitutions. In the multitude was referred the election of officers charged with the secondary affairs of the community: the brethren held up the hand, although they did not lay the hand: the *heiroutona* was allowed them, where the *heurothesia* was reserved to the presbyters and bishops. Public business was indeed arranged, propounded, and carried through by Public Persons; but still it was carried as *public business*. The machination in closets of interests that ought to be openly discussed, is a treason against the community; nor was any such secret management admitted even by the divinely commissioned apostles.

But the tenor and the terms of the apostolic epistles afford the most satisfactory evidence on the point of the liberal and open constitution of the first Churches. These epistles, fraught with various and specific advices on questions of discipline and government are, addressed comprehensively and directly to the mass of believers;—not to the people through the medium of their rulers. The pastors are indeed mentioned, but this mention of them distinctly implies that the writer, in each instance, had his eye immediately fixed upon the people. Were then the people—the believers at large, the mere subjects of church power? did they constitute an inert mass, upon which sacerdotal functions were to be exercised? Common sense is insulted by any such supposition; historic evidence is outraged by affirming it to have been the fact. The Church, with its teachers and pastors, was one living body, various in its functions, but full of energy and action.

The course recommended or enjoined, on various occasions, by St Paul, and the public measures which he advises to be pursued, were plainly supposed to issue from the breadth of the Church; and not to be promulgated from the closet of an oligarchy. Our inference in this instance has precisely the same strength as that which we draw in favour of the independence of the clerical function from the fact, that all the instructions bearing directly and explicitly upon the appointment, investiture, character, and behaviour of the rulers of the Church, are conveyed to *INDIVIDUALS* (not to Churches) and these being such

as had received an irresponsible authority, from an irresponsible source.

VIII. We have then before us the constituents of a Church, and their reciprocal influence. It only remains to inquire, what should be the relative position of those who exercise the various public functions of the body. The following considerations seem proper to be premised to such an inquiry.

1st. It should be admitted that the information furnished in the writings of the New Testament concerning the form of government prevailing in the apostolic Church is scanty, incomplete, informal, to some extent ambiguous, and such, in a word, as excludes the supposition that any definite polity was intended to be authoritatively conveyed to the Church universal. Or let it be granted that the few who are fully and familiarly conversant with ecclesiastical antiquity, may arrive at a clear conviction that such and such was the economy of the first churches, or of most of them; yet the SCANTY EVIDENCE alone, and unaided by learned researches, can never be so presented to the mass of Christians as to command their assent to this or that system, as apostolic and unchangeable.

2dly. The information we gather, in part from the incidental allusions of the canonical writers, and in part from the extant remains of early Christian literature, suggests the belief (in itself probable) that, under the eye, and with the approbation or permission of the apostles, different modes of church government prevailed in different countries. It is, we say, perfectly credible, and pretty nearly established as a fact, that a certain ecclesiastical constitution which might well accord with the national sentiments and civil usages of the Christians of Syria, or Persia, or the provinces of Hellenic Asia, might be altogether repugnant to the feelings of the Churches of Greece proper, of Italy, Gaul, or Northern Africa. That sort of superstitious, servile, and despotic inflexibility which is characteristic of the arrogant churchman of later ages, assuredly was not the temper of the first promulgators of the Gospel. St. Paul, especially, had learned that high wisdom which is at once immovable in principle, and compliant in circumstances. The whole analogy of his behaviour, and of his sentiments, contradicts the supposition that he went about carrying an iron model of ecclesiastical government, from country to country.

3dly. We must be especially aware of those fallacies in argument that arise from placing reliance upon either the etymological import, or the afterwards acquired and specific sense of certain terms of office; since it is manifest that these terms are used convertibly throughout the New Testament, and are interchanged with a latitude and a freedom that does not at all accord with the definitions and assumptions of modern controversialists. Modern controversies, on church government, have been rendered indecisive by the fault, common to all parties, of contending for and against NAMES; instead of inquiring concerning facts. What avails it, for example, to prove that the pastors of single and small congregations were called *bishops*? The only question of significance is this, whether, when there were ten, fifty, or a hundred congregations in a city, each was an insulated and independent Church, having its bishop, and its exclusive organization, or whether they did not, in *all such cases*, constitute one Church, governed by a single president (call him what we may) who bore rule over all the clerical persons ministering to those several congregations? If we find in fact at Jerusalem, at Antioch, at Ephesus, at Alexandria, at Rome, some such economy as this, and always one Church, comprising many congregations, directed by one angel, or chief, those who choose may argue the question—what was his title?