

The Scripture Argument for Presbyterian Government.

The first thing to be noticed, in the constitution of the primitive Church, says the *Australian Witness* is the very important fact that, by the terms bishops and elders, not two but only one order of ministers is meant. The two names are used indifferently for one and the same office-bearers. Accordingly, each church is spoken of as having bishops or elders; but no church is said to have possessed both bishops and elders—except when both names are manifestly applied to the same class of persons. The pastor of a congregation was called a bishop or an elder, and had no ecclesiastical superior. Prelacy, which means one order of ministers exalted above another with exclusive authority to perform certain religious functions, was not known in the earliest age of the Church. The one office of pastor, or rather the person who holds the office, is designated either by *presbuteros* or *episcopos*; and this latter term, again, our version renders either by bishop or by its equivalent overseer. But this is nothing more than an English variation, and it is only necessary to bear it in mind. The proof of the foregoing statement is found in the following passages of Scripture. The first occurs in the 15th chapter of the Acts and the 7th verse. A difference had arisen regarding the observance of the ceremonial law in the Christian Church, and the dissension had proceeded so far that it was necessary to convene a general council of the leading office-bearers to decide the question. Who, then, were these leading guides of the Church? The 7th verse says, "the apostles and elders." Had there been an intermediate order of bishops, how could they possibly be excluded from a convention of such extreme importance as this was to the Christian Church? The same remark will apply also to the 4th verse, where none but apostles and elders are mentioned. Turn next to the opening verse of the Epistle to the Philippians. Here the apostle's salutation is given to the "bishops and deacons." Had there been three orders of ministers, the dedication would certainly have been to bishops, elders, and deacons. But nothing can be more evident than the fact that "bishops" is here only another name for "elders." The Church at Philippi was only a small one; and it would be absurd to suppose it possessed of several bishops in the modern sense of the term; whereas it is very certain that it was provided with a staff of elders. Again, in the 20th chapter of the Acts, and from the 17th verse onward, we read that Paul sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the Church. And then in the 28th verse, we find him addressing these same persons under the name of bishops. The old version here presents the unfortunate variation for the English reader, already noticed, for instead of the name bishops, it gives the equivalent, overseers. This ambiguity, however, has no place in the original language of the inspired author, which ought to be rendered thus: "And he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the Church, and said, Take heed unto yourselves and to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you bishops." Once more, let us compare text and context in the opening verses of the Epistle to Titus. Verse 5th reads thus: "For this cause left I thee in Crete . . . to appoint elders in every city;" verse 6th, "if any be blameless;" and in continuation, verse 7th, "for a bishop must be blameless." Thus it will be seen here, as in all other cases the same persons who in verse 5th are called elders are spoken of in the 7th under the name of bishops. This fact must now be so evident that it would only be a waste of words to adduce further proof. The name of bishop or overseer is a fitting title as descriptive of the office. It is one of superintendence or oversight.

Hence the Apostle Peter speaks as follows: "The elders which are among you I exhort who am also an elder; feed the flock of Christ, taking the oversight not by constraint, but willingly." It was natural to expect that an office of such importance in the Church, and demanding matured Christian experience, would usually be filled by men well advanced in life; and from this circumstance is seen the propriety of the other designation of elders. When this order of Christian office-bearers is looked into a little more closely, there is seen to be a distinction between some who were engaged in teaching and others who were occupied in ruling or governing the Church. The same distinction prevailed in the ancient synagogue, or the model of which, more than that of any other Jewish institution, the Christian Church was formed. There some were employed in the government of the synagogue, and others in the conduct of public worship. That a similar arrangement found a place in the primitive Church is evident from 1 Tim. v. 7: "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in word and doctrine." The latter are to be accounted worthy of double honor as performing a twofold duty—that of ruling and teaching. This double honor, the apostle goes on to say, includes maintenance, inasmuch as the man who gives his time and labor to the Church is entitled to look for his support in so doing, according to the proverb which says that the laborer is worthy of his hire. Here, then, is our authority for a twofold classification of elders. The one order, being concerned with the government and discipline of the Church, have their special office in ruling, and are, therefore, fittingly called ruling elders. The others, besides ruling in common with the former, also labor in word and doctrine, that is to say, teach and preach the gospel, and are, therefore, properly called teaching elders, but more commonly preachers or ministers of the Word. From the nature of the case, each congregation had usually only one teaching elder; but there were associated with him several ruling elders, the precise number being regulated according to the extent of his charge and the exigencies of his situation. The duties of the ruling elders are similar to those of the minister, with the exception of the preaching of the gospel and the conduct of public worship. We are not disposed to attach an exclusive importance to Church government, for it is, after all, a means to an end. Nor, on the other hand, can we agree with some prelatists who, finding no sufficient warrant for their system in the New Testament, affirm that ecclesiastical government was left an open question to be regulated according to convenience. This is a liberty which could not fail to be abused by human caprice. It belongs to the headship of Christ to furnish the rule for His own house. He who gave directions for the smallest minutiae in the erection of the tabernacle and superadded the command: "See thou do all things according to the pattern showed thee in the Mount, is not likely to have left the government of His Church to the wisdom or the fancy of men.

Love to Christ is no pent-up emotion or hidden force. It is demonstrative. It is absent from no circle or condition. It is more than a transient feeling or a momentary heart-glow. It is a real, moving, and constraining affection. It affects the mind, fills the soul, thrills the being, evokes latent energies, and sets the entire nature on fire. It is as all-permeating as was Mary's broken alabaster box, which filled the entire room with its fragrance.

28