

PRIMITIVE CHURCH GOVERNMENT AND LAY-REPRESENTATION.

"But he is not called Rabbi, for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren."—Matt. xxiii, 8.

In discussing the rights of all the members of the Church to participate in the Government of it, it is hardly necessary to go further than to announce the portion of Holy Scripture at the head of this article. If all the disciples of Christ—if all the members of each particular community of Christians in any place are brethren; as they are on the highest authority declared to be, the whole matter is settled in favour of Lay-Representation, which is only a more convenient mode of giving every member a voice in the Councils of the Church. Instead, therefore, of our being under obligation to prove an equality of the members of the Christian Church with the ministers thereof, it behoves those who have assumed power to govern the Methodist Church in all its affairs to show their authority for this assumption of power.

It is probable that St. Peter foresaw the usurpation of the government of the Church by the elders, when he exhorted them to "*feed the flock of God, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but ensamples to the flock.*"

The beloved disciple, St. John, seems to have been of the same opinion, as shown in the notice he took of one Diotrephes. He says "*I wrote unto the Church; but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the pre-eminence among them, receiveth us not.*" Whether he withheld the Apostle's letter from the Church or not, considering it sent to himself personally, the Apostle does not inform us; but there is little doubt that he considered himself the Church, and was, apparently a good modern clergyman, but rather in advance of his age. He might at least have waited till the Apostles had disappeared. He had assumed authority to refuse to receive brethren, and to forbid others doing so, and to expel members of the Church.

We shall perhaps be opposed by another portion of scripture, which says, "*Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves, for they watch for your souls as they that must give account.*" This scripture is, in our opinion, quite irrelevant to we do not object to Government or to obedience and submission; but to a Government independent of the community,—to a Diotrephesian government, which is that of the Wesleyan Methodist Church.

However it is needless for us to call upon them for their authority for usurping the entire management of the affairs of the Church, as both they and we know that none can be produced. We shall therefore follow up the subject, and endeavour further to prove that the Government of the Primitive Church was administered by the whole of the members or disciples. There was no separation of Apostles, elders, or deacons from the rest of the community. No conference sitting with closed doors, and so grasping interference with all the secular matters of the Church. So far from this, that the Apostles found it necessary to lay the burden

of secular affairs on persons chosen by the community, that they might give themselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.

The first important act in Church Government, was the appointment of an Apostle to supply the vacancy made by the death of Judas. In our day this would be an interference which the laity would be willing to renounce, believing the Ministry most competent to perform such an important function. The election of an Apostle was thus conducted:—"And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, Men and brethren, this Scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas." After reciting the prophecy and its fulfilment in the person of Judas, the Apostle continued:—"Wherefore of these men which companied with us, all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning at the Baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained, to be a witness with us, of his resurrection." And they appointed two. After solemn prayer to God, the selection of one out of the two chosen by the people, was made by lot, in the person of Matthias.

At this time the number of disciples was about one hundred and twenty. The Apostle Peter addressed them on the subject of appointing another Apostle; one was chosen out of their own number and by themselves. This fact cannot be disputed, therefore at the first and most important meeting of the Church, the business was transacted by the whole community.

The next, important act of the Church, was the appointment of Deacons, Stewards or Servants of the Church in secular matters. This is concisely and clearly proved in the following words, Acts 6, v. 3-5: "*Wherefore brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.*" "And the saying pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen," and the whole seven as related.

Here again the whole of the Disciples were together, who selected their officers from among themselves, to whom was committed the secular affairs of the Church, expressly that the Apostles might be relieved of the encumbrance of them; that they might give themselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word. How happily those holy men must have gone to their spiritual labour, after being released from the responsibility of these secular affairs. No doubt very differently from what they would have done, had they insisted on their authority to manage things as they pleased, or to depute whom they pleased in their stead. An authority, which, in our opinion, they could have exercised with better right than any of their successors.

The next important affair was to decide whether the Gentile Christians should observe the laws of Moses. This question seems to have been amply debated by the whole Church, with the Apostles and Elders, and no doubt, with considerable feeling on

both sides, the Jewish Christians being very zealous for the laws of Moses, while Paul and Barnabas, both Jews, must have appeared to be opposed to them. This debate ended in a resolution as follows:—"Then it pleased the Apostles and Elders, with the whole Church to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch, with Paul and Barnabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren, and they wrote letters by them after this manner. The Apostles, and Elders, and Brethren, send greeting, &c. &c." The letter in question, contains the following expressions bearing on our argument. "It seemed good unto us being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you," "For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things. That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled and from fornication."

In this transaction the members of the Church were equal with the Apostles in the authority to send forth special missionaries, and to issue a decree binding on the consciences of the Gentile Converts. To this the Holy Ghost gave Divine authority, associating in the decree with the members of the Church. Surely, if God could condescend to associate the members of the Church with himself, in the exercise of such power, it is no degradation of the members of the Methodist Conference, to admit their lay brethren to a similar association with themselves in the government of the Church.

We have in the three instances just referred to in the history of the Primitive Church, examples of the whole administration of Church Government, or evidently the most important functions of it being performed by the Church,—the multitude,—the disciples or brethren, and we have no instance of the separate exercise of authority by the Ministers only.

The brethren appointed an Apostle, they chose Deacons or Stewards to manage the secular affairs of the Church. They sent out special Missionaries, and wrote letters, containing decrees binding on the conscience of Christians.

When it is considered that, to all these acts of the disciples, the Holy Ghost gave his sanction, we ask, who can have the temerity to forbid the members of the Church taking part in the management of the funds contributed by themselves, or to have a voice in the question as to what Church they are to belong to, or whether the chapel property, built by their subscriptions and their labours, is to belong to others—to be alienated without their consent or even without consulting them? We have not yet heard of any special pretensions being made by the Methodist Clergy, as to their being true successors of the Apostles, we believe all Ministers of the Gospel are, just in the degree that they partake of the Holy Spirit, by which the Apostles were most distinguished. If such are the pretensions of the Methodist Clergy, they ought for consistency to imitate the Apostles in associating the members of the Church with themselves in the management of its affairs; that they might give themselves con-