

Messenger and Visitor

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The Bishops of Ephesus.

The passage in the Acts which forms the lesson in the International series for next Sunday, is called Paul's Address to the Ephesian Elders. It might with equal propriety be called—Paul's Address to the Bishops of Ephesus. These men who are spoken of as "elders" or "presbyters" in verse 17, are called by Paul, in verse 28, "overseers," or, as the R. V. gives the word, "bishops" the Greek word being *episcopos*. They may be taken as representatives of the class of men designated in the New Testament as bishops, though certainly they seem to have lacked a number of characteristics which belong to the bishops of modern times. There is no reason to suppose that in respect to dress or factitious title they were distinguished from their brethren. It is hardly necessary to say that none of the bishops of those days were called "lords," or "primates," or "right reverend," or "very reverend," or even plain "reverend." They were simply bishops, that is overseers, *in*, not *over*, the church. (see R. V. v. 28.) Their grand distinction was that they were men in whom their brethren had recognized qualities—especially spiritual qualities, fitting them for leadership. It had been evident to the church that the Holy Spirit had designated them to that work, and so their fitness was formally recognized by their brethren, and they were constituted elders or bishops by the voice of the church and the laying on of the hands of the apostles. Yes, it seems quite a long step from those bishops of Ephesus to the bishop of a later time. The modern prelate, with all his dignities of dress and title, seems from some points of view, it must be admitted, a more imposing figure, but it does not appear to us certain that the later development is an essential improvement upon the New Testament pattern. The condition of paramount importance to spiritual ministry in the church is that the man who is to assume the duties of that ministry shall be designated and fitted for his sacred office by the Holy Spirit. After that, what churchly ordination and titles he may receive is a matter of very secondary importance. But surely we make no mistake in imitating the simplicity of apostolic methods. It should tend to edification in these matters to study the mind of the Spirit as expressed in the doctrine and the example of our Lord's apostles. If there be those who are fully persuaded in their own minds that an Episcopal form of church polity is most in accord with the spirit and letter of the New Testament, we shall not quarrel with them for being Episcopalian, though we think that Episcopacy, as it is for the most part today, is a very wide departure from the simplicity that is in Christ and the New Testament. But when men assure us that a man is not, and cannot be a properly constituted minister of Christ, unless he shall have received ordination at the hands of a bishop whose own ordination has come through an unbroken line of bishops from the apostles, then we feel like warning these men to have a care lest they be found speaking against the Holy Ghost. The grace of God is not limited in its operations to the channels afforded by prelatical machinery. Christianity is a very much larger word than Episcopalianism or any other "ism"; whatever Paul commanded the grace of patience to others, and he cultivated it in himself. Still we cannot but wonder whether the apostle could have spoken calmly of a Christian system, which has so easily conferred the title and the function of minister of Christ upon certain types of men, of whose mental and spiritual equipment it were charitable to say little, and at the same time denied such recognition to the Chalmerses, the Guthries, the Halls, the Spurgeons, the Moodies and

MESSENGER AND VISITOR.

September 15, 1897.

ten thousand others—men mighty in the word and the doctrine of Christ, and as clearly designated by the Holy Spirit for spiritual ministry in the church of God as were the apostles themselves. It is in no narrow or sectarian spirit that we regard Episcopacy, and especially that part of it included in the great Anglican communion. We are grateful for all the good that it has done. We rejoice in the Christian character, the spiritual lives and ministries, the noble charities, the Christian scholarship, the evangelizing agencies which it has initiated and promoted in the world. But it is a pity that the Anglican church should have been so engaged in nursing and admiring its episcopacy as not to be able to discern, what God has written large in the New Testament and in Christian history, that it is the Holy Ghost that makes men bishops.

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Paul's Address to the Ephesian Elders.

Reading casually Paul's address to the Ephesian elders, which affords the topic for the Bible lesson of the week, the captious critic would perhaps charge the apostle with egotism. It is quite true that Paul has a good deal to say about himself and his work, and he commends his own conduct to the elders of Ephesus as an example to be followed. But anyone who has read into the heart of this narrative must feel that the apostle's egotism is not only pardonable, but in the highest degree honorable. There are occasions when to speak about one's self and the importance and faithfulness of the service one has rendered, and to counsel others to follow the example that has thus been afforded, may be most natural and salutary. Such an occasion it is when the faithful mother who feels that death is about to remove her from her loved ones, calls her eldest daughter to her side, and committing to the daughter's inexperienced hands the duties which the mother may no longer perform, counsels her to constancy and faithfulness in the discharge of them, reminding her how constant, how tender, how devoted, she herself has been in loving ministry for all the family, and admonishing the daughter to seek to be, so far as possible, a mother in her love and devotion to them all. If that is egotism, so was Paul's address to the men of Ephesus; and drawing near we listen with uncovered heads, for the place is holy ground. It is only a love that is stronger than death and a faithfulness that dares appeal to God's judgment-seat, that enables a man or woman to talk like that. It were surely well if all ministers, speaking to their congregations, all teachers, to their classes, all parents, to their families, all Christian men to their brother men, should find the record of their service one so characterized by loving devotion and faithfulness as to make Paul's egotism possible for them.

We find Paul in this chapter, under a mighty impulsion of duty, making his way steadily and with all practicable speed toward Jerusalem. That Jerusalem was the most dangerous place in the world for Paul was probably apparent to anyone who knew the disposition of the Jews generally, and of many of the Jewish Christians toward him. The apostle had also the witness of the Spirit that bonds and imprisonment awaited him. At every point on his journey where disciples are met, they entreat him not to go to Jerusalem, testifying through the Spirit that great dangers, if not death, lie before him. Still Paul goes steadily on, declaring his willingness, if necessary, to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. What Paul's great purpose in his visit to the holy city was, is not very explicitly brought out in the narrative. It appears, however, to be indicated with sufficient clearness that it was a mission of conciliation. He bore the contributions of the Gentile Christians to relieve the poverty of their destitute brethren in Judea, and Paul doubtless hoped that this and other influences connected with his visit might be effectual to the bringing of the Jewish and Gentile elements in the church into a stronger and more cordial unity, and thus preventing a great schism in which a Jewish and a Gentile form of Christianity would be set over against each other. How far Paul was successful, or how far disappointed in the purpose he had in view, we cannot here

discuss. The fact to be taken special note of here is that Paul had heard in his soul, strong and clear, the voice of duty sending him upon this mission, and he permitted no other voice, whether of friend or of foe, to turn him aside from his course. In this steady progress toward Jerusalem the indomitable purpose of the man is seen. But it is more than that. One may be inflexible in purpose and yet have little in common with Paul. It was devotion to his Lord. He was "ready to die at Jerusalem"—for what, his own opinion, his own will? No, but "for the Name of the Lord Jesus." In his exhortation to the Elders the same principle of devotion and the reason for it appears. He admonishes these bishops to feed the church, to care with all earnestness and devotion for its welfare, even as he himself had done. Why, because the church was Paul's, because he had gathered it and shepherded it for years, because he loved it and had suffered for it? No, but because it was Christ's, who had purchased it with His own blood. Here is the true principle, the motive which we all need most of all to cultivate, that of love and faithful devotion to Him who loved us and gave Himself for us. Thus devoted to His service we shall be able to do all things through His strength.

Do not fail to see how strongly this passage indicates that Paul's hope for the church was in God. Paul knew how valuable his own ministry had been to the church at Ephesus, knew it better than did the brethren there. He knew too, better than they, how greatly the flock of God would need wise and faithful shepherding in the coming days. But he did not despair of the church because he himself would no longer be able personally to counsel and guide it. It was of God's planting, and He would care for it. Therefore the apostle confidently commends them to God, and to the word of His grace, persuaded that He who has begun the good work will carry it on. Sometimes good men and women, pastors, teachers and others, give themselves needless anxiety as to what shall become of the work when they must withdraw their hands from it. They fear that it will all go to pieces. But if the foundations have been laid in faith, if the work is God's, there need be no fear for the future.

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Editorial Notes

—The death of Dr. Joseph Ricker, of Augusta, on Sept. 4th, removed one who for many years was prominently connected with the Baptist cause in Maine. From 1869 to 1889 Dr. Ricker performed with ability and great faithfulness the duties of Corresponding Secretary of the Maine Baptist Missionary Convention. Speaking of Dr. Ricker and his work, Zion's Advocate says: "As a denomination we cannot be too thankful for such a man as Joseph Ricker. . . . Other men labored and we have entered into their labors, but of them all no one has done more for the upbuilding of our many denominational interests than he."

—If the nomination of Seth Low, President of Columbia University, as Mayor of the greater New York, shall be confirmed by the electors, it will be a cause for congratulation to people everywhere who value what is honest and of good report in civic government. Mr. Low has received his nomination not from any political party but from the Citizens' Union, and the requisition is signed by 127,000 voters. Mr. Low's election would mean in the first place the defeat of Tammany, in the second place the defeat of the party boss domination, and in the third place would probably insure to the great municipality, with its 3,000,000 of people, the best government that existing conditions will admit of. It is unnecessary to say that the opposition to anything that carries with it the probability of real reform in New York Civic government is great, and that the friends of reform, with Mr. Low at their head, have a hard battle to fight. The contest and its issue will be widely observed, and with great interest.

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