

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

THE OFFICE OF ELDER—ITS NATURE AND FUNCTIONS.

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Some of those offices spoken of in the New Testament, and which existed in the early Church, were evidently extraordinary and temporary, and others ordinary and permanent. Those which embraced special and miraculous functions, which have ceased to be enjoyed, were evidently intended only for the establishment of Christianity. These have passed away with the special and extraordinary gifts with which those who filled them were endowed. Those offices, however, which were ordinary, and whose functions may now be enjoyed, were intended to be permanent. The first, the most important, dignified and useful of these is that of the presbyter or minister of the Word and ordinances. "The first act of Christ's ministry," says an able writer, "was to institute the sacred order of the ministry as His representatives, heralds and ambassadors. This, also, was His last action upon earth when in commissioning His Church, He made the preaching of the Gospel its fundamental business, and preachers its essential rulers. When He ascended up on high and gave gifts to men, pastors and teachers—that is, the sacred order of the ministry in its twofold work of oversight or rule and instruction—was the all comprehending, permanent order which He established in His Church. Around this order, to secure to it greatest efficiency, more certain purity and popular adaptation there were gathered from time to time, as occasions opened up the way for their institution, the order of brethren, called also governments and rulers, to represent and act for the people in congregations with the order of the ministers of the Word; and besides them, the order of deacons to act under and co-operate with both in the government and administration of the Church."

Those called by this writer "The Order of Brethren," are spoken of in that Enumeration of office-bearers given in 1 Cor. xii. 28, as "governments" or governors, and in Romans xii. 8, as "He that ruleth," and is that denominated in the Presbyterian Church, in a large and general meaning of the word, elders. They are the representatives of the people, chosen by them to help the presbyters or ministers of the Gospel in watching over the flock of God, and in carrying on the government of the church. They in no sense fill the same office as that filled by the ministers of the Word; nor are they in the proper meaning of the word presbyters or bishops. They are, as has been said, the representatives of the people to take part with presbyters or bishops in the oversight and government of the people. The functions of their office embrace neither preaching the Word, dispensing ordinances, ordaining to office nor pronouncing the benediction. These belong exclusively to the one essential and fundamental office of the Gospel ministry. They are the "helps in government," and are not generally ordained to office by the laying on of hands, nor do they join with ministers in the laying on of hands in the ordination of ministers.

Such Church officers we find in the first Synod held in Jerusalem in the days of the apostles, Acts xv., taking part in the decision come to anent Circumcision, and spoken of in conjunction with the apostles and presbyters. "The apostles and elders or presbytery and brethren send greeting. . . . I recommended good unto us being assembled with one accord." There we have the apostles, the presbyters, and the brethren all spoken of as having come to this decision, and as joining in this written authoritative document called in the fourth verse of the sixteenth chapter, "the decrees." Who could these brethren be other than the representatives of the Christian people, who thus joined with the apostles and presbyters in decreeing what should be done in the particular case submitted to them—the helps in government commonly now called elders?

That the above view of the office now filled in the Presbyterian Church by those denominated, in a large and general sense of the word, elders, is the scriptural and historical one, will still further appear from the following considerations:—

1. The office of the New Testament elder or presbyter embraces all the functions of the Christian ministry, and is the same as that of bishop. In proof

of this examine some of those passages in which elders or presbyters are spoken of. Take Acts xx. 17, 28. In verse 17 they are called elders, and in the 28th overseers or bishops. And what were the duties and functions of their office? They were not only to take heed unto themselves, but to all the flock—"to feed the Church of God." With what were they to feed the flock, but with the green pastures of the Word? Thus they were invested with the function of preaching as well as that of ruling. In Titus i. 5, 9, we read that for this cause he was left in Crete that he might ordain elders or presbyters in every city. In stating their qualifications, Paul says: "A bishop must be blameless as the steward of God, not self-willed, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; but a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate, holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and convince the gainsayers." Who does not see in this passage, not only that the New Testament elders are the same as the bishops, but also that they possessed the qualifications and functions of the Christian ministry? They are to hold fast the faithful word, or in other words be sound in the faith. And why? That they may be able "both to exhort and convince the gainsayers." In other words, that they may be sound, faithful and efficient preachers of the Word. Again in 1 Peter v. 1, it is written, "The elders" or presbyters "who are among you, I exhort who am also an elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed, feed the flock of God which is among you taking the oversight thereof." There we again find the two principal functions of the ministry—namely, oversight and instruction. In laying down the qualifications of a bishop in his first letter to Timothy, Paul mentions "apt to teach" as one. But teaching is a function of the presbyter or minister.

These passages appear amply to sustain the position that the office of the New Testament elder embraces the functions of the Christian ministry. They are the presbyters—the ministers of the Gospel, and not what are now denominated elders. There is, however, another passage to which attention is solicited, a passage on which another and different view is based. It is 1 Tim. v. 17. This is the only passage, so far as the writer is aware, on which another and different theory is founded—the theory of two classes of elders, with different functions, filling one and the same office. "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in word and doctrine." Now, if there be a contrast in this passage at all between two classes of elders it is humbly submitted that it is this, namely, between presbyters who rule only, and presbyters who labour in word and doctrine only. But this would deprive the office of the ministry of one of its principal functions, and cannot be the correct view of the passage. Again, the interpretation to which reference is made, and which is held by not a few, makes two classes of office-bearers having different functions fill one and the same office, which is contrary to all right views of an office, and all right practice in relation thereto. An office is nothing without its functions, and if a person properly fills an office of any kind he is invested with all the functions of that office. If it be the office of a presbyter he is invested with all the functions thereof, and one of its chief functions, as has been shown, is to "feed the flock of God," or in other words, preach the Gospel.

Further, the honour here spoken of is evidently material support, and this interpretation which makes two classes of elders fill the same office, would necessitate the adequate maintenance of both—both those who rule only, and those who rule and teach. An interpretation, therefore, which involves these necessary and erroneous consequences, cannot be the correct one and we must seek for another. The word "rule" in the passage means to preside; hence, Dean Alford and others render the verse, "Let the Presbyters who have well presided over their portion of the Church's work be held worthy of double honour, especially those that labour in word and teaching." The same word in 1 Thes. v. 12 is rendered, "Who are over you in the Lord." Justin Martyr uses the word six times for the ministers who presided in public worship, preached, prayed, gave thanks and blessed the people. Other early writers used the word in the same sense. What, therefore, is predicted of elders or presbyters in the first part of the verse, is that they preside and

moderate in all church assemblies. Another word in the passage requires particular attention, namely, "especially." This word at first sight appears to make a distinction between the elders in the passage, and to divide them into two classes. Let it be observed, however, that it is a term which does not divide things that are essentially different, but only marks a difference between things essentially alike. In this instance it points to some specified peculiarity of a portion of the same class, and not to two distinct classes. Besides the word is sometimes used to denote the reason of a thing; thence the learned Joseph Mede renders the passage, "Let presbyters that rule or govern their flock well, be counted worthy of double honour, and that chiefly because or in respect of their labour in word and doctrine." And the learned Dr. John Guys paraphrases the passage thus, "And now I am speaking about the use of the Church's stock, I would recommend the paying a due regard to such elders as by office are employed in the spiritual services of the Church, that they who are prudent and faithful in presiding over them may stand high in their civil respect and esteem, and may have liberal allowances sufficient to make their worldly circumstances easy, respectable, and comfortable, especially those of them that are eminent and remarkably laborious in studying and preaching the Gospel, and spreading, maintaining and defending its pure, unmix'd doctrines." All the Presbyters mentioned in the passage are the ministers of the Word, and when rightly understood affords no support to the theory of two classes of elders with different functions filling one and the same office—an absurdity never met with in civil society.

To this interpretation of the passage, however, it is objected that there was a plurality of elders ordained in every Church, as is stated in Acts xiv.; and in every city, as is said in Titus i. 5; and there could be no room and no necessity for a plurality of ministers in any one Church or even city; hence some must have been only rulers, and others both rulers and teachers. Before this objection can be allowed to have any force, it must be shown that the term Church in the passages to which reference is made, means a single congregation, and is not used to denote all the called of God, or all the congregations in a particular province or city, and that there was only one congregation in each of these cities. Besides, it is evident from early history that different places were missionary centres from which presbyters went forth to the surrounding country to preach the Gospel—headquarters as we would call them. Ephesus was no doubt a mission centre where there resided a number of missionaries or presbyters, just as many places now are in foreign lands. At Thessalonica there may have been another, to which arrangement Paul, in all likelihood, refers in his first epistle to the Thessalonians i. 8, where he says, "From you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad."

2. The view thus given of the office of those commonly called elders is that which obtained in the Westminster Assembly, and which has been generally held in the Presbyterian Church until very recent times. The following is the resolution adopted by that venerable Assembly anent this office: "It is agreeable to and warranted by the Word of God that some others, beside the ministers of the Word, of Church governors, should join with the ministers in the government of the Church." In the form of government adopted by them it is stated, "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 hath instituted government and governors ecclesiastical in the Church, besides the ministers of the Word, with gifts of government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereto, who are to join with the minister in the government of the Church, which officers Reformed Churches commonly call elders."

It appears also from the First Book of Discipline adopted by the Church of Scotland, that they were elected at first annually. "The election of elders and deacons ought to be made every year, once when we judge to be most convenient on the first day of August, lest of long continuance of such officers mean peruse on the liberty of Kirk." Chapter section 3. In this same Book of Discipline drawn up in 1560, and formally recognised by a convention in 1562, it is also stated, "the elders being elected