

THE HISTORIC ELDERSHIP.

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To speak of the Eldership of the Presbyterian Church as historic is only to state our belief in its authoritative existence and its function in the Church. Were the term historic always used, in speaking or writing of offices in the Church, to designate that which derives its authority from our Lord or from His apostles, this explanation might not be necessary; but inasmuch as it has been used more frequently to designate that which can only be shown to be a subsequent development in history, the explanation is deemed advisable.

Of the three orders of the Christian Ministry, the Eldership is the longest established. It may be that, because of modern usage, (rather would we say disuse and neglect,) it has become necessary to say the most in defense of the diaconate, although its institution is so plainly stated in the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, and the qualifications for the office so well defined there and in 1 Tim. 3, the Ministry of the Word and Doctrine, on the other hand, will be found to be the most difficult to differentiate. The reason for this latter fact it will be advantageous to state, for the stating of it will involve the closer defining of the several orders relatively. The apostles were at the first under the necessity of ministering in temporal affairs as well as in word and doctrine. They therefore ordained deacons to undertake the former duties that they might themselves be freer for the latter. But in directing the choice of men for this office they required not only that these should be men "not greedy of filthy lucre," (1 Tim. iii: 8), who would not yield to the seductions of their office in dispersing to the necessities of the poor, but also that they be "men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom," (Acts vi: 3). These, it will be noted, are qualifications exceedingly likely to render the possessor of them "apt to teach," (1 Tim. iii: 2). Accordingly we find Stephen, one of the seven deacons first chosen, preaching the Word of God and defending the doctrine so stoutly that he forfeits his life to the fury of the "stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart," (Acts vi: 8 to ch. viii: 2). Teaching and preaching the Word was not the peculiar function of the office of the deacon, but this individual deacon had ability and the opportunity he is shown to have supplemented the work of the Apostles and Elders. The office of the deacon was one that was entirely new, as both the narrative in Acts will show and also the subsequent development of the office in point of importance. It was not so with the office of the Elder or Presbyter. Just as Christ Himself "taught in the synagogue and in the temple," (John xviii: 20.) So the synagogue government seems to have been recognized by the Apostles. This fact cannot be too carefully noted, for it is part of the history of the Eldership. Lightfoot, in his valuable work on The Christian Ministry, says: "The Christian congregations in Palestine long continued to be designated by this name (of synagogue,) though the term *ecclesia* took its place from the very first in heathen countries. With the synagogue itself, they would naturally, if not necessarily, adopt the normal government of a synagogue, and a body of Elders or Presbyters would be chosen to direct the religious worship, and partly also to watch over the temporal well-being of the society." Unlike the deacons, then, the Elders are introduced in the New Testament "without preface."

It is evident from the action of the several Apostles (and particularly of Paul,) in ordaining Elders in every city through which they passed on their missionary excursions, that they intended to ensure the preaching of the gospel in their absence and after they would have passed away. Paul and Barnabas "ordained them Elders in every church," (Acts xiv: 23.) Titus, by Paul's direction, ordained Elders "in every city" in Crete, (Titus i: 5.) The first thing Paul does on arriving in any place where Elders have already been ordained, as at Miletus (Acts xx: 17,) is to call these Elders together to consult and advise with them; and when again he contemplates his departure from them with the prospect of never returning, he exhorts them to "take heed . . . to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the Church of God," (Acts xx: 28.) The Apostles and Elders are associated together in deliberating upon matters of doctrine and practice, (Acts xv: 4-23.) But soon the twelve Apostles, and the Apostle to the Gentiles too, will be numbered with the dead.

We have as yet but two orders in the ministry, Elders or Presbyters and Deacons. We must inquire what the peculiar function of the Eldership is disclosed in Holy Writ to be. There is one passage of Scripture that defines with special clearness what this

was and is. "Let the Elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor," (1 Tim. v. 17). Although to these words is added the further clause: "especially they who labor in the word and doctrine," it is abundantly evident that the particular reason for their being "worthy of double honor" is, that they "rule well." They are all the more worthy if, having performed the proper function of their office, they add to that the preaching of the Gospel, as Stephen a deacon, did. The office of the Elder, then, is that of ruling the congregation in spiritual things; and, secondarily, of ministering to them within the same sphere, (James v: 14). The Apostle Peter, addressing the Elders in the fifth chapter of his first epistle says: "feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof." And we have already found equivalent words in Acts xx: 28. Nor can too careful consideration be given to this matter of taking the oversight, (*ἐπισκοπεῖν*) for therein lies the solution of the whole question. The term is one of a more general character than the word "rule" (*προστίηαι*) which is used in 1 Tim. v: 17, 1 Thess. v: 12, and in other passages, and which specially characterizes the office. It embraces both this duty and also that of "feeding the flock." Moreover, it declares emphatically the kinship that subsists between the three orders of the ministry, and more especially between this, the second order, and the first—that, viz., which is known to us as the Ministry of the Word. As the special office of the deacon was to minister to the necessities of the poor, and yet the deacon himself was to possess those qualities that would make him essentially a teacher; and as the special office of the Elder was to rule the congregation, yet he also was to be a qualified teacher of the word and doctrine; so also there was to be, in the economy of divine grace, another permanent order, the peculiar function of which should be the teaching or preaching of the Word of God and the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, the appointed means of grace to all nations. The consideration of this order, its institution, development, and paramount importance, we will leave, perforce, to another time.

There is another fact to be reviewed in a study of the historic Eldership. It is this: "The Apostles do not appear to have ordained deacons in each city and place when first they founded the Church there, nor has the first order of the ministry an existence yet, as we have seen. They ordained Elders, however, in every church. The first order has no existence because there is no reason yet for its distinct existence, the Apostles themselves being the Preachers of the Word in every place. Nor, was the diaconate established in each particular place until the necessities of the infant Church demanded the division of labor. So at least we judge from the reason assigned in the Acts of the Apostles, for its institution, from the nature of the case, and from the absence of any mention of the order in such passages as Titus i: 5. The fact of the invariable ordination of Elders itself declares the importance of the Eldership; and the added fact that Elders were left in sole charge of the infant Churches in the absence of the Apostles declares, moreover, that that importance is fundamental. From the Eldership was to be developed the stated ministry, the third order to be established, although first in dignity and importance, during all subsequent time. The differentiation has already begun and was inherent in the office, a fact that is beautifully set forth by the authority already referred to. Lightfoot, in his Christian Ministry, (pp. 29, 30.) "With the growth of the Church," he says, "the visits of the Apostles and Evangelists to any individual community must have become less and less frequent, so that the burden of instruction would be gradually transferred from these missionary preachers to the local officers of the congregation. Hence St. Paul in two passages, where he gives directions relating to bishops or presbyters, (Elders) insists specially on the faculty of teaching as a qualification for the position. Yet even here this work seems to be regarded rather as incidental to than as inherent in the office. In the one epistle he directs that double honor shall be paid to those presbyters who have ruled well, but especially to such as labor in word and doctrine, as though one holding this office might decline the work of instruction. In the other, he closes the list of qualifications with the requirement that the bishop or presbyter (Elder) hold fast the faithful word in accordance with the apostolic teaching that he may be able both to exhort in the healthy doctrine and to confute gainsayers, alleging as a reason the pernicious activity and growing numbers of the false teachers. Nevertheless, there is no ground for supposing that the work of teaching and the work of governing pertained to separate members of the Presbyterial College. As each had his special gift, so would he devote himself more or less exclusively to the one or the other of these sacred functions."

We have italicized the words of the last sentence because they contain the whole story as in a nutshell.

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