

LECTURES ON THE CHURCH

LECTURE III.—Text, Acts xvii. 2.—“These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether these things were so.”

Mr. Wheaton having in his second lecture introduced the testimony of Ignatius, in favour of Episcopacy, he proceeded in this to examine first, the writings of Polycarp. This Father, as well as Ignatius, was the disciple of St. John, and was constituted Bishop of Smyrna a few years before the death of that Apostle. These facts are learnt from Irenæus, Eusebius, Tertullian, and St. Jerome, the last of whom affirms that Polycarp was esteemed the head or principal Bishop of all the churches in Asia. It was customary with the early Fathers, in imitation of the practice of the Apostles, to address letters to the various Churches, containing such admonitions and advice as appeared necessary to confirm them in the faith. Of Polycarp's Epistles, but one has come down to us. This is short, written with much elegance, abounding with precepts taken from Scripture. Its direction is, “Polycarp, and the Presbyters that are with him to the Church of God, which is at Philippi.” It scarcely alludes to the subject of the ministry in direct terms, but the incidental testimony it bears to this point is important. 1st. All antiquity concur in the fact, that he was Bishop of Smyrna, and from the address of his Epistle it appears that there were at that time a number of Presbyters in the city. One of the seven epistles of Ignatius was addressed to him as Bishop of the Church at Smyrna, in which he admonishes the Smyranean Christians to hearken unto the Bishop, and to submit to him with their Presbyters and Deacons. 2ndly, The epistle of Polycarp mentions incidentally the Presbyters and Deacons at Philippi, so that it appears from the Epistle, that the Bishop of Smyrna, with the Presbyters that are with him, address a letter to the Church at Philippi, in which the Presbyters and Deacons of the latter city, are particularly mentioned. 3dly, A very important testimony to the truth of Episcopacy, is found in the approbation bestowed by Polycarp upon the Epistles of Ignatius, which speak so decidedly upon the subject of Episcopacy, as appeared in a former lecture; Polycarp having collected the Epistles of Ignatius and enclosed them in his own to the Philipians, declaring at the same time that “they treated of all things which pertain to edification in the Lord Jesus.”

Polycarp's character was held in great veneration by his contemporaries; and undoubtedly he was the angel of the Church of Smyrna, to whom John in the Revelation was directed to write. Here Mr. Wheaton went into the investigation of the official character of the angels of the seven Asiatic Churches, and showed that they were Bishops of those Churches, with jurisdiction over a number of Presbyters and Congregations, from the following considerations.

1st. From the style of the messages in the 2d and 3d chapter of the Apocalypse, it is evident they were addressed to individuals. Each Church had its own Angel, who must have been an individual man—a single minister, who had some office in the respective Churches addressed.

2nd. This “Angel” or individual had jurisdiction over both clergy and laity. One is commended for personal piety, yet reproved for laxity of discipline: another is blamed for suffering certain doctrines to be taught—they are censured for certain corruptions in their respective Churches, and are addressed as having authority to reform them—addressed personally, and not as a number of co-ordinate Presbyters, whose general concurrence was necessary to enable them to exercise discipline.—Hence it was evident they had authority to rule in their respective Churches.

3d. How do we know that there was more than one Presbyter and one Congregation in each city, and subsequently that the “Angel” was not that Presbyter? It is proved beyond a doubt that Polycarp was made Bishop of Smyrna by the Apostles; and as St. John, the last of the Apostles, wrote the Revelations just before his death, Polycarp must have been the Bishop of that city at that time. But he begins his Epistle, “Polycarp and the Presbyters that are with him;” which shows beyond a doubt that there were a number of Presbyters, and consequently of congregations at Smyrna; and

that Polycarp was therefore, what at the present day, would be styled a diocesan Bishop.

A similar argument was drawn from the message to the Church at Ephesus. Onesimus was Bishop of that Church at the time St. John wrote the Revelations. And it appears from St. Paul, thirty years before, there were a number of Presbyters at Ephesus. Onesimus was then the “Angel” addressed, and from the style of the message it is evident he possessed jurisdiction over these Presbyters; and as the angels are declared by our Lord to be “stars in his own right hand,” it follows that their office was of divine appointment, and not an anti-Christian usurpation.

Mr. Wheaton then resumed the consideration of the testimony of the Fathers. He alluded to the writings of Hegesippus, from which it appeared that the author, shortly after the days of the Apostles, travelled over most of the Christian world—conversing with ecclesiastics, to learn the institutions and doctrines of the Apostles. He mentions several Bishops whom he visited, as at Corinth, Rome, &c., and in every succession and in every city, he says the same doctrine, i. e. of episcopal rule, is received, which was taught by the law, the prophets and our Lord.

Passing over the writings of Justin Martyr, which contained nothing upon the subject of the ministry, Mr. Wheaton next considered the writings of Irenæus, Bishop of Lyons, in France, who was made Bishop about the year 177—had known Polycarp in his youth, and he gives ample testimony to the existence of the three orders of the ministry in his day.

Theodoret, Hilary and others, who lived in the third and fourth centuries, were referred to, and parts of their writings were quoted, confirming in the fullest manner the foregoing views. Mr. Wheaton then gave a summary of the authorities he had presented, from which it appeared that all the ecclesiastical writers from the Apostles down as far as the fourth century, without one exception, concurred in testifying in the most explicit manner, whenever they alluded to the subject of the ministry, to the existence of three distinct orders, of Apostolic origin.—Their testimony is plain, and direct to the point; and is opposed only by that of a constructive character, which with the attempts of some of the opponents of Episcopacy to discredit the testimony of the earliest Fathers, betrays most glaringly the weakness of their cause.

In conclusion of his lecture, Mr. Wheaton presented an argument in favour of the Apostolic institution of Episcopacy, in our view unanswerable. He remarked that during the Apostolic age, no one will deny the existence of three orders of the ministry, Apostles, Presbyters and Deacons. From the language of the New Testament, it is clear beyond a doubt, that Matthias, Paul, Barnabas, Timothy, Titus and Epaphroditus, were successors in the Apostolic office. Having established from Scripture these three orders of the ministry, at the close of the Apostolic age, he supposes for its sake of the argument, that all the records of the next hundred years, relative to the Church, were erased from history—that the direct testimony of Ignatius, Clemens Romanus, Polycarp, Irenæus, &c., to the three orders, was blotted out, and lost to succeeding ages. Having no history of the Church during this time, we look into the constitution at the end of the second century, and find it just as it was at the close of the Apostolic age. We find Bishops, taking the oversight of a number of congregations, and exercising the duties which belong to the order—Presbyters, over individual Churches a separate and inferior grade in the ministry; and still lower, we find deacons exercising the functions of their order.—The opponents of Episcopacy admit this. We then have the acknowledged fact, that at the close of the first century three orders of the ministry existed, and that the same three orders existed at the close of the second century. He then enquired if it were possible, that in the course of one hundred years, the ministry of the Church could have undergone two complete and total changes—that is, from the Episcopal to the Presbyterian or congregational form, and then back from these to the Episcopal; and all this in a space of one hundred years, and not a syllable concerning these changes to be found in the writings of any cotemporaneous or succeeding author. It was manifestly absurd to suppose this to have taken place; and yet the advocates of ministerial parity must maintain these changes, to sustain their cause, upon the supposition that the Fathers, who are directly opposed to them, are not to be relied upon.—*Episcopal Watchman.*