

# The Wesleyan.

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"WISDOM IS THE PRINCIPAL THING; THEREFORE GET WISDOM."

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## Chronology.

### CHURCH GOVERNMENT.

From Dr. W. L. Brown's "Comparative View."

It is very evident that Christ and his apostles prescribed no particular form of ecclesiastical government, which was to be adopted and invariably maintained in every country, and under every form of civil society, wherever Christianity should be introduced. Nor can I help thinking, that this circumstance itself affords no inconsiderable proof of divine wisdom, applied to the universality by which this religion is characterized. It was designed to spread over the world, to regulate the moral conduct, and to advance the present and eternal felicity of mankind, in every situation, whether domestic or civil, in which they might be placed. It was to furnish those grand principles, which must ultimately meliorate all the rigours of absolute power, and improve whatever excellence civil constitutions might exhibit, establish good laws on still firmer foundations, and gradually lead to the abrogation of such as were unjust and contrary to the eternal rule of right. The different modes and forms of administering, whether civil or sacred matters, are not the ends but the means of attaining the ends of government, the security and improvement of society,—of its peace, piety, virtue, and general happiness. Whatever form of polity most effectually promotes these great ends, is certainly the best.—For the apostle assigns it as the main reason why men should pray for governors, that "we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." Now, nothing can so effectually tend to this, as the belief and practice of the Christian religion; and every form of ecclesiastical polity therefore should, as is professed, be uniformly directed to the maintenance, the enforcement, and the propagation of those most important truths which the gospel unfolds and establishes.

As Christianity spread through the world, and had such an admirable tendency to unite by the most tender bonds of affection all its professors, it naturally occurred to establish some common form of ecclesiastical government which might serve as a bond of union among different churches widely separated from each other. This could be easily accomplished among the Christians who lived under the same civil polity. Hence, the ecclesiastical form was generally modelled after that of the civil constitution; and, as the Roman empire extended over the whole civilized world, soon assumed a resemblance to the government of the state. The papal dominion was thus gradually established, and the principle which merely dictated a common centre of union among all the professors of the gospel, was at last perverted into a source of the most dreadful tyranny and most abominable corruption which the world had ever beheld.

The wisdom of the founder and first promulgators of Christianity, in leaving undefined any precise form of ecclesiastical polity, was particularly manifested. For, since this divine scheme was designed to pervade the whole earth, and to descend to the latest generations, it became necessary that the external form of spiritual administration should be more or less adapted to the peculiar circumstances in which Christians might be placed in the different and successive ages of the world. The fundamental articles of our faith are, like their author, immutable; but the peculiar mode of managing the concerns of spiritual communities might vary, provided the purity of doctrine, of ordinances, and worship, was maintained. Indeed, any form of church government, perverting the very ends of its institution, and, instead of promoting the spiritual interests of the people, rendering

the spiritual influence of rulers subservient to their purposes of worldly profit and ambition, is radically vicious, and inconsistent with the principles of a Christian church. Such was the character of the Romish hierarchy, and it became absolutely necessary to reform this corruption, as well as every other by which it was accompanied, and which it so powerfully fostered and maintained.

On this subject I completely assent to the opinion of my acute and judicious predecessor, whose words I shall here quote: "In regard to the outward order, however important it be, it effects not the essence of religion in the least; and even our adversaries themselves being judges, is not represented in scripture as affecting it. The garments which a man wears, or the house in which he lodges, however necessary for his accommodation and comfortable subsistence, are not, as his limbs and members, and still less as the powers and faculties of his mind, a part of his person. Now, in this respect there appears a very close analogy. For though, in our present situation, clothes and dwelling are requisite for protecting us against the inclemencies of the weather and other external accidents, we may, nevertheless, have both clothes and dwelling of different forms, yet equally commodious. Nay, one form may be more convenient in certain climates and certain situations, which is less convenient in other climates and other situations. The same thing may with equal truth be affirmed concerning the form of church government. This is evidently true also of civil government.

"Now, I can see no reason why a church may not subsist under different forms, as well as a state; and though it must be owned, that one form may be more favourable than another to the spirit and design of the constitution, we cannot always judge with safety from the first of these, how much it has retained of the last. Nay, I must acknowledge, that for any thing I could ever discover in the sacred oracles to the contrary, the external order may properly undergo such alterations, as the ends of edification in different exigencies may require, and prudence may direct. The only thing important is, that nothing be admitted which can in any way subvert the fundamental maxims, or infringe the spiritual nature of the government.

"Thus much in general is conformable to the doctrine both of the Church of England and of the Church of Scotland. For how different soever those churches are in the plans of government they have adopted, and how much soever each of them is attached to its own, they equally avoid limiting the Christian ministry to one particular model. The former, in her xxiii article, entitled, *Of ministering in the Congregation*, says expressly, 'Those we ought to judge lawfully called and sent, which be chosen and called to this work by men who have public authority given unto them in the congregation, to call and send ministers into the Lord's vineyard.' This, if it mean any thing, and be not a mere identical proposition, of which, I own, it has some appearance, refers us ultimately to the authority, however modelled, which satisfies the people, and is settled among them. Again, in the Westminster Confession of Faith, which is of equal authority with us, as the xxxix articles are in England, chap. xxv. entitled, *Of the Church*, sect. 3. 'Unto the catholic visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life, to the end of the world.' And this is all that is said on the subject. Neither has presumed to delineate the essentials of a Christian ministry, or to say any thing which could be construed to exclude those who are governed in a different manner from that in which they themselves are governed. So much moderation has on this article been shown by both churches. I

shall add to these the doctrine of the episcopal reformed church of Scotland, contained in a Confession of Faith, ratified by law in this country in 1560; which, though set aside in the time of the civil wars, to make room for the Westminster Confession, was re-enacted after the Restoration, and continued in force till the abolition of policy of the Revolution. I recur to it rather, in order to show how much, on this article, the sentiments of our late nonconformists differed from the sentiments of those whom they considered as their ecclesiastical predecessors, and from whom they derived their spiritual pedigree.

"In article xiv. entitled, *Of the Notes of the true Kirk*, (I use the words of that Confession,) it is affirmed, 'They are neither antiquity, title usurped, local descent, nor multitude of men assisting an error.' Again, article xxv. *Of the right Administration of the Sacraments*.—That sacraments be rightly ministered, we judge two things requisite, the one, that they may be ministered by lawful ministers, whom we affirm to be only they that are appointed to the preaching of the word, they being men lawfully chosen thereto by some kirk, &c. We fly the doctrine of the papistical kirk in participation of their sacraments. 1st, Because their ministers are no ministers of Christ Jesus, &c. Here, not only is heretical descent expressly excluded, but its very channel is removed, as the popish clergy are declared (I think with too little ceremony, and too universally) to be no ministers of Christ. Nay, all that appears externally necessary, according to them, to constitute a minister, is the choice of some congregation. Far from believing one particular form of ecclesiastical polity to be sacred and inviolable, they say, article xxi. *Of general Councils*, &c. 'Not that we think any policy and any order of ceremonies can be appointed for all ages, times, and places.'

"It will be owned likewise by those who, on this subject, are capable of examining with coolness, and pronouncing with impartiality, that we have not that sort of information in holy writ, from which we can with certainty form a judgment concerning the entire model of the apostolic church. What we can thence learn on this subject, we must collect from scattered hints given, as it were, incidentally, when nothing seemed less the intention of the writers, than to convey to us a particular account of the plan of the society they had formed. It is a just observation of a writer of the last century, and deserves the attention of disputants on both sides.—We see that the apostles were, in their writings, more solicitous concerning the qualifications than the degrees of the ministers, and inculcated and delineated more largely the conduct which might be worthy of that state and condition, than they discussed the form of government."

### CORRECT ESTIMATE OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS.

Not only the partial insisting upon some truth, but even the undue importance assigned to some rite or institution, has been productive of many heresies. Many do not distinguish between the essentials of Christianity, and its accessories; they lay almost as much stress upon a mean as upon an end; upon that which is relatively good, as upon that which is absolutely so. Christianity consists of truth, of holiness, and of happiness. That the truth should be presented before the mind, and continually kept there, by human means, and by divine aid, is all that Christianity can require. To contribute to this end we have two signs, baptism and the Lord's Supper, answerable to the two parts of salvation which are carrying on on earth, justification and sanctification, the washing away of sin, and the living by faith upon the Lord Jesus. Concerning the things signified by these

signs, there is no dispute amongst those who take the Bible for their guide; concerning the mode of administering those signs, there are endless controversies amongst inquirers after truth, who, to all appearance, are equally sincere. Whatever is important in the Scriptures is clear in proportion to its importance; we may conclude therefore, that the signification of these signs is highly important, but that the mode of administering them is not so, because very doubtful. It is clear that every one should be allowed to choose for himself, and to use the sign in that way which most directly carries the mind to the thing signified. Controversy here is entirely out of place. It makes the sign of no effect, and distracts the attention from the thing signified, which alone is the useful contemplation, to the mode in which the sign is administered, which is altogether an unimportant subject of thought; for the use of a sign, that the mind may pass immediately from it, to the thing signified. Thus these signs, not being continually disputed about, are to controversialists, not so much the signs of salvation, as the emblems of a peculiar party.

Nearly the same observations apply to disputes about church government. Government is not a thing valuable in itself; it is only the means of attaining some valuable end, and has therefore no excellency apart from its utility. The end of churches, and, of course, of church government, is to display and perpetuate religious truth throughout all generations. It is a matter of some difficulty, as we have already observed, to ascertain the exact form of the apostolic churches; what we know best of its structure is, that they were exceedingly simple, and that they owed their prosperity less to any positive and municipal regulations than to their innate energy and freedom. But suppose that we had a precise model handed down from the times of the Apostles, its whole excellency would consist in its aptitude to preserve and to spread the truth, and if, instead of directing our eyes to the gospel, it withdraw our attention to contemplate its own structure, so far, it would be not only useless, but hurtful.—James Douglas, Esq.

### THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY.

From the Rev. M. Stewart's Letters to Dr. Miller.

TEST OF RELIGIOUS TRUTH.—It is grateful to find that your sentiments, in respect to the real foundation of Christian doctrine, agree so entirely with mine; and I trust I may add, with the fundamental principles of the Protestant religion. In your Letters, you have undertaken to show and reprove the "weakness" of Unitarians, in attempting to support their views by the authority of great names. You say, "The weakness of this plea is so obvious, that a formal refutation of it will not be thought necessary, by any impartial reader." In the sequel, you say very justly, that "transubstantiation and other gross errors and most wretched superstitious" might be proved to be true, if this mode of argument could be adopted.

In Letter IV, you say, "The word of God, as the orthodox believe, is the only certain test of divine truth; the only infallible rule of faith and practice. Of course, that which is not found in Scripture, however extensively and unanimously it may have been received by those who love the Christian name, must be rejected, as forming no part of the precious system, which God has revealed to man for his salvation." You then proceed to observe, that still there is consolation as well as duty in walking in the steps of the pious, who have agreed in the doctrine of the gospel.

All this I most freely and fully admit. I will only add, that the fact of Christians having been agreed in a doctrine, is not sufficient of itself to make the reception of it consolatory. It must prove, on examining