

Voting in the Church.

A. CAMPBELL IN 1835.

Some Christians are opposed to voting in the church. They only vote against voting! They will give their voice; but say they will not vote. Now, upon a little reflection, it may, perhaps, appear to them that to vote is to give their voice is identically the same thing. To express their mind or their wish on any question is certainly to vote—whatever form of expression may be chosen, whether standing up, stretching forth the hand, simply saying yes or no, aye or nay. Wherever there is an election, or a choice of persons or measures, there must be voting or the casting of the lot. To cast the lot is an appeal to heaven; and very extraordinary, indeed, must be the incident or the occasion that will justify such a solemn appeal, or an irrevocable decision. We need not labor to show that the Christians under the very eye and with the approbation of the Apostles, for the Apostles commanded them to vote—to choose out persons for certain works, and with reference to certain measures. Acts vi. 3; 2 Cor. viii. 19.

But a question arises of some consequence, nay of great consequence. On what occasions and for what purposes are the Christians authorized to vote? Are they not to vote on questions of discipline, piety or morality. Truth is not to be settled by a vote, nor is any institution respecting the worship of God decided by a majority. These are matters of revelation, of divine authority, and to be regulated by a "thus saith the Lord," and not by a thus saith the majority. But in all matters of faith, piety, morality; in all questions of fact pertaining to cases of discipline, there is no other way of deciding but by vote of the brotherhood. There is no revelation that A, B, C shall be chosen elders or deacons; that D, E or F shall be sent on a special message; that the church meet in any given place at any given hour; or that this or that measure is to be adopted in reference to any particular duty arising out of the internal or external relations of the church. In matters are to be decided by the voice of the whole community, or not at all.

How that vote shall be given, whether by stretching out the hand, as the Greek word found in Acts xiv. 23 and 1 Cor. viii. 19 literally indicates, or by standing up, or saying aye

or nay, may itself be a question of expediency to be decided by a vote of the community. And certainly it matters not in this instance what the form be, provided only the mind of the church be clearly ascertained.

A matter of greater importance occurs. Must the church be always unanimous before it acts upon any question of fact or expediency? While it is possible to be of one faith and of one hope, however desirable it may be, it is not to be expected that a congregation will always be of one mind in all questions of discipline and expediency which may occur in their earthly pilgrimage. Some, however, will insist not only upon one opinion in matters of abstract speculation, but upon one mind in all matters of expediency.

In the New Testament we have the word which the Greeks used for majority, sometimes translated "the greater part." 1 Cor. xv. 6. "The more part." Acts xix. 32; xxvii. 11, and "the many" 2 Cor. ii. 6. Where the censure inflicted upon a certain individual is spoken of, rendered by Macknight "the majority." "Sufficient for such a one is the censure inflicted by the majority," plainly intimating that not every individual but that a decided majority of the church had concurred in the sentence pronounced.

True, indeed, that where there is much love and great devotion to the will of the Lord there will be the greatest approaches to unanimity in all matters of great importance. The wisdom which comes from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle and easy to be persuaded. Self-willedness is no ornament to the Christian character, and when each esteems his brother as better than himself there will not be much earnestness displayed in striving to carry our views of expediency over the judgment of others.

Besides, it is sometimes inexpedient for the majority to carry all in its power. There may be occasions when it is better for the majority to waive its privilege than to carry its point. These, however, are matters which discretion and good sense must and will decide according to the bearing of all measures upon the good order, peace, harmony and prosperity of the brotherhood.

All warmth and impassioned feeling in the house of God is disorderly; and no church acting under the guidance of the Good Spirit will ever attempt hastily to decide a matter in the midst of the least excitement.

Still, however, neither reason, nor experience, nor revelation itself suggests any other method of procedure in all



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questions of expediency respecting men or measures than that the voice of the majority, when clearly and fully expressed, should be cordially and conscientiously acquiesced in by the minority. Indeed, some churches make it a rule that no measure shall be adopted but upon an expressed unanimity. This, without intending it, necessarily subjects the congregation to an oligarchy or monarchy—to the dictation or to the weakness of not merely a minority, but often of a single individual. On this scheme a minority, often an individual, governs the whole church. In nine times out of ten it is more likely to happen that there will be a dissident or two, who cannot think with the majority on such matters, than that there will be a perfect unanimity. What is to be done in such cases—act or not? If the church does not act, then she is governed by a minority, and the majority yield. If she act, then is the principle of unanimity abandoned.

The only question, then, is, whether it is most expedient and comely that the minority submit to the majority, or the majority to the minority; for one of them must yield. Unanimity we have seen very generally gives to the small-

est minority the absolute control of the whole community. There can be no debate. The minority will, in the spirit of love, and in the spirit of Christian modesty, agree to submit to a clear and decided majority. Having, indeed, agreed when no question is before the church that such shall be its custom, the minority feels itself always justified in submitting to the judgment of the greater part.

It is scarcely necessary to be observed that before the voice of a community can be called for, the proposition ought to be clearly stated and fully explained; so that all who vote may vote understandingly. The question, therefore, ought never to be put until the congregation shall have had time maturely to consider the matter. Good order, indeed, being the same thing in all deliberative bodies, those rules which have universally obtained in other assemblies of the people in this country may very suitably and safely be adopted on such occasions as call for an expression of the mind of the church on any of those questions of fact or expediency which demand its decision; with this proviso only, that more courtesy, good feeling, and good spirit should always be displayed in the house of God than usually appear in the moral, literary, or political assemblies of the people.

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