

of Episcopacy, to which Charles I. was accounted a martyr, and which all who trode in the steps of Archbishop Laud zealously inculcated, was one cause of those persecutions which the Presbyterians endured during a great part of the seventeenth century, both before the civil war commenced, and after the restoration. And now that the progress of science and good government has exploded the horrid practice of persecution for conscience sake, the same principle is the foundation of that contemptuous language with regard to the Presbyterian church, which often proceeds from the zealous friends of Episcopal ordination, and which sometimes appears in the writings of able divines, men in other respects profound and enlightened.

While every Presbyterian is bound to resist an opinion which represents the ministers of this National Established Church as intruders into the sacred office, and which unchurches the people of this country who attend their ministrations, he is not obliged to recur to the opinion held by the Presbyterians of the seventeenth century, but may rest in a system more liberal than either opinion. This system proceeds upon the following principle, which was first explained by Hooker, in the third book of his Ecclesiastical Polity, and was afterwards demonstrated by the learned and profound bishop Stillingfleet, in the treatise which he entitled *Irenicum*. Although church government is of divine appointment, that is, although the powers which it implies were not created by the state, but are conveyed from the Lord Jesus through those whom he ordained; yet the New Testament does not prescribe any one particular form of church government in such a manner as to render another form unlawful. By comparing incidental passages in the history of the journeyings of the apostle Paul, with the information which can be collected from his epistles, we may form a conception of the plan of government which he established in some churches. But the book of Acts does not enable us to follow that apostle through the whole of his progress, and of what was done by the other apostles, who, in the execution of their universal commission, visited different quarters of the world, scripture gives us little information, and ancient writers speak very generally and uncertainly. Our knowledge upon this subject, therefore, only extends to a part of the practice of one apostle. But we draw a conclusion which the premises by no means warrant, when we infer, that what was done by one apostle in planting some churches, was done by all the apostles in planting all churches. The presumption is, that instead of following one uniform course, they would, in every city, accommodate their establishments for the edification of the Christian converts, and the future increase of believers, to the numbers whom they had added to the church, to the population of the city, and to the qualifications for the different offices which those whom they found there appeared to possess; and that they would leave many things to be settled as the future occasions of the

church might require. From Paul's appointing Timothy and Titus evangelists, with inspection over the ministers of Ephesus and Crete, we may clearly infer that such inspection, which, in the particular circumstances of those churches, was expedient, is not in itself sinful: but it appears to be held forth rather as an example of what may be done, than as a binding rule; and it does not furnish any proof that every Christian church is incomplete without a similar appointment. The directions in the New Testament concerning the qualifications of ministers, and the right discharge of their office, are equally applicable to the Episcopal and the Presbyterian forms; and the exhortations and rules concerning the establishment and conduct of church-government, are sufficient to correct the abuses to which all different forms are liable.

This liberty in regard to the forms of church-government, which seems to be warranted by all that we know of the practice of the apostles, is agreeable to the genius of Christianity, and is essential to its character as an universal religion. Moses might deliver to the one nation, of which he was appointed lawgiver, a code of ecclesiastical, as well as of political and judicial institutions. But the apostles, who were sent to gather converts out of all countries, could not adopt any form of ecclesiastical polity that was equally applicable to the infant churches which were then planted, and to the national churches which were afterwards to be established; and any attempt to bind upon Christians a particular form of church-government, must have proved an obstacle to the propagation of Christianity amongst all the nations who found that plan incompatible with their civil constitution. The gospel, therefore, preserves upon this subject the same just and delicate attention to the nature of a reasonable being, and the varying circumstances of the human race, which pervades the whole system. Instead of creating, by the divine institution of any form of church-government, a pretext for sedition or disaffection to civil rulers, it inspires such sentiments, and delivers such general precepts, as may, in all different situations, furnish the most perfect directory for the government of the church; and it leaves every nation which embraces the gospel, to proceed under the influence of the true spirit of that religion, in accommodating their form of church-government to their political constitution; so that the two, moulded together by human wisdom, may conspire in preserving the public tranquillity, and promoting the spiritual and temporal good of those who live under them.

By the revolution settlement, Presbyterian government was established in Scotland, not as being of divine right, but as being agreeable to the inclinations of the great body of the people of this country; and by far, I trust, the largest proportion of the members of the church of Scotland hold the liberal sentiments upon which the words of this settlement proceed. We do not contend, that there is an inseparable connection between Popery—the grossest abuse of church-government, and a superiority of a bishop above Presbyters,