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THE PULPIT

AND INTELLIGENCER OF THE

ASSOCIATE REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN

CHURCH.

CONSISTING OF

SERMONS BY THE MINISTERS

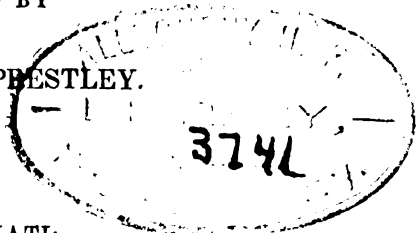
OF THE FIVE SYNODS.

AND

DENOMINATIONAL INTELLIGENCE.

EDITED BY

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OFFICE OF THE RULING ELDER;

ITS SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY, QUALIFICATIONS AND DUTIES

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Acts 14c: 23v. And when they had ordained them Elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord on whom they believed. Acts 15c: 4, 6 vs. And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the Church, and of the Apostles and Elders. Acts 20c: 28v. And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called for the Elders of the Church; and when they were come unto him, he said unto them: Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers. Thess. 5c: 12, 13 vs. And we beseech you brethren, to know them which labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly, in love, for their work's sake. 1 Tim. 5c: 17v. Let the Elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor; especially, they who labor in word and doctrine. Heb 13c: 17v. Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves, for they watch for your souls as they that must give account. Titus 1c: 5v. For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldst set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain Elders in every city, as I had appointed thee. 1 Pet 1c: 2 and 3vs: The Elders which are among you I exhort which am also an Elder. Mat. 18c: 18v: If thy brother trespass against thee, go and tell him his faults, between him and thee alone. If he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more. If he will not hear them, tell it to the Church. If he will not hear the Church, let him be unto thee as a heathen and a publican. Verily, I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven. Matt. 16c: 19v. I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth, shalt be bound in heaven.

1. It has been questioned—I think very foolishly—whether God appointed *any* form of government for his Church. For, that it is his will that the Church should be governed, is the same as to say, it is his will that she should exist; because, without government, her continued existence were impossible. Now, if any one will consider that the church was, by her Divine Author, intended to be universal in extent, and perpetual in duration; holy in her aims, and heavenly in her character; that He assigned her a work, at once the most immense, difficult and sublime; that she was

ordained by the wisest and best of all Beings, for the highest and the holiest of all purposes; her field, a sinful world, and her members, sinful men; it would seem a necessary thing, that her great Founder has given her a Constitution under which to exist, and to act; and the opposite opinion, viz: that he has left her, in so vital a matter, naked and destitute, to me, seems unreasonable and incredible.

Accordingly we find, in the New Testament, that God *has* set officers in the church, and defined their grades, characters, and duties; and so, by consequence, has instituted a Government. "He has set some in the church; first Apostles, secondly Prophets, thirdly Teachers; after that miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, *governments*, diversities of tongues," 1 Cor. 12c: 28v. He has enjoined those who *rule*, to do it with diligence; bade the people *obey* those who have the rule over them; and declared the Elders that rule well, worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in word and doctrine. He has, moreover, set limits to the power of office bearers, forbidding them to be lords over God's heritage, and testifying his disapproval of diotrephion arrogance and emulation. By precept and approved example, he has made it their duty to suppress heresy, expel the heretical and unholy, defend and diffuse the truth; and maintain and cherish a universal charity, active zeal, pure morality, and glowing piety in the church of God.

2. Concerning the different ranks and grades of office ordained in the New Testament, there has been some diversity of opinion. Some suppose there are various grades of office *in the Gospel ministry*, such as Deacons, Presbyters, and Bishops. Others deny it. They maintain that the Apostolic office, properly so called, was temporary—designed for the time then present,—and that since their day, the teaching Presbyter, in his capacity of Evangelist, Pastor and Doctor, is the only *clerical* officer known, properly, in the church.

A very large number of those who maintain this latter opinion, also hold, that, in addition to the teaching Presby-

ter, God has also ordained "Presbyters that rule well," (Tim. 5c: 17v.,) and Deacons, whose business (see Acts 6c) it is to "serve tables"—that is, to attend to the charities of the church in ministering to the necessitous.

3. It is not my purpose to-day, to discuss all these questions. I shall confine myself to one—that which pertains to the *Ruling Elder*. I shall not discuss the questions raised concerning the Clergy, whether there be three grades, or one. Nor shall I discuss questions mooted in reference to the Deacon, whether he be a *Clerical* officer, or only such as I have described him:—My subject shall be *The divine authority, nature and duties of the office of the Ruling Elder.*

I shall show that such an office is of divine right in the Church of God, and explain its nature and duties,—“Count the Elders that rule well worthy of double honor; especially they that labor in word and doctrine.”

1. It is impossible to understand the history, the doctrines, or the institutions of the New Testament, without going back to the Old; much more so than it would be to have clear conceptions of our Federal or State Constitutions and laws, without going back to the times antecedent to their formation, and acquainting ourselves with the history of the causes out of which they grew, and which gave them their present character.

At the advent, and the mission of the Apostles, the Church existed under its Jewish forms. The Apostles, Preachers and primitive converts, had been members of it under that Economy. And, indeed, the Christian Church, is only a continuation of that Jewish Church, under a new Constitution. And it retains much that it possessed before the change. Just as under the new Constitution of the State of Ohio, many of the laws and offices and ordinances are continued, which were in force under the old regime.

Thus, the name and office of Elder, under the New Testament, is derived from the Old. Literally, the word, whether in Hebrew, Greek or English, means “an aged person.”—

from the fact that among the ancients, young men were kept much more in the back ground than with us, and the conduct of public affairs committed into the hands of the aged, public rulers came to be called Elders,—“Elders,” because, generally, old men. And so a term which was, at first, expressive of age, came at last—as our term “Senator” now—to be expressive of office.

Among the Jews, the supreme civil power was in a court of “Elders,”—six from each tribe, and seventy-two in all, Ex. 3: 16, and 4: 49, and 24: 1, 9, 10, and Josh. 24: 31 and Judg. 21c. These Elders, the number possibly varying, became, in latter times, the Sanhedrim, Senate, or Supreme Council of the nation. But besides these, there were Elders that ruled in every city, holding their Court in the open spaces around the gates. Ruth 4c: 2v and Ezra 10c: 14v.

But, in addition to these there were still a third class of Elders known to the Jews,—those who ruled in the Synagogue. When and by what authority, whether of God or of men, Synagogues were instituted, are questions upon which there has been diversity of opinion, and much learned controversy. But *all* agree that they were introduced in some way, by some authority, and that this was done before the coming of Christ. It is admitted that they were instituted for religious worship and culture, that in them the Jews met and worshiped from Sabbath to Sabbath; that the exercises were reading, singing,* and prayer, and an exercise corresponding to our sermons and exhortations. In every Synagogue, there was a bench of Elders, whose duty it was to govern the congregation there worshipping, to decide upon applications for admission, to guard the faith and morals of the people over whom they had the oversight. Before this Court *ecclesiastical* offenders were arraigned, and, if condemned, were punished by reprimand, by stripes, or by

*It is well to note also, that in singing they used the inspired Psalter, and no other; that they chanted, and did not employ instrumental music, nor a choir. They neither worshiped God by a Committee nor a machine. In the Temple service, they employed both—but *that* service, being typical, and suited to the childish state of the church, was subsequently abolished.

expulsion from the communion of the church. Luke 8c:49v and 13c: 14v, and Mark 5c: 35v, and Acts 8c: 8v, and Matt. 16c: 18v and 10c: 17, 23 and 34vs, and Acts 22c: 19v and 26c: 11v, and Cor. 11c: 22v.

These Synagogues, and this regime were established, not only in Palestine, but throughout Asia-Minor, Europe, Africa, and wherever the dispersed Jews had a population.—Acts 2c; 9v and 13c: 42vs and 14c: 1v and 17c: 1, 13vs and 13c: 4v and 19c: 8v and Josephus Ant. 19: 6, 3, and De Bell Jud. 7: 3, 3.

Now when the Apostles and Evangelists went forth into any city to teach, it was their custom to commence in the Synagogues. There they found—what they could not have found elsewhere,—a house and audience, and all things ready to their hands. In these Synagogues were the first converts made, and from them the first Christian congregations formed. When expelled, by the Rulers of the Synagogue, as they were sure to be, those primitive proselytes formed new Synagogues of their own called “Churches.” Being expelled by their brethren, they immediately organized themselves into a society, and established worship for themselves.

But they established it upon the old plan—the plan they had been used to all their life-long; retaining their Reader, Preacher and Chief Ruler, (usually now, in our churches, united in the same person,) and their bench of Elders.—These Elders, in conjunction with the “Chief Ruler,” Pastor, Bishop, or Teaching Elder, formed an Ecclesiastical Senate, Consistory, or Session,—just such as from childhood, they had always been used to, for the government of their church—such a church as is spoken of in Matt. 18c:17v.—These things, I think, are susceptible of the clearest proof, have always been asserted by the ablest advocates of Presbyterian policy, and have been substantially conceded by some of the most pious, learned, and able of prelatical writers, such men as Bennett, Goodwin, Stillingfleet, and Lightfoot.

The facts, then, so far as we have progressed in the argu-

ment, are these:—The Christian Church is a continuation of the Jewish under a new Constitution, and has much, very much, in common with the dispensation that preceded it. True, the Temple-service, with its magnificent ritual, being typical, (see Heb. 5 and 10chs.,) was abolished by the coming of the Antetype; but the Synagogue-service, being moral in its nature, and well suited to all times and dispensations, has passed over into our age, and by the approved example of inspired men, is of divine authority in our times. It is therefore the will of God that the ruling Elder be retained in all our congregations; and that churches continue to be regulated as they have always been since they were first instituted among men.*

2. This will receive additional and abundant confirmation, from an examination of the Scriptures of the New Testament. There we find Bishops, or Presbyters, and Deacons appointed *in every church*; and in every church, *a plurality* of them. There were *several* Bishops or Elders, (for in the New Testament Bishop or Overseer, is synonymous with Presbyter or Elder,) in the Church at Ephesus. See Acts 20c: 17—28vs. And the same was true of other cities where the church got a foothold. Nor was this by mere accident. It was of Divine Institution, that there should be a PLURALITY of Bishops or Presbyters in every church. Thus it is related that Paul and Barnabas, in their journeyings from place to place, “ordained them PRESBYTERS IN EVERY CITY.” And what Paul did himself, he enjoined to be done by his representatives, the Evangelists. “For this cause,” says he to Titus, “left I thee in Crete, that thou mightest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain Elders in every city, as I had appointed thee.” See Titus 1c: 5v, Acts 15c: 4, 6vs and 14c: 23v, and 20c: 17—28vs and 1 Thess. 5c: 12, 13vs, add 1 Tim. 5c: 17v, and Heb. 13c: 17v, and Jas. 5c: 14v, and 1 Pet. 5c: 1, 2vs.

*Of course I do not mean to deny that, during the darkness and corruption of the middle ages, this office went into very general disuse. But then it was known by those elect saints, the Waldenses and others, who continued a testimony for the truth.

Now notice, I pray you, how in *all* these apostolic churches, or in the emphatic language of the texts quoted, "in EVERY church," whether in the city or country, whether large or little, prominent or obscure, a *plurality* of Presbyters, were appointed. But I think every unbiased, sane man will agree, that there was not, and could not have been, a plurality of *teaching* Presbyters (or Elders) appointed. For it is utterly inadmissible that in all, and "*every one*" of these churches,—many of them just organized, comprising but a handful of mere neophytes, often ignorant, bigoted converts,—there could have been found a plurality of men, possessed of those qualities which, Paul himself being judge, (see the Epistles to Timothy and Titus,) are requisite to fit a man for the office of Pastor or Teaching Elder. But if the office of Ruling Elder is allowed, then all is clear and easy.

3. Nor are our sources of argument yet exhausted. The New Testament, clearly and repeatedly, speaks of an officer whose duty it is *to rule* in the church. It directs "him that teacheth to wait on his teaching; and *him that ruleth*, to do so with diligence;" thus, clearly pointing out a *ruling*, as distinguished from the *teaching* class. And, in another place, after comparing the church to a human body, in which are many members, each having its appropriate place and function, he applies the figure by saying, "God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers; after that miracles; then gifts of healing; helps; *governments*; and diversities of tongues." Nothing can be plainer from the contents than that the apostle is speaking of *distinct* offices in the church; nor can any thing be plainer from the text itself, than that *Government* is one of them. Do our Congregational brethren have persons whose function it is to govern; or do our Episcopal brethren have those who are especially and *exclusively* set apart to this office;—I mean, have they a separate officer for this very thing; an officer whose sole duty it is, not to preach, but to govern? See Rom. 12c: 6, 7, 8vs and 1 Cor. 12c: 12, 28vs.

If any doubt yet remain, as to whether we have divine authority for the office of Ruling Presbyter, "in every church," it must instantly vanish upon reading the injunction in Tim. 5c: 17v, "to count the Elders that rule well worthy of double honor, *especially* they who labor in word and doctrine." For if we suppose that there is but one class of Elders, or Presbyters, in the church, and that *they all* "labor in word and doctrine," then the sentence were senseless. For if I should say that all the members of this church are worthy of much praise, *especially* those of them who spend much time in prayer and deeds of charity, and in laboring for the salvation of those around them; I must either mean that some do not so act, or I should speak nonsense. Just so with the passage before us. And its force is so great as to have compelled many of the most distinguished, both of the Prelates on the one hand, and of the Independents on the other, to acknowledge that such an office existed in the primitive Church.

And the miserable shifts to which those able men have been driven, who seek to pervert the plain meaning of the text, more than any thing its friends could say, confirm the right interpretation. They tell us, for example, that the Presbyter that rules well, but does no more, as distinguished in the text, from the Presbyter who, besides "ruling well," does also, "labor in the word and doctrine," is a Presbyter, who by age, disease, toil and persecution, has become incapacitated for active service,—as if the man who had worn his life out in the faithful and heroic service of the Ministry, might then, and therefore be neglected!—as if men might give such an one as Paul, the aged, less honor now, because his strength and power were gone!!—as if he were worthy now, but half the honor due to those *young men*—far his juniors in years and toils—who were still able to continue in the field!!!—as if a superannuated Pastor might be turned out, like an old horse, to die!!!! Who is able to believe that the old age and gray hairs and tottering steps, consequent upon a life of such high and sanctified toil, are

to be shorn of the honor, support and reverence due, because the old man can no longer gird up his loins and go forth as before?

Nor can "the Elder that rules well" mean the Christian Chief Magistrate, as some suppose; because there was no such officer at the time the Epistle was written, nor for generations afterwards. Besides such an interpretation would give a very strange meaning to the text; as if it were a duty of one class of Civil Officers, to act in their official capacity as "Preaching Elders," and of all classes of them to act as "Ruling Elders."

Equally fallacious is the attempt to explain this as meant of the Deacons; because the Deacon, as such, neither ruled nor preached; but it was his business to serve tables. (See Acts 6 chap.) Besides, as it regards the prelatists, *their* Deacons *do* labor in the word and doctrine; which is contrary to interpretation. To these and all similar quibbles to pervert the plain meaning of this celebrated passage, I can barely suppress the exclamation, "Miserable interpreters are ye all! How long will ye darken counsel by words without knowledge!" For the palpable truth is, the passage contemplates two classes of Presbyters;—those who rule well, and those who, in addition to ruling well, do also labor in the word and doctrine.

4. Among the crowd of texts, which still await and solicit, to be considered, I can find time for but one other, Matt. 18c: 15—17vs: "If thy brother trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault, between thee and him alone. If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word may be established. If he shall neglect to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican." It is true, our Congregational brethren understand the expression, "tell it to the church," as an injunction to delate the offender to the whole assembled congregation, and not to a Session, or Congregational Presby-

tery, But we must always interpret language according to the *usus loquendi* of the people who employ it. We must understand it as they understood it. If not; if we may affix arbitrary interpretations to suit our own whims, or party interests, there is an end to all exegesis. Now the Savior spake to the *Jews*, in the language of the Jews, at a time when the Jewish Economy, and the Synagogue worship were still standing; and so the clause "tell it to the church," is only another form of saying "tell it to the Synagogue," that is, to "*the rulers*" of the Synagogue—the Elders. For among the Jews the trial of offenders belonged not to the whole body of the people, but to those chosen and ordained to the Eldership. And as the congregation succeeds the Synagogue, we are most indubitably,—since the text though *spoken* to Jews, is *written* to us—to pursue the same order *now* which Jesus enjoined to be pursued *then*.

5. But instead of wearying you longer with this redundancy of argument from the Living Oracles, I hasten to remark that for more than one hundred and fifty years, these officers obtained in the congregations of the primitive church. Ignatius, who had lived with the Apostles, and a truly apostolic man, speaks frequently, and largely of them, in his epistles to different churches. He exhorts the Magnesians that they "study to do all things in a divine concord; their Overseer, (pastor, bishop,) presiding in the place of God; their Elders, (presbyters,) in the place of the council of the Apostles, and their Deacons, (most dear to him,) being entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ." Writing to the Trallians, he says, (no doubt extravagantly:) "Let all reverence the Deacons as Jesus Christ, and the Overseer (pastor) as the Father, and the Elders as the Sanhedrim of God and College of Apostles." From many other passages, equally pertinent, we have no time to quote. Again: Polycarp, a disciple and companion of John, in writing to the church at Phillippi, not only conveys the idea that he had an eldership in his own congregation, but assuming the existence of a similar body in the church to which he wrote, he exhorts

them in a passage, which deserves to be read and pondered by every ruling Elder: "Let the Elders be tender and merciful, compassionate to all, converting them from their errors; visiting the weak; not forgetting the widow, the fatherless, and the poor; abstaining from anger, respect of persons, and unrighteous judgment; not quickly believing anything against any one; not severe in discipline; knowing that all are debtors and liable to judgment." Admirable compend, this, which should be in the head and heart of every Elder who would "rule well." There is one other apostolic cotemporary, whose testimony I shall stay to adduce, Clement by name; which name, Paul assures us, is in the Book of Life. Writing to the church in Corinth he says: "Let the flock of Christ enjoy peace with the Elders who are appointed to govern it." And again, when reproving their divisions and contentions, he says: "Do ye therefore, who laid the foundation of these disorders, submit yourselves to your Elders, and be instructed into repentance, bending the knee of your hearts."

6. If we pass from the Apostolic to the primitive fathers of the church, we shall find those among them, who are most noteworthy, testifying to the same fact. Cyprian, in his 29th Epistle, speaks of "teaching Elders" in such a way as to leave the impression that some Elders were not "teaching Elders." In his 40th Epistle, he expressly distinguishes between the "Elders" and the "Clergy." Origin, *Contra Celsum*, two hundred years after Christ, alludes to these officers as still existing and performing all those duties which they now perform amongst us. Ambrose, in the fourth century, says: "The Synagogue, and afterwards the church, had Elders, without whose council nothing was done in the church; which grew into disuse, by what negligence I know not, unless, perhaps, by the sloth, or rather by the pride of the teachers, while they alone wished to appear something." Augustine speaks of Elders in his church at Hippo, (Epistle 137,) and in other churches, and represents them as "*reprehending the erring.*"

I pass by a cloud of witnesses in silence; for surely more

on this point is unnecessary—those already quoted being competent, credible, and conclusive.

It remains to be observed, that this office, in after times, gradually fell into general disuse. A variety of influences conspired to produce this melancholy result,—the corruption of manners; the decay of piety; a disposition on the part of the people to escape the salutary restraints of discipline; on the part of the clergy a fondness for splendor and power, leading them to ape the grandeur of the Temple, rather than the simple and spiritual service of the Synagogue,—these all conspired to throw the office in question, more and more into the shade, until, finally, it was lost amid the mediæval darkness of a thousand years. Ruling Elders fled, with vital piety, into the obscurity of a “wilderness-state;” and when almost the entire, so called, church had refused them, their office was known and venerated by the Waldenses, amid the valleys of their Alpine home.*

7. But when it pleased God that pure and undefiled religion should revive, the Ruling Eldership revived along with it. The great religious revolution of the sixteenth century, that did so much to sweep away hoary error and sanctified iniquity, and rid and right the church, and bless the land, brought along with it a restoration, in the churches best reformed, of this divinely appointed and necessary order.—And even in the churches where, from untoward circumstances, the ruling eldership was not reinstated, its want was sensibly felt, and its divine right admitted by the greatest and best of them. Probably four-fifths of the Reformed churches, at first, concurred in restoring this office, and in pleading the authority of scripture, and the example of the primitive church for what they did. And though England adhered to Prelacy, yet many of her ablest divines held the same views. And there is good ground for believing that they would have introduced this reform also, had not the

*See Perrin's History Waldenses.

hapless union of Church and State fettered the hands of her Reformers.

8. If any argument be yet wanting to commend the office of the Ruling Eldership to Christian men, it may be found in its necessity in order to maintain the discipline and purity of the church. That these *ought* to be maintained is a proposition which it is impossible to doubt. That they cannot be well maintained, without Ruling Elders, will not be difficult to show. Or, if not; if they be laid aside, how then shall Christian order be maintained and a congregation governed? Can you do this, on any other plan, so easily and so well? Dispense with them and then the duty must devolve, either on the Civil Magistrate,* or on the Pastor, or on the body of the congregation. That it ought to devolve on the officers of the Civil Government, will not, in this country, be for a moment pretended. If you say, "it devolves upon the Pastor," then how many of them are young, inexperienced, rash? How many even of the old, are far better qualified to teach than to rule? How often do cases transpire in which the Pastor, or his near friends are an interested party. Besides, he is a man, and so has his natural friendships and affinities, and how liable is human infirmity to be influenced, in its judgments, by such causes? And, though all these insurmountable difficulties were removed, and *every* Pastor were deliberate, unbiassed, just and wise, in *all* his decisions; yet how often is, even a just and necessary course, for a time, odious to a congregation, or to some influential portion of it. And if you devolve the whole responsibility of odious measures upon the Pastor, how many of them will recoil, in fear, from even attempting their duty; and how many more will be ruined in the attempt! How often does the largest, wisest and weightiest Eldership, even with a beloved and experienced Pastor at its head, find all its influence weak enough for some solemn emergency! And would it be wise in

* Absurd as it may seem to most of my readers, to devolve this duty on the Civil Magistrate, yet I assure them, that such a plan has, by no means, been without its advocates.

such a case, to devolve *all* this burden upon the Pastor alone—perhaps on some young, weak, or unskilful Pastor,—and leave him to stem the torrent alone! Who is able to believe such a policy as this to be judicious?

But if, on the other hand, you ease the Pastor of this burden, and devolve it on the entire congregation, you do but involve the case in new and grave difficulties. All experience teaches that popular assemblies, are ill suited to adjudicate causes requiring calm, weighty, and thorough deliberation. Besides, can any one be ignorant, that cases are continually occurring, and demanding prompt and active attention, which any tolerable sense of propriety and delicacy, utterly forbids to be brought before a promiscuous assembly of men and women, boys and girls, wise and unwise?

In short, the exercise of wholesome government by either the Pastor, or the congregation, is an unscriptural and an impracticable thing, and those who have attempted either, have been generally driven, in the end, to some unbiblical, and less efficient substitute, for that Eldership which they repudiate.

Thus, the Prelatist constitutes his Vestry-men and Churchwardens, as his Councillors and helps, and calls upon them to perform, in substance, many of the duties of a Ruling Elder: though the lamentable state of discipline in many Episcopal congregations, is a sufficient indication of the inefficiency of this human substitute, and another fact in the long list of proofs that the foolishness of God is wiser than men. The Congregationalists, though they too, reject the Eldership, and, in theory, commit the cares of government into the hands of the people, yet warned by painful experience, of the dangers and difficulties of their position, have Committees appointed to do much of that work, which were better done by an experienced and weighty session—a little ecclesiastical Senate, composed of the wisest and worthiest members, and looked upon by the rest of their brethren as clothed with divine authority, and acting under divine commission. We come now to consider

II. *The qualifications for this office, and its duties.*

The duties of Elders now, are such as they have ever been; such as they were when the office was first instituted, as they were all along under the Jewish economy; such as they were at the coming of the Savior, and when he uttered the notable words in Matt. 18c: 15—18vs;—it is their duty to take the spiritual oversight of the congregations. They are to “take heed unto themselves, and to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost hath made them Overseers, to feed the Church of God which he hath purchased with his own blood.” And they are to do this cheerfully and heartily; not of constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind. They are to consider themselves as called of God, and set by him for the performance of their high work, and are to devote their energies and their lives to it.

That the Elder may fulfill his office to the highest edification, important personal qualifications are requisite.

1. *He must be sound in the faith.* An unsound Eldership were a scandal and a stumbling-block. Instead of guarding the purity of the church, they would corrupt it. Instead of contending as in an agony for the faith once delivered to the saints, they would be a mighty engine for its perversion. It is well nigh impossible for that congregation to continue rooted and grounded in the faith, whose Senators are carried about with every wind of doctrine. They cannot be suitable judges either of sound doctrine, or of Christian character, in any of those courts where they are called to act; nor can they “feed the flock” on the wholesome food of the word, while they themselves are unsound. Therefore, although it would be manifestly improper to preclude applicants from the communion of the church, until such times as they can give an intelligent assent to *everything* in our Constitution*; yet such an assent is, by all means, to be most rigidly required of those who are to administer that Constitution, if we mean to maintain our original character as a church.

*Indeed, we have no authority to require from an applicant *anything* but a sufficient evidence of Christian discipleship—*any more transcends our commission* Matt. 28c: 19v.

2. Again: as far as practicable, *Elders should be men of good mind, good temper, sociable disposition, public spirit and general intelligence.* I regret that I can hardly do more than mention these points. No position does more imperatively require a perspicacious and discriminating understanding, sound judgment, acquaintance with men and the tendencies of the times, and integrity, weight and decision of character, than theirs. The Elder has to deal with men in reference to interests the most momentous, urgent and eternal—often with unreasonable and wicked men; with prejudiced, obstinate, ignorant, interested or angry men; with men, the best of whom are imperfect, encompassed with infirmity, falling into frequent and sometimes grievous errors; who are always beset with innumerable snares on every side, and liable to succumb to passion, or be carried away by custom, or fashion, or public sentiment, into sin.

He is charged with the duty of governing and controlling these men. He is to stem the tide of all these evil influences. He is to watch for the souls committed to his care; he must win them from sin, reclaim them from error, school away their fierce and wayward passions, subdue their wilfulness and obstinacy, nourish every good principle, cherish every good purpose, and claim and cheer them onward amid all trials in every good work.

Such are some of the difficulties and duties of his sacred office. Great, they will be allowed to be; and yet he can employ none of the usual resorts of the Statesman, the warrior or the priest. He can resort to no court-martial, with its summary processes; no civil tribunal, with its prisons and penalties; no bloody Inquisition, with its secret, dark, terrible machinery of death. It is the soul and not the body, the inner and not the outer man, which he is expected to govern; and so he has no resources at all, except such as are moral and spiritual in their nature and tendencies; and therefore if he be a weak, inconsistent, ignorant, or narrow-minded man, it cannot but be that the great interests committed to his hands must suffer.

3. Yet, once more—the *Ruling Elder should be “apt to teach.”* It is his duty to visit the sick, and converse and pray with them (Jas. 6c:14v;) to speak occasionally in prayer-meetings, Sabbath-schools, and church courts; to converse with those who are inquiring about salvation, and teach them what they need to know; to hunt out baptized youth, and open up to them the high privileges and the solemn obligations of their position; to instruct the ignorant and reclaim the erring of the flock; to visit and condole with the orphans, the widows and all those in affliction or adversity; to catechise the children of their respective districts, and converse and pray with families from time to time; to reclaim erring brethren, and influence worldly men to come to Christ and receive a better portion; to be able to give infidels a reason for the faith that is in them, and by sound doctrine to exhort and to convince the gain-sayers. Surely, therefore, it is desirable that the Elder be apt to teach. He should not only be a man of sound mind, sound faith and enlarged views; he should also, upon occasions, be able to make a respectable statement, defence and commendation of the truth as it is in Christ Jesus.

4. And if the views now stated be correct, it will follow that, *so far as may be, the Ruling Elder should be in easy worldly circumstances.* Not that such things add anything to a man's intrinsic worth, but they furnish the requisite opportunities for doing good. For if the Elder be poor, and oppressed with daily toil and numerous home cares and solitudes, how shall he be able to find time for the high and solemn duties of his office. But in cases where a church is so happy to have “a poor honest man,” (Eccl. 9c:15v,) whose public services she cannot afford to do without, and who, yielding to her wish, betakes himself to a faithful discharge of the duties of his office,—such a church ought in honor and in honesty, to make him a just compensation for his time and labors. And this, no doubt, is the meaning of the Word, when it bids us (Tim. 5c:17v,) to “count the Elders that rule well worthy of double honor.” The context shows that pecuniary recompense was that which was partly intended; the writer immediately adding,

“For the Scripture saith ‘thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn; and the laborer is worthy of his reward.’”

5. Bear with me yet once more, while I remind you that *the Ruling Elder should be an officer of genuine, deep and shining piety*. I use an accumulation of qualifying terms, I know; but none of them are redundant. Not one of these qualities can be wanting from his character without the most serious and lamentable consequences.

That he should be a man of piety;—that he should experimentally know of the reality, power, and preciousness of grace, is too plain to be argued, and too important to be passed over without the most serious attention. Without piety all the other qualities I have mentioned will go for nothing; or rather, they will constitute so many reasons why a man should be shunned, rather than sought, for this office. For of what avail is a vigorous, active, well-trained and well-stored mind, sound judgment, weight and energy of character, sociability and amenity, the art to persuade and the power to govern men—I say, of what avail, are all these, so long as the gifted possessor is an unreconciled enemy of the Lord Jesus Christ, dead in trespasses and in sins, and his carnal mind enmity against God and his blessed Gospel? How shall *such a man* fulfill the great duties of a Presbyter? How shall *his* bowels yearn over those who are ignorant, and those who are out of the way? How shall *he* “travail, as in birth, until Christ Jesus be formed in you, the hope of glory.” How shall *he*, poor, blind, besotted sinner as he is, espy the dangers of the unrepenting and unregenerated from afar, and fly to their rescue? How can he be expected to warn every man and entreat every man, with tears and travail, night and day; or cherish life and warmth in others, who is dead himself? or explain to them the mystery of which he himself is ignorant? or console the sad when he is a stranger to the “consolation?” or rightly perform any one of the numerous and weighty duties of his God-ordained and heaven-high functions? Nay! what assurance can we have, that all his natural gifts and attainments, all those inherent and acquired powers of which we have spoken—

shall not be used, not for the truth, but against it? The Bible and all experience show that we have no assurance that any man will persevere in the right, except in the grace of Christ—a thing in which an unconverted Elder has no interest whatever.

But his piety *must be deep and all-pervading*. He should be a man having a large experience of grace; a man of prayer and of God; a prince in the congregation, eminent among the people. His piety should be an all-pervading principle, the grand master-passion of the soul. He should be a man distinguished for his purity and labor; for his love of God, and Christ, and souls; willing to spend and be spent in the work; and able to say to his brethren “so live as ye have us for an example.”

I need hardly add, therefore, that *his piety should be shining*, as well as deep. He should be well reported of for good works. I mean, he should have piety of an active and aggressive cast. There are many men of good mind, respectable education, and deep-toned piety; who lack this characteristic. Constitutionally of a contemplative and passive nature, grace has not, in these respects changed them. Such men are not, though Christians, in deed, properly qualified for the office of the Eldership. They lack that resoluteness and robustness of character, that gnarl and power of soul, which they should have who become the Captains of the Lord's Hosts, in a battle where the salvation of souls, the empire of the world, and the great honor of God are the immense prize for which the swaying squadron strain and struggle in the mighty combat. An Elder should be a man having something of Paul's and Peter's spirit; a man with a heart and an arm to work and to suffer; ready, at all times, to say “here am I, send me;” a moral hero, who, if called to it, could offer house, lands, wife, children, and life itself, upon this altar, and when he had finished the great sacrifice, could exclaim, with the tone of triumph on his lips and the flash of a conqueror in his eye, “None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I may finish

my course with joy, and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus."

But to say all, in a word, "An Overseer must be blameless the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach; not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient; not a brawler, not covetous; one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity. For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the Church of God? Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride, he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must have a good report of them that are without, lest being lifted up with pride, he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. (Tim. 3c: 1—7v.)*

Conclusion.

Let the Church, and especially the Elders, learn to take a higher and more enlarged view of the nature and duties of this high calling. Let Ruling Elders learn to magnify their office, by making full proof of their ministry. Let the people be taught to submit themselves to those who are placed over them in the Lord and admonish them, and who watch for their souls, as they that must give an account. O! if we could restore this office to its primitive dignity, activity and power!—if every congregation were so happy as to have a band of *such* men, led on by a Pastor fit to be at their head; a band of wise, grave, weighty men; holy, God-serving, soul-loving, lion-like men; men full of faith and the Holy Ghost, devoted with heart and will and waking energy to the work,—I say, if such a spectacle were seen in all our congregations, how long would it be until new life, and power, and action would be diffused throughout the whole body; until you could no longer find prayerless families, and graceless professors, and baptized infidels in Zion; until there would be a shaking of the dry bones, in the valley of vision, and a

*The practice of interpreting the above and similar texts as if they referred to preachers or prelates, and not to Ruling Elders, has no scriptural foundation, and ought, at once, to be abandoned. Digitized by Google

mighty and wondrous resurrection among them; and Zion would arise, shake herself from the dust, put on her beautiful garments, and look forth, "fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners."

But let us ever remember, that in order to this, we all have something to do. Pastors must gird up the loins of their minds. They must study this important subject more thoroughly. They must acquaint themselves with the great depths of wisdom and goodness displayed by the adorable Mediator in the establishment of this office. They must instruct both the Presbyters and the people, and admonish and stimulate them all to duty.

And you, the people, especially have a great and an important work to do. Indeed, I had almost said this necessary reformation must begin with you. You must reverence the will of God in the institution of this sacred Ecclesiastical Senate. You must be much in prayer for those who labor among you, and who are over you in the Lord, that they may possess, in an eminent degree, fitness and furniture for their office. Lend them your countenance and co-operation in the discharge of their duties. When they come to you and tender their faithful words of counsel, of admonition, or reproof, let no one receive them unkindly, or answer them rudely; but remember that faithful are even the wounds of a friend, while the very kisses of an enemy are deceitful. Let your heartfelt language be, "Let him that is righteous smite, —it shall be a kindness; let him reprove, I shall count it a precious oil; such smiting shall not break my head, but prove the salutary discipline of love." I speak in the bitterness of my heart, when I say that it is painful exceedingly, to perform the necessary office of reprove; therefore, I entreat you, do not increase the pain by treating unkindly that God-ordained Overseer, who undertakes this self-denying work.— Whatever the character of his official errand, when he comes to your house, receive him cordially. Let a sweet smile of welcome irradiate your countenance when you meet him at your threshold. Let your door and hand and heart be ever

open to give him perfect welcome. Never be in haste to criticise his little idiosyncrasies and peccadilloes; and as for his infirmities, instead of publishing them abroad, or speaking of them before your children, take the soft mantle of charity, and walking backwards, reverently and prayerfully cast it over them, and hide them away; so shall God hide thee, in the day of thy trouble.

When he visits you, try to turn your opportunity to profit. Ad him in the introduction of edifying topics of conversation. Listen, with a greedy ear, to his instructions. Write them upon the tablets of memory. Call your household around him, that they too may share in the profit. See that he has the opportunity and the invitation to catechise, to instruct, and to pray with them, when circumstances will at all permit; and when he is gone impress his lessons upon them.

Thus living and praying, you shall call down the rich effusions of the Holy Ghost upon the anointed heads of your Eldership, your own souls shall be refreshed, and strengthened and edified; and your happy household shall be instructed into a knowledge of the good and the right way. Your families shall be blessed of God. Your sons shall be as plants grown up in their youth; your daughters as corner stones, polished like a palace. And when death dissolves every earthly tie, you shall not mourn as those who have no hope, but look joyfully forward to a certain and speedy re-union in a brighter and a better world. Thus, too, shall you secure a blessing upon the congregation of which you are a member, and of the community of which you are citizens. A life and power and zeal, a faith and prayer and energy, shall be shed forth, which, under God, shall make glad the wilderness, and make the desert bud and blossom as the rose.

But, methinks, I hear more than one exclaim, "Who is fit for these things? Who is able to occupy this high and arduous post? Who is able to stand before the great and holy Lord God, as his Ancient, and the Overseer of his heritage? What happy congregation is so blessed as to have the requisite complement of men for Presbyters possessed of these

high qualities of mind and heart?" Alas! were it not that the assisting grace of God becomes perfect in our weakness, we could only sit down and weep because no man was found worthy. But let us rejoice, that all weak as water though they be, yet through the prayers and tears of his people, offered in their behalf, this rich grace shall rest plentifully upon the Ancients who sit in the gates of Zion. And O! let your prayers in their behalf ascend day and night, to him who filled Solomon with wisdom, and of the shepherd boy, David, made a suitable leader of his people, that in like manner he would most abundantly replenish the hearts of your Elders with wisdom and grace, and fill them with heavenly strength for the great word whereunto he has called them.