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THE  
DIVINE APPOINTMENT,  
THE  
DUTIES, AND THE QUALIFICATIONS  
OF  
RULING ELDERS:

A

SERMON,

PREACHED IN THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,  
IN THE CITY OF NEW-YORK,  
MAY 28, 1809.

—  
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ONE OF THE PASTORS OF THE SAID CHURCH.

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**THIS Discourse would have been sent to the press many months ago, agreeably to the author's promise to those friends who desired its publication, had not his unavoidable engagements, and his delicate health, rendered an earlier attention to the manuscript impossible.**

***New-York, January 15th, 1811.***

# A SERMON,

&c.



ACTS xiv. 23.

*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.*

**I**T is indispensable to the order and well-being of every society, that it have government; and it is equally indispensable to all regular government, that there be officers intrusted with its administration. To think of maintaining any society, ecclesiastical or civil, without government, in this depraved world, would be to contradict every principle of reason and experience, as well as of Scripture; and to think of supporting government without officers to whom its functions shall be intrusted, is to embrace the absurd hope of obtaining an end without the requisite means.

Accordingly, our blessed Lord has appointed a government in the Church, of which he is the Head and King. And for maintaining and conducting this government, he has appointed office-bearers in his

sacred family. For when he ascended up on high, he gave some Apostles, and some Evangelists, and some Pastors and Teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; until we all come, in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.\*

In every organized church, in the Apostle's day, there were, and in every organized church, at the present day, there ought to be, three classes of officers; viz. *Pastors, Ruling Elders, and Deacons.* The *first* to preach the Gospel, and administer the Sacraments; the *second* to assist the Pastor in the government of the church; and the *third* to serve tables, and take care of the poor. Accordingly, when *Paul* and *Barnabas* were sent forth, by divine direction, to preach the gospel, and organize churches, among the gentiles, we are told that *they ordained Elders in every church.*

The word *Elder*, exactly corresponding with the term *Presbyter*, literally signifies *an aged person.* Among the Jews, and the eastern nations generally, persons advanced in life were commonly selected to fill stations of dignity and authority, both ecclesiastical and civil. From this circumstance, the term *Elder* became, in process of time, and by a natural

\* Ephes. iv. 11—14.

association of ideas, an established title of office. Accordingly the Jews gave this title to most of their officers. They had Elders over the nation, and also over every city, and every synagogue. The apostles, who acted under the direction of the Holy Ghost, finding this title so generally and familiarly employed among the Jewish converts, who formed the first christian churches, adopted it in their system, and gave it, not only to the Pastors who *laboured in the word and doctrine*, but also to another class of officers, appointed to aid the pastors in the exercise of discipline, and in the preservation of order. When, therefore, we read that *Paul and Barnabas ordained Elders in every church*, we are to understand, that in every particular congregation which they organized, they set apart a bench of Elders ; that, of these, one or more in each church was appointed to preach and administer sealing ordinances ; and that the others were appointed as rulers, to assist in maintaining order in the church.

Being called, on the present occasion, to ordain a number of brethren, as ruling Elders in this church,\* it is my purpose to employ the time allotted for the present discourse in making some remarks on this office, on its WARRANT, its NATURE, and the QUALIFICATIONS of those who bear it.

\* The brethren ordained on this occasion were, Messrs. Robert M<sup>c</sup>Gill, David Gehlon, Robert Lengx, Peter Ludlow, and David L. Dodge.

I. Let us ascertain our WARRANT for appointing in our churches that class of officers which we denominate RULING ELDERS.

We say, then, that *lay Elders*, or *ruling Elders*, were found in the *Jewish synagogue*, which was the model of the Christian hierarchy;\* that they existed in the *primitive Church*, the organization of which was conducted under the direction of inspired men; that the great body of the *Reformers*, when they separated from the corruptions of Popery, restored this class of officers to the church; and, finally, that they, or officers of a similar kind, are *indispensably necessary* in every well ordered congregation.

1. Ruling Elders were found in every *Jewish Synagogue*, and the order of the synagogue was the model after which the apostles organized the Christian Church. The most learned and accurate writers on Jewish antiquities inform us, that in each synagogue there were, at least, three Elders, who were appointed to assist in bearing rule, in correcting offences, and in preserving order in the congregation. This class of elders had no right to expound the law; but they were associated with the teachers in the exercise of government: and, with the *Angel of*

\* The word *hierarchy*, strictly interpreted, signifies *sacred government*, or the *government of the church*. In this sense it is here used. Like the term *Bishop*, it has been too long restricted to the *prelatical system*. It is just as applicable to *one* form of church government as to *another*.

*the clerk, or the Bishop of the congregation, at their head, they formed a Session, Consistory, or Court, for the purpose of ordering, in a judicial manner, the concerns of the synagogue which they represented. These facts are so unquestionable, that the formal establishment of them by citing authorities is altogether unnecessary.*

And as the *fact*, that there were *ruling or lay Elders* in the Jewish synagogue, is well established, and freely acknowledged, even by many who reject the use of such officers in their ecclesiastical systems; so it is equally certain, that the order of the synagogue was the model after which the Apostles organized the Christian Church. Some have said, indeed, that the Apostles adopted the model of the *temple*, and not of the *synagogue*, in the organization of the church; but the slightest attention to facts will be sufficient to disprove this assertion. If we compare the names, the powers, the duties, and the ordination, of the officers of the christian church, as well as the nature and order of its public service, as established by the Apostles, with the corresponding parts of the synagogue system, we shall find that, in all these particulars, there is a close and striking resemblance; while between the service of the church and that of the temple, there is scarcely any conformity.\* If, then, there

\* The organization and service of the Christian church, resemble the temple in *scarcely any thing*; while they resemble the synagogue in almost

were, confessedly, *ruling*, or *lay Elders* in the Jewish synagogues; and if it be equally evident that there is so close and striking a resemblance between the synagogue and the church, as to prove, that the former was adopted as the model of the latter; we may confidently conclude, that a class of officers so useful and important, could not have been left out in constructing the government of the church. A class of officers so familiar to every Jew, and so indispensable in his eyes to the maintenance of ecclesiastical government and order, would by no means be likely to be rejected, when every other was notoriously retained.

2. Ruling Elders were, in fact, found in the Church as organized and left by the Apostles. The

*every thing*. There were *bishops, elders, and deacons* in the synagogue; but not in the temple. There was *ordination* by the *imposition of hands* in the synagogue; but no such ordination in the temple. There were reading the scriptures, expounding them, and public prayers, *every sabbath day*, in the synagogue; while the body of the people went up to the temple *only three times a year*, and even then to attend on a very different service. In the synagogue, there was a system established, which included a weekly provision, not only for the instruction and devotions of the people, but also for the maintenance of discipline, and the care of the poor; while scarcely any thing of this kind was to be found in the temple. Now, in all these respects, and in many more which might be mentioned, the Christian church followed the synagogue, and departed from the temple. Could we trace a resemblance only in *one* or a *few* points, it might be considered as accidental; but the resemblance is so close, so striking, and extends to so many particulars, as to arrest the attention of the most careless inquirer. It was, indeed, notoriously so great in the early ages, that the heathen frequently suspected and charged Christian churches with being Jewish synagogues in disguise.

New Testament makes express mention of such Elders. When we read, that *Paul and Barnabas ordained Elders in every church*; and that *Titus, in setting in order the things which were wanting in Crete, was charged with the duty of ordaining Elders in every city*,\* we are naturally led to conclude, that the apostolic plan was to appoint a *plurality* of Elders in every particular church; and, if so, that all of them could not be necessary for the purpose of public *instruction*; but that some were *rulers*, who formed a kind of college, or consistory, for the government of the church.

But there is a more pointed reference to this class of Elders, in 1 *Timothy*, v. 17. *Let the Elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.* Every man of plain good sense, who had never heard of any controversy on the subject, would conclude, on reading this passage, that, at the period in which it was written, there were *two kinds* of Elders, one whose duty it was to *labour in the word and doctrine*, and another who did not thus labour, but only ruled in the church. The Apostle says, *Elders, that rule well, are worthy of double honour, but especially those who labour in the word and doctrine.* Now, if we suppose that there was only *one kind* of Elders then in the church, and that they were *all teachers, or labourers in the word*, we make the inspired wri-

\* Titus i. 5.

ter employ a language utterly unworthy of his character. There was, therefore, a class of Elders in the apostolic church, who did not preach, nor administer sacraments, but assisted in government. These, by whatever name they may be called, were precisely the same with those officers which we denominate *ruling Elders*.

For this construction of the passage, Dr. Whitaker, a zealous and learned episcopal divine, warmly contends. "By these words," says he, "the Apostle evidently distinguishes between the Bishops and the *Inspectors* of the Church. If all who rule well be worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine, it is plain there were some who did not so labour; for if all had been of this description, the meaning would have been absurd; but the word *especially* points out a difference. If I should say, that all who study well at the university are worthy of double honour, *especially they who labour in the study of theology*, I must either mean that *all do not apply themselves to the study of theology*, or I should speak nonsense. Wherefore I confess that to be the most genuine sense by which pastors and teachers are distinguished from those who only governed\*." Equally to our purpose is the opinion of that acute and learned episcopal divine, Dr.

\* *Prælect. ap. Biddesley*, p. 661.

*Whitby*, in his note on this passage. "The Elders of the Jews," says he, "were of two sorts; 1st. Such as governed in the synagogue; and 2dly, Such as ministered in reading and expounding their Scriptures and traditions, and from them pronouncing what did bind or loose, or what was forbidden, and what was lawful to be done. For when, partly by their captivity, and partly through increase of traffick, they were dispersed in considerable bodies through divers regions of the world, it was necessary that they should have governors or magistrates to keep them in their duty, and judge of criminal causes; and also Rabbins to teach them the law, and the traditions of their fathers. The first were ordained *ad judicandum, sed non ad docendum de licitis et vetitis*, i. e. to judge and govern, but not to teach: The second, *ad docendum, sed non ad judicandum*, i. e. to teach, but not to judge or govern. And these the Apostle here declares to be the most honourable and worthy of the chiefest reward. Accordingly, the Apostle reckoning up the offices God had appointed in the church, places teachers before governments. 1 Cor. xii. 28."

I am aware that several glosses have been adopted to set aside the testimony of this text in favour of ruling Elders. To enumerate and expose them would be a waste of time and patience. It is sufficient to say, that none of them possess any real force,

and scarcely any of them even plausibility. And you will hereafter find, that, notwithstanding all these glosses, the text in question has been considered as conclusive in support of our doctrine, by some of the best judges, and by the great body of orthodox christians, from the Apostles to the present day.

The next passage of scripture which affords a warrant for the office of ruling Elder, is to be found in *Romans* xii. 6, 7, 8. *Having then gifts, differing according to the grace given to us ; whether prophesy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith ; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering ; or he that teacheth, on teaching ; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation ; he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity ; HE THAT RULETH, with diligence ; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness.* With this passage may be connected another of similar character, and to be interpreted on the same principles. I mean the following, from *1 Corinthians* xii. 28. *God hath set some in the church, first Apostles, secondarily Prophets, thirdly Teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, GOVERNMENTS, diversities of tongues.* In both these passages, there is a reference to the different offices and gifts bestowed on the church, by her divine King and Head ; in both of them there is a plain designation of an office for *ruling or government*, distinct from that of *teaching* ; and in both, also, this office evi-

deently has a place assigned to it *below* that of *Pastors* and *Teachers*. This office, by whatever name it may be called, and however its character may be disguised by ingenuity, is, to all intents and purposes, the same with that which Presbyterians distinguish by the title of *ruling Elder*.

In addition to the testimony of Scripture, on this subject, it would be easy to produce passages from those early christian writers usually denominated the *Fathers*, to show, as well that there were ruling Elders in the apostolic church; as also that this class of officers did not fall into disuse until long after the time of the Apostles\*. But it would exceed the limits of a single discourse, to enter on so wide a field of inquiry; I shall, therefore, content myself with the following quotation from *Hilary*, (frequently called *Ambrose*,) who lived in the fourth century, and who, in his explication of 1 *Timothy* v. 1. has

\* *Cyprian*, in his 29th Epistle, speaks of "TEACHING Elders." On this passage, the Rev. Mr. *Marshall*, the episcopal translator and commentator of *Cyprian*, remarks—"It is hence, I think, apparent, that all Presbyters were not *teachers*, but *assisted the Bishop* in other parts of his office." And *Bishop Fell*, another editor and commentator on *Cyprian*, remarks on the same passage in the following words: "Inter Presbyteros *rectores* et *doctores* olim distinctiase videtur divus *Paulus*, 1 *Tim.* v. 17." i. e. "St. *Paul* appears to have made a distinction, in ancient times, between *Teaching* and *Ruling Elders*, in 1 *Timothy* v. 17." Here two learned episcopal divines explicitly acknowledge the distinction between *teaching* and *ruling Elders*, in the primitive Church; and one of them, an eminent Bishop, not only allows that *Cyprian* referred to this distinction; but also quotes as an authority for it the principal text which Presbyterians adduce for the same purpose.

the following passage—“ For, indeed, among all nations old age is honourable. Hence it is that the *synagogue*, and afterwards the *church*, had *Elders*, without whose counsel nothing was done in the church; which by what negligence it grew *in to disuse* I know not, unless, perhaps, by the *stoltz*, or rather by the *pride* of the *Teachers*, while they alone wished to appear something.”

Having seen that both *Scripture* and the *Fathers* afford a clear warrant for the office of *ruling* or *lay-Elders* in the church; let us,

3. Next inquire whether the *Reformers* and other distinguished witnesses for the truth, in different ages and countries, declared *for* or *against* this office. I know that the authority of the *Reformers* is not to be considered, any more than that of the *Fathers*, as a rule either of faith or practice; but when we recollect the great talents, the profound learning, the fervent piety, and the eminent services of many of those distinguished men, in clearing away the errors of Popery, and restoring the faith and order of the primitive church, we cannot fail to acknowledge that their opinions and decisions are worthy of high regard. It is worth while, therefore, to inquire what those opinions and decisions were, with respect to the question before us.

*John Paul Perrin*, the celebrated historian of the *Waldenses*, and who was himself one of the *Ministers* of that people, in a number of places, recognizes the office of *Ruling Elder* as retained in their churches. He expressly and repeatedly asserts, that the *Synods* of the *Waldenses*, long before the time of *Luther*, were composed of *Ministers* and *Elders*\*.

The same writer tells us, that, in the year 1467, the *Hussites* being engaged in reforming and separating their churches from the church of *Rome*, understood that there were some churches of the ancient *Waldenses* in *Austria*, in which the purity of the gospel was retained, and in which there were many eminent *Pastors*. In order to ascertain the truth of this account, they, (the *Hussites*,) sent two of their *Ministers* with *two Elders* to inquire into, and know what those flocks or congregations were†.

The same historian, in the same work, speaks of “the *Ministers* and *Elders* of the *Bohemian* churches‡.”

The testimony of *Perrin* is supported by that of *Gillis*, another historian of the *Waldenses*, and also

\* *Hist. of the old Waldenses*, Part ii. Book II. Chap. 4.

† *Ibid.* Chap. 10.

‡ *Ibid.* Chap. 9.

one of their pastors. In the *Confession of Faith*\* of that people, inserted at length in the "Addition" to his work, it is declared, (p. 490. Art. 31.) that "It is necessary for the Church to have *Pastors* to preach God's word, to administer the Sacraments, and to watch over the sheep of Jesus Christ; and also *Elders* and *Deacons*, according to the rules of good and holy church discipline, and the practice of the primitive church."

But we have still more pointed evidence, that the churches which ecclesiastical historians have generally distinguished by the title of the *Bohemian Brethren*, and which flourished before the time of *Luther*, bore their testimony in favour of the office of *ruling Elder*, by retaining it, amidst all the degeneracy of the times. This fact is attested by *Martin Bucer*, a learned Lutheran divine, whose fame induced Archbishop *Cranmer* to invite him to *England*, where he received preferment and patronage, and was held in high estimation. He speaks of it in the following terms ;

"The *Bohemian Brethren*, who published a *Confession* of their faith in the year 1535, with a preface by *Luther*, and who almost alone preserved in the world the purity of the doctrine, and the vigour of the discipline of Christ, observed an ex-

\* This *Confession*, *Gillis* expressly declares to have been the *Confession* of the ancient, as well as the modern *Waldenses*.

“cellent rule, for which we are compelled to give  
 “them credit, and especially to praise that God who  
 “thus wrought by them; notwithstanding those  
 “brethren are preposterously despised by some  
 “learned men. The rule which they observed was  
 “this : besides ministers of the word and sacraments,  
 “they had, in each church, a bench or college of  
 “men excelling in gravity and prudence, who per-  
 “formed the duties of admonishing and correcting  
 “offenders, composing differences, and judicially  
 “deciding in cases of dispute. Of this kind of El-  
 “ders, *Hilary*, (*Ambrose*,) wrote, when he said,  
 “Therefore the synagogue, and afterwards the  
 “church, had Elders, without whose counsel nothing  
 “was done\*.”

The celebrated *Peter Martyr*, a protestant di-  
 vine of *Italy*, whose high reputation induced *Ed-  
 ward VI.* to invite him into *England*, where he was  
 made professor of divinity at *Oxford*, and Canon of  
*Christ Church*, speaks of ruling Elders in the fol-  
 lowing decisive terms : “The church,” (speaking of  
 the primitive church,) “had its *Elders*, or if I may  
 “so speak, its *Senate*, who consulted about things  
 “that were for edification for the time being. *Paul*  
 “describes this kind of ministry, not only in the 12th  
 “chapter of the Epistle to the *Romans*, but also in  
 “the first Epistle to *Timothy*, where he thus writes,

\* *Scripta duo Adversaria Latini, &c. in Cap. De Ecclē. Authoritat.*  
 p. 159.

“ *Let the Elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those that labour in the word and doctrine.* Which words appear to me to signify, that there were then some Elders who taught and preached the word of God; and another class of Elders who *did not teach, but only ruled* in the church. Concerning these *Ambrose* speaks, when he expounds this passage in *Timothy*. Nay, he inquires whether it was owing to the *pride* or the *sloth* of the sacerdotal order that they had *then almost ceased in the church?*”\*

In the *Confession of Saxony*, drawn up by *Melancthon*, in 1551, and subscribed by a large number of Lutheran churches, we find this class of church officers, recognized, and represented as in use in those churches. Speaking of the exercise of discipline, in its various parts, they say—“ That these things may be done orderly, *there are also Consistories appointed in our churches.*” Of these *Consistories*, the principal members, it is well known, were *ruling Elders*.

That there were *ruling Elders* in the primitive church, is also explicitly granted by Archbishop *Whitgift*, a warm and learned friend of diocesan episcopacy. “ I know,” says he, “ that in the primitive church, they had in every church *certain seniors, to whom the government of the congre-*

\* *P. Martyris Loci Communes.* Class. iv. Cap. 1. Sect. 2.

“gation was committed; but *that* was before there  
 “was any christian prince or magistrate that openly  
 “professed the gospel; and before there was any  
 “church by public authority established.” And  
 again, “Both the name and office of *seniors* were  
 “extinguished before *Ambrose* his time, as he him-  
 “self doth testify, writing upon the *fifth* of the first  
 “Epistle to *Timothy*. Indeed, as *Ambrose* saith,  
 “the *synagogue*, and after the church, had *seniors*,  
 “without whose counsel nothing was done in the  
 “church; but that was *before his time*, and before  
 “there was any christian magistrate, or any church  
 “established\*.”

*Szegedin*, a very eminent Lutheran divine, of  
*Hungary*, contemporary with *Luther*, also speaks  
 decidedly of the apostolic institution of *ruling El-*  
*ders*. The following passage is sufficient to exhibit  
 his sentiments. “The ancient church had *Presby-*  
 “*ters* or *Elders*, of which the Apostle speaks, 1  
 “*Corinth. 5. 4.* And these *Elders* were of *two*  
 “*kinds*. One class of them preached the gospel,  
 “administered the sacraments, and governed the  
 “church, the same as *Bishops*; for *Bishops* and  
 “*Presbyters* are the *same order*. But *another class*  
 “of *Elders* consisted of grave and upright men, taken  
 “from among the laity, who, together with the  
 “preaching *Elders* before mentioned, consulted re-

\* *Defence against Cantwright. p. 638. 651.*

“specting the affairs of the church, and devoted  
 “their labour to admonishing, correcting, and taking  
 “care of the flock of Christ\*.”

*Hieronymus Kromayer*, a learned Lutheran divine, and professor of divinity in the university of *Leipsic*, who lived in the age immediately following that of *Luther*, bears decided testimony to the apostolic institution of *ruling Elders*. “The title of “Bishop,” says he, “takes its name from a Greek word, which signifies an *overseer*. This title differs from that of *Presbyter*, because the latter is “taken from *age*. Of *Presbyters* or *Elders* there “were formerly *two* kinds, those who *taught*, and “those who exercised the office of *rulers* in the “church. This is taught in *1 Timothy* v. 17. *Let “the Elders that rule well be counted worthy of “double honour, especially those who labour in the “word and doctrine*. The latter were the same as “*our Ministers*, at present; the former were like “*the members of our Consistories*†.

The learned *Voetius*, a German divine of great eminence, also contends for the apostolic institution of *ruling Elders*. He speaks of a number of *Popish* writers, as particularly warm and zealous in their opposition to this class of church officers; “Nor is

\* *Szegedini Loci Communes*, p. 197. Edit. quint. folio—Basil, 1608.

† *Historia Ecclesiastica*, autore *Hieronymo* Kromayero, D. D. and S. S. T. P. in Acad. Lips. 4to. p. 59.

“ this,” says he “ any wonder, since nothing is more  
 “ opposite to the Papal monarchy, and anti-chris-  
 “ tian tyranny, than is the institution of ruling El-  
 “ ders.” *Voetius* is of the opinion that the *church*  
*wardens* in the church of *England* are the “ vesti-  
 “ ges” of these “ ruling seniors\*.”

*Ursinus*, an eminent German divine, who lived  
 about the same time with *Luther*, in enumerating  
 the officers of the church, as laid down in the word  
 of God, speaks of *ruling Elders* and *Deacons*. The  
 former he defines to be officers “ elected by the  
 “ voice of the church, to assist in conducting disci-  
 “ pline, and to order a variety of necessary matters  
 “ in the church.” And the latter, as officers, “ elect-  
 “ ed by the church, to take care of the poor, and to  
 “ distribute alms†.”

After this view of the opinions of some of the most  
 distinguished reformers and others, in favour of the  
 office of *ruling Elders*, you will not be surprised to  
 hear, that the great body of the reformed churches  
 adopted, and have always maintained, this class of  
 officers. Instead of being invented by *Calvin*, as  
 the enemies of that great man have insinuated; and  
 instead of being confined, as some seem to imagine,  
 to *Geneva* and *Scotland*, they were generally intro-

\* *Polit. Eccles.* Par. i. Lib. ii. Tract. 3. Cap. 4. Sect. 1.

† *Corpus Doctrinae.* Par. iii. p. 721.

duced, with the reformation, by *Lutherans* as well as *Calvinists* ; and are generally retained to the present day, in almost all the protestant churches, excepting that of *England*. We have seen that the *Waldenses*, the *Hussites*, and the *Bohemian Brethren*, had them, long before *Calvin* was born. It is notorious that the reformed churches of *Germany*, *France*, *Holland*, &c. received this class of *Elders* early, and expressly represented them in their public *confessions*, as founded on the word of God. And it is a fact equally notorious, that the *Lutherans*, as well as the *Presbyterians* in our own country, have, at this hour, *lay Elders* to assist in the government and discipline of the church. The truth is, that at the period of the reformation, three fourths of the whole protestant world declared in favour of this class of *Elders* ; not merely as *expedient*, but as *appointed in the apostolic church*, and as necessary to be restored. And to the present time a decided majority of protestants maintain the same opinion and practice.

4. *Ruling Elders*, or officers of a similar kind, are INDISPENSABLY NECESSARY in every well ordered congregation. The laws which are appointed by Christ for the government and edification of his people, cannot be executed, without such a class of officers in *fact*, whatever *name* they may bear. And that which is the necessary result of a divine institution, is of equal authority with the institution itself.

All powers indispensable to the execution of laws which an infinitely wise Governor has enacted, must be considered as implied in those laws, even should they not be formally specified.

The discipline of the church is an ordinance of Christ, to which every member of it is bound to submit. But discipline cannot be exercised with wisdom, and with punctuality, if there be no aid given to the pastor, in maintaining it. To say nothing of the unwillingness which every discreet pastor will feel, to be the only active and responsible person in duties of so much delicacy; and to say nothing also, of the inexpediency of depositing so much power with an individual; it is plain that the pastor cannot be every where, or know every thing. He cannot so watch over the people of his charge, as to know, from his own observation, the character and conduct of every family, and every member of his church. He must read; he must prepare for the services of the pulpit; he must perform his various public labours; he must employ much time in private, in instructing and counselling those who apply to him for instruction and counsel; and he must act his part in the general concerns of the whole church with which he is connected. Now it is impossible for him to do this, and, at the same time, to watch over every individual in the church, in such a manner as to be able, from his own knowledge, to exercise strict, impartial, and efficient discipline: and it is

equally impossible that the merciful Head of the church should require this to be done, without providing him with some auxiliaries in inspection and government. It is in vain to say, that the *whole body of the church* are his *auxiliaries*. We all know the reluctance of men to go forward and take an active part, in cases of discipline, even where they are *officially* bound to the performance of this duty. But that which is incumbent on no particular individual more than another; that which *equally* belongs to *every* member of a whole religious community, will generally be found to be either entirely neglected, or imperfectly performed. There is, then, much and weighty reason, in favour of, what we know to be a divine ordinance, that in every congregation there be appointed a bench of *rulers*, who shall assist the pastor in visiting, inspecting, judging, censuring, and absolving; and who shall, with him, be invested with authority over the flock committed to their care\*.

Further; the *representative* principle is a most important one in the constitution of the christian church. It is essential to the system of grace. It was known to the Old Testament church; and it is clearly exhibited in the New Testament Scriptures.

\* The Author takes great pleasure in acknowledging, that the substance of several sentences in this paragraph, and in the subsequent one, is taken from a manuscript of his learned and excellent friend, the Rev. Dr. M<sup>r</sup> Love, Pastor of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in this city.

The Elders of *Israel* are repeatedly called the whole congregation of *Israel*, because they *represented* it. And an ecclesiastical judicatory is called, upon the same principle, "the church," because it is the whole body by representation. Every body of associated churches, however extensive, or however numerous its parts, is but one; and, of course, when the representatives of those associated churches, are regularly convened, it is conformable to all correct ecclesiastical language, to call them "the church," and their acts, the acts of the church. In like manner, there is no warrant, either in scripture, or expediency, for convening the whole body of the faithful, in any particular church, to deliberate and decide in a judicial manner. Their proper, and only suitable organ, is the *Eldership*, which, by representing the whole body, is the church. It is, therefore, scriptural, reasonable, convenient, and necessary, that some discreet, wise, and pious individuals be deputed by the church to represent in council and in judgment the whole body, and to assist the pastor in preserving its order, purity, and peace.

We can hardly have a better comment on these principles, than the practice of those churches which reject *ruling Elders*. Our *Episcopal* brethren reject them; but they are obliged to have their *vestry-men* and *church-wardens*, who perform many of the duties belonging to such *Elders*. Our *Congregational* brethren also reject this class of church officers; but

they too are forced to resort to a *committee*, who attend to those details of parochial duty which their ministers cannot perform. They can scarcely take a single step without having in *fact*, though not in *name*, substantially such officers as we recognize under the scriptural appellation of *Elders*. Now, is it probable, is it credible, that the Apostles, acting under the immediate direction of Christ, the King and Head of the church, should entirely overlook this necessity, and make no provision for it? It is not credible. We must, then, either suppose, that some such officers as those in question were appointed by the Apostles; or that means acknowledged by the practice of all to be indispensable, in conducting the affairs of the church, were forgotten or neglected.

Such are some of the arguments by which we consider ourselves as warranted in retaining the office of *ruling* or *lay Elder* in the church. Nay, we not only retain this office; but we consider it as an appointment of high importance. Important, because every appointment of God is so; and because we have no doubt that it is more immediately and closely connected, with the edification and welfare of the body of Christ, than is generally imagined, even by many of the warmest friends of our truly primitive and scriptural Church.

You will not suppose, however, while we make these remarks, that we either deny the christian

character, or doubt the validity of the acts, of those churches which discard the office in question. We judge them not. On the contrary, we respect and love them. But we are *fully persuaded in our own minds*; and we claim the privilege of saying, with affectionate deference to those sister churches who are of a different mind, that all our researches in the sacred volume, and in christian antiquity, confirm us in the great principles of the system which we have adopted.—Let us now proceed,

II. To consider the nature and extent of those DUTIES which belong to the office of *ruling Elder*.

The general duty of *ruling Elders* is to assist the Pastor in the exercise of ecclesiastical authority. *He that ruleth, let him do it with diligence\**, is the summary of his appropriate functions, as laid down in scripture. But, the proper elucidation of the subject requires a more particular detail.

*Ruling Elders*, as the representatives of the church, form, together with the pastor, an ecclesiastical court, to act, in all cases of a spiritual nature, in the name, and on the behalf of the church. In this capacity, it is their province to judge of the qualifications of candidates for church membership; to receive and dismiss members; to watch over the

\* *Romans xii. 8.*

purity of faith and manners in those committed to their care; and, in general, to take order respecting every thing which may be considered as affecting the spiritual prosperity of the congregation. Accordingly it is declared, in the *eighth* chapter of our *Form of Government*, "The Church Session is competent to the spiritual government of the congregation: for which purpose, they have power to inquire into the knowledge and christian conduct of the members of that church; to call before them offenders and witnesses, being members of their own society; and to introduce witnesses from other societies or denominations, where it may be necessary to bring the process to issue; and, when they can be procured, to attend, to admonish, to rebuke, to suspend, or exclude from the sacraments those who are found to deserve the censure of the church; to concert the best measures for promoting the spiritual interest of the congregation; and to appoint delegates to the higher judicatories of the church."

Under the general expressions, of "watching over the spiritual interests" of the flock, and "concerting the best measures" for promoting its prosperity, a large field of vigilance, care, and action is embraced. They imply frequent and serious consultation on these great subjects; carefully noticing and correcting every thing that may tend to disorder, or that is contrary to edification; digesting and executing

plans for promoting a spirit of inquiry, of reading, of prayer, of order, and of universal holiness among the members of the church; superintending the instruction and deportment of the youth of the church; and, generally, acting the part of *guardians* and *watchmen* on that portion of the *walls of Zion*, to which they are assigned.

But besides these duties, which belong to *ruling Elders*, with the pastor, in their collective capacity, as a judicatory of the church, there are others which are incumbent on them in the intervals of their judicial meetings, and by the due discharge of which they may be constantly edifying the body of Christ. It is their duty to attend to the case of those who are awakened and inquiring concerning their eternal interest; to converse with them; and, from time to time, to give information concerning them to the pastor. It is their duty to converse with, and admonish, in private, those who appear to be growing careless, or falling into habits, in any respect, criminal, suspicious, or unpromising. It is their duty to visit and pray with the sick, as far as their circumstances admit, and to request the attendance of the pastor on the sick and the dying, as may be judged desirable. It is their duty to visit the members of the church and their families; to converse with them; to instruct the ignorant; to confirm the wavering; to caution the unwary; to encourage the timid; and to excite and animate all

classes to a faithful and exemplary discharge of duty. It is their duty to consult frequently and freely with their minister; to aid him in forming and executing plans for the welfare of the church; to give him, from time to time, such information as he may need, to enable him to perform aright his various and momentous duties; to impart to him, with affectionate respect, their advice; to support him with their influence; to defend his reputation; to enforce his admonitions; and, in a word, by every means in their power, to promote the comfort, and extend the usefulness of his labours. We are next,

III. To ascertain the QUALIFICATIONS proper for those who bear this office in the church.

It is by no means necessary that *ruling Elders* should be *aged* persons. If *Timothy* was an *Elder*, though so young a man, that the Apostle said to him, *Let no man despise thy youth*; and if, in every age of the church, young men have been considered as qualified, on the score of age, to be *Elders that labour in the word and doctrine, as well as rule*; there can be no doubt that young men, if otherwise well qualified, may with propriety be appointed *Elders* to assist in *ruling* the church of God. Nay, where such characters, with other suitable qualifications, are to be found, it is *expedient* to introduce some in younger life into the *Eldership* of every church, not only that there may

be individuals in the body fitted for more *active* duties ; but also that some of the number may have that kind of official training, and that familiarity with ecclesiastical business, which early information, and long habit can alone give.

But though the circumstance of *age*, as a general rule, does not enter into the essential qualifications of *ruling Elders* ; there are other qualifications which are highly important, and indeed indispensable. These are stated by the Apostle, in writing to *Titus*, in the following comprehensive and striking language : *An Elder must be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children, (or as it is elsewhere expressed, one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity,) not accused of riot, or unruly, not self-willed, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre ; but a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate, sound in the faith, in charity, in patience\**.

It cannot be doubted, that every member of the christian church is bound to exhibit a holy, devout, and exemplary life ; to have his mind well stored with religious knowledge ; to be able to give an answer to every one that asketh a reason of the hope that is in him ; and to avoid every thing that is criminal

\* *Titus* i. 6—8. ii. 2. These passages appear, on tracing the connexion, to be equally applied to *teaching* and *ruling Elders*.

in itself, or that may be cause of offence to his brethren. But it is equally manifest that all these qualifications are still more important, and required in a still higher degree, in those who are intrusted with the spiritual inspection and regulation of the church. As they occupy a place of more *honour* and *authority* than the other members of the church; so they also occupy a station of greater *responsibility*. The eyes of hundreds will be upon them as *Elders*, which were not upon them as *private christians*. Their brethren and sisters, over whom they are placed in the Lord, will naturally look up to them for advice, for instruction, for aid in the spiritual life, and for a shining example. These expectations are reasonable, and must not be disappointed. The qualifications of Elders, therefore, ought, in some good measure, to correspond with them.

An *Elder*, then, ought to be a man of unfeigned and approved **PIETY**; for without this, he cannot sincerely, nor with skill, watch over the spiritual interests of the flock; without this, he is not qualified to converse with, and direct the awakened, the inquiring, the anxious, the tempted, and the doubting. He ought to be a person of **GOOD SENSE** and **PRUDENCE**; for without these he will be wholly unfit to act in the various difficult and delicate cases which may arise in the discharge of his duty. An Elder of an ignorant, weak, and childish mind, however fervent his piety, is by no means

adapted to the station of an ecclesiastical ruler, counsellor, and guide ; and he who is rash, indiscreet, and precipitate, instead of composing differences, removing offences, turning away wrath, and promoting peace, will be apt to produce effects in the church directly of an opposite kind. Further ; a *ruling Elder* ought to be WELL INFORMED ON the subject of evangelical truth and order. Unless a man be not only orthodox in his faith, but also well acquainted with the doctrine and government of the church, how can he act intelligently, when called upon to judge between truth and heresy, or officially to decide questions of faith and discipline? How can he determine whether he is acting in conformity with the standards of his church, or in opposition to them? How can he determine whether he is promoting the peace and order, or the confusion of the household of God? Again ; an *Elder* ought to be a person of that GRAVITY and DIGNITY OF DEPORTMENT, and that general WEIGHT and RESPECTABILITY IN SOCIETY, which are fitted to command the esteem and confidence of his brethren. Without these qualifications, he is likely to render but little permanent or essential service to the church. Finally ; an *Elder* ought to be animated with an enlightened and ardent ZEAL for the glory of God, and the interests of his kingdom. The design of appointing persons to this office is, not to pay them a compliment ; not to create the pageants of ecclesiastical ceremony ; but to secure able, faithful, and

diligent rulers of the church. To fit them for acting in this character with constancy, and for performing the work which pertains to it, with diligence, faithfulness, and perseverance, will require ardent zeal; minds intent upon the work; hearts filled with love to Jesus, and to the souls of men; and *preferring Jerusalem above their chief joy*. Unless they are animated with this affectionate zeal; unless they are habitually impelled by an enlightened and cordial attachment to the great cause in which they are engaged, they will soon become weary of their arduous and self-denying labours; they will soon find waiting on the flock, visiting the sick, correcting the disorderly, watching over the spiritual interests of all, and attending the various judicatories of the church, an irksome task. But with such a zeal as has been described, no labours, no trials, no difficulties will move them; neither will they count their lives dear to themselves, so that they may *finish their course with joy, and accomplish the work which they have received of the Lord Jesus*.

From what has been said, we may learn,

1. *The importance of church government; and the propriety of every member of the church making himself, in some degree, acquainted with ecclesiastical order, as well as with evangelical truth. Every thing that God has appointed is important; especially every thing that relates to the household of*

*faith, to the family of God.* You will not understand me to mean that the *government* of the church is *as* important, and enters *as* deeply into her vital interests, as her *doctrine* and *sacraments*. For such a comparative estimate, the scriptures, I am persuaded, afford no warrant. Men may be of different opinions on the subject of ecclesiastical government, and yet, in other respects, be equally excellent and exemplary as practical christians; enjoy equal spiritual consolation here, and attain equal glory hereafter. Still the government of the church, (though the precise form of it is by no means essential to the religion of the heart,) is a subject of high importance, and worthy of being examined and studied by all. If a God of infinite wisdom, who does nothing in vain, has thought proper to prescribe a form of government for his church, and to exhibit that form in his word, who will venture to say that it is unworthy of his consideration? And allow me to add, that if it be dishonorable to a member of civil society not to understand the government of the state; much more dishonorable is it for a member of the church, a far nobler community, not to understand the ecclesiastical government under which he lives.

Brethren, it is my earnest desire, not only to see you *Presbyterians* in principle, but also intelligent, enlightened, well instructed *Presbyterians*. Make it your study, then, to be able, not only to give an

answer to every one that *asketh a reason of the hope that is in you*, as christians ; but also to give a reason for all those things which distinguish the denomination to which you belong. Let there be a copy of the *Confession of Faith, and Form of Government* of our church, in every family. Make yourselves familiarly acquainted with the contents of this volume ; and I verily believe you will find it, next to the word of God, to contain the most perfect summary of faith and practice that ever was drawn up by the collected wisdom of the church. I say "next to the word of God ;" for highly as we prize this excellent compend of gospel truth and order, we do not place it on a par with the inspired volume ; or rather, to speak more properly, it is because we consider it as the most correct and sound exhibition, in a narrow compass, of what the inspired volume contains, that is at present extant, that we prize it so highly, and recommend it with such confident zeal.

2. From what has been said, we infer, that the office of *ruling Elder* in the church, is not only a very *honorable*, but also a very *important* office. If the office of magistrate or ruler in *civil* society, be highly important, as well as honourable, much more so is that of ruler in the *Church of God*. An Elder, then, ought to consider himself as placed in a most interesting station ; and when he is animated with the spirit of that station, he has it in his power

to serve the church, and to promote her interests, essentially, and in a great variety of ways. He may, in fact, promote her interests in ways, and on occasions, in which a pastor cannot; because he can gain access to many who feel some reserve in the presence of a minister of the gospel. Accordingly, it has been the happiness and the honour of many Elders, by their pious example, as well as by their prudence, wisdom, zeal, and activity, in watching over the various interests of the church, to render more signal and important services to the cause of Christ, than many *labourers in the word and doctrine*. And I am persuaded, that, if our Elders in general had a more just sense of the nature and extent of their duties; and if our church-members were more correctly informed on this subject, we should daily see the most indisputable and gratifying proof of the utility and importance of the office in question.

3. Further; from what has been said, we infer that the office of ruling Elders is an office of great *responsibility*; and that they need the candour, the aid, and the prayers of the friends of Zion. Be entreated, then, to pray for them, and to assist them by every means in your power; and ever bear in mind that they have a difficult task to perform. Methinks I hear one and another exclaim—“Thank God, that I am not an Elder!” But why, my friend, think or express yourself thus? Because

you are not an *Elder*, can you deceive yourself so far as to imagine that you are free from *responsibility*? Are you a professing christian? And are you not, as such, bound to employ every faculty and every privilege for God? Are you not, as such, bound to be devout, sober, exemplary, zealous, and *ready to every good work*? Are you not, in short, as such, bound to remember that *you are not your own*, and to *glorify God in your body and spirit which are his*? And even if you are not a professor of religion, have you no *responsibility*? Does your want of a holy temper, and your criminal neglect of christian duty, free you from all obligation? Alas! brethren, be not deceived! you are under a responsibility which you may forget, which you may despise, which you may affect to renounce; but which you cannot tear off, or throw from you. Yes, my hearers, every one of you is bound to be as pious, as exemplary, as holy in all manner of conversation, as if you were Elders. The circumstance of your not being ecclesiastical rulers, gives you no license to lead a careless life. Instead, therefore, of saying, "Thank God that I am not an Elder!" let the aspirations of each of your hearts rather be—"O that *I* also might be prepared to serve God in any station in his church, in which he might be pleased to place me! O that *I* too might be disposed and qualified to assist, if it were but in the humblest capacity, in promoting that great cause for which Jesus died!

*“ I had rather be a door-keeper in the house of my  
“ God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness.”*

Finally ; let me call upon all in this assembly, and especially upon those who profess to feel for the welfare of Zion, to take an interest in the solemn transaction in which we are about to engage. While your brethren, who have been chosen to the important office of rulers in this church, are taking on themselves the solemn vows prescribed by our form of government, and are set apart by prayer to the service of God, let your hearts ascend to the throne of grace, in humble petitions for a blessing on them, and on the great interests which they are appointed to superintend. Let each one cordially say, with the prophet of old—*For Zion's sake I will not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth\*.*

*(Here the Elders elect presenting themselves before the congregation, gave their assent to the questions prescribed by our Form of Government, to candidates for this office, and were set apart by prayer ; to which the following Charges immediately succeeded.)*

MY DEAR BRETHERN,

You are now to consider yourselves as ruling El-

\* *Isaiah, 62. 1.*

ders in this church. You have heard the *duties*, as well as the *warrant*, of your office. Make it your daily study to perform those duties with fidelity and zeal. As private christians, you have for some time borne a very important and endearing relation to the members of the church of Christ here assembled. But you now bear to them a new, and still more interesting relation. Think much and seriously of this relation, and of the duties and responsibility which it infers. Strive to be *ensamples to the flock, and to walk before them in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless*. Shun the very appearance of evil; and let every part of your life and conversation testify, that your aim is to *edify the church*. In conducting discipline, difficulties and painful occurrences will arise. No man ever performed his duty, in any station, without finding these. But meet them with meekness, prudence, firmness, and humble prayer, and you need not fear the result. Be men of prayer. Be much employed in studying the word of God. Make yourselves familiarly acquainted with the government and discipline; as well as the faith of our church; and that not merely as they are exhibited in our public standards, but also as embodied in the practice of our ecclesiastical judicatories. Display yourselves, and foster in others, that public spirit which seeks first of all, and above all, *the things which are Jesus Christ's*. *Endure hardness as his soldiers*; looking for your reward in

heaven. And God grant that you may be enabled to discharge your high trust, to your own comfort; to the edification of the church; and to the acceptance and glory of the king of Zion!

**MY BRETHREN OF THIS CONGREGATION,**

Remember, henceforth, that these worthy brethren, are your ecclesiastical rulers. Always consider and honour them as such. Obey them in the Lord. *Esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake.* And follow them daily with your prayers, that God would bless them, and make them a blessing.

It is earnestly to be wished, that the importance and the duties of *ruling Elders*, were better understood, and more suitably appreciated, than they generally have been, heretofore, in our churches. Misconceptions on this subject, are among the numerous current mistakes which need to be corrected. When we shall see more just views, and a more scriptural spirit prevailing, with regard to this, as well as other points of church order, there will be reason to hail them as tokens for good. Consider your spiritual rulers, then, as *set over you in the Lord*. Recognize their appropriate character and duties. Bear in mind the difficulties with which they will have to contend. And be not unreasonable in your expectations from them.

Many are ready to criminate Elders of the church, for not taking notice of particular offences, as *speedily*, or in such *manner*, as they expect. And this disposition to find fault is sometimes indulged by persons who have never been so faithful themselves as to give that information which they possessed, respecting the alleged offences; or who, when called upon publicly to substantiate that which they have privately disclosed, have drawn back, unwilling to encounter the odium or the pain of appearing as accusers. Such persons ought to be the last to criminate church officers, for supposed negligence of discipline. Can your rulers take notice of that which never comes to their knowledge? Or can you expect them, as prudent men, rashly to set on foot a judicial and public investigation of things, concerning which many are ready to whisper in private, but none willing to speak with frankness before a court of Christ? Besides, let it be recollected, that the session of almost every church is sometimes *actually* engaged in investigating charges, in removing offences, and in composing differences, which many suppose they are utterly neglecting, merely because they do not judge it, for edification, in all cases, to proclaim what they have done, or may be doing, to the congregation at large.

Your Elders will sometimes be called—God grant that it may seldom occur!—But they *will* sometimes be called, to the painful exercise of discipline. Be

not offended with them for the performance of this duty. Add not to the bitterness of the task, by discovering a resentful temper, or by indulging in reproachful language, in return for their fidelity. Believe me, the nature of the duty is sufficiently self-denying and distressing, without rendering it more so by unfriendly treatment. Receive their private warnings and admonitions, with candour, and affectionate submission. Treat their public acts, however contrary to your wishes, with respect and reverence. If they be honest and pious men, can they do less than exercise the discipline of Christ's house, against such of you as walk disorderly? Nay, if you be honest and pious yourselves, can you do less than approve of their faithfulness in exercising that discipline? Ah! if you knew all the difficulties which attend this part of the duty of your Eldership, you would feel for them more tenderly, and judge concerning them more candidly and indulgently, than you are often disposed to do. Here you have it in your power, in a very important degree, to lighten their burdens, and to strengthen their hands.

When your Elders visit your families, for the purpose of becoming acquainted with them, and of aiding the pastor in ascertaining the spiritual state of the flock, remember that it is not officious intrusion. It is nothing more than their duty. Receive them, not as if you suspected them of having come as *spies* and *intruders*, but with respect and cordiality. Con-

vince them by your treatment, that you are glad to see them; that you wish to encourage them in promoting the best interests of the church; and that you honour them for their fidelity. Give them an opportunity of seeing your children, and of ascertaining whether your household are making progress in the spiritual life. Converse with them freely, as with fathers, who *have no greater joy than to see you walking in the truth.* And give them cause to retire under the pleasing persuasion, that their labours are neither unacceptable, nor *vain in the Lord.*

To conclude; never forget that there are duties which you owe to your spiritual rulers, as well as duties which are due from them to you. Before you impute blame to them, for any supposed remissness, ask yourselves whether you have been faithful toward *them*, in giving them all the requisite information, and in rendering them all the aid in your power? Bear them on your hearts in your daily approaches to the throne of grace. And cease not to cry mightily to God for a blessing upon our Church; that all its officers may be *faithful unto death*; that all its members may be living and fruitful members of the body of Christ; that the word and ordinances administered here may be accompanied with divine power; that the Holy Spirit may be *poured upon us from on high, and times of refreshing granted us from the presence of the Lord.*

*Now unto Him who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God, our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen!*