

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
FIRST GENERAL PRESBYTERIAN COUNCIL

CONVENED AT EDINBURGH, JULY 1877.

WITH RELATIVE DOCUMENTS
BEARING ON THE AFFAIRS OF THE COUNCIL, AND THE STATE OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.

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this account, to the large body of persons drawn from all classes of the community who fulfil, in their respective congregations, the important duties connected with the local kirk-sessions of which they are constituent members, many of them likewise giving the benefit of their counsel in the deliberations of the superior Church courts. In the fulfilment of these duties the ecclesiastical officers now referred to dedicate to the service of the Church an amount of time and labour which they cannot, without serious sacrifices, spare from their professional and social engagements; business habits, and varied experience in worldly matters, which are, both of them, in many ways of the greatest value in ecclesiastical affairs; a familiar acquaintance with the condition of the people over whom they have the oversight; and the influence of a personal character, piety, and zeal certainly not inferior to that of the clergy with whom they are associated in their spiritual charge. That they are wholly unremunerated for their "labours of love," while it ought to increase the feeling of gratitude due to them for these often onerous and irksome labours, has a natural tendency to augment the personal influence, and consequently the usefulness, of this important class of ecclesiastical office-bearers.

A single word in conclusion. Reference has been made to the importance of the services rendered to the Church by the ruling eldership. Let a single word be said as to the claims which the Church may urge to the loyalty of its members, when their services are lawfully called for in that office, as in any other in which they may advance the interests of the Church and the cause of Christ. There is always difficulty in securing a sufficient staff of competent men for the eldership. No man certainly ought lightly to undertake duties for which he considers himself disqualified. Nor is it possible to deny that the office of the eldership is not one without serious responsibilities. But the work of the government of the Church of Christ must be carried on.

The following Paper was read by the Rev. WILLIAM E. MOORE, D.D., Columbus, Ohio, on the same subject :—

THE polity of the Reformed Churches is based upon the general model of the Synagogue, as it existed in the days of our Lord and his Apostles.

That the model was not copied in every detail, nor limited by it, is obvious. Under the guidance of the Spirit, exigencies were provided for as they arose, e.g. the appointment of deacons (Acts vi. 1-6). Essentially we find in the New Testament Churches two classes of officers,—Presbyters, answering in the main to the elders of the synagogue, and Deacons, who may have had their prototype in the *ὑπηρέτης* of the synagogue (Luke iv. 20), and to whom were assigned the care of the poor, and at a later date the temporalities of the Church.—Origen, Tract xvii. in Matt. "The deacons preside over the money tables of the Church."—Cyprian, Ep. 25; Sozomen, Lib. v. cap. 8.

The distribution of the elements was a function of the deacons in the time of Ignatius—see Ep. ad Tr., Chap. ii. The Council of Nice, Canon 18, forbade deacons to distribute the elements to presbyters.

To the presbyters or elders were assigned the manifold duties of teaching, training, and ruling in the Church. A plurality of elders is found in every church, as was the case in every synagogue (Acts xiv. 23, xv. 4, 6, xx. 20, 28; James v. 14; Titus i. 5; Hebrews xiii. 17, etc.). We have no mention of a church with but one elder. These elders were all of the same order. They were chosen from the brotherhood, at first seemingly by the Apostles (Acts xiv. 20), or Evangelist (Titus i. 5): afterwards by the Eldership, with the approval of the people. They were called in common, *ἐπίσκοποι* (Acts xx. 28); *ἡγουμένοι* (Hebrews xiii. 7, 17, 24); *πρεσβύτεροι* (Acts xv. 4, 6, 23). They in common bore rule in the Church, and were its pastors and teachers. They were all required to possess the same moral qualifications, viz., those of a bishop (1 Timothy iii. 2-7; Titus i. 6-8, ii. 2).

In the New Testament *πρεσβύτερος* and *ἐπίσκοπος* are synonymous as titles of office. The elder is a bishop, and the bishop is an elder (Phil. i. 1). Officially the rank of all elders or bishops was the same; so Jerome, Ep. 82 ad Oceanum, "Apud veteres iidem episcopi et presbyteri, quia illud nomen dignitatis est, hoc ætatis." *Id.* in Tit. i. 7: "Idem est ergo Presbyter qui Episcopus." The functions of these *συμπρεσβύτεροι* were diverse, as is shown in St. Paul's statement of the diversity of gifts, 1 Corinthians xii. 4-11, "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administration, but the same Lord," etc. Verse

28: "And 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," etc. (1 Cor. xii. 4-11, and 28-31). If it be said that the first of these passages applies to all the members of the Church, then *a fortiori* to the official members. As to verses 28-31 there can be no doubt, and cf. Ephesians iv. 11-16.

In the Church, as in the Synagogue, one of these elders was chosen *προεστώς*, i.e. president or moderator, at first perhaps in rotation, but afterwards on account of special fitness, and to him was assigned the function of teaching in the Church, and of presiding over the brethren, with whom in common he shared the functions of a ruler (1 Peter v. 1), (Justin Martyr, Pap. cir. 65). Hence 1 Timothy v. 17, "Let the elders that preside well (*καλῶς προεστῶτες*) be counted worthy of double honour, specially they which labour in word and doctrine." At first it would seem all these presbyters, as occasion required, exercised all or any of the functions of their office; administering the sacraments as well as taking the oversight of the flock (Hilary the Deacon, A.D. 380, in commenting on Ephesians iv. 11).

In the distribution of the gifts of the Spirit, "dividing to every man severally as he will" (1 Corinthians xii. 28-30), there was developed in one and another a peculiar fitness for the diverse functions of the one work of taking heed to the flock over which the Holy Ghost had made them equally *ἐπίσκοποι*, to feed (*ποιμαίνειν*) the Church of God (Acts xx. 28). Hence, in the same official rank, we find diversities of functions, as there are diversities of gifts (Romans xii. 6-8, 1 Peter v. 1-2). But they were all pastors and teachers, "instructing the churches, not indeed exclusively, since teaching and evangelising were not an exclusive official prerogative (Acts viii. 1, 4), but a universal prerogative and duty. Yet they were responsible for the teaching, wielding an authority in it and over it peculiarly their own. Teaching was an official, though not an exclusive official prerogative. Others might teach who felt moved to it, but always under the direction of the elders, who alone had official authority to teach. In a word, the whole eldership was a pastorate. If these elders did not all teach, as even in the Apostolic age all did not teach, though advised and urged to do so, it was simply because, for some reason or other, they deemed it inex-

pedient, not because it was no part of their office to teach."—(Professor R. D. Hitchcock, *American Presbyterian Review*, 1868, p. 265.) See Neander, vol. i. p. 197; Gieseler, vol. i. p. 243, note 13.

Eldership in the Reformed Churches.

The Reformed Churches restored this office of the primitive Church, not, it is true, according to the New Testament and Apostolic model in all respects, but appealing to the Bible for divine sanction. In 1467 the Bohemian Brethren (*Unitas Fratrum*) chose elders to assist in the government of their churches (Gieseler, *Church History*, vol. iii. p. 452, n. 7.)

In 1542 John Calvin established the Presbyterian polity at Geneva, and in a few years it had been adopted by nearly all the Churches of the Reformation. It is probable that had Edward vi. lived to carry out the views of Cranmer and his associates, the eldership would have been adopted in the Church of England (Pierce, *Vindication of Protestant Dissenters*, p. 23).

That the functions of the eldership, as restored at the Reformation, were narrower than in the Apostolic age, is obvious. They were distinguished from the ministers of the Word. They were chosen more exclusively for government and discipline, and were regarded especially as the "representatives of the people," exponents of the lay element in the churches, and hence are commonly designated as "lay elders." The functions of preaching publicly in the church, and of administering the sacraments, were specially assigned to the clergy, as was also the moderatorship of the session.

Calvin's elders at Geneva were laymen. "Two of them must be members of the Lesser Council of State, and ten of them members of the Large Council. They were to be elected every year; the clergy nominating, the Lesser Council voting, and the people having a veto. There was nothing like clerical ordination in their case. They were simply laymen called in year by year to assist in the discipline and government of the Church."—(Hitchcock, *Presbyterian Review*, 1868, p. 254.)

The Church of Scotland, from which chiefly the Presbyterianism of England, Ireland, the Colonies, and the United States is derived, gave to the eldership, in theory at least, more of the functions of the elders of the early Church. In the First Book of Discipline, Chap. vii., 1560, it is declared, "Their office is to assist the Minister

in their execution of discipline in all great and weighty matters.

"The elders shall watch upon all men's manners, religion, and conversation, that are within their charge, correct all licentious livers, or else accuse them before the session.

"They should take heed to the doctrine, diligence, and behaviour of their minister and his household, and, if need be, admonish them accordingly."

In the Second Book of Discipline, 1578, Chap. vii., they say, "We call these elders whom the Apostles call presidents or governors. Their office, as it is ordinary"—see chap. ii. as distinguished from the extraordinary or temporary—"so it is perpetual, and always necessary in the Kirk of God." They further define: "The eldership is a spiritual function, as is the ministry."

They further say: "It is not necessary that all elders be also teachers of the Word, albeit the chief ought to be such, and so are worthy of double honour." The Scottish elder might, therefore, if qualified, preach in his own church. Their special and common office they define to be, "as well severally as conjunctly, to watch diligently over the flock committed to their charge, both publicly and privately, that no corruption of religion or of manners enter therein;" . . . to be "careful in seeking after the fruit of the Word in the people;" to assist the pastor in examination of them that come to the Lord's table; *item*, in visiting the sick. The elder was then also a pastor, and was declared to share his office "with the pastors and doctors."

The Westminster Assembly—Form of Government, Title, "Other Church Governors;" and Directory for Church Government, Title, "Of the Officers of the Church"—say, "It is likewise agreeable to, and warranted by the Word of God, that some others besides the ministers of the Word be Church governors, to join with the ministers in the government of the Church; which officers Reformed Churches commonly call Elders."

The Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1789—Form of Government, Chapter v.—says, "Ruling elders are properly the representatives of the people, chosen by them for the purpose of exercising government and discipline, in conjunction with pastors or ministers."

It seems to follow, as well from the historical standards of our Churches as from the Scriptures, that the elder is of right a pastor, and a

teacher—if qualified by suitable gifts—as well as a ruler, in the church which has chosen him to be an elder. These functions belong to his office. The exercise of them is a question of expediency, determined by his own gifts, and the call of the people, and the sanction of the session.

A question has been mooted of late in the Churches of the United States, and perhaps elsewhere, whether an elder, if chosen, might fill the chair of moderator of Presbytery, Synod, or General Assembly. The chief objection urged is the requirement—Form of Government, Chapter xix. section iii.—that "the moderator . . . shall open the next meeting with a sermon." But if, as is assumed by the Second Book of Discipline, chapter vi., *supra*, ruling elders may be "also teachers of the Word," their difficulty disappears, and it becomes a question of expediency which the judicatory may decide for itself.

Undoubtedly an elder, if qualified, may preach in his own church, with the approval of the session. And so the expedient of Wesleyan and other Churches, of appointing local preachers, is a perpetual provision of the Presbyterian Church, however much it may have been neglected, or even ignored.

When one is chosen and ordained an elder, it is for the eldership to ascertain with what of all the gifts of the episcopacy the Spirit may have endowed him, and to use him accordingly as opportunity offers. The call and the necessity for what is called lay preaching in our day, and which is probably to increase, may thus be met, in strict accordance with our polity, by calling into the eldership laymen of approved character who are the choice of the people, and who are, according to the Scriptural requirement, "apt to teach"—*διδασκτικοί* (1 Tim. iii. 2; 2 Tim. ii. 24). In "the Presbyterian Church in the United States" the lay elder is, as regards the function of ruling, an officer only of the church which has chosen him.—(Form of Government, Chapter v.) By delegation of his brethren he may bear rule, through the Presbytery, Synod, or General Assembly, in the Church at large.

A special session, *i.e.* of elders from different churches for the exercise of discipline, is held to be unconstitutional.—(Minutes of General Assembly, 1823, p. 92; 1824, pp. 115, 117; and 1860, O.S., p. 28.) An elder may not be called in to adjudicate in another church.—(Minutes, 1831, p. 324.) He must be "a member in full com-

munion in the church in which he is to exercise his office.”—(Form of Government, Chapter xiii., section ii.) Hence a minister of the Gospel may not be chosen an elder, inasmuch as he is not a member of the particular church.—(Minutes, 1856, p. 522, O.S.; 1865, p. 13, N.S.; 1869, N.S.; 1874, p. 84.)¹

Term of Service in the Function of Ruling.

In all the Reformed Churches the term of actual service was limited by election for one or more years. In Geneva, 1542, the elders were elected every year. In France, 1559, no limit was set, but elders are “expected to continue in office as long as they can.”—(Quick, *Synodicon*, p. 28.)

In Scotland, 1560, by the First Book of Discipline, Chapter vii., it is provided: “Their election shall be annual, where it may be conveniently observed.” It is assigned as a reason why it is not necessary to appoint a stipend for elders and deacons, that “they are changed yearly, and may wait upon their vocation with the charge of the Kirk.” Another reason is assigned by Knox, *Works*, vol. ii. p. 234, viz., “Lest that by long continuance of such officers, men presume upon the liberties of the Kirk.” He adds, “It hurts not that one man be retained in office more years than one, so that he be appointed yearly by common and free election.”

The Second Book of Discipline, 1578, while affirming the spiritual nature of the functions of the elder, and that “elders once lawfully called to the office, and having gifts from God meet to exercise the same, may not leave it again,” but “may relieve one another for a reasonable time, as was among the Levites under the law in serving of the temple,” yet leaves the annual election as fixed by the First Book and by the uniform usages of the Reformed Churches. Spotswood (*History of the Church of Scotland*) tells us that in his day (*obit* 1639) the rule was that the election of elders and deacons ought to be made every year once, “which we judge to be most convenient to be done the 1st of August yearly.”

From the beginning the election had been by the members of the Church. First Book of Discipline, Chapter vii.—“How the votes and suffrages may be best received with every man’s

freedom in voting, we leave to the judgment of each particular Kirk.” The Second Book of Discipline, Chapter iii., says, “Election is the choosing out of a person, or persons, most able, to the office that takes, by the judgment of the eldership, and consent of the congregation to which the person or persons shall be appointed.” This applies to all offices. They further say, “It is to be eschewed that any person be intruded in any offices of the Kirk contrary to the will of the congregation to which they are appointed, or without the voice of the eldership.” From this it would seem that the eldership nominated and the people elected. In 1642, however, in answer to a question “anent the choosing of kirk-sessions,” “the Assembly ordains the old session to elect the new session both in burgh and land, and that if any place shall lack in the session chosen—by death or otherwise—the present session shall have the election of persons to fill the vacancy.”—(Session 5, August 1, 1642.) Annual elections, however, seem to have continued, at least in theory, for in 1705 we find certain overtures of the General Assembly, professing, among other things, that “annual elections ought to be rectified, and that new elections of elders, except in cases of great necessity, should only be within the compass of four years.” These overtures, however, were never adopted.—(Acts of General Assembly, Church of Scotland, Edinburgh, 1843.) The theory of the Church of Scotland is therefore annual election of elders; its practice, election without assigned limit.

The “Directory for Church Government” of the Westminster Assembly 1647, was “recommended” in connection with the “Adopting Act,” 1729, by the Synod of Philadelphia, then the supreme judicatory of the Presbyterian Church in the American colonies. This Directory became the general model by which our congregations were organised. The provision for the election of elders is, “When any ruling elder is to be chosen, where an eldership is constituted, let it be done by them with the consent and approbation of the people of that congregation, and that not for a limited time.”

Undoubtedly we trace here the influence of Independency, and probably a compromise. Life-eldership, which the Directory hints at, is a feature of Congregationalism, but not of Presbyterianism. The first record of it known to me, is in the history of what is sometimes called “The

¹ A more pertinent reason is that he is already a member of Presbytery, and would sit both as a minister of the Word and as a ruling elder.—(Minutes, 1865, p. 340, N.S.)

Martyrs' Church," in London, of which Barrowe, Greenwood, and Perry were members. This Church was driven into exile in 1593, and gathered at Amsterdam. In 1598 it published its Confession of Faith. In answer to some strictures of Francis Junius, who thought they ought to have joined themselves to the Dutch Church, they gave as the seventh of eleven differences between them and the Presbyterians, "Their elders change yearly, and do not continue in office according to the doctrine of the Apostles and practice of the primitive Churches" (Hanbury, *Historical Memorials*, vol. i. p. 144). The reply is dated July 1, 1602. In 1616 the Congregationalists became a distinct body. They had, says Toulmin (*History of Protestant Dissenters*, p. 281), beside the minister, "another person not a minister, but a layman, whom they called a ruling elder." John Robinson, in a letter, January 27, 1618, to Sir John Wostenholme, designed for the eye of the king, affirms the general agreement of the Congregationalists with the Reformed Churches, but mentions as a difference, "Their elders are annual, or at most for two or three years: ours are perpetual."—(Prince, *Chronological History*, N. E., p. 144.) The office of ruling elder, generally a single one, was retained in the Congregational Churches in America till near the close of the seventeenth century, when it gradually fell into disuse. The Cambridge Synod of 1680 laments its decline, and provides for its revival. The Saybrook Platform of 1708 shows us its active existence in Connecticut. Its life-tenure had much to do with its gradual and final disuse. In the Presbyterian Church in the United States the usage conformed to that of the Presbyterian Churches of Scotland, i.e. an election to the office simply without assigning a limit. Practically, the service was for life, although the constitution adopted in 1789 gives no warrant for such an idea.¹ Its provision (Form of Govern-

ment, Chap. xiii., Sec. ii.) is, "Every congregation shall elect persons to the office of ruling elder . . . in the mode most approved and in use in that congregation." This was meant to cover a variety of usages common in the Reformed Churches, as to the electors, etc., and has been held to sanction the principle of "term service" as practised by the Dutch, German, and French Churches.

At an early date individual churches chose their elders to serve for a term of years, usually three, but re-eligible at the mutual pleasure of the elders and the people.

As early as 1849, an overture was sent to the Assembly (N. S.) asking for "a change of the constitution respecting the term of service in the office of ruling elder."—(Minutes, p. 182.) The Assembly, however, declined to overture the Presbyteries on the subject, while expressing "sympathy with those churches which are most especially tried by the present rule." The same change was sought in 1852, N. S., p. 177; 1857, O. S., p. 45; 1862, N. S., p. 34; 1869, O. S., p. 911, and after the reunion, 1871, p. 592.

The general feeling as expressed by the Assembly of 1852, N. S., that while such an organisation of a session is not anti-presbyterial, yet the Assembly would discourage the adoption of the principle (of election for a limited term) in our Church, from respect to the plain meaning of the rule."

In 1872, however, it was judicially decided by the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (North), "That while the office is perpetual, the time of its exercise in each individual congregation may be left to the decision of the Church itself, according to the mode approved and in use in such Church."—(Minutes, 1872, p. 75.)

To remove all doubt, however, an overture was sent down by the Assembly, 1874, and adopted by the Presbyteries, 101 to 36, in 1875, adding to Chap. xiii., Form of Government, Sec. viii. in these words: "If any particular church, by a vote of members in full communion, shall prefer to elect ruling elders for a limited time in the exercise of their functions, this may be done; *provided* the full time be not less than three years, and the session be made to consist of three classes, one of which only shall be elected every year: and *provided* that elders once

¹ Section vi., Chapter xiii., Form of Government, declares, "The offices of ruling elder and deacon are both perpetual, and cannot be laid aside at pleasure. No person can be divested of either office but by deposition. Yet an elder or deacon may become, by age or infirmity, incapable of performing the duties of his office; or he may, though chargeable with neither heresy nor immorality, become unacceptable, in his official character, to a majority of the congregation to which he belongs. In either of these cases he may, as often happens in respect to a minister, cease to be an acting elder or deacon."

The difficulty of remaining an inefficient or unacceptable elder, under a system which implied life-tenure, led to the adoption of section vii., viz., "Whenever a ruling elder or deacon, from either of these causes, or any other not inferring crime, shall be incapable of serving the Church to edification, the session shall take order on the subject, and state the fact, together with the reasons of it, on their

records: *provided always*, that nothing of this kind shall be done without the concurrence of the individual in question, unless by the advice of Presbytery."

ordained, shall not be divested of the office when not re-elected, but shall be entitled to represent that particular Church in the higher judicatories, when appointed by the Session or the Presbytery."

This accords with the action of the Dutch Church, whose elders not in active service are members of the Great Consistory. It secures in the higher courts of the Church the services of men eminent for their wisdom and experience, who may have retired from the active duties of the eldership for reasons satisfactory to all.

The election for a term of years, as to actual service, was declared by the Assembly 1872, Minutes, p. 85, to be "in full accordance with our Standards, liberally and historically interpreted." It is obviously a return to the universal usage of the Churches of Presbyterian polity for many years after the Reformation. It is in full accordance with the fundamental principle of the office in all the Reformed Churches, that it represents the people. The polity of Presbyterianism is republican, not prelatic, nor democratic. At the base of its government lies the "congregational assembly" exercising local government through its chosen representatives. It is not in accordance with republican institutions that "the representatives of the people" should hold their governmental functions by a tenure which virtually does away with all direct responsibility to those in whose name they govern; and in the event of their becoming "unacceptable in their official character to a majority of the congregation," leaves no redress, save by a process always difficult, and often disastrous.

The plan of frequent elections works well. It assures the elder of his acceptability. In perhaps every case, if useful and willing, he is re-elected, as long as he wishes to serve, and retires not by compulsion, but the ordinary operation of law. The annual recurrence of elections gives the opportunity of electing to the eldership any in the congregation who may be found specially fitted for it.

The perpetuity of the office is provided for, as in the Scottish Church, which contemplated rotation of duties after the Levitical institutions, by limiting the application of the law to the function of ruling.

If, as is sometimes said, this leaves nothing of the office but the name, this can be true only where, contrary to the Apostolic model, and the

theory of the Reformed, and especially the Scottish Church, the elder, who is *ex officio* a teacher and a pastor, an ordained evangelist, has limited his office to the one function of ruling in the Church.

In the eldership our Church has an agency, orderly, powerful, numerous, and ordained of God, peculiarly fitting it to meet the exigencies of times like ours, when the demand for Christian guidance, instruction, and nurture outruns the ability of the ministry, however zealous, and opens fields white already unto the harvest, in which the Church may reap a glorious harvest for her Divine Master!

The following Paper on the same subject, prepared by Dr. HARPER of Alleghany, was read in his absence by Dr. Kerr of Alleghany:—

GUIDED by mere etymology, we should in general terms define Presbyterianism to be a form of Church polity which assigns a place of prominence to certain functionaries called presbyters or elders. But the scanty information thus obtained must be supplemented from other sources, in order that a correct, or at least a complete view of Presbyterianism, distinctively so called, may be gained.

In all Presbyterian Churches there are at least these family features traceable, though not in all cases equally visible, namely, government by elders in a conjoint capacity; a distinction of the eldership into two sub-divisions, to both of which the ruling prerogative belongs, the teaching function to one of them only; and a grouping of several congregations or local Churches under the control, more or less direct, of the entire eldership of the same.

I do not count it my business at present to show the Scriptural grounds of the form of church-government which has thus, in its chief outlines, been sketched. Neither do I reckon the theme assigned to me, although couched in somewhat unrestricted terms, to relate to the ministerial section of the eldership. On the contrary, I shall take the term "eldership" to mean, according to popular usage, the ruling elders as distinguished from those who also teach; and, by the "theory and practice" of the eldership, I shall understand the ideal or normal and the actual aspect of their character, or, in other words, ruling elders as delineated in the Scriptures, and as in point of fact they are found to be. Studying the brevity enjoined,