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Validity of Presbyterian Ordination.
By the Rev^d Ebenezer Pemberton of Boston

1766

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I shall introduce this Discourse with the Charge of
S^t. Paul to the Elders of the Church of Ephesus—

Acts 20: 28.

Take heed therefore to your selves, and to all the flock,
over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you Overseers—

When the Son of God had finished his Work upon
Earth, and was about to enter upon the Services of his heavenly
Sanctuary; he Instituted an Order of Men, to publish the glad
Tidings of Salvation, to all Nations, to preside in his Worship,
unto the End of the World.

The first Ministers of the Church, were the Apostles,
who attended on Christ's personal Ministry, were Spectators of his
Miracles, the Witnesses of his Resurrection, & endowed with Power
from on High, to qualify them for the important Work to which
they were appointed. — Armed with a divine Commission,
furnished with an extraordinary Measure of the Gifts and
Graces of the Holy Spirit; they propagated the Religion of
Jesus to the End of the Earth. Notwithstanding the fond
Attachment of Mankind to the Superstitions of their Ancestors,
and the united Opposition of Magistrates and People; these
Messengers of Heaven proceeded in their triumphant Progress;
the Altars of the Pagan Deities were overthrown, their Idolatrous
Worship abolished: Not only Uncivilized Barbarians,
but

but the politer Nations of Greece & Rome, were subelated
to the Faith of the Gospel.

These inspired Apostles were not suffered to continue by reason
of Death; having finished their Course with Joy, they were trans-
lated from the Church militant upon Earth, to the Church triumphant
in Heaven. But the Wisdom your Blessed Savior provided that
there should always be a Succession of Ministers to carry on the
Design of redeeming Love. — These have been employed, by
divine Grace, in all Ages, to turn Men from Darkness to Light, from
the Power of Sin and Satan unto God. By the Foolishness of
Preaching, a great Multitude which no Man can Number, have
received the forgiveness of Sin, and an Inheritance among them
that are sanctified. Nor shall this Sacred Order cease in the
visible Church, till these Heavens and this Earth are no more;
— till the whole Number of the Elect shall be accomplished, &
we all come in the Unity of the Faith & of the Knowledge of the
Son of God, unto a perfect Man, unto the Measure of the
Stature of the Fulness of Christ. — This is not an uncertain
Conjecture, but an Article of Faith, founded on the immutable
Promises of the Son of God.

The Persons appointed for this important Design,
must be properly qualified, & regularly invested with the
Sacred Character. — The Apostles had an immediate Commission
from the great Head of the Church: they gave Mankind, the
most authentic Evidence, that they were the Messengers of Heaven:
they performed numberless and unquestionable Miracles, to convince
the World, that they did not follow cunningly devised Fables,

but taught the Truth as it is in Jesus

This immediate Mission ceased with the Apostolic Age — But in all Periods of the Church, the Ministers of the Gospel, derive their Call from Jesus Christ. He qualifies them for their important Work, & authorizes them for the regular Discharge of it — He in his unerring Word, specifies the qualifications they must possess, the Doctrines they are to preach, the various Duties they are to perform, & the Powers which belong to their Office. These Directions are always to remain unalterable Rules for the Conduct of the Church. It is the highest Presumption in any Man, or Order of Men, to add to, or diminish from them.

The only Business of those who are to invest Men with the ministerial Character, is to determine, whether they are regularly called and properly qualified for the wise & successful Discharge of their Office, & then solemnly to introduce ^{them} into it, by Prayer & the Imposition of Hands. — This is not an insignificant Ceremony, but a necessary expedient, to secure a Succession of well qualified Ministers — A Neglect of this established Order, would soon prove of the most dangerous Consequence — Our Pulpits would be filled with ignorant Enthusiasts, if not with Men of corrupt Principles and licentious Manners.

In these Things there is a general Agreement among Christians of almost every Denomination. — The only question is — who are appointed by the great Head of the Church, to introduce others into the Sacred Office — This has occasioned long and obstinate Contentions, not only among the Subjects of the pope's Empire, but also among those who have renounced the Romish Hierarchy & erected

erected Churches upon a ~~poor~~ Establishment. But I am persuaded,
if greater Regard had not been paid to the Traditions of Man, than
to the inspired Scriptures, these Disputes would soon have come to
an amicable Conclusion. — Some, Zealously contend that Bishops,
by divine Right, are a superior Order to Presbyters, & by a Commission
from Jesus Christ, are invested with the sole Power of Ordination &
Jurisdiction. — In Opposition to this unscriptural Claim,
agreeable to the Intention of the learned & honorable Founder of
this Lecture, I am to prove — That Ordination by Presbyters "as
practised in Scotland, at Geneva, & among the Dissenters in England,
and in the Churches in New-England, is safe, scriptural & valid"

That I may place the evidence of this ^{Truth} in a clear Light,
I shall attempt to prove the following Propositions —

Bishops and Presbyters in the Language of the New Testament,
are not two distinct Orders of Ministers, but one & the same.

There are no Superior Officers, appointed to be fixed Ministers
in the Christian Church

We have Scriptural Evidence that the Power of Ordination &
Government, were actually exercised by Presbyters, or the ordinary
fixed Ministers of the Churches.

This was the Sense of Primitive Antiquity, and

The Uniform Opinion of the first Fathers of the
Reformation.

First, Bishops and Presbyters in the Language of the New
Testament, are not two distinct Orders of Ministers but one &
the same — — — They derive their Power from the same Commission —
— — These Names are promiscuously used to signify the same
Order & Office —

Bishops and Presbyters derive their Power from the same Commission — It is the sole Prerogative of the King of the Church, to appoint the Officers who are to be employed in the Administration of his Kingdom. He assigns the Duties of their Station, and prescribes the Limits of their Authority. They who act without a Commission from him, are to be esteemed as criminal Intruders, and are justly exposed to his righteous Displeasure.

The solemn Commission ^{from} which all his Ministers derive their Authority, was delivered, just before our Lord's triumphant ascension into Heaven. — Go (said our Adorable Redeemer to his chosen Apostles) teach all Nations, Baptizing them in — Lo I am with you alway unto the End of the World.

This was not a temporary Appointment, confined to the Apostolic Age, but designed to perpetuate a Succession of Ministers in the Church to the Consummation of all Things. — The Words assigned them is required of every Person invested with the sacred Character — The Promise of the divine Presence, evidently looks forward to every future Age — This is the grand Charter, by which the Ministers of Jesus are authorized to discharge their important Function. Every Claim, which cannot be justly deduced from this Commission, is an Invasion of the Authority of the only Lord & Lawgiver of the Christian Church. — All to whom this Commission extends, have an unquestionable Right to all its Prerogatives and Powers. If then Presbyters have a Right to discharge any Part of the ministerial Office, they have an unquestionable Claim to the Whole. If Bishops and Presbyters act by the same Commission they are equal in Dignity & Station. — This will more clearly appear if we consider —

That these Names are plainly intended in the Sacred Scriptures

to signify the same Order & Office: they are indiscriminately applied to the same Persons: Bishops are stiled Presbyters, & Presbyters Bishops: Nor is there any Instance in the New Testament in which they are distinguished one from another. St. Paul exhorts the Elders of Ephesus, to take heed to themselves & to all the Flock over which the Holy Ghost had made them Bishops or Overseers. This shews beyond all Dispute, that the same Persons who are called Presbyters or Elders, are immediately after stiled Bishops. The first Title points out the Office & Authority - the next their Office. — They were appointed Inspection of the Churches of Christ. — The same Inspired Author enjoins Titus to Ordain Elders in every City, & describes the Character of those who are to be admitted to this Office; to enforce the Necessity of observing his Directions, he subjoins this Reason; For a Bishop must be blameless as a Steward of God. — This Reason would be in- pertinent, if Bishops and Presbyters, were different Officers in the Church: A Weakness I am sure none will impute to the illuminated St. Paul, who besides the Advantage of a learned Education, was under the unerring Guidance of the Spirit of God. — St. Peter in his general Epistle to the Churches &c., exhorts the Elders to take heed to the Flock of God among them, taking the oversight thereof, or acting as the Bishops thereof.

Acts 20: 28 -

ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΩΣ

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ΕΣ

These texts must convince every impartial Reader, that the Name Elder & Bishop are promiscuously used for the same Persons, & denote one & the same Office in the Church of Christ. I am sensible, long established Custom has affixed to the Name Bishop, Ideas vastly different from what has now been represented. I do not

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to whom they owe
the most dutiful
Submission

soon or hear the word Bishop pronounced, but we immediately
suppose the Person to whom this Title belongs, is of superior Dig-
nity to the rest of the sacred Order, & by Virtue of his elevated
Station in the Church, is to be supported by a large Revenue, in
worldly Pomp & Splendor. — But these are Refinements of more
modern Times, and were utterly unknown in the primitive Church.

If we would entertain a just View of the Bishops spoken
of in the New Testament, we must lay aside those Prejudices
which prevailing Practice has introduced into our Way of
thinking, and form our Opinion upon the inspired Writings;
& then I am persuaded, we shall soon be convinced, that the
scriptural Bishops, were Pastors of particular Churches, who
claimed no Dominion over their Brethren; but were appointed
to watch over the Flock committed to their Charge, & feed them
with Knowledge & Understanding.

As this is the true Character of Scriptural Bishops or
Presbyters, I proceed to

Secondly There are no Superior Officers appointed in the
New Testament as standing Ministers in the Church.

The Apostles, it is allowed, were Officers of a superior Order;
they had peculiar Privileges which were not to be transmitted to
any Successors. We observed before, they were immediately commisi-
oned by Jesus Christ, & appointed the first Ministers of his Kingdom:
they had Power to work Miracles to engage the Attention of Mankind,
& confirm the Truth of the Doctrine they delivered: they were endued
with the Gift of Tongues, that they might address every Man in his
own Language, and propagate the Christian Faith among the most barbarous
Nations.

Nations. They were not stationed in any particular Place, they had the whole Earth for their Charge, & were to preach the glad tidings of Salvation, from the Rising to the setting Sun. They were general Superintendants over all the Churches which were erected by their indefatigable Labours, & employed the Evangelists to assist them in the Execution of this extensive Charge.

There is not the least hint thro' out the Sacred Pages, that they appointed any to succeed them in this extraordinary Character — Certain it is that modern Diocesan Bishops, can form no Pretence to this unlimited Jurisdiction. — All the Apostles, without any Exception, received their Mission from Jesus Christ alone, without the Intervention of any human Appointment. — But the modern Bishops are advanced to the Episcopal Throne, in Obedience to a Royal Mandate: they are set apart to their dignified Station, by their Brethren of the same Order: their Authority is fixed by Law within certain Bounds, & a determinate Number of Churches, with their respective Pastors, are subjected to their Inspection — They therefore can have no claim to be esteem'd Successors to the Apostles, in the Plenitude of their Ecclesiastical Power. — Justly therefore the celebrated D Barrow says — "The Apostolic Office as such, was personal & temporary; & according to its Nature & Design not Succession or communicable to others: That it was, as such, in all respects extraordinary; design'd for special Purposes, discharged by special Aids, endowed with special Privileges, as was needful for the Propagation of Christianity, & founding of the Churches:"))

I know it is alledg'd that the Apostles in Vertue of the Power they received from Jesus Christ, appointed Bishops, a superior Order to Presbyters, to preside over a Number of Churches, & to exercise the Powers of Ordination & Government — They mention

Timothy & Titus, as remarkable Instances of Persons invested with this Episcopal Dignity. This is more easily received as a Truth by vulgar Minds, because in the Postscript of the Epistles of St Paul directed to these celebrated Evangelists — The one is said to be ordained the first Bishop of the Church of the Ephesians — The other the first Bishop of the Church of the Cretians. — But these Postscripts are allowed by all Men, acquainted with Ecclesiastical Antiquity, to be no Part of the Canon of Sacred Scriptures, but the Addition of some subsequent Age. These eminent Ministers of the Church, were confined to no Particular Charge, but employed by the Apostles, to assist them in the Execution of their extensive Commission. — whose perusal the short Abstract of their History which is recorded in the Scriptures, will easily perceive, they had no fixed Place of Residence assigned them; but travell'd thro' different Countries, to execute the Apostolic Orders, as the Exigence of the Churches demanded.

These Facts are so plain, that the Learned D Whitby, is obliged by the Force of Truth, on this Occasion, to desert the Cause of his Episcopal Brethren, & ingenuously acknowledge^x "That if by saying Timothy and Titus were Bishops, the One of Ephesus & the other of Creta, we understand they took upon them these Churches or Dioceses as their fixed Charge & Care, in which they were to reside for Term of Life: He believeth that Timothy and Titus were not such Bishops." I add

Thirdly, We have Scriptural Evidence that the Power of Ordination and Government, were actually exercis'd by Presbyters, or the ordinary fixed Ministers of the Churches.

To these Power, our Episcopal Brethren, suppose Diocesan Bishops have an exclusive Claim; & that for the ordinary Ministers of the Gospel to form any Pretensions to them, is highly presumptuous and criminal.

* Whitby's Preface to his Comment on Titus.

criminal. But we are convinced, that the New Testament speaks a different language. St. Paul in his solemn Address to the Elders of Ephesus, when he took his final Farewell, was so far from Prohibiting them to intermeddle with the Government of the Church, that earnestly exhorts them to a faithful Discharge of this Trust. — Fixed the Block over which the Holy Ghost hath made you Overseers — Inspectors or Bishops — By this they were required, not only to instruct them in the Doctrine and Duties of Religion, but to exercise that Government which Christ had appointed in his Church. — The Elders that rule well, St. Paul pronounces worthy of double Honor.

— The same inspired writer, describing the qualifications of a Bishop I Tim. 3:17. or Elder, directs that the Person invested with this Office, be one that rule his own House, having his Children in Subjection, gives I Tim. 3:4, 5 this reason for it, For if a Man know not how to rule his own House how shall he take care of the Church of God.

Now our Episcopal Brethren universally acknowledge, that the Powers of Government and Ordination, are inseparably connected. If then Elders or Pastors of particular Churches, have the first, they may indisputably claim the second. — We are not left to uncertain Conjectures in this Point, but have plain Evidence in the inspired writings, that ordinary Ministers of the Gospel, were employ'd to invest others with the same Office. — Timothy was set apart to the Work of the Ministry, by the I Tim. 4:14. laying on of the Hands of the Presbytery. Tho' the Apostle in another Place speaks of laying his own hands upon him; this by no means invalidates the Arg^t: to make St. Paul consistent with himself, we must suppose this was to convey some extraordinary Gift to Timothy, which was the peculiar Privilege of the Apostles to bestow, & not to invest him with the ministerial

Acts 13: 1: 2: 3

ministerial office. — This is not the only Instance upon sacred Record that ordinary Ministers were employ'd on this Solemnity. Teachers as well as Prophets, were appointed to set apart Barnabas and Saul, for the Work wherunto the Holy Ghost had called them. If then ordinary Ministers of the Gospel, have a scriptural Right to ordain others, no human Constitution can justly deprive them of it — If they are authoris'd by the Commission in St. Mattheu, to preach the Gospel, they have an undoubted Claim to all the Powers it communicates in their unlimited Extent.

To sum up the Whole — If the Words Bishop & Presbyter are always us'd in the New Testament to signify the same Office — If no superior Officers were appointed while the Apostles liv'd to be fixed Ministers in the Church — If Elders or Pastors of particular Churches, exercised the Power of Ordination in the Apostolic Age — Their Successors in Office have an equal Claim to the same Power, except some new Revelation has depriv'd them of it. — What I think is not pretended — consequently Orders confer'd by Presbyters, are agreeable to the inspir'd Scriptures, & unexceptionably valid — — — Here too rest our Cause — If the Scriptures are given by divine Inspiration — if they contain the only unerring Rule of Faith & manners — whatever has not received the Stamp of their Authority, may be safely disregarded by every consistent Protestant. We have no Directory for our Faith, Worship, or Discipline, which can justly demand our Obedience, but what is contain'd in these sacred Pages. — But because our Adversaries in this controversy plead the Authority of the Fathers for the Establishment of Diocesan Episcopacy I go on to say

Fourthly. This was the sense of Primitive Antiquity.

I am sensible, that Bishops began early to be distinguished from Presbyters; but not as a divine Institution, but an Ecclesiastical Appointment, to preserve Peace & good Order in the Church. — They were only the Senior Pastor of single Congregation, who presided in the College of Presbyters, where all things were transacted with the common Consent. They were stated Moderators in the Assembly of their Brethren of the same Rank and Order. — St. Jerom one of the most judicious of the Fathers, plainly asserts that in the Apostolic Age, the Presbyter is the same with the Bishop; & that before there were Parties in Religion, the Churches were govern'd by the common Consent of Presbyters; that afterwards it was determined that one of the Presbyters should be exalted above the Rest, & the Seed of Division be removed." — A

little after, he adds ^{Bishops} "showed shew that they are above Presbyters" — "not by the Custom of the Church, but by the real Appointment of the Lord?" — ~~Epiphanius~~ — Arianus is allowed by all to Entertain the same Sentiments — He strongly asserts the Parity of Bishop and Presbyters. — This has been frankly acknowledged by many of the Episcopal Character, who were shining Ornaments of the Mitre they wore, & extensive Blessings to the Age in which they lived, — who had made the most critical Enquiry into the Doctrine and Discipline of the primitive Church; and were engaged by Duty and Inclination ~~were eng~~ to support the Cause of the Diocesan Episcopacy to the utmost of their Abilities. — The Learned Dr. Stillingfleet expresses himself in this Manner — "I believe upon strictest Enquiry, Medina's Judgment will prove true, that Jerom, Austin, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Theodoret &c. — will all of Arianus his Judgment as to the Identity both of Name & Order, of Bishops and Presbyters in the primitive Church."

Hieron. Ep: ad
Evag-

Stillingfleet
Irenicum -

— The celebrated Bishop Burnet said "I am more willingly
inclined to believe Bishops and Presbyters, to be the several Degrees
of the same Office, since the Name of Bishop and Presbyters, are
used for the same Thing in the Scripture, and also used pro=
misfouly, by the Writers of the two first Centuries." —

The most learned Primate of Ireland, the Venerable D. Usher,
in a Letter to D. Bernard said "I have ever declar'd my Opinion
to be; that Bishops and Presbyters differ only in Degree, & not
in Order."

I shall only add —

Fifthly, This was the uniform Opinion of the first
Fathers of the Reformation.

These chosen Instruments of Divine Providence, to deliver
the enslaved Nation from the tyrannical Empire of the
Bishop of Rome — Those bright Luminaries of the Christian
Church, who diffused the Knowledge of true Religion among
Mankind, which had been immersed for whole Ages in a
dark Night of Error, Superstition & Idolatry. — In the Dawn
of this happy Day, published a remarkable Treatise, entitled
a Necessary Erudition for a Christian Man. — In this May, say —

"That the Scripture makes express Mention only of two Orders
of Ministers, that is to say Priests & Deacons —" — This is not

Vid: Neale's History
of the Puritans.

to be look'd upon as the singular Opinion of a few particular
Divines, but as the establish'd Doctrine of the Church of England.
The Book wherein it is contain'd, was drawn up by a Committee
of Bishops and Divines, approv'd by the Lord Spiritual & Temporal
in Parliament assembled, recommended by the King to all.

his

his faithful Subjects, and design'd as a Standard of the true
Christian Doctrine. Arch Bishop Cranmer & his Brethren, were
so far from imagining that they were Bishops Jure Divino, that
they took out Commissions to hold their Bishopricks during
the Kings Pleasure, & to exercise their Jurisdiction by his
Authority only. — In the same Reign ⁱⁿ a public Declaration
subscribed by the Arch-Bishops of Canterbury & York, eleven
Bishops, and many other Doctors & Civilians, it is ~~declared~~
expressly asserted, "that in the New Testament, there is no
mention made of any Degree or Distinction in Orders, but
only of Deacons or Ministers, and of Priests or Bishops." —
These are convincing Evidences, that in the judgment of
our first Reformers, Bishops as a distinct Order from Priests
was not a divine Constitution, but a prudential
Establishment.

This continued to be the sense not only of foreign
Divines but of the English Church — till at length — Dr.
Bancroft arose, & maintain'd that the Bishops of England,
were a distinct Order from Priests & had Superiority over
them by a Divine Appointment. This new Doctrine was
warmly oppos'd by both Clergy & Laity. — In the next
Age this Debate was revived, & the Pretensions of Bishops carried
to so great an Height, as to involve Church & State in the
most melancholly Confusions.

When James the first ascended the Throne of
Britain, the Puritans who were ardent Enemies to the
exorbitant Claims of the Hierarchy form'd high Expectations
that

Calderwood's Hist. Ch.
Scotland

that he should have a Royal Advocate to plead in their favor - they knew he had been nurs'd up in the Bosom of Presbytery, and when in Scotland, in the presence of the General Assembly, with hands lifted up to Heaven, in the most solemn manner gave God thanks that he was a King of the purest Church upon Earth. - But alas! how fatally were they disappointed! This public Profession was an Act of profound Dissimulation, or the English Air produced an immediate Change in his Sentiments.

In the Beginning of his Reign in the Conference at Hampton Court, he espoused the Cause of Episcopacy, appeared in Favor of those Ceremonies, which before he declar'd to be the Defilement of Popery - The Intrepid Bishops pronounced him inspired - Their Aged Primate could not conceal the Gladness of his Heart, but broke out in this extravagant Language - Undoubtedly your Majesty speaks by the special Assistance of Gods Spirit. - The King whose darling Popery was the Love of Praise, was willing to exact the Character of those who entertain'd so high an Opinion of their Monarch. - From this Period the Aspiring Church Men, found the way to Preferment was to assert that Princes & Bishops, held their Station by Divine Right & that it was the most criminal Sacrilege to dispute their Authority. - This continued to be the Court Doctrine - thro' out this indolent & inglorious Reign.

But the most fatal Consequences of it were reserv'd for the Times of his unhappy Successor. - Charles bred up in the Opinion the Bishops were the immediate Viceregents of Heaven -

Heaven, invested with absolute Power, to order all things according to their Sovereign Measure— esteemed every Degree of Resistance to his sacred Will, not only High Treason against an earthly Prince, but direct Rebellion against the supreme Monarch of the Universe. — By Nature & Education superstitious, he was fond of introducing among his Protestant Subjects, all the Pomp and Parade, with which Divine Worship was attended in Papish Countries.

In all these Designs he was encouraged by his Prime Minister, Arch-Bishop Laurel, who was his principal Adviser in the State, & the Director of his Conferences in Religion. — Under this Administration daily Innovations were made upon the established Laws & Constitution of Britain. The most ridiculous Paganry was introduced into the Public Form of Worship. The divine Right of Diocesan Episcopacy was the prevailing Doctrine. Communion was renounced with foreign Protestants, because they were under the Government of Presbyters. The Church of Rome, which the Reformers esteemed the Mother of Harlots, was received as a Dear Sister. Charles saluted the Roman Pontiff with the Title of most Holy Father and Laurel took it kindly to be stiled Papa alterius Orbis.

In this melancholly Situation, every Complaint uttered against the Innovations daily introduced in Church & State — Every Attempt to prevent the entire Destruction of Civil & Religious Liberty, was rewarded with exorbitant Fines — perpetual Imprisonment — & the most infamous Corporal Punishments.

These

These Severities, peopled the wilds of America, with great
Members of illustrious Fugitives, who in these uncultivated
Deserts, sought a safe Retreat from the Honor of Royal &
Ecclesiastical Tyranny, which reigned in Triumph on their
Native Land.

Here they erected Churches to the Honor of our
Divine Redeemer, form'd upon what they were convinced
was the most scriptural Plan. They acknowledged No Superior
or Officers in the Church to Presbyters or Elders. — Upon this
Foundation the Churches of New-England have hitherto
flourished. God has visibly appear'd for us in Times of
extreme Distress & Danger; & has attended the Administration
of his Ordinances, with the sanctifying Grace of his Spirit.
— May the same Zeal for pure & scriptural Religion, which
animated our Fathers, be transmitted to the latest Posterity.
— May the Presence of our Adorable Redeemer be continued
to these Churches, till his Second & glorious Advent: When
the Generation of the Faithful, shall no longer worship him
in Temples made with Hands; but be admitted to the General
Assembly of the Church of the First born

To which &c.

Amen