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Gospel, the faith which was once for
all delivered unto the saints.*

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By Rev. Wm. C. Robinson, D.D.*

(Presented to the Presbyterian Ministers' Association of Atlanta, Ga., and preached as the doctrinal sermon to the Fall 1942 Meeting of North Alabama Presbytery.)

I. The Authority Of Our Lord.

According to Presbyterianism, the Lord Jesus Christ is the sole Head, Lord and King of His body, the Church. All authority has been given unto Him in Heaven and on earth. He has been exalted to God's right hand a Prince and a Saviour to give repentance to Israel and the remission of sins. At His Ascension, the Lord God gave unto Him the throne of His father David to reign over the true Israel of God forever. (B.C.O. 8; Acts II. 29-36). Christ is prince of the kings of the earth, the rightful ruler over every nation and kingdom and relationship, but only in His Church is this Lordship visibly recognized. Therefore, the Church is His visible Kingdom of grace, in which He exercises His own authority through the ministration of His Word.

Thus, the authority of Christ is not limited to heaven, it is exercised also here on earth by His Word, the sceptre of His power, the sword out of His mouth. And our submission is not merely to God in heaven, the obedience of faith calls us to subject ourselves to the Holy Spirit speaking in the Word. "Indeed, it is only in His Word or Spirit that we can either honour or despise Christ here; in His own Person He is infinitely exalted, so that nothing of ours can affect Him; but it is in regard to these that He tries our faith and obedience" (Owen). We are not to set up our opinions, or the opinions of the popular religious writers and preachers of the day and presume to judge God's Word by the opinions of men. We dare not call God to account before man's judgment bar. By His Word, God sits in judgment upon us and all our human thinking, speaking and acting. "The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my Word let him speak my Word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the Lord. Is not my Word like as a fire, saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" (Jer. 23:28,29).

II. The Authority Of His Word.

Our Lord who came as a governor and a shepherd for the people of God and who so spoke that men wondered at the words of authority which fell from His lips, gave unqualified recognition to the authority of God's Word. One who does not believe in all that the prophets have spoken is "foolish and slow of heart". Scripture "Must needs be fulfilled". "It is written" is a sufficient answer to Satan; for "Scripture cannot be broken". We call Jesus Lord and Master and so He is; therefore if the high view of the infallible truth and Divine authority of the Holy Scripture held by the masters of Israel had not been true He would have told us. Rather He laid His hand in benediction over the Old Testament Scriptures proving from Moses, the prophets and the psalms the necessity of the Messiah's suffering and entering into His glory.

Consequently, He promised the Holy Spirit to speak for His disciples and to guide them into all

truth that they might correctly testify of Him. The New Testament writers quote the words of the Old Testament as synonymous with the words of God. (Mt. xix. 4,5; Heb. iii. 7; Acts iv. 24; Heb. 1:5f), and quote the New Testament as of equal authority with the Old Testament (I Tim. v:18; II Pet. iii:16). In two of his earliest epistles, Paul demands that his apostolic word, spoken and written, be received as the Word of God and calls for the exclusion of those who will not so receive it (I. Thess. 2:13; II. Thess. 2:15; 3:6,14). It may not always be easy to take one's stand with Christ and His Apostles, but it will always be found safe. We confess Christ in all the glory which the Holy Scripture ascribes to Him, and the Scripture in all the authority which our Lord gave to it.

Our Westminster Confession carefully distinguishes two questions: (1) the ground of the authority of Scripture and (2) our persuasion of this authority. The Confession (1:4) affirms that the authority of the Holy Scripture depends not upon any man or Church, but wholly upon God the author thereof. Because the Scripture is the Word of God written, therefore its authority ought to be recognized; and it is authoritative, whether or not any of us are persuaded to recognize that authority.

Then, in 1:5, the Confession deals with the second question, the matter of our persuasion of this authority. The ground of the Bible's authority is that it is the Word of God; our persuasion of this authority is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. According to 14:2, by the saving faith which the Holy Spirit works in our hearts we believe to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word for the authority of God Himself speaketh therein. Our General Assembly has passed an in *thesi* deliverance to the effect that our ordination vows involve the acceptance of the infallible truth and Divine authority of the Word of God. This no more means that the Church can give anyone such a persuasion than the Church can give a sinner saving faith. The Holy Spirit who works saving faith in the heart of a sinner, works a persuasion of the infallible truth and Divine authority of the Holy Scripture in the heart of a minister. But as the Church requires a credible profession of saving faith for membership, so she requires an acceptance of this infallible truth and Divine authority of Scripture for ordination. According to the Assembly of 1880 in *thesi* deliverances are interpretations of the Word which not only deserve high consideration, but must be submitted to unless contrary to the constitution and the Word.

III. This Authority In The Church.

It belongs to Christ's Majesty to rule through the Word and Spirit by the ministry of men, thus mediately exercising His own authority and enforcing His own laws in His body the Church (B.C.O. 9). Calvin points out that the power delegated to officers of the Church comes to them not personally, but officially, not so much to their ministry as to their ministration, or more specifically that the power is given to the Word. They have this spiritual power only as they rest in the Word. Even our Lord confessed as the source of His power, "My doctrine is not mine, but His that

sent me". "The power of the Church, therefore, is not unlimited, but subjected to the Word of the Lord." In the Church, "the authority of everyone is subject to the control of the Word of God" (Institutes 4:8:2,4,9).

Or, to bring out of the storehouse things new, as well as old, Professor G. T. Thomson of Edinburgh warns us, "the Church's weakness is her trust in organizations run well. Her strength is her reliance upon Christ for everything. . . . History relates how the humanized edifice driven to assert her own authority instead of Christ's has become a persecuting society. . . . The Church is a servant and never God."

"The exercise of ecclesiastical power, whether joint or several, has the divine sanction, when in conformity with the statutes enacted by Christ, the Lawgiver, and when put forth by courts or by officers appointed thereunto in His Word" (B.C.O.19). "This power, therefore, in the church is only 'ministerial and declarative', that is, the power of a minister or a servant to declare and execute the law of the Master, Christ, is revealed in his word, the statute-book of his Kingdom, the Scriptures contained in the Old and New Testaments. No officer or court of the church has any legislative power. 'Christ alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to the Word, or beside it in matters of faith and worship' (C.O.F. 20:2). Slavery to Christ alone is the true and only freedom of the human soul". (Leslie P.L.&P. p.50). "The power of a preacher is the power of a minister or servant to declare his Master's will, both in reference to the *credenda* and *agenda* in preaching." (Peck).

This doctrine of the sufficiency of the written Word is the architectonic principle of the Scottish covenants. It is taught in the Scots' Confession, the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, the petition of the Westminster Divines to Parliament and in the adopting act of 1729 in which the original American Synod disclaimed "all legislative power and authority in the Church". In the Preliminary Principles drawn up for the first American General Assembly, John Witherspoon wrote, "All church power, whether exercised by the body in general, or in the way of representation by delegated authority, is only ministerial and declarative, that is to say, the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and manners. No church judiciary ought to pretend to make laws to bind the conscience in virtue of their own authority, and all their decisions should be founded upon the revealed will of God."

Though Witherspoon's noble principles formed part of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, USA they were not entirely lived up to, partly because an ecclesiastical offense was defined as anything contrary to the Word of God or which, if it be not in its own nature sinful, may tempt others to sin or mar their spiritual edification. Just before the division of the Presbyterian Church a committee of which Dr. Thornwell was Chairman and Dr. Charles Hodge a member proposed a revision of the Book of Discipline changing this definition. Regarding the last part of this definition as either tautology or error, Thornwell's committee held, "In respect of discipline, that an offense, the proper object of that discipline, is nothing but what the Word of God condemns as sinful." Unfortunately, this report was never

adopted by the undivided Church. However, it has since become fundamental in Southern Presbyterian Polity.

In declaring that the *sole* functions of the Church are to proclaim, to administer and to enforce the law of Christ revealed in the Scripture, that church courts can make no law binding the conscience, and in defining an offense *exclusively* as anything in the principles or practice of a church member professing faith in Christ which is contrary to the Word of God, our Book of Church Order has simply carried out the great Presbyterian principle of the sufficiency or completeness of Scripture which looms so large in our Confession and in the catechetical expositions of the first two commandments. Indeed, it is only carrying out the teaching of Scripture. "The Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our King." "In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men". "We must obey God rather than men."

IV. The Authority Of Presbyterian Courts.

Thus, Southern Presbyterian Polity holds with R. E. Thompson, a former historian of the Presbyterian Church, USA, that Presbyterian courts are not legislatures, but only courts for the interpretation of the law (*Presbyterians*, p.66), and differs with A. C. Zenos, their later historian, who says: "These courts are more than means of administering justice. They are seats of authority in the comprehensive sense. They are centers of government with legislative, judicial and executive functions" (*Presbyterianism in America*, p.19). We do not hold that they are merely meetings for fellowship and advice, as the Congregationalists do; nor that they are legislatures with power to make laws, as Rome does. Rather they are courts empowered by the Lord Jesus Christ to interpret and enforce by spiritual authority His Word.

Dr. Peck distinguishes our view from that of the Papists, the Erastians and the Latitudinarians. He is especially insistent against this last danger. "Liberty in the mouths of those who have the power in their hands, means doing what they please, serving their own lust of dominion, and lording it over the weak and defenceless. Where the largest discretionary power has been claimed and exercised in the nominal Church of God, there the people groaned under the hardest bondage; for it is the discretionary power of the rulers to impose burdens upon the people . . . the word of God and that *alone* is the safeguard of freedom." Peter calls on the presbyters to be ensamples of the flock, not lords over God's heritage.

Distinguishing between the dogmatic, administrative and judicial powers of the Church, Peck reasons: "There is no legislative power in the church, properly so called, but only a judicial and administrative power. The law is in the Bible, and nowhere else, and Christ is the only lawgiver. But all the details of the application of the law are not given, and could not have been given without swelling the book to dimensions utterly incompatible with its ready use as a rule." Congress passes laws, but leaves to the Departments of Government the making of regulations in circumstantial matters of detail. Such agencies exercise not a legislative, but a *diatatic* power, the power of arranging and ordering under the law.

Christ has given to His Church officers, oracles and ordinances. He has ordained His system of doctrine, government, discipline and worship to

which He commands that nothing be added (B.C.O. 10). But there are circumstances in the worship of God and the government of the Church common to human actions and societies which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence according to the general rules of the Word which are always to be observed. These circumstances are the concomitants of an action without which it cannot be done or cannot be done with decency and decorum. "We must carefully distinguish between those circumstances which attend 'human actions' as such, i.e. without which the actions could not be, and those circumstances which though not essential, are added as appendages. These last do not fall within the jurisdiction of the Church. She has no right to appoint them. They are circumstances in the sense that they do not belong to the substance of the act. They are not circumstances in the sense that they so surround it (*circumstance*) that they cannot be separated from it" (Peck, *Ecclesiology* 2nd Ed. pp.115,116,118,120-122). Adger recognizes the propriety of church regulations, but warns against making laws respecting one's relations to God. Bannerman insists that the Church has no right to prescribe a ceremony for worship, no right to decide in *sacris*; but does have a right to decide how the rites and ceremonies of worship prescribed in Scripture are to be conducted, a right to decide *circum sacra*. The circumstantial details only are left to Christian prudence (B.C.O. 58).

This discretionary power ought never to be exalted above the power of the Word. We ought never to take our regulations more seriously than we take the doctrines of God's holy Word. Some of our leading thinkers are deeply yconcerned lest we introduce into the Book of Church Order, under the guise of rules, laws that bind the conscience. For instance, is the requirement that a minister must lay down his pastoral office at a specified age only the regulation of a circumstantial detail, or is it what Peck calls an appendage—a law which the Church has no authority to enact?

Authority in the Presbyterian Church is to be exercised by Church courts. These powers come to all of the courts from the Head of the Church, and prior to any constitutional jurisdiction every court has all the power that any court has. "The power of the whole is in every part, and the power of the whole is over the power of every part." "It is not one order of clergy rising above another, like the gradation in the Roman hierarchy, but a large square of the same order or presbyters, including a smaller until the 'great cube' is reached. The subordination is not that of inferior officers to superior, but of a smaller body to a larger body of the same order—the smaller constituting a part of the larger." "The presbytery does not derive its powers from the session, nor the synod from the presbytery, nor the general assembly from the synod or presbyteries in an ascending scale, nor the synod from the general assembly, etc. in a descending scale. But as every court is a presbytery composed of presbyters of two classes, it is clothed with all the powers of government" by the Divine Head of the Church. The sphere of the several courts, therefore, is not determined by the place they occupy in the scale, but by the definitions of the constitution (Peck, 204-5; B.C.O. 59).

Since these courts are the governing bodies in the Church they are unable to transfer their governing authority to any other organization or

body no matter how good it may be. (Leslie, par. 82). This was brought out in debates over the Board system just prior to our independent organization, as a result of which we have not semi-independent Boards, but Executive Committees each directly responsible to the General Assembly. Consequently our Executive Committees are governed by the General Assembly, not by interdenominational agencies. By analogy our theological seminaries are governed by the Constitution of the Church and the courts thereof. They are neither autonomous nor are they governed by civil or academic agencies. All the promotional work of the committees is subject to the courts of the Church, session, presbytery, synod and general assembly, not vice versa. Nor is the church governed by forums, summer conferences or periodicals.

A larger body of equal presbyters is the Church's safeguard against that totalitarian control which is sweeping so many countries. In order to bring in their absolutism the Stuarts saw that it was necessary to place bishops over the presbyteries. The introduction of bishops into the Church in Germany after the First World War made it much harder for the Confessional Church to withstand Hitler. The inability of the Japanese to find our bishop has made it harder for them to crush the Presbyterian churches in China. I am happy that the ablest of our ecclesiastics are interpreting the commission on the minister and his work as a committee and administering it as gentlemen and as brethren. But just because totalitarianism is abroad in the world would it not be safer and more befitting Presbyterian polity for this new instrument to be a committee or an executive committee with the express privilege of appeal to presbytery?

V. The Authority Of The Presbyterian Standards.

In governing the Church, our courts do not need to start *de novo* in their interpretation of Scripture. Our Book states, "The Confession of Faith and the larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly, together with the formularies of government, discipline and worship, are accepted by the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. as standard expositions of Scripture in relation to both faith and practice" (173). Thus, without thereby adding to the terms of ordination, the Assembly has the right to offer in *thesi* deliverances declaring certain things which are stated in the very language of these formularies to be involved in the ordination vows, as it did in 1939, justified in 1940, and maintained in the Lilly resolution of 1942.

Acting on this principle the Assembly of 1941 instructed its committee on revisions to examine current Dispensationalism and point out wherein that movement differs from the Standards of the Church. But while we are using this measuring rod to judge Dispensationalism, it certainly behooves us before the great searcher of hearts to examine our own teaching, the books we prescribe for credit courses, and the teachers we introduce into our conferences by these same standards. Diverse weights and diverse balances, both are an abomination to me, saith the Lord (Proverbs 20:10).

Lack of space limits the statement of Hodge's careful exposition of the meaning of the Presbyterian ordination vows. Briefly, he shows that in accepting the system of doctrine contained in the standards we hold all those doctrines that are common to Christians which are summed up in the

Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, that we accept those doctrines that are common to Protestants as distinguished from Romanists, that we hold those that are peculiar to the Reformed Churches as distinguished from Lutherans, Arminians and later sects. Then he specifies these doctrines which constitute our system through two large pages (**Church Polity**, pp. 332-340).

We shall each give account of himself to God; and among other things we shall account to the Head and King of the Church for the way in which we inwardly believe and outwardly preach the system of doctrine to which we have given our allegiance and which we are authoritatively using to judge other systems. May the Word of Christ have free course and be glorified in our preaching, may the Kingship of Christ be honored as in judgment we yield submission to and administer the oracles of God, and may we each be received, notwithstanding our imperfect lives and works, in the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

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Student Christian Activities At Davidson College

The Davidson student has many opportunities for worship, Christian fellowship, self-expression, and prayer. There is nothing on the campus which gives him a better setting for these religious activities than the weekly hall prayer meetings.

Each Wednesday night at 10:15 o'clock the bell on Chambers sounds, reminding every man on the campus of a prayer meeting on his hall. Many opportunities and blessings wait for him when he goes. There he will hear a fellow student speak on "How Is The Christian Life Different," or "Prayer And Its Effects," or some similar subject. Perhaps the meeting will be in the form of a discussion of some campus problem which lets the fellows in on each others' thoughts, prompting understanding between the men, and usually helping someone in deciding his problems.

All of the dormitories have meetings on each hall. On each hall is a leader, often two, who plan the meetings. He is a hard worker and a man who can be counted on. After each meeting he writes a report of the number present and the effect and worth of the meeting. These reports are collected and taken to the two members of the "Y" Cabinet who are in charge. These men record the attendance and study the messages from the hall leaders. Helpful criticism is remembered and requests are answered.

Frequently all of the hall leaders, with the two Cabinet leaders, meet for conference. There is always free exchange of ideas, discussion of programs, and helpful hints which improve the work.

At such a time as this, when prayer is sorely needed, college men are praying. These meetings are entirely voluntary and are not under any faculty regulation. Members of the faculty, administration and others are frequently invited to speak or lead discussion, but the meetings are usually for the students only. There men feel free to speak and often offer their first public prayers. These students enjoy the privilege of worshipping together and an important need of college and personal work is met.

MONTREAT

By R. C. Anderson
President

Perhaps many of our Montreat friends have noticed in the papers that Assembly Inn is to be occupied by some of the families of German and Japanese diplomats who are now internees under the protection of the government, and surely these friends would like to have fuller information in regard to this occupation.

It is only a temporary occupation. The minimum limit is six weeks, beginning October 29, and the maximum limit is to April 1, 1943.

All of the internees will be restricted to the Inn and the grounds between the building and Lake Susan. Even the Montreat Office Building will not be within the restricted area, nor will the Historical Foundation nor the entrance to the Historical Foundation from the north side of the building be within the restricted area.

There will be twenty-four official guards set about the building and there will be no communication nor connection whatsoever with the college campus or other grounds in the Montreat District.

There will be 264 of these internees. A large portion of them will be women and children. They will be of the best element, both of Germans and Japanese, and while they were interned at White Sulphur Springs, W. Va., and in Grove Park Inn, Asheville, N. C., we are informed they gave no trouble whatsoever. We are assured by the government authorities that they will be of no annoyance whatever to any of the operations of the college and that the college and the residents of Montreat would scarcely know they were in the grounds but for seeing them at a distance. They will be kept incommunicado.

We are opening Sylvan Heights as a first class boarding house for guests coming to Montreat during the period of occupation of the Inn.

We consider it a privilege for Montreat to be of some service to our government in this critical time of its great need. It will also be an opportunity to show these people who have been brought providentially within our borders the meaning of the Christian life and they will receive at the hands of all who serve them an example of the Christian way of living. It will also give the Assembly Inn some financial help during the months that it needs it most.

Immediately upon the request of the government when we were approached to grant the use of Assembly Inn, communication was made with a majority of the Board of Directors and every one of these thought to voluntarily offer the use of the building, under the terms mentioned, was the proper thing to do.

We wish to give assurance, as far as the present arrangements are concerned, that no church use of the buildings or the Montreat Grounds will be disturbed in the slightest degree. We have assurance that the government will restore any damage, if any, that might be done, and we will have ample time to make ready for the meeting of the Assembly in May and all of our conferences as scheduled for the summer without the slightest interruption.