

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
SEVENTH GENERAL COUNCIL
OF THE
ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES

HOLDING
THE PRESBYTERIAN SYSTEM

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EDITED BY THE
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hold General Councils or some form of special meetings in the European countries that personal intercourse may be carried on between us and our Continental brethren in their own lands. I earnestly hope that this Council will not close without taking some steps in that direction.

The Alliance was organized, I said, to promote not organic union but fraternal co-operation. It has secured the adoption of its programme both by Churches that have, and by Churches that have not, sympathy with the cry for organic union. Among the English-speaking Churches of the Eastern Section it has therefore done its pioneer work, and all that remains for it in that Section and among those Churches is to watch over and develop the fraternal relationships now so happily existing between them, and so unlike those which unhappily once too often prevailed.

The Rev. Dr. ROBERTS was now requested to prepare a Paper showing the work done on the Western Section, to be presented before the Council closes.

The Rev. Professor GIVENS B. STRICKLER, D.D., Union College, Richmond, Va., then read the following Paper on

THE SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY FOR THE PRESBYTERIAN SYSTEM.

The only points in regard to Presbyterian Church Government that I will notice are those about which there is difference of opinion between ourselves and one or more of the other Evangelical denominations.

I. In the New Testament Church there was a class of officers known as elders. It is expressly said that there were elders in the Church in Jerusalem and in the Church in Ephesus; that Paul and Barnabas, on their first missionary tour, appointed elders in all the Churches of Lycaonia and Pisidia; that Paul, on one occasion, left Titus in Crete "to appoint elders in every city"; and that the elders amongst "the strangers scattered abroad throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia," were exhorted to tend the flock which was amongst them (1 Peter.v. 2). So far, then, as the word elder, as a title for a class of church officers is concerned, we have unquestionable Scriptural authority.

II. These elders were not only officers in the Church, but they were rulers also. There was a class of officers appointed in the New

Testament Church by Apostolic authority who were not rulers (Acts vi. 1-6), the Seven, and whose sole business was "to serve tables"; to deal with the wants of the poor. These were officers, but they were not rulers, while elders were officers and rulers. Indeed, the word elder as a title was one with which the Jews always associated the idea of authority; as a title it occurs over one hundred times in the Old Testament Scriptures, and in every instance it signifies one who possessed some kind of authority. The elders to whom Moses was sent in Egypt, the elders to whom he delivered the law received on Mount Sinai, and the elders associated with him in the administration of the affairs of the people, were rulers in Israel. The usage of the Old Testament Scriptures, then, is in favor of the claim that the word elder was the title, not only of an officer, but of a ruler in the Church of God. This claim is strengthened by a fact drawn from the organization of the Synagogue, for all authorities agree that there was in every Synagogue a bench of rulers charged with the administration of its government, and that their official title as rulers was elder.

Thus the Jews were familiar with the word elder as meaning a ruler in God's house. When, then, it is said that the Apostles "appointed elders in every Church," the word must be taken in the sense in which the Jews already understood and used it, unless a different meaning is ascribed to it. But no instance of such a different meaning can anywhere be found.

We are not left here, however, to mere inferences. In a number of instances we find these elders in the actual exercise of authority in the Churches (Acts xvi. 4; 1 Pet. v. 2; 1 Tim. v. 17, etc.).

It is thus clearly made out, not only from the uniform usage of the word, but from the express teachings of the Scriptures, that there was not only a class of officers in the New Testament Church called elders, but that these were rulers, performing the highest and most important acts of ecclesiastical government.

III. But the elders were not only rulers in the New Testament Church; they were the only rulers of which the New Testament gives us any account. It is claimed, indeed, by some that the elder was an officer inferior to the bishop, having different and less important duties. But the scriptural evidence is conclusive that by the two titles precisely the same officer was meant (Acts xx. 17, 18; Titus i. 5-7, etc.).

Further proof that they were the same is found in the fact that in his first letter to Timothy, Paul gives the qualifications of a bishop,

and in his letter to Titus gives those of an elder, and these qualifications are in all essential respects exactly the same. Indeed, as a matter of fact, we find them in the New Testament discharging the same duties. In the New Testament Church, then, bishop and elder were names for the same officer, and, as no other rulers are mentioned, elders must have been the only rulers in the Church, as it was established by the Apostles.

This is not simply the conclusion of Presbyterians. It is the conclusion also of high prelatist authorities. Bishop Lightfoot, in his commentary on the Philippians, says: "It is a fact now generally recognized by theologians of all shades of opinion, that, in the language of the New Testament, the same officer in the Church is called indifferently bishop or elder or presbyter."

Elders, then, were not only rulers, but the only rulers in the New Testament Church. The great Head of the Church has committed the government of this into the hands of officers called elders, and as rulers, these are of the same grade.

IV. Of these elders there was a plurality in every Church. It was so in the Churches in Jerusalem, Ephesus, and in Philippi. Paul and Barnabas, on their first missionary tour, appointed elders in all the Churches of Lycaonia and Pisidia, and Titus was directed by Paul to ordain elders in every city of Crete. So far as appears, there was no Church organized under apostolic authority that did not have a plurality of those rulers.

We may note, in passing, that this fact of a plurality of elders in these New Testament Churches, is in conflict with some other systems of Church government; and that, too, whether these are individual Churches, each under its own independent government, or aggregations of individual Churches under a common government. If they are individual Churches, then, on the one hand, Churches that have in them only one elder—the preacher—are not scripturally organized; and, on the other, prelatists, who insist that these elders were bishops, must admit that they were congregational bishops, and not diocesan. If, however, these Churches be aggregations of individual Churches under a common government, then the independency of congregationalism should be renounced, and prelatists should admit that aggregated churches should be governed by a plurality of elders, or a presbytery, and not by a single bishop. But while this fact is not in harmony with the systems of other Churches, it is in perfect harmony with our own.

V. These elders were chosen by the people (Acts i. 15–26).

It is not claimed, of course, that this case proves the right of the members of the Church to choose their officers and rulers in ordinary circumstances. The office to be filled; the mode of filling it, in so far as the lot was concerned; and almost all the circumstances of the case were extraordinary, and such as could never occur again. We should therefore be careful how we draw inferences from it to govern the Church in the administration of its affairs in the very different circumstances in which it is now found. Still, it deserves to be noticed, that in filling this first office in the Church, the people were recognized, their agency was required, and their judgment sought. Indeed, the natural understanding of the passage is, that they alone made the selection of the two men who became the subjects of the lot. At any rate, they took part in the selection; for why else was the vacancy in the apostleship brought to their notice, and why was the necessity of filling it urged upon their attention? If they had nothing to do with it; if, in the nature of the case, they could not have anything to do with it, why was so solemn an address on the subject delivered to them? But now, if, in selecting the first officer chosen in the Church at the threshold of the New Testament dispensation, the people were allowed a part—and as large a part as was possible in the choice of so extraordinary an officer and ruler as an apostle—the inference is inevitable that they should be allowed a still larger part in the choice of their ordinary and permanent officers and rulers.

But what may, perhaps, be hardly more than a hint in this case is plainly taught in the account of the apostolic institution of the Diaconate (Acts vi. 1). There was a choice, or election, by the people; and no reason can be given why, if the people may choose their deacons, they may not also choose their elders. If it be said that the fact that the people were allowed to choose officers to manage their less important temporal matters is no proof that they were allowed to choose officers to manage their more important spiritual matters, the answer furnished by the account of the institution of the Diaconate is, that the apostles there assumed that the people were competent to judge who were men of good report; and who were spiritual and wise, for they were told to select such for that office; but if they are competent to discern such qualifications for that office, of course they are equally competent to discern the prescribed qualifications for the office of the eldership. It may be added, that if the people, because of their personal interest in the matter, were allowed to choose their deacons, much more, since their

personal interest in the matter is so much greater, should they be allowed to choose their rulers and teachers also.

In favour of election, then, we have the analogy in the case of the choice of deacons; while those who compose the Church, who support it by their gifts, who are the subjects of its government, and who, therefore, are as much concerned to have it well governed as anybody else can be, ought to have a voice in the choice of its rulers. Such considerations as these are so satisfactory that Dean Alford, in his commentary on the passage, says: "Nor is there any reason for departing from the usual meaning of electing by show of hands."

VI. The elders thus chosen by the people were, in each church, organized into a court, called a presbytery (from which now our name as a denomination is derived). How could a number of rulers in the same church, each equal in authority and in responsibility for its government, administer its affairs in a wise and orderly way without organization? But where this is there is what we mean by an ecclesiastical court or presbytery.

Not only, then, must the elders have been organized in a court, but such an organization is distinctly referred to in connection with the ordination of Timothy to the office of Evangelist: "Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery."—1 Tim. iv. 14. The word thus means, and, it would seem, must mean, an organization or court of the elders for government and discipline. This view is confirmed by the nature of the duties imposed on elders. They are to "watch for souls as they that must give account"; they are to "warn, reprove, and rebuke"; they are to receive into the churches those who in their judgment possess the necessary qualifications, and to cut off those who become incorrigible, and who can no longer be allowed in its membership without dishonour to its name. But how can all those duties be discharged with anything like necessary efficiency without such an organization as is meant by a church court?

VII. But not only are the elders of a single church to be organized into a presbytery, but, within certain limits, the elders of associations of churches are thus to be organized also.

1. The principle of association for mutual spiritual benefit, and for the more efficient prosecution of the work of the Church, is Scriptural. We have actual Scriptural instances of the principle in that association of Christians for those purposes which formed

every church of which the New Testament gives us any account, and in the association of the elders of every such church in the form of a presbytery.

2. Not only is this principle Scriptural, but since so many advantages may be gained by it, that cannot be gained in any other way, it is obligatory. It secures the combined wisdom of the Church in the adjudication of all questions affecting its common interests. It secures the combined resources and energies of the Church in the prosecution of its common enterprises for the salvation of men and for the establishment of Christ's kingdom. It secures the combined testimony and influence of the Church against all forms of evil, and in favour of truth and righteousness.

3. The necessity for such organization is illustrated by the experience of those who deny that such organization is Scriptural. Who does not know that such are obliged to resort to devices that in some measure secure the same ends, and that the necessities of their work compel them to do practically what they maintain theoretically they have no right to do?

Association gives outward expression to the inward unity of the Church. The true Church is one. It has "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Lord and Father of all," and external expression of this inward unity is to be given, so far as possible, that the united influence of the Church may be secured in her testimony for truth and righteousness. This can be accomplished in the view of the world only by such an organization of the Churches as shows that all her different congregations are but parts of one great whole, holding the same fundamental truths, and striving after the achievement of the same great ends. Such an organization our denomination presents.

I have thus endeavored to show that there was in the New Testament Church a class of officers called elders; that these elders were rulers, the only rulers in the Church of which the New Testament gives us any account; that there was a plurality of these rulers in each congregation; that they were chosen by the people; that they were in each Church organized in the form of a court or presbytery; and this for the accomplishment of the great ends the Church is intended to accomplish.

These truths furnish clear Scriptural authority for our system of Church government. They involve all the great principles underlying that system, in whatever form we may prefer to express them. If we prefer to say, as some do, that "Presbyterianism consists in the government of the Church by parliamentary assemblies, com-

posed of two classes of presbyters, and of presbyters only, and so arranged as to realize the visible unity of the whole Church," the facts collated furnish grounds for that statement. Or, if we prefer to say, as others do, "that the several different congregations of believers, taken collectively, constitute one Church of Christ, called emphatically the Church; that a larger part of the Church, or a representation of it, should govern a smaller, or determine matters of controversy which arise therein; that, in like manner, a representation of the whole should govern and determine in regard to every part, and to all the parts united—that is, that a majority shall govern; and that consequently appeals may be carried from lower to higher judicatories, till they be finally decided by the collected wisdom and united voice of the whole Church," the facts authorize that statement. Or, if we prefer to say, as still others do, that Presbyterianism consists negatively in denying (1) that the apostolic office is perpetual; (2) that all Church power is vested in the clergy; and (3) that each individual congregation is independent; and affirmatively in asserting: (1) That the people have a right to a substantive part in the government of the Church. (2) That presbyters who minister word and doctrine are the highest permanent officers in the Church, and all belong to the same order. (3) That the outward and visible Church is, or should be, one, in the sense that a smaller part is subject to a larger, and a larger to the whole." The facts furnish a basis for that statement.

Thus Presbyterianism, in any of these different forms by which it has been sometimes expressed, has a broad and secure foundation in "the word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice."

SAMUEL SMITH, Esq., M.P., London, now read the following Paper on

DANGERS TO THE PROTESTANT FAITH FROM THE PRESENT SACERDOTAL MOVEMENT IN ENGLAND.

The question that eclipses all others in the religious world of Great Britain and her colonies is the enormous growth of sacerdotalism in the Anglican Church. It affects not only the British Colonies, but also the United States, and is closely connected with the efforts which the Church of Rome is making to regain her hold on the Anglo-Saxon race. The two movements are not identical, but run in parallel lines, and tend more and more to blend.

Let me say a word or two of the origin of this movement for the