

Apostolical Church Polity

WILLIAM WILLIAMS



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Williams, William, D.C., LL.D., Professor of Ecclesiastical History, Church Government, and Pastoral Duties in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was born at Eatonton, Putnam Co., Ga., March 15, 1821. He was converted and united with a Baptist church in 1837, and graduated at the University of Georgia in 1840. His attention was first directed to the legal profession, as a preparation for which he attended the law-school of Harvard University, where he graduated in 1847. He entered the ministry in 1851, his first pastoral charge being at Auburn, Ala. In 1856 he became Professor of Theology in Mercer University, then at Penfield, Ga. In 1859 he was elected Professor of Ecclesiastical

History, Church Government, and Pastoral Duties in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. At various times during the enforced absence of the Professor of Systematic Theology the duties of that chair were filled by Dr. Williams, and in May, 1872, he was formally transferred to that professorship, in which he continued until his death. Dr. Williams was on several occasions elected one of the vice-presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention, and was the appointed preacher of its twenty-fifth annual sermon at St. Louis, Mo., in May, 1871. He received the degree of D.D. from Mercer University in 1859, and of LL.D. from Richmond College in 1876.

He died at Aiken, S.C., Feb. 20, 1877, and was buried at Greenville, S.C., where his former students have erected a monument to his memory.

—William Cathcart, 1881

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BY WILLIAM WILLIAMS, D.D.,

PROFESSOR IN THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA.

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When our Lord communicated the startling intelligence to his disciples, that they were soon to lose the blessed privilege of his personal presence, he comforted their troubled hearts with the assurance that it would be better for them that he should go away, because the Holy Spirit, who otherwise would not come, and whom he promised to send, would more than compensate for the loss even of his bodily presence. On the fiftieth day after his resurrection, this promise was fulfilled, and their hearts were encouraged and strengthened by the wonderful success of the gospel in the addition of three thousand persons to their number. This occasion is usually referred to as the organization of the first Christian church. Almost certainly, however, there was no organized church formed at this time, nor at any time among Jewish Christians, previous to the ingathering of the Gentiles. Notwithstanding our Saviour's teachings as to the universality of his kingdom, and his positive commission to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," yet so extremely difficult was it for them to divest themselves of long-cherished Jewish notions and prejudices, that they interpreted "all the world" to mean Palestine, and limited "every creature" to every Jew. Accordingly, for several years after our Lord's ascension, they confined the ministry to those who were Jews,—the case of Cornelius being the only exception, and that in consequence of a special divine direction.

We have reason to believe, therefore, that for several years after our Lord's ascension, all who embraced Christianity, with an exception or two, were exclusively Jews. They embraced it with an undiminished attachment to the Mosaic law, and an unabated conviction of its continued and permanent force. They did not comprehend that Christianity had superseded Judaism; they thought that it had only supplemented it by faith in a particular person as the Messiah, and by additional peculiar religious worship and ordinances. They were, accordingly, not otherwise distinguished from other Jews than by this faith and worship. They worshipped in the temple with other Jews, and like them; but, in addition, would meet as Christians in such numbers and places as convenience might dictate, to observe steadily the worship and ordinances of Christianity, much after the manner, doubtless, in which they had been accustomed to worship in the synagogue;—which term in James ii. 2, is actually applied to these various assemblies. With *their view* of the relation of Christianity to Judaism, it would not naturally occur to them to form churches as distinct organized bodies, nor would there seem to them to be any necessity for it. The term *Church*, therefore, is not probably applied to Jewish Christians with any technical meaning until after the Gentiles are received, and the fact becomes developed by the subsequent controversy growing out of their reception, that Christianity is not supplemented Judaism. Thus, in the ninth chapter of Acts it is said, "Then had the church rest throughout all Judea

and Galilee and Samaria,” where the term is applied to the collective number of Jewish Christians throughout these regions, as the similar Hebrew term is applied in the Old Testament to the congregation of Israel. In the first chapter of Galatians, the apostle, referring to his first visit to Jerusalem, and his subsequent residence in Syria and Cilicia, says, that he was, during all this time, “unknown by face to the churches in Judaea,” where the term is probably used in its popular sense of assemblies. He had never been present at any of their meetings, and was therefore “unknown by face” to them. Or, he may be using the term from his then position, and as their assemblies would then be called. So soon as churches, as formally organized bodies, come clearly into view in the New Testament, first at Antioch, and soon afterward at Lystra, Derbe, Iconium, and Antioch in Pisidia; and in a little while throughout the most important parts of the Roman Empire by the missionary labors of the apostle to the Gentiles, three important particulars which characterized their organization deserve our attention,—their *officers*, *membership*, and *relation to each other*.

I. ORGANIZATION OF THE APOSTOLICAL CHURCHES.

1. *Officers of the Churches*.—A serious hindrance which attends the modern missionary, even in the comparatively slow progress of his mission work, is to find among his new converts from heathenism, suitable persons who can be safely entrusted with the work of religious instruction, so as to leave him free, when he has gathered a band of disciples in one place, speedily to extend his labors to other places. Much time must be spent in proving, training, and instructing, before he can safely leave the church to the guidance of a native preacher; and perhaps even then, no suitable person is found. This hindrance, which would have been much more serious, if not fatal, in the very rapid progress of early Christianity, and in the absence for many years of any written Gospel, was providentially met then by men supernaturally qualified by the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit. Our ascended Lord, “exalted to the right hand of God, a Prince and a Saviour,” to give gifts unto men, gave “diversities of gifts.” “To one the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another divers kind of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.” “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers.” “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.” The apostle in these passages is not enumerating *different orders* in the ministry and several *offices* that existed in the apostolic

churches, but obviously is speaking of the “diversities” of the charismata of the Holy Spirit—the extraordinary spiritual endowments bestowed to meet a temporary emergency in the incipency of Christianity. They were, therefore, temporary in their nature, and intended to cease when the necessity for them should cease; and never, so far as we have reason to believe, to be revived in the church.

The ordinary, normal officers of an apostolic church were bishops, or elders, and deacons. As to the former, they are called indifferently bishops and elders. These are not names of different offices but different names of the same office. This is abundantly proved, if it were necessary to prove it in this day, by the fact that these names are sometimes used interchangeably in the New Testament, the same person who is called in one place bishop, being called elder in another (Acts xx. 17, 28; Titus i. 5, 7); that bishops and deacons are saluted in the beginning of an epistle (Phil. i. 1) without the mention of elders, which slight would surely not have been cast upon them if they were distinct from bishops; and that the apostle in his epistles to Timothy gives the qualifications of bishops and deacons only. But “it is a fact,” says the learned Dr. Lightfoot of the Church of England, in his Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians, p. 93, “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, and elder, or presbyter.’” Not in the language of the New Testament only, is this the case. In the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, in those of Justin in the middle of the second century, and of Irenaeus toward the close of the second century, the terms bishop and elder are applied indifferently to the same officer. Not even is Ignatius an exception, when fairly interpreted and restricted to those epistles least liable to the charge of a want of genuineness or of authenticity. But certainly in the New Testament there is no ministerial imparity—there is no episcopacy. Not anywhere are even the apostles found claiming any ministerial rights and functions that elders might not exercise. Learned men of the Episcopal Church do not hesitate to admit that episcopacy is not to be found in the New Testament, and that it was gradually introduced at a later period. Litton, of the Church of England, in his excellent work on “The Church of Christ,” p. 286, says: “In truth it does seem an arduous task to attempt to discover in the inspired record, taken alone, the existence of an order of ministers not apostles, and yet superior to presbyters and deacons.” The cases of James, Timothy, Titus, and the apocalyptic angels, he shows, are not examples of bishops in the episcopal sense. Again, he says: “So long as the advocates of episcopacy are content to rest their cause upon *post-apostolic testimony*, their position is impregnable; it is only when they attempt to *prove it from Scripture alone* that the argument fails to convince” (p. 302). Dr. Jacob, another distinguished member of the Church of England, in his recent work, “The Ecclesiastical Polity of the New Testament” (p. 66, *et seq.*) says: “In order

to obtain a correct conception of the Christian ministry in its primitive state, it is necessary to distinguish clearly between what the apostles themselves established in the church, and what was afterwards found to be expedient as a further development of their polity. That which may justly claim to be a beneficial and legitimate extension of apostolic order must not on that account be confounded with ordinances of apostolic institution.... These” (elders and deacons) “were established in the churches by the apostles themselves; while the episcopate, in the modern acceptance of the term, and as a distinct clerical order, does not appear in the New Testament, but was gradually introduced and extended throughout the church at a later period.” After remarking, as we would expect an Anglican to do, “that it was perfectly lawful for the post-apostolic church to adopt the episcopal form of ecclesiastical government,” and that all lawful exercise of church power and authority is sanctioned by Christ himself as well as by his apostles, he says: “But unfortunately, not contented with such indisputable, just, and reasonable sanctions, writers on church matters in all ages have too often evinced a tendency to represent the regulations of their own times as precisely those which were made at the beginning, and to insist upon referring to the actual institution of the apostles, or even the personal appointment of Christ himself, all the existing ordinances of their own churches. And thus, after the general establishment of episcopacy, it was often assumed and asserted that this ordinance emanated from these sources. . . . Such assertions put forth in the early centuries of Christianity have often been repeated even by learned men in later times, without any sufficient examination of their correctness and of the evidence—or lack of evidence—on which they rest; and the unlearned, if they have indulged in any thought upon the subject, have commonly taken it for granted that such assertions have been fully proved, and that there is no reasonable doubt whatever to be entertained respecting them. . . . There is evidence of the most satisfactory kind, because unintentional, to the effect that episcopacy was established in different churches *after the decease* of the apostles who founded them, and at different times.” The testimony of Jerome, in the fourth century, the most learned scholar among the Latin fathers, is pointedly to the same effect. He ascribes the rise of episcopacy to ecclesiastical usage, and not to any divine institution (Comm. in Tit. i. 7). With him agree the great commentators of the Greek Church, Chrysostom and Theodoret.

There can be no doubt then, in the mind of one who examines this matter impartially, that episcopacy is a radical change in the apostolic organization. If anyone ask how this took place, the answer is easily given, as furnished by the best scholars of former and present times. In most, if not all the apostolic churches, there was a plurality of elders. The circumstances of the early churches rendered such an arrangement very advantageous, if not absolutely necessary. They were *generally* large. Christianity being a religion disallowed by the laws of the Empire, they were liable to legalized

persecution even unto death. To meet together in any large number for religious worship would more readily attract attention and call upon them persecution. As a matter of prudence, the whole church could not *ordinarily* meet together, but were obliged to meet in small companies and in retired places—private houses, vaults or caves, or other places of security. There must be a plurality of elders to instruct these several sections of the church, especially in the absence of any written word, it being about twenty years after our Lord's ascension before the first book in the New Testament was written. These churches, too, had just been gathered out of heathenism and were surrounded by it on all sides. If Christianity, in its incipiency, is to make any headway against this overwhelming tide of superstition and corruption there would seem to be a demand for a greater number of preachers than one elder to every church. Besides, persecution would be most likely to fall upon the leaders, the elders; and if there had been only one to a church, it, or even a number of the churches, might suddenly be deprived of any religious instructor.

Thus, temporary reasons growing out of the peculiar exigencies of the time, would seem to demand a plurality of elders in the primitive churches, and the Saviour adjusted the supply to the demand in accordance with the temporary exigency. After the decease of the apostles, as Jerome tells us, rivalries and jealousies arose among the elders, reviving the old question, "Who shall be greatest?" and exciting corresponding parties in the churches. "The want of united action among the different presbyters of the same church when they were all of equal authority," and the order of public deliberations requiring that there should be some one "invested at least with the authority of collecting the sentiments and executing the resolutions" (Gibbon, i. c. 15) of the church, led to the appointment of one of their number as permanent president or moderator. The title bishop, which was applied to all the elders, came after a while to be applied exclusively to the president,—elder, as Justin in the middle of the second century still calls him, merely to distinguish him from his equal co-elders. He was not superior to them, but only "first among equals." But the love of rank and power is natural and strong, and needs to be jealously watched;—how jealously, experience had not yet taught the early Christians. Gradually and imperceptibly, under a political system that favored the centralization of power, and in the midst of heretical tendencies that would naturally lead to consolidation and visible unity, and stimulated more or less by carnal ambition and the love of rank and power, the president-elder, no longer continuing, as originally, merely "first among equals," assumed a position above his co-elders, and in the third century claimed and exercised the exclusive right to perform certain ministerial functions, thus constituting a new order in the ministry and originating episcopacy.

In the New Testament, however, there is only one order. The apostles were not properly an *order* of ministers. They were not officers of any par-

ticular church. They had no locality. Their appointment was temporary and extraordinary, for a temporary and extraordinary purpose, and they have and can have no successors in office (Lightfoot's Phil., p. 194).

The elders of the New Testament were all equal in rank and authority, and discharged the same duties,—the ministry of the gospel and the oversight of the government and discipline of the church. The distinction of preaching elder and ruling elder, made by the Presbyterians, rests upon a single passage of Scripture, 1 Tim. v. 17. (The passage in 1 Cor. xii. 28, and that in Rom. xii. 8, are so indefinite as to the import of the terms used, and therefore susceptible of such a variety of interpretations, that they would surely never have been thought of in this connection, if it had not been for the one in First Timothy.) The objection to making a distinction, which establishes an important office, upon a single passage of Scripture, would lose its force if that one clearly and unmistakably necessitated the distinction. But the passage in question does not. It certainly makes a distinction among elders; the only question is, what is the *kind* of distinction. Is it an *official* distinction; is it of so marked a character as to make two distinct official classes of elders, to one of which belongs the official duty of preaching and ruling, whilst the other is restricted to the official duty of ruling? Or is it a personal distinction among those of the same official class and with respect to the discharge of different duties which all might equally perform? In favor of the latter the following reasons may be given.

(a) The words translated "double honour" mean, in this passage, as the context shows and scholars are agreed, not merely high *respect*, *esteem*, but ample *temporal maintenance*. If, then, this passage does establish the office of ruling elder, it enjoins that they who hold it shall receive ample pecuniary support. This is not brought forward to show Presbyterian inconsistency in not pecuniarily supporting their ruling elders, and hence to derive an argument against the office; for one's theory may be right and his practice inconsistent; but the argument is this:—Nowhere else does Scripture, by precept or example, enjoin pecuniary support to any except those who preach the gospel. If it does here, *this is the only passage where it does*. The strong presumption then is, that it does not here, and that the interpretation is wrong which makes the distinction among elders official and not personal, and thus introduces a Scriptural rule of temporal maintenance nowhere else to be found.

(b) It has been shown that the term elder is used in the New Testament as synonymous with bishop, that is, preaching elder. If it is not so used in this passage, this is, undeniably, *the only passage* in which it is not. This creates so strong a presumption that it is not here used in a different official sense from that which it everywhere else has, that, according to an established rule of interpretation, he who affirms that it is so used, is bound to show, not merely that it *may not*, but that it *cannot* have the sense here which everywhere else it has.

(c) If the apostles appointed the office of ruling elder, they have nowhere prescribed its qualifications. In 1 Tim. iii. the apostle prescribes the qualifications of bishops, or preaching elders, and of deacons; but nowhere is anything said about the qualifications of the very important office of ruling elder. If it be said that the qualifications for the office of bishop were intended to apply as well to the office of ruling elder, the answer is, that "aptness to teach" is one of these qualifications, and what would be the use or the propriety of specifying that qualification for an office which is restricted to ruling, and from which teaching is specially excluded? The omission to give any qualifications for this office, whilst those for the offices of preaching elder and deacon are *carefully laid down*, creates a very strong presumption that there was no such office, and that the distinction among the elders in the passage in question is not an official one.

(d) The post-apostolic churches had no such office. This omission is wholly unaccountable if the apostles really appointed it. They had *every other* appointed office or ordinance, and in the course of the centuries introduced many that were never appointed. But they never had ruling elders. They were never known until Calvin invented them.

(e) The passage fairly and naturally admits another than the Presbyterian interpretation. Among a plurality of elders it may reasonably be supposed there would be some diversity of talent. Whilst all might possess the ability to rule well and to preach, yet some having a special talent for government and discipline might give themselves more particularly to that, though not to the exclusion of preaching; and others, having a special talent and zeal for preaching, might give themselves more particularly to that, though not to the exclusion of ruling well. Now, the apostle enjoins, that the elders that rule well must be counted worthy of ample maintenance, especially those of them who are laboriously devoting themselves to preaching. All of them are worthy of high esteem and ample support, but particularly those of them who are giving their time and energies specially to the more important and more laborious work of preaching.

This meaning of the passage corresponds with the usage of the word translated "especially" (if the emphasis be supposed to fall on that word, and not, rather, on the word translated "labour"), which, in other passages, does not mark distinct classes of persons, but introduces a specification of particular persons belonging to the same general class. "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all, *especially* unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. vi. 10);—"them who are of the household of faith" belong to the "all" before mentioned, but, for a reason, are particularized. "If any man provide not for his own, and *specially* for those of his own house, he hath denied," etc. (1 Tim. v. 8);—"his own" (relatives) is the general class to which "those of his own house" (family) belong, but are particularized. Many other examples might be given. So, in the passage in question: "the elders that rule well" is the general class to which belong

“they that labour in word and doctrine,” but who, for the reason above given, are particularized. The passage does not distinguish two distinct classes, but persons belonging to the same class. The distinction is not official but personal, and relates to the discharge of different duties of the same office, and not to the discharge of duties of different offices.

Barnes, good Presbyterian authority, in his comment on this passage, says: “It cannot, I think, be certainly concluded from this passage that the ruling elders who did not teach or preach were regarded as a separate class or order of permanent officers in the church. There seems to have been a bench of elders selected on account of age, piety, prudence, and wisdom, to whom was intrusted the whole business of the instruction and government of the church, and they performed the various parts of the duty as they had ability.” Dr. Cunningham, late principal of New College, Edinburgh, high Scotch-Presbyterian authority, says upon this passage: “Some keen advocates for presbytery, as the word is now understood, on the model of John Calvin, have imagined they discovered this distinction in the words of Paul to Timothy. Here, say they, is a twofold partition of the officers comprised under the same name, into those who rule and those who labor in the word and doctrine; that is, into ruling elders and teaching elders. To this it is replied, on the other side, that the *especially* is not intended to indicate a different office, but to distinguish from others those who assiduously apply themselves to the most important as well as the most difficult part of their office, public teaching; that the distinction intended is, therefore, not official but personal; that it does not relate to a difference in the powers conferred, but solely to a difference in their application. And to this exposition, as by far the most natural, I entirely agree” (quoted in “Wardlaw on Independence,” p. 218). But if this passage be given up, as these authorities do, ruling elders must be given up, for there is not another in which they may even plausibly be found. For these reasons, ruling elders are rejected as extra-scriptural, and preaching elders and deacons, it is believed, were the only officers of an apostolic church.

The duties of deacons were secular and not clerical. The account in the sixth chapter of Acts sufficiently proves this. Nor does it make any difference as to this point, whether this is or is not an account of the appointment of deacons technically so-called. Perhaps it is not. Perhaps those whom the apostle calls deacons, and whose qualifications he gives in 1 Timothy, were of subsequent appointment. Yet that the transaction recorded in Acts vi. furnished the model according to which those technically called deacons were appointed, seems evinced by the fact that the post-apostolic churches for two or three centuries observed the number *seven* in the selection of their deacons, after the manner of the account there given.

These seven were appointed to be the trustees and stewards of the common fund, to distribute to each one according to his or her necessities. This had hitherto been done by the apostles. But when the number of the

disciples had so increased as to render the work burdensome and an interference with the ministry of the word, and when jealousies had arisen, and complaints of partiality, exposing them to influences injurious to their usefulness, they abandoned the work, alleging that it was not proper that they should leave the word of God and serve tables. This very reason shows that these seven did not belong to the ministry of the word. Otherwise *they* could have said the same thing, and the reason would have been good for them also. There is no evidence that Stephen preached in the usual sense of that word. He defended himself when assailed by the opponents of Christianity, as any Christian should do. And even if there were evidence that he *preached* in the apostolic churches, anyone who could might preach as occasion and feeling prompted. Preaching was not regarded as a *prerogative* of the ministry. Even women sometimes preached, until the apostle corrected this error. Philip became an evangelist.

Besides, "aptness to teach" is not a qualification of a deacon. If preaching had been included among the official duties of their original appointment, this qualification would certainly not have been omitted. Its omission would, therefore, seem to be conclusive proof that it was not. Only those qualifications are laid down which would be most likely to insure the selection of men of good business qualities, not apt to yield to those peculiar temptations to which the nature of their work exposed them—an "itching palm" and a gossiping tongue. They must be "grave" men, of more than ordinary piety, of "honest report," not "double-tongued," nor greedy of gain. Furthermore, in the post-apostolic churches, preaching was not considered as incidental to their office, nor were they at first allowed to preach. In the fourth century, by special permission, they sometimes preached and baptized, yet probably only in some places, and very occasionally: for the author under the name of Ambrose says positively that they did not preach in his time—probably the fourth century (Bingham's *Antiquities*. i. p. 90). To style ministers of the gospel of a certain grade deacons, is an abuse of the scriptural term, and a perversion of its meaning.

Deaconesses were appointed in some at least of the apostolic churches. It is most probable, however, that they were not ordained as were the deacons, as we have no account of such ordination, and were not therefore *officers*, but were merely appointed or requested to perform the same duties for the female portion of the church which the deacons did for the male portion. The rigid separation of the sexes in that day, which would debar the female members from the administrations of the deacons, rendered such an appointment at that time necessary. As, however, that which originated solely from a necessity peculiar to a particular state of society, may be discontinued when the necessity no longer exists, it should not be considered that such an appointment must be followed now by us. The principle by which we are to be guided in determining what appointments in the apostolic churches are to be considered as binding for all time, and what dis-

cretionary, may be stated thus. Whatever can be CLEARLY shown from Scripture, either by precept or example, to have been instituted by the apostles, *and which cannot be shown to have had its origin in the temporary and peculiar circumstance of their time*, is binding on us and for all time. Whatever can be shown to have had its origin in the peculiarities of that time, is not binding, the same peculiarities no longer existing. Upon this principle, deaconesses, a plurality of elders, and the “holy kiss,” are omitted now. Upon this principle also, the frequency of the Lord’s Supper is left to the pious discretion of the churches. It is believed by most, that it cannot be *clearly* shown, to say the least, *from Scripture*, either by precept or example, that the apostolic churches communed weekly. Whatever is of such importance that our Saviour would make it binding upon his people, it is presumable he would teach with such clearness that they might learn it with reasonable care and candor.

These officers—elders and deacons—were chosen by popular election. In the case of the deacons this is evident. As to the elders, Scripture is silent; but, in this case, this very silence is significant, since in every voluntary society, and a church is such, popular election is the *normal rule* and need not be expressly stated, but any other mode would *require express teaching*, and there is none such. It is said, indeed, in Acts xiv. 23, that Paul and Barnabas “appointed them elders in every church;” but this does not exclude the concurrence of the church. Some think that the word translated “appointed,” according to “its original and usual sense,” means that Paul and Barnabas *took the vote of the people*; thus merely presiding over the choice. (So Schaff, Hist. Apostolic Ch. 501.) Others think that “appointed” means formally set them apart to their office after the church had chosen them. Whether either of these views be considered correct or not—and it is admitted that neither should be—yet, certainly, in any view justified by the original word, their *appointment* does not necessarily exclude the approbation and concurrence of the church. The apostle, possessing a better judgment as to the fitness of persons for the office of the ministry than an inexperienced church newly converted from heathenism, would, doubtless, in all the churches, that he planted, exercise a controlling influence in the selection of such persons. Very probably, he would name the persons most suitable, and the church would concur; in like manner as a Baptist missionary of the present day might do, yet always recognizing the popular right of the church, and appointing no one without its concurrence. There is, therefore, nothing said or necessarily implied in Acts xiv. 23, that shows that the apostolic churches did not choose their elders by popular election, whilst we know that this was the practice of the churches *immediately succeeding* the apostles and for many centuries afterward. The apostolic Father, Clement of Rome (close of the first century), says explicitly, his first epistle to the Corinthians, that the apostles appointed bishops and deacons “with the concurrence of the whole church” (Schaff’s Hist.

Apostolic Ch. 502). Even the Roman Catholic Dollinger says, in his "History of the Church," i. p. 242: "The election of the clergy could not canonically take place without the participation of the assembled community....They chose the seven whom the apostles ordained. In succeeding times the bishop in particular (who, to enjoy the confidence of all, required the testimony of all that he was the most worthy) was chosen by the voices of his brethren." So late as the middle of the third century, Cyprian testifies to the same practice, and contends that the right of popular election is a principle sanctioned by the sacred Scriptures, and based *jure divino* (Cunningham's Historical Theol. i. 191). This right the churches continued to exercise, although all the growing tendencies were against it, until a dominant prelacy, naturally developing into papacy, crushed out this last remaining apostolic right of the churches.

2. *Members of the Apostolical Churches.*—The *members* of the apostolic churches were all converted persons, or supposed to be converted. In the various epistles they are addressed as "saints," "faithful brethren," "the sons of God," "sanctified in Christ Jesus." The many exhortations to a godly life and a holy conversation presume that they are "new creatures in Christ Jesus;" and the motives by which they are enforced are such as could be expected to have no force upon any other presumption. Upon the day of Pentecost they that gladly received the word were baptized; "and the Lord added to the church daily those who are saved;" that is, those who were already in process of being saved, in whom a work of salvation had already commenced before they were added, and who were not, therefore, added in order to commence that work.

There are two different and opposite ideas of the nature and functions of the church, upon one or the other of which every Christian organization must practically proceed. One is that which conceives of the church as occupying a mediating position between us and God, and connection with which by baptism is therefore necessary to place us in the channel of grace and in the way of salvation. This is the Romish idea of the church, out of which naturally grow a hierarchy, infant baptism, and a mixed membership. The other is that which conceives of the church as a society of believers in Jesus Christ. They are first believers in order to become members of this society, and not first members of this society in order to become believers. This is the apostolic idea of the church. Accordingly, there was no hierarchy in the apostolic churches. The ministers of the gospel appointed by the apostles are called bishops, elders, pastors, teachers, stewards, servants, leaders, etc., but *never priests*. This is very significant. The apostles were Jews. All their religious ideas and associations had been intimately connected with a sacerdotal ministry and the priestly service of the Temple. Yet never in the New Testament are Christian ministers called priests, and never are any sacerdotal terms employed in speaking of their ministrations. There is no infant baptism in the New Testament. Dr. Jacob, of the church

of England, says: "Notwithstanding all that has been written by learned men upon this subject, it remains indisputable that infant baptism is not mentioned in the New Testament: No instance of it is recorded there; no allusion is made to its effects; no directions are given for its administration. . . .; it ought to be distinctly acknowledged that it is not an apostolic ordinance. . . . There is no trace of it until the last part of the second century, when a passage is found in Irenaeus which may possibly—and only possibly—refer to it. Nor is it anywhere distinctly mentioned before the time of Tertullian, who, while he testifies to the practice, was himself rather opposed to it. As an established order of the church, therefore, it belongs to the third century, when its use and the mode of its administration and the whole theory of it as a Christian ceremony were necessarily moulded by the baptismal theology of the time" (Eccl. Pol., pp. 270, 271). If anyone should wonder how one holding such views should yet practice infant baptism, the explanation is found in the fact that he justifies himself upon the ground of "*church authority*." Hence the difference between the Presbyterian and the Episcopalian in their admissions upon this subject. The Episcopalian holds that the church has authority to alter or to add to the apostolic ordinances when the alterations or additions are supposed to be legitimately deduced from apostolic principles. He has no difficulty, therefore, in candidly admitting that immersion was the primitive mode of baptism and believers the only subjects, because, upon his principles he can justify, by "*church authority*," his substituting sprinkling for immersion and his practice of infant baptism. The Presbyterian more properly holds that the church has no authority to alter or to add to the ordinances of the apostles by any deductions or inferences. The apostolic ordinances are certainly right, but our inferences may be wrong. He is restrained, therefore, in his admissions, and to justify *himself* in sprinkling and in infant baptism is obliged boldly to assert against Episcopal as well as Baptist scholarship, that immersion was not the primitive mode, and that infant baptism *is* found in the New Testament. The logical exigencies of his case force him to this. If he were to take any other ground, consistency would oblige him to become a Baptist, at least so far as the mode and subject of baptism are concerned. But to proceed Litton says: "All the members of the church were supposed to be true believers, and to have been baptized as such: many may have been hypocrites, but they were not baptized as hypocrites or nominal Christians. In short, St. Paul addresses Christians according to their profession, according to what, if their profession was sincere, they actually were. How far his expressions are applicable to a church composed of persons baptized in their infancy is another question; but it must never be forgotten that this was not the case of those to whom St. Paul wrote" (p. 213, note). Pressensé says: "Christian baptism is not to be received any more than faith by right of inheritance. This is the great reason why we cannot believe that it was administered in the apostolic age to little children. No

positive fact sanctioning the practice can be adduced from the New Testament; the historical proofs alleged are in no way conclusive." (Apostolic Era, p. 376)

There was no mixed membership in the apostolic churches. If there was no infant baptism, there was no mixed membership; for there is no difference among Christians of any denomination, except Roman Catholics, as to adults. These, to be received as members, it is agreed must give credible evidence of conversion. But the apostolic churches were composed of adults only, or of those only who were capable of exercising personal faith and repentance, there being at that time no infant baptism, and consequently no infant church-membership. All, therefore, received into the apostolic churches were converted, or believed to be converted. If some were self-deceived or hypocrites, they were not received *as such*; and when their true character was found out, they were told that they had "neither part nor lot" in the church. This—a converted church membership, a membership composed only of persons who are believed to have exercised personal repentance and faith—is, of all others, the most important peculiarity that characterized the apostolic organization of the church. And when it shall come to be recognized by Christians of the present day as a necessary and fundamental characteristic of a Christian church, a sacerdotal ministry and infant baptism will find their proper places among the Jewish Pagan corruptions of Christianity. Let that Romish idea of the church cease to be entertained by Protestant Christians, which conceives of it as mediating between us and God, so that connection by baptism with it, if not necessary to salvation, yet at least places us in a more salvable condition, and infant baptism and consequent infant church-membership will be remitted to the exclusive advocacy and practice of the Church of Rome—where alone they consistently belong. For it is this unscriptural, Romish idea of the nature and functions of the church, leading to the persuasion that connection by baptism with it somehow places a child more nearly in the channel of God's grace and in the way of salvation, that gives to infant baptism its hold upon the parental mind, and continues its practice. The Rev. Wm. Bates, Lecturer of Christ's College, Cambridge, in "College Lectures on Christian Antiquities and the Ritual," p. 399, propounds the following question and answer: "Why must parents and friends be careful to get their children baptized? Because by this ordinance their original sin is washed away and they are grafted into the body of Christ; so that if they die before they have committed actual sin, they are undoubtedly saved; and if this be neglected by their fault, they must answer *for putting the salvation of the children to so great a hazard*." It is very much to be deplored, that when the Reformation took place, Protestantism did not throw off entirely all the errors of Romanism. Naturally enough, from long association, but very unfortunately, it retained and has continued to retain some of these errors, thereby giving a degree of plausibility to the charge that Protestantism is a "failure."

3. *Relation of the Apostolic Churches to each other.*—The churches organized by the apostles were all distinct, independent bodies. Each church managed its own affairs, independently of every other, recognizing no human control or authority outside of itself. There was no consociation or confederation of several churches under one common ecclesiastical judicatory. It is believed by Presbyterians, and urged in favor of Presbyterianism, that in some large cities, Jerusalem for example, the number of Christians was too large ever to meet together as one church, and that therefore there must have been several separate churches, but all confederated under one common presbytery, and hence the “church at Jerusalem” is spoken of, and not the churches. To say nothing of the too great readiness which the advocates of this theory manifest to swell the number of disciples, in the case supposed, by taking it for granted that all the large conversions which took place at Jerusalem were additions to the church there, whereas, it is certain in some cases, and probable in all, that this was not the case to a great extent, very many of these converts being nonresidents, as on the day of Pentecost, so that we are not obliged to suppose that it was not possible for them all to meet as one body or church;—to say nothing of this, it may be remarked, that, since the term “church” in all other similar connections is confessedly applied to a single church, the inference is, that in the case supposed it means one single church, and not several confederated. This inference is strengthened by our not being obliged to suppose that the number of disciples was so large that they could never all meet together, and becomes assurance by our being expressly told that the “whole church” did come together (Acts vi. 2; xv. 22; 1 Cor. xiv. 23). It is doubtless true, that, in a large city like Jerusalem, and it may be Antioch, Ephesus, and Corinth, the number of Christians *was* too large to meet as one body *ordinarily*. Prudential reasons would cause them most probably to meet in several assemblies in different places. The fallacy, however, in the above theory lies in supposing that these several congregations were several distinct churches, and not sections of the same church meeting in different places for ordinary worship, but the “whole multitude” coming together when anything of special importance required.

Reference is made to the so-called Council at Jerusalem, Acts xv., to prove that the Scriptures furnish a model of a Presbyterian Synod, “for a rule to the churches of Christ in all succeeding ages.” A statement of the facts of this case will show how erroneous this reference is. While Paul and Barnabas were laboring at Antioch after their return from the apostle’s first missionary tour, certain persons came from Judaea, more particularly from Jerusalem, as verse 24 shows, and were teaching the members of the church at Antioch, that faith in Christ *without circumcision* would not save them. Paul and Barnabas opposed their false teaching, and “had no small dissension and disputation with them.” The church determined to send Paul and Barnabas, and others of their number, to the apostles still residing at

Jerusalem, and to the elders of the church there, to inquire “about this question.” If ever a question called for inspired decision, this did. It was one of vital *doctrinal* importance, involving the fundamental doctrine of salvation by faith or by works. The apostles might have assembled alone together and decided it themselves, by their infallible authority as inspired teachers of the gospel. It was a most proper question for inspired apostolic decision. But, as these Judaizing teachers constituted no small part of the number of Jewish Christians, and as they were very bigoted in their views, and very zealous in teaching them; and as they did not perceive or recognize the character of the apostles as inspired guides (if indeed their character in this respect was, at this early period, at all generally understood); and, moreover, as the teachers had represented, as appears from verse 24, that their teaching had the sanction of the church at Jerusalem,—the apostles, instead of settling the question themselves, seem to have deemed it expedient to assemble the elders “with the whole church,” that the subject might be discussed with these false teachers, and that they might publicly settle it with the concurrence of the elders and of “the whole church.” After much “disputing” with these errorists to convince them, the church at Antioch is informed that they did not have the sanction of the church at Jerusalem, and the Gentile Christians at Antioch and in Syria and Cilicia are required to do only that which Christians in all times are required to do (Rom. xv.), namely, to make some concessions to the weak consciences of their weak Jewish brethren, by abstaining from certain things. The decision was the decision of the apostles *as such*, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as the narrative shows; but, for the reasons mentioned, the more effectually to silence, if possible, these false teachers, and to confirm the confidence of Gentile Christians, it is made in a meeting of the whole church at Jerusalem, the church concurring, and goes forth as the decision of “the apostles, and the elders and brethren” there. This union of the elders and members of the church at Jerusalem with *the apostles* in promulgating the decision, does not show it to be any less the inspired decision of the apostles, nor imply that the elders and church members were inspired too; any more than when the apostle begins his Epistle to the Galatians by saying: “Paul, an apostle (not of men, etc.), and all the brethren which are with me,” this shows that it was not his inspired epistle, or that “the brethren” shared his inspiration. How unlike this transaction is to a Presbyterian Synod, both in the character of its decision, and in the character of the assembly, anyone may see. The decision of a Presbyterian Synod is the fallible decision of fallible men;—this the infallible decision of *apostles* under the infallible guidance of the Holy Spirit. This assembly is composed of the apostles, with the elders and members of the church at Jerusalem. The “certain other of them” sent from Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, do not constitute part of the assembly to discuss and decide the question, but to submit it. A Presbyterian Synod is composed of delegates elected by the various Presbyteries of the region embraced under

the jurisdiction of the Synod. To make the character of the two assemblies similar, so that one may be a model for the other, Dr. Mason (Works, ii. 117), says that, "the apostles returned thither from their excursions in preaching the gospel, accompanied *with elders, or presbyters, from the churches which they had planted (!)*, and met together in ecclesiastical council, to consider about their common interest. Herein they have set us the example and left us the warrant of a *delegated body*." It is very wonderful how anyone who reverences the word of God can get his own consent to "handle it" so "deceitfully." What error in the world could not be proved from the sacred Scriptures, if we may thus allow ourselves to interpolate into them facts from our fancy, manufactured to suit a theory. Neither Presbyterianism nor Independency finds any support from this so-called council.

Abundant authority could be cited in favor of the independence of the primitive churches; only two, however, will be given,—the infidel Gibbon, and the archbishop Whately. Gibbon (i. chap. 15), says: "The societies which were instituted in the cities of the Roman Empire were united only by the ties of faith and charity. Independence and equality formed the basis of their internal constitution. Such was the mild and equal constitution by which the Christians were governed, more than a hundred years after the death of the apostles. Every society formed within itself a separate and independent republic." The late Archbishop of Dublin ("Kingdom of Christ," p. 36), says: "It appears plainly from the sacred narrative, that though the many churches which the apostles founded were branches of one spiritual brotherhood, of which the Lord Jesus Christ is the heavenly Head,—though there was 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism' for all of them, yet they were each a distinct, independent community on earth, united by the common principles on which they were founded, and by their mutual agreement, affection, and respect; but not having any one recognized head on earth, or acknowledging any sovereignty of one of these societies over others." The infidel, having no ecclesiastical preferences to favor, could speak impartially; and the archbishop, having no doubt as to the "authority" of the church to change apostolic appointments, could speak candidly. To these might be added the testimony of Mosheim, Neander, Gieseler, Hinds, and others. "It is clear as the noonday," says Mosheim.

Such was the apostolic organization of the churches as to their officers, membership, and relation to each other. They had, as officers, only elders and deacons, of equal rank, and chosen by the people;—their members were all required to be converted persons;—and the churches were all independent or each other.

II. THE OBLIGATION OF THE APOSTOLIC MODEL.

Should the disciples of our Lord regard this organization as a model obligatory upon them to adopt, or has he left the form of church polity discretionary

with his people? This is a question of great practical importance. Ecclesiastical history teaches us, that the first errors that infected the early church, leading it farthest astray, and exerting the widest influence in causing its departure from apostolic simplicity and purity, were not errors in doctrine, but in church government and discipline. And it is chiefly errors here, rather than in doctrine, that now separate the followers of our common Lord and Master. If all the true followers of our Lord could see eye to eye, as respects the scriptural idea of the nature and functions of his church, and the principles upon which its first organization proceeded, the chief differences, and most serious errors, that now divide the "body of Christ" into discordant and belligerent sects, would disappear. The question, therefore, is one of very great practical importance, and deserving a fuller consideration than may here be given to it. Whilst the importance of the form of church government should not, indeed, be unduly magnified, on the one hand, by being placed among things *essential*, yet, on the other, it ought not to be unduly under-estimated by being placed among things *indifferent*, nor that feeling indulged which would regard all questions relating to this subject as trivial and not worth the trouble of an earnest investigation.

Our Saviour intended that his disciples should form themselves into churches; and when in Matthew xviii. 17, he says, "Tell it unto the church," he has in view the societies or churches, soon to be formed, and speaks by way of anticipation. Man is a social being. The highest development of his nature as an intelligent being is found in society. In all matters that deeply interest and affect, he naturally seeks the sympathy, communion, and cooperation of kindred spirits. His religious nature is not an exception. "It is natural that those whose hopes and fears, whose joys and sorrows, are similar, should associate together that they may strengthen their faith by fraternal communion. Again: it is made the duty of every disciple to extend the spiritual reign of his Maker. Much of this labor can be carried on only by associated effort. For such reasons as these, our Lord has taught us that his disciples in any place should form themselves into fraternal societies." They are intended to subserve the highest and most important ends in the world,—individual edification and growth in grace, and the evangelization of the world. Now, if any and every form of church government is equally adapted to promote these ends, and therefore equally "acceptable to the Master," then the question proposed is no question at all. But this, surely, will not be affirmed, and cannot be maintained. It is certainly not true of any other kind of government. Any and all forms of civil government are not equally adapted to promote the true ends of government. The character, too, of a people is largely moulded, we know, by the character of the political government under which they live. Is there any reason for saying that this is not so as respects church polity? Will not the genius of the government, in the one case as well as in the other, reflect itself in the genius of the people? Will not a church polity that deals larger in rites and cere-

monies, for instance, tend to impress a formal and ceremonial religious character upon its members? Will not a polity that exalts prominently the authority of its rulers, and the acquiescence of its members, tend to destroy the exercise of the right of private judgment and the sense of individual responsibility, and to impress a religion that consists in mere submission to church authority, and is satisfied with a blind following of the leadership of others? The external encloses the internal, and has an important influence upon it. "The outward form and constitution of a church; the laws or customs which regulate its worship and discipline; the functions assigned to its officers,—the ritual observed in its devotions; and its whole action as a visible Christian body,—react with great force upon its inner life, upon the doctrines which it most prominently teaches, the manner in which those doctrines are received and held by its individual members, and the whole of their religious character and state. The importance, therefore, of the external action in any Christian church, though it must be confined to its own proper sphere, can hardly, within that sphere, be exaggerated or too highly placed. Hence in every church, a due attention to its outward organization—its regulations, ceremonial, government, and polity in general—is intimately connected with its most vital interests, and can never with safety be omitted, or regarded as a matter of slight and trivial concern" (Jacob's Ecc. Pol. pp. 18, 19). The correctness of these views will hardly be denied by anyone. But if admitted, they settle the question, whether our Saviour has left the form of church organization discretionary with his people. If any and all forms are not equally adapted to subserve the high ends for which churches are divinely instituted, then there is a form better adapted than others; and if there be one better adapted than another, the Saviour would surely not leave it to fallible human wisdom to find it out. When we consider the vastly important ends for which churches are instituted, and that these ends are vitally affected,—for good or evil, for progress or hindrance,—by the form of organization, we cannot believe that the Saviour left the apostles to their unassisted wisdom in the organization which they instituted. The antecedent improbability of such a thing is too great to allow us to believe this. He must, *in some way*, have given them divine guidance in this matter,—a matter so extremely important, as we have seen, and so entirely new to them and to all their previous training. Whether in the forty days that he was "seen of them," and spake "of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God," he then gave them personal directions, we cannot, of course, say. But we know that they received extraordinary endowments for their great mission. To found churches was a part, and a very important part, of their mission. We must believe, in view of the important bearing of the form of their organization upon the successful or unsuccessful accomplishment of the high ends of their institution, that they were under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in this matter, as well as in the enunciation of the doctrinal principles of Christianity: so that the polity

instituted by them must be regarded as the expression of divine wisdom on this subject. The real question, then, seems to be this—Are we under obligation to adopt that polity which divine wisdom has pointed out to be the best adapted to promote the ends of church organization, or may we feel at liberty to change it or to substitute some other, according to our views of fitness and expediency? Such a question does not admit of debate.

It may be said in reply, that if there were a system of church government laid down in the Scriptures, certainly we should regard it as the Holy Spirit's indication of the best system, and therefore binding upon us; but there is none. Dr. Wayland, in "University Sermons," p. 228, says: "I do not perceive in the New Testament any directions on this subject. . . . I see nothing in the New Testament which would prevent any community of Christians from adopting any form of church government which they esteem most for their edification." This must be regarded as one among a few other errors of a great and good man. The antecedent improbability of this, as already shown, is so great as to make one doubt its correctness. But we need not have recourse to any *a priori* reasoning. We may appeal at once to facts. In the New Testament we learn, that the apostles appointed certain officers, elders and deacons; that they were chosen by popular vote, certainly as to the latter and by fair if not necessary inference as to the former, from the significant silence of Scripture before alluded to; that they had certain rights and duties; that there was no imparity among them; that certain qualifications were necessary for membership; that the members had certain rights and duties; and that each church had the full power of its own government, recognizing no other authority save that of Christ, "Head over all things." Now, here are certain great, leading, fundamental principles which constitute a system of church government. It is not contended that there is a system, logically propounded, and laid down in systematic form. But neither are the doctrines of the gospel so laid down; and for a wise purpose. We are thereby left to a diligent search of the Scriptures, and by comparing Scripture with Scripture, and collecting instruction from the scattered and incidental references to doctrines in the Scriptures, to arrange them into a systematic, harmonious body of doctrine. Similarly, with the great leading principles of church government. The objection of the absence of a formally propounded system no more proves that a system is not deducible and intended to be deduced from the Scriptures, than it does in the case of the doctrines of the gospel. Indeed, a formally stated system of church government is much less to be expected than a formally stated system of doctrine. It would have been inappropriate in letters to churches already formed to give forma directions as to how they should be formed. They knew that already. Nor is it contended that full and minute directions are given as to the *incidentals* and *circumstantials* of church government. The great leading, essential principles are all that could be expected or that are necessary. Thus, minor circumstantials may vary, while the essential, sub-

stantial form is retained. There may be but one elder to a church instead of a plurality; or but one or two deacons instead of seven; but the number belongs to the circumstantial; it is the *office* that is the essential thing.

Again: it may be said, that church organization appears in the New Testament only in a *formative* state, and therefore not in a condition to be a pattern to us. This, however, is hypothesis merely. If it be true that certain leading, distinctive principles, such as have been stated, can be collected from the writings of the New Testament, they certainly furnish in full a *constitution* by which a fully organized church government may be formed. Why should the apostles leave the organization in a merely formative state, and, in a matter so important, risk the issue of an unfortunate final form? What was there to hinder them from completing the organization, and setting everything “in order,” in every case in which they commenced it?

Again: somewhat similarly, it may be alleged, whilst admitting in the main what has been said, that church polity, like the doctrines of the gospel, was intended to be a matter of progressive development, the apostles laying down the general, leading principles upon which the subsequent development was to take place. Hence, most Episcopalians—and it is they that take this ground—whilst admitting, as does Archbishop Whately, that the independent and congregational form of government was the one instituted by the apostles, yet speak of subsequent episcopacy, not as a *change* but a *development* of the apostolic regulations. To this it may be replied: In the matter of doctrine there was a progressive development, but this development was conducted by inspired men, and is recorded in Scripture. No such claim is made for the alleged development of church polity. Further, this development theory gives us a very unusual kind of development,—a development progressing *backwards*. In reference to government in general, it is conceded, perhaps universally, that a system which is founded upon the principle of self-government, in which all authority emanates from *the people* and is in the hands of the people, is the best, if they have sufficient intelligence and virtue to conduct so good a system. But it is admitted, as before shown, that this was the kind of government instituted by the apostles, and in the infancy of the church. To speak of episcopacy as a *development* of this, is very like saying that a child, when he is a child, may govern himself, but when he becomes a man he must be governed by guardians and masters. “It does me good,” says the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, in his way “to hear people talk of church government being so necessary to men; and nowhere in the world does it do me so much good to hear them thus talk as in America, where the fundamental theory of the civil government is that every man is competent to govern himself. Men insist that in matters relating to the village or town, it is competent to govern itself, that the county is competent to govern itself, that the State is competent to govern itself, and that the Nation is competent to govern itself; but when they come down to the church, which is composed usually of

picked men—of the best men in the community in which it is located—they say that the church is not able to govern itself; that it needs a presbytery over it, and a synod over that, and a general assembly over that—as if you wanted four hens sitting on one set of eggs.”

Again: it may be said, “The apostles were known to be infallible guides; and those who immediately succeeded them, and all subsequent ages, are quite sure, that they must have pursued that which was, under the existing circumstances, the most direct line to their object; that, circumstance as Christianity was in their hands, all their regulations were the best. The uninspired church was therefore bound to follow them, until any apostolical practice should be found inadequate to accomplish its original purpose. Here commence the discretion and the responsibility; the first obligation being to maintain the principle according to the best of their judgment, as the prudent steersman alters his track and deviates from the course marked out in his chart when wind and tide compel him to deviate. . . . In matters which admit of appeal to the usage of the apostolic church, we are sure, not only that the measure was wise, but the very wisest; and accordingly the only question is, whether its suitability has been affected by any change of circumstances” (Bishop Hinds’ “Early Christianity,” p. 210).

This is plausible, but it is plausibility only. The apostles instituted a certain form of church government. They “were known to be infallible guides.” “Circumstanced as Christianity was in their hands” the form they instituted, “we are sure,” was not only wise, “but the very wisest.” “Accordingly, the only question is,” indeed, “whether its suitability has been affected by any change of circumstances.” But they have nowhere intimated even that any change of circumstances would affect its suitability. If it be alleged that any change of circumstances *does* render it unsuitable, so as to justify us in changing it according to our discretion, we have a right to demand that its unsuitability be shown *clearly* and *unmistakably*. It was the “very wisest,” confessedly, under their circumstances, because they were infallible guides. If it is alleged not to be the “very wisest” under other circumstances, we have a right to demand, in the absence of any apostolic intimation to that effect, that its unwisdom be as certainly shown in changing circumstances, as apostolic infallibility shows that it was the wisest under their circumstances. The admission justifies this demand, and the nature of the case requires it. But this never has been, and of course, never can be done. That changing circumstances render it unsuitable is only our judgment, our inference. But how liable our judgement and our inferences are to be wrong in this matter of church government, all history proves. Besides, there is an obvious fallacy that lies under this plea of changing circumstances. To support it, we are referred to the analogy of civil government, and told that a form of civil government that may be the best for a people under some circumstances may not be the best under others. We admit the fact, but deny the analogy. In spiritual matters there are *no chang-*

ing circumstances rendering a form of religious government which was “the very wisest” at one time, not the wisest at another. The churches of Jesus Christ, according to the apostolic idea and appointment, are everywhere and always associations of spiritual persons, united on spiritual principles that *never change*, for spiritual ends that *never change*, and in the use of spiritual means that *never change*; and the same constitution therefore, that suited them at first, must suit them *always* and *everywhere*. The nature upon which the gospel operates, and whose edification and sanctification is one of the ends of church organization, is ever the same. In whatever other respects men may change their state or circumstances, there can be none here; depraved human nature is the same now that it was in the days of Peter and of Paul, and will remain the same amid all the mutations of earthly things. The gospel too, is ever the same. The onward march of civilization and of science can add no new brightness to its glory, nor strength to its potency, nor lustre to its purity. That form of polity therefore, which was instituted by the apostles, and which is admitted to have been “the very wisest” means to accomplish its ends then, must be “the very wisest” for all times, human nature, the gospel, and the ends ever being the same. If, “circumstanced as Christianity was in their hands,” when the church was in its infancy and its members recently converted from Paganism, the independent and congregational form was “the very wisest” for promoting individual edification and growth in grace, what possible reason can be given why it should not be “the very wisest” now, and under all circumstances? If, when the church was in its infancy and surrounded on all sides by heathenism, this form was the best for promoting the world’s evangelization, what possible reason can be given why it should not be the best now and for all circumstances? This plea of changing circumstances is dangerous as well as fallacious. It leaves everybody at liberty to say what change of circumstances renders apostolic regulations unsuitable, and thus, as some one has well said, what is claimed to be left to our discretion is left to everybody’s *indiscretion*.

Finally, it may be said that this form of polity is too good a government for professing Christians as we ordinarily find them,—very fine in theory, but in theory only,—and therefore could not have been the one intended, “upon the principle that the most ingenious tool is useless without a competent workman to handle it.” It is very freely admitted that this form is the most worthless and inefficient if the churches are not imbued with the spirit of Christ, and is efficient only in proportion as they are. But “it is no discredit to a Christian organization that it cannot succeed without Christianity,” whilst it is an unanswerable argument in its favor that it requires for its complete success the highest attainments in Christian virtue and the most thorough consecration to the cause of Christ. If our Saviour intended that his disciples should form themselves into churches at all, we should naturally expect beforehand that this would be the kind of organization he

would intend,—an organization that would derive all its energy and efficiency from the spirituality of its members and their love for his cause. “Too good for Christians as we ordinarily find them,” it is said. This is an objection that must not be urged against the suitability of the form of government, but against the piety of Christians as we ordinarily find them. The form which the apostles, our “infallible guides,” instituted, must not be brought down to the low attainments of Christians ordinarily, but Christians must bring up their attainments to it. “Too good for Christians as we ordinarily find them.” Only the more reason why all should adopt this good government, and strive after a more than ordinary degree of devotedness to his cause. Other forms of government have a machinery to work them, and can work by the mere force of their machinery. It is more than cheerfully admitted that this has nothing to work it but love to Jesus and consecration to his cause.

There are obvious excellences belonging to this form of polity which would lead us to believe that our Saviour *did* intend it. Among others, its ministerial parity offers less temptation than any other to ministerial rivalries and jealousies, and a carnal ambition. Its elective franchise offers less opportunity than any other to a priestly lording over God’s heritage. Its congregational form begets, more than any other, a sense of individual responsibility, an active interest in church matters, and the exercise of private judgment. Its cardinal principle of a converted church membership tends more than any other to maintain the purity of the church. Its independent form guards better than any other against schism. Indeed, when this independence is faithfully observed, there cannot be any schism to which a great confederated church is liable.

But enough; let us hope that the day may not be so distant as the present divisions among Christians would indicate, when the word of God shall be accepted by the people of God as the only authority in all matters of religious belief and practice, and when our Saviour’s prayer that his people “may be one” will be completely answered.