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HISTORICAL THEOLOGY:

*A REVIEW OF THE PRINCIPAL DOCTRINAL DISCUSSIONS
IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH SINCE
THE APOSTOLIC AGE.*

BY THE LATE

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CHAPTER II.

THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM.

Sec. 1.—Scripture Narrative.

ALTHOUGH our review of Theological Discussions properly begins at the close of the apostolic age, yet there is one transaction recorded in the New Testament to which it may be proper to advert, from its intimate connection with the whole subsequent history and government of the church, and with the controversies to which they have given rise, many of them continuing down to the present day. I allude to what is commonly called the Council of Jerusalem, recorded in the fifteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.

There has been a very great deal of discussion about the true character of this transaction, and the lessons, if any, which it is fitted to suggest respecting the government of the church in subsequent ages. Papists, Prelates, and Presbyterians have usually held that it was fitted and intended to convey some instruction as to the way and manner in which the government of the church should be permanently conducted, and have all professed to find in it something to favour their respective systems; while Congregationalists, not being able to find in it anything to favour *their* views of church government, have generally contented themselves with maintaining that it does not afford any very clear or certain materials for determining in what way the government of the church should be conducted in subsequent ages.* Papists, finding it recorded here that Peter took a prominent part in the discussion

* Books and references on the Council at Jerusalem:—

Moshemii Institutiones Majores, p. 263. *Commentarii*, pp. 155, 169.

Buddaeus, *Ecclesia Apostolica*, c. iv.

Buddaeus, *Isagoge*, lib. ii. c. v. sec. iii. p. 741.

Parker, *De Politica Ecclesiastica*, lib. iii. c. xiii.

Boëhmeri, *Dissertationes Juris Ec-*

which arose upon this occasion, adduce the narrative as a proof that he acted then, was entitled to act, and was recognised as entitled to act, as the vicar of Christ and the head of the church. Prelatists, finding that, several centuries afterwards, the notion was broached that James was appointed by the apostles Bishop of Jerusalem, profess to get scriptural evidence of this fancy in the prominent part which *he* took in the discussion. There is not in the narrative a trace of any *superiority in office or jurisdiction* on the part either of Peter or James; so that the substance of the Popish argument is virtually this: Peter spoke *first*, and therefore he was superior in authority and jurisdiction to the other apostles; while the Prelatic argument is: James spoke *last*, and gave shape to the decision of the council, and therefore he was diocesan bishop, and, as such, superior in some respects even to the apostles. This, of course, is sheer trifling; and the only question of real importance or difficulty connected with this matter, lies between the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists or Independents.

The Congregationalists usually contend that this transaction was so peculiar and extraordinary as to afford no pattern or precedent for the disposal of theological controversies, and the regulation of ecclesiastical affairs in subsequent ages, and in ordinary circumstances; * while Presbyterians deny this, and allege that it affords a warrant for the general substance of some of the leading features of Presbyterian church government. The question whether or not the transaction was so peculiar and extraordinary

clesiastici Antiqui, Diss. iii. pp. 98, 218, commented on by Mosheim, *Inst. Maj.* 264.

Rutherford, *Peaceable Plea*, c. xiv. p. 199.

Rutherford, *Due Right of Presbyteries*, pp. 355-380 *et seq.*

Divine Right of Church Government. Jus Div. Reg. Eccles. By London Ministers, c. xiv. and xv.

Wood's *Answer to Lockyer*, and books referred to there. Part ii. sec. viii. p. 302.

Cotton's *Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven*, c. vi. and c. vii. Prop. iv.

Gillespie's *Assertion of the Government of the Church of Scotland*.

Brown's *Vindication of the Presby-*

terian Form of Church Government, Let. viii. and xii.

Carson's *Reply to do.*, Let. x.

Davidson's *Ecclesiastical Polity of the New Testament*, Lect. vii.

Wardlaw on *Congregational Independency*, c. vi.

Heidegger, in his *Libertas Christianorum a Lege Cibaria*, gives a full commentary upon the whole chapter.

* Others besides Congregationalists have sanctioned this view. Dr. Pusey contends that, "being the result of full inspiration, it forms no precedent at all."—*The Councils of the Church*, c. i. p. 33.

as to afford no model or precedent for the subsequent government of the church, is virtually identical with this one,—whether the apostles acted *in this matter* as inspired and infallible expounders of the will of God, or simply as the ordinary office-bearers of the church, using the ordinary means of ascertaining the divine will, and enjoying only the ordinary guidance and influences of His Spirit.

Presbyterians contend that there are plain indications in the New Testament that the apostles sometimes acted in the administration of ecclesiastical affairs, not as inspired men directed by the infallible guidance of the Spirit which they enjoyed in declaring truth and in organizing the church, but simply as ordinary office-bearers in co-operation with other elders, and more especially that they acted in this capacity merely in this case; and Congregationalists, not absolutely denying, and yet not prepared to admit, that they never acted in the administration of ecclesiastical affairs without infallible guidance, strenuously contend that in this case they acted under the influence of immediate supernatural inspiration, which infallibly guided them to a right decision, and that therefore it affords no model or precedent for the church in future times.* It seems very manifest, from the whole scope and strain of the narrative, that the apostles did *not* act here as inspired and infallible men, but simply as ordinary ecclesiastical office-bearers, in conjunction with the elders or ordinary pastors. Had it been the purpose of God to settle the controversy which arose about the necessity of circumcision by an inspired infallible decision, the apostles might have at once decided it without meeting, and without discussion of any kind; or any one of them might have done so in the exercise of his apostolic authority, and confirmed his decision by the “signs of an apostle.” Paul himself might have done so at Antioch, without the matter being brought up to Jerusalem at all. This was not done; the matter *was* brought up to the church at Jerusalem. The apostles and elders assembled to deliberate upon it publicly in the presence of the people; and we are expressly told that much disputing took place regarding it, when they were assembled to decide it. The apostles who took part in the discussion, in place of at once declaring authoritatively

* Wardlaw on *Congregational In-* | *Ecclesiastical Polity of the New Testa-*
dependency, p. 278. Davidson on the | *ment*, Lect. viii. p. 317.

what was the mind and will of God regarding it, formally argued the question upon grounds derived at once from God's providential dealings, and from statements contained in the Old Testament Scriptures. In this way, and by this process, they carried conviction to the understandings of all who heard them, so that they concurred at length in an unanimous decision. Here everything plainly indicates, and seems to have been obviously intended to indicate, that inspiration was not in exercise, but that the matter was decided by means accessible to men in general under the ordinary guidance of the Spirit.

There is no evidence, indeed—and the Congregationalists found much on this consideration—that *any of the apostles* were, even at the first, of a different mind from that in which the whole assembly ultimately concurred, or that they had any disputing among themselves; but it is certain—and this is sufficient to warrant our conclusion—that there was much disputing, *i.e.*, arguing on opposite sides, in the assembly *in their presence*; and that they did not put an end to this disputing by an immediate and infallible declaration of the mind of God upon the point, in the exercise of their apostolic authority, but by ordinary arguments derived from admitted principles, and addressed to the understandings of those who heard them. The only thing that appears to contradict the conclusion to which the whole scope and strain of the narrative obviously points, is the fact that the decision to which the assembly ultimately came is announced in these words: "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us." Now, this statement certainly implies that they were confident that the decision was *de facto* in accordance with the mind of the Holy Ghost, but it does not *necessarily* imply more than this; and therefore it should not be held to imply more, as it would then contradict the general scope and strain of the narrative, which are plainly fitted to teach us that Christ, the Head of the church, determined the disposal of this matter, not by direct and infallible inspiration, but by a general meeting of apostles and elders seeking and attaining the truth upon the point, by means accessible to men in general with the ordinary influences of the Spirit. Not only does the expression, "it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us," not necessarily imply more than the certain accordance *de facto* between the decision given by them and the mind of the Spirit, but it seems of itself to indicate that there was

something in the case different from a mere declaration of what they knew simply as inspired men. It seems much more natural, that if they had been simply declaring what they had been miraculously and supernaturally taught upon the point by the Spirit, they would have said only, "it seemed good to the Holy Ghost;" the addition, "and to us," having the appearance of intimating that they did not act in the matter merely and solely as the inspired declarers of His mind, though confident that their decision was accordant with His.

We hold it, then, to be clear, that while the apostles ordinarily had the gift of supernatural infallible inspiration in the discharge of their public duties, in declaring the truth and in organizing the church, yet on this occasion they did not, in point of fact, exercise this gift, but left it as it were in abeyance, and acted in the matter just as uninspired men might and could have done. Now, these two facts, taken in combination, not only prove that this transaction may afford a pattern and precedent for the proceedings of the church ordinarily in similar circumstances, but also warrant us to believe that it was expressly arranged in this way for that very purpose, and that therefore it is the church's duty to apply it for the regulation of her conduct. We assume now, then, that the view generally taken by Congregationalists, as to this controversy having been decided by a supernatural exercise of infallible inspiration, is erroneous. We assume that the whole transaction must have been intended, and of course fitted, to convey instruction and direction to the church as to the management of its affairs; and we proceed to inquire what particular instructions or directions it does convey.

Sec. 2.—The Rule of Church Power.

This transaction, and the record of it which has been transmitted to us, are fitted to remind us of the great scriptural principle, that the sole standard by which the affairs of the church ought to be regulated is the revealed will of God. The question upon this occasion was, whether Gentile converts should be required to be circumcised, and to keep the ceremonial law. The apostles and elders, when met to consider this point, evidently had it for their sole object to ascertain what was the mind and will of God concerning it; and they looked to no other standard

but this. None but God was entitled really to decide this question, and no certain materials for deciding it aright could be derived from any other quarter. Accordingly, they directed their attention to the sources from which the will of God might be learned, and examined *them*. They considered, indeed, both the providence of God and the word of God; for we find that Peter, in his statement, founded mainly upon what God had actually done in the case of Cornelius, upon the evidence of the fact that His Spirit had been then and there communicated; while James appealed to statements contained in the writings of the prophets. The written word of God is, properly speaking, the only standard by which the affairs of the church ought to be regulated, though much is also to be learned from carefully considering His providence, or what He has actually done, in connection with the statements of His word; the example of Peter in this matter especially affording us warrant and encouragement to give careful attention to any evidence that may be presented to us of God having poured out His Spirit upon any occasion for the conversion of sinners.

The church is represented in Scripture as the kingdom of Christ. He alone is its King; and He has established and promulgated in His word its constitution and laws, as well as made provision for the ordinary application of these laws to the permanent regulation of its affairs, as a distinct organized society *in* the world, but not *of* the world. He has commissioned none to make laws for His kingdom; He has done this Himself, as a Son over His own house. He has indicated His will as to the way in which the affairs of His kingdom are to be permanently administered, and he has committed the application and execution of the laws He has established to the church itself. He has authorized no civil or secular authority to interfere in the regulation of the affairs of His kingdom; and therefore it is at once unlawful for them to interfere, and for the church either to be a consenting party to their interference, or to pay any regard to their mere enactments or requirements. He has laid down the laws of His kingdom in His word, and therefore the church is bound to be guided wholly by His word in the execution of the functions which He has conferred, and in the discharge of the duties which He has imposed upon her; and with that view, she is called upon to bring everything to that standard, and to make it her sole object

in regard to every question that comes before her, to ascertain what is the mind and will of Christ concerning it. The church is not only not bound to be guided by any other rule or standard, but is not at liberty to have regard to any other; as this would be virtually to withdraw herself from subjection to Christ's authority, and voluntarily to submit to a foreign yoke. No mere laws or statutes of men,—no mere regard to worldly or secular advantages,—should ever regulate the conduct of the church of Christ, or of any section or branch of it. She should be guided solely by the revealed will of Christ, and she should ascertain what that will is by diligent and prayerful study of His word.

When this great principle is explained and enforced, men who, from whatever cause, dislike and shrink from it, but who do not venture openly and directly to dispute it, usually attempt to evade it, and to escape from the practical application of it, by questioning whether there are, in point of fact, materials in God's word for deciding many of those disputes that arise in connection with the administration of the affairs of the church.

This notion, as it is often exhibited, is little else than a pretence for escaping from the supremacy of God's word without formally denying its authority. But the truth is, that God fitted and intended His word to be a full and adequate guide to His church in the execution of its functions, and in the discharge of all its duties, and to His people individually in everything bearing upon their relation to God and their eternal destiny; and it is very certain, that if men were really willing to submit to the authority of Christ as the supreme and only lawgiver, if they were really anxious to know His will that they might do it, and if they would diligently and prayerfully search His word, they would find materials there for regulating their opinions and conduct in all circumstances much more fully and completely than they might anticipate. It has been remarked—and the remark, we think, is equally just and important—that many of the applications made in the New Testament of Old Testament statements seem to have been intended, besides their direct and immediate object, to convey this general lesson, that much more is to be learnt from the Old Testament—and, of course, from the Scriptures generally—than might at first sight appear. Men desirous to evade or abridge the authority of Scripture, in its practical applications, seem to think that they are not called upon to regard anything

but what appears plainly and palpably upon the surface of Scripture, and is set forth there in distinct and explicit assertions or requirements. But the mode of applying Old Testament statements frequently adopted by our Saviour and His apostles, points to a very different conclusion. We have a specimen of this in the statement made by James on the occasion we are considering. There was nothing very direct and express in the Old Testament upon the precise question to be decided; and the way in which he does decide it, by an application of Old Testament statements, is one of the many instances of a similar kind occurring in the New Testament, which are fitted to impress upon us the conviction, that much more is to be learnt from the written word than what can be found on the surface of it,—much which cannot be discovered and brought out without a large amount of study and meditation;—and that the Bible is fitted and intended, when rightly used and improved, to be far more extensively useful and effectual, as a rule or standard of faith and practice, than men commonly suppose or experience.

Sec. 3.—Authority of Church Officers.

The inspired record of this Council of Jerusalem plainly sanctions the Presbyterian principle of the right of the office-bearers of the church, as distinguished from the ordinary members, to decide judicially any disputes that may arise about the affairs of the church,—to be the ordinary interpreters and administrators of Christ's laws for the government of His house. It is quite plain, from the inspired narrative, that the apostles and elders, or presbyters—*i.e.*, the office-bearers of the church—alone composed the Council; that they exclusively were its constituent members, and that they alone formally and judicially decided upon the point brought before them. It is true that the brethren—*i.e.*, the Christian people—generally were present, that they were consulted, and that they concurred in the decision; and the place which they occupied in the matter will be afterwards adverted to. But it is certain that the apostles and elders alone composed the Council, and alone formally pronounced the decision. We have the regular formal minute of sederunt, as it might be called, in the sixth verse, where we are told that “the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter;” and at the fourth verse of the sixteenth chapter, the decrees of the Council are expressly described as “the

decrees that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem ;” and these decrees, it is manifest, were authoritative or binding upon the churches. There is, indeed, a clear distinction kept up in the New Testament between the office-bearers and the ordinary members of the church,—the one class being described as rulers and governors, and of course being invested with a certain kind and degree of authority ; and the other being bound to render a certain measure and degree of submission and obedience.

There are some obvious and important limitations of the authority to be exercised by the one party, and of the obedience to be rendered by the other.

First, The authority of the office-bearers, while restricted exclusively to the affairs of the church,—to the administration of the ordinary necessary business of Christ’s house,—is even there not lordly, or legislative, or discretionary, but purely ministerial, to be exercised in Christ’s name, *i.e.*, in entire subjection to His authority and to His word. Christ is the church’s only King and Head ; and this implies that its affairs must be regulated by His mind and will revealed in His word. The constitution and laws of His kingdom have been fixed by Him, and cannot by any human or uninspired authority be altered, abrogated, or extended. The office-bearers of the church are not lords over God’s heritage : they have no dominion over men’s faith ; they have no jurisdiction over the conscience ; they are the mere interpreters of Christ’s word, the mere administrators of the laws which He has enacted.

Secondly, Even within their proper sphere of simply interpreting and administering Christ’s laws—*i.e.*, applying them to the actual regulation of the affairs of the church as occasion may require—the office-bearers of the church are not, as Papists allege, infallible, so as to be entitled to exact implicit and unquestioning obedience. No such privilege has been promised to, or conferred upon, them ; and to claim it, is to put themselves in Christ’s stead, and to usurp dominion over the conscience.

Thirdly, The office-bearers of the church have no *exclusive* right to interpret Christ’s laws. Upon scriptural and Protestant principles, every man has the right of private judgment,—*i.e.*, he is entitled to interpret the word of God for himself upon his own responsibility, for the regulation of his own opinions and conduct, for the execution of his own functions and the discharge of his own duties, *whatever these may be* ; and Christ has conferred upon

no class of men any power that interferes with the exercise of this right. This right of private judgment belongs to all men in their different capacities, public and private, and ought to be exercised by them with a view to the discharge of their own duties and functions, whatever these may be. Civil rulers are, on this ground, entitled and bound to interpret the word of God for themselves, with a view to the right discharge of any duties, competent to them in their own sphere and province, with respect to which the word of God affords any data for decision; and every private individual enjoys the same right or privilege. The same principle, in this general mode of stating it, applies equally to ecclesiastical office-bearers; but in their case it must be viewed in connection with this additional Scripture truth, that they are Christ's ordinance for the ordinary government of His visible church,—that it is *their* function and duty, while it is *not* the function and duty of any other party, to administer His laws for the management of the ordinary necessary business of His church,—for deciding and regulating all those matters which require to be regulated and decided wherever a church of Christ exists and is in full operation. This being their function and duty, they are of course entitled and bound to interpret the word of God for themselves, in the exercise of their own judgment, and upon their own responsibility, for the execution and discharge of it. Christ has not vested the government of His church—*i.e.*, the management of its ordinary necessary business—either in civil rulers or in the body of ordinary members; and therefore they are not entitled to interpret the word of God *for the purpose of executing this function*. He has vested the ordinary administration of the affairs of His church in ecclesiastical office-bearers; and to them, therefore, and to them alone, belongs the right of interpreting and applying *His laws for the attainment of this object, the accomplishment of this end*. In so far as the decisions of ecclesiastical office-bearers affect other men collectively or individually, these men are fully entitled to judge for themselves whether or not the decisions pronounced are in accordance with the mind and will of Christ; and by the judgment which they form upon this point to regulate their own conduct, in so far as they have any function to execute, or any duty to discharge. But since the judicial determination of the office-bearers of the church is the only ordinary provision which Christ has made for administering the affairs of His church,

no party is entitled to interfere authoritatively with them in the execution of this function ; and all parties, while exercising their own right of private judgment, ought to regard the decisions of the ordinary and only competent authorities in the matter with a certain measure of respect and deference—at least to this extent, that if they do resolve to condemn and disobey the decisions, they ought to be very sure that these decisions are opposed to the mind and will of Christ, and that therefore they may confidently appeal from the decision of the office-bearers to the tribunal of the Head of the church Himself.

With the limitations, and in the sense, now explained, it is a scriptural principle which has always been held by Presbyterians, in opposition to Independents or Congregationalists, that the government of the church—the ordinary administration of Christ's laws, the judicial determination of any questions that may arise, and that may require to be decided in the ordinary management of the business of His house—is vested, not in the body of the people, or the ordinary members, but in the office-bearers of His church; that they constitute the only regular and ordinary tribunal for the decision and regulation of these matters ; that therefore their decisions should be treated with respect and obedience, unless they be contrary to the mind and will of God ; and that men who refuse to obey them are bound to be well satisfied, upon good scriptural grounds, that they can confidently appeal to Christ against the sentence pronounced in His name upon earth.

It is the doctrine of our church, as set forth in the Confession of Faith,* that “the decrees and determination” of Synods and Councils, “if consonant to the word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement with the word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereto in His word.” Without giving a full exposition of this general principle, I merely observe that it may be regarded as comprehending the three following positions :—

First, That all the decrees and determinations of Councils or Church Courts should be regulated by the word of God.

Secondly, That they are to be received with reverence and submission only *when* they are consonant with the word of God ;

* Chap. xxxi. sec. 3.

and that of this, of course, every one is entitled and bound to judge for himself on his own responsibility.

Thirdly, That when they are consonant with the word, regard should be had, in the feelings with which they are contemplated, and in the way in which they are treated, not only to the fact of their accordance with the word, but also to the fact that they are righteous and scriptural decisions of a legitimate authority, rightfully exercised; that they are instances of the right working of a provision which God has made, of an ordinance which He has appointed for the administration of the affairs of His church. The ordinary provision which God has made, for settling public controversies and regulating the ordinary necessary business of His church, is by the public deliberations and decisions (according to His word) of the ordinary office-bearers; and when, through His blessing, this provision operates rightly, and brings out results which are consonant with the word, men are called upon to recognise the wisdom and goodness of God in appointing such an ordinance, and in guiding it, *upon this particular occasion*, to a right and scriptural result, and to contemplate and receive the result with the reverence and submission which the realization of the truth that this is an ordinance of God appointed thereto in His word is evidently fitted to call forth.

Sec. 4.—The Place of Church Members.

The history of the council suggests to us, that, in important ecclesiastical matters, the Christian people, or the ordinary members of the church, though not possessed of a judicial or authoritative voice in determining them, ought to be consulted; that the merits of the case ought to be expounded to them, and that their consent and concurrence should, if possible, be obtained. There is a very marked distinction kept up through the whole of the narrative we are now considering, as well as through the New Testament in general, between the position and functions of the apostles and elders, or of the office-bearers, on the one hand, and of the people or ordinary members on the other. The assembly, as we have seen, was composed properly and formally only of the apostles and elders; and its decisions were, as they are expressly called by the inspired historian, "the decrees that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem." All this is

very plain,—so plain, that it cannot be explained away; and therefore what is said or indicated of the place and standing of the people or ordinary members, must, if possible, be so interpreted as to be consistent with this.

What, then, is here said of the people; and what does it fairly and naturally imply? They are mentioned for the first time in the twelfth verse, where we are told that “all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul.” This, of course, implies that they were present, but it implies nothing more; and, for anything that appears here, they might have been mere spectators and auditors, without having anything more to do with the matter. They are next mentioned in the twenty-second verse, where we are told that “it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, *συν ὅλη τη ἐκκλησίᾳ*, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch.” Now, the way in which they are here introduced, plainly implies that they did not stand upon the same platform in the matter with the apostles and elders, and that they had not the same place and standing in this, any more than in the preceding part, of the transaction which the office-bearers had. It *does* imply, however, that *after* the apostles and elders had made up their minds as to what was the mind and will of God in this matter, and what decision should be pronounced, the subject was brought before the people,—that they were called upon to attend to it, to exercise their judgment upon it, and to make up their mind regarding it. It implies that all this was done, and that, as the result of it, the brethren were convinced of the justice and soundness of the decision, and expressed their concurrence in it, as well as in the practical step by which it was followed up, of sending chosen men of their company to Antioch. *All this having taken place*, it was perfectly natural that the public letter addressed upon the subject to the Gentile churches, should run in the name of the whole body of those who, at Jerusalem, had adopted or concurred in the decision or judgment pronounced; and accordingly we find at the twenty-second verse, that this letter runs in the name of “the apostles, and elders, and brethren.” There is no reasonable ground to doubt the correctness of the representation we have given of the actual facts or *res gestae* of the case, as indicated by the narrative, up till the time of the preparation of this letter; and if it be correct, then the mere introduction of the brethren, *along* with the apostles and elders, into the letter, cannot

be fairly held to indicate, as it certainly does not necessarily imply, that the brethren formed a constituent part of the assembly, or that they had acted with anything like judicial authority, as the apostles and elders had done, in deciding upon the question.

Some Presbyterians, afraid that this introduction of the brethren into the letter along with the apostles and elders, might sanction the idea that ordinary members of the church had some judicial authority in deciding controversies as well as the office-bearers, have tried to show that the brethren mentioned here are not the same parties as the whole church mentioned in the preceding verse, but rather the presbyters, or elders, who were not pastors or teachers. But this, I think, is a forced and unnatural interpretation, unwarranted by anything in the passage itself, and unnecessary to the end for the promotion of which it has been devised. Presbyterians have always denied, upon good and sufficient grounds, that Scripture assigns to the ordinary members of the church anything like judicial authority in the decision of controversies, or in the ordinary administration of the general government of the church. But they have very generally admitted, on the ground of what is contained in this chapter and in other parts of the New Testament, that, in important ecclesiastical questions, the nature and merits of the case, and the grounds and reasons of the judgment, should, in so far as circumstances allowed of it, be laid before the ordinary members of the church; and that their consent and concurrence should, if possible, be obtained. Presbyterians, indeed, have never assigned to the ordinary members of the church, because they could see no warrant in Scripture for doing so, the same distinct and definite place and influence in the ordinary regulation of ecclesiastical affairs in general, as they have ascribed to them in the appointment of their own office-bearers; in other words, they have never held their consent or concurrence in the decisions pronounced by the office-bearers in the ordinary regulation of ecclesiastical affairs to be necessary or indispensable, so that the withholding or refusal of their consent nullified or invalidated the judgment, or formed a bar in the way of its taking practical effect.

Upon distinct and specific scriptural grounds bearing upon this particular subject, Presbyterians have usually held that the consent or concurrence of the ordinary members of the church is necessary or indispensable in the appointment of their office-

bearers, so that the withholding or refusal of their consent or concurrence is an insuperable bar to the formation of the pastoral relation. But while they have maintained this principle upon *special* scriptural grounds, bearing upon this particular topic of the election of office-bearers, they have usually denied that either this, or anything else contained in Scripture, afforded any sufficient ground for assigning to the ordinary members of the church so high and definite a standing and influence in the ordinary government of the church, or in the regulation of ecclesiastical affairs in general. They have, however, generally admitted that, in important questions affecting the welfare and peace of the church, the people should be consulted, and that their consent and concurrence should, if possible, be secured by the fair use of scriptural arguments addressed to their understandings.

The Presbyterians of this country about the time of the Westminster Assembly, had perhaps somewhat higher and more aristocratic ideas of the power and authority of ecclesiastical office-bearers and church courts than had been generally entertained by the Reformers of the preceding century;* not that there was any very marked or definite difference in opinion or doctrinal statement between them on this subject, but that there was a somewhat different impression produced by the controversy in which, at the later of these two periods, Presbyterians were engaged with the Independents,—a disposition to keep rather at a distance from anything that might seem to favour Congregationalism. Accordingly, there is nothing direct or explicit upon the subject of the place and standing of the people in the general regulation of ecclesiastical affairs, as distinguished from their influence or privilege in the election of their office-bearers,—nothing, indeed, but the general statement formerly explained, that Christ has given the ministry to the church,—contained in any of our authorized standard books prepared at that time. But, at the same time, it is certain that the leading Presbyterians of that period held the principle about the consultation and concurrence of the people which we are now illustrating; and that they ordinarily acted upon it in practice.

* The Theological Faculty of Utrecht thought that too high ground was taken on some points connected with this subject in Gillespie's (cxi.) *Propositions*. Vide *Voetii Politica Ecclesiastica*, p. i. lib. i. tract ii. c. vii. tom. i. p. 246. The Faculty consisted at this time of Voetius, de Maets, and Hoornbeeck, and the judgment prepared by Voetius was signed by them.

As this point has been very much overlooked in modern times, it may be proper briefly to adduce some evidence of the statement which has now been made. In 1641, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland sent a letter to their Presbyterian brethren in England, who had asked their opinion in regard to the Congregational scheme of church government, which contained the following passage:—"Not only the solemn execution of ecclesiastical power and authority, but the whole exercises and acts thereof, do properly belong unto the officers of the kirk; yet so that, in matters of chiefest importance, the tacit consent of the congregation be had before their decrees and sentences receive final execution." We have statements to the same effect published in the same year by Alexander Henderson and George Gillespie,—the one the most influential actor, and the other the most learned and conclusive reasoner, among the great men who adorned our church at that important era in her history. In the work entitled *The Government and Order of the Church of Scotland*, intended to give an account to Englishmen of the ordinary practice of our church, Henderson says, "Nothing useth to be done by the lesser or greater presbytery—*i.e.*, the kirk-session or the presbytery—in ordering the public worship, in censuring of delinquents, or bringing them to public repentance, but according to the settled order of the church, and with express or tacit consent of the congregation."* And Gillespie, in his treatise entitled *An Assertion of the Government of the Church of Scotland*, has the following statement: "It is objected (by Independents) that what concerneth all, ought to be done with the consent of all. Answer, *We hold the same*; but the consent of all is one thing, the exercise of jurisdiction by all another thing." And, in commenting upon the Council of Jerusalem, he gives the same view of this point as we have done, saying, "The apostles and elders met, sat, and voiced apart from the whole church, and they alone judged and decreed. In the meanwhile were matters made known to the whole church, and done with the consent of all. . . . The brethren are mentioned (along with the apostles and elders), because it was done with their knowledge, consent, and applause."†

These were the views entertained upon this subject by the men to whom we are indebted for the standards of our church, who

* P. 39.

† Pp. 117–118.

held that they were sanctioned by the inspired narrative of the council at Jerusalem, while they held also that neither this, nor any other portion of the New Testament, warranted or required the ascription to the people of any higher place or standing than this in the ordinary administration of ecclesiastical affairs.*

Sec. 5.—Subordination of Church Courts.

There is another principle of church government which Presbyterians have generally regarded as sanctioned by the transaction recorded in this chapter—viz., what is called the subordination of courts; or, to adopt the phraseology of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Form of Church Government, the right of synodical assemblies to exercise authority or jurisdiction over congregational and classical assemblies, *i.e.*, over what we now call kirk-sessions and presbyteries,—their right to receive appeals in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same. The scriptural warrant for classical assemblies or presbyteries is, that there are clear instances in Scripture in which the whole body of the Christians of a particular place—as at Jerusalem and Ephesus, where there must have been more than one congregation—are spoken of as a church, or one church, which they could be only as being under one and the same presbyterial government, having a joint or common body of ecclesiastical office-bearers, who presided over them, and regulated their common ecclesiastical affairs. The chief direct warrant which Presbyterians profess to find in Scripture for synodical assemblies, or higher courts invested with some measure of authority over congregational and classical assemblies or elderships, is this synod or council at Jerusalem; and I have no doubt that it does give countenance to the general idea on which the Presbyterian principle of a subordination of courts is based. The whole transaction here recorded, viewed in its complex character, naturally and obviously wears the aspect of the church at Antioch referring an important and difficult question, because of its importance and difficulty, and because of its affecting the interests of the whole church, to the church of Jerusalem, as to a superior authority; and of that church accordingly entertaining the reference, and giving

* Vide *Discussions on Church Principles*, p. 383, etc.—EDRS.

an authoritative decision upon the subject referred to them. This, we say, is naturally and obviously the general character and aspect of the transaction here recorded; and as there is nothing in the particular statements of the narrative inconsistent with, or exclusive of, this view, this must be held to be the general idea or principle which, if the transaction was really fitted to furnish a model or precedent for the government of the church in subsequent ages, it was intended to sanction. And if this was really the general character of the transaction, then it is plain that, if the church at Antioch, instead of referring the matter to the church at Jerusalem, had themselves given a decision upon it, as they might have done, it would have been equally competent for the minority in the church at Antioch (for we know there was a division there) to have appealed to the church at Jerusalem to review, and, if they saw cause, to reverse the decision.

While this is the idea or principle which the transaction, *in its general aspect*, naturally and obviously suggests and countenances, there is no real weight in the attempts which have been made by Congregationalists and others to overturn or escape from the conclusion. There are two positions upon this point which, with this view, and for this purpose, the opponents of Presbyterian principles have laboured to establish: first, that the decision of the council at Jerusalem was not binding, as possessed of any proper authority, but was a mere counsel or advice, having only a moral weight or influence; and, secondly, that even if the decision were binding or authoritative, the council at Jerusalem did not stand to the church at Antioch, or to other churches, in a relation at all similar or analogous to that of a superior authority to an inferior one, as being possessed of higher and wider jurisdiction. That the decision was binding and authoritative, and was not merely a counsel or advice coming from a party whose judgment was entitled to much moral weight, seems very plain from the whole strain of the narrative, and especially from the twenty-eighth verse, where the council says, "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, *to lay upon you* no greater burden than these necessary things;" and from the fourth verse of the sixteenth chapter, where it plainly appears that "the decrees which were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem" were promulgated and prescribed as laws binding upon all the churches. This last circumstance—viz., that the decrees were imposed not only upon the church at Antioch, but

upon all other churches likewise, overturns another view which has been propounded, intermediate between that which describes the decision as an authoritative judgment, and that which represents it as a mere counsel or advice. It has been contended by Böehmer*—a very learned German jurist, who has thrown much light upon some important topics in ecclesiastical history and ecclesiastical jurisprudence, though he was a strenuous defender of Erastian principles—that this question was referred by the church at Antioch to the church at Jerusalem simply in the way of arbitration, or, as he says, *per modum compromissi*,—any obligation which might attach to the one party to obey the decision being based *wholly* upon their own voluntary act, in agreeing to submit it to the determination of the other. The narrative exhibits no trace of anything like a voluntary submission to arbitration on the part of the church at Antioch; and this, therefore, is a mere gratuitous assumption, devised to serve a purpose, while the imposition of the decrees upon other churches, equally with the church at Antioch, proves that this was *not* the character of the transaction.

The generality of Congregationalists, who maintain that this whole transaction affords no direct pattern or model for the permanent government of the church, on the ground that the decision was pronounced by the apostles in the exercise of their apostolic authority, under infallible supernatural guidance, cannot of course adopt the first mode of overthrowing the Presbyterian conclusion, and commonly have recourse to the second position which we have mentioned—viz., that the church of Jerusalem did not stand to the church of Antioch in a relation *at all* similar or analogous to that of a supreme authority to a subordinate one, or of a higher to a lower church court; or, more generally, that the council at Jerusalem did not possess those qualities or attributes which Presbyterians require as necessary to warrant and legitimate the exercise of a supreme controlling authority on the part of synodical assemblies. Now, it must be admitted in fairness that some zealous Presbyterian writers have gone beyond what the inspired narrative warrants in making out a virtual identity, or very complete similarity, between the Council of Jerusalem and modern synodical assemblies. More particularly, it must be admitted that

* *Dissertationes Juris Ecclesiastici* | on by Mosheim in his *Instit. Maj.*, p. *Antiqui*, Diss. iii. p. 218, commented | 262.

we have no evidence that any other churches were present, or were represented in this council, except those of Antioch and Jerusalem; and that thus the council cannot be shown to correspond fully with the modern idea of a synodical assembly or supreme church court, formally representing, and *simply because representing*, a considerable number of particular churches, exercising authority or jurisdiction over them. But notwithstanding this concession, Presbyterians contend, and we think with good reason, that the *general principle or idea* of a representative character or standing, and of a *corresponding* jurisdiction or right of exercising judicial control, is sufficiently indicated and maintained by the general position of the church at Jerusalem, and especially of the apostles who resided there, and regulated and administered its affairs.

The apostles, whether regarded as inspired and infallible teachers, or merely as ordinary office-bearers, had, it will not be disputed, jurisdiction over the whole church of Christ. Their authority was not confined to any one particular place or district, but extended over the whole church, over all who professed subjection to their Master. And if so, then a Synod or Council of which they were constituent members might be fairly regarded as representing the church, and as thus entitled to exercise over the whole length and breadth of it whatever authority and jurisdiction was in itself right or competent. This is quite sufficient to sanction the use which the more judicious Presbyterians make of the council at Jerusalem, as countenancing the general idea or principle of courts of review, or of a subordination of courts of ecclesiastical office-bearers—of some assemblies possessed of a wider representative character, and of a corresponding wider jurisdiction than others. It is of course only the general principle or idea that is sanctioned—the general principle or idea of the subordination of one court to another of wider jurisdiction—of the subordination of one church to many churches, or to their representatives. The way in which this general idea is to be followed out and applied may, or rather must, depend much upon external circumstances, upon opportunities of meeting and organizing; but enough may be fairly deduced from the inspired record of the council at Jerusalem, if it was really intended to afford instructions in regard to church government in subsequent ages, to show that this general idea may be legitimately applied to the regulation of ecclesiastical affairs.

The regulation of all ecclesiastical affairs, and especially the decision of theological controversies, should be characterized at once by an uncompromising adherence to truth, and by a tender regard to the infirmities and prejudices of those who may be to some extent involved in error.

That both these qualities were exhibited in the decision pronounced by the apostles and elders upon this occasion, might be easily shown; but it is not necessary to enter into detail upon this point. That these qualities should be combined in the decisions and proceedings of ecclesiastical office-bearers in the administration of ecclesiastical affairs, is a position the truth of which all admit; but experience abundantly proves that it is very difficult to follow it out in practice, and the history of the church exhibits very many instances in which the one or the other of these objects was entirely disregarded or trampled under foot. There have been many instances in which individuals possessed of authority or influence in the church and in ecclesiastical councils have, on the one hand, exhibited, under the profession of a great zeal for truth, a great want of Christian forbearance and discretion, and practised odious and offensive tyranny; or, on the other hand, under a profession of moderation and forbearance, have sacrificed the interests of truth and sound doctrine. The council at Jerusalem did neither, but combined a due regard to both the important objects referred to; while the sharp contention that soon after separated Paul and Barnabas—originating, no doubt, in the same general features of character, in the same tendencies and infirmities which tempt men on more public questions either to undue zeal or to undue forbearance—affords a striking lesson of the necessity of men keeping at all times a strict watch over their own spirits, and realizing unceasingly their dependence upon the Spirit of all grace, that they may be guided in the ways of wisdom, and fitted for the right discharge of their duties, to the glory of God and the welfare of His church. Some Congregationalists have dwelt much upon the humility and condescension which the apostles manifested in the whole course they pursued upon this occasion, in submitting the decision of the matter to an assembly of elders in conjunction with themselves,—in permitting disputation to go on in their presence,—and in dealing with the erroneous views propounded by arguments, and not by mere authority. We have no doubt that the apostles manifested in their proceedings and deportment upon

this occasion, everything which humility and condescension could have suggested ; but in the facts now referred to, in which Congregationalists see only manifestations of these graces, we see, as has been explained, the proof of something else, of something different from this, and much more specific ; a proof, viz., that they did not act in this matter as inspired men under infallible guidance, but as ordinary office-bearers in conjunction with the elders ; and we venture to think, that if they were really upon this occasion exercising their infallible apostolic authority, as Congregationalists allege, the facts referred to would furnish indications rather of something like simulation and deceit, than of humility and condescension.

It thus appears, upon a survey of this whole subject, that the first controversy which arose in the Christian church, and which broke out while the church enjoyed the guidance of inspired men, was taken up and disposed of in such a way as was fitted and intended to afford general lessons as to the mode in which the affairs of the church should be conducted, after the miraculous and supernatural gifts of the Spirit should be taken away.

Sec. 6.—Obligation of Apostolic Practice.

There can be no reasonable doubt that it may be justly laid down as a general principle, that apostolic practice, such as that exemplified in the council at Jerusalem, does impose a permanent binding obligation in regard to the constitution and government of the church, and the administration of its affairs ; though it has been generally conceded by Presbyterians, that there are some limitations or modifications attaching to this principle in its practical application. The truth of this general principle seems very clearly deducible from these two positions : First, that Christ commissioned and authorized the apostles to organize His church as a distinct visible society, and to make provision for preserving or perpetuating it to the end of the world ; and secondly, that the apostles, in executing this branch of their commission, have left us few direct or formal precepts or instructions as to the constitution and government of the church, and have merely furnished us with some materials for ascertaining what it was that they themselves ordinarily *did* in establishing and organizing churches, or what was the actual state and condition of the church and the churches while under their

guidance. Whatever *precepts* or *directions* they might have given on this or on any other subject, would have been received as binding; and whatever precepts or directions they *have* given, are admitted to be so; but as they were executing their Master's commission when they were establishing and organizing churches,—as they did little in the way of executing this branch of their commission except by their practice in establishing and organizing churches, and by giving us materials for ascertaining what their *practice* in this respect *was*,—and as there is no intimation in Scripture, either in the way of general principle or of specific statement, that any change was ever after to take place in the constitution and government of the church, or that any authority was to exist warranted to introduce innovations, the conclusion from all these considerations, taken in combination, seems unavoidable, that the practice of the apostles, or what they actually did in establishing and organizing churches, is, and was intended to be, a binding rule to the church in all ages; that the Christian churches of subsequent times ought, *de jure*, to be fashioned after the model of the churches planted and superintended by the apostles.

It is proper, however, to advert to some of the limitations and modifications under which this general principle is to be held and applied, and to the objections commonly adduced against it. One very obvious limitation of it is, that the apostolic practice which is adduced as binding, must be itself established from the word of God, and must not rest merely upon materials derived from any other and inferior source. This position is virtually included in the great doctrine of the sufficiency and perfection of the written word,—a doctrine held by Protestants in opposition to the Church of Rome.

If this doctrine be true, then it follows that anything which is imposed upon the church as binding by God's authority, or *jure divino*, whether the medium, or proximate source, of obligation be apostolic practice or anything else, must be traced to, and established by, something contained in, or fairly deducible from, Scripture. Unless Scripture proof be adduced, we are entitled at once to set aside all claim alleged upon our submission. If God really fitted and intended the written word to be the only rule of faith and practice, and has made this known to us, He has thereby not only authorized, but required us to reject or disregard anything obtruded upon the church as binding that cannot be traced to

that source. Papists and Prelatists, as we shall afterwards have occasion to show, profess to produce to us evidence of apostolic practice, or of what the apostles did, not derived from Scripture, but from later authors; and on this ground demand our assent and submission to their views and arrangements, in regard to the constitution and government of the church.

We think it can be shown that neither of these parties has produced proof of apostolic practice favourable to their views, which can be regarded as sufficient, when tried fairly by the ordinary rules of historical evidence. But even if they could produce evidence of apostolic practice that answered this description, and was adequate to establish any ordinary point of history as a matter of fact, we would hold it sufficient to disprove any alleged *obligation* to submit to it, that it could not be deduced from anything contained in the written word. Subsequent ordinary historical evidence of apostolical practice might be legitimately employed in elucidating the meaning and confirming the sense of a scriptural statement which was somewhat obscure or dubious in its import, but could not of itself be sufficient to impose an authoritative obligation.

It is generally conceded, however, that everything which the apostles did or sanctioned, connected with the administration of the affairs of the church, is not necessarily and *ipso facto*, even when contained in or deduced from Scripture, binding universally and permanently upon the church. It has, for instance, been the opinion of the great body of divines of all sects and parties, that the decrees of the Council of Jerusalem, simply as such, and irrespective of anything else found in Scripture bearing upon any of the subjects to which they refer, were not intended to be of universal and permanent obligation, and are not now, in fact, binding upon Christians. It was undoubtedly made imperative upon the churches of that age by the decree of the Council, to abstain from things strangled, and from blood; but the great body of divines of all parties have been of opinion, that an obligation to abstain from these things was not thereby imposed permanently upon the church, and is not now binding upon Christians. If this principle may be warrantably applied to what was then by express injunction, in accordance with the mind of the Holy Ghost, imposed upon the church, it must be at least equally warrantable to hold it applicable to what merely prevailed in fact in the primitive churches under apostolic superintendence. And,

accordingly, there are things which, as we learn from Scripture, obtained in the apostolic churches, but which scarcely any church now considers itself under an obligation to preserve. There were some things which, from their nature, seem to have been local and temporary, suited only to the particular circumstances of the church in that age, and in the countries where the gospel was first preached; and these have been generally regarded as destitute of all permanent binding force.

When this concession is once made, that there are some things made known to us in Scripture about the apostolic churches which were local and temporary, and not binding permanently upon the church in future ages (and it is a concession which could not be reasonably withheld), some degree of doubt or uncertainty is of course introduced into the application of the general principle formerly established, as to the permanent binding force of apostolic practice in regard to the constitution and government of the church and the regulation of ecclesiastical affairs. But this doubt or uncertainty as to *some* of the applications of the principle affords no ground for the use which some have made of it in rejecting the principle altogether, and denying that apostolic practice, ordinarily and as a general rule, forms a binding law for the regulation of the affairs of the church. The general considerations already adverted to, establish the truth of the general position as to the ordinary binding force of apostolic practice. These considerations cannot be directly answered and refuted, or shown to involve anything erroneous or absurd; and therefore, as nothing formidable can be adduced upon the other side, the general principle must be held as proved. And neither the ground we have to believe that the principle is to be held with some qualifications, nor the difficulties that may arise in particular cases, as to the practical application of the principle viewed in connection with these qualifications and limitations, warrant us in refusing to admit and maintain it, and to make a reasonable application of it.

It must be admitted, indeed, that some practical questions have been started upon the particular subject we are now considering which are not of very easy or certain solution. But they are all of such a kind as are manifestly, from their very nature, and from the general genius and spirit of the Christian economy, of no great intrinsic importance; and such as that the consciences of men who are conscious to themselves of a sincere and honest desire to do the

will of Christ so far as they clearly see it, need not be greatly distressed about the precise adjustment of them. We cannot enter into much detail upon this subject, or give any exposition of the particular questions that have been controverted under this general head; but we think the substance of the truth upon this topic—the principal general rules by which we ought to be guided in the regulation of this matter—may be summed up in the following positions:—

First, That nothing ought to be admitted into the ordinary government and worship of the Christian church which has not the sanction or warrant of scriptural authority, or apostolic practice at least, if not precept; but with this exception or limitation, as stated in the first chapter of our Confession of Faith, “that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed.”

Secondly, That the scriptural proof of any arrangement or practice having existed in the apostolic churches ordinarily and *prima facie* imposes an obligation upon all churches to adopt it,—an obligation that is imperative and unlimited in regard to all those things which obviously enter into the substance of the government and worship of the church, and the mode in which they are administered.

Thirdly, That the *onus probandi* lies upon those who propose to omit anything which has the sanction of apostolic practice, and that they must produce a satisfactory reason for doing so, derived either from some general principle or specific statement of Scripture bearing upon the point, or from the nature of the case, as making it manifest that the particular point of practice under consideration was local and temporary.

There are two great practical questions involved in the right adjustment of this general topic of the binding force of apostolical practice, or of the permanent obligation of what we know from Scripture to have been actually done in the primitive churches under apostolic superintendence, viz.,—first, whether it be lawful for Christian churches now to omit any arrangement or observance which the apostles introduced into, or sanctioned in, the churches; and secondly, whether it be lawful to introduce into the church

any arrangement or observance which they did not sanction or require. To maintain the affirmative on either of these questions, as a general rule, seems to amount to something like a negation of the place or standing which is plainly ascribed to the apostles in the New Testament, as supernaturally authorized and guided by Christ for the work of organizing and establishing His church in the world. If this function were really devolved by Christ upon the apostles, and if they were supernaturally qualified by Him for the execution of it, then there is no reason whatever to reject, but, on the contrary, every reason to admit, the conclusion, that what they *did* in this matter, either in introducing or in omitting, when ascertained from Scripture, forms a rule or standard which the church in all ages is imperatively bound to follow. To deny this is virtually to reduce the apostles, with reference to what was evidently one of the main parts of their special function, to the level of ordinary uninspired men, and to ascribe to the office-bearers of the church in subsequent times an equal right and an equal fitness to determine the arrangements of Christ's kingdom with that which the apostles possessed. The rejection of apostolic practice as a binding rule for the church in all ages is of course glossed over by its defenders under plausible pretences; but it really amounts, in substance and in effect, to a preference of their own wisdom to that of the apostles, *i.e.*, of the wisdom of man to that of God.

The chief pretences employed in this matter are the alleged impossibility of making arrangements and instituting observances that might be equally adapted for all ages and countries; the allegation that the apostles introduced somewhat different arrangements into the different churches which they planted,—an allegation of which no evidence can be produced; and the alleged propriety and expediency of leaving room for a judicious adaptation of things so insignificant as external arrangements and ceremonies to the suggestions of experience, and to the existing state of the development of the Christian life and the Christian consciousness, to use the favourite phraseology of our own day, of particular churches or classes of men.

There might have been some plausibility in the allegation of the impossibility of introducing at once arrangements and ceremonies that would be equally adapted to all ages and countries, if Christianity, as an outward system, had at all resembled in its

general features and objects the Mosaic economy—if it had been intended to be a system of minute prescription and observance. This manifestly was not intended. Accordingly there is very little, as compared with the Mosaic economy, of what is external that can be held to be fixed or determined for the Christian church in all ages, either by the precepts or by the practice of the apostles. Christianity is adapted for permanence and for catholicity by the very absence of any detailed standard or directory of external arrangements and observances; and when so little that is merely external can be held to have been prescribed and imposed, even when it is assumed that apostolic practice constitutes a permanent binding rule, the presumption is very strong that nothing which has been so sanctioned may be omitted in subsequent ages, unless there be pretty manifest indications, either in the nature of the case or in some scriptural statements, that it was intended to be but local or temporary. Accordingly, almost all churches have admitted, as a general principle, their obligation to have still what apostolic practice has sanctioned, and have not differed very materially as to the limitations and practical applications of this principle.

In making this statement, of course I do not refer to those questions which have been started and debated between different churches, as to whether or not particular arrangements *were* made by the apostles, and did obtain in the apostolic churches,—as, for instance, whether the apostolic church was under the government of Peter as Christ's vicar,—whether it was ruled by diocesan prelates,—whether presbyters or elders, who were not ordinary pastors, had a share in the administration of its affairs. In discussing these points, the question is not, whether apostolic practice is a binding rule,—for both parties in these controversies usually concede that it is,—but whether the practice of the apostles did, in point of fact, include and sanction these particular arrangements. We refer to cases with respect to which *it is admitted* that the apostolic practice did sanction them, and where, of course, the question that arises is, Did this admitted practice of the apostles render the observance of them imperatively binding upon the church in future ages? The chief points to which *this* question has been applied, are of no great importance in themselves, and have not occasioned any great diversity of opinion, or much controversial discussion among men of sense and discrimination. They are principally these: the washing of the feet of the dis-

ciples, practised, and in some sense enjoined, by our Lord,—abstinence from blood,—the order of deaconesses,—the kiss of charity, or what some of the more strenuous defenders of its permanent obligation have called the ordinance of salutation,—and the *αγάπαι*, or love-feasts, which seem to have usually succeeded the celebration of public worship. There is no great difficulty in showing, partly from the nature of the case, and the manifest relation of the practices to temporary or local circumstances, partly from the manner in which they are spoken of in Scripture, and partly from other statements in the New Testament, which bear upon the particular point, though not directly and immediately treating of it, that these things are *not* binding upon Christians and churches in all ages, and that men's consciences need not be disturbed by the omission or disregard of them. The churches of Christ in general, while holding that these practices are not permanently binding, although admitting that we have in the New Testament sufficient grounds to believe that they did in fact generally obtain in apostolic times, have, at the same time, usually held, as a general principle, the binding force of apostolic practice or example, and have professed to apply this general principle to the actual regulation of their own conduct.

There is one topic connected with this subject which has given rise to a good deal of discussion in our own day, and on which, for this reason, we may make a passing observation, especially as it occupies a sort of intermediate position between the two classes of cases formerly adverted to, in the one of which the fact of the apostolic practice is admitted on both sides, and in the other of which it is controverted. I refer to the attempt which has been made to show that apostolic precept and practice fix one exclusive mode of providing for the temporal maintenance of a gospel ministry, viz., by the voluntary contributions of those who enjoy the benefit of it. That apostolic precept and practice impose an imperative obligation upon those who are taught to provide for the maintenance of him who teaches, and of course give him a right to maintenance from them, and that this was the way in which ordinarily ministers were maintained in the apostolic church, is of course admitted; and so far the parties are agreed as to what *de facto* the general apostolic practice was, while they are also agreed in this, that, *de jure*, this obligation to give, and this right to receive maintenance, permanently attach to the two parties respectively.

But it is contended on the other side—and, we are persuaded, with complete success—that there is nothing either in the statements of Scripture, or in the practice of the apostles, which affords any ground for the position, that it is unlawful for ministers to derive their support from any other source than the contributions of those among whom they labour; and that a survey of all that Scripture teaches upon the subject, and especially of the diversified procedure adopted by the Apostle Paul in regard to his own maintenance, affords positive grounds for holding that this position is not true.

We have dwelt, however, longer than we intended upon the less important department of the subject, viz., the lawfulness or unlawfulness of *omitting* what apostolic practice sanctions; and we must now briefly advert to the other and more important topic comprehended under this general subject, viz., the lawfulness or unlawfulness of *introducing* what apostolic practice has *not* sanctioned. The difference upon the former question is one merely of degree; for it is generally admitted, even by those who hold as a general rule the binding force of apostolic practice or example, that there are some things which have the sanction of apostolic practice which may be lawfully omitted as not permanently binding. But, on the latter question, the difference is one of kind or of principle, because we hold it as a great general truth, that it is unwarrantable and unlawful to introduce into the government and worship of the Christian church any arrangements and ordinances which have not been positively sanctioned by Christ or His apostles; and because, when this general truth is denied, there is no limitation that can be put to the introduction of the inventions of men into the government and worship of Christ's house. There is no valid argument, or even reasonable presumption, against the truth of this general position, *as we have above explained it*; and there is a great deal that cannot be answered to be adduced in support of it. There is no warrant in Scripture for the doctrine laid down in the twentieth Article of the Church of England, that "the church has power to decree rites and ceremonies," unless this power be restricted within the limits indicated in the quotation formerly given from the first chapter of our own Confession of Faith. If these limits are carefully observed, the principle we have laid down is safe, for scarcely any case has ever been started where there was any real difficulty in deciding,—and on this the question turns,—whether a particular ecclesiastical arrangement about the

government and worship of the church was really the introduction and establishment of a new and unauthorized thing into the church, or merely the regulation of the circumstances requiring to be regulated in the mode of doing things, which things Christ or His apostles have sanctioned.

Sec. 7.—Divine Right of a Form of Church Government.

Another question suggested by the history of the Council of Jerusalem is, whether or not a particular form of church government is laid down in Scripture so as to be binding by God's authority, or *jure divino*, upon the church in subsequent ages? This question has given rise to a good deal of discussion, though it has not unfrequently been discussed in such a way as to resolve very much into a dispute about words, in which men, whose views did not very materially differ from each other, might support the affirmative or the negative in the question, according to the precise sense in which its terms might be explained. It has been the most generally prevalent opinion in the Christian church, that a particular form of church government has been laid down in Scripture so as to be binding upon future ages, though there has, of course, been much difference of opinion as to what the particular form of church government is which has received the sanction of Scripture. Those who have disputed or denied this *general* position about the Scripture sanctioning a particular form of church government, have been most commonly men who had some particular purpose to serve, who were exposed to the temptation of being influenced in their views and practice by some other consideration than a pure love of truth,—as, for instance, a desire to leave room for the interference of the civil power in the government of the church, or to palliate their own submission to what the civil power may have sanctioned and established in this matter. And in defending the position, that no particular form of church government was laid down in Scripture, they have usually represented the opposite opinion in a manner which the statements of its supporters do not warrant, as if *they* meant to assert that the whole detailed particulars of a full directory for the government of the church were laid down in Scripture, and admitted of no change,—a position which is manifestly untenable.

Papists, Prelatists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists, have

in general contended that their own system of church government is laid down in Scripture, and is binding upon the church in all ages; but they have also in general admitted, that it is only the leading features or fundamental principles of their system that are sanctioned by Scripture, without claiming direct scriptural authority for its details, and without denying that there are things of minor importance connected with the government of the church which the church herself may regulate from time to time, according as local or temporary circumstances may suggest or require. In this way it sometimes happens, that the more reasonable and judicious *affirmers* and *deniers* of the *jus divinum* of a particular form of church government do not differ very materially from each other on the general question, while very considerable differences are to be found on both sides as to what particular form of church government it is that has the sanction of Scripture, or can make out the most plausible claims to support upon scriptural grounds. It is also to be noticed, that those who concur in maintaining that there is a form of church government laid down in Scripture, differ considerably among themselves as to the *extent* to which they claim a scriptural sanction for the *subordinate* features of their own scheme; and as to the view they take of the fulness and clearness of the scriptural evidence even of what they may think the Scripture sanctions. So that, in laying down the position usually maintained by the defenders of the binding scriptural authority of a particular form of church government, it must be stated in this way, that the fundamental principles or leading features of a particular form of government for the church of all ages are indicated in Scripture, and are indicated in such a way as to impose an obligation of conformity upon the church in all succeeding times. I have no doubt of the truth of this position, and think that it can be satisfactorily established.

I think it can be, and has often been, proved that the Presbyterian form of church government, *in its fundamental principles and leading features*, is sanctioned by Scripture and apostolic practice; or, to adopt the language of our ordination formula, "is founded upon the word of God, and agreeable thereto;" and that this can *not* be truly predicated of any other form of church government, such as Prelacy and Congregationalism. I am not called upon *at present* to establish this position, as I am merely proposing to illustrate the general topic of the way in which the

subject of the *jus divinum* of church government has been, and should be, discussed. I may remark, however, in general, that the mode in which this position is to be established is that of an induction of particulars,—*i.e.*, we proceed in the way of collating from Scripture certain rules in regard to the government of the church, which have the sanction of apostolic practice; we combine these together; we show that, when combined, they constitute what may be fairly called a scheme or system of church government; and that this scheme or system is just Presbyterianism in its fundamental principles and leading features, as it has been held by the great body of those who have been usually classed under this designation. It is no very difficult matter, I think, to prove from Scripture that the apostles, in establishing and organizing churches, committed the ordinary administration of divine ordinances, and the ordinary regulation of ecclesiastical affairs, not to the body of the ordinary members of the church, but to rulers or office-bearers; that these office-bearers, settled and constituted by the apostles in the churches which they founded, were of two classes, *viz.*, presbyters—called also bishops—and deacons; that no other ordinary class of functionaries was introduced by them into the administration of the government of the church, and especially no class of ordinary functionaries of superior rank or authority to the ministers of the word—the pastors of congregations; that these presbyters or bishops were divided into two classes, one of whom both taught and ruled, and the other only ruled, but did not ordinarily exercise the function of public teaching; that while these presbyters alone administered the spiritual affairs of the church, they all, in conjunction with the deacons, managed its temporal or secular affairs; that, in some cases at least, several congregations were placed under one presbyterial government; and that some countenance is given to the general idea of a gradation of judicatories—the general principle of a subordination of courts.

This was the way in which we see from Scripture that the apostles organized and made provision for the government of the churches which they planted. These different rules and arrangements, if really scriptural, as we believe they are, manifestly constitute, when combined together, a full scheme or system of government—what may be justly and reasonably called a particular form of church government; and *that* form of church government is manifestly just Presbyterianism in all its essential

principles and leading features, as distinguished from Prelacy on the one hand, and from Congregationalism on the other. The Presbyterian form of church government, then, has the warrant and sanction of apostolic practice, *i.e.*, we can show from Scripture that the churches planted by the apostles were organized substantially in accordance with the arrangements of what is usually called the Presbyterian system; and we have shown that there is no good ground for denying, and that there is quite sufficient ground for maintaining, as a general principle, with the limitations or modifications then explained, that the practice of the apostles in establishing and organizing churches, as made known or indicated to us in Scripture, is, and was intended to be, a permanent binding rule for regulating the government of the church of Christ, and of all its branches or sections. From all this the conclusion manifestly follows, that a particular form of church government has been laid down in Scripture as permanently binding upon the church of Christ—that form being the Presbyterian one.

This is what is implied in the profession which the ministers of our church are called upon to make when they receive ordination, and which, as I have already mentioned, is expressed in these words, that “the Presbyterian government and discipline of this church are founded upon the word of God, and agreeable thereto.” The language here employed is cautious and temperate, and is thus well suited to the circumstances of a solemn profession to be made by a numerous body of men, who might not all see their way to concur in stronger and more specific phraseology. Besides, it is to be observed that the profession respects not merely the fundamentals or essentials of Presbyterianism in the abstract, which alone can be reasonably maintained to have the clear and positive sanction of apostolic practice; but “the Presbyterian government and discipline of this church,” including the detailed development of the essential principles of Presbyterianism as exhibited in the actual constitution and arrangements of our church, and of all this in the concrete, or taken complexly, nothing higher or stronger could with propriety be affirmed, than that it is founded upon the word of God, and agreeable thereto. Of the *fundamental* principles and *leading* features of the Presbyterian system of church government as above described, and as distinguished from Prelacy and from Congregationalism, I would not

hesitate to use stronger and more specific language than our ordination formula applies to the Presbyterian government and discipline of this church—viz. this, that *in its substance it is the form* in regard to which Christ has, with sufficient plainness, indicated in His word, by the practice of His inspired apostles in establishing and organizing churches, that it is His mind and will that *it*, to the exclusion of all others, in so far as they are inconsistent with it, should be the form of government adopted in His church, and in all its branches; in other words, that Presbyterianism, in its substance or fundamental principles, is binding *jure divino* as the form of government by which the church of Christ ought permanently and everywhere to be regulated.

Some, in opposing the principle of the permanent scriptural authority or *jus divinum* of any one particular form of church government, take the ground that we have no sufficient materials in Scripture for determining what the apostolic practice in establishing and organizing churches was; others—and this is the view taken by Mosheim—that the apostolic practice, though substantially known and ascertained, does not constitute a rule permanently binding upon the church; while others, again—though this is virtually a modification of the first view—found much upon an allegation that the apostles did not establish the same form of government in *all* the churches which they planted. For this last allegation no evidence whatever can be produced; and unless it be restricted to matters of a comparatively insignificant kind, and of a manifestly local and temporary character, such as would not affect the real position in dispute, there is much that conclusively disproves it. The first of these views implies a large amount of distorting and perverting the word of God,—the exercise of a great deal of sinful ingenuity in involving it in obscurity and confusion; while the second, unless restricted, as we have explained, within such narrow limits as to make it incapable of affecting the proper question in dispute, is based, as we have shown, upon a general principle that is not only untenable, but dangerous, as infringing upon the sufficiency and perfection of the written word.

These are nothing more than mere hints upon a somewhat difficult and complicated subject; * but if pondered and followed

* Vide *Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, p. 37.—EDRS.

out, they may help to form a judgment upon a topic of considerable practical interest and importance in the present day, and may contribute to guard against the loose and latitudinarian views that are generally prevalent concerning it.

In conclusion, I would simply advert to another pretence which is sometimes employed in our day by those whose views concerning the government of the church, and the regulation of ecclesiastical affairs, cannot stand a scriptural investigation, and which is had recourse to for the purpose of evading the authority of Scripture, without needing to face the question of what it is that Scripture teaches and imposes upon the subject. It consists in the insinuation (for the notion is too absurd to be openly and explicitly asserted) of some such idea as this, that the obligation to be subject wholly to Christ, and to be guided exclusively by His written word in all things, attaches only to the invisible church, or to individual believers; and not, or at least not so fully, to the visible church and its separate branches.* To state this notion plainly and distinctly is to refute it: for nothing surely can be more obvious than that the obligation to be subject wholly to Christ's authority, and to be guided exclusively by His word in all matters on which it furnishes any information, attaches equally to all societies as to all individuals, which profess to receive Him as their Master; that the general principles, in this respect, which apply to the invisible must apply equally to the visible church; and that the general principles and rules applicable to the catholic visible church in its totality, must apply equally to every particular church, *i.e.*, to every section or branch of the catholic visible church, to every distinct organized society, large or small, Prelatic, Presbyterian, or Congregational, which assumes to itself the character and designation of a church of Christ.

* *Vide* Elliott, author of *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, in his reply to Dr. Candlish.