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**THE OBJECTS AND ORIGIN OF ECCLESIASTICAL POWER,
AND THE MANNER OF EXERCISING IT.**

MATTH. 18:18. *Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*

THE Church of the living God on earth has always been considered, by both her friends and her foes, as a society distinct from the world. This is the leading fact which is brought into view in the text and context. The church in this passage is represented as a regularly organized body, having a government of her own, and exercising that government for peculiar and special purposes, and with singular efficiency. Whatsoever she *binds* "on earth shall be bound in heaven," and whatsoever she *looses* "on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

We propose at this time to consider,

- I. THE OBJECTS OF THIS GOVERNMENT.
- II. THE SOURCE FROM WHICH IT IS DERIVED. And
- III. THE MANNER IN WHICH THOSE TO WHOM IT MAY BE ENTRUSTED ARE TO EXERCISE IT.

On the first of these we need not dwell. A mere statement of a few of the leading facts is all that is necessary. And,

1. The church, as a society, is within a society, and having objects and modes of operation peculiarly her own. But in these respects

* A Synodical Sermon.

there is no difference betwixt the church and a thousand other societies that are in the world. Every voluntary association for commercial, or literary, or national, or benevolent purposes, has exactly the same character. It is formed and it operates within the bosom of the national government, and in every case it is modified to a great extent by the character and habits of the mass of the population of the country.

All these societies agree further, in that though each has its peculiar object, and its peculiar mode of acting, and though all the members of any particular society may be connected with a vast number of other societies; yet men are known and recognized as members of that particular society only for a particular and specified purpose; and while all the arrangements of the society are made to bear upon that one object, yet the government of the society has no control over any of its member, but just so far as the declared object of the society is concerned. In all *other* matters, every member of the society is as free as if no such society did exist.

2. The great and specific object of the church, as a society, distinct from the world, is, without doubt, the deliverance of the human family from the power and pollution of sin. All her peculiar titles will be found to bear on this one object, and for this purpose were all her ordinances and modes of doing business appointed.

3. The *means* which the church, as a distinct society, commands for the accomplishment of this great object are *ample*, and most appropriate. They may all be comprehended under—the written word,—her sabbaths,—her ministry,—and the character and attainments of her members. Hence the great object of church government must be, to preserve these, and to exhibit them in all their purity and simplicity; and in the exhibition of them, to make them bear upon the understanding, and the hearts, and the consciences of men. And, in every case, the administration of church government is good when it accomplishes this one object, and it is bad when it fails to accomplish this object.

4. All things considered, and so far as government is concerned, the character and the attainments of her ministry and members is that which has the most important bearing on her efficiency and success. Nor does the church in this respect differ from other associations. In every society, whether large or small, whether voluntary or supported by authority, the society will be efficient, and will ultimately accomplish its specific object, in exact proportion to the qualifications and character of its members, and particularly of its officers.

This great and important matter is particularly brought into view in the passage before us. "Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican." Mat. 18:15—17. The great and distinct object of church government is, to attend to the admission or rejection of members. Let all things in this matter be done at the right time, and in the right manner, and with the right spirit, and all will be well. The authority and arrangements of the church will be irresistible. "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

We proceed now to consider,

II. The SOURCE from which church government is derived.

And here we are at once presented with one of the peculiar characteristics of the church. In all other associations of men, the power claimed and exercised by the officers of government over their fellow-men, is either directly or indirectly derived from the members of the society; and these officers, whether legislative or executive, act in the name and by the authority of the whole. But in the church, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Mediator of the new covenant, is the sole source of all the authority claimed and exercised.

He is the sole Head and Sovereign of the church. As Jehovah he created and gave being to all men, whether of the church or of the world. As Redeemer, he purchased the church with his own blood. He has, therefore, an original and undivided right to supreme authority. He, and he only, gave to the church and to the world the written word, which is the charter of all her privileges, as well as the only proper rule of her conduct, and the ground of all her hopes. He appointed her ordinances,—her sabbaths, and her sacraments, and the reading and the preaching of the word. He, and he only, appointed her ministry both under the Old and New Testament dispensations. And under the New Testament dispensation particularly, the ministry was appointed before the church was organized. Or in other words, the officers existed before the society existed. He still continues to communicate, from generation to generation, all the necessary ministerial gifts and graces. And in preaching the word, and

in administering the sacraments, and in exercising government and discipline, these officers are merely executive—they possess no legislative or creative power.

He hath further marked distinctly in his word what ought to be the qualifications of all her members. And members and officers are in all cases to be admitted or excluded only upon the evidence being produced of their possessing, or their not possessing these qualifications.

Finally: He has, in the passage before us, distinctly stated that he is to be personally present wherever the church may meet in his name, and that he is to take a deep interest in all their proceedings,—and that whatever is done in these meetings in accordance with his revealed will shall be ratified and carried into execution by himself. And in another passage, referring to the exercise of the ministerial office in all its parts, he says, “He that heareth you heareth me, and he that despiseth you despiseth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me.”

We pass on •

III. To attend to the MANNER in which those to whom the government of the church is entrusted are to exercise it.

We cannot, here, go into any details as to the various forms of ecclesiastical government. We can only state a few general principles. And,

1. No society of any kind can exist and act without *some form* of government. And whatever may be the form of government, there must be officers; and these officers, by whatever name they may be called, always constitute the executive department.

2. We have just seen that the church, properly speaking, has *no legislative power*. In whatever form then any particular church may agree to do their particular business, they are only to carry into execution the laws already given them; and given to them in common with all who call on the name of the Lord Jesus. No portion of the church has any power to make any new laws. The written word given by the Lord Jesus Christ is the common rule, and common charter, and common statute book of the whole catholic church.

3. In the Presbyterian Church the representative form of government is adopted, and ordained officers only are entrusted with the whole administration. Hence, in the remarks which are to be offered, though the general principles which may be stated may be applicable to every form of church government, yet they are to be applied in the present case particularly to ourselves.

We ask then, in *what manner* are those to *whom* the government of a church is committed to exercise that important trust? And

1. It is indispensably necessary that we at all times know and feel our responsibility, and know and feel to whom, and to whom *only*, we are responsible.

As men, and as christians, and as citizens, we are intimately connected with our fellow-men and fellow-christians; and our individual and social interest is in all cases intimately connected with their interest. But as officers in the house of God we are not responsible, in the strict and proper sense of the term, to any of our fellow-men for the manner in which we may discharge the duties of our office. We received our office from God. We hold it of Him, and to Him only are we properly responsible.

When we were entrusted with this office by "the laying on of the hands of the Presbytery," the brethren who acted on the occasion, acted only as executive officers. They merely announced to the church and to the world that they had what they considered satisfactory evidence that we were called and qualified by the Head of the Church for the great work for which we were set apart. Hence if we have these qualifications, and had that call, we minister in Christ's stead as his ambassadors, and as such we will be recognized while we are employed in his service. But if, on the other hand, we have been deceiving ourselves and imposing upon the church, we are only traitors and intruders, and will in the great day be published to an assembled world as such.

As fellow-officers in the house of God, we have a common trust; and one important part of that common trust is, to look out for faithful men to whom we may commit this ministry. And another important part of the trust is, to watch over one another, and to assist and admonish one another; and we are in the most of cases to know the particular will of our Lord and Master through the brethren with whom we are associated, and in this sense we are to be obedient to one another in the Lord. But still, strictly and properly speaking, we are individually and unitedly responsible only to Him of whom we hold our commission.

Much less do we hold our office of the people. It is true that we are the people's servants. We are to give ourselves wholly to our proper work, and our time, and our talents, and our attainments, and our all are to be devoted to the service of the people. And we are to watch for their souls, and to watch as those who are to "give an account." And to watch, as those who are to account for souls at the

risk of losing their own. But no where in the Bible is it said, either *directly* or *indirectly*, that this account is to be rendered to the people. Every where it is represented as to be rendered to God. Particularly in that important hour when it shall be said, "Give an account of thy stewardship, for thou shalt be no longer steward." And still more so, in that day, when "the dead, small and great," shall stand before the "great white throne."

The practical use of this *one* fact is of vast importance, and must be very obvious. It is only by understanding at all times the true nature of our responsibility, that we can exercise ourselves so as to have consciences void of offence towards God and towards man. This principle will lead us to study the bible—to be men of prayer and devotion—and to live above the favors and frowns of the world. The preacher of the gospel also, who shall thus live continually in the fear of God, will generally be equally noted for his humility, and his meekness, and his love to the brotherhood, and for his cheerful submission to all lawful authority. We remark,

2. That church authority is always to be exercised with great charity, having a due respect to all the *diversities* which mark human nature in its present state. Please to read the context, from verse 15 to the end of the chapter. We offer no comment on this passage. We only would request the fathers and the brethren of the ministry and eldership to read it, and pray over it again and again. It is our Lord and Master who addresses us in these verses; and while we shall be acting as his officers, let us each daily ask himself, "Do I understand this passage? Have I as an officer in God's house imbibed and acted out its spirit?" We remark,

3. That *continued prayer* and *devotion* ought to be intermingled with all our deliberations, and with all our conduct as executive officers. See verses 19 and 20. Many reasons might be urged to enforce this prerequisite. We suggest only a few. And,

1. The exercise of government and discipline is undoubtedly the highest and most important part of the ministerial office. It is admitted on all hands and on all occasions, that when we are called to administer either of the sacraments, we ought to be in a solemn and devotional spirit: and yet the sacraments are administered to particular individuals, because, by a previous act of government, these individuals have been admitted into the communion of the church. Hence all the distinguishing privileges of a christian and of a christian community depend on the faithful—the judicious—the conscientious administration of government and discipline. If we act *right*, here,

what we "bind on earth", is "bound in heaven," and what we "loose on earth" is "loosed in heaven." But if we act *wrong*, we sport with the realities of both worlds. The eternal destiny of an immortal—in many cases the destiny of *many* immortals, is involved in a single act of discipline.

Add to all—that while we sit in judgment we act as the representatives of the Redeemer, not in his humiliation, but in his exaltation, and in his highest grade of mediatorial glory. Every act of church government *rightly* administered is the symbol or representation of the final decision at the great day. Surely, then, if a mortal can be serious at any time, he ought to be serious, and ought to cherish a devotional spirit when he is called to act under such circumstances.

2. Under the Old Testament dispensation, a direct appeal to heaven for direction, or for a decision was almost an ordinary occurrence in all cases of difficulty. But we have no reason to believe, that *ordinary* communications from the throne of God to the sons of men are less frequent, or less efficient *now*, than they were then. All the evidence is otherwise. The whole tenor of Old Testament prophecy must lead to the conclusion, that the Divine presence is to be more abundant, and more general, and more powerful under the new dispensation, than ever it was under the old.

3. In the passage before us, the enjoyment and the exercise of the power of binding and loosing is intimately, and I believe inseparably, *connected with prayer and devotion*. Read verses 18, 19, 20. The inference from this connection is plain.

We might reason also here from *analogy*. The government and the discipline of the church is a divine ordinance. The same as the reading and the preaching of the word, or the giving and receiving of the sacraments. But we all agree in acknowledging the necessity of sincere, and fervent, and united prayer, in dispensing or in receiving any of these divine institutions. Much more, then, is the spirit of grace and supplication necessary, in the administration of government and discipline.

We might farther dwell upon the need we have of special direction while sitting in judgment. It is here that we are peculiarly in danger from the deceitfulness, the passions, and the prejudices of the human heart. Mind, in these cases, comes into contact with mind; and opinion clashes with opinion. Almost every case of discipline, also, supposes some departure from profession or principle—some accusation or suspicion; and consequently, more or less of irritation and want of confidence, *even* among brethren. And from whom are we to expect

assistance in such cases, but from Him who ruleth in the raging of the sea, and stilleth the noise of the people?

4. All that is known of the nature and efficacy of prayer, might be made to bear on this particular case. We know that Jehovah has been pleased to annex a great efficacy to prayer. We know that he has commanded and encouraged us to pray always, and to pray and not faint. We know further that he has given us special promises and encouragement and directions to pray, applicable to every possible situation, and that all the enjoyments of a child of God are sweet and profitable just in proportion as he has the spirit of grace and supplication. But as officers in the house of God, we are to take the lead in all the devotions of the sanctuary. And generally speaking, there will be *like priest, like people*. When the officers are men of prayer and devotion, the household will partake of the same spirit. But if it is otherwise with us, we need not expect to find among the people any thing but deadness and darkness and desolation.

5. The history of the church, in all lands and in all ages, and in every state and condition of men, will confirm and illustrate this part of our subject to almost any extent. It is a matter of historical doubt what was the particular form of government in some particular periods of the church; and where history is clear and decided as to the particular form, it is certain that there have been great diversities as to the success attending the administration of the very same ecclesiastical forms. There have been good and wise and faithful episcopalian governments, and good and wise presbyterian governments, and good and wise congregational governments; and there have been bad,—very bad administrations of government under all of these forms, and in all their varied modifications. But, in every case, the general rule has held good, without a single exception. The government and the discipline of the church have been good, while administered under the influence of the spirit of prayer and devotion. The most meek and humble and pious men have uniformly been the men whose judicial proceedings were most evidently ratified in heaven; and the proud and the arrogant, and those who had little or nothing of the spirit of devotion, have been the men whose decisions did not promote the peace and the purity and the prosperity of the church of God. These facts speak volumes.

6. We may appeal, fathers and brethren, to your own personal experience on this subject. When, brethren, do you study best? When do you preach best? When is your private and social intercourse with the members of the church, and with the men of the world

most conducive to the declared object of the gospel ministry? Uniformly, without a single exception, when you enjoy most of the spirit of prayer and devotion.

In like manner we may ask,—at the meeting of what particular church courts have you had the most decided evidence, that the Lord Jesus Christ was present in the midst of his officers, and fulfilling to them the promise, that he would be “a spirit of judgment to him that sitteth in judgment?” We presume the answer will be as in the former cases. The Head of the church was visibly present to direct and bless, just in proportion as the spirit of prayer and devotion prevailed. Can any of you say, that your Master has on any occasion forsaken you, when you were seeking him with your whole heart? Or have you ever been left to your own wisdom, or to your own strength, but when you were too proud and too self-confident to humble yourself before him? We presume not.

The *practical improvement* of all that has been advanced on this subject, will suggest an answer to a very important question, viz. Why has not the Divine presence been more deeply felt than it generally has been in the meetings of our church courts? This has been our situation in the most of cases, because,

1. Christians generally, and even the officers of God’s house, have not been properly impressed with the peculiar nature, and the peculiar character of church courts and church authority. Hence,

2. We have been in the habit of doing business in these courts nearly wholly in the way of the world, and very little under the influence of piety and devotion.

3. Our discipline has frequently been exercised for purposes very different from what ought to be the proper object of all church government. Hence, our ecclesiastical courts have been distinguished in many cases for producing and cherishing the *very opposite* of what they ought to produce and cherish. And,

4. Even when all our judicial business has been of the right kind, and conducted with the right spirit, the *necessity* of the continued influence of God’s Spirit to carry into effect our decisions, has, probably, been often,—very often, forgotten. If we have enjoyed Jehovah’s gracious presence, while sitting in judgment in his name, we have soon, like many of our ordinary hearers, lost all our devotional spirit, and returned again to act under the influence of the maxims and spirit of the world.

Fathers and brethren,—Shall these things be always so? Shall we not with one heart and one spirit return to the Lord God of our fathers? Shall we not yet know our weakness and our dangers,—the importance of the trust committed to us,—and the source of our strength,—and the encouragement which we have to lay hold of this strength; and act on all occasions according to the dignity and nature of the sacred office?