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R E V I E W

OF

DR. R. J. BRECKINRIDGE'S LETTERS,

ON

THE RIGHTS OF RULING ELDERS.

FROM THE

PRINCETON REVIEW,

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Albert Baldwin ✓
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THE ELDER QUESTION.

IT is truly mortifying that the Presbyterian Church, at this period of her history, instead of "leaving the first principles of the doctrine of Christ and going on unto perfection," should be employed in the juvenile task of laying again the foundation of the "doctrine of laying on of hands." We are utter disbelievers in the vaunted efficacy of a perpetual recurrence in the spirit of sceptical inquiry, to the first principles of our organization. The distinctive features of the Presbyterian form of church government have been known and settled for ages; and yet there are some who would persuade us that all who have hitherto embraced this system have used it, as common people do their watches, without comprehending at all the true principles of its construction; and who seek therefore to divert the energy of the church from reaching forward unto those things that are before, and waste it in the re-examination of foundations that were long since well and securely laid.

It is a great evil, when a church, instead of acting with the genial vigour of a well settled faith in the established principles of her organization, is agitated with a perpetual inquiry as to what her principles really are. If the Presbyterian Church of this country after a century of well-defined practice under a written constitution, needs to be instructed in such elementary matters, as who ought to perform the work of ordination to the ministry, and what constitutes a quorum of her ecclesiastical courts, we see no reason to hope for any progress in all time to come. If these matters have not been already settled beyond a reasonable doubt, we see not how they can now be settled, so as to prevent them from becoming the means of future agitation.

It forms a part of the mortifying character of the present agitation of our church, that it should touch upon questions that are in themselves of such little moment. How many members shall be required to constitute a quorum of a Presbytery, and whether among the designated number there shall be one or more ruling elders are questions, that

involving no principle of abstract truth or necessary order, can be determined only by general considerations of expediency. We know not what incessant and powerful appeals to some of the worst principles of human nature may effect in the end, but we are sure that no calm and considerate argument will ever succeed in convincing the sober judgment of the ministers and elders of the Presbyterian church, that our fathers in establishing the quorum clause in our constitution, or their successors in their uniform practice under it, had any intention to encroach upon the rights of the elders, or diminish in any degree their importance. The notion that the intent or the effect of the rule, or of the practice under it, is to establish a hierarchy, or to take the initial step towards so monstrous a conclusion, is simply farcical; or at least it would be so, if no other means than dispassionate argument were employed in support of it. Nor do we suppose that an attempt to show that our fathers or ourselves in maintaining that ordination to the office of preaching the word, and administering the sacraments should be performed by those who have themselves been authorized to discharge these functions, did really disclose an implicit belief that ordination was a mystical charm, would be deemed worthy a serious thought, were this attempt made in the simple sincerity of honest argument. That the whole Presbyterian church of this and other lands have been for ages devoted to a superstitious belief, and need now to have some one, in the plenitude of his gifts, declare unto them the true meaning of that which they have ignorantly worshipped, is too preposterous for grave argument. It will be impossible by any ingenuity of argument to persuade the church, that the belief that ruling elders ought not to impose hands in ordination is a superstition, or that it involves the injurious intents and consequences which are charged upon it. The question is in itself of trifling moment. It is a matter merely of fitness and propriety. If any Presbytery had seen fit quietly to depart from presbyterian usage in this matter, no one we presume would have thought it expedient to call their conduct into question, for no one believes that the act of ordination is rendered invalid by the supererogatory addition of the hands of the ruling elders. But when it is claimed that all Presbyteries ought to, and shall ordain in this manner, upon the ground that there is no distinction of order between the bishop and the ruling elder, the question becomes one of principle, and we are called upon to vindicate the ancient faith

of the Presbyterian church when thus attacked through a proposed change in one of its ceremonial usages.

It is also worthy of consideration that the present agitation of these questions has arisen from no practical grievance under the operation of our system. No church has complained that its interests have been slighted at meetings of Presbytery held without the presence of ruling elders; no elders have complained that at such meetings advantage has been taken of their absence to encroach upon their rights and privileges; nor has any elder complained that having offered to take part in the ceremony of ordination he was hindered therein, and thus debarred from what he deemed a rightful exercise of his authority. If the germ of a hierarchical establishment is contained in the interpretation which the church has always given to the quorum clause in her constitution, it is strange that this germ should have remained so long undeveloped. If the hierarchy of this rule has continued to this day constructive only, it might have been permitted to slumber in its potential form until it had passed into actual existence. And if the confinement of the imposition of hands in the rite of ordination to preaching elders, has resulted as yet in no further encroachments of the spirit of priestly domination from which it is said to spring, it might, we think, be safely trusted a little longer. From the days of the Reformation until now, every Presbyterian church of which we have any knowledge has ordained its preachers by the hands of preaching elders; and though Milton, in the disordered times of the English commonwealth, complained that "new Presbyter was only old Priest writ large," it certainly is not among the Presbyterians of any age or land, that we are to look for the reign of priestly usurpation. The evils complained of in the practice of our church are purely abstract. They have never yet taken on a concrete form. Instead of the voice of complaint from parties who feel themselves to be aggrieved, we have only the voices of those who are endeavouring to make the ruling elders feel, that in their ignorant simplicity they have long been imposed upon without knowing it, and that this imposition is but the prelude to further strides of priestly power if it be not met with timely resistance. It is a singular feature in the championship of the cause of the ruling elders, that the most difficult part of the duty of the champion consists in persuading the body to be defended that they have been ill used and are likely to be still further trampled upon.

It remains to be seen whether the valour exhibited in such a cause will meet with its reward or not.

In the pamphlet, the title of which we have placed at the head of this article, we have the substance of two arguments upon the ordination and quorum question, delivered before the Synod of Philadelphia by Dr. R. J. Breckinridge, a conspicuous defender of what he deems the rights and privileges of Ruling Elders. It will be remembered that the General Assembly of 1842 decided by a unanimous vote that it was not within the intent of our constitutional rule upon that subject, that ruling elders should join in the imposition of hands in the rite of ordination. This vote was subsequently re-considered, and the subject was referred to the next Assembly. The last Assembly after a full argument of the case decided by a vote of 138 to 9 that the constitution of our church does not authorize ruling elders to impose hands in the ordination of ministers. This was the deliberate judgment of the church expressed through its highest court, upon a question not hastily brought before it, nor hastily decided. If the church is capable of forming its mind upon the meaning of its own elementary principles and methods of proceeding, we have that mind distinctly expressed in this decision. If the unanimous decision of one Assembly, and the nearly unanimous decision of another, after a year's reflection, ought not to be final, so as to be an end of controversy, we can discern no means by which such a question can ever be definitively settled; and for aught that we can see, our church must be reduced to the humiliating attitude of ever learning what her own simplest rudiments are, and never coming to the knowledge of the truth.

By the same Assembly it was decided that any three ministers regularly convened are a quorum competent to the transaction of all business. A resolution to this effect was adopted by a vote of 83 to 35, nearly three fourths of the body voting in the affirmative. Considering the true insignificance of the question at issue, affecting not in any sense the constitution of a presbytery, but only the definition of a competent quorum of the body, this vote was sufficiently decided to set the question at rest. We shall make ourselves a by-word among the churches, if our General Assembly is to consume its time year after year in discussing such minor points of order, and disgrace its character as a right-judging and stable court by the utterance of contradictory judgments concerning them. Should the next Assembly reverse the decision of the last, we see not why

the succeeding one may not be called upon again to review and annul. The decision of our highest court upon a question of the interpretation of the constitution, when calmly and decisively pronounced, ought in all ordinary cases, to be held final and conclusive. It were far better that they who are dissatisfied should receive the interpretation as authoritative, and seek to obtain such an amendment to the constitution as would meet their wishes, than to impeach the wisdom or probity of the Assembly that rendered the decision, and attempt to move succeeding ones to set it aside. How can this venerable body retain its hold upon the confidence of the churches, how can its counsels be received with respect, or its mandates obeyed with cheerful zeal, if upon questions affecting the interpretation of the constitution, the decisions of one year are continually annulled by those of the next?

Dr. R. J. Breckinridge, dissenting from the decision of these two questions by the last Assembly, moved the Synod of Philadelphia, at their meeting in October last, to adopt two several minutes condemning the resolutions of the Assembly, and proposing to the next Assembly to repeal these obnoxious resolutions and adopt others in their stead of a contrary tenor. The Synod refused to adopt the proposed minutes, whereupon Dr. Breckinridge gave notice of an appeal or complaint to be taken to the next General Assembly, in the trial of which appeal or complaint he should insist upon the exclusion of the Synod from the right of voting upon any question connected therewith. There can be no doubt that if the General Assembly entertain this protest against the decision of the Synod of Philadelphia under the character of an appeal or complaint, and institute the proceedings directed in such cases, the inferior judicatory must be debarred from the right to vote upon any question connected with the issue of the matter. And this of itself would be sufficient to show that this was not a case in which either an appeal or complaint could with propriety be taken, and that the proper course for the Assembly to pursue would be to dismiss it at once from consideration as irrelevant. If this appeal is to be so construed as to bring up the merits of the main questions for argument and decision, then surely the Synod of Philadelphia ought to be upon the floor. The questions at issue, not having relation to the wise and just administration of law, but to the determination of what the law itself is, can with propriety be settled only by the united voice of the whole church. The posterous character of this appeal may be sufficiently illus-

trated by a very supposable case. The Synod of Kentucky has within the past year passed a resolution to the effect that in their judgment ruling elders ought to impose hands in the ordination of ministers. Let us suppose that some member of the minority had appealed from this decision to the next Assembly, and that that body issue this appeal. It is possible that the state of opinion in the next Assembly might be such that with the Synod of Kentucky off the floor, as it must be in the trial of this appeal, the decision would be adverse to the claim set up on behalf of the ruling elders, and with the Synod of Philadelphia excluded upon the issue of Dr. Breckinridge's appeal, a contrary decision might be rendered. We should thus have the church perplexed by two contradictory decisions of the same question by the same General Assembly. There can obviously be no fixed law or settled constitution in a church, if its highest court, in the exercise of its prerogative as an interpreter of the law and the constitution, may thus be broken into factions by the conversion of abstract questions into personal wrongs.

The utter irrelevancy of Dr. Breckinridge's appeal will be further apparent, upon a moment's consideration of the nature of the decision appealed from. The Synod of Philadelphia passed no affirmative resolution. They neither affirmed or denied the doctrines put forth by the last Assembly. They simply refused to adopt certain private opinions held by Dr. Breckinridge, and by him embodied in writing and presented for their acceptance. Was this refusal a personal grievance of which Dr. Breckinridge has a right to complain? The Synod pronounced no judgment on the soundness or unsoundness of his opinions, but for reasons which they have not seen fit to assign, they declined to entertain them. Who was injured or aggrieved by this declared unwillingness of the Synod to take any action in the matter? A delay to act, may in some cases, where personal rights and interests are involved, be unjust and injurious, but in this matter we see not how any allegation of wrong can be sustained except upon the ground that Dr. Breckinridge has an inherent right to demand that any Synod to which he may be attached, shall entertain whatever opinions he may see fit to offer.

It is difficult to conceive upon what ground other than the existence of some such unqualified right, the Synod of Philadelphia could have been expected to adopt all the opinions that were on this occasion offered for their acceptance. In the minute touching the quorum question which

Dr. Breckinridge, "with a profound conviction of its truth and a deep sense of its timeliness" submitted to the Synod, this body is called upon among other things, to express its belief that "the principle here involved is practically the question between an aristocratical hierarchy, and a free Christian commonwealth." That Dr. Breckinridge should believe this is not perhaps surprising, for nothing is more common than for men who find themselves out of sympathy with the community to which they belong, to manifest a certain extravagant tendency of opinion as well as of feeling. The calmness which measures the exact nature and precise relations of the question at issue is not to be expected from a man who feels himself to be in the position of Jeremiah, when Jerusalem was beleaguered by the army of aliens, and he himself imprisoned, denounced as a traitor, and threatened with death, unless with the prophet's doom he possesses also the prophet's qualifications and supports. That Dr. Breckinridge's convictions and feelings should run out into great exaggeration, that matters in themselves of small import should be magnified into vital principles, and things that are totally dissimilar be confounded as identical, was nothing more than was to be expected from any uninspired man occupying the position in which he feels himself to stand. But if a complaint should be entertained against a deliberative body, because they refused to express their belief, that an economical rule, which affirms nothing respecting the constitution of a Presbytery, which debars no one entitled to partake in its deliberations and votes from attendance upon its meetings, which restrains no right and curtails no privilege, and which moreover has been in practical operation for more than a century, without having led to any evil, involves "practically the question between an aristocratical hierarchy and a free commonwealth,"—this we confess would surprise us.

There are other methods than by appeal or complaint by which these questions may be brought before the next Assembly, under such a form as may provide for the utterance of the deliberate judgment of the entire body; and in some one of these methods we suppose they will be brought up and discussed anew. We have therefore examined Dr. Breckinridge's arguments to ascertain what new light they have shed upon the subjects of which they treat. The many imputations of bad motives and sinister designs to those who are of a contrary opinion, which these speeches contain, as well as their confident prophecies, we shall pass

without further remark. It is impossible to refute a sneer, a vituperation, or a prophecy. Honest deeds are the only fit answer to dishonest words, and time, in the absence of miracles, is the only test of the prophet. But what they offer of argument or of fact, bearing upon the proper discussion of the subject, we propose briefly to examine.

In the discussion of the question, who ought to impose hands in the ordination of ministers, we do not find that Dr. Breckinridge has added anything to the argument as delivered before the last Assembly. The whole stress of this question turns, of course, upon the interpretation to be given to the direction contained in our form of government, that "the presiding minister shall by prayer, and with the laying on of the hands of the Presbytery, according to the apostolic example solemnly ordain him to the holy office of the gospel ministry;" and the whole force of the reasoning, upon the side of those who would change our established customs, resides in the assumption that the presbytery herein named must of necessity, mean the Presbytery previously defined as consisting of ministers and ruling elders. "Presbytery imposes hands in ordination; elders are of right members of that body; therefore they must necessarily impose hands." This is the whole argument. To assert that the Presbytery that imposes hands is not the entire Presbytery Dr. Breckinridge declares to be "utter folly." "Why," he asks, "would you stultify our fathers? Did they first define with the utmost clearness the term Presbytery; then invest the body so called with the power of ordaining ministers of the word; then in a long chapter treating of this ordination in detail use the word a dozen times in its defined sense; and then without motive or notice, use the same word in the same chapter and touching the same business, in a sense not only inconsistent with their own definition and their constant use of it, but in a sense flatly contrary to both? The thing is supremely absurd." Here is the whole case on the other side. And we are willing to grant that the *prima facie* meaning of the language is in favour of the interpretation here given to it. But we find sufficient evidence that this is not the true explanation, in the historical fact, altogether unexplained and inexplicable, upon the contrary hypothesis, that in the actual practice of our church with few and unimportant exceptions, ministers have been ordained by the imposition of the hands of ministers. The language of the written constitution, it is affirmed, is clear and explicit; it can have but one meaning; to attempt to give it any other is to stultify our fathers, is utter folly, is supremely absurd.

How then came it to pass that our fathers stultified themselves, for it is undeniable that they ordained by the imposition of the hands of preaching elders? If the language of the constitution is so unequivocal and explicit that it can bear but one meaning, how happens it that it was, as a matter of fact, understood and applied in a different meaning by our fathers and by all who have succeeded them, even until the present day? This fact is in truth decisive of the controversy. It is perfectly futile for men to write and speak, however plausibly or ably, to prove that certain language can have but one meaning, when it is a notorious fact that they who indited that language and the whole church after them for a period of fifty years, have actually attached to it a different meaning. No attempt has been made to explain this fact. Our fathers, whom we are urged in filial tenderness not to stultify, are left in the extraordinary predicament of having formally laid down a proposition in terms too explicit to be misunderstood, and then instantly reduced to action one that is not only inconsistent with it, but flatly contrary thereto; that is, through incredible ignorance they were incapable of comprehending their own language, or through wilful dishonesty they perverted it. We have said that no attempt has been made to explain this fact, for we do not reckon as such Dr. Breckinridge's argument to show "the absurdity of talking about a practice that elders *should not* impose hands." If there be any other man than one of straw who has ever talked thus, we congratulate Dr. Breckinridge upon his triumphant victory over him. Nor do we consider the force of the argument drawn from the practice of the fathers of our church as impaired in any degree by Dr. Breckinridge's denial that the practice of ordaining by the imposition of the hands of preaching elders has been strictly universal. What may have been done in one or two western Presbyteries, of late years, we know not, but it is beyond all doubt, that at the establishment of our church, the practice was universal, and that from that day to this, the same practice has prevailed throughout the church. Under such circumstances it is a truly desperate attempt, to show that the framers of our constitution intended to establish a rule which was flatly contradicted by every act to which that rule was applicable. The plain palpable force of the concurrent practice of the church from its commencement until now is not to be evaded. It is conclusive as to the meaning which our fathers who established the constitution attached to the laying on of the hands of the Presbytery. Whether these words can properly bear this meaning or not,

it is certain that this was the meaning which they actually affixed to them when they inserted them in the Form of Government; it was in this sense that the church received them in adopting the constitution; it is in this sense that they have ever since been interpreted; and it is in this sense that we are bound by them. Of what avail is it, in disparagement of this conclusion, to tell us of other practices of this same church, such as the disuse of the office of deacon, and the establishment and tolerance of the Plan of Union, that were clearly unconstitutional? Who needs to be taught the distinction between a corrupt practice that has crept into the church, however insidiously, at some definite period of her history, and one that is co-eval with its constitution and necessarily interpretative of it?

The conclusion to which we are thus forced by the language of the constitution, as illustrated by the practice of its founders, derives additional strength from every quarter. The terms of the constitution are not only susceptible of the interpretation for which we contend, but they do of themselves, when properly collated, compel us to adopt this as their only consistent meaning. More than one instance occurs in our Form of Government, in which the terms Presbytery, and member of the Presbytery are used, where it is apparent that ministers only are meant, the duties being such as could be properly discharged only by them. Now we maintain that in the ordination service itself, there is evidence that the whole ceremonial part of the ordination was judged to be a work which could be fitly performed only by ministers. This is sufficiently clear from the direction given that "the minister who presides shall first, and afterward all the other members of the Presbytery in their order, take him by the right hand, saying, in words to this purpose, We give you the right hand of fellowship to take part of this ministry with us." Here the language, all the other members of the Presbytery, is express and peremptory, and yet it is obviously limited to those members who have already partaken of the ministry to which the candidate is ordained. Dr. Breckinridge indeed asserts that this argument is a sophism, which chiefly rests on an error of fact; and the error of fact which he elaborately overthrows consists in an alleged misapprehension of the word ministry, which restricts it to the ministry of the word. He succeeds in proving what no one has ever denied, that the word ministry, in its etymological sense, means service, and minister a servant; but he has not succeeded in finding a single instance in our form of government where

these words are employed to denote any other kind of service than that which is discharged by preaching elders. And if he had found any number of such instances, this sophism, as he is pleased to call it, would still remain a strong and impregnable argument in the judgment of all who can rightly appreciate the meaning of words. As if to forestal the very objection raised, this salutation defines with the utmost precision the kind of ministry, or service intended. They who take the newly ordained minister by the hand, receive him not to the ministry, but to *this* ministry. What ministry? Beyond all dispute, that to which the candidate is receiving his ordination, and which they who take him by the hand share with him. And is this the ministry of rule over the church, or the higher ministry inclusive of the other, of preaching the word and administering the sacraments? When, as has not unfrequently occurred, a ruling elder has been ordained, as a preacher, to what ministry did the right hand of fellowship welcome him? The theory of Dr. Breckinridge would demand that in this case there should be no second ordination; and the contrary judgment of our constitution shows conclusively that whatever may be in other respects the merits of his system, it is not the presbyterianism of our standards. When one who is already a ruling elder is ordained to the ministry of the word, with what propriety can an elder of the Presbytery, welcome him "to take part of *this* ministry *with us*?" It is clear that these words limit the performance of this act to the preaching members of the Presbytery; and it is equally clear that it was intended that they who welcome the newly ordained minister to his office should be they who induct him into it.

In reply to the question, why the unrestricted language, laying on of the hands of the Presbytery, is employed, if it was intended that it should be limited to preaching elders, we answer that it was doubtless for the same reason that when it is said that "a member of the Presbytery" shall preach a sermon, it was not deemed necessary to qualify the designation of the person any farther than was done by the nature of the duty assigned. There never was a Christian church upon the face of the earth, excepting the Anabaptists, the Brownists, and such like, which did not ordain its preachers by the hands of those who were themselves preachers. There is no account in the New Testament of an ordination that was not performed by those who were themselves possessed of the office conferred. It was thus that all ordinations had been performed in the Presby-

terian church of our own country, prior to the adoption of our present constitution. The Form of Government previously recognised as authority in the church, that drawn up by the Westminster Assembly of Divines and adopted by the Church of Scotland, expressly limits the imposition of hands to the preaching elders, and yet it speaks familiarly elsewhere of ordination as performed by the Presbytery, the whole Presbytery, and by the laying on of the hands of the Presbytery. It was to have been expected that, in settling a Form of Government in opposition to one that had previously prevailed, the Westminster Assembly would be precise and full in their exposition of the minor details of the organization established; and on the other hand it was not to be expected that in drawing up our briefer directory, its authors would be equally careful to define words and phrases which had been settled in their meaning and usage for a hundred and fifty years. At the time that our standards were framed there was no doubt as to who ought to lay on hands in ordination. There never had been any question respecting this matter. It was altogether natural, therefore, that in compiling the rule for ordination, the authors of it should quote the scriptural phrase, "laying on of the hands of the Presbytery," without dreaming of the necessity of imposing a limit upon the general term Presbytery, which had been already affixed to it by the universal consent of the church in all ages, and by the unbroken and unquestioned practice of our own church in particular. And had the danger of misapprehension occurred to them, they doubtless would have supposed that they had sufficiently guarded against it, by the direction subsequently given that "all the members of the Presbytery in their order" shall utter certain words, which words would be perfect nonsense coming from the mouth of any other than a preaching elder. If the ministry to which the preacher is ordained is a different ministry from that exercised by the ruling elder, then it is evident that "the Presbytery," and "all the members of the Presbytery" refer exclusively to preaching elders.

This is the law of our book, consistent with itself, with the practice of the church, with right reason, with scriptural authority, and with universal custom. Not one instance has been produced, from apostolic example or from the history of any Presbyterian church that has ever existed, in which a man was ordained to the office of a preacher, by the imposition of the hands of those who were not themselves preachers. It has always been recognised as fitting

and right, that the distinction which exists between the teacher and the ruler should be made apparent in the act of ordination; and it will accordingly be found that they who have undertaken what they are pleased to call the defence of the ruling elders, plead for their participation in the act of ordination upon principles that are utterly subversive of the true distinction between the preaching and the ruling elder.

We do not enter at present more particularly into the argument founded upon the use of the term presbyter in the New Testament; for this argument so far as it has any bearing upon the question under discussion has no force except as it tends to obliterate all distinction between the two classes of elders. The same reasoning which proves that ruling elders ought to impose hands in ordination, proves also that they ought to teach. The ruling elder, it is contended is a scriptural presbyter, a scriptural bishop, and as presbyters and bishops ordain, by the imposition of hands, therefore ruling elders must impose hands. So also the scriptural presbyter or bishop must be apt to teach; they that had the rule over the church were also they who spoke unto them the word of God. It is easy therefore, by the change of the middle term of the above syllogism, to construct one which would prove that it was one of the functions of the ruling elder to preach the word. When they who are now seeking their ends through the distortion of our standards, shall seek to change the standards themselves upon the ground that they are not consistent with scriptural teaching, we shall be ready to enter with all minuteness into this discussion. In the mean time the single question before us now is, what is the presbyterianism of our constitution? And the language of the instrument itself, interpreted by the collation of one part with another, and illustrated by other formularies from which it was compiled, and by the undoubted practice of its founders, leaves no room for doubt in an unprejudiced mind, that it was not within the intent of the rule upon that subject, that ruling elders should unite in the imposition of hands in the ordination of ministers.

Dr. Breckinridge has attempted to invalidate the historical argument, drawn from the practice of other churches, and this, as might have been expected, is much the weakest part of his essay. He who sets out to find in history that which never existed, is very apt to lose his way. Dr. Breckinridge, "the course of whose studies," as he informs us, "has not left him ignorant of the sentiments of God's people

in past times," avows his belief that the teaching of other reformed churches furnishes more in favour of his position than against it. How well he has sustained this belief, our readers may judge for themselves.

He refers, in the first instance to the Reformed churches of France and Geneva. In these churches he admits that ordination was performed by ministers, but attempts to show, by an argument that may be safely left to do its work unhindered, that the authority of this example is in favour of the participation of ruling elders in this service among us.

He then passes to what he terms "the most remarkable confession to which the Reformation gave birth," the second or latter Helvetic confession. In the eighteenth chapter of this confession, which treats of the ministry of the church, it is said that "they who are chosen shall be ordained by elders, with public prayers and imposition of hands." But before the meaning of this can be comprehended it must be understood who are meant by elders. In a preceding paragraph, after giving and defining the terms applied to the ministers of the church in the New Testament, it adds, "*licebit ergo nunc ecclesiarum ministros nuncupare Episcopos, Presbyteros, Pastores, atque Doctores;*" it is therefore proper now to call the ministers of the churches, Bishops, Presbyters, Pastors, and Teachers. The term elders or presbyters is, therefore, one of several terms that may be appropriately employed to designate the ministers of the church. What then were the peculiar functions of ministers? This is made perfectly apparent. In page 510 of the same chapter, it is said: "*Data est omnibus in ecclesia ministris una et aequalis potestas sive functio,*" to all ministers of the church, one and the same power or function is given. And again, "*officia ministorum sunt varia, quae tamen plerique ad duo restringunt, in quibus omnia alia comprehenduntur, ad doctrinam Christi evangelicam et ad legitimam sacramentorum administrationem;*" the duties of ministers are various, though they are generally restricted to two, in which all the rest are comprehended, namely, teaching the evangelical doctrine of Christ, and the lawful administration of the sacraments. Through the whole chapter it is apparent that the ministers of the church, of whom it treats, are such, and such only, as are authorized to preach the word, and administer the sacraments. It says not one word, directly or indirectly, respecting any other class of ministers or rulers. The existence of ruling elders is not

once hinted at throughout the document. It affirms that ordination shall be by the imposition of the hands of the elders—that elders is one of the terms appropriately applied to ministers—and that ministers are they whose chief functions are to preach the evangelical doctrine of Christ and administer the sacraments. It must require optics peculiarly constituted, to discern in all this any evidence in favour of the participation of ruling elders in the imposition of hands. It teaches the same doctrine that is found in the standards of our own, and of all other churches, that induction into the office to preach and administer the sacraments, should be performed by those who are themselves incumbents of the same office.

We are next referred to the second book of discipline of the Scottish church, which affirms that “ordination is the separation and sanctifying of the person appointed to God, and his kirk, after he is well tried and found qualified,” and that “the ceremonies of ordination, are fasting, earnest prayer, and imposition of the hands of the eldership.” “Such,” Dr. Breckinridge adds, “is ordination according to the doctrine of that venerable church whose standards have furnished so large a portion of our own; and such it is, essentially as held by all the Reformed churches—and I may add by the primitive and apostolic church.” And this is, as we maintain, precisely the doctrine of our standards. The same language in substance is employed, and the same question arises here as in the interpretation of our own directory; what does this language mean? what is the doctrine taught? It sheds less light upon the subject, than upon the difficulties by which the reasoner feels himself to be environed, when he attempts to fortify his interpretation of an ambiguous phrase by reference to one of precisely equivalent import. “The laying on of the hands of the Presbytery,” and “the imposition of the hands of the eldership,” inasmuch as they differ from each other only in sound, undoubtedly mean the same thing: but what is this one thing which they both mean? What was intended by the “hands of the eldership,” in the second book of discipline, is clearly made known by cotemporary writers who treat expressly of the subject. Calderwood, in the *Altare Damascenum*, published in 1623 says that the imposition of hands “is confined to pastors or teaching elders only,” and expressly justifies the consistency of this usage with the language of the directory. Samuel Rutherford in his “Peacc-

able Plea for Paul's Presbytery in Scotland," published in 1642, says, "everywhere, in the word, where pastors and elders are created, there they are ordained by pastors. . . . Ordination of pastors is never given to people or believers, or to ruling elders, but still to pastors." To the same effect is the testimony of Alexander Henderson, and of James Guthrie.*

There is no room left for doubt as to the doctrine of the second Book of Discipline, that venerable standard which "was drawn up by Andrew Melville, adopted by all the civil and ecclesiastical authorities of the kingdom, and made the basis of more numerous and solemn national acts than any other paper, perhaps, of merely human origin." This book teaches the exact doctrine which we maintain, that ordination is to be performed by the imposition of the hands of the eldership, meaning thereby preaching elders. We have thus, not only the example of the Scottish Church, confirming us by the conclusions to which the ablest men of the day arrived, at a period which peculiarly called for a thorough sifting of the principles of church organization; but what is still more important in its bearing upon the precise question before us, we find that in the standards which are admitted to "have furnished a large portion of our own," the phrase "imposition of the hands of the eldership" had acquired a settled meaning as early as the year 1578.

Dr. Breckinridge declares that it seems to him "the very height of absurdity and an absolute contempt of common sense, for any one to contend, that according to the principles and the very terms of this instrument, ruling elders are not permitted to impose hands in the ordination of ministers of the word." And yet, in the light of the authorities above cited, it would be so plain an affront to common sense to deny that the principles and the terms of this instrument were intended to exclude ruling elders from taking part in the act of ordination, that no one we suppose will henceforth presume to call it in question. It was universally understood by the men who framed, adopted, and used this instrument, that it confined the imposition of hands to preaching elders. If men who use language are not to be denied the privilege of explaining what sense

* See these authors cited in the appendix to Dr. Miller's Sermon on the office of the ruling elder. p. 126.

they attach to their own terms, then the "imposition of the hands of the eldership," in the Book of Discipline refers exclusively to preaching elders. It was in this sense that the church understood these words; in this sense they passed into the Westminster Directory, and into our own standards. Through a period of two hundred and sixty-five years, during which this language has been employed, in the rite of ordination, no doubt has existed as to its true meaning. And are we now to be told that during all this time the men who compiled and used the church standards which have prevailed, did not understand the meaning of their own words? Is a purely verbal argument, founded upon nothing higher or deeper than a mere jingle of words, to be considered as of weight in determining that the true intent of language is one which they who employed that language, have disavowed by all their writings and in all their acts?

Greater violence even, than in the cases already reviewed, is needed so to torture the standards of the Westminster Assembly as to make them utter the desired response. There is of course no doubt as to the judgment of the Westminster Assembly respecting the point in debate. They have expressly decided that ordination shall be "by imposition of hands, and prayer, with fasting, by those preaching presbyters to whom it doth belong." They have made this matter so clear that there is no room left for a play upon words. The Directory for the ordination of ministers states, in general terms, analogous to the language employed in our book, that "the Presbytery, or the ministers sent from them for ordination, shall solemnly set him apart to the office and work of the ministry, by laying their hands on him," but this is elsewhere and more than once, limited to preaching presbyters. "The preaching presbyters orderly associated, either in cities or neighbouring villages are those to whom the imposition of hands doth appertain, for those congregations within their bounds respectively." To evade the force of this example, Dr. Breckinridge contends that this Directory teaches an entirely different doctrine respecting ordination from that which we maintain. Citing the declaration that "every minister of the word is to be ordained by imposition of hands, and prayer, with fasting, by those preaching presbyters to whom it doth belong," he asserts that this requires us to go much further than has yet been contended for, for not only imposition of hands, but ordination itself

is here explicitly declared to belong to preaching presbyters ; and he adds the significant hint, that it will not be long before this authority will be quoted to prove that preaching elders only, have any concern with the whole process of ordination. "Is that," he asks, "the doctrine of our church." Again he quotes the declaration of the Directory, that "the power of ordering the whole work of ordination is in the whole Presbytery," with the subsequent qualification that "the preaching presbyters . . . are those to whom the imposition of hands doth appertain;" and from this he infers that the business of the whole Presbytery is *only* to order the work of ordination, and that it is the preaching presbyters who ordain. And again he demands, "is this our system?" We answer, that the system of the Westminster Directory, according to the clear and palpable meaning of the instrument itself, is undoubtedly our precise system, neither more nor less. The "ordering of the whole work of ordination" which it gives to the whole Presbytery, will not be lessened in its meaning by the disparaging "*only*" which Dr. Breckinridge has prefixed to it. The whole Presbytery are to order or to determine the entire work, to judge of the qualifications of the candidate, and decide whether he shall be ordained ; but the executive acts by which their decision is actually carried into effect, the prayers, the exhortations, the imposition of hands, are to be performed by the preaching presbyters. Such is the plain doctrine of this directory, and such precisely is the doctrine of our standards. The intent of the instrument itself is so clear, that it needs no elucidation. If any confirmation were necessary, it could be found abundantly in the debates of the Assembly, attending the formation of the Directory ; and in contemporary expositions and defences of the form of government which they established. In the *Jus Divinum Ministerii Evangelici*, or the divine right of the gospel ministry, we find the whole matter of ordination, in its substantive and formal part, treated at length. This work was published in 1654, by the Provincial Assembly of London ; it was subscribed, November 2, 1653, in the name and by the appointment of the Assembly, by the Moderator, Assessors and Scribes, one of the latter of whom was Matthew Pool. In the XIIIth chapter of this work, entitled, "Wherein the fourth assertion about ordination is proved, viz., that ordination of ministers ought to be by the laying on of the hands of the Presbytery," we find the following question and answer :

“*Question 4.* What part hath the ruling elder in ordination.

“*Answer.* Supposing that there is such an officer in the church (for the proof of which we refer the reader to our vindication) we answer, that the power of ordering of the whole work of ordination belongs to the whole Presbytery, that is, to the teaching and ruling elders. But imposition of hands is to be always by preaching presbyters, and the rather because it is accompanied with prayer and exhortation, both before, in, and after, which is the proper work of the teaching elder.” Here is the same phraseology that is employed in the Directory, and its meaning is placed beyond the reach of cavil. The system here taught is, we repeat it, our system. The decision of every question connected with each particular case of ordination is vested in the whole Presbytery, and the formal act or acts by which the decision is declared and carried into effect, is placed in the hands of the teaching elders.

But, in the second place, Dr. Breckinridge attempts to invalidate the authority of the Westminster Directory on the ground that its provisions for ordination were extemporaneous, devised confessedly to meet the exigencies of a particular crisis and of course not adapted to a different state of things. We prefer quoting his own words upon this head, fearful that any paraphrase which we might make of them would necessarily pass with the reader for a caricature. After citing from the Directory the passages to which we have already referred, he adds: “The two heads of *Doctrine and Power* under which the foregoing statements occur, are then thrown together; and under the 11th and 12th sections of this united head we have these two important propositions, ‘*In extraordinary cases something extraordinary may be done. . . . There is at this time, an extraordinary occasion for a way of ordination for the present supply of ministers.*’ True enough, sir; but it sets the whole matter on a new foundation. Are we in a state of civil war? Have we no church courts in America as there was not one in England, when this Directory was drawn up? Do our fifteen hundred ministers, and two thousand churches furnish no present supply of ministers to constitute a single Presbytery?” This has no meaning unless it be to disparage the directions, already quoted, respecting ordination, on the ground that they were framed to meet a special exigency, there being at that time no eccle-

siastical court, regularly constituted in England. But were there no courts, with ruling elders a constituent portion of them, in Scotland, to which no less than to England, regard was had in the compilation of these directions? Do they not in their own nature, and in express terms, contemplate a Presbytery fully formed? It is true that this instrument under the *Doctrinal part of Ordination*, which precedes the *Directory*, after laying down ten principles or rules, among which is one limiting the imposition of hands to teaching elders, adds that, "in extraordinary cases, something extraordinary may be done, until a settled order may be had, yet keeping as near the rule as possible." It is evident that the rule befitting a settled order, and to which, in the mean time, as near an approximation as possible is to be made, is that contained in the ten preceding principles. The *Directory* then follows, giving minute directions as to the manner in which this rule is to be carried out in practice, under a settled order of things. At the close of this, it adds,— "Thus far of ordinary rule and course of ordination, in the ordinary way; that which concerns the extraordinary way, requisite to be now practised, followeth,"—and it then proceeds to explain what it may be allowable to do under the present exigency. Had the restriction of the imposition of hands to teaching elders been found among these extraordinary things, which were allowed on account of the present distress, we should not of course cite the authority of this venerable standard in favour of the interpretation which has always been given to our constitution. We are seeking realities, and not playing with the mere sounds and shows of things. The only two points that have any conceivable relation to the question under discussion with us, that the power of ordering the work of ordination was entrusted to the whole Presbytery, and that the authority to execute the work, when ordered, was committed exclusively to teaching elders, are not alluded to among the extraordinary allowances that were to be permitted because no Presbyteries "could be immediately formed up to their whole power and work." This, on the contrary, was the perfect theory and practice of ordination, the complete rule, which might, in certain particulars, be varied to suit the necessities of the times, "until a settled order might be had."

And yet Dr. Breckinridge, after specifying some of the allowable departures from the rule, which are all given under the distinct head of the extraordinary way which may

now be practised, asks, "Is it not equally manifest, that the whole Directory contemplates the extraordinary posture of affairs then actually existing around them?" We answer that this is about as manifest, as that the Constitution of the United States in prescribing the method now pursued in the election of President, contemplated the adopting act of the several States and other provisional measures, which were necessary to carry the constitution into operation. No man can read the Directory without seeing at once, that upon the points under discussion, and upon all other matters, excepting the few that are touched upon in the appendix upon "the extraordinary way," it contains the matured and deliberate judgment of the body respecting what is orderly and right under a perfect state of the church.

But in the third place, Dr. Breckinridge attempts a higher strain. He aims not only to deprive the positive teaching of the Assembly of its due weight, but to make them utter a contrary doctrine. To effect this, must of course require peculiar powers of ventriloquism. By a comparison of dates he finds that the Directory for Church Government was sent in to the Parliament seven months after the Directory for Ordination. Hence he infers that this work contains "the more matured decisions of the body—their advice for a permanent and not for an extraordinary church state." He then selects from this work certain general principles of church government, such as, that the government of the church is in the hand of Assemblies, that these Assemblies are composed of teaching and ruling elders, and that many congregations are under this presbyterial government; and from these he argues that the Westminster Assembly, in its matured judgment, by deciding that ruling elders are of divine right a constituent portion of the governing assemblies of the church, have decided "*ex vi termini*, that they must unite in ordinations." If by uniting in ordinations, is meant, that ruling elders must have some share in the work, then all this talk about the matured decisions of the body, after seven months study, is devoid of meaning; since the Assembly had already decreed in their immature directory for ordination, that the power of ordering the whole work was in the hands of teaching and ruling elders. If it means that ruling elders must unite in executing, as well as ordering, the whole work, then we say, that the Assembly have decided no such thing, *ex vi termini*, unless *termini* means a determination to force upon their language

a construction which it was never intended to bear, and which it does not legitimately admit. The supposed advance in knowledge made by the Westminster Assembly during the seven months which elapsed after the establishment of the directory for ordination, upon which this argument rests, is of course destitute of the shadow of a foundation. There is nothing in their later work, which contradicts or supersedes any thing in the former. They were combined together and adopted as the form of government, in England and Scotland. The decision of the Assembly that ruling elders are of right governors of the church, did not, in their own judgment of it, decide that ruling elders must therefore impose hands in ordination. Nor does it, *ex vi termini*, include this, any more than the right which every member of congress has to deliberate and vote upon any question brought before them, includes the right to join his signature to that of the speaker, in attestation of the bills passed. This matter is really too plain for argument. The doctrine which the Westminster Assembly intended to teach respecting ordination, the doctrine which they do teach, is as explicit and clear as it is within the compass of language to make it; and the alleged inconsistency between placing the whole work of ordination in the hands of all the governors of the church, and restricting certain formal parts of the execution of the work to one class of those governors, does not seem to us worth an argument.

By the process which Dr. Breckinridge employs to extract historical evidence in favour of his position, we could prove any doctrine or practice whatever. He first determines that the work of ordination in all its parts and processes, in its decision, declaration, and attestation, belongs of necessity to the governors of the church. Hence if the government of the church is vested in teaching and ruling elders, he infers that ruling elders must impose hands in ordination. In whatever standards he finds that the work of ordination in general is committed to the governing body in the church, whatever that may be, he sees the proof of his doctrine, even when those standards in other parts expressly contradict it. History thus furnishes more that is for him than against him, because he forces upon historical documents his own inconsequent reasoning, and determines what the facts of history actually were from his opinion of what they ought to have been.

The discussion into which Dr. Breckinridge enters touch-

ing the influence of the Westminster standards upon the Church of Scotland, has no relation to the question in debate. We have shown that the doctrine of the Scottish and the Westminster standards respecting ordination was precisely the same. The second Book of Discipline, and the Westminster Directory, alike place the power of ordination in the Presbytery, and reserve the imposition of hands to the preaching elders. It is of no avail therefore to depreciate the modern Scottish church as compared with the ancient, seeing that upon this point she has never varied her doctrine or her practice, since the establishment of the second Book of Discipline.

Dr. Breckinridge asserts that, "it would be easy to establish the same doctrine from other confessions—for example, those of the Bohemian churches of 1535 and 1575, and various professions of the Polish and Lithuanian churches of the following century." Of the Bohemian Confessions here referred to, the second contains not one word respecting ordination; and the first has only the following sentence: "*Praeterea vitae consuetudinem honestam, atque ut hi probentur prius, tum demum a senioribus facta precatatione, per manuum impositionem ad hoc munus in caetu confirmantur.*" There is nothing to inform us who the *seniores* were, except that throughout the article in which this occurs, entitled, *De ordine ecclesiastico, seu praefectis vel ministris ecclesiae*, there is not one word said of any other class of rulers or ministers of the church than those whose duty it was to preach the word and administer the sacraments; and the conclusion hence is irresistible, that they were the *seniores*, who were to offer up prayer and impose hands, in setting others apart to the same office.

No other confession is specially designated as lending aid to the new theory; but we find, in the October number of the Spirit of the Nineteenth Century, that Dr. Breckinridge has pressed the Belgic confession into his service. He says, "In Art. XXXI, *De Vocatione Ministrorum Ecclesiae*, of the last-named confession, it is explicitly declared that the work of holy ordination, as to manner and form, is prescribed in God's word, and appertains '*verbi ministris et senioribus ecclesiae*,' and that by it ministers, elders and deacons ought to be, '*confirmari in muneribus suis per impositionem manuum.*'" There is nothing in his article, or in the whole confession, which bears the re-

most resemblance to the affirmation which Dr. Breckinridge has extracted from it. The first sentence is as follows. *Credimus Ministros, Seniores, et Diaconos debere ad functiones illas suas vocari et promoveri legitima ecclesiae vocatione, adhibita ad eam seria Dei invocatione, atque adhibitis ecclesiae suffragiis, ac postea confirmari in muneribus suis per impositionem manuum. eo ordine et modo, qui nobis in Verbo Dei prescribitur.* The only other sentence in which the word *seniores* occurs, is that from which Dr. Breckinridge has excerpted the phrase, *verbi ministris et senioribus ecclesiae. Porro ne sancta haec Dei ordinatio, aut violetur aut abeat in contemptum, debent omnes de verbi ministris et senioribus ecclesiae propter opus cui incumbunt, honorifice sentire: That this holy ordination of God may not be undervalued or contemned, all men ought to esteem highly the ministers of the word and the elders of the church, on account of the work to which they apply themselves.* By what curious process this has been transformed into an explicit declaration, that ordination appertains to the ministers of the word and the elders of the church, we leave the reader to surmise. After this exposition of the manner in which Dr. Breckinridge has dealt with the historical documents which he has undertaken to expound, we need not fear to leave his assertion, that he could easily sustain his position from certain other Polish and Lithuanian confessions, to be rated at its just weight.

The attempt to extract aught from history in favour of the innovation urged upon us, is a signal failure. It remains a fact, to which nothing contrary has been shown, that through all time, in all countries, and by all Christian churches, the ordination of ministers has ever been ratified and attested by the imposition of the hands of ministers. The Presbyterian churches of England and Scotland, from whose formularies ours have been compiled, practised no other mode of ordination. Our fathers, who drew up our constitution, knew of no other; and the constitution itself, according to the only consistent interpretation which can be given to its language, admits of no other.

In maintaining what has always been believed to be the doctrine of our standards, we have not felt it necessary to interpolate any professions of our sense of the importance of the office of ruling elder, or of high regard for the intelligence and worth of the present incumbents of this

office in our church. We feel that we shall best manifest our true respect for the heads and hearts of the body of our elders by believing them to be inaccessible to the arguments and motives addressed to them, by some of those who claim to be their peculiar friends.

We have but little to say in reply to Dr. Breckinridge's argument in opposition to the decision of the last Assembly respecting the constitutional quorum of a Presbytery.* The constitution of the church declares, that "Any three ministers, and as many elders as may be present belonging to the Presbytery, being met at the time and place appointed, shall be a quorum competent to proceed to business." The decision of the last Assembly was, "That any three ministers of a Presbytery, being regularly convened, are a quorum competent to the transaction of all business;" and it is alleged that this decision is in direct conflict with the constitutional provision.

It is argued, in the first place, that the language of the book implies that at least one ruling elder must be present to constitute a quorum; since as "many elders as may be present" can never be construed to mean no elders. But the advantage of the argument from the apparent meaning of the terms in which the rule is expressed, is clearly in favour of the construction given by the last Assembly. "As many elders as may be present belonging to the Presbytery," is a contingent expression, which leaves the number of elders unlimited in either direction, except by their right to sit in that body. All belonging to it may be present, which is the limit, in one direction; and none may be present, which is the limit, in the other direction; and in either case, if three ministers are present, there is a quorum of the body. The quorum shall not be hindered by the voluntary absence of all the elders in the one case; nor by their outnumbering the ministers in the other. This is the apparent intent of the rule; it is the natural, unforced meaning of its terms. In defining the quorum, it makes it to consist of two parts, one constant and the other variable; and the variable element may evidently vary from nothing to the entire number, who may lawfully be present. This is to us, the obvious construction of the rule;

* This question has been so largely discussed through the press, that it is the less necessary to enter into at length. Dr. Maclean, in a number of essays in the Presbyterian, has examined in detail, and refuted every position taken by Dr. Breckinridge.

and we are confirmed in it, because with this construction we can see a reason why the language used was selected, but none at all, if it was intended to express, that at least, one elder must be present. The language, as it now stands, leaves the number of elders to vary from zero upwards; if it had been intended to fix unity as the lower limit, it would have been altogether easy and natural to have expressed this intent. The rule could have been stated so as to express this with absolute precision, in as few or fewer terms than it now contains. That the purpose of the rule was as construed by the Assembly is further apparent from the practice under it. Abundant evidence, such as cannot be called into dispute, has been furnished from the records of our Presbyteries, that meetings have been held and business transacted, without the presence of any ruling elder. But few such meetings can occur now in our old Presbyteries. The facilities for attendance upon their meetings are such that in all ordinary cases one or more ruling elders will be present. The practical interests involved in the settlement of this question, which are magnified by Dr. Breckinridge into the wide difference "between an aristocratical hierarchy and a free Christian commonwealth," are literally nothing at all; except that for our frontier settlements, and for missionaries in foreign lands, the received construction of the rule might often be convenient and sometimes necessary, to enable them to obtain a meeting of the Presbytery. If a change in the rule were sought, in the mode prescribed by the constitution, except for the cases named, we do not suppose that much, if any, practical inconvenience would result from making it. But if the change is demanded on such grounds as are urged in opposition to the Assembly's decision, and if made, is to be considered as sanctioning the principles contended for, then the question before us is nothing less than a radical revolution in our whole system. The free Christian commonwealth of Dr. Breckinridge is nothing else than parochial presbyterianism—the governor or ruling elder of the church being the chief officer, the only one requiring ordination, who may also be designated and employed as a teacher, if in addition to his gifts for ruling, he be judged to possess also the gift of teaching,—and the bench of ruling elders of each particular church being fully empowered to license, ordain, and transact all other business that a Presbytery may lawfully do. This is a distinct and intelligible system. It is that to which

all the distinctive principles advocated by Dr. Breckinridge plainly lead. But it is not our system; and the church, we trust, will pause and deliberate long before she will be ready to adopt it.

The necessary presence of ruling elders to constitute a quorum is argued, in the second place, from the definition of a Presbytery, which makes it to consist both of ministers and ruling elders. Ruling elders are, therefore, held an essential element, not only of a Presbytery, but of a legal quorum of Presbytery. The only force of the reasoning under this head, resides in the confusion of these two perfectly distinct things. If a meeting of Presbytery could be held under the compulsory exclusion of ruling elders commissioned to attend, if the received construction of the rule involved this, there could be no doubt that it would be in conflict with the principles of our constitution. And it will be found that every plausible argument upon the other side, and all the fanfaronade about hierarchy, and freedom, and priestly usurpation, are founded upon the quiet assumption that such is the effect of the interpretation given to this rule. Ruling elders, if there be any within the district covered by the Presbytery, constitute a portion of that body, and no lawful meeting can be held, no business of whatever kind transacted, without an opportunity afforded, to all who may lawfully partake in its deliberations and acts, to be present and assist; but if they choose voluntarily to absent themselves, then, that the business of the church may not suffer through their absence, it is provided that the ministers who may be assembled may proceed to business without them. It will be perceived at once that there is here no restraint imposed, no subjection established, and, of course, no power bestowed. Ruling elders, one from each congregation, have a right to be present at every meeting of the presbytery. That right is left untouched. And this is a hierarchy! These are slight materials out of which to compose the horrid picture of the church, subjected to the rule of "three ministers without charge, who, it may be, have forsaken their covenanted calling."

If it could be shown that there was anything in our book, in the nature of the case, or in reason, requiring that the quorum of a body, which, when fully formed, was composed of different classes, must of necessity embrace some members of all those classes, the question would be decided that our rule ought to have been made to mean what Dr.

Breckinridge maintains that it does mean. But this has not been shown. On the contrary, our book, in providing for the action of a church session when no minister may be present, and for a quorum of the General Assembly when no ruling elders may be present, distinctly sanctions the principle, that a quorum of a body composed of two classes may be formed entirely of one of those classes. The expediency of the case furnishes no argument against our interpretation, inasmuch as there never have been any diverse interests between the ministers and elders of our church, nor is it easy to conceive how any such can legitimately arise. They are not adverse parties, nor is there anything in the practical working of our system which could ever make them so. And if this were not so, if they were antagonistic parties, the quorum rule would still be harmless, as the elders would, in that case, take care to exercise the privilege which they possess of being always present, and thus prevent their priestly adversaries from taking advantage over them. It has also been shown, that in the common judgment of men, as manifested in the constitution and rules of other analogous bodies, it has never deemed essential to the constitution of a quorum that it should embrace some of all the classes represented in the body; as in the English House of Lords, which can transact business in the absence of all the spiritual Lords.

In the last place, it is argued that the authority of precedent is opposed to the authorized interpretation of the quorum rule. Dr. Breckinridge quotes under this head the authority of Steuart of Pardovan, who declares that neither the constitution of the church nor the law of the land, "do authorize any other ecclesiastical judicatory but Assemblies, Synods, Presbyteries, and Kirk Sessions, or their committees, consisting of ministers and ruling elders." It will be seen at once that this does not touch the question in debate. This, and all the other authorities cited by Dr. Breckinridge refer only to the proper constitution of church courts, and we are all agreed that these must be composed of ministers and ruling elders. They affirm nothing respecting the formation of a quorum of these courts. This is apparent from the language itself; and it is placed beyond all doubt by the fact that Steuart himself quotes from the Directory, "That to perform any classical act of government or ordination, there must be present, at least, a major part of the ministers of the whole classis." So that the

quorum of a classis, or Presbytery of the Scottish church did not require the presence of any ruling elders. This fallacy of confounding the composition of a body with the quorum of that body, runs through the whole of Dr. Breckinridge's historical argument, and vitiates every one of his conclusions. A proper regard to this distinction rescues from him every instance which he has adduced, excepting that of the condemnation, by the General Assembly of 1638, of six preceding Assemblies. And every one acquainted with the rudiments of the ecclesiastical history of Scotland knows that the grounds of this condemnation were utterly wide of the question which we are discussing. It was not because there were no ruling elders present in those Assemblies that they were set aside, but because there were elders present and voting, who had no lawful commissions. This case is too irrelevant to waste words upon. If anything can be established by testimony, it is clear that the doctrine and practice of the Scottish church are in agreement with the decision of our last Assembly. In addition to other authorities which have been abundantly given to this effect, we refer to the correspondence of Robert Wodrow, the celebrated historian of the kirk, Vol. I. p. 181. In a letter, dated Nov. 29, 1710, we find the following passage. "*Thirdly*, The rule of the church, though elders have a share in it, is principally committed to pastors. The keys of the kingdom are given to them. They are such as rule over the people, and speak the word, Heb. xiii. 7, and watch for souls as they that must give account, ver. 17; none of which places to me have any relation to the ruling elder; *and therefore they can act in absence or under the want of elders*, though I cannot see how elders can act without pastors."

We have thus in favour of the Assembly's decision, the obvious meaning of the language of the rule; the sanction by our book, of the principle involved, by its provision for the action of a church session, and of the General Assembly, in the entire absence of one of the classes that compose these courts; the practice of our own church in times past; the concurrent practice of the Scottish church; and the analogies of other bodies constituted in like manner. We have opposed to it, certain abstract notions about the rights of ruling elders, which, if fairly carried out, are destructive of our whole system; and certain exaggerated fears about the establishment of a hierarchy, by means of a harmless rule

of convenience, which, restraining no right, confers no power.

We cannot doubt that the next Assembly will, if need be, affirm the decisions of the last. There are some things which the church ought to be presumed to know, and among these surely should be numbered her first principles of truth and order.