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The RULING
ELDER 

THE
RULING ELDER

BY THE

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THE INSTITUTION OF THE OFFICE of "ELDER" in the Christian Church, is not definitely stated in the Scripture narrative. The origin of the subordinate office of DEACON, is commonly traced to the appointment of Philip and Stephen and their five fellow-laborers. Yet the very fact that the institution of the chief office is not recorded, while that of the lesser office is so explicitly stated, is taken as a confirmation of the accepted belief that the government of the early Church by elders was simply a continuation of the familiar mode of governing the Jewish synagogue. The office was so well-known and understood that its adoption by the Hebrew Christians was treated as a matter of course, and was naturally extended to the Gentile churches which were formed by the labors of the early missionaries. There was no

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place for recording the institution of an office so ancient and so familiar.

THE NATURE OF THE OFFICE, however, is most definitely set forth, not only by many historic statements, but even by the titles by which the bearers of the office were designated.

They were called "*Elders*" or "*Presbyters*." These words are but the English and Greek equivalents of the Hebrew word used to denote the controlling officers in the Hebrew synagogue.

The name originally suggested advanced years, but came to signify the office for which one was specially fitted by the wisdom and maturity of age. That the officers of the early Christian Church bore this familiar title is, in itself, at least suggestive of the fact that they performed the well-known duties of rule and government.

They were also called "*Bishops*" or "*Overseers*," as exercising a spiritual oversight of the flock, visiting the sick, administering the sacraments, admitting to church membership, disciplining and excluding offenders. That "Elder" and "Bishop" were

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different names for the same office is not disputed, even by those who hold the most divergent views of church government. The former was a name more familiar to the Jewish convert, but the latter to the Gentile, to whom it suggested the very thought of government, as a term already familiar to those under Roman rule.

They were also designated "*Pastors*," to emphasize the fact that they were the divinely appointed shepherds who were to "feed the flock of God." They were therefore, as again and again stated, the appointed teachers and spiritual guides in the early Christian Church. Public instruction was not the essential function of the office; but in the later epistles this duty of the elders is more and more emphasized, as the need had arisen of defending "sound doctrine" against false teachers and rising heresies.

Among these elders, bishops, and pastors, there were no classes or distinctions, other than such as were due to special gifts of the Spirit, or unusual ability, or exceptional fidelity. Some were able to render more important service than others, and

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some to devote more time to the work of the office. When official duties interfered with their secular callings, they were considered as entitled, in greater or less degree, to the financial support of their fellow-Christians, particularly if, in addition to faithful administration and "rule," they "labored in word and doctrine." This ability to teach, however, made no distinction of rank, nor any division in the board of elders; all were on an equality; all were chosen in the same way to one and the same office. All were permitted, in addition to the essential function of *ruling*, to exercise any special gift for the edification or help of the Church.

From this primitive office of elder or presbyter *a development* can be traced:— on the one hand, in the Episcopal churches to the two offices of "bishop" and "priest;" and on the other hand, in Presbyterian churches, to the distinction between "ministers" and "elders," or between "teaching" and "ruling" elders. Bishop Lightfoot cheerfully admits that the concentration of power in the hands of one presbyter,

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and his elevation to the rank of a modern "bishop," was purely "a question of practical convenience," in accordance with the Scripture, but without any scriptural precept. Presbyterians can be quite as frank in admitting that the establishment of the office of "*ruling elder*," as distinct from that of "minister," is a matter of practical convenience, not required by the New Testament, but quite in accordance with Scripture. We believe it to be a provision eminently judicious, convenient, and wise, perfectly adapted to the conditions of modern life, and abundantly vindicated by its historic success. How far this distinction has been carried by our Presbyterian system is suggested by such familiar facts as the following :—

a. The fitness of a Christian for the office of *ruling elder* is determined by the congregation of which he is a member; the fitness for the office of *teaching elder* or minister, is determined only by the presbytery.

b. The ruling elder is ordained by a minister, either with or without the laying

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on of hands ; the minister is ordained by “the laying on of hands of the presbytery.”

c. A ruling elder must be a member of the congregation which he serves ; a minister cannot be a member of the church in which he is laboring.

d. An elder coming from another church may be invited to become a member of the board of elders in his new church home ; but a minister “without charge” has no such right, and no authority as an officer, and no vote as a member, no matter how closely identified he may be with the work of any particular church.

e. An elder cannot administer the sacraments, nor pronounce the benediction, nor solemnize a marriage, nor have part in the ordination of a minister ; all of which functions are reserved for the minister.

f. An elder can be tried by the church session ; a minister only by the presbytery.

As Presbyterians, we hold it to be eminently wise and convenient that such a distinction should be made by which men, who have been peculiarly endowed with the gift of public speaking, and specially trained for

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specific duties, should be authorized as official teachers, and appointed to a distinct office in the Christian Church; yet, admitting the fact of this historical development, as distinct from a scriptural requirement, we should accept *two logical and practical inferences* :-

1. The *dignity* of the ruling elder is not beneath that of the minister; his authority and power are the same. He is a bishop, a presbyter, an overseer, filling the very highest office in the Christian Church. Our familiarity with the fact of the distinction between the elder and the minister should not lead us to believe that the office of the former has been degraded, or subordinated or circumscribed, by the division of labor which custom and convenience have sanctioned. We should rather be reminded, by such an historical review, of the fact that minister and elder hold one and the same scriptural and divinely authorized office. "This is a true saying, If a man desireth the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work;" so good that it is not to be prayerlessly offered,

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nor lightly declined, nor carelessly accepted.

2. The second logical inference is one which should give encouragement to many, who, from a sense of personal limitations, and a conscious lack of certain gifts, have hesitated to accept the office, or have feared lest the performance of the duties of that office should fall short of its real requirements. The logical inference should be that *convenience and circumstances* can still indicate a *division of labor*, among ruling elders, in the matter of many official tasks. All cannot accomplish the same lines of work, or be successful in the performance of the same duties. No man need refuse the office because he is not "apt to teach." This is a specific function of the minister. No more need one refuse the office because he has not the time or the talent for "visiting the sick," or the gift of "public prayer." One elder may be specially adapted to work in the Sabbath school; another to leading in the social worship of the church; another to the spiritual oversight of the

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members of the flock ; and another may be so confined by secular duties as to have less time for his official work, but may have a larger opportunity for assisting in the financial support of the church. In relation to the duties of the elder's office, we do well to remember that elders are men, "having . . . gifts differing according to the grace that is given."

THE ESSENTIAL DUTIES OF THE RULING ELDER are such, however, that they *cannot* be neglected nor divided nor delegated to others. They may be summarized in two words—*Rule* and *Representation* :—

I. RULE.—If to some this word sounds harsh and despotic, we can admit that the words which are associated in the New Testament with the office of elder are commonly such as may better be translated "preside," "lead," "instruct," "guide." Undoubtedly the office was that of wise leadership and careful exercise of necessary authority ; yet the word "rule," which we have commonly associated with the office of elder, will hardly be misunderstood, and it suggests to us the serious character of

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the office, upon which depends, in so large measure, the welfare of each particular church. Under this head of *ruling*, we all understand, such duties as the following are included: The reception of members into church fellowship; the exercise of discipline; the spiritual oversight of individual members and of the entire congregation, and, in brief, the decision of every question which concerns the welfare of the church. The elder is, therefore, associated with the pastor, with equal authority, in administration and government.

II. REPRESENTATION. — The authority and power, suggested by the duties of ruling, are, however, purely delegated; they are enjoyed not in an individual capacity, but as an official, chosen to represent the people. This is the essential feature of the Presbyterian form of government. It is a government exercised by chosen representatives.

a. In the church court, or *session*, the elder expresses the desire of the people, and strives to carry out their will. He has no right to insist on merely personal and in-

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dividual desires, but must act in accordance with the will of the congregation in so far as that will can be ascertained. Any member of a congregation, therefore, has a perfect right to appeal to the church session in a case of grievance, or to present to the church session any matter which seems to concern the welfare of the church.

b. The elder represents the church in the *higher courts* of presbytery and synod and General Assembly. In these courts, elders and ministers are present in equal numbers and with equal authority. In such service it becomes necessary for the elder to pass his judgment upon the fitness of candidates for the ministry, to plan for the well-being of the individual churches, and for the conduct of the whole work of the Church at home and abroad. He is expected, likewise, to defend the doctrine of the Church, and with this in view, when entering upon his office, he is asked to subscribe to the standards which are both doctrinal and administrative. The former include the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms; the latter,

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the Form of Government, Directory for Worship, and Book of Discipline.

c. The elder represents the Church before *the world* in a very peculiar measure. As an office-bearer he is looked upon, by those who are not professing Christians, as an example of Christian life and practice. We are not to assume that there are two standards of Christian living, one to be applied to officers and a second to the other members of a Christian Church. No truer Christian life should be expected of the one than of the other. There are, however, two standards of influence, and the office-bearer as such has an unequal responsibility in the result of his example for good or for evil. The elder can perform a peculiar service in showing to the world that Christianity does not mean isolation, and is not confined to public exhortation, but is consistent with a career of business enterprise, of political endeavor, and of practical and helpful activity along all the lines which concern the welfare of society and the State.

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difficult, it is evident that the Church must choose men of approved piety, of good reputation, and of exceptional ability,—“lovers of good, sober-minded, just, holy, temperate, holding fast the faithful word, tending the flock of God willingly, not lording it over the charge allotted, but as ensamples to the flock, that when the chief Shepherd shall appear they may receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.”