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ART. I.—*The Bible its own Witness and Interpreter.*

A NEW philosophy, which has been frequently exposed on the pages of this Review, has invaded the Christian Church both in Britain and America, within the last thirty or forty years. Foremost among its ushers is Coleridge, whose views on the fundamental subjects of Inspiration, the Fall, and the Atonement, were so distorted by his philosophy, that by no alchemy of charity can we make them part or parcel of the Christian scheme. His philosophy was confessedly derived from Schelling.

Since Coleridge wrote and talked, this phase of metaphysical thought has been gradually extending itself through the domain of the Church. It is impossible to define the limits of its influence. It has, more than all other forces combined, created the "Broad Church" party of the Establishment of England, numbering about thirty-five hundred of its clergy,\* and adorned with the names of such men as Arnold, Hare, Conybeare, Maurice, Jowett, Baden Powell, &c. It has effected an entrance into the Free Scotch Church; and while it has called

\* Edinburgh Review, Oct. 1853, article on Church Parties.

As Thomas Shannon, Jr.  
Pastor, in Edinburgh Review

ART. III.—*Theories of the Eldership—The Constitutional view of the Presbyterian Church.*

IN a previous article we delineated the nature, and endeavoured to trace the progressive development of a recent theory of the Eldership, which, in various forms, has obtained considerable currency. Based upon the English or modern versions of the Scriptures, and the frequent use in them of such words as *elder* for the original word *presbyter*, and upon the now established use of the official title, *ruling elder*, it has all the advantage of apparently carrying with its premises its conclusion. That conclusion is, that ruling elders are “the presbyters” of Scripture, and “the presbyters who rule well” of the apostle; that ruling is therefore the fundamental office of the presbyter—its essence; that as the terms bishop, pastor, teacher, shepherd, watchman, overseer, leader, president, governor, steward, householder, ambassador, angel, are all used interchangeably with presbyter, whatever is set forth in the way of qualification and office concerning any one of these, is spoken primarily of ruling elders; that as preaching is also found to be characteristic of some of these variously described officers, there is a twofold order of elders, one class who only rule, and another who preach and rule—first rulers, and then preachers—rulers by the essence of their office, and preachers by a superadded charisma or gift; that “it is this distinction which gives us our name of ‘The Presbyterian Church’—the church that holds to government by elders, the essence of whose office is ruling, and not teaching.”\*

Such is the theory for which is claimed the indubitable authority of Scripture, the practice and writings of primitive Christianity, the sanction of ancient and reformed churches, and the standards of the Presbyterian Church, and the abettors of which say that the rejection of it “by many Presbyterians and Presbyterian ministers” is “disreputable,” and proves that they are “very imperfectly acquainted with their own system.”

\* Dr. Adger’s Inaugural Disc., Southern Presb. Review, 1859, pp. 165, 166.

“The ruling elder, even in the decisions of the General Assembly, occupies a very anomalous position.”

Now, the confusion we have found in every attempt to draw out this theory from Scripture, or state it in words, is its confutation. And when we remember that every prophet who expounds it has his own utterance different as well as distinct, and in some cases even contradictory and antagonistic, we use the language of Dr. Miller in reference to similar variations in the prelatie theory and among its defenders, when we affirm that “this very strife in their camp is a fatal testimony against their cause.”\* “When they contradict, with so little ceremony, both the letter and spirit of their own public offices, drawn up by martyred fathers of their church, rendered venerable by the lapse of nearly three centuries, it would really seem as if to them victory or defeat must prove equally fatal. If they fail of establishing their argument, their cause, of course, is lost. If, on the contrary, they succeed in establishing it, they dishonour the venerated authors of their formularies.”

It will, at all events, be evident that the controversy, though about words, is not a mere logomachy, but involves all that is vital in the relations of the Eldership, the Ministry, and the Deaconship. This is the real question at issue. There is no manner of dispute whether the ruling elder is an officer, divinely appointed, deriving his authority from Christ the Lord; nor whether “he sits in Presbytery by divine right as a constituent element of the body;” nor even whether he may not be properly denominated, in a general use of the terms—ruling-elder—and especially as the original word, presbyter, and its cognate words, bishop, pastor, minister, &c., are in general usage, and in our standards, restricted to the office of the preacher. The status, in short, the dignity, the ecclesiastical and spiritual character of the ruling-elder as an office-bearer and ruler in the church of Christ, and as an essential element in Presbyterian polity;—these, none of them, are in question in this discussion. We claim, and it may be, shall establish, a greater honour for the ruling elder than this theory secures. We rejoice as much as any can rejoice, in every manifestation by our ruling elders of greater and growing interest in all that

\* On the Christian Ministry, p. 60.

affects the prosperity of our church, and our heart's desire and prayer to God has been for thirty years, that he would send us ruling elders, able and willing to lead on and to sustain pastors in all pastoral visitation and instruction, and in the well-ordering and marshalling of the forces of the sacramental host.

What, then, is the Presbyterian view of the ruling eldership? It is very simple, and may be clearly, stated, both negatively and positively.

And first, negatively. The ruling eldership is not the ministry, nor of the same order or office as the ministry, which is the highest both for dignity and usefulness. And as the ministry combines both teaching and ruling, and ruling in order to teaching, IT is, on the last analysis, unquestionably the one fundamental order in the kingdom of Christ. On this point, we must omit a full exhibition of the decisive teaching of all Presbyterian standards. The remarkable harmony with which these all combine in exalting the ministry, in appropriating to the ministry the title of presbyter, and its collateral terms; in refusing so generally to give even the English term elder to our ruling elder, except under the explicit statement that it is in a "large" and comprehensive sense; the employment of *various* other terms for the official standard definition of ruling elders; the *rejection* of the title, ruling elders, and 1 Timothy v. 17, as proof, after long discussion, by the Westminster Assembly, whose form of government is that of the Church of Scotland, and of all affiliated churches, and the basis of, and for a time itself, our own form;—all this is completely subversive of the theory in question, which makes the ministry a class under the order of ruling elders or a function of the office of ruling elders.

The ministry, according to the Presbyterian system of doctrine and polity, is a distinct ORDER, and not a CLASS under an order. It is also the FIRST order in the church, both for dignity and usefulness, and not "a new function" of a more fundamental order. It is the order to which an analysis of the church of Christ, either as a doctrine or as a duty, or as a dispensation of God's gracious mercy, must ultimately lead—the instrumentality for making known authoritatively to lost and guilty men the glorious gospel of the blessed God. The

ministry is the radical and essential order in the church. It contains within itself, by necessity, both discipline and distribution, both ruling and relieving, watchful care for the interests both of the body and the soul.\* The apostles accordingly are always named first, and all the other offices grow out of theirs, like branches from a common stock. The apostles were at the same time prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, and at first had charge even of the business of the deacons. This universal official character belonged in the highest sense to Christ. He is expressly called apostle, prophet, evangelist, (Eph. ii. 17); calls himself the Good Shepherd; and condescends to take even the title of deacon or servant; and all the various branches of the spiritual office are the organs through which Christ himself, in the Holy Ghost, continues to exercise on earth the offices of prophet, priest, and king. According to this fundamental idea of the Presbyterian church, therefore, the pastor includes in his official potentiality, the elder and deacon, as the elder does that of deacon, and thus as a missionary or evangelist, the pastor can call together and organize, and conduct churches, until God provides elders and deacons, whom he can then ordain.

Having thus shown what the system of the Presbyterian church in relation to the eldership is *negatively*, and that most assuredly it is not what this theory makes it, that is, the fundamental order of which the ministry is a class, or "a new function," we proceed to state what it is *positively*. On this point there ought to be no disputation, as our standards are unmistakably clear. They deliver no uncertain sound. They separate the eldership by a definite order from the pastorship, and from the deaconship by a distinct consideration of each in separate chapters. In our Form of Government (ch. v.) there has been even peculiar clearness of analysis, and we have both a lucid definition and a plain and popular *description* of ruling elders. In the definition we have first the *genus* or *class* to which ruling elders belong, viz. "the ordinary and perpetual officers in the church," (ch. iii.) of which there are *three kinds or orders*—(evangelists being properly considered as missionaries, and differing from ministers generally only in the

\* Gillespie argues this against Stillingfleet, and quotes older writers.

nature and field of their work and not in office or order. The *species* or *order* to which ruling elders belong, and the particular mark—or relation—by which this office is distinguished from each of the others, is their being “the representatives of the people (ch. iii.);” or, as it is more fully given in chapter v., “Ruling elders are *properly* the representatives of the people, chosen by them for the purpose of exercising government and discipline, in conjunction with pastors or ministers.” Such is the *definition*. The *description*, as given in ch. iii. is, that they are those officers who are “*usually* (not *universally*) *styled* (not *are so by divine calling*, and hence not by divine right,) ruling elders.” In ch. v. it is: “This office has been *understood* by a great part of the Protestant Reformed Churches to be designated in the Holy Scriptures by the title of governments and (*described in their works as*) those who rule well, but do not labour in word and doctrine.”

We have here, therefore, a formal definition and a full description of ruling elders, and a candid admission that in regard to the name, and the application to that name of 1 Tim. v. 17, there has only been a “*common understanding*” (or *opinion*) by “a *great part*” of the churches. In the definition you will notice, that they are not called ruling *elders*, and that they are not—*here*, or anywhere else—called *presbyters*, which title is given exclusively to the bishop or pastor. And whereas “the *elders* that rule well,” in 1 Tim. v. 17, is quoted in proof, it is to be noted, that it is only in support of the “*commonly*” used title, “*ruling elders*,” for it lends no countenance whatever to the definition of “representatives of the people;” and also, that the suggestion of the name of *ruling elders* is founded upon the English rendering of “*rule well*” for οἱ καλῶς προεστῶτες, (literally those who preside well or in an acceptable manner.)

Secondly, you will notice that they are “*properly* called representatives of the people,” which bishops are neither said to be, nor can be. The *people* can neither give nor take away their office, their call, their commission, their authority, their power of loosing and binding, their gifts and graces, their status as *representatives*, heralds and ambassadors of *Christ*, as lights of the world, salt of the earth, stars in Christ’s right

hand, angels, rulers, stewards, husbandmen, fathers, shepherds, builders, watchmen, the chariots and horsemen of Israel."\* Logically and efficiently, and in the order of the divine instrumentality, preachers precede believing people, and preaching is in order to discipleship, the shepherd to his flock, and the pastor to his people. There are, for instance, presbyteries in India, China, and elsewhere, where no suitable materials for elders or deacons exist, and where, therefore, ministers are in no proper sense representatives of the people. And as surely as there is a catholic visible church, there are ministers whose primary relations are to that church. As *ministers* they represent Christ and his kingdom, and as *pastors*, in the present strict sense of that term, by virtue of their relation to, and covenant with a particular church, they represent it. This principle constitutes the vital distinction between Presbyterianism and Independency, as Dr. Owen admits. Ruling Elders are common and proper to both, so that neither elders nor deacons constitute the distinctive characteristic of Presbyterianism.

And hence ruling elders are defined to be "*properly* representatives of 'the people;' because, as Dr. Adger well expounds, "*they are nothing more.*" They are, he adds, "specifically representatives of the people for the reason also, that not every elder in any district may be a member of Presbytery;" but "each session shall send one elder *only* to represent that session, and so to represent that church or people."† Dr. Adger, however, is entirely mistaken in adding "with the minister," as if the people sent the minister to Presbytery. Every ordained *minister* is, *ex officio*, a member of Presbytery which consists of all ministers, "and ONE ruling elder from every congregation within a certain district." (Form of Gov. chap. x. § 2, See § 3—5.) "The pastor of the congregation also *shall always* be the moderator of the session, except when for some good reason some other *minister* be invited to preside."

The fundamental relation of the ruling elder is, therefore, to the people. For while it is true that the apostles go before the church, not the church before the apostles; nevertheless, as

\* Divine Right of the Ministry.

† Inaugural Discourse, *Southern Presbyterian Review*. 1859, p. 175.

soon as a Christian community was called, nothing was done without its coöperation. As all authority and power inhere in Christ, the autocratic King and Head, so does it pertain ministerially to his theocratic kingdom, or house, or family, or body, as it is severally called. The supreme government is upon his shoulders, who is head over all, and King of kings to his church. All power in the church, by whomsoever *exercised*, is made binding or loosing only by the authority of Christ, as constitutionally declared in his word. This power is not imparted primarily to officers, but to the church, considered as a kingdom, for whose edification officers are given. "Whatever authority and dignity the Holy Spirit confers on priests, or prophets, or apostles, or successors of apostles, is wholly given *not to men themselves*, but to the ministry to which they are appointed, or to speak more plainly, to the word, to the ministry of which they are appointed."\*

The Presbyterian system is distinguished from Popery, Prelacy, and Independency, by its belief in one holy catholic, visible church, UNTO WHICH Christ hath given the ministry, oracles and ordinances of God. (Conf. of Faith, chap. xxv.) Officers therefore are given to the church, and not the church to officers. Jesus Christ hath erected in this world a kingdom which is his church. (Form of Gov. ch. ii.) Our blessed Lord at first collected his church out of different nations, and formed it into one body by the mission of men.

This is a fundamental doctrine of the Presbyterian system. "The ministry, oracles and ordinances of Christ, are given† by" Jesus Christ to the general church visible. All church power is, therefore, resident ultimately in the body of the people, to whom was given the commission to evangelize the world. And as Christ greatly honours his people, calling them a royal generation, a holy priesthood, and the commonwealth of Israel, they have a right to a substantive part in the government of the church, through officers appointed by them, and by whom it is to be administered, according to the laws of the kingdom. This power extends to everything, whether pertain-

\* Calvin's Instit. B. iv., Chap. viii. § 2.

† Form of Government, by the Westminster Assembly.

ing to doctrine, discipline, or distribution, and to ministers also, and is only limited and restrained by the revealed will of the King of Zion. The church therefore in its visible form, is neither a democracy, nor an aristocracy, nor an autocracy, but a spiritual republic. It is a representative commonwealth, in which ministers represent God to the people and the people to God, and are in many ways subject to the direct and indirect control of the people, and in all cases are approved, elected, sustained, and supported by the people; in which ruling elders are properly representatives of the people; and in which deacons are representatives of both pastor and people to each other, and to the wants of a perishing world. In order however to avoid the use of any civil terms, our reformers have adhered to the original terms, kirk, pastors, elders, ancients or governors, and deacons. In Scotland, the first name adopted for this commonwealth was "The Congregation."\*

According to this system, therefore, ALL the officers of the church are alike of divine appointment and authority, and their difference in importance, in dignity, and in usefulness, arises out of their relations to Christ and his people, and to the work assigned them. The office, and the gifts fitting for it, are in all cases, exclusively from Christ, and in the case of the minister the personal call is also from Christ, and when recognized and ratified by his existing ministers and elders in solemn convention, he is by them recommended to the people.

But it is very different with ruling elders. These are instituted for the special purpose of representing the people. By them the people exercise a popular and controlling influence in all the courts of the church, and in all spiritual government, discipline, and order, just as a similar control over all the temporalities, and charities, and funds of each church is wielded by the deacons, who also represent and act for the people in all this department of fiduciary power. This is the *essential* character of the ruling elder and deacon. They represent the inherent rights and prerogatives of the people as the free and loyal subjects of the King of Zion—the *elders* in their relation

\* See Hetherington, History.

to the *whole church* as one body, of which all are members, and the *deacons* in their relation to a *particular church*.

According, therefore, to our Standards, ruling elders "act in the name of THE WHOLE CHURCH." (Form of Government, ch. i. § 3.) The election, and the mode of their election, is left to each church. (Ibid. § 7, and ch. xiii. § 2.) When they become unacceptable to a majority of the congregation to *which they belong*, they may cease to be acting elders or deacons." (Ibid. § 6.) They cease also to be officers when they remove to a different congregation, and require a new election and installation in order to be elders and deacons in it. Neither can an elder by virtue of office sit in any court of the church higher than his own church session, unless he is personally and regularly delegated by his session to represent their church in said body, and when said court adjourns, said commission and representation cease.

The ruling elder and deacon can do, officially, nothing which, if supposed to be acting directly, the church as a body could not rightly do; and can do nothing officially and regularly which is by the word made the peculiar and solemn duty of the minister.

Neither elders, nor deacons, nor people, nor all combined, can in the ordinary organized condition of the church call or ordain to the *office* of the ministry. They may call a man to become *their* minister, and to labour as *their pastor among them*. But he may be, and often is, already a minister—in the *office*—and if he is *not*, then other ministers must ordain him and install him with imposition of *their* hands. Though ruling elders are required to coöperate, as representatives of the people, in all the acts by which Presbytery examines and judges of the qualifications of a candidate for the ministry, and to approve or disapprove, yet such a thing as elders uniting in the imposition of hands in the ordination of a minister *has never been heard of under the constitutional laws of any Presbyterian church in the world, so far as we can find*.

The ruling elder, according to our Standards, is neither ordained by imposition of hands, (see Form of Government, ch. xiii. § 4,) nor allowed to unite in imposing hands in the ordination of ministers, (ibid. ch. xv. § 14,) and the adequate rea-

son is given by Dr. Miller.\* “It seems,” says this venerated father of our church, “to be a fundamental principle in every department both of the natural and moral world, that every thing must be considered as capable of begetting its like,” and in meeting the Episcopal objection against presbyterial ordination, “when it is well known that our Presbyteries are made up of clerical and *lay elders*, and that we do not permit the latter to impose hands at all in the ordination of ministers,” he replies: “There is no inconsistency here. We deny the right of an *inferior* officer to lay on hands in the ordination of a superior, and uniformly act accordingly. The Presbytery lays on hands when all its teaching elders do, although those who are only rulers do not.”† This is the law in the Church of Scotland—our mother church‡—in which ordination of elders is to be by the minister of the congregation, or by one of the Presbytery. “Then the elders chosen, still standing up, the minister is next by solemn prayer, to set them *apart in verbis de presententi*.”§ And in the same chapter on ruling elders, it is added, “The execution of some decrees of the church; *such as the imposition of hands*, the pronouncing the sentences of excommunication and absolution, &c. doth belong to pastors only.”|| In the ordination of ministers accordingly, the several parties “are to sit together with the intrant, (or *pastor elect*) so that all the ministers may conveniently give him the imposition of hands, and the others (elders, heritors) may *take him by the hand when thereunto called*.”¶ In 1698 the Assembly passed the following remarkable act, which will explain itself: “The Assembly unanimously declare that as they allow no powers in the *people*, but only in the pastors of the church, to appoint or ordain church officers, so they disclaim the error of the press in Acts vi. 3, . . . bearing ‘whom *ye* may appoint over this business,’ instead of ‘whom *we* may appoint’ . . . to prove the people’s power in ordaining their ministers, which error the Presbyterians are wrongously charged with.”\*\*

In the very first Book of Discipline which was one drawn up

\* Ruling Elders, p. 293.

† On the Ministry, p. 74.

‡ Laws of the Church of Scotland, vol. i. p. 222. Pardovan, Book I. Title vii. § 1.      § Ibid. § 5.      || Ibid. § 9.      ¶ Ibid. Title i. § 34, p. 196.

\*\* Compendium of Laws of Church of Scotland, vol. ii. p. 202.

by Bullinger in 1536, and translated by Wishart in 1540, the ministers are called presidents, heads, and teachers, and ruling elders, *officers chosen by the minister or magistrate*, and only ministers imposed hands.\* “It (the election of ministers,) is well and justly approved by the voice of the church, and the imposition of the hands of the priests,” i. e. presbyters. By the Second Book of Discipline, which continued in force in Scotland until the adoption of the Westminster Standards, the office of elders is made permanent, but the incumbents of it may rotate in the actual discharge of its functions, and it was not required that there should be an *eldership* in every church, but only in towns and famous places. This view of the eldership as held by the Reformers, is given by Dr. Miller, as the reason why, “although they with one accord retained this rite, (the laying on of hands,) in the ordination of Teaching Elders, they seem *quite as unanimously*, to have discarded it in the ordination of Ruling Elders.”† Calderwood in his *Altare Damascenum*, says, “the administrators of this rite are pastors—presbyters—only. Still the others will not thereby be excluded from Presbytery, because the laying on of hands does not belong to them. For the imposition of hands may be called the imposition of the hands of the Presbytery, though each and every one of the presbyters have not the power of imposing hands. It is enough that the leading part of the Presbytery have that power, as the tribe of Levi is said to offer incense, when it was the prerogative of the priests only.”‡

Alexander Henderson, in his treatise on Church Government, written two years before the Westminster Assembly, confirms this opinion. Rutherford, also, who was commissioned to that Assembly, not only affirms this to be the doctrine of the church, but confirms it by scriptural arguments.§ James Guthrie, of Sterling, in his treatise on Elders and Deacons, says this rite, and other prerogatives, “do belong to ministers alone.”

\* Art. xviii. See in Miscellany of the Wodrow Society, Vol. 1, Art. 1. Edinb. 1844.

† On the Ruling Elder, p. 285—288.

‡ Cap. xii. De administr. laicis, p. 689.

§ Peaceable Plea for Paul's Presbytery, p. 57.

The Westminster Form of Government was solemnly adopted by the Church of Scotland in 1645, and has ever since formed a part of their constitutional standards, and of all the branches of the Presbyterian Church affiliated with it throughout the world. Now, on the doctrine and order of ordination by imposition of hands, it is both explicitly and emphatically strong, having no less than six distinct sections on "The Ordination of Ministers," "Touching the doctrine of Ordination," "Touching the power of Ordination," "Concerning the doctrinal part of the Ordination of Ministers," "The Directory for the Ordination of Ministers," and "The Rules for and Form of their Ordination;" and repeating over and over again, that "every minister of the word is to be ordained by imposition of hands, by those preaching presbyters to whom it doth belong." "Preaching presbyters, orderly associated, are those to whom imposition of hands doth appertain."\*

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, in addition to the Westminster standards, have their own Constitution and Discipline. The form for ordination of ruling elders and ministers is very similar to that of the Church of Scotland. The elder is "set apart to his *office* by prayer only." (Ch. iii. § 2.) The minister is "ordained by prayer on the part of the minister appointed to ordain, the candidate reverently kneeling . . . in some part of the prayer the officiating minister shall lay his hands upon the head of the candidate, and be joined by the rest of the ministers present." (Ch. iv. § 14, p. 39.)

At a later period, the Church of Scotland, in allusion to the act of 1698, quoted above, reaffirmed that law. "Our church doth condemn any doctrine that *tends* to support the *people's* power of ordaining their ministers."†

We are thus full in our presentation of the Presbyterian system in the Church of Scotland on the question of ordination *of* and *by* ruling elders, because it not only determines her view of ruling elders to be, that they are *not* ministers, nor of

\* See in every Scotch Confession of Faith, and all published elsewhere, except under our own Form of Government.

† Compendium of Laws, vol. i. p. 194. Pardovan, B. I. tit. 1, § 21.

the same order; but also because it determines the proper interpretation of their nature and powers.

But we can carry this authoritative constitutional interpretation of the nature and powers of ruling elders up to the very first standards of Presbyterianism—to the Institutes of Calvin, and to the standards and practice of the Waldensian, and other primitive churches of God.

Calvin did not originate the Presbyterian system, combining as it does the order of the ministers—the fundamental rulers and teachers of the church of God—with the orders of ruling elders and deacons.

All Calvin had to do was to complete the system by adding the bench of ruling elders, and even this he did not invent, but confessedly borrowed from that branch of the Waldenses called the “Bohemian Brethren.”\* This Zwingle had also done. Let us then hear on this subject the ancient discipline of the Waldenses: “God has given to his *people* to choose from themselves guides of the people, (*that is, pastors,*) and *ancients* in their carriages according to the diversity of the work in the unity of Christ;” and as it regards ordination, it is expressly provided (Article 93,) that “*the body of the pastors of the church shall give the imposition of hands.*”† The Bohemian Brethren carried these ancient confessions and forms of discipline from Picardy, some two hundred years before the time of Huss.

The precise relation between the doctrine of our own standards, and these original ones on the subject of ruling elders, will be clearly perceived by quoting the original form of the language in which they were expressed by the Church of Scotland, which is as follows, “and it is also agreeable to, and warranted by, the word of God, that *some others* (not *ruling elders nor even elders,*) besides those who labour in the word and doctrine, be (*not ruling elders,* but) church governors to *join with* ministers of the word (*already presupposed and prescribed as rulers*) in the government of the

\* Dr. Miller as above, p. 21.

† See given in Blair’s History, in Appendix, in full; and also in Muston’s recent able History in two vols. 8vo.

church and discipline, which office-bearers Reformed churches do commonly call ruling elders.”\*

Here also, it will be noted, we find, as in our book, a *definition*—“church governors to join with the ministers of the word in the government of the church,” or as they are termed in section 4, “the representatives of that congregation;” and also a *description*, “which office-bearers Reformed churches do commonly call ruling elders.”

We have now established, beyond dispute, the constitutional doctrine of the Presbyterian system concerning ruling elders on these points—that they are not ministers, nor of the same order of officers as ministers, that they are defined to be *properly*—that is, in their very nature or essential character—representatives of the people; that they are not officially, nor by divine assignation, the presbyters of Scripture who are ministers; that it is only “commonly,” and in the common or “large” sense of the term, they are styled elders; that they represent, and cannot transcend the power ultimately inherent in, the people, to whom and for whose benefit they are instituted; that their power is strictly representative, and capable of exercise beyond their particular “people” only by special, personal, and temporary delegation, and may cease to be exercised even over that people in case they become unacceptable; that they are not as ministers are, *ex-officio*, necessary, and constant members of any superior court; and that they never have been ordained by imposition of hands, nor considered as officially capable of uniting in imposition of hands, in the ordination of ministers, by the constitution of any Presbyterian church in any part of the world.†

But further, the antagonism of the theory in question to the Presbyterian system will be made more manifest by proving *distinctly*—what is implied in the positions already established—the lay, or popular, and non-clerical character of ruling elders. Ruling elders are laymen—that is, as the word literally and in universal usage means—they are not clergymen, but are distinct from the clergy; individuals of the people who

\* Compend. of Laws, vol. 1, p. 187. Pardovan, Title 1, Sec. 1.

† “It was the practice of the Church for three hundred years to ordain bishops or presbyters with imposition of hands of neighbouring bishops or presbyters.” (Jus. Div. Regim. Eccl. p. 60.) Elders not sixty, ordained. (See Pref.)

are not in orders. The term *laity* is altogether relative, be it observed, to *office* and *order*, and not to *dignity*, or *worth*, or *rank*. The layman may in all these respects be exalted, and the minister be humble and poor. The term only distinguishes that relation which the clergy sustain to God and to his sacred services which the laity do not. In any invidious sense ruling elders are not laity; but neither are deacons, nor believers generally, for all are kings and priests unto God. But in every proper sense ruling elders are laymen, just as certainly as deacons are, since they are both called, elected, and ordained by the same formula. (*See Form of Government.*) It is idle work, therefore, to controvert this distinction, since it would only necessitate some other. The truth in the case was evidently this. In a high and holy sense all Christian people are *κληροι*, *cleroi*, or clergy, but ministers are in a peculiar and distinguishing sense, clergy. There is, therefore, an order of Christian laity as well as of Christian ministers or clergy, and it is in accordance with Christ's appointment that both orders should be represented in the government of the church, by a double class of officers, combining in the one, permanency and conservative wisdom as a Senate; and in the other, popular representation, prudence, activity, and authority, as a House of Representatives; united as one; acting as checks and balances to each other; coöperating as one court in everything common; and discharging, by each, everything peculiar to the character and office of each; and thus combining the greatest liberty with the highest security, and avoiding the extremes of a simple democracy and a spiritual hierarchy.

The defined nature of ruling elders, as properly the representatives of the people, implies and requires that they be laymen. A representative is one who bears the character, is clothed with the power, and performs the functions of others; who is one of them, united with them in interest, in power, and privilege, and chosen by them, from among themselves, to support their interests, and act in their name. Now if by becoming an elder, a man ceases to be a layman and becomes a clergyman, then he is no longer properly a representative of the people, and the Presbyterian government ceases to be representative, and a free commonwealth, and

becomes a clerical aristocracy, or in other words, a hierarchy. In their original form, as found in all modern and reformed churches, as among the Waldenses, in Switzerland at Geneva, in France, in Scotland, elders were unquestionably laymen, chosen from the civil state and not from the ecclesiastical, *and by the civil authorities* in many cases, as by the Confession of the churches of Switzerland, and the first adopted in Scotland. Blair,\* “one of the most profound writers on the Waldenses,” as Dr. Miller justly styles him, (on Presbyterianism, p. 18, 19,) “points out the difference between the lay elders of the Waldenses and of the Church of Scotland, by stating that the former were chosen by the Waldensian *congregations*, meeting annually and appointing the elder.” “Calvin,” says Principal Hill, “in 1542, admitted *lay* elders into his church.† The admission of *lay* elders into church courts having the sanction of these early authorities, Calvin thought it expedient to revive the primitive practice as an effectual method of preventing the return of inordinate power *in a superior order of clergy*. With some variation of name and privilege, the office of *lay* elders is found in all the Presbyterian churches on the Continent. Ever since the Reformation it has formed an essential part of the constitution of the church of Scotland.” (*View*, pp. 24, 25.) “The Kirk session is composed of the minister of the parish, who is *officially* moderator, and of *lay* elders.” P. 48. “The Presbytery is composed of the ministers of all the parishes within its bounds, and of *lay representatives* from the consistories.” P. 26. Speaking of these lay elders as assisting the minister in everything which concerns discipline, Principal Hill adds, “They are called *laymen* in this respect, that they have no right to teach or to dispense the sacraments, and on this account they form *an office* in the Presbyterian church, *inferior in rank and power to that of pastors*.” ·Ibid. p. 23.

The very learned Vitringa, in his elaborate treatise on the Ancient Synagogue, in discussing the question of ruling elders as maintained by Calvin, and as commonly adopted in his own church, uniformly styles them *presbyteros laicos*. (See p. 484.)

\* In vol. ii. p. 540, he calls them *lay*, five times.

† View of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland, by George Hill, D. D. Principal of St. Andrews College, Third edition, p. 23.

That ruling elders have always been considered as laymen in every branch of the Presbyterian church, will be clearly seen further, from the variety of names by which they have been called. In the Syrian churches of Malabar, the Romish inquisitor addressed them as “representatives and procurators of the people.”\* In the laws of Geneva they are called “inspectors, seniors, and commissioners for the Seniors.”† Among the Waldenses they received the names of rulers, ancients, and elders; among the Bohemians, of guides, elders, and censors; by Comenius they are called “seniors, judges of the congregation, or censors of the people.” Ecolampadius styles them elders of another kind, that is, “senators, leaders, and counsellors.” In the Helvetic Confession, “The elders are the agents, as it were the senators and fathers of the church, governing it by holy counsel.”‡ In the Books of Discipline, no one term is employed, but several, such as seniors, other governors, elders. In the Westminster Standards, and in the notes preserved by Gillespie, they are spoken of as—ruling officers—other church governors, *ruling* elder or others, church governør, others to join in government.” We have not found the full term “ruling elder,” until about the time of the Westminster Assembly, when it is introduced and reprobated in speeches preserved by Neal,§ and is used in the commission given by the Church of Scotland to its delegates to that Assembly. After ten days of elaborate discussion in the Westminster Assembly, both names, *elder* and *ruling elder*—were abandoned, and “other church governors,” and as in ch. on Presbytery, “other public officers,” were adopted. In the early churches in the United States, many had no elders.|| They were frequently called “assistants, representatives of the people, and sometimes the minister’s assistants, representatives of congregations.”¶

The lay character of ruling elders is not trivial nor unimportant. It is fundamental to the Presbyterian system and to

\* See the Confession imposed on them in Hough’s Christianity in India, vol. iv. Append. p. 515.

† See Name, Nat. and Functions, of Elders, p. 11.

‡ See *ibid.* and auth. pp. 78, 79, 80, 84, 86, and Harmony of Confessions.

§ See Hist. of Puritans, vol. i. and Appendix.

|| Hodge, Constit. Hist., i. p. 96, 97.

¶ Do. 95, see example.

the true character and importance of the ruling eldership. It is their lay character which brings the lay element into our form of government and imparts voice and power to the people; indeed gives into their hands the *controlling* power in particular churches and sessions, and *equal* power in every other court and in every department. These lay representatives constitute the house of representatives united with the senate in one body in all the courts of our church.

“Our divines,” says Mr. George Gillespie in his Assertion of the government of the Church of Scotland, Part I. chap. 4, “prove against papists that some of these, whom they call laics, ought to have a place in the assemblies of the church, by this argument among the rest; because otherwise the whole church could not be thereby represented. And it is plain enough, that the church cannot be represented, except the hearers of the word, which are the far greater part of the church, be represented. By the ministers of the word they cannot be represented more than the burghs can be represented in parliament by the noblemen, or by the commissioners of shires; therefore by some of their own kind must they be represented, that is, by such as are hearers, and not preachers. Now some hearers cannot represent all the rest except they have a calling and commission thereto; and who can these be but ruling elders? And again, when the Council of Trent was first spoken of in the Diet at Wurtemberg, Anno 1522, all the estates of Germany desired of Pope Adrian VI. that admittance might be granted, as well to *laymen* as to clergymen, and that not only as witnesses and spectators, but to be judges there. This they could not obtain, therefore they would not come to the council, and published a book, where they allege this for one cause of their not coming to Trent, because none had voice there but cardinals, bishops, abbots, generals, or superiors of orders, whereas *laics* also ought to have a decisive voice in councils. If none but the ministers of the word should sit and have a voice in a synod, then it could not be a church representative, because the most part of the church (who are the hearers and not the teachers of the word) are not represented in it. A common cause ought to be concluded by common voices. But that which is treated of in councils, is a com-

mon cause pertaining to many particular churches. Our divines, when they prove against papists, that the election of ministers, and the excommunication of obstinate sinners, ought to be done by the suffrages of the whole church, make use of this same argument; that which concerneth all, ought to be treated of and judged by all."

So argued one of Scotland's noblest sons, and a representative in the Westminster Assembly of Divines. And such, also, are the general views of the early fathers of the Presbyterian church. (See Jamieson's *Cyprianus Isotimus*, pp. 554—556, 540—544.)

One of the ablest and most effective works written in favour of the Presbyterian system, in 1641, two years before the Westminster Assembly, and by some who were members of that body, was what—by the union of the initial letters of the names of its combined authors—was called *Smectymnuus*. "By all these testimonies," they say, (at the close of their argument for *governing elders*, whom they call *lay presbyters* and *lay elders*) "it is apparent, first, that in the ancient church there were some called *seniors*. Secondly, that these seniors *were not clergymen*. Thirdly, that they had a stroke in governing the church and managing the affairs thereof. Fourthly, that the seniors were distinguished from the rest of the people." P. 74.

We need not do more than refer to the biennial election of elders in the Dutch Church, and to the character of the eldership in the French and Swiss Churches.\*

It is very remarkable that the proofs given by Dr. Killen for his theory from the Synagogue, prove also that if similar to the Parnasim, elders must be laymen. "In every synagogue," as he quotes from Lightfoot, "there was a *civil* triumvirate, that is, three *magistrates*, who judged of all matters in contest, advising within that synagogue." "The same writer," adds Dr. Killen, "declares that in every synagogue there were elders that ruled *in civil affairs* and elders that laboured in word and doctrine."† Dr. Miller admits all that we desire. 1. That

\* See Lorimer on Eldership, p. 165.

† Lightfoot's Works, xi. 179, Killen, pp. 233, 234.

the earliest fathers distinguished ministers by the title of *clergy*, and the people by that of *laity*. 2. That in the time of Cyprian this use was general. 3. That the name of clergy was given to presbyters and deacons, and to any others who in the growing multiplication of orders were *ordained by imposition of hands*. 4. That this distinction is found even in Scripture. (Acts iv. 13.) 5. That in any *invidious* sense, ruling elders are not laymen, nor ministers, prelates or popes. 6. But that “so far as it is intended to designate those who are clothed with office and authorized to discharge important spiritual functions which the body of church members are not authorized to perform, and to mark the distinction between these two classes, the language may be defended, and that either that (*i. e.* laity) or some other of equivalent import, *ought to be, and must be used*, if we would be faithful to the New Testament view of ecclesiastical office as an ordinance of Christ.” “Let all necessary distinction be made by saying, ministers or pastors, ruling elders, deacons, and the laity or body of the people.” (Ruling Elders, pp. 211, 212.) Amen. So let it be.\*

We are not left to put any sense possible or plausible upon our Book of Government. “Our whole arrangement of judicatories, and *our whole ecclesiastical nomenclature*, are, with few exceptions, borrowed from Scotland,” and although “Presbyterianism in Scotland, Holland, France, Geneva, and Germany, are in substance the same . . . yet as those who commenced the Presbyterian church in America were chiefly emigrants from North Britain and Ireland, so the Church of Scotland was more than any other their model.” Thus speaks Dr. Miller, who must be considered as being himself one of the most venerated fathers and upbuilders of our church.†

This constitutional interpretational authority of the Westminster standards is confirmed by the fact that, as Dr. Archibald Alexander remarks, “the *immediate* mother of our American

\* Several names are employed in Scripture to denote the body of the Christian people, such as *brethren—one heritage—disciple*, as opposed to *Master—taught*, as opposed to *teachers—soldiers and leaders—ἱ λαός, the people—παιμὸν, the flock, the church—private persons, ἰδιαιται—and later, βίαιτοι, laymen, or men devoted to secular pursuits.*

† See “Presbyterianism the truly Prim. and Apostolic Church,” pp. 21, 22.

Presbyterian Church was the Synod of Ulster, from one of whose Presbyteries, the Lagan, the Rev. Francis Mackemie, its founder, was formally commissioned and ordained to labour in this country. Now, in a minute of the Synod of New York in 1751, it is said: "We do hereby declare and testify our constitution, order, and discipline to be in harmony with the established Church of Scotland. The Westminster Confession, Catechisms, Directory for Public Worship, and *Church Government*, adopted by them, are *in like manner* received and adopted by us. We declare ourselves united with that church in the same faith, order, and *discipline*.\*"

In conclusion, on this point, we remark, that either ruling elders are laymen, or deacons are not; and that if deacons are laymen, then ruling elders must be also, since both are elected and ordained by the same formula, word for word—(see *Form of Government*)—and therefore since deacons are universally recognized as lay officers in the church, so also are ruling elders. They are both laymen, and so understood and felt to be by themselves, by the church, and by the world—chosen from the people and by the people, to represent the people; and separated from them by no form of ordination peculiar to the sacred order of the ministry.

But we proceed to remark, that ruling elders and deacons, though laymen, are not incumbents of a *lay office*, nor *lay officers*, in the sense of being originated or authorized by man. They occupy a divinely instituted office, and are clothed by divine right with all the dignity and honour of ecclesiastical officers. In other words, they are authorized by Scripture and by sound reasoning from established scriptural truths, and are agreeable to, and approved by, scriptural examples, and by its general teaching.†

It is also to be remarked that this view of the office of the elder is the only one which gives a proper explanation of the nature and functions of ruling elders. Whatever can promote

\* See in Hodge's Constitutional History, vol. i. p. 18, and his multiplied proofs of the fact.

† A divine right is supported by any one of these arguments. See Dr. McLeod's Ecl. Catech., p. 12, Q. 39, and note. Also, Jus. Div. Regiminis Ecl., ch. i.

the spiritual interests of the people, preserve their rights, and secure their prosperity, peace and purity, and the godly upbringing of the children of the church—all this pertains to the eldership, and is expected from them, according to their several ability and opportunity.

This view gives to the eldership the power of the church in a very large measure, and to the church itself its popular representative character. This view gives to the church also its spiritual character. As elders are, the church will be; and as elders are, the ministry itself will, in all ordinary cases be; and either be as greatly hindered in what they would be, or helped in all they would accomplish. Elders can vitalize and popularize the church. There are no limits to their usefulness. They are the palladiums of the church's liberty and rights, and the preservers of its purity, both of doctrine and of life.

Such then is the Presbyterian theory of the eldership, as found in its standards, and in the history and practice of every Presbyterian church. The question, therefore, between this and the new theory is not, what *ought* to be, but what is *constitutional*—not what might be constitutionally altered, if a better is pointed out; nor even what is most scriptural, and most authoritatively maintained; but simply what is the Presbyterian system as it regards ruling elders? and are Presbyterian ministers and officers under solemn and covenant engagement bound to maintain and preserve it?

Is this then, we ask, the theory of the Presbyterian church in these United States on the subject of the eldership? The answer can be definitely given. That our church does not hold the theory propounded by Dr. Breckinridge, Dr. Thornwell, Dr. Adger and others, is admitted. "The ruling elder," says Dr. Thornwell,\* "even in the decisions of the General Assembly occupies a very anomalous position, and it is still disputed† . . . whether he belongs to the *same order with the minister*, or whether the minister alone is the presbyter of Scripture, and the ruling elder a subordinate assistant. It is still disputed whether he sits in Presbytery as the deputy of

\* *Southern Presbyterian Review*, October 1859, p. 615.

† What is not at all disputed by the church, is here omitted.

the brotherhood, or whether he sits there by divine right as a constituent element of the body; whether as a member of presbytery, he can participate in ALL presbyterial acts (*i. e. ordinations, &c.*) or is debarred from some by the low nature of his office."

Now, passing by the invidious imputation of a design to lower the eldership by magnifying, as the apostles do, the high calling of the ministry, we have in this statement a full admission of the fact, that the theory of Dr. Breckinridge, which he adopts, is in antagonism to the Presbyterian system as interpreted by our General Assembly.

For three successive years (1842—1844,) our General Assembly was agitated by overtures to allow ruling elders to unite in the imposition of hands in the ordination of bishops. "The denial of this right," it was alleged by those who protested, "involved the denial that they are scriptural presbyters, which denial seems to us to undermine the foundations of Presbyterian order."\* In accordance with the *unanimous* report of the Committee, the General Assembly resolved, "that in its judgment, neither the constitution nor the practice of our church authorizes ruling elders to impose hands in the ordination of ministers," (yeas 138, nays 9); and in a long and able reply to a long and able protest, the Assembly in 1844, † says: "These views are contrary to Scripture, and to the constitution of our church, and to the practice of our own and all other Presbyterian churches, and tend to subvert the office of ruling elder, by confounding it with that of the minister of the word. It was the doctrine of the Independents, and not of Presbyterians, that ruling elders had the right to impose hands in the ordination of ministers, as could be abundantly shown from authorities not to be questioned. In favour of the decision of the Assembly, or rather of the last three Assemblies, it can be shown, 1. That the decision accords with the word of God; 2. With the very words of our constitution; 3. With the uniform practice of those who framed the constitution; 4. With the uniform practice of all other Presbyterian churches; and we cannot but express the hope that a matter

\* Protest, Baird's Digest, p. 77.

† By a vote of 154 to 25.

which has been decided, after a full and careful examination, by our whole church, and by such large majorities, may be considered as settled, and that it will not be made a subject of further agitation."

The question, therefore, which theory of the eldership is the Presbyterian system, according to the deliberate and almost unanimous judgment of our church, against the ablest opposition, and during three successive years of agitation, is no longer an open question, nor one of doubtful disputation. The positions here affirmed have to this day never been assailed. If the new theory of the protestors is the Presbyterian system, let the *proof* be given.

In another and closing article we will examine the grounds assumed as the basis of the new theory, and after proving that it has no foundation in Scripture, exhibit its tendency to destroy Presbyterianism, the ministry, the eldership, and the deaconship.

ART. IV.—*Reid's Collected Writings*. Preface, Notes, and Supplementary Dissertations by SIR WILLIAM HAMILTON, Bart., Professor of Logic and Metaphysics in the University of Edinburgh, &c. &c. Third edition. Edinburgh, 1852. (Referred to in the following article by *R.* and the page.)

*Discussions on Philosophy, &c.* By SIR WILLIAM HAMILTON, Bart., &c. &c. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853. (Referred to by *Dis.* and the page.)

*Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic.* By SIR WILLIAM HAMILTON, Bart., &c. &c. Vol. I., Metaphysics. Boston: Gould & Lincoln, 1859. (Referred to by *Lect.* and the page.)

HAMILTON's doctrine of the Conditioned is a modification of Kant's Critique of the Reason. Kant's Critique is a development of the doctrine of Hume. To explain Hume, we wish to say a few words of Locke.

In the epistle to the reader which Locke prefixed to his Essay on the Understanding, he says, "five or six friends