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AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF REVELATION, CHAPTER 20, IN THE
LIGHT OF THE BOOK AS A WHOLE.

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The twentieth chapter of the book of Revelation contains four visions, as follows: the binding of Satan (vs. 1-3); the souls of martyrs and confessors enthroned with Christ (vs. 4-6); the final battle between Satan and the saints (vs. 7-10); and the general resurrection and final judgment (vs. 11-15). The first three visions are closely connected, being tied together by the six times repeated expression, "a thousand years." Indeed, the first two visions—the binding of Satan and the enthronement of the martyrs—describe events that are synchronous. They are to be followed by the final onset between Satan and the saints, and this, in turn, will usher in the general resurrection and final judgment.

It is of the utmost importance that we have a clear conception of the nature of a vision. For not only is this twentieth chapter made up of visions, the whole book of Revelation is a stupendous and magnificent vision, or rather series of visions. The author describes his book for us in 1:19: "Write therefore the things which thou didst see—both the things which are and those which are destined to occur hereafter."

WHY TWO CLASSES OF ELDERS!

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There are three Greek words which furnish names for three of our greatest denominations. These words are *baptismos*, *episcopos* and *presbuteros*, Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians. These names point to difference of emphasis and to the claim of apostolicity. The Baptists have no monopoly of baptism, but they set special store by it and claim that they alone have the apostolic baptism. Episcopalians can lay no exclusive claim to the possession of bishops, but they pay a prodigious respect to bishops and claim to have the only apostolic bishops. Presbyterians are not alone in the possession of presbyters, but they put peculiar honor on them and are perfectly sure that they possess the only apostolic presbyters. When we talk about our presbyters, or elders, we are talking about the quintessence of Presbyterianism. We owe it to the elders that we are Presbyterians.

It would be easy to show that our Presbyterian superstructure, as a whole, rests upon a broad and solid network of Scripture. I think it more profitable, however, to raise the question whether we have a broad and solid foundation in Scripture for our particular feature of our system. Have we clear and unmistakable support for the broad, official distinction which we draw between our two classes of elders?

It may seem assumptious in me to raise this question, seeing that the distinction is recognized by all the different families that constitute the great Presbyterian brotherhood, and enters into the frame-work of their government. Nevertheless, in the face of this formidable consensus of opinion, I venture to raise the question. The inquiry is not as to ecclesiastical

support, but as to Scriptural support. It may be as well to state, however, that touching ecclesiastical support, they that be for us, are more than they that be against us.

I. This distinction rests on only one verse of Scripture, namely, 1 Tim. 5:17. "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in word and doctrine." Possibly one verse of Scripture is a sufficient foundation for so great a distinction, a distinction of such tremendous importance in the practical work of the Church. But if so, it should be a very plain verse, and should it seem to conflict with other Scriptures it should be capable of only the one interpretation. No law of interpretation commends itself more readily to our common sense than the law which demands that we shall so interpret the Scriptures as to make them consistent with themselves. The general teachings must control the interpretation of isolated texts.

The verse I have quoted is a plain text. It is almost universally agreed that it teaches that in the Apostolic Church there were some elders who only ruled, while there were others who in addition to ruling, also labored in word and doctrine. But this does not settle the question. We must ask further, whether the distinction rests upon an official difference, or merely on a difference of gifts? Does "laboring in word and doctrine" constitute an official function entirely distinct from that of ruling? If so, then some elders had no official right to labor in word and doctrine, but if the distinction was based merely on difference of gifts, then all elders had an official right to labor in word and doctrine. The reason they did not was that this part of the work was committed to those who could do it best. A board of deacons divides up the work common to them all, distributing it among a number of committees. They are actually doing different work, but, of course, this implies no official distinction between them. Why may not a board of elders do the same thing? May this not be the reason for the two classes of elders referred to in 1 Tim. 5:17? Such is the view of the late Bishop Lightfoot, the learned and judicious Bishop of Durham, England. He says: "There is no ground

for supposing that the work of teaching and the work of governing pertained to separate members of the presbyterial college. As each had his special gift, so would he devote himself to the one or the other of the sacred functions." Such is also the view of many distinguished scholars in the Presbyterian Church, notably among them, the eminent teacher of church history in Magee College, Londonderry, Ireland, Dr. Thomas Withcrow. He says: "Ruling and teaching were two different functions of the same office; but while every elder was free to discharge both, yet in practice each attended to that department of the office to which he was most inclined by personal gifts and taste, or by the requirements of the congregation. Teaching and ruling were the main functions of the one office which all filled; one elder might excel as a ruler, another as a teacher, while perhaps some two or three might have capacity for both. Each labored in that department of the office for which he felt himself best adapted."

It is a weighty consideration, bearing on the question that none of the other great churches of Christendom makes this distinction in the eldership. These churches have the office, but they do not divide those who hold the office into two official classes. Perhaps a yet weightier consideration is the fact that no such distinction is found in the early undivided church, the sub-Apostolic Church. The literature of that early period furnishes no evidence of a broad line separating between elders who only ruled and others who labored in word and doctrine. There is no trace of such a distinction.

In the light of all this, it does not seem so very assumptious in us to raise the question. We find no support for the distinction under consideration in either the theory or practice of other churches than the Presbyterian Church. Neither do we find any support for it in the history of the early church. It rests for support exclusively on one verse of Scripture, and that verse is easily capable of an interpretation which removes even its support.

II. All other teachings of the New Testament are against any such distinction. If we look, for instance, at the churches

to which the Apostle Paul wrote letters, do we find him drawing any line between the presbyters? Do we find in any of these churches an elder answering to our teaching? Elder, or pastor? Did the Church of Thessalonica have a pastor? or the Church of Philippi? or the Church of Ephesus? The apostle wrote letters to all of these. He mentions their presbyters, their bishops, their rulers, but he gives no hint of any difference among them. On the contrary he gives:

(1) The same titles to all. He calls them all bishops, presbyters, pastors. We need cite but two passages to put this beyond question: Acts 20:17, "And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church." In the course of his address to them, vs. 20, he says: "Take heed to' yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops to feed the church of the Lord, which he purchased with his own blood." Here he calls the elders bishops and charges them to exercise the duties of pastors toward the flock. Titus 1:5-7, the apostle instructs Titus to ordain elders for the churches in Crete, and then proceeds to lay down qualifications for bishops. The language makes no sense unless he means the same persons under both titles, calling them first elders, then bishops.

(2) Lays the same duties on all. Look at his farewell charge to the Ephesian elders. He commits to them the entire care of the church, bidding them to exercise the functions of a shepherd toward his flock. Does he separate them into classes? No indeed; what he says to one he says to all. He lays a common work on them all. Would any one venture to say that some of these elders were charged with official duties which others had no right to perform? Was there one of them who had no official authority to take on himself any duty included in shepherding the flock? And what were the duties comprehended under this term? Dr. Joseph Addison Alexander, than whom no one could speak with more commanding voice, specifies preaching, administering the sacraments and governing, and then adds: "All the powers of the ministry collectively are comprehended in the metaphor of acting as a

shepherd to the flock of Christ." It is not probable that any competent student of Scripture would call in question this interpretation.

Turning to 1 Peter 5:1-3, we find him using the same metaphor and giving substantially the same charge to the elders of Asia Minor. There could be no broader, more comprehensive term used than the term shepherd, whatever the flock needs, it is the duty of the shepherd to supply. Recurring now to Paul's speech, was there one of the elders of the Church of Ephesus who might excuse himself from preaching, or administering the sacraments, on the ground that he had been appointed merely to rule? Could he not be confronted with Paul's charge, and reminded that he was commissioned by the great apostle who founded this church, and who perhaps ordained all these elders, to act the part of a shepherd to the flock, *i. e.*, to feed it with the pure word of God, guide it in paths of righteousness, and protect it from grievous wolves?

(3) Prescribes the same qualifications for all. The apostle in two different epistles furnishes a list of qualifications to be possessed by those who are to be ordained bishops, or elders—I Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9. These lists contain virtually the same qualifications. Are these meant to apply to all elders? In the case of Titus certainly to all the elders in Crete. Were all of these ruling elders? If so, where do we find any qualifications for teaching elders? Were they all teaching elders? If so, where do find any qualification for ruling elders? Either we have no qualifications prescribed for the one class, or the other, or the same qualifications are prescribed for both classes. Is not the latter interpretation the true one? Paul recognizes no distinction, but lays down certain qualifications which should be possessed by all who are to be ordained to the office of bishop or elder. This comes near to saying that all are to be ordained to one and the same office.

III. We have now reached this point, the same titles are applied to all, the same duties are assigned to all, and the same qualifications are prescribed for all. They are all called bishops, presbyters, pastors; they are all enjoined to exercise the

functions of a shepherd toward the flock, and they are all to possess the qualifications which will fit them for the common task.

In view of this, is it by any means certain that we do well to divide them broadly into two official classes? Had there been such a division in apostolic times as obtains in our times, is it not likely that we should be able to discover it? Would they all have had the same titles, the same duties, and the same qualifications? Look for a moment at chapter IV, Sections II and III, in our Book of Church Order. You will note that in Section II, which treats of ministers of the word, nine different titles of dignity and honor are given to one class of our elders. Whereas in Section III, only one title is given to the other, and that is not a Scriptural title. While we assign some duties in common, yet on the whole the spheres of duties of the two classes are vastly different. We expressly assign them to two distinct and dissimilar offices. We do not demand the same qualifications for both classes. If in all this we are apostolic, obviously the apostles expressed themselves with far less precision and accuracy than we have done in our Book of Church Order.

IV. Suppose we should confess ourselves in the wrong, and should blot out the distinction, and reduce all elders, or elevate all elders, to the same class, what then? For one thing every elder would have an official right to do whatever any other elder had an official right to do. Every elder would be authorized to preach, to administer the sacraments, to solemnize marriages, and would, no doubt, enjoy the privilege of traveling on the railroads at reduced fare on a clergyman's permit.

But would every one be bound to do whatever any other one did? Certainly not. 1 Tim. 5:17 would still furnish apostolic authority for distributing the work according to gifts. The elder who could preach most to edification would give himself to laboring in word and doctrine; those who had no special gift or liking for public speaking would look after the morals and manners of the people; and here and there, the elder who had been elected because of his wealth, or social emi-

nence would continue to be a mere knot on a log, a worthless lumberer of the ground.

What would be the advantage of the change? Much every way; chiefly there would be no more vacant churches. What is a vacant church? Not an empty church. It may be a church of five hundred members, with a dozen able-bodied elders and an equal number of able-bodied deacons; but it has lost its pastor. The absence of one man makes a vacant church, perhaps three or four vacant churches. What a tremendous fellow a preacher is in our system. He may be a very sorry sort of a preacher, and yet he can vacate three or four churches.

Is vacancy a very serious thing for a church? Almost as serious as the Pope's interdict used to be. The vacant church is deprived of the life-giving ordinances. It begins at once to decay and it does not possess the power of self-preservation. It can baptize no baby, can admit no one to the communion. Only let it remain vacant long enough and death is inevitable. Possibly the Great Head of the Church made no better provision for His people than this, but I am reluctant to believe it.

But would not this lower the standard of ministerial education? If all our elders should be recognized as preachers, we should have on an average a ministry no better educated than that of the Methodists and the Baptists. Well, perhaps even that disaster would not be as bad as dead churches.

There is no reason, however, why we should not have just as many educated preachers then as now. We would have the same reason for providing the best preaching that we could provide. But in the scarcity of well trained ministers those without the training would do the best they could, and would keep life in the churches that are now called vacant. Is it not highly probable that such a change in our system would secure greater care in the selection of our elders? Is it not further probable that if our elders were taught that preaching was a function pertaining to their office, and that circumstances might arise at any time calling for an exercise of this function, numbers of them would consecrate themselves entirely to the

work of preaching and seek the training necessary to the greatest efficiency?

V. Have we any precedents throwing light on, or justifying these views?

(a) Do we not find a precedent in the history of the Church of Scotland? When the first General Assembly met in 1560, it was found that there were only thirteen ministers for the whole realm of Scotland. There was no outside source from which to draw them. It would be fatal to the interests involved to wait till schools could be provided and candidates for the ministry educated. Consequently, under the leadership of John Knox, they appointed godly men to gather the congregations into their houses of worship, and read the Word of God to them. It was demanded of these readers that after they had grown familiar with the Scriptures, they should add to reading exhortation. It was further contemplated that those engaged in these sacred labors should ultimately fit themselves for ordination and enter the regular ministry. Thus John Knox and his colleagues made this theory of an educated ministry yield to the exigencies of Christ's kingdom. The doors of the church were kept open, its pulpit supplied, and the congregation had some one to lead their worship. These worthy leaders found nothing in the Word of God to hinder such a course, and the results abundantly justified them.

(b) Do we not find another precedent in the foreign mission field? No church thinks of applying the rules that may well be followed in an old and settled country to the struggling congregations on the foreign field. Just so soon as a native Christian can be put in possession of sufficient knowledge to enable him to tell the story of the cross to his fellow-countrymen, he is sent forth to do the work of an evangelist. The exigencies of the case control the policy of the Church. In dealing with conditions across the sea our practice is sufficiently flexible. Why should we be less considerate of exigencies at home? Why relax our rigidity rather than permit the cause of Christ among the heathen to suffer, and than rather than relax our rigidity permit our feeble churches at home to decay and die?

(c) Have we not another precedent in the Campbellite Church? Alexander Campbell was reared a Presbyterian, and when he organized an independent church, he introduced the very innovation which we are considering, thinking hereby to conform his church more nearly to the apostolic pattern. The Campbellites have a plurality of elders in every church, just as we have, but they all belong to the same class. They try to provide an educated preacher for each pulpit, but in the absence of such a trained elder, the service proceeds the same as if he were there. No church is ever closed, and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is administered every Lord's day. The growth of the Campbellite Church has been phenomenal. There is reason to believe that it due in no small measure to this effective use of the eldership.

VI. It has been objected that if every elder were authorized to preach, then woe be to every elder who did not devote his life to preaching. But see the Book of Church Order, Chap. IV, Par. 37: "As the Lord has given different gifts to the ministers of the word, and has given to them various works to execute, the Church is authorized to call and appoint them to labor as pastors, teachers and evangelists, and in such other works as may be needful to the Church, according to the gifts in which they excel." Here we recognize expressly the principle that officers to whom a common work is committed may distribute the work among them according to their diversity of gifts. It is precisely the principle which according to Bishop Lightfoot and others governed the presbyters of the Apostolic Church when some only ruled and others labored in word and doctrine. On this principle our Book permits those who seldom or never preach to belong to the official class designated as ministers of the word. Is a Rev. College Professor, or a Rev. Newspaper Editor required to preach? He may or he may not, just as inclination prompts, or circumstances determine. He is not considered to have violated his ordination vows if he does not preach once in ten years, or even in a life time. If there is a need, and there is no one else to supply it, he certainly ought to preach. But this may be true of every

other elder. If he is authorized to preach, he should not preach if there is some one available who can do it better. Otherwise he should. Such at any rate is my judgment, and I think I have the mind of the Spirit.

I record with thankfulness that our Church leads the van in the honor which it puts on the eldership. Since its organization, sixty years ago, it has been moving towards the goal to which this discussion points, enlarging from time to time the scope of the elder's official activities and reducing the distance that separates the two classes. It would be a sad reversal of our history if our Presbyteries should write into our law the proposal now before our Church and discredit the office by providing a new limit for the activity of those elected to fill it.