

Presbyterianism

Tested by the Word of God.

A letter to the Editor of "The British Herald."

by W. Kelly.

Note.

This letter to Mr. Reid is a brief but perhaps sufficient answer to three articles (entitled "Rule in the Church," "Local Charges" and "Power the Ground of Office,") in the *British Herald* for April 1, 1870.

Nothing can be more unfounded in principle or in fact than Mr. R.'s note to the *May Herald* (p. 78), in which the impression is given that "Brethren" imply "something very like a mistake" in the apostolic choice of elders. Not so: it is our conviction of God's wisdom in this which compels us to reject as unauthorised and anti-scriptural either Prelatic or Presbyterian appointment of elders. But it is impossible to choose them scripturally without apostles or their delegates. Let those who will, dare to imply a mistake that apostles were not perpetuated, on whose authority, living authority, direct or indirect, the choice of elders depends according to Scripture: we adore the God who provides all that is needful for a day of ruin without endorsing false pretensions.

Presbyterianism,

Dear brother, — In general, as you know, "Brethren" do not answer attacks made on them, unless they afford a good occasion for stating the truth. I am bound to add that your allusion cannot be rightly viewed as an attack, but rather as a defence of your own position. Suffer me, however, to send a few words which may remove misapprehension as to ourselves, if they do not convince you of what I believe to be mistaken on your part.

There has never been a time when "Brethren," as represented by those competent to speak for them, did not hold the perpetuity of all the gifts needed by the saints and given in Christ's love; and among the rest of pastors or rulers, Not an article, tract, pamphlet, or book has ever emanated from their midst, so far as I know (and I know them long and extensively), which does not insist on the value of rule in the church, if they treat of ministry at all. I have known strange doctrines elsewhere compromising the truth — never among such as possess the confidence of "Brethren" Individuals have shown a tendency, one to clericalism, another to democratic spirit; but it would be disingenuous to confound the mistakes of a few (whether among teachers or among taught) with the genuine working and effects of their distinctive principle, which I consider to be the return and recall of Christ's members to the word and Spirit of God, from the actual disorganisation of Christendom in which His sheep are scattered by Popery, Nationalism, and Dissent.

From rule in the church, then, which we all accept cordially (provided, of course, it be of God and not a mere name or a cheat), I turn to *local charges*. Here you concede that *apostles* chose the elders according to Scripture. It is equally clear that *the people* never chose them — none ever did but an apostle, or an apostolic delegate expressly commissioned so to do. We have no controversy with you as to the plurality of elders, or their identity with overseers; but we are sure that Episcopacy is not more at issue with Scripture in setting up a class of men (call them bishops or what not, who claim to perpetuate the ordaining power of the apostles) than Presbyterianism or Congregationalism in

substituting popular election for the apostolic choice of elders.

It is acknowledged by all well-informed Presbyterians that the earliest authentic documents after the apostles demonstrate the existence of the Episcopal system, as it is confessed that this prevailed in the Catholic world, till Rome crowned the incubus with the papal tiara. In vain do Congregational or Presbyterian controversialists invoke the testimonies of such fathers as Cyprian or Jerome: Episcopacy (though of a city, rather than of a diocese, at first) is a fact patent from the beginning of the second century. We hear of a bishop, of presbyters, and of deacons, in the same church from Ignatius, even if we use the shorter Syriac to correct the larger Greek copies. It is in vain then to say that you were "born in the apostolic place." Not so: we have all been born out of it. Eighteen centuries ago, "the Church-train" left the rails. The Reformation was a greet work; but there was no return to the original apostolic line — none even in the theory of Presbyterianism, still less of revolutionary Congregationalism.

And the error lies far deeper than an informal appointment of presbyters. The sub-apostolic fathers and their successors, you will not deny, evince a complete ignorance of the church's character and calling, as well as of the Holy Spirit's presence and action in it. So did Luther, Calvin, John Knox, and John Owen. Hence from first to last the clerical system is seen in operation, i.e., the confusion of Christ's gifts with the local charges (even if duly appointed, which they never were by any of these), which confined preaching in the church to the bishop of old, or "the minister" among moderns. He might by courtesy permit others to minister, but *he only* had the title. Such was and is the prevalent system of a clergy, from which Presbyterianism is no more free than other sects, in open war with the Christian assembly as seen in Scripture and carried out everywhere among "Brethren." It is evident, then, that the "Church-train" had disastrously slipped aside (not "shunted" but slipped) from the rails laid down in Scripture.

Calvin and his fellows, who thought they gathered Presbyterianism from Scripture, never pretended that they were "born in the apostolic place," but turned their back on Episcopacy as a deviation from Scripture, though it had lasted for more than a thousand years. They tried to distinguish between ministry and eldership, but really fell into the Presbyterian notion of two classes of elders, the one ruling and the other teaching. You rightly call this a "mistake;" but is it not a mistake to which you are bound in subscribing the Westminster Confession of Faith? Calvin and Knox never had their eyes opened, as yours have been, to the momentous truth of God's assembly on earth with the Spirit, free to act by whom He will among Christ's members in the exercise of gift, thanksgiving, prayer, etc. Something resembling this you have essayed at the Lord's Supper of each Lord's day at Warwick Road; but how it is to be reconciled with the plain honesty of a Presbyterian minister and members has always been a pain more than a marvel to me. I do not say to you or any other, Come to us; but I affirm that you are bound in the Lord's name to cease from all evil, to avoid even its appearance, counting on His future guidance when you stand clear of all you know to be an unscriptural bond and ground-work.

Agreeing with you that "Christendom is in rebellion" (which is surely serious for the "Church-train"), I hold with you that rule abides no less than preaching and teaching. But I ask: are Presbyterian elders chosen spiritually? If not, is this nothing? or is it part of the "rebellion?" And what of the place given to "the minister?" Is it more scriptural than an Anglican bishop? Does either honour the Lord's order? "Brethren" hold that, though we may lack much of apostolic order, we are never at liberty to contravene it. What can more flatly contradict Scripture than letting the people choose their elders, who in Scripture were invariably chosen by apostles or their delegates? If Scripture allowed this either to the assembly or to ordinary gifted men, "Brethren", could and would use the like liberty. But they find in Scripture principles irreconcilable with either; and to it the

authority of the Lord binds them to adhere, as did the Christians in early days, when no apostle or apostolic envoy visited to choose them elders. Call this "naked" if you will; but we can prove that this has the sanction of God's word, as readily as we can disprove the self-will of allowing the people, or an Anglican bishop, to choose presbyters. All that can be done by either is to clothe with the livery of a sect; whereas the value of appointment in Scripture depends on its being of the Lord through His apostles. If not the true Scriptural authority, we are convinced it is worse than nothing, for it is really an act of "rebellion," — even though those who do it ignorantly may be His servants. How much better to confess our wants than to hide them by a pretentious fiction!

Do "Brethren," therefore, undermine rule in the Church? Are they thereby destitute of rulers? In no way. Have you observed that many (yea most) of the inspired Epistles of the apostle Paul suppose rulers, but not elders in them? So at Rome, where ruling is enjoined (ch. 12), but not a word about an elder. How could there be elders where none had as yet gone competent to choose them? They had rulers like "Brethren;" but like them they had no elders. — It was not otherwise at Corinth, where their presence is ignored, though the Apostles had formed the assembly there. This is not surprising to us, but inexplicable to a Presbyterian. It was not the apostolic way to appoint elders in an infant assembly, but rather in places where churches already existed, and some exhibited the qualities required in overseers or elders. — In the assemblies of Galatia we hear of no elders; but we cannot doubt that some ruled, as we know they taught from the apostolic command that the saints should communicate with those who taught them in all good things. — There were not gifts only but elders at Ephesus, which had enjoyed the apostle's stay there for a considerable time, after an earlier stage of less light and power. — At Colosse both fact and principle point to an absence of elders; while it is certain that the church at Philippi had overseers.

But at Thessalonica we see how false the assumption is, that we cannot have men over us in the Lord without elders. Not that apostolically chosen elders were not a great boon locally, as apostles were yet more universally; but it is a fallacy to teach or fancy that we cannot walk in holy obedience and recognition of rulers without the presence of either. At Thessalonica those over the saints were clearly not invested with the charge of eldership, yet the saints there had rule then, as "Brethren" now. Apostolic order neither taunted them as "naked," nor admitted of election by the people to clothe them with authority. This I should call democracy, the fruit of "liberty, equality, and fraternity," which "Brethren" dislike more than any other Christians that I know.

It would seem too that, in writing to Jews, the Apostle purposely employed the phrase οἱ ἡγουμένοι in Heb. 13: 7, 17, 24, to embrace all who exercised pastoral care, whether "elders" or not. Compare Acts 15: 22, where it is applied to two "prophets" (not "elders"), and is translated "chief men." The true deduction from all this, compared with 1st and 2nd Tim. and Titus, I consider both plain and as decidedly in favour of "Brethren," as it is adverse to Presbyterianism and every other denomination. Among the Jewish believers we do not read of any formal installation of "elders," who are first named in Acts 11: 30.

On the one hand, then, scripture speaks of the people choosing men to take care of the poor (Acts 6, 2 Corinthians 8)* — never of elders chosen save by apostles or their delegates. "Brethren" could as easily as others choose; but they could no more than Presbyterians confer the scriptural authority of elders which apostles did (directly or indirectly); but after all they are no worse off in this than many chief churches for some time, many probably always, in apostolic times. Presbyterians, on the other hand, like the rest, have never been "on the rails" of Scripture in this respect, of which they nevertheless are apt to boast. I see no "shunting" in our case, any more than in the assemblies at Rome, Corinth, Colosse, and Thessalonica. But I do see an upset of the scriptural

system in Presbyterianism, not of elders merely, but of ministry, of the assembly itself, and of the sovereign action of the Holy Spirit in the assembly.

* It would be a wrong to Paul and Barnabas to rank them as mere ἀποστολοι ἐκκλησιῶν ("messengers of the churches") entrusted with supplies for poor saints. They are called οἱ ἀποστολοι ("the apostles") twice over, not Paul only but Barnabas also, in the same chapter which records their choice of elders. (See Acts 14: 4, 14, 23.) Elders never chose elders, though the apostle associated them with his own laying on of hands when he communicated a gift, χάρισμα, to Timothy, who was an evangelist, not an elder.

I have now, I trust, said enough to raise grave inquiries in grave minds; and to God and the word of His grace I would commend you and your readers, desiring only His will to stand. He is the best judge of the church's need, and the only wise and adequate provider for it. He abstained from perpetuating an ordaining authority where the departure from His truth was such that He must thereby have given an outward sanction to His own dishonour. He does vouchsafe all that is needful, but in such a way as to exercise faith in all, and to convict of disorder those most of all who pique themselves on names and shadows without reality. Ever yours in the Lord,

W Kelly.