

## CHAPTER V.

### THE GOVERNMENT OF A CHURCH.

There are three forms of church government, indicated by the terms Episcopacy, Presbyterianism, and Congregationalism.

Episcopacy recognizes the right of bishops to preside over districts of country, and one of its fundamental doctrines is, that a bishop is officially superior to other ministers. Of course, a modern bishop has under his charge the “inferior clergy;” for it is insisted, that the “ordaining power,” and “the right to rule,” belong to the Episcopal office. Those who adopt the Episcopal form of government, believe that there are three orders in the ministry – namely, deacons, elders, and bishops. The modern application of the term bishop to a man who has under his charge a district of country, is very objectionable. It has almost banished from Christendom the idea originally attached to the term. In apostolic times, bishop, pastor, and elder were terms of equivalent import. The elders of the church of Ephesus are termed (Acts xx. 24,) *overseers* – in the original, *episcopos* – the word generally translated “bishop,” if indeed “bishop” may be called a translation.

Prebyterianism recognizes two classes of elders – *preaching* elders and *ruling* elders. The pastor and ruling elders of a congregation constitute what is called the “session of the church.” The “session” transacts the business of the church, receives, dismisses, excludes members, &c. From the decisions of a session there is an appeal to the presbytery; from the action of the presbytery an appeal to the Synod; and from the action of the Synod an appeal to the General Assembly, whose adjudications are final and irresistible.

Congregationalism antagonizes with Episcopacy and Presbyterianism, and distinctly recognizes these truths:

1. *That the governmental power is in the hands of the people.*

It resides with the people in contradistinction from bishops or elders – that is to say, bishops or elders can do nothing, strictly and properly ecclesiastic, without the concurrence of the people.

2. *The right of a majority of the members of a church to rule, in accordance with the law of Christ.*

The will of the majority having been expressed, it becomes the minority to submit.

3. *That the power of a church cannot be transferred or alienated, and that church action is final.*

The power of a church can not be delegated. There may be messengers of a church, but there can not be delegates in the ordinary sense of the term. It would be well for the churches in their Letters to Associations and Councils, to say *messengers*, not *delegates*. No church can empower any man, or body of men to do any thing which will impair its independency.

These are highly important principles, and while the existence of the congregational form of church government depends on their recognition and application, it is an inquiry of vital moment: Does the New Testament inculcate these principles? For if it does not, whatever may be said in commendation of them, they possess no obligatory force.

Does the New Testament then inculcate the foundation principle of Congregationalism; namely, *that the governmental power of a church is with the members?* Let us see.

*It was the province of the apostolic churches to admit members into their communion.*

In Romans xiv. 1, it is written: “Him that is weak in the faith receive ye.” The import of this language obviously is, “Receive into your fellowship, and treat as a Christian him who is

weak in faith.” There is unquestionably a command – RECEIVE YE. To whom is this command addressed? To bishops? It is not. To the “Session of the church,” composed of the pastor and the ruling persons to whom the epistle was addressed, and it was written “to all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints.” No ingenuity can torture this language into a command given to the officers of the church in Rome. The members of the church, whose designation was “saints,” were addressed and commanded to “receive the weak in faith.” It was their business to decide who should be admitted into their Christian community; and Paul under the impulses of inspiration, says, “Him that is weak in the faith, receive ye.”

*We now proceed to show that the New Testament churches had the right to exclude unworthy members, and that they exercised the right.*

In 1 Cor. v. 1-5, we read as follows: “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I verily, as absent in the body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed; In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one to Satan, for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”

It is worthy of remark that while Paul “judged,” that the incestuous man ought to be excluded from the church, *he* did not exclude him. He did not claim the right to do so; and when he said to the “churches of Galatia,” “I would they were even cut off who trouble you,” he did not cut them off, though he desired that it should be done.

It deserves notice, too, that the members of the Corinthian church could not, in their *individual capacity*, exclude the incestuous man. It was necessary that they should be “gathered together.” They must assemble as a church. Thus assembling, “the power of our Lord Jesus Christ” was to be with them. They were to act by his authority, and execute his will; for he makes it incumbent on his churches to exercise discipline. In the last verse of the chapter referred to, Paul says: “Put away from among yourselves that wicked person.” Here is a command, given by an inspired man, requiring the exclusion of an unworthy member from the church at Corinth. To whom was the command addressed? To the official members of the church? No; but “to the *church* of God, which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.”

The right of a church to exclude from its communion disorderly persons is recognized in 2 Thess. iii. 6: “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly.” This command was addressed “to the *church* of the Thessalonians.” To withdraw from a “disorderly brother” is the same thing as to exclude him. There is a cessation of church fellowship.

Matt. xviii. 17, has not been referred to, because it will be noticed in another place. The reader will see, upon examination, that the passage clearly implies the power of “the church” to perform the act of excommunication, by which the member cut off becomes “as a heathen man and a publican.”

*The apostolic churches had the power and the right to restore excluded members, who gave satisfactory evidence of penitence.*

In 2 Cor. ii. 6-8, the “incestuous man is again mentioned as follows: “Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him and comfort him, lest perhaps such an one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love towards him.” The apostle manages this case with the greatest tenderness and delicacy. He refers to the excluded member without the least reference to the disgraceful offence for which he was excluded. “Sufficient,” says he, “is this punishment,” etc. That is, the object of the exclusion had been accomplished. The church had shown its determination not to connive at sin, and the excluded member had become penitent. But the point under consideration is, that the apostle advised the restoration of the penitent offender. Paul could no more restore him to the church than he could expel him from it in the first instance; but he says, “I beseech you that ye confirm your love toward him.” The power to restore was with the church, and Paul solicits an exercise of that power. The great apostle in saying, “*I beseech you,*” bows to the majesty of democratic church sovereignty. He virtually admits that nothing could be done unless the church chose to act.

Now, if the New Testament churches had the power and the right to receive, exclude, and restore members, they must have had the right to transact any other business coming before them. There surely can be nothing more vital to the interests of a church than the reception, exclusion, and restoration of members. Here we might let the argument for the foundation principle of congregationalism rest; but there is other proof of the recognition of that principle.

In the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, there is an account of the election of Matthias to the apostleship. He was to succeed Judas, the traitor. The most natural inference is,

that Matthias was chosen by the “one hundred and twenty disciples” mentioned verse 15. These disciples were, no doubt, the church to which the three thousand converts were added on the day of Pentecost. The people must have been held in high estimation by Peter, if called on in conjunction with the apostles themselves to elect a successor to Judas.

In Acts vi., there is a reference to the circumstances which originated the deacon’s office, and also to the manner in which the first deacons were appointed. It will be seen that the matter of grievance was referred by the Apostles to the *multitude of the disciples* – that they directed the *brethren to look out seven men* – that the saying pleased *the whole multitude* – and *they chose, etc.* The words we have *italicized* render the agency of the people in the whole transaction clear as the sun in heaven. Not only the *disciples*, but the *multitude*, the whole *multitude* of the disciples acted. No language could more strongly express the action of a church, as distinguished from that of its officers.

In support of the fundamental principle of Congregationalism, the following facts are stated: The “whole church” – the “brethren” – are named in connection with the “Apostles and elders,” Acts xv. 22, 23: “Then pleased it the Apostles and elders, *with the whole church*, to send chosen men. “And they wrote letters by them after this manner: ‘The Apostles, and elders, and *brethren*, send greeting.’” The brethren of the church at Jerusalem acted, as well as the Apostles and elders.

The churches of Apostolic times sent forth ministers on missionary tours. When Antioch received the word of God, the church at Jerusalem “sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch,” Acts xi. 22. His labors were successful – “much people was added to the Lord” – and at a subsequent period the church in Antioch sent out Saul and Barnabas, who made a long journey, performed much labor, returned and reported to the *church* all that God had done with

them. Acts, xiii. 1-3; xiv. 26, 27. With what deferential respect did these ministers of the gospel treat the church that sent them forth! The Apostles, so far from exercising lordship over the churches, did not control their charities. This is seen in Acts xi. 29, 30: 1 Cor. xvi. 1, 2: 2 Cor. ix. 7 The churches selected messengers to convey their charities. See 1 Cor. xvi, 3: 2 Cor. viii. 18, 19. Phil. ii. 25; iv. 18.

A second principle of Congregationalism already announced, is *the right of a majority of the members of a church to rule in accordance with the law of Christ.*

In 2 Cor. ii. 6, it is written, “Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many.” A literal translation of the words rendered “of many,” would be “by the more” – that is by the majority. McKnight’s translation is, “by the greater number.” If, as has been shown, the governmental power of a church is with the members, it follows that a majority must rule. This is so plain a principle of Congregationalism, and of common sense, that it is needless to dwell upon it.

A third truth, recognized by the Congregational form of church government is, *that the power of a church cannot be transferred or alienated, and that church action is final.*

The church at Corinth could not transfer her power to the church at Philippi, nor could the church at Antioch convey her authority to the church of Ephesus. Neither could all the apostolic churches combined, delegate their power to an association, or synod, or convention. That church power is inalienable, results from the foundation principle of Congregationalism – that this power is in the hands of the people, the membership. And if the power of a church cannot be transferred, church action is final. That there is no tribunal higher than a church is evident from Matthew xviii. 15-17. The Saviour lays down a rule for the adjustment of private

differences among brethren. "If thy brother shall trespass against thee go tell him his fault," etc. If the offender, when told of his fault, does not give satisfaction, the offended party is to take with him, "one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." But if the offender "shall neglect to hear them," what is to be done? "Tell it to the church." What church? Evidently the particular congregation to which the parties belong. If the offender does not hear the church, what then? "Let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican." But can there be no appeal to an Association, or Presbytery, or Conference? No. There is no appeal. Shall an Association, or Presbytery, or Conference, put the offender back in church fellowship, when the church, by its action, classed him with heathens and publicans? This is too preposterous. What kind of fellowship would it be? Will it be asked, what is to be done if the action of a church does not give satisfaction to all concerned? What is to be done when the action of a Presbyterian General Assembly, or Methodist General Conference, or an Episcopal General Convention does not give satisfaction? There must be a stopping place. There must be final action. Baptists say, with the New Testament before them, that the action of each local congregation of believers is final. Pedobaptists, with the exception of Independents and Congregationalists, deny the *finality* of church action. Who are right? Let those who oppose the Baptist form of church government show in the New Testament, the remotest allusion to an appeal from the decision of the church to any other tribunal. It cannot be done.

The view here presented of the independence of the apostolic churches is so obviously in accordance with the facts of the case that distinguished Pedobaptists have been forced to concede it. Hence Mosheim, a Lutheran, an a bitter enemy of Baptists, speaking of the first century, says, "The churches in those early times, were entirely independent, none of them being subject to any foreign jurisdiction, but each governed by its own rulers and its own laws; for, though the



churches founded by the apostles had this particular deference shown to them, that they were consulted in difficult and doubtful cases, yet they had no juridical authority, no sort of supremacy over the others, nor the least right to enact laws for them.” (Maclaine’s Mosheim’s Church History, Baltimore Edition, Vol. I., p. 39.)

Archbishop Whately, a dignitary of the Church of England, referring to the apostolic churches, says: “They were each a distinct, independent community *on earth*, united by the common principles on which they were founded, and by their mutual agreement affection, and respect; but not having any one recognized Head on earth, or acknowledging any sovereignty of one of these societies over others.” Again: “A CHURCH and a DIOCESE seem to have been for a considerable time *coextensive* and *identical*. And each church or diocese though connected with the rest by ties of faith, and hope, and charity, seems to have been perfectly independent as far as regards any power of control.” (Kingdom of Christ, Carter’s Edition, pp. 36, 44.)

This is strong testimony from a Lutheran and an Episcopalian. They would have given a different representation of the matter, if they could have done so consistently with truth. They virtually condemned their own denominational organizations in writing thus.

Before closing this chapter, it may be proper to say that while a church in the exercise of its independence may receive members excluded from another church, it can not be done, *in ordinary circumstances*, without a violation of church courtesy, and a departure from the spirit of the gospel. It is assumed that, as a general thing, members are *deservedly* excluded from church fellowship. When this is the case, it is manifestly improper for them to be received by sister churches. It would have been a flagrant violation of propriety for any other church to have received to its membership the incestuous man expelled by the church at Corinth. Those justly excluded, if they would enjoy church privileges once again, must penitently confess the offenses

for which they were excluded, and obtain restoration to membership in the church from whose fellowship they were cut off. This is the general rule. Sometimes, however, a member is unjustly excluded. Prejudice or party feeling may control the action of the church. In the exercise of discipline the law of Christ may be departed from. Acknowledgments which ought to be satisfactory may be declared insufficient. The arraigned member is unjustly expelled. The impression, it may be, is made on the community, as well as on sister churches, that the expulsion is unjust. What is to be done? The excluded member is suffering wrongfully, and earnestly desires to enjoy church privileges. The church that has passed the excluding act ought to rescind it. Suppose, however, the church, disregarding the advice of disinterested, judicious brethren, does not rescind its act. Then the expelled member, the injustice of his exclusion being known, may be rightfully received into the fellowship of another church. Such cases rarely occur; but when they do, it is well to know that they may be disposed of in the manner here suggested. There is in church independence ample authority for this course of procedure. **THE ACTS OF A CHURCH ARE VALID AND BINDING WHEN THEY ACCORD WITH THE LAW OF CHRIST: WHEN THEY DO NOT THEY ARE NULL AND VOID.**