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ARTICLE VIII.

DAVIDSON'S ECCLESIASTICAL POLITY.

The Ecclesiastical Polity of the New Testament unfolded, and its points of Coincidence or Disagreement with prevailing Systems indicated. By Samuel Davidson, LL. D. London, 1848, 8vo. pp. 458.

It has been understood for some years, that the author of this work, who is widely known as a theological professor in the Lancashire Independent College near Manchester, and one of the most learned and diligent scholars in Great Britain, has been engaged in the preparation of an elaborate treatise on church polity. Proposing to himself to make an investigation *de novo* of the principles and usages which respect the government of the church, as they are contained in the New Testament, rather than to undertake the defence of any one existing form of ecclesiastical polity, it is not without reason that in view of his known independence the results at which he should arrive have been looked for with no little interest. These results we will now endeavor in a brief compass to state.

The main questions in dispute in respect to church polity, it is well known, resolve themselves into these three:—what is the meaning of *ἐκκλησία*, or church; in whom is its government primarily vested; and what relation do its officers sustain towards each other in respect to rank and prerogative.

The first of these is fundamental, since upon the solution given to the question, what we are to understand by *church* as used in the New Testament, the decision of the others in no small degree depends. Does it mean, then, a single visible commonwealth, spread in separate communities over the earth, but possessing a common organization, and recognizing a common ruler, as the Greek and Romish churches claim? or is it the aggregation of a number of congregations within a province or country, united under a mutually recognized government, like the church of England or Scotland, or the Presbyterian and Episcopal churches in the United States? or does it simply mean a local assembly of Christians associated together for the observance of

Christian worship and ordinances, or as the Cambridge Platform expresses it and as Congregationalists hold, "a company of saints by calling, united into one body by an holy covenant for the public worship of God, and the mutual edification of one another in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus?"

Of these widely different views Dr. Davidson affirms that the last only is supported by the New Testament. Passing by what is said in the Scriptures of the *church universal*, which, as being composed of all in heaven and on earth who are interested in the blessings of redemption, has no special connection with the question at issue, our author maintains that *a church is a congregation*—not of course of free citizens assembled for political purposes, as the word ἐκκλησία is used by Xenophon, Plato, and very frequently by Thucydides—but, as we learn from the characteristics of the persons composing it, *a congregation of Christian believers* habitually assembling for the worship of God *in one place*. Hence the varying phraseology, to correspond with this, which the New Testament employs, viz. the *church* at Corinth, Ephesus, Smyrna, etc. but the *churches* of Judea, Galatia, Achaia. To meet the strong argument derived from this, it is claimed by those who reject the Congregational view, that the church in large cities, as Jerusalem, Corinth, and Ephesus, must have consisted of *several congregations*, each having its own pastor, and united in one body styled the church, and that the enlargement of such bodies so that they shall include all the congregations belonging to a district, province or country, is an arrangement which depends upon the same principle, and is therefore justifiable on scriptural grounds.

In reply, Dr. Davidson shows in an elaborate argument, covering nearly fifty pages (pp. 70—119), that the churches of Jerusalem, Ephesus and Corinth, were Congregational, not Presbyterian or Prelatic churches—that they each met ordinarily for worship in one place, under the same elders and teachers, and that if they occasionally met in separate bands and smaller bodies, it was for the purpose of social prayer, or for the sake of bringing a larger number under the power of the preached word.

The answer to the second main question of ecclesiastical polity, viz. in whom is the government of the church primarily vested, is closely connected with the decision arrived at, in respect to the nature and constitution of the church itself. If the church is a universal monarchy, then it is not unnatural to suppose that its government may be vested in one sovereign pontiff; if it is a provincial or national confederation of congregations, united under a common government, then the supreme power is probably enough vested in the whole body, or

the representatives deputed to act in their stead; but if, as Congregationalists hold the phrase, *the church*, applied to merely earthly associations, has no meaning according to New Testament usage, except when connected with the *name of the town or city*, in which it meets, as the church in Corinth, the church in Laodicea, then it is and must be self-governed, subject to the jurisdiction and control of no other body, secular or ecclesiastical, but in respect to authority and legislation, complete in itself.

In regard to this question, Dr. D. stands fully upon Congregational ground. "Our investigations regarding the primitive churches," he says (p. 134, 135), "have led to the full conviction, that they were voluntary societies; that they were of a spiritual character, existing for purposes of edification, worship and discipline; that they were not in connection with civil governments, or under their control; that in the time of the apostles there were no provincial or national churches; that there was no external visible unity among them, further than a sisterly relation; that they were not subordinate the one to the other; and that they were complete in themselves."

If each church is complete in itself then it necessarily follows that it is competent to do and enact all things necessary to its well being; that is, to choose its own officers and induct them into office; to cause the sacraments to be administered; to admit and exclude members, in accordance with the laws of Christ, and in furtherance of the great end of church fellowship, for which its members are associated; in a word, to use the strong language of Arnold, that it has "a true *church* government as distinguished from a *clergy* government or from none at all." In respect to all or either of these privileges, it is not dependent on any prelate, church or synod, but is itself inherently vested with the power to perform all the functions requisite to its greatest prosperity. While admitting as we must, that churches were not designed to be isolated bodies, but rather to be closely connected in the bonds of mutual recognition and fellowship, still we are to remember that this is a union of affection and not of authority; and that any attempt to exercise jurisdiction over a church of the Lord Jesus Christ, whether by other churches or their ministers, is an act of usurpation.

As descriptive, therefore, of the relations which churches sustain towards each other in respect to ecclesiastical power, it may be said without hesitation that they are entirely independent. In the 17th century, when the idea of the completeness of individual churches was a novelty, and the term independent, was in danger on the one hand, of being regarded as implying treason or disaffection towards the State, or, on the other, a settled non-intercourse between congre-

gations of believers, there was a reason for attempting to throw off the obnoxious appellation, which, at the present day, does not exist. This is only one out of many cases in which a word once disorganizing and destructive, has become in time eminently conservative. Hooker was afraid two hundred years ago that Independency might be understood to imply the denial of the "coäctive power of the magistrate to compel the church to execute the ordinances of Christ." Who has any such fear now?

In regard to the power of a church to elect its own officers, Dr. D. takes the ground that the four passages on which Congregationalists have been accustomed to rely (Acts 1: 15—26. 6: 1—6. 14: 23. 2 Cor. 8: 18, 19) afford a strong presumption in favor of popular suffrage in the early churches, rather than directly demonstrate its existence, at least so far as the election of elders is concerned. He prefers to rest the argument, first upon the *nature* of a church as a voluntary association and the right of choosing its own officers, which inherently and fundamentally resides in every such body; then, upon the *absence of any express precept* in the New Testament in respect to the mode in which church officers are to be appointed, since, if churches are voluntary associations of believers, such directions would evidently be superfluous; and finally, upon the *general drift* of the notices in the New Testament, which abundantly shows that the popular voice was recognized and treated with respect and deference not only in ordinary cases, but even in the appointment of an apostle, and by men who were invested with infallible authority in ecclesiastical arrangements. The word *χειροτονήσαντες* (Acts 14: 23), rendered by Hammond and the English version *consecrated* or *ordained*, and to which Beza and the Cambridge Platform give its primary signification, *elected by the suffrages of the people*, Dr. D. thinks should be simply rendered *appointed*, on the ground that in the age of the apostles, the word was used in its secondary sense, in which the idea of suffrage is wholly dropped, and which it is known to have had. Granting, however, that Paul and Barnabas actually chose elders for the churches, there is no evidence, he justly remarks, that they did this without the concurrence or even the previous designation of the brethren; much less can it be shown that the prerogatives exercised by men divinely inspired, may be rightfully claimed by modern prelates or ecclesiastical dignitaries.

In answer to the objection, once plausible, always superficial, and now fast becoming obsolete, that it is absurd to place the choice of their teachers in the hands of the ignorant and unlettered, the fine observation of Milton is cited, that "many may be able to judge who

is fit to be made a minister that would not be found fit to be made ministers themselves; as it will not be denied that he may be the competent judge of a neat picture or elegant poem that cannot limn the like."

With these views, it will not excite surprise that our author takes as strong ground in respect to ordination as the most rigid Congregationalist could desire. Rejecting at once all those notions which conceive of it as some mysterious gift or prerogative—which in fact degrade it to a cabalistic process and are neither more nor less than the disguised remnants of popery, he regards it as the public and formal ratification of the act of election—the simple inauguration with appropriate ceremonies of the pastor chosen. "The essence of it," he claims, "lies not in the imposition of hands, nor in the communication of any mysterious something, but in *the solemn invocation of the Divine presence and assistance.*" This is substantially, if not precisely, the view laid down in the Cambridge Platform: "His *ordination* we account but the solemn putting a man into his place and office in the church, whereunto he had a right before by election; being like the installing of a magistrate in the commonwealth." Nor were the framers of that document by any means singular in this view. "As for ordination," says Milton, "what is it but the laying on of hands, an outward sign, a symbol of admission?" Accordingly Dr. D. agrees with the Cambridge Platform in affirming that it belongs to each church to ordain its ministers, first by the agency of the presbytery or elders of the church itself, if such it has residing with it, and next, in the absence of these, "by some of the brethren orderly chosen by the church thereunto." The abstract validity of an ordination, in the latter mode, we see not how any Congregationalist can deny. It follows by necessity from its fundamental principle. If the people may *elect* officers which is the greater and wherein the substance of the office doth consist" (says the Cambridge Platform), "they may much more, occasion and need so requiring, *impose hands in ordination*, which is less and but the accomplishment of the other."

A Congregational church, therefore, in varying from either of the modes of inauguration above specified, and extending an invitation to neighboring churches to assist in the ordination of its pastor, is to be understood as in no manner confessing that it does not possess the power to induct him into office, but only as embracing a convenient opportunity of recognizing the unity of faith and the friendly relations which subsist between them, or in other words as performing an act of ecclesiastical courtesy and fellowship. Notwithstanding the doubts which our author expresses, the practical effect of councils for ordina-

tion has been good; and after an experience of more than a century and a half, they have become too deeply rooted in the confidence and affections of the churches of New England ever to be displaced, unless such claims of jurisdiction should be set up by ecclesiastical councils as to render their discontinuance a matter of stern necessity.

For authoritative courts of review, Dr. D. finds no sanction in the New Testament. The assembly recorded in Acts xv., he thinks, is not in point because its decision emanated from inspired men. Consultative assemblies, therefore, should be admitted on the ground of expediency, not on the basis of Scripture. Councils, he argues, should not be standing bodies, the tendency of which is to prepare the way for abridging the liberties of the churches, but wholly *occasional*, and always with the distinct understanding that they are only *advisory* and *persuasive*.

The third main question at issue in regard to church polity, respects the relation which ministers sustain towards each other. Are there different grades of office among them, such as exist in monarchical governments, or are all Christ's ministers in respect to power and prerogative equal? In answer to this, Dr. Davidson, after justly remarking that office-bearers are not essential to the *being*, but to the *well-being* of a church, takes the ground that the terms elder and bishop designate one and the same office, the former being the Jewish name, which was probably transferred from the זְקֵנִים of the synagogue, and only at a later period gave way to the latter term (ἐπίσκοπος) with which the Gentile churches were previously familiar, as denoting an office in the Athenian State. In confirmation of this theory in respect to the substitution of one term for the other, he cites the fact that Peter and James who labored among the Jewish churches, invariably employ the term *elders*, not *bishops*. He denies that any traces of diocesan bishops are to be found in the N. T., and maintains that the only ordinary officers are bishops or elders and deacons. The primitive churches, he thinks, had each a plurality of ordained elders, and labors to show that such an arrangement would be useful at the present day.

From this rapid sketch, it will be seen that the results at which Dr. Davidson has arrived, are substantially identical with the Congregational system of church government. They more nearly accord, however, with that type of Congregationalism embodied in the Cambridge Platform, than with the form of church polity at present prevalent either in New England or in the mother country.

While his conclusions on some points, rather of detail than of principle, appear to us to rest on insufficient grounds, and in some in-

stances to be tinged with the influence of the strict Independency prevailing in Great Britain, we think no reader can fail to admire the spirit of candor and independent research which pervades the work.

The limited space to which notices of new works are necessarily confined in this Journal, allows us only to commend this new treatise, on what is destined to prove one of the greatest questions of our times, to the American public, with the assurance that though they may not agree with the learned and estimable author in all respects, they will find substantial results which we doubt not will be generally recognized as an addition to our literature in this particular department.

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ARTICLE IX.

THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF LUTHER IN THE CLOISTER OF ERFURT.

By B. Sears, D. D., President of Newton Theol. Institution.

The origin of the Reformation, as a religious movement and as connected with the efforts of Luther, is to be traced to what he himself experienced in the convent at Erfurt. There he first made thorough trial of that outward and legal system of religion which had nearly banished the gospel of Christ from the church. There he groped his way through the mazes of papal error, and found the path that led to Christ as the simple object of his faith and love. He went through all the process of overcoming the elements of a ceremonial and of appropriating those of an evangelical religion by the force of his individual character, and by the power of the word and the Spirit of God. He found himself standing almost solitary on the ground of justification by faith alone, and private judgment in interpreting the Scriptures. From the time of his going to Wittenberg to the year 1517, he was chiefly employed in working out these two ideas, reconciling his experience with well established truths, and trying upon the minds of others, namely, of his pupils and some of the younger professors, the same experiment which he had unconsciously made upon himself. When he came to feel the full strength of his foundation, and, with the Bible and the sober use of reason as his weapons, prostrated the scholastic theology, and professor and student confessed their power,