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T H E

NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH.

BY

H. HARVEY, D. D.

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THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH.

THE apostles, in organizing the local church, plainly acted under divine inspiration; for Christ, when speaking of it, expressly promised them: "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. xviii. 18). Whenever they gathered disciples, they formed a church; and the churches thus established, though differing, possibly, in some local customs, received in all essential principles the same constitution. And when these inspired men died, they left the church, thus organized, as the sole visible organization of the Christian religion.

Now it is evident that, since the apostolic age, no inspired authority has existed competent to abrogate or alter the constitution thus given to the church; and it follows that the church, as then organized under divine inspiration, stands, in all its essential features, as the authoritative model for subsequent ages. No body of Christians, therefore, is properly a Scriptural church, unless it is conformed in character, doctrine, ordinances, and organization to that divine model; and any such body, if thus conformed

to the apostolic church, is, by virtue of such conformity, a true church of Christ, invested with all the powers conferred on the church by him. The Bible is in this, as in all matters of faith and practice, the only and the all-sufficient rule. The plain Christian man, in seeking for the true church, need only open God's own word, and study the model there delineated by God's own hand; and, following the infallible guidance of this, he shall know, with assured confidence, what is "the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."

What, then, was the church which Christ and his apostles established, and which they left as the one church organization for all the ages? Omitting whatever was purely local and transient in form and worship, what were those fundamental, constitutive features which, expressing essential truths, were found in every apostolic church, and which are, therefore, universal and perpetual? To this question the following pages seek to give the simple, Scriptural answer.

I. A REGENERATE MEMBERSHIP.

In a New Testament Church only such as give credible evidence of regeneration, or experimental religion, and have been baptized on a personal profession of faith in Christ, are admitted to membership. In Jer. xxxi. 31-34; Heb. viii. 6-13, the Christian covenant is contrasted with the Mosaic, as to the character of

its members, in four particulars: 1. Instead of an external system of law, God will put his law in their inward parts, and write it on their hearts—that is, he will give them the spirit of true, spiritual obedience. 2. Instead of an outward relation to them as a nation, God will enter into a living union with them as individuals; he will be their God, and they shall be his people. 3. Instead of being a mixed people, composed alike of saints and sinners, as Israel was, “they shall *all* know the Lord, from the least to the greatest.” 4. Instead of the temporary removal of sin by sacrifices that need constant repetition, God “will forgive their iniquity, and will remember their sins no more.” Plainly, the visible community of God’s people, in the church of the New Covenant, is here predicted as a body composed of regenerate souls, obedient, believing, and forgiven, and in this respect, placed in contrast with the visible community of God’s people in Israel under the Old Covenant, where the regenerate and unregenerate were intermingled without visible and ritual distinction. In like manner, John the Baptist, when he announced the advent of Christ, declared that, whereas before, under the Old Dispensation, the fruitful trees and the fruitless had stood together in God’s orchard, now, under the New, the axe is laid at the roots of the fruitless, and the fruitful alone will remain there; and whereas before, the wheat and the chaff lay

mingled on God's threshing-floor, now, the winnowing shovel is in Christ's hand, and the wheat alone will find place in God's garner (Luke iii. 7-9). When Jesus came, he said: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." He thus made a new spiritual birth the fundamental condition of admission to the church. The unit of the church is a regenerate soul, in living union with Christ by faith; and the church itself is an assemblage of such souls, attracted to each other by the spiritual affinities of the new life, and held by the common bond which binds them to their Lord. Hence, in Biblical imagery, the church is a vine, in which every true branch is in vital union with Christ, the vine-stock. It is a body, of which Christ is the head; and believers, as vitally connected with him, are its members. It is a building, in which Christ is "the chief corner-stone"; and Christians, as "living stones, are built up a spiritual house," "a holy temple in the Lord," "a habitation of God through the Spirit." Such is the constant language of the New Testament. The original church, assembled at the Pentecost, consisted of "disciples," and only those who "gladly received the word," "such as should be saved," were "added unto them." Churches are always addressed in Scripture as composed of converted persons, men "sanctified in Christ Jesus," "called to be saints." The church in its spiritual character is often con-

trusted with the world. Paul, addressing the whole Roman Church, speaks of them as "once the servants of sin," but "now the servants of righteousness"; and of the Ephesian Church as formerly "dead in trespasses and sins," but now "quickened," made alive from the death in sin, by the Holy Ghost. The spiritual duties and exercises, also, required in church members, such as faith, love; joy, hope, presuppose that they are converted persons; as, indeed, do the relations they sustain as "the salt of the earth," "the light of the world," "the children of God," "heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ."

It is plain, then, that a church is properly composed only of regenerate persons; for otherwise, the language of Scripture as applied to church members would be wholly inexplicable and unjustifiable. Besides, the criteria of regeneration, so clearly and emphatically presented, and the oft-repeated warnings against admitting those who have not experimental religion, also make it evident that spiritual character was a condition of membership. The apostolic churches, like churches now, were fallible, and sometimes erred in judging character. In spite of all precautions, unworthy persons, then as now, found admission. But the ideal set forth in Scripture is a regenerate church; and, though all judgment of spiritual character by fallible men must needs be imperfect, it is the plain duty of a church to use, care-

fully and reverently, the criteria that God hath given; and seek to realize, as far as man may, the divine ideal of a spiritual church.

The church, as thus composed of new-born souls, admits to membership only those who have received baptism, the symbol of the new birth. This is evident from the apostolic commission, which requires the ministry first to disciple, and then to baptize those disciplined (Matt. xxviii. 14); from the uniform example of the New Testament, in which believers everywhere, as at the Pentecost, are baptized before being "added to the church"; and from those passages which necessarily imply the baptism of all church members. Thus Paul bases one of the main arguments of the Epistle to the Roman Church on their voluntary symbolic burial and resurrection with Christ in baptism (Rom. vi. 3-5); in which the language plainly implies that all the members of that church, and of churches generally, were thus baptized. This is also implied as to all church members in Col. ii. 11, 12; 1 Peter iii. 21.

This confession of Christ in baptism, followed by union with the church, is everywhere in the New Testament the free, intelligent act of a redeemed soul, gratefully avowing his personal experience of the new birth and his fealty to the Lord Jesus Christ. The voluntariness of baptism, as the conscious, free, personal, act of the recipient, is an evident and promi-

nent feature in every recorded example. Involuntary baptism and church membership has neither precept nor example in Scripture. For this reason, the ordinance cannot properly be administered to infants, because in their case, it is not, and it cannot be, the conscious, personal act of a free, intelligent moral agent, but it is necessarily the act of others performed on a being not yet capable of intelligent, true worship; and the symbol in such cases can only be a meaningless form, representing no corresponding reality in the inward experience.

II. A CONGREGATIONAL ORGANIZATION.

All the members of a church, as alike related to Christ, have equal rights; the essential powers of the body, therefore, are exercised, not by a select few, but by the whole congregation. The church is not composed of different castes, a higher and a lower, a clerical order set over against the common people. It has officers, indeed; but these do not form a ruling caste. Jesus said: "One is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren." The essential powers of a church are vested, not in a special class, but in the whole church as a congregation. These include:

1. The power of receiving, disciplining, and excluding its members. Christ directed, as the final step in the treatment of a grievance: "Tell it to the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto

thee as a heathen man and a publican"; where the word church plainly denotes, not a body of officers, but the entire congregation of believers (Matt. xviii. 17). In the case of the incestuous man at Corinth, Paul referred both the exclusion and the restoration to the whole church (1 Cor. v. 1-5; 2 Cor. ii. 4, 5). Directions for the maintenance of doctrine and discipline are ordinarily given to churches; but it is plain that, if these churches had been Episcopalian or Presbyterian in organization, such directions would have been sent to the bench of bishops, or the presbytery, or the session. The right of discipline, exclusion, and restoration thus clearly belonged, not to a body of officers, but to the whole assembly of the church; but it is evident that this involved also the right of admission.

2. The power of electing its own officers. In the election of Matthias as an apostle, the whole body of disciples, and not the Eleven only, acted; for Luke, when saying, "they gave forth their lots," or possibly, votes, is clearly speaking of the one hundred and twenty disciples then assembled (Acts i. 15-26). The apostles, in directing the election of the Seven, said to "the multitude of the disciples": "Look ye out among you seven men . . . whom we may appoint over this business." "The whole multitude" then made an election of the Seven, and the apostles "prayed and laid hands on them" (Acts vi. 1-6.)

The principle of an election of church officers by the whole body was thus distinctly fixed by these two earliest and most marked examples; and all the subsequent allusions to the subject are in harmony with it. All the highest authorities in New Testament exegesis, as Meyer, Lange, and Alford, concur in holding that the briefer statements respecting the appointment of officers must be interpreted by these more full ones, and in all cases presuppose an election by the whole church. The idea of a clerical order, as a self-perpetuating body of ministers, outside of the congregation, and independent of it, is wholly foreign to the New Testament. Indeed, this right of the congregation to elect its own officers continued to be recognized long after the apostolic age, even among the later Fathers.

3. The power of determining all other subjects relating to the affairs of the church. When a dissension arose in the church at Antioch, "they," that is, the church, "determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem," to seek counsel in the matter (Acts xv. 14-31). The brethren thus sent were received at Jerusalem "by the *church*, and the apostles, and the elders." After the discussion of the question, "it pleased the apostles and elders, *with the whole church*, to send chosen men with their decision"; and this delegation, on reaching Antioch "gathered," not the bishops, nor the presby-

tery, but "the whole multitude together," and "delivered the epistle." Such is the common representation in Scripture ; the church, in the whole assembly of its members, is everywhere the source of power.

Now, as the powers thus committed to the congregation constitute the vital functions of a church, it follows that church power resides, not in a hierarchy, nor in an ecclesiastical judicatory, but in the whole assembly of the membership. The organization, therefore, is neither episcopal nor presbyterial, but congregational.

III. ECCLESIASTICALLY INDEPENDENT.

A church is complete in itself ; its decisions are final, subject to revisal by no ecclesiastical tribunal on earth. Jesus, speaking of the church, said : " Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." A church, thus assembled in his name, has the special promise of his Spirit, and acts by his authority ; and, as it possesses the word of God, the completed revelation from heaven, it has the highest possible means of interpreting the will of Christ. The Scriptures furnish no example of the subordination of a church to organizations outside of itself, nor of a number of churches grouped under the government of a bishop, or presbytery, or conference. On the contrary, they afford positive evidence that such forms of organization did not exist. We

read of "the churches of Judea," "the churches of Galatia," "the churches of Macedonia"; whereas, if the episcopal or presbyterian form of organization had existed, we should have read of the *church* of Judea, the *church* of Galatia. "The seven churches of Asia" would have made a convenient diocese, or presbytery, or conference; yet we read, not of the *church* of Asia, but of "the churches of Asia"; and Christ, in his Epistles to them, deals with each as absolutely independent of the others, and directly accountable to him (Revelation, chaps. 2 and 3).

It has been assumed, from the large number of Christian converts at Jerusalem, that several separate congregations must have existed there, which, however, were grouped under one government, and called "the church at Jerusalem." But this is a pure assumption. It is refuted by the plain fact that no less than six occasions are recorded on which the entire body of disciples met in one place, and in some of these cases, the form of statement indicates this as an ordinary occurrence (Acts ii. 44, 46; iv. 31, 32; v. 12, 13; vi. 2-5; xv. 22; xxi. 22). Plainly, as Jerusalem was the great centre of Jewish worship, multitudes from all parts of the world were converted there, who were soon dispersed to their own homes. This was true also of Ephesus, the centre of Diana worship in Asia Minor, of Corinth, the commercial metropolis of Greece, and of other large cities. It has

also been assumed that the body assembled at Jerusalem to consider the question of Gentile circumcision (Acts xv.), was a church judicatory, similar to a general council, or synod, or conference. But the Biblical narrative shows that this body was composed, not of delegates from many churches, but only of the church, the apostles, and the elders at Jerusalem ; that in deciding the question they alone acted ; and that the authority of their decision was due, not to any right this church had to dictate to other churches, but to the presence of inspired apostles, so that the decision could go forth : “ It seemed good to *the Holy Ghost* and to us.” No evidence exists that the decision would have had binding authority over other churches, except as these inspired men announced it as the divine will. It has been objected, also, that doctrine and discipline are not safe with the people, since they are liable to be swayed by ignorance, prejudice, and passion ; whereas a judicatory of educated ecclesiastics would act with intelligence and impartiality. But history shows that truth and justice have nowhere proved so safe as in the keeping of the masses. The popular judgment and conscience of a congregation doubtless may be subject to occasional aberration ; but, *in the long run*, the verdict the people pronounce is faithful to the truth and the right. The errors and wrongs that have oppressed Christendom through the ages did not spring from the people, but from hierarchies and synods.

The Sanhedrin condemned the Lord Jesus ; but the "common people heard him gladly." History in all succeeding ages has shown the same result.

A church, therefore, is independent as respects ecclesiastical control from without ; in things spiritual it owes subjection only to Christ. This independence, however, is not isolation. Each church forms one in a grand fellowship of churches, bound together, not by the arbitrary bond of a great outward organization, but by the mightier spiritual bond of unity in doctrine, spirit, life, and unity in the common, personal love and fealty they bear to Christ, their one Lord. This higher unity of the Spirit held the apostolic churches throughout the world in mutual sympathy and co-operation, while yet in no instance was there interference with the self-government of any church. The fellowship of the churches, so apparent in the New Testament, reveals itself now in a fraternal regard for each other's welfare—each church sacredly respecting the ecclesiastical character and acts of other churches ; recognizing the validity of their ministry, ordinances, and discipline ; giving and receiving letters of commendation and dismission to and from them ; seeking in all practicable ways to promote their peace and prosperity ; and co-operating with them in the common work of extending the knowledge of the gospel. The associations, conventions, missionary and educational organizations, in

which churches unite, are only modes in which their mutual sympathy and co-operation find practical expression; but to none of these bodies is any vital function of a church delegated. These are reserved for the church alone—acting under the will of Christ as expressed in Scripture, and accountable only to him.

IV. ITS OFFICERS—PASTORS AND DEACONS.

The officers of a church are pastors and deacons; the first class presiding over its spiritual welfare, the second over its temporal. There were extraordinary officers; some of whom were temporary, belonging only to the apostolic age, as apostles and prophets; and others permanent, belonging to all ages, as evangelists, preachers, and teachers; but the ordinary officers, such as are essential to the full organization of a church, were plainly only the pastors and deacons. For these alone are mentioned as ordinary (Phil. i. 1); the qualifications and duties of these only are stated in connection with church offices (1 Tim. iii. 1–13); and only these are found in the age immediately succeeding the apostolic.

Pastors, the first class, are also called elders and bishops; these terms in the New Testament designating the same officers. The idea of bishops, as an order superior to elders or pastors, has no basis in Scripture; for these terms are plainly used interchangeably—the word bishop, or overseer, being

simply a Greek designation of the officers whom the Jews called elder or pastor (Acts xx. 19, 28; Eph. iv. 11; Titus i. 5-7). The qualifications and duties of the officers designated by them are identical (1 Tim. iii. 2-7; Titus i. 6-10; 1 Peter v. 1, 2). Indeed, the original equality of elders and bishops is attested by nearly all the Fathers, and is now conceded by nearly all New Testament scholars. The conception of the ministry as a priesthood, existing in three orders, bishops, priests, and deacons, is wholly post-apostolic. For not only does the New Testament give no example, or even hint, of such a hierarchy, but it expressly restricts the office of atoning-priest to Christ himself. All believers, by virtue of their immediate access to God through the blood of Jesus, do, indeed, form "a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"; but their priesthood involves neither mediation nor expiation. Christ is the one mediating, expiatory, and absolving priest of the New Covenant. On earth he offered, "once for all," the eternally valid sacrifice for sin, when he offered himself; and now, in heaven, "appearing in the presence of God," "he ever liveth to make intercession for us." Superseding the ancient priesthood, he remains the one **ETERNAL PRIEST**; and the assumption of mediating and atoning functions by man is, therefore, an invasion of the prerogatives of Jesus Christ. (Heb. ix. and x.)

The simple duties of pastors, then, are: 1. The public preaching of the gospel; for which it is required that they be "apt to teach," and "able by sound doctrine to exhort and convince the gainsayers." 2. The administration of the ordinances; as our Lord, when instituting the Supper, gives the ministers special charge respecting its maintenance, and in the Great Commission enjoins them to baptize those who have believed. The Scriptures give no clear example of the administration of ordinances by any person not a minister of the gospel; and the natural inference is that this, in the divine order, is a proper function of the ordained ministry. 3. The government and spiritual oversight of the church; as Scripture, in speaking of pastors, exhorts the church: "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account." They "feed the flock of God"; and, as divinely appointed guides and overseers, they are invested with authority, not as "lords over God's heritage, but as ensamples to the flock," and as executive officers, through whom the power of the church is exercised.

Deacons, the second class of officers, probably first appear in "the Seven," who were appointed "to serve tables," or supervise the temporal affairs of the church. They were thus distinguished from the pastors, whose work was "prayer and the ministry of

the word." Their character and duties are distinctly described (Acts vi. 1-6; 1 Tim. iii. 8-13). They should be men of "honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and of wisdom," "grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre, holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience," and should "be first proved." It is evident, also, that they were chosen by "the whole multitude of the disciples," and set apart to their office by prayer and the laying on of the hands of the ministry.

Ordination, or the public investiture of church officers with official authority, is clearly Scriptural, and belongs to both classes. It is not, however, the ultimate source of their authority: this is found in the call of the Holy Spirit, and the election by the church. Only three examples of the simple and beautiful ceremony occur in Scripture—that of "the Seven," that of Barnabas and Saul, and that of Timothy (Acts vi. 6; xiii. 1-3; 1 Tim. iv. 14). In all these, ordination was conferred only by the ministry, and the form observed was prayer and the laying on of hands. No new power was imparted by the act; since it was conferred in obedience to a previous choice of the Holy Spirit, and in view of the gifts for the office they had previously exhibited.

The organization of the church, as respects its officers, is thus one of divine simplicity and effectiveness. The natural and obvious division of its

work, committing the spiritual supervision to the bishops, or pastors, and the temporal to the deacons, secures the highest efficiency, while it gives no stimulus to the clerical pride and ambition so manifest under hierarchical systems.

Christian reader : Such is the church of the New Testament, as established by Christ and his apostles, and intended to remain through all the ages the one church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. It was not a great hierarchy, with prelates, in the pride and pomp of power, exercising lordship over it ; nor was it an assemblage of congregations, forming by presbyteries, synods, assemblies, one vast church, under one supreme judicatory. These are the work of man. The church of Christ was a simple congregation of believers, united first to him by a living faith, and then to one another by mutual covenant, and organized under Christ its Head, to make known his gospel and win men to him. Marvelous in its simplicity, it is the fitting outward embodiment of Christianity, and has a universality which adapts it to all times and all lands. Its demand of spiritual character in the applicant for admission preserves its essential purity of doctrine and life ; while its elevation of all members to equal privileges and responsibilities develops, to the highest degree, the intelligence, gifts, and spiritual forces of the individual soul

and of the whole body. It is the church Christ organized for all time as a training school for heaven, as an evangelizing force to win souls to him, as a missionary body to bear his gospel to the ends of the earth; and the wonderful symmetry and perfection of its structure marks its builder and maker as God.

Disciple of Christ: Do you belong to this church? Remember: it is not optional with you, whether to unite with the church, or to remain outside of it. The church was instituted by Christ, your Lord; and he requires you, as redeemed by him, to be a living member in that body of which he is the Living Head. It is not optional with you whether to unite with the church he has established, or with some other which has been devised by man. Uniting with the church is not a question of personal convenience, or taste, or preference; it is a simple question of obedience to Christ. His word reveals a church formed under his authority, and founded on great principles of his kingdom. Surely, it is not for you to turn aside from this divine church; and, moved by personal preferences, enter a church devised by man. Search, then, the inspired word. Seek honestly to know and do the will of Christ, your Lord; and see that your life is identified with that one divine organization which he has established, and of which he has said: "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it."