

1

Statement of the Question

It is very common for professing Christians to draw a distinction between essentials and non-essentials in religion, and to infer that, if any fact or doctrine rightly belongs to the latter class, it must be a matter of very little importance, and may in practice be safely set at nought. The great bulk of men take their opinions on trust; they will not undergo the toil of thinking, searching, and reasoning about anything, and one of the most usual expedients adopted to save them the trouble of inquiry, and to turn aside the force of any disagreeable fact, is to meet it by saying, “The matter is not essential to salvation; therefore we need give ourselves little concern on the subject.”

If the distinction here specified is safe, the inference drawn from it is certainly dangerous. To say that, because a fact of Divine revelation is not essential to salvation, it must of necessity be unimportant, and may or may not be received by us, is to assert a principle, the application of which would make havoc of our Christianity. For, what are the truths essential to salvation? Are they not these: That there is a God; that all men are sinners; that the Son of God died upon the cross to make atonement for the guilty; and that whosoever believes on the Lord Jesus Christ shall

Statement of the Question

be saved? There is good reason for believing that not a few souls are now in happiness, who in life knew little more than these the first principles of the oracles of God the very alphabet of the Christian system; and if so, no other Divine truths can be counted absolutely essential to salvation. But if all the other truths of revelation are unimportant, because they happen to be non-essentials, it follows that the Word of God itself is in the main unimportant; for by far the greatest portion of it is occupied with matters, the knowledge of which, in the case supposed, is not absolutely indispensable to the everlasting happiness of men. Nor does it alter the case, if we regard the number of fundamental truths to be much greater. Let a man once persuade himself that importance attaches only to what he is pleased to call essentials, whatever their number, and he will, no doubt, shorten his creed and cut away the foundation of many controversies; but he will practically set aside all except a very small part of the Scriptures. If such a principle does not mutilate the Bible, it stigmatizes much of it as trivial. Revelation is all gold for preciousness and purity, but the very touch of such a principle would transmute the most of it into dross.

Though every statement in the Scripture cannot be regarded as absolutely essential to salvation, yet everything there is essential to some other wise and important end, else it would not find a place in the good Word of God. Human wisdom may be baffled in attempting to specify the design of every truth that forms a component part of Divine revelation, but eternity will show us that no portion of it is useless. All Scripture is profitable. A fact written therein may not be essential to human salvation, and yet it may be highly conducive to some other great and gracious purpose in the economy of God: it may be necessary for our personal comfort, for our guidance in life, or for our growth in holiness, and most certainly it is essential to the completeness of the system of Divine truth. The law of the Lord is perfect. Strike

The Apostolic Church—Which is It?

out of the Bible the truth that seems the most insignificant of all, and the law of the Lord would not be perfect any more. In architecture, the pinning that fills a crevice in the wall occupies a subordinate position, in comparison with the quoin; but the builder lets us know that the one has an important purpose to serve as well as the other, and does its part to promote the stability and completeness of the house. In shipbuilding, the screws and bolts that gird the ship together are insignificant, as compared with the beams of oak and masts of pine, but they contribute their full share to the safety of the vessel and the security of the passenger. So in the Christian system, every fact, great or small, that God has been pleased to insert in the Bible is, by its very position, invested with importance, answers its end, and, though perhaps justly considered as non-essential to salvation, does not deserve to be accounted as worthless.

Every Divine truth is important, though it may be that all Divine truths are not of equal importance. The simplest statement of the Bible is a matter of more concern to an immortal being than the most sublime sentiment of mere human genius. The one carries with it what the other cannot show: the stamp of the approval of God. The one comes to us from heaven, the other savors of the earth. The one has for us a special interest, as forming a constituent portion of that Word which is a message from God to each individual man; the other is the production of a mind merely human, to which we and all our interests were alike unknown. Any truth merely human should weigh with us light as a feather in comparison with the most insignificant of the truths of God. The faith of a Christian should strive to reach and grasp everything that God has honored with a place in that Word, the design of which is to be a light to our feet as we thread our way through this dark world. Besides, this, unlike every other book, is not doomed to perish. Heaven and earth may pass away, but the words of Christ shall not pass away. The seal of eternity is stamped on

Statement of the Question

every verse of the Bible. This fact is enough of itself to make every line of it important.

With these observations we deem it right to introduce our exposition of ecclesiastical polity. Few would go so far as to assert that correct views on Church government are essential to salvation, and yet it is a subject whose importance it were folly to attempt to depreciate. The Holy Spirit, speaking in the Scriptures, treats of this theme. The Christian world has been divided in opinion about it ever since the Reformation. We cannot attach ourselves to any denomination of Christians without giving our influence either to truth or error on this very point; and the views we adopt upon this subject go far to color our opinions on matters of Christian faith and practice. With such facts before us, though we may not regard the polity of the New Testament Church as essential to human salvation, we do not feel at liberty to undervalue its importance.

The various forms of Church government that we find existing at present in the Christian world may be classed under some one or other of these three heads: Prelacy, Independency, and Presbytery. We do not employ these terms in an offensive sense, but as being the best calculated to denote their respective systems. Prelacy is that form of Church government which is administered by archbishops, bishops, deans, archdeacons, and other ecclesiastical office bearers depending on that hierarchy; and is such as we see exemplified in the Greek Church, the Church of Rome, and the Church of England. Independency is that form of Church government whose distinctive principle is, that each separate congregation is under Christ subject to no external jurisdiction whatever, but has within itself in its office-bearers and members all the materials of government; and is such as is at present in practical operation among Congregationalists and Baptists. Presbytery is that form of Church government which is dispensed

The Apostolic Church—Which is It?

by presbyters or elders, met in Session, Presbytery, Synod, or General Assembly; and is such as is presented in the several Presbyterian Churches of Ireland, Scotland, England, and America. These three forms of ecclesiastical polity are at this moment extensively prevalent in Christendom. Indeed, every other organization, that any considerable body of Christians has adopted, is only a modification or a mixture of some of the systems we have named.

A very brief examination enables us to see that these three systems differ very widely in their characteristic features. Not only so, but Prelacy, in all its main principles, is opposed to Presbytery; and Independency, in its main principles, is opposed to both. It follows that three forms, differing so very much, cannot all be right, and cannot of course have equal claims on the attachment and support of enlightened and conscientious men. It is self-evident, moreover, that the Word of God, the only rule of faith and practice, cannot approve of all; for, as the Word of God never contradicts itself, it cannot sanction contradictory systems. Some one of the three must be more in accordance with the will of God, as expressed in the Scriptures, than either of the others; and to know which of them is so, should be a subject of deep interest to every child of God. A Christian, of all men, is bound to be a lover of the truth; and we are warranted in supposing that, if a Christian could only see to which of these competing systems the Word of Truth bears witness, he would support it with all his might, and would lend no encouragement to the others. If a man, after he sees the difference, can hold what he knows to be merely human in the same estimation with what he knows to be Divine, let him bid farewell to his Christianity, and cease to pretend that he cherishes any attachment to the truth. The religion of the Lord Jesus, except we mistake its spirit far, binds all who receive it to prefer the true to the false, the right to the wrong, the good to the evil; and for us to be tempted by any consideration to hold them in

Statement of the Question

equal reverence and render them equal support, is to fling one of the first requirements of Christianity away from us. The influence of a Christian is often very little in this world, but whatever it is, it is a talent, for which, like his time, his money, or his intellectual power, he is accountable to God, and that influence ought ever to be on the side of the truth, never against the truth.

Which, then, of the three forms of Church government prevalent throughout the world is it the duty of a Christian to select and to support?

This is a question of great importance. It is, besides, forced upon our consideration in every locality where a dissenting chapel lifts its front, and a church steeple tapers into air. And yet it must be admitted, that the majority of Christians contrive to pass through life without ever giving an hour's thought to this most interesting theme. Most people are content to let their ancestors choose a church for them, and every Sabbath walk to Divine worship in the footsteps of their great-grandfathers—they know not why, and care not wherefore. Some shrink from inquiry, lest it should turn out that the Church to which they are bound by ties of family, education, and habit, is destitute of all Scriptural authority, and lest they feel uncomfortable by having their convictions and their interests set at war. But the great reason why the spirit of inquiry is almost dead on this subject is, that the pulpit is silent, or nearly so, on ecclesiastical government. On this topic the trumpet gives not an uncertain sound, but commonly no sound whatever. There are, we are persuaded, few ministers in any denomination who could say to their people that, on this subject, “we have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.” The people never having had their attention specially directed to those passages of Scripture where the principles of Church government are embodied, give no time or thought to the consideration of the subject. The result is, that vast masses of men and women live in

The Apostolic Church—Which is It?

utter ignorance, not only of the Scriptural facts bearing on the case, but even of their own denominational peculiarities; they are Prelatists, Independents, or Presbyterians by birth, not by conviction; they view all forms of Church government as equally true, which is the same thing as to count them equally worthless; they have no definite ideas on the subject; and thus, in absence of public instruction, they are, by the education of circumstances, prepared to fall in with any system or no system, as may best suit their private convenience or promote their worldly ambition. So it is that many who, in the judgment of charity, are Christians, regard the denomination with which birth or accident has connected them, either with a blind attachment or a sinful indifference; and, though rival systems of Church polity have their representatives in every village, they plod the weary way of life in happy unconcern about all such matters, and are never troubled with the question that the very sight of a church spire suggests to other men: Which of these is true?

Most people who withdraw from the communion of one Church to connect themselves with another, and thus exercise their right of choice between the various forms of ecclesiastical government, are induced to give their preference from motives such as should never influence an intelligent Christian. They are guided by feeling rather than by judgment. They do not first ascertain the leading principles of the denomination from its acknowledged standards, and then examine these principles in the light of the Word of God. The bulk of mankind are not intellectual enough to search for principles and weigh them.

At least, they do not take the trouble, but are influenced in their choice, either by the authority of some great man, or the moral worth of some particular persons, or the piety and eloquence of some local minister or perhaps by paltry pique, or petty gain, or love of the rank or fashion of the world, or by some other equally

Statement of the Question

low and vulgar consideration. But to decide the rival claims of Prelacy, Independency, and Presbytery by any such tests as these, is absurd in the extreme. Try them by the authority of great men! There is not one of the three systems that could not present a long catalogue of distinguished men, who were its warm supporters till the last hour of life. Test them by moral worth! There is not one of them that could not present a goodly number of the excellent of the earth, waiting on its ministrations and reposing beneath its shadow. If we ask which of these systems provides able and pious ministers to instruct the people, we find a large number of such persons filling the pulpits of each of them; and if we examine further, we will find that not infrequently there may be in the same town a minister who is an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, who, all the week in the garden of the Lord, is active as the busy bee, and who, when Sabbath comes, dispenses the sweets of the Divine Word to admiring multitudes; while, in connection with the same denomination, there may be on the other side of the street some poor pitiful drone, who is doomed to hum to vacancy all the year round. Any such modes of testing ecclesiastical systems, however common, are unsure and unsafe.

To us it seems there is a much more satisfactory way of deciding upon the claims of those forms of Church government which obtain at present in the world that is, to test their peculiar principles by the standard of the Word of God. That book is quite sufficient to point out the path of duty to the Christian in this as well as in all other matters, for it was intended by its Divine Author to be our guide in matters of practice as well as of faith. The Bible furnishes us with peculiar facilities for forming an opinion on this very point. It tells us of a Church that was organized in the world eighteen hundred years ago. The founders of that Church were apostles and prophets, acting by the authority of God. Every fact known with certainty about the original constitution of the Church is preserved in the Bible, everything

The Apostolic Church—Which is It?

preserved elsewhere is only hearsay and tradition. We read in Scripture very many facts that enable us to know with tolerable accuracy the history, doctrine, worship, and government of that Church which existed in apostolic days. The principles of government set up in a Church which was founded by inspired men, must have had, we are sure, the approbation of God. Corruptions in government, as well as in doctrine, sprang up at a very early period, but the Church in apostolic days was purer than it ever has been in subsequent times. The most obvious method, therefore, of arriving at the truth is to compare our modern systems of ecclesiastical government with the model presented in the Holy Scriptures. That which bears the closest resemblance to the Divine original is most likely itself to be Divine.

The warmest friends of existing ecclesiastical systems cannot fairly object to such a test. There is scarcely a Church on earth that is not loud in its pretensions to apostolicity. The Prelatic Churches claim to be apostolic. The Independent Churches claim to be apostolic. The Presbyterian Churches claim to be apostolic. Each of these denominations professes to maintain the same doctrine, worship, and government that distinguished the Church which was planted by the apostles of the Lord. On one of these points—that of ecclesiastical government—we propose to examine these claims by the very test that they themselves have chosen. Divesting ourselves of all prejudice, we come to the law and to the testimony, desirous to know what God says on the topic in question, and determined to follow where the Scripture points, let that be where it may. Let us search the Bible, to see what it teaches on this great theme. If, on a thorough examination, we fail to discover there any clear and definite principles of Church government, the conclusion of necessity follows, that Prelacy, Independency, and Presbytery are on the same level: none of them is based upon Divine authority and it becomes a matter of mere expediency or convenience which form we support. If we find, on

Statement of the Question

the other hand, that certain great principles of Church government are embodied in the Scriptures, then, when we have ascertained accurately what these principles are, we have reached the mind of God upon the matter, and we have discovered a touch-stone, wherewith we can try the value of existing systems, and determine how much is human and how much Divine in every one of them.

Meaning of the Word Church

The word church in our common discourse is used in a variety of senses. Sometimes it signifies the material building erected for Divine worship; sometimes it means the people usually assembling in such a building; sometimes the aggregate body of the clergy as distinguished from the laity; sometimes the collective body of professing Christians. As general use is the law of language, it does not become us to take exception to the variety of significations that are given to the term by our best writers; nor can we even say that much practical inconvenience arises from them, inasmuch as the accompanying circumstances usually determine the specific sense in which the word is to be understood. But it is never to be forgotten that, when we come to the interpretation of the Word of God, the variety of senses commonly attached to the term is altogether inadmissible, and would, if adopted, darken and corrupt the meaning of Divine revelation. The word Church in Scripture has always one meaning, and one only—an assembly of the people of God: a society of Christians. The Greek word *ἐκκλησία*, in its primary and civil sense, means any assembly called together for any purpose (Acts 19:32); but in its appropriated and religious sense, it means a society of Christians, and is invariably translated by the word Church.

The Apostolic Church—Which is It?

Examine the Scriptures from the commencement to the close, and you find that the word Church never has any other meaning but that which we have stated. Let any man who feels disposed to dispute this statement, produce, if he can, any passage from the Word of God where the sense would be impaired, if the phrase society of Christians, or Christian assembly were substituted for the word Church. This, we are persuaded, would be impossible.

Though the meaning of the word Church is in Scripture always the same, let it be observed that its applications are various. It is applied, at the pleasure of the writer, to any society of Christians, however great, or however small. Examples of this fact will not fail to suggest themselves to all who are familiar with the Word of God. We give a few passages as specimens:

Colossians 4:15: "Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house." There the term is applied to a society of Christians so small as to be able to find accommodation in a private dwelling-house.

Acts 11:22: "The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch." There it means a society of Christians residing in the same city, and including, as we know on excellent authority, several thousand persons.

Acts 7:38: "This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us." Here the word signifies a society of Christians an assembly of God's people so large as to include a whole nation, consisting at the time of at least two million in number. The term is also applied to the people of God in the days of David, when residing in Canaan, spread over a great extent of territory, and amounting to many millions (Hebrews 2:12, compared with Psalm 22:22-25).

Statement of the Question

1 Corinthians 12:28: “And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.” Here the term means the society of Christians residing on earth; for it was among them, not among the saints in glory, that God raised up men endowed with apostolic and prophetic gifts.

Ephesians 5:25: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” The word is here used to signify the society of Christians in the largest sense: all for whom Christ died; the whole family of God; all saints in heaven and all believers on earth, viewed as one great company.

Let it be observed, however, that, amid all this variety of application, the word Church never alters its sense. Its meaning in every occurrence is the same. However applied, it never ceases to signify a society of Christians; but whether the society that the inspired writer has in view is great or small, general or particular, is to be learned, not from the term, but from the circumstances in which the term is used. In every instance it is from the context, never from the word itself, that we are to gather whether the society of Christians, intended by the writer, is to be understood of the collective company of God’s people in heaven and earth, or only of those on the earth, in a nation, in a city, or in a private house. The practice into which the best expositors of Scripture are occasionally betrayed of taking up some idea conveyed by the context only, and regarding that idea as entering into the meaning of some particular word, has been shown by a late eminent critic to be the origin of those numerous significations perplexing by their very multitude appended almost to every word in our classical dictionaries, and the prolific source of errors in the interpretation of the Word of God. This is obviously what has led many to suppose that the word Church has two meanings signifying something different when referring to the universal

The Apostolic Church—Which is It?

body of believers, from what it does when denoting the body of believers connected with a particular locality. The truth is, that the word Church has only one meaning, but it has a variety of applications. The term of itself never conveys any idea but a society of Christians; it is the context that invariably determines its general or particular application: It is manifestly inaccurate, therefore, to maintain that an idea, invariably conveyed by the context, enters into the meaning of the term; when, as all must admit, the term, apart from the context, does not suggest either a limited or universal application.

Had we occasion to speak of the several Christian congregations of a province or nation in their separate capacity, it would be quite in accordance with the Scriptural idiom to designate them the Churches of that region. None can forget how frequently the apostle speaks of the Churches of Syria and Achaia, Galatia and Asia. So, if we required to speak of the individual congregations of Christians in Ireland the separate Christian societies scattered over the country we might denominate them the Churches of Ireland, there being nothing in existing ecclesiastical usages to make such language either unintelligible or liable to be misunderstood. But it deserves to be noticed that, when we use such phrases as the “Established Church of Scotland,” the “Episcopal Church of America,” or the “Presbyterian Church of Ireland,” there is no departure whatever from the Scriptural sense of the word. The meaning of the word in Scripture, as we have seen, invariably is a society of Christians, and this is precisely its meaning in any of the above phrases; the context, at the same time limiting the Christians in question to those professing certain principles, and belonging to a particular country. When we employ, for instance, such a designation as the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, the word Church is used precisely in the Scriptural sense to denote a society of Christians, which we learn

Statement of the Question

from the context professes Presbyterian principles and resides in Ireland.

The propriety of applying the term to signify the Christian people of a country does not arise from the fact that they are ever assembled in one congregation, either personally or by representatives, but from the fact that the mind contemplates them as a collective body. All saints in heaven and believers on earth are styled the Church, not because they are assembled either literally or figuratively, but because, in the view of the mind, they are regarded as a great society, separated from the world, and united by common principles into one great brotherhood. And so the Christians of any denomination, though composing a multitude of congregations, may, in their aggregate capacity, be properly styled a Church, not because they are either figuratively or literally assembled, but because, in the view of the mind, they are regarded as a collective body, distinguished from others, and united among themselves, by the profession of a common creed.

It was once doubted whether the Scriptures contain an example of the word Church being applied to the Christians of a country. The science of Biblical Criticism has now set that question at rest in all time coming. The true reading of Acts 9:31, is, "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied." No man, with the slightest pretensions to scholarship, can now hesitate about receiving this as the original form of the text, when it is known that the lately discovered MS. the Codex Sinaiticus is in its favor, no less than A B C; these four being at once the most ancient and valuable manuscripts of the New Testament now extant. Not to speak of the evidence derivable from versions and Fathers, the united voice of these four MSS. is enough to settle the correct form of any text; their testimony as to the original reading of Acts

9:31 none can question; and to that passage we confidently point as a clear instance of the word Church being applied to the Christians of a country, viewed as one collective society, though in reality divided into many separate congregations.

Some writers, indeed, give a different account of the matter. They tell us that the universal community of Christians in heaven and on earth is called in Scripture the Church, not because they are viewed as one great brotherhood, united by common principles, but because they “are at all times truly and properly assembled in Jesus.” It is a mere fancy to suppose that the mind ever takes such a fact into account, when employing the term in its universal application; but, if so, it does not alter the case. The Christians of a particular district, or of a province, or of a nation, may be properly designated a Church for the same reasons; because they also “are at all times truly and properly assembled in Jesus.” There is no sense in which all the Christians on earth and in heaven are “assembled in Jesus,” that the Christians of any particular country are not thus assembled. If the whole is assembled, so also are the parts. Take the matter either way, the Christians of a district, or a province, or a kingdom, holding certain principles in common, if viewed as a collective community, are a Church, exactly in the sense of the Scriptures. They are a Society of Christians.

Government of the Church

The Christian society on earth, or, as it is usually called, the Church, is represented in the Scriptures as a kingdom. It was of His Church that the Lord Jesus spoke, when He said to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). The fact of its being a kingdom necessarily implies at least three things: first, a king or governor; secondly, subjects; thirdly, laws. In the Church

Statement of the Question

or kingdom of God, the king is Christ; the subjects are believers; the laws are the Scriptures of truth.

Every king has officers under him, who are charged with the execution of his laws, and who have authority from the crown to do justice and judgment. Judges and magistrates are the office-bearers of a kingdom, deriving their power from the monarch under whom they serve, and putting the laws in force among all ranks and classes of the people. Hence a very palpable division of a kingdom is into rulers and ruled: those whose duty is to administer the law, and those who are bound to obey it.

The same distinction holds in the kingdom of Christ. It also consists of rulers and ruled: the office-bearers entrusted with the dispensation of the laws, and the people who are commanded to yield them submission. This is very plain, from Hebrews 13:17: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." It is clear from this passage that there are some in the Church whose duty is to rule; they are the office-bearers of the Church. It is no less clear that there are others in the Church, whose duty is to obey; they are the private members, the subjects of the kingdom, the people.

But in every society where it is the acknowledged duty of some parties to exercise authority, and of others to practice submission, there must be what is called government; for in such authority exercised on the one hand, and in such submission rendered on the other, the essence of all government consists. Even was there no passage in the Scriptures but that last quoted, bearing upon the subject, it is undeniable that government was established in the Apostolic Church. If government existed, some form of government must have been adopted; for to say that there was established in the kingdom of Christ government without a form

The Apostolic Church—Which is It?

of government is absurd. History tells us of many ecclesiastical and political wonders, but of all the strange things that have been witnessed in the world or in the Church, since the beginning of time, there has never yet appeared government without a form of government. The thing is impossible. Government in itself is an abstraction. The moment it puts forth power, it becomes a reality; it stands before the world as a visible thing; it assumes a form.

That there was government in the Apostolic Church, and that this government existed under a certain form, seems clear to demonstration. To determine with precision what this form was, is a matter of great consequence; for it must be evident to all that a plan of Church government, instituted by the apostles of the Lord, acting under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, must carry with it a degree of lawfulness and authority that no human system, though in itself a masterpiece of wisdom made venerable by age, or recommended by expediency ever can exhibit; and that every existing form of Church government is deserving of respect only so far as it conforms in its principles to that Divine original. But there are obvious reasons that make it a matter of some difficulty to ascertain with accuracy the system of ecclesiastical polity that was established in the New Testament Church.

1. The apostles, writing to Christians who were themselves members of the Apostolic Church, and of course well acquainted with its organization, did not judge it necessary to enter into detailed descriptions of the Christian society. To do so would have been unnatural. They do occasionally state facts bearing on Church government, and hint indirectly at prevailing practices. These hints and facts were sufficiently suggestive and intelligible to the persons originally addressed, but by us, who live in a distant age, in a foreign country, and among associations widely different, they are not so easily understood.

Statement of the Question

2. They do not even arrange such facts as bear upon the question in systematic order. If man had had the making of the Bible, it would have been a very different book; but as that circumstance was not left to our option, we must take it as we find it. On examination, we see that it teaches nothing in scientific order. Even morality and doctrine are not there arranged in regular system, but are conveyed in detached portions, and our industry is stimulated by having to gather the scattered fragments, to compare them with each other, and to work them up into order for ourselves. So ecclesiastical polity is not taught in Scripture methodically; but away over the wide field of revelation, facts and hints and circumstances lie scattered, which we are to search for, and examine, and combine, and classify. Now, all do not agree in the arrangement of these facts, nor in the inferences that legitimately flow from them, nor in the mode of constructing a system from the detached material.

These things make it difficult to ascertain with accuracy, and still more so with unanimity, the form of Church government that existed in apostolic days.

But difficult as it seems, it is proved quite possible, by a thorough and unprejudiced examination of the Scriptures, to discover the main principles that entered into the constitution of the primitive Church. We say the main principles more than these we need not expect to find. The Word of God, except in some rare instances, never enters into details: it states principles. This is a very noticeable peculiarity of the Divine legislation that deserves a passing remark.

In every civilized country, it may be observed how those entrusted with the duty of government aim to provide a law for every specific case. The human legislator descends to details. The result of this in our own country is, that the common and statute laws of

England are so bulky that the books in which they are written would make of themselves a magnificent library; Parliament meets every year for the express purpose of constructing new, and amending old laws, to suit the ever varying circumstances of the country and the times; and notwithstanding all, cases occur daily in the public courts, wherein the most accomplished jurists have to acknowledge that the existing laws determine nothing. But observe how the Divine law proceeds on a method quite different. It rarely enters into specific details, but lays down general principles, any one of which is quite sufficient to decide a whole multitude of cases. Instead, for instance, of attempting to prescribe every form of good that it is right for a man to perform to his neighbor, it lays down a principle quite sufficient to meet every case: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Instead of enumerating the different ways by which children are to discharge the duties that they owe their parents, Scripture enacts this general law, holding good in every case: Honor thy father and thy mother. Declining to specify every semblance of sin that it were well for Christians to avoid, the statutes of the Lord direct us to abstain from all appearance of evil. Human legislation enters into minute details, but Divine legislation enacts general principles. The result is that, while there is perhaps more room left for difference of opinion in the interpretation and application of the enactments of a code of law constructed on the latter system, yet this disadvantage is more than counterbalanced by the fact, that the laws of God are in themselves perfect; that they do not change with the ever-varying circumstances of countries and of times; that they meet every case which can possibly occur; and that they are compressed into a reasonable size, being all written in a book so small that it can be lifted in the hand, or carried in the pocket.

Now, the Scripture teaches us Church government, as it teaches morality. It does not furnish minute details, but it supplies the great leading principles that entered into the polity of the

Statement of the Question

Apostolic Church. What these main principles were, it is now our purpose to ascertain.²

It is the common practice of writers, in discussing the important subject of ecclesiastical government, to select some one of our modern Churches which happens to be a favorite, delineate its characteristic features, and then proceed to show that they are a reflection of the pattern presented in the Word of God. That this plan has some recommendations, we can readily believe, but it is no less obvious that it is liable to grave objections. It seems to assume at the commencement the conclusion to which the reasoner can only hope to conduct us after a sound process of logic. It somehow produces the fatal impression that the writer has determined in the first place that his view of the subject is right, and then goes to Scripture to search for proof of it. The author may be the most impartial and truth-loving of men, but his very plan betrays a preference for some particular system, and thus, at the outset, awakes the prejudices of many readers. Besides, it affords opportunities, for viewing passages of Scripture apart from their connection, and tempts writers to quote in their favorite texts, the sound of which only is upon their side. For these reasons we do not choose to adopt this method on the present occasion.

The plan of procedure we propose is more unusual, though, we trust, not less satisfactory. We will examine the Holy Scriptures with a view of ascertaining from them the various facts that bear on the government of the Apostolic Church. We will produce the passages, contemplate them in their immediate connection, unfold their meaning, and try if, by their aid, we can arrive at great principles. We will then turn to our modern Churches, view the different forms of ecclesiastical polity that exist in the world at present, and see which of them it is that embodies all or most of

² This paragraph was suggested by reading Dr. Paley's Sermon on Rom.14:7, p. 521.

The Apostolic Church—Which is It?

these principles. When this is done, we shall have found the denomination that, in point of government, is best entitled to be regarded as the Apostolic Church. This process of reasoning is so very clear and simple that there is no room for practicing deception either on ourselves or our readers. The very humblest intellect may follow our logic to the close. There are but two steps till we arrive at the conclusion. First, we are to ascertain from the unerring Word of God what were the main principles in the government of the Churches founded by the apostles of the Lord; and, secondly, we are to ascertain in which of our modern Churches these main principles are most fully acknowledged and carried out. We will then apply to the settlement of the matter an axiom, radiant in the light of its own self-evidence. That axiom is, the modern Church which embodies in its government most apostolic principles, comes nearest in its government to the Apostolic Church.