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PRIESTCRAFT OPPOSED TO LIBERTY.

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THE EARLY CHURCHES UNFETTERED.

NOT only were the individuals of the early Church free, but each congregation was free from the control of every other congregation. Even the Apostles, although by divine appointment they were competent to direct all of the affairs, did not do so *arbitrarily*, but always respected the rights and liberties of each congregation and of each individual Christian. They did reprove, rebuke and exhort, but it was with longsuffering and patience, and by pointing out the errors of doctrine or practice, just as the humblest of the brethren had a right to do.

The entire arrangement of the early Church was based upon (1) *confidence* in the Lord, and in each other as partakers of his spirit; (2) *love* for the Lord and for all who possessed his spirit; (3) *obedience* to the Lord's will, in whatever manner expressed. They recognized the [R1821 : page 131] Scriptures as the substance of the Lord's revelation, but they did not forget that God declared that he would provide teachers, helps, etc., in the Church for its upbuilding in the truth and in its spirit. They were therefore on the lookout for those whom God might be sending as such helpers; yet they were cautioned not to receive every spirit or doctrine, but to try or prove by the Word of God whether or not the teachings and teachers were from God or false teachers transforming themselves to appear as servants [R1822 : page 131] of the light. Accordingly, even the Apostle Paul gave proofs of his teachings by repeatedly referring to the Old Testament Scriptures.

Knowing the superior ability of the Apostles, and noting to how large a degree the Lord had confidence in them and used them, the early

Churches readily accepted the judgment of the Apostles as to which of their number would be best qualified, naturally and spiritually, to be their "Elders," or to have the chief direction and oversight of the work in their midst. And the Apostle shows that he judged of fitness in the same manner that we now should judge, and not by some super-human intuition. – See Titus 1:6-11.

But it is very evident that the Apostle appointed no "Elders" in any Church contrary to the will of the congregation. It was by the will of the Church that the Apostle chose for them; they having more confidence in his experience, disinterested judgment, etc., than in their own. Love and confidence were the grounds of obedience, and not arbitrary authority. These facts must impress themselves upon all who read the New Testament with their eyes open. The strongest utterance is merely advisory; it reads, "Obey your leaders and be submissive [then the reason for this advice is given], for they keep watch on your behalf, as those who shall render an account." (Heb. 13:17.) Even when the Apostles called or sent any of the younger brethren in the ministry, it was not as of arbitrary authority, but as of *request* which they were likely to follow, because of their confidence in him as a faithful and experienced servant of the Truth. (See 2 Cor. 8:17; 1 Tim. 1:3.) But those calls or requests were not always obeyed; and no offense was taken by the Apostle, if the brethren sometimes felt and acted differently from his suggestions or requests. (See 1 Cor. 16:12.) On the contrary, some of the "Elders" became self-seekers, and spoke evil of the Apostles, yet were not anathematized: the Church was merely cautioned as to how to judge, and another more suitable brother was *suggested*, not appointed (3 John 9-12) – indicating that full liberty was accorded to each congregation. But the caution was sometimes given that the spiritually minded would receive the Lord's counsel through his mouthpieces, the Apostles. – 1 John 4:6; 1 Cor. 14:37,38.

So also in introducing brethren to the Churches, force and authority are ignored, while the liberty of all is respected even by the apostles, who write not commandingly but entreatingly, not arbitrarily,

but giving the reasons why those commended should be held in esteem. (See Phil. 2:29,30; Philemon 12,17; Col. 4:10; 3 John 8.) In all this the apostles did nothing more than what all the "brethren" had full privilege to do. (Acts 18:27.) And those who received the letters were bound to act upon such letters only by their love and confidence; hence probably a letter of commendation from St. Paul couched in the very same words would have had a greater influence than if from some others, simply because of the unbounded confidence of the Churches in his judgment and carefulness of their interests.

As the territory was smaller and the means of travel much less complete, the letters used by the early Church were *special*, rather than *general*, and were sent to the Churches rather than carried by the visiting brethren. They were written, instead of printed, and were for one visit instead of for a year as are the Letters of Introduction now in use amongst us.

The financial methods in the early Church, although not regulated by *law*, were simple and full of individual liberty as now with us. Pew-rents, church-fairs, etc., were unknown as means for helping forward the Lord's cause. The "Elders" in each little congregation did not serve for filthy lucre, but of ready minds. (1 Pet. 5:2,3.) So far as we can judge, they served the weekly meetings without thought of compensation; – probably continuing their usual work or business for a livelihood. The traveling "Elders," such as Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Peter, Timothy, etc., who gave their entire time to the service, sometimes "wrought with their own hands" to provide their necessities, but sometimes were supported in part by the voluntary contributions of those *previously* served with the truth. (See Phil. 4:10-18.) But they all seem to have strenuously avoided asking or receiving anything from those whom they were seeking to win to Christ. (See 3 John 7,8; 1 Cor. 9:12-15; 2 Cor. 11:8,9.) However, the apostles desired, for the sakes of the givers, to see the truth take such hold upon them that they would take pleasure in *giving* for the spread of the Truth: and therefore he accepted for his own necessities and for the necessities of those who

were his collaborators and under his supervision what the Churches he had served were *forward* to offer. And although he sometimes pointed out the duty and privilege of the Lord's people, he never directly requested money, so far as we know, except for the relief of the poor of the Church at Jerusalem; – probably at a time of dearth or famine.

On the whole, dear brethren, we congratulate you that as representatives of the Lord to-day, on all these subjects, we all stand, so far as we can judge, in just about the same position as the early Church. The principles under which we operate are identical with those of the primitive Church, and the methods are modified only by changed circumstances and facilities.

Each individual and each little gathering is free, absolutely free, except as voluntarily controlled by love, confidence and obedience to our Lord, and love to each other. We, too, look for the Lord to SET every member in the [R1822 : page 132] body as it hath pleased him (1 Cor. 12:26-31); and we seek to recognize such by the characteristics laid down by the Apostle. We, too, recognize character and consecration as essential prerequisites to a *believer* (one who trusts in Christ's ransom sacrifice), before he could be "apt to teach" the truth. We, too, introduce by Letters which *none are bound* to recognize. We, too, have a general fund used in publishing the gospel, much more cheaply than we could publish separately, out of which provision those who can use tracts can have them freely whether they can contribute or not; out of which the poor are supplied with the regular visits and preaching of ZION'S WATCH TOWER; out of which the MILLENNIAL DAWN as a preacher of present truth is sent the world over on loan to the poor or at low prices and in various languages to those who can circulate it and thus share in preaching the gospel according to present improved facilities. And we, too, while pleased to see evidences of a love of the truth which extends to the pocket-book and the bank account, feel that we have neither authority nor desire to *beg* in the name of our Master.

Let us stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and permit love, and love alone, to be the constraining power in our hearts and lives; and in all matters of small importance, let us say as St. Paul did about wearing the hair long or short; – "But if any one is disposed to be contentious, we have no such custom [as a law], neither have the Churches of God." – 1 Cor. 11:16.
