

# GEORGE GILLESPIE AND THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY: THE DEFENCE OF PRESBYTERIANISM<sup>1</sup>

W.D.J. MCKAY, AGHADOWEY, COLERAINE,  
NORTHERN IRELAND

## Introduction

George Gillespie is frequently referred to as one of the most prominent of the Scottish Commissioners at the Westminster Assembly, yet in comparison to Samuel Rutherford and Alexander Henderson, Gillespie has received little scholarly attention. In his short life,<sup>2</sup> however, he made a significant contribution to Presbyterian ecclesiology, in addition to his active participation in the Assembly debates (167 speeches, cf. Rutherford, 148 speeches, Henderson, 83 – by November 1644). This study will consider Gillespie's writings against the background of the Assembly.<sup>3</sup>

Gillespie was born in Kirkcaldy, in Fife, probably in 1613, a son of the Revd John Gillespie who was minister in the town. Wodrow gives his date of birth as 21 January, but the Session Register of Births and Baptisms for the relevant period has been lost, so certainty is impossible.

---

<sup>1</sup> This material was first given as a lecture to the Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland on 18 November 1993. A full consideration of Gillespie's views of church government will be found in the author's *Church Government in the Writings of George Gillespie: An Ecclesiastical Republic* (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> For an outline of Gillespie's life see William Hetherington's 'Memoir' in *The Works of George Gillespie*, in *The Presbyterian's Armoury*, 2 volumes (Edinburgh, 1846). All quotations are taken from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Standard works on the Assembly are: W.M. Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Edinburgh, 1856); A.F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly, its History and Standards* (Edinburgh, 1883); and B.B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and its Work* (New York, 1931). Apart from the manuscript Minutes, the basic source for the Assembly debates is A.F. Mitchell and J. Struthers (eds), *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines while engaged in preparing their Directory for Church Government, Confession of Faith and Catechisms (November 1644 to March 1649)* (Edinburgh, 1874).

Nothing is known of his early life, but in 1629 (aged 16), he began studies at the University of St Andrews. After university he could not enter the gospel ministry because of his refusal to be ordained by a bishop, but he did serve as domestic chaplain to Lord Kenmure until 1634, and then in the same capacity in the household of the Earl of Cassilis.

In 1637 Gillespie published his first polemical work in the midst of the ferment leading up to the signing of the National Covenant. Entitled *A Dispute against the English Popish Ceremonies*, it immediately brought his name to public attention. In defiance of the Episcopalian Establishment he was ordained to the parish of Wemyss by the Presbytery of Kirkcaldy on 26 April 1638, before the momentous General Assembly in Glasgow that year, at which he was selected to preach.

In 1640, Gillespie, along with Henderson, Robert Blair and Robert Baillie, accompanied the Scottish Commissioners negotiating peace with Charles I in London. He successfully resisted a call to Aberdeen, but in 1642 the General Assembly accepted an application from the town of Edinburgh to have him translated to the city's New (or High) Kirk. Appointed one of the ministerial commissioners to the Westminster Assembly, from 1643 onwards Gillespie took an active role in the work of the Assembly, especially in the debates on church government.<sup>4</sup> He had set out his basic position in 1641 in *An Assertion of the Government of the Church of Scotland*, and during the Assembly he defended his views in pamphlets written in reply to the Erastian, Thomas Coleman, namely *A Brotherly Examination, Nihil Respondes* and *Male Audis*, all written in 1645.

Gillespie also preached 'Fast Day Sermons' before the House of Commons (27 March 1644) and before the House of Lords (27 August 1645). His most influential work, *Aaron's Rod Blossoming*, was published in 1646. In 1647 he

---

<sup>4</sup> See R.S. Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord* (Edinburgh, 1985) for a comprehensive and original examination of the debates on church government. For a detailed study of Scottish input to the *Form of Presbyterian Church-Government* see Wayne Spear, *Covenanted Uniformity in Religion: the Influence of the Scottish Commissioners upon the Ecclesiology of the Westminster Assembly* (PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1976).

appeared with Baillie before the General Assembly to present the results of the Westminster Divines' years of work (although it was not until 1846 that the surviving two volumes of Gillespie's notes of the Assembly debates were published). His health broken by consumption, Gillespie died on 17 December 1648, and was buried in Kirkcaldy.

### The Sources of Gillespie's Ecclesiology

**1. Scripture.** It is entirely unsurprising to find that Scripture is Gillespie's fundamental authority in formulating his ecclesiology. As the inspired Word of God, Scripture is binding on the church, and this is the case with regard to government as much as in relation to doctrine or life.<sup>5</sup> This is the foundation of his principle of the 'Divine Right' of Presbyterian church government.

Generally, the authority of Scripture is an unspoken assumption in Gillespie's writing, but its power is clear from the copious exegetical support which is provided for each aspect of Presbyterianism. Many texts and passages are examined, sometimes in considerable detail, to establish the point at issue. Thus with regard to graded courts, Acts 15 is examined carefully and alternative interpretations are refuted.<sup>6</sup>

In his one explicit consideration of scriptural authority in *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions* (1649), Chapter 20, Gillespie seeks to prove

That necessary consequences from the written Word of God do sufficiently and strongly prove the consequent or conclusion, if theoretical, to be a certain divine truth which ought to be believed, and, if practical, to be a necessary duty which we are obliged unto, *jure divino*.<sup>7</sup>

The heat of polemical exchanges, however, meant that on occasion all sides tried to extract from biblical passages more

---

<sup>5</sup> This is the burden of Gillespie's case in *A Dispute against the English Popish Ceremonies*. The power of the church in relation to worship and ceremonies (the 'diatactic' power) is especially in view in the Third Part, 'Against the lawfulness of the ceremonies'.

<sup>6</sup> Gillespie, *An Assertion of the Government of the Church of Scotland*, Pt. 2, ch. 8. See also the examination of Matt. 18:15-17 in *Aaron's Rod Blossoming*, Bk 3, ch.2-6, and, for the Assembly debate, *Notes*, pp. 37-42.

<sup>7</sup> Gillespie, *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions*, Ch. 20, p. 100.

than was there. The danger of eisegesis – of finding what one had already decided must be there – was not always avoided, and Gillespie could eisegete as well as any. Thus both Presbyterians and Independents could argue fiercely that Matthew 18:17 (tell it to the church) was proof of their ecclesiology.<sup>8</sup> Given their assumption that the New Testament taught only one system of church government, no concessions could be made to the views of opponents.

**2. Natural Law.** Although the concept of natural law is most readily associated with Roman Catholic theologians, it also has a long history in Reformed circles. Gillespie, Rutherford and others had therefore no qualms about an appeal to natural law in support of their ecclesiology. They believed that God had so formed his creation that certain principles of order, hierarchy and government could be discerned by the human mind.<sup>9</sup>

When Gillespie argues in his *Assertion*, that the institution of synods is by 'Divine Right', his first argument draws on 'the very light and law of nature'.<sup>10</sup> This he couples with his desire to provide arguments from reason as well as Scripture. Although the Word of God is the fundamental authority, the same basic principles of government can be discerned by the light of nature.<sup>11</sup>

---

8 *Assertion*, Pt. 2, ch.1.

9 For Scottish views of natural law in relation to civil government, see Samuel Rutherford, *Lex Rex* (1644) Q2, and George Buchanan's *De Jure Regni Apud Scotos* (1579). Both works are to be found in *The Presbyterian's Armoury* (Edinburgh, 1846), reprinted in 1980 by Sprinkle Publications.

10 *Assertion*, Pt. 2, ch.5, p. 51.

11 Gillespie states that as the church is a company of Christians subject to God's law, 'so it is a company of men and women who are not the outlaws of nature, but the followers of the same' (*Assertion*, Pt. 2, ch. 5, p. 51). In the same vein are Rutherford's words: 'If we once lay the supposition, that God hath immediately by the law of nature appointed there should be a government, and mediately defined by the dictate of natural light in a community, that there shall be one or many rulers... then the Scripture's arguments may well be drawn out of the school of nature....' (*Lex Rex*, Q2, p. 3).

Gillespie does not, however, provide any indication of how to discern the limits of what is revealed in the natural law, an issue on which there is a wide range of views, and it is surprising to find a Calvinist theologian making no reference to the effects of sin on our perception of this law.

**3. Reformed Theologians.** Gillespie generally supports his views of church government and his exegesis of specific texts by appeal to a multitude of scholars – Lutheran and Reformed, especially to Calvin. His knowledge of continental theology is extensive – reminding us that Scotland at that time was no isolated parochial realm.<sup>12</sup> Gillespie, however, calls no one master and is willing to hold a minority viewpoint if convinced that it is biblical (e.g. his belief that the mediatorial reign of Christ will end).<sup>13</sup>

### The Headship of Christ

The central issue in the struggle between the Covenanters and the Stuart monarchs during the Second Reformation in Scotland was the headship of the church. Rutherford, Gillespie and their associates held that the church is under the headship of Christ alone and free from any form of state control, and they defended what has become the usual Presbyterian view that God has instituted two separate, coordinate spheres of authority, church and state, which are not to exercise control over each other.

Gillespie's views on the subject are expressed in three pamphlets written to refute the Erastian Westminster divine Thomas Coleman. On 30 July 1645, Coleman preached a sermon before the House of Commons entitled *Hopes Deferred and Dashed*,<sup>14</sup> in which he defended the basic tenets

---

<sup>12</sup> This is reflected in Gillespie's belief in the value of 'oecumenical synods', drawing together representatives of Reformed churches in a number of nations to deliberate on significant theological and moral issues. See *One Hundred and Eleven Propositions*, pp. 36-8.

<sup>13</sup> See *A Brotherly Examination*, p. 12, and *Aaron's Rod*, Pt. 2, ch. 5, p. 91. In contrast see H. Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, translated by G.T. Thomson (Grand Rapids, 1978), p. 484.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Coleman, *Hopes Deferred and Dashed: a Sermon preached from Job xi. 20 to the Honourable House of Commons in St*

of Erastianism. Among other things, he asserted that *all* government has been given to Christ as Mediator and that magistrates serve as vicegerents of Christ as Mediator, so that they have authority in the church. The exchange of pamphlets ended with Coleman's death at the end of March 1646.

In relation to the headship (or kingship) of Christ, two principles emerge from Gillespie's contributions to the debates, especially from *A Brotherly Examination*:

**1. Christ is the sole Head of the church.** This doctrine, the keystone of Presbyterian ecclesiology, was shared with most of the Westminster divines. In *One Hundred and Eleven Propositions* Gillespie refers to 'the King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus Christ, the only monarch of the church'.<sup>15</sup> This King gathers, preserves, builds, instructs and saves the church and all authority exercised within it derives from him as Head.

**2. Christ exercises a twofold kingship.** As eternal Son, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, he exercises authority over all things. As the incarnate Mediator he exercises authority over the church alone.<sup>16</sup> His kingship over the nations is as Son, and it is under Christ as God that magistrates are to rule. This contrasts sharply with Coleman's position that it is as Mediator that Christ rules the nations, and it may be partly in reaction to Coleman's Erastian conclusions

*Margaret's Church, Westminster, July 30th 1645* (London, 1645). Biographical details of Coleman (1598-1646) will be found in *Memoirs of the Westminster Divines* by James Reid (Paisley, 1811), vol. 1, pp. 236-50. Coleman's other contributions to the debate were *A Brotherly Examination Re-Examined: or a clear Justification of those Passages in a Sermon against which Mr Gillespie did both preach and write* (London, 1645), and *Maledicis, Maledicis: or a Brief Reply to Mr Gillespie's 'Nihil Respondes'* (London, 1646).

<sup>15</sup> *Propositions*, p.100.

<sup>16</sup> See for example *Aaron's Rod*, 2:5. This view is shared by many of Gillespie's European contemporaries. See for example Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium Theologiae Christianae* (1626), ch. 17, in J.W. Beardslee (ed.), *Reformed Dogmatics. Seventeenth-Century Reformed Theology Through the Writings of Wollebius, Voetius and Turretin* (Grand Rapids, 1977).

that Gillespie (like Rutherford and others) rejected this view.<sup>17</sup> Gillespie is also concerned to hold together Christ's three-fold office as Mediator – Prophet, Priest and King, and he thinks of the 'kingdom' in terms of a realm, namely the church.<sup>18</sup>

### The Courts of the Church

From Christ the Head of the church is derived the church's authority. Gillespie is at pains to point out that

the ecclesiastical power dealeth spiritually, and only in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by authority intrusted or received from him alone: neither is exercised without prayer or calling on the name of God; nor, lastly, doth it use any other than spiritual weapons.<sup>19</sup>

In common with his Reformed contemporaries, Gillespie divides ecclesiastical power into three aspects:

- (i) Dogmatic: interpreting the Word and formulating articles of faith;
- (ii) Diatactic: dealing with the external circumstances of worship;
- (iii) Critic: spiritual censures such as deposition and excommunication.<sup>20</sup>

This power is to be exercised through a series of graded 'courts' such as we find in Presbyterianism. In Gillespie's view, the most basic justification of this system is that it is commanded by God – hence the term 'Divine Right Presbyterianism'.<sup>21</sup> This was the position defended by the

---

17 Rutherford describes the view that the magistrate is a vicar or deputy of Christ as Mediator as 'the heart and soul of Popery' in *The Divine Right of Church Government and Excommunication* (London, 1646), ch. 27 (Q23), p. 601.

18 Thus Gillespie speaks in terms of subjects, laws, officers *etc.* See *Male Audis*, ch. 8. The modern dynamic understanding of 'kingdom' as 'reign' is well set out by Herman Ridderbos in *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Nutley, NJ, 1962), pp. 24-7, with appropriate cautions.

19 *Propositions*, p. 62.

20 *Assertion*, Pt. 2, ch. 4. This scheme is taken up by *e.g.* James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (1869; r.p., Edinburgh, 1960), vol. 1, pp. 225-8.

21 In view of the efforts of some to deprive synods of their lawful authority, Gillespie says that orthodox churches must 'know,

Scots (and others) in the Assembly, not only against the Independents but also against those who could be termed 'pragmatic Presbyterians'.

Gillespie is prepared to offer a range of arguments in defence of his polity, however. In *One Hundred and Eleven Propositions*, for example, he argues that higher courts are needed to deal with erring congregations, to rectify unjust treatment of cases and to attend to general matters common to several churches, in order to strengthen each other, so that the church may be 'as a camp of an army well ordered'.<sup>22</sup>

On the basis of both scriptural and pragmatic arguments, Gillespie also seeks to make a case for representative church government. He cites biblical passages which indicate a difference between rulers and ruled in the church – Hebrews 13:17, 1 Thessalonians 5:12 and 1 Timothy 5:17. Ecclesiastical power is not to be exercised by the whole congregation, but by the elders set apart for this task. At the pragmatic level, Gillespie argues that the majority of members in a congregation are not fit to exercise such jurisdiction, especially with regard to the examination of a minister's doctrine and abilities.<sup>23</sup> In imagining the exercise of government by an entire congregation, Gillespie speaks of 'the rudeness of the vulgar sort, who, if they should all speak their judgement, what a monstrous and unavoidable confusion should there be?'<sup>24</sup>

What of Presbyterianism *jure divino*? On 19 January 1644, the First Committee reported two propositions to the Assembly which were passed without discussion, although there may have been some opposition to the second:

The Scripture doth hold out a presbytery in a church.... A presbytery consisteth of ministers of the word, and such other public officers as have been already voted to have a share in the government of the church.<sup>25</sup>

---

defend, and preserve, this excellent liberty granted to them by divine right' (*Propositions*, p. 35).

22 *Propositions*, p. 31.

23 All of these are considered in *Assertion*, Pt. 2, ch. 1.

24 *Assertion*, Pt. 2, ch. 1, p. 40. This 'rudeness', however, does not disqualify church members from deciding which ministerial candidate is best suited to minister to their congregation (see *Miscellany*, ch. 2, p. 13).

25 *Notes*, p. 6.



The Independents could accept these statements because the term 'presbytery' could be applied to minister and elders in a local congregation. The real debate was over 'classical' presbyteries, central to the Scottish model. After the Independents had been allowed three weeks (February 2-22) to put their case, their arguments were voted down.<sup>26</sup>

The key elements in Gillespie's case for Divine Right Presbyterianism are set out in a memorandum which he wrote during this period and included in his *Notes* between 9 and 10 May.<sup>27</sup> He defends the association of churches in presbyteries on these grounds:

- (i) Christ's institution: citing Matthew 18:17, 'tell it to the church';
- (ii) the apostolic pattern of such association of congregations;
- (iii) the general rules of Scripture: *i.e.* two witnesses are better than one;
- (iv) the light of nature which applies to church and state;
- (v) the law of necessity, *e.g.* regarding a tribunal for appeals;
- (vi) that if people were allowed to choose regarding association, many would 'despise the fellowship of their brethren, and not join with others in common counsel'.<sup>28</sup>

In practice, Gillespie places greatest weight on evidence regarding the New Testament church. Presbyteries, he argues, 'have a certain warrant from the pattern of the apostolical churches'.<sup>29</sup> Much attention is given to the church in Jerusalem after Pentecost, although Ephesus and other centres are considered.

Gillespie's case can be summed up in four propositions:<sup>30</sup>

- (i) in many cities where the apostles planted churches there were more Christians than did or could meet for worship in one place;
- (ii) in those cities there was a plurality not only of ruling elders but of ministers of the Word;
- (iii) nevertheless the whole number of Christians in the city was one church;

---

<sup>26</sup> See Paul, *Assembly of the Lord*, pp. 249ff.; Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*, pp. 180ff.

<sup>27</sup> *Notes*, pp. 61-2.

<sup>28</sup> *Notes*, p. 62.

<sup>29</sup> *Assertion*, Pt.2, ch.3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

(iv) the whole number and several companies of Christians in one city were all governed by one common presbytery.

Some of the evidence which Gillespie assembles does serve to support his case, for example the numbers converted at Pentecost in Jerusalem and their having to meet in private houses. At times, however, we simply do not know enough about the shape of the church in centres such as Ephesus, although Gillespie is very reluctant to admit this. As a result Gillespie's account of the New Testament church sometimes bears a remarkable resemblance to the Presbytery of Edinburgh or Glasgow.

In the *Assertion*, Gillespie goes on to argue at length for the divine institution of synods and the subordination of presbyteries to them. Arguments are drawn from the light of nature, Christ's institution, the Jewish church and Acts 15, as well as from geometrical proportion and necessity.<sup>31</sup> As far as Christ's institution is concerned, Gillespie argues that, as Prophet and King, Christ has provided for every necessity in the church, and that this includes the establishment of synods and presbyteries to remedy abuses, hear appeals, examine ministers, *etc.*

The two key passages of Scripture for Gillespie's case are Matthew 18 and Acts 15. In his view the meaning of Matthew 18 is determined by the Jewish ecclesiastical system of Jesus' day, a view shared, for example, by Calvin.<sup>32</sup> Acts 15 was discussed at length in the Assembly (12-13 March 1644),<sup>33</sup> with the Presbyterians using the passage to defend both presbyteries and synods. Gillespie argued that it was a synod, with representatives from Antioch being on an equal footing with those from Jerusalem, which issued a decree that was binding on the churches represented (a narrower view than that of other divines).<sup>34</sup>

In spite of his detailed exegetical work in defence of presbyteries and synods, Gillespie states that in his view

---

31 *Ibid.*, chs. 5-10.

32 John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke* (1555), translated by A.W. Morrison (Edinburgh, 1972), *ad loc.*

33 See Gillespie, *Notes*, pp. 39-42. The printed Minutes do not cover this early period.

34 *Assertion*, 2: 9, p. 59.

the several sorts of these assemblies are not particularly determined in Scripture, but left to be particularly determined by the church, conform to the light of nature, and to the general principles of the word of God.<sup>35</sup>

His thorough defence of the Scottish model of Presbyterianism, however, does suggest that the scope for variation to which he refers would in practice be quite limited.

### **The Office of Minister**

Gillespie distinguishes three types of elders: 1. preaching elders / pastors; 2. teaching elders / doctors; 3. ruling elders.<sup>36</sup> The category of ruling elders will be considered below. The doctor dealt with scriptural interpretation, but unlike the pastor he did not have responsibilities relating to discipline or the sacraments. The pastor (or minister) dealt with all these areas of church life.

In reply to some Erastians, who held that there was no longer a special sacred calling to the ministry, and to the Seekers, who held that there had been no true ministers for many centuries, Gillespie speaks of the ministry as 'a perpetual standing ordinance of Christ in his Church to the end of the world'.<sup>37</sup> This view he supports from biblical passages such as Matthew 28:19-20, which Gillespie applies only to preachers, and Ephesians 4:11-13, with its reference to God's gift of 'pastors and teachers'.

It is Gillespie's contention that there always have been and always will be lawfully ordained ministers in the church of Christ. Reformed theologians in maintaining this position had to face the question of the validity of the ordination (at Roman Catholic hands) of the first Reformed pastors. The approach of Gillespie is to say that, in spite of its evident corruptions, Rome before the Reformation 'was even then a church'.<sup>38</sup> Hence he concludes

that those who were ordained in the church of Rome before the reformation, in so far as they were ordained in the name of Christ, by those who had been themselves ordained presbyters as well as bishops,

---

35 *Ibid.*, ch. 6, p. 52.

36 *Ibid.*, 1: 2.

37 *Miscellany*, ch. 1, p. 1.

38 *Miscellany*, ch. 4, p. 27.

and authorised to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments, this far they were true and lawful ministers, truly and lawfully ordained.<sup>39</sup> Although continuity in ministry was not held to be essential, Gillespie argues that it did in fact exist. In this he reflects a strong commitment by Scots Presbyterians to a kind of 'apostolic succession'.<sup>40</sup>

As we would expect, Gillespie denies that Reformed ministers form any kind of priesthood. Where, in his view, prophetic passages such as Isaiah 66:21 refer to priests in the New Testament era, they designate ministers 'for their offering up of the Gentiles to God by the preaching of the gospel'.<sup>41</sup>

It is also significant that Gillespie equates 'bishop' in the New Testament with 'pastor', so that he argues, for example, that in Acts 20 Paul is meeting with 'the bishops or pastors of the church of Ephesus'.<sup>42</sup> The same argument is to be found in Alexander Henderson's *The Unlawfulness and Danger of Limited Prelacie* (1641).<sup>43</sup>

Two vital issues with regard to the office of minister are considered at length by Gillespie, election and ordination.

---

39 *Ibid.* It is interesting to note that when John Knox was challenged regarding the status of his ministry, he argues on the basis of an extraordinary call of God. In debate with Quintin Kennedy of Crossraguel in 1562 Knox argued that Protestant ministers received their ministerial authority direct from God and that, due to the corruption of the Roman ministry, God had temporarily suspended the usual order of calling ministers. See John Knox, *Works*, edited by David Laing (Edinburgh, 1854), vol. 6, pp. 191-2, and the discussion in Richard L. Greaves, *Theology and Revolution in the Scottish Reformation* (Grand Rapids, 1980), pp. 72-5.

40 This is helpfully discussed by James Walker in *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland 1560-1750* (1888; r.p., Edinburgh, 1982), ch.7.

41 *Miscellany*, ch. 1, p. 3. Cf. Rom. 15:15-16, the source of this idea.

42 *Assertion*, Pt. 2, ch.3, p. 48.

43 Henderson, *The Unlawfulness and Danger of Unlimited Prelacie, or Perpetual Presidencie in the Church, Briefly Discovered* (London, 1641), p. 4.

**1. Election of ministers.** Scottish Reformed theology has always put great stress on the right of the people to elect their own minister: in the *First Book of Discipline* (1560), the Fourth Head on the lawful election of ministers is longer than those on the sacraments and on abolishing idolatry.<sup>44</sup>

Gillespie too asserts the need for the consent of the people to be obtained in the election of a pastor. He has no truck, however, with Brownist or Anabaptist ideas about ecclesiastical government being in the hands of the whole congregation: he believes it is necessary for only the eldership to vote, although any member may bring forward objections against the candidate, and he maintains the rights of the presbytery regarding the examination and ordination of the candidate.<sup>45</sup>

Gillespie assembles a wide range of arguments from Scripture, the history of the early church, Protestant writers and churches, 'sound reason' and the 'confessions' (*i.e.* admissions) of opponents. Greatest weight is placed on Acts 14:23, set during the missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas, which contains the words 'when they had ordained them elders in every church' (KJV). Gillespie argues at length that *cheirotoneo* really indicates 'election by raising of hands'.<sup>46</sup> Much has to be inferred from the available evidence, and the influence of Reformed tradition is evident in his conclusion:

[liberty of consent] we ascribe to the whole church, without whose knowledge and consent ministers may not be intruded; [counsel or deliberation] to the ablest and wisest men of the congregation, especially to magistrates, with whose special advice, privity, and deliberation, the matter ought to be managed; the third, which is the formal and consistorial determination of the case of election consisteth in the votes of the eldership.<sup>47</sup>

---

44 *The First Book of Discipline*, edited by J.K. Cameron (Edinburgh, 1972).

45 All of these issues are discussed in detail in *Miscellany*, ch. 2.

46 For a consideration of the meaning of *cheirotoneo* see standard lexicons such as Arndt-Gingrich-Danker and G. Abbott-Smith. The patristic development of the term is described by George Every in 'Cheirotonia and Ordination' in *SJT* 9 (1956), pp. 175-82.

47 *Miscellany*, ch. 2, p. 11.

**2. Ordination of ministers.** In this matter, it is Gillespie's concern to insist, in opposition to Independents and Anabaptists, that ordination is essential to a valid ministry, and is not merely the ratification of the call of the congregation. It is lawful ordination, after proper election, that constitutes a person a minister.<sup>48</sup> Ordination is 'the solemn setting apart of a person to some publick church office'.<sup>49</sup>

The laying on of hands is not considered necessary to ordination: it is not part of the 'substance, essence and formal act of ordination'.<sup>50</sup> It may, however, be used, following the example of the primitive church, as long as it is not considered to be a 'sacred significant ceremony'.<sup>51</sup>

Copious scriptural arguments are mustered in the *Dispute* and the *Miscellany* in support of the necessity of ordination for ministers, including Romans 10:15 ('how can they preach unless they are sent?'). His conclusion regarding the act of ordination is this:

To the whole presbytery, made up of those two sorts of elders, belonged the act of ordination, which is MISSION; howbeit the right, which was impositions of hands, belonged to those elders *alone* which laboured in the word and doctrine.<sup>52</sup>

### The Office of Ruling Elder

From the Reformation onwards, Reformed churches have generally had two kinds of elders: those who preach, teach and exercise oversight of the congregation and those who exercise oversight only (ruling elders or, simply, elders). There has, however, been great diversity in understanding the nature of this second office.<sup>53</sup> Do ministers and elders hold

48 *Ibid.* See also Henderson, *The Government and Order of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1641), p. 5.

49 As defined in the Westminster Assembly's *Form of Presbyterial Church-Government*.

50 *Miscellany*, ch. 3, p. 15.

51 This phrase is used in Gillespie's discussion of the issue in *Dispute against the English Popish Ceremonies*, Digression 1, pp. 160-68.

52 *Dispute*, p. 167.

53 A useful survey of the debate about the eldership in American Presbyterianism in the middle of the nineteenth century, involving

entirely separate offices or is the eldership one office with two different functions? How is the ruling elder related to the *presbuteros* in the New Testament?

This diversity was reflected in the members of the Westminster Assembly.<sup>54</sup> The Scots, together with the Independents and others, argued that ruling elders were explicitly warranted by Scripture and so their office was *jure divino*. Others of the English were very reluctant to accept such a position and some had serious reservations about the whole concept of ruling elders. The debates were inconclusive and the matter was remitted to a committee. The resulting statement in the *Form of Presbyterian Church-Government* does little to clarify the office of those who are 'when called thereunto... to join with the minister in the government of the church'.

Gillespie argues strongly in the first part of his *Assertion* that Scripture warrants the office of ruling elder, which is distinguished from that of the pastor by its lacking the power of order, by which a pastor preaches, administers the sacraments, prays in public and performs marriages.<sup>55</sup>

The arguments produced by Gillespie are as follows:<sup>56</sup>

**(i) The example of the Jewish church.** His basic premise is: 'Whatsoever kind of office-bearers the Jewish church had, not as it was Jewish, but as it was a church, such ought the Christian church to have also.'<sup>57</sup> On this basis Gillespie argues that the priests, Levites, doctors and elders of the Jewish system have parallels in the Christian church. This, however, does not deal adequately with the function of priests, which Gillespie reduces to teaching and governing,

such theologians as Samuel Miller, R.J. Breckinridge, J.H. Thornwell, Charles Hodge and Thomas Smyth, is provided by Iain Murray in 'Ruling Elders - A Sketch of a Controversy', *The Banner of Truth* 235 (April 1983), pp. 1-9.

54 The debate lasted from 22 November to 7 December 1643, without reaching agreement. See the full account in Paul, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-74. See also John R. de Witt, *Jus Divinum: The Westminster Assembly and the Divine Right of Church Government* (Kampen, 1969), pp. 78-86.

55 *Assertion*, Pt. 1, ch. 2.

56 See *Assertion*, Pt. 1, chs. 3-7.

57 *Assertion*, Pt. 1, ch. 3, p. 13.

and there is a blurring of the Temple and (later) synagogue systems.

(ii) **Matthew 18:17: 'Tell it to the church'**. In this instance Gillespie argues that the eldership in the New Testament is representative. This, however, has to be proved on other grounds, and brings us back to the case made for Presbyterian polity in general. The verse itself is not proof of the office of ruling elder.

(iii) **Romans 12:8: the use of spiritual gifts**. Gillespie argues that in fact Paul is making reference to ecclesiastical *offices*, so that 'he that ruleth' indicates ruling elders. In Gillespie's view Paul is *not* speaking of gifts given to the whole body of Christ. Unfortunately he has to propose a new office of 'visitors of the sick' and must translate *praxis* (v.4.) as 'office' (as KJV does), in spite of the lack of linguistic support.<sup>58</sup>

(iv) **1 Corinthians 12:28**. Again Gillespie believes that offices rather than gifts for the whole body are in view, and so he applies 'governments' to ruling elders. They may well be in view in the verse, but the danger is of proving too much from the available evidence. Other texts must show who actually exercises 'government'.

(v) **1 Timothy 5:17: teaching and ruling elders**. Although the Assembly's *Form of Presbyterial Church-Government* makes no reference to this text, it was widely used by the Scots and by other English Presbyterians outside the Assembly.<sup>59</sup> Like his fellow-countrymen, Gillespie wants to identify contemporary 'elders' with those formally given the title in the New Testament. He believes that his argument 'riseth from the plain text, than which what could be clearer?'<sup>60</sup> It is clear that Gillespie was a strong proponent of the 'presbyter theory' of the eldership, although his case is

---

58 Modern commentators, including conservative Presbyterians, do not share Gillespie's exegesis of this passage, See e.g. William Hendriksen, *Romans* (Edinburgh, 1981), *ad loc.*

59 Examples are cited by Mitchell in *The Westminster Assembly, its History and Standards*, Note G, pp. 487-90.

60 *Assertion*, 1: 7, p. 21.



hampered by an unwillingness to equate *presbuteros* and *episcopos*.<sup>61</sup>

The Scots in general had a high regard for the role of ruling elders. Thus in the courts of the church they have an equal voice with ministers, as Gillespie believes happened at the council of Jerusalem. A court is not properly constituted unless it represents the 'hearers' of the Word as well as the 'teachers'. As those designated in Scripture 'rulers' and 'governors', ruling elders should vote and judge in cases coming before them.<sup>62</sup>

This regard for ruling elders is perhaps undermined by a lack of attention to their ordination, in contrast to that of ministers. Gillespie does insist that ordination is necessary: there is to be a 'deputation of them unto their presbyterial functions, together with public exhortation unto them, and prayer in the Church for them',<sup>63</sup> but no further details are given. The Assembly's documents have, however, even less to say on the subject.

### Sacramental Discipline

Gillespie devotes a large portion of *Aaron's Rod Blossoming* to defending the Presbyterian view that the church has authority to excommunicate unrepentant 'scandalous' offenders and also that prior to being excommunicated such offenders may be suspended from the Lord's table.<sup>64</sup> He thus opposes the Erastians, who held that all discipline should be in the hands of the civil magistrate, and argues at length against the views of William Prynne, a Presbyterian who nevertheless believed in the supremacy of the state over the church, who had recently denied the practice of suspension.

In speaking of discipline Gillespie is careful to stress that this power is in the hands of the eldership, not of any

---

61 The direction of Calvin's thinking on this issue is helpfully examined in R.E.H. Uprichard, 'The Eldership in Martin Bucer and John Calvin', *Evangelical Quarterly* 61 (1989), pp. 21-37. Important discussions will be found in T.M. Lindsay, *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries* (London, 1902), and J.B. Lightfoot, *Dissertations on the Apostolic Age* (London, 1892).

62 *Assertion*, Pt. 1, ch. 13.

63 *Ibid.*, ch. 14, p. 38.

64 *Aaron's Rod*, Bk. 3, pp. 156-276.

individual, and that 'their power is given them to edification, and not to destruction'.<sup>65</sup> Only ecclesiastical offences are in view, not civil matters such as debt, and Gillespie underlines that suspension and excommunication relate to 'scandalous sinners', not to those committing 'such sinful infirmities as all the godly in this life are guilty of'.<sup>66</sup> In the exercise of discipline, as described by Gillespie, there is to be both warm pastoral concern, which does no harm to weak or doubting Christians, and holy zeal, which seeks to preserve the sanctity of the Lord's supper. As he expresses it:

God forbid we be censorious, peremptory, and rigid in our judging of men's spiritual estate; where there is any thing of Christ, it is to be cherished, not quenched. But again, God forbids that we shut our eyes to call darkness light, or black white.<sup>67</sup>

To support his view of sacramental discipline Gillespie puts great weight on two passages of Scripture:

(i) **Matthew 18:15-17.** This passage Gillespie relates to sins rather than to personal injuries. He believes that Jesus is setting out the procedure to be followed by the church in dealing with such cases, culminating in excommunication, described as treating the offender 'as a heathen man and a publican'. Such a sentence is to be passed only for the 'public scandalous sin'<sup>68</sup> of refusing to listen to the church. This passage is exegeted in great (if not always convincing) detail and a wide range of opposing interpretations refuted.

(ii) **1 Corinthians 5.** The phrase 'Let us keep the feast' (v. 8) is used by Gillespie to justify an application of this passage to the Lord's supper. Particular attention is given to Paul's instruction in verse 5, 'deliver such a one unto Satan' and also to the words 'no, not to eat' (v. 11), which Gillespie is convinced include a reference to the Lord's supper.

One argument against keeping unrepentant sinners from the Lord's supper, which was used by Prynne, was the alleged presence of Judas at the Last Supper. Gillespie considers the matter thoroughly in order to prove that Judas had left before the institution of the supper, although he creates problems for himself by proposing that there were two suppers that

---

65 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

66 *Ibid.*

67 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 165.

night.<sup>69</sup> More satisfactory is Gillespie's careful argumentation against the Lord's supper being viewed as a 'converting ordinance'.<sup>70</sup>

### Contemporary Relevance

A review of modern evangelical writing on ecclesiology might suggest that Gillespie's seventeenth-century polemics have no relevance to the contemporary church.<sup>71</sup> Considerations of the sociology of the early Christian movement<sup>72</sup> or of how the concept of 'community' is to be understood<sup>73</sup> are of much greater interest than arcane exegetical debates regarding the intricacies of Presbyterianism. At first sight, Gillespie appears to inhabit an entirely different world from present-day writers.

The issues which Gillespie addresses, however, are of perennial relevance and the core of the Presbyterian model which he defends embodies principles which must be taken into account in any ecclesiology which claims to be biblical. These are not vitiated by Gillespie's eisegesis or his tendency to see seventeenth-century Scotland mirrored exactly in the New Testament. The following principles are of particular importance:

**(i) The church is a structured institution.** Is the church to be thought of as an organism or an institution? A diversity of models of the church have been proposed<sup>74</sup> and in recent years, in reaction to undue stress on institutional models, the focus has been on the church as an organism, giving rise to such ideas as body-life and every-member

---

69 *Ibid.*, Bk. 3, chs. 8-10.

70 *Ibid.*, chs. 12-14.

71 A useful sample of modern discussion can be found in the essays in the two WEF-sponsored collections, edited by D.A. Carson, *Biblical Interpretation and the Church. Text and Context* (Exeter, 1984) and *The Church in the Bible and the World* (Exeter, 1987).

72 E.g. Derek Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology of the New Testament* (Exeter, 1983).

73 E.g. Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Exeter, 1980).

74 A wide-ranging discussion from within Roman Catholicism is Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 2nd ed. (Dublin, 1987).

ministry. Institutions tend to be thought of as inflexible and lifeless.

A balance is needed, however, if an ecclesiology is to be faithful to all that Scripture says about the church. As well as being a living body, the church is also a building (still growing), an organisation with a definite structure and order. This perspective is well set out by Gillespie. The description which he gives to the church on several occasions, 'an ecclesiastical republic', makes the point well. Any movement which exists over a period of time inevitably develops structures of some kind: Gillespie's ecclesiology is a reminder that such structures should be formulated in the light of Scripture rather than developing in an *ad hoc* manner.

**(ii) Church leaders are a gift from God.** Although Gillespie is careful to maintain the right of the people to elect their church office-bearers and the duty of the church to test those called to office, he thinks of the ministers and elders as the gift of the reigning Christ to his church for its spiritual welfare. Gillespie stresses that Christ has provided for every need of his people, and a pre-eminent part of that provision is spiritually-gifted and duly-ordained leaders. Ordination is a recognition by the church of the gift that God has given.

**(iii) Ruling elders are an essential element in church government.** As already noted, Gillespie in his writings and in his contributions to the Assembly debates contended vigorously for the Scots Presbyterian institution of ruling elders, in spite of a measure of English resistance. In doing so he was maintaining the New Testament pattern of placing the government of the church in the hands of a group not made up exclusively of preachers. Elders elected from within the congregation are to be set apart by ordination to exercise leadership along with the minister. The leadership of the church is to be corporate and not confined to a professional 'clerical' caste. Presbyterians have always been sure that this was the scriptural way, although they have differed widely regarding the precise standing of ruling elders and their practice has often failed to match their theory. The basic commitment to having leaders chosen from among the people is nevertheless sound and carefully defended by Gillespie.

**(iv) Ecclesiastical authority is to be exercised at several levels.** Gillespie assembles sufficient evidence to indicate that in the New Testament church the eldership of a local congregation was not the only locus of authority. Assemblies representing wider areas, such as the council of Jerusalem, were able to issue authoritative decisions on matters concerning a number of congregations. The Independents' explanation of these assemblies as being solely consultative does not do justice to the evidence.

It is not necessary to find an exact representation of the Scottish variety of Presbyterianism in the New Testament for the principle to be accepted. One expression of the church's identity as the body of Christ is the concern and responsibility that the parts have for each other, expressed in part by the exercise of authoritative oversight by assemblies representing increasing numbers of congregations. At a time when authority in different spheres is often flouted and when many have little conception of church authority, Gillespie expounds important truths regarding the authority of church assemblies, including their responsibility for pastoral oversight of congregations under their jurisdiction.

**(v) The Lord's supper is to be kept holy.** Underlying all that Gillespie says about sacramental discipline is a deep concern to preserve the sanctity of the ordinance. It is not enough for the church to leave the matter of coming to the table to individual consciences. Where there is flagrant sin, without any sign of repentance (and only in such cases), the elders are to act in order to keep the sacrament from being profaned. Gillespie's position is very far from contemporary attitudes to the Lord's supper among many church members, yet his concern is biblical, and is not devoid of warm pastoral concern.

Gillespie, like many of his contemporaries, had a big vision of the church. He thought of the Reformed church in European terms and longed for greater cooperation among those who shared his convictions. As barriers of all kinds come down throughout the Europe of the 1990s and beyond, such a vision for unity in the truth is again a challenging possibility to be pursued.