

## TO THE PUBLIC.

*Having applied to the Editor of the Presbyterian, to allow the subjoined communication to occupy a column in his paper, which he refused to do—and having made application to two of our secular daily papers to publish it, each of which declined complying with my request on the ground that it might lead to a controversy to which they could not devote the necessary space in their papers,—I have adopted the only alternative—that of publishing it in the form of a CIRCULAR. I deem it DUE TO MYSELF to lay the whole affair before the public eye.*

Baltimore, April 26th, 1844.

MAXWELL McDOWELL.

MR. EDITOR:—There is a matter which, though originally confined to the Rev. Dr. Samuel Miller and myself, has assumed some importance; and which, as that gentleman has made public reference to it in the appendix to his late work on the "Office of Ruling Elder," I feel bound to explain.—There can no longer be any doubt that the whole affair must be laid before the public; and it is best on all accounts that this should be done while Dr. Miller and I both survive. I had been long a Ruling Elder in the First Presbyterian Church of Baltimore, when at the ordination of the Rev. Mr. Musgrave, in the month of July, 1830, acting as a member of the Presbytery which ordained him, I was struck with the singularity of my situation, standing aside while the few ministers who were present imposed hands upon him. This incident led me to reflect deeply on the subject, and to examine it carefully; and the more I did both, the more I became convinced that Ruling Elders, when members of Presbytery, should unite with Preaching Elders in imposing hands in all ordinations. In this state of mind, I sat as a Ruling Elder, from the Presbytery of Baltimore, in the General Assembly of 1831, during which the subject of the Ruling Elders' office became a matter of debate, protest, &c., in consequence of a successful effort made to give a *committee-man* a seat as an Elder. Dr. Miller was also a member of that Assembly. He was then, and had been for many years before, Professor of Church History and Government, in the Theological Seminary at Princeton; and he had then recently published his valuable work on the office of the Ruling Elder, in an enlarged form. Under all these circumstances, and having before this a friendly acquaintance with this distinguished divine, I ventured after the rise of the Assembly, to address him a letter upon the especial point just above referred to, and received from him the letter, a copy of which I think it due to myself, to him and to truth, to send you herewith for publication.

Princeton, Augt. 26th, 1831."

"MY DEAR SIR,—Your letter of the 15th inst., reached me on the 18th, and I seize the first leisure moment to reply. "It gives me great pleasure that my volume on the *Ruling Elder* meets with your approbation. I cannot help thinking "the subject very important, and cherish the hope that God "will be pleased to bless the attempt, however feeble, to promote the welfare of Zion. I fully concur with you in opinion, that Ruling Elders ought, upon principle—to lay on "hands, with Teaching Elders, in all ordinations; in other "words, that when a Presbytery, as such, ordains, all who are "members of the body ought, as members, to lay on hands in "the judicial and authoritative act. We are not yet, however, "I suppose, prepared for such a step. Let us first get the important principle recognized and established, that Ruling El-

ders are to be ordained, themselves, with the imposition of "hands—when this shall become the general practice—we "shall be prepared to take the next step, of which you speak. "In the meantime we must wait patiently. There are many "prejudices to be overcome before we reach the proper point. "While I express this opinion, however, in accordance with "my real sentiments, I do not think you or any other Ruling "Elder ought to feel embarrassed by being on the stage at an "ordination without laying hands on the candidate. The fact "is, that where a Presbytery is large, as for example, that of "New Brunswick or Philadelphia, not more than *one quarter* "part, even of the *clerical* members (as they are commonly "called,) ought to attempt to lay on hands. Four, five or six, "are quite sufficient for the purpose in all cases, (indeed three "are enough,) and the rest ought to stand round the candidate "in a circle, in token of their concurrence. If, therefore, "Ruling Elders are placed, for the present, in the situation in "which four-fifths of the Teaching Elders ought to stand at "every ordination, they need not feel embarrassed.—Mr. "Breckinridge left us this morning, on his way to Albany, in "pursuit of the object of his new appointment. He is in his "usual health. His family is well. I fully concur with you "in the opinion that the people of his late charge acted injudiciously in sending for two candidates at once.—May the "great Head of the church order what has been done in mercy, "and send them a pastor after his own heart. I am, my dear "Sir, very respectfully and affectionately, your friend and "brother in Christ,"

"SAMUEL MILLER."

"Dr. M. McDowell."

This letter of Dr. Miller, fully supporting and avowing my own opinions, gave me, as may well be supposed, great pleasure; and I did not hesitate, as often as it seemed to me necessary, to refer to it in conversation, and to show it to such as I supposed took a special interest in the subject.—On the 24th of March, 1843, Dr. Miller opened a correspondence with me in regard to this letter, the purport of which seemed to be to let me know that he had changed his opinion, and that he considered the letter itself private. As to the former point, I regret it, of course; but I neither knew nor could have anticipated it, till he informed me of the fact; and my use of the letter was always supposed by me to be calculated to enhance Dr. Miller's reputation instead of injuring it. That a public teacher, a public servant of the church, an author, a distinguished minister of the gospel—should consider his opinions private, and his letter expressing his opinions confidential—in regard to matters which it was his duty to teach, and by writing about which much of his reputation was acquired—seems to me truly astonishing. At any rate, after the lapse of so many years, it was too late to recall what I had done, as I still believe with perfect propriety; and all I could do was to express

my views of the matter to Dr. Miller, and send him a copy of the letter, which I did. It was therefore before him when he wrote the passage in the appendix to his late work, in regard to this business, which I copy below, and which I beg you to print, and which has made it impossible for me to omit this explanation.—In his late work on the Office of Ruling Elder, page 121, Dr. Miller writes in the following manner:

“The first time that the writer of this manual ever read or heard, among Presbyterians, of a proposal that Ruling Elders should impose hands, with teaching Elders, in the ordination of Ministers of the Gospel was in the year 1831. In that year a friend and Ruling Elder, in the city of Baltimore, whom he had long known and highly esteemed, in a letter on the subject, expressed an opinion that “as every ordination is performed by a Presbytery; as Ruling Elders are component members of the Presbytery, when judicially assembled; and as laying on of the hands of the Presbytery is the formal rite which at once accompanies and seals the ordaining act; no good reason could be assigned why the Ruling Elders were not as much entitled to participate in that rite, as to unite in the vote which authorised it.” As this position was strongly stated, and ingeniously defended, the writer confesses it struck him at first rather favorably; and in a few days, returned to his friend a corresponding answer. When the suggestion was first presented to him, the idea which struck him most forcibly, was that the participation contended for was a mere ceremony, which could not be supposed to be practically important, either for good or evil; and therefore, if desired by any scarcely worth opposing. He was aware indeed, that the exercise of the right included in this claim was wholly without precedent, as far as he knew, in any Presbyterian church. This circumstance, the more he enquired, led him more and more to doubt. Not long afterwards, it began to be reported, that one or more of our western Presbyteries had actually admitted the claim in question; and that in all their ordinations, the Ruling Elders were in the habit of imposing hands with the Pastors. This circumstance led the present writer to a new examination of the subject; and a number of publications in the West as well as in the East, brought under his view the principal reasonings on both sides, and enabled him to judge of the validity and safety of the leading arguments by which the advocates of the new doctrine attempted to maintain their position. The consequence was an entire recession from the favorable opinion which he had expressed to his friend in Baltimore, and a strong conviction that the new claim could not be defended:—that it was not only contrary to all Presbyterian practice, but also to all established Presbyterian principles, and if generally admitted, might lead to consequences highly objectionable.”

Thus writes Dr. Miller in his new work on the “Office of Ruling elders.” As a part of the passage which I have extracted from Dr. Miller’s late book stands on the page of that book designated by *inverted commas*, supposing it was so marked as quoted from my letter of 1831, I wrote to the Dr., requesting him to furnish me with a copy of that letter. The Dr. in reply to my request stated that he had it not in his power to furnish me with a copy, as he had destroyed my letter with some other letters. These quotation marks, therefore, can mean nothing more than that the recollection of Dr. Miller as to the contents of my letter of 1831 is so expressed.—It will appear perfectly just and candid to every right thinking man, that after the publication of the contents of my letter from memory, I should publish the entire answer to it from the original. My letter to Dr. Miller, requesting a copy of my letter of 1831, is dated March 30th, 1844.

I make this statement, throughout, without a particle of unkindness towards Dr. Miller. As I have before intimated, I consider it due to myself to make it. And moreover it is due to Dr. Miller, that if he considers it necessary to justify his total change of opinion, he should have the means of meeting the whole case in its full strength: and besides, it is no mean proof, that opinions, which this learned gentleman, in the highest vigour of his faculties, and when fresh from publishing a comprehensive work on the Elder’s Office and Duties, openly avowed, on principle, are, to say the least, worthy of being treated with a decent respect; so that truth itself is interested in this business.

I have no intention to attempt any defence of the principles to which I still cling with *unwavering* attachment. I am an old man; an old Presbyterian; an old office bearer in the Church. I am guiltless of intentional departure from the standards of the church. My reason and my conscience are clear, that I have only done my duty in what I have attempted, first and last, to extend and strengthen such views and principles as will place the office of Ruling Elder—which I have held for more than *thirty years* on its scriptural footing. And I thank God that he allows me to witness his good providence in raising up men qualified to maintain a cause which I deem so important.

I am, Mr. Editor,

Your Friend

And Brother in Christ,

MAXWELL McDOWELL.

Baltimore, April 9, 1844.

To the Rev’d Wm. M. Engles, D. D., }  
Editor of the Presbyterian. }