

In Defense of Parity: **A presentation of the parity or equality** **of elders in the New Testament**

CHAPTER SIX **An Historical Examination of the Parity of the Eldership in** **Independency and John Owen**

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Dr. Poh Boon Sing has rendered a very valuable service to Reformed Baptists in his book, *The Keys of the Kingdom*. A study on ecclesiology from a Reformed Baptist perspective helps to begin to fill a very real void. Moreover, his directing our attention to our historical roots, most notably those of Puritan Congregationalism, is not only praiseworthy, but also needful and timely.

Our response on these pages has been necessitated however by a number of factors. The first and most obvious factor is that Poh advocates an unscriptural view of plurality and parity in the eldership. Secondly, he has misrepresented the views—and the outworkings of those views—of a large number of other Reformed Baptists. Thirdly—and this is the concern of the present chapter—he has misrepresented the views of John Owen, the great Puritan Congregationalist. (This is not to minimize the valuable service Dr. Poh has rendered in pointing us to Owen and in drawing out much good from him.) The question before us in this chapter is not primarily whether Dr. Poh’s conception of the eldership is scriptural, but whether or not his views find support in the writings of John Owen.

Plurality in the Eldership

When it comes to the subject of plurality in the eldership, we are in basic agreement with Dr. Poh. We believe in the propriety of a plurality of scripturally qualified elders holding office in the local church. With John Owen, we recognize that plurality is the scriptural norm. That is, it is the situation we uniformly encounter in the churches in the New Testament. It is therefore desirable for our churches today. However, to have less than a plurality in a given local church is not sinful in itself.

Dr. Poh, commenting on the circumstances we face in the church today, suggests a modification to our conception of plurality. First, he says that, in the face of what he calls “authoritarian oligarchies”, “it would not be wise [for us today] to stress ‘plurality.’” He means that we must be sensitive to the abuses of even a biblical institution and would perhaps do well to de-emphasize plurality. Secondly, Dr. Poh suggests that, for the same reasons, “It is preferable to advocate instead the validity of the office of ruling elders” (as opposed to advocating plurality). We second his concern to avoid abuses in church government. Furthermore, we share his jealousy to guard the integrity of the churches

which have not yet been blessed by the Head of the Church with a plurality of elders—or in some cases even one elder. They are not in sin simply because they have not yet achieved the scriptural norm.

However, we do not agree that a *de facto* retreat from the emphasis on the biblical norm for the eldership is the way to face any perceived or real problems regarding church government. There are definite and weighty reasons for not retreating on this subject, especially at this juncture in the history of the church of Christ. For one thing, the same basic dangers which Owen realized plurality is designed to thwart still threaten the church today. Owen writes, “It is difficult, if not impossible, on a supposition of one elder only in a church, to preserve the rule of the church from being *prelatical* or *popular*.” Also, the times in which we live argue that the doctrine of plurality needs to be articulated and accentuated. Plurality of elders is not the prevailing practice in most evangelical churches in the United States. (Regrettably, a large percentage even of Reformed Baptist churches do not have pluralities of elders.) Further, the troubles faced by every church of Christ regardless of the size of its eldership are only intensified when the scriptural norm does not exist, or to use Paul’s terminology, when there is something “lacking” ([Titus 1:5](#)).

Therefore, we wholeheartedly concur with Owen’s sentiments when he writes:

The nature of the work whereunto they are called requires that, in every church consisting of any considerable number of members, there should be more elders than one.... And some there are who begin to maintain that there is no need of any more but one pastor, bishop, or elder in a particular church, which hath its rule in itself, other elders for rule being unnecessary. This is a novel opinion, contradictory to the sense and practice of the church in all ages.

Parity in the Eldership

Our chief area of disagreement with Dr. Poh centers around the subject of parity in the eldership. The word parity means “equality”. When it is applied to the elders in a church, it means that they have equal power or authority when it comes to governing the church. “Parity” is therefore verbal shorthand for “parity of authority”.

Poh cannot affirm that there is parity of authority among the elders in a church. He believes in a hierarchy of authority among elders, and he bases it upon the distinction John Owen drew between elders who labor in the ministry of the Word and those who do not.

John Owen believed that there is a distinction between teaching elders and ruling elders. To him, the teaching elders are the pastors. All pastors are elders, but not all elders are pastors. *The pastors have the priority over the ruling elders*. The pastor (or one of them, if there are more than one pastors [*sic*]) should act as the leading elder.

Poh is right in his assertion that Owen made a distinction between pastors and ruling elders. Owen also asserted that there is a genuine primacy inherent in the calling of the ministry of the Word. However we will see that Poh is incorrect to maintain that Owen grants a greater authority to the pastor than to the ruling elder when it comes to the government of the church.

Poh further argues that other Reformed Baptists are wrong to maintain that parity ought to exist among all the elders in a church. He writes:

Some Reformed Baptists are advocating a view of the eldership in which all elders are regarded as equal, with no distinction between them apart, perhaps, for the different functions they perform. To them, all elders are pastors.

This is a fair representation of the doctrine of parity held by a number of Reformed Baptists. However, Poh does not regard this difference from his own view as either minor or innocent. He writes, “[S]ome...[churches] believe in the ‘equality of elders’ and carry this to an extreme, calling every elder ‘pastor’ . He also caricatures their view of parity by calling it the “Absolute Equality View”, and asserting that those who hold to parity believe “that all the elders are equal in authority *in every way*”. One might be led to think that those who hold to parity teach that the elders in a church must wear the same shoe size and part their hair in the same way. At best, Poh gives a poor caricature of the views of such Reformed Baptists as Sam Waldron and A. N. Martin based, we presume, on ignorance of their actual teaching and practice.

Church Polity and Church History

It is the concern of the other chapters of this book to assess the scripturalness of the views of both Poh Boon Sing and John Owen regarding the eldership, and to articulate our view of plurality and parity in the eldership. It is our present concern however to evaluate Poh’s professed reliance upon and adherence to John Owen, the great exponent of Puritan Congregationalism. As we will see, Poh follows Owen to a point, but when it comes to authority to rule in the church, he makes a significant departure from the Puritan.

As we begin this consideration from the standpoint of historical theology, we must remember that *our first and final authority is the Word of God*. It is one thing to recognize the significant place of John Owen in our own stream of church polity and our great indebtedness to him; it is another to rigidly adhere to him despite the teaching of the Scriptures. Poh himself explicitly recognizes the supremacy of Scripture in determining our own convictions and practice. The Independent ministers of the Westminster Assembly expressed this dependence upon the Word of God as well in a seminal document in the history of Congregationalism:

First, the supream rule *without us*, was the Primitive patterne and example of the churches erected by the Apostles. Our consciences were possessed with that reverence and adoration of fulnesse of the Scriptures, that there is therein a compleat sufficiencie, as to make the *man of God perfect*, so also to make the Churches of God perfect, (meere circumstances we except, or what rules the law of nature doth in common dictate) if the directions and examples therein delivered were fully known and followed.... A second Principle we carryed along with us in all our resolutions, was, Not to make our present judgement and practice a binding law unto our selves for the future, which we in like manner made continuall profession of upon all occasions. We had too great an instance of our own frailty in the former way of our conformity; and therefore in a jealousy of our selves, we kept this reserve, (which we made open and constant professions of) to alter and retract (though not lightly) what ever should be discovered to be taken up out of a mis-understanding of the rule: Which Principle wee wish were (next to that most supream, namely, to be in all things guided by the perfect wil of God) enacted as the most *sacred law* of all other, in the midst of all other Laws and Canons Ecclesiastical in Christian States and Churches throughout the world.

We are grateful for the Puritans'—and Poh's—conviction that the matter must be resolved exegetically and for the Congregationalists' explicit recognition that progress in doctrine did not end with them.

Another vital consideration is the plain reality that *there is not homogeneity in "Independent" church polity*, particularly when it comes to the subjects of plurality and parity in the eldership. For instance, as we saw above, John Owen insisted that the scriptural norm is to have a plurality of elders in each church. He emphasized the scriptural validity of the office of ruling elder. Contrast Owen's convictions with these words of Benjamin Keach, the seventeenth century Particular Baptist:

Query, *Are there no ruling elders besides the pastor?*

Answer. There might be such in the primitive apostolical church, but we see no ground to believe it an abiding office to continue in the church, but was only temporary.

1. Because we have none of the qualifications of such elders mentioned, or how to be chosen.
2. Because we read not particularly what their work and business is, or how distinct from preaching elders; though we see not but the church may (if she sees meet) choose some able and discreet brethren to be *helps in government*; We have the qualifications of bishops and deacons directly laid down, and how to be chosen, and their work declared, but of no other office or officers in the church, but these only.

This is a fairly radical departure from Owen when it comes to the subject at hand, and it comes from one of the signers of the *1689 Confession*. However we are not compelled to follow Keach in his departure from Owen precisely because we are not bound to follow either one of them whenever we find them at variance with the Word of God.

There were Particular Baptists in this country who held to the view of church officers defended in this anthology—i.e. that the titles pastor, bishop, and elder all refer to all the rulers in the church. The Baptist Association of Charlestown, South Carolina wrote in their *Summary of Church-Discipline* in 1774:

The ordinary officers of the church, and the only ones now existing, are ministers and deacons ([Phil 1:1](#)).... Ministers of the gospel, who are frequently called elders, bishops, pastors, and teachers, are appointed by Christ to the highest office in the church and therefore need peculiar qualifications such as are pointed out ([1 Tim. 3:2-7](#) and [Titus 1:5-10](#)).

Here is the view we advocate, held by Baptists directly upstream from us in the current of ecclesiastical development and tradition. These Baptists had adopted the *Philadelphia Confession of Faith* and were undoubtedly aware of their indebtedness to the Puritan Congregationalists, Owen included. Nevertheless, they did not consider themselves bound to follow Owen in this point of church polity, based on their clearer light from the Word of God.

As did our Baptist predecessors, we do well to remember that church history helps us to see Scriptural light, but it is not that light itself and therefore not authoritative for us. We are greatly indebted to our forefathers in the faith, most notably to the Particular Baptists and the Puritan Congregationalists on whose ecclesiastical shoulders the Baptists stood. We neglect the light they furnish us at our peril. Our first commitment however is to the Word of God, not to John Owen, not even to the *1689 Confession*.

Poh Boon Sing and John Owen on Parity

It remains for us to consider in greater detail what John Owen taught regarding the eldership generally, and regarding parity in particular. What did the great Puritan say about the matters of office, plurality, function, and parity? Who are his legitimate ecclesiological descendants?

Offices in the church

Owen held to the view that there are two distinct offices in the church, elder and deacon. Though he distinguished between teaching elders (the pastor is a teaching elder) and ruling elders, he asserted that they held the same office. That is, Owen recognized a distinction *within* the one office of elder between two distinct types or classes of elders.

The bishops or elders are of two sorts: 1. Such as have authority to *teach* and administer the sacraments, which is commonly called the *power of order*; and also of *ruling*, which is called a power of jurisdiction, corruptly: and, 2. Some have only *power for rule*; of which sort there are some in all the churches in the world.'

He emphasizes that though there is a distinction when it comes to function within the office of the eldership, there is nevertheless one office only. Whereas deacons hold an entirely distinct office from elders, yet pastors and ruling elders, though they possess different functions in the church, occupy the same office. Owen wrote:

The distinction between the elders themselves is not like that between elders and deacons, which is as unto the whole kind or nature of the office, but only with respect unto work and order, whereof we shall treat distinctly.

There is no uniformity in Independency on this subject of offices, even among the Puritan Congregationalists themselves. The Congregationalists in New England held, contrary to Owen, that pastors and teachers held one office, ruling elders another. The Baptists of the Philadelphia Baptist Association did not follow Owen on this point either, asserting that the office of ruling elder was “wholly a distinct office” from that of the office of minister. As noted above, Benjamin Keach argued that a ruling elder does not occupy any office, properly speaking. Thus, it is meaningless, if not misleading, to speak of “*the Independent position*” or “*the Particular Baptist position*” on this point.

Reformed Baptists today are generally in agreement with Owen regarding the number of offices in the church, holding that all elders occupy the same office in the church, whether they labor in the Word and doctrine or not. Poh agrees with Owen at this point, and such is the position advocated in this book.

Diversity of gift and junction among elders.

Owen, Poh, and the writers of these articles agree that there is a vast and legitimate degree of diversity of gifts possessed and tasks performed by men who are elders in the church of Christ. All recognize the peculiar calling and work of some elders to “labor in word and doctrine” ([1 Tim. 5:17](#)). This is a scriptural distinction. Whether an elder labors in Word and doctrine or not depends on a number of factors, including his level of gift, the peculiar needs of the church, the opportunities available, the recognition of the church and eldership, and his corresponding assignment or commission to that task.

To one side of Owen at this point are the Congregationalists and Baptists who made a sharper distinction between pastors and ruling elders than Owen himself did and assigned to them separate and distinct offices. In their minds, this functional diversity could not be exercised within the same office. The Philadelphia Association's *Short Treatise* says:

Their [ruling elders'] office *only relateth to rule and order*, in the church of God, and doth not include teaching; yet if the church findeth they have gifts and abilities to be useful in teaching, they may be put upon trial, and if approved, they may be called and solemnly set apart by ordination, *it being wholly a distinct office* from the former, which was only to rule well, and not to labor in Word and doctrine.

To the other side of Owen are those who insist that all the elders share equally in every task and thus artificially divide the pastoral labors with strict uniformity among all the elders. Such a view is based on a superficial understanding and a perversion of the biblical notion of “parity” among elders.

Here, we agree with Owen in substance, but not in form. That is, we recognize the diversity of function legitimate within an eldership without adopting rigid categories which are foreign to the Scriptures, John Owen notwithstanding. For some, those categories take the form of assigning separate offices to pastors and ruling elders. For Owen, they take the form of assigning separate titles to pastors and ruling elders. For him, only an elder who labors in Word and doctrine may be called pastor. Poh, for his part, faithfully follows Owen at this point. We have seen, however, that the New Testament designations pastor, bishop, and elder all refer to all the elders without distinction (Chapter 4). Therefore; *we regard our primary difference with Owen to be essentially one of terminology, not of substance*, as the next consideration will especially make clear.

Poh criticizes those who hold what he calls the “Absolute Equality View” of the eldership: “All the elders are regarded as pastors. They are equal in power. *They have equal right to preach*. The elders may end up preaching in rotation, as have [sic] occurred in Brethren circles!” Note that 1) there is nothing improper about elders preaching in rotation if they are all gifted to preach and this is recognized by the church; 2) Poh wrongly implies that those who hold our view do not admit the distinction made in [1 Tim. 5:17](#) between those elders who labor in the Word and those who do not—we agree with Owen on this point; we depart from Owen in our terminology, in that he differentiates the preacher from non--preaching elders by calling him “pastor”, whereas we call him “pastor-teacher”, “teaching elder”, or “pastor who labors in Word and doctrine”; 3) not even Owen disputes the truth that others besides teaching elders may teach publicly. He identifies the ruling elders as “Elders not called to teach *ordinarily*...” Why does Owen make so much of the titles “pastor” and “teacher” and restrict them—in particular the title “pastor”—to only those elders who regularly teach publicly? The first answer is because of his flawed exegesis of [Ephesians 4:11](#). Owen believed that the last two words in this text, “pastor” and “teacher”, referred to two distinct ministers of the word, and that was his basis for reserving the title “pastor” for only a teaching elder. However, the best interpretation of [Eph. 4:11](#) sees these words as the description of one man, not two. Thus “pastor-teacher” refers to a pastor who is a teacher, or to put it as Paul does elsewhere, an “elder ... who labor[s] in the word and doctrine” ([1 Tim. 5:17](#)). Secondly, the historical context in which Owen and the rest of the Puritans labored helps to explain the sharp distinction they drew between teaching and ruling elders. They were departing from the Anglican prelatical system, in which a person who held an office of authority in the church, but was not a minister of the Word, was basically unheard of. It was unthinkable for many Anglicans that anyone other than a minister of the Word

should have such a place of prominence & authority. (There was heated debate in the Westminster Assembly over this issue. Arguing against the introduction of ruling elders, Henry Wilkinson protested, "I have informed myself concerning those churches in which the discipline is exercised [i.e. churches with ruling elders]... in some of them 12 lay elders & but one minister & he hath but a single voyce[!]" Thus did the pressure to justify elders who were not preachers and the intense scrutiny they came under pave the way for the imprecise application of one biblical term "pastor" and the development of another term that is extrabiblical "ruling elder".

Parity of authority.

Parity is the key area of difference between us and Poh Boon Sing. It is also the key area of difference between Poh and John Owen. Parity means equality. With reference to local church elderships, parity refers to parity of authority and means that all the elders, whether they are preachers or not, have the same degree of authority when it comes to the rule of the church. Their authority is not of a lower grade; they are not second in rank to the preaching elder(s).

Poh does not agree that there should be such parity of authority among the elders in a church. He believes that elders who labor in the Word have a higher degree of authority than elders who do not labor in the word. He writes:

The ministry of the word should have *primacy* (that is, the supreme place, the pre-eminence) in the life of the church. It should have *priority* (that is, being earlier, occupying the position of greater importance) over other important matters. Of the two types of elders, the teaching elders have the priority over the ruling elders.

The first two sentences in this quotation reflect the conviction of all Reformed Baptists, being no more than assertions of the doctrine of the primacy of the Word of God or the primacy of preaching. The greatest exponents of the primacy of preaching were the Puritans, whose heirs we cannot be without affirming that doctrine and emulating their application of it. Owen certainly upheld the doctrine of the primacy of preaching. He would even have agreed that, because of the importance of the ministry of the Word, those who are continuously engaged in it warrant a degree of honor commensurate with their calling. This is a legitimate application of Paul's exhortation in [1 Thess. 5:13](#), to "*esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake.*" A pastor who labors in the Word and doctrine is employed in the most noble occupation to which a man can be called, and he ought to be esteemed accordingly.

It is a very simple step to proceed from this conviction of the primacy of preaching and the corresponding importance of the preaching office and the value of the men who occupy it to the assertion that the elder who teaches possesses a higher level of authority in the church than the elder who does not. This is the assertion Poh makes in the last sentence in the above quotation: "Of the two types of elders, the teaching elders have the priority over the ruling elders." But Poh walks alone when he takes that step. He is no longer following Owen, because that is a direction in which the Puritan will by no means go. Owen never argues that, on the basis of the "superiority" of the *teaching function*, the one who labors in Word and doctrine has greater *governing authority*. Poh evidently senses this when he attempts to enlist support for his assertion from Owen. He appears to realize that he has no explicit support from Owen here and that the strongest statement he can make is that there

“are *some indications* that Owen did believe in the priority of the ministry” in the sense in which he (Poh) understands it. In fact, there are no such indications in Owen whatsoever.

Owen does indeed address the subject of the relative power or authority of the several elders in the church explicitly and directly. Here is what he says:

The qualification of these [ruling] elders, with the way of their call and setting apart unto their office, being the same with those of the teaching elders before insisted on, need not be here again repeated. *Their authority, also in the whole rule of the church, is every way the same with that of the other sort of elders; and they are to act in the execution of it with equal respect and regard from the church.* Yea, the business of rule being peculiarly committed unto them, and they required to attend thereunto with diligence in an especial manner, *the work thereof is principally theirs*, as that of labouring in the word and doctrine doth especially belong unto the pastors and teachers of the churches. And this institution is abused when either unmeet persons are called to this office, or those that are called do not attend unto their duty with diligence, or *do act only in it by the guidance of the teaching officers, without a sense of their own authority, or due respect from the church.*

Arguing against episcopacy, he writes:

... I shall briefly, as in a diversion, add the arguments which undeniably prove that in the whole New Testament bishops and presbyters, or elders, are every way the same persons, in the same office, have the same function, *without distinction in order or degree...*

Again:

They [ruling elders] are joined unto the teaching elders in all acts and duties of church-power for the rule and government of the church;... Both sorts of elders are joined and do concur in the same rule and all the acts of it, one sort of them labouring also in the Word and doctrine. Of both sorts is the presbytery or eldership composed, wherein resides all church-authority. And in this conjunction, *those of both sorts are every way equal*, determining all acts of rule by their common suffrage.

We cannot but conclude that, if anyone is “guilty” of teaching the “absolute equality” of elders when it comes to authority in the church, John Owen is. Moreover, Owen is unmistakably clear and emphatic regarding this point. It is almost as if he were saying, “Read my lips.” Why would he have seen it necessary to be so dogmatic? Three reasons suggest themselves. First, it was difficult for those sympathetic to the prelatical Anglican system to even see the validity of the ruling elder, let alone to admit that one who was not a “minister of the Word” could possess governing authority equal to that of a “minister”. Second, Owen may have anticipated that the sharp distinction he drew between pastor and ruling elder, together with the recognition of the primacy of preaching, might lead some to conclude that the pastor is superior in rule. (Evidently such anticipation was well founded.) He wanted to make it crystal clear that he was in no way implying any such thing. Third, Owen was emphatic regarding parity because he was so vigorously opposed to anything but a parity of power among elders. Since he saw the grave danger of building a niche for a Diotrephes right into the authority structure of the church, he adamantly opposed it and warned against it. Insisting that elders are “the highest officers in the Christian church”, he wrote:

The pope would now scarce take it well to be esteemed only an elder of the church of Rome, unless it be in the sense wherein the Turkish monarch is called the Grand Seignior. *But those who would be in the church above elders have no office in it, whatever usurpation they may make over it.*

So, John Owen.

“Leading elder”

One further consideration warrants discussion. Dr. Poh addresses the subject of the manner in which “the priority of the ministry” is applied practically in the governing of the church. He writes:

In all such meetings [of church officers], the pastor should normally be the chairman. If there are more than one pastors in the church, one of them who has been recognised and approved by the church as the leading elder would be the chairman. This is to be so by virtue of the principle of “the priority of the ministry”.

Again,

All pastors are elders, but not all elders are pastors. The pastors have the priority over the ruling elders. The pastor (or one of them, if there are more than one pastors) should act as the leading elder.

Owen also addresses this concept of leading elder or chairman of the elders. But once again, when we compare Poh with Owen, we find that he follows the Puritan to a degree—but only to a degree. Poh conflicts with Owen based on the same misunderstanding noted above. Because Poh insists that the pastor, or teaching elder, has *de jure* authority above that of the non-teaching elder(s), he reasons that when there is even the smallest plurality in an eldership consisting of at least one teaching elder and one non-teaching elder, the teaching elder presides as chairman in their meetings. Owen likewise recognizes the need for one elder to preside in meetings, but he only calls for this “where a church is greatly increased, so as that there is a necessity of *many elders* in it for its instruction and rule”. Furthermore, whereas Poh grounds the “pastor’s” chairmanship in “the primacy of the ministry”, Owen cites other factors in the determination of this presider, determinants which may be found in any of the elders in the church, regardless of whether he is a teaching elder or not. Owen says that the elders may “take turns” at this duty.

Whether the person that is so to preside be directed unto by being first converted, or first ordained, or on the account of age, or of gifts and abilities, whether he continue for a season only, and then another be deputed unto the same work, or for his life, are things in themselves indifferent, to be determined according unto the general rules of reason and order, with respect unto the edification of the church.

Note what Owen maintains regarding this presiding function: 1) it is only necessary when a church has “*many elders*”; 2) determination of who performs it is not based on any superior office which he holds; 3) it does not superadd any additional authority to the one who serves in it; 4) its use neither constitutes nor creates any new or separate office in the church; 5) it is in no way a departure from parity of authority—Owen states this most explicitly in the midst of his discussion of this subject:

[A]mong these elders one should be chosen by themselves, with the consent of the church, not into a new order, *not into a degree of authority above his brethren*, but only unto his part of the common work in a peculiar manner, which requires some kind of precedency. Hereby no new officer, no new order of officers, *no new degree of power or authority*, is constituted in the church; only the work and duty of it is cast into such an order as the very light of nature doth require. *But there is not any intimation in the Scripture of the least imparity or inequality, in order, degree, or authority, among officers of the same sort, whether extraordinary or ordinary.*

(Owen is so careful to avoid any pitfall that he refrains even from giving a title to the position he describes here.)

Conclusion

Poh Boon Sing's interpretation of John Owen's church polity is inaccurate, especially on the key matter of parity in the eldership. His portrayal of the views of other Reformed Baptists is also flawed. Regrettably, he has evidently studied neither well. The Reformed Baptists who have published this volume hold to Owen's views on the eldership *essentially*, differing from him basically in terminology. Poh disagrees with Owen on a most vital matter—that of the division of authority among elders in the church.

Owen's influence is evident in A. N. Martin's summary statement regarding plurality and parity in the eldership: "The normal framework for the administration of the task of oversight is that of a plurality of scripturally qualified overseers functioning with genuine parity, but with realistic, harmonious, functional diversity." This is Owen's view in substance. May we ever guard the deposit handed to us by our godly predecessors, always testing all things by the Scriptures, and holding fast what is good.