

An Analysis of Rutherford and M' Crie on whether
Ladies have the Right to Vote in the Election
of Church Officers

Rev. Travis Fentiman

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With the writings of
Samuel Rutherford and Thomas M' Crie
Appended

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An Analysis of Rutherford and M’Crie on whether Ladies have the Right to Vote in the Election of Church Officers

Rev. Travis Fentiman¹

Thomas M’Crie, the rightly renowned Scottish historian of the Covenanters, wrote in the early 1800’s, “It will not be pleaded, I suppose, that it was a practice for women to vote in the best times of the Church of Scotland.”² Samuel Rutherford, a Westminster divine of the mid-1600’s, during the best time of the Church of Scotland, defended the practice of ladies voting in ecclesiastical elections.

Does Scripture give ladies the right to vote for their own rulers in the elections of church officers? The question is scriptural, practical and perennial; and, as it deals with ‘rights,’ it sometimes incites fervor in those whom the question affects. M’Crie, in one of the best pieces history has provided on the subject, argued ‘no.’ The more well-known Rutherford, wrote, in a very unknown excerpt in the middle of a disorganized, 600 page polemical tome, ‘yes.’

In proceeding to sift the relevant material in order to reach a Biblical conclusion, Rutherford’s Presbyterianism will be used to critique M’Crie, then Rutherford’s position itself will be critiqued, and finally M’Crie’s position will be reevaluated, with (perhaps) an unexpected conclusion.

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² In his exemplary letter, ‘[On the Right of Females to Vote in the Election of Ministers and Elders](#)’, in *Miscellaneous Writings, Chiefly Historical* (Edinburgh, 1841), pp. 669-76.

Rutherford in Context

Rutherford argued for a page and a half against the head-of-household voting of the New England Independents, Richard Mather (1596-1669) and William Thompson (1595-1666).³ George Gillespie also mentioned that the Independents had this practice⁴ and M’Crie gives plausible documentation that, the largely Independent, John Owen advocated similarly.⁵

Rutherford gave three objections to their practice. The first was an *ad hominem* argument, on their own terms. The Independents’ established, in part, the right and power of the congregation to have all the power of the Keys of Church government on the principle that Paul in 1 Cor. 5⁶ was speaking to, and giving the power of excommunication to, every person in the congregation at the church in Corinth. If Paul was not speaking to every individual hearer in 1 Cor. 5 (as, according to the Independents, ladies did not have the right to vote in elections), then the foundation of Independency was undermined. Rutherford’s third argument was similar: If the right to vote in officer elections is a privilege and not a power (as the Independents state), then,

³ *The Due Right of Presbyteries, or, A Peaceable Plea for the Government of the Church of Scotland* (London, 1644), pp. 476-7. See pp. 23-4 of this article below. Independents held that all power of church government was rooted in the local congregation. Presbyterians, on the other hand, such as Rutherford, held that the root of all Church government was rooted in the presbytery, the regional over-seeing body of elders.

⁴ ‘And first it is objected, That this [elections by the people of God as opposed to the bishops of Rome] is a tenet of Anabaptists, Independents, and Separatists... Answer 2: Neither in this same point of elections do we homologate [agree] with them, who give to the collective body of the Church (women and children under age only excepted) the power of decisive vote and suffrage in elections, we give the vote only to the eldership or Church representative, so that they carry along with them the consent of the major or better part of the congregation.’ *Miscellaneous Questions* (Edinburgh, 1649), chapter 2, p. 24

⁵ ‘Dr. Owen, when speaking on this subject, very frequently, and evidently in the way of restriction, employs the word “fraternity.”’ ‘[On the Right of Females to Vote](#)’, p. 675

⁶ 1 Cor. 5:4-5, ‘In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.’

how can the congregation of itself confer the power of ruling upon their officers (this being a central tenet of Independency)?

Rutherford's second argument is the most important. He argued that the 'privilege' of voting belongs to the Body of Christ in common, to every member. As Christ died to purchase these privileges for his people, it cannot be denied to ladies, as 'there is neither male nor female... in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28).

Rutherford vs. M'Crie

M'Crie, in his model letter of principle mixed with humility and charity, gave two main scriptural arguments against ladies voting in ecclesiastical elections: (1) from ladies being prohibited to speak in worship services (1 Cor. 14:34-35),⁷ and (2) from ladies not being allowed to exercise authority over men in the Church (1 Tim. 2:11-12).⁸ The application of these scriptures to voting, he said, are to be taken in conjunction with the larger teaching of 1 Cor. 11:3-16 regarding a lady's natural subordination to her husband, especially as it is expressed in the Church.

To M'Crie's first argument, Rutherford agreed that women are not to speak in worship according to 1 Cor. 14:34-35, however ecclesiastical elections are not regularly worship services and are something common to 'human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules

⁷ See *Due Right*, p. 475 and other places.

⁸ 1 Tim. 2:10-11, 'Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.'

of the Word.’ (Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.6)⁹ Thus, ladies voting outside of the worship service does not come directly under the ban of 1 Cor. 14:34-35.

Election is not an Act of Ruling

To M’Crie’s second argument, Rutherford also agreed that women are not to rule in the Church.¹⁰ The Independents, believing that the power of ruling laid in the people, gave the congregation the vote to judge on numerous congregational affairs.¹¹ Rutherford argued that this is self-ruling and is contrary to the Biblical rule of elders.¹² Rutherford’s presbyterianism denied the Independent principle of self-rule at every point.¹³

In Rutherford’s Church of Scotland, the only vote the congregation had a right to, and exercised, was for the election of officers.¹⁴ The Scriptural principles urged for this practice were that (1) there is no other vote warranted in Scripture for the congregation, and (2) any further voting would be self-ruling, which is contrary to the rule of elders (presbyterianism).

⁹ Though one need not bring forth Biblical warrant for the practice of things indifferent and common to human society, for the Bible’s descriptive accounts of such civil elections, see: Deut. 1:13; Judg. 8:22; 1 Sam. 11:14-15; 2 Sam. 16:18; 17:14, etc.

¹⁰ *Due Right*, p. 38,40

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38. Yet, they did not allow ladies to vote in these congregational votes, probably because they agreed that ladies ought not to rule with men in the church. Congregational voting on the budget and many other matters is the practice of much of American Presbyterianism today. Such denominations usually let women rule along with men in these popular votes.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 40

¹³ For one example of this chronic and regulating point in Rutherford, see *A Peaceable and Temperate Plea for Paul’s Presbytery in Scotland* (1642), chapter 13, argument 4, p. 194 ff.

¹⁴ As it is today in Churches that follow in the same historic presbyterian practice, such as the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing).

The election of officers in presbyterianism, however, is not ruling.¹⁵ This is because, while, election is a necessary precondition to the ordination and installation of an officer, in Rutherford's words, 'election does not make a minister.'¹⁶ A nominated officer can turn down the congregation's call. Not only can the presbytery veto the congregation's choice,¹⁷ but the decisive choice and external call of the officer "consists in the presbyters' separation of a man for such a holy calling, as the Holy Ghost speaks [Acts 13:2-3].¹⁸ We find no Church-calling in all God's Word of sole election of the people, and therefore it cannot be the essential form of a right calling."¹⁹ Thus, the will of the congregation is not determinative, does not effect its own desire and hence it cannot be an act of power, authority or self-rule.²⁰

Rutherford argued for the distinction between election and ordination (which distinction the Independents did not adequately recognize).²¹ While the election of the people is a necessary precondition, ordination is the 'supernatural act' that confers the

¹⁵ If the election of officers were an act of ruling, then the heads-of-households, where such voting is practiced, would be ruling themselves, as opposed to the elders. Ladies voting in officer-elections can be no more an act of ruling than the votes of men. Thanks to Mrs. Jessica Jacobson for this insight, a Priscilla of our day (Acts 18:26) in the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), Mebane, North Carolina congregation.

¹⁶ *Due Right*, chapter 8, section 8, question 5

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 496

¹⁸ While the regulations for the ordination and installation of ruling elders and ministers are different in some particulars, this article is mainly referring, for the sake of simplicity, to ministers.

¹⁹ *Due Right*, 205

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 198-9. M'Crie says, 'In choosing office-bearers, the people seem necessarily to exercise a species of power, and their call seems, in so far, to have an authority over the individuals who are its objects, and to constitute in part what goes in ordinary cases to determine the call of God.' ('*On the Right of Females to Vote*,' p. 672) M'Crie is right that the people's election is a part of the outward call of the Church to the officer, but this outward call of the Church may or may not really reflect the call of God (one can be present without the other). Rutherford says: 'The people are not infallible in their choice and may refuse a man for a pastor whom God has called to be a pastor; election makes not one a pastor *in foro Dei* [in the court of God], for then he should be no pastor whom God has made a pastor because people out of ignorance or prejudice consent not to his ministry.' (*Due Right*, p. 205)

²¹ *Due Right*, ch. 8, sect. 8, pp. 201-2. Rutherford used Acts 6:1-6 as a Biblical example of this distinction (*Due Right*, pp. 198-9), a passage that will be very relevant later in this article.

power and office which makes a minister. Ordination is not by the people, but by their rulers, who hold Christ's authority in the Keys of Church government: the elders.²²

Neither church members, nor heads-of-households, can perform any act of ruling in the Church because church members and heads-of-households are not a prescribed ruling office in the Church, not being in the lists of officers in Eph. 4:11, 1 Cor. 12:28 or other places. Thus, while election is a way to discern the will of the people, the voting of ladies is not an exercise of ruling authority, and hence it does not come under the ban of 1 Tim. 2:11-12.

The Grounds of Voting

M'Crie says that the strength of his application of 1 Cor. 14:34-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-12 to the issue of voting lies in 'the grounds and reasons... which are laid down in these places, and in 1 Cor. 11:3-16.'²³ Numerous of these grounds and reasons do 'not solely

²² M'Crie makes an argument from extraordinary circumstances (where there are no elders or a constituted church) to there being an inherent power in the call of the people, a power that females would hence exercise in voting: 'I believe it is generally allowed that the choice and call of the people, in certain extraordinary cases, forms a valid and sufficient warrant for exercising the pastoral office.' (*On the Right*, p. 672). Rutherford allowed for a person extraordinarily called by God, where there is no regularly constituted church, to take up the office of pastor at the people's call, but does not allow it for a regularly constituted church: 'Distinction 1: There is one power of public preaching in a Church not constituted, and another in a Church constituted; gifted persons in extraordinary cases, where a Church is not planted, may publicly preach, but the case is otherwise in a Church constituted.' (*Due Right*, p. 272, see also p. 205 ff. with regard to the extraordinary calling of 'Luther, Calvin, and our blessed Reformers') One ought not, as M'Crie, to infer a power out of what is exceptional.

²³ 1 Cor. 11:3, 'But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.

4 Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head.

5 But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.

6 For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.

rest on apostolic prohibition,' but are 'founded on nature.' M'Crie specifies some of these grounds as ladies 'being under obedience' (1 Cor. 14:34), 'that the head of the woman is the man' (1 Cor. 11:3), ladies 'not usurping authority over the man' (1 Tim. 2:11-12) and also, societal 'custom' (see the Greek of 1 Cor. 11:14, often translated as 'nature'), 'which is in many cases the best expounder of those principles and feelings which are natural to man, and recognized by those who are unenlightened by divine revelation.' These principles of nature apply to and regulate, says M'Crie, the propriety of ladies voting in public ecclesiastical elections. Whatever legitimacy there may be in M'Crie's application of these natural principles to voting, Rutherford did not ground the right of ladies to vote in nature, but in the superadded, God-given right revealed in the Word,²⁴ as ladies are members of the redeemed Body of Christ. Thus, 'the liberty wherewith Christ has made women free cannot be taken away by any law of God from their sex.'²⁵ If society, according to nature, did not allow ladies to vote in the civil sphere, it would appear that Rutherford would still argue that ladies have an unmediated right of election in the Church.

7 For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man.

8 For the man is not of the woman: but the woman of the man.

9 Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.

10 For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels.

11 Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord.

12 For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God.

13 Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?

14 Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?

15 But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.

16 But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.'

²⁴ See *Due Right*, chapter 8, section 8, pp. 201-2

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 476-7. See pp. 23-4 of this article below.

Acts 6:1-6

Rutherford, in other places of *The Due Right*, implicitly grounds the right of every church member to vote in the scriptural examples of congregational election. Rutherford said, 'the people have God's right to choose,' citing: Acts 6:6; 14:23; 15:22; 1 Cor. 8:19 and 16:3.²⁶ Therefore, all the people of God have the right to make that election known by vote.

Acts 6 is the most detailed example in the Bible of an election of ecclesiastical officers. Rutherford cited this passage as a proof-text for congregational election,²⁷ and noted (elsewhere) that the Church at Jerusalem must have been composed of 'many thousands of men and women (Acts 2:42; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1,7; 21:22).'²⁸ See also Acts 1:13-14, where 'the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus' are mentioned at Jerusalem.

Rutherford was right that this passage is inclusive of ladies as church members. The apostle says in verse 3, 'Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report... whom we may appoint over this business.' (KJV) The Greek word here for 'brethren', *adelphoi*, has five or so different shades of meaning,²⁹ but is clearly being used here for a member of the church (inclusive of ladies), as it is also used in Mt. 12:50;

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 201-202. Rutherford said, 'the election of Mathias was by the common suffrages of the whole church (Acts 1:26).' (*Ibid.*, p. 77) Rutherford interpreted the giving forth of 'lots', not as the supernaturally decisive casting of lots by the apostles, but as the voting of the congregation.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 201-202

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 472-3

²⁹ The various meanings of *adelphos* are given by a standard Greek lexicon of the New Testament as: (1) a genetic, physical brother, (2) the disciples of Jesus or a religious community, a church member, (3) a fellow countryman, (4) a neighbor, (5) a person of very high rank being spoken to by a king. Bauer, Arndt & Gingrich, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd edition revised and augmented by Danker (University of Chicago Press, 1958). The second, third, and fourth meanings of the word, which are perhaps the most common meanings of the word, are inclusive of ladies. See also Joseph Thayer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Baker, 1977) on *adelphos*.

25:40; Mk. 3:35; Heb. 2:12,17; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 5:11, and many other places.³⁰ The scope of meaning for the English word ‘brethren’ was similar in the days of the King James Version and is still used by some in church circles today, though the word has largely lost its gender-inclusive meaning in broader culture.

While the apostles in Acts 6:3 speak to the whole congregation as ‘brethren’, they specifically distinguish that the congregation would pick out seven males (*andras*) as office bearers. When the apostles mean to speak of only males, they do, and if only the males were to elect the office-bearers, surely the apostles would have been careful to adequately convey this.

The Church of Scotland

Rutherford in *The Due Right* was self-consciously defending his beloved Scottish Church in minute detail against her opponents. The fuller subtitle of his work is, *A Peaceable Plea for the Government of the Church of Scotland*. In another work, also defending in detail the practice of the Church of Scotland, Rutherford gave a typical account of an officer’s election:

‘The presbytery and people meeting... after the sermon the pastor calls him [the nominated officer] up before the congregation... then the pastor asks the people’s consent, which they testify by their *keiro onia*, ‘the lifting up of their hands’ (as Acts 14:23), and the man must please the whole multitude (as Acts 6:5; 1:26).’³¹

³⁰ See also, Acts 9:30; 10:23; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 1:1; 16:12; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 6:23; Phil. 1:14; 2:25; Col. 1:1; 4:7,9; 1 Thess. 3:2; 1 Tim; 6:2, Philem., 1; 1 Pet. 5:12; 2 Pet. 3:15; Rev. 1:9; 12:10, and many other verses.

³¹ *A Peaceable and Temperate Plea for Paul’s Presbytery in Scotland (1642)*, ch. 20, 3rd Article, ‘Calling of Officers’

In discerning what Rutherford meant by 'the whole multitude' in the above quote, it should be noted that Rutherford argued from numerous scriptures that in Acts 6:5 (cited in the quote above) ladies were included in the Church at Jerusalem, that 'the people have God's right to choose,' and that ladies, being members of the Body of Christ, cannot be denied their right to vote.

George Gillespie, Rutherford's compatriot, in his reference to the Independents' practice of only allowing heads-of-households to vote,³² seemed to note it for the sake of distinction and uniqueness as something novel. When Gillespie defended the government of the Church of Scotland, he recorded: 'After the election of ruling elders, with the notice and consent of the whole church...'³³ Thus, the voting of ladies in elections for church officers was not only the view of Rutherford, but also appears (until more light comes forward) to have been the practice of the Church of Scotland during her 'best times.'³⁴

³² 'And first it is objected, That this [elections by the people of God as opposed to the bishops of Rome] is a tenet of Anabaptists, Independents, and Separatists... Answer 2: Neither in this same point of elections do we homologate [agree] with them, who give to the collective body of the Church (women and children under age only excepted) the power of decisive vote and suffrage in elections, we give the vote only to the eldership or Church representative, so that they carry along with them the consent of the major or better part of the congregation.' *Miscellaneous Questions*, chapter 2, p. 24

³³ *An Assertion of the Government of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1641), chapter 14, p. 104

³⁴ Who should elect church officers was a live and varied issue in the Church of Scotland during the mid-1600's. For a sketch of the struggle between congregational election vs. election by the local session's elders as their representatives, see William Wilson, *Defence of the Reformation-Principles of the Church of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1769) pp. 308-315. Note that throughout the sketch the phrase, 'the whole body of the faithful,' is used, but no hint is given of male-only voting or that of the heads-of-households. As to the question of when female voting changed from its probable allowance in the mid-1600's to its nearly complete absence shortly before the days of M'Crie in the early 1800's, there is very little to go on. The closest hint that this author has found, is in the reference of M'Crie himself on p. 675. M'Crie cites John Currie (1734), a Church of England minister who said that the Church of England and the Presbyterian and Independent dissenters were agreed in the matter of giving the electoral vote to the 'brotherhood' of the particular congregation since the 'Syncretism or Agreement' of 1690, at the time of the large scale changes involved in the Revolution Settlement. It is possible that the English Presbyterians (on the assumption that they shared the same view as Rutherford) compromised with the Independents at this time in removing the vote from the ladies. While Scotland's Church was under different terms than the English Church, there were great influences and changes during this period. Such a hypothesis (until further light is brought forth) would explain the difference of prevailing practices between Rutherford's day and that of M'Crie.

Rutherford Critiqued

Rutherford's position is not free from criticism. His argument hinges on two points: (1) Gal. 3:28 and there being no 'male nor female... in Christ Jesus', and (2) the Biblical proof-texts regarding the congregational election of officers.

Regarding Gal. 3:28, the context is: In being united to Christ by faith (v. 26), and baptized (v. 27), Christians are therefore heirs of the spiritual promise given to Abraham (v. 22, 29), in which spiritual promise and blessing there is no distinction of qualification or standing regarding nationality or sex (in contrast to some of the administrative differences of the Old Covenant, vv. 19, 23-24). As the spiritual benefits of the New Covenant are primarily in view (with some broadening of the outward administration of the Covenant), it is not clear that, upon the *prima facie* reading of this passage, a particular right of Church government is in view or that one could be derived solely from this verse. Without knowing what other egalitarian rights of polity (according to Rutherford) could legitimately be derived from this verse for Church members (Rutherford does not specify any others, and was opposed to most that are commonly affirmed today), it may seem partial, or an example of eisegesis, to select the voting of ladies as the only one.

Rutherford mentioned that the 'privilege' of the right of church members to elect their officers, was 'part of the liberty purchased by Christ [for his] Body.' Presumably Rutherford means that Christ purchased this right and blessing of Church membership in the atonement as a gift to his Church (Eph. 4:11-13), which privilege they did not have under the household of the Kingdom of Darkness. Without further elucidation from Rutherford, it is unclear how a church-member's right of voting for one's officers is grounded in the atonement, and it should be noted that Eph. 4:11 only speaks of the teaching and ruling offices of Church as being a gift from Christ in heaven, not any rights of those ruled as church-members.

The Biblical proof-texts for congregational election³⁵ may be the strongest exegetical argument that every member of the Church has the right to vote, though Rutherford only seems to assume this argument and does not press it explicitly. The Biblical examples of congregational election, though, are very ambiguous as to the manner of how it was executed. Even the clearest passage, Acts 6:3,5, only assumes that they did choose seven men as they were exhorted, and does not elucidate how it was done. If Rutherford was right, that Acts 1:26 refers to the congregational election of Matthias by ‘suffrage,’³⁶ then an even greater diversity of electoral means may have been allowed to discern the will of the congregation, as the Greek phrase denotes (and is usually translated), ‘by the casting of lots.’

While it is clear from the Biblical warrant for congregational election that the congregation as a congregation has the right of election, and that their consent is necessary to the installing of a minister, it cannot be particularly derived from the ambiguity of these passages that every church member has an inalienable right (and presumably obligation) to vote.

The Middle View

Thus, there is a third view,³⁷ in-between the alternatives of Scripture prescribing the voting of every Church member and Scripture prescribing the voting of heads-of-households. While the consent of the congregation, as a whole congregation (or the better part of it), is necessary in the election of officers, the particular methodology of discerning

³⁵ Rutherford cites: Acts 6:6; 14:23; 15:22; 1 Cor. 8:19 and 16:3. *Due Right*, pp. 201-2

³⁶ ‘The election of Mathias was by the common suffrages of the whole church (Acts 1:26).’ *Due Right*, p. 77

³⁷ Thanks to Elder Gregory Moek of First Orthodox Presbyterian Church of San Francisco who initially pointed this out to the author.

the will of the congregation is indifferent (as long as it is fair and agreed upon). This consent to one's political rulers (ecclesiastical or civil) is grounded in the nature of man being a rational being, and Scripture prescriptively upholds this natural right.³⁸ Thus the whole Body of Christ holds the right of election in common, though this does not necessitate that each member thereof has an individual vote, but only that they are represented in whatever form of electoral process is used. This third view will be argued: (1) from the ambiguity of the Biblical-proof texts, (2) from natural law, (3) from the distinction of common consent from individual voting, and (4) that ordination is the only act of authority and power (from Christ in heaven) that is distinctive to the Body of the Redeemed.

(1) One of the more specific passages relating to elections besides Acts 6, is Acts 14:23. It says: 'and when they had ordained them elders in every church...' The Greek word for 'ordained' (*keirotonesantes*) signifies a lifting up of the hand.³⁹ Most commentators on this verse, in attempting to explain what is meant, revert to the various methods of election that were used in civil society in the ancient world, and allow for a breadth of methodology.⁴⁰ To impose one prescribed method of election from this verse on all cultures and societies that the Church is sent into, not allowing for other principled forms of election by general equity, would be an undue over-narrowing of what lays behind this verse. Commentators, in fact, generally do not assert that scripture is limiting all ecclesiastical elections everywhere to be by the lifting up of hands (which almost no church does today), but, commentators, in seeking to preserve the moral principles involved, often fall back upon natural law.⁴¹

³⁸ That is to say, Special Revelation upholds the rights inherent in General Revelation.

³⁹ Most commentators take this to refer to the congregational vote though it can also be understood as referring to the apostles' lifting up their hands in ordaining the new elders, as in some presbyterian denominations.

⁴⁰ See especially Gillespie's discussion, *Miscellaneous Questions*, chapter 2, pp. 9-11.

⁴¹ Natural law refers to the designs and normative ethical precepts discerned in the natural order of God's creation. The phrases and concepts of natural law, the light of nature and similar expressions are being used in the same sense as they are used about a dozen times in the Westminster Confession of Faith. To see a full listing of these references, see the webpage [ReformedBooksOnline: The Westminster Standards on Natural Law](#).

(2) Rutherford argued in *Lex Rex, Question 2*, that consent to one's rulers is a natural right.⁴² This is due to man being a living, rational soul, made in the image of God, and to the naturally owed limitations upon all human authority due to our finite creaturehood, coupled with the possibility of error and abuse. That consent to one's rulers is a natural right, is why tyranny (whether it be in the state, church or otherwise) is so instinctively unnatural, wrong and hurtful. Tyranny goes against our very constitution and innate ethical convictions (Rom. 2:14-15), so much so that most societies find justification to throw off the prolonged tyranny of rulers who mercilessly tread over the popular consent of their people.⁴³ On the other side of the coin, who will deny that the consent of the ruled is an innate concept and morally approved blessing which ensures to make legal the union between the ruled and the ruler?

As civil government is grounded in nature (as Rutherford expounds),⁴⁴ elections are common to 'human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word.' (Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.6), and are descriptively recorded in the Bible as such (with some variation of detail) in Deut. 1:13; Judg. 8:22; 1 Sam. 11:14-15; 2 Sam. 16:18; 17:14, etc.⁴⁵

While Church government is (in contrast to civil government) grounded in the authority of Christ in heaven given ministerially to the collective body of earthly elders

⁴² In *Questions 4, 6 & 13*, he further argues this in regard to the rule of a king, and by inference, of other civil rulers. Thanks to Elder Moek for these references.

⁴³ The right of the people to throw off tyrants is a prominent thesis of Rutherford's *Lex Rex*.

⁴⁴ 'As domestic [family] society is by nature's instinct, so is civil society natural *in radice*, in the root, and voluntary *in modo*, in the manner of coalescing.' *Lex Rex* (Edinburgh, 1843), *Question 2, p. 1*

⁴⁵ Whereas the consent of the congregation does not make a Church-officer (and so ladies can vote in ecclesiastical elections), the popular civil election of a people, according to Rutherford, is determinative of, and does make a ruler by conferring the people's power upon that person. 'The power of creating a man a king is from the people.' 'Expressly Scripture says, that the people made the king, though under God: Judg. 9:6, 'The men of Sechem made Abimelech king;' 1 Sam. 11:15, 'And all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the Lord...' Rutherford also cites 2 Kings 10:5; 1 Chron. 12:38. *Lex Rex, question 4, pp. 6,7*. See the whole of the section. As civil elections are determinative, confer power and are acts of ruling, while Rutherford does not address whether ladies may vote in civil elections in *Lex Rex*, presumably, as women are not to rule with or over men by nature (1 Tim. 2:11-14), Rutherford would disallow ladies from voting in civil elections.

in his Church,⁴⁶ yet the natural rights of man are upheld in this scripturally revealed presbyterial government of the people of God. Special Revelation enforces General Revelation. Thus, many of the foundational principles of scriptural Church government (presbyterianism) have also been argued by historic writers to be found in and derived from natural law as well. And it is no coincidence that consent to rulers is found not only at the level of church members choosing elected officers, but it saturates presbyterianism at every level, beyond anything that could be proof-texted from Scripture, precisely because it is common to just government by the light of nature.

(3) The common consent of the congregation as a whole, and not a persistence upon the voting of every individual member, is all that Rutherford, the numerous witnesses of Church history that he quotes,⁴⁷ and presbyterians historically, have ever generally asserted from the Biblical evidence. George Gillespie began his chapter entitled, 'Of the Election of Pastors with the Congregation's Consent': 'The question is not... whether the whole collective body of the church ought to be assembled, and their voices severally asked in elections, for all may consent when none vote in elections but the representative body of the church... but the question is whether it be necessarily required to the right vocation of a pastor, that he be freely elected by the votes of the eldership, and with the consent (tacit or expressed) of the major or better part of the congregation, so that he be not obtruded *renitente et contradicente ecclesia* [in resistance and opposition to the church].'⁴⁸

M'Crie himself allowed that consent does not of itself imply a right to an individual vote:

'In my opinion, and so far as I have attended to the subject, the exclusion of women from an explicit choice or formal vote (for their consent or dissent must always be supposed, and there are many ways in which it may be ascertained or declared)...'⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Jn. 20:22-23; Matt 28:16,18-19; 16:18-19; Eph. 4:11, etc.

⁴⁷ *Due Right*, pp. 202-4

⁴⁸ *Miscellaneous Questions*, chapter 2

⁴⁹ 'On the Right of Females,' pp. 672-3

The late 1600's, influential Genevan professor, Francis Turretin,⁵⁰ in elucidating the general reformed orthodox viewpoint, wrote that, while the people fundamentally hold the right of election, yet election was formally to proceed from the elders, their representative rulers:

'Our opinion is that the right to call belongs to the church originally and radically, with whom Christ deposited it to be exercised; however [this is done] by the rulers in the name of the church...'⁵¹

This implies that each individual was not necessarily guaranteed a vote, as their rulers chose for them, though Turretin did allow the people to be part of election virtually by a necessary consent:

'Now although the form of the call and election may vary as to species by reason of places and persons and the mode of government (political as well as ecclesiastical); still it can be said that it belongs to the presbytery formally, as to trial, election and ordination... and to the people virtually, as to consent and willing admission. And thus the right to call always remains proper to the body of the church.'⁵²

Thus, as Turretin wrote, what the Bible strictly requires (only a necessary consent), allows for all the variations of form the call may take according to the differing places, persons and mode of government (civil and ecclesiastical) that may be present in a given society, as elections are common to human society.

(4) Thus, the only thing distinctive to the Body of the Redeemed in joining an officer to a congregation, is not the necessity of the consent of the people or the specific electoral process, but the power of ordination which comes from the authority of Christ

⁵⁰ Turretin (1623-1687) was a Swiss-Italian scholastic theologian at Geneva.

⁵¹ *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James Dennison (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997), vol. 3, p. 224

⁵² *Institutes*, p. 225

in heaven as ministerially held by the elders of the broader visible Church.⁵³ This power, as Rutherford says, is alone supernatural and makes the nominated person an officer. No other society in the world has the power and authority of ordination from Christ in heaven to make a Church-officer over God's redeemed people.

In summary: One need not ground the right of church members to the electoral process in the atonement, special revelation or even something distinctive to the Church, as such arguments appear to be strained. Rather, it is a common right natural to man with regard to their rulers, and is in this way prescribed and enforced by Scripture. All the people of God hold right of election in common as a body, though this does not entail of itself a specific right to an individual vote. A breadth of methodologies are allowed by general equity, the process being indifferent and not regulated in detail by scripture. Common sensibilities of justice and Christian prudence ought to govern it. In the wisdom of Christ (both Creator and Redeemer), the method of discerning the will of the congregation and the methodology of the process of election is wide enough to find itself in harmony with the natural customs of every nation (within the moral boundaries of the created order) that Christ sends his Gospel into (Matt 28:19-20).⁵⁴

The View of Thomas M'Crie

To any that read M'Crie's letter, the first half will seem distinctly different than the second half. The second half reaches the assured conclusion that the scriptural principles

⁵³ Even the external call of the church to an officer, distinguished from the superadded inward call of God, is common to any society calling an officer to serve them.

⁵⁴ 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations... teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.'

of 1 Cor. 14, 1 Tim. 2 and 1 Cor. 11, while not directly referring to voting, yet apply closely enough to it (in M'Crie's mind, though he 'may be wrong')⁵⁵ that M'Crie is 'opposed'⁵⁶ to ladies voting for their office-bearers in Scotland, where the practice, in his day (the early 1800's), was not commonly accepted. What may be surprising to some though, is that the first half of the letter, in laying the foundation for this conclusion, does not argue *jure divino*, from the infallible Law of God, but from the natural instincts of human societies as they apply broad scriptural principles to more specific particulars. The application of these principles (or others, which may reach the opposite conclusion) are, to some extent, culturally relative.

Thus, M'Crie's view was fundamentally our third middle view, that, the method of congregational election is grounded in nature and is morally indifferent within a society's accepted framework, being founded on various principles in both nature and Scripture. M'Crie says, that Paul:

'assigned... reasons founded on nature. It is generally allowed that when he refers to 'nature itself,' [1 Cor. 11:14] he means to include custom, which is in many cases the best expounder of those principles and feelings which are natural to man, and recognized by those who are unenlightened by divine revelation; and by the manner in which he appeals to it, the apostle teaches us that there is a regard due to such dictates even in what relates to the Church...'⁵⁷

Different societies have sometimes 'uniformly acted on a different principle,'⁵⁸ than that preferred by M'Crie. M'Crie considered every-member-voting to be 'plausible,'⁵⁹ and that where it has been commonly accepted by society it should continue to be practiced. M'Crie, in fact, would participate in it:

'I for one would have no objection to provision being made that females should be allowed to vote for office-bearers, in those congregations where

⁵⁵ 'On the Right of Females,' p. 673

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 670

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 673-4

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 670

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

they had hitherto enjoyed this privilege; and that if sent to moderate in any such congregation, I would not scruple to intimate that all the members were allowed to hold up their hands for or against the candidates.’⁶⁰

M’Crie’s hypothetical accommodation to every-member-voting was not simply due to a pragmatic concern, but was due to every-member-voting being ‘well-founded’:

‘[In] a congregation or society in which the right had been recognized, at least tacitly and by practice... I would think it my duty to continue the common practice, not only because it had been the custom, but also because I looked on it as well-founded.’⁶¹

Thus, if M’Crie had lived in Scotland during ‘her best times,’ that of the days of the Westminster Assembly, he would have participated in every-member-voting and would have considered it to be ‘well-founded.’

Conclusion

To summarize, it has been argued that: (1) The voting of ladies was defended and practiced during the best time of the Church of Scotland; (2) voting in elections for Church officers is not an act of ruling; (3) the grammar and context of Acts 6 does not exclude ladies; (4) the exegetical argument from ‘no male nor female’ (Gal. 3:28) and other proof-texts of congregational election for every-member-voting, grounded on church membership, is strained and inconclusive; (5) there is a third, middle-view in-between the alternatives of every-church-member voting and head-of-household voting; (6) the congregation’s consent to its rulers is necessary by natural law, and Scripture enforces

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

this natural right; (7) this is the substance of all that presbyterians have ever largely desired to maintain from the pertinent passages of Scripture; (8) the congregation holds this right of election in common, though this does not specifically stipulate that each member has the right of a particular vote; (9) the method of election in discerning the will of the congregation is not clearly prescribed by scripture and is hence indifferent; and (10) this was essentially the view of M’Crie. Thus, the election of officers, whether by the vote of every church member, the heads-of-households, the session of elders (in their representative capacity) or otherwise, is indifferent and adaptable.

One of the benefits of the viewpoint here sketched is its ecumenical and universal application to all cultures, tribes and nations that the Savior has told the Church to go into with the Gospel (Mt. 28:19-20). While all the moral elements of Christ’s Church-economy are to be preserved amongst God’s people wherever they are, this economy is wonderfully adapted to the various natural instincts of man, being harmonious with the natural, created order. As the puritans lauded, ‘Grace perfects nature.’

Rutherford and M’Crie had remarkably similar convictions. Both were Bible believing, divine-right Presbyterians, who thought that ladies partook of all the spiritual benefits of the New Covenant, though they ought not to speak in worship (1 Cor. 14:34,35) or have rule over men (1 Tim. 2:11-14), both were strongly grounded in the reformed understanding of natural law, and both were dearly committed to the principles of the Scottish reformation.⁶² Rutherford’s remarks on ladies voting, on the one hand, are surprisingly brief.⁶³ Often his polemical disputing was fast, and, sometimes, furious. M’Crie, on the other hand, was much more of a slow and sifting nature. In reading

⁶² Rutherford was a leader in the second reformation of Scotland (post-1638). M’Crie’s commitments to the principles of the same era hardly need to be documented, but to read them explicitly, see David Scott, *Annals and Statistics of the Original Secession Church: till its Disruption and Union with the Free Church of Scotland in 1852* (1886), p. 181

⁶³ They occur only in the context of the larger Independent debate which goes on for hundreds of pages. Rutherford, often, unfortunately, limited his remarks solely to refuting his opponents’ specific points. Thus, while you will not often find extended, balanced, positive expositions of the topics Rutherford addresses in *The Due Right*, gems (with great magnitude and significance) abound.

M'Crie's letter though, he shows himself unaware of the best arguments for ladies not being disqualified from voting, which arguments are only based upon the most stringent principles of historic presbyterianism. It is wondered whether, with time and further consideration, Rutherford and M'Crie, in sharing so many foundational presuppositions, could have come to agree in the middle?

Samuel Rutherford

The Due Right of Presbyteries ⁶⁴

pp. 476-77

Mr. Mather and Mr. Thompson [assert]:

“Governing power is only in the elders, 1 Cor. 12:28; Rom. 12:8; Heb. 13:17. The people have no power, but rather a liberty or privilege, which, when it is exercised about ordination, deposition or excommunication, it is of the whole community (or, in general), but not of all and every member in particular. Women for their sex, children for lack of discretion, are debarred.”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ [This work has been gratefully edited from the public domain [EEBO-TCP edition](#). Footnotes in [brackets] are those of Rev. Fentiman. Updated English, punctuation, formatting and minimal stylistic changes have been made in order to make the work easier to read. The specific version of this work is licensed under the very sharing-friendly [Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#). Please share this work in any godly way, shape, or form desired]

⁶⁵ Richard Mather and William Thompson, *A Modest and Brotherly Answer to Mr. Charles Herle's Book Against the Independency of Churches* (London, 1644), ch. 1, pp. 8-9 [Charles Herle (1597-1659), to whom Mather and Thompson are writing against, was a leading English presbyterian and moderator of the Westminster Assembly. His book against Independency was published the year before in 1643. Rutherford is answering Mather and Thompson in the same year their book was written.]

[Rutherford's] Answer:

1. If there be no governing power in women, nor any act at all in excommunication, you lose many arguments that you bring [from] 1 Cor. 5⁶⁶ to prove that all had a hand in excommunication, because:

1. Paul writes to all;
2. all were to mourn;⁶⁷
3. all were to forbear the company of the excommunicated men.⁶⁸

[If your thesis be true] Then Paul writes not to all saints at Corinth: not to women. And [consequently] women were not to mourn for the scandal, nor to forbear his company.

2. This privilege, being a part of the liberty purchased by Christ [for his] Body, it must be due to women. For the liberty, wherewith Christ has made women free, cannot be taken away by any law of God from their sex, except in Christ Jesus there be difference between Jew and Gentile, male and female [Gal. 3:28]. Nor is it removed because it is a power or authority, for the authors say it is 'no power, but a privilege.'

3. What privilege the people have in [the] ordination [of officers], to confer a ministry which they have neither formally nor virtually, I know not.

⁶⁶ [1 Cor. 5:4-5, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord Jesus."]

⁶⁷ [1 Cor. 5:2, "And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you."]

⁶⁸ [1 Cor. 5:6-7, "Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened."]

Thomas M'Crie

(The elder)

'On the Right of Females to Vote in the Election
of Ministers and Elders'

1822

From

Miscellaneous Writings, Chiefly Historical, 1841

pp. 669-76

Original Editorial Note

by his son

Thomas M'Crie

(The younger)

The following remarks on this subject occur in a letter written by our author in January 1822, to one of his brethren who consulted him on the occasion of a dissension in his congregation, arising from some females insisting on their right of voting; and they are added here from their having some connection with the subject of the foregoing pamphlet, as well as from the interest which the subject is exciting at this present time.

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On the Right of Females to Vote in the Election of Ministers and Elders

Everything which relates to rights, real or supposed, is calculated to excite a lively feeling of interest, and the passions eagerly enlist on the rumor of the least invasion of them. The feeling is peculiarly strong against encroachments alleged to be made in societies founded for the express purpose of vindicating injured rights, and asserting Christian privileges and liberty. And perhaps it is the more intense, when felt by those who are conscious of being placed, in other respects, in circumstances of inferiority and restraint, against which they dare not (if they were disposed) to complain.

In such cases, persons think they do well to be angry, and that they might expostulate even with a higher than man, in language somewhat similar to that of the grieved patriarch, — “Joseph is not, Simeon is not; and will ye take away Benjamin also!” Amidst the apathy prevailing in the land about religious rights, and the tameness with which the privilege of popular election has been surrendered by the great body of our countrymen, is there not a respect due to those who discover a different spirit, even when they may be wrong as to the particular instance in which they complain of being denuded of their rights, and when their jealousy may be unreasonable or extravagant?

It will easily occur to you, that the plea on the present occasion is plausible; and to those who have lived in societies in which it was recognized, and uniformly acted upon, I may say that it will appear to be a plea both incontrovertible and irresistible. You and your people who are of an opposite opinion, have only to conceive yourselves in their situation, and I have no doubt you will feel disposed to act towards them in that spirit of lenity and allowance to which their feelings are entitled. But I am taking up your time in

telling what you already know very well – which is easier than to tell you what you want to know.

When the question respecting the female right of vote was started at the meeting of the joint-committee,⁶⁹ I recollect of saying that, although my opinion was opposed to the claim, yet, if all other points of union were agreeably adjusted, I for one would have no objection to provision being made that females should be allowed to vote for office-bearers, in those congregations where they had hitherto enjoyed this privilege; and that if sent to moderate in any such congregation, I would not scruple to intimate that all the members were allowed to hold up their hands for or against the candidates.

Nor can I say that I have yet seen any reason for altering that opinion. But I consider that there is a wide difference between the case of a congregation or society in which the right had been recognized, at least tacitly and by practice, and the case of another congregation or society which had never recognized it, but had uniformly acted on a different principle. In the latter case, I would think it my duty to continue the common practice, not only because it had been the custom, but also because I looked on it as well-founded. And if any individuals should complain that they were denied their rights, I would say to them, “You are not denied any rights which were ever recognized in the body of which you are members; and provided you think that the right of election is too much circumscribed by its laws or usages, the least thing that is incumbent on you is, to wait until you can obtain a rectification of the supposed evil in a regular way, and, in the meantime, to show me and those whose province it is to authorize the alteration, that our present practice and mode of management is faulty and unscriptural.”

Provided such an address were in any degree effectual, and your complainants were disposed coolly to listen to it (which I think they ought to do), in that case there might be a propriety in your waving the merits of the question, in conversations with them, at least for a season, until any heat which may have been produced has evaporated.

⁶⁹ Of the [Original Burgher Synod](#) and the [Constitutional Presbytery](#) [of which M’Crie was a part of], who were at that time contemplating a union.

But I am much afraid this may be found impracticable, and that it will be necessary for you to examine the grounds of the claim, and bring forward the reasons for resisting it. There are some persons who are incapable of estimating forbearance, and if you decline engaging in argument with them, they straightway conclude you have nothing to say for yourself, and that your opinions are groundless, and your conduct indefensible. It is well if they do not conclude at once that you are conscious of this being the fact.

It will be felt as one difficulty on this subject, that you cannot assign the grounds of your procedure, in reference to the real merits of the question, without bringing forward topics which must be ungrateful to the ears and feelings of those who are already offended. How, for example, would they feel at hearing the translation of the following extract from a foreign writer [Gisbertus Voetius⁷⁰], who has adverted to the subject, which he introduces thus: ‘Question—Whether women constitute the Church as visible and instituted, and how? Answer—In a diminutive sense, and with some limitation.’⁷¹ Nor would they probably relish much better the conclusion to which that writer comes. After granting that they constitute the invisible Church equally as men, and also the visible Church in respect of common confederation, and all the common privileges and exercises of religion, public or private, so that in respect of grace, and all the means of grace, “there is neither male nor female, but all one in Christ;” he comes to say:

‘But as to the organic state and integrity of the Church, women do not so constitute it, as that the power of rule and jurisdiction belongs to the’*m*; either as to its common exercise, whether by votes and declaration of opinions, Act 14:23; 2 Cor. 8:19; and 1 Cor. 5:4; or by scrutiny, or by holding up the hand, or by vocal and outward acclamation; or as to its special exercise, which belongs to the ministers only and the Presbytery, not to the Christian people.’⁷²

⁷⁰ Voetius (1589-1676) was a significant Dutch minister and theological professor that played an important part at the synod of Dort (1618-9).

⁷¹ *Quaest. An et quomodo foeminae constituent ecclesiam visibilem et institutam? Resp. Diminute, et cum quadam limitatione.*

⁷² *Sed quod ad statum et integritatem ecclesiae organicam, non ita constituunt eam Foeminae ut penes illas sit potestas regiminis et jurisdictionis, quod ad executionem sive communem per suffragia et publicas sententiarum collationes, Acts 14:23; 2 Cor. 8:19; et 1 Cor 5:4; sive per scrutinium, sive per {GK}, sive per vocalem et externam acclamationem: sive specialem, quae solis ministris, et Presbyterio competit, non populo ecclesiastico.* Voetii, [Politicae Ecclesiasticae, vol. 1](#), p. 32

This author, as you will see, regards the calling or electing of church-officers as a part of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, which he distinguishes by the name of common; others, however, view the matter in a different light, although it is probable the difference lies chiefly in words. In choosing office-bearers, the people seem necessarily to exercise a species of power, and their call seems, in so far, to have an authority over the individuals who are its objects, and to constitute in part what goes in ordinary cases to determine the call of God. The whole appointment denominated in our older standard books, election, *vocatio ministrorum* [the calling of ministers], is, you know, a general term used by divines; and I believe it is generally allowed that the choice and call of the people, in certain extraordinary cases, forms a valid and sufficient warrant for exercising the pastoral office.

In my opinion, and so far as I have attended to the subject, the exclusion of women from an explicit choice or formal vote (for their consent or dissent must always be supposed, and there are many ways in which it may be ascertained or declared) rests on the apostolic prohibition, 1 Cor. 14:34-35;⁷³ 1 Tim 2:11-12;⁷⁴ taken in connection with the grounds and reasons of it, which are laid down in these places, and in 1 Cor. 11:3-16.⁷⁵ It

⁷³ ["Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church."]

⁷⁴ ["Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence."]

⁷⁵ [3 But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.

4 Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head.

5 But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.

6 For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.

7 For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man.

8 For the man is not of the woman: but the woman of the man.

9 Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.

10 For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels.

11 Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord.

12 For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God.

is true that the apostle does not speak directly of voting, and that public teaching is something different from it, but I think the considerations which he adduces are applicable to both.

I need not go over the particulars; you will easily perceive, by looking at them, how they strike me, at least, as applicable, whether my application of them be just or not. I may be wrong, but I confess 1 Cor. 11:3-16 appears to me to suggest ideas which it would be difficult to reconcile with women's taking an active part in the public management of ecclesiastical affairs, giving their voices, and influencing the determinations of the society, equally with the men, including their own husbands—and, indeed, in most instances taking the determination into their own hands; for, I suppose, in all our congregations, and even in all Dissenting congregations⁷⁶ (with perhaps a few exceptions), they form the decided majority in respect of numbers. How does this accord with their being under obedience, as says the law—asking their husbands at home—not usurping authority over the man—remembering that the woman was deceived—that the head of the woman is the man, even as the head of every man is Christ—that she is the glory or image of the man, and that even nature itself teaches that she should have her head veiled, in token of modesty, and in point of decorum, in the public assemblies of the Church?

The exclusion of women from teaching or exercising authority in the Church, does not solely rest on apostolic prohibition,—the practice was an irregularity before he prohibited it, and he assigned reasons for the restraint, and reasons founded on nature. It is generally allowed that when he refers to “nature itself,” he means to include custom, which is in many cases the best expounder of those principles and feelings which are

13 Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?

14 Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?

15 But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.

16 But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.”]

⁷⁶ [Dissenters were those persons and churches that were not part of the Church of Scotland. This included M'Crie's own denomination, the Seceders.]

natural to man, and recognized by those who are unenlightened by divine revelation; and by the manner in which he appeals to it, the apostle teaches us that there is a regard due to such dictates even in what relates to the Church; as we are taught by several places of the New Testament, that, from inadvertence or from other causes, Christians and Christian Churches may fall into opinions and practices, which those who had only nature's dim lamp to guide them avoided.

Now, among all nations (unless any would name the Amazons⁷⁷), and even among those who carried the principles of liberty to the greatest extent, both ancient and modern, women have been excluded, or rather have excluded themselves, from taking part in public managements, and particularly in voting for public officers and functionaries. Did the part which women took, or rather were instigated to take, during the heat of the Revolution in France,⁷⁸ or more lately among the radicals in England and Scotland, contribute either to the honor of the female character, or the credit of the cause in which they embarked? Is there not a danger of a similar evil from their interference in ecclesiastical elections, and of the cause of popular election suffering odium and being exposed to disrepute, although no great disturbance or excess should take place among us?

The silence of Scripture, and of ecclesiastical history, respecting the exercise of any such right in primitive times, is, in my opinion, of considerable weight. The author quoted above says, — 'That the woman should call or elect ministers of the Word, etc., neither the Word of God, nor the order of the Reformed Churches, permit.'⁷⁹ Another writer now before me expressly states, that women were not allowed to vote in Holland, even in those parishes where election was most popular and free. It is stated in the

⁷⁷ [Known classically for having lady rulers.]

⁷⁸ [[The French Revolution](#), 1789-99]

⁷⁹ *Ut mulier vocet aut eligat verbi ministros, etc., nec verbum Dei, nec ordo reformatarum ecclesiarum permittit.* [This statement needs to be qualified, as Samuel Rutherford argued for the voting of ladies and it is likely this was the practice of the Church of Scotland during the days of the Westminster Assembly.]

disputes between the Orthodox and Arminians,⁸⁰ in that country, previous to their coming to an open breach, that the Arminians, with the view of getting ministers planted who were of their views, had recourse to the unprecedented practice of procuring the subscriptions and votes of women.

Even among the sober part of the Independents,⁸¹ Brownists,⁸² and Anabaptists⁸³ in the 17th century, women were not admitted to vote; as you may see stated in Gillespie's *Miscellaneous Questions*, p. 24.⁸⁴ Dr. Owen,⁸⁵ when speaking on this subject, very frequently, and evidently in the way of restriction, employs the word "fraternity." It will not be pleaded, I suppose, that it was a practice for women to vote in the best times of the Church of Scotland.⁸⁶

And I am satisfied it was not the practice in the Secession⁸⁷ at the beginning. I thought I could refer you to a passage decisive of this in Wilson's *Defense*,⁸⁸ but on turning to the book, I cannot find it at present; it seems, however, to be implied in the expression

⁸⁰ [Arminians were named after James Arminius give dates. The Synod of Dort (1618-9) condemned their five points of: free-will, conditional election, general atonement, resistible grace and the falling away of the saints. The 'Orthodox' here, refer to the reformed churches in Holland.]

⁸¹ [Those who held to Independent Church government. M'Crie was a Presbyterian.]

⁸² [After [Robert Browne](#) (d. 1633), a separatist from the Church of England.]

⁸³ [Literally, 're-baptizers'. The [Anabaptists](#) did not recognize the baptism of the Roman Catholic Church, or infant baptism, and so would rebaptize their adherents. They also had numerous other extreme views and practices, including not taking vows, not paying taxes, etc.]

⁸⁴ ['And first it is objected, That this [elections by the people of God as opposed to the bishops of Rome] is a tenet of Anabaptists, Independents, and Separatists... Answer 2: Neither in this same point of elections do we homologate [agree] with them, who give to the collective body of the Church (women and children under age only excepted) the power of decisive vote and suffrage in elections, we give the vote only to the eldership or Church representative, so that they carry along with them the consent of the major or better part of the congregation.' *Miscellaneous Questions* (Edinburgh, 1649), chapter 2, p. 24

⁸⁵ [John Owen (1616-1683), an influential puritan, was an Independent.]

⁸⁶ [Samuel Rutherford, who self-consciously defended the practice of the Church of Scotland in 1644 in his *Due Right of Presbyteries*, pp. 476-477, defended the right of females to vote in ecclesiastical elections. See pp. 23-4 of this article above.]

⁸⁷ [Thomas M'Crie was of the [Scottish Seceder tradition](#), which had its origin in the secession from the Church of Scotland in 1733 due to patronage (the practice of civil town patrons enforcing their will in the election of officers against the congregation's consent), the first Church-split in Scottish history since the Revolution Settlement of 1690.]

⁸⁸ [William Wilson, *A Defence of the Reformation Principles of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1739) This is a history and defense of the Secession Church by one of the original seceders.]

of “calling every one of the congregation, man by man,” which occurs in p. 313 of my edition. The fact, however, may be considered as authenticated sufficiently by another publication of that period, referred to by Mr. Wilson with approbation, from which I shall copy an extract, as you may not have the book.

“They say, that Mr. Erskine⁸⁹ and his adherents have not to this day come to any agreement about it, viz., about who shall be the electors. But if, by his adherents, they mean such as stand up for the people’s right, then this is refused: for we and these reverend brethren are all of the same mind with the English Dissenters, who declared in that known Syncretism or Agreement, which they, to wit, the Presbyterians and Independents, entered into in 1690, where they give the right of election to the brotherhood of that particular church over which the candidate is to be set; or, which is the same, we are of the mind that this is the right of such men in the congregation as in the judgment of charity are meet for a communion-table.”⁹⁰

This book was written by Mr. Currie in 1734, and before he had any thought of writing against the Seceders.⁹¹

I am sensible that several of the topics to which I have alluded, even if you should approve them, are not of that kind which would be likely to make an impression on your complainants; but at your request I have put down what occurred to me.

⁸⁹ [[Ebenezer Erskine](#) (1680-1754) was one of the original seceders.]

⁹⁰ [John Currie, *The Search: or, An Enquiry into the Conduct of the Author of the Modest and Humble Inquiry* (Edinburgh, 1734), p. 220. John Currie (1679-1765) was a Church of England minister. The Dissenters were those who remained outside the Church of England. In the [Glorious Revolution of 1689](#), William of Orange of the Netherlands became king of England. The Revolution Settlement of 1690 defined how the State and Church would relate together. Specifically, it was the beginning of the era of [toleration](#), where separate denominations from the Church of England were officially allowed in the land without further penalties. According to Currie there was an agreement at this time between the dissenting English Presbyterians and Independents relating, amongst other things, to who should vote in officer elections. Currie is saying that, while Rev. Erskine of the Seceders and his followers had not determined who should vote in officer elections (the choice was probably between the elders of the session or presbytery and the congregation) in their two years of secession, the Church of England and the Presbyterian and Independent dissenters had been legally united that it should be the ‘fraternity’ of the local congregation since 1690.]

⁹¹ [Currie, although initially having a very high esteem of the Seceders, would become one of their fiercest critics, specifically arguing that they had no right to secede.]

The End