

Ladies have the Right to Vote in Ecclesiastical Elections

Samuel Rutherford

1644

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Introduction

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Thomas M’Crie, the rightly renowned Scottish historian of the Covenanters, wrote, “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 Below, Samuel Rutherford, the Westminster divine, defends the practice, during the best times of the Church of Scotland,³ of ladies voting in ecclesiastical elections.

Rutherford argues in this excerpt for a page and a half against the New England Independents, Richard Mather (1596-1669) and William Thompson (1595-1666), whose practice it was to have head-of-household voting. Gillespie mentions the same regarding the Independents⁴ and M’Crie gives plausible documentation that the largely Independent John Owen advocated similarly.⁵

Rutherford gives three objections to the head-of-household voting of the Independents. The first is an *ad hominem argument*, on their own terms. The Independents’ established the right and power of the congregation⁶ to ordain their own officers on the principle that Paul in 1 Cor. 5 was speaking to, and giving the power of

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

³ Rutherford and George Gillespie were the leading defenders of the ecclesiastical polity of the Church of Scotland during their time in the mid-1600’s. Rutherford was self-consciously defending every point of his Scottish Church against opponents in his *Due Right of Presbyteries*. The fuller subtitle of the work is *Or, A Peaceable Plea for the Government of the Church of Scotland*.

⁴ *Miscellaneous Questions*, Ch. 2, p. 24

⁵ ‘[On the Right of Females to Vote](#)’, pp. 675

⁶ As opposed to a presbytery, which the Independents denied the existence of.

excommunication (and hence, ordination) to, every person. If Paul was not speaking to every individual hearer (as ladies, according to the Independents, do not have the right to vote in elections), then the foundation of Independency is undermined. The third argument is similar. If the right to vote is a privilege and not a power (as the Independents state), then 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 argues 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).

M'Crie, in his model letter of principle mixed with humility and charity, gives 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), and (2) from ladies not being allowed to exercise authority over men in the Church (1 Tim. 2:11-12). The application of these scriptures to voting, he says, 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, it should be noted that ecclesiastical elections are not regularly worship services and are something in common with the ordinary elections of human society. Thus ladies voting outside of the worship service does not come directly under the ban of 1 Cor. 14:34-35.

To M'Crie's second argument, Rutherford denies that a lady voting is an exercise of ruling authority, and hence the voting of ladies does not come under the ban of 1 Tim. 2:11-12. Rutherford argues in *Due Right, ch. 8, sect. 8*, pp. 201-2 for the distinction between election and ordination (which the Independents did not recognize). While ordination (the conferring of office and power to make an officer) comes from the elders, election

(the choice of one's rulers) is common to the people.⁷ If all the people of God have the right of election, as Rutherford affirms, then ladies are able to vote for their rulers. Choosing one's rulers, by definition, is not an act of ruling. If it were an act of ruling, then the people of God would be self-ruled in this respect. Rutherford's presbyterianism denies the Independent principle of self-rule at every point.⁸

M'Crie says that the strength of his applications 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.'" Thus, numerous of these grounds and reasons do 'not solely rest on apostolic prohibition,' but are 'founded on nature.' M'Crie specifies some of these grounds as 'being under obedience', 'that the head of the woman is the man', and also, societal '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.' These principles of nature apply to and regulate the propriety of ladies voting in public ecclesiastical elections. Whatever legitimacy there may be in this, Rutherford does not ground the right of ladies to vote in nature, but in the superadded, God-given right revealed in the Word,⁹ as ladies are members of the Body of Christ. 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 Rutherford cites Acts 6:6; 14:23; 15:22; 1 Cor. 8:19 and 16:3.

⁸ See *A Peaceable and Temperate Plea for Paul's Presbytery in Scotland* (1642), chapter 13, argument 4, p. 194 ff. for one example of many of this.

⁹ See *Due Right*, chapter 8, section 8, pp. 201-2

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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.”¹⁰

[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. 5¹¹ to prove that all had a hand in excommunication, because:

¹⁰ 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 [Thomas Herle (1598-1659), 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.]

¹¹ [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.”]

1. Paul writes to all;
2. all were to mourn;¹²
3. all were to forbear the company of the excommunicated men.¹³

[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.

The End

¹² [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."]

¹³ [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."]