

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

1822

Thomas M'Crie

(the elder)

1772-1835

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For an analysis of M'Crie's letter and a comparison of it with Samuel Rutherford's argument for the voting of ladies in the elections of Church officers, see Rev. Travis Fentiman's, '[An Analysis of Rutherford and M'Crie on whether Ladies have the Right to Vote in the Election of Church Officers](#),' 2015, 20 pages.

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,¹ 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.

¹ 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 Voetius²], 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.’³ 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.’⁴

² Voetius (1589-1676) was a significant Dutch minister and theological professor that played an important part at the synod of Dort (1618-9).

³ *Quaest. An et quomodo foeminae constituent ecclesiam visibilem et institutam? Resp. Diminute, et cum quadam limitatione.*

⁴ *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;⁵ 1 Tim 2:11-12;⁶ taken in connection with the grounds and reasons of it, which are laid down in these places, and in 1 Cor. 11:3-16.⁷ It

⁵ ["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."]

⁶ ["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."]

⁷ [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.

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

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 congregations⁸ (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 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

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.”]

⁸ [Dissenters were those persons and churches that were not part of the Church of Scotland. This included M'Crie's own denomination, the Seceders.]

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 Amazons⁹), 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,¹⁰ 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.’¹¹ 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 disputes between the Orthodox and Arminians,¹² in that country, previous to their

⁹ [Known classically for having lady rulers.]

¹⁰ [[The French Revolution](#), 1789-99]

¹¹ *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. See Rev. Travis Fentiman, ‘[An Analysis of Rutherford and M’Crie on whether Ladies have the Right to Vote in the Election of Church Officers](#),’ 2015, 20 pages.]

¹² [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

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,¹³ Brownists,¹⁴ and Anabaptists¹⁵ in the 17th century, women were not admitted to vote; as you may see stated in Gillespie's *Miscellaneous Questions*, p. 24.¹⁶ Dr. Owen,¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

And I am satisfied it was not the practice in the Secession¹⁹ at the beginning. I thought I could refer you to a passage decisive of this in Wilson's *Defense*,²⁰ but on turning to the book, I cannot find it at present; it seems, however, to be implied in the expression 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

and the falling away of the saints. The 'Orthodox' here, refer to the reformed churches in Holland.]

¹³ [Those who held to Independent Church government. M'Crie was a Presbyterian.]

¹⁴ [After [Robert Browne](#) (d. 1633), a separatist from the Church of England.]

¹⁵ [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.]

¹⁶ ['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

¹⁷ [John Owen (1616-1683), an influential puritan, was an Independent.]

¹⁸ [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 Rev. Travis Fentiman, '[An Analysis of Rutherford and M'Crie on whether Ladies have the Right to Vote in the Election of Church Officers](#),' 2015, 20 pages.]

¹⁹ [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.]

²⁰ [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.]

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. Erskine²¹ 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.”²²

This book was written by Mr. Currie in 1734, and before he had any thought of writing against the Seceders.²³

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.

The End

²¹ [[Ebenezer Erskine](#) (1680-1754) was one of the original seceders.]

²² [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.]

²³ [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.]