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“Thomas Witherow was a nineteenth-century Irish Presbyterian minister and professor whose contribution to Reformed theology has benefitted the church far beyond the shores of Ireland and continues to be relevant for the contemporary church. In an age when many people have been abused and hurt by bad or dysfunctional church government, Witherow’s work on ecclesiology is an important reminder of how good church government is a critical part of Christian discipleship. When properly implemented, it enables the church’s members to pursue a fruitful Christian life, to pray better for others, and to serve the church most effectively. Above all, Witherow’s work gives Christians a deep appreciation for the wisdom and glory of the church’s Head and King, Jesus Christ. As the recently retired principal of the same theological college that Witherow served with such eminence, I am delighted to commend the work of my godly predecessor.”

—STAFFORD CARSON, Principal (Retired), Union Theological College

“Jonny Gibson introduces us to Thomas Witherow, an Irish Presbyterian who continues to speak on doctrines that have too often been side-lined as ‘not essential for salvation.’ But non-essential is not the same as unimportant. The Bible teaches extensively on the topics of polity, baptism and Sabbath, and that should be sufficient reason for us to be informed about them. This book is a clear and compelling resource that will inform, and maybe even convince, its readers of Presbyterian distinctives.”

—IAN SMITH, Principal, Christ College, Sydney

“In a day where there is so much confusion about the structures within which God has ordained believers to live out their Christian lives, we need wise guides. Enter Thomas Witherow! Witherow was deeply concerned that God’s people know that God has provided sound wisdom for life in this world. After a brilliant, brief biography, Witherow himself shares his biblical wisdom about polity, baptism, and Sabbath in ways that encourage us to walk in these tested paths. I am so grateful to Jonny Gibson for bringing these wise words of Witherow to the attention of Christians around the world!”

—SEAN MICHAEL LUCAS, Chancellor’s Professor of Church History, Reformed Theological Seminary

“Long before I ever sampled James Bannerman’s *Church of Christ*—that beefy main entrée of Scottish Presbyterianism—Thomas Witherow’s *Apostolic Church* was the *hor d’oeuvre*, which first awakened my scriptural palate to the doctrine of the church. Some in his day (and in ours) might style such doctrine as ‘non-essential,’ which Witherow thought could too easily lapse into meaning ‘unimportant.’ He countered that all biblical doctrines are ‘essential’ to some ‘wise and important end.’ So he seeks to prove it. His inductive method is simple, yet clever. His goal is sincere, yet ambitious: he aims to make any ‘Presbyterian by name’ a ‘Presbyterian by conviction.’ So if you are not one, be warned: Witherow may whet your appetite and lure you in, just like he did to me. True doctrine tastes good.”

—A. CRAIG TROXEL, Professor of Practical Theology,
Westminster Seminary California

“It is a great pleasure for me warmly to commend this new work by Jonny Gibson. Thomas Witherow’s name ought to be better known than it is. His brief works on church polity, baptism and Sabbath, are written with admirable clarity and a generous gospel spirit. In an age when Christianity is being seduced by the shallow mantras of modernity, reading Witherow will help to recalibrate your thinking on truths that belong to the heart of the Christian faith and the health of the Christian church. The engaging introductory biography introduces us to a man who used the gifts and passions the Lord entrusted to him to serve the cause of the gospel in his homeland and beyond.”

—IAN HAMILTON, Professor of Historical Theology,
Westminster Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“To understand how the church is ordered according to Scripture, how membership within her ranks is signified and sealed by baptism, and how we should sanctify the Lord’s Day to the praise and glory of God are three of the great needs of the church in our time. These three short books by Thomas Witherow, newly edited and accompanied by an enlightening biography by Jonny Gibson, help to supply that lack admirably. Here is an account of a thoroughly biblical Presbyterianism from a previous generation that will serve future generations.”

—DAVID STRAIN, Minister of First Presbyterian Church,
Jackson

“Twenty-five years ago, an elderly Anglican minister placed a copy of Thomas Witherow’s *The Apostolic Church: Which Is It?* in my hands, and whispered, ‘Biblically, there is no answer to Presbyterianism!’ That book introduced me to the possibility that—and a theological world in which—profound devotion and submission to God’s Word could be combined with crystal clarity of thought. In an age where Christian faith has been reduced by non-Christians and Christians alike to private acceptance of just a few key doctrines, Witherow’s conviction that Scripture speaks to the whole of life, and the whole of human society, is even more important than it was in his own day. This is a fine introduction to the man and his work.”

—MATTHEW ROBERTS, Minister of Trinity Church, York

“In these pages Thomas Witherow makes the case—rather convincingly, I must say—that confessional Presbyterianism is biblical Christianity come into its own. Although written in the mid-nineteenth century, the Irish pastor’s spirited survey of polity, baptism, and the Christian Sabbath is surprisingly accessible for modern readers. It serves as a clarion call to practice true and consistent Presbyterianism in our churches. Read this book and you will not only better understand the distinctives of the Presbyterian tradition—you will also cherish them. This volume will be compulsory reading for present and future officers in my church. I cannot recommend it highly enough.”

—JON D. PAYNE, Senior Pastor, Christ Church Presbyterian,
Charleston

“I am delighted that Jonny Gibson is making available for a new generation some of the chief works of the great Irish Presbyterian Thomas Witherow. Some decades ago, one of my sons was working his way through the issue of church government and wondered why we should be Presbyterian rather than hierarchical as in Episcopacy (Anglicanism). I sent him to Witherow, and that fully satisfied the issue for him! May these reprinted volumes of rich historical and biblical theology help many more seekers in years to come. Witherow’s works are marked by eminent fairness and good sense.”

—DOUGLAS KELLY, Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology,
Reformed Theological Seminary

“Given the unity of the church across time, those concerned for its present wellbeing would do well to avail themselves of helpful resources from its past as they look toward its future. The works of Thomas Witherow reprinted in this volume provide one such resource. The biography of Witherow by Jonny Gibson provides an instructive and interesting bonus.”

—RICHARD B. GAFFIN, JR., Distinguished Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

“I had not met Thomas Witherow before reading Jonny Gibson’s account, then these three pieces from his own pen. The biography has just the right mix of detail and pace for an informative introduction to the man. Though they were written a long time ago, Witherow’s pieces on church government, baptism, and the Sabbath are all highly pertinent to our own times. The opening of *The Apostolic Church* is stunningly contemporary: Witherow could be speaking of our own day when he warns against confusing something being secondary with it being unimportant, or when he challenges those who hold that Scripture does not teach a form of church government. The moments of striking relevance continue through all three pieces, right up to the way in which we ourselves see the sad fulfilment of his warnings about the ultimate consequences of rejecting the Sabbath day. He writes with humor too: I don’t think I have ever before laughed aloud while reading a book on baptism (I’m not sure a baptist would find it quite as funny, but engage it he should). These works are so accessible, clear, and lively that I envisage enthusiastically handing this book to friends who ask about the biblical and Presbyterian position on these three topics. I am glad to have been introduced to Thomas Witherow.”

—GARRY WILLIAMS, Director, The Pastors’ Academy, London

“Though Presbyterian Christianity holds to many doctrines shared by other branches of the faith, three doctrines especially distinguish Presbyterianism: covenantal infant baptism, the rule of the church by its elders assembled in presbytery, and the keeping of the Lord’s Day as the Christian Sabbath. Thomas Witherow was an ardent defender of these doctrines, and his competent, Scripture-based writings, which were very popular then, will be warmly welcomed today

in a modernized text by Presbyterians and others who desire to understand the reasons for their beliefs. The cherry that sits on top of these riches is a new, fascinating biography of Witherow himself, written by the able editor of this valuable volume, Jonny Gibson. Highly recommended!”

—JOEL R. BEEKE, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“With great pleasure, I recommend *I Will Build My Church*. I have only read the first of Witherow’s three treatises, *The Apostolic Church: Which Is It?* I was introduced to Witherow’s book in seminary in the late 1960’s and it has been a valuable resource throughout my ministry. I require my students at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary to read it. The treatise is a well-written statement of Scripture’s instruction on church government. Obviously, the three topics addressed in *I Will Build My Church* are controversial; however, Witherow deals with them in a gentle, persuasive manner. His approach is summarized by the quotation from the frontispiece of the book: ‘There is such a thing as being a Presbyterian without being a Christian, and it is possible to be a Christian without being a Presbyterian. Depend upon it, it is best to be both.’ This book will strengthen the commitment of Presbyterians and be useful in helping other Christians to understand our position.”

—JOEY PIPA, President Emeritus, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

I WILL BUILD
MY CHURCH

*Selected Writings on Church Polity,
Baptism, and the Sabbath*

THOMAS WITHEROW

Edited by JONATHAN GIBSON

Foreword by SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

WSP WESTMINSTER
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*I Will Build My Church:
Selected Writings on Church Polity, Baptism, and the Sabbath*

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CONTENTS

| | | |
|--|--------|-----|
| Foreword by Sinclair B. Ferguson | xix | |
| Introduction | xxiii | |
| Acknowledgments. | xxix | |
| A Note on the Text | xxxiii | |
| PART I: A Biography of Thomas Witherow | | |
| <i>A Prince of Irish Presbyterianism:</i> | | |
| <i>The Life and Work of Thomas Witherow</i> | 1 | |
| PART II: The Presbyterian Distinctives of Thomas Witherow. | | 79 |
| <i>The Apostolic Church</i> | 81 | |
| <i>Scriptural Baptism</i> | 153 | |
| <i>The Sabbath</i> | 215 | |
| Appendix A: A Chronology of Thomas Witherow's Life | | 255 |
| Appendix B: A List of Thomas Witherow's Writings | | 257 |
| Appendix C: A Brief Biographical Sketch of | | |
| James M. Witherow, M.A., D.D. | 263 | |
| Index of Subjects and Names | | 265 |
| Index of Scripture References | | 275 |

FOREWORD

You will probably search most dictionaries of Christian history and biography in vain if you are looking for the name Thomas Witherow.

Perhaps Witherow's time and place told against him. For his time coincided with the halcyon days of Presbyterianism when theological giants such as Thomas Chalmers and William Cunningham in Scotland, and Archibald Alexander and Charles Hodge in the United States, were the names on people's lips. And his place was the Province of Ulster—but a small part of the Lord's vineyard. Nor did Witherow leave behind a *magnum opus* that would become required reading for generations of theological students and lead to it being quoted from the pulpits of the English-speaking world.

Nevertheless, Thomas Witherow was far from being an insubstantial figure. Indeed, despite his relative neglect by dictionaries of the Christian church, the editors of both editions of the great *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* regarded him as sufficiently significant to merit an article on his life. And rightly so, for he was a force to be reckoned with during the second half of the nineteenth century.

We can be grateful, therefore, to Jonny Gibson for his labor of love in bringing together in one volume the three brief studies for which Thomas Witherow was probably best known. Even more so because he has made his own substantial contribution to these pages by providing an account of Witherow's life and times.

The themes of the three works republished here are Presbyterian polity, paedobaptism, and Sabbath observance. A simple listing of them is a like a theological version of the Rorschach Inkblot test. What do you see?

Of course, Rorschach's inkblots hardly provided the best objective, verifiable, scientific method for analyzing someone's personality; a bit like the practice in my childhood days of reading the tea leaves left in the bottom after a cup (not mug!) of tea (properly made!) had been drunk. But the different reactions to, and what different people saw in, the tea leaves could nevertheless tell you something about the way they saw things.

The trilogy of *Presbyterian polity*, *paedobaptism*, and *Sabbath observance* all have something in common; in fact, more than one thing. Each of them is likely to produce a reaction. It may appear to be an objective reaction, saying something about the topic itself. But it will almost certainly tell us something about the respondent as well. Is the reaction, “Love it!” Or, perhaps, “Legalism!”? Is it, “That’s something I need to think about and study more”? Or might it be, “I don’t want to think about that”? Or perhaps it is, “None of these things matter. What really matters is the gospel.”

Thomas Witherow did not regard how we think about any of these three subjects as essential to salvation. But he was not altogether being tongue-in-cheek when he expressed the axiom which Jonny Gibson quotes in the first pages of this book: “There is such a thing as being a Presbyterian without being a Christian, and it is possible to be a Christian without being a Presbyterian. Depend upon it, it is best to be both.”

But why would he think that? It is here that we see that the themes of Witherow’s trilogy have something else in common: they all help to provide biblical answers to the question, “How does God want us to live and regulate our lives?” Our church life? Our family life? Our weekly life? Witherow believed that the biblical answers to these three questions are: by belonging to and benefitting from a church pastored by elders, which enjoys communion with other congregations; by developing a view of our family set within the context of God’s covenant promises; by living each week in a steady rhythm of rest and work that not only gives us the blessing of one day’s rest in seven but also helps to recalibrate our whole life to the risen Lord Jesus. When these three elements are present a measure of harmony is restored to them and stability and simplicity become hallmarks of our Christian living.

So, while each of Witherow’s works has a polemical context—since Presbyterian polity, paedobaptism, and Sabbath observance were all under siege of one kind or another—his ultimate goal is not out-arguing opposing views. Rather, we should think instead of the polemical element as necessary surgery, so that a pattern of health might be allowed to develop in our church, family, and personal lives.

Thomas Witherow was convinced that in each of these areas he was simply expounding the teaching of Scripture. In its very nature, therefore, his exposition is intended to teach us clearly, to convict us

if we are guilty of wrong thinking, or simply indifferent to right thinking, and to establish healthier views and practices in our lives, so that they might be increasingly shaped to the image of our Lord Jesus. For, after all, the church to which the Savior belonged was elder led; the family into which he was born was a covenant family; and the rhythm of his whole life was one of work and rest.

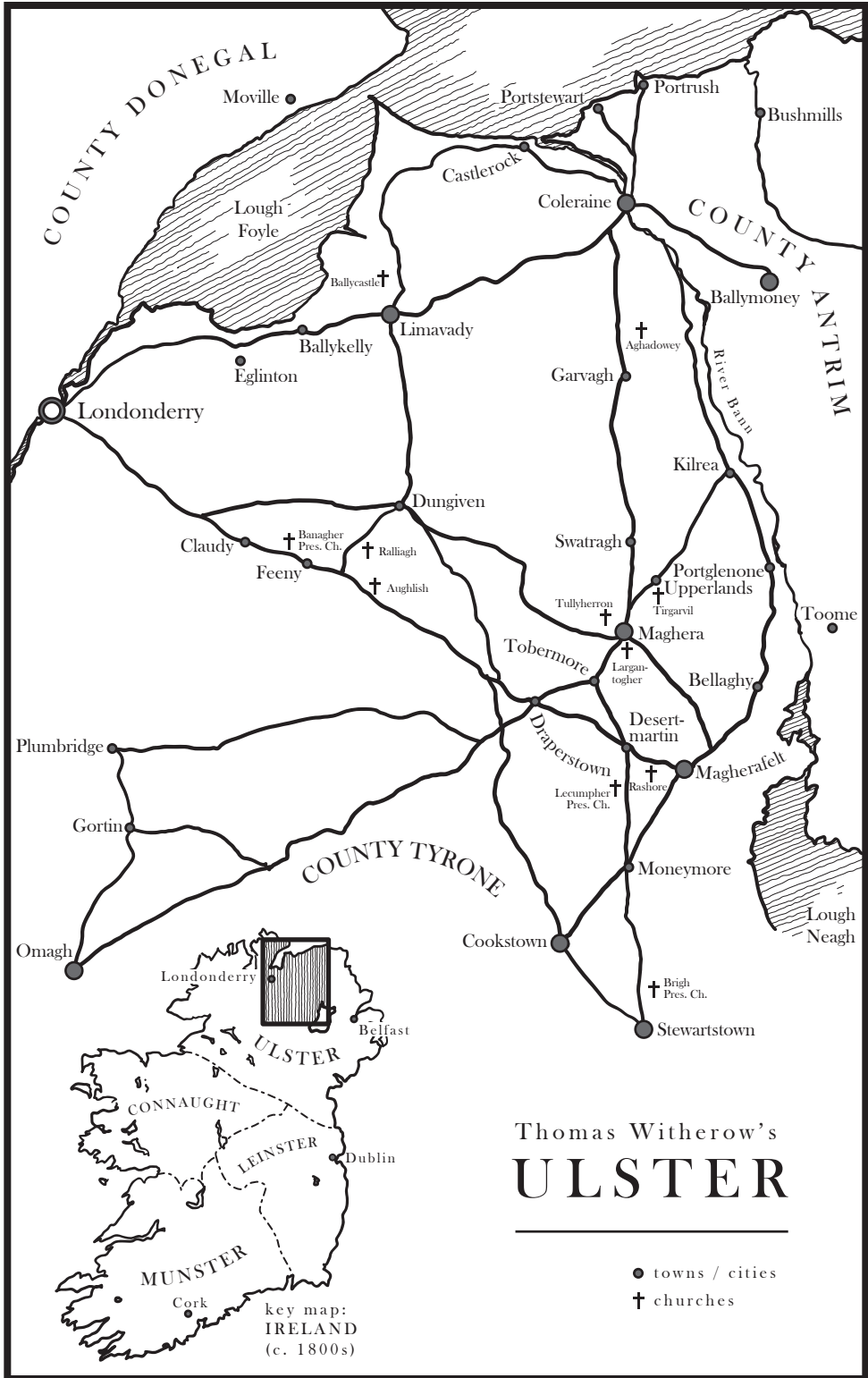
Here then is a volume combining biography and theology. It informs our doctrinal thinking and should strengthen our Christian living. Jonny Gibson has surely served us all well by bringing to a wider contemporary audience the life story and the written work of Thomas Witherow.

Sinclair B. Ferguson
Visiting Professor of Systematic Theology
Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

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A PRINCE OF IRISH
PRESBYTERIANISM
The Life and Work of Thomas Witherow

JONATHAN GIBSON



CONTENTS

| | | |
|----|--|----|
| 1 | “A Prince Has Fallen”: Introduction to Thomas Witherow (1890) | 9 |
| 2 | “Hugh Witherow of Aughlish”: Family Background and Birth (1787–1824) | 12 |
| 3 | “The Happiest Days of My Life”: From Hedge School to Classical School (1824–1838) | 14 |
| 4 | “Stranger in a Strange Town”: First Year in Belfast (1838–1839) | 16 |
| 5 | “A Seminary of Arianism”: Belfast Academical Institution (1839) | 19 |
| 6 | “Intellectual Indolence at Inst”: College Years (1839–1842) | 24 |
| 7 | “New Turn in Religious Feelings”: Theological Studies and Conversion (1842–1843) | 28 |
| 8 | “Solace and Delight”: Sojourn in Edinburgh (1843–1844) | 32 |
| 9 | “Woe to Me If I Do Not Preach the Gospel”: From Probation to Ordination (1845) | 35 |
| 10 | “Labor Not in Vain”: Early Ministry in Maghera (1845–1852) | 38 |
| 11 | “Humble Study and Pleasant Home”: Writing and Marriage (1853–1859) | 43 |
| 12 | “Year of Grace and Anguish of Death”: Latter Years in Maghera (1859–1865) | 51 |
| 13 | “From Stormy Ocean to Land-Locked Bay”: Early Years at Magee College, Derry (1865–1877) | 60 |
| 14 | “The Most Trying and Momentous Year”: Moderatorship and Bereavement (1878–1879) | 68 |
| 15 | “Worthy of Double Honor”: Literature and Licentiate (1879–1888) | 72 |
| 16 | “The Heavenly Home”: Sad Decline and Happy Reunion (1888–1890) | 76 |

“A Prince Has Fallen”

Introduction to Thomas Witherow (1890)

“A prince and a great man has fallen in our Presbyterian Israel.”¹ So wrote *The Witness* newspaper in 1890 following the death of Thomas Witherow on Saturday, January 25. The obituary stated that Witherow’s death was “a very serious loss to the cause of Presbyterianism and to everything it represents.” It continued: “Few men will be more or longer missed than Dr. Witherow, few deaths make such a void as his, few lives have been so fructuous in good and glorified by hard, faithful work; he was a great teacher, a ripe scholar, a stimulating preacher and a most capable professor.”² The *Derry Standard* commented that the name Witherow was “known and revered in every quarter of the globe where Presbyterianism has a footing,”³ while the *Londonderry Sentinel* noted that, “In his death the Presbyterian Church has lost one of its ablest theologians and controversialists and the Magee College a learned and indefatigable teacher.”⁴

Thomas Witherow was born into the fold of Irish Presbyterianism during the Arian controversy of the 1820s. By the time he began to experience a call to ministry in the summer of 1843, Arianism had been eliminated and the Presbyterian Church had reformed its structures and discipline. In 1836 full subscription had become compulsory for all ministers, which paved the way for the union of the General Synod of Ulster and the Secession Synod into the General Assembly of the

1. *The Witness*, January 31, 1890.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Derry Standard*, January 27, 1890.

4. *Londonderry Sentinel*, January 28, 1890.

Presbyterian Church in Ireland in 1840.⁵ The rest of the century was most transformative for the Presbyterian Church: spiritually, it was a time of revival and growth, exemplified by the Ulster Revival in 1859; ecclesiastically, it was a period of significant expansion in terms of structure, finances, and bureaucracy.⁶ If the eighteenth century had been described as a time of religious declension for Irish Presbyterianism, the nineteenth century was one of religious revitalization. This was the church and period in which Thomas Witherow conducted his ministry, first serving as minister of Maghera Presbyterian Church and then professor of church history and pastoral theology at Magee College, Derry, before being hailed posthumously as one of the denominations most notable figures in the nineteenth century—“a prince of Presbyterian Israel” no less.

Yet, strictly speaking, Thomas Witherow was not “of Presbyterian Israel” from birth. While he was raised in Banagher Presbyterian Church, County Londonderry, his maternal grandmother had him baptized into the Church of Ireland just after he was born in her home, a fact which was unknown to his father at the time. Moreover, his rise through the ranks of a burgeoning church to become one of her leading ministers and professors is somewhat surprising given his

5. Presbyterian ideas and practice arrived in Ireland through Scottish and English influence. In the late sixteenth century, James Fullerton and James Hamilton, two Scottish Presbyterians, were the first elected fellows of Trinity College, Dublin; the Presbyterian influence was further supplemented by the English Puritan Walter Travers, who served as the university provost from 1594 to 1598. In the early 1600s, Scottish Presbyterian influence came to Ulster as a result of the plantation of Scottish Covenanters. By 1642, the first Presbytery (of Antrim) was formed at Carrickfergus, and in 1690, the General Synod of Ulster was established. A few decades later, in the 1730s, Seceder Presbyterians began to migrate over to Ulster as a result of the Secession from the Church of Scotland in 1733. It was not long before they divided into two factions of their own in 1747: the Burgher Seceders and the Anti-Burgher Seceders. The two groups reunited in 1818 to form the Presbyterian Synod of Ireland distinguished by the name “Seceders,” which went by the shortened name “Secession Synod.” See C. H. Irwin, *A History of Presbyterianism in Dublin and the South and West of Ireland* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1890), 3–4; Finlay Holmes, *The Presbyterian Church in Ireland: A Popular History* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2000); Andrew R. Holmes, *The Irish Presbyterian Mind: Conservative Theology, Evangelical Experience, and Modern Criticism, 1830–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 18–23. For a general overview of Irish Presbyterianism from 1770–1840, which consisted of six distinct Presbyterian bodies, see Andrew R. Holmes, *The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian Belief and Practice, 1770–1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 30–51.

6. Holmes, *Irish Presbyterian Mind*, 25–26. For example, Holmes notes that, in 1841, there were only four committees in the General Assembly; by 1887, there were 29 standing committees. The assets owned by the denomination rose from virtually nothing to nearly £1,000,000; church properties and manses were either erected, improved, or expanded; and Belfast and Magee Colleges were also constructed.

circumstance. Witherow was raised a poor farmer's boy in the back-water townland of Aughlish, County Londonderry, which did not naturally afford him the opportunity for a proper education in order to pursue a religious vocation. When a classical education did present itself at the Academical Institution in Belfast—a school with a collegiate department that prepared young men for Presbyterian ministry—Witherow went without any intention of entering the pastorate. His father had no such ambition for him either. Indeed, until he was nineteen years old, Thomas Witherow had only a passive acceptance of the religious beliefs of his family and church, even holding to an implicit form of salvation by works. So how did the young, spiritually uninterested and theologically confused lad from the obscure townland of Aughlish rise to become a prince of Irish Presbyterianism in one of Ulster's most prominent cities?

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THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH

*Which Is It? An Inquiry at the Oracles
of God as to Whether Any Existing Form
of Church Government Is of Divine Right*

THOMAS WITHEROW

“If a divine plan of church government be extremely necessary,
by what authority does any man reject the apostolical?”

ALEXANDER CARSON¹

1. Alexander Carson, *Reasons for Separating from the General Synod of Ulster* (Belfast, 1805), 53. *Ed.* Alexander Carson (1776–1844) was a minister in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, in Tobermore, County Tyrone. After leaving the Presbyterian Church, he became an Independent Baptist and wrote his classic work *Baptism in Its Mode and Subjects* (Edinburgh, 1831; enlarged edition, 1844).

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Preface to the Fourth Edition | 85 |
| I. Statement of the Question | 86 |
| Introduction | 86 |
| Meaning of the Word <i>Church</i> | 93 |
| Government of the Church | 97 |
| II. Apostolic Principles | 103 |
| Church Offices | 103 |
| The First Principle | 105 |
| The Second Principle | 108 |
| The Third Principle | 111 |
| The Fourth Principle | 114 |
| The Fifth Principle | 116 |
| The Sixth Principle | 121 |
| III. Application of the Test | 125 |
| Prelacy | 126 |
| Independency | 129 |
| Presbytery | 132 |
| The Result | 136 |
| IV. Practical Lessons | 140 |
| The Pulpit Dumb on the Subject | 141 |
| Truth Must Be Planted | 146 |
| Call No Man Master | 150 |

Preface to the Fourth Edition

Since the last edition of this little treatise was published in Ireland, an authorized abridgement, which omitted various passages and the whole of Chapter IV, was published in London, and was widely circulated in England. This abridgement was entitled “An Inquiry into the Scriptural Form of Church Government,” and was specially adapted for English readers.

The present edition is unabridged. The local allusions are understood in Ireland, and the sentiments of Chapter IV are as applicable to our circumstances at present as they were in 1856. In view of it being stereotyped, the whole work has been again revised, and has received some alterations at the hand of the author. He ventures to cherish the hope that, in this its permanent form, it may still continue to be of some service to the truth.

Some ministers have already used it as a textbook in the Bible Class, and in the higher forms of the Sabbath school, the author trusts not without profit.

Magee College, Derry
March 1869

Statement of the Question

INTRODUCTION

It is very common for professing Christians to draw a distinction between *essentials* and *non-essentials* in religion, and to infer that, if any fact or doctrine rightly belongs to the latter class, it must be a matter of very little importance, and may in practice be safely set at naught. The great bulk of men take their opinions on trust. They will not undergo the toil of thinking, searching, and reasoning about anything, and one of the most usual expedients adopted to save them the trouble of inquiry, and to turn aside the force of any disagreeable fact, is to meet it by saying, "The matter is not essential to salvation; therefore we need give ourselves little concern on the subject."

If the distinction here specified is safe, the inference drawn from it is certainly dangerous. To say that, because a fact of divine revelation is not essential to salvation, it must of necessity be unimportant, and may or may not be received by us, is to assert a principle, the application of which would make havoc of our Christianity. For, what are the truths essential to salvation? Are they not these: that there is a God; that all men are sinners; that the Son of God died upon the cross to make atonement for the guilty; and that whosoever believes on the Lord Jesus Christ shall be saved?

There is good reason for believing that not a few souls are now in happiness, who in life knew little more than these—the first principles of the oracles of God—the very alphabet of the Christian system; and if so, no other divine truths can be counted absolutely essential to salvation. But if all the other truths of revelation are unimportant, because they happen to be non-essentials, it follows that the Word of

God itself is in the main unimportant. For by far the greatest portion of it is occupied with matters, the knowledge of which, in the case supposed, is not absolutely indispensable to the everlasting happiness of men. Nor does it alter the case, if we regard the number of fundamental truths to be much greater. Let a man once persuade himself that importance attaches only to what he is pleased to call essentials, whatever their number, and he will, no doubt, shorten his creed and cut away the foundation of many controversies. But he will practically set aside all except a very small part of the Scriptures. If such a principle does not mutilate the Bible, it stigmatizes much of it as trivial. Revelation is all gold for preciousness and purity, but the very touch of such a principle would transmute the most of it into dross.

Though every statement in the Scriptures cannot be regarded as absolutely essential to salvation, yet everything there is essential to some other wise and important end, else it would not find a place in the good Word of God. Human wisdom may be baffled in attempting to specify the design of every truth that forms a component part of divine revelation, but eternity will show us that no portion of it is useless. All Scripture is profitable. A fact written therein may not be essential to human salvation, and yet it may be highly conducive to some other great and gracious purpose in the economy of God—it may be necessary for our personal comfort, for our guidance in life, or for our growth in holiness, and most certainly it is essential to the completeness of the system of divine truth. The law of the Lord is perfect. Strike out of the Bible the truth that seems the most insignificant of all, and the law of the Lord would not be perfect anymore. In architecture, the pinning that fills a crevice in the wall occupies a subordinate position, in comparison with the quoin. But the builder lets us know that the one has an important purpose to serve as well as the other, and does its part to promote the stability and completeness of the house. In ship building, the screws and bolts that gird the ship together are insignificant, as compared with the beams of oak and masts of pine, but they contribute their full share to the safety of the vessel and the security of the passenger. So in the Christian system, every fact, great or small, that God has been pleased to insert in the Bible, is, by its very position, invested with importance, answers its end, and, though perhaps justly considered as non-essential to salvation, does not deserve to be accounted as worthless.

Every divine truth is important, though it may be that all divine truths are not of equal importance. The simplest statement of the Bible is a matter of more concern to an immortal being than the most sublime sentiment of mere human genius. The one carries with it what the other cannot show—the stamp of the approval of God. The one comes to us from heaven; the other savors of the earth. The one has for us a special interest, as forming a constituent portion of that Word which is a message from God to each individual man; the other is the production of a mind merely human, to which we and all our interests were alike unknown. Any truth merely human should weigh with us light as a feather in comparison with the most insignificant of the truths of God. The faith of a Christian should strive to reach and grasp everything that God has honored with a place in that Word, the design of which is to be a light to our feet as we thread our way through this dark world. Besides, this, unlike every other book, is not doomed to perish. Heaven and earth may pass away, but the words of Christ shall not pass away. The seal of eternity is stamped on every verse of the Bible. This fact is enough of itself to make every line of it important.

With these observations we deem it right to introduce our exposition of ecclesiastical polity. Few would go so far as to assert that correct views on church government are essential to salvation, and yet it is a subject whose importance it is folly to attempt to depreciate. The Holy Spirit, speaking in the Scriptures, treats of this theme. The Christian world has been divided in opinion about it ever since the Reformation. We cannot attach ourselves to any denomination of Christians without giving our influence either to truth or error on this very point; and the views we adopt upon this subject go far to color our opinions on matters of Christian faith and practice. With such facts before us, though we may not regard the polity of the New Testament church as essential to human salvation, we do not feel at liberty to undervalue its importance.

The various forms of church government that we find existing at present in the Christian world, may be classed under someone or other of these three heads: *Prelacy*, *Independency*, and *Presbytery*. We do not employ these terms in an offensive sense, but as being the best calculated to denote their respective systems. *Prelacy* is that form of church government which is administered by archbishops, bishops,

deans, archdeacons, and other ecclesiastical office-bearers depending on that hierarchy; and is such as we see exemplified in the Greek Church, the Church of Rome, and the Church of England. *Independence* is that form of church government whose distinctive principle is, that each separate congregation is under Christ subject to no external jurisdiction whatever, but has within itself—in its office-bearers and members—all the materials of government; and is such as is at present in practical operation among Congregationalists and Baptists. *Presbytery* is that form of church government, which is dispensed by presbyters or elders, met in Session, Presbytery, Synod, or General Assembly; and is such as is presented in the several Presbyterian Churches of Ireland, Scotland, England, and America. These three forms of ecclesiastical polity are at this moment extensively prevalent in Christendom. Indeed, every other organization, that any considerable body of Christians has adopted, is only a modification or a mixture of some of the systems we have named.

A very brief examination enables us to see that these three systems differ very widely in their characteristic features. Not only so, but Prelacy, in all its main principles, is opposed to Presbytery; and Independence, in its main principles, is opposed to both. It follows that three forms, differing so very much, cannot all be right, and cannot of course have equal claims on the attachment and support of enlightened and conscientious men. It is self-evident, moreover, that the Word of God, the only rule of faith and practice, cannot approve of all. For, as the Word of God never contradicts itself, it cannot sanction contradictory systems. Some one of the three must be more in accordance with the will of God, as expressed in the Scriptures, than either of the others; and to know which of them is so, should be a subject of deep interest to every child of God. A Christian, of all men, is bound to be a lover of the truth. And we are warranted in supposing that, if a Christian could only see to which of these competing systems the Word of Truth bears witness, he would support it with all his might, and would lend no encouragement to the others. If a man, after he sees the difference, can hold what he knows to be merely human in the same estimation with what he knows to be divine, let him bid farewell to his Christianity, and cease to pretend that he cherishes any attachment to the truth. The religion of the Lord Jesus, except we mistake its spirit far, binds all who receive it to prefer the true to the false, the

right to the wrong, the good to the evil; and for us to be tempted by any consideration to hold them in equal reverence and render them equal support, is to fling one of the first requirements of Christianity away from us. The influence of a Christian is often very little in this world, but whatever it is, it is a talent, for which, like his time, his money, or his intellectual power, he is accountable to God, and that influence ought ever to be on the side of the truth, never against the truth.

Which, then, of the three forms of church government prevalent throughout the world is it the duty of a Christian to select and to support?

This is a question of great importance. It is, besides, forced upon our consideration in every locality where a dissenting chapel lifts its front, and a church steeple tapers into the air. And yet it must be admitted, that the majority of Christians contrive to pass through life without ever giving an hour's thought to this most interesting theme. Most people are content to let their ancestors choose a church for them, and every Sabbath walk to divine worship in the footsteps of their great-grandfathers—they know not why, and care not wherefore. Some shrink from inquiry, lest it should turn out that the church to which they are bound by ties of family, education, and habit, is destitute of all scriptural authority, and lest they feel uncomfortable by having their convictions and their interests set at war. But the great reason why the spirit of inquiry is almost dead on this subject is, that the pulpit is silent, or nearly so, on ecclesiastical government. On this topic the trumpet gives not an uncertain sound, but commonly no sound whatever. There are, we are persuaded, few ministers in any denomination who could say to their people that, on this subject, "We have not shrunk from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" [Acts 20:27]. The people never having had their attention specially directed to those passages of Scripture where the principles of church government are embodied, give no time or thought to the consideration of the subject. The result is, that vast masses of men and women live in utter ignorance, not only of the scriptural facts bearing on the case, but even of their own denominational peculiarities. They are Prelatists, Independents, or Presbyterians by birth, not by conviction. They view all forms of church government as equally true, which is the same thing as to count them equally worthless. They have no defi-

nite ideas on the subject. And thus, in absence of public instruction, they are, by the education of circumstances, prepared to fall in with any system or no system, as may best suit their private convenience or promote their worldly ambition. So it is that many, who in the judgment of charity are Christians, regard the denomination with which birth or accident has connected them, either with a blind attachment or a sinful indifference. And, though rival systems of church polity have their representatives in every village, they plod the weary way of life in happy unconcern about all such matters, and are never troubled with the question that the very sight of a church spire suggests to other men: *Which of these is true?*

Most people who withdraw from the communion of one church to connect themselves with another, and thus exercise their right of choice between the various forms of ecclesiastical government, are induced to give their preference from motives such as should never influence an intelligent Christian. They are guided by feeling rather than by judgment. They do not first ascertain the leading principles of the denomination from its acknowledged standards, and then examine these principles in the light of the Word of God. The bulk of mankind are not intellectual enough to search for principles and weigh them. At least, they do not take the trouble, but are influenced in their choice, either by the authority of some great man, or the moral worth of some particular persons, or the piety and eloquence of some local minister—or perhaps by paltry pique, or petty gain, or love of the rank or fashion of the world, or by some other equally low and vulgar consideration. But to decide the rival claims of Prelacy, Independency, and Presbytery by any such tests as these, is absurd in the extreme. Try them by the authority of great men! There is not one of the three systems that could not present a long catalogue of distinguished men, who were its warm supporters until the last hour of life. Test them by moral worth! There is not one of them that could not present a goodly number of the excellent of the earth, waiting on its ministrations and reposing beneath its shadow. If we ask which of these systems provides able and pious ministers to instruct the people, we find a large number of such persons filling the pulpits of each of them. And if we examine further, we will find that not infrequently there may be in the same town a minister who is an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, who, all the week in the garden of the Lord, is active as

the busy bee, and who, when Sabbath comes, dispenses the sweets of the divine Word to admiring multitudes; while, in connection with the same denomination, there may be on the other side of the street some poor pitiful drone, who is doomed to hum to vacancy all the year round. Any such modes of testing ecclesiastical systems, however common, are unsure and unsafe.

To us it seems there is a much more satisfactory way of deciding upon the claims of those forms of church government which obtain at present in the world—that is, to test their peculiar principles by the standard of the Word of God. That book is quite sufficient to point out the path of duty to the Christian in this as well as in all other matters, for it was intended by its divine Author to be our guide in matters of practice as well as of faith. The Bible furnishes us with peculiar facilities for forming an opinion on this very point. It tells us of a church that was organized in the world eighteen hundred years ago. The founders of that church were apostles and prophets, acting by the authority of God. Every fact known with certainty about the original constitution of the church is preserved in the Bible, everything preserved elsewhere is only hearsay and tradition. We read in Scripture very many facts that enable us to know with tolerable accuracy the history, doctrine, worship, and government of that church which existed in apostolic days. The principles of government set up in a church which was founded by inspired men, must have had, we are sure, the approbation of God. Corruptions in government, as well as in doctrine, sprang up at a very early period, but the church in apostolic days was purer than it ever has been in subsequent times. The most obvious method, therefore, of arriving at the truth is to compare our modern systems of ecclesiastical government with the model presented in the Holy Scriptures. That which bears the closest resemblance to the divine original is most likely itself to be divine.

The warmest friends of existing ecclesiastical systems cannot fairly object to such a test. There is scarcely a church on earth that is not loud in its pretensions to apostolicity. The Prelatic Churches claim to be apostolic. The Independent Churches claim to be apostolic. The Presbyterian Churches claim to be apostolic. Each of these denominations professes to maintain the same doctrine, worship, and government that distinguished the church which was planted by the apostles of the Lord. On one of these points—that of ecclesiastical

government—we propose to examine these claims by the very test that themselves have chosen. Divesting ourselves of all prejudice, we come to the law and to the testimony, desirous to know what God says on the topic in question, and determined to follow where the Scripture points. Let that be where it may. Let us search the Bible, to see what it teaches on this great theme. If, on a thorough examination, we fail to discover there any clear and definite principles of church government, the conclusion of necessity follows, that Prelacy, Independency, and Presbytery are upon a level—none of them is based upon divine authority—and it becomes a matter of mere expediency or convenience which form we support. If we find, on the other hand, that certain great principles of church government are embodied in the Scriptures, then, when we have ascertained accurately what these principles are, we have reached the mind of God upon the matter, and we have discovered a touchstone, wherewith we can try the value of existing systems, and determine how much is human and how much divine in every one of them.

MEANING OF THE WORD *CHURCH*

The word *church* in our common discourse is used in a variety of senses. Sometimes it signifies the material building erected for divine worship; sometimes it means the people usually assembling in such a building; sometimes the aggregate body of the clergy as distinguished from the laity; sometimes the collective body of professing Christians. As general use is the law of language, it does not become us to take exception to the variety of significations that are given to the term by our best writers; nor can we even say that much practical inconvenience arises from them, inasmuch as the accompanying circumstances usually determine the specific sense in which the word is to be understood. But it is never to be forgotten that, when we come to the interpretation of the Word of God, the variety of senses commonly attached to the term is altogether inadmissible, and would, if adopted, darken and corrupt the meaning of divine revelation. The word *church* in Scripture has always one meaning, and one only: *an assembly of the people of God—a society of Christians*. The Greek word *ecclesia*, in its primary and civil sense, means any assembly called together for any purpose (Acts 19:32); but in its appropriated and religious sense,

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SCRIPTURAL BAPTISM

*Its Mode and Subjects, as Opposed
to the Views of the Anabaptists*

THOMAS WITHEROW

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| I. Introduction. | 157 |
| II. The Mode of Baptism. | 159 |
| Difficulties Connected with Dipping | 159 |
| Dipping Not Proved by the Scriptures | 161 |
| The Scriptural Mode of Baptism | 170 |
| Conclusion. | 173 |
| III. The Subjects of Baptism | 176 |
| The Question in Debate. | 176 |
| Anabaptist Objections | 179 |
| Evidence for Infant Baptism. | 185 |
| The Apostolic Commission | 191 |
| Additional Considerations | 194 |
| No Proof on the Anabaptist Side | 203 |
| Parable of the City Park. | 204 |
| Conclusion. | 212 |

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THE SABBATH

*Not a Church Holiday but a Divine
Ordinance under All Dispensations*

THOMAS WITHEROW

To the Ministers of Coleraine,

Rev. R. W. Fleming

Rev. Robert Wallace

and

Rev. Robert B. Wylie, LL.B.

This address, originally delivered at a meeting of their united congregations held in the First Presbyterian Church on the evening of the 2nd of April 1871, is most respectfully inscribed.

Londonderry, 19th April, 1871.

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| I. Introduction | 219 |
| II. Distinction Between a Moral and a Ceremonial Law | 220 |
| III. The Moral in the Sabbath Law | 222 |
| IV. Ceremonial Additions to the Sabbath Law | 225 |
| V. Attitude of Christ Towards the Sabbath | 227 |
| VI. Abolition of the Ceremonial Law | 229 |
| VII. Christian Adaptation of the Sabbath Law | 231 |
| VIII. The Perpetuity of the Sabbath | 236 |
| IX. Why Quote the Fourth Commandment? | 239 |
| X. Efforts to Make It a Day of Amusement | 242 |
| XI. What Would Be the Result? | 244 |
| XII. Nobody the Richer by the Abolition of the Sabbath | 247 |
| XIII. Practical Advice | 249 |

Sample PDF. Pages missing.

INDEX OF SUBJECTS AND NAMES

- A
Abraham, 179, 185-86, 195
 progenitors of, 222
Aenon, 164-65
Agrippa, 122
Aghadowey, 14
Aghadowey Presbyterian Church,
 16
Alexander, Archibald, xix
Allen, Robert, 70:n
Amos, Prophet, 117
Anabaptists, xxv, 54, 153, 155,
 159-170, 174-184, 189, 191-96,
 199-203, 212-13
 “Parable of the City Park,”
 and, 54, 204-12
Andrew, Apostle, 105
Anglicans, xxiii, xxxii, 51
Anson, George (1st Baron Anson),
 16
Antioch, 107, 112, 120
 church of, 115-18, 131, 229
Antony, Mark (Roman politician),
 113
apostles, xxvii, 92, 98-99, 103-5,
 107, 115-16, 119, 120-21, 129,
 136-38, 159, 163-64, 169,
 171-73, 191-93, 200-3, 228-30,
 232-34, 238
Arian Remonstrants, 20-21, 23
Arians, 24-25
 controversy (1820s), 20-23,
 32, 45
Armstrong, Douglas,
 The Life and Work of
 the Rev. Professor Withe-
 row...1824-1890, xxix-xxx,
 47:n, 58:n, 77:n, 78:n
Ascension, 106, 171, 232
Assembly’s College, Belfast, 20:n,
 22, 51, 53, 55, 55:n, 56, 63, 70,
 74-76, 163:n
allowed to confer degrees, 75
Aughlish, xxviii, 11-12, 14, 17, 30,
 61, 78
Augustus, Caesar (1st Roman Em-
 peror), 113
Authorized Version, The (King
 James), 107
B
Baird, Alexander and Nancy, 15
Ballinascreen Historical Society,
 xxx
Ballycastle, County Londonderry,
 12-13
Banagher Presbyterian Church, 10,
 14, 34
baptism, xix, xxvii, xxviii
 and the Lord’s Supper, 66
 infant (paedobaptism), xix,
 xx, xxiv, xxiii, 54, 176,
 179-203
 mode of, xxiv, 52-54, 159-75
 subjects of baptism, xxiv, 54,
 176-214
Baptists, xxiii, xxiv, xxxii, 48,
 51-52, 89, 145
Barnabas, 107, 112, 114-18, 130
Beaconfield, Lord, 75
Begg, James, 33
Belfast Academical Institution, 13,
 17, 19-24, 25, 27, 28, 32-33,
 46:n, 55:n, 56:n, 74
 curriculum, 25
 founder of, 19

- Belfast Academy, 16, 17-18, 24-25
- biblical criticism, 46:n, 53, 56, 74, 96, 163:n
- bishop/bishops, xxxiv, 65, 73, 88, 103-4, 106, 110, 114-15, 133, 138-39
- independency, view of, 129-32
 - prelacy, view of, 126-28
 - presbyterian, view of, 132-36
 - same office as elder, 108-111, 104, 113, 125
- Boyd, Archibald, 45, 141:n, 142
- Brethren, Bethesda, xxxi-xxxii
- Brethren, Plymouth, 196
- Brigh Presbyterian Church, 36-37
- Brown, John, 16, 42, 60:n
- Brown, William, 49
- Bruce, William, 20-22, 49, 63
- Brutus, Marcus Junius (Roman politician), 113
- Bryce, James, 14-16, 17
- Bryce, Reuben J., 16-17, 24
- Buchanan, James, 33
- C
- Caesar, 15, 121-22
- Caesarea, 172
- Calvin, John, 65, 139:n
- Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 30
- Calvinists, 20
- Campbell, George, 104, 105:n, 138, 139:n,
- Canaan, 94
- Candlish, Robert, 33
- Carson, Alexander, 44, 48-49, 52, 82, 180, 184, 193-94
- Carson, Robert H., 48-49
- Cassius, Gaius (Roman senator), 113
- Catechism on the Government and Discipline of the Presbyterian Church*, 45
- Chalmers, Thomas, xix, 32-33, 39
- on charity and reason, 32:n
- Chichester, George Augustus, 19
- church,
- meaning of, 93-97
- church, apostolic, 92, 98-99, 101-2, 111, 123, 125, 150
- and baptism, 169-70
 - children in, 203
 - and church offices, xxvii, 103-124, 125, 135, 141
 - dealing with disputed matters, 119-20
 - ordination and, 128
 - and Presbyterian system, 132-39, 150
 - view of bishop and elder, 111, 127, 129, 132-36
 - view of office-bearers, 127-32
- church, visible, 43, 178, 186-87
- Church of England, 89, 126-128, 136, 174, 262
- Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical*, 126, 128:n
- and monarch, 126, 128
- Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion*, 126, 128, 144
- Church of Ireland, 10, 13, 77
- Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, 31, 96, 135, 145
- church polity, 53, 72, 88, 91, 97-102
- divided in opinion since Reformation, 88
 - episcopal, xxiii, xxxiv, 46-47, 73, 88-89, 81, 90, 93, 126-28, 140, 141
 - exposition of, 142
 - independent, xxiii, 47, 88-90, 93, 129-132

- presbyterian, xxiii, 45, 47,
 72, 88-93, 132-36, 139,
 141-51
 pulpit silent on, 141-46
 tested by God's Word, 92
- Church of Rome. *See* Roman
 Catholics
- Church of Scotland, 10:n, 32, 96,
 132
- Cilicia, 117-18, 121
- Clarke, Adam, 44
- Codex Sinaiticus*, 97
- Columbus, Christopher, 16
- Comber Presbyterian Church, 52
- Companion to the Bible*, 33
- Congregationalists, xxiii, 46:n, 89,
 130
- Conkey, Joy, xxix
- Cook, James, 16
- Cooke, Henry, 20, 22, 24, 25, 27-
 29, 38, 42:n, 44, 49, 56, 68,
 Cooke Centenary lecture,
 74-75
 need for a converted minis-
 try, 29:n
- Council of Nicea, 111
- covenant, 190, 185-87, 197, 226
 of grace and works, 185-86
- Covenanters, Scottish, 10:n
- Cowan, Martyn, xxix, 29:n
- Crete, 109
- Cunningham, William, xix
- circumcision, 116-18, 157-58, 179-
 180, 186, 188, 195, 229
- D**
- Damascus, 37
- Damascus Mission, 56
- deacon/deacons, 65, 73, 103-4,
 108, 113-14, 116, 126, 129-30,
 139. *See also* office-bearers
- D'Aubigne's, Merle, 27
- David, King, 109, 110:n, 133
- Davidson, Samuel, 46:n
- Decalogue. *See* Ten
 Commandments
- Denham, James, 45:n
- Derbe, 112, 118
- Derry, xxxiv, 42, 44, 52:n, 59, 60-
 61, 74-78, 216
 city cemetery, 63, 69
 "Derry Controversy," 45
 map of, 5
 "Siege of Derry," 63
Derry Standard, 9, 70-71
- Dick, John,
Lectures of Theology, 33
Dictionary of National Biography,
 xix, xxxiii, 77:n
- Dill, Samuel M., 62-63
- Dissenters, 145
- Don Quixote*, 14
- Drennan, William, 19
- Dublin, 5, 10:n, 49, 63, 113, 126
- Dunmurry Presbyterian Church, 20
- E**
- Edgar, John, 30
- Edgar, Samuel, 20
- Edinburgh,
 New College, 32-33
- elders, xx, xxvii, 64-66, 89, 104,
 107-22, 125, 127-39, 229-30.
See also bishop/bishops
 at Ephesus, xxvii
- Ellison, Thomas, 14, 35
- Enlightenment, The, 21
- Episcopal Church, 46, 77, 96
- Esau, xxiv, 190
- Established Church of Scotland, 32
- Evangelical Alliance, 145
- evangelicalism, 32
 "evangelical heresy," 143
- Evangelicals, xxiii
- F**
- Ferrie, John, 21-23
- Finvoy Presbyterian Church, 37

- First Presbyterian Church, 216
 Flavel, John, 74
 Fleming, R. W., 216
 Free Church of Scotland, 32
 Fullerton, James, 10:n
- G
- General Assembly, 9, 10:n, 22,
 27-28, 30, 32, 33, 52, 55, 68,
 77-78, 89, 134, 137, 145-46
 jurisdiction over synod, 134
 General Synod of Ulster, 9-10,
 141:n
 Gentiles, of Antioch, Syria, Cilicia,
 120
 Gentiles, preaching to, 115, 117,
 229
 Gibbon, Edward, 111
 Gibson, William, 51
 Gladstone, W. E., 42:n
 Glasgow, University of, 21
 Glendermot Presbytery, 37
 Goudy, Alexander P., 45:n
 Great Commission, The, xxvii,
 xxviii
 Great Disruption of 1843, 32
 Great Ejection, The, (1662), 57
 Great Famine of Ireland, 41,
 57-58
 Greek Church, 89, 136
 Greer, Samuel McGurdy, 42
 Guthrie, Thomas, 33
- H
- Hamilton, James, 10:n
 Hanna, Samuel, 20, 29, 30, 56:n
 Hanson, David, 16
 Hincks, Thomas Dix, 20, 22
 Hodge, Charles, xix, 70
 Holmes, Andrew R., 10:n, 29:n
 Holmes, Finlay, 10:n, 20:n,
 Holmes, R. F. G., 20:n
 Homer,
Iliad, 15
- Holy Spirit, xxvii, xxxiv, 88, 96,
 99, 103, 107, 110-12, 114-15,
 117-18, 136, 144, 157-58, 162-
 63, 168-69, 172-73, 191-92,
 212, 228, 233-34
 baptism of, 171-72, 212
 gift of tongues, 94, 170-71,
 233
- Horace, 15
 Hume, Abraham, 16-17
- I
- Iconium, 112
 Independency. *See* church polity
 International Presbyterian Church,
 xxix
 Ionia, 113
 Irish Home Rule, 42:n
 Irwin, C. H. [Clarke Huston],
 10:n
- J
- James, Apostle, 108, 117
 Jeremiah, 31
 Jerusalem, 53, 94, 106, 110, 112-
 13, 116-20, 160, 171-72, 229
 Christians of, 120, 137, 159
 "New Jerusalem," 240
 Jerusalem Council, xxvii, 120
 Jews, 37, 117, 168, 177-78, 187-
 88, 191, 227-28, 232, 234, 240
 John, Apostle, 110, 204
 John the Baptist, 53, 179, 187
 Jordan, river, 160, 164-65, 168
 Joseph, 106
 Judaism, 107
 Judas, 106, 117-18
 Judea, 96, 116, 118, 160, 171, 233
- K
- Killaig, 14-15, 17
 Killen, W. D., 30, 45, 56
 resignation from professor-
 ship, 76

King, David, 109, 110:n, 133:n
 Knox, D. B., 58:n

L

Laodicea, 94
 Larne Presbyterian Church, 22, 63
 Latimer, W. T., 47, 48:n
lectio continua, 38
 legalism, xx
 Liverpool, 113
 Livingstone, David N., 20:n, 70:n
 London, 47, 76, 85, 114, 242
London Times, 63
 Londonderry. *See* Derry
Londonderry Sentinel, 9
 Lord Mayor, of London, 109-10
 Lord's Day, The. *See* Sabbath
 Lord's Prayer, 14
 Lord's Supper, 66, 133, 162, 167, 181-82, 233
 Lucian,
 Dialogues, 15
 Luke, Evangelist, 112
 Lurgan Presbyterian Church, 55
 Lycaonia, 112
 Lydia, 113, 177, 200, 210
 Lystra, 112, 118

M

Macedonia, 114
 Magee College, 9, 10, 56-57, 60, 62-63, 73-77, 85
 allowed to confer degrees, 75
 founders Martha and William Magee, 55-56
 MacCloskey, John, 12-13
 Maghera Presbyterian Church, 10, 36-37
 building program, 41
 Magherafelt Presbyterian Church, 34, 36
 Mason, John, 190:n

Matthew, Apostle, 105
 Matthias, 106
 May Street Presbyterian Church, 20, 70, 74
 McClure, William, 45:n
 McGuigan, Hudy, 49
 Methodists, xxiii, xxiv, 145
 Miletus, 113-14
 Milling, Thomas (father in law), 49
 Molyneaux, Henry, 22
 Montgomery, Henry, 20-22, 24
 Moses, 31, 94, 188, 195, 222-23, 226-27, 229-31, 235
 Mount Sinai, 94, 185, 195, 222-23, 225, 230

N

natural theology, 21
 New Lights, 21, 24
 Newton, John, xxxi
 Nicanor, 107
 Nicolas, of Antioch, 107
 Nympha, 94

O

office-bearers, 98, 138. *See also*
 church polity
 and apostolic church, 103-24
 chosen by the people, 105-8, 125
 and independency, 129-32
 ordination of, 73, 114-16, 125, 128, 130, 132
 and prelacy, 88-89, 126-28
 and presbytery, 132-36
Orthodox Presbyterian, 21
 Ovid, 15

P

Paradise, 223
 Parmenas, 107
 Paschal Supper, 162
 Passover, 157, 186, 236

- Paul, Apostle, xxvi, xxvii, 96, 105-6, 108-10, 112-18, 120-1, 129, 138, 167, 181, 189, 194, 197, 201, 233
 Damascus experience, xxvii
 Pentateuch, 225
 Pentecost, xxvii, 106, 113, 159, 163, 170-72, 177, 203-4, 233
 Pentecostals, xxiii
 Peter, Apostle, 105-6, 110, 117, 168, 171-72, 234
 Philip, 103, 107, 165-68
 Pilate, 97, 122
Pilgrim's Progress, 14
Plea of Presbytery, The, 27, 45, 141
 Pope, 123, 126
 Porter, Josiah L., 56, 74
 Porter, Classon, 63-64
 Porter, Thomas G., 48
 Prayer Book and Homily Society, 128
 prelacy. *See* church polity, episcopal
 Presbyterian Church in Ireland, xxiii, xxix, 31-32, 52:n, 63, 66, 68
 Arian controversy in, 9
 General Assembly of, 9, 22, 27, 28, 30, 55, 68
 and Waldensians, 55
 Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland, xxix
The Presbyterian Review, 73:n
 Presbytery of Antrim, 10:n, 21:n
 Presbytery of Glendernot, 25
 Presbyterian Theological Faculty, Ireland, 75
Presbyterianism Defended, 45
Princeton Review, 187:n
 Princeton Theological Seminary, 54:n, 70
 Procorus, 107
 Promised Land, 187
 puseyism (doctrine of Edward Pusey), 145
- Q
 Queen's College, Belfast, 22
 Queen's Privy Council, 128
- R
 Ralliagh Church School, 14
Regium Donum, 15:n
 Reid, James Seaton, 68
 Remonstrant Synod, 20:n, 21
 Robinson, John, 167
Robinson Crusoe, 14
 Robson, Smylie, 37
 Rodgers, John, 52, 78
 Roman Catholics, 13, 35, 42, 47, 51, 66, 89, 126, 132, 136, 145
 Royal Belfast Academical Institution. *See* Belfast Academical Institution
 Royal University of Ireland, 75
- S
 Sabbath, The, xix, xx, xxv, xxiii, xxv, xxvi, xxvii, xxviii, 64, 90, 92, 142, 167, 195-97, 215-251
 as a sign of rest to come, xxviii
 breaking of, 222, 226
 Christian adaptation, 231-35
 "Lord's Day," xxvii, 241
 moral obligation to observe, 222-24
 perpetuity of, 236-38
 and Pool of Bethesda, 227
 Sabbath schools, 34, 41, 47, 76, 85, 134
 and God's Word, 181
 Saint Patrick, 61
 Scripture, 88, 92-93, 95
 ancient versions, 97
 cannot contradict itself, 89, 191

- Codex Sinaiticus*, 97
 and ecclesiastical polity, 92,
 99-102
 essentials and non-essentials,
 xxvi, 46, 86-87
 and faulty translation, 107,
 164
 “great principles,” 100-1
 guide in matters of faith, 92
 interprets itself, 173
 invested with importance,
 87-88
 and Presbyterian principles,
 xxiv, 136-39, 143-44, 147,
 150-1
 rule of faith and practice, 89,
 92, 100, 123, 136
 teaches morality, 100
- Salim, 164
- Seceders, 20
 Anti-Burgher, 10:n
 Burgher, 10:n
- Secession Synod, 9-10, 20-22, 30,
 67
- Silas, 113, 117-18
- Silvanus, 120
- Simon Magus, 167-68, 177
- Stephen, 107
- synod, 89, 134
- Synod of Ulster, 9, 10:n, 15:n, 16,
 20-23, 25, 27, 29:n, 30, 32,
 45:n, 46:n, 66-68, 74, 82:n,
 141:n
- Syria, 95, 117-18, 120
- T
- Ten Commandments, 187, 222,
 239
- Theological Monthly*, 73-74
- Thomson, Robert, 14
- Thrace, 113
- Timon, 107
- Timothy, xxvii, 103, 113, 116, 120
 ordination of, 115
- Titus, xxvii, 103, 109-10, 115
- Tobermore, 52, 82:n
- Tobermore Presbyterian Church,
 48-49
- Todd, Andrew, 37
- Troas, 112, 161, 233
- Travers, Walter, 10:n
- Trinity College, 10:n
- Tyrglasson School, 14
- U
- Ulster, xix, xxv, 10:n, 44, 51-52,
 54, 142, 145, 156
 map of, 5
- Ulster Revival (1859), xxiv, 10, 52,
 156
 “Year of Grace,” 51
- Union Theological College, Belfast,
 xxix
- Unitarian, 20
- United Presbyterian Presbytery,
 15:n
- Uzzah, 164
- V
- Virgil,
 Eclogues, 15
 Aeneid, 15
- W
- Wallace, Robert, 216
- Wardlaw, Ralph, 131
- Warfield, B. B., 73
- Watts, Robert, 70, 75
- Whately, Richard, 248
- Wellington Place, 17, 20:n
- Wells, Ronald A., 20:n, 70:n
- Welsh, David, 33
- Westminster Assembly documents,
 Confession of Faith, 20:n,
 21:n, 22, 33, 54, 66, 144,
 174
 Directory for Public Wor-
 ship, 33

- Form of Presbyterian Government, 33
 Shorter Catechism, 14, 29, 33, 178
 Westminster Divines, 65
 Westminster Theological Seminary, xxx
 William IV, King of Great Britain and Ireland, 19
 Wilson, Hugh, 18
 Wilson, James, 34, 36
 Wilson, Robert, 30, 53, 162, 163:n, 198
 death of, 56
 Witherow, Catherine (wife), 49-50, 62, 68
 death of, 69-70
 Witherow, Elizabeth (mother), 12-13
 Witherow, Hugh (father), 12, 13, 18, 26,
 death of, 61
 Witherow, Hugh (first named son), death of, 58
 Witherow, Hugh (second named son), 61-62
 Witherow, James (grandfather), 12
 death of, 36
 Witherow, Jane (daughter), 57, 69, 76
 Witherow, Jane (mother), 12
 Witherow, Robert (brother), 13:n
 Witherow, Thomas, xix-xxi, xxiii, xxv, xviii, 10, 23-24,
 The Apostolic Church, xxiii, xxix, xxxiv, 44-48, 55, 66, 72, 81-151
 The Autobiography of Thomas Witherow, xxx
 The Boyne and Aughrim, 63, 70
 call to Maghera Church, 37
 children of, 57, 60
 classical education, 14-15
 clerk of presbytery, 44
 conversion of, 30-31
 death of, 77-78
 Defence of the Apostolic Church, 48-49
 Derry and Enniskillen, 63, 70
 descendants of, xxx
 Doctor of Divinity conferred to, 75
 elder, office of, 64-65
 first sermon, 35-36
 The Form of the Christian Temple, 71-74, 76
 health of, 49, 68-69, 76-77
 Historical and Literary Memorials of History of the Reformation, 70
 An Inquiry into the Scriptural Form of Church Government, 85
 Presbyterianism in Ireland, 66-67, 70
 “intellectual indolence,” 26
 Latin skills of, 15-16, 25
 licensure, 33-35
 Magee College librarian, 63-64
 moderator of General Assembly, 68-70
 New College, experience, 32-33
 New Testament Elder, 64
 ordained, 37
 preaching, 31, 35-36, 38-39,
 Principles of Christian Truth, 70
 professor at Magee College, 57
 “second literary abortion,” 62-63
 sermon preparation, 39-40
 The Sabbath, Not a Church

- Holiday*, xxv, xxix, xxxiv,
 64, 215-51
Scriptural Baptism, xxiv,
 xxix, xxxiv, 55, 153-214
A Short Catechism, 76
 teaching in college, 56
 “Theory of a Universal Es-
 tablishment,” 43-44, 55
 writing of, 43
Three Prophets of Our Own,
 44, 52
 typhoid fever, 15, 42-43
 visitation of congregation,
 40-41, 56
 “The Witherow Theory,” 64
- Whig, 42
 Wolterstorff, Nicholas, xxxi
 Wordsworth, Charles, 72
 *The Outlines of the Christian
 Ministry*, 72
Witness, The, xxiii, 9, 77:n
 Wylie, Robert B., 216
- X
- Xenophon,
 Cyropaedia, 15
- Y
- “Year of Grace.” *See* Ulster
 Revival

INDEX OF SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

| | | | | | |
|-------------|----------|----------|--------|----------|------------|
| Genesis | | Ezra | | 19:14 | 199, 202-3 |
| 1:22 | 200 | 9:2 | 197 | 19:19 | 100 |
| 2:2-3 | 225:n | | | 20:28 | 31 |
| 8:10, 12 | 224:n | Nehemiah | | 28:18-19 | xxvii |
| 9:9 | 185 | 13:19 | 227:n | 28:19 | 179 |
| 17:7 | 186 | | | 28:19-20 | 54, 191 |
| 17:10 | 185-86 | Psalms | | | |
| 17:14 | 186 | 16:6 | xxxii | Mark | |
| 21:14 | 186 | 22:22-25 | 94 | 2:23-28 | 227:n |
| 26:17-33 | 165 | 23 | 14 | 2:27 | xxvii, 237 |
| 29:27-28 | 224:n | | | 2:28 | 227 |
| 50:10 | 224:n | Proverbs | | 6:2 | 228:n |
| | | 1:23 | 158 | 9:36-37 | 196 |
| Exodus | | | | 9:37 | 202 |
| 12:48 | 186 | Isaiah | | 9:41 | 197 |
| 13:2 | 199 | 1:16 | 158 | 10:6 | 196 |
| 16:22-30 | 225:n | 40:11 | 196 | 10:13-16 | 180 |
| 20 | 225 | 58:13-14 | 226:n | 10:14 | 189 |
| 20:8 | 225, 240 | | | 10:16 | 54 |
| 20:9-10 | 225:n | Ezekiel | | 11:22-23 | 70 |
| 20:11 | 225:n | 44:9 | 186 | 12:17 | 121 |
| 20:12 | 100 | | | 16:16 | 183 |
| 24:7-8 | 185 | Joel | | 16:18 | 114 |
| 33:15 | 226:n | 2:28 | 171 | | |
| 35:3 | 226:n | | | Luke | |
| | | Malachi | | 1:59 | 187 |
| Leviticus | | 2:7 | 144 | 2:21 | 179, 187 |
| 20:26 | 197 | | | 2:22-23 | 199 |
| | | Matthew | | 2:23 | 199 |
| Numbers | | 3:5-6 | 160 | 3:16 | 171-72 |
| 15:36 | 226:n | 3:6 | 164 | 4:16 | 228:n |
| 17 | 37 | 3:11 | 171-72 | 13:10-17 | 227:n |
| | | 3:13-17 | 179 | 17:1-2 | 212 |
| Deuteronomy | | 4:23 | 228:n | | |
| 5 | 225 | 11:43 | 188 | John | |
| 5:14-15 | 225:n | 12:1-14 | 227:n | 1:11 | 197 |
| 29:9-13 | 186 | 16:18 | xxviii | 1:12 | 31 |
| | | 18:2-3 | 196 | 3:3 | 157 |
| 2 Samuel | 39 | 18:15-18 | xxvii | 3:16 | 31 |

| | | | | | |
|--------------|-----------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------|--------------|
| 3:23 | 164 | 15 | xxvii, 73, 116-21, | 6:7 | 167 |
| 4:1-2 | 179 | 229, 231, 234 | | 11:17 | 188 |
| 4:23 | 200 | 15:2 | 120 | | |
| 5:1-18 | 227:n | 15:6 | 120 | 1 Corinthians | |
| 7:14-24 | 227:n | 15:12 | 120 | 1:13-17 | 177 |
| 9:1-16 | 227:n | 15:23 | 138 | 1:14-16 | xxvii |
| 10:6 | 188 | 16:4 | 118, 120 | 1:16 | 200 |
| 16:12-13 | 228 | 16:13 | xxvii | 4:12 | 138 |
| 18:36 | 97 | 16:15 | 177 | 5:7 | 157 |
| 20:1, 19, 26 | 232:n | 16:30 | 113 | 7:14 | 189, 197 |
| 21:15 | 196 | 16:31 | 158 | 9:16 | 37 |
| | | 16:33 | 164, 200 | 11:26 | 157 |
| Acts | | 16:33-34 | 177 | 12:13 | 168 |
| 1:4 | 171 | 16:34 | 200 | 12:28 | 94 |
| 1:8 | 171 | 17:2 | xxvii | 16:1-2 | xxvii, 233:n |
| 1:13-26 | 106 | 18:3 | 138 | 16:15 | 200 |
| 2:1-8 | 233:n | 18:4 | xxvii | 15:58 | 58 |
| 2:3 | 171 | 18:8 | 177 | | |
| 2:17 | 171 | 19:5 | 177 | 2 Corinthians | |
| 2:33 | 172 | 19:6 | 114 | 1:24 | 122 |
| 2:38-39 | xxvii | 19:32 | 93 | 5:17, 21 | 31 |
| 2:41 | 159, 164, 177 | 20:7 | xxvii, 233:n | | |
| 5:6 | 114 | 20:17 | 113 | Galatians | |
| 6:5-6 | 108 | 20:17-28 | 110 | 1:1 | 121 |
| 6:6 | 116 | 20:17-35 | xxvii | 2:11 | 123 |
| 7:38 | 94 | 20:27 | 90 | 3:10 | 30 |
| 8:12 | 164 | 20:28 | 65, 111 | 3:17 | 195 |
| 8:12-13 | 177 | 20:34 | 138 | 6:15 | 188 |
| 8:13 | 167 | 20:35 | 138 | | |
| 8:17 | 114 | 22:22 | 200 | Ephesians | |
| 8:23 | 168 | 28:8 | 114 | 1:1 | 201 |
| 8:26 | 164 | | | 1:20-23 | 123 |
| 8:35 | 177 | Romans | | 2:14 | 188 |
| 8:38-39 | 165 | 3:4 | 175 | 5:23 | 123 |
| 9:17 | 114 | 5:1 | 37 | 5:25 | 94-95 |
| 9:18 | xxvii, 164, 177 | 5:13 | 222 | 5:30 | 168 |
| 9:31 | 96-97 | 5:13-14 | 222:n | 6:1 | 201 |
| 10:47 | 177 | 5:21 | 185 | | |
| 11:15-16 | 172 | 6 | 167-68 | Philippians | |
| 11:22 | 94 | 6:3 | 168 | 1:1 | 108, 111 |
| 13:1-3 | 114-116 | 6:3-4 | xxvii, 166-67 | | |
| 13:14 | xxvii | 6:3-7 | 166 | Colossians | |
| 14:15 | 200 | 6:4 | 167 | 1:2 | 201-2 |
| 14:23 | 106, 112, 130 | 6:6 | 167 | 1:18 | 123 |

| | | | | | |
|-----------------|---------|---------|----------|------------|--------------|
| 2:11-12 | xxvii | Titus | | 5:2a | 65 |
| 2:12 | 166-68 | 1:5 | 115, 150 | 5:3 | 122 |
| 2:16 | 234:n | 1:5-7 | 109 | | |
| 3:20 | 202 | 1:5-9 | xxvii | 1 John | |
| 4:15 | 94 | 1:7 | 109 | 2:13 | 189 |
| | | 2:14 | 151 | 5:12 | 157 |
| 1 Thessalonians | | | | | |
| 2:9 | 138 | Hebrews | | 2 John | |
| 5:22 | 100 | 2:12 | 94 | 1 | 110 |
| | | 4:9 | xxv, 236 | | |
| 2 Thessalonians | | 4:9-10 | xxviii | Revelation | |
| 3:5 | 138 | 7:26 | | 1:10 | xxvii, 233:n |
| | | 11 | 187 | 14:13 | xiii, xxxii |
| 1 Timothy | | 12:22 | 240:n | 21:2 | 240:n |
| 1:15 | 31 | 13:7 | 98 | 22:16 | 35 |
| 2:8 | 192 | | | | |
| 3:1-7 | xxvii | James | | | |
| 4:14 | 114-115 | 2:2 | 240:n | | |
| 5:17 | 65, 133 | 5:14 | 108 | | |
| 5:22 | 114 | | | | |
| | | 1 Peter | | | |
| 2 Timothy | | 2:24 | 31 | | |
| 1:10 | 77 | 5:1 | 110 | | |
| 3:16 | xxvi | 5:1-5 | xxvii | | |

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