

## ARTICLE VI.

## THE SEVEN ANGELS OF THE SEVEN APOCALYPTIC CHURCHES.

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THE opinions of critics, commentators and theologians respecting the angels of the apocalyptic churches, have been very divided and contradictory. It may, therefore, appear rather presumptuous in the writer to add to the number of these conflicting opinions. We will, however, offer no apology, but proceed, at once, briefly to review the various solutions of the difficulty which have been proposed, and then with equal brevity to state our own. The different views which have been advocated by various writers may be stated in the following order:

1. *The angels denote* THE "CHURCHES" THEMSELVES, *as viewed in their* COLLECTIVE, CORPORATE CAPACITY. This has been called the ultra-Congregational view; and certainly it is an ultra-violent one. It makes little account of the principles of interpretation, or even of the common sense of the document to be interpreted. Suffice it to say, with the "Faithful and True Witness," by way of refutation, "the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches;" language sufficiently decisive, that the angels and the churches are not the same.

2. *The angels are the* PASTORS *of the churches; each church having but one pastor.* This view is recommended by its simplicity; but several weighty objections lie against it, and forbid its reception. *First*, the apostolic churches had generally, if not universally, a plurality of pastors, elders, or bishops. Thus, for instance, the church at Ephesus had, as we know, several. The twentieth chapter of the Acts puts this out of question: "From Miletus Paul sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church, and said unto them: Take heed to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost hath made you bishops" (vs. 17, 28). Now, assuming the earlier or later date of the Apocalypse, it is improbable that this numerous eldership should, in so short a period, have dwindled down to one. But, *secondly*, we attach more weight to the fact, that pastors are never elsewhere designated angels. It is true

that the priest and the prophet are, in the Old Testament, entitled  $\text{מַלְאָכִים}$  or angel (Mal. 2: 7. Hag. 1: 13). But the New Testament pastor is neither a prophet nor a priest. We urge, *thirdly*, against the view in question, the consideration, weighty to our minds, that it is improbable a symbolic title should be given as the *explanation* of the symbolic "star;" especially, when the symbolic candlesticks are *literally* explained. To the writer these arguments are perfectly conclusive.

3. *The angels of the church are the CONSISTORIES OF THE ELDERSHIP; the kirk session, according to some; the presbytery, according to others.* In this case, the session or the presbytery is regarded as *officially one*. This view we consider still more untenable than the preceding. The second and third arguments urged against that, are equally refutatory of this. It is open, besides, to other serious objections. How can an angel denote plurality? an "unit" be the "symbol of a collective number?" "As each of the stars is a unit, so must each of the angels be. To make the stars symbols of the angels, and the angels in turn symbols of collective bodies, is to make a caricature of symbols."<sup>1</sup> That sometimes the singular and sometimes the plural number are employed in the epistles to the seven churches, is no proof of the "collective import" of the term *angel*; for it is not the angels which are addressed in these epistles, but the churches. Each church is addressed, sometimes in its collective or corporate capacity, as one church, in which case "thou" is employed; and sometimes in relation to the plurality of persons composing its membership, when "you" is employed. "He that hath an ear let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." But even if the angels seem sometimes personally addressed, it is as component parts of these churches and their representatives.

4. *The angels of the churches are the PRESIDENTS, the primi inter pares, of the college of elders in each particular church.* That in those churches in which there was a plurality of elders, one of these elders was appointed president, or chairman, either temporarily, or permanently, for the sake of order, and that this president came at last to be designated emphatically  $\acute{\omicron}\ \acute{\epsilon}\nu\acute{\iota}\alpha\kappa\omega\tau\omicron\varsigma$ , we are not disposed to question. But that this president is the "angel of the church," we reject for the same reasons that we reject the claim to that honor of the individual pastor.

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<sup>1</sup> Mason's Claims of Episcopacy refuted, p. 108.

5. *The angels denote the MODERATORS of the presbyteries, or synods of the churches.* This view takes for granted that Presbyterianism was the form of church government in existence when John wrote the epistles to the seven churches of Asia. But this must first be proved, before such an interpretation of the "angels of the churches" can be allowed. We have no right to bring our preconceived views of ecclesiastical polity to the Apocalypse, and interpret the document by them. And, even if the correctness of these or any other views of church polity were certainly made out, we should not be at liberty to bring in these views and fasten them here; the difficulty should be examined independently of them, and dealt with simply as a question of interpretation. Besides, the view proposed lies open to the objections alleged against the second view examined above.

6. *The angels are the DIOCESAN BISHOPS who presided over the seven Asian churches.* This is the Episcopalian theory.<sup>1</sup> It is untenable for the reasons already assigned against view No. 2. It is also exposed to other fatal objections peculiar to itself. 1: It assumes that each of the seven churches consisted of several distinct churches or congregations; an assumption most gratuitous, arbitrary and baseless. 2. The word *church* is never in the New Testament applied to a plurality of congregations. It denotes simply a congregation, an assembly. 3. There is no evidence that, at the time the Apocalypse was written, one bishop ever presided over more than one Congregational church.

7. Dr. Davidson has proposed a rather novel view of these apocalyptic angels of the churches. "The general style of the book," he says, "accords with a symbolic interpretation of the title; and, since several parts of the epistles indicate that they were addressed neither to one president, nor to several, it is probable that the title angel of the church is simply a *personification of the pervading and predominant spirit of each church.*"<sup>2</sup> This appears, to our mind, too abstract a theory to be likely to be found in John's Apocalypse. It has too modern an aspect for so ancient a book. There is nothing like it, so far as we are aware,

<sup>1</sup> Boyd's *Episcopacy*, p. 108, second edition. Hooker's *Eccles. Polity*, II. 249, Cambridge edition.

<sup>2</sup> *Eccles. Pol. N. Test.* p. 160. Dr. Davidson's work is the most independent, luminous and satisfactory exposition of the ecclesiastical polity of the New Testament in the language.

in Scripture. How can the "predominant spirit" of a church be separated from the church itself? If the churches are aggregate personalities, must not the angels be personalities too? If the angels are only abstractions, must not the churches, consistently, be reduced to abstractions also? How could letters be addressed to "personifications of the predominant spirit" of churches? or, sent by them to the churches to which they pertained? And what can be meant by the Redeemer holding "personifications" in his right hand? and personifications of the "predominant spirit" of each of the churches, be that spirit good or bad? There are, we humbly venture to think, fatal difficulties in the way of Dr. Davidson's theory.

8. Dr. Wardlaw gives up the subject as a hopeless difficulty. After combating several views as untenable, and referring to two others as the most probable, he adds: "On the whole, the point is one of dubiety and difficulty. . . . It is one of those points (of which there are a few) which would be quite intelligible at the time, but which to us have become somewhat uncertain and obscure."<sup>1</sup>

9. Professor Stuart, in his elaborate Commentary on the Apocalypse, appears to have no fixed views on the subject before us. He refers to the Old Testament usage of  $\alphaγγελος$  =  $\alphaγγελος$ , as applied to priests and prophets, and seems to think that this latter application of the term *angel* applies in the case before us; and that the *leading teacher or religious instructor* in the Asiatic churches is intended. He then refers to another exposition, derived from the synagogue. Some find in the  $\alphaγγελος$   $\alphaγγελος$  *legatus ecclesiae*, a person to correspond with the  $\alphaγγελος$   $\alphaγγελος$  of the Apocalypse. But no satisfaction is to be obtained by resorting to the synagogue. Confusion rather is the result. For, while one makes the *shehiach tzibbur* a bishop, a president, a teacher; another (Ewald) makes him a *clerk*, a *secretary*, or *sexton*; for such, inferring from synagogue sources, he pronounces our  $\alphaγγελος$  to be, maintaining that  $\alphaγγελος$  is much better fitted to express the meaning of  $\alphaγγελος$  than  $\alphaγγελος$ . Of this Prof. Stuart disapproves, and expresses his opinion that, probably, the angel of the church is so called in conformity with the Chaldee *shehiach tzibbur*, and may be named *legatus ecclesiae* because he is "*delegatus ab ecclesia*, in order

<sup>1</sup> Congregational Independency, p. 1762.

that he may offer their public devotions to God, and superintend their social worship." Dr. Robinson (N. T. Lex. in Verb.) takes essentially the same view, but without making any reference to synagogue sources. Having given a *messenger, one who is sent*, as the meaning of the word, he adds: "So in Rev. 1: 20 seq. *the angels of the seven churches* are probably the prophets or pastors of those churches, who were the messengers, delegates of the churches to God in the offering of prayer, service," etc.

But the objections already urged against other views, especially against No. 2, are equally fatal to this. Besides, it seems very far fetched to designate a pastor or bishop of a church as a *messenger*, because he has been chosen by the church to preside in their assemblies and lead their devotions. It is still more weighty against this view, that it involves the germ of the most pestilent heresy which has ever cursed the church; the heresy of a human priesthood. Is the pastor "delegated" by the people "to God in offering prayer, service," etc. as Dr. Robinson says? Surely, not. Surely, he is not a mediator between them and God. Surely, he does not offer their prayers for them. They offer their own spiritual sacrifices. They are as truly, and in as high a sense, priests, as he. It is their privilege, as priests unto God, to draw nigh into the holiest and appear in the immediate presence of God with their prayers and offerings. In leading their devotions, the pastor does not act as a priest, or a "delegate to God." He merely gives *audible* expression to the prayers which they all equally present unto God, so that all may, at the same time, unite in the same supplications at the throne of grace. If this were not so, if the pastor were their delegate to God, he might as well pray silently as to offer supplication with an audible voice. We do not intend, by anything we have said, to intimate that Prof. Stuart or Dr. Robinson meant to insinuate this priestly heresy. Far from it. All we intend to assert is this: that, unconsciously to themselves, the view which they have advanced on the present subject, contains the germ of a most pestilent evil, and that, therefore, that view cannot be sustained.

10. Having thus examined the several explanations which have been usually proposed of the "angels of the seven churches," and suggested refutatory considerations of them, we shall proceed to lay before our readers two other explanations, one of which we have been constrained to adopt.

The former of these views is that which assumes the *appropriated* sense of the word *ἄγγελος* as its basis. The word primarily and properly denotes a messenger, any messenger, human or divine. In this general and unappropriated sense it is frequently used in the Scriptures. More generally, however, it occurs there in its appropriated sense as designating a celestial messenger; an angel in the ordinary sense of the word among ourselves. So common is the use of the word in Scripture, that we do not readily depart from it unless we find something in the context, or the subject spoken of, to show us the contrary.

It is by no means a novel opinion which regards the seven angels of the seven apocalyptic churches as seven celestial messengers. It is as old as Gregory Nazianzen, bishop of Constantinople, who flourished in the latter half of the fourth century. It is, also, a view capable of being defended by plausible, if not conclusive, arguments. First, the meaning of the word it assumes has general usage on its side, especially in the Apocalypse. In ordinary Biblical usage, an angel is a celestial being. The Apocalypse is full of angelic agency. God is here viewed as accomplishing almost all things by the agency of the celestial beings who surround his throne; and why not also, it may be asked, in the case before us? It may be argued, secondly, when we read of the seven angels of the churches, and then proceed with our reading through the entire book and find angels referred to, and that these are invariably, or generally; at least, angels in the appropriated sense of the word; and, moreover, when we read of four angels, and, repeatedly, of seven angels, and find that these are angels proper, are we not almost compelled to the conclusion, that the seven angels of the churches are seven *bona fide* angels? If, we may further ask, an "angel of the waters" means an angel proper who presides over the waters, why should we not regard the angels of the churches as celestial beings to whom the care of these churches was in some sense committed? This view, it is again urged, accords most fully with the Biblical doctrine of guardian angels. They are constantly represented, both in the Old and New Testament, as employed on behalf of the people of God. "Are they not all ministering spirits sent for service on account of them who are about to inherit salvation" (Heb. 1: 14)? The reader may also consult the following passages: Matt. 18: 19. Acts 12: 7—15. Gen. 32: 1, 2. 2 Kings 6: 17, etc. May we not, then, not only in consistency, but with the

current doctrine of the Bible on our side, take the seven angels of the churches as guardian angels; as celestial spirits appointed by God to render service to those churches? What is to hinder our doing so? What impropriety does such a view involve? Will it be said, in reply, there is this impropriety: that, according to this view, celestial spirits are brought in as the objects of reproof in these epistles; a thing utterly repugnant to all right feeling, and all correct views of the character of these heavenly beings? But this objection, it is said, is wholly founded on mistake. The angels of the churches are *not* reproofed. Reproof is administered to the churches themselves, but not to the angels of the churches.

There are, however, objections to this view which cannot be so easily obviated. First, apocalyptic usage is not so certainly in favor of this view of the "angels," as is taken for granted. In many cases, the angels introduced seem rather *ideal*, than real beings, as the angel of the waters, the angel of the altar, etc.; and, in other cases, the angels brought before us seem to be the representatives of human agents, the instruments of God's vengeance on the ungodly nations, as in the case of the angels who pour out the vials of God's anger on the earth. Secondly, the supposition that Christian churches have each a guardian angel is, to say the least, uncertain and unbiblical. We know of nothing like Scripture which can be urged in its behalf. We go so far as to assert, while admitting the general ministry of angels, that the doctrine of a guardian angel to each individual believer, is not made out very clearly from the statements of the sacred word. But, thirdly, an overwhelming objection, in our mind, to the view in question, is this: that the seven epistles are represented as being addressed to the angels, or addressed to them for the churches with which they are respectively connected. This seems not very natural when these angels are regarded as celestial spirits. Think of letters addressed to certain of the angels of heaven for Christian churches on earth! No facile solution of this difficulty can be furnished. It may, indeed, be replied, that the Apocalypse is highly figurative, and that in a figurative way, angels may be represented as conveying messages of encouragement, admonition and reproof to the respective churches over which they preside. But this reply is not satisfactory. Figurative language never violates propriety. Angels, in the appropriate sense, are not the messengers employed by

God to edify his churches. Besides, there would be no sense in addressing an epistle, intended for a Christian church in Asia, to a celestial being, as if he could be, in any proper sense, the conveyer of such a communication to them.

11. The second view referred to above, is that which assumes the unappropriated, etymological sense of the word *ἄγγελος* as its basis. The *ἄγγελοι*, angels, are *messengers*; *the messengers of the churches to which the epistles are addressed*. But do we find a similar class of persons spoken of elsewhere in the New Testament? We do: "Whether our brethren be in question — they are the messengers, *ἀποστόλοι*, apostles, of the churches" (2 Cor. 8: 23). "Epaphroditus, your messenger, *ἀποστόλος*" (Phil. 2: 25). These messengers were sent forth by the churches for many purposes. They carried letters of salutation to other churches. They transacted various kinds of business committed to their care. They visited brethren, especially preachers, who were in want, or in bonds, to relieve their necessities, to perform for them any act of kindness they might need, and to administer to them the consolations of Christian sympathy. They were the messengers of benevolence on behalf of the churches which sent them forth. They were not a distinct class of officers, but were, perhaps, generally elders, whose services were thus occasionally used as circumstances might require; but, when sent forth on any message of love or mercy, they were styled *ἀποστόλοι τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν*, or messengers of the churches.

Now is it not very natural to view the angels of the churches as the messengers of these churches? True, the word used is different from that employed in the epistles of Paul; but then it has the same general meaning. *Ἀποστόλος* is messenger, and *ἄγγελος* is messenger. Besides, the latter word is peculiarly suitable to such a highly figurative book as the Apocalypse.

The "Alpha and Omega" commands the Apostle John: "What thou seest write in a book and send unto the seven churches which are in Asia" (Rev. 1: 11). And who shall convey this writing to these churches? There are messengers, *ἄγγελοι*, at hand for the purpose; a piece of service, be it observed, which the messengers of the churches were wont to perform; as, for example, Epaphroditus, the messenger of the church of the Philippians to Paul, who, on his return home, conveyed to the church by whom he had been sent forth, the epistle which Paul had written to them.

To confirm this view, let it be borne in mind, that in the Old Testament the  $\alphaγγελος$  =  $\alphaγγελος$ , angel, is often used for an ordinary messenger (see 1 Kings 19: 2. 1 Sam. 16: 19. Job 1: 14, etc.). Any messenger, in the unappropriated sense of the word, according to Scripture usage, is an angel. In the New Testament, the word is, in a few cases, used in a similar manner. Thus, in a quotation from the Old Testament, God is represented as calling John the Baptist  $\tauὸν \alphaγγελόν μου$  = my angel, or messenger (Luke 7: 27). So in the epistle of James (2: 25), the spies, or messengers, sent to spy out the land of Canaan, are called  $\tauὸς \alphaγγέλους$  = the angels.

Now let us make a supposition, a supposition in itself exceedingly probable, that the seven churches of Asia which are named, and to which epistles are addressed, had sent each its  $\alphaγγελος$ , or messenger, to John in Patmos, and that these messengers were with him when he received the  $\alphaποκάλυψις$  "to show unto his servants things which were about to come to pass." What could be more natural, in this case, than that John should send letters to their respective churches, making them the bearers of these letters, or that the Holy Spirit should make them the means of conveying his reproofs, exhortations, warnings or encouragements, to the churches from which they came out; and that the Redeemer should be represented as holding them in his right hand, denoting his absolute control over them and care for them, while he is exhibited, at the same time, as walking in the midst of the churches from which they had been sent, to denote his close inspection of all their affairs and his knowledge of all their ways?

Further, this view meets and removes the difficulties involved in the inquiries: Why are *only seven* churches, and these seven churches of *Asia*, named and addressed by letter? and, Did John send directly, a letter to each of these churches; and, if he sent a letter to each, how did he send it? These inquiries have perplexed the commentators; but, according to the view we advocate, they are easily answered. The seven churches named, and only these, had letters addressed to them, because messengers sent forth by them to visit the venerable Apostle in his exile were with him; and these letters were actually conveyed to them by the hands of their respective messengers.

So far, then, as we can see, this view, which is based on the

primary and usual meaning of the word *angel*, meets the *exgentia loci*; is perfectly natural in itself; meets and removes various difficulties, and is open to no fair grammatical, logical or theological objection.

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## ARTICLE VII.

### RICHARD BAXTER'S "END OF CONTROVERSY."

On the 21st of January, 1691, Mr. Baxter wrote the Preface to this celebrated treatise. The title of the treatise is: "An End of Doctrinal Controversies which have lately troubled the Churches by Reconciling Explication without much Disputing. Written by Richard Baxter. Psalm 120: 6, 7, My soul hath long dwelt with him that hateth peace; but when I speak, they are for war. Luke 9: 46, 49, 50, 54, 55, There arose a reasoning among them, which of them should be greatest, etc. London: Printed for John Salusbury, at the Rising Sun, Cornhill, 1691." On the 8th of December, 1691, Baxter died. Of course, the present treatise could not have been published many months before his decease. Parts of the treatise, however, had been, for twenty years, lying by him in manuscript. The work, therefore, may be presumed to contain his latest and maturest views. Notwithstanding all that has been said with regard to his theological fluctuations, this treatise develops a good degree of harmony pervading the entire course of his theological speculations. He changed his opinions sometimes. Not seldom has he contradicted himself; so did Dr. Owen and Dr. Twisse contradict themselves; but most of the contradictions found in Baxter's later works, were found in his earlier also. In one sense, he was consistent with himself in adhering to them.

A succinct but luminous and richly suggestive view of Baxter's theological system, spirit, and history, was given in two Articles of the *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. IX. pp. 135—169, 300—329. The only doubts which we have heard expressed with regard to the entire impression of those Articles, were derived