

The Sacred Regiment of Bishops

Towards an Anglican Definition

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The phrase which stands at the head of this essay is taken from Hooker¹ and expresses perfectly the high esteem with which episcopacy was regarded in the classical epoch of Anglican history. By the year 1550, when the first vernacular Ordinal was published for use in the Church of England, many continental protestants had experienced church life without the sacred regiment of bishops for nearly a generation. The influence of their writings and of their ecclesiastical policies had been widely felt in this country through the friendly intercourse which the English reformers enjoyed with them. Cranmer and his fellow workers conceived of themselves as called to undertake in the English Church that same work of reformation which had been so successfully inaugurated on the continent. There was in the middle of the sixteenth century an evident community of interest between Canterbury, Geneva and Wittenberg. Yet there was never in England any question of dispensing with the main structure of church life, including the orders of its ministry. No leading English reformer at this time seriously proposed the abolition of episcopacy, and the publication of the Ordinals of 1550 and 1552 testified to the determination of English churchmen to retain the essentials of what was regarded as a form of ministry coeval with the life of the church itself.

This grave respect for its own past, combined with an informed criticism of the distortions which had marred the more recent historical development of the Church of God, was a leading characteristic of all the work of reformation undertaken in England. "We hope, therefore," wrote Hooker at the end of the sixteenth century, "that to reform ourselves if at any time we have done amiss is not to sever ourselves from the church we were of before. In that Church we were, and we are so still."² A generation earlier Bishop Jewell had enunciated the claim of the Church of England to the possession of all the essential marks of catholicity when he wrote: "We have left that fellowship (of Rome) of very necessity, and much against our wills. We have departed not so much from that church as from the errors thereof—not disorderly or wickedly, but quietly and soberly—we have done nothing herein against the doctrine either of Christ or His apostles."³ What Hooker and Jewell thus defined as the meaning and purpose of reformation in the Church of God illuminates the doctrine of ministry set forth in the Ordinal. Indeed, reformation can have no coherent meaning unless it signifies the essential continuity of the community and its institutions which have been reformed by resorting to Scripture and primitive practice.

The intention to continue the three historic grades of order in the Church, bishops, priests and deacons, is plainly asserted in the preface to the Ordinal and as plainly implied in the rite itself. The antiquity of these orders which can be traced back to apostolic times is claimed as the justification for their retention in the Church of England reformed. Yet no elaborate or narrowly exclusive claim, which might have been disallowed by subsequent historical investigation, is made for their divine institution but a sober confidence expressed that the practice of the primitive church was based on a right understanding of apostolic precedent. "It is plain to anyone who will read the scripture without prejudice that there were three distinct orders of ministers in the Christian Church in the apostles' days, which were designed to

continue to the end of the world.”⁴ This confidence has not been misplaced, for no research has been able or is likely to be able to modify the substance of the Anglican claim. But it was in no antiquarian spirit that the Anglican fathers secured the continuance of an episcopal ministry. The justification for their action was apparent to them in the history of the church from the earliest times, but this history they interpreted as the handiwork of the living God. If it could justly be claimed that “the Church of Christ is at this day lawfully, and so hath been sithence the first beginning, governed by Bishops, having permanent superiority and ruling power over other ministers of the word and sacraments,”⁵ then this testimony of history afforded a theological basis for the significance of episcopacy in the structure of church life. The exact pattern of an episcopal ministry could not be found in the New Testament, but it was not the duty of churchmen merely to endeavour to reproduce the details of a phase of church life which had long passed away. Nevertheless, the rapid emergence of an episcopal order in the primitive church could not be understood except on the assumption that it was a legitimate development of the embryonic order of the New Testament and faithfully embodied the true order of the Gospel. Historical development and theological significance were not to be regarded as two entirely separate things.

The use by Hooker of the word “sacred” in describing the office and work of a bishop was a deliberate act to assert that the existence of an episcopal ministry was not the result of historical accident nor due to the whim of man but was so bound up with the earliest epoch of church life that it possessed a unique authority in the church which could only be set aside for very grave reasons. To make an exclusive claim for the “regiment” of bishops might not only bind too heavy burdens on Christian men, but impose an unwarrantable restriction on the sovereign grace of God. But the public admission that the Church was not constituted by its ministry did not lead to the conclusion that the form of ministry was a matter of indifference or that the bishop could be treated as an optional extra in the life of the church which could yet continue without any noticeable injury if deprived of an episcopal ministry. The grave reasons which appeared to justify the action of continental evangelicals in dispensing with episcopacy never existed in England, but the exponents of Anglican theology did not conceal their belief that the other churches of the Reformation had suffered injury in their loss of bishops and manifestly lacked something of “the integrity or perfection of a church, which we cannot grant them without swerving from the judgment of the Catholic Church”.⁶ This was not merely to assert that nothing in the Ordinal conflicted with the language or the general teaching of scripture, but that the particular form of ministry set forth in the Anglican rite gave such adequate expression to the New Testament principle of ministry as accorded with the integrity of church life.

I

It is sometimes alleged that the Church of England retained episcopacy as a fact of its life and because it was convenient so to do, without making any authoritative pronouncement on the significance of the fact which might make impossible the maintenance of effective fellowship with the non-episcopal churches of the continent. The language of Article XXIII, which declares “and those we ought to judge lawfully called and sent, which be chosen and called to this work by men who have publick authority given unto them in the congregation to call and send ministers into the Lord’s vineyard,” can be cited in defence of this opinion, for it carefully refrains from making any definition of the men who may lawfully execute this authority and seems to suggest that differing usages may be allowed. But Article XXIII must be read in the light of the Ordinal and the practice of the Church of England in which an

episcopal ministry has been maintained as a sacred regiment against all challenge. In so far as differing ministerial orders were not considered to present insuperable barriers to fellowship, this was because classical Anglicanism observed the necessary distinction between what the Church essentially is and what it possesses. Since the Church is the Body of Christ it can only be defined in its essential being by reference to Christ: that is, in terms of faith. The Church possesses among other aids to the fulfilment of its life the gift of order, and until the sixteenth century this gift had only been known in one form. It was not open to men of their own initiative to dispense with this form and to devise a new one, even if the latter were modelled upon an alleged New Testament pattern. Circumstances might compel the Church to undertake such a re-ordering of its ministry if the corruption of the traditional form had gone too far to be arrested, but this could only be regarded as an emergency measure and in no way as a precedent.

It would indeed constitute a serious ground of complaint against the reformers if it could be demonstrated that they had failed to see that the shape of the ministry must bear some relationship to the truth of the Gospel. The tenacious hold upon episcopacy manifested in the Ordinal and in subsequent Anglican history would hardly be intelligible if no positive value had been discerned in its function in the Church. Care in the maintenance of an order which only possessed a certain natural convenience would have been little better than ecclesiastical irresponsibility of the worst sort when it led to a lack of outward unity. Once the distinction had been made clear between what the church essentially is and the gifts it possesses of which “one of the very chiefest is ecclesiastical polity”,⁷ then it was possible to make very high claims for the apostolic order of the Church of England without repudiating the Christian standing of other churches or suggesting that salvation depended on the kind of government exercised in the Church.⁸

II

It is in the contents of the Ordinal as that has been received and used in the Church of England for nearly four centuries that there is set forth a positive conception of the significance of episcopacy in the life of the people of God. The writings of many of the principal Anglican theologians, particularly in the seventeenth century, show that the Church of England through its representative spokesmen regarded this reformed episcopate as a pattern which might well be followed elsewhere. The deliberate attempt had been made in the English reformation, and it was believed had been successfully made, to recover the pattern of ministry as it had been exercised by the Apostles and received in the early church. Critics of the Ordinal were openly challenged by the language of the preface to demonstrate the incompatibility of the Anglican order with the teaching of Holy Scripture. No such convincing demonstration has ever been forthcoming.

The Ordinal clearly intends to make bishops as they had been made in the earliest Christian times and as they ought still to be made, and not as they had been corrupted by Roman innovations and secular entanglements. Episcopacy, like the substance of authentic Christian faith, had survived the deformations of the medieval centuries and was now deliberately restored to what was believed to be its primitive pattern. It was therefore no new episcopate which was created in the middle of the sixteenth century but the continuance of the historic episcopate purged from the corruptions of the centuries and renewed according to the Word of God. Thus the ancient rule which required at least three bishops to participate in the consecration of a new bishop to ensure the genuineness of the succession and to remind him

of his place in the whole Church, is observed by the specific direction that in addition to the Archbishop or chief consecrating bishop, two other bishops should be responsible for reading the Epistle and the Gospel. The awareness of a continuity with the Church of the ages expressed in the words of the preface is emphasised again in the prayer at the laying on of hands, when the candidate is addressed with the solemn injunction, "Receive the Holy Ghost for the office and work of a Bishop *in the Church of God*, now committed unto thee by the imposition of our hands." It would be difficult to estimate how much the Church of England owes to the maintenance of the episcopate for its consciousness of being an integral part of the Apostolic and Catholic Church of the ages. It was on this theme that Dean Church dwelt with eloquence and passion in the well known sermon that he preached at the consecration of the Bishop of Salisbury in 1869. "If, in spite of all our differences, we all of us feel ourselves one with the first ages, one with the Church Universal of all times, instead of an entirely different body growing out of it and coming into its place, it is along these threads and networks of the episcopate that the secret agencies have travelled which have kept alive the sentiment of identity, amid so much that seemed to contradict and defy it."⁹ The ministry, and particularly that order in the ministry which bears the chief responsibility for its continuance, must have an especial concern with true succession in the apostolic gospel. Succession is not a matter of lineal descent from the apostles by imposition of hands, apart from the whole life of the Church; but within that life the episcopate can and does express the Church universal in an effective way. In recent times Archbishop Benson was distinguished for his insistence on the larger responsibilities which fall to a bishop in virtue of his office and frequently expressed his impatience with these bishops who became too immersed in their own dioceses. "They are bishops of dioceses and make an immense fuss about their business . . . they are good diocesan bishops, but bishops of England, no!"¹⁰

III

It is in the light of this firm, albeit not narrow, insistence on the function of the bishop as uniquely representative of the Church from apostolic times that the reformed pattern of episcopacy contained in the Ordinal must be considered. The candidate is first asked, "Are you persuaded that you be truly called to this ministration, according to the will of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the order of this Realm?", thereby indicating that episcopacy in the Church of England, while preserving what is essential for genuine continuity, is nevertheless exercised in a different way and for different purposes from those specified in the unreformed rites. The bishop-elect is not left to form his own conception of the office which is to be committed to him, still less is he expected to exercise his authority in any merely personal or individualistic fashion. The archbishop is directed to put to the candidate certain questions designed to teach him the elements of the new responsibility which will now rest upon him. What is to be observed in all the questions is the emphasis upon the pastoral duty of a true bishop in the Church of God. A bishop is consecrated to a ministry of Word and Sacraments like any other minister in the Church of England, and the authority which he receives is to be exercised in conformity with the teaching of scripture, and is derived from the Word of God. He must be persuaded that the scriptures "contain sufficiently all doctrine required of necessity for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ," and be ready to devote himself to the instruction of the people under his care in these saving truths. He must be careful to distinguish between the truth of God and his own theological reflections, valuable as these may be, and to claim for the latter no greater authority than they possess by reason of his learning and experience. The fulfilment of this task will make great demands upon his time both in respect of private prayer and study as well as in public instruction. An important

element in this task of feeding the flock of God is a readiness “to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God’s Word.” A concern for the integrity of Christian faith has been down the centuries a special episcopal responsibility, but it is not an exclusive responsibility since the bishop is urged “both privately and openly to call upon and encourage others to do the same.” At a later moment in the service prayer is offered that “this Thy servant . . . may evermore be ready to spread abroad Thy Gospel, the glad tidings of reconciliation with Thee; and to use the authority given him not to destruction, but to salvation”; and at the delivery of the Bible to the newly consecrated bishop he is charged to “give heed unto reading, exhortation, and doctrine. Think upon the things contained in this Book. Be diligent in them, that the increase coming thereby may be manifest unto all men.”

There is, alike in exhortations and in prayers, a notable absence of any reference to the high priesthood which was a prominent feature of the great consecratory prayer for a bishop in the old rite. Allusions to the Old Testament priesthood are omitted and there is no prayer beseeching God to bestow on the candidate the “*cathedra episcopalis*”. The evangelical functions of preaching, administering sacraments, and reconciling men to God and one another by proclaiming the good news of God, are indicated as the principal ways in which this episcopal ministry will be fulfilled. It cannot be argued that the sacerdotal functions of the earlier episcopate are assumed and a necessary emphasis upon pastoral duty given particular emphasis because of the way in which this latter duty had come to be overlaid in the medieval centuries. The reformers were indeed aware of the pastoral failure of the ministry in their time, and the grievous injury inflicted on the church by so many non-preaching and absentee bishops who were absorbed in affairs of state, and they perceived the necessity of recalling the episcopate to its primary function of pastoral care. When the two rites, the reformed and the unreformed, are compared, what is omitted in the reformed rite is of equal importance with what is asserted. What is omitted is any reference to lordship or a sacrificial high priesthood. What is emphasised is the responsibility of preaching and of personal pastoral activity in setting forward “as much as shall lie in you, quietness, love and peace among all men.”

This emphasis upon preaching and pastoral duty presents a pattern of episcopal activity very different from the pattern which had been commonly accepted in the medieval centuries. It requires from the bishop a diligence in biblical study and an aptness in teaching which is in accord with the New Testament doctrine of ministry, however novel it may have seemed in the sixteenth century. To many a twentieth century bishop it must appear as an almost impossible ideal, for it certainly rebukes the managerial revolution in the Church which has merely tended to replace episcopal grandees with managing directors. The ordinal not only contemplates a teaching bishop as the chief requisite of the Church, and has little to say of the good administrator, but also insists that he must be a faithful pastor who will administer discipline, not irresponsibly but agreeably to God’s Word. The bishop, though he is representative of the great Church and possessed of an authority which no other member of the Church enjoys, is as much under the authority of the Word of God as the humblest Christian, and this cannot fail to impart a confidence in his rule. It is lamentable that the plainly expressed intention of the Ordinal has so rarely produced this result, and the gulf between bishops and priests which was evident in the later middle ages has hardly been narrowed down in practice. The phrasing of the Ordinal points to a similarity of function and a common obedience to the rule of Christ, expressed through the scriptures. It is only as the administration of a diocese (like the governance of a parish) is undertaken in this constitutional manner on the basis of a common subjection to the Word of God that confidence can be restored and the gulf closed.

The delivery of sound doctrine and wise guidance to the people implies the requirement of personal and direct ministrations on the part of the bishop. "Be to the flock of Christ a shepherd, not a wolf. . . . Hold up the weak, heal the sick, bind up the broken, bring again the outcasts, seek the lost." This evangelistic and pastoral work cannot be done through committees and diocesan boards but must be carried out in person. It would be folly to decry the many advantages which have come to the Church through modern organisation and efficient machinery; but if the bishop is turned from the Father-in-God who in a representative way maintains personal contact with the other clergy and through them with the people, into merely the chief diocesan official, then the Ordinal is repudiated and the work of reformation undone. The pattern of ministry given to the Church of England since the reformation has been based on a pastoral episcopate in which jurisdiction has been derived from the Word of God and exercised for the pastoral good of the Church. This is the declared intention of the Ordinal. To indulge in recriminations over the manifest failure of the Church of England to follow this pattern is of little profit at this juncture. But the suggestion that others should take episcopacy into their church life, still more the requirement that all shall accept an episcopal ministry in a re-united church, make imperative the task of studying afresh and implementing the declared intention of the Anglican Ordeal—to make a pastoral episcopate.

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Endnotes:

- 1) *Eccl. Pol.*, VII. i. 4.
- 2) *Eccl. Pol.*, III, i., 1.
- 3) *Works* (Parker Soc.), iii. p. 79; *cf.* iv. pp. 709-713.
- 4) *A Rational Illustration of the Book of Common Prayer* : Charles Wheatley (1863 ed.), p. 94.
- 5) *Eccl. Pol.*, VII. iii. 1.
- 6) J. Bramhall, *Works* (L.A.C.T.), Vol. III., p. 518.
- 7) *Eccl. Pol.*, III. i. 14.
- 8) See especially Whitgift, *Works* (P.S.) I, pp. 180-7; Hooker, *Eccl. Pol.*, III.. xi. 16.
- 9) R. W. Church, *Pascal and other Sermons*, p. 104.
- 10) A. C. Benson, *Life of E. W. Benson*, Vol. II., p. 260.