

Towards an Evangelical Ecclesiology (Part Two)

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Melvin Tinker

Episcopacy

There is little doubt that evangelicals in particular within the Church of England are giving a fair amount of time and attention to the question of episcopacy. The Anglican Evangelical Assembly of 1990 devoted a whole conference to the subject, and this is all part and parcel of a wider concern to grapple with the issue of ecclesiology. But why focus on episcopacy? For two main reasons. The first is a very practical and immediate one. There are now a number of evangelical bishops in the Church of England, and they are asking for help to think through their role and their position within the church structures. Secondly, as the failed Methodist-Anglican reunion scheme has shown, the question of episcopacy is one which is central (as far as many Anglicans are concerned) to ecumenical relations: to what extent is it legitimate to view episcopacy as being essential to the being of the church?

Of course in putting the question in this form one has in mind a certain view of episcopacy—the view which came to the fore in Anglican circles with Newman's first *Tract for the Times*, which saw the threefold institution of bishops, presbyters and deacons as being divinely ordained, stemming from the apostles and secured by an unbroken line of ordinations. In 1946, the book *The Apostolic Ministry*¹ was published which made a distinction between those ministries which were essential (that is, having an unbroken link with the apostles) and those which were dependent. So the question revolves not so much around episcopacy *per se*—after all Free Churches have oversight and eldership—but rather apostolicity understood in terms of succession being maintained by the laying on of episcopal hands, which is a different concept altogether.

It really is quite astounding that, within such a relatively short space of time, such a view should become so widely accepted as if it were mainline, historic, Anglican teaching—let alone Biblical teaching! More recently Carey and Hind have spoken of apostolic succession as

precisely the recognition that the special ministry is a gift of God to, in and through the Church and the continuity in office and responsibility is one of the signs of the continuity of the whole church in the faith and witness of the apostles . . . one of the symbols [i.e. both signs and instruments] of the universality of the church . . . [The] historic and distinctive ministry is one of the constitutive elements of the Church of Jesus Christ: one of the means by which he himself exercises his own headship of his body and by which the Holy Spirit reminds Christians now of what Jesus taught his disciples and leads them into all truth.²

But how can such a statement be taken at all seriously when we have had popes making declarations about infallibility, the immaculate conception and the like? Are we seriously to believe that here the 'Holy Spirit is reminding Christians now of what Jesus taught his disciples and leads them into all truth'? What of duly ordained bishops who deny the fundamentals of the faith? Is it really through such as these that 'Christ is exercising his headship'? One only has to ask such questions to reveal how vacuous and dangerously romantic such thinking is.

What are we say to such claims?

First of all from a Biblical standpoint, such a view of apostolic succession cannot be demonstrated. There is no indication that a congregation had to wait for an apostle to come along to authorize it. There certainly were ministries in Rome and Antioch long before an apostle visited these places. Why, if such succession is essential to the church is no mention of it to be found, especially in the pastorals? The silence is deafening. As we have seen there is an apostolic succession there, but it is the concern to ensure the continuity of apostolic doctrine (2 Tim. 2:2).

Secondly, from an historical standpoint this view leaves much to be desired. The one who places great emphasis upon bishops as a means of ensuring unity in the church is Ignatius of Antioch in the second century, but even here we find no mention of manual transmission of apostolic authority. In a concern to fend off heresy, Ignatius urges Christians to conform to the mind of Christ, which, he argues, means conforming to the mind of the bishop, even to the extent that the congregation was not to do anything without the express say of the bishop (understood in terms of area oversight). Now for some this would be enough to provide some support for the present view of bishops prevalent in the Anglican communion—but is it? Professor Geoffrey Bromiley has this astute comment to make:

Ignatius' programme could not work out historically because it rested upon a naive and unsupported assumption, *viz.*, a supposedly self-evident equation of the mind of the bishop with the mind of God . . . God did indeed choose apostles, and through them pastors and teachers . . . but he also laid upon them a responsibility of faithfulness to the spoken and written tradition. Far from enjoying a direct identity with the mind of God and a consequent infallibility, they had thus to be subject to God's own word in the apostolic testimony³.

In other words, if we were to take the *principle* that Ignatius is promoting, 'unity by conformity to the mind of Christ', and translate that into contemporary thought, it would be that a ministry which is truly apostolic is one which renounces self-opinion and humbly tunes itself to the mind of God as expressed in the apostolic, Biblical teaching.

Thirdly, from the standpoint of Anglican teaching is it acceptable? Again the answer must be—'No'. According to article 6, we are required only to believe those things demonstrable from Scripture. As we saw in Article 19, succession is not offered as one of the marks of the church. Richard Hooker, who although he prized episcopacy, did not consider it necessary, said that 'The church hath power by universal consent to take it away.' But not only in accordance with traditional Anglican teaching is episcopacy not of the *esse* (essence—being) of the church, neither is it of the *bene esse* (well being)—we are merely told that it is something which has been received from ancient times and is continuing it; it is something which is not contrary to Scripture. So as far as traditional historic Anglicanism is concerned, episcopacy is a matter of indifference.

We should therefore not be enticed into accepting a view of episcopacy which is scripturally and theologically deficient. The church is not derived from the ministry (it is derived from the Gospel); rather, the ministry is derived from the church: we need to get it the right way around. We are not to allow this innovative doctrine to hinder fellowship and work with fellow believers who have a different ministerial structure, so that they cannot enter our pulpits or celebrate around the Lord's table—that is a scandal and must be overcome.

Even one such as Professor Geoffrey Lampe has written that we should be ‘increasingly reluctant to be committed as Anglicans to a position in which our Church too often seems to the rest of the world to be concerned with a gospel which is no gospel, a gospel of the grace of God in bishops’⁴—how true.

Turning to the present situation, many Anglican evangelicals are tending to approach the question of episcopacy from the standpoint of accepted historical-sociological convention [the Anglican episcopate as we have it] and then try and read into it the rôles and functions of episcopacy as we find it in the New Testament (—teaching, pastoral care, mission etc.), with the resulting call for more bishops with more power and smaller dioceses to enable such roles to be fulfilled in today’s society.

However, such a procedure needs to be stood on its head for it to be truly evangelical (*Sola Scriptura*). We need to apply the principle of the ‘dynamic equivalent’ in our Biblical interpretation and application, and ask: who are the ‘dynamic equivalents’ to the presbyters/overseers in the New Testament? The answer, of course, is the pastor-teachers of the congregations, the Vicars and Curates.

Therefore, in order for New Testament oversight to be translated into a living reality today, we do not need to multiply the number of existing Anglican Bishops, but to increase and facilitate the number of pastor-teachers in our congregations, seeking people whose rule is God’s Word, and whose ‘focus of unity’ is the Gospel.

If the present Anglican episcopate structure is to be retained (although it may help if another term other than ‘bishop’ could be adopted), it could be reformed in a direction away from the monarchical model towards a truly servant rôle, whereby as area spiritual advisers and enablers, they commit themselves to encouraging, training and resourcing the true bishops of congregations to fulfil their calling—to teach the faithful and reach out to the un-evangelized. Instead of the diocese being seen as the primary reality of which the congregation is but a small part, the situation would be reversed so that the concern of such ‘area enablers’ would be to make every resource available to foster the work of Christ where he is present, in the midst of his people, the congregation.

This would not only have the advantage of removing the delusory ‘career ladder’ which exists, but bring us back into line with the Scriptural emphasis upon the local congregations as the primary loci of God’s activity and objects of his concern. It may also be a great step forward for such ‘area advisers / bishops’ to be elected by the diocese itself and for a shorter fixed period of time so that he may return, at a future period, back to a congregation (if he was to leave one at all). In any event, more radical thinking in the light of Scripture is surely required.

Ecumenism

As we saw earlier, the unity of the church is one of the essential aspects of the doctrine of the church. The very term *ekklesia* means ‘gathering’—the people of God gathered around the Messiah, Jesus Christ. This too is linked to the ‘catholic’ dimension, so that there is *one* shepherd and *one* flock (Jn. 10:16)—(a favourite text of the Reformers) and there are others who are to be gathered in by the teaching of the apostles as we read in Jn. 17:20-21. There is no doubt that this prayer of Jesus, ‘that they may be as one even as the Father and the Son are one’, was fulfilled at Pentecost: the spiritual unity was brought about by the Holy Spirit, a unity which was made manifest in terms of fellowship, submission to apostolic teaching and

corporate activity in evangelism. So it is not surprising to find that in the New Testament the proclamation of the *fact* of Christian unity is followed by a call to *maintain* that unity such that we are to be 'eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph. 4:3).

The unity that the New Testament speaks of and urges is never uniformity, nor is it seen as some multinational conglomerate. It is a unity 'in Christ', emphasizing its spiritual and personal nature; and a unity in truth, emphasizing its doctrinal nature: after all it is possible to be united in error, a point once graphically brought home by Jewel: 'There was the greatest consent that might be amongst them that worshipped the golden calf and among them who with one voice jointly cried "Crucify Him!"'⁵ Also Latimer was to remark, 'We ought never to regard unity so much that we would or should forsake God's word for her sake'⁶. The New Testament never sees 'unity' as an end in itself: it is something which arises out of God's gracious movement towards us in Jesus Christ and which we are to work out in dependence upon him. This means that there will be limits to unity. Where the apostolic truth is rejected, no unity exists. Paul pronounces upon those who promote error a curse (Gal. 1:8). John goes so far as to say that those who promote such heretical teaching never belonged in the first place (I Jn. 2:18ff.; 4:1ff.). So not all so-called disunity is wrong. Indeed it would seem that in the New Testament there are two motifs for disunity, one which is unacceptable, the other necessary.⁷ The first is what can be called the 'Apollos' motif as we find it in I Cor. 1 and 2, where the local church is being split on purely personal grounds—for non-theological reasons—and that is condemned. The second is what can be termed the 'Anti-Christ' motif, as we find in John's letters, where one must separate oneself from those who are teaching serious error. So the first cause for disunity is lack of love, and this must be overcome; the second is lack of truth and the promotion of error, and this too, where possible, must be corrected, and if necessary, separation must occur.

Let us now work out some of the implications that this teaching has in two directions: what we can call 'external ecumenism'—the way churches of one denomination or none relate to others; and 'internal ecumenism'—how we might view churches within our own denominational structure.

The modern ecumenical movement as represented by the World Council of Churches and the new Inter-Church Process have as their focus external ecumenism, the bringing together of denominations and affiliations of churches: and it is with visible unity that they are primarily concerned. But as we have seen, the unity which exists is spiritual and it is the invisible church which is truly one, although it is within the local church that that unity should be expressed visibly. However, it would seem that one of the reasons why there is much confusion and frustration in modern ecumenism is because it is mistakenly thought that a denomination is a church. We believe in the church, yes—local, regional and universal, but surely it is seriously wide of the mark to say that we believe in the church denominational. A denomination is more of a para-church organization, ideally organized to facilitate and encourage the work of the local church. As such it is not contrary to Scripture (as indeed other groups like the Church Pastoral Aid Society and Universities' Colleges' Christian Fellowship are not). But to speak of a denomination as a 'church', as we do, is as misleading as to speak of a building as a 'church', which we also do. It is theoretically possible to have a 'unity' of denominations or only have one 'superstructure', and yet be far removed from the unity of which the New Testament speaks—unity in Christ and in truth. This is not to say that where possible one should not seek a greater understanding between such organizations, and where appropriate a sharing of resources—but is this really Biblical ecumenism? Would it not be more in line with the New Testament view of the church to seek closer fellowship, a

recognition of ministries, a coming together between local churches which do confess and have that oneness in Christ and truth, that is what would commonly be called evangelical ecumenism? Should this not be the prayer of evangelical believers, as it was that of the great Richard Baxter? Is it right that for the sake of a para-church affiliation, that fellowship in the Gospel should be hindered? Our survey so far would suggest not.

So what of 'internal ecumenism', which since the Keele congress of 1967 has seemed to be the main concern of Anglican evangelicals?

Again we need to raise one or two questions. Is it perhaps the case that just as a confusion has arisen because of the mistake of identifying the church with a denomination, so there is confusion because there has been the tendency uncritically to accept a congregation as being a 'church' simply because it belongs to a denomination? Supposing, without being harsh or judgmental, that there is a congregation called St. Swithin's, but as far as one can tell, the pure word of God is not being preached, nor the sacraments duly administered, and discipline not exercised. If these marks of the church are absent, then can it be called a church? This does not mean to say, of course, that those amongst the number there do not belong to the universal church—the church invisible; but it does raise a serious question mark about the congregation's validity or at the very least its health. Now we obviously have to be very careful at this point. We are not saying that a congregation which contains error, or where immorality is to be found, is not a church—look at Corinth. But we surely do have to ask whether a gathering where the Gospel is repudiated in both word and symbol can in all honesty be conceived as a church, even though it belongs to a denomination. Such questions are not purely theoretical either: they have very practical and pastoral implications. For instance, one of your congregation is to move to a new town. Do you recommend that he finds the nearest church which belongs to your denomination or do you encourage him to find fellowship where the marks of the church are exhibited? As members of the Church of England, are we to put denominational loyalties above Gospel loyalties in our working with other congregations? We have to face these questions honestly if we are going to understand our ecclesiology in practice.

Ministry

There is little doubt that questions regarding the ministry are bound up with questions about the church—the two are indissolubly linked. Differing views of the church will reflect differing views of ministry and *vice versa*. Most questions today regarding the stipendiary / ordained ministry generally take it for granted that one model is correct, namely that the primary function of the minister is to act as a sacrificing and representative priest, hence the focus on eucharistic presidency. But it has to be said quite clearly that this view is quite alien to the New Testament, where the leader is not a priest but a presbyter who exercises leadership through teaching and example. Or to change the imagery, the pattern of the New Testament church is the synagogue in which the law is read, and not the temple in which the sacrifice is made. This is because *the* sacrifice has been made on the cross, and the people of God *are* his temple. (I Cor. 3:16).

When we turn to the New Testament there are a number of principles which emerge regarding ministerial leadership.⁸ First of all, there is the principle of *flexibility*: no real 'job description' is offered of what the ministers are to do in any detail, although in I Tim. 3:1ff. we are told of the qualifications required. It would seem that it was the needs of the local church that determined to some extent what rôle the ministers were to perform. Secondly, there is the question of *function*: the one specific duty of the elder which comes over time and

time again is that he must be a *teacher*. In Acts 20, Paul commends his own example to the elders in Ephesus as one who did not shrink back from proclaiming the whole counsel of God *cf.* Heb. 13:7. It is to teaching rather than eucharistic presidency that the elder is to be linked. Thirdly, the leaders were to lead—an obvious point but one which needs to be stressed. They were to do this not by domineering, nor was it to be particularly ‘low key’, but with compassion, working alongside others. But rule, they were to do (Heb. 13:7, I Peter 5:2). Finally, leadership was shared, that is it was collegial—there were ‘elders’ in the churches—one man leadership was out (as it was with Diotrephes in 3 Jn. 9).

What, then, are the implications for today? Let us consider just one or two. The office of elder as we have it must be, and be seen to be, one of a pastor-teacher. As such he must be highly trained and supported in that rôle so that he can handle the word of God aright. Oversight and care of the church must be plural, involving a number of people, and we see no Scriptural reason for arguing that women should not be involved in such a team (as deacon / deaconess). Thirdly, what is unfortunately called the ‘laity’ must be freed to exercise their ministry, not only within the church, but particularly in the world.⁹ They need to be taught and equipped to bear Christian witness in the varying situations in which God has placed them. Too often ‘lay ministry’ is exclusively thought of in terms of sharing out liturgical functions, but primarily it should be seen in terms of Christian men and women bringing the mind of Christ to bear on their position. After all, they are privileged to have access to people and situations to which the clergyman would hardly ever be allowed to venture.

Mission

This brings us on to our final section, that of the church and mission. To speak of the Church of England as the ‘best boat to fish from’ is not all that removed from Archbishop William Temple’s celebrated statement that the church is the ‘only club specifically designed for non-members’. As we have seen, the church is called out of the world by the Gospel in order to be sent back into the world with that Gospel. Paul saw his priestly duty [*function* rather than office] as ‘proclaiming the Gospel of God’ (Rom. 15:16).

It is quite interesting to note that in the world of chaplains in higher education there is something of an identity crisis, or rather a rôle crisis. It would not be unfair to say that a good many of them are constantly asking ‘what are we supposed to be doing?’ Other clergy are asking the same question. But to a certain extent, in a society which is becoming increasingly secularized, the church at large seems to be going through a similar crisis; maybe this accounts for some playing at amateur politics, or, as has happened in the past, some clergy leaving the church to become social workers, seeing this as being far more of an effective way of helping people and changing society. Such a state of affairs is a sad reflection of an inadequate ecclesiology, a failure to understand what the church is and what her unique rôle is in the world. Dr. Alistair McGrath has put the matter in these terms:

In the first period of its existence the church exulted in the fact that it had been *given* its reason for existence, the basis of its identity and relevance—it did not have to *seek* a role through which it could justify its existence to the world. It had been given its role as the bearer and proclaimer of the good news of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus Christ and of the implications of this astonishing event for the world. No other body had this role . . . the roles imposed upon the church by society, or claimed by the church for herself within society, are in the process of being withdrawn. Is it not time for the church to reclaim the role which is hers and hers alone? The changing face of society . . . has been the occasion of a serious identity crisis within western churches, forcing them to ask why they exist at all. If the church merely performs roles which others perform (and perform more professionally), it has no business to

continue in existence. There is no sadder sight than a church which has lost the social roles which it chose, and which is unwilling to assume the role which was originally given to it, to which the New Testament eloquently witnesses: 'Go . . . and make disciples of all nations.'¹⁰

How poignantly true! The priority of Gospel proclamation must be established if the church is to fulfil its call to be apostolic.

Conclusion

Surely these are some of the Biblical principles and priorities that we should be praying and working for today. An oversight which sees itself under the rule of God's Word, serving and supporting the pastor-teacher and his congregation. An ecumenism whose basis and rule is the one Gospel—open and free. A ministry equipped and enabled to teach the apostolic faith, geared towards getting the Gospel out into the world and so 'building up the body of Christ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ' (Eph. 4:12). May this be the vision for evangelicals in the vital days which lie ahead.

MELVIN TINKER

Endnotes:

- 1) *The Apostolic Ministry*, (Ed. K. Kirk, London: Hodder & Stoughton).
- 2) Carey and Hind, 'Ministry, Ministries and the Ministry' in *Stepping Stones*. (Ed. C. Baxter, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987) p. 59.
- 3) G. Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978), pp. 53-54.
- 4) G. Lampe, 'Episcopacy and Reunion', in *Churchman*, Vol. 75, (1961) p. 16.
- 5) Jewel, Parker Society, 3. 69.
- 6) Latimer, Parker Society 1. 487.
- 7) See Klaas Runia *Reformation Today* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth; 1968) p. 61.
- 8) I owe much of what follows to Alec Motyer's 'The Meaning of Ministry' in *Restoring the Vision* (Eastbourne: Monarch, 1990) p. 259.
- 9) See Tony Walter's 'Against Participation for the Kingdom', in *Churchman*, Vol. 102 (1988) pp. 143-180.
- 10) A. McGrath, *The Enigma of the Cross*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987) pp. 171-173.