

EPISCOPAL AUTHORITY

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“As a sign of the continuity of the church and the gospel down the centuries the episcopate stands as an impressive testimony worth guarding and cherishing. As a divine blueprint continuing the ministry of the apostles, originating the fullest life of the church, it is a fallacy theologically and historically.”¹ This quotation from *The Olive Branch: An Evangelical Anglican Doctrine of the Church*, is indicative of the division between its evangelical and Anglo-Catholic polarities on the issue of episcopal authority. Both sides to the argument agree that the office of bishop is a useful one for church governance. They disagree over whether or not it is essential to the church. In other words, could there be a valid church without a bishop? As a corollary to that question, does apostolic succession really matter? This paper will briefly address those subjects in the context of exploring a bishop’s authority.

The conflict starts right from the beginning; in other words, what came first the presbyter or the bishop? A common Reformed theory of Episcopacy is that the office of bishop resulted from conflicts amongst the presbyters.² This point of view apparently stems from the writings of St. Jerome, who said, “Among the ancients, bishops and presbyters are the same, for the one is a term of dignity, the other of age. The Apostle plainly shows that presbyters are the same as bishops.”³ Two noted Anglican theologians are commonly quoted in support of the evangelical view. Richard Hooker said, “It was for a remedy of schism that one was afterwards chosen to be placed above the rest, lest every man’s pulling unto himself should render asunder the Church of Christ.”⁴ Richard Field, Dean of Gloucester and a contemporary of Hooker, argued that the episcopate was fundamentally an administrative function, saying “... wherein a bishop excelleth a presbyter, is not a distinct or higher order, or power of order, but a kind of dignity and office or employment only.”⁵ David Holloway, in quoting Jerome, Hooker and Field goes on to say, “So for Hooker and Field, as with the other reformers, it is obvious that the church is defined by the clear truth of the gospel and not by having bishops. Bishops are not of the *esse* of the Church.”⁶

However, after Hooker and Field wrote, the writings of the Apostolic and Early Church Fathers were discovered. John Halliburton notes that Clement of Rome (Bishop 88-97 CE) recorded of the Apostles that “...as they preached in the country and in the towns, they appointed their first fruits ... to be bishops and deacons of them that should believe ... our Apostles knew also through our Lord Jesus Christ. That there would be strife over the dignity of

¹ Tim Bradshaw, *The Olive Branch: An Evangelical Anglican Doctrine of the Church*, (Oxford, Latimer House, 1992), 179.

² D.R.J. Holloway, *Episcopal Oversight – A Case For Reform*, Latimer Studies 48, (Oxford: Latimer House, 1994), 23.

³ St. Jerome, “Letter 69, Letter 146” quoted in Holloway, 21 (note 42).

⁴ Richard Hooker, “Laws” Bk 7 v.4, p 342, quoted in Holloway, 24.

⁵ Richard Field, “Of the Church, Vol 1”, 321, quoted in Holloway, 25.

⁶ Holloway, 26.

the bishop's office. For this reason, therefore, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the aforesaid, and after a time made provision that on their death, other approved men should succeed to their ministry."⁷ Halliburton also observes that Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (50 to 117 CE) wrote that as churches grew he needed to send delegates to cope with Sunday worship, pastoral care and instruction; and so ordained presbyters who went out to do his bidding.⁸ According to Halliburton, "The episcopate in other words is the original order and it is from this that the order which came to be called the presbyterate devolves."⁹

Halliburton's argument is persuasive. The Apostolic Fathers - St. Clement, who knew both St Peter and St. Paul; St. Ignatius, the pupil of St. John, made Bishop by St. Peter; with St. Polycarp, made Bishop of Smyrna by St. John - were among the first appointed bishops of the early Church. They had personal acquaintance with one or more of the Apostles, and others who knew them. Indeed as another Church Father, St. Irenaeus (115 – 200 CE), Bishop of Lyon, who knew Polycarp, argued in his treatise *Against Heresies* to whom else would the Apostles have entrusted knowledge of how the church was to be run if not the bishops to whom *they* entrusted their churches.¹⁰ St. Jerome was not born until the year 340 CE. Hooker and Fields were writing in the sixteenth century. The bishop came first, and Apostolic succession, through the office of bishop has a solid basis in fact; as does Apostolic authority to govern the church. The question remains is it necessary to the Church?

The Anglican Church has taken several different positions on this question over the years. At the time of the English Reformation, the authority previously vested in the Bishop of Rome to govern the English church transferred to the Crown, not to the Archbishop of Canterbury. In fact the ultimate authority in the Church of England still resides legally in the Queen in Parliament. To the reformers, kings were 'God appointed' and the 'Lords of the Council and all the Nobility' were responsible for not only the punishment of wickedness and vice' but also for the 'maintenance of true religion and virtue'¹¹ Parliament became integral to the Church of England not only on matters of administration and internal discipline, but also in matters of faith; witness the several Acts of Parliament prescribing the use of the Book of Common Prayer for the whole realm (1549, 1552, 1559, and 1662). Bishops were regarded as 'Ministers of the Crown' for the spiritual governing of the nation.¹² The episcopacy was regarded as a matter of government, not of faith; and while normative to the church, in the period prior to 1662 it was not regarded as being necessary for salvation, even if divinely

⁷ John Halliburton, "Order and the Episcopate" in Robert Hannaford, ed., *The Future of Anglicanism*, (Leominster, Gracewing, 1996), 41.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ F.J. Bacchus, "St. Polycarp", in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume XII (Online Edition), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12219b.htm>.

¹¹ John Halliburton, *The Authority of a Bishop*, (London: SPCK, 1987), 3

¹² Richard A. Norris Jr., "Episcopacy" in Stephen Sykes et al, eds., *The Study of Anglicanism*, (London: SPCK, 1988), 334

instituted. This is demonstrated by the church's acceptance of the 'foreign' Reformed churches organized on the presbyterian model as genuine, on the grounds of necessity; since they had no access to validly consecrated bishops.¹³

After the restoration of King Charles II, the Act of Uniformity of 1662 formally excluded clergy who were not episcopally ordained from holding pastoral office in the English Church. Foreign non-episcopal churches continued to be recognized as in communion. By the dawning of the 18th Century, the position of the Church in English society had subtly changed. It could no longer count on a 'godly' prince to maintain its traditions and identity. James II and William III, in their different ways, made that clear.¹⁴ Its life was openly subject to the secular, civil authority of parliament; and its bishops were becoming political figures, by necessity, whose attention to pastoral issues was limited. The paradoxes and problems of this situation were brought into focus by the deprivation of bishops who would not swear allegiance to William III and Mary II.

Before 1689 the episcopacy was regarded as normative; but not the one absolutely indispensable mark of the church. That distinction fell to apostolic and scriptural teaching. After the "Glorious Revolution", and its aftermath, clergy, looking for a way for the church to retain its identity, and distance itself somewhat from political control, rediscovered the importance of apostolic succession. William Beveridge, Bishop of St. Asaph saw the succession of bishops in traditional fashion as perpetuating the Apostolic office. The primary importance of this succession to him lay in its character as a sign that Christ himself is 'continually present at such imposition of hands; thereby transferring the same Spirit he had first breathed into His Apostles upon others successively after them'.¹⁵ He saw the office of the episcopate as marking out the church as truly Apostolical, and thus guaranteeing its identity as Christ's own.¹⁶ Similarly, the Nonjuror William Law argued the necessity of an uninterrupted succession of authorized persons from Christ for the validity of the Sacraments; and for the independence of the church's constitution from that of civil society. Only by maintaining that constitution - ordination by persons standing in succession to the Apostles - could the church retain its identity.¹⁷ By 1791 it was realized, as one Bishop of Norwich put it, 'Without this rule we are open to imposture and can be sure of nothing; we cannot be sure that our ministry is effective or that our sacraments are realities'.¹⁸

At that point there had been a significant shift in emphasis. Episcopacy had become recognized as a factor that grounded the identity of the Church; marking it out as an ordered

¹³ Norris, 341.

¹⁴ Ibid, 342.

¹⁵ Ibid, 343.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

society historically independent, and indeed transcendent of civil society.¹⁹ In this shift of perspective lay the roots of the modern debate; between those who see the historic episcopate as belonging to the very essence of the church (*esse*), those who see it as a matter of well-being (*bene esse*), and those who see it as the full being (*plene esse*) of the Church.

H.W. Montefiore, discusses these three contrasting models, in *The Historic Episcopate.*, In the first (*esse*), the historic episcopate guarantees the church, which would not exist without it. Only priests ordained into apostolic succession have authority and grace to celebrate the eucharist.²⁰ In the second view (*bene esse*), the Historic episcopate is a link of continuity with the past. The Bishop's office is important for strengthening the faithful and propagation of the gospel. The government model of bishop-in-diocese reflects the same genius for representative monarchy as the political society in which it functions.²¹ In the third view, (*plene esse*), the historic episcopate is the fullness of being of the church, manifesting Christ's authority. It provides an effectual sign of unity; embodying the biblical proclamation the church is one, and the principle of apostolicity. It provides guardianship of the Word, Sacraments of the faith and the flock of Christ. The episcopally ordained ministry is both 'sent' to represent Christ to His church, and is representative of the church.²²

The debate continues, however, the high or exclusivist view has had a permanent influence on Anglican understandings of church order; attested to clearly by the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral in which Catholic order took its place alongside norms of teaching and sacramental practice as a factor essential to the visible unity of the Church.²³ However, as Norris notes, this influence has not led to a general commitment to the view that where there have been no bishops there has been no church. The Lambeth Conference of 1948 suggested both that Anglicans cannot declare the sacraments of non-episcopal churches null and void, nor treat non-episcopal ministries as identical in status and authority with episcopal ministry.²⁴ Anglicans were still conflicted about Episcopal authority. The same Lambeth Conference also delineated the Anglican solution to this dilemma - the 'theology of dispersed authority'.

The theology of the Bishop-in-Synod,²⁵ as it is otherwise known, developed of necessity in the 18th and 19th centuries when the colonial churches first gained their independence from the Crown. Not having the Monarch and Parliament to answer to, they found their seat of authority in synodical government. Voting by houses - bishop, clergy and laity - and the requirement that these houses concur made episcopacy constitutional; and left bishops with

¹⁹ Norris, 343.

²⁰ H.W. Montefiore, "The Historic Episcopate", in Kenneth M. Carey, ed., *The Historic Episcopate: In the Fullness of the Church*, (London: Dacre Press, 1960), 105.

²¹ Ibid, 106.

²² ibid, 108

²³ Norris, 344.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ K. S. Chittleborough, "Towards a Theology and Practice of the Bishop-in-Synod", in Stephen W. Sykes, ed., *Authority in the Anglican Communion*, (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1987), 147

the power of veto over proceedings. Episcopal authority was thus shared between the bishop and the synod. However, the bishop had certain powers and responsibilities proper to his office which he could not delegate to synod.²⁶ Legislative authority resides neither in the 'house' of bishops, nor in the various committees and bureaux of the church, but in diocesan and, to a lesser extent, provincial and national synods. Other structures of authority – the National Bishops' Meeting, The Lambeth Conference, The Anglican Consultative Council – are advisory, relational and collegial but not legislative.

In this system of church government, personal oversight by the diocesan bishop goes hand in hand with the corporate responsibility shared by all three houses acting together. The consensus fidelium – consent of the faithful – is made real by the house of the laity acting in constitutional conjunction with the clergy and the bishop. Anglicans relate lay and clerical authority by simultaneously assigning a presidential role to the ordained person and by giving open access to all criteria for decisions in the church. Episcopope, is best understood as a function of the body of Christ – the whole Church. Synod is the organ of the diocese that exercises episcopope. The Bishop of a diocese is elected by the clergy and laity at a synod. Episcopacy, as a distinct office, is exercised by the bishop wielding his authority by virtue of divine commission in synodical association with his clergy and laity. The Bishop shares episcopope not only with his synod, but with his fellow Anglican bishops, and the universal church as a joint tenant of the whole.²⁷

The bishop has a particular responsibility for teaching the faith, encouraging, promoting, maintaining the proclamation, in Word and Sacrament, of the apostolic gospel by and in the whole church, for the pastoral care of his own flock and for making visible the unity of 'the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church' of the creeds. He or she is part of synod (immanent) yet his or her Episcopal authority transcends it.²⁸

In the Church in England, Parliament remains the final authority. General Synod dates only from 1969 (having been delegated the authority of the Convocations of Canterbury and York which met only when summoned by the sovereign), and owes its authority solely to what is delegated to it by parliament. The Church of England now has forum to debate and decide on its own affairs without recourse to Parliamentary machinery, but Canons still require Royal Assent before promulgation.

Episcopal authority is, therefore, different depending on where it is situated within the Anglican communion. In the 'Mother Church' it still resides in the Crown, in the last instance. The bishops have spiritual authority to the extent the Crown permits its exercise. In the other provinces of the Communion, it resides in the bishop-in-synod.

²⁶ Chittleborough, 145.

²⁷ *ibid*, 147-149.

²⁸ *Ibid*. 150.

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