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The Problem of Episcopacy

THE honest Christian, in his age-long, painful endeavour to discover the truth about God's dealings with mankind, must always distinguish between theological dogma and historical fact. So much of the Christian faith is founded upon actual events in history attested by reliable witnesses, and glimpsed, however dimly, by succeeding generations, that prayerful speculation about the meaning of these events is inevitable. Where the results of such speculation have been crystallised into Articles of Faith accepted by the majority of the faithful throughout the ages, the witness of the latter impels us to acceptance, though honesty, even here, would also interpose caution. But where the problem is one of a particular ecclesiastical institution, however founded, however sanctioned by the consensus of the saints, any honest man will demand an even closer scrutiny. A thing is not true because it is old.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, in his famous Cambridge sermon of 3rd November, 1946, appealed to non-episcopal churches to "take episcopacy into their system." But episcopacy does not appear in the New Testament as one of the facts accompanying the Revelation of God in Jesus Christ. It is, as all respectable scholars would agree, a subsequent phenomenon.¹ Through the centuries up to the Reformation, it was the dominant system by which the Church was governed, although from time to time we find evidence that it not only varied a great deal within itself, but also that sundry small dissentient bodies managed to subsist without bishops. After the Reformation, a great section of the Church broke away from episcopacy *inter multa alia*. At present, among the non-Roman churches, the probability is that episcopals are in the minority.

On what grounds then did the Archbishop make his appeal? Partly upon the "Lambeth quadrilateral," one of whose cornerposts is the "threefold ministry" of bishops, priests and deacons. Partly also, although this is generally understood rather than openly avowed, on the grounds that the various Anglican churches would find it impossible to unite with any non-episcopal body. Since the above pronouncement was made, long, elaborate and painful negotiations have been carried on year after year. It cannot be denied that progress has been slow, and that the rank and file of church members on both sides have little information about the situation, and little interest in it. We seem to have stuck. In the question of inter-communion with the Church of South India, some of whose ministers are still non-episcopally ordained, we Free Churchmen cannot be wholly disinterested. The Church of England must, of course, settle its own affairs, but if we are asked to accept "episcopacy" it must at least be made clear to us what is involved. Is it a divinely authorised institution, of the very *esse* (being) of the

¹ In New Testament bishop = presbyter or elder. *Tit.* i. 7-9, etc., and similar passages are later interpolations.

Church itself, or is it something, which has been blessed throughout the ages, which it might be expedient to adopt in present circumstances, but which is intrinsically no better than any other institution of similar honour and antiquity?

Seven scholars associated with Westcott House, Cambridge, have written a book² in which the thesis is advanced that episcopacy is neither of these—that it is of the *plene esse* of the Church; that the Church cannot “express the plenitude of its being as the one Body of Christ” without it. Various arguments are advanced purporting to give the proof of this from “Bible, tradition and reason.” One of the writers, indeed, is inclined to leave history out of account: “The fundamental conception of the episcopate for which we are contending is not, in itself, a matter of history but of theology” (p. 22). A considerable part of the book, however, is taken up with arguments from the Fathers, both ancient and post-Reformation. A brief reference must be made to this later, but from our point of view the apologetic built up round certain New Testament references is more important. Amid much that is unexceptionable one cannot escape a suspicion of special pleading.

To give only one example, the Apostolic Ministry is “distinguished from the mere (sic) preaching of the apostolic gospel and from mere pastoral oversight” (p. 117, referring to *Eph.* iv. 11). It is pointed out, quite correctly, that church orders—we should prefer to say the varying Spirit-given functions of Christians—“do not constitute the Church but . . . minister to it.” It is then stated that the “historic episcopates embodies a special form of the ministry. It will be shown that through it the apostolic ministry is continued and the unity of the faith built up.” But a precisely similar argument might be used in support of a prophetic ministry or a ministry of evangelists, pastors and teachers, for they are all mentioned in the same verse and are all distinctly indicated as fulfilling the function of “building up the Body of Christ” in the succeeding verse. If any priority is given to the apostles it is one of place only: there is neither here nor elsewhere in the New Testament any indication that the apostles were regarded as possessing, in virtue of their ‘office,’ a superior infusion of Grace or greater usefulness than anyone else. In fact, the unpremeditated witness of the historical narratives and the artless greetings at the end of the Epistles give rise to a completely opposite conclusion—compare Stephen and Philip who were *not* “Apostles,” and Andronicus and Junius (*Romans* xvi. 7) who, most surprisingly, were.

Nor is the argument from history, which follows in the next section, any more convincing. As a specimen we may select the quotation from (the then) Professor Ramsey on page 118: “As guardian of teaching, as an organ in the Body’s continual Life of

² *The Historic Episcopate*—Seven Essays edited by Kenneth M. Carey.

Grace—the Bishop sets forth the Gospel of God.” What bishop? Any and every bishop? Or only those bishops who have actually done so in the eyes of God and man? Only those who have been witnessed to by the Spirit through their ‘fruit,’ which has obviously been His ‘fruit’ also? Concerning the pretensions of any other bishop or collection of bishops whatever, we must register our objection. The Catholic Church supports us in this, for more than one Council of Bishops has been anathematized as heretical and its canons declared null and void.

If we look for the working of the Spirit in individual lives it would be hard to maintain the thesis that the “historic episcopate” has contained in its ranks a larger number of saints, inspired Church leaders, evangelists or scholars than any other category of Christians. But can it be argued that, apart from individuals, the *institution* has been, in any peculiar sense, the instrument of Providence in history? There is no need to delve very deeply into the records of the past in order to discover that, somewhere or other, in every century without exception, episcopacy has been the instrument in some places of tyranny, of oppression, or corruption, of avarice and of the devil. The scandals of the first century are exceeded by those of the second, and neither, perhaps, amount to very much. But in the third and fourth century and onwards, the abuse of the episcopate, the misuse of the prestige and power it conferred, has been what we should expect if we regard it as a human invention used by sinners. Such abuse is overruled by God, but there is nothing in episcopacy to distinguish it from any other institution which may be similarly abused and similarly regulated by the Divine Power. It is of no avail to rejoin “*corruptio optimi pessima*,” for we have no *proof* that this was the best possible means of protecting the Church from the assaults of the heathen or propagating the Gospel in, say, the Dark Ages. We know that it was expedient—a quality which it shares with many other similar phenomena. The claims put forward on its behalf, in so far as they require any specific Divine sanction or unique ‘validity’ fail, then, before the bar of history. What, according to a certain ecclesiastical or theological dogma, *must* have happened, has, in fact, *not* happened, and there is no appeal from such evidence.

Nor, on the other hand, can it be shown that any other form of Church government (apart from transient sectarian notions) has been any less successful over the whole range of its exercise in place and time, or any less an instrument of God’s purpose.

The conclusion is inescapable, that neither the Word of God in Scripture nor the experience of the Church in history afford any support for the claims put forward for the ‘historic episcopate,’ even in so reasonable and temperately-written a book as the one referred to above.

Yet one of the most valuable ingredients of our Free Church heritage is the liberty we possess, which enables, or should enable, us, to "prove all things" and "hold fast to that which is good," even if it be unfamiliar. Stubborn prejudices, each surrounded by its ingenious system of rationalizations, are surely the most insuperable of all obstacles in the way of Church Unity. We clearly see the mote in our brother's eye, but must ever watch and pray so that the Spirit may remove, at whatever cost, the beam in our own. The manifest abuses of the past should not induce in us an unwavering hostility to new proposals brought forward in the vastly different circumstances of the present.

For as an expedient or, even more, as an instrument of God's purpose in and through His Church, episcopacy has proved its value over and over again. In many situations the bishop has proved to be, not indeed the source of unique authority which the advocates of a 'high' doctrine of Apostolic Succession would have him be, but a God-inspired leader and a true preserver of the historic Faith. In the far corners of the earth, among comparatively undeveloped peoples, the episcopal form of Church government has proved its worth a thousand times. Even at the present day, the Church, faced with so many and formidable hostile combinations, may be well advised to make use of this well-tried institution.

To those who believe that it is the Will of God that a greater measure of Church unity should be attained, and that our present condition of disunity is sinful and stands in the way of a true Revival, the question of "bishop or no bishop" becomes one of urgent practical importance. It is clear, as remarked above, that the Church of England will never unite in any real sense with *any* non-episcopal body. Yet without the Church of England we cannot conceive a great united advance to make England once more a predominantly Christian nation. If we really want this to happen, we must, therefore, like our Congregational brethren in South India, find out what kind of episcopacy we are expected to accept. At present the Church of England herself does not know. The book we have been discussing is an attempt to enable her to discover her own mind on the matter. Is it not time that we made up our minds also? It appears to the writer that South India has shown us a good example. We may accept episcopacy without thereby being obliged to believe in any theory about it. We may accept it in the hope that, in time, we, together with the authors of *The Historic Episcopate*, may find it to belong "to the full stature of the Church" of Christ. And we may believe, especially after the experience of the Church of South India, that it may prove to be God's will for His divided and ineffective Church in this country.

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