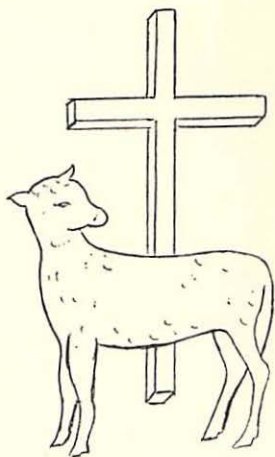


THE OFFICE OF BISHOP

Chapter Five



THE OFFICE OF BISHOP

What is episcopacy? There are some names whose real meaning you only discover when you deal with them as the devotee of science deals with the stones known as "geodoes." They must, as it were, be broken open to find what lies hidden inside. Such a word is the Greek *episcopos*, which in the English Bible is translated "bishop." It has in it just this significance—it means an "overseer."

Clearly then, an Episcopal Church is one which believes that certain ministers hold a position of oversight in church affairs. There may be very different notions as to the authority which these overseers possess. There may be widely variant views as to the sources from which their authority is derived. But the essential principle of Episcopal government, which lies underneath all its forms, consists in this gift to certain ministers of an oversight of the Church of Christ.

I. DOES THE REFORMED EPISCOPALIAN BELIEVE THAT THE OFFICE OF A BISHOP IS OF DIVINE APPOINTMENT, AND PERPETUATED BY AN UNBROKEN APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION?

The Reformed Episcopal Church was born of the Protestant Episcopal Church. If we inherited from it extravagant views of the office of a bishop, it would only be an illustration of the laws of heredity.

For not more clearly do high church writers assert that Christ established the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, than they insist that He appointed the threefold order of bishops, priests, and deacons. The Reformed Episcopalian protests against such a position as contrary alike to the Scripture, to history, and to all the analogies of human life.

A village springs up on the virgin prairie of the West. A mere hamlet, its government is of the simplest character. Two or three men are vested with all authority that so primitive a state of things demands. But the population grows. The hamlet becomes a town. The necessities of the case call forth a demand for a new class of officers. By and by, a city, number-

ing tens and hundreds of thousands, has swallowed up in its vast population the little germ out of which it sprang. New emergencies arise, and the government which was adequate for a country town is succeeded by the complete municipal machinery of a great and populous city. Those who founded the place did not provide the offices of city magistrate, aldermen, mayor, and judges of various courts, while the hamlet consisted of a half a dozen houses and a half a hundred people. Those offices were created when the need for them arose. It is the natural and historical way.

Exactly parallel to this is the account of the natural development of the apostolic Church. The early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles reveal to us no ministers, no administrators, no governors of the new born Church, except the Twelve Apostles.

As the gospel spreads and multitudes are added the emergency calls for a new set of officers, and the *deacons* for the first time appear. The lowest office in the ministry is the earliest to be created. But it arose only when needed and grew out of an unforeseen emergency.

All this time the entire Christian Church had been confined to a single city. Jerusalem alone had contained the whole of Christ's "little flock." Now persecution drives them out. Scattered throughout Palestine, they carry the great tidings with them. New churches spring up far distant from the apostolic center. The Twelve cannot be pastors in a hundred different towns. And so another new emergency calls forth the appointment of "elders" or "presbyters." It is not till the eleventh chapter of the Book of Acts, and probably ten years after the appointment of the seven deacons, that elders or presbyters are mentioned. They came like the deacons to supply a felt want. They were appointed only when such a need arose. But from the beginning to the end of the Acts of the Apostles you look in vain for any record of the creation of the episcopate.

The name "bishop" is not in the Book of Acts, except as Paul calls the presbyters of Ephesus "overseers," where the Greek word is equivalent to "bishops." Wherever the name is used throughout the epistles it refers to presbyters. Every advocate even of the highest claims for divine authority for the office of the bishop, frankly confesses that "bishops" and "presbyters" are used everywhere in the New Testament to signify the same office. Nothing can be clearer than this fact,

that a bishop and a presbyter in the view of the New Testament are one. If when no Apostles remained alive to exercise oversight in the Church, some presbyters were chosen to hold a supervisory position, and to them the name of "bishop" was given to distinguish them from their fellows, it was to meet a felt need in the Church precisely as with the deacons and presbyters. Nothing can be more certain than the fact that no divine command exists for the appointment of such an order in the ministry.

Even if we admit the claim that Timothy was made a bishop at Ephesus, and Titus at Crete, by the authority of the Apostle Paul, it would not follow that it bound the Church everywhere, and in all ages to maintain such an office as a permanent feature of the ministry. For the Apostles sanctioned the community of goods among Christians; yet no believer in modern times regards that principle as obligatory on the Church or its members. Apostles sanctioned anointing the sick with oil but no man regards it as a divine command for all lands and ages.

Paul recognizes an order of "deaconesses," and commends a Christian woman to the Church at Rome, expressly calling her by that name, yet the order of deaconesses has almost died out of the Church and no Christian imagines that a divine obligation requires the Church to restore it. Episcopacy may be a form of Church polity equally suited to all times and regions. Reformed Episcopalians would be the last to deny it. But that because after the Apostles died, episcopacy is found prevailing throughout universal Christendom, it is therefore a polity which God requires as essential to the existence of His Church, we abhorrently deny.

It will be asked, does not the Church of England, and through her, the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States, claim an "Apostolical Succession" of bishops, so that in an unbroken chain from the Apostles down to the latest prelate consecrated, each one can trace his ecclesiastical pedigree? Unquestionably such a claim is made, and on the basis of it, we are told that outside of this genealogical line there can be no valid transmission of ecclesiastical authority. How monstrous such a doctrine is can be more fully realized when we remember that it makes invalid and a mockery all the work which since the Reformation God has wrought by the non-episcopal Churches. On this theory they are no churches. At the same time that this theory remands all non-episcopal

Churches to the category of unauthorized "sects," it makes the corrupt and idolatrous Roman Church to be a true Church of Christ, because the chain of "Apostolic Succession" has been preserved in the consecration of its bishops.

No line or words of Scripture can be adduced to prove that either Christ or His Apostles commanded any such chain to be constructed through which the unseen current of church life should flow. There is no record in the Book of Acts or the Epistles of a solitary consecration of a bishop. The chain drops powerless because its very first link is lacking. However far down the centuries the so-called succession may have been extended, there is no proof that it ever had a beginning.

We are told that the early Fathers of the Church and writers of history give us every link of this chain. One list makes Clement the first bishop of Rome. Another as positively confers that dignity upon Linus. Still a third leaves Clement out and remands Linus to the second place in the succession. "The succession of Rome is as muddy as the Tiber." And yet we are gravely told that the "existence" of God's Church on earth "depends" upon this contradictory testimony.

As we follow the frail thread down the ages, it becomes still more confused and tangled. There were long dark ages in which all history becomes a hopeless labyrinth. Yet the believer in Apostolic Succession must hold that all Church existence depends on a certainty that through that period of ignorance and corruption, when bishops were feudal chiefs and when their lives were the shame of mankind, each one was duly consecrated, and the long chain never broken.

Added to this, we have the positive testimony of Jerome in the fourth century, and a host of later writers, that the great metropolitan Church of Alexandria (whose line of bishops figures largely in these lists) during two hundred years immediately succeeding the Apostles, always chose its own bishops from among the presbyters, who laid their hands upon him in consecration.

The reformers of the Church of England, who sealed with their blood their testimony of the truth, unanimously reject such a theory of Apostolic Succession. Canmer argued that a presbyter and a bishop were of the same order, and that no consecration to the episcopate was necessary. Bishop Jewel distinctly states that the Scripture makes a bishop and presbyter the same, and "only church custom" elevates the former above the latter. Even Archbishop Whitgift, opposing Puritan at-

tacks upon episcopal order, owns that "the Church of Christ may exist *with or without this or that form of government.*"

What the reformers and martyrs of the English Church thus forcibly and boldly taught, was also the earnest conviction of the first bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States. The venerable William White, Bishop of Pennsylvania, has been well styled "the father of episcopacy in America." When the English bishops, after the American Revolution, hesitated to consecrate a bishop for the revolted colonies, Dr. White recommended that bishops should be appointed and *consecrated by presbyters*. So stands the case. Against this theory of Apostolic Succession, the protest rings out from good men of every age, from all Christian history, and from the Word of God.

II. WHY DOES THE REFORMED EPISCOPALIAN THEN, RETAIN THE OFFICE OF BISHOP?

The answer is that the Reformed Episcopalian sincerely believed in the *practical value* of having in the Church such a presiding officer. To hold one individual responsible is the fruit of ripe experience.

The Church of Christ has ever taught that the entrance to its ministry cannot be too carefully and jealously guarded. The Reformed Episcopalian holds that in no way can the worthless and the ignorant, the unsound in doctrine and the unholy in living, be so effectively barred from entering the sacred ministry, as by holding one officer of the Church responsible for ordination to the work of gospel preaching. Responsibility is like the precious metals. One grain of gold may be beaten so thin as to cover a surface of fifty square inches, but its thinness destroys its tenacity and strength. It is an awful responsibility to which a Church holds one of its officers when it demands that he shall answer for the entrance gate of ordination. It cannot fail to impress him with a sense of his need of God's grace and wisdom sought in prayer. The Reformed Episcopalian does not believe that such responsibility will waken so profound a sense of watchfulness and prayer when it is beaten out to cover fifty or a dozen men with the duty of ordaining.

Let us pass from the entrance of the ministry into the *government* of the Church itself. No bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church can ever be "a lord over God's heritage." But as an adviser and a friend, he stands among his fellow

ministers as a presiding officer. If heart-burnings and jealousies creep into the hearts of fallen men, who, though ministers of Christ, are liable to temptation, it is his to "reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine."

He occupies too, the responsible position of a mediator and arbitrator, when differences spring up between ministers and their congregations. Troubles which might grow to vast dimensions and a shameful publicity, and add to the scandals that block the progress of Christianity, if either left to themselves or entrusted to the settlement of councils or ecclesiastical courts, may be quieted and harmonized by the wisdom and godly counsel of a presiding officer of the whole Church.

Moreover, who can so stir up the stronger parishes "to support the weak," who can to the same degree interest one church in another, and push on the missionary effort of the whole body, as an officer whose sympathies, interests and responsibilities are enlisted not in a single congregation, but in the Church as a whole?

Does it not also prove that a presiding officer among his fellow presbyters is a necessity to the Church when we find in the non-episcopal Churches a bishop, not in name, but in actual work and responsibility? It clearly shows that such an office is a natural and necessary one. It grows out of the inevitable demand of all human society that for every body there should be a head. Are we Reformed Episcopalians wrong when we claim that having the office, we should give the officer his ancient name?

We have been charged with inconsistency in one prominent fact of our history. The Reformed Episcopal Church rejects, as we have seen, the theory of an unbroken succession of episcopal consecrations from the Apostles down. "Why then," it has been asked, "did it come into existence only when a bishop of the old line led the movement? Why does it continue, to consecrate bishops by bishops and thus perpetuate a succession to which it attaches no importance?"

The answer is that Reformed Episcopalians do attach importance to their historic episcopate. We do not hold that it is necessary to the existence of a valid ministry and a true Church, but we believe that it links us with the glorious reformers of the English Church. Their polity is ours. It puts us clearly in that ecclesiastical family which preserves the idea of a president among presbyters which history testifies was the practice of the early Church.

That is not all. Our argument of practical utility again has its influence. The work of this Church must be largely in the line of opening a refuge for Episcopalians. It must be a home for men who love a liturgy and episcopal government, though loving the gospel better. When Bishop Cummins entered on the work of this Church he wrote to the Presiding Bishop of the communion from which he withdrew that he took the step in order to "transfer his work and office to another sphere." He entered this Church bringing his episcopal office with him. As such he consecrated other bishops.

It has been urged that canon law requires three bishops to consecrate, but history is full of instances in which but one acted as the consecrator. Dr. Pusey himself writes, "Consecration by one bishop is valid." Cannon Liddon, as high authority as the highest churchman could desire, has distinctly admitted over his own signature, when his opinion of the historic position of the episcopate was sought, "A consecration by one bishop is valid. All orders conferred by a bishop so consecrated are undoubtedly valid." Dean Stanley, certainly one of the profoundest students of Ecclesiastical History that the English Church has produced, has also pronounced his verdict as follows: "Whoever lays hands on presbyter or deacon (whether bishops or presbyters) takes part in the consecration or ordination: though a *single bishop is sufficient* in each case."

We can therefore give to our brethren who desire a pure gospel in a historic Church, an invitation which could not have been extended if ours were not a Church in the line of the historic episcopate.

Our Church has a reason over and above its practical argument for episcopal polity. Antiquity considered by itself proves nothing to the Christian. There are ancient institutions which degrade man and dishonor God. Polygamy and slavery are gray with age. But when we cherish something which itself is good, and possesses a manifest practical value, it adds to that value to know that it has stood the test of ages. There are certain principles of right and justice which constitute the bulwarks of society in this century, but it certainly adds to the estimate in which we hold them when we find them in the Magna Charta and know that they have stood between freedom and despotism since the barons at Runnymede wrested them from the reluctant hand of King John.

We have seen that episcopacy has a practical value in our

own day. Surely, it ought to add to the honor in which we hold it if history shows that it has come down to us from the apostolic age. If too, we find that the New Testament hints at, if it does not clearly prove, the fact that overseers were appointed while the Apostles lived, to do precisely the work which bishops do in an episcopal Church of our own time; and if later history shows that through all the earlier centuries of Christianity that polity prevailed, we have a valid reason for retaining the episcopal office.

That such evidence is to be found in the New Testament appears indisputable. All Protestants admit that the Twelve Apostles ordained other ministers, and that upon them there fell "the care of all the churches." Now, the simple question is, did these episcopal duties cease to be exercised by presiding presbyters when the apostolic band gradually passed away from earth? Even before the death of the last Apostle, did there exist no such presidency among the presbyters of the early Church when the work became too extensive for the personal supervision of the Twelve? Let the reply come from Paul's own writings. He says to Timothy: "The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to each others also" (II Timothy 2:2). When we ask how, and in what form, the authority to preach was to be conferred by Timothy, we receive the answer from the same authority. He tells Timothy to "lay hands suddenly on no man." He was to use the same watchful care and thorough examination of a candidate, expected of a bishop now; but when such investigation was complete, he was to admit the man who had thus been scrutinized by *laying on of hands* (I Timothy 5:22).

Still stronger does the point of our argument appear in the directions given to Titus, "For this cause," says Paul, "left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee" (Titus 1:5).

These two presbyters of the early Church manifestly exercised a power which did not belong to other presbyters. Paul exhorts Timothy to forbid the preaching of certain doctrines (I Timothy 1:3) which can only be explained on the theory that he had supervision of his fellow ministers. Explicit directions are given him as to the qualifications on which he should insist in those exercising their ministry under him (I Timothy 3). He is to count a presbyter who ruled well, "worthy of

double honor." He is not to receive an accusation against a presbyter, except in the presence of two witnesses (I Timothy 5:17, 19). When satisfied of sin on the part of a presbyter, he is to rebuke him publicly (I Timothy 5:20). Titus is given instructions to "rebuke with all authority." If necessary, he was to stop the mouths of those who held and taught heresies in doctrine (Titus 1:11, 2:15, 3:10). It seems almost impossible to avoid the conclusion that these two early ministers of Christ were entrusted by apostolic hands with precisely the duties and responsibilities which now pertain to the office of a bishop.

Let us create no misunderstanding. The New Testament does not say that Timothy and Titus were Apostles. It does not assert that they, or either of them, ever succeeded the Apostles in their peculiar office. But it does make it reasonably evident that even in the Apostles' days, some presbyters were appointed to oversight of the Church. They were entrusted with special authority in the two departments of admitting men to the ministry, and exercising a leadership and presiding influence. How perfectly natural it would be that as martyrdom, or a more peaceful death took the Apostles from their earthly work, the model suggested by their appointment of Timothy and Titus, and perhaps others, as presiding presbyters, should lead the Church to make such an office a permanent feature of its polity. And what was so natural actually took place. As early as the period A. D. 107-116, Ignatius testifies that the episcopal polity was universal in the Church.

It is unnecessary to cite the long category of Christian writers whose testimony makes it clear that from the time of Ignatius, onward for 1500 years, bishops presided over all the ever spreading activities of the Christian Church. We may justly reject many of the opinions of these writers. We may treat their doctrinal views precisely as we do those of any other uninspired men. The Bible is the supreme test to which they must be subjected even as the preaching and writing of teachers in our day. But their religious opinions are one thing. Their historic testimony is another. They are competent witnesses as to what took place in their own age, and their evidence is absolutely like that of one man. Beyond all question, they prove that the universal polity of the Church from within a hundred years of the death of Christ onward, was an episcopal polity.

What makes this the more remarkable, is the fact that

while endless controversies arose regarding Christian doctrine and government, there is no record of any question concerning the settled polity of the Church being a government by bishops. Orthodox and heretics were perfectly agreed on that point.

The Reformed Episcopalian cannot believe that within thirty years of the death of the last Apostle, the universal government and polity of the Church could have become episcopal if such a system had been repugnant to the Apostles' own teaching and practice. The Reformed Episcopal Church retains this form of Church government because we believe it to be "*ancient and desirable*." May this Church with bishops, who are "first among equals" with their brethren, demonstrate the value of this form of Church organization. While maintaining that the episcopate is not essential to the "being" of the Christian Church, may we show that it can be for the "well being" of the Church.