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Bishops And Baxter

John Pearce

One of our present diocesan bishops, when a suffragan, was giving a charge to his clergy. Without pomposity, but without compromise also, he declaimed, 'I am the successor of the apostles'. In discussion with many clergy as they left the church, I was amazed to find that very few of them took exception to such a downright statement.

It is likely that a good number of men on the bench today hold the same view, and therefore have no compunction about seeking the aggrandizement of their office. The parish minister is simply 'the manager of the corner shop', who functions merely as a representative of the bishop of the diocese or his commissary. The never synodically authorized 'Thine and mine' in most institution services really means, for the bishops, 'I am making you my delegate in this parish'.

This theory of the episcopacy was fully treated in the massive tome *The Apostolic Ministry* which was edited by Kenneth Kirk. It is no exaggeration to contend that this book has proved determinative in fashioning a theology of episcopacy for Anglicanism world-wide. But is there really any serious evidence that the bishops of the early post-apostolic times were in fact the successors of the apostles? More to the point, do we see any hint of this in the New Testament, where what primarily constituted an apostle was having been a witness of the Resurrection through a meeting with the risen Lord (which is why Paul is also called an apostle). Indeed Paul is described as the 'last of the apostles' (1 Cor 15:8).

In fact there were other apostles in the New Testament period. For example Titus and Epaphroditus were 'apostles of the churches' (2 Cor 8:23), but in such passages the meaning is clearly not 'one of the twelve' but 'messenger'. Muller asserts roundly in the *New International Dictionary*: 'One thing is certain. The New Testament never betrays any understanding of the apostolate as an insitutionalized church office, capable of being passed on.' It is therefore very difficult for biblical Christians to contend that our present bishops/presbyters are actually successors of the apostles. Indeed, it is high time that we contended strongly against this odd belief about the episcopate, which has led inevitably to the view that bishops are of the 'esse' of the church, and that this office depends for its validity on the laying on of hands direct from the

Twelve!

However, there has always been another theory which is expounded in *The Historic Episcopate in the Fullness of the Church* edited by Kenneth Carey. In this volume it is argued that episcopacy could not be reliably claimed to be of the 'esse' of the church, but that it was most certainly to be described as of its 'bene esse'. The trouble with this theory is that one then has to go on to prove that it really is effectively useful for the church, and that any church without it is seriously harmed in its work and ministry – an argument which has never commended itself, for example, to the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Of course this theory still retains the idea that bishops are somehow of a different order from the presbyters.

A third position is commonly held by Evangelicals – who have rarely taken bishops seriously at all. The bishop is simply a local chairperson of the presbyters, and is undifferentiated from his presbyters, except in his function which is an enhanced kind of oversight. How far Evangelicals actually do make use of this oversight to which they are theoretically committed is debatable.

Most evangelical parishes act as if they were Independents or Presbyterians, and the bishop is only invited into the real life of the parish when there is a Confirmation. It is likely that even this will soon cease as Confirmation itself slowly falls into disuse with the misguided admission of infants to the Lord's Table. Bishops, in this constituency, are only used in cases of dire emergency, and at times of a change of ministry in the local church. But this practical employment of episcopacy cannot justify bishops as of the 'bene esse' and certainly, even less, of the 'esse' of the church. Indeed there are all too many clergy who would argue that the bishop's office is in fact that of a 'deacon', serving the local churches administratively. (It is for this reason that some Evangelicals argue that there is no bar to women in a position of headship as bishops of dioceses.) Oddly enough, the role of deacon or administrator is one which most bishops have actually espoused in recent years! They are no longer pastors with serious oversight of their brother presbyters, but find it necessary to busy themselves with paperwork and committees. Few are prepared to delegate such tasks to able lay people and archdeacons, with the result that many people feel that the bishop is irrelevant to the real work of the church which is carried on locally. It is therefore difficult to justify that form of the episcopate which is theoretically held by Evangelicals in the Church of England.

At the same time the episcopate is slowly ceasing to be significant in the

wider life of the nation. For example, in the recent public controversy about abortion, it was left to the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster to speak on behalf of Christians, while not one Anglican bishop apparently spoke out on the issue. The most significant public intervention on non-church matters by a bishop recently was that of the Bishop of Oxford who sought to reduce the age of consent for homosexual sexual activity to sixteen!

Of course the bishops claim that they often speak on matters of public concern, but the important fact is that people and the media are not listening to them. Bishops do not have a role which is recognizably biblical in these days. One of our problems is that the model of episcopacy which we have inherited from the unreformed church is a prelatial one. Most real Evangelicals have reacted violently against this kind of pattern (at least until they become bishops). And yet there does seem to be a certain '*episcopo*' in the New Testament.

Outside the Church of England, oversight is in fact widely used in one form or another. The new Charismatic churches usually have a 'shepherd' to whom they refer from time to time. Indeed they often have a kind of denominational structure. Even the Independent churches have regular gatherings of ministers and local leaders who may call together other like-minded churches in the area for mutual support and encouragement. Typically one or more of the ministers takes a leadership role and there will be active interest and even practical help between churches. Therefore it would not be true to say that 'oversight' is unknown outside episcopal churches, but it is a very different form of '*episcopo*' and far less threatening. It could be said to be the oversight of a gifted minister (or lay person) who is recognized by his peers to have special abilities in leadership, teaching and pastoral care. However, this fact does not mean that the Presbyterians and Independents are likely to accept the Anglican model of monarchical episcopacy. The only free churches which are moving in an Anglican direction in this regard are those which are moribund.

The New Testament makes it perfectly clear that even St Paul, with all his natural gifts and the charisma of his remarkable call to be an apostle 'out of due time', did not act in the way that Anglican bishops act in places like the United States today. He had to appeal to his readers for support and the acceptance of his teaching and his rulings. The defence at Ephesus (Acts 20:17-38) does not read like the words of an instrumental leader, but

as those of one whose authority was in the love and acceptance with which he was held by his friends in Ephesus. None of this is to deny the necessity for leadership, but it is clear that it was of such a nature that it needed to be accepted by the hearers not as of right but because of its innate truth and integrity. In other words it seems to have been a leadership very much like that which obtains in the free evangelical churches – not an official leadership, but one given to a person with outstanding teaching and pastoral gifts. Outside the established church for example, there is no doubt that Martyn Lloyd-Jones exercised a most significant role in oversight. Such an oversight is very common indeed today within the evangelical wing of the Church of England, and most of my readers would be able to name a few men who are, for them, bishops, although not in Anglican bishop's Orders.

It may be that this was in some sense the model which seemed to Richard Baxter to be the right one, and that it was because of his conscientiously held convictions that, effectively, he was one of those who suffered in the Great Ejection. It is therefore worth considering exactly what theology and theory of episcopacy was held by one of our most successful and holy parish ministers, the chief protagonist of the Savoy Conference.

In the autobiography of Baxter, there is a fascinating summary of the various views then held about conformity (and one of the most important issues was what ought to be the proper nature of a restored episcopate if there was to be one). First of all there were those who conformed 'in their own sense', in other words with their fingers crossed – a common enough attitude for many Anglican Evangelicals today, as they take the oaths of canonical obedience. And yet it is difficult to understand how those about to be ordained or instituted as incumbents can take solemn vows to God without intending to keep them.

A second sort were those called Latitudinarians whom we should call Liberals (thus misusing a grand old word). Such folk were often concerned to 'rise' in the church. The evangelical movement in the Church of England has been ensnared into this way of thinking, rejoicing that many of its number have become bishops or archdeacons but not facing the issue of what kind of leaders are really appropriate to a church which is 'under the Word'. In passing, it is fascinating to note the way in which Evangelicals are so keen to wear mitres as a sign of their superior authority. To such a fall has come the religion of the Carpenter.

Churchman

The third group were those who ‘were heartily such throughout’. We might call them Vicars of Bray, and there are many such in our day like the very senior bishop who tells one group that he is a good Evangelical and tells another group that he is no longer such!

We then come to the Nonconformists.

First amongst these were those who could not ‘subscribe and consent to all things now imposed’. They were for the old conformity (ie that before the Commonwealth, so they were probably prepared to accept bishops in the old style) but they could not accept the new impositions. In other words they were likely to be un-enamoured of the liturgical changes introduced in 1662. But most Evangelicals in our day have accepted them and so much more – even a thoroughgoing return to a 1549 Lord’s Supper!

Secondly, there were those amongst whom Baxter included himself. These folk liked the oversight of the early church but not ‘the English diocesan frame... they like what is good in Episcopal, Presbyterians or Independents but reject somewhat as evil in them all’. This, in my estimation, is precisely the view held by most readers of this journal and an ideal to which we are – or should be – working. In other words we bring all forms of church government to the bar of Scripture.

The third sort were Presbyterians and the fourth were the Independents.

Now if Baxter’s own view is still the most biblical and indeed the most pragmatically helpful one for the people of God, then we either have to leave the Church of England or vigorously set about changing it. The matter is well pointed up in Baxter’s autobiography: ‘a bishop and presbyter differ not in “*ordine*” but in “*gradu*”, and ... a bishop was but a chief presbyter, and that he was not to govern but with his presbyters’ assistance and consent’ (ascribed to Reynolds later of Norwich). Such would seem to be an exact summary of the state of affairs in the New Testament.

By contrast, at the present time we are moving very fast in an opposite and even more autocratic direction, with the House of Bishops setting itself ‘over against’ the clergy and laity, not only at General Synod level but also in the dioceses.

How can we return to a system of oversight which is genuinely ‘*primus*

inter pares'? Maybe that can only be achieved when we have a few bishops who are secure enough to try out a new model of episcopacy based upon that of the foot-washing Christ; that would indeed be '*stupor mundi*'! Such bishops would eschew all 'duties' which were not of a pastoral or teaching character. It is significant that the Provincial Episcopal Visitors are seen to fulfil precisely such a role because they are set free from the treadmill of that administration which is not pastoral. This experience demonstrates that it would be perfectly possible for our present bishops to divest themselves of all activities which are not essential to a pastoral oversight. But too many of our episcopate live for an administration which affirms them. One reads of bishops taking their 'staff' away for a time of discussion. In that very statement the whole show is given away. The real 'staff' of the bishops are the clergy and leading lay people of each parish. The diocesan staff are really a kind of 'para-church organization' which exists solely to assist and support the real church, which exists in the parishes of the land. However, at the moment the parishes are seen as dependent upon and ancillary to the diocese.

What is the way ahead?

The radical solution is to work for the abandonment of the episcopate as we now have it, not in order to do away with episcopacy but in order to obtain it. In this model we should abandon diocesan structures wholesale and replace them with a network of geographical areas which might be comparable in some parts of the country to two or three Rural Deaneries. One of the clergy (or laity?) would be chosen by his peers and hands would be laid on him as he was given the responsibility of oversight for a period (say) of ten years. The entire administration of the Church of England would be closed down and the monies of the Commissioners would be paid direct to the parishes who would be responsible for maintaining their clergy either on their own or in conjunction with other parishes nearby. Large churches might support 'mission areas' in places like the inner city and deep countryside. The whole emphasis would now be upon the local church and upon mission. The churches would be held together by a common allegiance to the doctrine and practice of the Articles, the Catechism and the *Book of Common Prayer*. From time to time, groups of local churches would come together for mutual encouragement and support.

Having been a member of the National Synod and of every kind of committee at diocesan level, I can think of nothing of importance which

this radical plan would leave out of account. Instead of DACs we could use the ordinary planning regulations. Instead of finance committees of dioceses we should have self-financed churches in the parishes. Instead of Boards for Schools we should have local accountability. Instead of Parsonage Boards we should have the local builder maintaining the vicarage. Ordinands and potential Readers would be tested in the deanery and would come back to the deanery after training by extension through the theological colleges. The church would indeed be in a missionary situation and, in my estimation it would grow quickly and efficiently. Instead of the clergy and leading laity spending their time in meetings they would be out most evenings engaged in evangelism and pastoral care. The church would have the dynamism of the church of New Testament times. But of course I dream...

The question must be this: How can we move (however slowly) from our present debased form of church life and '*episcopus*' to one which approximates more truly to a real pastoral care and a real mission strategy? Clearly we cannot renew episcopacy unless we transform the diocesan structures. Therefore we must drastically reduce all diocesan organizations, abolishing as much as we can, stage by stage. We must reduce *all* meetings by setting them farther and farther apart and by discovering ways in which their work (if it is still required in the short term) can be undertaken in other ways. We must reduce the numbers of people required to be at each meeting. We must persuade the bishops not to attend any meetings at all and to leave that work to archdeacons (who should of course be deacons). We must refuse to accept the appointment of any bishop who has not been a parish minister for at least twenty years. We must give the administrative work of the diocese to lay people and refuse to allow the clergy to waste time upon a matter for which they do not have the expertise.

In general terms we need to persuade the Church of England to rethink its structures and their *raison d'être*. This means that we need to:

1. Open a debate on the nature of '*episcopus*' in the church without allowing anyone to begin with a model from the Dark Ages.
2. Do some serious work on the office of apostle in the New Testament and make certain that the results of that work are widely known.
3. Consider what kind of oversight is really for the '*bene esse*' of the

church and whether that is best experienced in a formal or in a charismatic way.

4. We must in every way shift the centre of gravity from the centre to the local church. (For example why should the diocese be the custodian trustee of local church property?)

This writer's personal opinion is that, if we could gain acceptance for the view that the bishop is simply the chairperson of local presbyters and laity, much would fall into place and the bishop would be set free to be a pastor. At the same time a rediscovery of the proper role of the deacon would move the administration of the church away from the presbyters and bishops into the hands of the specialist.

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