

Bishops and Presbyters in the Primitive Church.

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I. THE NEW TESTAMENT.

WHILE in the Gospels themselves there is little to indicate that our Lord prescribed either a definite form of government or distinct orders of ministry for His Church, to maintain that He did neither seems both hasty and ill-considered. That He founded an ordered society and gave to His Apostles authority for the fulfilment of the mission which He entrusted to them seems clearly conveyed by many parables and direct instructions.¹ And, by implication, it would seem certain that He gave them some indication of the principles on which the Church was to be organized, although He may have left many matters of detail to be decided by them under the guiding influence of the Pentecostal Spirit according as the exigences of time and place should demand. It is, therefore, reasonable to view the New Testament period as one during which the organization of the Church became gradually settled, and to see in the Apostolic injunctions the result of those instructions which our Lord had given to the Twelve, but of which no detailed mention is made in the Gospels.² To form, however, a true conception of the manner in which the Church's orders of ministry and form of government developed, it is necessary to remember that in the period immediately following the Ascension, the Apostles were, in all likelihood, looking for their Master's speedy return, and that, consequently, it was not until after the disappointment of this their hope—many of them having been called to their rest—that those who remained on earth began to lay aside their cruder

¹ St. Matt. xiii. 24-30, 47-50; xvi. 18-20; xviii. 15-20; xxii. 2 ff.; xxviii. 18-20; St. Luke x. 16; xxiv. 45-49; St. John x. 16; xiv. 16, 17, 26; xvi. 13; xvii. 20, 21; xx. 22, 23.

² See St. Matt. xxviii. 18-20; St. Luke xxiv. 45-49; St. John xxi. 25; Acts i. 1-9.

eschatological conceptions, to contemplate the possibility of a lengthened earthly career for the Church, and to prepare for such an eventuality. Hence the Apostolic Age naturally divides itself into three periods. In the first we see the Apostles at Jerusalem governing, as a college, the infant Church, and apparently regarding their own ministry as sufficient, until a practical difficulty in regard to the care of the poor suggests the appointment of deacons whose duty it would be to administer the needed relief. These "deacons" at first, no doubt, confined themselves to the "serving of tables," but it is not long before we find them preaching—as in the case of Stephen—while a year or so later their ministry seems to be extended, for we read of Philip preaching and baptizing, and thus the diaconate early attains its full development, and reaches a point beyond which it has never since advanced—so far, at least, as spiritual functions are concerned.

In the second period the Call of the Gentiles and the commencement of missionary enterprise brings about a new state of things, and makes new demands on the Apostolic ministry. The necessity of providing for the spiritual wants of scattered communities obliges the Apostles to associate with themselves others in the work of the pastoral office. Hence we find early mention of "Presbyters," or "Elders," as sharing not only the temporal administration of separate congregations, as in Acts xi. 30, but as admitted to the solemn deliberations of the Apostles in council, as in Acts xv. 6. That these Presbyters exercised spiritual functions similar to those of the Apostles themselves, and were actually admitted to share the burden of Apostolic rule, is abundantly clear from the various injunctions given as to their appointment.¹ It is, indeed, almost certain that each particular or local church of any considerable membership was a kind of reflection of the Apostolic College so far as its ministry was concerned, being governed by a body of Presbyters under the presidency of a "Primus" or "Ruling Elder."

¹ Cf. Acts xiv. 23; xx. 27, 28; Col. iv. 17; 1 Thess. v. 12, 13; Heb. xiii. 7; 1 Pet. v. 1-4. The Pastoral Epistles, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, *passim*.

In the third period of the Apostolic Age the Church begins to show early symptoms of a "Catholic" development. "In the Pastoral Epistles," says Bishop Gore, "a different situation is represented from that which appears in the Epistle to Corinth. The Church in the Pastoral Epistles is seen preparing itself to perpetuate the witness and ministry of Christ. . . . In the Pastoral Epistles, then, we find in the Church a general and a local ministry. . . . The local ministry consists of presbyters, also called 'bishops,' and deacons."¹ Who were these Presbyters or Bishops? "No one who reads the Pastoral Epistles, or the Epistle of Clement" (written by Clement from Rome to the Church of Corinth, about A.D. 95), "can doubt that the names indicate practically the same officers. . . . Practically we must recognize that the presbyters and bishops of the local Church are the same persons."²

Dr. McAdam Muir's comment on these admissions of Dr. Gore was as follows: "Were Bishop Gore to follow his premises to their legitimate conclusion, he would be among the foremost of the many clergymen of the Church of England who frankly acknowledge our orders."³ But although such a conclusion might be "legitimate," it is not therefore logically inevitable, the question would still have to be answered whether Presbyters who had received ordination at the hands of an Apostle or his deputy were able in turn—and without further consecration—to transmit the presbyterate to others, and the most zealous advocate of the rights of Presbyteries must admit that there is a difference between ordination conferred by a Timothy or a Titus acting as an Apostolic delegate (*i.e.*, during the lifetime of the Apostle) and an admission to the ministry in a Scottish kirk to-day. Even if it *is* admitted that the Presbyters and Bishops of the Church of the Apostles were, to all intents and purposes, the same officers, it by no means follows that all alike had "power of order."

¹ Bishop Gore, "Orders and Unity," pp. 115, 116.

² Bishop Gore, *ibid.*, p. 116 f.

³ Address, as Moderator, to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1910.

There were, apparently, some who, to the exclusion of others, received a special, personal authority to ordain. And may it not have been this latter ministry which passed into that which has, for so many centuries, been known as the Episcopate proper? Might not the Apostles, by virtue of the authority which they had received from the Lord Himself, have created a new order of ministry endowed with the power of perpetuating itself, so that one who had acted as an Apostolic delegate became a Bishop in the later sense of the term? It must reluctantly be confessed that however attractive and plausible such a theory may be, so far as the New Testament is concerned there is no indisputable evidence in its favour, while the Epistle of Clement, written in the last decade of the first century, though it refers to an "injunction" given by the Apostles that "approved men" should succeed to the administration of the Church, gives no indication whatever of the manner in which they received their commission.¹ Taking the evidence simply as it stands, and without reading into it any of the conjectures which have resulted from later modes of thought, it would seem that in the local churches a place of honour was conceded to those Presbyters who had stood nearest to the Lord, or who had been personally acquainted with an Apostle or immediate disciple, either by friendship or through having listened to their teaching, so that "there would not be any electing one man as a president over others who had hitherto been his equals, but the bringing in of new men in the position of subordinates, as the responsibilities of the surviving members of the original Episcopate were gradually enlarged. In a transition of this kind there would be no difficulty, and it could be easily accomplished in a generation.

¹ Clement, "Epist. ad Corinthios: "Preaching through countries and cities, they (the Apostles) appointed the first-fruits (of their conversions) to be bishops and ministers (*ἐπισκόπους καὶ διακόνους*) over such as should afterwards believe, having first proved them by the Spirit" (xlii). "Likewise our apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that contentions should arise over the name (dignity) of the overseer's office (*τῆς ἐπισκοπῆς*). And therefore, having received a complete foreknowledge, for this cause they appointed the aforesaid persons (*i.e.*, their first converts), and afterwards gave a further injunction that, if they should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their administration" (xliv).

Such a change does not lend itself to the suggestion of any unworthy grasping at superiority and exclusive rights, and it would obviously be an improvement of organization for exercising the cure of souls."¹ There is, indeed, no reason to believe that the power of order was not regarded as inherent in the Presbyterate, or that the *Episcopus* of the New Testament was other than a "Ruling Elder" with an extending jurisdiction, it may be, but without peculiar spiritual powers as belonging to a distinct order of ministry.

II. THE SUB-APOSTOLIC AGE.

If the Pastoral Epistles reveal an evolution or growth of the idea of centralized authority in Church life, the period immediately following the Apostolic Age shows us the Episcopate in process of development. It contains, says Dean Stanley, "the great question, almost the greatest which ecclesiastical history has to answer—How was the transition effected from the age of the Apostles to the age of the Fathers, from Christianity as we see it in the New Testament, to Christianity as we see it in the next century, and as, to a certain extent, we have seen it ever since? No other change equally momentous has ever since affected its fortunes, yet none has ever been so silent and secret. The stream, in that most critical moment of its passage from the everlasting hills to the plain below, is lost to our view at the very point where we are most anxious to watch it . . . It is not so much a period for ecclesiastical history as for ecclesiastical controversy and conjecture. A fragment here, an allegory there; romances of unknown authorship; a handful of letters, of which the genuineness of every portion is contested inch by inch; the summary examination of a Roman magistrate; the pleadings of two or three Christian apologists; customs and opinions in the very act of change; last, but not least, the faded paintings, the broken sculptures, the rude epitaphs in the dark-

¹ See "The Cure of Souls," lectures delivered at Cambridge by the Ven. Archdeacon Cunningham, 1908. Lecture II. on "The Definition of the Sphere of Responsibility."

ness of the catacombs—these are the scanty, though attractive materials, out of which the likeness of the early Church must be reproduced.”¹

In contemplating the history of Christianity in the early part of the second century, we view it in its beginnings as a system of ecclesiastical polity. If, as Professor Harnack supposes, “the Monarchical Episcopate were firmly rooted in the time of Ignatius of Antioch,”² it must be asked when and how did the change take place? The New Testament leaves us regarding the offices of Bishop and Presbyter as practically identical. When did they become orders of ministry essentially distinct? Ask when and how the Bishop of Rome became a Pontifex Maximus, supreme over all his brethren in the Episcopate, with power to exalt and to cast down, and history will furnish us with some sort of an answer by tracing for us through successive centuries the growth and development of papal power. Ask, however, when and how the “Moderator” of a local Presbytery or the president of a provincial synod was transformed into the occupant of an Episcopal throne, through whose hands alone could be transmitted the orders of ministry which he himself had received from those who, formerly his equals, were now his inferiors in order and jurisdiction, and who were henceforward to be accounted virtuous in so far as they “ran together according to his will,” and were “fitted to the bishop as exactly as the strings to the harp,”³ and the answer to such a question will depend on a variety of conjectures of greater or less probability, it may be, but not in any sense indisputable. All that can be said with certainty is that the few documents of the second and third centuries at our command show us an evolution in the Church’s ministry, by which “the ruling body in every congregation changed from being a session of elders without a president and became a session with a president. The president, sometimes called the ‘pastor,’ but usually the ‘Bishop,’ became gradually

¹ Dean Stanley, “History of the Eastern Church,” Introductory Lecture, pp. 30, 31.

² *The Expositor*, January, 1886.

³ Ignatius of Antioch, “Epist. ad Ephesios,” iv.

the centre of all the ecclesiastical life of the local Christian Church, and the one potent office-bearer."¹ That such a change in the Church's ministry and government actually took place is admitted even by upholders of the Apostolical institution of the Episcopate as not being "the affair of a year," or "effected everywhere under the same conditions or at the same rate," "rather was the mode of it various: it came earlier here, somewhat later there,"² in fact, there is "considerable doubt as to how the rule of the single Bishop in each Church actually came about."³ One very common cause of misconception in reading the history of the Early Church no doubt arises from the error of supposing that a threefold ministry and the Episcopal form of government are necessarily one and the same thing.⁴ Frequent allusion to a threefold order is made by the early Fathers, and, in general, it may be conceded that Episcopacy is indicated, but it is none the less a matter of history that although the distinction between the offices of Bishop, Presbyter, and Deacon was common, it was by no means general until a much later date. Clearly, for instance, the Church of Corinth did not possess a Bishop when Clement wrote his epistle about A.D. 95.⁵ In A.D. 117 the Church at Philippi apparently had no Bishop when Polycarp wrote urging submission "to the presbyters and deacons."⁶ Jerome, in one of his letters, bears witness to the fact that "at Alexandria there was a substantial equality between the bishop and the presbyters down to about A.D. 250 in the sense that when the bishop died one of the other presbyters succeeded by mere election without any further ordination."⁷ In Rome, too, there is reason to believe that the Church was, in the time

¹ Rev. T. M. Lindsay, D.D. "The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries," p. 205.

² Dr. Bright, "Some Aspects of Primitive Church Life," pp. 43, 44.

³ Bishop Gore, "Orders and Unity," p. 129.

⁴ "The Presbyterian or Conciliar system of Church government is as much a threefold ministry as Episcopacy," Principal Lindsay. *Op. cit.*, p. 170 n.

⁵ Bishop Gore, "Orders and Unity," pp. 129, 130; Dr. Bright, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

⁶ Dr. Lindsay, *op. cit.*, p. 194 f., *cf.* Bishop Gore, *op. cit.*, pp. 129, 130.

⁷ Bishop Gore, *ibid.* *Cf.* Jerome, "Epist." 146.

of Ignatius, governed by a College of Presbyters,¹ and it is a fact, surely not without significance, that the Roman Church has never formally declared the Episcopate to be a distinct order of ministry, but, according to the opinion of her older theologians, following ancient tradition, has generally regarded it as the crown or "complement" of the sacerdotal order,² and, as Principal Lindsay has pointed out, "there is many a trace in the ancient Canons that the Bishop was only a *primus inter pares* in the session of elders, and that he was distinguished from them by two things only—a special seat in the church, and the power to ordain elders and deacons. The practice made him the centre of the whole congregational life and the ruler; the theory recalled the earlier days when every congregation was governed by a council of elders who had no president. We find the theory in such law-books as the Canons of Hippolytus; it was repeated by Jerome; it never lacked supporters during the Middle Ages, of whom Thomas Aquinas was one; it re-emerged at the Reformation when the Reformed Church revived the ecclesiastical organization of the early centuries; and the same difference between theory and practice exists among the Reformed Churches in the present day."³

¹ "The threefold ministry developed much more slowly in Rome than in Asia Minor. Cf. Lightfoot, "Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians" (1881), sixth edition, p. 217 ff.; Réville, "Les Origines de l'Episcopat" (1894), p. 420 ff. (Lindsay, *op. cit.*, p. 195 n.).

² "Certum est episcopatum habere rationem sacramenti, sed controvertitur utrum sit ordo a presbyteratu distinctus. Multi antiqui theologi, cum paucis recentioribus (cf. Billot, S.J., th. 31, Roma, 1894), tenent episcopatum non esse ordinem a presbyteratu distinctum, sed ejus extensionem et intrinsecum complementum; nam distinctio ordinum accipitur secundum habitudinem ad Eucharistiam; atqui Episcopus non habet relate ad consecrationem potestatem superiorem sacerdoti," etc., cf. St. Thomas Aq., Sup. q. 40, a. 5 (Tanquerey, "Synopsis Theol. Dogm.," vol. ii., p. 602, Baltimore, 1897). In fact, the three Major or Holy Orders are said to be those of the Subdiaconate, Diaconate, and Priesthood, while the Episcopate, Archiepiscopate, Patriarchate, and so on, are regarded as degrees of the sacerdotal order only "varying in dignity and power" (see "Catechismus Trident.," part ii., chapter vii., q. 25), and although ordination to the Diaconate and Priesthood may be conferred only by a Bishop, yet Confirmation, the Minor Orders, and the Subdiaconate may, by special delegation, be conferred by a simple priest (see Tanquerey, *ibid.*, "Tr. de Confirmatione," art. iv. 15; "de Ordine," iv. 21). It is interesting to note that in the Greek Church the priest is the ordinary minister of confirmation.

³ Lindsay, *op. cit.*, p. 225. For a large collection of authorities see Gieseler, "Compendium of Ecclesiastical History," vol. i., pp. 88-90, n. 1.

Taking into account, then, the fact that Monarchical Episcopacy was not universal during the first two centuries, and that there is evidence that even in the middle of the third, election and benediction by Presbyters was, in some churches, regarded as a sufficient Episcopal consecration, it can be said with something almost approaching to certainty that the maxim "no bishop, no church" did not apply universally, and, however useful it may have proved, it cannot be regarded as "fundamental." Tested by the Vincentian Canon, it is found wanting in that *nec "semper," nec "ubique," nec ab "omnibus creditum est."* The lists of "bishops" which in some Churches were so carefully kept, as we see from such writers as Irenæus and Tertullian—and which have misled many, are found on examination to be adduced *not* as an argument for any theory of the Apostolic institution of the Episcopate, but as a testimony against the Gnostics that no secret tradition, such as they claimed to possess, existed, since it was not found in Churches of unquestioned Apostolic origin, as the lists of the succession of presiding ministers testified—"We refer them (*i.e.*, the heretics)," says Irenæus, "to that tradition which is preserved by means of the succession of elders in the Churches,"¹ the names of the presiding "elders" or "bishops" being given as seeming to impersonate the "genius" of the particular church, like the "angelic" presidents of the Apocalypse. According to Bishop Lightfoot, such notices "indicate that the solution suggested by the history of the word 'bishop' and its transference from the lower to the higher office is the true solution, and that episcopacy was created out of the presbytery."²

¹ Irenæus, "Adv. Hær.," III. ii. 2.

² Bishop Lightfoot, "The Epistle to the Philippians." Dissertation I. "On the Ministry of the Church," p. 225, Ed. 1869. Cf. "If 'bishop' was first used as a synonym for 'presbyter' and afterwards came to designate the higher officer under whom the presbyters served, the Episcopate properly so called would seem to have developed from the subordinate office. In other words, the Episcopate was formed not out of the Apostolic order by localization, but out of the presbyteral order by elevation: and the title which originally was common to all, came at length to be appropriated to the chief among them" (*ibid.*, p. 194). "It is the conception of a later age which represents Timothy as Bishop of Ephesus and Titus as Bishop of Crete.

From such considerations, then, it would appear that those who so state the principle of Apostolical Succession as to identify it in all cases with the Episcopal form of government betray a tendency to make that a cause of separation, which is not declared in the New Testament to be essential to Christian Unity, and that however natural the desire to justify adherence to a particular ecclesiastical system, it is frequently attainable only at the expense of actual historic fact. It may well be that Episcopacy is the more perfect way, it may be that the experience of ages has proved it to be a guardian of ancient tradition and godly order that the Church could ill afford to lay aside; still, the arguments in favour of its Divine, or even Apostolical, institution can hardly be regarded as so overwhelmingly convincing as to justify any one communion in cutting off from the ministration of Christian Sacraments those who differ from it in their conception of what is essential to the valid transmission of Orders. Were full justice done to the views of Bishop Lightfoot—as to those of Bishop Gore—might there not be seen to exist such a connection between Episcopacy and Presbytery as to open up a way for the recognition of a common source, and so as to embrace both in the communion and fellowship of the Catholic and Apostolic Church?

St. Paul's own language implies that the position which they held was temporary. In both cases their term of office is drawing to a close when the Apostle writes" (see 1 Tim. i. 3, iii. 14; 2 Tim. iv. 9, 21; Titus i. 5, iii. 12). "But the conception is not altogether without foundation. With less permanence, but perhaps greater authority, the position occupied by these Apostolic delegates nevertheless fairly represents the functions of the bishop early in the second century. They were, in fact, the link between the Apostle, whose superintendence was occasional and general, and the bishop, who exercised a permanent supervision over an individual congregation. Beyond this stage the Apostolic writings do not carry us" (p. 197). "In the mysterious period which comprises the last thirty years of the first century, and on which history is almost wholly silent, Episcopacy must have been mainly developed" (pp. 203, 204). To the attempts which have sometimes been made to explain away these words, perhaps no better answer could be given than that, as Dr. A. K. H. Boyd testifies: "Liddon expressed great regret that Bishop Lightfoot of Durham, lately his colleague in St. Paul's, had written a well-known passage admitting that Presbytery was the primitive government of the Christian Church" (see Dr. Boyd's "Twenty-five Years of St. Andrews," vol. ii., p. 89).