

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

EPISCOPACY AND WESLEYAN REUNION.

BY THE REV. C. SYDNEY CARTER, M.A.

THE Bishop of London's definite scheme for reunion with the Wesleyan Methodist Church provokes serious criticism, as it is in reality a challenge to the Evangelical view of the Church and the Ministry. For his proposal to allow existing Wesleyan ministers to *preach* in the reunited Church, but not to celebrate the Eucharist, without reordination, not only exalts the Ministry of the Sacrament over that of the Word, a superiority nowhere supported by our Church's formularies, but it advances a popular mechanical theory of Orders, held only by a section of Churchmen, as the fundamental and official teaching of the Church. In a published "Note" in the *London Quarterly Review* for July the Bishop animadverting on a suggested modification of his scheme—to the extent of temporarily suspending our existing rule of episcopal ordination so as to receive all *existing* Wesleyan ministers at the time of the Union *without reordination*—asserts that such a course would be equivalent to "abandoning episcopacy as the recognized organ of the unity and continuity of the Church," and would amount to declaring that "ministers of all denominations should be regarded as equally fitted to celebrate the Holy Communion and preach in our churches." But surely this is an extravagant and unwarrantable construction to put upon it? For such a compromise would in no way involve the "abandonment of episcopacy," but merely the temporary dislocation of a purely non-official "Tractarian" theory of it. The Bishop, I feel sure, would not think that the unity or continuity of the Church were jeopardized if in an emergency a layman should administer the Sacrament of Baptism: how then can it be in imminent peril if for an emergency period a certain number of presbyterianly ordained ministers were permitted to celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper? In view of such statements as these we do well to remind ourselves that it is not in accordance with a Divine or Scriptural injunction, but merely as a matter of Church order and regularity that we adhere to the ancient ecclesiastical custom of confining the administration of Holy Communion to the clergy.

The Bishop also asserts that at least the London Evangelical clergy would resent an "order" from him "to allow a minister of

any other denomination, without first receiving episcopal ordination, to celebrate the Holy Communion in their parish churches." The immediate question however is not concerned with the ministrations of an *individual* minister " of any other denomination," but whether a general rule is to be temporarily relaxed in the case of a large body of ministers of a definite and worldwide Church (the Wesleyan), who would have consummated a real organic union with us on a previously agreed doctrinal basis ! When we remember that down to 1660 individual foreign Reformed divines, only in Presbyterian Orders, were freely admitted to exercise their ministry in our Church, and that Presbyterian ministers in the Scotch Episcopal Church continued their ministries after 1610 and 1660 without any reordination, we naturally wonder what became then of " the unity and continuity of the Church " ? Was it irretrievably broken by such practices ? If not, we may well hope that it would also recover from the special and temporary abrogation of a domestic Church rule to-day. Since all the Wesleyan candidates for the Ministry would in future receive episcopal ordination, the principle and rule of the historic episcopate with an exclusively episcopally ordained ministry would still be retained and regarded as the uniform, regular and normal practice for the future. Moreover, the scruples and conscientious convictions of individual clergy with regard to the ministrations of the existing Wesleyan ministers, received into fellowship with us, would be safeguarded, since they would be under no obligation or compulsion to accept their ministrations in their particular churches, and surely for the priceless benefit of restoring in some measure the visible unity of the Catholic Church they should be willing to make some slight modification of what is not even an official theory of our Church polity ? For it must again be clearly emphasized that the fact that episcopal ordination has been exclusively required for our ministry since 1662 has not fastened on the Church the rigid Apostolical Succession theory of episcopacy. Such a view was not officially asserted at the time and was moreover in effect denied by the concurrent practice in the Scotch Church and by the proposal regarding the admission of foreign divines to our ministry made in the Comprehension Scheme formulated at the Jerusalem Chamber Conference in 1689. While we deplore the fact that the bitter political and controversial spirit of the day led to the enactment of this new rule in 1662, it is fairly evident that it denoted rather the culminating

triumph of episcopal over presbyterian government for the National Church than the condemnation of the validity of all but episcopal orders.

It is most important that we should not lose sight of the fact that the struggle for the previous eighty years had been between the protagonists of the divine right of presbytery as asserted in the first place by Cartwright, Travers and their followers and the divine right of prelacy as asserted by Bancroft, Laud and their followers. It was not, we must remember, a struggle for mutual toleration, as the medieval idea of "one State one religion" still tenaciously held the field, so that whichever side won no quarter would have been given to the vanquished. Had Presbytery been victorious, as it threatened to be early in the Civil War, it would have proscribed not only prelacy but the sectaries also. It would have set up a national Presbyterian Church *with no place at all for episcopacy*. We may safely say that the original English Presbyterians were far more rigid and intolerant in their views than their contemporary Elizabethan Churchmen. They regarded episcopacy as a positively unlawful and unscriptural form of government. This accounts for the clandestine and illegal devices pursued by Travers and men of his views, to obtain foreign Presbyterian Orders and then claim the protection of the statute of 1571 which permitted genuine foreign Reformed divines to minister in our churches with their existing Orders. Had the principles of these men spread more widely there is little doubt that they would have overthrown episcopacy in England altogether. With the knowledge, therefore, of these facts and the experience of the Commonwealth, with its harsh persecution and proscription of "Prelatists," behind them, it was not at all unnatural that the Restoration Churchmen, who still clung to the intolerant doctrine of one and only one form of religion for a nation, should want finally to safeguard this by allowing no exception whatever to the general rule of episcopal ordination. The stringent rule of 1662 was in the main a party triumph and denoted the end of the long-drawn-out battle between presbytery and prelacy in favour of the latter. It in no way involved a fresh theory of the exclusive value of episcopal government to safeguard the very being of a true Church and a valid sacrament. Had such a view been at all generally held at the time, not only would Presbyterian ministers in the revived sister episcopal Church of Scotland have been required

to be reordained, (which they were not,) but it is inconceivable that Convocation could have officially styled the foreign Presbyterian Churches in 1689 as "other Protestant Churches," or that the Jerusalem Chamber Conference proposals would have recommended the continuance of the practice which had obtained since the Reformation, of receiving these foreign divines to minister in England without reordination. We should also remember that the different and stricter line adopted towards the English Separatists was due not solely to the fact that most Caroline Churchmen regarded them as distinctly culpable and in a state of schism by wilfully rejecting episcopacy "where it could be had," but very largely also because they were regarded as "seditious" people disturbing the peace of the kingdom by attempting to frustrate the exclusive national form of Church government established by law.

"A zealous and impartial Protestant," a typical Restoration Churchman, writing in 1681 declared that "to strive for toleration is to contend against all government. It is not consistent with public peace and safety without a standing army; conventicles being eternal nurseries of sedition and rebellion. . . ." The cry of persecution was not, this representative Churchman affirmed, "so scandalous as anarchy, schism and eternal divisions and confusions both in Church and State," (quoted Hallam, *Hist. of England*, p. 721, note 1). In other words, Englishmen had no right to be anything but Episcopalian.

But the passing of the Toleration Act and the final overthrow of the medieval theory of exclusive national religions as well as the established position of nonconformist communities from two and a half centuries of history and progress have surely led them now to be regarded as sister churches analogous in standing to the foreign Reformed churches of the seventeenth century?

If, therefore, the Bishop of London's proposal for reordination, in a Reunion Scheme, with the entire Wesleyan Church should be conceded it would reverse the judgment and practice of our Reformers and their successors and would fasten on Evangelicals a yoke which neither our fathers nor we are able to bear. In spite of formal "Protestations" it would irrevocably fasten a particular theory of Episcopacy on the Church which even the Second Interim Report states is not now required to be held by any of her members. It would stereotype a rigid mechanical theory of the transmission of

grace which our Reformers deliberately repudiated and which our Church since then has more than once explicitly and implicitly denied. It would be almost impossible for Evangelicals ever again to declare that our Church held episcopacy as of the *bene esse* and not of the *esse* of a valid ministry, or to assert that a Sacrament administered by a non-episcopally ordained minister was of real, or, to use the most recent distinction, of "guaranteed" spiritual value and efficacy. It is one thing to insist that the Historic Episcopate must form the basis of a future reunited Church and quite another to require each separated non-episcopal Church by a definite and significant act to deny in advance the validity or "fully commissioned" effectiveness of its previous ministry before being welcomed into full fellowship with a reunited Episcopal Church. Dr. Forsyth's recent letter to the *Times* describing the suspicion engendered in the minds of many Free Churchmen that we are insisting on a "mere polity as vital to Church unity" because we hold that "that polity alone validates a kind of Sacrament which is a part of their call in the service of the Gospel to reject," should warn High Churchmen that some temporary surrender of their cherished convictions is absolutely essential not only to prove the sincerity of our desire, but if we are ever again to attain to a visible unity of the Church.

The War has taught us that the triumph of noble and righteous ideals can only be secured by the sacrifices of all classes of the community, and the same principle surely applies with regard to the grand ideal of recovering a reunited Christendom based on loyalty to its common Lord.

C. SYDNEY CARTER.

