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BAPTISTS, BISHOPS AND THE SACERDOTAL MINISTRY

As a Baptist who before my ordination frequently presided at the Lord's Table - and on one occasion in the presence of no less than four Anglican priests (one of whom is now secretary to the Board of Mission and Unity) - I am by no means a likely advocate of a fully sacerdotal ministry. Nevertheless, my view of ministry is what I would call a "high" view, which, combined with my interest in symbol, ritual and liturgy has led some to label me a "Bapto-Catholic". I pray, however, that my view of ministry is not "high" because of personal pride in my own office, but out of humble recognition that despite my unworthiness, Christ has seen fit to call me and equip me as a Minister of Word and Sacrament. I believe, moreover, that my "high" view of the ministry is consistent with much of Baptist history. Indeed, the Baptist Statement of 1948 declared that "Baptists have had from the beginning an exalted concept of the office of the christian minister".¹

I will even go so far as to say (being in a provocative mood) that episcopacy - that highest of all concepts of ministry - also has a place in Baptist tradition. I will begin my defence where all good Baptists begin, with the Bible, by examining briefly the Biblical basis of *episcopate*. In I Peter 2.25, Christ himself is described as the *episcopos* of our souls (translated as "guardian" in the R.S.V.). He is the Over-seeer of the Church, His Body, of which He is the Head.² Neville Clark, in *The Pattern of the Church* speaks of the special function of *episcopate* which was given in the New Testament to the Apostles, whose ministry "stems from their special place in salvation history", and is "unique and unrepeatable".³ Yet clearly the New Testament does not restrict the office or the function of *episcopate* to the Apostles, and elsewhere the term is used of church officers of non-apostolic rank, such as in the passage in I Timothy about the qualities required of one who "aspires to the office of a bishop" (I Tim.1.3). In Philippians 1.1 we see that the functions of *episcopate* and *diakonia* (service) are signs of the correctly ordered Church fellowship. In the light of this New Testament passage, Baptists have always accepted the necessity of these two functions for correct church ordering, but have insisted that they adhere not to individuals within the church, but to the Church corporately. They are interpreted in terms of "function" rather than "person". What matters, says Neville Clark, is not "he who ministers but that which is ministered",⁴ i.e. Christ. The true Bishop and Deacon is Christ himself, who alone over-sees and serves his Church. Episcopacy is thus rooted in Word and Sacrament, which, together, symbolize the continuing presence and activity of Christ and his Spirit within the Church. The individual Christian requires no mediator, no priest; he may himself commune with Christ. Yet within the church fellowship, which Neville Clark calls, "the local manifestation of the kingdom of priests"⁵ the functions of *episcopate* and *diakonia* - though the possession of the whole church must clearly be carried out in an orderly and becoming manner. "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers?" asks Paul in I Corinthians 12.29, and, to adopt Paul's language, we could ask "Are all fitted to over-see? Are all fitted to serve?"

Officers are therefore duly appointed and set aside for the work of oversight and service: *diakonia* manifesting itself in the local Baptist Church in the office of the Deacon, and *episcopo* "in the word and sacrament which is attached to the minister" and who "in a unique and special way is charged with the guardianship of the apostles' doctrine".⁶ Thus in practice, if not in theory, in the Baptist communion, the function of *episcopo* is exercised by one man, though he remains always under the oversight and, as it were, a delegate of, the Church Meeting. Hence Neville Clark's statement that the apostolic ministry, the diaconate and the Church Meeting together impart true order to the congregation.⁷ The Baptist ministry is therefore an "apostolic ministry" and, logically, a sacerdotal (sacramental) ministry too, for if the function of *episcopo* which attaches itself to the ministry cannot be separated from the Eucharist, then neither can the Eucharist be separated from the ministry. I contend, therefore, that in principle and often in practice, the Baptist ministry belongs to the sacerdotal order. It is both a truly Biblical and a truly apostolic ministry - which ministry Calvin declares to be as necessary for the preservation of the Church in the earth as light and heat, food and drink are for the preservation of the body.⁸ Brought up in the evangelical Calvinist tradition of the Baptist churches of New South Wales, I would equally wish to put my name to the following statement published in the *Australian Baptist*: "The Baptist Church is the ecumenical movement of New Testament Christianity. We are not sectarian or denominational in the usual sense of that term - we are the New Testament Church".⁹

Now let me defend myself.

Baptists have, from their earliest days, ordained men to the ministry of Word and Sacrament in accordance with the tradition of the Church universal. The right to so minister, however, remains a delegated right, exercised on behalf of the Church and derived from the Church, which is the Body of Christ. However, though we have always allowed, when circumstances require that this should happen, any baptized believer to fulfil the ministerial function, this has never been the norm of Baptist church polity. It has, in practice, been the exception rather than the rule. For example, the Particular Baptist Assembly at Bristol in 1693 stipulated that only Elders could administer baptism and the Lord's Supper, though Elders not yet ordained, but called to the office by the suffrage of the Church (here the implication is that they will be ordained) may do so if necessary. The General Baptists, who practised four levels of ordination - Messengers (to whom we return later), Elders, Deacons and Ministers - were even more reluctant to allow laymen to officiate at the Lord's Table. Their "Ministers" or "Preachers", though tested and ordained, were not usually allowed to baptize or to preside. The New Connexion of General Baptists, which in 1792 declared that it was "not improper" in cases of necessity for a minister, though not ordained, to administer the Lord's Supper, had by 1810 reached the decision that "ordination as a deacon certainly confers no right to administer the Lord's Supper"¹⁰ and by 1828 that "it is unscriptural for an unordained person to

officiate as a pastor". W. M. S. West, summarizing contemporary polity, wrote in 1963 that "no man can take to himself the right of performing the functions normally carried out by an ordained minister".¹¹ Here we have, I believe, my high view of ministry a ministry which derives from the church the prerogatives of the sacerdotal ministry, but which never possesses this right exclusively or "in-its-self" - since situations may arise when one other than an ordained man must exercise the ministerial function. However, the usual and regular channel of *episcopate* within the Baptist fellowship is the ordained minister - and as we have observed, the Biblical term for he who exercises *episcopate* is "Bishop" (though it should be noted here that the New Testament does not distinguish clearly between the office of Elder (*presbuteros*) and that of Bishop). Nevertheless, although hardly common practice, Baptists have not objected to use of the title "Bishop" for the minister of the local congregation. W. M. S. West comments that in the 16th and 17th centuries, this title was actually used of the office of the Christian minister.¹² John Smythe, in his "Principles and inferences concerning the visible church", written at Gainsborough, though admittedly before he reached his "full" Baptist position, contended that the officers of a true visible church were Bishops and Deacons, received by election, approbation and ordination. John Bunyan, 1628-88, Minister of the Independent-Baptist Church at Bedford, was popularly nicknamed "Bishop Bunyan".

From where, then, does the present day Baptist objection to the title "Bishop" come? It arises out of our objection to the way in which the office of the Bishop developed within the early church.

Within the New Testament, the title Bishop is applied not only to the two groups we have examined, i.e. the Apostles and the local minister, but also to a third group of people - to people such as Titus, whom Paul left behind in Crete to "appoint elders" and "to exhort and to reproach with all authority" (Titus 1.15); and Timothy, who fulfilled a similar role in the church at Ephesus. In the sub-Apostolic era, the title "Bishop" was used, and eventually exclusively so, of third-tier officers who were given pastoral authority over a group of churches within a defined area. Such officers were elected by the people, and held their *episcopate* in trust. Clement of Rome appears to have been such a Presiding Bishop when ca. 100 A.D. he wrote to the church at Corinth. Calvin writes thus of the origin and function of the Presiding Bishops:

In each city the presbyters selected one of their number to whom they gave the special title of bishop, lest, as usually happens, from equality dissension should arise. The bishop, however, was not so superior in honour and dignity as to have dominion over his colleagues but as it belongs to a President in an assembly to bring matters before them, collect their opinions, take precedence of others in consulting, advising, exhorting, guide the whole procedure by his authority, and execute what is decreed by common consent, a bishop held the same office in a meeting of presbyters.¹³

This third tier "Bishop" quickly developed, however, into what we term the "monarchical episcopate" - largely due to the influence of such men as Ignatius of Antioch who ca. 107 wrote as "though the norm of Church government was the bishop, priest and deacon with absolute power in the hands of the bishop".¹⁴ Yet for many years the people continued to possess the right of election - which in some cases remained a real power of choice - as in the classic election of Ambrose to the See of Milan in 373. It is interesting to note that the word for "ordain" used in the Greek tradition, *cheirotoneo* (cf. Acts 14.23) means "to constitute by voting", "to appoint" (Lit. "to stretch out the hand"). Gradually, however, the Bishop began to be seen as the representative of Christ, not of the people, and it was from this tendency that the doctrine of the apostolic succession emerged, in which the Bishop, by virtue of his ordination, inherits from the Apostles the function of *episcopus* which qualifies them (and those so licensed by them, i.e. the presbyters) and them alone to preside at the Eucharist and to fulfill the functions of oversight and service within the church.

Clearly, the monarchical episcopate must be rejected by Baptists, but I would argue that the person of the Presiding Bishop, the *pastor pastorum*, the representative of the Church universal, has an honourable place in Baptist tradition. Indeed, such a person is necessary if *episcopus* is to be seen as the possession of the whole Church, which alone is truly the Body of him who himself is the *episcopos*. Although some Baptists argue that a Baptist minister is minister only of the local congregation (which, they say, is "The Church" in Baptist polity - hence General Baptist Elders were ordained to their congregations for life), Baptist ordination has been, on the whole, to the ministry of the Church universal. Thus a minister who moves to a new congregation is inducted, not re-ordained. Logically, then, if ordination is to the ministry of the Church universal, a representative of the Church universal should play an important part in the act of ordination. Someone like Titus should be appointed to appoint Elders himself. Thus the General Baptists possessed (as we have mentioned) a three-tier ministry. Their third tier ministers were called "Messengers" - a title taken from II Corinthians 8.23, "As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker in your service; and as for our brethren, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ" - and the Greek word here is *apostolos*. The Messengers were thus believed to be the successors not of the Apostles, but of their successors, e.g. Titus and Timothy, in other words, the Presiding Bishops, the "Apostles". The Messengers were officers of the whole Church. They ordained Elders and "assisted in dispensing the Holy Mysteries",¹⁵ and the tendency was for only Messengers to ordain Messengers. Thomas Grantham, who in 1674 wrote a defence of the office of Messenger, actually uses the title "Bishop" as belonging to church order - though he does not identify it with the Messenger. Although they were never to my knowledge called "Bishop", their historical and Biblical background was that of the Titus type of "Bishop": Today, the office of the General Superintendent is, I believe, identical with that of the Messengers, which provides, in fact, their historical basis. Indeed, one Superintendent whom

I know does not object to being called "Bishop" - understanding that his function and office was conferred on him by the Church and may be taken off him by the Church. To me, the priesthood of all believers does not mean that everyone can do everything, but that the authority by which people perform their individual functions is derived from the whole church which is the Body of Christ - rather as, in a democracy, the government derives its right to govern from the people, the *laos* and remains itself part of the *laos*. Classically, the very word *ecclesia* which we translate "Church" was used to distinguish a "legislative assembly" from an ordinary gathering.¹⁶

It is my belief that the Titus type of Bishop is not incompatible with the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers or with Baptist ecclesiology, and perhaps if we adopted the title for our General Superintendents it might so shock our sister churches of the so-called historical episcopate - that Baptists could have Bishops! - that they might re-examine the true Biblical nature of *episcopus*. Though I do not seriously believe this will ever happen - and suggest it with my tongue in my cheek - I personally rejoice in the fact that we do have at least two Baptist Bishops, the Rt. Rev. J. K. Mohanty, Bishop of Cuttack, and the Rt. Rev. L. R. Tandy, Bishop of Sambulpur in the Church of North India. Some will no doubt say that they ceased to be Baptists when they became Bishops: I leave this to your judgement.

NOTES

- 1 W. M. S. West, "Baptist Church Life Today" in *The Pattern of The Church - A Baptist View* ed. A. Gilmore, London, 1963, p.51.
- 2 Ephesians 5.23.
- 3 Neville Clark, "The Fulness of the Church of God", in Gilmore, op.cit., p.102.
- 4 *ibid.*, p.104.
- 5 *ibid.*, p.106.
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 *ibid.*, p.107.
- 8 J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book Four, Ch.3, section 2.
- 9 Cited in J. D. Bollen, *Australian Baptists: A Religious Minority*, London, 1975, p.41.
- 10 A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, London, 1947, p.158.
- 11 West, op.cit., p.47.
- 12 *ibid.*, p.52.
- 13 Calvin, op.cit., Book Four, Chapter four, section 2.
- 14 W. H. C. Friend, *The Early Church*, London, 1965, p.49.
- 15 Thomas Grantham, cited in Underwood, op.cit., p.120.
- 16 Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford, 1869, p.450.