

The Origin of the Episcopate: Was it a Fundamental Principle or a Development?

[Concluded from the CHURCHMAN of March, p. 138.]

OUR next question is, *Were all the Bishops of the Apostolic age diocesan Bishops of the type of the Bishops of later times?* Now it is clear that the *terms Bishop and Presbyter* (or *Elder*) were at first *convertible terms*. This is clear from St. Paul's address to the Ephesian elders recorded in Acts xx., where those who are in verse 17 called *presbyters* or elders (see R.V. text and margin) are called bishops in verse 28 (in the Greek), see R.V. text and margin. The same language is found in Titus i. 5, 7. He was instructed, verse 5 tells us, to ordain *elders* (Greek, *presbyters*) in "every city" in the island of Crete. But in verse 7 the persons called elders are called *Bishops*. In 1 Timothy iii. 3, 4, when compared with v. 1, 17, we learn that the elders placed under Timothy's control were a *body* of men, and not men who presided single handed over a Church. In Philippians i. 1 we find *only two* orders mentioned by St. Paul, *bishops* and deacons. From what has been said before it is clear that these "bishops" were Presbyters or Elders. *Diocesan Bishops they certainly were not*. For Philippi was but a single city, and it is quite impossible to suppose that so large a number of its inhabitants had joined the Church there as would constitute more than one modern diocese. And besides, St. Paul evidently had them under his control. Thus we seem driven to the conclusion that local Churches, in St. Paul's time, were governed in ordinary matters by *colleges of Presbyters*, who confirmed the baptized, and selected the candidates for Holy Orders, laying hands on them *when the members of the Church were present*, as a sign of the consent of the Church, rather than as the necessary conveyers of the grace of Holy Orders. The solemn setting apart of Paul and Barnabas recorded in Acts xiii. to their missionary work may be taken as a proof of this. Paul and Barnabas had been called by the Holy Spirit, how and when we know not, to that work. But they did not start on their errand until they were solemnly recommended to God by the heads of the Church at Antioch. *Not one of these was an Apostle*. Yet they "separated Barnabas and Saul for their work," and "laid their hands on them" before they were

“sent away.” It is extremely curious that we have a survival to this very day among us of this Presbyterian rule of the Churches in Apostolic times. The Bishop in our own Ordinal ordains the deacons alone. But when he ordains the Presbyter or elder, *every presbyter* or elder (or *priest*, which is only a contraction of presbyter) *present officially lays his hands upon the candidate*. I have many times (not alone, of course, but as one among many) ordained, or rather *helped* to ordain, elders in this way.¹ It may be well to add that in the Church of Rome, which is certainly not regarded as lax in laying down its doctrines, her leading theologians state that by far the most prevalent opinion among her divines was that Bishops were originally presbyters, and were afterwards placed over the presbyters, not as a distinct Order, but as Presbyters of higher dignity and authority than the rest. Chrysostom and Jerome stand at the head of the long list of doctors of the Church who held this opinion.²

One more reference to ecclesiastical history will conclude this section. Clement’s Epistle to the Corinthian Church, a work of the first century A.D., is written on account of dissensions “concerning the Episcopate” in that Church. It must have been written some little time before the Epistles of Ignatius, in which it is clear that a *diocesan* Episcopate had for some time existed in Asia Minor.³ No mention of a diocesan Bishop appears in it, though Clement was no doubt Bishop of Rome when it was written. Some writers have contended that the see of Corinth was then vacant. But no allusion to this fact is found, and had it *been* a fact it were scarcely probable that Clement would have made no allusion to it. Wherefore it seems that we are once more driven to the conclusion that Corinth was at that time governed by a college of Presbyters, between whom serious dissensions had arisen. This is Bishop Lightfoot’s view, and there is no ecclesiastical scholar who is saner, soberer, more cautious, or more impartial than he. It may be necessary to add that I do not, as many seem to do, regard an impartial person as one who has no opinion of his own, but as one

¹ St. Paul speaks to Timothy twice about his Ordination (1 Tim. iv. 14, 2 Tim. i. 6). The first time it is clearly his Ordination as presbyter; the second probably refers to the same thing. But probability is not certainty.

² I have not Martene at hand. But if I remember rightly, it is he who states this fact.

³ The earliest date attributed to the Epistles of Ignatius is 107, the latest 116.

who does not arrive at his conclusion without a fair and candid consideration of the views of other people. I may also be allowed to add that no record is found of any disastrous collapse in the work of the Gentile Churches after the death of St. Paul, nor any wholesale creation of diocesan Bishops. Therefore it must be regarded as *not proven* that any interference was attempted with the Presbyterian character of Church government till near the end of the first century. I may add that we have no list of the Episcopal consecrators who initiated the succession of diocesan Bishops of Corinth after St. Paul's death.

Our third question is, *Can it be proved that every diocesan Bishop mentioned as existing in the early part of the second century was consecrated by imposition of hands?* I do not wish to deny that it is extremely probable that they *may* have been so consecrated, though even then the consecrators may not have been diocesan Bishops. But a fundamental doctrine of the Church cannot be a question of mere probability. It requires definite proof. That such proof can be given is, I may venture to say, altogether impossible. It is true that we have Irenaeus, who lived and died in the second century, and Tertullian who survived till the beginning of the third, telling their contemporaries that if they desired security against false doctrine they must *trace the successions of their rulers up to Apostolic times*. But that is not the same thing as declaring that *each Bishop* must be able to *trace his Episcopal succession through his consecrators* up to Apostolic times. Each successive Bishop of a see vacated it *before his successor was consecrated*. So that a list in chronological order of the Bishops of a see tells us *nothing whatever* about the *transmitters* of the gift. The names of the consecrators in the first or second century are in no case given. It seems clear, as will be seen presently, that St. John *did* appoint Ignatius Bishop of Antioch, and Polycarp Bishop of Smyrna.¹ It is moreover clear that the Episcopate in the later sense of the word existed widely in Asia Minor before the death of Ignatius. But we do not know whether St. John laid his hands on these Bishops or not. He *may* have done so. But we do not *know* that he did so. On the contrary, Ignatius and Polycarp may have been set apart for their work respectively at Antioch and

¹ Ignatius, before his martyrdom (see note above) addressed seven letters to Churches in Asia Minor which were under Episcopal superintendence.

Smyrna, on the nomination of St. John, just as Paul and Barnabas were set apart to theirs at Antioch (Acts xiii. 2, 3). On the theory of the hymn already quoted, the "successions of the Bishops" ought to mean the *names of their consecrators*, and *their* successions up to the Apostles. It is therefore clear that it must be the *continuity of the community* which is meant by the expression "successions of the Churches," just as the continuity of a republic may be inferred from the successions of its presidents. The Bishops in the first two centuries, by whomsoever selected for their office, may therefore have been solemnly set apart for it by the Church to the oversight of which they had been appointed, the "presbytery" laying their hands upon them in token that they had been lawfully chosen for their office. It is noteworthy that *this is the way in which the Popes are appointed*, unless the advocates of the actual transmission theory are prepared to contend that each Pope is consecrated to his office by his predecessor. We do not find the Episcopal consecrators mentioned till about the end of the second century, and this is stated to have become the rule in consequence of frequent *disputed elections*. The Bishops present were required to be there in order to testify that the election was a valid one. And as late as the age of Cyprian (A.D. 258) we find him saying that the practice was even then not universal.¹ Mr. Norman Maclean, himself, I presume, a Scotch Presbyterian, tells us that, "in his opinion, it is hopeless to think of organizing the African Church of the future permanently on any basis except that of Uganda" (which is Episcopal). The "troubles" of various "missions in Africa are," he says, "in the main traceable to the fact that the black presbyter came to deem himself as good as the white presbyter, and there was no spiritual chief to teach him otherwise."² So there can be little doubt that in St. John's neighbourhood the presbyter just ordained sometimes deemed himself "quite as good" as the presbyter of years and experience (we sometimes, strange to say, find such young men in the ministry after twenty centuries of Christianity), and there was then "no spiritual chief to teach him otherwise." So the most probable alternative is that in the later years of the first century St. John strongly urged the election of a pres-

¹ See Ep. lxxvii., ch. v. He says the presence of other Bishops was the custom in *almost* all the provinces.

² *Africa in Transformation*, p. 229.

byter of age and experience to preside over the rest, and that the system was found to work well, and so it spread everywhere in the end. The Epistle of Clement, already alluded to, was called forth by the fact that such troubles *did* occur, and we may be sure that there were many other instances of a similar kind. But the Episcopate, like many other things, became corrupted before the Reformation, and in many countries it had become a scandal instead of a benefit to the Church. So in *some* countries it was cast aside. Has it been proved altogether impossible for portions of Christ's Church to exist without it?

Just a few words in conclusion. The theory of the absolute necessity of Bishops in every Christian community has been supported by the argument that our Lord is stated by St. Luke (Acts i. 3) to have spent much of the time between the Resurrection and the Ascension in discussing with His disciples matters "concerning the kingdom of God," and that this necessarily involved precise information concerning the form Church organization should take. There is no such necessity. The term "kingdom of God" suggests matters of far more consequence than mere rules of organization, nor is there any subsequent hint that our Lord straitly enjoined His disciples to have from the first three orders of clergy, and no more, and ordained that every Bishop should of necessity receive his commission at the hands of one or more Bishops. Moreover there is considerable reason to suppose that our Lord left the external organization of the Church to circumstances, of course under the direction of the Holy Spirit. We may note also that in no sense were the diocesan Bishops of the first or second century Apostles. *Successors* of the Apostles they undoubtedly were. But they were not *founders* of Churches: their functions were simply administrative, and confined to a definite area; and as we have seen, there are vastly preponderating reasons for the belief that while the Apostles lived the Churches were locally governed by the presbyters who were then also called Bishops. If any general authority to define matters of faith or morals existed, it resided in the *whole Church*, of which, in later days, the voice of the collective Episcopate was usually taken as the expression.¹ Thus it appears quite certain

¹ Cyprian, *De Imitate Ecclesiae*, ch. ii, *Episcopatus unus est, cujus a singulis in solidum pars tenetur*. The meaning is that the Episcopate formed a *solid whole* throughout the world, and every individual Bishop was a part of that whole.

that the rigorist theory of the absolute necessity of an Episcopate transmitted from one Bishop to another by imposition of hands is no necessary first principle in every local Church, but is at most simply a probable opinion. And the serious corruptions existing in the Church of later times, and the violence and harshness of those who exercised Church authority, may have justified those who felt compelled by the circumstances of their time to organize on other lines, and does *not* justify us in treating those who have done so as "aliens from the Christian commonwealth" and "strangers from the covenant of promise," however desirable it may be that the Episcopal regimen, so early and so long universal in the Church, and so clearly in accordance with Apostolic practice, should be retained as far as possible.

Into the question that, in England at least, the non-Episcopal bodies are schismatic, I do not intend to enter at length. But it must be confessed that the methods of conversion adopted in the sixteenth and previous centuries were not altogether persuasive, and that the guilt of the schism was not always entirely on one side.

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