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

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

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

A GREAT many theological, as well as other questions are practically decided by means of tacit assumptions. The present paper is an attempt to show that the question of the absolute necessity of Episcopacy at all times, and under all circumstances, has been frequently decided on such grounds. It will be our endeavour to examine the question not from later Ecclesiastical History, but from the contents of the Christian Scriptures, which have from the first been held in the Church to be very early and authentic records of the facts recorded in them.

Writers of the High Church school have been, as a rule, content to accept the verdict of the great eighteenth-century scholar Bentley on this matter. The Apostles, he says, were the earliest rulers of the Christian Church. The Bishops were their successors. With a commendable modesty, the first of these successors refused to take the title of those who were appointed to their work by Christ Himself. So they took one of the titles of the *second* order of the ministry—that of Bishop, leaving the other (Presbyter or Elder) to be retained by the second order. Thus the Episcopate was ordained from the very first, and the *name* of the Order only was changed. This is Bentley's argument. To it the contention has been added that Episcopacy was therefore a fundamental principle of the Universal Church, and that no community of Christians which is not under Episcopal rule can be a part of the Universal Church. To this yet another principle has been added in later times. The most clear and intelligible expression of this is found in the words of the hymn :

" His twelve Apostles first He made
His Ministers of grace ;
And they their hands on others laid,
To fill in turn their place."

It is unfortunate that the controversy on these three points has been on grounds rather ecclesiastical than Scriptural. As far as I know, it has never yet taken the form of an investigation into the earliest records of the Church of Christ. It has always commenced with the second century of the Christian era, or the last ten years of the first.

It should be noted that there are three assumptions here :—

1. That the Bishops of the sub-Apostolic age, i.e., the age which succeeded the death of the last of Christ's Apostles, exercised precisely the same functions as were exercised during their lives by the Apostles themselves
2. That Episcopacy was therefore a necessary condition of the existence of all local Churches, under all possible circumstances.
3. That no Bishop could, under any circumstances whatever, succeed to the Episcopate without the laying on of the hands of one or more persons who were themselves Bishops.

It will be seen that there is *no evidence whatever* for any of these propositions in the first two centuries. Yet if these propositions be necessary principles of Christ's Church, we shall expect to find them distinctly laid down by Christ, and proclaimed and acted upon by His Apostles. I think we shall find, on examination of the Acts of the Apostles and the Apostolic Epistles, that no such necessary principles were ever laid down there. And if that be the case, then, if amid the fierce struggles among Christians in later years any communities should have arisen which could not or did not fulfil these primary conditions, such communities cannot be pronounced to be outside the Covenant of Grace, or incapable of being regarded as parts of the Christian Church. I proceed to discuss these points in order.

1. *Were the duties of the Bishops in the second and following centuries precisely identical with those of the first Apostles of the Lord ?* To answer these questions we had better ask what those duties were. Of the original twelve (regarding Matthias as having taken from the first the place of Judas) we know very little. Ecclesiastical history tells us that some of them, in later years, preached the Gospel either to the heathen, or to Jews resident among the heathen. But all we know from the account of St. Luke is, that they remained in Palestine, and confined their ministrations to the converts from Judaism. But, strange to say, they seem to have exercised *no authority whatever* among the Jewish converts of St. Paul, though Peter is said to have gone *once* to Antioch, and to have taken part in the work of the Church there (Gal. ii. 11-15). Therefore we may take it that the whole of Christ's Church throughout the world, save Judæa, Samaria, and Galilee, was practically under the supervision of St. Paul alone. That he did exercise such a supervision, he states (2 Cor. xii. 28). But it is impossible to suppose that such

supervision was more than a *general* one. On matters of great importance we know that he received letters from the Churches, and either settled difficulties himself or sent others with authority from him to settle them. In *two* cases, as we shall find later on, he delegated his authority to others. But if it is contended that he discharged the duties of the Bishops of later days, we must ask whether he confirmed all the young people, ordained all the clergy, and took part in the consecration of the Bishops (as we now understand the word), if there were such Bishops in his days. That he did, sometimes, at least, "ordain elders in every Church" is clear from Acts xiv. 23. But this must refer to Galatia only (supposing, as seems most probable, that the *Roman province* is meant). It is not said that at Philippi, Thessalonica or Athens, elders were ordained. The Greek word translated *ordain*, let it be remembered, seems rather to indicate *choice by show of hands* rather than the *laying on* of hands. In the case of the Thessalonian Church (see 1 Thess. v. 12), its members had evidently been placed under *some* superintendence, though probably¹ informally. It must not be forgotten that the Apostle's stay at Thessalonica was very short indeed—probably under a month. Of course, during his stay at Corinth and later, at Ephesus, he could, and possibly did, ordain Presbyters. But did such ordinations by him continue after he had left Corinth and Ephesus? Was he ever consulted about them? Of this there is no evidence. If St. Paul did ordain elders, and confirm the baptized when *resident* in a place, and we know that he once did the latter at Ephesus (Acts xix. 1-7), it does not necessarily follow that he, and *no one else*, did the work which is now entrusted to Bishops. How, for instance, did St. Paul manage to confirm the young, and ordain Presbyters for all the Gentile Churches from Antioch to Rome during his two years' imprisonment in Judæa, and during the two years' imprisonment at Rome (Acts xxiv., xxviii.)? Were the candidates for Ordination and Confirmation sent to him? Or did he ordain one or more Missionary Suffragans, and sent them round the world to fulfil the duties which he could not fulfil himself? Of course he *might* have done so. But how is it that we never get so much as a hint in the Scriptures of such a fact for the guidance of future

¹ If I use the word "probably" here, it is because we have no definite evidence how the superintendents were appointed.

ages? And if St. Paul did not, and could not do this, who did? Then, again, there is the case of the Roman Church, which has always been a *crux* to the advocates of the rigid theory of Episcopacy. That Church was not founded by an Apostle. St. Paul addresses to it one of his longest and certainly his most important Epistle before he had ever been there. He does not describe it as a body of believers which, in consequence of its having no ministers who had received Episcopal Ordination, was as yet no part of the Universal Church of Christ. On the contrary, he describes its members as "called to be Jesus Christ's," as "beloved of God," and "called to be saints" (i. 6, 7). He does not, it is true, happen to call it a "Church." But what more could he say (or *does* he say), of other churches (or, as the Greek word is also correctly translated, "congregations") than he says of the disciples at Rome? Yet the Roman Church at that time could only have consisted of individual Christians—some of whom had possibly been living there since the first Whit-Sunday (Acts ii. 10—"sojourners from Rome," R.V.), and who had organized themselves into a community for worship and works of mutual loving-kindness. The Apostle Paul never hints that the Roman branch of the Church universal was in any sense inferior to any other local Church throughout the world. It is true that he does say that he desires to visit them in order that he may "impart unto them some spiritual gift," and this has been explained as meaning that he would impart proper form to that which, at the moment he was writing, must be considered "*without form, and void.*" He may, of course, have *meant* this. But he does not *say* it. And if he does not say it, and say it explicitly, it can be no necessary "principle of the doctrine of Christ."

That our Church, in her Ordinal, rightly states that diocesan Episcopacy was from the very first recognized in the Church, must be admitted. Every mention of James, "the Lord's brother," in the Acts, speaks of him just as we should speak of any diocesan Bishop now (Acts xii. 17; xv. 13; xxi. 18; also Gal. ii. 9, 12, and note that James takes *precedence* of Peter and John). It may safely be assumed that no presbyters would be ordained without his sanction. Therefore, to speak lightly of an institution which is nearly as old as Christianity, and which, at a very early period, was adopted in the mother of all Churches, is clearly inadmissible. But it is one thing to speak with reverence of the

Episcopate as a primitive institution, and quite another to insist that no body of Christians anywhere which does not possess Bishops who can specify every link in the chain of Episcopal consecrations going back from the present time to that of the Apostles can, under any circumstances whatever, be recognized as a part of Christ's Church. Again, there can be no doubt that Timothy and Titus, who were sent by St. Paul to Ephesus and Crete, exercised there the precise functions which local Bishops have exercised from the second (or, looking at the example of St. James, we might say the first) century of the Christian era to the twentieth. But this is not to affirm the proposition to which I have just taken exception. For (1) it is never said that St. Paul *consecrated* them to the Episcopate, as we now understand the word; (2) we have no contemporary evidence that their commission was a *permanent* one,¹ and (3) there is no evidence that the Diocesan Episcopate was established before the concluding years of the first century (and therefore long after the death of the Apostles Peter and Paul) *except at Jerusalem*. Once more, therefore, the rigoristic theory of Episcopacy comes before us, not as a *principle*, but as an *inference*.

Our last point under this head will be the theory that the angels of the Churches in Revelation ii. iii. were their Bishops. No doubt a very vast number of high authorities can be pleaded for this opinion. Still, it is but an opinion, and cannot possibly be represented as a fact. It is clearly a perfectly reasonable view to take of the angels of the seven Churches that they were angels in the ordinary sense of the term, spiritual beings who were entrusted with a mystic supervision of those Churches. When we remember that the Apocalypse is full of references of all kinds to angelic ministrations it cannot be altogether unreasonable to suppose that among them the superintendence of the Churches of God might find a place. Once more, then, it is clear that *no one has a right to assume* that by the time the Apocalypse was written (about 95 A.D.), each of the Churches named in the letters was under the supervision of a Diocesan Bishop. *Probable* it may be, *certain* it most clearly is not.

J. J. LIAS.

¹ The words "Tychicus I sent to Ephesus" (Tim. iv. 12 R.V.) seems clearly to indicate that, as the Apostle (vv. 9-11) urgently needed Timothy to minister to his various needs, he had sent Tychicus to Ephesus to fill Timothy's place there during the absence of the latter.

(To be concluded.)