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An Anglican Understanding of Ministry and Church Polity in the Sixteenth Century

Douglas Stoute

We do not arrogate to ourselves either a new Church, or a new religion or new Holy orders... our religion is the same as it was, our Church the same as it was, our Holy orders the same they were, in substance; differing only from what they were formerly, as a garden weeded from a garden unweeded. (John Bramhall: A Just Vindication of the Church of England. ¹)

Of all the problems that beset the English Church of the Reformation none was more keenly felt or none more hotly debated than the question of its polity. In the first phase of the Reformation this question lay dormant, but by the time Elizabeth ascended the throne it had begun to assume ominous proportions. In this debate there were essentially two parties. On the one side were the "puritans" who sought a Presbyterian Church, which was seen to rest upon a hierarchy of individual congregations, provincial assemblies and national synods, administered by a democracy of ministers and an oligarchy of lay elders. Armed with arguments from Geneva this group had many champions. On the other side was the Queen. Committed to the principle of episcopal government with authority percolating downwards from the top—from the supreme governor, through archbishops and bishops down to the parish clergy—she too had little trouble finding staunch defenders. In the end—not until the restoration in fact—it was the Queen's men who would prevail.²

Although in large measure the proponents of the Queen's position may be seen simply as apologists for the *status quo*, their vision was in fact larger. Their goal was to achieve a poise between Protestant and Catholic ideals. How they attempted to do this in relation to the ministry and polity of the church will be the subject of the following discussion.

I

Despite the many vicissitudes, political and religious, in the Church of England during the sixteenth century, the will of the "godly prince" for the retention of traditional patterns of ministry and episcopacy was clear and unequivocal. Even during the reign of Edward VI—England's most Protestant monarch—no attempt had been made to experiment with non-episcopal forms of ordination. The extreme care taken at the accession of Elizabeth, in circumstances of peculiar difficulty for the regularity and validity of the consecration of Matthew Parker as Archbishop of Canterbury, testified to the concern for the preservation of the continuity of episcopal succession.³ Moreover, the preface to the ordinal expressed in the clearest terms the intention of the Church to continue the traditional order of bishop, priest and deacon.

It is evident unto all men, diligently reading Holy Scripture and ancient authors, that from the Apostles' time there hath been these orders of Ministers in Christ's Church: Bishops, Priests, and Deacons: which offices were evermore held in such reverent estimation, that no man by his own private authority might presume to execute any of them, except he were first called, tried, examined, and known to have such qualities as were requisite for the same; And also, by public prayer, with imposition of hands, approved and admitted thereunto. And therefore, to the intent that these orders should be continued and reverently used, and esteemed, in this Church of England, it is requisite that no man (not being at this present Bishop, Priest, nor Deacon) shall execute any of them, except he be called, tried, examined, and admitted according to the form hereafter following.⁴

This commitment to the traditional pattern of ministry is picked up in the Articles of Religion, and in Article XXXVI, "Of Consecration of Bishops and Ministers", it is affirmed that the ordinal "doth contain all things necessary to such Consecration and Ordering" and therefore "whosoever are consecrated or ordered according to the Rites of that Book... or hereafter shall be consecrated or ordered according to the same Rites; we decree all such to be rightly, orderly, and lawfully consecrated and ordered."

In Article XIX "Of the Church", no mention is made of the form of polity and ministry, but the article defined "the visible Church of Christ" as "a congregation of faithful men, in which

the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly administered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same."⁵

Likewise, Article XXIII, "Of Ministering in the Congregation", after underlining the necessity of lawful calling and commission to the ministry, continues with the statement that: "... those we ought to judge lawfully called and sent, which be chosen and called to this work by men who have public authority given unto them in the Congregation, to call and send Ministers into the Lord's vineyard."⁶

Using the Ordinal as the backcloth, these Articles testify plainly to the commitment of the Church of England to continue the traditional threefold ministry and to maintain episcopal ordination and government. However, as Norman Sykes has pointed out, what is particularly noteworthy here is that there is no statement concerning the doctrinal significance of the threefold ministry and episcopal government.⁷ The task of providing this foundation was to fall to the so-called theologians of Anglicanism—the apologists for the *status quo*.

II

Among the first of these apologists was John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury. Jewel had been an exile under the Marian regime, and although he was the bearer of impeccable Protestant qualifications, he was not of the Genevan school. To the extent that he was influenced by the continental reformers it was to Luther and Zwingli that he was most indebted; and his theological speculation "where he permits himself the luxury, may be said to be Lutheran in emphasis."⁸ His significance as the father of Anglican apologists is testified to by the splendidly insular appraisal of him by Hooker who saw him as "the worthiest divine that Christendom hath bred for the space of some hundreds of years,"⁹ and by Bramhall's citing of him on a par with the Prayer Book, the Ordinal and the Articles in his defence of the episcopacy.¹⁰

Jewel's main apologetic works are his *Apologia pro Ecclesia Anglicana* in 1562 and his longer more vehement *Defence* in 1570. In these works, as in the writings of Luther and the other Protestant reformers, he sets up the word of God as the test for catholicity of the Church and the orthodoxy of its members.

But unlike the men of the emerging Reformed tradition he was loath to rest his case entirely on the unadorned word of God. Thus, he maintains "in this conference and judgement of the Holy Scriptures we need oftimes the discretion and wisdom of learned fathers."¹¹

The fathers that Jewel had in mind were not those of medieval scholasticism but the early fathers. "We for our part, have learned of Christ, of the apostles of the devout fathers." This dual appeal to both scripture and antiquity became a hallmark of Anglican apologists in the years that follow and this approach was seen to rest on the assertion that "in the judgement of the Godly five hundred of those first years are worth more than the whole thousand years that followed."¹² This appeal to antiquity was especially important to Jewel when he sought to answer the charge that the Church of England was guilty of schism, a charge that Anglicans felt most keenly. The blame for this division Jewel maintained was not to be placed on English heads but on the head of the Pope who "to feed his ambition and greediness of rule hath... rent whole Christendom asunder."¹³ Accordingly, the Church of England had been forced to return to the higher, more primitive ground of ancient Christendom, and must be acquitted of the charge of schism for "he seemeth not to depart from the Church, that bodily departeth; but he that spiritually leaveth the foundation of the ecclesiastical truth... we are departed forth from there in the sight of men; they are departed from us in the judgement of God."¹⁴

The strength of his underlying commitment to the true and primitive Church can be seen when he says, "we have indeed put ourselves apart, not, as heretics are wont, from the Church of Christ... but from the infection of naughty persons and hypocrites... and to say we do not despise the Church of these men... partly for the namesake itself, and partly for that the gospel of Jesus Christ hath once been therein truly and purely set forth."¹⁵

The understanding of ministry that emerges in Jewel's writings is, therefore, in keeping with the pattern set forth in the Ordinal and the Articles. The traditional threefold ministry is assumed and no theological justification is offered. In reply to the charge that Anglicans are schismatic, he points out they are merely being true to the Gospel and the primitive church.

A clearer picture of the theological understanding of the threefold ministry and of episcopal government began to emerge in the writings of the man that Sykes refers to as that *malleus puritanorum*, John Whitgift, who in 1583 was to be elevated to the See of Canterbury.¹⁶ His views were honed in his celebrated controversy with the puritan divine, Thomas Cartwright, then incumbent of the Lady Margaret Chair at Cambridge.

The first phase of the controversy between what with hindsight we now call “anglicans” and “puritans” took the form of a dispute concerning the vestments that should be worn by ministers both in church and out of doors, but the issues soon shifted to more fundamental assumptions about the nature of the church.¹⁷ Among Cartwright’s major assertions was that the Presbyterian model of church government was the sole regimen prescribed in the Holy Scriptures. Instead of meeting this claim with a counterproposal on the behalf of episcopacy, Whitgift took a different tack. Basing his argument on the then traditional Protestant and Anglican definition of the marks of the church—“the essential notes at the church be these only: the true preaching of the word of God, and the right administration of the sacraments”—Whitgift drew a distinction between matters that are necessary for salvation and matters that are not. With regard to the first there had to be agreement, but in the case of the second differences of opinion could be tolerated. The following passage captures the essence of Whitgift’s argument:

... that any one kind of government is so necessary that without it the church cannot be saved, or that it may not be altered into some other kind thought to be more expedient, I utterly deny; and the reasons that move me so to do be these: The first is, because I find no one certain and perfect kind of government prescribed or commanded in the scriptures to the church of Christ; which no doubt should have been done, if it had been a matter necessary unto the salvation of the church. Secondly, because the essential notes of the church be these only: the true preaching of the word of God, and the right administration of the sacraments: . . . So that, notwithstanding government, or some kind of government, may be a part of the church, touching the outward form and perfection of it, yet is it not such a part of the essence and but that it may be the church of Christ without this or that kind of government, and therefore the “kind of government” of the church is not “necessary unto salvation.”

To argue, as had Cartwright, that "matters of ceremonials discipline and government" were matters "necessary to salvation and faith", seemed to Whitgift to be a "very popish conclusion" and "not to stand with the truth and with learning."¹⁸

In these writings of Jewel and Whitgift we find some of the earliest attempts to rationalize the peculiar Anglican settlement. The underlying foundations of their defence are provided by the Ordinal and its preface along with the Articles. Accordingly the resolve to continue the threefold ministry and to maintain episcopal ordination and government provides a kind of *cantus firmus* to all they say. What is of particular significance, however, is that no attempt is made to erect their argument on the foundations of a speculative theology of the episcopate and its relation to the Church. Indeed, their sole concern is to establish that government by bishops is an ancient and allowable practice; they never attempt to establish its exclusive claim.

III

These fragmentary insights were finally woven into a comprehensive rationale for Anglicanism in eight books entitled *Treatise of the laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* by the pre-eminent Elizabethan divine Richard Hooker.¹⁹ Long venerated by Anglicans for his gentleness and judiciousness, not to mention his unimpeachable integrity, Hooker was in fact just as treacherous and at times as unprincipled as any other polemicist of his age. He was, however, more subtle—a quality that significantly enhanced his formidability in debate. The real value of Hooker's work—which was in essence a long apologetic for episcopal government—was not so much in the originality of his argument as in the broadly based philosophical theology and beautiful prose in which he couched his case. In Hooker we find for the first time in the English experience a theology which is neither Roman nor Genevan but recognizable catholic reformed and Anglican.²⁰

In his defence of the episcopate Hooker—like Whitgift—resisted the temptation of making exclusive claims on its behalf, even though he recognized that such a line of argument was the way that would "most advantageth our cause."²¹ Rather—again like Whitgift—he drew a distinction between

things "necessary" and matters "accessory" and reckoned ceremonies and "matters of government in the number of things accessory, not things necessary in such sort as hath been declared."²² In making this distinction he was careful to point out that he did not hold that the question of ecclesiastical government was unimportant,

... but we must note, that he which affirmeth speech to be necessary among all men throughout the world, doth not thereby import that all men must necessarily speak one kind of language. Even so the necessity of polity and regiment in all churches may be held without holding any one certain form to be necessary in them all.²³

To Hooker the Church of England stood with those who deny "that any one complete form of church government can be found in scripture" and challenged his opponents to prove otherwise.²⁴ For his part he was content to marshal evidence, both scriptural and patristic, that demonstrated the validity of episcopal government without laying claim to exclusive validity.

This polemical reticence on Hooker's part should not be construed as lack of fundamental commitment to the episcopal cause. To gauge the measure of his commitment the following is helpful.

A thousand five hundred years and upward the Church of Christ hath now continued under the sacred regiment of bishops. Neither for so long hath Christianity been ever planted in any kingdom throughout the world but with this kind of government alone: which to have been ordained of God, I am for mine own part even as resolutely persuaded, as that any other kind of government in the world whatsoever is of God.

From the evidence of which long continuance, "this we boldly therefore set down as a most infallible truth; 'That the Church of Christ is at this day lawfully, and so hath been since then the first beginning, governed by bishops, having permanent superiority and ruling power over other ministers of the word and sacraments.'"

Equally positively Hooker did not "fear to be herein bold and peremptory, that if anything in the Church's government, surely the first institution of bishops was from heaven, was even of God, the Holy Ghost was the author of it."²⁵

It should be underlined that this "sacred regiment of bishops" constitutes a superior order in the church. In Book VII Hooker defines the office of a bishop by stating his powers: he

has "a power to be by way of jurisdiction a pastor even to pastors themselves;" the things "which do properly make him a bishop cannot be common unto him with other pastors," his superiority to these lying both in the latitude and jurisdiction of his power; presbyters' powers are lights borrowed from the episcopal lamp.²⁶

But however bright the episcopal lamp might shine there was another lamp that always eclipsed it, the church. Despite the principles stated above Hooker is adamant that the bishops "albeit they may avouch with conformity of truth that their authority has thus descended even from the very apostles themselves, yet the absolute and everlasting continuance of it they cannot say that any commandment of the Lord doth enjoin; and therefore must acknowledge that the Church hath power by universal consent upon urgent cause to take it away; if thereunto she be constrained."²⁷ As Till has wisely remarked, Hooker's "doctrine of episcopacy... is high, but his doctrine of the Church... is higher".²⁸

Before drawing this section to a close it will be useful to see how Hooker related his claims for the episcopacy to the non-episcopal churches in Scotland and on the Continent.

In Book III of *Ecclesiastical Polity* he writes

in which respect for mine own part, although I see that certain reformed churches, the Scottish especially and French, have not that which best agreeth with the sacred Scripture, I mean the government that is by Bishops. inasmuch as both these churches are fallen under a different kind of regiment; which to remedy it is for the one altogether too late, and too soon for the other during their present affliction and trouble: this their defect and imperfection I had rather lament in such case than exagitate, considering that men often times without any fault of their own may be driven to want that kind of polity or regiment which is best, and to content themselves with that, which either the irremediable error of former times, or the necessity of the present hath cast upon them.²⁹

In the same vein he writes in Book VII:

whereas... some do infer, that no ordination can stand but only such as is made by bishops, which have had their ordination likewise by other bishops before them. till we come to the very Apostles of Christ themselves:... to this we answer, that there may be sometimes very just and sufficient reason to allow ordination made without a bishop. The whole Church visible being the true original subject of all power, it hath not ordinarily allowed any other than

bishops alone to ordain: howbeit, as the ordinary course is ordinarily in all things to be observed, so it may be in some cases not unnecessary that we decline from the ordinary ways.

Of these extraordinary circumstances two examples are specified.

Men may be extraordinarily, yet allowably, two ways admitted unto spiritual functions in the Church. One is, when God himself doth of himself raise up any, whose labour he useth without requiring that men should authorize them; but then he doth ratify their calling by manifest signs and tokens himself from heaven... Another extraordinary kind of vocation is, when the exigence of necessity doth constrain to leave the usual ways of the Church, which otherwise we would willingly keep: where the Church must needs have some ordained, and neither hath nor can have possibly a bishop to ordain; in case of such necessity, the ordinary institution of God hath given oftentimes, and may give, place. And therefore we are not simply without exception to urge a lineal descent of power from the Apostles by continued succession of bishops in every effectual ordination. These cases of inevitable necessity excepted, none may ordain but only bishops: by the imposition of their hands it is, that the Church giveth power of order, both unto presbyters and deacons.³⁰

The second of these exceptions was clearly drawn with a view to the Continental Reformed Churches in Hooker's day, and seems to have direct bearing on Anglican and Lutheran discussions still.

IV

In speaking of Jewel, Whitgift and Hooker, the impression can be given that all "anglicans" were of the same mind on the question of ministry in England during the Elizabethan age. Of course that would be a false impression. There were those like Richard Montague, for example, "who held an exclusive doctrine of the episcopacy by which the Reformed Churches on the Continent were unchurched."³¹ Others like John Williams, Bishop of Lincoln, and opponent of the unfortunate Laud, maintained that bishops were not *de jure divino*;³² still others like Field, the able apologist, held to a theory of episcopacy, yet identified the orders of priest and bishop in much the same way as the Lutherans.³³ But mediating between these two extremes, in retrospect, we can identify a kind of *via media* emerging. The champions of this middle way are referred to as the Caroline Divines, and it is with two of these divines that we close.³⁴

Preacher, bishop and theologian, Lancelot Andrews has long been seen to represent what is best in the Anglican tradition. It was he who expressly formulated the classical Anglican appeal to the two testaments, three creeds and the first four general councils and the first five centuries of the undivided church. On these foundations he rested his case for the episcopate and laid his claim that "our Church doth hold there is a distinction between bishop and priest *de jure divino*."³⁵

But although Andrews represents a high form of Anglicanism his attitude towards non-episcopal orders is not inflexible. In his correspondence with Du Moulin on the question of non-episcopal orders Andrews recognizes the argument of necessity:

You ask if your Churches do err in the divine law. No, I say. I say that some part of the divine law is missing from your Churches: but the blame is not yours. but the hardness of the times. Because you did not have in France kings as favorable to the cause of reformation as we had in England.³⁶

But even though allowing for necessity, Andrews presses on:

Nevertheless if our form [of episcopacy] be of divine right, it doth not follow from thence that there is no salvation without it, or that a church cannot consist without it. He is blind and does not see churches consisting without it; he is hard hearted who denieth them salvation. We are none of those hard hearted persons; we put a great difference between these things. There may be something absent in the exterior regiment. which is of divine right, and yet salvation be to be had.³⁷

This distinction was taken up and refined by the sincere but often injudicious Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud. Laud distinguished between the Lutheran and Reformed Churches in respect to polity, and in rebutting the assertion that "all Reformed Kirks" had presbyterian order, asked whether those who held this

be so strait-laced as not to admit the churches of Sweden and Denmark, and indeed all or most of the Lutherans, to be reformed churches? For in Sweden they retain both the thing and the name; and the governors of their churches are, and are called, bishops. And among other Lutherans. the thing is retained, though not the name. For instead of bishops they are called superintendents, and instead of archbishops. general superintendents. And yet even here too these names differ more in sound than in sense. For bishop is the same in Greek. that superintendent is in Latin. Nor is this change very well liked by the learned. Howsoever. Luther since he

would change the name, did yet very wisely, that he would leave the thing, and make choice of such a name as was not altogether unknown to the ancient church.³⁸

Thus, even Laud was willing to embrace and recognize the various Lutheran Churches on the grounds that they had retained the episcopate in essence if not always in name. Here then we see the hallmarks of the Elizabethan Church. There is the affirmation of episcopacy as a sign of the fullness of a church; there is the recognition of inculpable necessity in the continental churches; and underlying this is the realization that however important the episcopate may be it is, after all, not a matter of faith but order.

V

In conclusion the following observations may be made. Unlike their continental counterparts in the Lutheran and Reformed Traditions, the Anglican fathers of the Elizabethan church never sought to provide an elaborate theological structure upon which to rest their view of ministry. Recognizing the word of God as the test of orthodoxy in the church, they assumed the threefold pattern of ministry and episcopal government; but against the assertors of the divine prescription of presbyterianism, they were only willing to claim that their position was, on the basis of scripture and the tradition of the church, tolerable and allowable. Scripture they maintained sanctioned no one form of church government and they challenged their opponents to prove otherwise. Their reticence to be drawn into debate by the Puritans accounts in large measure for the absence of close theological discussion on the precise nature of ministry in sixteenth century Anglican theology.

But even though they argued that scripture prescribed no one form of ecclesiastical organization, and while they maintained that the polity of the church was a matter of order and not faith, thus allowing for differences of opinion, their high view of the episcopate was scarcely concealed. Thus by the end of the century while they recognized that the episcopate was not a sign of the essence of the church, they were adamant that it was a mark of its fullness.

Notes

1. J. Bramhall, "Works", *Library of Anglo Catholic Theology*, Vol. I, 199.
2. For background information see Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).
3. *Ibid.*, 607.
4. *Book of Common Prayer* (1968), 533.
5. *Ibid.*, 607.
6. *Ibid.*, 609.
7. Norman Sykes, "The Church of England and Non-Episcopal Churches in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", *Theology: Occasional Papers* No.11 (London 1949), 7. This is an excellent study and it provides the background for this paper.
8. B.D. Till, "Episcopacy in the Works of the Elizabethan and Caroline Divines", in *The Historic Episcopate*, ed. Kenneth Carey (London, 1954), 64. This study adds little to the Sykes paper cited above.
9. R. Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, II.VI.4.
10. Bramhall. *Works*. Vol. III. 471-2.
11. Jewel, *Defence* IV, XVIII, I and I, IX, 1.
12. *Apology* III, i, I and *Defence* I IV 3.
13. *Apology* VI. i. 3.
14. *Defence* V, XII. 2.
15. *Apology* IV, IX, 2.
16. Sykes, 11.
17. See Collinson, *Puritan Movement*.
18. John Whitgift, "The Defence of the Answer to the Admonition", *Works* (3 Vols. Cambridge: The Parker Society, 1851-53), Vol. I, 180-1, 184-5, and 187.
19. Of the five books which appeared in Hooker's lifetime I-IV were published in 1594 and V in 1597. Books VI. VII and VIII did not appear until after 1648 and there is strong suspicion that they have been tampered with. For our purposes here we can assume that he is the sole author.
20. The adjectives generally used by Anglicans to describe Hooker are often excessive. For an interesting appraisal of Hooker see W. Carghill Thompson's article in the book on Hooker edited by Speed Hill.
21. *Polity* III. X. 8.
22. *Ibid.*, III, ii. 2.
23. *Ibid.*, III. i. 14 and ii. 1.
24. *Ibid.*, III. ii. 1.
25. *Ibid.*, VII. i. 4 and V. 10.
26. *Ibid.*, VII. ii. 3 and VII. VI.
27. *Ibid.*, VII. V. 8.
28. Till. "Episcopacy". 70.
29. *Polity* III. XI. 16.
30. *Ibid.*, VII. XIV. 11.

31. Sykes, 14-15.
32. See A.J. Mason, *The Church of England and Episcopacy* (Cambridge, 1914). 147.
33. Field. *Of the Church* (Ed 1847), 318 23.
34. This "middle way" is to be recognized only with hindsight. To those that lived at this time the situation was one of flux. After the restoration and with the help of the Anglo-Catholic movement of the nineteenth century this middle way has become fundamental to Anglican self-understanding.
35. Andrews, *Letters to Cardinal Perlon*. Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology, Minor Works, 29.
36. Letter to Du Moulin, *ibid.*, 2111.
37. *Ibid.*, 191.
38. W. Laud, *Works* Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology, Vol. III, 386.