

Bishops' Overseeing Ministry in The English Reformed Tradition

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If the Bible does not distinguish between elders and overseers, why does the Anglican Communion have bishops?

How are bishops (aka: 'overseers') viewed differently in the English Reformed tradition when compared to Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy?

Short Answer: The role of bishops within the Anglican Communion is implicitly derived from the nature of James', Timothy's and Titus' functions and positions articulated in the New Testament that further developed in the Early Church. Of fundamental importance for these functions and positions is protecting the teaching of Sound Doctrine, the Apostolic Deposit of Faith contained in the Bible, within the Church. Bishops are called to be protectors; not bureaucrats. *"We recognize the three-fold orders of ministry, bishops, priests and deacons in historic succession for the edification of God's people and their ministry to the world, for the protection of God's truth, and the good order of God's church."* - John G. Mason

We may take a little more time to look at this in light of The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. The main Articles of Religion that help form the Reformed English ('Anglican') understanding of the role and function of bishops are summarized below.

Articles 6 - Holy Scripture contains all things necessary for salvation. Whatever is not read or proven in the Bible is not required to be believed.

Articles 19 - The Church of Jesus Christ can be visibly discerned as a congregation of Believers in which the pure Word of God is preached and in which the sacraments are rightly administered.

Articles 20 - The Church is a witness and guardian to Scripture and has authority over ceremony and forms of worship along with moral authority over controversies concerning the faith; however, it is always subject to the Word of God revealed in the Bible.

Articles 23 - The Church grants authority for ministry within the congregation of Believers for the office of public preaching and the administration of the sacraments.

Articles 34 - It is not necessary that customs and forms of worship be exactly the same everywhere, and the Church has authority to alter such ceremonial. As long as such changes are not contrary to God's Word, such alterations should be adhered to.

Articles 36 - The Consecration of Bishops and the Ordaining of Priests and Deacons within the Anglican tradition involves all things Biblically necessary to decree their validity.

Comments from John H. Rodgers in “Essential Truths for Christians” and John G. Mason in commenting on ACNA’s Draft Constitution and Canons

Rodgers states that Article 36 “goes beyond the specifics of the Anglican Ordinal and raises fundamental and general questions about the nature of the ordained ministry in the Church in all of its expressions when viewed in the light of the Scriptures.

“At the time of the Reformation everything was being considered in the light of Scripture. Because the adequacy of the Anglican ordinal...was questioned by Rome and others on theological grounds, this became a question about the very nature of the ordained ministry as well.

“Anglicans, in the Articles, seek to build their doctrine and practice on the Holy Scriptures and only on such developments in the history of the Church that are congruent with the Scriptures. Also, as the Articles frequently assert, the Church has no authority to ordain anything that is contrary with Scripture.

“It is interesting that the New Testament never uses the term ‘ordain,’ but the substance of ordination is found under such terms as ‘called,’ ‘chosen,’ ‘appointed,’ and ‘set apart.’

“Therefore, it would satisfy biblical teaching and practice if an ordination rite or ordinal consisted of public prayer and the laying on of hands by those in authority to ordain or consecrate persons into a particular order or office.

“The Anglican Ordinal from the time of Edward the Sixth onwards contained these essential elements. Anglicans, therefore, are confident that the services of ordination in the Anglican Ordinal, from the beginning, contained the necessary elements to ordain persons for the godly ministry of the Word and sacraments in God’s One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

“In the New Testament, the dominant language about the office of Presbyter or Priest [Elder] and of Bishop [Overseer] is that of humble service in pastoral oversight and teaching. Little is said about who presides in the celebration or administration of the Holy Communion, though one can surmise with a high degree of confidence that it was one of the elders or presbyters who presided when an Apostle was not present.

“Rome objected that there was not sufficient differentiation in the words of ordination for the different orders of ministry, since the same words for ordination and/or consecration were used for both the Priesthood and Episcopate. However helpful this differentiation might be at the point of laying on of hands, the earliest known ordinals of the ancient Church did not include any such differentiation. [*There is no such differentiation in the New Testament either.*]

“It should be stated that the word ‘Priest’ in *The Book of Common Prayer* is a shortened form of Presbyter or Elder; *Presbuteros* and not *hieirus* (the word for the Old Testament priest, who did offer sacrifices for sin). The word *hieirus* is never once applied to the ordained ministry in the New Testament. That could hardly have been accidental. It was due to the fact that Jesus had made the final and sufficient propitiatory sacrifice. It was not to be repeated. Further, Jesus remains in office eternally, interceding for us as our High Priest in heaven. [*Therefore, we must reject any notion of sacerdotalism; that an elder overseer is a mediator between God and humanity.*]

“...later some Puritans raised...objections. It seems that Bishops were a matter of contention. They objected to the office and the authority of the Bishop on two grounds. First, they objected to the fact that the Ordinal sees Bishops as being an order and exercising an office distinct from Presbyters because, in the New Testament, the roles of Bishops and

Presbyters/Priests referred to the same people. The distinction of Bishop from Presbyter was a purely post-Canonical development, in their mind.

“Anglicans disagreed, holding that the rise of the monarchical Episcopate took place along lines already found in Scripture in Timothy and Titus and was a development fully in accord with Scripture

“In the Scriptures, the Apostles held authority over the congregations. However, as the Church was rapidly expanding and the Apostles were being martyred, some new form of unifying oversight was needed. Anglicans see the beginning of a developing episcopate in figures such as James, who was something of a monarchical figure in Jerusalem, and Timothy and Titus who were apostolic deputies, presbyters answerable to the Apostles and who had several congregations with [other pastoral overseeing elders] placed under their oversight by the Apostles. *[It may be helpful to highlight the biblical principle of primacy among equals evidenced in Peter, James and John among the Twelve Disciples. While they were of equal status and role, the three exercised additional functions as appointed by the Lord. This is known as the parity and diversity among pastoral elders by which some are raised up by the Lord to exercise a greater degree of pastoral oversight within His Church to protect Sound Doctrine/The Apostolic Deposit of Faith. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this biblical model is an extension of pastoral overseeing eldership and is not administrative or bureaucratic in nature.]*

“In addition, those Puritans were also offended by the words of the Ordinal: ‘Receive the Holy Ghost for the office and work of a Priest (Bishop) in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; whose sins thou dost retain they are retained.’ These words were retained from the pre-

Reformation Ordinal. The Puritans held that these words were superstitious, for in their opinion, man cannot claim to bestow the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands, nor can any man forgive sins. God alone does both. They held this despite the fact, as Anglicans pointed out, that the words quoted are those of Christ spoken to the Apostles. The incarnate Son did and does have the authority to forgive sins, and it is in His Name and service that the Presbyter or the Bishop authoritatively declares to repentant believers the forgiveness of Christ.

[I strongly sympathize with the Puritan reservation here. Because of my agreement with the Puritan view, I use the inclusive plural when declaring absolution with the forms of The Book of Common Prayer to be clear such forgiveness is in Christ's Name alone. More to the point, however, John 20:19-23 previously cited regarding the forgiveness and retention of sins pertains to proclaiming the Gospel. This is John's version of "The Great Commission" in Matthew 28:18-20 enabled by the Outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. John 20 has more to do with "The Keys to the Kingdom" of Matthew 16:13-20, which centers on Peter's confession of Jesus as 'the Christ, the Son of the Living God'. Understanding this also has implications for Church Discipline. I refer the reader to "Lord's Day 31" of The Heidelberg Catechism (Q. & A. #'s 83-85) and DeYoung's comments on pages 151-153.]

“The apostolic succession of the Church is not just Bishops in succession through time, as is sometimes taught, but also all the various ways the Church passes on the Apostolic Faith, life, and mission from one generation to the next generation. ...an Anglican Bishop in historic succession who is teaching contrary to the Apostolic Faith and contrary to the Thirty-nine Articles of the Anglican Church is unfaithful first and fundamentally as a Bishop in the Church Catholic, and in particular as an Anglican Bishop. Apostolicity in the Episcopate cannot be

isolated from the Apostle's teaching. ...it is important to go on to say that Anglicans have not un-churched those Churches of the Reformation that did not continue with Bishops in historic succession" (pages 607-622).

The reader is referred to 2 Timothy 2:2 for the essence of Apostolic Succession contained in the Apostolic Deposit of Faith which is Sound Doctrine preserved in the Bible. Article 19 also clearly articulates that the visible Church is where the pure Word of God is rightly preached and the two Gospel Sacraments are rightly administered; NOT where there is a bishop.

Mason wrote an article on June 3, 2009 offering legitimate criticism of ACNA's Draft Constitution and Canons which will be reproduced, in-part, below to further articulate a proper English Reformed understanding of episcopacy (the office of bishops/overseers in the Church). "A major concern I have with the draft ACNA Constitution is that it undervalues the biblical record and early church history on the matter of 'ministry'. This has the consequence of 'un-churching' any church that is not episcopally structured."

The main issue addresses the wording of ARTICLE 1 and the 'eight elements...essential to membership' Clause #3 which reads: *'We confess the godly historic Episcopate as an inherent part of the apostolic faith and practice, and therefore as integral to the fullness and unity of the Body of Christ.'* Mason states, "This clause above all is problematic for 'reformation, evangelical Anglicans' for it excludes those who would concur with important points made by many scholars from the time of the English Reformation – for example, Bishop J.B. Lightfoot in his detailed and highly respected essay, 'The Christian Ministry' in *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Philippians:1868*, notes, inter alia, that the order of bishops not only grew out of the order of

presbyters but that this development was uneven, occurring more quickly in some places than others, as in Corinth, Philippi and Rome (p. 225).

“Many Anglicans would find it impossible to *confess the godly historic Episcopate as an inherent part of the apostolic faith and practice, and therefore as integral to the fullness and unity of the Body of Christ*. The concept of the episcopate arose out of the presbyterate which was commissioned by apostles such as Paul and Peter. The function of that ministry was twofold: ‘they were both rulers and instructors of the congregation.’ As well as establishing ‘good order’ in the churches the ‘teaching’ function of the ‘presbyters’ was essential, particularly as the peripatetic [traveling; transitory] ministry of the apostles and others diminished. It is only in the second and third centuries that we find the development of a cluster of ‘bishops’ or a single ‘bishop’ in a church or in a city.

“Certainly, defined views with respect to the bishopric developed in those early centuries. As Lightfoot has noted, for Ignatius the ‘bishop is the center of Christian unity’; but for Irenaeus the bishop is the ‘depository of the apostolic tradition’ (p. 238). In the light of this for many Anglicans it is going too far to say that the ‘bishop’ is *integral to the fullness and unity of the Body of Christ*. Article 19 reflects both this theology and history... Furthermore, it is significant that both the Ordinal (for the consecrating of bishops) and the Thirty-Nine Articles are silent on matters of ‘apostolic succession’ or the ‘unity’ of the church except for the preaching and protection of God’s Word. The English Reformers accepted the faithful ministry of men who were not necessarily episcopally ordained: they did not un-church them.

“**To summarize, Clause 3** of the draft Constitution is not correct in stating that it is universally held that the episcopacy is an essential or *integral* feature of Anglicanism – that is that bishops are the *esse* [essential to] or even the *pleni esse* [belonging to the fullness] of the

church. Anglicans of the reformed, evangelical tradition have, prime-movers of GAFCON, have always held a different view, namely episcopacy is for the *bene esse* [beneficial ordering] of the church. The inclusion of the words, *an inherent part of the apostolic faith and therefore as integral to the fullness and unity of the Body of Christ*, is not only inconsistent with the Early Church leaders and English reformers but also Clauses 7 and 12 of the Jerusalem Declaration. The words deny a significant body of Anglicans' freedom of expression and conscience on this most significant matter.

“**Clause 3 – suggested rewording**, *We recognize the three-fold orders of ministry, bishops, priests and deacons in historic succession for the edification of God’s people and their ministry to the world, for the protection of God’s truth, and the good order of God’s church.*”

Supplementary Essay

How do we define or label Timothy’s ministry or role in the Church? Although he is charged with overseeing that orthodox doctrine be taught, the word Overseer is not used here to define his ministry? Is he an elder despite the fact that he was ordained by other elders along with Paul’s laying on of hands? It appears that Timothy held a position of oversight over other elders who typically performed the duty of teaching in the assembly of Believers.

“[Timothy and Titus] stand between the apostle and the church, in the sense that they represent him and relay his teaching to the church. They have been appointed to oversee the churches in Ephesus and Crete respectively, yet their job specification has been written by Paul [who regularly points Timothy and Titus back to ‘the truth’, ‘the faith’, ‘the sound doctrine’, ‘the teaching’ or ‘the deposit’ he has imparted to them]” (Stott, 1996, p. 11). “The true apostolic succession is a continuity not of order but of doctrine, namely the teaching of the apostles handed on from generation to generation [as it is written in the New Testament]. Much contemporary confusion in the church arises from our failure to make a clear enough distinction

between the apostolic and the post-apostolic periods. Oscar Cullmann's explanation could hardly be improved: 'The fixing of the Christian canon of Scripture...means that *the church itself*, at a given time, traced a clear a definite line of demarcation between the period of the apostles and that of the church...between the apostolic community and the church of bishops, in other words, between apostolic tradition and ecclesiastical tradition'" (Stott, 1996, pp. 12-13).

Barrett may help shed some light on the ambiguity of Timothy's, along with Titus', ministerial role within the Church. He states, "Timothy and Titus are represented as Paul's assistants" (Barnett, C.K., The Pastoral Epistles, p. 30). Barnett poses the question as to whether their (Timothy and Titus) roles are unique in history as "apostolic delegates" or whether they represent "types of the ministry in general" (Barnett, p.30). We can see that Timothy's ministry mainly involved evangelism (2 Tim. 4:1-5) and preaching/prophesying (1 Tim. 1:18; 4:14) along with teaching (1 Tim. 4:6, 13, 16; 2 Tim. 3:10; 16), including teaching other teachers (2 Tim. 2:2) (Barnett, p.31). The charge to guard and teach other men Sound Doctrine is the essence of apostolic succession of which the laying on of hands is merely a visible representation. With the exception of the importance placed on evangelism for Timothy's and Titus' ministry, the ministry of others as described in the Pastoral Epistles "correspond closely with those of Timothy and Titus" (Barnett, p.31). As examples themselves of ministry in the New Testament, we see Titus and Timothy commanded, or given authority, to appoint (Titus) and supervise the teachings (Timothy) of overseeing elders within the Church while also being charged with exercising the duties of overseeing elders themselves. Acknowledging the larger historical context of the Pastoral Epistles, especially Second Timothy, we can deduce that Paul is charging Timothy and Titus to continue his apostolic ministry when he departs.