

EPISCOPACY:

WHAT GROUND IS THERE IN SCRIPTURE
OR IN HISTORY FOR
ACCOUNTING IT AN INSTITUTION OF GOD?

By J. N. D.

LONDON:
G. MORRISH, 24, WARWICK LANE,
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WERE it merely a question between one form of church government or another, no one would hear a word from me about it. If man forms a government, others will judge of it according to their habits of thinking, their early prejudice, or natural dispositions. But the establishment of episcopacy led on to popery, and was closely connected with the progressive corruption of Christendom. In modern times the same system is leading to the same result and associated with the same degrading superstitions. The system might sleep, but, awoke up, that is its universal path. It is well therefore to ascertain what true scriptural and historical ground there is for the episcopal system. Respect for position and authority is no unholy feeling, nor to be despised even as a natural one; but if the prestige of position is used to resist the truth and

lead into error, as in the case of the high priests, we must not give up God's authority over us and the truth that sanctifies us, for pretensions that after all have no real ground in scripture or history.

It cannot be expected that the great body of Christians should be able to search out in Benedictine tomes the facts of the case. I have given them here so that any one can judge of the claim that episcopacy has to be an institution of God. I am not aware of any historical testimony in its favour which has been omitted. I do not go into the gross corruption which rapidly sank Christianity to the level of heathenism. My object is the original title of what now professes to be the necessary channel of all spiritual grace and authority. No one denies that at the end of the second century the episcopal system, not the diocesan, but one superior president of the principal local churches, was generally established. Our question is its origin ; who established it?

First, it is perfectly clear that in scripture bishops and elders are the same thing. (Acts xx.; 1 Tim. iii.; Titus i.) In Philippi Paul adds, to all the saints, "bishops and deacons," and this, note, when

he was in prison very late in his ministry, the last period of which we have any definite history, where we might have expected a bishop according to the later acceptation of the term if anywhere, now that the church was in a certain sense left to itself. So in Acts xiv. he appoints for them elders in *every* church. The inspired author, in the formal constitution of the church, had no idea of any higher authority established by the apostle. Thus we have distinct and formal evidence of every kind: original constitution, Acts xiv.; address at the close of his life, Philippians i. 1; and those to whom he commends the church, Acts xx., when he thought he should see them no more. That Paul knew no such thing as a prelate in the church, he neither institutes them nor recognizes them. If such there were, he treats them with absolute neglect, takes no notice of them, but charges others with duties which would have been incumbent upon them. The modern notion that Titus and Timothy were bishops, has no ground in scripture whatever. They were personal companions of the apostle, whom he deputed for special services, and recalled them when it was done ; and they stayed with him, or he sent them elsewhere. Peter knows no more of any such order than Paul, though we have fewer details.

Elders were the usage among the Jews: all we have from him is “the elders which are among you.” This utter contempt of the principal authority in the churches, if such there were, is utterly inconceivable.

There could not be stronger evidence against an individual superior authority in the churches, against episcopacy, than that which scripture affords. The only semblance of anything of the kind is James at Jerusalem: we find him closing the debate in Acts xv., and saying, “Wherefore my sentence is,” &c. Peter, when delivered by divine intervention from prison, says, “Shew these things to James, and the brethren.” (Acts xii. 17.) So Acts xxi. 18: “Paul went in with us unto James, and all the elders were present.” So Galatians i. 19: he saw besides, “James the Lord’s brother.” So chapter ii. 12: certain came from James who made poor Peter afraid to eat any more with the Gentiles. We have thus clearly one who had great influence amongst the Jewish Christians, not always a happy one. It led Peter into dissimulation, Paul into the temple, so that his public ministry, as far as scripture goes, was closed. God may have overruled their effects and shewn perfect and blessed grace—assuredly He did; but so it was

in fact. But in his history there is no trace of episcopal care. His position in Acts xv., which seems to look most like it, gives a clue to his local influence, which there was of the greatest importance. But it is quite inconsistent with a bishop's place. Either he was the apostle James, son of Alpheus, or he was not; if he was, he gave his voice as such after the others, and as the most Jewish of all; and the very leader of Jewish thought and feeling, as Galatians ii. 12 shews, and the other passages confirm, to say nothing of his being the Lord's brother, which it appears he was. His voice in such a case as the Jews compelling Gentiles to be circumcised was all-important, and would naturally close the question the assembly had discussed. Peter and Paul had declared God's ways in their active ministry, and now James, the vessel of Jewish thought, brings in the conclusion of the matter.

Now all depended on the Jews accepting this: hence God had not allowed Paul to settle it by apostolic authority at Antioch. Had he done so, we should have had a Jewish church at Jerusalem, and a Gentile one at Antioch, rival and hostile centres. The Jews, under grace, must decide for Gentile freedom, and all was right, and so it was

through God's gracious handiwork. If he was not an apostle but a bishop, then we have a bishop deciding over the heads of the apostles who were there and spoke, and, if this ground be taken, as inferiors.

We hear in history exterior to the Bible, that he not only had this influence over even unconverted Jews, but Josephus attributes the destruction of Jerusalem to their killing him. He had acquired the name of James the Just. His influence scripture does tell us of. (His epistle is to the twelve tribes, though with the faith of Christ the Lord of glory.) It neither gives him this or any analogous name, nor gives a hint of any episcopal service. Paul among the Gentiles, as we have seen, neither established nor knew such. And this his contemporaries, as far as we have them, confirm. Clement gives us the same evidence as scripture, as far as he goes, and as history it is important; his epistle is universally received as genuine. He addresses the church—knows no episcopacy there but that of the elders. As was just said of Paul, it was treating the bishop of Corinth with utter contempt if there were any such; but the evidence is positive—he knew of no such thing, but the contrary. (C. 42.) We read, “and thus preaching through countries

and cities they appointed the first fruits of their conversions to be bishops and deacons over such as should afterwards believe," quoting Isaiah, right or wrong, for the purpose. So 44: "So likewise our apostles knew by our Lord Jesus Christ that contentions should arise on account of the ministry, and therefore, having a perfect knowledge of this, they appointed persons as we have before said, and then gave a direction (*ἐπινομήν*, a difficult word if the reading be right) in what manner, when they should have fallen asleep, other chosen and approved men should succeed in their ministry." And then he fully speaks of them in the plural, closing by saying, "blessed be those elders," &c. Clement's testimony then is perfectly clear on the subject. The apostle appointed elders, several, in a church, arranged further succession; but of bishops, so-called now, he knows nothing. His statements contradict their existence.

Polycarp affords us the same testimony; he writes to the Philippians, desires them to be subject to the presbyters, but wholly ignores any so-called bishop, and speaks of the elders that were with him. Ignatius addresses him as bishop, and there is no doubt that Ignatius recognized the office. He does not in writing to the Romans or Ephesians in

the Syriac ; but the bishop is mentioned apart from elders, and no doubt there were such—not diocesan, which were very much later—in local churches. Ignatius uses them only to urge a spirit of subjection and so of unity. If the Greek epistles are nearly of this date, as some allege, it would be a proof that it was a new thing which from the coming in of disorder and heresies, led the forger of them, finding that Ignatius had once so spoken in his letter to the Ephesians, to urge submission to the bishop and elders with a gross and offensive elaborateness of repetition, using Ignatius' name to give it currency. At all events, we have no trace of a bishop till near the end of the first quarter of the second century; all previous testimony positively contradicting the existence of such.

This is the broad fact, and Polycarp's not calling himself so, when so called by Ignatius, just proves the earnest purpose of Ignatius to use it as a means of unity. A later tradition may connect itself with this, but scripture directly contradicts its existence, as does the earliest history. Barnabas, a very early writer at any rate, if not the true Barnabas, probably the earliest and with more personal faith, does not speak of it. And Hermas who came thirty

years or more after Ignatius, does not speak of any episcopacy, but makes the angel to desire Hermas to tell the presbyters what was said. But no bishop appears, yet he does blame the way presbyters sought to be first or chief. At the close of the second century their existence as presidents of churches in a city was general.

The country was still largely or chiefly pagan, the word meaning a villager. But for some hundred and twenty years, not only is scripture, which has final authority, most clear, giving another system than episcopacy, but, after this, history confirms the same as existing, and that by unexceptionable testimony, where it is recognized as a fact without any motive to lead to it but the existence of the fact ; whereas the motives of the earliest testimonies to the existence of episcopacy betray an anxious, earnest desire to maintain it. Justin Martyr even speaks of no bishop ; but his testimony can hardly be cited for any system, as he only speaks of the earliest meeting of an assembly, and of one that presides in it, and of deacons. Were this all the testimony of nearly the first hundred years after Christ, it is clear against episcopacy, the scripture establishing formally another system which excludes it. But testimony to the contrary is alleged, es-

pecially from Irenæus, but also from Tertullian; and we may add Hegesippus, an old historian in Eusebius. Now that there were local (not diocesan) prelates in their days is unquestionable.

But these ancient writers are alleged to shew lists of prelates back to apostolic times. We have seen positive contradiction of this from earlier unquestionable authorities, we may now see that these have really none; and that ecclesiastical tradition of the kind is a most uncertain and unsatisfactory guide—may be perhaps trusted if writing of what was under their eye, but no more, like old Herodotus.

Irenæus was a Christian worthy of respect, though not sound in the faith after all, but our question with him is as an historian. Now the first point to be remarked is, that he had a controversial object in his facts, which alters the force even of his testimony: but we shall besides find that he states on the subject what certainly is not the fact. I do not doubt he believed it. He was tormented, as was the whole church, with Gnosticism, which denied that the true God of the Christians was the Creator, and he appeals to the universal faith of the churches everywhere, and specially Rome, to prove that such a notion was never held amongst Christians. And he traces back the list of

prelates, particularly at Rome, to prove this, that it was handed down by these worthy men from the beginning. He appeals to the scriptures, but, the heretics cavilling and appealing to tradition too, finding himself baffled by their cavils, (instead of doing as the Lord did when Satan quoted scripture to Him, answering by another plain scripture,) he turns to the common faith of the churches, and what the most esteemed leaders of the church had held, and hence gives their succession; but I am sorry to say, he was, what Rome and all orthodox persons would call, himself a heretic. But his appeal is really to meet the use of it by the Gnostics who pleaded, as Rome does now, that there were doctrines known by tradition, not contained in scripture.* He answers, None of these successors of the apostles had such as you allege. What I have just said as to his testimony to tradition is clearly stated, lib. iii. c. 2, 3.† We have only a very bad translation of most of Irenæus' works.

But it is as an historian we have to do with him: how little his statements can be trusted, a few in-

* They quoted 1 Corinthians ii. 7.

† I have not the least doubt that *potiorem principalitatem* was in Greek ἀρχήν, and meant "origin." The context proves it, I think. It is a famous passage with Romanists.

stances will shew. First he states that Christ Himself continued on to be an old man, which he reckons as forty or fifty years, sanctifying old age as well as youth, as he tells us the gospel and all the aged men who conversed with John testified. (Lib. ii. c. 22.) The gospel we can answer for ; the tradition of John, Irenæus and the aged men must answer for. Who, he adds, are we to believe most, those who had seen, not only John but the other apostles and heard these things from them . . . or Ptolemy, who had seen none of them? Massuet says, Perhaps he heard it only from Papias, who, says Eusebius, was a foolish old man. But, as Massuet observes, Irenæus makes Christ not teach immediately after His baptism but wait till He was of full age, at thirty being only a youth, and so die an old man—diametrically, as he says, opposed to the plain testimony of scripture. But so much for tradition.

But we have another case directly to the point, as the commencement of the passage which is quoted to prove that episcopacy dates from the apostles' days and was established by their authority. "Now Matthew," says Irenæus, "brought out amongst the Hebrews in their own dialect the written gospel (τὴν γραφὴν εὐαγγελίου) when Peter and Paul

were evangelizing in Rome and founding the church.” I will add what the Benedictine edition remarks on this. All the Fathers hold Matthew to have first consigned the gospel to writing; but how reconcile this with what is said of Peter and Paul, for Paul could not have been there before A.D. 64 or 65? Either, therefore, the other Fathers are to be abandoned or Irenæus; either are alike inconvenient. The securest thing to say in so obscure a matter is, that nothing can be defined. (Ire. lib. iii. c. 1, Benedictine edition [Massuet] 174.) Eusebius follows his account. (H. E. v. 28.) Not only so, but this account which Massuet admits to be untenable and contradictory to all the statements of other Fathers, is the basis of all Irenæus says on the succession, and of papal pretensions too. I may add, though our business is with Irenæus, Eusebius (ii. 25) quotes from Dionysius of Corinth, the statement that Peter and Paul planted together the church of Corinth, and then went on to Rome, taught in like manner, and were martyred. Now that Peter and Paul may have been taken to Rome and martyred together, passing at Corinth together too, is very possible, though we have no account of it; but what is said as to the foundation of the church at Corinth or Rome is unquestionably false.

Paul, we know from the Acts and his Epistles, founded that at Corinth, Peter having nothing to say to it. And even Paul did not found that at Rome more than Peter, as his Epistle to the Romans shews: Christianity preceded them both there. The Roman church, so far from having a *potiorem* beginning, was not founded by an apostle at all.

But this famous proof of episcopacy leads us to another passage of Irenæus (iii. 14, 12). He is arguing against the Gnostics, that Luke was the constant companion (which itself he states in a manner contrary to Luke's, to make him always his companion, whereas this only began at Troas), yet he never puts forth these Gnostic notions, and then adds: not only to those with him, but he (Paul) made himself clear to all, for having called together in Miletus the bishops and presbyters which were from Ephesus and the other nearest cities, and then he gives Paul's discourse. That is, he falsified the plain statement of the passage to get up his traditional testimony with episcopal authority attached to it. Now he gives us in this book (iii.) a list of bishops at Rome as serving for all such; and this is the authority for bishops going back to the beginning. Now, untrustworthy as we have seen him to

be as to his historical statements, this, as far as it goes, plunges us into utter obscurity, suggesting that there were not any bishops really there. The list is (lib. iii. 3, 3) Linus, Anencletus, Clemens, Evarestus, Alexander, Sixtus, Telesphorus, Hyginus, Pius, Anicetus, Soter, Eleutherus, who was in Irenæus' time. Paul and Peter, he says, committed it to Linus.

Eusebius as usual follows Irenæus, but he gives the dates: Peter to 68, Linus 68–80, Anencletus 80–92, Clemens 92–101. Here we stumble, after three or at any rate two others his predecessors in the see, on one who, as we have seen, owns no bishop at all but states, and justly, entirely another order of government as established by Paul. Tertullian (*De præs.* 32) puts Clement as the one put in charge by Peter. Eusebius (iii. 2) states positively it was after Peter's death Linus was put in, and Clement is twenty-four years afterwards. Rufinus, says he, does not deny that Linus and Anencletus were first, but Clement was appointed while Peter was alive. Some indeed say Clement was named first but would not be from modesty, but was obliged after the death of the others. The point with Tertullian is security of doctrine by succession, but he contradicts Irenæus plump as to who was the person it was committed to. Optatus

Mil., who leaves out two, puts Peter first, then Linus, then Clement, and then Anencletus.

Now all this shews how totally uncertain these traditions were, that they could only be varying memory, whereas he who was specially wheeled about as to his place, being placed first, second, and third, Clement, knows nothing of any such place at all. My own conviction is they were all there together and that Clement has given the clue to it. None of them were bishops; practically, one or another may have presided. There is just the same disorder found at Antioch, betraying the same origin of prelacy. But we have more as to this episcopacy, which helps us on to trace this clue. The deacons were setting up to be great people at Rome, and Jerome, the most learned Father of the ancient church, knowing East and West, thus writes (on Titus i. 5): The presbyter is therefore the same as the bishop; and before that by the instigation of the devil parties were sought to be made in the church, and it was said among the people, "I am of Paul," &c. The churches were governed by the common council of the presbyters; but after each sought to make those whom he had baptized his own, not Christ's, it was decreed in all the world that one chosen from among the presbyters

should be set over the rest to whom the care of the whole church should appertain. . . . As therefore the presbyters know that they are subject by the customs of the church to him who may have been set over them, so let the bishops know that they are greater than the presbyters, more by the custom of the church than by the truth of any ordering of the Lord, *veritatem dominicæ dispositionis*. And he declares that while the only thing a presbyter could not do was to ordain, yet in Alexandria till Heraclas' time, when the bishop died, the presbyters themselves established another from among themselves in his stead. (Ep. 146 ad Ev.)* And even Cyprian, the greatest founder of the power of the primitive episcopacy, says *almost* everywhere there must be prelates to do it. So Augustine says (Litt. lxxii. 33): Although, according to titles of honour

* He adds 'Does any one think that the judgment that a bishop and a presbyter are one is ours, not that of the scriptures? let him read again!' and quotes Philippians i.; Acts xx.; Peter v., also Hebrews xiii. 17. See also epistle to Oceanus (Ed. Vall. lxix. 416), to Evangelus (old Ed. Evagrius) cxlvi. The same difficulties occur as to Smyrna, if we listen to Apos. Const. Pope Urban in a very numerous council declares (A.D. 1091), "It is read that the primitive church had them (presbyters and deacons) alone; as to them alone we have precept of the apostle."

which the practice of the church has made valid, the bishop is greater than the presbyter.

If the reader desires to see more as to the change made as to ministerial order, and a positive historical statement of the substitution of episcopacy for the government of presbyters—one presiding as the senior and another succeeding him, as it produced scandals often, the successor being worthless—he may consult the commentary on Ephesians iv. 12, published at the end of Ambrose's works: said to be by Hilary; who states also, that the presbyters ordained the prelate of Alexandria. According to him the system was changed for prudence' sake, adding *providente concilio* (whatever that may mean), a council making provision in the matter. (Supplement to vol. xi. page 243, Bened. Ed.)

Thus, for some ninety years after Christ's death, there is no episcopacy on record; but after that, we hear of it first pressed for the sake of unity by Ignatius; then, on account of false doctrine, by Irenæus and Tertullian. In the latter part of the second century it prevailed; only presbyters appointed, and (it is said) ordained, their prelate in Alexandria; and he was recognized by all as a true bishop. Clement of Alexandria says

that John after his release from Patmos went in some places establishing bishops, in some arranging whole churches, in some the clergy (κλήρω) putting into that place (κληρώσων) some one of those signified by the Spirit. (*Quis Dives Salv.* 42.) Tertullian says, the order of bishop counted to its origin will stand on John for its author. (*Adv. Marc.* iv. 5.)

I do not enter on proofs of the wretched uncertainty of the traditions of the Fathers. Were we to believe them, Christ Himself made and ordained James bishop of Jerusalem; another, that Christ and the apostles did, and that He committed His throne on the earth to him; that John and James and Mark were high priests. (*Bingham* ii. 9, 5; *Euseb.* v. 24, as to John from *Polycrates*.) James, as I have already said, had a special place and influence from his character and being the Lord's brother; it is related that on his death some meeting of the remaining apostles and others replaced him by Symeon, another in the same relationship with the Lord.* But it is never

* Rothe will have it that the meeting, which according to *Hegesippus* put Symeon in James's place in Jerusalem, established episcopacy as a received order. But this only proves this learned man could find no real proof of it.

hinted that James was a bishop ; and, besides what I have already said, the address of the letter to the churches proves he was not. It is addressed from the apostles and elders and brethren. Why, if he was a bishop and spoke as president, is he left out? It cannot be said because the apostles are spoken of, because the elders are distinctly noticed, and they delivered to the churches the decrees of the apostles and elders. The result is, first, that scripture refutes episcopacy and established another kind of official authority, which this sets aside, just as much as if a republic was changed into a monarchy ; the monarch is not added, the state has ceased to be a republic. I do not say the church was a republic or that authority came from the people—I do not think so ; what I say is, that the addition changed the government which was scriptural. Episcopalians and Puseyites do claim for the church the title to change its government. I do not agree, but I do not discuss it ; I only say that the episcopal government is not the scriptural one, but sets it aside. Further, Ecclesiastical history confirms the fact and does not recognize episcopal government ; and we have the most learned Fathers of the church declaring presbyter and bishop were the same at the outset,

and that church custom only had made the honour valid. I conclude with Jerome that episcopacy does not come from *veritate dominicæ dispositionis*.

I have gone through the traditions which are alleged for it, I believe fairly, and admit the system was generally established in the latter part of the second century; but it was not established by God.



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