

The Reduction of Episcopacy Unto the Form of Synodical Government Received in the Ancient Church

James Ussher

Anglican · Post-Reformation · Treatise

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INTRODUCTION

Written in 1641 by James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh, and published only after his death in 1656, this brief tract proposes a middle way through one of the seventeenth century's most consuming quarrels: whether the English church should be governed by bishops or by presbyteries. Ussher's answer is neither - or rather, both. He sketches a graduated system of monthly, diocesan, and provincial synods in which bishops preside but do not rule alone, grounding the scheme in the practice of the ancient church rather than in party polemic. The result reads less like a pamphlet than a piece of careful ecclesiastical engineering, dense with citations from Tertullian and Cyprian, offered by a man trying to keep a fracturing church whole.

The Reduction of Episcopacy

The Reduction of Episcopacy unto the form of Synodical Government Received in the Ancient Church: Proposed as an Expedient for the compromising of the now Differences, and the preventing of those Troubles that may arise about the matter of Church Government. 1656

Episcopal and Presbyteral Government conjoined.

By Order of the Church of England all Presbyters are charged (1) to minister the Doctrine and Sacraments, and the Discipline of Christ as the Lord hath commanded, and as this Realm hath received the same; and that they might the better understand what the Lord had commanded therein (2), the Exhortation of S. Paul to the Elders of the Church of Ephesus is appointed to be read unto them at the time of their Ordination; Take heed unto your selves, and to all the flock, among whom the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to Rule (3) the Congregation of God, which he hath purchased with his blood.

Of the many Elders, who in common thus ruled the Church of Ephesus, there was one President; Whom our Saviour in his Epistle to that Church in a peculiar manner styles the Angel of the Church of Ephesus (Rev 2.1); and Ignatius, in another Epistle written about twelve years after unto the same Church, called the Bishop thereof, betwixt which Bishop and the Presbytery of that Church, what an harmonious consent there was in the ordering of the Church government, the same Ignatius doth fully there declare, by the Presbytery with St. Paul (1 Tim 4.14) understanding the Company of the rest of the Presbyters or Elders, who then had a hand not only in the deliverance of the Doctrine and Sacraments, but also in the administration of the Discipline of Christ, for further proof whereof, we have that known testimony of Tertullian in his Apology for Christians. (4)

In the Church are used exhortations, chastisements and divine censure. For judgment is given with great advice as among those who are certain that they are in the sight of God; and it is the chiefest foreshowing of the judgment which is to come, if any man have so offended that he be banished from the Communion of Prayer, and of the Assembly, and of all holy fellowship. The Presidents that bear rule therein are certain approved Elders, who have obtained this honour, not by reward, but by good report; were no other (as he himself elsewhere intimates) but those from whose hands they used to receive the Sacrament of the Eucharist (5). For with the Bishop who was the chief President (and therefore styled by the same Tertullian in another place (6) *Summus Sacerdos* for distinction sake) the rest of the Dispensers of the Word and Sacraments joined in the common government of the Church; and therefore, where in matters of Ecclesiastical judicature Cornelius Bishop of Rome used the received form of gathering together the Presbytery (7); of what persons did consist, Cyprian, sufficiently declares, when he wishes him to read his letters (8) to the flourishing Clergy which there did preside or rule with him, the presence of the Clergy being thought to be so requisite in matters of Episcopal audience that in the fourth Council of Carthage, it was concluded, that the Bishop might hear no man's cause without the presence of his Clergy, and that otherwise the Bishops sentence should be void, unless it were confirmed by the presence of the Clergy, which we find also to be inserted into the Canons of Egbert, who was Archbishop of York in the Saxons times, and afterwards into the Body of the Canon Law itself.

True it is, that in our Church this kind of Presbyterial government has been long disused, yet seeing it still professes, that every Pastor has a right to rule the Church (from when the name of Rector also was given at first unto him) and to administer the Discipline of Christ, as well as to dispense the Doctrine and Sacraments, and the restraint of the exercise of that right proceeds only from the custom now received in this Realm, no man can doubt but by another Law of the Land this Hindrance may be well removed: And how easily his ancient form of government by the united Suffrages of the Clergy might be revived again, and with what little show of alteration, the Synodical conventions of the Pastors of every Parish might be accorded with the presidency of the Bishops of each Diocese and Province; the impartial Reader may quickly perceive by the perusal of the ensuing Propositions.

- In every parish the Rector or Incumbent Pastor together with the Churchwardens and Sidesmen may every week take notice of such as live scandalously in that Congregation, who are to receive such several admonitions and reproofs, as the quality of their offence shall deserve; and if by this

means they cannot be reclaimed, they ay be presented unto the next monthly Synod; and in the mean time debarred by the Pastor from access to the Lord's Table.

- Whereas by a Statute in the 26 year of King Henry the eight (revived in the first of Queen Elizabeth) Suffragans are appointed to be erected in twenty six places of this Kingdom, the number of them might very well be conformed unto the number of the several rural Deaneries into which every Diocese is subdivided; which being done, the Suffragan (supplying the place of those who in the ancient Church were called Chorepiscopi) might every month assemble a Synod of all the Rectors, or Incumbent Pastors within the Precinct, and according to the Major part of their votes conclude all matters that should be brought into debate before them.

To this Synod the Rector and Churchwardens might present such impenitent persons, as by admonition and suspension from the Sacrament, would not be reformed; who if they should still remain contumacious and incorrigible, the sentence of Excommunication might be decreed against them by the Synod, and accordingly be executed in the Parish where they lived.

Hitherto also all things that concerned the Parochial Ministers might be referred, whether they did touch doctrine or their conversation; as also the censure of all new Opinions, Heresies, or Schisms, which did arise within that Circuit; with liberty of Appeal, if need so require, unto the Diocesan Synod.

- The Diocesan Synod might be held once or twice in the year, as it should be thought most convenient: Therein all the Suffragans and the rest of the Rectors or Incumbent Pastors (or a certain select number) of every Deanery within that Diocese might meet, with whose consent, or the Major part of them, all things might be concluded by the Bishop or Superintendent (call him whither you will) or in his absence by one of the Suffragans whom he shall depute in his stead to be Moderator of that Assembly. here all matters of greater moment might be taken into consideration, and the Orders of the Monthly Synods revised, and (if need be) reformed: And if here also any matters of difficulty could not receive a full determination; it might be referred to the next Provincial or National Synod.
- The Provincial Synod might consist of all the Bishops and Suffragans, and such other Clergy as should be elected out of every Diocese within the Province; The Primate of either Province might be Moderator of this meeting (or in his room, some one of the Bishops appointed by him) and all matters be ordered therein by common consent as in the former Assembly.

This Synod might be held every third year, and in the Parliament do then sit (according to the Act for A Triennial Parliament) both the Primates and Provincial Synods of the Land might join together, and make us a National Counsel: Wherein all appeals from inferior Synods might be received, all their Acts examined, and all Ecclesiastical constitutions which concern the state of the Church of the whole Nation established.

END.

The Form of Government here proposed, is not in any point repugnant to Scripture; and that the Suffragans mentioned in the Second Proposition, may lawfully use the power both of jurisdiction and Ordination, according to the Word of God, and the Practice of the ancient Church.

ENDNOTES

(Not all the endnotes have been copied because of the difficulty of reading them in the manuscript available. Whereas Ussher gave most of the notes in Latin the English version of Schaff has been used here.)

The form of Ordaining Ministers

Ibid. ex Acts 20.17,28

poimainein – so taken in Matt 2.6 and Rev 12.5 & 19.15

“In the same place also exhortations are made, rebukes and sacred censures are administered. For with a great gravity is the work of judging carried on among us, as befits those who feel assured that they are in the sight of God; and you have the most notable example of judgment to come when any one has sinned so grievously as to require his severance from us in prayer, in the congregation and in all sacred intercourse. The tried men of our elders preside over us, obtaining that honour not by purchase, but by established character.”

Tertullian : Apology Chapter 39.

“We take also, in congregations before daybreak, and from the hand of none but the presidents, the sacrament of the Eucharist” Tertullian : The Chaplet or De Corona, Chapter 3

Tertullian : On Baptism, Chapter 17

“The whole of this transaction therefore being brought before me, I decided that the presbytery should be brought together; (for there were present five bishops, who were also present today;) so that by well-grounded counsel it might be determined with the consent of all what ought to be observed in respect of their persons.” The Epistles of Cyprian : Epistle 45 Cornelius to Cyprian The Epistles of Cyprian : Epistle 53 to Cornelius

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Translation: Author died 1656. Original English composition, no translation involved. Incidental English renderings of Latin patristic citations in the endnotes draw on Philip Schaff (d. 1893), also safely public domain.

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