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

THE MINISTRY IN THE EARLY
CHURCH AS SEEN BY JOHN CALVIN
(*concluded*)

by J. F. PETER

III

OUR consideration of the significance of Calvin's statements about the ministry, and his view of the relation of his own thought to that of the early fathers, calls for a number of comments. In the course of these we shall see how far we can agree with his judgments concerning the early church, and in what ways the acceptance or rejection of those judgments impinges upon inter-church relationships today. These comments we shall group under three headings, suggested by words that loom large in contemporary discussion: the words *Episkopē*, Succession and Catholicity.

1.—The first group of comments are concerned with the matter of *episkopē*.

(*a*) That there was in the church from the beginning the exercise of *episkopē* is beyond question. Though the word itself occurs but rarely in the New Testament, there is quite evident the idea that the church is a community under the obedience of faith, and that neither is it given to the members to think and behave as they please nor are they bereft of means whereby their thoughts and actions may be properly guided and effectively aided. Without pausing to define the matter too closely, we may say the *episkopē* involves such things as the retaining of the church along the lines of the mission begun with the apostles and under the authority of the tradition handed down from them, the provision of a ministry of Word and Sacraments, the exercise of pastoral discipline, the guarding of truth and the excluding of error, and the representation of the church's unity and universality[1].

(*b*) The question, "Who was responsible for the exercise of this *episkopē* in the Early Church?" seems to have an obvious answer.

It is probably true to say that Rome had no bishop when Ignatius wrote to the church there, Corinth none when Clement wrote, Philippi none when Polycarp wrote, and that other centres were without a single *episkopos*. We know, however, that the situation

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[1] *Cf.* the statement concerning *episkopē* in *Relations Between Anglican and Presbyterians* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1957), p. 18.

soon changed in each of the places we have named. S. L. Green-slade offers a reliable summary of the situation which the evidence attests when he writes:

> My conclusion is that there are anticipations of monepiscopacy in the New Testament, that there were bishops, monarchical bishops, in Asia and perhaps elsewhere early in the second century, that they were common in *c.* 150 and normal by *c.* 180, when Irenaeus and Tertullian assume their normality; but that this normality is true, so far as evidence goes, of fully organized churches, and we still cannot exclude the possibility that many groups of Christians lived outside the episcopal system. The date by which it became universal would vary, naturally, with the history of missionary work. The *Didascalia* (*c.* 250?) and Cyprian assume that any proper church is episcopal, but legislation to that effect is not found before the fourth century[2].

That is to say, the answer to the question, "Who was responsible for the exercise of *episkopē?*" seems clearly to be: "the monarchical bishop". By this term we mean to denote a situation in which one man is recognized as exercising general oversight of the work in a particular area, and as having under his direction any other ministers appointed there. In this position he is acknowledged to be the guardian of the church's preaching and ordinances, of the morals of all the faithful (including other ministers), the custodian of discipline, the chief minister in ordination, and the spokesman of the church in its dealings with other churches.

We know that such a situation came to prevail. While there is evidence to suggest that in some places *episkopē* was exercised by a college of presbyters, or even by a congregation as a whole, it seems clear that there were some places in which *episkopē* was from the beginning in the hands of a single bishop, that this came to be the practice adopted everywhere, and that once it was adopted the church showed little disposition to depart from it.

It need hardly be stated that the rise of the monarchical bishop did not absolve every one else in the church of all responsibility for *episkopē;* the responsibility of others was recognized—quite apart from any question whether the "monarchy" of the bishop was what we today would call a "constitutional" one. In speaking of "responsibility" here we have meant "ultimate responsibility".

(*c*) There is nothing in all this to suggest that Calvin was wrong in his understanding of church history. He was aware that the usual situation in the early church was one of a single bishop who, in his exercise of the pastoral office, had the assistance of a number of presbyters, and perhaps of certain other categories of the "clergy".

[2] S. L. Greenslade, "Monepiscopacy; Its General Acceptance", *Friends of Reunion Bulletin,* No. 48 (January 1954), p. 6.

Where of course there may be room for questioning Calvin's historical judgment is in his belief that the bishop owed his place of particular responsibility to the will of the presbyters. As Calvin understood the matter, responsibility for *episkopē* was not, as it were, originated with the bishop and by him passed out to others serving as his deputies but was, on the contrary, handed up to him from its source in the body of the presbyters. (Neither of the words "originated" and "source" in this sentence is to be understood as overlooking the truth that all authority in the church is Christ's.)

Now our evidence as to how the first bishops were appointed is not at all conclusive ; the end of the "tunnel period" sees almost everywhere a single bishop, but we do not know how each one came into his office. Nor, of course, is the question as to *how he came to be chosen* identical with that as to *how he was considered to exercise his authority.* The answer we give to the second of these questions is tied up with the understanding we have of succession; and to that we shall turn in a moment.

It is, however, important to note here that, with the evidence we have, Calvin's answer to the first question (namely, that the bishop was chosen by the people, or was chosen by the presbyters and presented to the people for their approval) rests on the evidence as soundly as any other, and that, if his answer be the right one, in the so-called "non-episcopal" churches of today (or in some of them) we may have the closest approximation to the form of the ministry which prevailed in the early church[3]. To claim that Calvin, and the many churchmen who have followed him at this point, have knowingly turned away from the practice of the early church is to overlook both their claims and the evidence which supports them.

2.—We must now take up some questions suggested by the term "succession".

(*a*) The first of these asks whether an idea of succession is essential to the existence of the church.

There can be no doubt about the answer. From the beginning it was recognized that the church was not a congeries of individuals who from time to time came together for particular and temporary purposes. The church was thought of as a household built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Himself as the keystone (Eph. 2: 20); all who were joined to the church were joined to His body. The idea of a continuing community, of a

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[3] *Cf.* D. C. Lusk, "Scotland and England; Our Next Task in Church Union", *Scottish Journal of Theology,* viii (1955), pp. 1-19; G. S. M. Walker, "Scottish Ministerial Orders", *ibid.,* pp. 238-54.

succession, cannot be disregarded without obliterating this vital understanding of the nature of the church.

(*b*) It was the emergence of heresies which brought about a more sharply defined notion of succession, for then it became necessary for believers to know whether the community they were invited to join really was the one built upon the foundation of the apostles, as distinct from some other groups whose misunderstandings of Christian faith and practice were the result of their resting on foundations derived elsewhere. As is well known, the desirability of a ready means for distinguishing the true from the false brought about the linking of true succession with episcopal succession: the community which was true to the apostolic faith and practice was that presided over by a bishop who was a successor to the apostles, or to apostolic men.

Three early writers who did much to further the idea of true succession as episcopal succession are Ignatius, Irenaeus and Cyprian. Their statements on the place of bishops in the church have been often quoted, and need not be repeated here. But a few comments will help us to appreciate the significance of what they say.

i. Ignatius of Antioch (*obiit c.* A.D. 115), said B. H. Streeter[4], "had episcopacy on the brain". This is too caustic; what Ignatius had on the brain, if anything, was unity: he was concerned lest heretical teaching, or selfish pride, should bring about disruption, and he saw in obedience to the bishop the surest antidote. D. C. Lusk recalled that Lightfoot speaks of "the crushing despotism with which this language, if taken literally, would invest the episcopal office"[5], and adds:

> Poor Ignatius, prisoner of Christ, in chains, snatching time to write hurried letters—to think that after eighteen centuries he would be held to literal interpretations of his burning words! No doubt it is dangerous language, if the bishop is to become the great prelate of a mediaeval diocese; but for those who can see the true picture, on the small scale, in the humble setting of an early church, the language is easily intelligible, natural and fitting[6].

Lusk goes on to show how an appreciation of this setting lights up some of the well-known statements of Ignatius. "Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be"; we should think here of folk, with no building of their own, having to meet in one part of

4 Quoted by J. K. S. Reid, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Ministry* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1955), p. 27.
5 Quoted by Lusk from Lightfoot's commentary on *Philippians*.
6 D. C. Lusk, "What is the Historic Episcopate? An Inquiry Based upon the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, iii (1950), p. 267.

the city after another. "Let no one, apart from the bishop, do any of the things that belong to the church"; Ignatius deplores the arranging of services and functions behind the minister's back. "Whatever the bishop approves will be well-pleasing to God"; "of course", says Lusk, "he does not mean that the bishop can do no wrong. He is giving practical advice, not legislating . . . . Perhaps the unhappy thought of a really unchristian bishop had never yet been entertained. It was too dangerous a job".[7]

Passing over Lusk's suggestion that one really needs to be a minister in the Church of Scotland to appreciate Ignatius, let me underline the significance for our present purpose of this sort of realistic approach to his writing: the words in which Ignatius exalts the bishop are not to be construed as a testimony that succession in the church is united to the succession of bishops.

ii. Irenaeus of Lugdunum (A.D. 120-202), says J. N. D. Kelly, "gathers together the main second-century ideas about the church and, in conscious reaction against Gnosticism, imposes a sharper outline on them".[8]

This is certainly what he does in regard to the idea of succession, and in his *Adversus Haereses* we have a clear enunciation of the idea that the true church is where there is an evident succession of bishop after bishop.

> Wherefore it is incumbent to obey only those presbyters who are within the church, who have the succession from the apostles, as we have shown; those who when they succeeded their predecessors as bishops received the secure gift of truth according to the will of the Father (IV.26.2).

Such statements as this[9], and his production of succession lists[10], make the position of Irenaeus clear: "those who depart from the original succession . . . are to be considered either as heretics . . . or as schismatics . . . or as hypocrites" (IV.26.2).

But a careful reading of what Irenaeus says discloses that what he is really concerned about is not the episcopal succession as such, but the sound doctrine of which he sees the succession as a guarantee. His thesis is that, amid the conflicting traditions, the soundest is to be found where there is a recognized continuance of leadership in the Christian community. His aim is to show that the apostolic tradition is held within the church, not to establish the authority of a particular order within the church (as, incident-

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 269.

[8] J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1959), p. 192.

[9] Others in similar vein are III.2.2; III.3.1; IV.33.8.

[10] I.27.1; III.3.1-4.

ally, his apparently indiscriminate use of the terms "bishop" and
"presbyter" shows).   Moreover, as Einar Molland has pointed
out:

> The validity of Irenaeus' argument depends on the fact that no
> bishop in the Apostolic churches had committed apostasy and become
> a heretic.   The orthodoxy of all bishops in the chain from the
> Apostles is an indispensable presupposition for the use of the succes-
> sion as an argument[11].

iii   It is with the teaching of Cyprian of Carthage (A.D. 200-258)
that we have the clearest identification of true succession with
episcopal succession.   For him, the authority of the bishop—that
for which he should be respected and obeyed—lies in his person ;
he is himself the *sacerdos,* and the successor of the apostles in an
office of dominical institution.

The struggle with Novatianism in which Cyprian was engaged,
and his involvement in the controversy over the baptism of here-
tics, are factors which make his obsession with the place of the
bishop understandable ; but they cannot make acceptable the posi-
tion he adopted.   He went beyond what his predecessors had
asserted concerning succession, and beyond what most Christians
since him have been prepared to countenance. We may admire the
consistency and the tenacity with which he linked Church, Ministry
and Sacraments in an indissoluble unity; but we cannot consider,
in the light of its implications, that the price to be paid for such
consistency is worth it.

What I am suggesting is that, placed in Cyprian's position, we
too might have urged unqualified adherence to one's bishop as the
only way of ensuring unity and orthodoxy, but that, placed in other
circumstances (with, for instance, another set of bishops in the
Catholic churches), we might have felt differently.   And it is
probable that Cyprian himself, confronted with the defection to
Novatianism of a bishop who had regularly succeeded to an apos-
tolic see, would have urged a much modified form of submission.
(In his case, too, "the orthodoxy of all bishops in the chain from
the Apostles is an indispensable presupposition for this use of the
succession as an argument".)   Certainly there have been many

[11] Einar Molland, "Irenaeus of Lugdunum and the Apostolic Succession",
Journal of Ecclesiastical History, i (1950), p. 22. Molland also points out
(following Van den Eynde and Karl Müller) that the very passage
(IV.26.2) which Gregory Dix *(The Apostolic Ministry,* ed. K. E. Kirk.
[London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946], pp. 209 *ff.)* hails as showing belief
in a charisma of infallibility received at ordination is evidence for
Irenaeus's view that those who abandon right doctrine *absistunt a princi-
pali successione* (Molland, *ibid.,* pp. 25-26). Irenaeus's words in III.3.1. ("if
they fell it would be the greatest calamity") are patient of a similar
interpretation.

instances since that time of bishops whose succession was un-
questioned being anathematized on account of their doctrine or
their behaviour.   It was Cyprian's error that, in order to deal with
a relative situation, he made statements which equated catholicity
absolutely with episcopal succession.

In arguing thus, I have been taking Cyprian at (what I should
regard as) his worst, and have been questioning his assumptions
on much the same grounds as Calvin based his opposition to cer-
tain claims made on behalf of episcopal succession.   It may be of
interest therefore to observe that Calvin himself did not read
Cyprian in this way.   For it is evidently in regard to one of
Cyprian's most-quoted statements[12] that Calvin comments:
"Cyprian, also following Paul, derives the source of concord of the
entire church from Christ's episcopate alone".[13]   And, indeed,
this passage is capable of such an interpretation. Perhaps Cyprian
did not hold such a weighted brief for bishops after all.

(c) What we have done so far, in considering the matter of
succession, is to agree that the idea of succession had a real place
in the early church and then, by taking up the views put forward
by three early fathers, conclude that an identification of true suces-
sion with episcopal succession (in any absolute or sacramental
sense) did not find expression before the time of Cyprian—and
perhaps not even then.   What I want to do now is to advance a
general consideration, the recognition of which must affect our
appreciation of what happened in the early church.

This general consideration (which, I think, has received in-
sufficient recognition in discussions of this subject) arises from the
fact that, in the very nature of the case, there could not have been
immediate succession from bishop to bishop in any particular
place.

For, in an age when a bishop remained in office until his death
(which in any case might well be early and sudden), a man could
scarcely have had any part in the election of his successor, and
could certainly have had no part in the ceremony by which he was
admitted to his office: the rather macabre manner in which,
according to Telfer[14], a bishop's consecration in Alexandria
was combined with the obsequies for his predecessor is a piquant
illustration of this point.

[12] *De Unitate*, 5; "It is particularly incumbent upon those of us who
preside over the Church as bishops . . .".

[13] *Institutes*, IV.iii.6.

[14] W. Telfer, "Episcopal Succession in Egypt", *Journal of Ecclesiastical
History*, iii (1952), pp. 1-13.

Leaving aside the question of who *chose* a new bishop, we have to ask: "Who imparted to him the 'succession'?" Since it was not his predecessor, it must (if it were from a bishop at all) have been some neighbouring bishop—or a number of bishops. And either instance is evidence that succession to the see was not the same thing as receiving some grace or commission from one's predecessor: thus the production of a succession list is no evidence for adherence to a view that true succession is a personal succession. It is evidence rather for a view that true succession is one of office and function.

Moreover, there is evidence that not even neighbouring bishops were considered necessary for the proper admission of a bishop. The practice at Alexandria, whether we accept Telfer's reading of the evidence or Kemp's,[15] was for the bishop to be "consecrated" by the presbyters, and it is hard to believe that this was an isolated instance: Irenaeus, for example, in view of the fact that Pothinus of Lugdunum was martyred while Irenaeus was in Rome and that the latter took his place as bishop soon after his return, could not have been consecrated by bishops there.[16] In such cases, any notion of succession must have envisaged it as resting somewhere other than in the bishops alone.

(*d*) The evidence which have had before us shows that, at least in the earliest period, there was no thought of the true succession being absolutely identical with the episcopal succession. True succession was thought of as resting on a broader basis.

And in such a thought the early church was fundamentally right.

H. P. Owen has drawn attention[17] to the close link which Paul saw between the resurrection and the apostolate: not, of course, that all who had seen the Lord were called to be apostles, but that an encounter with the risen Lord was an indispensable prerequisite; it was upon his having had such an encounter, as well as upon the visible results of his labours, that Paul rested his own claim to be an apostle.[18] But there can be no appreciation of Paul's statements concerning the Resurrection which does not see them in the context of what is often called his "mysticism": his recognition that, ἐν Χριστῷ, every believer is brought within the sphere of the Cross and the Resurrection: along with other believers, and within

[15] E. C. Kemp, "Bishop and Presbyters at Alexandria", *ibid.*, vi (1955), pp. 125-42.

[16] See Molland, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28, and the authorities he cites.

[17] H. P. Owen, "Resurrection and Apostolate in St. Paul", *The Expository Times*, lxv (1953-54), pp. 324-28.

[18] I Cor. 9: 1-2.

the community (this seems to be the significance of the "raised *together*" in Eph. 2: 6; Col. 3: 1), each believer is himself risen with Christ. "These peculiarly Pauline developments", says Owen:

> have an acute bearing upon the concept of the apostolate. For obviously the specific character of the apostles as a group deliberately selected to witness to the Lord's resurrection appearances lost its edge so soon as His Resurrection came to be looked upon as an event repeatable within normal Christian experience. Previously the accent had fallen entirely upon the Resurrection as an overt act of Divine vindication with which only a few chosen eye-witnesses could claim connexion. Now it was universalized as a power which every Christian could receive. The whole Church became, at least theoretically, apostolic in an intrinsic as well as a derivative sense. For the Church did not merely rest upon the external authority of the apostles. As the fellowship of those who had "risen with Christ" it possessed a prerogative which would entitle it to a fresh apostolic commission of its own[19].

If the occasion demanded it, we might well ask from Owen a more precise statement concerning the "repeatability" of the Resurrection, and the relationship (which he clearly recognizes to be important) between the historically continuous community and its "fresh apostolic commission". But his remarks have drawn · attention to the way in which Paul stands as a corrective to any idea of a succession wholly circumscribed by the continuity of any particular group. Though he was obviously anxious to be at one with the existing community and its tradition,[20] he was willing to speak against it if agreement with it meant the hindering of what he conceived as his own apostolic mission.[21] He saw the whole Church as built upon the foundation of the apostles, and Christ Himself as the keystone.[22]

This aspect of the New Testament teaching relates significantly to our question concerning the placement of the true succession. The point at issue is, as J. K. S. Reid puts it, whether, among the different offices occupied by members of the church, there can be any which is more essential than the others. "Coming down to hard tacks", Reid goes on:

> Is there a primary commission to those holding this office and a secondary commission to the Church, or is there only one commission which belongs to the Church as such? Alternatively said, allowing that there is an episcopate and even that there should be an episcopate in the Church, does this office arise out of the Church, or does it

[19] *Op. cit.*, p. 326.
[20] Gal. 2: 2.
[21] Gal. 2: 5, 11; Rom. 11: 13; 15: 15-21.
[22] Eph. 2: 20.

enjoy a more immediate relation to the divine commission and so may justly be said to be given to the Church?[23]

What has been already said will have shown what answer I should give to this question: the succession which is essential to the church is the church itself, and not any particular group within it. And the consideration we have given to the teaching of Ignatius, Irenaeus and Cyprian shows that this was a view held by many in the early church.

It need hardly be pointed out, I hope, that the view which I have commended is not the same as that which regards the ministry as no more than an administrative convenience, appointed to do things which the other members cannot find time to do efficiently. Holding that the ministry—and the members of it—are given to the church by her ascended Lord, and that the continuance of His endowment is represented in the solemn admission to office by prayer and laying on of hands by those already in office, is quite compatible with denying that the recognition of those so given is the prerogative of any one group within the church, and asserting that Christ's action can be seen to run through channels other than that of the episcopal succession.

(e) It seems that Calvin's theological sense and historical sense —and indeed his common sense—were not far astray from the true facts. He recognized that succession was an important thing, and that in the early church this found most effective expression in the bishops who were the acknowledged leaders. He recognized also that, however effective, this was only an expression of something which lay much deeper, and that the confusion of this particular expression of succession with the reality of succession was what underlay the perversions of the medieval church. He was therefore insistent that the place of the bishops in the church was theirs because the church (no doubt in accordance with the Lord's will) had given it to them, and that, should they fail to function effectively, the church could manage without them.

If, as Stubbs suggested in 1888, the historic episcopate is:

A distinct, substantive and historic transmission of the commission of the Apostles in and by which our Lord formed His disciples into a distinctly organized body or Church,[24]

it appears that the churches which have an ordering of the ministry along the lines suggested by Calvin can lay as just claim as any others to having preserved the historic episcopate.

3.—Our final comments are under the heading of "Catholicity",

[23] *Op. cit.*, p. 42.
[24] Cited by D. C. Lusk, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, iii (1950), p. 255.

and ask in what sense any particular view of the ministry can be considered essential to the church.

The present situation in inter-church relationships is, happily, far less acrimonious than that in which Calvin wrote ; yet the same basic question falls to be answered: is there sound reason why churches, such as the Anglican, which have "the historic episcopate" (as this is usually, but in my opinion inadequately, understood) should persist in looking upon the ministries of Presbyterians (and others who agree generally with the principles set out by Calvin) as lacking in proper historical precedent?

If there is any substance in the points which have been brought forward in this paper, persistence in this attitude bespeaks an ignorance of the evidence which can be advanced to show the Reformed understanding to be both theologically sound *and* in accordance with the belief and practice of the early Christians.

Few of Calvin's avowed followers today would go so far as some of earlier generations who, in their avowal that Presbyterianism is the only form of government agreeable to the Word of God and their unchurching of any who denied the divine right of presbyteries, went far beyond what Calvin himself was prepared to say. Those who most appreciate Calvin's views on the ministry are prepared to concede that monepiscopacy has held, and may still hold, an honoured place in Christendom. What they cannot understand is the insistence that their church order is to be held inadequate unless they take in "the historic episcopate" in the form it has assumed in the socalled "episcopal" churches. They cannot see the theological grounds for so bating an emphasis and they cannot see how the history of the early church can be read as supporting it.

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