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A study in early church polity

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A Study in Early Church Polity.

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The civil governments of the world are tending toward democracy. Every-where the bonds of despotism are loosening. Liberal constitutions are supplanting the tyrannies of kings. The franchise is being extended to increasingly larger bodies of men and they are freeman men and know self-governing. Equality is the watchword of the hour; and it is declared that the future belongs to all men, and not to any privileged class. Aristocracies of birth and wealth are fading away. Freedom and liberty are in the air. Within sixty years one hundred and eighty millions of Europeans have become self-governing.

These things being so, one would naturally think that the Christian Church, shaking off her indifference, would follow the direction in which the thought and life of this century

are certainly tending.

And indeed such is the case. The Church does feel the movement toward re-adjustment of government to modern ideas. Church and State are breaking the cords that have bound them together and each is going its own way to do its own work. Disestablishment was never so strongly advocated in England as now. Now and now the spirit of independency is leaving the churches themselves. "And the movement is back toward the liberty and unity of the primitive churches, with their equality and care for the people."

This being the case, it is well to examine the polity of the early Church and seek for the method of church government hinted at by our Lord and introduced by the apostles and their immediate successors.

Christ himself did not elaborate a system of church government. Not until after his death could the full force and meaning of his mission and the work he accomplished for the world be understood. Divine recognition of the Christian church came at Pentecost. Not until then could there be, in any true sense, a Christian church.

But there are intimations, even in the Gospels, as to the principles which should govern a body of Christian believers. And these principles were always commendatory of the broadest charity and brotherly love. No superiority was to be assumed by any; humility was to characterize the followers of him who made himself of no reputation and took on him the form of a servant. Such was Christ's teaching. For instances of this see Matt. XVIII: 1-14, where Christ

makes a little child the pattern of the humility and trustfulness which should mark the disciples and distinguish them from the self-seeking goal of the children of this world.

See also Matt. XX: 20-28. Dean Alford remarks on this passage: "They are all brethren: all substantially equal none by office or precedence nearer to God than another; none standing between his brother and God." These are the words used: "But Jesus called them unto him, and said, ye know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. What so shall it be among you; but whosoever would be come great among you shall be your minister (margin, 'servant'), and whosoever would be first among you shall be your servant." (R. V.).

Again, in Matt. XXIII: 8 Jesus says, "But do not ye call Rabbi: for one is your teacher and all ye are brethren." (R. V). Such passages, if they teach anything, teach the broadest principles of universal brotherhood. How then is no elevation of one above another, even in office.

The abilities, the work accomplished, the renown of these early disciples might differ widely; but in rights they were equals, a brotherhood in which each should prefer the other as better than himself.

And there is inspiration in such a principle as this enunciated by Christ. Success, under this rule, depends, not so much upon an organization, as upon the faithfulness of individuals. There is recognition of personal merit. The man is not lost in an impersonal mass, called the Church; but he is

an independent part of the Kingdom of Christ, and that very independency brings with it a sense of responsibility which makes character.

We now turn to examine the Acts of the Apostles. Christ had died and risen. And now the Church has started on her career of conquest. In the Acts you find the army of the Church mustering and organizing. In the organizations were certain fundamental principles. This early Church was not a chaos. Steps were taken to ensure proper order and administration. Among the functions which the early Church was compelled to make provision for and exercise may be mentioned the following: Preaching, baptizing, celebration of the Eucharist, the necessary discipline of the Kingdom, and ordination, or appointment to the ministry.

1- Preaching, in the primitive church was not confined to those who, as we style them, were ordained men. The laymen of the apostolic church were allowed full liberty to preach. Acts VIII: 1, 2 reads, according to the Revised Version, thus: "and there arose on that day a great persecution against the church which was in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles". Now turning to verse 4 we read, "They therefore that were scattered abroad went about preaching the word." The word used in the original, εὐαγγελίζω, is the regular word used in the New Testament for the formal preaching of the Gospel. The apostles remained in Jerusalem. These laymen, when driven forth by persecution, preached the Gospel, not merely by their costly

lives and an occasional exhortation; but "went about" preaching the word. In other words, they became itinerant ministers. But we read nothing of their ordination. They were private Christians. No ecclesiastical body had authorized their functions. No hand, save the hand of persecution had been laid on their heads.

A similar case is recorded in Acts XI:19-21.

In Acts XIII:1, 2 we have the fact of laymen ordaining and sending forth Saul and Barnabas. The second epistle of Clement was originally a sermon and was preached by a layman, and did not take the title of epistle until the fifth century.

It is plain that the function of preaching and teaching was open to laymen. Undoubtedly some had

special fitness for this work and this would become apparent to the local church. But Christ is the head of the church. His call may come by the impartation of special gifts and graces, or by providing special opportunities for usefulness, but never by the mere appointment of some ecclesiastical officer. When this call does become manifest to the local church it is in the interest of good order for the church to add its sanction to the divine call, not by elevating the man to a priestly order or by stamping him with any peculiar or mysterious quality, but to recognize the divine call and guard against the impositions of bad men.

When, then, is apostatical succession? In the protetical sense it is a fiction. Is not this rather the

succession of the Spirit than the laying on of hands? Whosoever any man goes forth clothed in the power of the Spirit of God, filled with devotion and a holy purpose to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom, he is in the true apostolic succession.

2. The local church could baptize its own converts without the assistance of an ordained pastor. The validity and efficacy of the sacraments does not depend upon the one who administers the same. This has been the position of all sects, including the Roman Catholic. Tertullian, writing toward the close of the second century, said, "Besides this, even laymen have the right to baptize; for what is equally received can be equally given. The word of the Lord ought not to be hidden by any; in like manner, too, baptism, which is equally God's property,

can be administered by all".

The Council of Elvina which met in the year 305 gave laymen the power to baptize. Jerome, who wrote near the close of the fourth century speaks as if laymen enjoyed this right and had performed this function from the beginning.

If we may believe Irenaeus, from whom the hierarchical tendencies of the early church received great encouragement, the laymen, without ordained assistance, celebrated the Eucharist. This fact would also seem to be indicated by the words of the apostle Paul to the Corinthian Church in 1 Cor. XI, when six verses are devoted to a discussion of the Lord's Supper and no mention whatever is made of any minister.

3. If we examine the mode of discipline current in the early church,

Here again our investigation proves that this was exercised by the local body and by the members of the church, instead of this power being delegated to the officials of the church. The principle enunciated by Christ throws some light upon this subject of church discipline.

His words recorded in Matt. XVIII: 15-18 are as follows: "Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."

This sounds as tho' it was intended by our Lord to be a permanent rule which should govern the Church in all future time. Neither pope nor priest, nor synod, nor judicatory was to come between the individual Christian and the body of believers, to which alone he was amenable. For the word ἐκκλησία means, not the Church general, as conceived by some modern Churchmen, but simply the local body of believers.

Turning to Thayer's Lexicon we find this definition of ἐκκλησία - "An assembly of Christians gathered for worship" and again, "a company of Christians." The margin of the Revised Version has, as an equivalent of the word Church in the text, the word "congregation." This is the only conception of the Church which appears to have been entertained by Christ. In his important

utterances and in his prayers he seems to have had this conception of the church in mind. For proofs of this see John XVII: 1-26; Matt. XXVI: 26-29; Mark XIV: 22-25; Matt. XXVIII: 18-20; Luke XXIV: 36-49; John XX: 21-23.

The church universal never meets. To it there could be no appeal. The officers of a church are not the church itself and therefore can not be intimated in the words, "Tell it unto the Church." Says Ross in "The Church Kingdom," p. 113, "The discipline of the local church is final. There is no intervening tribunal or court between the first and last step, and no appeal from the vote of expulsion. There is no passage in the New Testament which impairs this conclusion by intimating some further process. The Master made

The action of the local church in the discipline of its members final.

If the above is the true idea of the church, we would expect to find its machinery of discipline very simple. Such is the case. The government is democratic. The churches govern themselves. There is no complicated process, but in time of need the appeal is directly to the whole body of believers. When Paul visited Jerusalem for the first time after his conversion, Acts 18:26-30, he joined himself to the brethren.

When the controversy arose at Jerusalem because Peter had Christianized Gentiles without first Judaizing them, and Peter appeared in his own defense, Acts 11:1-18, he presented himself, not to any hierarchy, but to a "democratic brotherhood." For similar cases see Acts XV:1-31; XVIII:27;

1 Cor. V: 4, 5, 13; 2 Cor II: 6.

Turning to the epistles we find the same fact of government by the local church. In 1 Cor. V Paul denounces in strong terms the sin of fornication. Yet he addresses no one but the body of believers to which the guilty ones belonged and at the last commands them to put away the wicked man from among yourselves.

Of like tenor is 2 Cor. II: 6. In closing this part of our investigation it is worthy of remembrance that the epistle of Clement and also of Polycarp, both of the second century, recognize the right of the local church, assembled, to exercise discipline on offending members.

4- Ordination in the early church was simply election or appointment by the company of believers or congregation. The ranks of the apostles

did not form a close corporation.

The place of the traitor Judas was not filled by the other apostles, but by the body of Christians at Jerusalem.

"And there was a multitude of persons gathered together, about a hundred and twenty." Says Ross, "The ordination of the New Testament was by the laying on of hands and prayer. The words translated 'to ordain', in the Authorized Version, are rendered from the prelatial sense into simply 'to be sworn or to appoint' by the revision". The officer, also, takes on

another significance when the passage is read in the Revised Version.

For instance, the word ἐπισκοπή, translated in the Authorized Version "bishoprick", has been changed to "office", and, in the margin, "overship". See Acts I: 20.

Says Dean Stanley, "The conception

of ordination, so far as we can gather either from the words which are used to designate it or from the elements which entered into it, was that simply of appointment and admission to office.

There was no idea of the minister as a priest. He was simply a man set apart by his own brethren to whom he was to minister, as one having peculiar gifts. Every pastor was an ἐπίσκοπος, or overseer, a man first of all called of God, and then, for the sake of good order, recognized and appointed by his brethren.

Mr. Edwin Hatch, in the Bampton Lectures for 1880, on the "Organization of the Early Christian Churches," remarks as follows: "In the earlier times there was a grander faith. For the Kingdom of God was a Kingdom of priests." Not those merely

in apostolic line, "not only the four and twenty elders before the throne, but the innumerable souls of the sanctified upon whom the second death had no power nor kings and priests unto God." In this lofty and inspiring sacerdotalism was predicable of all men.

We have now seen a few of the broad, underlying principles of the polity of the early Christian Church. We have seen that these principles and that polity were fundamentally democratic. Jesus Christ caught the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man; and this second truth was carried into practice in the early organization of that Kingdom composed of those for whom he laid down his life. Who shall say that this was not done in the Providence of God?

But today we see almost everywhere in the Church pomp and pride and vain display. Popes and cardinals, archbishops and bishops, assume the functions which in the early Church were exercised by the people. Lords over God's heritage, they profess to hold in their hands the power and the authority which belong to Christ alone. They arrogate to themselves the lordship over the consciences of men. Instead of feeding Christ's sheep they too often fleece them; and claiming the power to bind and loose, they exercise themselves principally in binding.

It is not enough to say that the times have changed and that any system which will "work well" is legitimate. That is begging the question. On such a theory we might change the whole face of

Christianity. To give such an idea
 from course is to throw the example
 and authority of the Word of God
 and throw expediency and novelty.

Let the watchword be, Back to
 the apostles, back to the grand, broad
 principles of equality!

Christianity must reform society, not on
 the basis of the shaven monk, the
 hooded nun, or the false assumption of
 authority and prerogative by any
 class of men, but on the basis of
 human brotherhood. Says Hatch, in
 the Bampton Lectures quoted above,
 "It would seem as tho', in that vast
 secular revolution which is accomplish-
 ing itself, all organizations, whether
 ecclesiastical or civil, must for as the
 early Church was, more or less dem-
 ocratic. Christianity's unaccomplished
 mission is to reconstruct society on
 the basis of brotherhood."

Then let the tendency already apparent
 in the Christian world become a
 power. Indeed, to attempt to stay the
 tide is useless. Out in the ocean of God's
 love a mighty current is gathering which
 shall deluge the continents. The spirit of
 the prairies of old Puritanism is in the
 air, "A Church without a bishop - a
 state without a king". Independency
 in thought and action is the mighty
 current which is to sweep away the
 forms erected by an ecclesiastical
 aristocracy and monarchy. Says Ross,
 "The future belongs to the primitive
 church polity of unity in liberty. If
 our reasoning be correct, the ecumen-
 ical unity of the Mediator's prayer
 will be reached not thro' the polity
 of an infallible primacy, or of
 apostolic succession, or of authoritative
 representation, but thro' the polity of
 Church independency and liberty."

And will it not be better? Never since the eye which saw their achievements has there been such activity in spreading the Gospel as was exhibited by the apostles.

Independency, then, does not hinder evangelism. It rather promotes it.

The loss of motion power, the lack of conservation alone can hinder the triumph of the Gospel. God's strength alone, and not human organization, makes man omnipotent.

Jesus Christ is the Great Head of the Church. He hath redeemed her.

His bride she is. Her true unity is one of faith and love & good works under one common Lord. To him be glory, both now and forevermore.