

Chapter 5 Doctrines of Apostolic Succession

Other than concerns about “validity” of orders, the Anglican Communion has two reasons for considering the *episcopi vagantes* a problem. The first reason is the wrong motives which many wandering bishops seem to have had in deciding to enter the ministry; the second is their lack of education and training for that ministry. Brandreth considers that a man may be a bishop on technical grounds, according to Western theories of episcopal transmission of authority; yet that bishop may still not be “valid,” because of the irregularities of his life and ministry.

There are generally two theories of “validity” of episcopal succession held in the Church: the Augustinian (after St. Augustine of Hippo), which is generally held by the West; and the Cyprianic (after St. Cyprian of Carthage), also known as the non-Augustinian. The Cyprianic view is generally that of the Eastern Churches.

The Augustinian view on episcopacy is connected to the bishop’s views on baptism, which he set forth in his treatise *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, written circa A.D. 400. The Donatists were a sect which, after the Diocletian persecution of the early 4th century, held that any Christians which had cooperated with the Roman authorities were not worthy to be considered true Christians. In some instances, the Romans had required priests and bishops to hand over sacred vessels, or copies of the Gospels, or even their own fellow Christians. Those who did so were known as *traditores*, traducers of the Faith, with whom Christians should have no contact.

Having previously written on the topic in his treatise *Contra Epistolam Parmeniani* [*Against the Epistle of Parmenianus*], Augustine held that the baptism given by the heretical Donatists was valid. First, he shows that those who leave the Catholic Church to join the heretics do not lose their baptism, for “when they return within the pale of the Church, and are converted through repentance, it is never given to them a second time, and so it is ruled that is never could have been lost.”¹ In the same way, persons who have the power to confer baptism (i.e., the clergy), do not lose that power if they leave the Catholic Church. “And as the baptized person, if he depart from the unity of the Church, does not thereby lose the sacrament of baptism, so also he who is ordained, if he depart from the unity of the Church, does not lose the sacrament of conferring baptism. For neither sacrament may be wronged.”² He points out too that schismatics who had been

¹ Augustine, *De Baptismo, contra Donatistas*, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. IV, ed. by Philip Schaff (reprint, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 411-412.

² *Ibid.*, 412.

ordained prior to their schism, are not re-ordained if they return to the Catholic Church; though the Church may not require their ecclesiastical services, yet at the ceremony of reconciliation “they are not ranked with the laity.”³

Surprisingly, Augustine holds it not completely ill that a person should receive baptism from the hands of the Donatists, providing that this person acted out of necessity. If there were, for example, no Catholic from whom he could receive baptism, and he intended to remain within the unity of the Catholic Church, then it would indeed be permissible to receive the Donatists’ baptism.⁴

Despite this, Augustine holds that there is a distinction between the *ability* to pass on baptism and the *authority* to do so. For the bishop holds that the Donatists do indeed pass on baptism to their adherents, but that this is not a good a situation as if they were still within the bounds of the Catholic Church: “We do not therefore say to them, ‘Abstain from giving baptism,’ but ‘Abstain from giving it in schism.’”⁵ He uses the analogy of the “military mark,” i.e., the character which one receives as a member of the armed forces. This mark, “though it can both be retained, as by deserters, and, also be received by those who are not in the army, yet ought not to be either received or retained outside its ranks; and, at the same time, it is not changed or renewed when a man is enlisted or brought back to his service.”⁶

This is the point which Brandreth brings out, the distinction “between the power conferred in ordination and consecration, and the legitimate exercise of that power.”⁷ Brandreth quotes the French writer L.J. Tixeront’s book *L’Ordre et les Ordinations* [*Holy Orders and Ordination*], when he says that “Heretics have the power to pass it [i.e., ordination] on...’but they do not possess, and cannot pass on, its legitimate exercise.”⁸

The Cyprianic view, on the other hand, considers orders valid only “within the context of the Mystical Body of Christ, and separation from that Body makes their exercise not only inadmissible, but impossible.”⁹ In other words, if someone is a schismatic—i.e., separates himself from the Church—he is not able to have a valid ministry. This view has been popular with the Eastern Churches, partly perhaps because the Orthodox do not generally favor the Western Church’s scholastic distinctions on episcopacy. Therefore they cannot pronounce an opinion on the “validity of orders” given outside the Orthodox communion.

³ Augustine, *De Baptismo*, 412.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 412, 413.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 412.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 414.

⁷ Brandreth, 8-9.

⁸ Tixeront, *L’Ordre et les ordinations* [*Holy Orders and Ordination*], 2nd ed., 202; in Brandreth, 9.

⁹ Brandreth, 9.

Cyprian, a third-century bishop of Carthage, set forth his views on holy orders in his anti-Novatianist treatise *On the Unity of the Church*. Novatian was a Roman priest who made himself an “antipope,” or rival to the true pope. He gathered around himself an ecclesiastical following, going so far as to create bishops for certain cities despite these locations already having godly episcopal leadership. In addition, he was declared a heretic for his harsh position toward those who had lapsed during the Roman persecutions. Novatian held that the lapsed could by no means be restored in this world; the Church must leave that to God.

Cyprian holds that not only is the Church one, but also is the episcopate one and undivided, “each part of which is held by each one for the whole.”¹⁰ Each bishop is the pastor of the flock for his particular location—as the Lord Himself said in the Gospel ““And there shall be one flock and one shepherd.””¹¹ How then, can there be more than one bishop in a particular place (as in the case of Novatian who had set himself up against the legitimate bishop of Rome)? Among the schismatics, those who break the unity of the church, are those “who of their own accord, without any divine arrangement, set themselves to preside among the daring strangers assembled, who appoint themselves prelates without any law of ordination, who assume to themselves the name of bishop, although no one gives them the episcopate.”¹²

Brandreth points out that the Anglican Communion is not bound by either view, but does tend toward the Augustinian position. He himself considers that since regularity is a good thing when available, orders “which are wantonly irregular are, in fact, invalid and worthless.”¹³ Although the Anglican Communion might make individual exceptions, in general it should refuse to license *vagantes* or their ordinands as Anglicans. It would, Brandreth says, “be necessary to impose the severest ecclesiastical penalties on any person infringing this condition.”¹⁴

In his introduction to Anson, St. John points out that the Cyprianic position can lead in the end to the abuse of “treating valid orders and sacraments as the sole mark of the true Church, whatever the aberrations and eccentricities of those who possess them may be.”¹⁵

¹⁰ Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. The Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D. and James Donaldson, LL.D. (American reprint of the Edinburgh edition, revised by Al. Cleveland Coxe, D.D.; reprinted Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 423.

¹¹ John 19:23,24, in Cyprian, 423.

¹² Cyprian, 424.

¹³ Brandreth, 12.

¹⁴ Brandreth, 12.

¹⁵ St. John, in Anson, 17.

Among the churches which trace descent from the *vagantes*, the Orthodox Catholic Church of America has made a fairly lengthy public pronouncement of its views on the subject. On its World Wide Web site, the church asserts that the Augustinian and Cyprianic views on episcopacy “are not mutually exclusive of each other.” Rather:

One is meant to be united with the other. Both aspects, both the Western and the Eastern understanding, doctrine and Faith, of the undivided church comprise the whole truth of what Apostolic Succession was, and is, to the church as a whole.¹⁶

This article on the OCCA’s Web site brings to bear the witness of the 2nd-3rd century Latin theologian Tertullian. His twofold test of apostolicity includes: 1) the apostolic succession of Bishops (understood in the tactual sense), and 2) “the apostolic FAITH as held and taught by the Apostles.”¹⁷ In conjunction with this, the OCCA claims that the three main points of the Western Church’s view on apostolic succession (“as Rome has always believed and taught”) are

1. “That Old and Independent Orders are valid if apostolic succession can be proven, and upheld and
2. “That the Scholastics, notably Aquinas, drew upon Tertullian and Irenaeus to distinguish between the ‘material’ validity of Orders, whereby there is a proven and valid reception of the Sacrament of Orders, and the ‘formal’ validity of orders, wherein there are valid orders, as well as communion with the college of Roman bishops under the Pope, and
3. “That the ‘regularity,’ or ‘licitness’ of orders has no bearing whatsoever upon their validity. The former is a purely political and jurisdictional judgment; while acknowledgement of the latter is in keeping with both the Augustinian canon and the Nicene Creed.”¹⁸

¹⁶ “The Episcopacy and Apostolic Succession,” on the World Wide Web site of the Orthodox Catholic Church of America. <http://www.webcom.com/oghp/episcop.html>, copyright 1996, 1997, 1998 by The Order of God’s Holy Peace, last modified January 3, 1998 at 22:05:39.

The Orthodox Catholic Church of America is one of the bodies which traces succession through Joseph Vilatte (“Archbishop Timotheous”). For a brief, official history, see the Church’s World Wide Web page <http://www.rio.com/~beagle/occ.html>.

¹⁷ Orthodox Catholic Church of America, <http://www.webcom.com/oghp/episcop.html>.

¹⁸ Orthodox Catholic Church of America, <http://www.webcom.com/oghp/episcop.html>.

An example of this is the fact that a single bishop may perform a valid consecration, although three bishops are required in the Western/Roman tradition for the “licit” conferring of episcopacy.¹⁹

There are many problems, however, with turning episcopacy into such a regimented, hierarchical brand of office. Not least, it unnecessarily constricts the work of God to human circumstances. It smacks of the thinking of the “Judaizers” in the early Church, who would have required all Gentiles to be circumcised before entering the Church. Although the Continuing Churches too often fall into the same mode of thought, in their sometimes-desperate insistence on regularity of ordinations, the principle is valid in showing that their own orders are good vis-à-vis the Anglican Communion.

From an Evangelical Anglican point of view, questions regarding “apostolic succession” must all be considered as touching the Apostles’ teachings, rather than their ordaining of subordinates. From the time of the English Reformers onward, Evangelical Anglicans have considered regularity of ordinations to be important for the good health of the Church (what some call the *plene esse*, the good essence). Yet for these Evangelicals the regularity of ordinations has always taken second place to the regularity and correctness of doctrine. In a 1910 article on the Church of England’s ministry, Bishop H.C.G. Moule of Durham, England set forth clearly the classical view of the English Reformers, as found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion. On the 23rd Article, he writes,

no word is used which is not as a fact equally fit to express the convictions of, for example, the Presbyterian. In the Prefaces, and in the cognate statement of the Thirty-sixth Article, nothing is said to the effect that the very existence of the Christian Church is suspended on the three-fold order [i.e., bishop, priest, and deacon], so that this order can alone guarantee the working of the covenant of grace.²⁰

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ H.C.G. Moule, “The Ministry of the Church of England, 1910, 2nd quarter, *Churchman*, 88-89. It will be helpful here to quote the full text of both Articles XXIII and XXXVI, which are both found at the end of the 1928 version of PECUSA’s Book of Common Prayer. Article 23, “Of Ministering in the Congregation,” reads:

It is not lawful for any man to take upon him the office of public preaching or ministering the sacraments in the congregation, before he be lawfully called and sent to execute the same. And those we ought to judge lawfully called and sent, which be chosen and called to this work by men who have public authority given unto them in the congregation to call and send ministers into the Lord’s vineyard.

Article XXXVI, “Of Consecration of Bishops and Ministers,” reads:

In addition to this, God has often performed His works through extraordinary means, outside of His normal modes of operation. Apollos the associate of Paul, for example, “worked without the normal commission. And the whole phenomenon of the Christian prophet warns us to-day not to turn sacred order into the chain rather than the stay and the girdle of the Church.”²¹

The title of the 1979 book *The Evangelical Succession in the Church of England* provides a pithy summation of this thought. For if “evangelical” means “of the Gospel,” then Evangelical Anglicans hold that our true connection to Christ is through sameness of doctrine with the apostles. As editor D.N. Samuel puts it in his introduction,

The evangelical succession is one of truth of doctrine. Roman Catholics and Anglo-catholics make their appeal to a tactual succession which savours more of legalism than the Gospel. Our appeal is to the foundation upon which the church is built—the teaching of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief corner stone. We are concerned to know that we hold the same doctrines as they held.²²

The Book of Consecration of Archbishops and Bishops and ordering of Priests and Deacons, lately set forth in the time of Edward the Sixth and confirmed at the same time by authority of Parliament, doth contain all things necessary to such consecration and ordering; neither hath it anything that of itself is superstitious or ungodly.

And therefore whosoever are consecrate or ordered according to the rites of that book, since the second year of King Edward unto this time, or hereafter shall be consecrated or ordered according to the same rites, we decree all such to be rightly, orderly, and lawfully consecrated or ordered.

²¹ Moule, 93.

²² *The Evangelical Succession in the Church of England*, ed. D.N. Samuel, Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1979, pp. 2,3.