

The Self-Organizing Power of the Gospel of Christ: Episcopacy and Community Formation

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Abstract: This article addresses itself to the question: how may episcopal ministry be considered an ordered, institutional, implication of the gospel? The overarching argument is that a ministry of oversight is implicit of the gospel. The argument proceeds along three lines: first, a discussion of the relation of gospel and church; second, an outline of an evangelical account of ministerial order; third, a consideration of an evangelical theology of episcopacy. Underlining the entire discussion is the primary conviction that an evangelical theology is determined by and responsible to the gospel.

I

In one of the most potent and celebrated Anglican essays on ecclesiology of the last century, Michael Ramsey set himself the following task: 'to study the Church's order not in institutionalist terms but in terms of the Gospel, and to ask . . . whether Episcopacy tells us of some aspect of the Gospel which would lack expression if Episcopacy were to be abandoned'.¹ Though its conclusions are rather different from those which Ramsey reached, this article addresses itself to the same question: 'What truth about the Gospel of God does the Episcopate, by its place in the one Body, declare?'² Its concern is to outline an evangelical theology of episcopacy. The word 'evangelical' is not used here as a term of discrimination (over against, for example, 'catholic'), but in a more primary sense. An evangelical theology is one which is evoked, governed and judged by the gospel. In this sense, evangelical is simply equivalent to 'Christian': all Christian theology, whatever its tradition, is

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1 A.M. Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (London: Longmans, Green, 1995), p. vi.

2 Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*, p. 8.

properly speaking evangelical in that it is determined by and responsible to the good news of Jesus Christ. (We might, of course, equally say that all Christian theology is catholic, in that it seeks reflectively to trace the universal scope of the truth of the gospel.) Here, however, my particular concern is to indicate how episcopal ministry can be considered an ordered, institutional implication of the gospel. The argument proceeds by, first, articulating the relation of gospel and church, then, second, by outlining an evangelical account of ministerial order, before finally moving to an evangelical theology of episcopacy. The 'case' is made by dogmatic description, not by historical defence. That is, the argument is not that – in the charmingly deceptive phrase beloved of Anglican apologists – 'from the earliest times' the order of the church has been normatively mono-episcopal and that the structure and content of the office has exhibited a high degree of stability: it hasn't. Rather, the argument here is simply that a ministry of oversight is a necessary implication of the church's confession of the gospel. But before turning to that description, some initial indications of the task of an evangelical theology of episcopacy will be useful.

Any case for episcopal order in the church must be evangelical, simply because it is 'by the heart of the gospel message that any ecclesiology ... can and must be measured'.³ The task of giving an account of episcopal order therefore falls within the realm of dogmatics. Dogmatics aims at the conceptual clarification of the Christian gospel which is set forth in holy scripture and confessed in the life and practices of the church. The task of an evangelical dogmatics of church order is to inquire into the entailments of the gospel for the structure of the church as political society; in the matter of episcopacy, such a dogmatics inquires into whether episcopal order is (minimally) fitting or (maximally) necessary to the life of a community at whose centre lies the gospel of Jesus Christ.

An approach from this direction is required for at least two reasons. First, it is vital to trace the connection between gospel and order if we are not to fall prey to the individualism and anticlericalism which have affected a great deal of modern Protestant theology and historiography of ministry. The protests of the magisterial Reformers against inflated claims for the mediating power of the church and its orders of ministry have in modernity often been translated into assertions of the primacy of private (or perhaps congregational) judgement, and of the merely secondary character of community order in relation to the fundamental reality of unmediated encounter with God in Christian experience. The polemical use made by some modern Lutheran theological and biblical-historical scholarship of the construct 'early catholicism', which serves as a negative contrast to the normative 'charismatic' Pauline communities, is merely one case in point. Such accounts seek to radicalize the contrast between the gospel (typically construed as an eschatological word of deliverance and justification) and order (construed as the routinization of charisma): Paul versus Ignatius. This kind of contrast cannot be

3 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad/London: SCM Press, 1990), p. xiii.

overcome by historical considerations alone, by pointing to the existence of some kind of primitive catholic order in the Jerusalem church, for example, because in the last resort the contrast is parasitic on a normative claim that 'charismatic' Pauline Christianity *is* authentic Christianity. Rather, the contrast can be challenged only by drawing attention to the gospel itself and seeking to indicate that order is ingredient within the gospel's logic.

Second, a dogmatic approach is also required if we are to disentangle discussion of episcopacy from the historical apologetics in which a good deal of (especially Anglican) theology of episcopacy has become entangled. This entanglement has been closely tied to the construal of the church's apostolicity through ideas of 'inheritance' or, worse, 'pedigree'. The difficulty into which apologetics of this kind falls is not simply that of the near-impossibility of the task of furnishing incontrovertible historical warrants. Much more is it that the search for origins is always driven by interests, so that doctrinal judgements masquerade as historical observations. Moreover, the pressure of historical apologetics has frequently skewed the content of theological portrayal of episcopal office, turning it into something amenable to historical demonstration. Thereby, crucial theological considerations – the relation of episcopal office to the ministry of all the baptized and, most of all, to the continuing activity of the risen and ascended Christ through the Spirit – are pushed to the margins. Episcopacy migrates to apologetics and polemics, and, detached from dogmatics, apologetics and polemics rather easily strike up alliances with ideology, furnishing retrospective warrants for the adequacy of existing institutional arrangements, and grounds for denying adequacy to other arrangements which fail to conform (a point which even the most generous of the dominant conventions of Anglican ecumenical theology have been reluctant to register). The corrective, once again, is to develop an evangelical dogmatics of the order of the church – as Ramsey put it, 'our view of the ministry had better be evangelical than archaeological'.⁴

In this connection, it is important to lay some emphasis on the *critical* function of a dogmatic theology of ministry. It is not the task of dogmatics to underwrite the practices of the church but to submit them to judgement. Dogmatics does so, of course, as part of the church, and the criterion by which it makes its judgement is none other than that under which the church as a whole has already been placed by its confession: the gospel announced in holy scripture. But because it is in this way evangelical, dogmatics is also inescapably critical. In the case of an evangelical dogmatics of order, this may mean for example, a quite sharp distinction between episcopacy as a given norm for the church's ministry and any particular contingent ordering of the episcopal office in a given context. But the church's capacity to draw such distinctions and critically to evaluate its practices depends in part upon the existence of the instruments of reflection which dogmatics seeks to furnish. In short: because dogmatics is evangelical, it is critical and reformatory.

4 Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*, p. 69.

II

Discussion of the relation of gospel and church must come before discussion of ministerial order, because (as Paul Avis puts in a remark about Luther) ‘the Church precedes the ministry in the logic of grace’.⁵ What, then, is the place of the church in the structure of the gospel? We might put the matter thus: The church is ingredient within the divine economy of salvation, which is the mystery of God made manifest in Jesus Christ and now operative in the power of his Spirit. The revealed secret of God not only concerns the unfathomable majesty of God himself; it also concerns that human society which the triune God elects, sustains and perfects ‘to the praise of his glorious grace’ (Eph. 1:5). From this there emerge two fundamental principles for an evangelical ecclesiology. First, there can be no doctrine of God without a doctrine of the church, for according to the Christian confession God *is* the one who manifests who he is in the economy of his saving work in which he assembles a people for himself. Second, there can be no doctrine of the church which is not wholly referred to the doctrine of God, in whose being and action alone the church has its being and action.

Accordingly, we need to draw a fundamental distinction between the being and act of God and the being and act of the church. This is done in order to secure the vital consideration that the church is not constituted by human intentions, activities and institutional or structural forms, but by the action of the triune God, realized in Son and Spirit. ‘The Church is, because Jesus Christ, the Crucified and Risen One, acts upon her ever anew ... She was not before this action; and she is not for an instant without this action.’⁶ This is what is meant by speaking, in company with the Reformers, of the church as ‘creature of the Word’: the church is that human assembly generated and kept in life by the continuing, outgoing self-presentation (‘word’) of Jesus Christ. ‘As the creature of the divine Word the Church is constituted by divine action. And the way in which the Church is constituted by divine action determines the character and scope of human action in the Church.’⁷

An evangelical ecclesiology will thus have a particular concern to emphasize the asymmetry of divine and human action: God’s work and the work of the church are fundamentally distinguished. But they are so distinguished, not in order to bifurcate them (which would undermine the fact that the church is indeed ingredient within the economy of God’s saving purpose) but in order to accord priority to the gracious action of God, through which the church’s action is ordered to its proper end in conformity with the will of God. The *distinction*, in other words, is for the purpose of *right relation*. They are also distinguished in order to specify

5 Paul Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981), p. 111.

6 Edmund Schlink, ‘Christ and the Church’, in *The Coming Christ and the Coming Church*, trans. I.H. Nielson (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1967), p. 116.

7 Christoph Schwöbel, ‘The Creature of the Word. Recovering the Ecclesiology of the Reformers’, in Colin Gunton and D.W. Hardy, eds., *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), p. 122.

with the right kind of theological determinacy the respective characters of divine and human, churchly action. Divine action is sheerly creative, uncaused, spontaneous, saving and effectual; human, churchly action is derivative, contingent and indicative. All churchly action – cultic, moral, diaconal – is thus characterized by ‘creative passivity’, an orientation towards that perfect work which has been done and continues to be done for the church and to the church.⁸ That orientation is, of course, what is meant by faith.

There is doubtless a danger of ‘spiritualizing’ the church with such affirmations. It is clearly important that this emphasis on the priority of divine action over the church as an act of human association not be allowed to eclipse the ‘visibility’ of the church. The polemical portrayal of Protestant religion as bare subjectivism without objective social form or endurance is doubtless a caricature, but it nevertheless identifies a potentially disruptive element in the dogmatics we have just outlined. Can a society which is in its essence ‘invisible’ ever be really human – that is, historical, material, bodily? In an evangelical ecclesiology, the gesture – rhetorical and theological – towards invisibility must certainly be made, and its absence from an ecclesiology may be symptomatic of other disorders – a lavishly over-realized eschatology, an eliding of the distinction between the gospel and its human representations, an atrophied sense of the church’s fallibility, above all, perhaps, a routinization of the operations of the Spirit. Properly defined, the concept of the invisibility of the church is a standing denial of any easy identification of divine and human work. Talk of the church’s invisibility secures the all-important point that ‘[o]nly as *creatura verbi divini* [creature of the divine word] is the Church an object of faith, because God’s action in establishing and disclosing the true relationship between the creator and his creation that makes faith possible can be confessed as the content of faith’.⁹ Yet when this necessary gesture takes over, and is allowed to become the only constitutive moment for ecclesiology, other problems quickly emerge, and a picture of the church is promoted in which the human Christian community is unstable, liminal, and so incapable of sustaining a coherent historical and social trajectory.

But the community which is constituted by the gospel is, indeed, an ordered society. The church is the event of the reconstitution of human fellowship by the saving acts of God which the gospel rehearses. The ‘spirituality’ of the church and its ‘visibility’ or ‘order’ are not quite different entities, the latter, perhaps, clothing the former but bearing no essential or intrinsic relation to it. Order does not constitute the church apart from the vivifying and sanctifying grace of the Spirit; but the life and holiness which the Spirit bestow are ordered because human, social and continuous. The danger of collapsing Spirit into structure ought not to frighten us into the equal danger of a purely punctiliar or actualistic ecclesiology. Church order is the social shape of the converting power and activity of Christ present as

8 Cf. Eberhard Jüngel, ‘Der Gottesdienst als Fest der Freiheit’, *Zeichen der Zeit* 38 (1984), pp. 264–72.

9 Schwöbel, ‘The Creature of the Word’, p. 131.

Spirit. This is not to claim that the Spirit can be formalized, or reduced to a calculable and manipulable element in what is envisaged as an immanent social process. It is simply to say that ‘without institutions, the church cannot become “event”’. This principle is correct, however, only if it is also reversible; unless the church becomes an event, it cannot be the kind of institution it is supposed to be.’¹⁰

III

We may sum up the preceding with some words from the Heidelberg Catechism, where, in answer to the question, ‘What do you believe concerning “the Holy Catholic Church”?’ the reply reads: ‘I believe that from the beginning to the end of the world, and from among the whole human race, the Son of God, by his Spirit and his Word, gathers, protects and preserves for himself, in the unity of the true faith, a congregation chosen for eternal life.’ From this, we may formulate a dogmatic rule for ecclesiology: an adequate doctrine of the church will maximize Christology and Pneumatology (for it is Jesus Christ through Word and Spirit who ‘gathers, protects and preserves’) and relativize (but not minimize or abolish) ecclesial action and its ordered forms. Our next question is: how does this shape an evangelical theology of ministry?

Jesus Christ is himself the minister of the church. He is himself prophet, priest and king; the ministry of revelation, reconciliation and rule by which the church is brought into being, restored to fellowship with God, and kept under God’s governance is the action of Christ himself, the risen and ascended one who is now present and active, outgoing and communicative.

Taking this point with full seriousness will entail wresting ourselves free from the notion (which very deeply affects much ecclesiology and theology of ministry) that at his ascension Jesus Christ as it were resigns his office in favour of human ministers, and that henceforth the church is the real centre of ministerial agency. Without an operative theology of the present action and speech of Jesus Christ (which means also, without an operative Pneumatology) human acts of ministry threaten to assume his role. The danger is present with especial acuteness in those theologies of episcopal ministry which interpret the apostolicity of the church’s ministry in terms of succession. Such accounts characteristically restrict the christological dimension of ministry to a dominical mandate given in the past, and run the risk of converting the pneumatological dimension of ministry into a mystagogical power transmitted through historical sequence. The christological inadequacy here is, very simply, an inoperative theology of the resurrection and the present activity of the glorified Christ; the pneumatological inadequacy is that of construing the gifts of the Spirit as manipulable possessions rather than as events of relation.

10 Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 241.

By contrast, an evangelical theology of ministry will be an ‘account of the history of Christ’s acts’.¹¹ Because of this, the critical questions concern the relation of Christ’s acts to the ministerial activity of the church. Here a number of lines intersect.

First, the ministerial acts of Jesus Christ in the Spirit, by which he gathers, protects and preserves the church are, properly speaking, incommunicable and non-representable. That is to say, if by ‘communication’ or ‘representation’ we mean the assumption of Christ’s proper work by agents other than himself, we may not make use of such concepts in a christologically and pneumatologically structured theology of ministry. The dogmatic premisses of an evangelical ecclesiology – that as the risen and ascended Lord, Jesus Christ is present and active – do not permit any such transference of agency. Christ distributes his own benefits through his Spirit, that is, by his own hand; they are not to be thought of as some treasure turned over to the church for it to dispense. Whatever else we may wish to say about the mediating acts of the church’s ministry, the barrier between Christ and the church must not be breached, for it is at this point that the principle of *solus Christus* [Christ alone] finds its ecclesiological application.

However, it would be illegitimate to deploy that principle in a way which disqualifies the real (though limited) ministerial activity to which the church is appointed by Christ himself as the vessel of his own ministry. For although the acts of Christ are incommunicable, non-representable, Christ himself freely chooses to represent himself through human ministry. He does so sovereignly, graciously and freely, that is, he does so as Lord; he is not delivered into the hands of his servants, who remain entirely at his disposal. But in his lordly freedom, he elects that alongside his triumphant self-manifestation there should also be human service in the church. In an especially fine and discriminating discussion, Calvin puts the matter thus:

He alone should rule and reign in the church as well as have authority or pre-eminence in it, and this authority should be exercised and administered by his Word alone. Nevertheless, because he does not dwell among us in visible presence [Matt. 26:11], we have said that he uses the ministry of men to declare openly his will to us by mouth, as a sort of delegated work, not by transferring to them his right and honor, but only that through their mouths he may do his own work – just as a workman uses a tool to do his work . . . ‘Christ ascended on high,’ Paul says, ‘that he might fill all things.’ [Eph. 4:10] This is the manner of fulfillment: through the ministers to whom he has entrusted this office and has conferred the grace to carry it out, he dispenses and distributes his gifts to the church; and he shows himself as though present by manifesting the power of his Spirit in this his institution, that it be not vain or idle.¹²

11 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to a Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1977), p. 69.

12 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J.T. McNeill, trans. F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), IV. iii. 1–2.

How, then, is this subordination of the church's ministry to be expressed? A modern Reformed theologian, T.F. Torrance, emphasizes that the church's ministerial acts are to be understood as *hypodeigma* (pattern or, perhaps, token), but not as *mimesis* (imitation) of Christ's own perfect work. What is secured by this or similar distinctions is the *indirectness* of the relation between Christ's ministry and that of the church. Indirectness is not a denial of the real participation of the church in Christ, for 'through the Spirit there is a direct relation of participation, but in the form of order the relation is indirect. The priesthood of the Church is not a transcription in the conditions of this passing age of the heavenly Priesthood of Christ.'¹³ The real instrumentality of the church is thus neither self-generated nor self-sustaining; both its origin and its *telos* lie wholly beyond itself. And so the ministerial action of the church is not in any fundamental sense 'causative': it is simply appointed and empowered to present that whose accomplishment lies entirely outside the church's sphere of competence and responsibility.

Two things follow from this. First, ministerial activity shares in the asymmetrical character of the relation of Christ and the church. If an evangelical dogmatics of the church refuses to see the Christian community as co-constituted by Christ and the community as equal partners, an evangelical dogmatics of ministry similarly refuses to see the church's ministry as a co-ordination or co-operation between divine and human agents. Whatever else we mean by 'fellow-workers of God', that we cannot mean.

Second, and more importantly, however, positing a limit to the action of the church's ministry by reference to the principle of 'Christ alone' determines the task or content of the church's ministry. Ministry in the church 'points beyond itself'¹⁴ to the action of another. Jesus Christ is not inert, but present with force, active as prophet, priest and king. The task of ministry is thus not to complete that which he has done, or to accomplish that which Christ himself does not now do, but rather to indicate or attest his work both past and present. That to which the ministerial action of the church is ordered is the 'showing' of Jesus Christ's self-proclamation in word, baptism and the Lord's supper. As such, ministry is 'a *responsive* movement to the dynamic force of the Word of God'.¹⁵ The ecclesiological principle here is that the community is defined by confession – that is, by dispositions and activities which give expression to the fact that the centre of the church is not within but without itself, constituted as it is by the free event of Christ's self-bestowal in the Holy Spirit. The ministerial principle is that because the basic event of the life of the church is the event of Jesus Christ's self-communication, the task of ministry 'is simply to serve this happening'.¹⁶ Ministry

13 T.F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry*, rev. edn. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), p. 97.

14 Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, p. 97.

15 Oliver O'Donovan, *On the Thirty-Nine Articles* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1986), p. 120.

16 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961–2), p. 833.

is thus *ostensive*, a work of testifying. Ministries in the church ‘exist not as visible signs or representations of the ministry of Jesus Christ, but as *ministeria verbi divini* [ministries of the divine word], that is to say, as *offices of service* of the actions in which and through which the ministry of Jesus Christ is accomplished’.¹⁷

IV

We now reach (at an appropriately late stage) the question of episcopal ministry. The church is a political society; that is to say, it is a sphere of human fellowship, though one created not by natural affinity or association but by the gathering power of the gospel. And the church is commissioned to the task of bearing witness to the gospel – of indicating in proclamation, sacrament and service that ‘Jesus Christ . . . is the one Word of God which we have to hear, and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death’. The ministry of the church is thus *ordered*. Because the church is a visible and enduring arena of common life and action, authorized to indicate the gospel, ‘official’ patterns of ministry are required. ‘Office’ does not usurp the work of Christ or the Spirit, or the work of the whole church in witnessing to that work. Rather, it has the task of overseeing the unity and authenticity of the testimony of the church, and so of being caught up into Christ’s own formation of his community.

In this sense, *episcopē*, oversight, is the basic ministry of the church. Anterior to the functional differentiation of office (whether in the so-called threefold office or in some other pattern) is the primary task of office to envisage, safeguard and unify the church’s fulfilment of its gospel mandate. This ministry ‘is, under God, what draws together the community of faith and equips it to continue the mission and ministry of Christ in the world’, and it is therefore a ministry which ‘keeps alive the question of the community’s integrity, by challenging its practice in the name of the gospel’.¹⁸ What orthodoxy is in the realm of reflection, *episcopē* is in the realm of practice and order: an instrument through which the church is recalled to Christianness, to the appropriateness of its action and speech to the truth of the gospel. Episcopal ministry ‘is that ministry whose special province is both to gather the believing community around the centre which it proclaims, the preaching of the resurrection, and *in* that gathering, to make sure that this community is critically aware of itself’.¹⁹ The gospel requires this simply because Jesus Christ elects to manifest himself to the world not without a visible human, historical society with a specific calling. And so the task of an ordered ministry of oversight is, very simply,

17 Ingolf Dalferth, ‘Ministry and the Office of the Bishop according to Meissen and Porvo’, in *Visible Unity and the Ministry of Oversight: The Second Theological Conference Held under the Messien Agreement between the Church of England and the Evangelical Church in Germany* (London: Church House Publishing, 1997), p. 42.

18 Rowan Williams, ‘Women and Ministry’, in Monica Furlong, ed., *Feminine in the Church* (London: SPCK, 1984), pp. 13f.

19 Williams, ‘Women and Ministry’, p. 15.

‘to minister to the Church’s very identity’.²⁰ The issue is therefore not whether we can do without *episcopē*, but whether oversight can be exercised in a way which is sufficiently ‘loose’ that ‘all encroachment on the lordship of the One who is alone the Lord is either avoided or so suppressed and eliminated in practice that there is place for His rule’.²¹ What shape of episcopal ministry will best serve this ‘giving place’ to the rule of Christ in the visible community of the gospel?

First, the dogmatic, christological groundwork. There is properly one ‘overseer’ of the church, Jesus Christ, ‘the bishop of our souls’ (1 Pet. 2:25). To start from this point is immediately to make episcopacy contingent, relative to the headship of Christ. This, indeed, is part of the force of Calvin’s rejection of primatial understandings of episcopacy: the church has no human head; Christ does not transfer his headship to another, and so there can be no single human primate. The church ‘has Christ as its sole Head, under whose sway all of us cleave to one another . . . Christ is the head, “from whom the whole body, joined and knit through every bond of mutual ministry (insofar as each member functions) achieves its growth” [Eph. 4:15–16f]. Do you see how he includes all mortals without exception in the body, but leaves the honour and name of the head to Christ alone?’²² Or, as he puts in a comment on Cyprian, ‘he makes the universal bishopric Christ’s alone’.²³ This extension of the doctrine of ‘Christ alone’ is a significant counter to those rich theologies of episcopacy which expound the office of bishop as the sign or epiphany of Christ in the church. Rowan Williams, for example, in a suggestive essay, argues that the church as a whole is a ‘showing’ of that which lies at its heart: “‘Showing’ is an effective, catalytic and transforming event, which draws new boundaries . . . And to belong to the Christian community is to accept the paschal symbol as decisive.”²⁴ As eucharistic president, the bishop is ‘the focal point around which the community gathers, overcoming its divisions, to affirm a single identity governed by the paschal symbol in its eucharistic shape’.²⁵ Such an account owes much to a strand of modern Orthodox theology, as well as to Ramsey’s work.²⁶ If it fails to persuade, that is because it risks softening the distinction between Christ’s self-presentation and the testifying acts of ordered ministry. Certainly Williams is insistent that ‘no particular act of showing is of the

20 Williams, ‘Women and Ministry’, p. 15.

21 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), p. 723.

22 Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. vi. 9.

23 Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. vi. 17.

24 Rowan Williams, ‘Authority and the Bishop in the Church’, in Mark Santer, ed., *Their Lord and Ours: Approaches to Authority, Community, and the Unity of the Church* (London: SPCK, 1982), p. 95.

25 Williams, ‘Authority and the Bishop in the Church’, p. 97.

26 See John Zizioulas, ‘The Eucharistic Community and the Catholicity of the Church’, *One in Christ* 7 (1971); ‘The Bishop in the Theological Doctrine of the Orthodox Church’, *Kanon* 7 (1985), pp. 23–35; along with Rowan Williams, ‘Theology and the Churches’, in R. Gill and L. Kendall, eds., *Michael Ramsey as Theologian* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995), pp. 9–28.

same creative order as the paschal event itself, so that no act of showing has meaning independently of the generative event and the life of the community as a whole'.²⁷ But even the refusal of the bishop as mystagogue does not secure the incommunicability, the non-transferable status, of Christ's headship which is primary for an evangelical account of ministerial order. In short: the bishop is not an 'effectual sign', for 'to make the bishop an "effectual sign" of the unity and continuity of the Church and thus to give him independent significance in the role of a mediator . . . is to make the episcopate usurp the office of the One Mediator and to give it precedence over the Church which is His Body'.²⁸

Placed in this way by reference to Christ as the church's prophet, priest and king, episcopal order 'oversees' the Christian community. It is that official, ordered place within the life of the church as a whole where its oneness and genuineness are most directly addressed. But this only takes place in so far as episcopal office is indicatory or ostensive, and not epiphanic. Episcopal office may serve unity and the continuation of apostolic authenticity, but it cannot secure those goods by its own existence. If it were able to do so as *alter Christus* [another Christ], then Christ would be pushed into inactive transcendence, and Spirit would be reduced to simply the immanent animating power of an institution.

This means, consequently, that the unity of the church is not generated or kept by the episcopate. Unity is pure gift; it is brought about by Christ himself, for 'The unity of the Church is not primarily the unity of her members, but the unity of Christ who acts upon them all, in all places and at all times.'²⁹ And so we must say that 'The ministry of the church can neither create nor represent this unity, but only make it visible through the fact that it points unmistakably away from itself and toward that which it serves – the present action of Christ in the proclamation of the Gospel through word and sacrament.'³⁰ Unity is evangelical; it is to that unity, established and formed by the gospel, that the ministry of oversight directs its own attention and the attention of the whole church. The office of bishop is not constitutive of the unity of the church; if it were, then the church would indeed be 'episcopocentric',³¹ and the sole headship of the one Lord Jesus Christ to some degree compromised. Nor does the office of bishop symbolize the unity of the church, at least if by 'symbolize' we mean 'realize' or 'actualize'. Nor does the office of bishop represent the unity of the church. Rather, the office of bishop *indicates* the unity of the church, testifying in a public manner to the oneness of the people of God as it is set out in the gospel. Episcopal office is thus a focused, public and institutional place through which attention can be turned to the given unity of the people of God through Spirit, baptism and confession. As such, episcopal office serves the unity of the church as it takes form in the congregation of the redeemed

27 Williams, 'Authority and the Bishop in the Church', p. 97.

28 Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, p. 108.

29 Schlink, 'Christ and the Church', p. 105.

30 Dalferth, 'Ministry and the Office of the Bishop', p. 37.

31 Zizioulas, 'The Bishop in the Theological Doctrine of the Orthodox Church'; cf. Volf, *After Our Likeness*.

as one body with one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (Eph. 4:4–6).

Episcopal office undertakes this in a variety of ways, but most centrally through teaching, through presiding at the sacraments and at the commissioning of ordered ministry, and through the exercise of discipline. The point can be illustrated by reference to the bishop as teacher. The teaching task of the bishop consists in the proclamation and safeguarding of the truth of the gospel. Accordingly, this involves – positively – the celebration of the sheerly authoritative goodness of the good news which the church is appointed to declare. It also involves – negatively – the defence of the gospel, particularly its defence from arbitrary, selective or partial exposition. But as teacher, the bishop is not to be considered as in possession of something other than the truth of the gospel which is set before the whole congregation; it is the task of the office simply to encourage and defend by functioning as an exemplary instance of submission to the gospel's claim. Ignatius's *Letter to the Ephesians* is not reluctant to take episcopal office pretty seriously ('we should look upon the bishop as we would look upon the Lord himself', *ad Eph* 6); yet behind this is an important movement of deference. 'I do not issue orders to you as if I were a great person', he says (*ad Eph* 3): at the core of episcopal ministry is a renunciation, a following of the declared will of God which is the true content of Christian teaching: 'I have ... taken upon me first to exhort you that you would all run together in accordance with the will of God. For even Christ, our inseparable life, is the manifested will of the Father, as also bishops ... are so by the will of Jesus Christ.' The bishop's authorization as teacher, in other words, is inseparable from submission to Jesus Christ, 'the manifested will' of God. If, then, it is the task of the bishop to 'form' the community, it is only by virtue of the fact that both bishop and community have already been formed by the divine self-manifestation of God in Christ and Spirit. As overseer, the bishop is one whose task it is to promote 'unanimous obedience' to the one faith (*ad Eph* 2).

In this way, the special task of the ministry of oversight with respect to the unity of the church is closely related to the church's apostolicity. Apostolicity has less to do with transmission and much more to do with identity or authenticity, with the 'Christianness' of the church's teaching and mission. Such authenticity cannot by its very nature be 'transmitted', because it is not capable of being embodied without residue in ordered forms. Forms cannot guarantee authenticity, simply because forms are themselves not immune to the critical question of their own authenticity. If this is so, then episcopal office is not some sort of condensation of apostolicity, or some means of securing the apostolic character of the whole church. Rather, episcopal office oversees the life of the apostolic community as a whole, presiding over the event in which the church becomes apostolic by consenting to the apostolic gospel of the resurrection and giving itself to the apostolic mission of proclamation and service. In particular, because apostolicity is so closely tied to mission, it is properly not merely an internal but an external orientation in the church's life. 'As an apostolic Church the Church can never in any respect be an end in itself, but, following the existence of the apostles, it exists only as it

exercises the ministry of a herald.'³² If the ministry of oversight is apostolic, it can therefore only be because it acts in relation to this mission. Episcopal order without mission is simply not the order of the church – that is, the order of the community which is simultaneously gathered around and impelled outwards by the uncontrollable compulsion of the Spirit of Christ – but mere form.

My suggestion is, then, that the office of oversight is best understood as a function of the unity and apostolic character which the church has by virtue of its election, gathering and sanctification, and its empowerment to know and speak the gospel. Episcopacy does not secure the life of the church, but is an office of deference to the life-giving power of Christ. Episcopal office forms the church in so far as episcopacy itself is formed by the one bishop of the church; and episcopal office forms the church in so far as it testifies to the shaping power of the same Jesus Christ.

How is episcopal office, so conceived, to be ordered? Two basic principles are to be held together. First, there is a necessary distinction to be drawn between *episcopē*, a ministry of oversight, and particular, contingent orderings of the episcopal office. I have suggested that oversight is a necessary implication of the gospel through which the church is brought into being and which it is commissioned to proclaim. But this is quite other than a defence of – for example – a threefold order of ministry headed by a regional episcopate, or of an 'historic episcopate', whether maintained by laying on of hands or by succession of teaching office; nor, on the other hand, does it necessarily entail a synodical or congregational episcopate. Such orderings are *adiaphora*. To claim this is not to claim, of course, that the way in which oversight is ordered is purely arbitrary or driven by the exigencies (and limitations) of context. If part of the function of *episcopē* is to indicate the church's unity and apostolicity, and therefore its catholicity, office cannot be simply reinvented at will. Rather, freedom is given to the church to order its life *appropriately*, that is the light of its evangelical calling and mandate. But such freedom is not the freedom to invent, but freedom responsibly to structure the life of the church in view of the fact that 'Christian believers *find themselves ordered* in a certain form of society precisely by the message which they believe and are charged to proclaim. And the decisive character of their order ... is that it maintains the teaching of the truth of the gospel'.³³ Hence the second principle: the particular shape assumed by the episcopal office must be *fitting* to the church's identity, for it is the structural expression of what it means to be the church living out of and testifying to the converting energy of the gospel.

32 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, p. 724.

33 O'Donovan, *On the Thirty-Nine Articles*, p. 118.

V

In sum: my suggestion is that – in the words of P.T. Forsyth – episcopal order is indicative of the ‘self-organizing’ power of the gospel.³⁴ A dogmatic case for episcopal ministry such as that offered here does not leave the exercise of that office undisturbed: evangelical dogmatics, we must recall, is an aspect of the church’s self-interrogation. A dogmatics of episcopacy, because it sets the office and its exercise in the light of the christological, pneumatological and ecclesiological principles of the gospel, is quite far from those serene Anglican accounts of the history and practice of episcopal ministry in which the emergence of the monarchical episcopate is shown to be an entirely natural and unproblematic development from the earliest Christian impulse. The naïvete of such accounts is not merely their reliance on the apologetic power of historical reconstructions, but their incapacity to envisage the history of episcopacy as political and ideological.³⁵ The church makes a move against the threats of ideology in this sphere as in any other, by simply being the church – attentive to word and sacrament, docile before the gospel, above all, prayerful for the coming of Christ and his Spirit. But theology, too, may have its part to play. Kierkegaard once famously remarked that ‘there is nothing so displeasing to God as official Christianity’.³⁶ If, on balance, he was more right than wrong, one way of heeding his lament would be to make sure that the case for episcopal office be made with the right kind of dogmatic precision and robustness.

34 P.T. Forsyth, *Lectures on the Church and the Sacraments* (London: Longmans, Green, 1971), p. 42.

35 Cf. R.H. Roberts, ‘Lord, Bondsman and Churchman: Identity, Integrity and Power in Anglicanism’, in Gunton and Hardy, eds., *On Being the Church*, pp. 156–224.

36 Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon Christendom*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 210.