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Bishop or Presbyter? French Reformed Ecclesiology in 1559

Dr Clifford gave us a study of 'Reformed Pastoral Theology' in the Evangelical Quarterly *66:4, 1994, 291–306. He now turns his attention to church polity in a paper which was given at the inaugural meeting of the Reformation Society held at Westminster College, Cambridge, on 13 April 1994.*

The culmination of some thirty years of evangelism and persecution, the first National Synod of the Reformed Churches of France was held at Paris from 25 to 28 May 1559.[1] The infant body declared the faith of its martyrs and confessors in the 40 articles of the *Confessio Fidei Gallicana*. It also adopted a reformed ecclesiastical discipline. Augmented and developed over the years through successive synods, this platform was hailed as a 'masterpiece'. The basic elements of the discipline were outlined in Article XXIX of the *Confessio*:

> We believe that [the] true church ought to be governed by that discipline which our Lord Jesus Christ hath established; so that there should be in the church pastors, elders and deacons, that the pure doctrine may have its course, and vices may be reformed and repressed, that the poor and other afflicted persons may be succoured in their necessities, and that in the name of God there may be holy assemblies, in which both great and small may be edified.[2]

Needless to say, the stamp of Calvin was to be seen in these developments. Besides the ongoing quadruple-influence of the *Institutes*, the Psalter, the Liturgy and the Catechism in his native land, Calvin drew up the first 35-article draft of the *Confessio* jointly (it is thought) with Theodore Beza and Pierre Viret, the final version passing through the hands of Calvin's pupil Antoine de La Roche-Chandieu.[3] Indeed, consistent with the presbyterian principle of

[1] See John Quick, *Synodicon in Gallia Reformata* (London, 1692), i. 1ff.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. xiii. See also H. B. Smith and P. Schaff, *The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches* (London, 1877), 356ff; A. Cochrane (ed), *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1966), 137ff.

[3] See Richard Stauffer, 'John Calvin' in Menna Prestwich (ed), *International Calvinism 1541–1715* (Oxford, 1985), 27.

parity between churches *and* ministers,[4] Calvin was opposed to a confession of faith being written by a single hand.

Unlike their brethren in England, French reformed Christians discarded diocesan episcopacy in favour of congregational and synodical presbyterial order. Thus reformed Gallicanism assumed a very different form from reformed Anglicanism. It has however been debated whether the French experience was dictated by principle or circumstance. Had more bishops been won to the Reformed faith, and had Guillaume Briconnet, bishop of Meaux, for instance, not abandoned his early sympathies, might not France have seen a settlement similar to that of the English church?

Although the French presbyterian polity was settled decisively at such an early stage, questions over its validity and interpretation were not unusual. Indeed, while the Amyraldian debate was raging in the 17th century, questions of ecclesiastical order were by no means neglected. The high orthodox Pierre du Moulin declared in 1639 that 'the French churches never unbishopped any prelate and . . . it was necessity, not any theological decision, that made them frame a church without bishops'.[5] One of this theologian's claims to fame was his extraordinary application for the vacant bishopric of Gloucester in 1624! Until recently the pastor of the prestigious Reformed church at Charenton near Paris, du Moulin had become *persona non grata* in France because of his attachment to the Protestant king of England, James I. Coupled with this incredibly tactless move was du Moulin's naive perception of Anglican episcopacy. The rise of Arminianism had been accompanied by a 'higher' view of episcopacy than was entertained in England during the late 1580s when du Moulin was studying at Cambridge. His anti-'divine right' remarks about Roman episcopacy—with embarrassing implications for Anglican orders—had not amused either the king or

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[4] This is explicitly stated in Article XXX of the *Confessio*. While Article XXXII speaks of 'superintendents', no sense of ministerial superiority was ever intended. It was merely a descriptive term for any pastor or elder chosen for office who would thus be involved in oversight. This was made clear by the Synod of Gap in 1603 (see Quick, *op. cit.*, i. 227) and confirmed by the Synod of La Rochelle in 1607 (Ibid., 266). This surely invalidates the 'episcopal' interpretation of 'superintendent' argued for by Dr Jacques Pannier in his essay *Calvin et l'Episcopat* (Paris, 1926). In reply to those who might plead for a quasi archiepiscopal status for Titus, Calvin says that Paul 'is not giving Titus permission to do everything arbitrarily by himself and impose whatever bishops he likes on churches, but is only ordering him to preside as moderator at elections, as is necessary' (*Comm.* Tit. 1:5).

[5] G. D. Henderson, *Presbyterianism* (Aberdeen, 1954), 38.

Lancelot Andrewes, bishop of Winchester. Thus du Moulin's hopes of episcopal preferment came to nothing.[6]

Du Moulin's views were not typical of his communion. Indeed most Huguenots were, on biblical grounds, deeply attached to the 1559 *Discipline*, including du Moulin's opponent in the debate over universal grace, Moise Amyraut.[7] However, at the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, the eminent Amyraldian Pierre du Bosc of Caen—regarded later by Louis XIV as France's greatest living orator—also expressed sympathetic views about episcopacy in a letter to the king of England's chaplain, Dr Brevint. Believing that Charles II was about to restore a 'moderate' and 'reformed' episcopacy, du Bosc wrote:

> Let none imagine that we condemn episcopal government, especially when it is well and lawfully administered. How can any person entertain that opinion of us after such an authentic declaration of Mr Calvin in his Epistle to Cardinal Sadoleto, where speaking of the order and dignity of bishops, when as they keep themselves within the rules of their duty and the bounds of Christian moderation. If there be such persons, as shall refuse to reverence and obey such an hierarchy, I account them as worthy of all kinds of anathema. I might add many other formal passages of our reformers: but this may suffice to notify unto the world what is the judgement of our churches.[8]

However, as Richard Baxter and the English Presbyterians were utterly deceived by Charles II's duplicitous declarations at Breda, du Bosc was similarly misled. Within two years, the king's intentions were perfectly clear. The type of carefully qualified episcopacy du Bosc envisaged was not on offer. The very 'tyranny' which he deplored was shortly to be unleashed upon his English puritan brethren in the Act of Uniformity of 1662. In many respects, supposedly reformed Anglican bishops were to differ little from their Roman counterparts in France in the treatment of nonconformists.

Of considerable significance is du Bosc's appeal to the views of 'Mr Calvin'. The question is thus raised: did du Bosc misunderstand Calvin or did the reformer needlessly mislead the Huguenot churches in a radical presbyterian direction? Was du Moulin right to say that circumstances rather than biblical principle created a non-episcopal reformed church in France? It is true, as Norman Sykes pointed out,

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[6] See Elisabeth Labrousse, 'Great Britain as Envisaged by the Huguenots of the Seventeenth Century' in Irene Scouloudi (ed), *Huguenots in Britain and their French Background 1550–1800* (London, 1987), 146.

[7] See Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (Madison, 1969), 116.

[8] John Quick, *Icones Sacrae Gallicanae (1700; MS transcript, Dr Williams's Library, London) DWL* 6. 38–39 (47), 550.

that Calvin allowed for variations in external policy and he did not object in principle to episcopacy.[9] However, these observations are of little help in the final analysis, for the reformer *did* object in principle to prelatic *diocesan* episcopacy, the only version that was ever seriously envisaged in England. Notwithstanding Calvin's famous fraternal relations with Archbishop Cranmer,[10] G. D. Henderson's verdict must be read with care that 'Calvin would plainly have approved of bishops in England and Poland if there was any chance that they would be, not what he sometimes called 'psuedo-bishops' but Scripture bishops'.[11] Henderson is surely correct when he describes Calvin's seeming toleration of diocesan episcopacy thus: 'There may . . . have been some idea that the situation was fluid, and that for the moment defects might be overlooked in the hope of conversion to more adequate arrangements'.[12] This was indeed the case, as a more detailed picture makes clear.

By 1552, Calvin had misgivings about the progress of the English Reformation, even to the point of rebuking Cranmer for his 'lukewarmness'.[13] With the lack of preaching pastors, Calvin was alarmed that still 'the life of the whole ecclesiastical order is all but extinct'. The tragic Marian interlude having passed, Calvin expressed to William Cecil his 'profound respect' for 'your most excellent queen'.[14] However, he soon realized that Elizabeth's policy was an impediment to a more thorough reformation. Writing to Edmund Grindal bishop of London in 1560, Calvin lamented that 'the churches of your whole kingdom have not yet been organized as all good men could wish, and as in the beginning they had hoped'.[15] Clearly, Calvin was criticizing the lordly status of the diocesan bishops when he urged Grindal to 'lay aside, nay, cast from you entirely whatever savours of earthly domination, in order that for the exercise of a spiritual office you may have a legitimate authority and such as shall be bestowed on you by God'. As if to anticipate the Queen's later opposition to her future archbishop over the appointment of preachers,[16] Calvin adroitly reflected on the nature of the

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[9] Norman Sykes, *Old Priest and New Presbyter* (Cambridge, 1956), 42, 111.
[10] *Letters of John Calvin* (Edinburgh, 1980), 130ff.
[11] Henderson, *op. cit.*, 39.
[12] *Ibid.* Thus Pannier is incorrect to imagine that Calvin's letter to the King of Poland favours prelatic episcopacy (see J. L. Ainslie, *The Doctrines of Ministerial Order in the Reformed Churches of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Edinburgh, 1940), pp. 92–3.
[13] *Letters of John Calvin*, 141.
[14] *Ibid.*, 213.
[15] *Ibid.*, 228.
[16] See Patrick Collinson, *Archbishop Grindal 1519–1583: The Struggle for a Reformed Church* (London, 1979), pp. 233ff.

queen's authority: 'This indeed will be her supremacy and pre-eminence; then she will hold the highest rank of dignity under Christ our head, if she stretch forth a helping hand to legitimate pastors, for the execution of these functions that have been enjoined us'.

Contrary to Henderson's surmise, there is no reason to imagine that Calvin would have remonstrated any differently with French episcopalians had an English-style situation been replicated in France. And why? Because Calvin believed he was restoring a *biblical* episcopacy. His letter to Grindal was written a year after the final 1559 edition of the *Institutes* appeared, in which he had 'discoursed of the order of church government as delivered to us in the pure Word of God, and of ministerial offices as instituted by Christ'.[17] Calvin's sympathetic discussion of the early development of episcopacy is *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*, in which he outlines the gradual transition from New Testament church order to the system of papal episcopacy. Even then, Calvin only endorses the kind of episcopacy that Presbyterians have always claimed, i.e. a 'bishop' or pastor in a settled congregation is simply an elder or presbyter *primus inter pares*. As such, the entire consistory is involved in 'oversight'. Not surprisingly, this is the very ecclesiology assumed in the *Confessio* and set forth in the *Discipline* of 1559. Therefore, if any other kind of episcopacy is envisaged, it is misleading for du Moulin or du Bosc or Sykes to imagine that Calvin had any sympathy for it. Thus Henderson correctly concludes that 'Calvin's *Ecclesiastical Odinances* were devised, in no sense as an emergency set of regulations, failing the possibility of bishops, but, after much reflection and enquiry and study, as the best possible church constitution, and its essentials a part of the Gospel which had been so long obscured'.[18] Similarly, J. L. Ainslie concluded that 'The Reformed Church leaders, theologians and ecclesiastics, from their study of the New Testament and Early Church history, were convinced that the Apostolic and Primitive Church had a ministerial order different from that which the Middle Ages had developed. They believed that it was the true and right Order. Under such convictions they became instrumental in reintroducing, as they considered it, the true Order into the Church. They were renewing and reviving the Apostolic and Primitive Ministry'.[19]

Henderson rightly explains the fundamental objection to medieval episcopacy: Calvin and the French Reformed churches were opposed to sacrificing priests in favour of preaching pastors. Since a spurious

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[17] *Inst.* IV:iv:1.
[18] Henderson, *op. cit.*, 39.
[19] Ainslie, *op. cit.*, p. vi.

theory of apostolic succession ensured a succession of sacrificing priests, the diocesan bishop was 'the symbol of priestcraft'.[20] After making the same observation, Sykes documents Whitgift's and Hooker's ambivalence about the Anglican retention of the name 'priest'.[21] Thus the truly reformed Anglican understanding of the Gospel was hampered by an ambiguous and unscriptural term—this is not to call in question the entirely separate and valid issue of the priesthood of all believers. Notwithstanding all the rationalizing endeavours of the conservative evangelical Anglican tradition, none can doubt that the retention of 'priest' has ensured that current controversy over the ordination of women to the priesthood has hinged on medieval theories of priesthood.[22]

To conclude, the reason why the French, Swiss, Dutch and eventually Scottish Calvinists preferred 'presbyter' to 'bishop' is derived from the character of the Gospel. Like John Calvin,[23] Richard Hooker could argue biblically and cogently against women ministers[24] but still retain the unbiblical and therefore 'odious name of priesthood'. In the longterm, such ambiguity could only cloud the gospel as recent events have proved. For instance, the question 'can a woman represent Christ at the altar?' is a non-starter. And why? The only altar recognised by God is the cross on Calvary's hill; the only atoning sacrifice recognised by God is that once for all offering of Christ; and the only priesthood recognised by God is that of his only begotten Son. For these reasons, French Reformed ecclesiology was a necessary expression of their soteriology. The Eglises Réformées de France believed that Christ's sacrifice for sin is remembered not repeated, on a table, not an altar; his real presence is spiritual, not physical, in the hearts of his people and not in the bread and wine. Hence Christian ministers are pastors, not priests, called to help, not

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[20] Henderson, *op. cit.*, 43.

[21] Sykes, *op. cit.*, 43.

[22] Whether or not 'priest' is etymologically related to 'presbyter', none can deny that Cyprian's sacerdotal theory of the episcopate is largely responsible for medieval theories of priesthood. His apparent ignorance of, or ambivalence towards, the Epistle to the Hebrews—with its clear teaching on the finality of Christ's sacrifice and the consequent termination of human priesthood—must explain this. See F. J. Foakes-Jackson, *The History of the Christian Church* (Cambridge, 1905), 221; H. Bettenson (ed), *The Early Christian Fathers* (1969), 272; B. F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon and the New Testament* (Cambridge, 1881), 371f.

[23] See Calvin, *Comm.* 1 Tim. 2:12.

[24] See R. Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Bk V:62:2.

to set up a hierarchy.[25] Unlike ambiguous Anglicanism, consistently reformed Gallicanism contrasted sharply with unreformed Rome. Aided by a corrupt and absolutist French monarchy, priests of the false gospel oppressed the preachers of the true gospel, precipitating a heroic Huguenot testimony of unsurpassed faith and fortitude for the greater part of three centuries.[26]

It is unfortunate that, following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, refugee pastors in England—unlike those who fled to Holland—became divided in their allegiance. Swayed by the doubtful ideas advocated earlier by du Moulin and du Bosc (who actually went to Rotterdam), many pastors accepted Anglican orders to minister in the 'conformist' French churches. Others remained faithful to their reformed orders, finding considerable affinity with the English nonconformists.[27] Thus the unhappy dissensions of English religious life were destined to fragment and weaken the refugee community. How different matters might have been had the full ecclesiological implications of the first National Synod of the Reformed Churches of France been appreciated on both sides of the Channel.

Abstract

Unlike semi-reformed Anglicanism's retention of episcopacy, the French Reformed Church swiftly adopted presbyterian order in 1559. While the Anglican settlement held an attraction for some pastors of the Eglise Réformée, their appeal to Calvin's authority had little justification. Recognising the thrust of Calvin's biblical insights, the first French National Synod saw the significance of a fully reformed ecclesiology for a consistent expression of evangelical soteriology. In rejecting episcopacy, they rejected the concept of a sacrificing priest in favour of a preaching pastor. Thus the Anglican via media possessed potential for ensuring that recent debates over the ordination of women would hinge on medieval theories of priesthood rather than a fully reformed concept of ministerial order.

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[25] If the concept of 'hierarchy' is understood in terms of an *imposed* episcopal priestly authority, it is inappropriate to designate the *representative* elective system of presbyterianism by this term.

[26] See S. Smiles, *The Huguenots in France* (London, 1875).

[27] See R. D. Gwynn, *Huguenot Heritage* (London, 1985), 91ff.