

Primitive Episcopacy

by J.H. Newman

J.H. Newman explores the evolution and significance of episcopal governance in the Primitive Church and its implications for modern ecclesiastical structures.

Scripture: Acts 14:23, Ephesians 4:11, 1 Timothy 3:1, Titus 1:5, 1 Peter 5:1

Topics: "Early Church", "Church Polity"

Description

J.H. Newman preaches about the early stages of evangelizing heathen countries in primitive times, where the first step was to establish a central city with a Bishop surrounded by clergy, gradually expanding to form an organized Church. The dioceses extended over the heathen country, with the Bishop's mission reaching all who had not heard the Christian faith. The early Church's polity naturally evolved into a Provincial and Patriarchal system, with a tendency towards large dioceses in its infancy and multiple smaller ones as Christianity grew stronger in a region.

Transcript

IN primitive times the first step towards evangelizing a heathen country seems to have been to seize upon some principal city in it, commonly the civil metropolis, as a centre of operation; to place a Pastor, i. e. (generally) a Bishop there; so surround him with a sufficient number of associates and assistants; and then to wait, till, under the blessing of Providence, this Missionary College was able to gather around it the scattered children of grace from the evil world, and invest itself with the shape and influence of an organized Church. The converts would, in the first instance, be those in the immediate vicinity of the Missionary or Bishop,

whose diocese nevertheless would extend over the heathen country on every side, either indefinitely, or to the utmost extent of the civil province; his mission being without restriction to all to whom Christian faith had never been preached. As he prospered in the increase of his flock, and sent out his clergy to greater and greater distances from the city, so would the homestead (so to call it) of his Church enlarge. Other towns would be brought under his government, openings would occur for stations in isolated places; till at length "the burden becoming too heavy for him he would appoint others to supply his place in this or that part of the province. To these he would commit a greater or lesser share of his spiritual power, as might be necessary; sometimes he would make them fully his representatives, or ordain them Bishops; at other times he would employ presbyters for his purpose. These assistants, or (as they were called) Chorepiscopi, would naturally be confined to their respective districts; and if Bishops, an approximation

would evidently be made to a division of the large original diocese into a number of smaller ones connected with and subordinate to the Bishop of the metropolitan city. Thus, from the very Missionary character of the Primitive Church, there was a tendency in its polity to what was afterwards called the Provincial and Patriarchal system.

It is not, indeed, to be supposed that this was the only way in which the graduated order of sees (so to call it) originated; but, at least, it is one way. And there is this advantage in remarking it: we learn from it, that large dioceses are the characteristics of a church in its infancy or weakness; whereas, the more firmly Christianity was rooted in a country, and the more vigorous its rulers, the more diligently were its sees multiplied throughout the ecclesiastical territory. Thus, St. Basil, in the fourth century, finding his exarchate defenceless in the neighbourhood of Mount Taurus, created a number of dioceses to meet the emergency. These subordinate sees may be called suffragan to the Metropolitan Church, whether the respective rulers were mere representatives of the Bishop who created them, i. e., Chorepiscopi: or, on the other hand, substantive authorities, sovereign within their own limits, though bound by external ties to each other and to their Metropolitan. The most perfect state of a Christian country would be, where there was a sufficient number of separate dioceses; the next to it, where there were Chorepiscopi, or Suffragan Bishops in the modern sense of the word.

Few persons, who have not expressly examined the subject, are aware of the minuteness of the dioceses into which many parts of Christendom were divided in the first ages. Some Churches in Italy were more like our rural deaneries than what we now consider dioceses; being not above ten or twelve miles in extent, and their sees not above five or six miles from each other. Even now (or, at least, in Bingham's time) the kingdom of Naples contains 147 sees, of which twenty are Archbishopricks. Asia Minor is 630 miles long, 210 broad; yet in this country there were almost 400 dioceses. Palestine is in length 160 miles, in breadth 120; yet the number of known dioceses amounted to 48. Again, in the province of Syria Secunda, the see of Larissa (e. g.) was about 14 miles from Apamea, Arethusa 16 from Epiphania. And so again, turning to the West, though the dioceses were generally larger, as partaking more of a Missionary character, yet we shall find in Ireland at one time from 50 to 60 sees.

Such was the character of the Primitive Regimen, where Christianity especially flourished in the zeal and number of its professors. But, where the country was mountainous or desert, the inhabitants scanty, or but partially Christian, it was considered advisable to leave all to the management of one chief Pastor, who appointed assistants to himself according to his discretion, as the circumstances of the times required. The office of these Chorepiscopi, or country Bishops, was to preside over the country clergy, inquire into their behaviour, and report to their principal; also to provide fit persons for the inferior ministrations of the Church. They had the power of ordaining the lower ranks of clergy, such as the readers, sub-deacons, and exorcists; they might ordain priests and deacons with the leave of the city Bishop, and administer the rite of confirmation; and were permitted to sit and vote in councils. Thus their office bore a considerable resemblance to that of our Archdeacons; except, of course, that they had the power of ordination; whereas the latter are only presbyters. And, in matter of fact, by such presbyters (visitors, as they were called) they were superseded in the course of the fourth and following centuries, till at length the Pope caused the order to be set aside almost altogether in the ninth.

Little use was made of Suffragans during the middle ages; but, at the time of our Reformation, Archbishop Cranmer felt the deficiency of the English Church in respect of Bishopricks, and projected several measures to supply it. The most complete was that of increasing the number, of dioceses; availing himself of existing circumstances; he advised the King to apply the Abbey lands to the founding of twenty

additional sees. Bishop Burnet gives some of the particulars of this attempt in the following passage:

"On the 23d of May, in the session of Parliament, a bill was brought in by Cromwell for giving the King power to erect new bishoprics by his letters-patent. It was read that day for the first, second, and third time, and sent down to the Commons. The Preamble of it was, 'that it was known what slothful and ungodly life had been led by those who were called religious. But that these houses might be converted to better uses; that GOD'S word might be better set forth; children brought up in learning; clerks nourished in the universities; and that old decayed servants might have livings; poor people might have almshouses to maintain them; readers of Greek, Hebrew, and Latin, might have good stipends; daily alms might be administered, and allowance might be made for mending of the highways, and exhibitions for ministers of the Church; for these ends, if the King thought fit to have more bishoprics or cathedral churches erected out of the rents of these houses, full power was given him to erect and found them, and to make rules and statutes for them, and such translations of sees, or divisions of them, as he thought fit.' In the same paper, there is a list of the sees which he intended to found; of which what was done afterwards came so far short, that I know nothing to which it can be so reasonably imputed, as the declining of Cranmer's interest at court, who had proposed the erecting the new cathedrals and sees, with other things mentioned in the preamble of the statute, as a great mean of reforming the Church." Some of the proposed additional dioceses are then enumerated; Essex, Hertford, Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire, Oxford and Berkshire, Northampton and Huntingdon, Middlesex, Leicester and Rutland, Gloucestershire, Lancashire, Suffolk, Stafford and Salop, Nottingham and Derby, Cornwall. As to the means by which they were to be endowed, no opinion is here expressed on its lawfulness, as the present sketch is confined to the consideration of the spiritual part of the ecclesiastical system. It is scarcely necessary to add that Cranmer's views were partly realized, in the subsequent creation of the dioceses of Chester, Bristol, Gloucester, Oxford, and Peterborough.

The same prelate whose episcopate has had so important an influence upon the constitution of our Church ever since, also projected with great wisdom, a system of suffragan bishops or Chorepiscopi, which he was able to bring into effect, and which lasted till the reign of King James. Twenty-six such bishops were appointed; the bishop of the diocese having the power of presenting two persons to the king, who might choose either of them, and present them to the archbishop of the province for consecration. These suffragans exercised such jurisdiction as their principal gave them, or as had formerly been committed to suffragans; their authority lasting no longer than he continued their commission to them. "These were believed," says Burnet "to be the same with the Chorepiscopi in the primitive church; which, as they were begun before the first council of Nice, so they continued in the Western Church till the 9th century, and then a decretal of Damascus being forged, that condemned them, they were put down every where by degrees, and now revived in England. The suffragan sees were as follows: Thetford, Ipswich, Colchester, Dover, Guilford, Southampton, Taunton, Shaftsbury, Molton, Marlborough, Bedford, Leicester, Gloucester, Shrewsbury, Bristol, Penrith, Bridgwater, Nottingham, Grantham, Hull, Huntingdon, Cambridge, Pereth, Berwick, St. Germain's, and the Isle of Wight."

After the disuse of suffragans in the reign of James I. there was a fresh project for establishing them on the Restoration. Charles, in one of his declarations, promises to increase the number of bishops, in accordance with Archbishop Ussher's plan for episcopal government. However, his intention was not put into execution, doubtless owing to existing circumstances, which reasonably interfered with it.

The following extract is made from Bingham, Antiqu. ix. 8, "One great objection against the present diocesan episcopacy, and that which to many may look the most plausible, is drawn from the vast extent

and greatness of most of the northern dioceses of the world, which makes it so extremely difficult for one man to discharge all the offices of the episcopal function . . . The Church of England has usually followed the larger model, and had very great and extensive dioceses; for at first she had but seven bishoprics in the whole nation, and those commensurate in a manner to the seven Saxon kingdoms. Since that time she has thought it a point of wisdom to contract her dioceses, and multiply them into above 20; and if she should think fit to add 40 or 100 more, she would not be without precedent in the practice of the Primitive Church. In Ireland there are not now above half the number of dioceses that there were before, and consequently they must needs be larger by uniting them together. In England, there are more in number than formerly, some new ones being created out of old ones, and at present the whole number augmented to three times as many as they were for some ages after the first conversion. Besides that, we have another way of contracting dioceses in effect here in England appointed by law, which law was never yet repealed; which is by devolving part of the bishop's care upon the Chorepiscopi, or suffragan bishops, as the law calls them:-a method commonly practised in the ancient Church in such large dioceses as those of St. Basil and Theodoret, one of which had no less than fifty Chorepiscopi under him, if Nazianzen rightly informs us. And it is a practice which was continued here all the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and even to the end of King James; and is what may be revived again, whenever any bishop thinks his diocese too large, or his burden too great to be sustained by himself alone."

To the above statements, may be subjoined the present number of souls, and the area of square miles, in certain of our dioceses, as given in a pamphlet lately published, which has come into the writers hands since the foregoing was put on paper. (Vide Plan for a New Arrangement, &c. by Lord Henley.)

Souls. Square Miles.

Chester	1,806,722	4140
London	1,676,725	1942
York	1,526,288	5300
Lincoln	920,011	5775
Lichfield.....	978,655	3344

By this table, it is not here intended to insinuate the necessity of any immediate measure of multiplying the English sees or appointing suffragans, (the expediency of which is to be determined by a variety of considerations, which it were unprofitable here to detail,) but to show that the genius of our ecclesiastical system tends towards such an increase, and that the only question to be determined is one of time. These statements are also made with the view of keeping up in the minds of churchmen a recollection of the injury which the Irish branch of our Church has lately sustained in the diminution of its sees.

OXFORD.

The Feast of SS. Philip and St. James.

P. S.-Since this was written, a new arrangement of Dioceses and Sees has been made by authority of a Royal Commission, composed of members the greater part of whom were laymen, and without confirmation of their acts on the part of the Church.

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