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CHAPTER I

The Reformation: challenge to an old consensus

For the last century and a half historians and theologians have strenuously invested themselves in dispute regarding the polity and order of the earliest Christian communities. The controversy has flared up at intervals. In the middle of the nineteenth century the subject was addressed mostly by German scholars, like Baur and Ritschl. The closing years of that century witnessed a very contentious surge of conflicting theories, with Englishmen Sanday, Hatch, Gore and Hort voicing over against more Germans: Harnack, Sohm and von Weizsäcker. Sabatier entered a French membership into the discussion. Another wave of interest and debate marked the years after the Great War, and again the main participants bore German and English names: Holtzmann, Lietzmann and Holl; Armitage Robinson, Streeter and Dix. Lastly, a new generation of scholars has returned to the subject in the past three decades, among whom Schweizer from Switzerland, von Campenhausen from Germany, Schillebeeckx from the Netherlands and Schüssler Fiorenza from the United States are prominent contributors. The debate was joined from many quarters.

There have however been a consistency of method, a communion of assumptions and a similarity of speculation which justify one in viewing this long and open debate as having pursued a single pathway. Thus has been crafted by many hands what one must acknowledge as the dominant consensus on office and order in the earliest church.

Others who have surveyed this literature would tend to accept the observation of B. H. Streeter:

For four hundred years the theologians of rival churches have armed themselves to battle on the question of the Primitive Church. However great their reverence for scientific truth and historic fact, they have at least *hoped* that the result of their investigations would be to vindicate Apostolic

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authority for the type of Church Order to which they were themselves attached. The Episcopalian has sought to find episcopacy, the Presbyterian Presbyterianism, and the Independent a system of independency, to be the form of Church Order in New Testament times.¹

It is surely true that most sponsorship for the consensus has been Protestant, with Lutherans in the vanguard and the congregational churches among the most interested audience. Virtually all resistance to the consensus has come from two sources. Catholic scholars, until recently, have defended an essentially continuous polity from apostolic times in unbroken sequence through to the present. Anglicans, especially those of a high church allegiance, have stood for a hierarchy and a succession of orders all along. While joining Catholics to sustain the aboriginal authority of the bishop, they have crossed over to the Protestant team to deny higher authority to the bishop of Rome.

It is my estimate that this has not been a symmetrical debate. Opponents of the consensus have always been in retreat. The agenda, the newly discovered evidences, the scholarly momentum: all have been to the advantage of the partisans of the consensus. Even when an earlier version was discredited or a previously load-bearing argument gave way, there was little embarrassment and no dropping back. The consensus has moved forward with sure and confident step. This is why, though we shall take note here of some of the nay-sayers, the central interest of our study will be fastened upon those creative and persisting scholars of the dominant theory who swept nearly all before them.

THE REFORMERS

To examine the consensus in its beginnings we must page back to the reformers of the fourteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As spokesmen of a movement that washed over the Western world in successive flood tides, they argued from scripture that all Christians are radically called to service in the church; that

¹ Burnett Hillman Streeter, *The Primitive Church: Studied with Special Reference to the Origins of Christian Ministry*, Hewlett Lectures for 1928 (London: Macmillan, 1929), viii. Streeter offers his own way around this obstacle: "But while each party to the dispute has been able to make out a case for his own view, he has never succeeded in demolishing the case of his opponent. The explanation of this deadlock, I have come to believe, is quite simple. It is the uncriticised assumption, made by all parties to the controversy, that in the first century there existed a single type of Church Order," p. ix. His theory is that in different provinces of the empire there existed, in the first century AD, quite different systems of church polity.

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it is empowerment by God, not ordination by a bishop, which gives the special graces of ministry; and that only the congregation had and has the authority to designate the church's ministers.

As overture to that inquiry we must first study a much earlier and haphazard venture. The principal initiators of the Reformation and of its earlier intimations in the late Middle Ages were learned men. John Wyclif had been master of an Oxford college. Martin Luther was a doctor of theology and a university-level lecturer in the scriptures. John Calvin, though not an academic, was an extraordinarily learned preacher. Most of their contemporaries who called for, designed or actually implemented reform in the church were proceeding on popular notions of what a church shriven and cleansed should be. Not these men. What blocked reform, as they saw it, was venality, superstition and corruption behind the rampart of clerical authority. As scholars, these men could not ignore those authoritarian claims. They meant as scholars to discredit them. No flanking attacks, but a frontal assault. They were constrained to justify another authority of higher appeal.

No reform of worship or piety or theology could have much promise of endurance unless the claim of the ordained clergy to unique office and authority were discredited. And that, in a church which validated all institutions by derivation from Jesus and his first disciples, had to be a task of historical scholarship.

John Wyclif of England, Martin Luther of Germany, John Calvin of Switzerland, the cohort of Pietists after them, and the retinue of learned divines they inspired: all undercut the theology of episcopal and papal authority by appealing to an earlier, foundational polity from which they claimed the church had quickly deviated into priestcraft and greed. This authentic church order, founded by Jesus upon the apostles, they reconstructed from the New Testament. Wyclif thought the fall from apostolic innocence had come with Constantine's acknowledgement and endowment of the bishops. Luther pursued the matter further, and found the fatal swerve already in the infant years of the second century, as witnessed in Ignatius of Antioch. The new wave of populist, spiritual reformers in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries tended to identify the corruptive era as that of Constantine.

The most accomplished authors of the Magisterial Reformation were beneficiaries of the New Learning. Many of the humanists, like Erasmus of Rotterdam, were led by their sophistication to be critical

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and cynical about worldly rascals who held office, high or low, in Christendom. Luther and his like took their scholarship to more radical conclusions, and delegitimated and disavowed not only the incumbents but the offices as well. Thus they convulsed the church by their academic findings about the ancient past, and their forthright conclusions about how to restore it for a wholesome future.

Their revolt was creative and intellectually impressive. It was not, however, to last long enough – as a school of academic inquiry, that is – to gain the solidity that any movement can acquire from several generations of reflection on the founding masters' insights. What foreshortened the theological development of the reformers' reconstruction of ancient church order was the inevitable effect of their having actually established church orders of their own. In a short time new orthodoxies and polities bristled – understandably – with defensiveness. It required scarcely one generation for the free-spirited speculations of Luther, for example – tentative enough to be reconsidered and even modified as he examined the evidence further, yet firm enough for him to design his ideal church and redesign it over and over again – it required, I say, no more than a generation for that theorizing to age into a defensive apologetic for the actual Lutheran establishment. And the defenders of the various Protestant forms of office and organization were to prove not much more productive in their research into the primitive church than were their adversaries, the Catholic apologists.

The reformers had correctly seen that a determination to vindicate later church practices had made better scholars of the Catholics. It was the more striking that they themselves soon began to exhibit a similar defensiveness. The brilliant findings of these men deserved and required a better sequel. Their line of study was reactivated again by the Pietists and Quakers a century later, in an equally fervent yet less scholarly or creative mode. It then had to lie dormant for two hundred years, to be taken up yet again in Germany.

Thus it is essential to be familiar with the findings of the most learned reformers, before going on to study and evaluate the extended work of the intellectual continuity which I call the dominant, contemporary consensus among later scholars on the polity and order of the earliest church.

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JOHN WYCLIF

“Considering the life and the task which God has specified for the priest, all that is required for a person to be a priest is for God to give him the grace to live that life and to fulfill that task.”² In 1383 this was strong talk. It came from Doctor John Wyclif, who by then had but a short course of life left to continue troubling Oxford’s theological schools.

He had first come under investigation six years earlier, when his views on church officers were not quite so strident, save for occasionally calling the pope a devil and the Antichrist. The issue on which his views were suspect was more canonical than theological. As a career theologian he had previously taken his share in the classical puzzlers regarding the technicalities of legal ordination. How could one be absolutely sure that a traveling priest was validly ordained? How could a cleric be assured that the bishop who ordained him was actually in valid possession of unbroken apostolic succession down through the centuries? Did a priest who had been ordained successively to four minor and three major orders belong to seven orders or only to one?

As Wyclif grew older, however, he had lost his taste for that sort of inquiry. Why fuss over some cleric’s testimonial documents, to verify whether they be free of misspellings or a fudged seal, he wrote in 1377, when we lack all sure knowledge of how and when the apostles themselves were ordained in the first place?³ It was not any written credential that showed the apostles to be priests, but their comportment. “The life of a priest, it seems to me, is the greatest natural evidence for assuring us of his really being a priest.”⁴

In the primitive church Christ had made his apostles priests, and they in turn established the deacons. These two orders were all that seem to have been needed. God only knows, grumbled Wyclif, what good it had done the church to go and create all the other orders, which have only a ritual purpose and no other practical benefit. “We are more fascinated with the proliferation of orders which the church has created than with the inner substance of the outward sacrament which God has given. Surely the distorted way we are drawn more by

² John Wyclif, *De Quattuor Sectis Novellis*, ch. 5; in *John Wyclif’s Polemical Works in Latin*, ed. Rudolf Biddensieg (London: Wyclif Society, 1883), 258.

³ Wyclif, *Tractatus de Ecclesia*, ch. 19; ed. Iohann Loserth (London: Wyclif Society, 1886), 454–455.

⁴ *Ibid.* 456–457.

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the foliage than by the fruit has cheapened our sacraments in God's eyes."⁵

The deeper issue should not be one's legal or sacramental status but one's moral standing. Some people are Catholics in name only. They are hypocrites bound for destruction. Others possess the reality of Catholic allegiance though they lack official membership. Never mind that the church's satraps hold them in contempt; they are predestined to glory.⁶ Moral reality is more determinative than ecclesial status.

A similar disparity between reality and outward appearances was to be seen in the clergy. Some of them, according to Wyclif, are set apart by little more than the cut of their clothes and the trim of their tonsures. Their tailors and barbers seem to have had more of a hand in making priests of them than their bishops did. Other clerics may have purchased their ordinations with an eye towards lucrative benefices. "How, then," he quotes a decretal, "if they are themselves anathema and unholy, can they sanctify others? If they are not within the body of Christ, how can they offer or receive the body of Christ? How can someone bless if he is under a curse?"⁷ What counts most is not the outward rite but the inward empowerment. "For God who gives the power to minister also gives the grace to accomplish the task, unless the ordained person's disposition rejects that grace."⁸ In most radical fashion he then goes on to assert that "there is no solemnity or human tradition which makes a person the head or a member of Holy Mother Church, or a vicar of Christ. What that requires is a special grace of Christ and conformity to Christ in one's behavior."⁹

In defense of clerical rank, Wyclif's opponents would claim that ordination (like baptism and confirmation, the two other unrepeatable sacraments) impressed on the soul an "indelible character," or identity, which set one above the laity. But this, he replied, was another avoidance of what was essential, even though it appeared at first to be an inquiry inwards. Sacramental character, Wyclif replied, was surely not a substantive, internal "thing." It was a commission to perform specified duties, and it was a submission of oneself to those tasks, rather like the way in which kings and soldiers take on their respective duties.¹⁰ Every cleric has been charged with ministry

⁵ Ibid. ch. 21, 514–515.⁶ Ibid. ch. 4, 89.⁷ Ibid. ch. 19, 455.⁸ Ibid. ch. 21, 511.⁹ Ibid. ch. 19, 459.¹⁰ Ibid. ch. 21, 508.

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corresponding to his rank; but by the same token so has every lay member of the church been given appropriate responsibilities. Better, in his opinion, to construe clerical identity as a duty that can be accepted and later accomplished or even laid aside, than as a permanent and magisterial ennoblement.¹¹

If this view of things were to prevail, Wyclif foresaw that candidates would be investigated more searchingly. Their preferments would be awarded more gradually so as to ascertain whether their performance justified further responsibilities, and unworthy recruits would be sifted out from those who were authentically prepared to serve the church. From that process would emerge priests ready to pursue the true clerical calling – to follow Christ and his apostles in a life deprived of benefice or property – the life of a poor preacher of God’s Word.¹²

Three years later in 1380 John Wyclif returned to this theme in his *Treatise on Pastoral Duty*. Now he ventured a step further, to call for the assignment of parish clergy by choice of the congregation. Once the position of curate could be disentangled from its corrupting involvements of being beholden to the nobility for the glebe and other temporalities, “then there could be a free election by the parishioners and the acceptance of a curate exclusively on grounds of his aptitude for the task.” It was absurd, he argued, for remote prelates to be making such assignments. “What pope has come by an inspiration to tell him which curate should be approved for such-and-such a parish, on nomination by the patron? Quite a few would see the pope motivated more by his appetite for the fees attached to the appointment than by his concern for the benefit of the souls concerned ... Take away the fee structure, and all that might be changed.”¹³

The prelates pretend that their parochial assignments are as sagacious as if God himself had signed and sealed them, but the bishops have too much of a financial interest for them to be believed. “Let the devout people, who have most stake in the salvation of their own souls, choose a fit and competent priest, and in this way they will avoid unpleasant surprises later on if he turns out to be more a burden than a benefit. And if the congregation falls to quarrelling, or swerves from the true course, then let the secular lords put them back on the path of righteousness.”¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid. 513.¹² Ibid. 516–517.¹³ *Johannis de Wiclif Tractatus de Officio Pastoralis*, ed. Gotthardus Victor Lechler (Leipzig: A. Edelmann, 1863), ch. 7, 39–40.¹⁴ Ibid. ch. 9, 43; see also ch. 7, 40.

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By 1383 the hot breath of censure was scorching his neck. Wyclif in his turn was writing more angrily against the prelates of the church. The superiority of bishops, he observed, was exemplified in the rule that certain actions were reserved to them alone, such as confirmation and ordination. They alone had the prerogative of consecrating churches. But consecration was the result, not of rituals, but of holy people. Job had brought sanctification to his dung-pile, and Jesus to his stable, just as Lot had maintained his sanctity in Sodom. When a greedy bishop is brought in to consecrate a church building some people would say, Wyclif noted (he was himself usually the “some people”), that the place would probably be hallowed more by pitching out the bishop than by letting him proceed with his rites. Some prelates, when asked to expound the text of holy scripture, are tongue-tied by their ignorance. What good could men like that accomplish by all their consecrations and blessings and other contrived signs? Some of them are more meticulous about the Rite of Sarum than they are about the gospel. Wyclif concluded by saying he could see no reason why any ritual should require a celebrant that outranked a simple pastor.¹⁵

The pope also came in for Oxford invective. If papacy meant avaricious men like Urban IV, or a deadlock between two contending claimants,¹⁶ then the church would be better off with no pope at all. “Christ with his law is capable of ruling the church militant by himself... A church that keeps trust with Christ is not headless, for it has Christ as its head, and that is as sufficient now as it was just after Pentecost.”¹⁷

Much of the sacramental posturing by church prelates of every rank was simply a deception for the laity. “Better for a believer to identify the duties of any rank, which were assigned to it by God, and then to verify whether those duties are in fact being carried out.”¹⁸ That applied to the pope as well. “The pope ought to be treated with respect, but only insofar as he treads in the footsteps of St. Peter. When he deviates, then turn your back on him.”¹⁹

Naturally Wyclif was confronted by those who disagreed. On what grounds was he so bold as to sit in judgment himself on the entire establishment of divine authority in the church? His adversaries, he

¹⁵ Wyclif, *De Quattuor Sectis Novellis*, ch. 6, 260–262.

¹⁶ The Western Schism had recently begun, with Clement VII as Urban’s rival, and all Europe divided in its allegiances.

¹⁷ Wyclif, *De Quattuor Sectis Novellis*, ch. 5, 257.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 259.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 260.

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answered, were relying in large part on human institutions, not on divine authorization. He appealed higher: to reliance on the scriptures, “and to lively reasoning.”²⁰ It was in this context that he made the assertion which we saw at the outset: that divine, not ecclesiastical, ordination empowered the true officers of the church. That was in 1383. A year later he was dead.²¹

Wyclif’s appeal over the church’s head to the New Testament had little by way of familiar precedent. He must not be unduly pressed for a consistency of program which his brief and rushing career could scarcely have allowed. His procedural principle was clear enough: that conventional church practice must be judged by scripture and theological conclusions grounded on scripture, and not vice versa. On scriptural grounds he argued that authentic membership in the body of Christ was a gift of divine grace, which need not (and often did not) conform to one’s outward sacramental status or rank. Indeed, the non-congruence of inner relationship to God and outer relationship to the church was a principal theme of his preaching. That being so, the church’s ministers had as their paramount task the preaching of the word (thus addressing the faithful directly in the order of the spirit), and only secondarily the performance of external rituals. The odious system of benefices, he grieved, had drawn into the clergy men whose false motivation became the more manifest the closer they approached the pulpit. The custom of allowing bishops to appoint candidates to livings (on predominantly materialistic grounds) had produced a hireling pastorate, and should be abolished in favor of appraisal and popular election by the local congregation. Wyclif naturally saw this proposal as likely to be resisted by the lords spiritual (yet so very temporal), and thus he appealed to the secular nobility as possessed of the authority requisite to reform the church.

²⁰ At the same time, Wyclif alleged his submission to church superiors. “Hic profiteor et protestor, quod volo ex integro sentenciare fidem catholicam, et si quidquid dixerō contra illam, committo me correccioni superioris ecclesie et cuiuscunque militantis persone, que me in hoc docuerit erravisse. Sed subduco quascunque tradiciones hominum citra fidem scripture, et sic non accepto in ista materia nisi fidem scripture, vel rationem vivacem, sed adducentem aliud de perfidia et ignorancia habeo plus suspectum.” Ibid. 256.

²¹ In the intellectual storm of his last years Wyclif had had neither the time nor the temper to discipline his doctrine into any consistency. For instance, one of his most persistently advocated measures of reform, the unleashing of unaffiliated, unbeneficed priests to preach at large across the English countryside, was seriously compromised by the fact that Wyclif himself was living off the prosperous benefice of Lutterworth (where, contrary to his own explicit teaching, the actual pastoral work was being done by a vicar whom he paid poorly), and he was enjoying the favors of the powerful court of John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster. See *Tractatus de Officio Pastoralis*, ch. 8, 40–42.

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It was, of course, a bold and reckless hope that would look to the princes and peers for a spiritual reform, but Wyclif had little time to appreciate the eventual price of such expediency. He was an understandably impatient man. What he did set in motion was the abiding suspicion that the order of God's doings was not identical with the order of the church's doings.

Wyclif was a pathfinder; he expounded convictions and assertions that were too new to allow him the time or the reflection to give them inner coherence or consistency. What began as an appeal to reform abuses in the church grew almost unintentionally into a much more radical theology of church order.

The Lollards were to pursue this program that Wyclif had formulated during the last years of his life. But it never did secure a substantial following in late medieval England. It was nevertheless an early expression of a bold critique that would be visited upon the church more rigorously and more vigorously by the reformers of the sixteenth century. They did not draw their inspiration or their agenda from John Wyclif, whom they largely ignored. But he was their intellectual ancestor all the same. In his venturesome way he was a first drafter of the primitive lineaments of a doctrine of church office which would not achieve full elaboration for another five or six hundred years.

MARTIN LUTHER

Nearly a century and a half later, after irresolute interim attempts at reform, the stresses in the Christian church which had angered John Wyclif now roused a member of one of the groups of mendicant friars that Wyclif had so despised: Augustinian Martin Luther. Quite like his English precursor, the German friar appealed to an inward Christianity of the spirit.

Christianity is a spiritual assembly of souls in one faith ... the natural, real, true, and essential Christendom exists in the Spirit and not in any external thing ... Beyond that, there is a second way of speaking about Christendom. According to this, Christendom is called an assembly in a house, or in a parish, a bishopric, an archbishopric, or a papacy. To this assembly belong external forms such as singing, reading, and the vestments of the mass. Here, above all, bishops, priests, and members of religious orders are called the "spiritual estate" ... Although the little words "spiritual" or "church" are violated here when they are applied to such externals, since they refer only to the faith which makes true priests and Christians in the soul, this manner