Archbishop Ussher's Proposal for Synodical Government (1641): Its Scriptural and Patristic Origins and Its Relevance for Today

By the Reverend Dirk C. Reinken

FROM THE TIME of the English Reformation until the Restoration of the monarchy under Charles II, the relationship of the role of the priest or presbyter to the role of the bishop was especially a source of constant debate and argument. This was linked with the argument over who had the authority to make binding decisions for the church. The Puritans or Presbyterians sought a form of church government in which authority was vested in a council of presbyters, answerable to no one, not even the sovereign. On the opposite end of the debate, the established church sought to maintain the distinctive office and authority of the episcopate under the leadership of the monarch. By the 1630s, the Presbyterians had their way in Scotland with the establishment of the Scottish League and Covenant in 1638. On the eve of the English Civil War, the Covenanters sought to abolish episcopacy in England as well, claiming that under scriptural warrant, the only legitimate government in the church was that of presbyters.

In the midst of these tensions, the Archbishop of Armagh, James Ussher, seeking the *via media*, wrote a proposal for a synodical form of government whereby both presbyters and bishops would share in the governance of the church. By appealing to Scripture and the theological development of the ordained ministry in the early church, he sought to set forth a model which was scripturally sound (and could therefore appeal to the Presbyterians) as well as grounded in the historical understanding of episcopacy (which the Church of England sought to maintain). This essay will examine Ussher's proposal in light of his appeals to Scripture and tradition as well as how it stands against the views of his more royalist peers of the day. Ussher's proposal, as it turns out, contains the essence of the form of ecclesiastical government that has evolved in most of the Anglican Communion. And, when compared with other ecclesiologies, Ussher's proposal can offer a partnership and mutual dependence among all orders of ministry that the church is trying to emphasize today. This will demonstrate how the Anglican emphasis on *via media* in crises of the

day, when founded on the origins of Christianity, can speak both to current needs and the needs of generations to come.

The Role of Scripture and Historical Theology Presumed in Ussher's Discussion

Historically, appeals to Scripture, reason, and tradition have been the source of authority within Anglicanism, and such appeal is also found in Ussher. This is the so-called three-legged stool of authority popularly ascribed to Richard Hooker.[1] Attempting to be faithful to the tradition of the catholic church in England, Hooker articulated a method for theological discourse which was not original but reached back to the foundations of Western theology as articulated by Augustine and understood by Aquinas.[2] In this method, the voices of Scripture and tradition are held in tension as the theologian works out a solution to a contemporary problem. However, there is a primacy of source. As Michael Ramsey describes it, Scripture is the supreme authority to apostolic tradition. "But Holy Scripture is not in a vacuum. It needs interpretation, and the church's tradition is the source of that interpretation."[3]

If theology is understood as reflection on God's revelation, particularly as revealed through Scripture, then the tradition of the church is the history of the development of a theological understanding of the implications of God's revelation. Thus Scripture and an examination of the historical development of theology are two tools that Anglicans use in sorting out issues presented by the questions of the age. As the primary source of authority, Scripture is the first avenue of appeal as witness to apostolic tradition. Following closely thereon is how Scripture's word has

---

[1]In *Laws*, Book 5, 8:2, Hooker writes, "...what scripture doth plainelie deliver, to that the first place both of creditt and obedience is due; the next whereunto is whatsoever anie man can necessarelie conclude by force of reason; after these the voice of the Church succeedeth." See Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, ed. W. Speed Hill, *Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977), 39.

[2]Urban T. Holmes, *What is Anglicanism* (Wilton, Conn.: Moorehouse-Barlow Co., Inc., 1982), 11.

[3]Arthur Michael Ramsey, *An Era of Anglican Theology: From Gore to Temple* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 98.

been interpreted and implemented in the ensuing centuries. This appeal to reason in tradition is a historical approach to theology. Thus, reason is used in reflection on the voice of both Scripture and tradition to discern their message for today.

Such an application of Scripture and the historical understanding of theology can be seen in Archbishop James Ussher's proposal for a synodical government by bishops and presbyters in the Church of England, a proposal with little impact in its day, but exemplary of the Anglican threefold appeal and anticipatory of later developments within Anglicanism. It has been suggested that Ussher's proposal was not received because leading episcopal proponents of the day (theologian and priest Herbert Thorndike and Bishop of Londonderry John Bramhall) argued in favor of a strong episcopacy.[4] However, on close examination, neither Thorndike nor Bramhall can be used to dismiss Ussher's proposal totally, since Bramhall was attacking exclusive presbyteral government as established in Scotland, and Thorndike defended the status quo rather than ruling out presbyteral consultation. Indeed, as will be shown, Thorndike's understanding of the relationship between bishop and presbyter is consistent with Ussher's vision of synodical government.

Archbishop Ussher's Proposal

On the eve of the Civil War in England, tensions between the advocates of presbyteral government of churches on the one hand and episcopal government on the other were at the breaking point. Since the 1570s, the established church in England had been contending with Calvinist claims that presbyteral government was the only scripturally warranted form of church government. As the tensions between the poles increased, royalist Anglicans insisted ever more strongly that episcopacy was divinely intended for the proper order and structure of the church. Contrary to this, the Presbyterians claimed that bishops actually obscured the gospel and the Lordship of Christ over the church. In 1641, Archbishop James Ussher's proposal offered a compromise that Ussher believed was both faithful to Scripture and the early church and could address the concerns of Puritans and Anglicans alike. His "Reduction of the Episcopacy unto

[4]Henry Chadwick, "Tradition, Fathers and Councils," in *The Study of Anglicanism*, ed. Stephen Sykes and John Booty (London: SPCK, 1988), 102.

the Form of Synodical Government" sought to achieve a common ground whereby presbyters would be involved in a synodical government of the church and the central role of the episcopacy would be preserved.[5] Although he appealed to scriptural evidence and ancient church practice, Ussher's proposal unfortunately came to naught and many of England's bishops found themselves in exile on the European continent in a few short years.

The immediate crisis leading up to Ussher's proposal had its roots in 1637 in the ill fated attempt to introduce to Scotland a revised Book of Common Prayer authored by the high-church Archbishop Laud and John Maxwell, the future Bishop of Ross.[6] The catholic character of the book so angered the people of Scotland that nearly all of Scotland responded by subscribing to the National Covenant on February 28, 1638, and the days following. This Covenant committed the signatories to resist recent innovations and maintain the "True Reformed Religion."[7] Following this, in November, 1638, in a meeting of the General Assembly of Scotland in Glasgow, episcopacy in Scotland was abolished save for that oversight which a pastor has over his flock. While the Covenanters expressed loyalty to Charles I, the King saw the Presbyterians as rebels who must be defeated in battle. By 1639, England was in armed conflict with Scotland. The distrust of the King, even after he accepted the abolition of episcopacy in Scotland in 1641, led the Presbyterians to support their counterparts in England.[8] Thus, the threat of the undoing of episcopal

---

[5]James Ussher, *The Reduction of the Episcopacy unto the Form of Synodical Government, Received in the Ancient Church: Proposed in the Year 1641, as an Expedient for the Prevention of Those Troubles, which afterwards did arise about the matter of Church-Government*, vol. 12 of *The Whole Works of the Most. Rev. James Ussher, D. D., Lord Archbishop of Armagh, and Primate of All Ireland* (Dublin: Hodges and Smith; London: Whittaker and Co., 1847), 527-536. This is the standard edition referred to by Ussher's principal biographers as well as other scholars who cite Ussher's proposal. Biographers are in agreement that the original proposal was published surreptitiously in 1641.

[6]For a full account of the introduction of the 1637 prayer book, see Gordon Donaldson's introduction in Gordon Donaldson, *The Making of the Scottish Prayer Book of 1637* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1954).

[7]James K. Cameron, "The Church in Scotland from the Reformation to Disruption" in *A History of Religion in Britain: Practice and Belief from the Pre-Roman Times to the Present*, ed. Sheridan Gilley and W. J. Sheils (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1994), 140.

[8]Cameron, 140.

government in the English church was real, and it was this threat that the major theological minds of the day sought to address by the reasoned use of Scripture and tradition.

The key to Ussher's intent is in his use of the word "Reduction" in the title of his proposal. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "Reduction" as used in Ussher's day as "the action of bringing (back) *to* or *from* a state, condition, belief, etc."[9] Therefore, in his proposal, he is seeking to draw the episcopate back to its most ancient form as found in the early church and in Scripture, thereby addressing the concerns of the Presbyterians for scripturally warranted government *and* maintaining the centrality of bishops which the established church found essential to church order. In Ussher's understanding, such synodical government originates in a diocese where the bishop presides over a council of presbyters who offer advice and share in making decisions.

Ussher's model for a joint government of presbyters and bishops in England is a simple, four-level structure reaching from the parish to the national church:

1) First, disciplinary actions taken by the rector of a parish, together with his wardens or sidesmen, would be presented to a monthly deanery synod.
2) The deanery synod, over which a suffragan bishop would preside, would consist of all rectors in the deanery and would meet monthly.
3) A diocesan synod would sit semi-annually, presided over by the diocesan bishop and consisting of all suffragans and either all rectors or a select number from each deanery.
4) Finally, a provincial synod would be held triennially, presided over by one of the two Archbishops and consisting of all diocesan and suffragan bishops and representative clergy elected by each diocese.

In this structure, no disciplinary action taken by a rector could be permanent without being upheld by the deanery synod. The deanery synod could rule in theological disputes, but appeals of any decision could be made as far as the provincial synod meeting every three years. It is

[9] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed. (1989), s.v. "reduction."

important to note that at each level beyond the parochial, a bishop is president, either suffragan, diocesan, or primate. However, all members have equal vote with matters being decided by majority vote.[10]

Ussher's rationale for this proposal is rooted in the theology of the ordination rite for priests in the Book of Common Prayer used in Ussher's day and in Paul's charge to the elders of the church at Ephesus in Acts 20:27-28. In the ordination rite, the person to be ordained priest, according to Ussher, is charged "to administer the doctrine and sacraments, and the discipline of Christ, as the Lord hath commanded, and as this realm hath received the same."[11] The ordination lesson, Acts 20:27-28, further explicates this charge. In this passage Paul is recorded as charging the leader of the church at Ephesus to "Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son." Ussher understands Paul as the bishop, the chief overseer, and the elders, literally *presbyteroi*, as his partners in the oversight and administration of the Ephesian congregation. This close partnership between the apostle and the elder is the parallel that Ussher has in mind in his synodical model where the presbyters are partners with their bishop in the administration and oversight of the church in England. This passage was used as the ordination lesson until the 1662 revision of the prayer book, when it was replaced with Ephesians 4:7-13, a description of the varieties of gifts necessary for ministry. William H. Willimon encourages the examination of Acts 20:27-28 for a reconstruction of theology on ordination. His suggestion is based on the sharing of leadership and service between Paul and the appointed elders seen in the passage as a model for contemporary ministry.[12]

Ussher next appeals to Ignatius' letter to the Ephesians, dated now to the early years of the second century. From this letter, Ussher finds in the Ephesian community that there is "betwixt the bishop and the presbyter of the church . . . an harmonious consent . . . in the ordering of

[10]Ussher, 534-536. Ussher is ambiguous in the number of rectors suggested for a diocesan synod and allows for the possibility that the Archbishop of either York or Canterbury may preside over a synod in the other primate's province.
[11]Ussher, 531.
[12]William H. Willimon, *Acts*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 158-159.

church government."[13] My own examination of Ignatius' letter to the Ephesians shows that the author does indeed find a blessed unity between bishop and elder. First, Ignatius describes the person of the bishop as containing the unity and presence of the congregation at Ephesus: "I received your large congregation in the person of Onesimus, your bishop in this world."[14] However, the bishop's ability to represent the community depends on the unity that is modelled in the leadership of the community. "Your presbytery, indeed," writes Ignatius, "which deserves its name and is a credit to God, is as closely tied to the bishop as the strings to a harp. Wherefore your accord and harmonious love is a hymn to Jesus Christ."[15] Therefore, according to Ignatius, it would seem that the very witness of the church at Ephesus is neither dependent upon the bishop's sole authority or on the model behavior of the presbyters, *but on the two acting together in harmony*. Later in the letter, the unity of bishop and presbyter is seen in the symbol of the common loaf of the Eucharist as a sign of the union between the church on earth and Jesus Christ:

> At these meetings you should heed the bishop and presbytery attentively, and break one loaf, which is the medicine of immortality, and the antidote which wards off death but yields continuous life in union with Jesus Christ.[16]

Therefore, in Ignatius we have the beginnings of a theology of the bishop as a distinct order exercising leadership in community with the presbyters, who are another distinct order no longer seen as interchangeable with the bishops. The bishop is the figure of unity which is visible in the harmonious relationship between bishop and presbyters, and this unity is not just for the good of the church on earth, but is in

[13]Ussher, 532. It should be noted that Ussher is the primary figure responsible for authenticating the genuine Ignatian epistles; and, therefore, was intimately familiar with Ignatius' thought. Ussher did not publish his work on the authentic epistles until 1644, three years after his *Reduction of the Episcopacy*. See Cyril Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1978), 81-82, for further discussion on Ussher's role.
[14]Ignatius, *Ephesians* 1:3 in Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 88.
[15]Ignatius, *Ephesians* 4:1 in Richardson, *Early Christian Father,* 89.
[16]Ignatius, *Ephesians* 20:2 in Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 93.

service to that unity for which Christ prayed and to which he offered himself.[17]

The Ignatian emphasis on the unity of relationship between presbyters and bishop extends beyond being symbolic of the unity of the church. It is also for the practical exercise of authority within the church on earth. Ussher demonstrates later theological development on this theme by appealing to Tertullian and to Cyprian of Carthage. Tertullian, writing in the middle of the second century, emphasizes the authority of the elders (*presbyteroi*) of the church when he describes them administering "words of encouragement, of correction, and holy censure."[18] Cyprian, a century later, gives the clearest patristic support for Ussher's model of discipline and government administered in a synod of bishop and presbyters. In 255, Cyprian convened the Council of Carthage which stated, "That the bishop might hear no person's cause without the presence of the clergy: and that otherwise the bishop's sentence should be void, unless it were confirmed by the presence of clergy."[19] This tradition was recognized in England as early as the Saxon period when Egbert, Archbishop of York inserted this concept into English canon law.[20] Indeed, Egbert's *Exceptions* 46-48 originate from Cyprian's Council of Carthage and witness to the collegiality Cyprian sought. *Exception* 46 states: "Let the bishop hear no cause, but in the presence of his clerks." *Exception* 47 states: "The Carthaginian canon. Let the rector do nothing without the consent of his brethren. For it is written, 'Do all things with advice, and thou shalt not repent afterward.'" *Exception* 48 is ambiguously attributed to Cyprian and states that majority vote is required for decrees to be valid.[21]

In addition to the Council of Carthage, other examples from Cyprian which influenced Ussher occur in his letters. In a letter "To the Priests and Deacons," Cyprian commanded both priests and deacons in his

---

[17]John 17:3-5.

[18]Tertullian, *Apology* 39:4, in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 10, *Tertullian: Apologetical Works and Minucianus Felix: Octavius*, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann, Emily Joseph Daly and Edwin A. Quain (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1950), 98.

[19]Ussher, 533.

[20]Ussher, 533, citing *Council of Carthage IV, cap. 23* and *Exception. Egberti, cap. 43*.

[21]John Johnson, ed., *A Collection of The Laws and Canons of the Church of England, from its First Foundation to the Conquest, and from the Conquest to the Reign of King Henry VIII*, trans. John Johnson, vol. 1 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1850), 194.

diocese to "act in [his] place regarding those matters to be carried out which the religious administration demands."[22] In response to the urging of fellow priests regarding the lapsed, Cyprian writes, "I have been able to reply nothing in writing alone because, from the beginning of my episcopate, I decided to do nothing of my own opinion privately without your advice and the consent of the people."[23] Cyprian's attitude, which so heavily influenced Ussher, is perhaps best summed up by G. S. M. Walker:

> At the head of the local congregation, the bishop is the focus of a [community] whose members are united to Christ and to one another through him; the union of the presbytery around its bishop is symbolic of sharing in a common rule, a common faith and a common love; administration and discipline are expressions of this single purpose which reaches its sacramental climax in the eucharist.[24]

Indeed, Walker even describes Cyprian's model as somewhat akin to Scottish Presbyterianism, although ultimately more Ignatian in style since the Scottish General Assembly had far more authority in individual districts than either Cyprian or Ignatius envisaged for bishops in dioceses other than their own.[25]

It is easy to see why Ussher found synodical government by bishops and presbyters an appealing compromise between the Puritan claims that only presbyteral government had scriptural warrant and the royalist ideal of an authoritarian episcopate. Ussher saw his proposal as firmly rooted in the collegiality witnessed to in Scripture (cf. Acts 20:27-28), a reclamation of the usage of the early church seeking to put that vision into practice. Further, as the history of English canon law attests, this model of bishop presiding with a college of presbyters in synod is a part of England's past which faded into the background as a stronger monarchy developed in the church of England. Given this history, it is easy to see why Ussher chose to use the word "Reduction" in the title of his proposal. The next question to be examined is how Ussher's proposal

---

[22] *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 51, *Saint Cyprian: Letters (1-81)*, trans. Rose Bernard Donna (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 1964), 41: Letter 14.
[23] *Cyprian*, 43: Letter 14.
[24] G. S. M. Walker, *The Churchmanship of St. Cyprian* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968), 43-44.
[25] Walker, 35.

measured against the arguments of his more royalist colleagues John Bramhall and Herbert Thorndike in their writings against the Covenanters' threat.

The Royalist Views of Bramhall and Thorndike

The principal texts to be examined are Bramhall's *The Serpent-Salve* (1643) and *A Fair Warning against the Scottish Discipline* (1649) and Thorndike's *Of the Government of the Churches* (1641). These are the major texts of the two authors which directly address the issue of church government and are written in the same era of conflict in which Ussher authored his *Reduction*. As was stated earlier, Thorndike and Bramhall have been used as examples of opposition to Ussher's proposal. However, these works neither mention Ussher nor do they refute the proposals Ussher put forward. Instead, as will be seen, while their arguments are directed against the Presbyterian system enacted by the Covenant of 1638, the scriptural, historical and theological interpretations found in their works further support Ussher's model. A historian could further elucidate why Ussher's proposal fell on deaf ears and was not able to forge the compromise that could have, potentially, reduced the threat of civil war.

In the case of John Bramhall, his arguments are primarily in opposition to presbyteral seniority over civil or royal authority. In *Serpent-Salve*, Bramhall is attacking any understanding of Parliament as equal to the king, and is also attacking presbyters as *ultimate* authority in the judgment of civil magistrates, up to and including the monarch. A master of polemic, Bramhall's views can best be seen in his description of Calvinist proposals for church government:

> They give power to kings to reform the Church . . . not certainly, but contingently, in the case of an ungodly clergy (that is, in their sense, all others but themselves); but if they be once introduced, neither King nor Parliament have any more to do but execute their decrees: then 'the whole regiment of the Church is committed by Christ to pastors, elders and deacons:' . . . magistrates must remember to subject themselves,

> submit their sceptres, throw down their crowns to the Church, that is, to the presbytery. What is this but kissing of the presbyters' toes?[26]

For Bramhall, the king and bishops together were responsible for proper government of the church. The king ensured the temporal preservation of the church by calling councils and legitimating their decrees. The bishops were responsible for the oversight of the church itself. However, Bramhall's chief grievance against the Presbyterians was that the king would lose supremacy in ecclesiastical matters and could be subject to excommunication by a presbyteral body. Indeed, such ecclesiastical authority over civil government was compared to the very popery to which the Presbyterians were rabidly opposed:

> See how these *Hocus Pocuses*, with stripping up their sleeves and professions of plaindealing, the declaiming against the tyranny of prelates, under the pretence of humility and ministerial duty, have wrested the sceptre out of the hand of Majesty, and juggled themselves into as absolute a Papacy as ever was within the walls of Rome.[27]

However, Bramhall did not see bishops as without reproach. Rather, he viewed the monarch as head of the church, as the last court of appeal or prohibition in affairs regarding a troublesome bishop. A synod, as proposed by the Presbyterians, in his view would not have the ability to hear the full extent of grievances or have the expertise to render an appropriate decision. He writes, "The people shall groan under the decrees of a multitude of ignorant, unexperienced governors [and be] burdened with lay-elders."[28]

In light of Scripture (Acts 20:27-28) and the historical practice cited by Ussher, Bramhall's views simply cannot be defended if seen as a defense of the exclusion of presbyters from church government. However, Bramhall's theology centers on the scriptural warrant for the supremacy of the king's authority. Citing Matthew 22:21ff. and I Peter 2:13, Bramhall

---

[26] John Bramhall, *The Serpent-Salve; or the Remedy for the Biting of an Asp*, in vol. 3 of *The Works of the Most Reverend Father in God John Bramhall* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1844), 302.

[27] John Bramhall, *A Fair Warning Against Scottish Discipline*, in vol. 3 of *The Works of the Most Reverend Father in God John Bramhall* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1844), 269.

[28] Bramhall, *Serpent-Salve*, 478.

reminds his readers that Scripture mandates obedience to the ruler, in this case the king, which is the highest power in the land. Bishops, by virtue of their crown appointment, are to be obeyed as agents of the king and are, in turn, subject to the king's earthly authority.[29] There is nothing in either of Bramhall's two works which suggests that presbyters *cannot* share with bishops in governance and the administration of discipline. One of Bramhall's chief complaints against presbyteral government, what he calls the Scottish Discipline, is that in the Presbyterian system there is no appeal to the state, for the High Commission is the ultimate authority on ecclesiastical matters. Under the existing system, the church is protected against bad bishops by its very ability to appeal to the ultimate authority of the crown.[30] Bramhall's concern, then, is with order and the right exercise of government in the hands of those who are capable and informed, rather than in a broad democracy which he would liken to a mob rule.[31] Bramhall is aware that checks and balances are needed in the exercise of ecclesiastical discipline, the same type of checks and balances which would be preserved under Ussher's plan. Bramhall felt that, given the choice, a reasonable person would "ten times sooner admit of a moderate Episcopacy, than fall into the hands of hucksters [those who would abolish Episcopacy in favor of democratic presbyteral government]."[32]

Herbert Thorndike presents a more comprehensive vision of church government based on Scripture and the primitive forms of the church. His position, like Ussher's and Bramhall's, was that if the church were to be faithful to its past, it could not abolish bishops. He understood bishops as the center of government in the church and presbyters as extensions of the bishop's ministry. This is modelled in a cathedral system where parishes are dependent upon cathedrals for their support. By virtue of the presence of the bishop and chapter, the cathedral would be the center of the complete ministry of the diocese, and parishes would be its satellites.[33]

---

[29]Ibid., 348-349.
[30]Ibid., 477.
[31]For a thorough discussion of Bramhall's royalist views, see John Anderson, "Serpent-Salve, 1643: the Royalism of John Bramhall," in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 25:1 (1974), 1-14.
[32]Bramhall, *A Fair Warning*, 249.
[33]Herbert Thorndike, *Of the Government of the Churches*, in vol 1. in *The Theological Works of Herbert Thorndike* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1844), 96.

Thorndike's arguments are based on the practice of the apostles found in Scripture, particularly in Paul's practice of planting churches and appointing presbyters to oversee the congregations in their daily matters while holding onto a special apostolic authority for himself. Thus, the ministry of the presbyter as an extension of the apostolic authority vested in Paul, and later in the office of bishop, is founded on the example of Scripture.[34] Thorndike rehearses a long history of the early church gleaned from Scripture and the early fathers, to show that presbyters, sharing with bishops in the oversight of early Christian communities, derived their authority from the person of the bishop. Thorndike, like Ussher, also cites Cyprian's letter, "To the Priests and Deacons," as illustrative of this sharing.[35]

Thorndike goes on to challenge the Presbyterian assumption that laity were also included among the *presbyteroi* of the early church.[36] Since the presbyterate was to assist the bishop in administration of discipline, only the ordained, those with the power of the keys, could be part of the presbyterate. Thorndike's argument is based on the power of the keys being given only to the successors to the apostles. Bishops are responsible for the administration of discipline, but presbyters can and did share in that authority since the power of the keys was given by Christ to the apostles and their successors the bishops, and bishops share that power with the presbyters.[37] Therefore Thorndike is in agreement with Ussher that appeals to Scripture and the early church demonstrate that bishops must be maintained for the proper administration of discipline, but presbyters can and should share more visibly in that administration.

Ussher, Bramhall, and Thorndike were all concerned for the apostolic authority of the church and saw the development of the episcopate as a divine gift for the church which the church did not have the authority to change. While Bramhall used Scripture and tradition to defend the status quo, that is, the royalist practice of episcopal government in Stuart England, both Thorndike and Ussher appealed to Scripture and tradition to propose a development of understanding based on greater

[34]Thorndike, 8-14. Thorndike cites Acts 14:23, 20:17; 1 Thess. 5:12; and, though authorship is disputed, Tit. 1:5.
[35]Thorndike, 31, citing the same passage in Cyprian, Letter 14 as Ussher (see note 20).
[36]Thorndike, 39ff.
[37]Thorndike, 65.

collegiality in ministry. A synthesis of these three voices demonstrates a consistent argument based on Scripture and a historical development of theology of the essential character of episcopacy to the life of the church. From this affirmation, a model can emerge of a ministry of *episkope* held by bishops but shared in a collegial fashion with the other orders of ministry in God's church.

Contemporary Implications

Given the witness of Scripture and the early church, as seen above, the fundamental context for apostolic ministry emerges as *koinonia*. Exercise of leadership and authority in community is a common theme in contemporary theology. Schillebeeckx argues that such *koinonia* is shown when Christian communities do not exist as isolated entities but come together in love to build one another up with mutual support and criticism grounded in the gospel. Drawing his argument from Scripture, Schillebeeckx writes that "for the New Testament, this bond of love seems to be maintained in its apostolicity by the collegial leadership and *koinonia* of all its ministers."[38] Further, apostolicity cannot be maintained merely in the embrace of the theory of *koinonia*, but must also be shown in its practice.

"Receive the Holy Ghost for the Office and Work of a Priest in the church of God." These words, in Latin, line the wall above the faculty stalls of the Chapel of the Good Shepherd at the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church in New York City. They come from the prayer for the ordination of a priest in the 1789 Book of Common Prayer, which was the standard book when the chapel was built in the 1880s. The words are inscribed in Latin, and the word for "church" in Latin is *ecclesia* which comes from the Greek *ekklesia*, which means assembly or gathering. Where "church" appears in the English translations of the New Testament, *ekklesia* is used in the Greek manuscripts. *Ekklesia* is also used in Acts 7:38 by Stephen to refer to the gathering of the Israelites as a congregation, a gathering for religious instruction, during the Exodus. And the word has also a secular character, as in Acts 19:32 where it refers to a generic gathered crowd in Ephesus. Thus, *ekklesia* is both a common

[38]Edward Schillebeeckx, *Ministry: Leadership in the Community of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 37.

gathering and, in the context of the ordination prayer, a sacred gathering of the people of God. While the church has, at times, focused on the office and work of a priest as an individual, these words serve as a reminder that the ministry of the ordained is specifically to be carried out in the context of the *koinonia* of the People of God.

The practice of *koinonia* finds its ultimate expression when the community is gathered around the Holy Table to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. Here, the bishop is the president sharing in the offering with the clergy joined by the whole community. As Ignatius writes to the Philadelphians, "Be careful then to observe a single Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup of his blood that makes *us* one, and one altar, just as there is one bishop along with the presbytery and the deacons."[39] More famously, Ignatius writes, "Where the bishop is present, there let the congregation gather, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church."[40] It is interesting to note that the Scripture passage most associated with this emphasis, Ephesians 4:1-16, has become the recommended Epistle reading for ordinations to the priesthood throughout much of the Anglican Communion.[41] It replaces Paul's command to the elders in Ephesus from Acts 20 to which Ussher and Thorndike both appealed in their models of episcopal and presbyteral collegiality.

From the evidence cited, it is clear that Archbishop Ussher's model of church government is faithful to both Scripture and tradition. While the polemic of the age may have obscured the sound of reasoned voices, the theology of Ussher's peers Thorndike and Bramhall further demonstrates that synodical government was not theologically inconsistent with the royalist position. A man of Presbyterian sympathy, Robert Baxter, wrote after the Restoration:

> They seem not to me to have taken the course which should have settled these distracted churches. Instead of disputing against all Episcopacy, they should have changed diocesan prelacy into such an Episcopacy as the conscience of the

[39]Ignatius, *Philadelphians* 4:1, in Richardson, *Early Church Fathers*, 108.
[40]Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans* 8:2, in Richardson, *Early Church Fathers*, 115.
[41]The key verses reflecting the unity which the ministry of bishop and presbyters are together called to foster are Ephesians 4:4-5: "There is one body and Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, on God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

> king might have admitted, and as was agreeable to that which the Church had in the two or three first ages.[42]

Further, in the disputes of the day, Ussher's was the voice of reason. Baxter says "Archbishop Usher [sic] there took the rightest course, who offered the king his reduction of Episcopacy."[43] It would be interesting to speculate on the nature of church unity today had the Presbyterians and the Anglicans received Ussher's proposal. However, with nationalist fervor on one side and aristocratic elitism on the other fanning the flames, the die was probably cast with Covenant of 1638 and its desire for "The extirpation of popery, prelacy (that is church government by archbishops, bishops, their chancellors and commissaries, deans, deans and chapters, archdeacons, and all other ecclesiastical officers depending on that hierarchy), superstitions, heresy, schism, profaneness, and whatsoever shall be found to be contrary to sound doctrine and the power of godliness."[44]

The importance of reflecting on Ussher's proposal for today is that it emphasizes the collegial nature of ministry. While Ussher, Thorndike, and Bramhall all wrote in the context of proposed collegiality between bishops and presbyters, the laity are included at the parochial level of Ussher's proposal by the role the sidesmen and wardens share with the rector in the administration of discipline. Further, there has been tremendous emphasis in the twentieth century on ministry rising out of community for service in community. John Zizioulas writes that "there is a fundamental *interdependence between the ministry and the concrete community of the Church* as the latter is brought about by the *koinonia* of the Spirit."[45] It is in the assembly of the People of God, the *ekklesia* gathered in Eucharistic worship, that the extension of Christ's ministry is conferred. Zizioulas argues that ministry is relational rather than institutional. In the *ekklesia*, all are ordained by some form of extension of Christ's ministry through the bishop and presbyters to a particular order, a

---

[42]Richard Baxter, *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1931), 62.
[43]Ibid.
[44]J. R. H. Moorman, *A History of the Church in England* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1954), 238.
[45]John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 212.

particular relationship in the eucharistic assembly.[46] Therefore the *ekklesia* is the incarnation of Christ's love for and presence in the world.

While Ussher's proposal did not find application in its day, it has survived in the form of synods and general conventions which now govern most of the churches in the Anglican Communion. Writing to address the issues of the seventeenth century, and in the seventeenth century understanding of ecclesiology, Ussher, Bramhall, and Thorndike all demonstrated the theme of *koinonia*. The genius of Ussher's proposal goes beyond its reason, and even its enthusiastic calm in the midst of polemic from the Covenanters and the royalists alike. It shows that the Anglican witness to collegiality in ministry is not a twentieth century innovation, but founded on Anglicanism's fundamental understanding of itself as an extension and development of the New Testament *ekklesia* throughout the ages.

[46]Zizioulas, 216.