

## Chapter 7 Conclusions

At the time of the Denver consecrations, in January, 1978, Earl Brill in *The Christian Century* made a prediction about what he called “the current movement toward schism” in the Episcopal Church. Defections of parishes and clergy, he said, would probably continue; but the movement’s leaders “will soon discover that there is far less support for their position among the laypeople than they had supposed.”<sup>1</sup> In absolute terms, this has proven true—the Continuing Church’s numbers number at most in the low tens of thousands, while those of the Episcopal Church remain in the millions. At the same time, however, the Continuing Churches have not vanished as some might have thought in 1977-1978.

Yet the numbers are ultimately beside the point, though some individual Continuing jurisdictions are so small as to seem almost non-existent.. We have seen that the *vagantes* are at least peripherally related to the episcopal lineages of the Continuing Church, as in the cases of the Anglican Orthodox Church and the American Episcopal Church. By and large, however, the Continuum traces its orders from persons consecrated within the Anglican Communion itself, such as the Right Reverend Albert Chambers. And though the Continuing jurisdictions often battle with one another, they seem more substantial than the classic *vagantes*, such as Vilatte and Mathew. *The Christian Challenge* generally follows the doings of Continuing Churches which number more than 3,000 members; this number is far higher than the membership of the Vilatte, Ferrete, and Mathew-inspired groups.

But even in the cases where the episcopal orders do descend from the *vagantes*, the question we must ask ourselves is, what is the most important part of the Christian life? Is it the visible expression of the divine order, as seen in the episcopal hierarchy, or is it each Christian’s individual connection to the Head of the Body, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself? Or to put it more simply, is the question more about church order, or the *reason* for the church order? Then, too, is the Church dependent upon human activity for its continuation, or is God the Son able to sustain His Bride howsoever He will, with whatever means He will?

Kenneth Sansbury asserts that Anglicans need to recognize two things more clearly: 1) “the fact that a church does not have bishops as we understand them does not mean that it lacks *episcopate*” and 2) “that ‘non-episcopal’ churches abandoned the use of bishops because of the misconduct of the bishops (prelacy, lack of pastoral care, elitist understanding of the office).”<sup>2</sup>

His guiding principle is that church order must fit with the Gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> Brill, 46.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Sansbury, *Truth, Unity and Concord: Anglican Faith in an Ecumenical Setting* (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co. Ltd., 1967), 193.

R.J. Cooke points out that John Wesley's decision to ordain Thomas Coke was not simply based on his belief that he, Wesley, as a presbyter, had the right to do such a thing; it was based, rather, on what one can call the "doctrine of necessity." Wesley ordained Coke, because it was the thing that was required to promote the Gospel in the Americas. As Cooke says,

the founders of the Methodist episcopate went back of Church canons and customs and behind all slowly evolved theories of the necessity of episcopal ordination to the essential validity of the ministerial function, and vindicated their action by appeal to Holy Scripture and the practice of the primitive Church.<sup>3</sup>

In evaluating the Continuing Churches, it is perhaps less important to consider the origins of their orders, as to consider what these bodies actually do with said orders. Are these churches' clergy believing and preaching the Gospel, making disciples, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked? If they are, and living righteously according to the rule of Christ, then they are more "valid" than mainstream clergy who have fallen into complete apostasy. In the late 1970's, those who left the Anglican Communion to found independent jurisdictions did so because they believed that the mainstream Communion had indeed fallen away from God's truth. Though one may dispute some of their positions, as for example on women's ordination, the Continuers tried in good faith to preserve what they saw as the Church's historic path.

It is distressing that both the Continuum and mainstream Anglicanism have forgotten the dictums of the English Reformers, men grounded in the Bible, patristics, and well as Catholic practice. The Reformers of England sought to reform the Church's ministry, yet considered church polity as *adiaphora*. It is disturbing that the Concordat between the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is held up due to a dispute over the "Historic Episcopate." The Episcopal Church insists on it as a requirement for merger, making it look as though the Lutherans do not have a true Church. It is disturbing, too, that the Continuing Churchmen spend so much heat on disputing each other's legitimacy. Good order is important, but faith in Jesus Christ is more important.

In a perfect world, perhaps, there would be no questions regarding the episcopate. But in even in such a world, the Lord remains sovereignly free to do as He will. In evaluating the Continuing Churches, then, it is best to judge each according to its faith and works, and not by the bare technical "validity" of its ministry. Using this test, we find exceedingly mixed results. Some of the churches appear to be busy with preaching and teaching and charitable service, while others appear rather torpid. It is not the place here to go into the particular merits and failings of the individual denominations, both in the interests of space and of charity.

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<sup>3</sup> Cooke, *The Historic Episcopate*, 135.

It seems, however, the ultimate irony that the very principle upon which the Continuing Churches base their claims of legitimacy—the Apostolic Succession of Bishops—is not the principle which best supports their separation from the Anglican Communion. It is, rather, the “doctrine of necessity,” one of the primary principles of the Reformation.

In the end, disputes over church polity will mean very little if the more essential matters are neglected. As the Body of Christ stands facing her third millennium, with enemies without and within, all of her members would do well to remember these.