

Episcopal Views of *Episkopé*: *Sources, Significance, and Expression*

It would be reasonable to suppose that a church that takes as its principal means of self-description an order of ministry—The Episcopal Church—would be characterized by a long-considered and well-developed set of theological ideas as to the substance and significance of that ministry. At least in the case of the Episcopal Church, however, that is not—at least not quite—the case.

To use a metaphor from the arts, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that a theological understanding of the ministry of *episkopé* in the Episcopal Church is less like a statue and more like a symphony. It is not a singular, monolithic understanding of the basis, purpose, and role of a given order of ministry in God's church; it is instead the living expression of a historic inheritance of influences and ideas stretching across history from the first centuries early church to the emergence of the United States as a nation separate from England.

This brief essay is an attempt to identify, and to a limited extent describe, the principal themes in that symphony. It is not, and has never been, entirely harmonious; and even today, it is not a finished work. Yet it has guided the development of one of the independent provinces of the Anglican Communion through its two hundred and thirty-five years; and in contemplating the stance of the Episcopal Church in its ecumenical relationships, it is well to bear in mind how it has evolved, and has become understood, among its people.

A full examination of this subject would take into view the inheritance of scripture in disclosing the leadership exercised by the community of the Apostles, and the model thus established for leadership in the church; the emergence of the episcopacy in the Western church, particularly the dramatic rise of its influence in the fourth and fifth centuries of its influence, which in many respects set the course for the theology, mission, and governance of the church, and its relationship to state power, for the next millennium; the emergence of a distinctive understanding of the episcopacy in late medieval England, and the significance of that order of ministry in the unfolding of a uniquely Anglican expression of the Reformation; and the consequent experience of the Anglican church in pre-Revolutionary America.

For the limited purposes in view here, our focus will necessarily be on the expression of the ministry of *episkopé* in the eighteenth-century Church of England,

and the ways in which the post-Revolutionary church in the United States both received some aspects of this and rejected others, creating a distinctively American expression of both the Anglican ideal and the historic apostolate.

A Church of Colonizers

The story of European settlement in what would become the United States does not begin, as is often thought, with a group of Calvinistic dissenters settling precariously in Massachusetts. It begins more than a decade before that event, with the arrival of a party sponsored by the Virginia Company, acting on the basis of a warrant from James I, in lands then part of the Powhatan Confederacy. Unsurprisingly for a group under English patronage, the company brought with them a chaplain, The Reverend Robert Hunt, who on June 21, 1607 celebrated what is thought to be the first Anglican service of Holy Eucharist on the American continent.

Between that moment and the rupture of Revolution, the Church of England spread alongside the sources of English government and power in the American colonies. The history of religion in colonial America is a tale well-told, and here it will have to suffice to provide a broad, necessarily oversimplified summary. Settlement in New England was largely ideologically motivated, often specifically grounded in a rejection of Anglicanism as Calvinistic dissenters—the Puritans—sought to establish a social, political, and theological order in the relative freedom of an unsettled colony. Ironically, perhaps, while New Englanders rejected the Anglicanism of England, they did not reject the privileges of establishment; the Puritans ensured that their own church, later to be called the Congregational church, was accorded the status of an established church—and thus support from public funds—in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut, and dissent from this understanding of Christianity was, to greater or lesser degrees, suppressed. Some colonies became areas of settlement for other confessions—Roman Catholics in Maryland, following George Calvert—while others, like Rhode Island and Pennsylvania, took a more radical approach to religious tolerance than the Puritans could countenance, permitting all confessions to find a home within their borders while favoring none.

Settlement in the southern colonies was more likely to be influenced by economic incentives. Especially after the restoration of the English monarchy in 1660, royal charters backed groups of private investors in launching ventures to develop agriculture in these areas for export to Great Britain, particularly tobacco; not surprisingly, in these areas of settlement, the Anglican church was more prominent

and was the church of political and economic elites, becoming established in some places.

The religious landscape of colonial America is the subject of a vast literature, the themes and nuances of which are beyond the task of this short study. It will suffice for our purposes to draw at some length on Bernard Bailyn's pathbreaking study of the intellectual history of pre-Revolutionary America, when he turns to the subject of establishment:

The establishment of religion had been a problem for Americans almost from the first years of settlement. Though most of the early settlers had carried with them traditional assumptions concerning the states responsibility for supervising and enforcing orthodox religious institutions, and though most of the original communities had sought to re-create ecclesiastical establishments, there had been difficulties from the start. In some places, as in Virginia, trouble was created by the physical circumstances of the situation; the scattering of population and the distance from ecclesiastical centers in Europe. Elsewhere, as in Massachusetts, where the physical circumstances were favorable, the very intensity of religious motivation and the desire to specify and enforce a letter-perfect orthodoxy led to schismatic challenges to the establishment. Still elsewhere, as in New York, the sheer diversity of religious persuasion in the population made the establishment of anyone church problematic.

Only rarely in the settlement period, however, were difficulties created by anti-establishment principles, and only in one colony, Pennsylvania, did systematic, principled opposition to establishments survive to shape the character of instituted religion in the eighteenth century. Elsewhere the pattern of establishments in religion, like that of so many other areas of life in the colonies, was the result of unsystematic, incomplete, pragmatic modifications of a traditional model. By the 1750s so irregular, so ill defined, and so quickly shifting were the religious establishments in the various colonies that they defy a simple summary. In the Virginia of Jefferson's youth, the church of England was established; but the law requiring nonconformist organizations to register with the government was often ignored, especially in the western counties where the settlement of dissenters was actively promoted by the government; nonconformists were not barred from their own worship nor penalized for failure to attend the Anglican communion, and they were commonly exempted from parish taxes. Dissent within Protestantism excluded no one from voting or from holding public office: even Roman Catholics were known to occupy government posts despite the laws that excluded them. And Virginia's was one of the more conservative establishments. The effective privileges of the Church of England were at least as

weak in South Carolina and Georgia; they hardly existed in North Carolina. There was scarcely a vestige of them in the middle colonies, and where they survived in law, as in four counties of New York, they were either ignored or had become embattled by violent opposition well before the revolution. And in Massachusetts and Connecticut, where the establishment, being nonconformist according to English law, was legally tenuous to begin with, tolerance in worship and relief from church taxation had been extended to the major dissent in groups early in the century, resulting well before the revolution in what John Adams described as “the most mild and equitable establishment of religion that was known in the world, if indeed it could be called an establishment.”... Almost everywhere the church of England, the established church of the highest state authority, was defensive, driven to rely more and more on its missionary arm, the society for the propagation of the gospel, to sustain it against the cohorts of dissent.¹

It was in the middle of the eighteenth century that the relationship between crown and colony began down a path toward irreparable breach. In the southern colonies, where Anglicanism enjoyed the privileges of either establishment or favor, a downturn in the tobacco economy—which directly benefited Anglican clergy, whose salaries were based on the amount harvested—brought about a measure to trim the clerics’ income, in view of the drop in income to farmers. The clergy appealed to the Bishop of London, who responded by sending an ill-considered *démarche* to the colony; and the resulting court case, known as the “Parsons’ Cause,” became a catalyst of anti-clerical—and especially anti-Anglican—sentiment in the most prosperous southern colony.

At nearly the same moment, in 1759, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), a missionary enterprise of the Church of England, established a mission in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the intellectual center of New England Puritanism. Ostensibly an effort to spread the Gospel among the indigenous peoples (although that community had been pushed out of Cambridge many decades earlier), the mission was entrusted into the hands of a much-maligned Anglican prelate, East Apthorp, who not long after arriving built a palatial mansion

1. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), 247–9. The quote from John Adams comes from his *Diary and Autobiography*, III, 312. In a note to this text, Bailyn adds: “That the Congregational establishments in New England were severe was a commonplace, however, especially among the Anglican opponents of the Revolutionary movement.”

just outside the college walls and published a pamphlet in which argued, *inter alia*, that Christian orthodoxy was properly understood to require episcopacy.²

These two events, in two of the most significant locations in British North America, coincided with the moment in which the parliament in Westminster was making clear its intent to extend its power over the colonies in the form of acts of taxation. It appeared to colonists of all persuasions, both dissenters and Anglicans alike, that the Church of England, in parallel with the parliament, was intent on extending its reach into the colonies—not only establishing an American bishopric, but ineluctably moving toward the logical outcome of extending the presumption of the establishment of the Church of England on American shores—a thing many even among American Anglicans could not countenance. Hence, as Bailyn has summarized the moment, “With the colonists echoing the old cry ‘No Bishop, No King,’ the renewal in the 1760s and 1770s of Anglican agitation for an American episcopate may properly be seen as one of the contributing causes of the American Revolution.”³

Revolution, Rebuilding, and Authority

The impact of the American Revolution on the experience of Anglicanism in the United States was dramatic—and comprehensive. For our purposes it is important to give a brief account here of the state of Anglicanism in colonial America at the threshold of the revolution. It was, in many respects, a very different church from the paradigm received from the United Kingdom; it had no bishops, no cathedrals, and no dioceses.

In the pews of these churches sat side-by-side those who were the product of many generations of settlement, and those who were only recently arrived from Britain; and this meant that within a single church there were those who considered themselves *English*, and those who were far more likely to consider themselves *American*. The clergy followed something like the same pattern; the earliest had been born in Britain, but toward the end of the colonial period a substantial number of Anglican clergy in the colonies had been born and educated in America, traveled to England to be ordained, and immediately returned, often with the support of the SPG, to serve parishes.

² Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 254-5.

³ David L. Holmes, “The Episcopal Church and the American Revolution,” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 47:3 (September 1978), 264.



An Attempt to Land a Bishop in America. Engraving from the *Political Register*, London: September 1769. An Anglican cleric is seen aboard an outbound ship, eagerly pushed away from the dock by a crowd of colonists. One exclaims “No Lords Spiritual or Temporal in New England”; others hold books saying “Locke” and “Sydney on Government”; another throws “Calvin’s Lawes” at the prelate, who prays the words of the Nunc Dimittis (“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace”). “Religion and the Founding of the American Republic” (Digital Exhibition of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.); <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/re103.html#obj086>

Each parish had dependencies that stretched in two directions—first, into the local community, upon which it depended for most of its financial support; and second, across the sea to England, and particularly to London: “From the last quarter of the seventeenth century until the end of the colonial period in the United States...the belief prevailed that the colonial Church was, in some undetermined

way, under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of London.”⁴ That dependency was not only spiritual, but in very real ways economic; beginning in 1748, Anglican clerics posted “missionary bonds” to the bishop of London as a condition of receiving support from the crown to emigrate to, and minister in, the colonies.⁵

This hampered the work of the church in many ways. It was understood that confirmation was the necessary condition for admission to Holy Communion, and that the bishop alone could officiate at a Confirmation; yet in the absence of bishops to do so, the requirement was widely overlooked. The bishop was seen as distant, disinterested, and, for the most part, dispensable. Similarly, the absence of both a structure connecting the parishes into a larger community, and of cathedrals serving as the center of that structure, meant that individual parishes were largely independent entities. Indeed, the degree of autonomy to which Anglican parishes in colonial America became accustomed was largely unknown in England. Vestries in Virginia (for example) both called, and capriciously dismissed, clergy; the situation became such that the civil authorities in Virginia acted by the mid-eighteenth century to remove the capacity of Vestries to shed even outrageously unfit clergy.⁶ The relatively wide compass of this autonomy would inform the milieu within which the proposals made for the future of the church on the threshold of victory in the Revolution were received—and heard.

Not surprisingly, then, on the eve of Revolution Anglicans in America, and the churches they made, were divided—sometimes bitterly—over which side to take in what was, for them, a civil war within the church. There were clergy who faithfully observed their oath to the crown and included at ever Sunday service the “State prayers” for the sovereign, often at the cost of being ridiculed, locked out of their churches, called before local committees of patriots—or even shot at in the pulpit.⁷ From the time of the Declaration of Independence in July of 1776, Anglican congregations closed across the colonies, and many clergy left for either Canada or England. The church itself seemed poised to become a casualty of the

4 William Wilson Manross, *The Fulham Papers in the Lambeth Palace Library: American Colonial Section Calendar and Indexes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), xi.

5 Manross, *The Fulham Papers*, 323.

6 “During the eighteenth century several laws were passed which gave the clergy the security they desired, but the laws never quite agreed with English custom and the clergy continued to be dissatisfied.” Joan Rezner Gunderson, “The Myth of the Independent Virginia Vestry,” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 44:2 (June 1975), 137.

7 Holmes, “The Episcopal Church and the American Revolution,” 275.

revolution. The issue, at its heart, was not merely one of bishops; it was that—as represented by the Church of England—Anglicanism, given the Erastian role of bishops in exercising civil authority, represented a form of both the establishment of religion and the exercise of authority in the church that conflicted fundamentally with Enlightenment ideals.

Expedient—and Episcopacy

Into this parlous situation one of a handful of remaining priests in Pennsylvania, William White, sought to speak to the seemingly impossible prospect facing a continuing Anglican church in the United States. By the middle of 1782, six long years after the Declaration, the end of the conflict was widely anticipated—but the place of the church in the outcome was clouded and uncertain. White accurately saw a number of pressing issues that Anglicans in the United States would face when the war had ended:

- How would the church be *governed*? The Church of England had maintained both the historic inheritance of three orders of ministry—deacons, priests, and bishops—and the claim of apostolic succession, assured through the instrumentality of the consecration of bishops, as a means of asserting its legitimacy as the continuation of the Catholic church in England. How could the American church continue to be governed by bishops, or hope to claim legitimacy, if it were no longer in communion with the Church of England?
- If a form of episcopal government was to be continued, how would bishops be *chosen* and the ministry of bishops structured? Because in the Church of England the crown was understood to be the head of both state and church, bishops in that church had been, in a formal sense, appointed by the sovereign, and (at least in some views) shared in the sovereign's divine right; but such a claim would obviously be unacceptable *ab initio* to the church in a newly independent United States.
- How would the church be *structured*? The church had inherited no structure of dioceses; it was, in effect, a collection of parishes, many of which depended on clergy supplied and supported by the SPG, and all somehow understood to be under the jurisdiction of a single bishop, in London. Anglicans in America now confronted the immense challenge of fashioning a new system of church government that would provide a common set of guidelines and parallel structures across a vast territory. And while they had an understanding of

the canon law inheritance of the Western church, not least in the Church of England, it was already clear that the governance of the church would need to be articulated in ways completely separate from civil authority and the power of the state.

White's set of proposals for the future of the church, *The Case for the Episcopal Churches in the United States Considered*, appeared as a pamphlet published in August of 1782. In it, White made a case for the continuation of a church in the United States shaped by episcopal government—although on the basis of a very different understanding of the nature and power of *episkopé* that would characterize the new church. White based his case for a church structured around the leadership of bishops on the observation that Anglicans in America had endured considerable hardships prior to the Revolution in order to maintain such an ecclesiology:

Wherever these churches have been erected, the ecclesiastical government of the church of England has been adhered to; they have depended on the English bishops for ordination of their clergy, and on no occasion expressed a dissatisfaction with episcopacy. This, considering the liberty they enjoyed in common with others, of forming their churches on whatever plan they liked best, is a presumptive proof of their preferring the episcopal government; especially as it subjected them under the former connection to many inconveniences, such as sending to the distance of three thousand miles for ordination, the scandal sometimes brought on the church by the ordination of low and vicious persons, the difficulty of getting rid of immoral ministers, and that several of the clergy formed attachments of which this country has been always jealous, and which have at last proved extremely prejudicial to her interests.⁸

At the same time, White acknowledged that there had been no desire for the emergence of episcopacy in the United States, and indeed active resistance to the idea of the presence of bishops among the colonists—even among Anglicans:

On the other hand, there cannot be produced an instance of laymen in America, unless in the very infancy of the settlements, soliciting the introduction of a bishop; it was probably by a great majority of them thought an hazardous experiment. How far the prerogative of the king as head of the church might be construed to extend over the colonies, whether a bishop would bring with him that part of the law which respects ecclesiastical matters, and whether the civil powers vested in bishops in England would

⁸ William White, *The Case of the Episcopal Churches in the United States Considered* (1782), reprinted in Richard G. Salomon, "William White's *The Case for the Episcopal Church in the United States Considered*," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 22:4 ("The Bishop William White Number"), September 1953, 456-7.

accompany that order to America, were questions which for aught they knew would include principles and produce consequences, dangerous and destructive to their civil rights.⁹

To this White appended a short commentary in a note, words that turn out to be, in no small way, prophetic:

Whether the above appendages would have accompanied an English bishop to America, the author is no judge. That they were generally feared by the episcopalian laity, he thinks the only way of accounting for the cold reception they gave (a fact universally known) to every proposal for the introduction of a bishop. Those who pleaded for the measure *on a plan purely spiritual*, thought he would not be invested, by the laws of England, with such powers; but in case it had proved otherwise, they proposed the limiting him by act of parliament. What the people would have thought of measures, which must have required an act of that body to render them harmless, no person formerly acquainted with their temper and sentiments need be told; and whether they judged right or not, recent events have abundantly shewn.¹⁰

It falls beyond the scope of this short essay to explore how White addressed the intertwined ramifications of all the challenges he saw facing the emergent Anglican church in the United States. For the moment, we limit our attention to White's specific (and later quite controversial) ideas about bishops—how they would be identified, and what role and authority they would have in the governance of the church.

White was nothing if not a sensitive judge of the culture and climate of his day. He well understood that central to the ideology of the Revolution was the conviction that sovereignty belonged to the people, and not to the crown; and that, in consequence, those who exercised leadership in the nation that emerged, in whatever realm of life, could not do so with legitimacy in the absence of a mandate from the people over whom their authority would be exercised. As William Sachs has noted, "White's plan reflected the explication of Anglican ideals in American guise. Absorbing American political values into the church, he insisted that, as in society, the people should be afforded full measures of authority and participation."¹¹ He saw, too, the impossibility of merely transplanting *tout court* the canon law of the

9 White, in Salomon, "William White's *The Case...*," 457.

10 White, in Salomon, "William White's *The Case...*," 457 n.51; my emphasis.

11 William L. Sachs, *The Transformation of Anglicanism: From State Church to Global Communion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 66.

Church of England, which reflected both in substance and in pretension the privileges of an established church on Erastian principles.

White's solution was to propose, in effect, a separation between the *spiritual* authority of the episcopal order of ministry—which he saw as both necessary for the order of the church and desired on the part of the faithful—and any claim to *civil* authority on the part of bishops, which would, in the new settlement, necessarily be surrendered. It is difficult, from the distance of twenty-four decades, to grasp how unprecedented—not to say outrageous—such a proposal would have seemed to those whose understanding of the life and work of Christ's church had been formed within any Western church governed by canon law.

Two specific aspects of White's newly imagined episcopal order merit our attention. The first is that, with the rejection of any idea that the crown would have power over either civil or ecclesiastical affairs in the new nation, the authority for the selection of bishops was placed—as with all to whom was entrusted the power of leadership—in an election encompassing the votes of both the clergy *and* the laity. This was a complete break from the understanding of episcopal selection in the Church of England, but White found support for his proposal in the practice of the ancient church:

The power of electing a superior order of ministers ought to be in the clergy and laity together, they being both interested in the choice. In England, the bishops are appointed by the civil authority; which was an usurpation of the crown at the Norman conquest, but since confirmed by acts of parliament. The primitive churches were generally supplied by popular elections; even in the city of Rome, the privilege of electing the bishop continued with the people to the tenth or eleventh century; and near those times there are resolves of councils, that none should be promoted to ecclesiastical dignities, but by election of the clergy and people. It cannot be denied, that this right vested in numerous bodies, occasioned great disorders; which it is expected will be avoided, when the people shall exercise the right by representation.¹²

Not only the election, but also the removal—or the “deprivation”—of bishops should be the exclusive remit of the church, and not, crucially, the state:

Deprivation of the superior order of clergy should also be in the church at large. In England, it has been sometimes done by the civil authority; particularly in the instances of Queen Mary's roman catholic bishops by Queen Elizabeth, and of the non-juring bishops at the revolution... It is well known, that the interference of the civil authority in such instances as the

12 White, in Salomon, “William White's *The Case...*,” 451–2.

preceding has been considered by many as inconsistent with ecclesiastical principles; an objection which will be avoided, when deprivation can only be under regulations enacted by a fair representation of the churches, and by an authority entirely ecclesiastical. It is presumed, that none will so far mistake the principles of the Church of England, as to talk of the impossibility of depriving a bishop.¹³

Second, the ministry of bishops—whom White often described in his pamphlet alternatively as “the superior order of clergy”—was seen as something very different from the princely, land-rich, quasi-royal personages of the Church of England. Not only was that form of leadership contrary to the egalitarian ethos of the new nation, but the history of the church’s development in America required a different approach to crafting a new governing structure for an Episcopal Church:

In England, dioceses having been formed before parishes, a church supposes one common flock, subject to a bishop and sundry collegiate presbyters; without the idea of its being necessarily divided into smaller communities, connected with their respective parochial clergy; the latter having been introduced some considerable time after the conversion of the nation to the Christian faith. One natural consequence of this distinction, will be to retain in each church every power that need not be delegated for the good of the whole. Another, will be an equality of the churches; and not, as in England, the subjection of all parish churches to their respective cathedrals.¹⁴

It is well to pause here to collect the implications of this for the church that would come into being.

- Bishops were to be *elected* by the clergy and laity together, not appointed by the state and not (significantly) only by those in orders.
- Bishops could also be *removed*. In White’s scheme, the power of removal lay in the whole church, as did the power of election.
- The church, having not inherited a hierarchical structure of cathedrals, dioceses, and parishes, would instead construct districts gathering together parishes in geographic areas, on the basis of a principal of *equality between parishes*. (The first cathedrals in the Episcopal Church did not appear until the nineteenth century.) Bishops would have oversight in these districts, which would, White believed, remain relatively small, in view of the poverty of most churches, which dictated

13 White, in Salomon, “William White’s *The Case...*,” 452.

14 White, in Salomon, “William White’s *The Case...*,” 452-3.

...the impossibility that the churches should provide a support for that superior order of clergy, to which their acknowledged principles point; of consequence, the duty assigned to that order ought not materially to interfere with their employments, in the station of parochial clergy; the superintendence of each will therefore be confined to a small district; a favorite idea to all moderate episcopalians.

- Bishops did not, in White's construction of a pattern for church governance, rule *over* these districts—which would become dioceses—but rather exercised leadership *within* them, sharing authority with regularly convened having a distinct calling and charism for the spiritual and pastoral leadership of the church, the guardianship of doctrine and forms of worship, and the responsibility for maintaining discipline among the clergy:

In the minds of some, the idea of episcopacy will be connected with that of immoderate power; to which it may be answered, that power becomes dangerous, not from the precedency of one man, but from his being independent.... It may further be objected, that episcopacy is anti-republican; and therefore opposed to those ideas which all good citizens ought to promote, for securing the peace and happiness of the community. But this supposed relation between episcopacy and monarchy arises from confounding English episcopacy, with the subject at large. In the early ages of the church, it was customary to debate and determine in a general concourse of all Christians in the same city; among whom the bishop was no more than president....

As the Episcopal Church has evolved since first gathering in General Convention three years after White published his treatise, the animating spirit of this understanding of the ministry of *episkopé* in the church has remained—even if some of White's specifics have not. Bishops are still elected. They may be removed, but only through a tribunal of the House of Bishops, not through a process involving the whole church. White's original vision of small districts expanded quickly into dioceses with scores of parishes; White's own "district," now the Diocese of Pennsylvania (of which he was the first bishop), now numbers 134 congregations.¹⁵ While the cathedral idea did emerge in the United States, it did so quite late—arguably the result of the church's shift from its early missionary roots to a church of economic and social power in the nineteenth century. Notably, the emergence of cathedrals did not bring about a significant change in either the governance of the Episcopal Church or in the essentially egalitarian nature of parishes participating in

¹⁵ <https://www.diopa.org/>, accessed 28 January 2021.

diocesan governance; and the role of cathedrals in the life of the Episcopal Church continues to be a source of scholarly discussion, not to say dispute.¹⁶

Perhaps most significantly, the role of the bishop in the governance of the church became something very different from that suggested by the inherited paradigm. For one thing, each of White's "districts" (ultimately, the dioceses of the church) formed their own constitution and canons, paralleling the constitution and canons of the church itself. The idea of diocesan canons distinct from canon law was unknown in the Church of England, and particularly the idea that the canons of a diocese would stipulate limits on the authority of the bishop. On this point, one contemporary ecclesologist in the Church of England has commented with no little bewilderment:

...an English diocesan synod is not a legislative body, and the bishop has an effective veto over its resolutions.... The Synodical Government Measure envisages matters on which the bishop will decide, having consulted his [sic] synod. It places the bishop under a duty "to consult with the diocesan synod on matters of general concern and importance with the diocese," but does not oblige [the bishop] to act in accordance with the synod's views....

The position in the Episcopal Church is very different. The Constitution of the General Convention requires that in each diocese there shall be a standing committee elected by the diocesan convention. Typically, the standing committee (of which the bishop is not a member) has four lay and four clerical members, who choose their own president. Reading both the canons of the General Convention and the diocesan canons, it is striking just how often a decision of the bishop requires the consent of either a simple or a two-thirds majority of the standing committee. Most striking of all is the fact that a bishop may not ordain anyone without the standing committee's agreement. The overall impression is not of the bishop as central to the life of the diocese, with a synod to advise him, but of the diocesan convention as central to the life of the diocese and supreme in its power, and of the bishop as its officer, able to act in many important matters only with the consent of the standing committee that the Convention elects. As F. V. Mills commented, "For the first time since the Norman Conquest..., the Episcopalians in America made a bishop of a major religious body an elected official of a convention of clergy and laity."¹⁷

16 See, e.g., Jane Shaw, "The Potential of Cathedrals," *Anglican Theological Review* 95:1 (Winter, 2013), 137–148; Gary Hall, "The Purpose of Cathedrals," *Anglican Theological Review* 96:4 (Fall 2014), 727–736.

17 Colin Podmore, "A Tale of Two Churches: The Ecclesiologies of the Episcopal Church and the Church of England Compared," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 8:2 (May

Podmore's assessment of the Episcopal Church is a negative one, but his analysis is, in its essentials, correct. It makes clear, moreover, why it is inaccurate and misleading to speak in general terms of the Episcopal Church as being "synodically governed," in view of both the vast differences between the authority of an English diocesan synod and an Episcopal diocesan convention, and the significant difference in the latitude of action given to the bishop in relationship to these respective bodies.¹⁸

The Question of Apostolic Succession

White had addressed the question of apostolic succession at length in his pamphlet, and in a way that would later cause him to become embroiled in controversy. It will suffice here to say that White's position—writing before the outcome of war, or the provisions of peace, could be known—was that in the newly autonomous church that would emerge in the United States, assuring the continuity of apostolic succession for the "superior order of clergy" he envisaged would be ideal, and desirable—but not necessary, at least not immediately. Balancing his aspirations for the church with what would prove to be a too-pessimistic estimate of its possibilities, he concluded a direct conferral of succession from English to American bishops as an impossibility, given what he understood to be the immovable obstacle of the Oath of Conformity. At the same time, White felt that maintaining a church structured around the episcopacy was an essential first step toward eventual communion, even if, from the perspective of his moment, he could not see how it would be accomplished. And he argued as well that the fragility of a church suddenly deprived of any connection to the structure and governance of the Church of England made clear the need for episcopal government, even if the word "bishop" was problematic:

2008), 144.

18 It is important to note that there are, indeed, gatherings within the Episcopal Church that are known as "synods." Some dioceses style their annual legislative gatherings "synods"; still others call them "councils." So, too, the nine geographic Provinces that gather groups of dioceses together meet in what are known as "Provincial Synods." The word means something fundamentally different from its use to characterize the ecclesiological structures of the Church of England; diocesan synods (or councils, or conventions) can, by and large, legislate on matters without a bishop's leave or approval, and Provincial Synods have relatively little power in the structure of the church (indeed, the continued need for the Provincial structure is questioned by some). All of this suggests the perceptiveness of Podmore's observation that "as with Britain and America in general, English Anglicans and American Episcopalians are 'divided by a common language,' using the same terms ('bishop,' 'diocese,' 'province,' 'primate') but meaning very different things by them." Podmore, "A Tale of Two Churches," 125.

...by delaying to adopt measures for the continuance of this ministry, the very existence of the churches is hazarded, and the duties of positive and indispensable obligation are neglected....

But it will also be said, that the very name of “Bishop” is offensive; if so, change it for another; let the superior clergyman [sic] be a president, or a superintendent, or in plain English, and, according to the literal translation of the original, an overseer.¹⁹

In view of the exigency faced by the American church, and the hoped-for reconciliation with the Church of England, White held out the somewhat confused idea that a “conditional ordination” might be put in place for bishops, looking toward the day that a more regular solution might be found:

All the obligations to conformity to the divine ordinances, all the arguments which prove the connection between public worship and the morals of a people, combine to urge the adopting some speedy measures, to provide for the public ministry in these churches; if such as have been above recommended [that is, by White] should be adopted, and the episcopal succession afterwards obtained, any supposed imperfections of the intermediate ordinations might, if it were judged proper, be supplied without acknowledging their nullity, by a conditional ordination resembling that of a conditional baptism in the liturgy....²⁰

Immediately after the publication of White’s pamphlet, the first word of a parley between British and American negotiators in Paris became publicly known.²¹ “White saw at once that this changed the aspect of his problem,”²² not least because the possibility of reconciliation with the Church of England now seemed a substantive possibility and the question of succession more easily addressed. But White was not just an Anglican clergyman; he was a patriot, and a product of the social and intellectual elite of Philadelphia. With his country now acknowledged as an independent nation by the British crown, he was not inclined to imagine a full

19 White, in Salomon, “William White’s *The Case...*,” 459–60.

20 White, in Salomon, “William White’s *The Case...*,” 460. White goes on to remind his reader that such stopgap had previously been proposed by John Tillotson while Archbishop of Canterbury (1691–1694), as well as by Simon Patrick, Bishop of Chichester (1689–1691) and of Ely (1691–1707), and Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester (1689–1699).

21 The so-called Carleton-Digby letter, addressed by Sir Guy Carleton, Commander in Chief of British forces in North America, and Admiral Robert Digby, admiral in command of the North American Station, to General Washington, August 2, 1782; see <https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.php/document/csr16-0162>.

22 Richard G. Salomon, “Introduction,” in “William White’s *The Case...*,” 437.

reintegration of the American church into the Church of England, or its subordination to its structures or prelates. A new church still remained to be constructed, and as such he had no interest in retracting entirely the proposals he had set forth in his treatise.²³

In later years, when White was of advanced age, voices in a rising generation of American theologians and controversialists would point to his 1782 pamphlet as testimony to his support for a Presbyterian ecclesiology. It is important for our present purposes, which focus on delineating both the authority of bishops in the Episcopal Church and the understanding of the purpose and significance of apostolic succession that church, that White vigorously rejected this assertion, reminding readers too young to remember the years of Revolution:

The pamphlet, written at a time, when there were few episcopal pulpits in the United States from which the sound of the Gospel was heard, was to the following effect:

It proposed the combining of the clergy and of representatives of the congregations, in convenient districts, with a representative body of the whole, nearly on the plan subsequently adopted. This ecclesiastical representative was to make a declaration approving of episcopacy, and professing a determination to possess the [apostolic] succession when it could be obtained; but they were to carry the plan into immediate act.

The expedient was sustained by the plea of necessity, and by opinions of various authors of the church of England, acknowledging a valid ministry under circumstances similar to those of the existing case, although less imperious.... Although reference was had to the position of the church, that "from the apostles' time, there have been in the church of Christ, the three orders of bishops, priests, and deacons;" nothing was said in proof of the fact; because it was not questioned in this church; and because argument to the effect would have been indiscreet....²⁴

Ten years later, in a letter to Bishop Henry Hobart of New York, Bishop White, now an eminence of eighty-two years, reminded his younger colleague of his distinctively American understanding of the ministry of *episkopé*:

23 As Salomon notes, "The assumption...that White stopped the distribution as soon as the Carleton-Digby letter was published, is wrong." Salomon, "Introduction," 438.

24 William White, *Memoirs of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia, 1820), quoted in Salomon, "William White's *The Case...*," Appendix II, Doc. 7 ("White's Additional Statement of 1820,") 503.

I am still of the opinion, that in an Exigency in which a duly authorized Ministry cannot be obtained, the paramount Duty of preaching the gospel, & the worshipping of God on the Terms of the Christian Covenant, should go on, in the best Manner which Circumstances permit. In regard to the episcopacy, I think, that it should be sustained, as the Government of the Church from the Time of the Apostles, but without criminating [sic] the Ministry of other Churches; as is the Course taken by the Church of England.²⁵

The Liturgical Expression of Episcopal *Episkopé*

While a thorough examination of the unfolding of the role and ministry of bishops in the Episcopal Church from the time of its earliest years is beyond our scope here, it is profitable to consider how the church's understanding of the ministry and authority of the bishop is expressed through its liturgy. There are two specific kinds of liturgies that give us insight into this question: the liturgy for the ordination of bishops (as found in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*), and the liturgies for the recognition and investiture of a diocesan bishop (in the case of one already ordained to the episcopate who takes up a new ministry leading a diocese) and "Welcoming and Seating of a Bishop in the Cathedral" (in the case of bishop who, as is often the case, was ordained as a bishop diocesan in a place other than the cathedral itself).

The Episcopal Church is only one church among others in the Anglican Communion; and since the middle of the last century, an increasing diversity of language and theology has been expressed in the ordination rites of the various provinces in the Anglican Communion. Richard Geoffrey Leggett, surveying the specific language of a number of these rites, notes that reviewing different Anglican ordinals "illustrate[s] the spectrum of theological opinion within the Communion as to whether ordination confers a function, empowers existing charisms, accomplishes an ontological change, or has some combination of these effects."²⁶

The ordination of a bishop in the Episcopal Church, as with the ordination of priests and deacons, is not understood as a service standing apart from the life of the church, but rather as the conclusion of a process of discernment and setting

25 William White, "Note No. 21, Added Dec. 21, 1830, p. 71, End," quoted in Salomon, "William White's *The Case...*," Appendix II, Doc. 8 ("White's Additional Statement of 1830,") 503.

26 Richard Geoffrey Leggett, "Anglican Ordinals," in Charles Hefling and Cynthia Shattuck, *The Oxford Guide to The Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 535.

apart that by design involves of necessity the support, and the consent, of both lay and ordained people in the church. Before the service itself, the candidate will not only have been elected in a convention in which she or he must have received a majority of the votes of both clergy and laity, voting separately (or “by orders”); the ordination of candidate must also have been consented to by a majority of the Standing Committees of dioceses, as well as a majority of the diocesan bishops (bishops having jurisdiction over a diocese, or bishops ordinary—of which more below).

This encompassing process is represented in the opening rite of the liturgy. The candidate is *presented* by a group comprising both lay and ordained people. The certificates of *consent* from both standing committees (the members of which are evenly divided between lay and ordained people and clergy) and from bishops with jurisdiction are read. And notwithstanding the process that has led to this moment, before the service proceeds anyone in the assembly is given an opportunity to object to the candidate’s ordination; after which all are invited to express their affirmation for the candidate’s election.

Once this takes place, the liturgy takes on a more traditional, even more catholic, sensibility. As with deacons and priests, both of whom are publicly examined by the ordaining bishop (and not, notably, by people in any other orders of the church), the candidate is examined by the chief consecrator and other consecrating bishops (of which there must be at least two, in addition to the chief consecrator). Again, the Examination is conducted only by those who are bishops—itself an expression of one aspect of the ministry of bishops in the understanding of the Episcopal Church, a particular responsibility for the guardianship of the faith.

The Examination itself, together with the language of the prayer of consecration, discloses other aspects of the Episcopal understanding of the distinctive ministry of bishops. Rather than present them in the order in which they appear in the liturgy, we can instead gather them in terms of principal areas of the ministry and life of bishops:

Ecumenical Ministry

- “To guard the faith, unity and discipline of the church”
- “To be in all things a faithful pastor and wholesome example for the entire flock of Christ”
- “To share in the leadership of the Church throughout the world”

Jurisdictional and teaching ministry

- To “share with your fellow bishops in the government of the whole Church”;
- To “boldly proclaim and interpret the Gospel of Christ, enlightening the minds and stirring up the conscience of your people”
- To “encourage and support all baptized people in their gifts and ministries”
- “To ordain priests and deacons and to join in ordaining bishops”;
- To “sustain your fellow presbyters²⁷ and take counsel with them”
- To “guide and strengthen the deacons²⁸ and all others who minister in the Church”
- To “wisely oversee the life and work of the church”

Sacramental ministry

- To “celebrate [with the people] the sacraments of our redemption”
- “To celebrate and provide for the administration of the sacraments of the New Covenant”
- To serve “in the ministry of reconciliation, declaring pardon in your name [and] offering the holy gifts”

Personal charism

- To be “merciful to all, show compassion to the poor and strangers, and defend those who have no helper”
- To “be faithful in prayer and in the study of Holy Scripture”
- To “have the mind of Christ”
- To “present before [God] the acceptable offering of a pure, and gentle, and holy life”

27 Note that in this question, the language of the Examination discloses a view of bishops as those ordained to a specific and distinct ministry yet still priests exercising the ministry of priests as well.

28 In the Episcopal Church the bishop has a direct relationship to deacons. While they may (and usually do) serve within a congregation, in their own Examination at the time of their ordination the bishop reminds candidates for the diaconate that “God now calls you to a special ministry of servanthood directly under your bishop.” *Book of Common Prayer*, 543.

- To “exercise without reproach the high priesthood to which you have called” [the candidate]

Of course, it may be said that many of these aspects of ministries—especially those enumerated within the categories of sacramental ministry and personal charism—are true of other orders of ministry as well. All the ordained are called to fashion their lives after the model of Christ; all the ordained are called to proclaim the Gospel. All deacons are called to have particular concern for the poor and neglected; all priests are called to celebrate the sacraments of the New Covenant.

Yet because the Episcopal Church, following the model inherited from the Church of England, practices *sequential*, not *direct*, ordination—to be ordained a bishop one must first be ordained a priest, and to be ordained a priest one must first be ordained a deacon—there is an implicit, but (at least to the present author) incorrect sense that the ministry of bishops somehow encompasses all the ministries of those ordained for the church. One consequence of this, worthy of further attention, is the lack of any articulation of distinctive competencies or sense of a developmental trajectory for bishops in the Episcopal Church, such as has been proposed, for example, by the Anglican Communion’s Office for Theological Education.²⁹

In the Episcopal Church, the liturgy for the ordination of bishops is exactly the same for all candidates, regardless of the ministry for which they have been elected. Further, while deacons and priests are simply ordained into their order, a ministry to be exercised within the canonical jurisdiction within which (typically) they have been ordained, bishops are elected and ordained *to* a specific ministry, e.g., “bishop of the Diocese of California” or “Suffragan Bishop in the Diocese of New York.” Hence bishops are not ordained generally and then assigned to a ministry; they are elected by, and ordained for, and serve, a specific, geographically defined, ministry.³⁰

That said, while all bishops are equally ordained, all bishops are not equal. All bishops are, upon ordination, given the right to a seat and a vote in the House of Bishops; but only some bishops are “bishops with jurisdiction,” the chief (or “ordinary”) bishop of a given diocese. The canons confer distinct authority on bishops with jurisdiction for the order and discipline of the church, particularly in

29 See “Theological Education for the Anglican Communion: Bishops Target Group” <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/108801/BishopsGrid110406.pdf>; accessed January 30, 2021.

30 There are two exceptions to this: The Bishop for Pastoral Development, whose task is the discipline and order of the House of Bishops; and the Suffragan to the Presiding Bishop for the Armed Forces and Federal Ministries, a functional, rather than geographical, episcopate.

areas of consenting to ordinations (including consenting to the elections of other bishops); issuing pastoral directives or disciplinary judgments to clergy; consenting to the appointment of parish rectors; appointing priests-in-charge (a category distinct from “rector” in the Episcopal Church); overseeing the relationships between clergy and their congregations; and holding customary (though not specifically canonical) responsibility to be the chief pastor of their diocese.

These distinctive roles are liturgically reflected in the services by which a new bishop—whether one previously ordained for a different diocese who has been called to serve in a new place, or one ordained for a given diocese but at a place different from the diocesan cathedral³¹—is recognized (i.e., attested to be the bishop chosen to lead the diocese), “invested” (i.e., formally given authority to exercise jurisdiction), and “seated” (which means what it says, typically in a large and frequently cumbersome *cathedra*).

These services, found in the *Book of Occasional Services*, in fact shed more light on the shared nature of governance in the church than does the ordination service itself. The new bishop *asks* to be admitted into the church and to be recognized; the president of the Standing Committee of the diocese is asked to certify publicly that the bishop now in the midst of the congregation is in fact the one elected, and that (in the case of investiture) a majority of Standing Committees and bishops with jurisdiction have consented to the election. The congregation is not, in this case, given an opportunity to object to the proceedings (the person before them has already been ordained, and the election itself, having been certified, can no longer be disputed); but even so, the bishop is once again examined in exactly the same way as took place when the bishop was first ordained to the episcopate.

Once this is done, the Presiding Bishop (or someone designated by the Presiding Bishop to preside over the service) accomplishes the investiture with these telling words:

31 In another departure from the model of the Church of England, not all dioceses in the Episcopal Church have cathedrals. Some have never had them; some have had them and chosen to close them as a poor allocation of resources. Again, Anglicans existed in the United States for nearly two hundred years before the idea of a distinctively Episcopal cathedral emerged in the church. See Hall, “The Purpose of Cathedrals,” and Shaw, “The Potential of Cathedrals,” *supra*.

I...by the authority committed to me, *and with the consent of those who have chosen you*, do invest you, *N.N.*, as Bishop of _____, with all the temporal and spiritual rights and responsibilities that pertain to that office;...³²

The “temporal” rights here are not, of course, those of an established church entwined in affairs of state; they refer instead to the bishop’s role as the administrative head of the legally incorporated body of the diocese.³³ While the spiritual rights spoken of here are delineated in the General Canons of the Episcopal Church, they are not without constraints; they are exercised within the limits, and subject to the discipline, of those canons.

Conclusion: Authority and Apostolicity

William White was not the only voice articulating an understanding of *episkopé* in the early Episcopal Church. His treatise, appearing in August of 1782, brought about a reaction among those who held to a higher and more expansive understanding of episcopal authority, many of whom were in the circle around Samuel Seabury. While White had been a patriot, and even a correspondent of Washington’s, Seabury had been a steadfast loyalist, famously arguing with Alexander Hamilton in print about the advisability of independence before the outbreak of hostilities.³⁴

Not surprisingly, Seabury and those around him took a dim view of White’s scheme, both his seeming diminishing of the authority and majesty of the episcopate and his expansive understanding the place of the laity in the governance of the emergent church. On March 25, 1783, the clergy of Connecticut sent a remonstrance to White, characterizing his proposal as “Presbyterian”; on that same day, without either a clear plan for how his consecration would be effected or any participation of the laity, elected Seabury to be their bishop (after another candidate, when elected, declined). Less than a month later, on April 21, 1783, they addressed themselves to the Archbishop of York:

32 *The Book of Occasional Services 2003* (New York: Church Pension Group, 2004), 353; my emphasis.

33 Some—but very few—dioceses in the United States are organized as a “corporation sole,” in which the legal entity is a sole office occupied by a sole natural person. (The Archbishopric of Canterbury, as well as dioceses in the Church of England, are such entities.) The prevailing (but not universal) pattern is that of a non-profit corporation within the laws of the state in which the diocese is located.

34 For which Seabury at least received the honor of becoming a character, and the subject of a production number, in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton* (“[Farmer Refuted](#)”).

....there is reason to apprehend that a plan of a very extraordinary nature, lately formed and published in Philadelphia, may be carried into execution. This plan is, in brief, to constitute a nominal Episcopate by the united suffrages of presbyters and laymen.... Whatever influence this project may have on the minds of the ignorant or unprincipled part of the laity, or however it may, possibly, be countenanced by some of the clergy in other parts of the country, *we* think it our duty to reject such a spurious substitute for Episcopacy, and, as far as may be in our power, prevent it from taking effect.³⁵

They went on to offer an encomium for Seabury's qualities; but this was not enough to overcome the impossibility, in 1783, of Seabury being ordained in England.

A race had now effectively begun to shape the future architecture of the Episcopal Church. Seabury, in a tale well told, finally found a path to ordination as a bishop—in the Episcopal Church of Scotland, itself disestablished in 1689 when its bishops refused to acknowledge William III and his queen, Mary II, as the successors of Mary's father, James II (of England and Ireland) and VII (of Scotland). The rupture ended with the Church of Scotland—the Presbyterian church—becoming the established church of Scotland, while the Episcopal Church of Scotland was finally granted recognition as a separate church in 1711. By the time the Connecticut clergyman went seeking for bishops to ordain him, bishops in the Episcopal Church of Scotland had refused to swear the Oath of Allegiance to the sovereign for nearly a hundred years. Seabury was ordained to the episcopate in Aberdeen on November 14, 1784, by which time the Revolution had been over for more than a year—and the ground of the question of the Oath of Allegiance had shifted.

While Seabury became the first bishop of the Episcopal church, his ideas did not, in the end, have a significant formative influence on the church that would eventually emerge in the United States. The first General Convention of the Episcopal Church convened in Philadelphia as only a House of Deputies in 1785; William White was its first president. That convention adopted the general outlines of White's plan for the constitution of the new church, and specifically endorsed the role of laity in its governance. At the same time, stimulated by Seabury's consecration, that first convention agreed a plan to secure episcopacy for the American church from bishops of the Church of England; what for White had been beyond imagining in 1782 was, just three years later, now made possible by the conclusion of peace and the acknowledgment of Independence.

35 "The Connecticut Clergy to the Archbishop of York, April 21, 1783," in Salomon, "William White's *The Case...*," Appendix 1, Doc. 2, 482.

White was elected bishop of Pennsylvania by a convention of his own diocese in 1786, and was ordained in the chapel of Lambeth Palace on February 4, 1787; in considerable contrast to Seabury's experience, his consecrators included both archbishops of the Church of England. Returning to Pennsylvania, White again took up a leadership role in the (fourth) General Convention of 1789, also held in Philadelphia; at this Convention he was elected the first Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church (he would also later serve as the fourth Presiding Bishop). While there remained work of reconciliation to do between those who had been aligned with Seabury's vision and the direction taken by the church at its first convention, that work was eased considerably when John Skinner, one of Seabury's Scottish consecrators, appealed the clergy of Connecticut to accept the idea of lay representation. White's essential vision of an elected episcopate, sharing authority in the church with elected delegations of both clergy and laity convened into conventions at both the "district" and national level, became the blueprint by which the Episcopal Church emerged as an Anglican church independent of, but in communion with, the see of Canterbury:

In the end the major divide among Episcopalians was the personality rift between Seabury and White. Compromise permitted incorporation of the dual principles of lay representation and episcopal oversight.³⁶

Although the suggestion is admittedly anachronistic, it might be said that White had an instinctive sense of what contemporary scholars of leadership have described as the distinction between *formal* and *informal* sources of authority. Formal authority is generally understood by students of organizational behavior as the *right* to decide, while informal authority is described as the ability to *influence* decisions. Formal authority is established by laws, canons, and regulations; informal authority arises from such sources as influence, reputation, or status.

It is reasonable to argue that White did not see the question of apostolic succession as a necessary condition for the formal authority of bishops in the church he envisaged. Surely he regarded it as desirable. Yet in arguing that necessity demanded the urgent development of a governing structure for the church, a structure that could somehow bridge the inheritance of Anglican tradition with the expectations and norms of the emergent republic, White implicitly grasped that the formal authority of bishops—the right to decide on matters shaping urgent questions of church order—could only be effectively exercised if it was founded on sources of informal authority. Primary in this consideration, under the circumstances emerging in the

36 Sachs, *The Transformation of Anglicanism*, 67.

new nation, was the informal authority conferred by virtue of election from among the faithful, clergy and laity.

Seen through this lens, it may be said that the question of apostolic succession was, for White—and, more than two hundred years later, for the church he helped to create—primarily a source of *informal* authority. As such, it was a treasure to be guarded and a tradition to be both respected and carried forward; but it clearly had a place of secondary importance in White’s understanding of the ministry of bishops, which was ultimately founded on the necessity of preserving a church when “the Congregations of our communion throughout the U[nited] States were approaching to Annihilation.”³⁷



As noted at the outset, the church that is the inheritor of White’s labors cannot be said to have a systematic theological understanding of *episkopé*, either as a ministry unto itself or as a part of a more comprehensive ecclesiology. A variety of views remain on the subject, a fact hardly surprising in a church characterized by decentralization, the absence of centralized doctrinal or theological authority, and a spectrum of liturgical and theological sentiment ranging from Reformed to Roman Catholic. But to the present moment, the American adaptation—some might regard it as an appropriation—of the Anglican inheritance, itself a set of ideas received from the Western church, has come to the view that:

- There are three distinct orders of ministry, not one ordination expressed in three different ministries;
- That the setting apart of those in these three orders by the act of ordination confers an acknowledgment of the whole church on a given individual’s charism for the exercise of that ministry, a charism we hold God offers without regard distinctions of race, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation;
- That the authority exercised by all orders of ministry, whether deacons, priests, or bishops, is set within an overall ecclesiology of shared governance, one set upon the twin foundations of the Anglican inheritance and the Enlightenment suspicion of unconstrained authority; and

37 William White, M.S. note to “Charge on the Subject of Revivals, Delivered before the Forty-Eighth Convention of the Diocese of Pennsylvania and Addressed to the Clerical Members of the Convention,” quoted in Salomon and Jarvis, “William White’s *The Case...*,” Appendix II, Doc. 9 (“White’s Additional Statement of 1832,”) 504.

- That the gifts expressed in each of the distinct ministries of the church, while *acknowledged* by the church through the deliberative processes of discernment (and, in the case of bishops, election), are gifts *conferred* by the Holy Spirit, and as such the orders conferred on individuals in these three distinct orders of ministry are life-long.

It remains to be seen how well this understanding of *episkopé*—and more broadly this understanding of how God’s church should be structured and governed, will equip the Episcopal Church for the challenges of a new era, and how responsive a church with such an understanding of authority will be to God’s call in mission across the years to come.

Mark Edington
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