



Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Easter
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Church Polity

A Sermon on the Government of the Church

For the past three weeks, we have been considering what I have called “the Lord’s Own Teaching,” given to His Apostles during the forty days between the Resurrection and the Ascension. We have seen, by an abundance of scriptural witnesses, that during these forty days the Lord gave commandments to his Apostles and taught them the principles of the Kingdom of God. We have discovered that some of the most contentious issues in the Church were not developed slowly over the years, but were the essence of the Lord’s commandments about how the Church was to function. We have seen this regarding Unction (Divine Healing), Holy Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Communion. We have further found that the *Book of Common Prayer* agrees with the Apostolic doctrine and practice.

Today we examine the commands given by our Lord as to how the Church was to be governed between His Ascension and his Second Advent. When we speak of “government” of the Church, we are necessarily talking about Church polity—the politics of ruling in the Church. We must ask ourselves if the Lord personally instituted a specific polity—a specific system of government—that we must therefore follow.

We must first understand that God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, possesses all power and authority over the creation. God is the absolute monarch of the Cosmos. Therefore, all power, including governmental power of any kind, is derived from Him. Further, we know that this power and authority is executed by Jesus Christ: “All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him” (Matt. 11:27). All things were delivered to the Son, including the power to rule, and to institute government. And the Lord has given this authority to no other. St. Paul affirms this when he describes the Lord Jesus Christ as the Head of the Church:

Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins... And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning,

the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence (Col. 1: 12-14, 18).

The question arises, how does Christ rule the Church as its Head, while we await His return? He rules, of course, by the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1: 4-8). The Spirit of God inhabits the Church, imparting grace to the world. And yet, it is a principle of the kingdom of heaven, made clear from both the Old and New Testaments, that God uses broken and weak humanity to affect His purposes on earth. Christ rules the Church by and through the Holy Spirit, coming upon men who thereby act as the governors of the Church on earth (see, for example John 20: 22,23). It is our solemn duty, therefore, as followers of Christ, to also follow the duly constituted government He instituted for His own Church—and a rejection of that sacred government is thus also necessarily a rejection of Christ’s own authority over us.

Jesus Christ chose twelve men out of His disciples, who became known as the Apostles, “Sent Ones,” who were given a special commission of governing in the Church:

Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And when they saw him, they worshipped him: but some doubted. And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Matt 28: 16-20).

Christ, as Head of the Church, would be with the Apostles, by the agency of the Holy Spirit, “until the end of the world”—better translated as “age.” He would be with them until the “end of the age,” the age between His Ascension and His Return in glory. Thus, the commission given to the Apostles must necessarily still be found in the Church today. We know this further from the fact that the Apostles replaced the position of the traitor, Judas Iscariot:

And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty,) Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus. For he was numbered with us, and had obtained part of this ministry. Now this man purchased a field with the reward of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out. And it was known unto all the dwellers at Jerusalem; insomuch as that field is called in their proper tongue, Aceldama, that is to say, The field of blood. For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his bishopric let another take. Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection. And they appointed two, Joseph called Barsabas, who was

surnamed Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen, That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place (Acts 1: 15-26).

If there were no divinely instituted and commanded government of the Church, as many Protestants insist, then the Apostles would have not chosen a successor to Judas Iscariot. But they chose a successor, in obedience to our Lord's own teaching. Further, notice that the qualification to be an Apostle is eye-witnessing the earthly life of our Lord and including His Resurrection (Acts 1: 21, 22). However, the authority of this office is the called the Episcopate (Acts 1: 20, "Bishopric"). While the eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection would die out, the authority of their sacred Office would not. Indeed, the pages of the New Testament plainly show us that other Bishops were consecrated during the lives of the original Apostles (2 Tim. 1:6; 1 Pet. 5:2), and their qualification for this Office was carefully documented (1 Tim. 3: 1-7). Furthermore, St. Paul commanded St. Timothy, who had been consecrated to the episcopacy, to ordain and commit the Apostolic doctrine and fellowship to others who would live after them (2 Tim 2:2). These were brought into the Episcopal order by the laying-on of the hands of the Apostles.

It is abundantly clear, therefore, that our Lord, who has all authority in the Church, commissioned the Apostles as the human hands of His government, acting by the power of the Holy Spirit, as His representatives on earth. The Apostles, in turn, consecrated successors to their Episcopal Office, and this will be done until the Lord returns. The original twelve did not rule the Church alone. Very shortly after Pentecost, the number of believers grew so rapidly that the Apostles needed assistance, and the Bible shows us the institution of the Diaconate:

And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith (Acts 6: 1-7).

The word "Deacon" in the original Greek, means "server." The role of the Diaconate in the Church is to assist the Bishops in the physical needs of the ministry. It is an honorable and needed Order in the Church, so much so that their moral qualifications are documented in First Timothy (1 Tim. 3: 8-13). Likewise, we have evidence that the

Apostles ordained “elders” (presbyters, or priests) in the earliest days of the Church (Acts 15: 4). For example, Titus, consecrated to the episcopacy by St. Paul for service in Crete, was to ordain priests to assist him (Titus 1: 5). The role of the Priesthood in the Church is to assist the Bishops in the sacramental needs of the ministry.

And so we have a scriptural witness to the three Orders of the Church: Bishops, Priests, and Deacons. There can be no doubt that this polity—or Church government—was instituted from the beginning of the Church’s history and is the system of government taught by our Lord. The Protestants, rejecting the Lord’s own teaching, insist that the hierarchy of Bishops was developed over the first few centuries, and that the original government of the Church was presbyterial in nature. Roman Catholics also separate themselves from the Lord’s own teaching by their insistence that St. Peter was given primacy of jurisdiction over all the Apostles. But the simple witness of scripture is that of a full hierarchy of three Orders—each with a specific calling, qualifications, and dignity. Further, the earliest of the Church Fathers confirm this understanding of the Lord’s teaching about Holy Orders. Ignatius, the disciple of St. John, writes: “In like manner let all reverence the Deacons, as an appointment of Jesus Christ; and the Bishop as Jesus Christ, who is the Son of the Father; and the Presbyters as the sanhedrin of God, and the assembly of the Apostles. *Apart from these there is no church*” (Trallians iii).

Anglican church polity agrees with this primitive witness. The Preface to the Ordinal of the *Book of Common Prayer* (page 529) says, “It is evident unto all men, diligently reading Holy Scripture and ancient Authors, that from the Apostles’ time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ’s Church,—Bishops, Priests, and Deacons.” An examination of the Ordinal itself shows that the Apostolic Office is conveyed in the Consecration of Bishops (page 553), as is the sacramental ministry of the Priesthood (page 546), while Deacons are charged to perform the physical needs of the ministry of the Church, after the example of the first Deacons to be ordained (page 532). The Bishops of the Orthodox Anglican Communion are furthermore in Succession from the Apostles, upholding not only the lineal succession of consecration, but Apostolic doctrine in its scriptural purity.

The Apostolic succession is found in both the Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship (Acts 2:42). To have the correct Church government, according to the institution of our Lord, without the faithful teaching of correct doctrine, is the situation found in many churches and communions ruled by Bishops but ruined by heresy. The antidote to this woeful situation—rampant in the Church today—is for the faithful to flee from an heretical episcopacy and adhere themselves to orthodox Bishops, for the protection and furtherance of the faith.

Our Lord Jesus Christ instituted a form of government for His Church. A rejection of that government is a rejection of Him. So closely is He tied to His servants, that He said to them, “He that heareth you heareth Me, and he that despiseth you despiseth Me, and he that despiseth Me despiseth Him that sent Me” (St. Luke 10:16). Thus we see that contentiousness about the government of the Church, strife over the rulership of God’s People, is, at its root, a rejection of the sovereignty of God Himself.

Let us thank the Lord, Jesus Christ, for His mercy in providing servants for His Church. And let us beseech Him, to grant us a larger portion of ministry in His Kingdom. Amen.