

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

How do we answer those who say that any number of things about the Episcopal Church (such as having bishops and baptizing infants) are unbiblical and therefore wrong?

We do come in for criticism from Baptists and others who believe that the English Reformation was not thorough enough, that (among other things) the Church of England should have abandoned the bishop-and-diocese system in favor of the presbyterial or even the congregational model of church government. (In the presbyterian form of government, an elected, representative body called a “presbytery” governs the congregations in the presbytery as a sort of “corporate episcopate,” while in Congregationalism, every congregation is totally, or almost totally, independent.)

Admittedly, the diocesan system with a bishop over each diocese and archbishops over a number of bishops and their dioceses is not found anywhere in the New Testament. As far as we can tell, in the First Century congregations were basically independent of each other, with people like Paul traveling between them and every congregation giving some degree of respect to the Mother Church back in Jerusalem. In the New Testament, the Greek word *episcopos* (literally, “overseer”) seems to be interchangeable with the word *presbyter* (literally, “elder”). The two

words did not yet refer to the distinct orders of ministry, though later “episcopos” would become “bishop” and “presbyter” would become “priest.”

The episcopal system that we know seems to have developed toward the end of the First Century, with Ignatius of Antioch being the first bishop we know of who was the sole leader of a number of congregations. Around the year 107, as he was being taken to Rome for execution, Ignatius wrote several farewell letters to churches under his care. Those letters make it clear that at least in his area, bishops, priests, and deacons were distinct orders of ministry.

So if you want to have your form of church government today be the way Christianity was organized in Paul’s day, you have to get rid of bishops and have independent congregations with traveling apostles going between them. And some groups of Christians have adopted exactly this arrangement, with men considered apostles over a number of congregations.

They exemplify what I call “originalism.” (I don’t know if I invented the word or read it somewhere.) By “originalism,” I mean the

belief that what is true is always revealed at the beginning and that any later historical developments are unauthentic and betrayals of the original.

A particular problem for originalism is that the precise creedal formulations of the Trinity and of the relationship of the divine and the human in Christ are not found in the Bible but developed after the Bible and come out of the Council of Nicea in 325 and the Council of Chalcedon in 451, respectively. Most Protestants accept the doctrines of Nicea and Chalcedon, but they are actually post-biblical developments and are not clearly and precisely set forth in the New Testament.

The problem with originalism as I see it is that it does not allow for legitimate development and adaptation to changed circumstances. I prefer a view which says that while we seek to remain true to the faith and experience of our ancestors in the faith, especially our Jewish and Christian ancestors who wrote the Bible, we are not required to reject all change. We should always seek to be true to the Gospel and to the essentials of biblical

faith, but we need not replicate exactly the Judaism or the Christianity of the people of the Bible.

An obvious example: our worship cannot be identical to that of New Testament Christians. We do not know what their music sounded like (except that it was probably sung *a capella*), since we have no recordings or sheet music from them. And the earliest Christians were Palestinian Jews who spoke Aramaic. Their hymns would have been sung in Aramaic. So we cannot sing either the melody or the lyrics of the New Testament Christians. We have to use the music of our day and the language we know to sing praise to God and cannot replicate the worship of the early church. We would hope that our worship would be as sincere and as joyful as theirs, but we have to sing our own songs in our own way.

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