



Second Edition

THE ROOTS OF THE REFORMATION

Tradition, Emergence and Rupture



G. R. EVANS



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PREFACE



WHAT HAPPENED AT THE REFORMATION? What did it “reform”? We see the sixteenth century now as a time of radical change, but looked at in the context of the history of disputes among Christians, it turns out to be an episode in a much longer story. Similar objections and criticisms had been raised for centuries, and some of them since the earliest Christian times. Many of them can still be heard today. Yet in the sixteenth century the questioning prompted an unprecedented event: the lasting fragmentation of the church in the West.

We can make sense of all this only if we know something of the reasons why the key questions first occurred to people and what happened when people kept on asking about them in different times and places. Beliefs have been held by individuals down the ages in the social environment of their times, in a complex of other ideas and assumptions which have given them color and point and emphasis, and made some things seem important at one time and other things at another.

The picture which emerges if we look at the story as a whole is of immense honest endeavor by believers well aware of the importance of protecting the essential character of the faith, and frequently infuriated by what others were saying precisely because it all mattered so much. There were mutual slanging matches, accusations of conspiracy and corruption (not always unjustified, it has to be said). Groups formed allegiances and clung to particular opinions, which were condemned by other groups who said they were heretics. The resulting divisions or “schism” between Christian communities seemed to some commenta-

tors to be a heresy in itself, because it did not take the need for unity seriously enough.

Throughout this colorful story run certain threads that reappear through the weave as topics of importance century by century. The difficulty is to spot the ends so as to tug them and begin the unraveling. This book is written as an aid to understanding the way continuities have run through the changes of Christian history. It offers a history of the changes of the Reformation seen as episodes in that continuity, and as a complement to the series of recently published modern studies of the Reformation and its immediate background.¹

A NOTE ON THE SECOND EDITION

I am grateful to Brannon Ellis for his support in producing in this second edition a revision of this book which it is hoped will meet the needs of readers seeking to use it as a textbook for relevant courses. The book has been streamlined somewhat to allow its major themes to come to the fore for these readers. All dates for people and places have been conformed to the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, or else the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, unless there was good reason to depart from these. The argument remains the same—while the Reformation and its effects were in many ways something new, many of the significant questions and concerns at its roots are as ancient as the church itself.

¹A number of these studies are mentioned in the footnotes and bibliography by way of providing references for further reading.

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ABBREVIATIONS



Augustine, <i>Confessions</i>	Augustine's <i>Confessions</i> is available in numerous Latin editions and English translations. References are to standard sections, and for convenience page references are given to Augustine, <i>Confessions</i> , ed. James J. O'Donnell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
Calvin, <i>Institutes</i>	John Calvin, <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> . 1559 edition. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. 2 vols. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960.
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Medievalis (Turnhout: Brepols, 1966-).
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina (Turnhout: Brepols, 1953-).
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latino-rum (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 1866-).
EETS	Early English Text Society
fl.	flourished
c.	<i>circa</i>
d.	died

- Homilies* *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to Be Read in Churches in the Time of the Late Queen Elizabeth of Famous Memory: And Now Thought Fit to Be Reprinted by Authority from the King's Most Excellent Majesty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1832).
- Hooker, *Laws* Richard Hooker, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, ed. William Speed Hill, 8 vols. (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1977-1998).
- Luther, *Table Talk* Martin Luther, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, trans. William Hazlitt (London: George Bell, 1883), www.ccel.org/ccel/luther/tabletalk.html.
- PL Patrologia cursus completus. Series Latina. 221 vols. Edited by J.-P. Migne. Paris, 1844-1864.
- Tanner Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990).
- Wilkins David Wilkins, *Concilia magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae* (London, 1737).

SETTING THE SCENE

The “Fair Field of Folk”

THE POET KNOWN AS WILLIAM LANGLAND (c. 1332–1386) had a vision of a “fair field of folk,” which he used as a motif in a hard-hitting analysis of the society of his day.¹ Medieval poets were fond of using pretend dreams as a literary device. This particular image of the “field of folk” may have been prompted by the real view from the Malvern Hills near the Welsh border, down into the Severn Valley, where Worcestershire and Warwickshire and Gloucestershire still lie spread for miles before the observer of the English scene today. In *Piers Plowman* Langland sketches the contemporary world in all its variety from his vantage point on these hills.

Despite its rural setting, most of Langland’s poem is about the behavior and attitudes of an urban community. He describes London’s people, the way they lived and the way they thought, at about the time when Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343–1400) wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, with its similarly sharp social satire and digs at the misbehavior of the clergy.² This urban way of life was a relatively new medieval phenomenon in Europe, except in Italy, where some of the towns of the ancient Roman Empire had persisted. There citizenship had remained a vivid reality, at least for those lucky enough to be well-born (and male).

¹J. A. W. Bennett, “Chaucer’s Contemporary,” in *Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches*, ed. S. S. Hussey (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 310–24.

²*Piers Plowman: A New Translation of the B-text*, trans. A. V. C. Schmidt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/authors/langland.

Elsewhere in Europe the opportunity of active participation in public affairs by a good proportion of the population had given way to a top-down way of running things. In most of northern Europe the last few centuries had been feudal. This was a hereditary aristocratic system and highly military in character. In the feudal system kings and emperors owned the lands of their realms and allowed the great nobles to hold and use them during their lifetimes as vassals, in return for an oath of fealty (loyalty or faithfulness) and the provision of a certain number of days of military service ("knight days") a year. The nobility ran their estates by farming the land with the aid of their peasants, some of whom were freemen but many of whom were serfs bound to the land in slavery. From the same aristocratic families were drawn the senior churchmen, whose elevation to bishoprics also involved holding land from the monarch, in the form of the estates of the diocese. Bishops too had to provide their quota of knight days. Church and state were intimately bound together in a power structure in which baron and bishop were often brothers.

So the emergence in twelfth-century northern Europe of towns full of tradespeople with marketable skills created a new class of articulate and inquiring people, the sort of people who ran businesses and behaved like entrepreneurs. There was even the beginning of a new middle gentry as they aspired to a social mobility which had not been possible for many centuries. They asked searching questions about social arrangements and conventional religious teaching, and wanted to have their say when they heard the answers. Langland's prospective readership in this new middle class was evidently quite considerable, to judge from the number of manuscripts of his poem which survive, so we can assume that the grudges he expresses struck a chord at least with the literate. And more of them, of both sexes, were becoming literate.³

A good deal of fourteenth-century England of all social classes was spread out before the poet for inspection:

³It is not possible to establish statistics; the evidence consists in the multiplication of books intended for the use of the laity, such as the Books of Hours. We cannot know whether the women who had such volumes mainly looked at the pictures, but the very fact of creating books for those who did not belong to the clerical classes is evidence of a growing interest in being able to read among such people.

All manner of men / the rich and the poor,
Working and wandering / as the world asketh.

“Barons and burgesses and bondmen also I saw in this crowd”; “bakers and brewers and butchers a-many”; “woollen-websters and weavers of linen”; “tailors and tinkers toll-takers in markets”; “masons and miners and men of all crafts.” He contrasts the hardworking laboring classes with the greedy “wasters.” There are the fashionable, leading lives of conspicuous luxury, and there are those “such as anchorites and hermits” who out of sight in their “cells” quietly lead lives of self-denial, “in hope for to have heavenly bliss.” There are retailers, who seem to do rather well (“such men thrive”). Then there are entertainers, some who just “make mirth” (“as minstrels know how”) and earn an honest living that way, but others defraud the public. Some are “tramps and beggars” who make a good living begging for their food and then create disturbances by getting drunk at inns, “the thieving knaves!”

Langland is particularly shocked by the corruption and fraudulent activities going on in the name of religion. “Pretend” pilgrims and “palmers” (pilgrims who carried a palm to show they had visited the Holy Land) told tall tales in order to get money from the gullible. “Hermits, a heap of them with hooked staves, were going to Walsingham and their wenches too.” Langland sees them as work shy:

Big loafers and tall / that loth were to work,
Dressed up in capes / to be known from others
And so clad as hermits / their ease to have.

He is equally disgusted by the friars of every kind “preaching to the people for profit to themselves”:

Explaining the Gospel / just as they liked,
To get clothes for themselves / they construed it as they would.

The friars who belonged to the Dominicans, Franciscans and other mendicant orders founded since the early thirteenth century were professional itinerant preachers, but they had also gained an entrance to the courts of Europe as personal confessors, the “life coaches” of their time. They behave like “chapmen,” or tradesmen, says Langland, and make a

nice living from the invitation “to shrive lords.” The friars and the professional peddlers of penitential aids will feature prominently in the medieval story told in part two.

The ordinary clergy come in for Langland’s criticism too. Since the “pestilence time” of the Black Death (with its climax in Europe in 1348-1350), they complain that they cannot live on the income from their parishes and they ask “leave and licence in London to dwell.” There they “sing requiems for stipends[,] for silver is sweet.” They neglect their pastoral duties: to hear their parishioners’ confessions, grant them absolution and “preach and pray for them and feed the poor.”

Langland was evidently confident that his descriptions would strike a chord. What did the general population know of the tides of opinion and discussion which are now apparent to us as we look at the records of these events and the theological controversies they prompted? The truth seems to be that the ordinary faithful were involved, to a greater degree than they perhaps realized, in setting those tides running and putting pressure on theologians to make theological sense of their pastoral demands. Langland could see the effect of this popular pressure clearly enough as he wrote his sketch. But the routes by which they could exchange views and gain up-to-date information were naturally limited by the very restricted means of communication then available, even for the literate. Satirical verses were distributed by traveling ballad sellers like the one in Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale*, Act 4, Scene 4:

Servant: O master, if you did but hear the pedlar at the door, you would never dance again after a tabour and pipe; no, the bagpipe could not move you: he sings several tunes faster than you’ll tell money; he utters them as he had eaten ballads and all men’s ears grew to his tunes.

Clown: He could never come better; he shall come in. I love a ballad but even too well, if it be doleful matter merrily set down, or a very pleasant thing indeed and sung lamentably.

Shakespeare’s examples in this play are ribald and poke simple fun, but some of the surviving medieval ones were highly political and socially aware.

If an inquiring population was beginning to ask awkward questions about the way the institutional church was running religious affairs, could it turn for answers to the Bible? Practical impediments stood in the way for the “fair field of folk” if they wanted to know what the Bible said about the matters which concerned them. Copies were expensive in the centuries before the invention of printing. In any case, even if they could have afforded Bibles, the medieval laity were mostly illiterate. And even if some learned to read or had someone to read the Bible to them, most of them could not read for themselves what the Bible actually said, because it was not widely available in any language except Latin until attempts were made in the late Middle Ages and the early Reformation to produce vernacular versions.

These impediments to Bible study were accidents of history, not deliberate attempts to keep Scripture from the ordinary Christian. It was, however, natural for the church authorities to become protective about the Bible, since the educated who could read it in Latin also had the knowledge to read the body of respected commentary which survived from the early Christian centuries, for example the work of Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Gregory the Great (c. 540-604) and Bede (672/3-735). The educated could be expected to understand the theology too. The laity lacked this background and context, and there were fears that without the necessary educational preparation they might misinterpret the Bible and be led astray in their faith. These barriers between the inquiring layperson and the Bible lasted until the late Middle Ages, when one by one they began to be resolved. But those who called for the changes that took place were looked at askance and made themselves objectionable to the authorities of church and state alike. It all became something of a power struggle for ownership and control of the Bible.

Other great themes emerged, which we shall see as recurring problems again and again throughout this book. One was the relationship of spiritual and secular, church and state, as they affected the people in their daily lives. Another was the way in which people’s lives were shaped by the teaching of the institutional church, its claim to hold the keys to heaven through the ministry of the sacraments, and its demands about behavior.

The story that follows traces these themes and their subthemes, and seeks to point to the patterns as they reappeared in the Reformation debates. Parts one and two tell the story of the way in which key Christian doctrines were formed and gave rise to concerns about various topics as they appeared to reformers in the sixteenth century. The way reformers and others tackled these concerns is explored in part three. At the end of the book is a “map,” in the form of a “Handlist of Reformation Concerns and Their History.”

PART ONE

BIBLE AND CHURCH
The Questions Begin



THE IDEA OF CHURCH



A NEW IDEA

How the story began. To the Reformers of the sixteenth century, “church” was an idea only too familiar; it connoted a monolithic institution corrupt and oppressive and urgently in need of reform. But at the outset it was a novelty. There had been nothing like it until the early Christians began to form themselves into communities for worship and “fellowship,” expressed by the Greek word *koinōnia*.

The New Testament was written within this early community of Christians, and in the same community the discussions took place which would decide which Old Testament writings were to be included in the collection that became the Bible. This forming of what is sometimes called the “canon”—which came to mean the authentic Scriptures—took place among a body of people who were also busy forming a community and organizing the life of that community. The two processes were interconnected and reciprocal. The emerging Scriptures were searched for guidance about the life of the church. The church decided which books were to be received as scriptural.

“Church” was something without exact precedent.¹ The word *ekklēsia* (Latin *ecclesia*) itself came from a Greek verb meaning to “call out”; the ancient Greeks used it for a political assembly of the sort used to govern Greek city-states. That was a bare starting point. A good deal

¹J.-M.-R. Tillard, *Eglise d'églises: L'ecclésiologie de communion* (Paris: Cerf, 1987); G. R. Evans, *The Church and the Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

of thought and experiment were going to be needed to create a Christian “church.”

The first question may well have been why a church was needed at all. One key answer, of course, was that Jesus had declared his intention to found one, when he said that Peter was the rock on which he would build his church (*ekklēsia*, Mt 16:18). That naturally led to the question what the church should be like.

One, holy, catholic and apostolic Church (Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 325/381)

The holy catholic Church (Apostles’ Creed)

These descriptions in the creeds (later sometimes called the “notes” or marks of the church) tell us what Christians of the first centuries took to be the defining characteristics of the church, and also emphasize the significance attached from the first to maintain its unity.

In this list of “notes,” *catholic* (from the Greek *katholikos*) meant “universal.” *One* stressed the importance of maintaining unity throughout this universal church. The emphasis from the beginning was on the need to keep the church together as one single great community with one faith, for it was obvious early on that quarrels were tending to tear it apart.

There was never any dispute that the church ought to be *holy*. That became a difficulty only when in a fragmented church the fragments claimed that each was alone the true church because rival fragments had ceased to be holy; that if there had been a breach of unity, it was the others who had broken away.

Apostolic had two distinct strands of meaning. One sense focused simply on faithfulness to the apostolic tradition, the teaching of the disciples or apostles who had received it directly from Jesus. The same ideal of keeping close to the beginning and its fresh vision inspired the founding of medieval religious “orders” (societies or communities who took vows to follow a particular rule of life), who felt a special calling to live lives of poverty and simplicity—to go out and preach the gospel just as Jesus had instructed.

When Richard Hooker (c. 1554-1600), lawyer and English theologian, took stock of the meaning of *apostolic* at the end of the sixteenth

century, he put the same emphasis on the poverty and simplicity of the apostolic life. He still saw it as a model:

In proposing the Apostles' times as a pattern for the Church to follow . . . the chiefest thing which lay reforms yawn for is, that the Clergy may through conformity in state and condition be Apostolical, poor as the Apostles of Christ were poor.²

But by then the medieval orders who had set out to live like this had gained a reputation for failing, because of the various sorts of reprehensible behavior William Langland had satirized. And there had been a Reformation. There was Hooker, writing from the other side of the Reformation and in a Protestant church, highly conscious of the irony that the Church the Reformers had rejected was the same Church “which hath such store of mendicant Friars,” the Franciscans and Dominicans and others, for whom apostolic poverty was basic to their way of life.³

The other meaning of *apostolic* linked it with a “succession of ministry,” through a line of transmission from the apostles by the laying on of hands. The problem of demonstrating the continuity of Jesus' commission from the apostles themselves arose several times over the centuries when there was a claim that a group or community had allowed a break to occur. It lay at the heart of the Donatist controversy of the fourth century and the Hussite controversy of the fifteenth. The Donatists claimed that those who disagreed with them had an invalid ministry because they had allowed ordination—episcopal succession through the laying on of hands—to be conducted by *traditores*, “traitors,” who had given up (literally “handed over”) the Scriptures in time of persecution (see p. 72). The Hussites, followers of John Hus (c. 1372-1415; see pp. 225-28), had made “emergency” ordinations using priests, when they had no bishop in sympathy with their party, and the resulting ministers were declared to have been invalidly ordained.

Apostolic continuity became contentious again at the Reformation and once more when Anglican orders were declared null and void by the

²Hooker, *Laws*, pref., 4.3.

³*Ibid.*, 4.4.

papal bull *Apostolicae Curae* in 1896 because the Roman Catholic Church held that there had been a break in the sequence of Anglican ordinations in the sixteenth century.⁴ The difficulty of establishing a basis of “mutual recognition of ministry” is still the most common reason for ecumenical conversations between divided churches to fail to reach agreement.

This has been held to be important, because if it is claimed that ministry is not valid, the efficaciousness of the acts of ministers in administering the sacraments comes into question, and that can threaten the sense of security of Christian people and their hope of heaven. *Validity* was taken to be an assurance of authenticity and proper authorization; *efficaciousness*, a guarantee that the sacraments would work.

Uncertainties about the status of the ministry were also taken to undermine ecclesial standing; this could give rise to the claim that the community in which ministry is a mere pretense cannot really be the church. Arguments of this sort are contentious in themselves. They beg many questions about what church is and what sacraments are and whether there is a way of salvation outside the church and not dependent on these technical questions. Not everyone would agree this is an appropriate way to think about church. But that has made these matters immensely important and divisive precisely because so much is at stake.

A practical necessity. Another reason for founding a church or churches was that it turned out that something of the sort was a practical necessity. Jesus’ disciples and Paul and some others got on with the missionary work of preaching the gospel as Jesus had instructed. (They came to be known as the apostles simply because the underlying Greek word means “messengers” or “sent ones.”)

The result of their energetic activity in spreading the gospel was the creation of gatherings or communities of Christians all over the eastern Mediterranean and around the Aegean and Ionian seas. It is evident from the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul to the young churches which were coming into being that this missionary work, partly because it was so successful, began to create organizational difficulties. Christians have always had heated arguments. There were squabbles; factions formed.

⁴Dom Gregory Dix, *The Question of Anglican Orders*, rev. ed. (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1956).

As the New Testament epistles show, the communities soon began to need some guidance on the conduct of their community life.

One of the first attempts to create a framework of rules within which to conduct the business of the infant Christian community is described in Acts 15. Some itinerant preachers were teaching that Christians could not be saved unless they were circumcised according to Jewish custom; Paul and Barnabas protested (Acts 15:1-2). So it was agreed that it would be sensible to go to Jerusalem and convene a meeting to discuss the matter. For this raised the larger question whether the whole law of Moses applied to Christians too and even whether Gentiles as well as Jews could be Christians. Peter had already had a vision, recorded in Acts 10:1-11:18, in which he saw animals regarded by the Jews as “clean” as well as those which were “unclean” and forbidden as food, lowered in a great sheet. Peter heard God telling him to kill and eat *both*, and he interpreted it as a sign that Gentiles as well as Jews were now welcome in God’s kingdom. In Acts 15:6-11, Peter is recorded as reminding the meeting of this new inclusiveness. He said the Christian calling was a calling to freedom and believers should not have to be burdened with the yoke of regulations that Israel itself could not bear. The agreement of the meeting was to be communicated throughout the local churches.

That account of finding a way to reconcile opposing positions contains many lessons about the way to organize a church and what sort of leadership works best. We see the first Christians learning to work by consensus, through meetings of the sort which eventually became councils, but also by appointing leaders and deciding what their responsibilities should be. The Reformers of the sixteenth century went back to these precedents in search of a truly scriptural model for the church. But anxious to cast aside what they perceived as the “corruptions” of more recent times, they tended to be selective in what they approved.

THE EMERGENCE OF MINISTERS AS LEADERS

The nature of the job. Ministerial leadership, the apostle Peter insisted, should not be managerial or dictatorial; the authority of a minister

should come from the example he sets.

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. (1 Pet 5:1-3)

The New Testament shows the young church working out—under the pressure of events—how to appoint and authorize its leaders, and how to decide on the range of their responsibilities. In the early church there were already arguments about the tasks for which the communities' leaders ought to be responsible. Were they to be overseers, teachers, ministers of the sacraments; or helpers of widows and orphans and the needy in general; or all those things? What exactly were their appointed tasks, and who gave them authority to carry them out?

Paul emphasized the importance of the authority of the Holy Spirit in commissioning a minister. He sent a message from Miletus to Ephesus, asking the elders of the church there to meet him (Acts 20:17). He explained that he wanted to leave them instructions for their future ministry. “Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God” (Acts 20:28). Paul saw that there could be a need for a firm hand when there were quarrels or when dissidents mounted a challenge to the community's faith. Local churches are to expect “wolves” to come among their sheep. Even their own members will “come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them” (Acts 20:30).

This perceived need for what might now be called management skills, and with it the definition of the scope of something rather like executive power, was also going to be worked out in a relationship with secular government in every period and throughout Christendom in the ensuing centuries. Churches had to do this locally. Every secular authority, whether empire, kingdom or city-state, had its own arrangements to be accommodated. But in every type of relationship with governments, the church found itself struggling to assert strong leadership

against the secular authority. The balance of power between church and state is a constant concern in the story told in this book.

To Titus, Paul wrote a comprehensive list of desirable personal qualities to go with the list of ministerial duties, which closely resembles the list he sent to Timothy (1 Tim 3:1-7).

I left you behind in Crete for this reason, that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you: someone who is blameless, married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious. For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain; but he must be hospitable, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled. He must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it. (Tit 1:5-9)

Paul did not think every minister would necessarily have to have all the relevant gifts or necessarily had to exercise all these forms of ministry. There are different gifts. Some should be "apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11-12).

Decisions about special responsibilities and the best way to divide them up, taken at the very beginning and recorded in Acts, were thus to have an influence for centuries. When there were complaints that the practical needs of the widows and orphans of the community were being neglected, it was decided to appoint men with a special responsibility for practical pastoral matters, looking after the finances of the community and making sure the helpless and the poor were looked after (Acts 6). These were to be the deacons.

Those specially appointed ministers who were to exercise leadership were also to teach and preach. These individuals were to be chosen by the whole community because it was important that they could be trusted to preserve the faith and not mislead the faithful. Reformers of the sixteenth century warmed to the tone of all this, because it seemed so free of the formalities and restrictions and power play of the institutional church in the West during the later Middle Ages.

Bishops or elders? Were the church's leading ministers to be called bishops (*episcopoi*) or elders (*presbyteroi*), and what was the difference? Probably there was no intended difference at first, and the New Testament authors used either word indifferently, but a difference emerged, and it grew to be important. In succeeding centuries two distinct categories emerged: *bishops*, as overseers of dioceses, and *priests*, as their deputies or vicars. The ancient diaconate lost its distinctive tasks and deacons became absorbed into a single hierarchy or ladder of ministry, where, mounting the first rung, a candidate would become a deacon, on the second rung a priest (elder?), with the episcopate (bishops) at the top.

There were sharp distinctions of function and powers for those in the process of climbing this ladder. Deacons were not allowed to celebrate the Eucharist or to "absolve" penitents; priests could celebrate the Eucharist, and from the early Middle Ages they were allowed to grant absolution too. Only bishops were allowed to ordain, and in the first centuries, the centuries of public penance for serious sins, they were also the ministers of absolution.

The allocation of these powers was to be of great concern to the Reformation's leaders of opinion. They claimed that the balance of tasks and personal qualities outlined in the New Testament had been lost sight of, that the preaching and teaching and pastoral care described in the New Testament had given way to a sacerdotal conception of a priest's role, in which a minister's chief duty was to make "sacrifices" rather than to be a shepherd to his flock.

Whether to have bishops or not to have bishops became a church-dividing issue for many sixteenth-century Reformers. The Lutheran *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* of 1537 explained the history thus. "Formerly" it claimed, "the people elected pastors and bishops." The role of the bishop of the local church (or a neighboring church if the election was of a bishop), was, it claimed, merely to confirm that choice by the laying on of hands. This was a mere ratification. Texts apparently of an early date—such as the writings of Clement, bishop of Rome, or those of Dionysius—appearing to support any other requirement, are dismissed as spurious or fictitious. It is only by human authority that the

grades of bishop and elder or pastor are distinct, the treatise argues.⁵

The reformer Martin Bucer (1491-1551) claimed in his *Commonplaces* that there was and should be no difference between a bishop and a priest. They held the same ministerial office, and deacons held the second:

The Holy Spirit has appointed two distinct degrees in the Church's ministry. . . . The one comprises the senior pastors, whom the Holy Spirit styles overseers and elders, . . . the other . . . comprises those who are to aid the elders in all their pastoral ministry and in feeding Christ's sheep, . . . and . . . helping the needy.⁶

Elders, as the followers of John Calvin (1509-1564) understood their role, should run their local churches by committee. Elders could even be laymen, some said, and therefore not infected with the high claims to special personal powers which bishops made. In Scotland, as we shall see, presbyterianism became the preferred form of church government. Richard Hooker recognized this as still a point of serious controversy at the end of the sixteenth century, when England was riven by factions wanting no more bishops and calling for a presbyterian style of church government instead:

It is a matter of biblical interpretation to say "it is probable that in the Apostles' times there were lay-elders . . . or to affirm that Bishops at the first were a name, but not a power distinct from presbyters."⁷

Vocational dramas. It also became important to be sure that those who exercised pastoral ministry had been properly instructed and "called" and "sent" for the purpose—and were not self-appointed or chosen by breakaway groups which admired charismatic leaders who might not be teaching the true faith. One of the reasons for the practice of sending a letter of introduction with priests who moved elsewhere was to ensure that this could not happen.

⁵*A Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope: A Treatise Compiled by the Theologians Assembled at Smalcald (1537), Triglott Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church: German-Latin-English*, ed. F. Bente et al. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917), <http://bookofconcord.org/treatise.php>.

⁶Martin Bucer, *A Brief Summary of Christian Doctrine (Commonplaces)*, trans. D. F. Wright (Abingdon, U.K.: Sutton Press, 1972), p. 83.

⁷Hooker, *Laws*, pref., 4.6.

The “calling” by the people could be dramatic. In the early centuries the shortage of good candidates, particularly for bishoprics, led to the practice of press ganging, where a likely subject would be seized by force, carried off and thrown down on the floor of the church to be forcibly ordained. Sometimes the new bishop was far from reluctant (though it was etiquette to look it, protesting unworthiness at one’s ordination). Augustine describes in his *Confessions* how he was brought by God’s guidance by means of “exhortations” and “terrors” and “consolations” to “preach the word” and minister the sacraments to God’s people.⁸ For when he returned to North Africa after his baptism, he justifiably feared that he too would be captured for the ministry, though what he really wanted to do was to spend time living a monastic life with a group of friends, thinking about God.

And so it fell out. First he was persuaded to allow himself to be ordained priest, as an assistant to the bishop of Hippo, and then a few years later he became bishop of Hippo himself. The ordination of the captured candidate, like that of every new minister, involved the laying on of hands in token of the calling of the Holy Spirit. This was God’s part of the “calling,” and it was soon held to be, like baptism and confirmation, permanent and unrepeatable, imposing a “character” or indelible stamp on the individual. So a new minister was thought to be set aside for ministry for the rest of his life, though able to serve other congregations than the one which first called him.

The final element was the tie to a particular church, and with it, ministry to a particular congregation. This was later known as “title,” partly because as the church began to acquire property rights, holding a particular pastoral ministry provided the minister with a living and the local secular authorities with a vested interest in conferring these temporalities on the new incumbent. Medieval kings fell into the practice of leaving bishoprics vacant for a year so as to help themselves to the income. It was a convenience they began to view as perfectly proper.

The increasingly formal set of requirements about ministry which evolved in the West by the end of the Middle Ages could give rise to

⁸Augustine, *Confessions* 11.2.2.

a serious crisis, as happened with the Hussites, if one of these required elements was seen to be compromised. But the Reformers, as we shall see, took an altogether more radical approach. They were concerned not only with the authenticity of a succession but with the very nature of the ministry and its purpose.

LOCAL CHURCHES AND THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

The church. The medieval and Reformation perception of the importance of the church's unity were strongly colored by the assumptions about its institutional structure, many of which the Reformers rejected. All this was very Western. Of the five ancient patriarchates—Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople and Rome—only Rome was in Western Europe, the part of the Roman Empire where Latin, not Greek, was the dominant language. There it had had no rivals during all the centuries since there had first been a bishop of Rome, until the Reformation. It had developed a complex and hierarchical institutional structure within which archbishops throughout Europe were subordinate to the jurisdiction of the bishop of Rome, and under them served the bishops of individual dioceses, each with his priests or vicars and their local congregations. So the structural unity of the church in the West was made up of parts, each in its hierarchical place in the whole.

In the Greek-speaking East the churches which came to be known as the "Orthodox" were familiar from an early stage with the difficulty of defining their areas of authority in relation to this fourfold structure. The solution they arrived at was to hold fast to one faith but allow variation of practice. Each patriarchate was "autocephalous," having its own primate or patriarch, and running its own affairs. Churches, whether very local indeed or the size of the patriarchate, saw themselves not as parts, but as microcosms of the whole church.

The overarching questions of primacy, including which of the five patriarchs was *first*, and in what sense, constituted a contentious subject from the end of antiquity. Medieval debate aimed at mending the schism which occurred in 1054 took place from time to time

(see pp. 102-8), but by the Reformation most of those involved in the debates had lost sight of the huge difference in attitude and understanding. Lutherans made overtures to Constantinople, in the belief that a shared dislike of the papacy would be enough to enable them to form an alliance, and were surprised to be roundly rejected.⁹ The distinction between “local and visible” and “universal and invisible” is an inheritance of these debates.

The real practical problem at first, as the New Testament makes clear, was to keep a jumble of only too visible local churches together in the faith. Can anyone start a new local church? The New Testament answer is evidently yes. The missionaries who converted groups of Christians across the Roman Empire were doing precisely that. But Paul’s letters show that too much loyalty to the person who had converted the local community could cause problems. Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria who became an assistant to Paul at Corinth and preached with him at Ephesus before going on to Achaia. He was, it seems, a powerful and persuasive preacher, though it was suspected that he was creating not followers of Jesus but followers of John the Baptist. In any case, his grasp of the Christian gospel seems to have been incomplete. Priscilla and Aquila had to take him home and explain the difference to him (Acts 18:26).

In 1 Corinthians, Paul found himself responding to a letter from a worried community which had become divided in its personal loyalties. First Corinthians 1:10-12 describes the emergence of factions with personal loyalties, some to him, some to Apollos. This tendency to adhere to a human leader who has preached an attractive gospel reappears throughout Christian history. It is the same instinct that has led to Christians calling themselves Benedictines, Franciscans, Dominicans, Lutherans, Calvinists and Wesleyans, and which can still bind a congregation to a charismatic pastor, and blind it to what threatens to be the creation of a new sect around a figure commanding adulation.

Even if there were no such special focus of loyalty to a particular individual, in growing local churches it soon became impossible for

⁹E. Benz, *Die Ostkirche im Lichte der Protestantischen Geschichtsschreibung* (Frieberg: K. Alber, 1952), pp. 17-20.

the leader of the community to be pastor to so many, perhaps over a considerable geographical area. A local bishop could not lead worship every week throughout a large diocese; there would have to be smaller local worshipping communities. The bishops could not be constantly traveling to run all their parishes on a daily basis; priests were chosen to be the bishop's deputies or vicars. This, rather than forming a team of equal elders, became the preferred solution to the problems created by missionary success throughout Christendom in the first centuries.

A priest remained with his bishop in his diocese unless there was a reason to move, and then his bishop would send him to his new bishop with a letter of recommendation, testifying to his suitability and good character and stating that he had been properly ordained.

What was the church in each place? What *was* the "church in each place"? Was it a fragment or complete in itself? Was it a part of the whole or a microcosm of the macrocosm? How were these units or entities related to one another, and how could they hold together in the unity of one church? A controversy divided Europe again and again over the centuries about fixing the date of Easter. This did not appear at the time to be just an unimportant difference of dating. It seemed a church-dividing matter, fragmenting the Easter moment of commemoration of the resurrection and therefore the church.

It certainly seemed like that at one of the high points of the controversy, recorded by Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History*. At the synod called at Whitby in the north of England in 664 to discuss the domestic and political difficulties caused by a king and a queen of different persuasions celebrating Easter on different days, King Oswiu of Northumbria "began by declaring that it was fitting that those who served one God should observe one rule of life and not differ in the celebration of the heavenly sacraments, seeing that they all hoped for one kingdom in heaven." The Synod ruled against the local Ionan tradition of calculating the date of Easter, in favor of conformity to the practice of Rome.¹⁰ The problem became controversial again in the late sixteenth century when

¹⁰Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 299.

the West moved to the Gregorian calendar decreed by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582, and the Orthodox found themselves celebrating Easter on a different day from Western Christians, as still happens.