



The Function of Bishops.



Introduction.

For many years the question of bishops has exercised the minds of a veritable procession of authors and scholars and there has been - and we believe that there still is - a great deal of confusion regarding the function of bishops in the Early Church in Alba.

We suggest that there are two principal sources of this confusion:

- the fact that bishops in the Early Church in Scotland did not fit into the mould of bishops in the 'Roman' and 'Middle Eastern' traditions.
- that too many individuals have approached the subject of bishops in the Early Church whilst 'straight jacketed' by notions of how bishops functioned in the Medieval Age, i.e. from within the bounds of a well-defined *diocese*.
Transferring their academic 'skills' to the earlier age they gleefully conclude that, if you have a bishop then, *ipso facto*, you must have a diocese ... and a cathedral ... and lots of canons!!

Both of these 'sources' have created problems, but the latter has been a particular 'breeding ground' of confused thinking.

The First Bishops

That bishops existed within the infant Christian Church in the Middle East, since almost its very earliest days, is without question. But it should be remembered that these bishops were to be found mostly in the 'cities,' and their influence was much less marked in rural areas. In most cases, the functioning of these bishops also reflected the Roman administrative structures which had been imposed upon the 'society' of the time. It is interesting to note here that the larger sub-divisions of the secular Empire were called 'diocese', a term which soon found its way into the *language* of the Roman Church. By the time of the first of the Six Great Councils of the Church, the *Council of Nicaea* (325AD), the function of bishops was a major topic of discussion, alongside the efforts being directed at countering the *Arian Heresy*. Almost 300 individuals attended this Council which opened May/June 325 at *Iznik*

near *Nicomedia*, the sheer size of the gathering being a fact which is of interest in itself. Canon VI of the Council at last determined the three great centres of Christianity - *Rome, Alexandria* and *Antioch* - in the face of a lengthy history of friction regarding the precedence of these bishoprics. Another interesting ruling was that, henceforth, the translation of bishops from see to see was forbidden and the concept arose of a bishop being "wedded" to his see. Canon VII laid down that the see of *Jerusalem (Aelia)*, while remaining subject to the Metropolitan of Caesarea, should be given the next place in honour after Antioch. Of course, it was also this Council which determined the new method of calculating the date of Easter - independent of 14 Nisan (from the Jewish calendar) - a reformation which was to have huge consequences for the Early Church across the British Isles. A great deal of time at the Council of Nicaea was spent discussing matters which impinged upon the office of bishop and it is a theme which runs through the deliberations of all of these first Church Councils. One soon recognises the significant importance that was placed upon the concept of the *bishop* within his *see*.

Scotland

However, the 'importance' referred to above is not reflected in the Early Church in Scotland. There were no great centres of population in Alba and, in a number of other ways, the need for bishops was not as pronounced. There was no overarching administrative structure, nor, indeed, a tradition of an all-powerful ruler. The power of the Roman legions never held sway in Scotland, particularly so north of *the Mounth*. The Picts were virtually independent aggregations of tribespeople who only owed a loose fealty to the *Ard Ri* (High King) and then, probably, only in matters relating to war and the defence of the country. This is another issue which can cloud the vision of modern scholars – is 'King' an appropriate translation for the native term 'Ri'? Does the term 'King' have such an assemblage of 'baggage' that it is inappropriate to apply it to Early Scottish society? We believe so and prefer to adhere to the native word *Ri*.

The tribes were independent to the extent that it may not even be appropriate to speak of such an entity as 'the Pictish People' or 'the Pictish Nation'! We believe that these tribes were possibly as different from each other as they were similar. But most important was the ancient notion of *dùthchas*¹ which was the 'glue' which bound the peoples together - a Gaelic concept which has such a deeply fundamental importance for the proper understanding of the tribal peoples of what we now call Alba.

The chief (*Ri*) was more of a father to the tribe than a supreme ruler and so it is not too surprising to find that the heads of the church communities (*muinntirs*) were, in

¹ *Dùthchas* - "a feeling of belonging, of where everything is linked, completely linked. Where you belong to the land, and the land belongs to you – there is no distinction. It's like a hand in a glove. Everything fits in, and your culture is part of that as well, and everything you know that's around you; every part of life that's around you is all interlinked and interdependent, and it's all about ancestry, knowing where you've come from and that you are a continuation of all that." [Alice Starmore, Lewis](#).

the same way, father-figures ('*abb*' - means father) rather than bishops or abbots - in the sense of a supreme ruler of a people or a district.

Some of these *abbs* were in Episcopal orders but this was only to allow for the *confirmation* of the laity and the *apostolic ordination* of priests (especially the *consecration* of other bishops). St Paul taught that the *energy* of Christian life depends on spiritual endowments specially given. Whether it be the administration of society or other church work, (or instruction or mediation), that occupies the individual, each has his *Charisma*. A man did not gain any distinction of honour within the community because of the 'rank' of Holy Orders he was in (*acolyte* or *presbyter*). A bishop may not have expected any greater deference from the members of the community than, say, a presbyter - we should remember that Colum Cille himself was only ever a presbyter. In the services of the church the bishop was held in high regard because he was the representative and recipient of the *Apostolic succession* and we can see St Columba being respectful to a bishop when one was present at the mass on Hy (Iona). However, in all other senses and at all other times the community was supervised by the elected '*abb*'. In this way we can see that the presence of a bishop within a community did not, in any way, signify the existence of a diocesan structure. The term 'Bishop of Mortlach', for instance, should be interpreted as relating to the member of the community who had the responsibility of ensuring the Apostolic Succession, not an individual who had any administrative function either within the community or in the geographical region about it. More properly, the phrase should be "Bishop at Mortlach." In some senses, the position of the bishop within the *muinntir* may be thought of as reflecting the position of the *draoidh* (druid) within the tribal organisation - the guardian of religious traditions who was to be referred to, or consulted, as required - bishops were not authority figures (this was the function of the *abb* of the community). They were also, as were the very earliest bishops in the Eastern Church, the *teachers* of the faith. The early bishops in Alba, who were not numerous, were to be found moving around the countryside, from *muinntir* to *muinntir*, as was required, administering the *episcopal* Sacraments - they are the '*episcopus vagans*' of the early writers.

Scholars, over the years, have demonstrated a distinct inability to shake themselves free of the Medieval 'mould' when it comes to discussions regarding bishops. They have attempted to project the Medieval structures and norms backwards in time not because of any concrete evidence but rather, it would seem, because of an assumption that if it was so in Medieval times, then it must have been so in earlier times. We hear them speak of these early bishops as rulers, approaching the position of the 'Princes of the Church' that bishops were to become in later ages. Likewise, some authors have been tempted to assume that because we hear of "a Bishop at ~~~~" then we must assume that from this time there was *de facto* "a Diocese of ~~~~" - and this is to be utterly mislead. The fundamental faith and liturgy of the Early Church was not very different from the Roman Church but, because of the very different social structures that surrounded it, its administration was not centralised.

Marjorie Anderson proposed that, "it will be convenient to speak of *Kinrimund* until 1093 as 'Celtic' and of St Andrews from 1144 onwards as 'medieval', with an intervening half-century of disintegration and experiment."²

Royal Influence

The Scotie kings did try to create a central authority and, as part of their strategy, there seems to be evidence of a use of Bishops and, perhaps, embryonic dioceses. However, the concept of a 'first Bishop of Scotland' either in the sense of chronology or authority, may be a statement of intent rather than of fact. *Ailred's* account of King David's times is the most dependable and he says that the king found three or four bishops (- not bishoprics -) when he came to the Scottish throne. David, Ailred goes on, restored some old bishoprics and founded some new ones. That David, on his accession, found bishops at Dunkeld, Elgin, Rosemarkie and Mortlach, is more than likely. St Andrews was without a consecrated bishop, Whithorn had presumably been long without a bishop, and there may have happened at that time to be no Bishop at Brechin. Dunblane was very likely in a state of decay. Caithness has by far the strongest claim to be regarded as a new foundation by David; but Dunblane possibly underwent reconstruction during David's reign, perhaps not at his own hands, but it could be regarded as falling into the same category; and if David moved a bishop's locus from Mortlach to Aberdeen, then that *See* might likewise rank as a new foundation. Glasgow, to which appointments were made when David was earl in Cumbria, would be reckoned as one of his restorations. Some such picture agrees broadly with what Ailred says and accords better with the facts than does the convention which has dominated writers over the years.

It was only with the coming of St Margaret and her sons that things began to change and most of this movement – effectively *the First Reformation* – was fuelled by political rather than theological 'causes'. The traditional structure of the Early Church allowed no centralised control at all. Some of the religious communities owed an allegiance of sorts to their 'mother house' but they were, in most senses, independent entities. This lack of central 'authority' did nothing to promote the influence and authority of the Crown – indeed it hindered the imposition of such political authority. So, for political reasons, it had to go, and the Medieval system started to be formed using a framework of Dioceses which were supported by the influence of strategically placed monasteries. The 'Roman' system was always based on central authority – that of the Bishop of Rome – and so it was seen as being the ideal vehicle by which the Crown could extend its influence over the face of a very unruly agglomeration of Pictish tribes! Many 'ruses' were used to convince the people that their old Church did not have the ancestry (and thus authority and truth) of an Apostolic Tradition. Celtic Saints were not really saints because they had not been 'approved' but had simply

² Anderson, M.O. (1974) *The Celtic Church in Kinrimund*, The Innes Review, Volume 25 Issue 2, pp. 67-76, at p. 67.

been canonized by popular acclaim. Churches had never been 'dedicated' but had simply inherited names that often linked them with those clerics who had first come to the area. This was why, the Bishop of St Andrews, David de Bernham (1239-1253), spent a considerable proportion of his time 'dedicating' churches within his extensive diocese. This did not mean that these churches had been recently founded but rather that he was 'officially' (or regularly) *dedicating* them, although they were often of a much more ancient *foundation*, using the *Roman Rite*, replacing their traditional Gallo-Celtic names with dedications to more 'appropriate' Roman saints. Quite often though, probably because of the comfort that comes from habit, the local people resisted these new names and the old ones prevailed!

It may be argued that Malcolm III (king from 1058-1093) and Margaret (queen from 1071-1093) were responsible for starting to regularize the Church in Scotland. It is possible, indeed probable, that Bishops came to reside more and more in the major centres of population and Royal power, thus becoming less and less 'wanderers' across the countryside.

There is a claim in the infamous *Scotichronicon* that "Bishop Cellach II of St Andrews," in the late 10th century - during the reign of *Culén son of Indulf* (966-971) - was the first bishop to go to Rome for confirmation of his consecration; and there is the claim made by the York historian, *Hugh the Chantor*, that Bishop *Fothad II* (c 1059-1093) had professed canonical subjection to York as his metropolitan, 'by counsel and command of Malcolm King of Scots and Queen Margaret'. If this is true, Malcolm, under the influence of his queen, must have conceded the claim to 'superiority' made by York in 1072, a claim which was later to be stubbornly resisted by their son Alexander I. Either way, it would seem that in the time of Malcolm and Margaret, the winds of change were starting to blow across the Scottish countryside and that the organisation of the Church was slowly being drawn more and more into line with Roman ways. At the beginning of the century the church in Scotland, floating on the edge of the archbishop of York's sphere of influence, and ever uncertain about ecclesiastical usage, can be described, at best, as a backward daughter of the Roman church. By the 1190's, however, York's control was broken, and the entire Scottish church now existed as the Papacy's 'special daughter', subject directly to the Apostolic See with no intermediary. The application of this exemption to an entire kingdom was an extraordinary and apparently unparalleled act in medieval church history. In this sense, the Scottish church of the Middle Ages was unique and attained a rank that was the envy of many, particularly in England! In many cases Scottish diocesan bishops having the care of poverty-stricken establishments within sparsely populated and remote parts of northern Europe, had direct access to the Pope himself, whereas in all other provinces this was a much-guarded privilege of the princely metropolitan archbishops.

Conclusion

It can be argued that it was only with the coming of the Romanizing influence that we can start to talk of *a Church* in Scotland in the sense of a cohesive and co-ordinated organism. Before this, Christianity existed only in isolated *muinntirs* which sometimes shared certain traditions with other communities. Dioceses in Pictish Alba were superfluous and inappropriate and did not exist except in the minds of some wishful metropolitans! They came into existence out of a political need - the need of the Crown to be able to exercise a co-ordinated, central, rule over a disparate population.

For further reading, see:

1. "Scottish Bishop's Sees before the Reign of David I," Donaldson. G., Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 1952-53. pp 106-117
2. "Scotia Pontifica," Somerville, Robert. Oxford. Clarendon Press 1982.



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