Bad Bishops: A Key to Anglican Ecclesiology

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Lambeth has focused our attention on many things. One of them is on bishops themselves, whose images we have seen reproduced in magazines, whose words we have seen quoted in newspapers, and whose arguments, statements, resolutions and objections we have seen injected into the ongoing debate of our own Church’s public life. In the process of this revived public exposure, theologically heightened by the discussion with the Lutherans over the episcopacy, the character of bishops, broadly understood, has come in for renewed examination and more often renewed disdain. Why allow our church’s public life to be led by the nose at the hands of incompetent and often wayward leaders invested with impossibly fulfilled potencies?

In particular, the struggle within the American Church over the doctrine and discipline touching upon sexuality has focused special attention on the integrity and meaning of “episcopal oversight” and authority, which, in a certain respect, has contributed to the already fallen status of bishops in the public’s eye. A recent diocesan clergy conference in this country, for instance, found it necessary openly to express its desire to refrain from malicious talk, particularly as it referred to its bishop. This commitment, of course, flies in the face of a long tradition of contemptuous speech aimed at bishops, who make up a large section of any index on folkloric ridicule. Clergy especially are familiar with gently complaining stories like that of the Anglican and the Presbyterian arguing over whether the episcopacy is established in the Bible. The Anglican finally says, “I can prove from the very words of Scripture that Saint Paul himself was under the authority of a bishop.” “How so?” wonders the astonished Presbyterian. “Observe 2 Corinthians 12:7,” the Anglican replies, “where Saint Paul writes, ‘to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the...

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flesh.' If that's not a proof that Paul had a bishop, I don't know what is!"

It is worth noting, however, that even in superficial tales like this, there is a positive character seen in the bishop's burdensome person, one that is informed by its link with a Scriptural insight about grace, and about God's providentially gracious use of bishops in their painful mode. And this positive character, vestigial to the weary disdain felt towards the episcopacy, is perhaps a clue to something more profound governing our Anglican ecclesiology. In what follows, in any case, I will attempt to use the figure of the "bad bishop" as a key to understanding—at least partially—the "essence" of the episcopacy within our Church. The purpose of this attempt is not to give credence to the assumption that there are not plenty of "good" bishops around. Without a doubt, there are. Furthermore, the character of the "good bishop" is also critical, and primarily so, to the "essence" of the episcopacy. And we should labor for good bishops, without ever becoming comfortable with the bad. But bad bishops can, nonetheless, help us get clearer about all this.

That we should talk about "essence" at all, with respect to bishops in our Church, is inevitable. Our Quadrilateral, for instance, lists the "historic episcopate, locally adapted" as an "inherent part of the sacred deposit" of the "Christian Faith and Order committed by Christ and the Apostles to the Church unto the end of the world," and "essential" to the restored unity of the Church. This is part of our basic claim concerning bishops. And the late nineteenth-century Quadrilateral's affirmation of this essence has, in fact, given rise to what is—however little appreciated—a revolution in ecumenical discussion. The 1982 so-called Lima Statement of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry, was extraordinarily significant in this regard, although its affirmations have had little practical impact on common Christian self-understanding. Among the agreed-upon assertions was the fact that, "among the gifts [of the Spirit for the Church] is the ministry of the episcopate"—that is, "oversight"—"which is necessary [emphasis added] for expressing and guarding the unity of the body; every church has need of this ministry of unity, in some particular form, in order that it can be the Church of God, the single Body of Christ, a sign of the whole's unity in the Kingdom" (Ministry, c. 23). While the Lima Statement does not make the "historic episcopate" an explicit element of the "essence" of the Church, it does recommend its explicit
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adoption, and indeed, could be interpreted as implicitly defining some “local adaptation” as part of that essence.

This revolution ought to alert us to something that, on first glance at the Quadrilateral, has always surprised people, despite our denomination’s name—that episcopacy is central to who we are as Episcopalians. It surprises people, because it seems so “formal” and “institutional”—bad things in the present culture—a part of the “spiritual” bequest of Christ; further, as noted above, we don’t really grant to bishops much public deference. But although we play down this institutional “essence,” probably simply in reaction to our present relativization of almost every evangelical essence apart from numerically quantifiable growth attached to the contentless name of “Jesus,” our Church is being driven, nonetheless, by its ecclesially centered focus on the episcopacy. If we had no bishops who taught or prayed or acted in ways that caused many Christians sorrow and anger, the issue of our Church’s health and institutional future simply would not arise with the energy, anger, fear, and passion that so grips us today.

This essay will address the question of the “essence” of the episcopacy, by offering conclusions to the following three areas of concern:

First, the question of the episcopacy’s essence is in itself crucially at stake in current tensions within our own American denomination: it is framed, usually unconsciously or only by implication, in often angry discussions about the episcopal “ideal” and its lack of embodiment among many working bishops in our Church. Episcopal essence is usually identified in terms of this ideal, and the ideal itself takes the various forms of doctrinal integrity, personal moral integrity—the “wholesome” example for the flock—courageous opposition to spiritual error and ethical disease, and so on. By focusing on the question of the “bad bishop,” I want us to ask if the essence of episcopacy—which we claim is itself “essential” to the Church—is to be measured by the fulfillment of such ideals. The conclusion given here: probably not.

Second, the question of how we, as a denomination, choose to understand and respond to “bad bishops” quite frankly has a larger ecumenical implication. We are not the only episcopally ordered denomination, nor the only one of such denominations to have bad bishops; but we are the only one to be facing, with such force, their problematic challenge—because we have staked our claim on the episcopacy—which renders our witness to the larger Church crucial on this issue: we shall either demonstrate the ancillary, as opposed to essential,
character of the episcopacy through our demolition of its constructive status, or we will lead the way for other Christians better to perceive their ecumenical opportunities within the larger purpose of God for the Church as they are tied to the episcopacy. In any case, the future and vocation of Anglicanism in the larger Church hangs, in part, on what we understand to be the evangelical location of bad bishops. Lambeth, let alone diocesan structures, has little to offer anyone, apart from a hopeful answer to this question.

Finally, there either is or is not an evangelical basis to the essentiality of the episcopacy. In allowing the problem of bad bishops to address our Church in a central and basic way, we will perhaps be helped in getting to the core of the Christian Gospel itself, that is, learn something of Jesus himself as the Christ of God, and the center and animator of the Church.

We can begin with a historical observation: there is far more written, within the ordering documents of the Church, about bad bishops than about good bishops—although this tendency began to shift in the twentieth century.

There are of course notable works on the positive character of the episcopacy: note, for instance, Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Rule*, which is tied to a number of earlier works on basic elements of Christian leadership associated with the priesthood, by Ambrose, or Gregory of Nazianzus, or Chrysostom. These works have even achieved some classic status. Much hagiographic literature, furthermore, has been written about Christians who *happen* to be bishops—these tend to stress miracles and asceticism, and their stories are often interchangeable with those of other saints. None of these stories, however, has achieved any normative status for the Church—an interesting fact about holiness as a (non)determining element in western ecclesiology that merits further exploration. But beyond Gregory the Great, in any case, little *ordering* literature about bishops exists, "ordering" in terms of defining the nature, character, meaning, duties, and calling of bishops. Rather, what has driven the definition of the episcopacy in our tradition, from the beginning, are the canonical documents—the Church "laws"—and these, significantly, speak at great length to the *problems* challenging the Church as they face the reality of bad bishops.

For the canons of the early Church—Ecumenical, Conciliar, so-called Apostolic, etc.—say far more about what to do with bishops who are drunkards, sexually fallen, financially corrupt, doctrinally in-
competent, ethically unjust, jurisdictionally wicked, etc.—than about how to call, discern, train good bishops, or about how good bishops should conduct their ministries.

As mentioned, this has changed in the twentieth century, something evident not only in the plethora of writings about the ministry for ministers—part of the self-help outlines in career management that have Dale Carnegie behind them as much as the Holy Spirit—but also apparent in the purely canonical documents of the contemporary Church. Our own Constitutions and Canons are in stark contrast to the early Church’s in the relatively abbreviated weight we have given to bad bishops. We might think this a gain, a redressing of the balance of concern. But is it? In any case, it is a significant shift. Why, for so long, did bad bishops loom so large?

On a basic level, the issue is power: bishops had it back then, they do not now. Nowadays, in fact, we can afford to ignore bishops in many ways, because of broad changes in social relations within modern, democratic nations. The question, however, is not the status of bishops in general, but of bad bishops in particular. Why care so much about the bad ones that the good ones seem to be allowed to take care of themselves, canonically anyway? We can explore two reasons: first, the figurai importance of the episcopal institution itself, in terms of its perceived embodiment of Jesus’ form within the temporal life of the Church, was significant in the past in ways it no longer is; second, in the past this figure implicitly lifted up institutional unity in particular as the mechanism by which the Jesus-figure is maintained. It is no novelty to say that, in the catholic view of episcopacy, certain institutional aspects have evangelical significance. This is well-known; but it is also shied away from in our voluntaristically oriented modern view of religion, where institutions are suspect as purely human and un-spiritual—and hence usually oppressive—entities. What is important to stress is how the early Church located the evangelical significance of its institutions precisely in the realistic assessment of the humanly fallible as the necessary context for the Spirit’s deployment: that is, the struggle for the unity of the institution in particular within conflict and fallibility, a struggle which was focused upon the office of the bishop explicitly—both as its cause and its instrumentality—was seen in the past to be a central vehicle of ecclesial grace.

First, we can note how the episcopacy was understood as a figure of Jesus. The seeming hierarchical character of the episcopacy in its origins is well-known, if regretted these days. It goes back to St. Paul’s
own image of apostolicity, of course. For St. Paul, his ministry as an official “apostle” of Jesus’ Gospel makes him the “father” to those he has converted, much in the image of Jesus’ paternity. And this paternal role Paul passes on to Timothy, providing a “reminding” ministry of imitation (1 Cor, 4:14ff.; cf. Philemon 10; 2 Tim. 1:11ff.). Although Jesus instructed his disciples to “call no man father” (Matthew 23:9), Paul seems to have no trouble staking apostolicity on that very name and relationship, precisely because apostolicity is about Jesus, not about Paul at all.

But the most famous defining exposition of the episcopacy as a figure of Jesus is found in the writings of St. Ignatius of Antioch. It is sufficient only to outline the general form of Ignatius’s vision, which places in the center of the Church the bishop, as one who represents God Himself (and yes, the male pronoun is not without significance here) in the midst of his people, and obedience to whom mirrors subjection to God Himself (cf. Ephesians 5:3-6). Ignatius is more supple in his characterization of hierarchy than this, however. He will locate the bishop as an imagistic part of a larger scheme of figural interrelation: the bishop indicates God, presbyters indicate the Apostles, the deacons indicate Christ; or, in another image, bishops are the Son, the Presbyters represent the Father, the deacons point to the Holy Spirit—and all of them, as located among and working in mutual relations with the people of God, form a unity of love that is, at once, the Body of Christ perfected. “Make a real effort to stand firmly by the orders of the Lord and the apostles . . . in body and soul, in faith and love, in Son, Father, and Spirit, from first to last, along with your most distinguished bishop, your presbytery, and your godly deacons. Defer to the bishop and to one another as Jesus Christ did to the Father in the days of his flesh, as the apostles did to Christ, to the Father, and to the Spirit. In that way we shall achieve complete unity. For I realize you are full of God” (Magnesians, 13).

Now hierarchy for Ignatius is important here, but not in the way we assume today—taking orders, groveling, and so on. Hierarchy was a totalizing image for the church in its entirety, as it conformed to the image of Jesus—the “form of a servant”: in Ignatius’s words, “defer to the bishop and to one another, as Christ did to the Father . . . .” That’s the figural relation: servant-deferral. To be in this form was to be a

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community in service of holiness, in subjection to its demands of obedience and love. The *institutional* structure of Church, according to Ignatius, is designed to figure this service through a range of mutual subjections—"we are fellow slaves," as he puts it (*Philadelphians*, 4), linking this service to the single eucharist under the one bishop. The bishop's role, as Ignatius makes clear, is simply to be a central example of this—hence Ignatius's joy in the clarity that his arrest and impending death offer to the Church at large. Hierarchy, in its individually concrete and corporately diverse yet practical modes, is the means of conformance to Christ—which is another way of translating Ignatius's notion of the "unity" of the Church with God: when you are conformed to Jesus, you are in unity. And because it is mutual subjection, its unity is also always demonstrated in its own visible life within itself. The Church at unity under and with its bishop is the Church in conformance with Jesus.

Now although he says much about the evils of schism, of acting apart from the bishop, Ignatius says little about problematic bishops, bad bishops. But the subsequent elaboration of canonical literature about the unity of the Church to which Ignatius is committed centers around just this problematic element: the question was not so much, "how maintain unity in the face of bad bishops?"—our moment's question—but rather "How does our unity as a Church express itself within a body in which bad bishops figure?" The answer is obvious when posed this way, given the premises: bad bishops do not, in themselves, represent a subversion of the life of mutual subjection in the figure of Jesus; rather, they represent the possibility of that life in a particularly acute form.

Let us take but one example. The *Apostolic Canons*—and there are parallel forms in other canonical literature, e.g. Council of Carthage, etc.—which may be based on fourth century originals, spend an inordinate amount of time dealing with two issues: what to do with bad bishops, and how to protect the integrity of diocesan boundaries from the predatory authority of external bishops. These two issues, coincidentally, dominate our current episcopal concerns in the Anglican Communion. Both issues are addressed with excruciating detail—what procedures are to be followed, who is to accuse whom, who is to decide, what provincial council, what trial, what decision, on what basis. On the one hand, the canons are concerned to deal with the reality of bad bishops; but, as we know, the procedure for so dealing with bad bishops is so complicated and long that it isn't
clear that responses will ever be decisive enough to resolve the situation in anything but an illegitimately aggressive fashion. (Compare our own “presentment” process in the modern Episcopal Church.) Further, and because of this, we may see these two concerns as potentially in conflict: if bad bishops are a problem, as they appear to be for many dioceses, and if it is so complicated and hard to get rid of them, then surely the integrity of diocesan boundaries ought not to be upheld idealistically; one ought to allow a bishop from outside—a “good” bishop—to intervene in the diocese led by a bad bishop. Surely this must sound familiar.

But this is not, in fact, the reasoning of the early Church. The enormous integrity of diocesan boundaries that early Christians insisted upon, and the grave error of blurring their lines, are critically linked to the enormous gravity of episcopal conduct, doctrinally and morally. It is because the unity of the Church is critical to its conformity with Jesus that individual conduct is brought into line with the image of Christ only through an ordered, if often ineffective, process of mutual subjection that does not allow for shortcuts. Or, put another way, the integrity of the episcopacy as an apostolic image that is embodied in time is maintained only through the mechanism of institutional unity. The bishops of the early Church will sometimes speak of the “blessed unity” of the episcopacy, and do so in the context of dealing with bad bishops (cf. the Letter and Canons of Constantinople), and of healing the injury that they do. Follow the process, they say, because of this “blessed unity” we have. Unity is a “blessing,” which means a saving balm in itself, by which evil is allowed to be expunged from the Church. It is so because its maintenance in itself represents the mutually self-subjugating character of the conformed life of Jesus by which unity with the Father is achieved. Extraordinary patience is required in dealing with bad bishops—cf. Canon 6 of the Council of Constantinople, which in its tedious and contorted demands for due process would make any normal person despair of ever punishing a once-accepted heretic—but this convoluted process is explained in terms of giving “honor” to the “order of the church” embodied in its laws, whose bequest of temporal breadth upon the Body—“patience”—allows for the flourishing of virtue over time.

Practically speaking, the ecclesiological consequences of this theologically informed canonical attitude are this: bishops are not primarily individual representations of Jesus; they are so only to the degree that they are part of a larger ecclesial figure of mutual subjection in the
image of Jesus. This larger figure allows for individual discrepancies—bad Christians, bad priests, bad bishops—and it allows for these precisely because their presence in the Church, however unfortunate and disruptive, can never subvert the possibility of service, and can, in cases of extraordinary challenge, even heighten them. Augustine, as we know, has much to say about the blessings that come from living in a mixed Church (cf. his exegesis on the presence of Judas among the Apostles, in his homilies on the Gospel of John). It is not the case that bad bishops are really “good”; they are always “bad,” and there are mechanisms by which the faithful Church is asked to reform or remove them. But these mechanisms are slow, hard, and often weak. And in this context, bad bishops can indeed always be a tool for the larger apostolic figure of “strength in weakness,” as in all situations demanding that we put up with episcopal oversight; in the case of bad bishops, the tool is specifically one that can reveal the character of corporate grace as it molds the Church’s ongoing life.

For instance, we talk of Jesus’ subjection in death, his “obedience”: is there a practical way to distinguish the object of his submission? Is it to the Father that He submits, or to his own Jewish leaders, Pilate and the people’s wrath? The latter can only be grasped as an extension of the former. He submits to both, surely. It doesn’t matter the level on which we parse this. The Creed contains the central fact of “crucifixion under Pontius Pilate,” not simply to emphasize the historical concreteness of the Lord’s death—this is what we hear said in explanation today—but, more profoundly, to remind us of the inescapably self-subjecting character of His life in time, whose bowing under the burden of human folly orders the whole subsequent character of human salvation, in the Church above all.

One of the richest images used to describe the relationship between mutual subjection, instanced in the continued existence of bad bishops, and the figure of Jesus is given by Gregory the Great, in a letter to one of his fellow bishops (Epistle 17, to Felix of Messana). The question Gregory was asked to answer was how to deal with those who “vex” a bishop—by complaining, accusing, blaming a bishop’s conduct and character, even his teaching. Gregory has no real advice to offer, except to say that such accusations, however justified in themselves, are inappropriately expressed in public with respect to a bishop. He

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uses the “hierarchical” model to explain this, by emphasizing how we should willingly be “subject” to the “throne” of a bishop, whatever his conduct: “subordinates—whether lay or clergy—are to be admonished that, when they observe the deeds of their masters, they return to their own heart, and presume not in upbraiding them.”

The primary Scriptural figure Gregory indicates in this, however, is not simply one that describes the natural relation of subject and authority, in terms of some divine social hierarchy. Rather, Gregory chooses an image from among the most lofty possible, that is, the example of David and Saul. “For David, who was the most righteous of kings, presumed not to lay his hand on Saul who was evidently already rejected of God.” That is, the Messiah himself, who was divinely legitimated in his kingship, refused even to undermine the oppressive and illegitimate king whom God himself had overthrown! Such is Christian subjection as it is rightly embodied. The use of the Messianic figure by Gregory is deliberate, of course, for he ends his discussion by subsuming this posture in the very life of Jesus, quoting from Matthew 10:24, “for the servant is not greater than the master,” the “master,” that is, of the universe itself, whose self-subjection to the world’s evils, and the evils of his own people, embraces the very calling of God’s people as a whole.

It is not surprising, then, to find Gregory framing the discussion in terms of two familiar themes that, as we have seen, characterize the early Church’s traditional attitude towards the episcopacy in general: first, that any relation to the bishop is a relation to Christ Jesus—“vexation or detraction of the bishop touches Christ,” he writes—and second, that this relation, which exists in subjection, is therefore given its significance in terms of the burdens of unity: “our Head, which is Christ, to this end has willed us to be His members, that through His large charity and faithfulness He might make us one body in Himself. . . . From the citadel of the Head let nothing divide us, lest if we refuse to be His members, we be deserted of Him, and wither as branches cast off from the vine.” The case of the bad bishop, figured in Saul and then fulfilled in the life of Jesus’ relation of Passion to the authorities of Israel and Rome, unveils the very character of the Church’s divine vocation and destiny.

We must be clear about the basis upon which this entire outlook of the early Church is founded. For it goes back quite literally to the character of apostolicity itself—which the episcopacy embodies—as lifted up by St. Paul. Paul, as we know, legitimated his “apostleship”
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precisely in terms of his experience of submission to the travails engendered for him by his own people. “Are they [other so-called apostles] Hebrews? So am I. . . . Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death” (2 Cor. 11:22ff.); and so the catalogue of Paul’s woes of submission follows, which he sums up with the flourish, “if I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (11:30). This is what it means to be an apostle, Paul asserts; and this is the relation which the ongoing character of the Christian leader assumes with the larger Church and world. Thus, Paul writes to Timothy, “For this gospel I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, and therefore I suffer as I do. . . . Follow this pattern you have learned from me” (2 Tim. 1:11-13).

If we were to transpose this to the explicit discussion of the episcopacy, we could say that Paul is talking about the self-subjecting character of the good bishop—that is, himself! But this character, as we know, assumes the central orchestrating role for the entire Christian ethical life of the Church, as it is elaborated by Paul himself, and Peter too, in that genre of Christian moral summary given in the so-called “Household Code” so common in the Epistles, and so maligned today. “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,” Paul writes (Eph. 5:21), placing the form of the Christian life under this one subsuming and submitting banner of mutual relation—slaves and masters, husbands and wives, and so on. Peter, for his part, outlines the shape of Christian duty in just these terms of mutual subjection in his First Epistle, but now stated explicitly as offering the means of our conformance to Christ. And Peter stresses, more than elsewhere in these lists of relations, how this conformance is given especially when we suffer the burdens of these relations unjustly. It is worth laying out the order of relation as Peter explicates it in this letter:

Jesus suffers patiently, giving us an “example” to follow “in his footsteps”; He does not lash out, He does not resist, He trusts only in God’s judgment (1 Pet. 2:2ff.).

As Christians, we are called to “be subject to every human institution ordained through the Lord—whether emperors or governors—acting as slaves of God” (2:13ff.).

Slaves are to be subject to masters, even when unjustly treated (2:18ff.).

Wives are to be subject to husbands (3:1ff.).
Husbands similarly (the mutual relation is properly understood as implicitly pressed through the rhetorical shape of the argument), and they are to understand that women are "co-heirs" with men of God's promises (3:7ff.).

"Elders" (that is, presbyters) or "shepherds"—the Church's leaders—are to be willing examples of Christ's sufferings for their flock (5:1ff.).

Finally, all others in the Church are to be "subject" to the elders themselves (5:5).

The governing rubric in all of this is the joyful sharing of Christ's suffering (4:13), which is explained as being given within the Church's life of mutual humility and love (3:8).

In this Scriptural light, obviously, the focusing importance of bad bishops is not a plea for the benign toleration of them. What we have here is rather a general description of the character of an episcopal church as it understands the essential quality of its self-ordering. Transferred to our own era and institution, we could say that apostolicity is a "reminder" of mutual subjection, and it is institutionalized—ordained, stuck into the middle of our lives—like a lightning rod. And we enter this "episcopal" church in order to be buffeted, ensnared, shaped, and molded through our formal encounters—with Scripture, the liturgy, but also with the "order" of the Church—into the shape of Jesus' self-giving.

The classical shape of this outlook should be familiar to those conversant with Church history, in the form of the monastic virtue of "obedience," related especially to that of the abbot. One way of looking at Anglicanism—and this is a topic worth investigating—is as a laicization of the ideals of religious communities, with all the theological alterations such a democratizing must make necessary (e.g., the defining Protestant issue of "justification by faith" within Anglicanism can be interpreted in this way, along with a number of other classic reforming doctrines). In any case, simply translate "obedience" as "mutual subjection," and define the bishop as the popular bond, in his or her official role, of this mutual subjection, and much of the Benedictine teaching on the virtue of obedience makes transferable sense in the terms we have been using. This is true especially in relation to "bad bishops." We can use, as a test case here, a classic text of Dom Columba Marmion, Christ the Ideal of the Monk (1922), and the
magnificent chapter entitled *Bonum obedientiae*—"the good of obedience."³

Marmion describes the virtue of mutual subjection in terms of Christlikeness—the monk is to follow in the footsteps of Christ, much like the mistreated slave and all Christians are to do in 1 Peter's exhortation. Marmion himself uses the image of Philippians 2 and Hebrews 10:7 ("Lo, I have come to do your will, O God"): in the Incarnation, Jesus "darts through the infinite space that separates the created from the divine" and the humanity of Jesus is "drawn into an impetuous current of uncreated love" towards God that surpasses any other human being's, that is founded in the gaze of a human child straight into the face of the loving Father. "His whole existence is summed up in love for the Father," Marmion writes; "but what form will this love take? The form of subjection [obedience]: *Lo, I have come to do your will.* And why this? Because nothing better translates filial love than absolute submission. Christ Jesus has manifested this perfect love and this full obedience from the moment of the Incarnation 'even to the death of the Cross' (Phil. 2:8)."⁴

Now, according to Marmion, within the monastic community, the disciple is joined in this Jesus-figure, through the exercise of mutual subjection as it is embodied in a relationship to the abbot, the "superior," who stands, as St. Benedict says, in the “place of Christ” for the monk, just as Ignatius describes the bishop. The monk is to obey the abbot "as if the order came from God himself."⁵ We are familiar with this aspect of the Benedictine rule. But it is not for the sake of servile self-abnegation that such subjection is enjoined; it is for the sake of the virtues of Jesus Himself, virtues that can only ground, as well as spring from, the act of mutual subjection: faith, hope, and love.⁶

For instance, we subject ourselves to the abbot in *faith*, faith that God will use my love for His ends, that my will offered up is usable, that my pride and insistence is expendable in the face of God’s omnipotent and gracious act. Self-subjection is "hopeful" in a related way, in that obedience casts out fear, and God is allowed to take our hand

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⁴ Ibid., p. 276.
⁵ Cf. Ibid., p. 265.
⁶ Ibid., pp. 267 ff.
and lead us, as he led Moses through his mission to the promised end; and self-subjection is driven by and leads to love, the love of union with Jesus' own submission, the love for others, that their lives are held by God's, lives to which we can join our own wills without doubt or fear.

This is well-worn ascetical wisdom. But Marmion spends a good deal of space on the most vital context in which the virtues of subjection find their effective spirit: not in some ideal community of faith, filled with nice, faithful people; no, rather these virtues of faith, hope, and love in subjection are most fully exercised in the face of bad or incompetent or fallible authorities. Obedience to weakness is the key, Marmion explains. Self-subjection to another is like receiving the sacrament of the eucharist:

Our senses cry out, 'that is not Christ! Only bread is there!' But Christ has said, 'this is my body. . . .' In the same way, Christ veils Himself in our superiors. The abbot, despite his imperfections, represents Christ for us. St. Benedict is formal on this point. Christ is hidden under the imperfections and weaknesses of the human being. . . . By reason of our habitual contact with him, we naturally see his deficiencies and limitations, and then we are tempted to cry, 'this man is not Christ! His judgment is limited, is fallible, he can be mistaken, he is mistaken, he allows himself to be biased. . . . Yet faith discovers Christ beneath the imperfections. . . . To obey the abbot because we have the same ideas as he, because we admire his talents, because we find him reasonable, is unworthy of us. . . . Why so? Because as soon as we place ourselves on the natural plane [every person is the same, and we should submit to no creature,] as such, [even a dazzling genius.] But if God says, 'This person represents me,' be he a man without talents, having the most blatant defects, belonging to an altogether inferior set, I would yield. . . .''

For I would be serving God with my faith, with my hope, with my love.

All this is firmly part of the tradition. It stands in continuity with the most splendid spirits of the Christian Church, like St. Francis, who, in his Testament begins by urging his brothers willingly to cease preaching where they are forbidden. "And if I were as wise as Solomon and met the poorest priests of the world, I would still refuse to preach against their will in the parishes in which they live. I am determined to reverence, love and honour priests and all others as my

7 Ibid., pp. 267f.; 272f.
superiors. I refuse to consider their sins, because I can see the Son of God in them and they are better than I. I do this because in this world I cannot see the most high Son of God with my own eyes, except in his most holy Body and Blood which they—the leaders of the Church—receive and administer to others.”

In the midst of our contemporary concerns over the urgent need for prophetic cleansing of the Church, we can ask ourselves: was St. Francis “effective” in renewing the Church of Christ? Or are we dealing here with a monstrous anachronism? Yet the cultural distance from our own that this perspective represents does not lie simply in our developed social structures that have done away with hierarchicals and self-denials in the face of the abuse of power. Marmion, as noted in the quotation above, is well aware that subjecting oneself to another creature, “as such,” is “unworthy” of who we are. Further, he is well aware that abbots can also err in matters of essential faith, in which case they are to be confronted, in a legitimately sanctioned way. But not disdained and repulsed.

No doubt there are standards for the episcopacy for which it is necessary to hold bishops accountable, and according to which bishops should be nurtured and upheld. No doubt there are doctrinal truths or moral conditions that the Church and her people are led to struggle for and guard. And the object of such struggle is worth defining and promoting. Further, the character and process of that struggle and guardianship are not simply up for grabs—we have canons and processes, which can even be changed and improved, through legitimate bodies of decision-making.

Be that as it may, what this present reflection suggests is that there is a fundamental set of informing parameters for our relationships with bad bishops that underscores our relationship with all bishops, because it derives from the very core of the Church’s vocation to follow Jesus. Whoever may be the “bad bishop” to whom we are subjected—and there are many candidates whose names could here be enumerated—there is a legitimate process to follow in opposition, a process however that may be likely to result in juridical standoffs. In the meantime and subsequently, questions of relation are pressed, such as: should the bishop be allowed to preach in the churches of the

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diocese, in my church? Do I pray for him as my "father [or mother] in
Christ"? Do I take communion from his hands? Do I attend her dioce­
san address? Do I pay his salary?

These kinds of questions are pressed, because proper subjection
has bite in terms of these elements of relationship. The President of
the U.S., for example, is "impeachable" (as well we know in these
times), but until legitimately removed from office remains "Mr. Presi­
dent," with all the authority to sign bills, conduct foreign policy,
address the Congress and people, and be paid, whether he is "good"
or "bad" (again, the era proves this to be the case). What we call
"moral authority"—as opposed to sanctioned authority—is, in canon
law, something that is only retrospectively recognized. And self-
subjection, according to the Gospel, is not something that is granted
only to the "morally" authoritative. It is itself the basis of Christian
moral authority. And thus, while the early Church canons can call "bad
bishops" "no bishops at all," this moral judgment is attached to indi­
viduals only later, and never translates into legitimate rebellion, but
instead sharpens the moral character of the mutually subjected
Church.

It is not our heightened sense of autonomy that separates us from
this consistent past in our tradition, and so renders pointless any ex­
ploration of the Gospel in such subjection. Rather, it is our sheer lack
of "faith" that God has any good purposes to fulfill in the mutual sub­
mission that orders His church. We do not trust, not simply other peo­
ple in the church; we do not trust God with the Church's life itself. Yet
that trust is crucial to the entire possibility of the Church's ongoing
continuity in time. In a letter falsely attributed to the early pope
Zephyrinus, the author writes, "Bishops are to be borne by clergy and
laity, and masters by servants, in order that, under the exercise of en­
durance, things temporal may be maintained, and things eternal
hoped for" (First Epistle of Zephyrinus).\textsuperscript{9} Hope for eternity, then, is
here given as a ground for subjection, one perhaps lost today.

Just so, the convictions of the early Church on the question of bad
bishops and their indicating gift of hope through subjection are not
ones that have been easily passed on to the modern era. Our own wor­
rries over independence, self-protection, and systemic integrity have
inflexibly pushed us away from any recognition of virtue in mutual

\textsuperscript{9} First Epistle of Zephyrinus, in Ante-Nicene Fathers (repr. Hendrickson Publ.,
1994), vol.8, p 610.
subjection. But it is notable how, even in Zephyrinus—and the letter was edited perhaps in the ninth century to defend the rights of individual dioceses against the power abuses of archbishops—a commitment to more democratic and local forms of Church government is tied to programs of self-subjection in unity. This fact has some bearing on our own Anglican situation; for amongst the most fervent “catholic” defenders of episcopacy in a non-papal perspective were those who stressed the value of suffering in love the depredations of unjust leaders. A glance at a famous ecclesial episode in the early modern era makes this clear. It is an episode that touches on the Jansenist experience in the Netherlands that has, curiously, held some traditional interest for Anglicans, like John Mason Neale, in search of extended catholic ties.

Jansenism, a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Roman Catholic reform movement, centered in France (Pascal, Racine, Boileau, among famous literary figures, were Jansenists), was deeply committed to an Augustinian reading of divine grace and providence, and to a generally catholic ecclesiology. Rather than leave the Church because of its corruptions and false teachings—which they felt acutely—the Jansenists' understanding of unity was informed by a call to suffer mistreatment, a call that was itself connected with the most rigorous of moral and doctrinal commitments. Pierre Nicole, one of the great Jansenist apologists for Roman Catholicism, is notorious for his argument against the Calvinists: despite the evils of the institutional Church, Nicole insisted to his Protestant countrymen, you should have gone without pastors altogether, rather than alleviate your suffering through subverting the unity of the Church by ordaining your own. For that unity will always be your vehicle of conformance, and you have now cast it aside.

The one great moment in which Jansenists took independent power, ecclesially, outside of France, can be seen as a challenge, not only to the governing theological principles of Nicole's call, but to the evangelical effects Jansenists claimed were associated with it. This occurred in the Catholic Church of Holland, which had, since the sixteenth century, been without a local archbishop, owing to conflicts associated with the Protestant government.10 Desirous of having their

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10 An accessible historical review of this episode can be found in C. B. Moss's *The Old Catholic Movement* (New York: Morehouse-Barlow, 1964), pp. 1-123.
own bishop, but ignored in their pleas to the Vatican, the Utrecht cathedral chapter, which was rife with Jansenist sympathisers, took matters into their own hands. In 1724, they consecrated an archbishop of their own, at the hands of a suspended Jansenist bishop then living in Amsterdam, Dominique Marie Varlet. The subsequent history of this event follows in kind: Varlet's refusal to step down as a working bishop and his continued consecrations, the fear of abandonment on the part of many Dutch Catholics, the drift of the Church into schism when Varlet's consecrations were not recognized—this is the origin of the so-called Old Catholic movement—and the final virtual disappearance of the church into parochialism and eventual preciosity came with a whimper. Curiously, the growth of the Catholic Church in Holland, in the wake of the Reformation, came in the earlier period of absent bishops—in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, before the split with Rome took place.

One of the interesting aspects of this modern episode is tied to the fact that all the French Jansenist bishops, despite their doctrinal and even institutional sympathies with Varlet and the beleaguered Dutch Catholics, refused initially to lead, and later to participate in his consecrations, although invited to do so. And here the consistency of their position was demonstrated: Jansenists themselves were passionately committed to the promotion of "good" bishops—they wrote treatises on the subject, instituted reforms, opposed corrupt and lax episcopacies. But the ascetic competence, if you will, of the Jansenists also allowed them to see the providential capacities that bad bishops had for the welfare of the Church—including paradoxically, in the case of Utrecht, the gracious consequences of incompetent institutions that actually rendered flocks bishopless. That is, they saw that the Dutch Church could in fact flourish without a bishop, if that lack was accepted in a mode of self-subjection. In Marmion's terms, of course, this was a vision derived solely from faith, faith in the purposes of unity through mutual subjection which the episcopate, in both good and bad forms, was established to embody. The parallel of this episode to certain pressures now felt in our own Church's current conflicts ought, in any case, to be obvious. And one important sociological point to be made is that the value of "democratic" ordering within the Church may actually call out, rather than cut against, the self-subjecting locus of blossoming unity that the bishop's role embraces.

We could multiply examples from the history of the Church and its theology, examples of both accepting and rejecting—with sad con-
sequences—the premises just asserted. But the main point itself has been clearly made already. It is now time to draw these scattered observations together in the form of some conclusions to the opening questions. Let us remind ourselves of three of those questions: first, is the evangelical character, or essence, of the episcopacy defined by an ideal? Second, what is the role of the episcopacy in our vocation as Anglicans for the larger Church? Finally, how, at root, is the episcopacy tied to, and expressive of, the nature of the Gospel of Jesus itself?

With regard to the first question—the ideal of the episcopacy—we ought to conclude that the essence of the episcopacy lies not in the embodied ideal of the bishop, whether functionally or morally defined. The essence, instead, lies in the dynamic of relationship that the real, concrete bishop establishes at the center of a mutually subjected body of Christian believers. To put it with provocative bluntness: whether or not a bishop is a “wholesome example” to the flock, or an effective or even truthful guardian of the faith, is irrelevant to the essence of the episcopacy in its individual exemplars.

Obviously, the ideal of doctrinal and moral integrity is highly relevant to the overall, ongoing purposes of the episcopacy in God’s ultimate designs. God did not order the Church episcopally with the final purpose of subjecting her to incompetent leaders. But unless, in individual instances, the continued subjection to bad bishops were not also essential to the salvific character of the Church, the Church itself would be a dead vessel in those ultimate divine designs. Since, however, those ultimate designs include the unity of the Church, in the form of the servant Christ, the relations of mutual subjection, even centered in faithless leaders, must work essentially for the Church’s positive destiny. And what could be a better tool for this than the lightning rod of bad bishops?

We need to stress again that the process of confronting, correcting, and perhaps even removing bad bishops is also a part of the episcopal essence for the Church. But this process is governed by the “order” of the Church that itself is subject to the character of mutual subjection in unity that bad bishops actually serve to unveil. If the process were not itself slow, painful, and often ineffective, it would not be reconcilable to the very character of the Church’s figural reality as an image of its Lord. In other words, the imperative of the process of opposing bad bishops cannot be seen as undermining the essential quality of mutually subjecting relations the episcopacy in every case must embody and promote.
In this light—the light of the relation and not of the ideal—surely a number of our current tensions in the Church must be rethought. And this is a task that urgently demands doing, in a way that goes far beyond the current tiptoeing around proposed “alternative” patterns of oversight, an oxymoron if ever there was one within the values of episcopal catholicism.

To the second question, regarding the vocation of the Anglican Church within the wider Church universal, perhaps we can draw a potentially encouraging, even exciting conclusion. We are, at this point in history, the Christian denomination best placed to exhibit the full character of the episcopate for other traditions; and in so doing, we are the most ready to render a glorious service to Jesus’ divine plea for unity among divided Christians, and so to His call to evangelize an unbelieving world (John 17). As Anglicans, we have bishops, we have bad bishops (and good ones too!), we are democratically and culturally dispersed, in ways that demand some deliberate form of relation, and finally, we are in a situation of doctrinal, liturgical, and moral fragmentation that would render any ministry of painful self-subjection in unity a blazing light to the world.

Our vocation as Anglicans at this point in time is not, by contrast, to be a “bridge” between Protestants and Catholics, to be an example of theological “comprehension” or tolerance, nor to be a model of “diversity.” Every major denominational church in America today is already running, with tongues hanging, after this set of supposed callings. Our vocation, rather, is to suffer in unity, around our bishops, for the sake of embodying the shape of Jesus Christ in flesh and blood. The fruit of this suffering, as Dom Marmion might put it, will be the fruit of all “faith, hope, and love,” that is, the unveiling of Christ’s Spirit at work in the world to convert the hearts of men and women to God’s eternal purposes and life.

Finally, there is the question about how the Gospel of Jesus Christ is clarified by the reality of bad bishops. We can simply summarize much of what has already been said in this essay’s array of citations: Since we are talking about the person of Jesus, the Body of Jesus Christ in the figure of His church, self-subjection in unity around a bishop of any kind is a profoundly evangelical act, a Gospel act, a signal of corporate humility before God set in front of the Nations (cf. Isaiah 66:19) that will bring Jew and Gentile together. Servire est regnare, “to be subject is to reign,” in St. Benedict’s phrase. And this maxim is not to be taken in a weak, or rhetorical sense. It is rather the
very proclamation of the Lord Jesus Christ, stating clearly who He is: to be subject is “to reign,” that is, in the fullness of God’s truth and glory, through which, in the action of Christ Jesus Himself, He will “draw all people to Himself” (John 12:32). Is there really any question about it? The Gospel itself is at stake in how we relate to bad bishops.