

I find it interesting that John Knox, in his way, concedes my point about what is, and what is not, constitutive of, or essential to, the church. Speaking of "the historic episcopate," he says,

... there are obvious difficulties in the way of our regarding it as essential. To mention only one: since it cannot be clearly traced to the Apostolic Age and was certainly not generally established then, one cannot say that it belongs to the *esse* of the church without placing in jeopardy the existence of the primitive church itself. Besides, even if the institution of episcopacy could be clearly grounded in the usages of the earliest communities, there would still be the question of whether it was an accidental or an essential feature. If by the *esse* of the church we mean what the church originally was and what it had to be (that is, regardless of the actual historical circumstances in which it arose), then we should have to deny, I think, that episcopacy belongs to the *esse*, any more than do the particular canon we have and the particular creeds we have. All these [*sc.* episcopacy, canon, creeds] were gradually developed in response to the actual conditions the church confronted (and these conditions might conceivably have been different). Although all three are in a degree adumbrated in the Apostolic Age (and could not have won later universal acceptance if they had not been), nevertheless none of them, as we have seen, can be thought of as having its origin there. If there is a certain inevitability about these developments, the inevitability exists only in the actual context of history; and if we are trying to define what the church from the very beginning and in the nature of the case *had* to be, we can hardly include episcopacy [any more than canon or creeds] in our definition. Besides—and most decisively—one may point to the indubitable fact that the reality of the church is actually found, and that manifestly authentic and effective ministries are being actually exercised, in nonepiscopal bodies (*The Early Church and the Coming Great Church*: 151).

This is not to say, however, that Knox clearly and consistently recognizes the full length and breadth of what he here allows, or that his understanding of qualifiers such as "original," "earliest," "from the very beginning," and the like isn't open to serious objection. Thus he can say, for example,

[L]et us not forget that the canon was the product, not of the first and early second centuries, but of the late second and early third. The primitive church produced the several books; it did not produce the New Testament. The New Testament canon is not to be understood as a sign of the visible unity of the primitive church; rather, it was a consciously created instrument of the post-apostolic church for the achieving of a visible unity among the many groups, with their varied and often conflicting ideas and practices, which primitive Christianity had bequeathed to it (15).

For all of his recognition that the primitive church did not produce the New Testament canon, Knox shows no awareness that the New Testament writings

themselves were one and all products, not of the "primitive church," in the strict sense of the "original," "earliest" church that was there "from the very beginning," but rather of the later church between the years, roughly, 50-135 C.E.

16 December 2007