

Some Notes on Apostolic Succession

1. The Role of the Apostles. Though their precise identity poses problems, the 'apostles of the Lord', as distinct from what might be called the 'apostles of the Churches', occupy a unique position in the New Testament. 'The Twelve', reminiscent of the patriarchs, are founder members of the New Israel. Despite this privilege, their vocation is more associated with humility and service than with the exercise of authority, which all stems from their closeness to Christ (e.g. Mark 10: 41-45). As Rengstorf concludes:-

"One should avoid the word 'office' in this connexion, and use 'commission' instead." (1)

But the apostles were not only commissioned by the Lord in person: they were the first witnesses to Christ and, in particular, witnesses to his resurrection (Acts 1: 22; cf. the emphasis of Paul on his having seen the Lord, 1 Cor. 9:1, Gal. 1:1, 15-16). Their role is unrepeatable, for the witness of their successors is derived and not direct. Ultimately the apostolic writings replaced the living voice of the apostolic band. The choice of Matthias had called for a man who had accompanied the first disciples "during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us." The case of Paul was undoubtedly sui generis.

"The Apostolate does not belong to the period of the Church but to that of the Incarnation of Christ."(2)

Consequently their names are associated with the very foundations of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21:14).

All this helps to elucidate the meaning of Eph. 20 - "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief corner-stone." It is in Christ that all is joined together and grows (v. 21). The association of apostles and prophets (the context suggests New Testament prophets) with Christ as the foundation of the whole structure stems from this first-hand testimony to the unique saving work of Christ. The inclusion of 'prophets' here should be sufficient indication of the point.(3)

2. Credal Affirmation. The statement of the 'Nicene' Creed, "I believe one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church", recognizes apostolicity as a hall-mark of the whole church, not just of a particular office or spiritual elite. Now the apostolic office was undoubtedly unique and unrepeatable, but the apostolic mission continues, for it will last until the end of the world (Matt. 28:20). To succeed the apostles is to heed their witness and to continue their ministry.

"Who then are the followers of the apostles? ... There can only be one basic answer: the Church. The whole Church, not just a few individuals, is the follower of the apostles ... The Church has only to be open to the Spirit in faith, and it will find the necessary obedience to the apostles and their witness. In this sense apostolic succession is a thing of the spirit.

"Apostolicity, like unity, holiness and catholicity, is not a static attribute of the Church. Like them it is an historical dimension, a dimension which has constantly to be fulfilled anew in history."(4)

The apostolicity of the Church is not just a question of abstract theological argument: it is also "a concrete question of credibility which cannot be separated from the concrete history of the Church."(5) Thus the true tests of apostolicity are a loyalty to apostolic doctrine, a continuance of the apostolic mission and a following of the apostolic example. Doctrine is of primary importance, because it is through the witness of the Apostles

that the Church hears the voice of the Lord. This is why an 'apostolic' origin, in the widest sense, was the major criterion in finalizing the New Testament canon. To limit apostolic succession to certain hierarchical figures or Sees was felt by the sixteenth century Reformers to be a stifling of the full implications of the Word and of the free operation of the Spirit.

3. Apostolic Succession. The problem of reference back to apostolic documents, whose message was held to be faithfully summarised in the profession of belief made by catechumens before baptism, met with real difficulty when challenged by second century Gnosticism. The Gnostic claims to secret traditions, traced back also to the apostles and subsequently brought to light, appeared more expressive of the dynamic development of the Church. In answer to such claims there was argued a public succession in the fellowship of the Church to which the apostolic writings had been committed. Of this the duly recognized and duly appointed bishops were the guarantee that the existing Church was indeed truly apostolic. Hence, then, the beginning of succession lists. Nor was each Church acting in isolation: the strength of the argument was on a 'catholic' basis.

"The appeal in its fullest scope was never to a single line of succession only. Behind even the greatest and most illustrious of these lines there lay in reserve that which gave its strength to each, the consent of all. Not even the Church of Rome was, in and by itself, a final witness." (6)

That is to say, the Church was catholic as well as apostolic. It should be noted that the first use, therefore, of succession in sees as an apostolic test had nothing specifically to do with transmission of orders or the conferring of sacerdotal powers. It was a necessary public safeguard, verifiable by all, for apostolic truth. Such would appear to be the implications of what we can deduce from Hegesippus and Irenaeus. It will be quite clear that such a rationale for apostolic succession is dependent upon all bishops having always taught the same doctrine. This was a very credible rationale over against the Gnostics in the second century, but it is a palpably incredible one for the heirs of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation to claim for themselves today.

Nevertheless, the relation of catholicity to apostolicity had important corollaries. While the Jewish and Gentile Churches in the first century enjoyed considerable local liberty and pluriformity of ministries, yet the necessary safeguard against fissiparous tendencies was a form of connexionalism ensured by the apostles, of which the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 is the most striking case. It is the same principle that lies behind the late developments concerning episcopal appointments.

"When the neighbouring bishops met to bestow on the bishop-elect the laying-on of their hands, they in fact ratified with the sanction of the Church at large the choice of the individual community. To settle all the elements of a lawful election or a lawful ordination was a task incumbent only on later generations: principles must be established first, and the rules which apply them had not yet been thought of." (7)

It is when the subsequent rules become of paramount importance over against the basic principles that trouble ensues. With Cyprian succession in office becomes combined with a theory of transmission. With Augustine, under the pressures of the Donatist schism, transmission comes to stand almost on its own.

Two interpretations of apostolic succession have confused the issues. (i) The pipe-line theory. Though so widely repudiated, it still gains tacit admission in the Vatican II documents.

"The order of bishops is the successor to the college of the apostles in teaching authority and pastoral rule; or, rather, in the episcopal order the apostolic body continues without a break." (8)

"Among those various ministries... the chief place belongs to the office of those who, appointed to the episcopate in a sequence running back to the beginning, are the ones who pass on the apostolic seed."(9)

However, the relation between the apostles and subsequent official ministry is notoriously difficult to assess. The apostles certainly made appointments (1 Clem. 44), but the evidence suggests 'elders' (e.g. Acts 14:23). Did they appoint 'bishops'? If so, in what sense were they 'bishops', when the New Testament evidence suggests that 'bishop' and 'elder' were interchangeable terms (Acts 20:17, 28, Titus 1:5, 7)? The monarchical episcopate developed later. Any rigid adherence to a line of tactual 'transmission' runs into extreme difficulty here. If it is a case of transmission of teaching authority, then apostolic doctrine remains the constant criterion. If it is a charism for ministry of Word and sacraments, then the apostolic succession is in the presbyterate (which poses some problems for traditional ideas of succession). Witness the conviction and practice of John Wesley. If it is the transmission of the power to confer orders, then that becomes the supreme ministerial function, whereas the presbyteral ministry as just stated is widely held to be in fact the essential ministry.

The Irenaean doctrine is not the problem. The difficulty lies in what the Latin Church did with it. As Dr. W. Telfer puts it:

"So these Latin churchmen created a historical myth, the unhistorical nature of which they were secure from discovering. This was to the effect that the apostles had provided for the future of the Church by creating an order of monarchical bishops. The first of these they ordained, according to this myth, with their own hands, and sent them to govern the several churches with which they were concerned."(10)

(ii) Addition to the College of the Apostles. This is how Dix interprets the prayer of Hippolytus, "Do Thou now pour forth", as a fresh creative act of divine power, analogous to but not simply dependent upon the imparting of the Spirit to the original apostles.

"The idea is not that of bishops as 'successors' of the apostles, but of each new bishop as an actual addition to the original apostolic college, made by the heavenly Christ Himself, as in the cases of St. Paul or St. Matthias."(11)

This obscures the unique role of the original apostles, as already described, besides raising serious historical objections.

4. The Historic Episcopate. The difficulties in the whole question of apostolic succession spring from the divorce of the apostolic ministers from the apostolic ministry of the whole Church. Traditional Catholicism has leant almost all its weight upon the ministers as embodying both apostolicity and succession.<sup>(12)</sup> Furthermore, judging the apostolicity of those ministers, juridical and formal criteria have so predominated as practically to oust any more dynamic and charismatic recognition of them. Apostolicae Curiae is a case in point. The dropping of the old arguments about the porrectio instrumentorum and the questions concerning the consecrations of Barlow and Parker was in large part a bowing to historical evidence. On the other hand, the alleged defectiveness of the Anglican 'Form of Ordering Priests' does seem to Anglicans an unduly niggling criticism. As for the matter of 'intention', this must be examined in the light of our present understanding of the nature of the priesthood and of the eucharist, for which the Windsor Eucharistic Agreement is of great importance.

On the Anglican side, was the inclusion of the historic episcopate in the Lambeth Quadrilateral intended to be an inflexibly dogmatic sine qua non? As Bishop John Robinson put it:

"The Lambeth Quadrilateral (of Bible, Creeds, Sacraments and Bishops) was formulated as a basis of unity, an attempted expression of the fulness of the Church: it has come in these latter years to be used as a pre-condition of intercommunion, a minimum qualification of catholicity."(13)

Perhaps a clue can be found in the phrase "locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the unity of His Church." Episcopate is certainly needed, but can it only be fully exercised by episcopoi in the historic succession? To maintain the necessity of apostolic succession through the historic episcopate, we need to ask what it guarantees. Here comes in the question of credibility. Is it to safeguard unity? For all the benefits granted through episcopacy, one could not pretend that it has ever guaranteed freedom from schism. For instance, the Non-Jurors claimed to be 'the Catholic remnant of the British Churches.' Is it to protect truth? It can hardly have looked like it to Athanasius. Is it to be the channel for sacramental grace? As Aquinas put it, "The sacrament of Order is directed to the sacrament of the Eucharist." (14) Anglicans have retained in their Ordinal the porrectio of the Bible but not of the chalice and paten. Is the virtual isolation of eucharistic celebration as the priestly distinction really tenable? When Anglicans in their Anglican/Methodist negotiations and Catholics in the documents of Vatican II have gone so far in recognition of the ecclesial status of non-episcopal churches, for how long can we go on behaving as if their manifest spirituality was only explicable in terms of 'uncovenanted mercies'? Their ministries are real and not illusory. In Anglican history at least, there has not always been the same intransigence. However we may try to explain it, when Archbishop Bancroft re-established episcopacy in Scotland in 1610 no re-ordinations followed. As he explained:

"Where bishops could not be had, the ordination given by the presbyters must be esteemed lawful; otherwise it might be doubted if there were any lawful vocation in most of the Reformed Churches."(15)

The equivocal attitude of the 1948 Lambeth Conference towards the Church of South India was a retrogressive step, especially when the 1920 Conference re-wrote 'historic episcopate' as 'a ministry acknowledged by every part of the Church', going on to ask 'May we not claim that the Episcopate is the one means of providing such a ministry?' Previous dogmatism was at least toned down a little. There remains the further question of whether episcopacy is a necessary form of Church government. Anglican divines such as Whitgift and Hooker were convinced it was not so laid down in Scripture. Again, the matter of credibility arises.

The New Testament church was characterised by pluriformity of ministerial patterns. Specific 'gifts' and what appear more like permanent 'offices' were alike the gift of the Spirit to the Church. The Church continues the apostolic mission, in obedience to the risen Lord - "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and for ever" (Heb. 13:8). It is to him that the apostolic teaching bears witness. In submission to this teaching episcopacy arose very early in the church. Here was a focus for unity, catholicity and apostolicity that appears to have swiftly become universal. Is not this the acid test? Insofar as the historic episcopate is most congruous with apostolic teaching and continuing the apostolic mission, so is it pre-eminently desirable. That in fact it arose as it did suggests that this is true. It is not that it is in some mysterious way of the esse of the Church: one might say that the historic episcopate was that incidentally in the second century, in that it fulfilled its purpose in the Gnostic crisis. Nor dare we claim that it is necessarily the mark of the fulness of the Church. A church without a ministry is a defective church, but nowhere in the New Testament is a particular form of ministry associated with the Church's fulness. It should give us pause before calling the orders and sacraments of others 'defective'. This befogging word was introduced into the 'Memorandum on the Status of the Existing Free Church

Ministry' of 1923, where all ministries were acknowledged as liable to be defective in varying degrees.<sup>(16)</sup> But it has seriously obscured the real issues at stake.

Apostolic Succession is fundamental to the life of the Church, but so also is unity, holiness and catholicity. It is disastrous to conceive it only mechanically or juridically.<sup>(17)</sup> It is the continuance of the apostolic mission in the whole life of the church. Apostolicity has also an eschatological dimension - it looks to the end as well as to the past. Rigidity can only stifle healthy growth. The true prospective is admirably stated in a passage in "growing into Union":-

"To isolate episcopacy as something which can, so to speak, be injected into a Church without organic relation to its faith, liturgical practice, and pastoral structure is not only to reduce episcopacy to "gimmick" or mascot status, it is to empty it of its historic meaning and to invert its real purpose. Episcopacy is not an accolade bestowed on the Church as a finishing touch or a final decoration, nor is it a trifle of which a Church should make as little as possible, lest its members be offended. The historic episcopate - which, as such, must be sharply distinguished from the corrupt prelatical forms it has too often taken - is a pattern of apostolic pastoral ministry."<sup>(18)</sup>

With such an understanding of apostolic succession the historic episcopate could become positively constructive instead of ecumenically divisive.

5. Conclusion. There are several major questions which the Commission will need to answer. How far is the nature of the Church only properly understood in terms of the nature of its ministry? In the light of what has been said, have Roman Catholics been asking the right questions about Anglican Orders? If the Catholic juridical and formal criteria do confirm Anglican Orders to be invalid on their terms, does this seriously matter? What view is to be taken of non-episcopal orders, both as they stand and in the context of reunion (e.g. the Church of South India)?

Besides these questions relating to Apostolic Succession, there are further questions concerning the ministry which must also be tackled. What is the theological relation between ministry and sacraments, and also between ministry and priesthood? Do the conclusions of the Eucharistic Agreement open up a new approach to the subject of ministry?

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NOTES

- (1) "Apostleship", p. 36 (Eng. Trans., London, 1952). It should be noted that there is nothing to suggest that the powers of 'absolution' given by the risen Lord (John 20:22-23) were confined to the Apostles. To maintain that only the Apostles were present on that occasion has no evidence to substantiate it.
- (2) "Christianity Divided", p.10, by Küng, Barth, Cullman et al. (London, 1961): from an essay by O. Cullmann on 'Scripture and Tradition'. For the extension of the idea of 'apostle', see B. Rigaux, "The Twelve Apostles" in Concilium 4:4, p. 7. The recognition of the uniqueness of the original apostles by Ignatius is well known: all the more significant in view of his high regard for the position of the bishop.
- (3) Compare J.A. Allan, "Commentary on Ephesians" (Torch, Bible Commentary, 1959) in loc.: "The Church rests on the total unique Event of which Christ is the centre, but in which the apostles and prophets, filled and guided by the Spirit and doing their work in unique closeness to Christ, had an indispensable and untransmissible part."
- (4) Hans Küng, "The Church", pp. 355, 356, 358 (London, 1967). Cf. "Apostolicité de ministère et apostolicité de doctrine", by Yves Congar (Freiburg, 1967), who shows that the primarily juridical view of succession is not compatible with either primitive or even medieval church tradition.
- (5) Hans Küng "Structures of the Church", pp. 95-96 (London, 1965), in examination of Luther's teaching on the 'real, old Church'.
- (6) C.H. Turner, "Apostolic Succession" in "Essays on the Early History of the Church and the Ministry", ed H.B. Swete, (London, 1918) p. 106.
- (7) Ibid, p. 107. That this was very likely the procedure in the late second century we would not question, but there is no evidence to confirm it before Hippolytus that is other than wholly conjectural.
- (8) Christus Dominus, 4.
- (9) Lumen Gentium, 20.
- (10) "The Office of a Bishop", p. 119 (London, 1962). Compare T.M. Lindsay, "The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries", p. 279 (London, 1902).
- (11) "The Apostolic Ministry" ed. K.E. Kirk, p.200 (London, 1946).
- (12) It is significant, though understandable, that the articles on 'Apostolic Succession' in 'Sacramentum Mundi' and 'A Catholic Dictionary of Theology' (Nelson) both assume ministerial succession in office to be the heart of the matter.
- (13) "On Being the Church in the World", (1960), p. 127 (Pelican edition). Also, Rouse and Neill, "A History of the Ecumenical Movement", pp. 264-5 (London, 1967 edition).
- (14) Summa Theologica, Vol. III Supplement, 37.2.
- (15) Quoted in N. Sykes, "Old Priest and New Presbyter", p. 101 (Cambridge, 1957).
- (16) There was a major controversy on this concept of 'defectiveness' at the Nottingham Faith and Order Conference of 1964, but it was still eventually included in the text "Unity Begins at Home", pp. 67-68).

- (17) E.L. Mascall in "Faith and Unity", XV No. 1 (January 1971) gives a brief list of references to some "Roman Catholic theologians whose attitude to the question is very different from the rigid position that tended to characterise both Roman and Anglican Catholics in the past", p.5. and Note 4 on p. 6. The Lambeth Conference of 1930, while insisting on the historic episcopate, emphasized that this did not mean "a particular theory or interpretation" (Lambeth Conference Report, p.115).
- (18) Buchanan et al., p. 77 (London, 1970). See also the quotation from D.N. Power on pp. 81-82. The dual emphasis in the New Testament on the church's historicity and newness, as exemplified in the Pastoral Epistles and the writings of John respectively, is clearly brought out in E. Schweizer, "Church Order in the New Testament", pp. 166-170 (London, 1961).