

RESTRICTED

Oxford Sub-Commission

Final DraftApostolic Succession

(and its relation to the apostolicity of Christ, of the  
Apostles and of the Church)

### 1. Christ the Apostle

In the New Testament, considerable emphasis is placed on Christ's own acknowledgement that he acts, not on his own authority, but as one who has been sent. (Mt. 10,40; John 4, 34; 5,23,30,36; 6,44; 7,16,18; 9,4; 10,36; 11,42; 12,45; 12,49; 14,24; 15,21; 16,5; 17,3,18,21,25; 20,21; I John 4,14). According to the Johannine portrait, his every act is performed in conscious dependence on and with constant reference to the Father, whom he reveals to the world by speaking His words and doing His works. He is charged with a mission to accomplish in and for the world, that the world may be saved (Jn.3.17) and that all men may come to the knowledge of the Father (Jn.17.3). The Father endows him with authority for the mission (cf Jn.17,1-2). Hence the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of Christ as the 'Apostle and High Priest of our confession', who like Moses is in all things faithful to Him who appointed him (Heb. 3, 1-2).

These texts indicate that there are four elements in Christ's apostolic role: (1) He is sent by the Father (2) as his representative, and (3) is granted authority (4) for a particular purpose, namely to save the world.

The early christian tradition continues to refer to Christ as the 'apostolos' of the Father (Justin Martyr I Apol. 12,9; 63,5, and references in Origen, Athanasius and Chrysostom, quoting Hebrews 3,1.) and to Christ's receiving a 'mission' or 'commission' (apostolē) from the Father (refs. in Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria).

The New Testament also represents Christ as 'sending' others. He exhorts his followers to pray that the Lord will 'send' forth labourers into his harvest (Mt. 9,38; cf Lk. 10,2). He 'sends' the Twelve out to preach and to cast out demons (Mk.3,14ff). They go 'as sheep in the midst of wolves' (Mt.10,16). According to St. Luke, Christ similarly commissions the seventy (Lk. 10,3) and the Twelve are designated as the 'apostoloi', or 'those who are sent' (Lk.6,13). St. Paul also regards himself as one who is sent by Christ (Gal.1, 11-12, 15-16). The association between Christ's own commissioning and his commissioning of others is to be summed up in his words, 'As the Father has sent me, even so send I you' (Jn. 20,21; cf Jn.17,18). Christ sends them out as his representatives: 'He who receives you receives me and he who receives me receives him who sent me' (Mt. 10,40; cf. Lk.10,16, 'He who hears you hears me'.). In the passage at the end of St. Matthew's Gospel, the risen Christ, endowed by the Father with all authority, delegates to the Eleven the task of teaching all men 'to observe all that I have commanded you' (Mt. 28,19-20). Thus the Eleven in their turn bear the four marks of

apostleship: (1) they are sent by Christ (2) as his representatives (3) with authority (4) to perform a mission.

God the Father therefore accomplishes his purpose through the sending of the Son; and the world comes to believe on him through those whom the Son sends to proclaim the truth (Rom. 10 13-15; cf Jn.17,20).

## 2. Apostolicity - the Church

### (a) The Apostles

Considerable difficulty is attached to the exegesis of the title 'apostle' in the New Testament. Critical research has shown that in the New Testament there is no consistent portrait of the apostle or unified concept of his office. There is however a striking unanimity in the sources on the point that the apostle of Christ is someone who has been sent as witness to the risen Jesus. Every New Testament view of the apostle and his function reflects some aspect of this idea of an envoy invested with authority. \* As a group, and not merely as individuals, the apostles are seen to exercise authority over the first christian communities (whether with or without the community's consent we cannot tell). They are represented as preaching the gospel, exorcising evil spirits, performing works of healing, settling disputes and disciplining members. They are entrusted with authority to forgive sins. At their instigation the congregation chooses the seven and brings them to the Apostles, who 'appoint' them by prayer and laying on of hands. In the pastoral epistles, one who calls himself an apostle recalls his commissioning of another for 'office' in the Church. But we have no clear picture of 'apostolic succession' in the ministry as it is popularly understood. We can say, however, that, as Christ is represented in the New Testament as one commissioned and sent by the Father, so the apostles are similarly represented as those who have been commissioned and sent by Christ for the work of the Gospel in the world, and who, in two instances at least, transmit authority to others with prayer and the laying on of hands. (Acts 6,1-6; 2. Tim.,1,6 cf 1 Tim. 4,14).

### (b) Apostolic Succession

All christians in baptism receive a commission from Christ to co-operate with Him in his saving work. In this sense the church is called apostolic, for the mission which the Father entrusted to the Son and which Jesus Christ accomplished once for all is carried out in

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\* Beyond this, the picture is less consistent. St. Luke, for example, gives special place to the Twelve (the 'Apostles of the Lord') as guarantors of the tradition about Jesus, and in the Apocalypse their names are associated with the very foundations of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21,14). St. Paul, who was a witness to the resurrection, though not one of the Twelve is called an apostle. He makes room for many other apostles (the 'apostles of Churches') who were apparently not witnesses to the earthly ministry and resurrection of Jesus.

the world by the Holy Spirit through the church (cf. Jn. 20,21). As the apostles in their ministry were enabled by the Spirit to be faithful to the teaching and ministry of Christ ('He will take of mine and declare it unto you' -- Jn. 16,15), so too the church, empowered by that same Spirit, is committed to that same task and enabled to fulfil it faithfully. She demonstrates her apostolicity by her faithfulness to the apostolic commission and by obedience to the apostolic teaching as contained in the Scriptures. By these two touchstones must her worship, belief, life and ministry ever be judged.

The church, however, is also said to be built on the foundation of apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ Himself as the corner stone (Eph. 2.20), and in her creeds proclaims belief in 'the apostolic church'. Here we see that the church understands her apostolic mission to be in some sense dependent on the apostles. For first her faith is confessedly that of the apostles and second at no time has the church existed without a commissioned ministry. The succession of ministers in office has been ~~seen~~ to be a further sign of loyalty to her commission and of identity with the apostles, their teaching and their work.

In their being commissioned, the ordained ministers represent the commissioning and sending out of the whole people of God; in their teaching by word and example, they articulate the faith of the apostolic church; in their sacramental ministrations, they constitute a vital structure in the ongoing life of the Body of Christ. The commissioning of ministers is a witness to the fact that the continuity of the Church as a society is inextricably linked with the handing down of ministerial authority through the historical process, a handing down which ultimately depends for its authority and power upon the gift that Christ entrusted to his apostles. Ministers today constitute a single body, as did the apostles, and enter the apostolic succession through being incorporated into that body.

We should note further that, although we speak of apostolic succession, the position of the Apostles of the Lord is in many ways unique; though some of their functions can be handed on to their followers in the ministry, others cannot. These followers, though witnesses to Christ, are not eyewitnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It was the Apostles, not these followers who received in trust the original revelation; and it is the Apostles' teaching that the books of the New Testament reflect and transmit, and which their followers both acknowledge and proclaim with that authority which belongs to their ministry. (vide supra)