

Comments by Fr. Georges Tavard on the Final Draft Paper on  
"Apostolic Succession" drawn up by the Oxford Sub-Commission

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I welcome the serious attempt to present a biblical conception of apostolic succession which is evident in this draft. This is indispensable to an ecumenical statement on this question in our time.

Nevertheless, I have some reservations, which I will list in the order of the draft.

I. Christ the Apostle

The section under this title seems to take its title as meaning both "Christ the sent" ('l'envoyé du Père), and "Christ the sender".

"Christ the sent". It seems to me that the text of Hebr., 3, 1-2, sees the titles "apostle" and "High-priest" as correlative, so that what is true of the latter applies to the former. As a consequence, if there is only one high-priest (which the Epistle clearly states), there is only one Apostle. For that matter, no-one else is called "apostle" in Hebrews.

The Johannine picture is different. So is that of Paul, that of Luke... In other words, the New Testament contains several views of the "sendness" of Christ which may be regarded as mutually exclusive. The continuity of sending, from the Father to Christ to the "apostles" does not appear in Hebrews. It appears elsewhere in two distinct forms. What I take to be Luke's view would be: from the Father to Christ before his death and resurrection to the Twelve (the follow up to some successors of the Twelve being debatable but to be negated, in my judgement). What I take to be Paul's view would be: from the Father to Christ resurrected to those who are prophetically called (like Paul himself) (the follow-up seems likely: to those whom Paul calls).

I should think that this section ought to allow for diverse readings of the New Testament evidence, rather than attempt to give a unified picture, which leaves us with several inconsistencies. V.gr. the New Testament speaks of the disciples, the Seventy, the Twelve, the Three (Peter, James John). It seems impossible to me to sort out what commission is given to which group; and the clearest passage (Mt. 28, 19-20) has every chance of being an anachronism, defending the special status of Twelve (Eleven) and the later practise of baptism in the threefold Name.

II Apostolicity - the Church

a) The Apostles

This section should make a clear distinction between the Twelve and the other Apostles (Paul and others). The Twelve, it seems to me, have a purely eschatological function in the expectation of the soon-to-come End. They have no meaning for the later Church or succession, beyond the one mentioned in Ephesians 2, 20: they are the basic stones around the cornerstone, together with the prophets. The (missionary) Apostles, typified by Paul, are the ones who start the commissioning of others for ministry. Their connection with witnessing to the resurrection, on which Paul insists, does not necessarily imply that they actually saw the resurrected Christ: this refers to the content of the message they must announce; they preach faith in the risen Lord. The heart of this section ought to be what has been relegated to a footnote...

b) Apostolic succession

Suddenly, this section becomes largely non-biblical. Rather, most statements in it go far beyond the biblical evidence of the texts referred to (J. 20, 21; 16, 15; Eph. 2,20). There is little connection between this and what has been said so far. For instance, "all Christians", "the whole People of God" are now said to be commissioned (in what sense?); yet the mission seems to be carried out, not by them, but "by the Holy Spirit" (top of p. 3).

Because of the absence of visible biblical substance, the two criteria of p. 3, para. 1 (faithfulness...obedience...) seem to be arbitrary: why not add, v. gr., the criterion of agapè?

In para. 2, the proclamation of belief in "the apostolic church" is not "in the creeds". The baptismal creeds proclaim "the holy Church" or "the holy catholic Church". The creed of Nicaea does not proclaim the Church (although the anathematisms come from "the catholic and apostolic Church"). The proclamation of belief in "the apostolic Church" is only in the Creed of Constantinople (the one we usually call the 'Nicene' Creed). This may suggest that holiness or catholicity may have been more important than apostolicity.

I have several difficulties with par. 3, and tend to agree with the dissenting footnote or P.S. I would like to have explanations of the term "represent" in the first line (in my sense of representing, the ordained ministers do not represent the commissioning of the whole people of God). In line 4, "sacramental ministrations" seem to be restricted to the ordained ministers; while this may be true for the first centuries, baptism by laymen has been accepted for a long time. In line 8, the "historical process" may be taken in a "pipeline" sense, which would not follow from the previous biblical argumentation. One may argue catholically for a commissioning by the Holy Spirit today, in which the historical process would be quite irrelevant. (Come to think of it, the Spirit is not in the spotlight in this paragraph!) The last sentence, about the "single body" seems to me to be without meaning: what is this single body, other than the Body of Christ mentioned a few lines before? In what sense can we truly say that the apostles constituted a single body (when there are different kinds of apostles in the New Testament, with different theologies of apostleship)?

I have problems, too, with the last paragraph. There is an ambiguity about "apostles of the Lord" (the Twelve? Paul?), another about witness and eyewitness: what is the evidence for Paul being an eyewitness of the life of Christ? and another about the books of the New Testament, which transmit many other things than the Apostles' teaching.