# Apostolic Succession: A Vision of Unity.

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IN the consideration of the subject of Apostolic Succession, there are two primary points which must be kept distinct. The first we may call the fact; the second, a deduction which has been drawn from the fact.

1. It is accepted as sufficiently proved that there has existed from the very first one form of ordination for presbyters in the Christian Church—viz., that the Apostles, in appointing them, laid their hands upon them, and that these presbyters, or certain ones of their number specially set apart for the purpose, in their turn ordained others; so that in the Church to-day there exists an order of ministers appointed in unbroken succession from the times of the Apostles. We find in Clement of Rome's Epistle to Corinthians these words: "The Apostles had provided carefully for a perpetual succession, that, when those died whom they themselves had ordained, others from them might take up their ministry."[1]

It does not much matter for our present point whether at first this succession was maintained by the laying on of the hands of the whole College of Presbyters, as we find was the case in the Church of Alexandria in the third century, or whether the office was conferred by the head of the College of Presbyters only, but with the assistance of the other presbyters present on the occasion, as is done in the Church of England at the present day. Very possibly the two customs existed side by side for a long time. It was not till the fourth century, as Lightfoot says,[2] that the power of ordination was confined to the Bishop; it was the culmination of a long period of development of the Bishop's power. In the New Testament the terms "Bishop" and "presbyter" are interchangeable; but since it was inevitable that the head of the presbyters should very soon be regarded as a person of

[1] Ep. Cor., ch. xliv.

[2] "Philippians," p. 233.

special importance, we are not surprised to find that as early as the beginning of the second century, this head came to be regarded as a person apart, and that the three orders of Bishop, Presbyter, and Deacon, had come to be clearly defined.

The distinctive office of Bishop was first clearly recognized in Asia Minor, and, from the close connection of St. John with that part of the world, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the evolution of the system had at least Apostolic sanction, if not Apostolic authority. But even before St. John's connection with Ephesus we find Timothy appointed by St. Paul[1] to the virtual office of Bishop, if not the name, by the laying on of hands, and Titus similarly appointed, with the instruction to appoint presbyters[2] in the same way as St. Paul had appointed him. Such is the beginning of the system which has continued in the Church to the present day, and though, as the Bishop of Durham has said, our claim for authority for the system is "an inference drawn from inferences, and based at the last resort on a presupposition,"[3] the evidence for the antiquity of the system, coupled with the benefits which history shows to have been derived from it, are sufficient to convince the unbiassed mind of the Apostolic origin of the fact, and the desirability of continuing the system.

2. But having acknowledged the fact, we come to the deduction that has been drawn from the fact. That deduction is, that only one who has been thus admitted to the presbyterate is qualified to exercise certain functions in the Church of Christ. The deduction is based on the assumption that one thus admitted by the laying on of hands is not only appointed as the Church's representative for performing those functions, but by the act of laying on of hands receives a supernatural power, technically called the "grace of orders," which one not so ordained does not possess. As members of the Church of England, we are entitled, according to our Article VI., to demand that proof for the deduction shall be furnished in Holy Scripture before

[1] 2 Tim. i. 6. [2] Titus i. 5.
[3] Speech at Edinburgh Missionary Conference.

we are asked to accept it as a matter of faith. However useful the system may be, however great the authority for it in the history of the early Church, we are not compelled to accept the deduction as *an essential of faith*; still less are we justified in demanding it as an essential from those who differ from us, unless we have reasonable grounds for proof of it in Holy Scripture. My feeling is that, on grounds of Article VI., we need more evidence before we can insist on the theory of the grace of orders being accepted *as an essential* by others who do not see eye to eye with us on all points.

Now, I think it will be accepted as a fact that those who insist most strongly on the acceptance of the deduction from the fact connect it with the sacrificial idea of the priesthood. It is because it is claimed that the priest has the power of offering sacrifice in the Eucharist that none but a priest episcopally ordained can be allowed to celebrate the Eucharist. Let it not be supposed that I wish so to misrepresent the school from which I differ as to suggest that they really claim to offer in Holy Communion the body and blood of Christ as an atoning sacrifice; though I must confess that it requires more education, time, and thought, than the average layman can give to distinguish between what their words mean in plain English and what they intend to say.

The High Church position is very moderately summed up by Moberly: "What is duly done by Christian ministers, it is not so much that *they* do it in the stead or for the sake of the whole, but rather that the whole does it by or through them. The Christian priest does not offer an atoning sacrifice on behalf of the Church; it is rather the Church through his act, that not so much offers an atonement, as is identified upon earth with the one heavenly offering of the atonement of Christ."[1] But though the priest wields, as the body's representative, the powers which belong to the whole body, the body cannot wield these powers except through its own organs fitted to the purpose; these powers are represented as sacrificial; therefore the man who in

[1] "Ministerial Priesthood," p. 242.

the New Testament is a presbyter has become a priest who alone can offer sacrifice.

All are agreed that in the New Testament the body is credited with sacrificial powers; such phrases as "a kingdom of priests," "offering spiritual sacrifices," etc., abound. High and Low,[1] Lightfoot, Westcott, and Moberly, all agree in enforcing this point. The difference comes in the fact that, whereas the Low Church (to use a necessarily unfortunate title) takes the term "sacrifices" in the New Testament to refer to the self-sacrifice of the life which is following in the footsteps of Christ, the High Church, while admitting that the life of sacrifice forms part of what is meant, yet claims that these sacrifices find their consummation in the sacrifice of the Eucharist. They shift the centre of gravity from the life to a single act in that life. The most that the Low Churchman can admit is that, while the Eucharist is a continual reminder of that act of our Lord which is the *raison d'être* of Christian sacrifice, while no doubt, each time he partakes of the Holy Feast, he presents himself soul and body to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto God, yet that act is in its essence symbolic only of the life which, if it would come after Christ, must deny itself, take up its cross, and follow. We do not claim that the words "Do this in remembrance of Me" are the whole meaning of the Eucharist. We believe that when Christ said, "This is My body," and when St. Paul said, "This is a partaking of the body of Christ," it is intended that, to those who faithfully partake of the consecrated elements in obedience to the Divine command, there is a life imparted, a strength received, from receiving in a spiritual manner the body and blood of Christ. We hold that when Christ said, "He that loveth Me keepeth My words, and We will come to him, and *take up Our abode* with him," and when He said, "He that eateth and drinketh *abideth in Me*, and I in him," the two sayings are collateral. We hold that the essence of eating and drinking in the Holy Communion is obedience, and that this obedience;

[1] Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, p. 183; Westcott, "Gospel of the Resurrection," p. 169.

whether in that service or not, is the highest sacrifice, and therefore Christians are a kingdom of priests.

When it is claimed that the priest alone can offer the sacrifice, the Nonconformist—I will take up his position for the moment—has a right to ask what Bible authority we have for the statement. Moberly, in his "Christian Ministry," feels the force of this, and seeks to find justification in Scripture. He has to admit[1] that in the words of Scripture both the connection of Christian ministry with Eucharistic leadership and the application to Eucharistic worship of sacrificial and priestly language is less explicit than we might at first have expected. He then tries to explain the silence of Scripture (for silence it is) on the point. "Had Scripture," he says, "laid stress on outward means, this would have inevitably resulted in an exaggeration of the intrinsic value of the outward and mechanical." This may be so, but, on the other hand, were the sacrificial aspect of these outward means an essential of the faith, I cannot understand the silence of New Testament writers on the subject. And, again, a second reason for the silence of Scripture he finds in this: To have called the Christian ministers "priests," and Holy Communion a "sacrifice," would, he says, have confused the popular mind, filled as it was with ideas of the Mosaic priesthood, which was "symbolic, ceremonial, and unreal." People would have confused the Christian sacrificial system with the Old Testament system, as if it were one and the same thing. When, however, Jerusalem was destroyed, then it was natural that the sacrificial terminology should be used, when there was no longer any fear of its being misunderstood. I fear that, though Jerusalem has been long destroyed, the popular idea of sacrifice still remains, and that to call the Eucharist a sacrifice, and to insist that the Christian minister is a *sacerdos*, still means to most people that the minister offers sacrifice, and that sacrifice is the body and blood of Christ offered in the Eucharist. These are the only two arguments Moberly can find to account for the silence of Scripture; but, filled with the idea that the

[1] Moberly, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

Eucharist is the Church's identification of herself with the offering of Christ by means of the action of the priest, he cites a number of New Testament passages, and when any expression occurs such as "feeding the flock," "offering spiritual sacrifices," "the ministration of righteousnes," "blood of sprinkling," or "we have an altar," he refers it directly to the Holy Communion. If these are the best arguments that can be brought forward in support of a theory that the Christian ministers have received an Apostolic commission to celebrate the sacrifice of the Eucharist, and that none but those episcopally ordained can do so, the Dissenter has a fair case in refusing to accept the theory. Granted that the Dissenter is lacking in historical perspective; granted that the Didache urges people[1] to elect Bishops and deacons *in order* to be able to offer the pure sacrifice in the breaking of bread; granted that it has been ever the custom of the Church to allow only those appointed in due succession to minister in holy things; granted that we find the historic episcopate an excellent institution in practice as well as in theory: at the same time, as Professor Gwatkin said at the Pan-Anglican Conference, "to claim for it a binding command of Christ or His Apostles is a defiance of history, and to make it a necessity for the Church without such command comes near to being a defiance of Christ Himself."

But to come to the point. We are seeking a vision of unity. We see ourselves surrounded by bodies of Christians claiming to be members of the Holy Catholic Church. We do not deny their claim; we admit that entrance to that Church is by baptism; and we do not deny even to the laity the right to baptize, we do not question the validity of lay baptism; and yet these are out of communion with us. As a matter of practice, we do not in individual cases deny Communion to full members of certain other Churches. Can we do anything? I only propose one step; there are many other difficulties in the way of other steps, but this is one step. Could we not go to ministers of accredited bodies? (It ought not to be impossible on the basis of

[1] Quoted by Moberly, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

Article VI. to find some definition of that term. (We say: "You claim to be as much a priest as I am"—*i.e.*, taking that word in the sense of "presbyter," in which sense alone it survives in the Prayer Book. "You have been elected by your Church very much in the same way as Paul and Barnabas[1] were elected by the presbyters of Antioch, as Timothy was elected by the laying on of the hands of the presbytery, or as the Didache calls on Christians to elect their ministers. You have been called by God; we cannot doubt it, since you have been permitted by Him to bring sinners to the foot of the Cross. Now try and look at the Church of England from an historical point of view. We have a certain order, inherited in germ at least from the Apostolic times, though developed according to the need of fuller organization brought about by time and place. We feel that this order is according to the mind of Christ, and that in following that order we receive a blessing and a power for carrying on the work of the Church of Christ.

"Your fathers once belonged to this Church of ours. They separated from us, wrongly—as we feel. We believe, as many of you do, that this breaking of the unity of the Body was a sin that has hindered the growth of the kingdom of Christ, and caused the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, even though God has been pleased in many cases to work out His purposes in spite of our divisions. At the same time we admit that your fathers left the Church for conscience' sake, and we admit, also, that the Church had so often failed in her duty as to justify their desire to promote a purer form of worship. We, too, have sinned on our side. However, now the differences of opinion over which we split have largely, if not entirely, passed away. We have differences to-day, but they are largely different from the original causes of schism. We feel that by the exercise of mutual charity much might be done to heal our present divisions.

"Now, though we consider that our episcopal system is most important, that it is essential to *the continuity of our Church*, yet

[1] Acts xiii. 3.

we are willing to admit with you that it is not essential to *the existence of the Church of Christ.* Will you come back to us and acknowledge the spiritual authority of our order of Bishops for the sake of unity? We will admit you to our ministry without reserve on your acceptance of the great Creeds of the Church; this is what we give. And we ask of you that, as you admit the authority of our Bishops, your sons will enter the ministry by the episcopal door. It is a great deal that we are asking, but remember that we, too, are giving a great deal for the cause of unity."

There are, no doubt, many of the brethren who still will say, "Oh! but they have no right to minister because they have not received episcopal ordination." Be it so; but as long as this is insisted on, any talk of unity is futile, any discussion of it must end in a deadlock. Such objectors will not abate any of their claims; neither will the Nonconformists abate any of theirs.