The Origins of the Christian Ministry

Some Aspects of the Apostolate in the New Testament

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THE purpose of this article is twofold : first, to attempt a restatement of some of the major issues over which there is disagreement between sincere and thoughtful Christians in their interpretation of the nature of the Ministry ; and secondly, to put forward views (none, or almost none of them novel), about some of the New Testament passages which, if correct, point to conclusions of great importance.

Apostolic Succession and Episcopacy. From the time of Cyprian at latest (that is, in the third century A.D.), there have been influential Christian leaders who have explicitly claimed that the Christian Church could not exist without Bishops—meaning by Bishops men who possessed a certain authority transmitted in unbroken succession from the Apostles by the successive laying on of hands. Only by such authority, it has been claimed, can the sacraments be validly administered.

Such a conception unchurches not only all non-episcopalian denominations but also such individuals within episcopalian denominations as do not believe in the necessity of apostolic succession as just defined ; and it is therefore a most serious bar—if not the only logical one—to intercommunion, let alone reunion. One is driven to enquire more narrowly into the meaning and basis of the conception.

Apostolic Authority. Let us exaggerate the difference between two types of interpretation of the evidence, in order to sharpen the issue :

(i) One view, in an extreme form, would be something like this : Christ commissioned the Apostles to do two things in His name : (a) to *give evidence* of the historical facts of the Gospel, as eyewitness ; (b) to be *pastors* in the Church—leaders, that is, with supreme authority in matters of discipline and organization, and who alone can administer valid sacraments.

Of these two functions, (a) was by definition untransmissible : the eye-witness evidence of the Apostles could, in the nature of the case, only be *recorded*, first orally, ultimately in writing. To this extent the apostolic office is recognised by all alike to have been limited to the Apostles' own life time : they furnished the " canon " for the oral period—the guarantee of the genuineness of the Christian announcement—just as the Scriptures have come to be the canon for later generations. But (b), the pastoral, disciplinary, priestly authority, could be and was (so this theory holds) transmitted to successors ; and this it is which has provided the authentic and constitutional directing and pastoral force in Christendom, guaranteeing the validity of the sacraments and ensuring the authority of the Ministry.

The opposite extreme (ii), maintains that the only distinctive com-

mission given by Christ to the Apostles as such was that just designated as (a)—the evidential function of eyewitness.

Nobody could deny that the pastoral and directive function, (b), and the administration of the sacraments, was in fact exercised at least by some of the Apostles; but where, it may be asked, is the evidence for any special, unique, divine commission in regard to (b) having been given to the Apostles as such? and why should it be assumed to be of such a character that it may be transmitted, or that it may not be legitimately and effectively performed except by those who can trace commissioning back, in unbroken succession, to the apostolate?

We shall return to the evidence on these matters. Meanwhile, it is important to distinguish between two meanings attached to apostolic continuity—(1) the continuity of Christian life and teaching in subsequent ages with that of the earliest apostolic period; and (2) the continuity of a succession of authoritative individuals, each ordained by his predecessor, right back to the Apostles. Of the reality of (1) there can be no doubt. At no period have there ever ceased to exist bodies of Christians united by a common faith expressed in common sacraments and based on the common tradition of the saving facts. That sort of continuity has never been lost even at the darkest times, and in that sense the Christian Church is, on any showing, apostolic.[1] But for (2) the evidence is more precarious. In the nature of the case, arguing *a priori*, one would expect that some break in the individual line of contacts might occur in the long history and many vicissitudes of the Church: a single chain of individual links is obviously more fragile than the multiple strand of the corporate life of the community; and the burden of proof would seem to rest on those who aver that it has held. It is undeniable, admittedly, that Clement of Rome (an early and important witness, probably writing earlier than the date of the latest parts of the New Testament) says that the Apostles did appoint persons to succeed them (this is clear, whatever reading of the famous doubtful word is accepted). But is Clement's single voice secure guarantee for the tremendous assertion of individual apostolic succession? And in any case can any theory of tactual transmission be read into his words? And to what function, precisely, does Clement suggest that the Apostles appointed, and to what extent does he imply that it was a divine institution? Again, we all know that Ignatius (perhaps only about twenty years later) asserts the necessity of episcopacy: but upon what grounds? Mainly, it would seem, on grounds of mere expediency: "chiefly" (as Lightfoot says) "as a security for good discipline and harmonious working in the Church."[2] "The needs and distractions of the age" (he says again) "seemed to call for a greater concentration of authority in the episcopate."[3] Similarly, the Pastoral Epistles (whenever compiled) are silent as to any principle of apostolic succession.

Before, however, we pursue the indications any further, some even more general considerations need to be remembered. Generalisations are notoriously dangerous and are necessarily vague; but they may not for that reason be safely ignored; and Church history points to the general principle that an initial diversity tends gradually to crystallise into some kind of uniformity. That is amply proved in

regard to the formulation of matters doctrinal (however uniform and constant was the tradition of the essential facts); and B. H. Streeter's suggestion[4] that it was so also in matters of Church government should not be summarily dismissed merely because Streeter's detailed working out of the theory is often specious. *A priori*, would not one expect Church order to develop into some sort of uniformity out of a primitive diversity? One would need very convincing evidence to the contrary in order to think otherwise. Further, God's very character, as revealed in the Bible and in the corporate life of the Church and in individuals' experience, is far more easily associated with a process of training for fellowship by free and flexible exploration, than with a rigid and authoritarian system laid down from the start. Again, therefore, the probabilities of the case throw the burden of proof heavily upon those who maintain a theory of an officially transmitted episcopacy.

One must add, in any case, that a specifically sacerdotal conception of the ministry is flat against the early evidence. The New Testament points solidly against the idea that a sacerdotal system was part of the Christian dispensation at all. The conception of a priestly line, the members of which are the only people by whom the sacraments can be effectively administered, is alien to the Gospel.

These considerations represent a radical cleavage, as between scholars who treat of the Ministry in terms which are primarily institutional and constitutional, and those who think first in terms of persons, not of "things"; and it is ultimately no service to harmony or mutual understanding to turn a blind eye to the distinction. This, of course, need imply no sort of personal disrespect between the two types.

Leaving the general considerations, and turning to the details of some of the New Testament evidence, one may ask first what meaning is attached to the word *apostolos* and its cognates.

THE APOSTOLATE. (i) Briefly, there are some instances where it is natural to regard the word *apostolos* as purely non-technical—meaning simply an emissary or messenger. An example is Jo. xiii. 16 ("neither (is) one that is sent (*apostolos*) greater than he that sent him"); so, probably, is Phil. ii. 25 (Epaphroditus is the Philippians' *apostolos*), and II Cor. viii. 23 ("*apostoloi* of churches").

(ii) There are others where the term seems to be used technically, of the original "inner circle", the Twelve. Mk. iii. 14, 15 gives at least the ostensible reason for this use of the term, when, without actually calling them Apostles (if we reject the longer reading), the evangelist says that Jesus appointed the twelve "that He might send them forth (*apostello*) to preach, and to have authority to cast out devils." Lk. vi. 13, in the same connexion, says "Whom He also named *apostoloi*". Mt. x. 2 assumes the title *apostoloi*; and Mark himself uses it in Mk. vi. 30. When Matthias was appointed to fill the gap in this body left by Judas, he was reckoned (naturally) with the Apostles; and it is possible that James the Lord's brother (who seems to be reckoned as an Apostle in Gal. i. 19, and who, like Cephas and John, was called a "pillar", Gal. ii. 9) may have been regarded as such in virtue of his filling the gap left by the martyrdom of his namesake, John's brother.[5]

(iii) But thirdly, the term was undoubtedly also applied to a wider circle still. Whether it was so applied by persons who were conscious that they were using it in a secondary sense, or whether some people reserved the term for the Twelve while others used it more broadly, is far from certain.[6] But certain it is that in some New Testament passages others besides the Twelve are called *apostoloi*: there are Andronicus and Junias (Rom. xvi. 7, where it is most unlikely that "of note among the apostles" only means "well-known *to* the Apostles"); there is Barnabas (Acts xiv. 14); there are *false* Apostles (Rev. ii. 2, II Cor. xi. 13); and, above all, there is Paul himself. In the New Testament period we see him fighting to establish his claim to this title against detractors; but, by a strange irony, it came about that very soon afterwards, "*the* Apostle" *par excellence* meant "Paul".

Thus, *apostolos* appears to be a fluid term, sometimes entirely general (="emissary"), sometimes very restricted (="one of the Twelve, or of their immediate circle"), sometimes technical but broader (="a person with a special Christian commission"—*cf.* our "missionary").[7] In these last two technical or semi-technical senses, can we define its characteristics? The mind naturally runs to "Am I not an apostle? have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (I Cor. ix. 1)—an ejaculation which suggests that an Apostle proper was primarily an eyewitness. This impression is, I believe,[8] not far from the truth; but further thought both modifies this and introduces other considerations besides. Paul's own claims seem[9] to be:

(a) the eyewitness function;
(b) divine commissioning to a specific task;[10]
(c) evidence of the divine confirmation of such a commission.

Now, it is clear that, in Paul's case, (a) was of what might be called an irregular nature. He had not been a friend of Jesus during Jesus' ministry. He had only given allegiance to Him afterwards in what we should call a supernatural and visionary meeting. So Paul's apostleship was, at any rate, not exactly like that eyewitness type which could guarantee the historical facts of the Gospel: hardly less than ourselves, Paul had to accept them on the evidence of others. There was, however, in his case the factor (b)—a direct, unmediated, divine commission (in his case, to preach to the Gentiles—see Gal. ii. 7, 8, besides other bits of evidence); and factor (c) certainly held good for him.

All three factors, then, (a), (b), and (c), belonged to the Twelve. It may well be that (b) and (c) belonged also to all Apostles in the wider semi-technical sense (though (b) may, for some, have been only indirectly divine—not directly "dominical"); but the primary question with which theories of apostolic succession are concerned is the nature of the "greatest" Apostles; and Paul's claim to be on a level with the greatest Apostles seems to have rested (in his own eyes) upon the reality of (a) and (b) combined, however abnormal their manner may have been as compared with the corresponding factors in the apostleship of the Twelve: the point was (it would seem) that the risen Christ had Himself commissioned Paul, and had specifically commissioned him to bear witness of Him (to the Gentiles, in particular).

Does the New Testament indicate anything else, besides this qualifi-

cation, as essential to the highest and most exclusive conception of apostleship? This is where there is a divergence of opinion; for many would say emphatically that it does; that it adds disciplinary authority, and, in particular, the power of giving or withholding absolution. Others, like myself, cannot believe that this is a true reading of the situation. Briefly, the famous passages in Mt. xvi. and xviii. and Jo. xx. are taken by some to apply exclusively to the Twelve and their tactually authorised successors, and to refer to sacramental absolution and disciplinary powers; whereas the present writer believes that they apply, in essence at least, to any who accept the Gospel: that is, that the powers in question depend on the apostolically authenticated Gospel, but not upon any other sort of apostolic descent. In other words, it was the special function of the Apostles to bear witness to that faith; and it is the acceptance of that faith that gives birth to the powers referred to in these passages, not any other kind of apostolic succession.

Now, exegesis of these passages is notoriously problematic. But is it unreasonable to suggest that the following is at least as consistent with both the detailed evidence and the general probabilities as alternative interpretations? (i) The "rock" in Mt. xvi. is the confession of Jesus as Messiah (*cf.* I Jo. iv. 2-4, v. 5). On that particular occasion it was a person called "Rock" (Peter) who was making the confession: that was perhaps largely why the Rock metaphor was used; but it is not Peter as an individual but Peter as voicing the Apostolic Conviction who is the foundation of the Church: *cf.* I Cor. iii. 11, Ephes. ii. 20, Rev. xxi. 14. It may in fact, be said that the conception of apostleship maintained in this essay—that of the foundation-witness to the historical Gospel—is typified by the Rock-name Peter. Peter is thus symbolic and typical of the apostolic faith. (ii) Similarly, the key which admits to the Kingdom of heaven or excludes from it is the proclamation of this same Gospel of Jesus as Messiah: it is, again, as a representative of the Apostolic Declaration that Peter is declared to be the recipient of this power (*cf.* the lawyers' "key of knowledge" in Luke xi. 52).

(iii) The "binding" and "loosing" are usually interpreted along the lines of the parallel phrases in Rabbinical writings, which, one is told, mean respectively "forbidding" and "permitting". If so, the most obvious early instance of the exercise of such discrimination is (as has often been observed) the decision about what must or must not be required of Gentile converts; and this, so far from being exclusively Petrine, was a joint decree in the name of the Apostles and Elders at Jerusalem under the leadership of James the Lord's brother, and was based on enlightened Christian commonsense under the Holy Spirit's guidance. On this showing, "binding and loosing" are a function of collective Christian understanding—the *communis sensus fidelium.*

(iv.) Without modifying this latter conclusion, it is, however, worth while to ask whether the *meaning* of the binding and loosing is not, after all, to be identified with the giving and withholding of absolution in the Jo. xx. passage. This conclusion is usually rejected by modern commentators. But let us see what happens if we adopt it. (a) It

involves abandoning the sense suggested by the Rabbinic parallels (namely, that of pronouncing on practice or conduct) in favour of one which, nevertheless, seems to impose no strain on the language, and which, in fact, fits the context of the Mt. xviii. passage even better : that is, the sense of binding sins upon somebody (*i.e.*, declaring them to adhere to him still) or releasing them (*i.e.*, declaring them to be detached from him). This is certainly the sense of the different but similar words in Jo. xx. (b) The three passages then become a declaration that on the basis of the Christian confession (of which the Apostolate, we must remember, was the " canon " or guarantee) and with the power of the Holy Spirit absolution may be given or withheld. (c) These conditions—the Christian faith and the presence of the Spirit—exist wherever there is a Christian congregation ; and the powers just referred to are, in fact, possessed by such a body : a Christian community has, indeed, the awful power of receiving back an offender into the fellowship of the Church (as represented by that congregation) or excluding him. There is an instance of such excommunication in Temple Gairdner's Life[11]. (d) On this showing it is, once more, not an apostolic function, in an exclusive or official sense, but one which is inherent in the Apostolic Church—that is, in " a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly administered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same " (Article XIX). That the Ordinal specifies this tremendous power in its commission to the Priest cannot possibly invalidate absolution given by a discerning Christian layman, if he is speaking in true fellowship with the Christian community : could such a layman be denied the description of a " discreet and learned Minister of God's Word " (*Book of Common Prayer*, First Exhortation in Holy Communion) ? Neither can such instances as Peter's handling of the Ananias and Sapphira case, Acts v., or of Simon Magus, Acts viii., or Paul's dealings with the Corinthian offenders, be held to point to such action as exclusively apostolic. The Clergyman, as officially representing the Christian community, is expressly declared to be possessed of this authority ; but this cannot rob an unofficial ministry by other Christians of its effectiveness—still less the official but non-episcopalian ministry of a Free Church clergyman. If it is objected that, on this showing, the Holy Communion may also be administered by anybody, the answer is that there is indeed no *theological* or *essential* reason against this (as, indeed, has always been recognised in respect of Baptism), and that the reason why it is so important in practice to limit it to the accredited Minister of a congregation is one of expediency—to ensure (as far as may be) decency, order, and reverence (*cf.* the preface to the Ordinal).

If all this is granted, then the apostolic function (in the more restricted sense of the words) is purely that of guaranteeing the Gospel, with all that ensues ; which means that disciplinary authority of one sort and another is not " transmitted " from the Apostles but created by the Apostolic Gospel—the Gospel to which it was the apostolic unction to bear witness. That the apostolic authority was not, in itself, legalistic, organisational, or disciplinary is further suggested by

the fact that the Apostles do not, in fact, figure prominently for long in the administration of the early Church. They are primarily guarantors of the Gospel, and that, by direct divine appointment. The commission to Peter to feed Christ's sheep (Jo. xxi.) cannot be assumed to be " transmissible ", even if this pastoral function means anything other than the preaching of the Gospel.

Who, then, did exercise disciplinary authority? In the first generation, it was sometimes undoubtedly the Apostles themselves.[12] The Pauline epistles are full of it. But there is no evidence that it was a particularly *apostolic* function,[13] as such. And when a regular and constitutional government became necessary, what could be more natural than to appoint highly respected senior men—elders, as in a Jewish community—to do the administrative and pastoral work? That the Apostles should, in the first instance, have been the ones to appoint them (in many, at least, of the local centres) is equally natural. But that they had any *inherent* power derived from the apostolate is both a non-proven and a quite gratuitous theory.

Thus, the task to which the Apostles were actually commissioned by Christ seems to have been that of witnessing to the facts and proclaiming them. Their witness passed in due course to the written records; and there remained the non-apostolic presbyterate (ultimately headed by the episcopate), aided by assistants (deacons). As Lightfoot says, " the permanent ministry gradually emerged, as the Church assumed a more settled form, and the higher but temporary offices, such as the apostolate, fell away "; and again: " How far indeed and in what sense the bishop may be called a successor of the Apostles, will be a proper subject for consideration: but the succession at least does not consist in an identity of office ".[14]

Episcopacy. If this picture of the difference between the apostolate and the constitutional ministry of presbyters and deacons (or, eventually, bishops, presbyters, and deacons) is sound, then it follows that overseership (*episcope*), which is a function of the presbyterate, should not be described as essentially apostolic. Here, the advocates of apostolic succession struggle hard. They try to demonstrate (a) that the overseers (*episcopoi*) were already, in New Testament times, a special and superior class of elder, corresponding to the later episcopate; and (b) that *episcope* is a continuation of one aspect of apostleship. But the arguments adduced will not bear close investigation; and we seem rather to be led back to the following conclusions:

1. The great, historical, basic facts of the Gospel were authenticated by the inner circle of eyewitnesses commissioned by Christ as such, and usually called Apostles. This function died with them—or rather, lived on in the apostolic scriptures. In any case, there is no evidence that they either transmitted this authority or could have done so.

2. The Gospel, introducing men and women to the living presence of God by His Spirit, created the Christian community, while the community, conversely, preserved and interpreted the Scriptures.

3. The community, in its turn, requires constitutional leadership, and this has been provided by various means: at the most primitive stage, and at least in some quarters, by Apostles; then by overseer-elders; and this system developed into a graded system of bishops,

priests (=elders), and deacons. But never has a sacerdotal system been true to the Gospel; and always it has been the Church which has authorized the Ministry, not *vice versa*.

Thus, the Anglican definition of the Church is confirmed up to the hilt; and, by contrast, any theory which regards an episcopate authorized by apostolic succession as a *sine qua non* is simply unbiblical and arbitrary.

[1] Perhaps it is relevant to this sense of apostolicity to recall that it was as a guarantee of orthodoxy that Irenaeus (for instance) valued the apostolic succession. See Lightfoot, *Philippians*, 8th Ed., p. 239.)

[2] *Op. cit.* pp. 235, 6.

[3] *Id.* p., 237.

[4] In *The Primitive Church*.

[5] See W. L. Knox, *St. Paul and the Church of Jerusalem*, pp. 363 *ff.*

[6] The former alternative is suggested by I Cor. xv. 1-11, II Cor. xi. 5.

[7] The word which, on the purely linguistic level, corresponds to this in Hebrew or Aramaic has been given prominence in recent discussions; but Lightfoot in *Galatians*, 8th Ed., p. 93 n. 1, and E. de W. Burton in the I.C.C. commentary on *Galatians* years ago, and K. Lake rather more recently in *The Beginning of Christianity*, v. pp. 48-50, seem to have said all that needs to be said about it; and it is certainly not logical to interpret the functions of a Christian *apostolos* in terms of a Jewish official merely because the terms coincide etymologically. See also J. W. Hunkin in *Theology*, May, 1948.

[8] Despite the hesitation in, *e.g.*, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, *loc. cit.*

[9] See especially 1 Cor. ix. 1 *ff.*

[10] It is highly significant that Heb. iii. 1, where *apostolos* is, strikingly, applied (together with "High Priest") to Christ Himself, corresponds to the well-attested fact that Jesus spoke of himself as "sent" by the Father; and Jo. xx. 21 explicitly makes the "sending" of the disciples by Christ a parallel to the sending of Christ by the Father.

[11] C. E. Padwick, *Temple Gairdner of Cairo*, p. 221.

[12] Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, pp. 187, 198.

[13] Not even the careful review of the evidence in *Beginnings*, v. 52 *ff.* convinces me that it was.

[14] *Op. cit.*, pp. 186 and 196.

THE ANGLICAN PATTERN OF EPISCOPACY (*concluded from p.* 94)

of episcopacy and of a refusal to assert for it an exclusive claim that the *differentia* of the Anglican tradition consists. "In this as in other respects," says Professor Sykes, "The Anglican tradition is that of a *via media*. In defence of its own history and position the Church of England stands firmly by its retention of episcopacy; in looking forward to the possibility of ecclesiastical reunion, it affirms that such union must find its indispensable basis in the episcopal form of church polity; and at the same time it refuses to unchurch non-episcopal churches and preserves an historical tradition of communion with them."