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A New Theory of Apostolic Succession

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AMONG the few general agreements reached in the course of the long and continuing debate on apostolic succession has been the conclusion that the earliest *doctrine* of episcopal succession affirms a continuity of teaching office rather than of sacramental grace. C. H. Turner in a famous essay thus described the idea of succession held by Irenaeus:

The bishop of any Christian church is the head and representative of his flock, and has been regularly and openly put into possession of the *cathedra* or teaching chair, in succession to a predecessor who had in turn been recognized in his time as the one proper possessor of the chair—and so on right back to the foundation of the particular local church.¹

It is characteristic of this early period that the bishop traces his succession not (as in later Western practice) through the bishops who consecrated him but through his predecessors in office. As Dr. A. J. Mason pointed out in the same volume, Irenaeus conceived of truth as abiding in the whole Church, "not in the line of bishops who govern it", although they are "the representatives of their Churches, and the responsible guardians of their traditions".² In more recent years Dom Gregory Dix acknowledged that "There is in this way of reckoning the matter no emphasis whatever on the *sacramental* 'succession' of a bishop to those bishops from other Churches who had consecrated him to the episcopate by the laying on of hands".³ The point at which the later conception of succession, in which the bishop is regarded as the recipient of a special *charisma* for government or for sacramental validity, replaced the more primitive idea is still a matter of disagreement among scholars, although most authorities agree that some such change took place in the latter years of the second century or in the first quarter of the third.⁴ The importance of this change of emphasis has also been variously estimated. Dom Gregory Dix maintained that the absence of a sacramental theory of succession from the earliest formulations did not affect the case of those who believe that episcopal succession is essential to the existence of the Church, and declared that the doctrine which came to be accepted later "was only a novelty in that it emphasized a different set of pre-existing facts".⁵ Others, including the present writer,⁶ have argued that the absence of this doctrine from the apostolic and sub-apostolic ages shows that the traditional catholic dogma of apostolic succession—however vital as one element in the fullness of Christian unity—cannot be made a test of the orthodoxy and validity of non-episcopal Churches and ministries.

In a recent important book, *The Apostolic Succession in the First Two Centuries of the Church* (Lutterworth Press, London, 1953) Dr. Arnold

Ehrhardt has propounded a new and interesting thesis. He claims that the idea of continuity of episcopal teachers, by which Irenaeus sought to demonstrate the authority and unity of the catholic faith over against Gnostic distortions, was not the earliest Christian conception of episcopal succession. Another view, which was "fully established" by the time of Clement of Rome (p. 77),⁷ was based upon "the unshakable conviction among the members of the Church at Jerusalem that an unbroken succession after the Jewish High Priests was essential for the New Israel, the Church" (p. 81). In Dr. Ehrhardt's judgment the earliest idea of succession was not concerned with teaching and doctrine but with sacerdotal functions. "The priesthood was at the root of the Apostolic succession. . . . The doctrine owed its impetus to the necessity of continuing the sacerdotal ministry of the Old Israel within the New Israel, the Church" (pp. 81-2). It is obvious that this thesis, if substantiated, will have important consequences for the modern discussion of the doctrine of the ministry.

Dr. Ehrhardt, after an interesting discussion of the Biblical evidence for succession, to which we shall refer again, comes in the second chapter to the most original part of his study. He examines in turn the various types of succession lists known to us from Jewish and secular sources, and reminds us that the idea of succession is by no means a peculiarly Christian tenet. In pagan society lists were made of royal successions, of appointed officers, and of the heads of various philosophical schools. None of these, argues Dr. Ehrhardt, could have supplied the pattern for the Christian episcopal lists which began to be drawn up in the second half of the second century. Unlike the Christian lists the pagan parallels either include the dates of succession, refer to regular (usually annual) appointment, or imply a progress of philosophical research (pp. 43-4). Of the four Jewish types, the rabbinic lists provide no parallel because they insist on succession in pairs and record the contributions of *new* knowledge made by each generation of rabbis (p. 46). The Jewish prophetic lists do have a parallel in the Church, but it is the Christian prophets rather than the bishops who correspond thereto, and "it is improbable that episcopal and prophetic succession lists should have sprung from the same root" (p. 47). This leaves us with the combined lists of Jewish royal and sacerdotal successions, which are "the only type that can have been followed by the episcopal succession lists" (p. 48). In a closely reasoned argument, which I must leave to more expert patristic scholars to scrutinize, Dr. Ehrhardt then proceeds to show that Hippolytus was well acquainted with such succession lists and that he connected them in thought with the Christian succession of bishops (pp. 48-61).

If we accept, for the moment, the validity of this argument as applied to Hippolytus, the question remains: What evidence is there of this doctrine of succession before the beginning of the third century? While Dr. Ehrhardt's researches may have supplied us with important new evidence as to the origin of Hippolytus's teaching, it is not news that this writer held

a sacramental-sacerdotal view of succession. It is at this point that Dr. Ehrhardt seems to me to have failed in establishing his thesis. We will look at the evidence in turn, working back from the end of the second century to the New Testament.

1. *Hegesippus*. In a famous passage Eusebius quotes Hegesippus (*ca.* A.D. 175) as writing:

Together with the apostles James the Lord's brother succeeded to the Church. He received the name of 'the Just' from all men, from the time of the Lord even to our own; for there were many called James. Now he was holy from his mother's womb, drank no wine nor strong drink, nor ate anything in which was life; no razor came upon his head, he anointed himself not with oil and used no bath. To him alone it was permitted to enter the holy place; for he wore nothing woollen, but linen garments. And alone he entered into the sanctuary, and was found on his knees asking forgiveness on behalf of the people, so that his knees became hard like a camel's, for he was continually bending the knee in worship to God, and asking forgiveness for the people.⁸

Dr. Ehrhardt understands this to mean that "Hegesippus saw in St. James the true successor of the High Priest" (p. 64) and concludes that both he and Eusebius saw in James the link between the High-priestly succession of the Jewish nation and the episcopal succession of the Church (p. 65). But, quite apart from the obscurity of the passage which seems to intermingle literal description and allegory,⁹ there is no indication that Hegesippus regarded the episcopal succession as a whole as sacerdotal. Indeed, Dr. Ehrhardt's own argument tells against him here. As we noted above, he draws a radical distinction between the pagan type of succession list which was concerned with philosophical teachers and the Jewish lists of high-priests. The former type, he maintains, is introduced by Irenaeus as the result of the assimilation of the Jewish-Christian succession doctrine to "a scholarly interest in the genealogy of the Christian doctrine which was *largely historical and purely human*" (p. 115, my italics).¹⁰ But in this case Hegesippus cannot be claimed as a witness to the undefiled sacerdotal succession theme, for in the passage in which he speaks of the continuing succession of the Church it is precisely *as a succession of true teaching that he understands it*:

And the church of the Corinthians continued in the true doctrine until Primus was bishop at Corinth. . . . But when I came to Rome, I made for myself a succession-list as far as Anicetus. . . . And in every succession and in every city that which the Law and the Prophets and the Lord preach is faithfully followed.¹¹

There is here no suggestion of priestly succession in the episcopate. The fact (if accepted) that Hegesippus thought of James as a Christian priest cannot of itself justify the claim that Hegesippus believed in an extension of that priesthood through episcopal succession. Even Tertullian, who was the first writer explicitly to name the bishop "high priest" (*summus sacerdos*),¹² does not seem to have connected the ideals of apostolic succession

and priesthood: "[The Churches] since they agree in the same faith . . . are accounted as not less apostolic [than those founded by Apostles], because they are akin in doctrine."¹³

2. *The Clementine Homilies*. These pseudonymous writings, says Dr. Ehrhardt, "have the Apostolic succession very much at heart" and exalt St. James above the other Apostles "because he was seen as Christ's successor in His priestly ministry" (pp. 72-3). The latter assumption is based, however, only on the precarious inference that since the Homilies compare Christ to Moses they would naturally draw an analogy between Aaron and "the brother of Christ". But as a matter of fact the Homilies do not make this connection explicitly, and, as Ehrhardt recognises, St. James did not play any great part in the sources which underlie this document (p. 73).¹⁴ As far as I have been able to discover, the Clementine Homilies, despite the fact that they "outstrip the most rigid orthodoxy in their respect for the episcopal office",¹⁵ do not ascribe any special priesthood to the bishop; and in any case their heterodoxy and the uncertainty of their date make them doubtful evidence for the teaching of the Church in the second century.

3. The evidence of *Clement of Rome* comes nearest to substantiating Dr. Ehrhardt's position. Without using the word "succession" Clement does clearly imply some intention on the part of the Apostles for the regular continuance of the ministry in the Church.¹⁶ Moreover, Clement does speak of the "offering of the gifts of the bishop's office",¹⁷ and in chapters 40-43 he draws a comparison between the necessity for order and authority in the Old Testament dispensation and in the Church. Dr. Ehrhardt takes it for granted that Clement means that "the ministry of the Church was the continuation of that of the priests and Levites in Israel" (p. 78); but in doing so he entirely ignores the weighty reasons given by Lightfoot for supposing that "this is an instance from the old dispensation adduced to show that God will have his ministrations performed through definite persons . . . [in which there is] no direct reference but an argument by analogy".¹⁸ Clement uses other illustrations of authority, including that of the leadership of the Roman army,¹⁹ but nobody supposes therefore that he regarded the Christian ministry as directly corresponding to "prefects, rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds and rulers of fifties". All that he means is that the Christian Church has its properly authorized leaders just as the Jewish people and the Roman army have theirs. Again, if Clement did intend a more direct comparison between the Old Testament ministry and the Christian succession, who corresponded in Rome or Corinth to the High Priest? Not the bishop, because neither place at that time had a monepiscopal constitution. Clement gives his own answer in chapter 36: "Jesus Christ the High-priest of our offerings." The claim that Clement used the doctrine of sacerdotal succession "clearly and competently, as a well established tenet of the Christian faith" (p. 77) proves on examination to be highly questionable.

4. *The New Testament*. Dr. Ehrhardt recognises that direct New Testament support for his thesis is not forthcoming, but he attempts to show that from the first sacerdotal associations formed around the episcopate. He points out that *Codex Bezae*²⁰ pictures St. James in Acts as having precedence over all other Apostles, and from this goes on to conclude (what neither *Codex Bezae* nor the original text of Acts explicitly suggests) that, "If on the one hand, the form of the court of St. James at Jerusalem reflected that of the Jewish High Priest, it is also true that it seemed to foreshadow that of a bishop in the early Catholic Church" (p. 30). In a round-about way it is suggested that since the Presbyters in Jerusalem formed part of the Sanhedrin, of which the High Priest was head, the use of the word for the Christian minister carries sacerdotal over-tones (pp. 27-8). Most remarkable of all, however, is the argument (put forward as a hypothesis on p. 79, but accepted as a premise on p. 107) that in addressing the Seven Churches through their "angels" the writer of the Apocalypse associates the bishop and the high priest because "the Jewish High Priest was regarded as the *mal'ak*, the angel of God". Lightfoot's careful refutation of the identification of the "angels" and the bishops is ignored.²¹

The Apostolic Succession serves a useful purpose in reminding us of the great importance attached to St. James in the early Church. It contains an invaluable discussion (Chapter 4) of the relation between prophetic and other ministries in the second century. It brings together a great deal of important evidence on the early doctrine of priesthood. But I find myself quite unconvinced by its major thesis. The author's use of his material can only be described as over-imaginative.²² The impression is given that he first arrived at a hypothesis (based on the use by Hippolytus of the High-priestly succession lists) and then set out to substantiate it by whatever evidence, however slight, existed. Thus, if either St. James, episcopacy, priesthood or succession is mentioned in his source, Dr. Ehrhardt seems to take it for granted that the other three elements of the quartet are in the writer's mind.²³ But this is to assume what is being proved. On the other hand, Dr. Ehrhardt does not claim that the conception of episcopal succession as sacerdotal was universally accepted in the early Church. He is not, even if his thesis is accepted, a supporter of the rigid doctrine of the necessity for episcopal ordination. He rejects the *shaliach* theory of *The Apostolic Ministry* (pp. 11-20) and does not believe that apostolic succession was generally taught by the New Testament writers (p. 35). Even in the second century there was no settled theory of succession in some Churches of Asia Minor (p. 66), and the Didache, Ignatius, Polycarp and Hermas were ignorant of any such doctrine (pp. 76-7). Dr. Ehrhardt believes that, even where the doctrine was held, the agents of ordination were sometimes the presbyters of the local church rather than visiting bishops (preface),²⁴ and in some cases enthronement rather than laying-on-of-hands was the "constitutive act" of ordination (p. 82). How, then, did the dogma of episcopal succession which originated in "the constitution of the Church

of Jerusalem" (p. 21) and with "the circle round St. James and his successors of the circumcision" (p. 82) gain such general authority in the Church of the third century? Dr. Ehrhardt's conclusion in this respect deserves more serious consideration than his claim that the doctrine originated in the apostolic age:

the scales were tipped in favour of its acceptance first by the Montanist crisis, which stayed the hand of the Church in Asia Minor, and secondly by the exertions of that very remarkable man Hegesippus, the author of the Roman succession list [p. 81].

NOTES

1. *Essays on the Early History of the Church and the Ministry* (ed. Swete), p. 105.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.
3. *The Apostolic Ministry* (ed. Kirk), p. 202.
4. In a footnote (54) on p. 74 of *Episcopacy and Reunion* (Fairweather and Hettlinger), I have pointed out the dangers of any dogmatic assertion of the precise point at which the transition occurs.
5. *The Apostolic Ministry*, p. 212.
6. *Episcopacy and Reunion*, pp. 75-81. For another recent discussion of the early patristic evidence which leads the writer to similar conclusions, see K. J. Woollcombe, 'The Ministry and the Order of the Church in the Works of the Fathers', chapter III in *The Historic Episcopate* (ed. Carey).
7. Oddly enough this statement is contradicted in the preface, which states that the belief in Apostolic Succession as a doctrine belongs only to the second century.
8. *Ecclesiastical History*, II.23.4-6.
9. Is it possible that Hegesippus, who, although a Palestinian, cannot have had first-hand knowledge of Jewish practice before the destruction of Jerusalem, supposed that James was actually a Jewish priest? If he means only that James was a Christian priest, the reference to the holy place and the sanctuary in close association with the use of linen garments etc. seems quite anachronistic. Of course, if the meaning is that James was a Jewish priest, the conclusion drawn by Dr. Ehrhardt for the whole Christian ministry are even less justified.
10. Cf. p. 159 where the conception of a succession of Christian teachers is said to be "partly dependent on pagan models". Dr. Ehrhardt's treatment of Irenaeus is difficult to follow. He acknowledges that Irenaeus does not expressly state that the Christian ministry continues the O. T. priesthood (p. 122). But on pp. 120-1, by arguing that when Irenaeus quotes Isa. 60: 17 he intends it to be understood as if it were Deut. 17: 9, 10 (an entirely gratuitous assumption), he is able to conclude that Irenaeus demands obedience to the bishop "because of his priesthood".
11. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.22.2, 3.
12. *On Baptism*, 17.
13. *The Prescription against Heretics*, 32. Cf. also 20, 21. Ehrhardt quotes two passages in support of the view that Tertullian "stated quite plainly that the Apostolic succession was the continuation of the Levitical priesthood" (p. 128). But the first (*Against Marcion*, 4.23) does not necessarily imply any more than that the Christian priest is not to concern himself with the affairs of the world (i.e. burying the dead) as the Jewish priest was forbidden to have contact with the dead; and the second (*On Monogamy*, 7) occurs in a Montanist work which implies that all Christians are priests.
14. The present text of the Homilies dates from the late fourth century, although it certainly incorporates second century material.
15. Lightfoot, *Dissertation on the Christian Ministry*, p. 211.
16. *The Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 44. What the relation of the various parties mentioned is to each other remains a matter of debate (see *The Historic Episcopate*, pp. 42-7); but whatever the answer to this question is, it cannot be that suggested by Ehrhardt. He writes that Clement "asserts that the Apostles had established a law—or made a will—concerning the succession to their ministry (*leitourgia*, 44.2), and says that the successors had been ordained by the Apostles or by other 'eminent men'" (p. 77). Apart from the inaccuracy of assuming that *katestesan* means "ordained", this is impossible. If the *leitourgia* is (as Ehrhardt assumes) that of the *Apostles* (and not of the bishops and deacons) those who succeeded to it were not "ordained by the Apostles or by other eminent men"—they were themselves the eminent men who had appointed the later bishops at Corinth!

17. *Loc. cit.*

18. *The Apostolic Fathers*, I.ii.123.

19. Chapter 37.

20. Ehrhardt does not claim that *Codex Bezae* reflects the original text of Acts, but that it expresses a partisan view in favour of the Church at Jerusalem "not more than a century after the event" (p 28).

21. *Dissertation on the Christian Ministry*, pp. 199-200.

22. The suspicion of a certain irresponsibility in the use of texts is confirmed by an example in an article contributed by Ehrhardt to *The Church Quarterly Review*, July-September, 1945. He there discovers evidence in Ignatius that "The Christian ministry is essentially the continuation of the Jewish priesthood" (p. 119), on the ground that "he exhorts the Christians to be obedient to the bishop as to the Decalogue (*Trall*, 13: 1) for, says Mal.ii.7, 'they should seek the law at his mouth' ". But (1) it is extremely doubtful whether *entole* here means "the Decalogue" (see Lightfoot *in loc.*); (2) Ignatius neither here nor elsewhere quotes Mal.ii.7; (3) without some explicit indication there is no reason why a reference to "the Law" (if it exists here) should carry sacerdotal associations; after all, the Law was given through Moses, who was not a priest but a prophet (Deut. 34: 10)!

23. On page 74 this underlying tendency is made partly explicit: "The pseudo-Clementines illustrate the mind of the early Catholic Church in the Roman province of Syria. It is clear that the influences of early Jewish-Christian thought played here a very important part. The prominence of St. James as well as the use of the title of *archon* for the bishop makes it clear; and it is also evident that the idea of the *Apostolic succession* belongs to the same body of opinion." No evidence is produced to give independent justification to the words I have italicized.

24. Ehrhardt accepts the conclusions of Dr. W. Telfer that in Egypt bishops were consecrated by presbyters until the middle of the third century (*Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, III.1).