

What Now? Administering a post-apostolic church.

There is a surprising lacuna in the history of the church. As surprising as the fact that it is so very rarely noticed or commented on, not even in the earliest History of the Church we possess, written by Eusebius (born c.260 A.D.). What happened on the death of the last Apostle? Surely that was a major event in the development of the church. How did the church, having lost the last representative of its overall leadership, react? Did they not ask; 'What do we do now?'

It is just possible that even though the Apostles were everything to the churches, the reason they had come into being and responsible for their continuing maintenance, the churches failed to recognise their loss. If we compare Paul's earlier letters with his later ones, we see increasing challenges to his authority in the latter. 'They say.....His speech is contemptible'.¹ 'You seek a proof of Christ speaking in me.'¹ 'Mark those who cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which you have learned.'² .. 'All they that are in Asia are turned away from me.'³⁴

And it is not only Paul who is witness to this falling away. 'I wrote to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to have the pre-eminence among them, does not receive us.'⁵ '..those who despise government..... not afraid to speak evil of dignities.'⁶ 'They went forth from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, surely they would have continued with us.'⁷ And the letter of Jude.

But what of those who remained faithful to the apostolic inheritance?

It 'was a self-evident truth in the first days of Christianity ... that the office of Apostle was essentially necessary to the completeness of the Christian Church, and that the government, instruction and care of the one body could not be perfectly carried on by the Divine Head in the absence of that ministry.'⁸ It was in 'the Apostles' 'doctrine and fellowship' that 'they steadfastly continued'.⁹

¹ 2 Corinthians 13:3

² Romans Chapters 16, 17

³ 2 Timothy 1:15

⁴ See also 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14

⁵ 3 John 9

⁶ 2 Peter 2:10

⁷ 1 John 2:19

⁸ Hodge, J. The Original Constitution of the Church. Chapter II

⁹ Acts 2:42

‘It was a melancholy moment for the Church when she was left to herself, without any of that ‘glorious company of the Apostles’, who had seen their Redeemer when He was in the flesh, and had received from His own lips the charge to feed His flock. He had committed the trust to faithful hands.’¹⁰

The Apostles had appointed elders (presbyters) as overseers (episcopi) in each local church and later one of these episcopi (bishops) to be the presiding minister, or ‘angel’ of the church. ¹¹Although each presbyter/elder shared in the ‘oversight’, the title ‘bishop’ came to be used of this presiding minister. But each bishop had jurisdiction only over his own local church.

We know what the state of affairs was a few generations later. The bishops had local jurisdiction only. They occasionally held synods of a number of bishoprics to determine doctrine and practice, but by reference to the teachings of the Apostles. They recognised that they did not themselves have authority to determine the truth but that their task was to preserve the apostolic teaching, teaching which itself derived from God through Jesus.

‘The Apostles have preached to us from our Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ from God.’¹². ‘The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him’¹³. ‘The Father who sent me gave me a commandment what I should say’¹⁴. ‘As my Father has taught me, I speak these things.’¹⁵ ‘All things that I have heard of my Father, I have made known to you.’¹⁶‘The church at Ephesus was founded by Paul, and John remained there until Trajan’s time; so she is a true witness of what the Apostles taught.’¹⁷ ‘The Church has received this solemn mandate of Christ to proclaim the truth from the Apostles.’¹⁸ ‘In conformity with’ his ‘view of the origin of the Church’ (that the Apostles founded the first churches), ‘Tertullian never fails, when arguing upon any disputed point of doctrine or discipline, to appeal to the belief or practice of those churches which had been actually founded by the Apostles; on the ground that in them the faith taught and the institutions established by the Apostles were still preserved.’¹⁹ (Tertullian wrote about 200 A.D.)

¹⁰ Burton, Dr. History of the Church in the Second Century, Chapter 1.

¹¹ Revelation 2 seriatim

¹² The (First) Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians. Paragraph 42

¹³ Revelation 1:1

¹⁴ John 12:49

¹⁵ John 8:28

¹⁶ John 15:15

¹⁷ Irenaeus. Heresies Answered Book III (quoted by Eusebius History of the Christian Church Book 3.23

¹⁸ Lumen Gentium, Paragraph 17

¹⁹ John, Bishop of Bristol and Cambridge Regius Professor of Divinity. The Ecclesiastical History of the Second and Third Centuries illustrated from the writings of Tertullian. Page 114.

It is because it is seen as the church's duty to be faithful to the truth as handed down from the Apostles that the Roman Catholic Church does not and, despite the standing of the Pope, cannot ordain women to the priesthood. Pope John Paul II 'declared that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful'.²⁰

On the succession of bishops, however, in its magnum opus on the constitution of the Church²¹, the Roman Catholic Church states that it was 'Jesus' will' that bishops should succeed them, but in the sense in which they come to interpret this, no evidence is given for the statement. At first, Christ's will is said to be that the episcopal successors should be 'Shepherds in His Church'²² – which is undoubtedly true. But later it is written that 'the Apostles, 'appointed ruler in this society', took care to appoint successors'²³ - without it being made clear that they did not appoint their successors as Apostles, only as bishops. And then 'the Apostles' office of nurturing' (sic – not at this stage governing) 'the Church is permanent, and is to be exercised without interruption by the sacred order of bishops'.

But later this goes further: 'The order of bishops, which succeeds to the college of Apostles and gives this body continued existence, is also the subject of supreme and full power over the universal Church'²⁴ (subject to the position of the Roman Pontiff, which need not concern us here – there is no evidence in the early writings about bishops of any thought that one of them might have supremacy)..

Clement did indeed write that because they knew that 'contentions would arise on account of the ministry', the Apostles appointed 'persons' and gave directions for other 'chosen and approved' men to succeed them, that is to succeed those whom the Apostles had chosen. But nothing is said about those so appointed succeeding to the office or powers of the Apostles themselves.²⁵

On the contrary, even soon after the death of the last Apostle, it was clear that the bishop's jurisdiction extended only over his own local church. Each member should 'obey your bishop in honour of Him whose pleasure it is that you should do so', the bishop in the local church representing God in that

²⁰ *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* 4

²¹ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church - *Lumen Gentium*. Paragraph 18

²² *Op cit* para 18

²³ *Op cit* para 20

²⁴ *Op cit* para 22

²⁵ Clement, (First) Epistle to the Corinthians Paragraph 44

local church and 'the elders under him', in that local church, His Apostles in the universal church ²⁶ Cyprian (in the 200s) says that there was unanimity among the Apostles and (later) that it behoves everyone and especially those who are bishops to maintain unity, clearly distinguishing bishops from Apostles²⁷..

Apostolic Succession means that the ministry of the Church is derived from the Apostles by a continuous succession of ordinations. But it does not mean that the Apostles' level of authority has been conveyed to bishops, who are not Apostles. That bishops had a lesser authority and in particular could convey only a lesser blessing was reflected in the early church in a symbolic practice which has continued – if little noticed – to the present day. Apostles are recorded always as laying hands (plural) on people²⁸. This 'laying on of hands' is one of the foundation truths²⁹..

But a bishop lays only one hand. Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine speak of the imposition of the hand in the singular. So when the Church of England at the Reformation rejected the anointing with chrism at Confirmation, they prescribed that the bishop should lay his hand, not both hands, on each candidate. Even in the modern form of the Confirmation service, the rubric remains the same³⁰.

Nor at first was any attempt made by the bishops to replace the Apostles in the task of governing the universal church;. any synods of bishops held were only of part of the church. Not until 325, the Council of Nicaea, was there an ecumenical synod (and that was summoned not by bishops but by the Emperor). The earliest more local Council of which we have any written records is that at Rome in 155 A.D. From what remains of the record, that did not address precisely the question of what to do in the absence of Apostles, although it did raise the question of the primacy of the bishop of Rome.

And in any case it was too late to be addressing for the first time the question. What now? The last Apostle to die is understood to have been John at the end of the first century A.D. And the Gentile churches may well have asked the same question when the last of the Apostles to the uncircumcision, Paul and Barnabas (and any other if there were such), was lost to them. What do we do now? should have been the question on every lip.

²⁶ Ignatius, Epistle to the Magnesians. Paragraphs 3 and 6

²⁷ Cyprian. De Ecclesiae Catholicae Unitate

²⁸ Acts 8:17; 19:6.

²⁹ Hebrews 6:2

³⁰ Later in the service the new rubric inconsistently speaks of the candidates on whom the bishop has laid hands (in the plural). He hasn't – or at any rate he should not have done..

We have some quite early post-apostolic writings and the church would have paid special heed to their writers as ones who had been instructed by an Apostle. There was Clement of Rome who had known the Apostle Paul (and wrote before the death of at least John); Ignatius, the second bishop of Antioch and Polycarp, the second bishop of Smyrna who had been a disciple of the Apostle John. But none of their writings which has come down to us addresses this question.

But consider. The church knew that Jesus had chosen twelve men and appointed them as Apostles.³¹ That the number was to be twelve is suggested both by His having chosen that number, by His saying that they would sit on thrones over the twelve tribes of Israel³², and by the selection after Judas' death of a twelfth to replace Judas and make up the number³³. Later Paul was also appointed as an Apostle, as seemingly was Barnabas. Whether by then the number of the twelve had been reduced by death, and these made it up again to twelve, we do not know, but there is no suggestion that this was the case. It seems rather that this was the beginning of a second group of Apostles; as the first had been primarily to the Jews, the circumcision, so this was to be primarily to the Gentiles, the uncircumcision.

Either way, it was through these Apostles and any evangelists working under them that the individual converts had been gathered and the local churches founded. The new Christians owed everything they knew to them, and they were the only universal authority there was. As Paul wrote of the churches he had founded, he daily had the care of all the churches on him.³⁴ On the face of it, it must have been a matter of huge concern to the Christians of that time, if there should ever come a time when there were no more Apostles; and when that time did come, a major question, What now? What ought we to do now that there is no more universal authority over us, no more Apostles?

Although they did not have modern methods of communication, news spread rapidly enough and we might have thought that the news of the passing away of the last of the Apostles would have been marked Urgent. Did any of the bishops of the metropolitan churches, Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria or Rome, for example call his fellow bishops to confer? Did they communicate with each other? If so, we have no record of either having happened. But they must (or at any rate should have) felt leaderless and

³¹ Luke 6:13; Mark 3:14-15

³² Matthew 19:28-29; Luke 22:28-30

³³ Acts 1:15-26

³⁴ 2 Corinthians 11:28

bereft of the only ordinance ever appointed by Jesus for the governance of the universal, as distinct from the local, church.

The most obvious question would have been: Should we appoint more Apostles? But that could not be done. Only Jesus, Head of the church, could do that³⁵. The first Apostles had been appointed by Him personally when He was in His mortal body. Judas' replacement by lot was regarded as God's choosing. (Because the Holy Ghost had not then been sent, he was chosen by the existing method of lot.³⁶) And Paul, we know from his own statement, had been appointed personally by Jesus after His resurrection³⁷. Clement describes the martyrdom of Peter and Paul but gives no hint that anyone then even raised the question of their replacement, not even from those who had, as he writes, been 'joined to them'.³⁸

The office of Apostle was clearly held in high regard. Men tried to pass themselves off as such. Paul had to speak of 'false Apostles'³⁹. The church in Ephesus had tried those who said they were Apostles and found them impostors (and were commended by Jesus for having done so)⁴⁰. There is no hint however that any individual church or group of churches or the church as a whole, nor even the Apostles themselves, ever tried to replace the Apostles as they died or were martyred, by appointments of their own. It is clear that they knew that it was not within their authority to do so. An Apostle could be appointed only by Jesus directly, whether in His mortal life or after His resurrection.

In the absence of any record of what took place then, it is of interest to see what happened at a much later date. Some sects, such as the Church of the New Covenant and the Quakers, have appointed their own men with the title 'Apostle', but there has been only one context in which Apostles have never been ordained to the office of Apostle by other men, but recognised as directly called and then separated from their positions in local churches, as were Paul and Barnabas⁴¹, by the immediate calling of the Holy Ghost speaking through prophets. Rather their Apostleship was recognised (again as had been Paul's) as a fact.

Those who so recognised them did not regard themselves as forming a new sect or denomination. They understood that God had appointed twelve

³⁵ Galatians 1:1; John 17:18; 20:21

³⁶ Cp. 1 Samuel 10:17-21

³⁷ Galatians 1:1,15

³⁸ Clement, (First) Epistle to the Corinthians. Paragraphs 5 and 6.

³⁹ 2 Corinthians 11:13-15

⁴⁰ Revelation 2:2

⁴¹ Acts 13:2

Apostles again to exercise governance under the Headship of Jesus over the universal church, and those who accepted them were members only of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church to which not only they, but all baptised Christians belong. (Others gave them a sectarian name but they never accepted it.)

Coincidentally this Apostleship lasted over much the same portion of a century as the first Apostleship. The Apostles were called from 1832 and separated to their task in 1835. As each died, as with the first Apostles, he was not replaced. The church had no authority to appoint of itself. As seems to have happened with John, one outlived the others by quite some years (since 1879), dying in February 1901.

The office of 'help' had been re-introduced⁴². In the case of the Apostles, the help was known by the Latinate word, Coadjutor. Each Coadjutor was of the rank of archbishop, or archangel – the term they were told in prophecy to use. The Coadjutors could be employed to carry out apostolic acts, such as ordination, but only on the specific authorising of the Apostle. (as had done Paul⁴³). At the death of the last Apostle, the question was, What could the Coadjutors do and what authority did they have in the absence of Apostles?

.⁴⁴They first held a fortnight of services in the Apostles' chapel of 'humbling ourselves before God' and recommended to the local churches that they do the same. This the churches voluntarily did. And 'from all sides we get reports how heartily the churches have joined; how the congregations have come up even to the weekday services in far larger numbers than usual, how even many lukewarm, backsliding and lapsed have been stirred to new energy.'

The Coadjutors had been 'left without any instructions' as to what they should do should the last Apostle be taken to his rest. They acted neither autocratically nor precipitately. They consulted. First with the 'ministers with Apostles', and then with the angels of the churches.

The term 'ministers with Apostles' needs explaining. Most of the priests ordained by the Apostles acted in local churches. But some worked with the Apostles in their care of the universal church. The fourfold ministry which Paul tells us that Jesus gave after He had ascended⁴⁵, had been restored; and with

⁴² 1 Corinthians 12:28

⁴³ Titus 1:5

⁴⁴ The narrative which follows is based on an unpublished record made at the time.

⁴⁵ Ephesians 4:8-11. 'until we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man'.

each Apostle there was a prophet, an evangelist and a pastor. Just as Paul and Barnabas, albeit at a very different and much earlier stage in the development of the church, had variously had for example Silas a prophet, Mark an evangelist and Timothy a pastor.⁴⁶

The Coadjutors concluded that the mind of the Lord was that they should be chief among their brethren; the endowment they had received by the laying on of Apostles' hands was not temporary. But they could not act as before: not as Apostles, nor even acting as coadjutors because their heads were no longer there, but as chiefs, as those who had companied with the twelve, as Joshua companied with Moses. What they could not do was to 'help ourselves and devise makeshifts'.

There was much else of which we cannot now expect to find the counterparts after the death of the Apostle John. Nor, so far as we know, had the ministry of 'helps' been developed in the early church to the point where 'Coadjutors' survived who could have acted as a focus of consultation after the removal of the first Apostles. The question remains; Did the early church react to John's death with the same sense of grievous loss of the governing ordinance appointed by Christ himself for the universal church? Did they understand the need for humility, and of waiting on the Lord's mind rather than making their own arrangements?

So far as we have any record, they seem just to have done nothing, only to have accepted that each local church must continue faithfully to teach apostolic doctrine on its own. And there could have been a reason for this. Apostles were important but there was One Who was much more dear to the churches, even their Head in heaven, Jesus Christ himself. His return was expected at any time; and so the absence of government was perhaps expected to be only temporary. Perhaps, in fact, the church at that time had not yet 'left its first love'.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ E.g. Acts 12:15,16. 1 and 2 Thessalonians 1:1

⁴⁷ Revelation 2:4.

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