

APOSTOLICAL SUCCESSION

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BY W. HAY M. H. AITKEN, M.A.
CANON OF NORWICH

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The fabric of Sacerdotalism rests upon the fundamental assumption that Jesus Christ created certain distinct orders of ministry, and assigned to each order specific prerogatives and functions; that, further, He instituted a *quasi-sacramental ordinance*—the laying-on of hands, whereby the capacity to exercise these ministrations should be imparted, so that those whom He first called might, by the laying-on of their hands, pass on to others all the ministerial powers that they themselves possessed, these, again, transmitting them to others, and thus maintaining a regular ministerial succession to the end of time. I have called this dogma an assumption, and it seems to me that I am justified in doing so, because there is so little to be found in the New Testament, or even in the earliest Christian literature after the completion of the Canon of the New Testament, that even *seems* to give the slightest colour to any such conclusions. Our Lord did, indeed, appoint twelve individuals, whom He called Apostles, who were to be with Him, and to share His labours and bear witness to His teaching. It is indisputable that these men held an altogether unique position. No other ministers of a later age could possibly exercise some of the most prominent functions that necessarily belonged to these, as is obvious on the smallest amount of reflection. First, they were to be His travelling companions and assistants, extending the influence of His mission, and in various ways contributing to its success. Second, they were directly commissioned to heal the sick, to cast out devils, and perform other mighty works. Third, they were to be personal witnesses to His character and to the great facts of His career. Fourth, they were to be the repositories of His oral teaching; and their memory of this was to be specially assured by the action of the Holy Ghost, so that they might hand down to others that which they had themselves learned from Christ. Fifth, as their name, implies, they were sent forth to carry the Gospel into the darkened world. They were to be evangelists rather than settled pastors; and all the stories of their settling down as “Bishops” of particular localities are mere traditions of a comparatively late date, and destitute of any historical value. Sixth, they were thus to be the human foundations of the Church, sharing, however, according to St. Paul, this distinction with another order of workers—the prophets of the Christian Church. In St. John's vision of the Holy City, she is described as having twelve foundations bearing the names of the twelve Apostles of the Lamb. Here it is to be observed that the number of those bearing this title in its original and strict sense is limited to twelve, whether that number was made up by the Apostles' choice of St Matthias or by Christ's own choice of St. Paul. Seventh, they were undoubtedly possessed of a certain limited authority in the Church—an authority that naturally flowed from the peculiarities of their office and position, that we have just been considering.

Now, it is clear that if there be such a thing as Apostolical Succession, and Bishops are their successors, they can only be their successors in one point out of seven, *i.e.*, the last. In the other six respects Bishops cannot be the successors of the Apostles.

Before proceeding to consider whether Bishops are even successors of the Apostles in this one respect, and, if so, how far they are so, let us observe that the only other appointment that Our Lord is reported to have made is that of “the Seventy.” These labourers do not appear to have been either Bishops, priests, or deacons, and yet they were commissioned by Our Lord Himself, and it is of them that He says, “He that receiveth you, receiveth Me.” So far, then, was our Lord from instituting directly the three orders of the ministry that now exist that it may be said that He

only set apart two classes of functionaries, and there is nothing to show that either of these was identical with any of these three orders. Is this what we should have expected, if, indeed, it be true that the very existence of the Christian Church depends upon the presence of one particular class of officials in her midst?

But were Bishops in any respect the successors of the Apostles? We have seen that they could only have been so to a very limited extent, inasmuch as in six features of their office out of seven it is quite clear that the Apostles could have no successors. What about the seventh characteristic of their ministry? Are Bishops the inheritors of Apostolic authority? Surely to ask this question, it might also be said, is to answer it; for clearly the authority exercised by the Apostles was quite as unique as everything else about their ministry. First, their authority was confined to no particular diocese, but extended over the whole Church of God. Next, we observe that it was an authority that flowed from the fact of a Divine inspiration directly bestowed upon them by the Holy Ghost for the special purpose of communicating the mind of God to the Church. It is not too much to say that St. Paul bases his right to exercise authority in the Church on this Divine revelation accorded to him; distinguishing carefully between those utterances of his in which he simply expressed his own judgment, without any such revelation, and his ordinary authoritative teaching, in which he regarded himself as actually expressing the mind of God. Their authority was therefore incommunicable, and could not be exercised by those to whom no such revelation was made.

In the third place, there is no sign that any such functionary as a Bishop, in the sense in which we now use the word, existed until long after the Apostles (*i.e.*, the original twelve) had passed away. True, the term came to be more loosely applied to certain labourers in the Christian Church, such as Barnabas and perhaps James "the Lord's brother," and certain "other brethren," who are referred to by St. Paul as "the Apostles of the Churches," but the application of this title to them did not constitute them Bishops. In the fourth place, we find that in the end of the first century and the beginning of the second the office of the Apostle still retains some of its primary characteristics.

The Apostles are classed with prophets as exercising an irregular and itinerant ministry, and are distinguished from the regular local rulers of the Church, who are still called Bishops, and are assisted by deacons, so that there is not only no proof that Bishops were the successors of the Apostles, but *there is clear evidence that they were nothing of the kind*. That remarkable treatise, so recently disinterred from an Oriental library, the *Didache, or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, and which must date from the end of the first century or beginning of the second, leaves no room for doubt that this was so.

It has been usually taken for granted by believers in Episcopacy that Timothy and Titus were Bishops in direct succession from the Apostles; but this is also not only an assumption, but an assumption that is opposed to the evidence at our command. For, first, they owed their connection with Ephesus and Crete to circumstances of a special character, and not to any regular and recognised plan of Church government determined upon by the Apostles. This is evident from the opening words of the First Epistle to Timothy, and of the Epistle to Titus. They were left in these places to meet certain dangers that had arisen, and to perfect an organisation that St. Paul had not had time to complete, and their appointment was only temporary. They were instructed to resume their position as the fellow-labourers with the great Apostle as soon as their special work was done. (*See 2 Tim. i. 9, and Titus iii. 12.*)

Second, there is no sign of their having been ordained by the laying-on of hands to the exercise of any special or episcopal ministry. The inference is, indeed, all the other way. For Timothy is exhorted not to neglect the gift that was given him by prophecy with the laying-on of the hands of the presbytery. Now, it is absolutely contrary to the theory of Apostolical Succession that Presbyters should have been able to create a Bishop, in the modern sense of the word. The lower officials could not call into existence the higher. If this passage refers to Timothy's ordination, it is a most awkward passage for those who hold this theory; for, first, it proves that Presbyterial

ordination is valid; and, second, it affords the plainest evidence that Timothy was never consecrated a Bishop at all by the laying-on of hands. I put it to any man of common sense, and of common honesty, is it conceivable that if St. Paul had been writing to an official who had been consecrated Bishop, as being such, he would have exhorted him to do justice to the gift which he received, not as Bishop, but as priest?

This damaging inference, which completely upsets the theory, is usually met by an absolutely gratuitous assumption that in writing a Second Epistle to the same person two or three years later St. Paul supplements the clear statement of his First Epistle by explaining that, after all, the gift came through his own hands. (*See 2 Tim. i. 6.*) But if this were so, why, in the name of reason, should he not have said so at first? Was it St. Paul's way to attribute to other officials the exercise of functions that owed their validity to his own official position? Is it, again I ask, conceivable that if the essential condition of Timothy's reception of his gift had been the laying-on of the Apostle's own hands he should have made, in the first instance, no reference to this, but have used words that quite suggested a different conclusion?

But, further, when we carefully examine the passage in 2 Timothy, we shall find the strongest reason for believing that St Paul is not here referring to ordination at all, but to that Pentecostal gift which is described as being communicated in the laying-on of his hands in Acts xix. The whole of the passage has to do, with Timothy's personal experience, not with his ministry; and the sentiment of this verse is just as much in harmony with the context, when it is regarded as referring to this, as it is out of harmony with it when it is regarded as referring to ordination. The Apostle is speaking of the unfeigned faith that dwelt in Timothy, and then adds: "Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou make to blaze up within thee the living fire—the gift that is in thee through, the laying-on of my hands." And then, associating himself, with Timothy as a fellow-recipient of this gift, he proceeds: "For God did not give us the spirit of cowardice, but the Spirit of power, of love, and of self-control." Surely these are the very gifts that the Pentecostal effusion carried with it, and this interpretation of the laying-on of hands renders the whole passage self-consistent throughout.

But, it may be asked, Is not Titus's episcopal rank proved by the fact that he was commissioned to ordain elders in every city? To this it is sufficient to answer that there is no such word as "ordain," in the sense in which we use the word, to be found in the New Testament. Of the two words most commonly used and translated "ordain," the one means to designate for an office, and the other to appoint, but neither of them specifies how this is to be done. Space forbids us to discuss the subject more fully. I will only boldly say that there is no really trustworthy sign of the existence of such an official as a "monarchical" Bishop till the time of the Ignatian Epistles, *i.e.*, some time probably in the first quarter of the second century. Their origin at that time is thus explained by Jerome: "When afterwards one Presbyter was elected that he might be placed over the rest; this was done as a remedy against schism, that each man might not drag to himself, and so break up, the Church of Christ."

No doubt the Church was wisely guided in thus supplementing her original ecclesiastical institutions. As the Apostles, and the leading spirits that followed the Apostles, passed away, it became expedient that others should take the place of leaders, and the Church, having received no express revelation on the subject, was acting quite within her competence in deciding upon this form of government. Furthermore, we readily admit that when once this decision had been arrived at, it became the duty of every loyal son of the Church to accept it, and to submit to the duly appointed ruler as the representative of the authority of the Church. It is quite another thing to affirm that this particular form of government is a matter of Divine revelation, and that it is therefore necessary to the very existence of the Church.

As a matter of fact, the Church did exist without monarchical Bishops for at least a hundred years, and there is, therefore, no reason why she should not do so again, if for any sufficient cause it were determined to dispense with their services. There was, therefore, nothing to prevent those

great Protestant communities which were unable to secure the services of Bishops at the time of the Reformation from falling back upon the earlier form of government; nor is there anything, either in the New Testament or in the constitution of the primitive Church, to show that by doing so they cut themselves off from enjoying the full benefits of the Christian ministry.

We may sum up the matter, then, in some such propositions as the following: (1) There can be no such thing as Apostolical Succession, because the Apostles (in the original sense of the word) had no successors. (2) Those who subsequently bore this designation did not belong to the regular local ministry, but were rather the leaders in what has been called the "ministry of enthusiasm." They were, in fact, the Mission preachers and Convention teachers of that time. (3) There is not a word to show that anyone was ever set apart for the Apostolic office, in whatever sense of the word, by the laying-on of hands, whereas this seems to have been the way in which presbyters were set apart for their office. Bishops, therefore, must trace their succession to presbytery, not to Apostles. (4) The original rulers of the Church appointed by the Apostles were presbyters, who also bore the name of Bishops, and this order continued, apparently, universally, till the end of the first century and the beginning of the second. (5) There is nothing to show that the assistants of the Apostles, such as Timothy and Titus, belonged to a superior order of ministry. But their association with the Apostles in missionary work gave them a special authority in new-formed churches similar to that which is possessed by white missionaries to-day in their relations with the Native pastorate. (6) Bishops in the later sense of the word were subsequently chosen from amongst the presbyters, there being nothing to show that they were at first consecrated to this office by the laying-on of hands. (7) They were, in the first instance, in the days when Ignatius wrote his epistles (if, indeed, they are really his), parochial rather than diocesan, exercising authority only in one particular congregation, and presiding over the local college of elders. (8) They seem, at any rate in some cases, to have been raised to this position of presidency, if we may judge from the statement made by Jerome about the Church of Alexandria, by the election of their fellow-presbyters, just as to-day the Pope is chosen by the Cardinals; and, as in this case, without any fresh consecration by the laying on of hands. (9) The episcopal office, therefore, can only claim a human, not a directly Divine, origin. It was brought into existence not by a Divine revelation of the will of God, but by a combination of circumstances that rendered the creation of such an office desirable. (10) As the Church had a perfect right thus to arrange its ministry, so no one has a right to repudiate episcopal authority, unless, indeed, this authority be abused, so as to render it an instrument of priestly oppression or of opposition to the truth. (11) Where such an abuse has occurred, or does occur, it is absurd to suppose that Christian people who resent it must needs be left without any authorised ministry, as if this human institution were necessary to the existence of the Church. A Church does not forfeit her right of delegating the authority that resides in her to those whom she may appoint as her ministers, because she is faithful to the truth, where those that hold the position of her ministers have been unfaithful to it; nor has Almighty God given His sanction to any ecclesiastical system that would render such a monstrous result possible. (12) The laying-on of hands represents a solemn delegation of authority, but the reception of the spiritual gifts that qualify for sacred offices must be dependent, not upon a mere manual act, which may be only mechanical, but upon such personal dealings with God as shall liberate His power to bless, and to make a blessing, the worthy recipient of the grace of ordination.