

ANGLICAN/ROMAN CATHOLIC INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION

SUMMARY OF PAPER ON APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION

by Crawford Miller

1. The notion of apostolic succession is not as such a New Testament concept. It developed in the Patristic period. However, this is not a fatal objection to it. The same could be said of the concept of the Trinity.
2. What does the notion of Apostolic Succession mean?
  - (a) What in general is it to be the successor to someone?
    - (i) one cannot just be the successor to someone - one must be the successor to someone in some specific respect.
    - (ii) The respects in which y could be the successor to x might be classified in various ways. Some important types of classification might be -
      - (a) natural descent
      - (b) personal aptitudes or characteristics
      - (c) Social function
      - (d) office - determined by convention - convention covers a range of possibilities from custom to specific legal enactments.

e.g. Some historians have regarded the late Josef Stalin as the successor to the Tsars in respect (c), and some as a kind of successor to Peter the Great in respect (b). But clearly he was not the successor to the Tsars in respect (a) or (d).
    - (iii) However Christian theology requires another category in terms of which talk about succession may be made. Let us label it X, the best an ordinary typewriter can do towards indicating the Greek letter chi, to stand for charisma - (X is more convenient to use than Ch.) I am deliberately leaving this notion rather vague. X stands for whatever it is that happens when someone can truly be said to do something not just by himself as we say, but by the Grace of God.

So X stands for a concept which is not just on the same level as those falling under the classification a - d above. For example, the criteria for detecting its presence are not simply of the empirical, historical or conventional character, requisite for establishing the presence of any of the characteristics falling under classifications a - d. On the other hand to assert the presence of X is normally at the same time to assert the presence of b or c or d, or some combination of two or more of them. For example one of the controversial issues in relation to Apostolic succession turns upon the legitimacy of regarding the presence of certain facts falling under category d as guaranteeing the presence of a particular variety of X.

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The question is 'How right can the relationship between X and one or more of the series b - d be made. In what sense can the presence of ordinarily discernible human characteristic aptitudes and arrangements be taken as signs of the operation of Divine Grace?

(b) Who are to count as Apostles?

The New Testament does not appear to provide any entirely precise answer to this question. (cf Bodo Rigaux The Twelve Apostles Concilium Vol.4 No.4 pp 4-9. H.von Campenhausen Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries pp 12ff. Hans Kung The Church pp 344 ff.)

This kind of issue is not important for more recent interpretations of Apostolic Succession, but a very real question for the so-called 'pipeline' theory (For the meaning of this term cf. Fr Camillus May Intercommunion. A Roman Catholic Approach A.C.C. document 1969 The Eucharist p.100)

(c) Respects in which the Apostles have no successors.

Later generations cannot be witnesses to the Resurrection of Christ or have received His personal commission. (cf Edmund Schlink quoted Concilium Vol.4 No.4 p.21). (It could be argued that certain modern interpretations of the Resurrection e.g. R.Butlmann, for whom the Resurrection seems to mean the Cross apprehended in faith, very much weaken this distinction between the Apostles and those who came after them.)

(d) Respects in which there can be successors to the Apostles.

(i) The whole church stands in Apostolic Succession.

All Christians are successors to the Apostles as obedient to the Word of God to which the Apostles witnessed. (cf. Hans Kung Concilium Vol.4 No.4 pp 16ff. and The Church pp 354 ff. Kung stresses very strongly the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. In principle every Christian is called upon to preach the word, he may administer baptism. "Every Christian is fundamentally empowered to take an active part in this eschatological meal of commemoration thanksgiving and covenantal fellowship" and is likewise "fundamentally empowered to take an active part in the forgiving of sins". (The Church p.380) Kung argues that "the word of God is associated with certain actions - the most important of these actions are baptism, the Lord's Supper, and absolution. - - the command to perform these actions is addressed not just to a few select persons, but to all the disciples of Jesus, to the whole Church". p.370 I am not quite clear whether Kung means that in principle any Christian may preside at the Eucharist, just as in certain circumstances he may baptize. However on his premises it seems to me that he ought to assert this. At any rate this priestly character of each baptised Christian means that he is a successor of the Apostles in every respect in which it is possible that they should have successors.

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(ii) On the other hand because there is a diversity of gifts and each has his own ministry, some have a special charge to exercise the special functions mentioned in (i) above publicly on behalf of the community. These people therefore may be regarded as being in a special way in succession to the Apostles in respect of those special functions which they perform in the Church.

This specializing of function is not to be interpreted as meaning that these functions are simply derived from and authorised by the Church in the sense of a given community of believers. One is not driven to a 'democratic' theory of ecclesiastical office. The gifts are the gifts of Christ. Accordingly these special functions while being exercised within the community, and as involving recognition by the community, nevertheless stand over against the community as a word of God addressed to the Church by the Lord of the Church. In this sense there are ministries in the Church which stand in succession to the ministries of the Apostles in a special sense as performing in the different circumstances of a new time something of the special service rendered by the Apostles to the Church of that time.

(iii) In view of the exigencies of human life in history the Church has come to order the exercise of these more special ministries in terms of various structures of office, interpreted and controlled by sets of what are claimed to be theologically founded conventions and rules. These conventionally determined structures of office cannot be read back into the Apostolic period, but they can be regarded as the analogical equivalents, in different social and historical circumstances, of the ordering of the Church's activities implicit in the ministry of the Apostles:- these conventionally determined structures of office being themselves always subject to the operation of the maxim 'ecclesia semper reformanda'.

So far these three senses in which the notion of Apostolic succession can be taken have been distinguished, each of them being compatible with the theological insights of the Reformation.

These were:

- (1) Apostolic succession as characterising the whole Church
- (2) Certain ministries within the Church as being in a special way in succession to the ministry of the Apostles.
- (3) A succession in the sense of a certain continuity of function provided for by a developing structure of office.

But there are three further ways of understanding the concept of Apostolic Succession which cause difficulty.

- (i) There is the so-called pipe-line theory, which is roughly that Christ gave to His apostles authority to shepherd and govern His Church, they in turn transmitting this authority to their successors the Bishops, and so on down the centuries.

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Two consequences would seem to follow from this theory.

- (a) Being in communion with a successor of the Apostles becomes a defining characteristic of being within Christ's Church.
- (b) Only Bishops within this succession and persons authorised by them can rightfully exercise any function within the Church.

This theory breaks down for a number of reasons.

(1) Logically the theory would require very firm historical support: hard evidence that in fact Jesus did decide things this way. Critical historical investigation simply fails to provide this firm support.

(2) It represents a one-sided development of aspects of the teaching of the Pastoral Epistles, and fails to do justice to the rest of the New Testament, and especially to the teaching of St. Paul.

(3) Especially as it tended to work out after some centuries it was in great danger of reversing the Pauline understanding of the operation of Grace. For Paul all true ministry in the Church flows from the divinely bestowed charismata. These charismata find expression in the exercise of various functions which are necessary for the upbuilding of the body in love. The concept of office perhaps hardly enters into Paul's purview. But it can be defended as historically inevitable, and justified to the extent to which it safeguards, provides the freedom, the space for the exercise of the functions which are the human expressions of the charismata bestowed by God upon His church. The 'pipe-line' theory tends to reverse this proper order, and to treat the historical chain of episcopal successions as if it were the primary and fundamental thing about the Church, as though with this chain there is a church, without it there is none.

(ii) Some theories of the threefold ministry-bishop, priest and deacon, though not the diversification in itself might appear to imply a questionable view of the relation of office to function. (The Medieval discussion about the sense in which the episcopate forms an order separate from the priesthood are interesting in this connection: e.g. Peter Lombard The Four Books of Sentences Bk IV Distinction XXIV Chaps III, XII and XIV. English translation L.C.C. Vol. 10 pp 349ff. St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica II. II Q40 A 4 and 5). Can there be a 'higher' ministry in the Church than that of proclaiming the Word of God and presiding at the Eucharist? Can it be argued that the development of diocesan episcopacy, whereby the Bishop tends to become in fact primarily the transmitter of orders, and pastor pastorum if not indeed primarily an administrator rather than the actual chief pastor of a local congregation, removes the justification for regarding the bishop as opposed to the presbyter as the 'essential minister', a view which was a natural one to take when presbyters were in fact the bishop's pastoral assistants. when he presided in person at the Sunday Eucharist of his people?

(iii) To many the exclusivist episcopal claims made by some remain theologically objectionable. The notion that if someone has not been ordained by a bishop in the apostolic succession he cannot be a presbyter in the Church of God, logically depends upon the 'pipe-line' theory and fails with the failure of that theory.

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This force of the argument for the indispensable nature of episcopal ordination is greatly weakened to say the least of it by the view that all Christians stand in the Apostolic succession, and are therefore all in principle capable of exercising all the ministries of the Church, if duly called thereto.

The notion fails to do justice to the fact that the structures of office in the Church exist to further and protect the exercise of functions which ultimately depend upon the charismata which are the gifts of God. Concepts of office and order must be developed relatively to the gifts with which God has endowed His Church. God is not to be required to conform Himself to the Church's order.

### 3. The Importance of Eschatology.

The New Testament looked back and forwards. It looked back to the ministry of Jesus and forward to His Parousia. But the emphasis was on looking forward. How much of the trouble about the proper ordering of the Church has arisen from the fact that for historically intelligible reasons, the characteristic balance of the New Testament was lost, and the Church largely lost its forward look - its eschatological perspective? Fr Beda Rigaux (Concilium Vol.4 No.4) quotes with approval Rudolf Bultmann's remark that the Twelve in the New Testament "are characteristic of the community's eschatological consciousness". In a different and wider sense something like this might be said of the whole New Testament understanding of the Apostolic function. To be an authentic successor to the Apostles would be to look forward to the consummation of God's purpose, and therefore to be always open to the possibilities of those futures into which man constantly move. St. Paul would provide a very striking example of this forward looking attitude. In his activities, for example, he breaks out of the confining assumption that the message of the Gospel is for the Jews and not for all. There is an eschatological dimension present in all his thinking: here we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, hereafter we shall know more adequately.

Again and again the Church has shown this openness to the future, but too often unwittingly. So it has marred its response to new situation by supposing that it was performing the impossible feat of re-instating the distant past. Perhaps this was the basic mistake of the Reformers.

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