

EYE-WITNESS: WITNESS

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Since Cullmann's study of PETER, the privilege of the apostles as EYEWITNESSES has been stressed. Eye-witnessship is untransmissible; and it has been inferred that the role of the apostles in the Church is therefore untransmissible. It is also argued that the apostles had, as such, a role of founders, also untransmissible. A sharp distinction has therefore been made between the apostolic and the post-apostolic ages of Christianity. Some have tried to bridge the gap by arguing that what the apostles were for the first Christian generation, that the canonical scriptures are for the post-apostolic Church. I think there are two oversights here.

(1) Apostles "founded" the Church-in-a-particular-locality. And in a sense they may be said to be the foundations of the Church simpliciter. But really Christ is the Founder of the Church. It is Christ's founding role that is intransmissible, not the apostles'. The apostles are members of the Church which Christ founded. (In a sense, one can go deeper still, and say that God founded the Church in sending Christ).

(2) The apostles were indeed eye-witnesses (even Paul claimed to be such); though they were not the only eye-witnesses. And it is true that "eye"-witnesses are the link which connects all of us with Jesus; with the Word incarnate in his incarnate life on earth. It has even been argued that eye-witnesses are part of the revelatory totality, since a revelation is not fully given except in so far as it is received. Revelation is essentially an inter-personal affair. Would revelation have occurred if the word had become flesh on an uninhabited planet?

But it has to be remembered that Jesus is both God self-

revealed AND the man who is the revealing "sign"; sign and signified are hypostatically one. He is perfect man, typical man, the Second Adam. All that God had in mind to give to man was given to the Second Adam (including God's self-revelation); and all that man had it in him to become, with the help of grace, was realised in and by the Man Jesus. I therefore accept the thesis that the first and archetypal RECIPIENT of revelation was the Man Jesus. As God and man in a single hypostasis Jesus is both the Word speaking and spoken AND the Word heard, accepted, received, AND man receiving the Word. Thus revelation was not only initiated but also accomplished in the incarnation and, to that extent, there WOULD have been revelation if the Word had been incarnate on an otherwise uninhabited planet).

The Word, however, was given in order TO BE COMMUNICATED. Humanity subsists in individual persons, but these persons are potentially members of a community. Sociality is part of our human condition; and personal life is ACHIEVED in interpersonal relationships. Men are potentially members of a society as universal as the human species (and this society is actuated, realised, in principle in the Church).

Jesus therefore "preached" the gospel and communicated what he had come to bring (sc. himself) to those who believed in him. He was "the man for other men" above all as being the transmitter of the divine revelation and gift which, as Man, he was receiving and, as Word, actually WAS.

He did not merely in fact communicate the gospel. It was given to him TO BE communicated. Hence he knew himself to be a "sent" person. I think this "sentness" is even a constituent element of the message gift; for the revelation discloses God to us as BONUM DIFFUSIVUM SUI, as love giving itself without limits.

Jesus then was sent to BEAR WITNESS to the divine

self-disclosure in and as himself. He is, in a sense beyond that of the eye-witnesses, the UNIQUE witness, just as he is the unique mediator, victim, priest, etc. If there is a "gap" it is not between the apostles and their successors, or the apostolic and post-apostolic Church, but between ALL of us and Jesus; but it is a gap bridged by self-communicating love.

The primitive Church knew that it had inherited Jesus's role of witness. It also knew that it had, and in fact had inherited from him, the "sentness" which gives to witness a divine authority. Paul could say that the "word" which he and his colleagues had "spoken" at Thessalonica was "not a human but a divine word" - of course it was really both; just as Jesus's word was both human and divine.

But note that the basic concept here is not EYE-witness but witness tout court (the fact that they were eye-witnesses gave credibility to the preaching of the apostles; but what they were doing, formally speaking, was not "bearing eye-witness" but bearing witness). If EYE-witness were essential, then the Church could only spread among those who had personal contact with the eye-witnesses; conversion could have come through the preaching of Paul, but not through that of Timothy, and the Church would have had to die out with the death of the last apostle. No; it is clear on any hypothesis, since the Church has survived, that the essential thing is witness (and, I think, sent witness)*.

Eye-witness cannot be the essence of apostleship, because there were other believing eye-witnesses who were not apostles. The fact is that what makes a man an apostle is that he is sent (as the term apostle indicates); though it is true that,

* Of course, eyewitness, though not part of the essence of the gospel, had its own importance; it is our guarantee that Christianity is not a myth. But credibility is one thing, the intrinsic properties of the revelation-tradition are another.

eventually, the term apostle (of Christ) was reserved to those who had been sent by Jesus not mediately through others but immediately (note Paul's insistence that he was not an apostle through men but through GOD). An apostle is, then, by role, a witness, and a sent witness; he is by privilege also an eyewitness.

Who "sent" the apostles? Not the Church (though the Church could (a) send "apostles of the churches" who need not be eye-witnesses and whose apostolic function was probably temporary; (b) designate particular apostles for particular jobs - give them what today we should call a "canonical mission"). Nor, immediately, God the Father. Nor, alone, the Holy Spirit (as though apostleship were "merely a charism"). According to Mark 3, it was Jesus who called, appointed, and "sent" the original Twelve. True, that first "sending" was - though not necessarily exclusively - for a particular and transitory task. But both Paul and Acts would seem to indicate that the primitive Church believed the Twelve to have received an abiding commission for the time after the Ascension (and this is probably why the account of the Mark 3 sending has been preserved for us; it was arche-typal, just as Jesus' baptism is recorded as a "type" of Christian baptism).

So there was in the primitive Church not only occasional charism but a stable ministry (that of the Twelve and Paul), held to have originated not in a purely pneumatic or charismatic calling, nor in a decision taken by the Church herself, but in an act of the incarnate Word.

I think we should see this stable ministry as not just "over" the Church but IN it. The Twelve, when chosen empowered and sent, were only a selection from among the "disciples" of Jesus. They were a nucleus in a cell which was larger than themselves. It is a mistake to ask whether ministry preceded Church or vice versa. They were from the beginning mutually

implicit. The cell is not a CELL without its nucleus; and the nucleus is not a nucleus except of a cell.

Why this special "calling" within the general Christian calling, why was not only the Church herself missionary but there was a special missionary ministry within it? I think the answer may show why the apostles were not only par excellence preachers of the Gospel, but also administrators of the Church. The fact is that, without such a nucleus, the believers are not a laos but a mere numerus. In other words, it was this ministry which gave the Church stable cohesion, and made it a "body"*.

Just because this organising ministry is essential to the Church in order that the Church may be a body, not a mere numerus, the primitive Church was right in representing this ministry as having been instituted by Jesus Christ. For the Church is not accidental but indispensable to the divine "economy"; that economy was "revolatory", self-communicating, and universal in its intention; and all that is essential to it must proceed from the Word incarnate. The apostolic ministry WAS essential to the Church, and the Church to the economy. Charisms of other kinds are also necessary in globo, but none of them is necessary in particular as the stable ministry was necessary. (However, it is important to bear in mind that (a) the incarnate Word is "seated at the right hand of the Father, and that his continuing operation in the Church thus involves a double reference: to the "historical Jesus" and to the "ascended Christ" - these two coincide; (b) the ascended Christ operates in the Church through the

* It follows that the apostles can only perform this "organising" function because they are themselves not a numerus merely but a collegium; and they can only be a collegium if they, as apostles, have a structuring centre-piece. But I cannot develop this idea without moving into the controversial subject of the papacy, or at least the primacy of Peter.

operation of the Holy Spirit - at once the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of Christ - and this operation is not confined by the structures; the Spirit bloweth where he listeth).

Was the ministry of the Twelve (apart from its EYE-witness aspect) to be transmitted, and was it in fact transmitted? We are told that New Testament evidence does not support such transmission, and that it cannot have been intended by Jesus, who expected an imminent end of history.

New Testament. There is ample evidence in the New Testament of the Twelve or Paul conveying authority to others (the appointment of the Seven; Paul's collaborators like Timothy and Titus). We must not expect the New Testament to be very clear about post-apostolic times, which were still in the future; though John 21 shows awareness that the Beloved Disciple (the last "apostle"?) might die before the Parousia.

Jesus and the imminent Eschaton. Alongside data suggesting this, there are references to "wars and rumours of wars", to the fall of Judaism, to the End being "not yet". I have some doubt whether we can fit Jesus's teaching wholly into the strait-jacket of an "imminent parousia" view. In any case, Jesus meant to make provision "till the End came" - whenever he thought that that end would actually occur.

In any case, we are not just historians but believing Christians. We believe that Christianity conveys the universal public "revolution", the mystery of gesta et verba, indeed the mystery which is Christ, the Word incarnate, to all men and for all historical time. Even in default of full historical evidence, we therefore believe that God has in fact provided whatever is necessary for the Church and her mission; and **that** so far as is necessary, this provision has been made in and through Christ and his work (the reference back to the historical Jesus is as essential as faith in the ascended Lord).

Now transmitted evidence, continuing witness, is necessary

for the Church at all times; the witnesses must have "sentness", and this sentness must derive from the "historical Jesus": "How are they to hear without someone to proclaim? And how are (proclaimers) to proclaim unless they are sent?" ("sent" here is the verb of which "apostle" is the noun).

The primitive Church did not think it sufficient that the Twelve were "sent" by Christ; they thought it necessary that other ministers in the Church, not immediately sent by Christ, should be immediately sent by the apostles; and the Pastorals give a hint of these secondarily "sent" persons "sending" or commissioning others to represent them. The "apostolic succession" is already outlined in the New Testament, and is explicitly referred to by Clement of Rome.

The argument is clinched, I think, by the consideration (vid, supra) that the Church is only a corpus by virtue of having a "nucleus", or being "structured"; SOME structure is essential to it, and - as essential - must derive from Jesus.

On the whole, the New Testament shows us the proto-stamanoi of the local churches as groups under authority outside themselves (apostles or apostolic delegates). We don't know how the transition to the local mono-episcopate was effected. Was it by the settlement in particular localities of the apostolic delegates? Or was it by the gradual differentiation between the leader of a presbyteral college and his colleagues? Possibly both methods occurred.

Hanson (middle-of-the-road Anglican bishop?) rejects the idea that the mono-episcopate was a corruption, but also rejects, as an "old legend", any appeal to a "succession of consecration" - which he thinks is lacking in evidence. This seems an audacious argument from silence. We can retort: Is there any evidence from the first three centuries of presbyters or bishops being appointed in any other way than by men who were already presbyters or bishops? (History cannot prove

the universality of the RITE of laying-on-of-hands; but there must be a strong presumption that "authority" was conveyed by SOME external "sign", even if only by published designation).

Hanson, however, says that the "most significant" form of ministry presented by tradition is "undoubtedly episcopacy". "When the monarchical bishop emerges in the second century, he clearly is, and clearly remains, the key-man in the permanent form which the Christian ministry has now ((i.e. then)) taken ... He is the central, representative, essential ministerial figure ... He is central to the Church's authority; he conveys its authority in ordination. He is central, above all, to the Church's tradition. It is his business to know what Christianity is all about, to hand on Christianity as the tradition, the thing delivered from generation to generation through the ages, intact and uncorrupted ... With his fellow-bishops he is responsible before God in the most general way for the well-being of the Church ... he has been ordained by those who before him had the same status, and this ordination and status have existed ever since the Christian ministry took permanent form".

In short, Hanson thinks that the Church NEEDS STRUCTURE: THAT THE EPISCOPATE IS THE STRUCTURE BEQUEATHED TO US BY THE CHURCH OF THE 2ND CENTURY: AND THAT "no other form of ministry has the slightest chance of being accepted in any wide-ranging proposals for ((Christian)) union intended to last for a long time". "It is in fact the form of Christian ministry par excellence".

Taking his contention (apart from the questionable one that succession by "consecration" has not occurred) along with my contention that the "economy" requires the survival of what Jesus instituted in and as the "college of the Twelve", I infer that that college survives in the second century and still today as the episcopal college. I don't know that it can be proved that it COULD NOT have taken a different shape. I'm not sure that it could not evolve into some different shape

in the future (but it would have to be an evolution maintaining continuity and identity with the past). The "great Church of the future" will have, in my view, to preserve the reality of the "apostolic college", a body which perpetuates itself by co-option of new members.

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