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# The Authority of Apostles

Michael Ovey

*'However, I am not issuing orders to you, as though I were a Peter or a Paul. They were Apostles, and I am a condemned man...'*<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Relevance

Our current debates about the episcopacy, in particular in the context of the question of the propriety of consecrating women bishops, lead us to consider the authority of apostles. That authority arises in at least two respects.

### 1.1 *Authority over us*

It is implicit in the above quotation from Ignatius that Apostles like Peter and Paul have an authority to command believers. As will be seen below, this authority is necessarily limited, but it must not be forgotten that it exists. Primary questions in the current debate therefore include—

- (i) Do the proposals to consecrate women bishops in fact respect apostolic authority?
- (ii) Does apostolic authority extend to determining the gender of future bishops?
- (iii) Does apostolic authority delimit the kind of teaching that other ministers of the Word may deliver?

### 1.2 *Tractarian arguments over apostolic succession*

This question also needs to be considered in the light of the Tractarian argument that bishops stand in some species of apostolic succession. This can no doubt be put in different ways, but the following is a pertinent statement.

My position then is this;—that the Apostles appointed successors to their ministerial office, and the latter in turn appointed others, and so on to the present day;—and further, that the Apostles and their Successors have in every age committed portions of their power and authority to others, who thus become their delegates, and in a measure their representatives, and are called Priests and Deacons.<sup>2</sup>

On this basis, to discuss apostolic authority is also to discuss episcopal

authority, at least in some sense, and therefore also to discuss the authority of women bishops, if such there be. Those convinced by the Tractarian proposals must then re-examine the apostolic question, while evangelicals faced with those holding Tractarian understandings in the hierarchy must be aware of the kind of authority claims that are involved. On this basis, the issue of apostolic authority is clearly relevant.

## 2. Theological context

It is important that no theological question be considered in isolation, and equally important that issues be related to each other within the correct perspective. That correct perspective is the character and nature of God, a theocentric perspective. This is demonstrable from the biblical teaching that creation (including humanity) is in a relation of dependence on its uncreated Creator, such that its being rests on His will and is for His glory (Rev 4:11). We move then to consider the character and nature of God.

### 2.1 *The Monarchy of God*

The position of the Bible is that God is monarch of his cosmos, in the important sense that all authority and rule is ultimately traceable to Him. Even a Nebuchadnezzar rules by God's providential hand (Dan 4) and cannot effectively repudiate the God from whom he rules. When he does so he delegitimizes his own rule and position. Humans cannot declare UDI either in the sense that they can in practice escape from God's rule finally (although they may temporarily appear to) or in the sense that they can establish a new legitimacy independent of God.

Later theologians develop this idea not, contrary to the views of some,<sup>3</sup> in the direction of unqualified rule by God's delegated human rulers, but rather in the direction of accountable rule. The conceptual tool for this is tyranny. It must be stressed that this is not a mere term of abuse, but a juridical concept. From John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*<sup>4</sup> the possibility of tyranny has been envisaged as arising in three basic arenas: the state (political tyranny); the family (the domestic tyrant) and the church (the ecclesiastical tyrant).

In the developed form<sup>5</sup> of this analysis, one can envisage tyranny arising from—

- (i) the unjustified seizure of power (e.g., a *coup d'état*)—one has no ‘just title’;
- (ii) the abuse of power by one with a ‘just title’.

It is worth clarifying this latter point. The argument runs that God may providentially appoint e.g., a political ruler. That ruler has a ‘just title’ for the purposes of being entitled to obedience within the framework of Romans 13. However, that lawful ruler can de-legitimate himself by trying to over-ride God’s law. At that stage the lawful ruler becomes a ‘tyrant’. This is, though, a juridical concept: it does not necessarily betoken any unpopularity or lack of popular backing.<sup>6</sup> Further, because the ruler holds power delegated from above, not from below, it is no answer to the charge of tyranny that he has ‘popular support’. God does the delegating and confers legitimacy, not the democratic process. Popular support has no *right* to confer legitimacy as against the rule of God. This is enormously important. The crucial factor for discerning legitimate authority rather than tyranny is the conformability of a ruler to the will of God.

### 2.2 *The truthfulness and reliability of God*

The narrative of Genesis establishes that God is a truthful and reliable speaker: He speaks and it is so. This is perfectly intelligible in the framework of an uncreated Creator of all from nothing. As uncreated and eternal He can know Himself perfectly. As Creator of all from nothing, He knows the entirety of his creation perfectly, and also its internal relations, as well as its relations with Him. This gives the ground for envisaging His continued words as equally being truthful and reliable. He has the knowledge to speak the truth and the character to do so—He is good.

### 2.3 *God’s Word is a Unity*

Given that God’s Word comes from a God of this character, with this knowledge and this power, it is inevitable that His word be treated as a unity. It cannot reflect the internal contradictions or inaccuracies that beset ordinary human words, for these are born of our imperfections: our inability to carry through our promises; our lack of knowledge of ourselves and surrounding circumstances; our moral fallen-ness and so forth. Hence the Anglican position that God’s word is not to be expounded in contradictory fashions (Article 20) is grounded in the doctrine of God. This means that an attitude to God’s Word that says it is internally contradictory implies something about God, that He is

inconsistent or otherwise unreliable. From this also follows the point that God's words are not necessarily time-bound: the indication is that His promises are not time-bound and obsolescent.

#### ***2.4 The Value of Words Secured from God***

For these reasons it is right to envisage God's Words as uniquely precious, and to be distinguished from the probabilities established by human reason, including theologians, a point made by Aquinas.<sup>7</sup> This is obviously reflected in Jesus' treatment of authority questions in Mark 7:1-13. Here he draws a sharp distinction on the basis of origin, words that come from God on the one hand, and words that come from men only on the other. It is to be noted that the men in question were men of good repute in the community of the time—'legitimate authorities'. Nevertheless, their words must not be preferred to those emanating from God. Such a distinction also pre-supposes that one cannot simply rely on a doctrine of 'natural illumination' to support the authority of human words. Jesus' point in Mark 7 is exactly that these words of men do not have any divine origin.<sup>8</sup>

### **3. Word Ministers**

#### ***3.1 The Value of Word ministry***

It is rightly stressed by commentators<sup>9</sup> that Ephesians 4:11-12 envisages the enabling of ministry by all God's people through the word ministry. We are now in a position to see why. Word ministers bring words that are utterly truthful and reliable because of their origin. Hence it is that such ministries build God's people up under the headship of Christ (Eph 4:15).

#### ***3.2 The consistency of word ministry***

However, that value derives exactly from the point that ministers proclaim the word of God. That word, as we have seen, must necessarily be internally consistent because of the character of God. From this it follows that no word-minister can proclaim as God's word something inconsistent with what God says elsewhere. Apostles are, *inter alia*, word ministers (included in the list in Eph 4:11-12). Therefore no apostle can give as a word of God what is inconsistent with God's words elsewhere. Paul cannot contradict Isaiah.

If an apostle were to teach something inconsistent with God's words as though it were God's words, it also seems clear that he would have moved from being

a legitimate apostle to being, at least *pro tanto*, a tyrant. This would still be the case even if he were saying things his congregations wanted to hear—this emerges from 2 Timothy 4:1ff, where Paul does not envisage popularity as breeding truth. As discussed earlier, the congregation has no right to prefer other words to God's words.

The obvious example here is Deuteronomy 13:1-5 where a test is applied to prophetic teaching or divination in terms of confessional consistency. In verse 2 the problem is put in terms of false prophets saying 'let us follow other gods'. The people are thus required to work out whether they are being told to worship other gods: they must weigh the content, and perforce must do so against the revelation that Moses gives.

#### 4. Apostles

##### 4.1 *Inspired witnesses to Christ*

This requires examination both in terms of inspiration and in terms of witness.

##### 4.1.1 Inspired

The burden of the argument thus far has been to locate the value of apostolic work in giving the word of God to God's people. It should be noted at this point that this does not involve the denial of a human side to apostolic words. Rather the point is that there is dual authorship or dual attestation, and that what makes the apostolic witness unique is the divine aspect of its origination. It is this side that Jesus stresses in Mark 7.

##### 4.1.2 Witnesses

'Apostle' is, of course, not originally a technical term, meaning rather simply 'one sent'. Even this, though, is revealing. For it emphasises that an apostle is a dependent, he depends on the one sending him. His authority is characteristically derivative and flows from his principal. This is picked up by John's Gospel in terms of Jesus, the one sent by God to the world. Jesus stresses that his words are not self-derived but come from his Father (see e.g., John 8:21-29). An apostle on any view is answerable to the one sending him.

It is, though, possible to see a more technical meaning in the New Testament. Here the stress falls on two aspects—(i) appointment by Jesus; (ii) appointment to be witnesses.

The appointment by Jesus is obvious in the case of the original band, but also stressed by the use of lots in Acts 1 as Judas is replaced (note especially the prayer of Acts 1:24 which indicates that the Apostles did not presume to appoint finally by their own judgement). Similarly Paul underlines that he is an apostle because of God's call on his life, not because of appointment by humans (Gal 1:15).

This means that an Apostle in the technical sense of the term is answerable to his principal, God (arguably the appointment is an appropriated action of the Son). The Apostle is mandated to carry God's message and words, not words of his own choosing. The other feature the New Testament stresses is the idea of witness, in particular to the Resurrection (Acts 1:22, 1 Cor 15:1ff).

For these reasons it is, incidentally, implausible to class Junia as an apostle (by citing Rom. 16:7). We have no indication that Junia (accepting the argument that this is a female name) and Andronicus are dominically appointed witnesses to the Resurrection. Even if they are witnesses to the Resurrection, this is a necessary but not sufficient condition to be an Apostle in the technical sense. Dominical appointment is still unattested.

Naturally, this idea of witness tends to preclude the idea that new Apostles in the technical sense are being appointed today.

#### *4.2 Responsibility of Apostles—Galatians*

However, the direction of the argument is that an Apostle is answerable to his sender, God. This is borne out by material in Galatians bearing on the Apostles Paul and Peter.

##### **4.2.1 Paul—the duties of an apostle**

Paul's conceptions of his duties emerge in two ways.

###### *4.2.1.1 Preaching the Gospel*

First, he must preach the Gospel—this is what God has appointed him to do (Gal 1:16). Since this is a word from God, this is a word that humans are ethically bound to hear: they should listen to their creator (cf. John 3:36; 1 Thess. and Paul's reaction to Thessalonian obedience to the gospel). The duty to proclaim carries an authority in the sense people should listen.

However, this authority is strictly in the sphere of the Gospel. If an Apostle preaches another Gospel, then people must *not* listen (Gal. 1:8f). Apostolic authority is not free-standing and independent, so that, to use the earlier tools, an Apostle who preaches another gospel is an ecclesiastical tyrant. It is no defence that he says simply what people want to hear, because as an Apostle he answers to his sender, God. The people to whom he speaks do not ‘send’ him.

#### 4.2.1.2 *Protecting the Gospel*

Secondly, Paul envisages that as an Apostle he must protect the Gospel. This is, on the most obvious view, why he is writing the letter to the Galatians anyway. This protection emerges at two points.

(i) First, in Galatians 1:8 he states of one who introduces another or contrary Gospel ‘let that one be accursed’ [NRSV: Greek ἀνάθεμα ἔστω]. It is not always remarked how this parallels the passage in Deuteronomy 13 dealing with false prophets. In both cases, the measure is inconsistency with what has previously been revealed.

(ii) Secondly, in Galatians 2:11ff it is clear that Paul thinks he must protect the gospel in the confrontation with Peter at Antioch. Being an Apostle involves protecting the gospel from error. This is consonant with the duties of other New Testament word ministers—Titus 1:8f makes it clear that presbyters must not merely teach the truth but also refute false teaching.

#### 4.2.2 Peter—the limits of an apostle

In a sense Peter forms the converse to Paul in Galatians 2:11ff and the Antioch incident. It is to be noted that Peter has not expressly said the judaisers are right. Rather he has acted sympathetically to them in conforming his own conduct to their wishes. In other circumstances Paul commends such actions (e.g., over feasts, etc. in Rom 14, 15). Here he does not commend Peter because the judaisers’ wishes compromise the gospel. In that sense it is Peter’s silence that is the issue: he has tolerated false gospel teaching and it is a necessary presupposition of Paul’s argument that Peter cannot do this. This is eminently logical: an Apostle cannot indulge in conduct that compromises the message given him by his sender. Paul has the authority to rebuke his fellow-Apostle because his fellow-Apostle is outside the scope of what his sender entrusted him to do.

One feature that is seldom remarked on at present but of great significance is the rationale on which Paul approached Peter. There is no question of accepting his say-so as a senior apostle. Nor of supplanting him by reference to his own more recent appointment. Both of these are species of hierarchical solutions. Instead the criterion is confessional: has Peter been straightforward with the gospel? It is clear that Peter is wrong because his conduct is at odds with the rest of God's words. This question of consistency establishes his inauthenticity at this point.

#### **4.3 Responsibility towards Apostles**

As someone sent bearing words from God, an apostle necessarily has authority.

##### **4.3.1 The anathema of Galatians 1:8f.**

However, the people to whom the apostle is sent have no right to receive the Apostle where he does not speak the words of the god who sends him. This emerges with crystal clarity in Galatians 1:8f. As Paul pronounces anathema on the bearer of another gospel, whoever that might be, he establishes that teacher of a false gospel is under the ban, *herem* (see e.g., Lev. 27:28, 29; Deut. 7:26; 13:15, 17; Joshua 6:17f; 7:1, 11-13; 22:20). The ban is associated with destruction (note the Joshua material) and the duty to be separate, apart from what is under the ban (Deut. 7:26). Contact with or handling of what is under the ban invites judgement and destruction, for it is a breach of faith with God (Josh. 22:20 in the case of Achan).

This is obviously of enormous significance in the Galatians case. The Galatians are faced with teachers of the kind Paul describes as being under the ban. It is very hard to avoid the inference that this puts a duty on them to treat such teachers as being given over to God, teachers from whom they must be in some way apart, otherwise they too will invite the wrath of God. Paul's phrasing suggests a duty, not a discretion, not an option, but a duty to repudiate false teachers, even if they were Apostles, or angels.

##### **4.3.2 Comparable duties on 'laity' in the Bible**

This principle, is, of course, essentially the same as the one in Deuteronomy 13 in its dealing with false prophets. There again, God imposes duties, not simply discretions or optional powers, on ordinary Israelites with respect to false prophets. These appear to be (i) an implied duty to weigh what a prophet says

(v. 2); (ii) a duty not to heed what they say if it introduces idolatry (v. 3); (iii) a duty to worship God and hold fast to him and his commandments (v. 4); (iv) a duty to put to death the false prophet (v. 5). This last duty compares closely conceptually to a pronouncement of anathema, which is also associated with destruction

In the New Testament context, Peter (2 Peter 2:1) compares false prophets in the Old Testament with false teachers in the New Testament, and again associates false teaching with God's judgement and destruction. Peter's intention is to warn and enjoin his readers to remain faithful to the Old Testament and the Apostolic teaching (2 Peter 3:1, 2). Again, this does not appear to be optional. John produces an uncompromising duty (2 John 10f.) that we must not receive one who does not bring the teaching of Christ. Jude makes comparable points, while in Revelation 2:18-29, verse 20 makes it clear that the church in Thyatira has no discretion over 'Jezebel'. It is precisely their tolerance of her that excites Jesus' wrath.

What these passages seem to preclude is a policy in God's people of toleration of false teaching, even if one does not oneself share those false views. The point is that they have been permitted. Such a ban is, naturally, readily intelligible. Sin remains attractive even for Christians, so sinful teaching will not necessarily ring 'hollow' to an audience. It will be precisely its sinfulness that makes it attractive. In such circumstances one cannot rely on a principle that 'the truth will out'. Such a principle has not considered how great sin is.

#### 4.3.3 Comparable duties on 'laity' in the early Church

The early Church no doubt basically accepted the authority of Apostles. It is, though, intriguing to observe that they considered that a duty remained on 'laity' to weigh the words of those teaching them and who were in office 'over' them. A striking example of this is afforded in Cyprian's letter to the Spanish churches regarding two bishops, Basilides and Martial.<sup>10</sup>

On which account a people obedient to the Lord's precepts, and fearing God, ought to separate themselves from a sinful prelate, and not to associate themselves with the sacrifices of a sacrilegious priest, especially since they themselves have the power either of choosing worthy priests, or of rejecting unworthy ones.<sup>11</sup>

### Authority

This paper has approached the issue of apostolic authority from its broadest theological context and found that apostolic authority and responsibility go hand in hand. The Apostle has authority precisely because he is responsible to the God who appointed him and sends him. When he breaches that responsibility he forfeits his authority. This means—

- (i) it is impossible by an appeal to a supposed apostolic succession in the Tractarian sense to support a claim to authoritative teaching that is contrary to the Gospel and by extension that sets itself against the revealed word of God.
- (ii) any appeal to apostolic succession in that Tractarian sense carries with it the duty to proclaim the gospel; and the duty to protect the gospel and not tolerate false teaching.
- (iii) that no appeal to apostolic succession can carry the idea that subsequent apostle/bishops can disregard any portion of God's word—this is contrary to their position as one of the genus of biblical word ministers.
- (iv) That accepting apostolic authority entails accepting the duty to discern and reject false teaching, no matter what quarter it comes from.
- (v) A critical question is whether on particular questions we envisage the Apostles as having authority at all (women bishops? After 1 Tim. 2?), on homosexual practice (after 1 Cor. 6?).
- (vi) The argument that bishops, whether by appeal to apostolic succession or otherwise, can appeal to some model of development to abrogate God's word is unfounded—this involves claiming a *greater* authority than the apostles had and requires by implication a *different doctrine of God*.
- (vii) There is a duty directly on individual believers to resist false teaching.

This suggests—

- (i) that critical issues are not to be solved on hierarchical principles but confessional principles.
- (ii) that identifying how ministers define and explain the gospel is a matter of paramount importance.
- (iii) That even without accepting the Tractarian argument, the treatment of apostolic authority as being inseparable from responsibility means that other 'word ministers' are to be treated similarly—they are accountable

for what they teach and have authority only within their delegated sphere, the delegator in question being finally God.

This leaves outstanding an important question: given that a word minister has disregarded the scope of his delegation and taught something contrary to God's word, what is the consequence?

Minimally, one can say that he has *pro tanto* lost authority. However, that authority may remain outstanding on other areas. Critically, others have a duty not to obey him at least in those areas where he has taught falsely. This accords with the treatment of Peter by Paul in Galatians 2. Paul does not de-apostle Peter. It is to be noted, though, that the implication of the New Testament is that Peter accepted Paul's rebuke and amended his ways.

Maximally, one can say that such a false teacher has lost his teaching ministry, and that it would be wrong for a Christian to treat him as an approved teacher in any way. This would not, of course, preclude the possibility of repentance. At this point one might well want to recall that although all error is serious, some errors have more obviously serious consequences. Where a false teacher has established false teaching in a way that readily over-rides the Scriptures, this is fairly clearly the case. An example would be a teacher who knowingly introduced the category of 'our experience' as something that could overturn a scriptural evaluation of, say, extra-marital sex. This puts a premium on establishing not just that someone has taught falsely, but the position of that false teaching within their system as a whole.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. *Ignatius Letter to the Romans I 5*. Trans. M. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).
2. *Tracts for the Times* 7.
3. E.g., J. Moltmann.
4. Ca 1159.
5. An excellent example is C. Salutati, *De Tyranno* conveniently available in E. Emerton, *Humanism and Tyranny* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1964).

6. Tyrants in the pre-classical period of Greek city-states appear not infrequently to have enjoyed popular support.
7. *Summa Theologiae* 1a.1.8.
8. In sharp contrast to the idea of the 'natural light that illuminates all' to be found in the Liberal Catholicism of the *Lux Mundi* school.
9. E.g. J.W. R. Stott; P. T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Leicester: Apollos 1999), p. 298.
10. *Epistle 67* in the ANF series Vol 5. Basilides and Martial had obtained certificates during the Decian Persecution stating they had sacrificed to the Emperor.
11. *Ep. 67*.