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## APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION

### I

WE are frequently victimised by the tyranny of words. They change their meanings, and we are imposed upon and misled by their vagaries. A glaring example of this is the use of the word "person" as applied to the constituents of the divine Trinity. Here the confusion is serious. In common parlance you have it in the word, "unhappy," which once meant just unlucky without any idea of attendant misery. In Calvinistic Theology the word, election, affords another instance. The truth it utters is reached by the believer by retrospect as the explanation of the blessed experience by which he has entered into saving union with Jesus Christ as his Saviour. It is the outcome of response to the initiative of God's grace. How the character of John Knox has been assailed because of his use of the word merry or merrily! Of some tragic event such as the death of Cardinal Beaton he says "these things we write merrily", and he is held up as gloating over the Cardinal's fate. Any study of his use of the word makes it plain that from his pen it implies not mirth, but the grim irony of events.

The same trick has been played in the matter of Apostolic Succession. The idea suggested by the word Apostolic has been imported into the idea of the episcopate, as if apostolic and episcopal were almost interchangeable terms. And a whole theory of the episcopate, historic or otherwise, is built-up on this assumption.

Now we live in an age when eyes are turned longingly on the idea of the re-union of the Church of Christ. Its divisions are deplored and are regarded as serious obstacles to the spread of the gospel. But there is a danger of exaggerating the seriousness of these divisions and of overlooking the far stronger unity that prevails. There is need to emphasise that unity as to the great fundamental truths of the Christian faith which in spite of divisions leaves it still the One Holy Apostolic Church

throughout all the World. A very striking illustration of this came under my notice not long ago. At a hill station in India there were the young folks of many missionaries' families. Some fifteen or twenty of them were anxious to become communicants in the Christian Church. A missionary of the Church of Scotland who was there was asked to conduct a preparatory class, which he did, and he found that the young people belonged to fourteen different communions—Methodist Episcopal, United Presbyterian, American Presbyterian, New Zealand Presbyterian, Irish Presbyterian, General Conference Mennonites, American Mennonite, Free Methodists, English Friends' Mission, American Baptists, Congregationalist, American Disciples of Christ, American Church of the Brethren, Church of England. Now if all of these young people can be prepared for the membership of the Church of Christ in one class by a teacher of still another communion, surely it is an exaggeration to make much of the diversity and ignore the substantial unity. This by the way. It suggests, however, that if we could get rid of some of the accretions which have gathered around words and recover their original scriptural meanings we might make better progress. There is a process to which from time to time the wooden ships of former days were periodically subjected. It was called careening. The ship was hauled up on shore, thrown on her beam ends, and her hull was carefully scraped clear of the weeds and barnacles growing there which hindered her progress and checked her speed. Some careening of words is needed to speed the ship of union, and Apostolic Succession and Historic Episcopate are among them.

## II

Take these three words, *Apostle* : *Bishop* : *Ordain*.

*Apostle* : Where does the word *Apostle* come from and who were called *Apostles*? The word *Apostle*, as everyone knows, comes from the Greek ἀποστέλλω and means a messenger, the man who carries a message, in other words a missionary. According to the Gospel of Luke vi. 13 it is the name which the Lord gave to the twelve disciples whom He called into closest fellowship with Himself for training and equipment and who were commissioned by Him to carry His message to other men. At a later date others were added to

their number such as Paul, Barnabas, and Timothy. It seems to me that it would have prevented misunderstanding if instead of simply anglicizing the Greek ἀποστόλος into apostle it had been translated missionary. In that case the Book of the New Testament which follows the four Gospels would not have been called the Acts of the Apostles, but the Doings of the Missionaries. Apostolic Succession also would have been seen in its proper light. It would have been seen to run not along a course of stationary functionaries attached to towns and cities, but of itinerant preachers of the gospel—Peter, Philip, Paul, Barnabas; later in Western Europe, Patrick, Ninian, Columba, Cuthbert, Columbanus, Boniface, Ansgar, Preaching Friars, Francis Xavier, Moravian Brethren, Livingstone, James Chalmers, Robert Laws. These are the true Apostolic Succession.

What adds weight to this exclusion of a succession of bishops in favour of a succession of missionaries is the fact that in the New Testament the apostles are never called bishops and are never spoken of as holding that office in any church, in any town or locality. The bishop in the New Testament has a very definite place and definite work to do, and he gets his name from his function. As everybody knows his name comes from the Greek and simply means overseer. Its equivalent is elder. Paul speaks of the Ephesian elders as those who have episcopal functions, the duties of oversight of the Ephesian Church. As Grimm, in his Lexicon under the word *πρεσβύτερος* says, *nomine τῶν ἐπισκόπων munus, τῶν πρεσβυτέρων dignitas indicat*. If within the eldership, which might equally be called the episcopate in any community, there is any room for priority among the members, it is not on the score of episcopal efficiency, of diligence in oversight, but of labouring in the word and doctrine, or better, the teaching (1 Tim. v. 17).

*Bishop*: All this puts us on the proper line to discover what the bishop of the New Testament really was. He was an efficient elder devoted to the spiritual oversight of the Christian community amid which he dwelt. If one among the number came to occupy an outstanding place among his brother officebearers so that they came to speak of him as the overseer, the bishop, is that not very much the position of a minister of a congregation among ourselves? What seems to confirm such an opinion is, for one thing, the position of Gregory Nazianzen,

and for another the number of bishops from Asia Minor attending the Council of Nicea. Gregory was bishop of Nazianzus. But what was Nazianzus? The centre of a wide diocese with many congregations in it? On the contrary it is easy to learn from the story of his life that it was a little upland town and his charge a country church. So also the large number of bishops at the Nicene Council from a comparatively small area excludes the idea that bishop as then used implied something corresponding to a diocesan bishop of the present day. They were just ministers of congregations, some larger, some smaller.

*Ordain* : Now as to ordination: what was it as it appears in the New Testament? Here again, as it seems to me, we have been victimised by the changing meaning of words. In *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*, III. 631<sup>a</sup> the same words translated in the Bible "ordain" (there are twenty-one of them) are arranged in four groups according to their several meanings. After the title of the fourth group—"to destine, set apart, appoint"—occur these words: "This is the most frequent use of the word in A.V., but it must not be confounded with the modern ecclesiastical use, which does not occur." There are four outstanding passages dealing with apostles and elders in the New Testament that lead us to a scriptural conception of what ordination should mean. There is Mark iii. 14, where we are told that our Lord ordained the Twelve. The literal translation is, "He made twelve that they might be with Him and that He might send them to preach" (*ἀποστέλλη αὐτοὺς κερύττει*). That was the ordination of the apostles. Although the word ordain is not used a very similar event is described in Acts xiii. 1 ff. There at Antioch we are told that when the Church was at worship, "The Holy Ghost said, Separate me (*ἀφορίσατε δὴ μοι*) Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, they laid their hands on them and sent them away". Later in the same book (xiv. 23) it is said that Paul and Barnabas ordained elders in every city, prayed with fasting, and commended them to the Lord on whom they believed. The verb here translated ordain is *χειροτονέω* (to take a vote by show of hands). Then there is the case of Timothy. Here again the word ordain is not used, but Timothy is reminded of the gift that was given him through prophecy with the laying on

of the hands of the body of elders, and among them, Paul reminds him, were Paul's own hands. These are the ordinations that are spoken of in the New Testament. Among them there is no mention of the ordination of bishops as such. If they are to claim scriptural authority for their ordination as bishops it must be in their capacity as elders, and the ordination as carried out either by missionaries like Paul and Barnabas or by the presbytery of elders.

After this careening of these words, what is the result as regards the subject we set out to consider? Apostolic Succession? For one thing it is plain that apostolic succession is not legitimately interchangeable with episcopal succession, for apostles were not bishops and bishops as such were not apostles. For another bishops depend for their ordination on their position as elders or presbyters, and ordination is bestowed, not by bishops, but by presbyters or elders. Above all, the living continuity of the Christian Church does not depend on a succession of officials installed with a particular set of rites and gestures, but on the abiding presence, in the community of believers, of the Holy Spirit of the Living Christ.

*Edinburgh.*

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