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Bearing the Apostles' Message*

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*This lecture is a portion of the book now in preparation, entitled
Criterion for the Church*

Thoughtful Christians are continually concerned about the validity of their faith and the truth of their expressions of it. Without claiming to know an easily applicable and infallible norm, I would still suggest with confidence the *criterion of Apostolicity* for the Church's faith. It means faithful congruity to the teaching and message of the Apostles, in such wise that unbroken continuity is maintained with the earthly life of Jesus Christ.

Before all else our chief concern is with what Christians believe and what they tell others which make a lasting difference in the others' lives. The first believers in Jerusalem persisted obstinately in the teaching of the Apostles (Acts 2:42). It was the Apostles' teaching, their *didache*, their witness to the incarnate Word of God whom they had known in Galilee and Golgotha and among the tombs—it was this apostolic message which attracted the earliest converts and accounted for their being drawn together in a new community of faith. It would be fruitless to debate with St. Paul over his assertion that love is the greatest of the spiritual gifts to men; and one would not wish to be numbered among those who say that good works themselves, without faith, are dead. Nevertheless it is proper to point out that neither the loving example nor the charitable deeds of the Apostles could possibly explain why some three thousand persons suddenly committed themselves in faith to Jesus Christ as Lord and thus embraced the new way of life.

Not the works, but the *words*, of the Apostles were the magnetic centre of the Church. For the words of their teaching and preaching told of the saving Person and of the happenings which marked the critical turning-point not only in the lives of the believers but of the whole human race. And as we scan the centuries of the Church's historical existence, the conclusion of the Heidelberg theologian, Peter Brunner, seems valid. He writes: "The Church is apostolic in so far as it is sent into the

*The Serampore College (University) Convocation address for 1961.

world with the witness to Christ which began in the mouth of the Apostles'.¹ And it is well worth considering that a congregation today can be authenticated as real church to the degree that its members devote themselves to the apostolic Gospel of the same Christ. As Carl Michalson declares: 'The history of the living church is the history of the will to maintain continuity with the apostolic witness. When one is called to witness to the Gospel, he is called into a community of interpretation which presupposes an entire history of Christian witness'.²

Before dealing further with this basic message, it is important to answer a query about something which is not self-evident to many modern Christians. *Why the Apostles?* Why are they and their teaching called essential and indispensable to the Church in all ages? To be sure, they are the venerated founding fathers of the Church. But have they not been superseded by saints and sages of later times, having interpretations of the faith more relevant to our day? Why dubious old Thomas, for example, when you can get the answers from Thomas Aquinas? Why Paul of Tarsus when you can hear and read Paul Tillich? Indeed, is not any Christian who effectively preaches and explains the Gospel as much a true Apostle as those of the New Testament who are so designated? In his book on the ministry of St. Paul, William Baird desires to show that an Apostle is simply any man in any time who 'truly proclaims the Gospel'.³ There is a worthy intention behind this kind of definition. He seems to hold up the supremacy of the Gospel and to keep human authority in its proper subordinate place, as well as to dignify the missionary activity of every Christian who attempts to share his faith with another. But the apparent intention and the conclusion which he draws do not quite square with the recorded evidence of the New Testament.

The Apostles had a unique identity and a unique function. They were not all in the categories of religious genius, pious holy man, theologian or eloquent preacher. Far from it! They were among the lowly and despised in society. It is unlikely that certain of the Apostles, if they lived now, would rate a D.D. degree from the most backward college in the land, much less from Serampore! Despite these deficiencies of wit and ability they had been given a unique and indelible character. It was due, to their having accompanied the Lord Jesus and having known Him between the time of His Baptism and ascension, as Peter is quoted in Acts 1:21, when the successor to Judas was being chosen. Of such credentials they could not be deprived. Nor could any one bestow the apostolic identity upon another who lacked the experience of being an eye-witness of the Risen Lord. 'According to the united witness of the New Testament';

¹ In *Oekumenische Rundschau*, IV: 4, December 1955, p. 116.

² *The Hinge of History*, N.Y.: Scribner's, 1959, p. 228.

³ *Paul's Message and Mission*, N.Y.: Abingdon, 1960, p. 98.

writes Oscar Cullmann in his book about Peter, 'the apostolic office, particularly that of the Twelve, is a unique office not to be repeated'.⁴

Because of their unique identity, the Apostles had a singular vocation on behalf of the Church and of mankind. They were our historical links with the Person of Jesus Christ and the witness to His work. As Thomas F. Torrance graphically describes their role, 'the Apostles formed the *hinges* of the divine mission, where, so to speak, the vertical mission in the sending of the Son by the Father is folded out horizontally into history at Pentecost'.⁵ According to this metaphor, the Apostles were literally the first 'cardinals' and their witness and teaching were the cardinal fact for the Christian faith, since the very being and integrity of the Church hinged upon the truth of it.

A similar understanding of the Apostles' function has been expressed by Emil Brunner in a sentence which, perhaps unintentionally, has a double meaning. 'The Church comes into being only because the Apostle comes forth from his secret intercourse with God and turns to others, giving them in the third person what God Himself gave him in his heart in the second person'.⁶ No doubt the eminent theologian of Zürich meant to say that after the Apostles had been addressed personally as 'thou' by the Lord, he turned to others and told them in his witness who the Lord was and what He had done. Brunner's reference was to a grammatical distinction. But is not the same truth expressed if we think of the second and third persons, not as elements of grammar, but as the classic designations of the Trinity? From their personal relations with Jesus Christ the Son, the Apostles turned to others and communicated to them through the enlightening agency of the Holy Spirit.

If the peculiar function of the Apostles was to be the historic links or hinges connecting Jesus Christ with the gathering community, the mode of fulfilling that function was primarily their proclamation and teaching of the new Gospel. As unique representatives of the Lord they exercised various other works in the economy of the Church. It was their calling and task to be the founders and initial leaders of new congregations throughout the Roman Empire and perhaps beyond it, as in the legend of Thomas in India. Their persistence in this task led invariably to their sharing in the sufferings of the Lord, that is, to their persecution and death as martyrs. For a time they were the men especially empowered by the Holy Spirit not only to preach but to heal and effect wondrous deeds as signs of God's immanent power. They were, moreover, the ones responsible for exercising discipline in the congregations, as Paul's letters clearly demonstrate. The

⁴ *Peter: Disciple—Apostle—Martyr*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953, p. 215.

⁵ *Royal Priesthood*, Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1955, p. 27.

⁶ *Revelation and Reason*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946, p. 123.

Apostles were quite clearly the ones who first bound the churches together in a real manifestation of the unity which was the intention and gift of God to the Church. Lastly, whatever conclusions may be drawn with respect to the debatable origins of the ordained ministry and episcopacy, it is evident that the Apostles had the authority to commission their fellow-believers to be deacons and elders and general overseers of the churches. When we speak today of apostolicity in reference to the present churches, we do not ignore these continuing elements in the ordering of the Church's life which was initiated by the Apostles.

While the debate about ministerial succession goes on, as it must for many more years, we may stress the conviction that apostolicity inheres primarily in the message of salvation which the Apostles knew and proclaimed on the basis of their knowledge of Jesus Christ. The pedigree of preaching is a matter nearer the centre of apostolicity than the breeding of bishops. Or, conversely, the distance from the Apostles is more readily seen in the anaemic faith and teaching of many contemporary churches than in their well-preserved order and ministry.

It is easy enough to assert that the apostolic message is the core of the Christian faith, and thus the criterion for our teaching, preaching and believing in this and every century. But how are we to understand the content of that message?

Those who have read any theology at all during the past twenty-five years know that the Greek New Testament's word for proclamation, *kerygma*, has been the object of intensive examination. It was in 1936 that C. H. Dodd's slender but significant book, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, appeared.⁷ It has been a salutary thing for Christianity today that the nature of the *kerygma* has been studied exactly. Thanks to the work of competent Biblical scholars, we are now enabled to perceive more clearly the ingredients of the apostolic faith. And this has given rise to the kerygmatic theology of our day. But unhappily, and perhaps inevitably, the word *kerygma* itself has become so commonplace and such a cliché that there has been more cheering for the idea of a message to be preached than serious clarifying of what should be preached today which is congruous with the apostolic message and intelligible to people whose minds do not work in Biblical categories.

'It pleased God through the folly of the *kerugma* to save those who believe', wrote the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 1:21). He should have known this well enough for he was unrivalled as the chief herald of the Gospel to the world. But just exactly what was preached by the Apostles? The substance of the message is as familiar to the readers of Dodd's formulation of it as it is still

⁷ London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936; 2nd ed., 1944, pp. 21-24. Support for Dodd's interpretation is given by Floyd V. Fison, *Jesus Christ the Risen Lord*, N.Y.: Abingdon, 1956, pp. 41-54; Bo Reicke, 'A Synopsis of Early Christian Preaching in *The Root of the Vine*, ed. by A. Fridrichsen, N.Y.: Philosophical Library; Paris: Delachaux et Niestle, 1952, p. 15.'

foolishness to the pretentious wisdom of the world. When the Apostles turned from their communion with Jesus Christ to address their fellow mortals, they proclaimed the news of salvation as follows:

The long period of man's longing and of Israel's expectation had come to an end, and the new age of fulfilment had dawned.

This tremendous and incomparable change in man's history and his relation to God the Creator had come about because of the ministry, the death on the cross, and the resurrection of Jesus the Christ. His coming as Messiah-King and Deliverer from sin and death was in accord with the expectation of the Scriptures of Israel.

In being raised from the dead on the third day, Jesus was exalted to the 'right hand of God' and made Lord over the Church and the world. Thereupon the Holy Spirit of God had been given in power to the Church, to guide it in its life and mission until the consummation of the Reign of God in the final coming of Jesus Christ.

In response to this proclamation, people were called upon to believe in Jesus Christ, to repent of their sins, be baptized, and become members of the redeemed community, the Church.

This was the Gospel as first preached in Jerusalem to the Jews. When Paul and others carried the message to the Greeks, they did not change it in substance but had to speak of the one true God as the primal object of faith, from whom the Gospel of Jesus Christ was derived.⁸ But whether addressed to Jews or Gentiles, the apostolic message was simply an out-thrust index finger pointing to Jesus Christ; none of the dialectic, exhortation, reassurance, threatening, bargaining or calculated rhetoric which has characterized much Christian preaching through the centuries. Just a stark assertion of the joyously incredible fact that He who is the ultimate Lord of all life had been revealed to men, crucified as a real man among them, and from the cold grip of death.

Many Christians are properly insistent upon the need to communicate the Gospel in the simple terms of the common man's paltry vocabulary. But this effort at simplification does not easily raise men's understanding above the plane of conventional belief that there must be a 'Divine Being', that the myth of Christmas stimulates kindness and charitable works for a season, and the myth of Easter suggests that the grave may not be the end after all.

But the first Christians did not devote themselves to theories about a Divine Being nor minimal precepts of cultic observation

⁸ This point is well made by Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. I, N.Y.: Scribner's, 1951, p. 65.

and moral duty. Nor was the 'faith which was once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3) like a dead deposit of gold in a government's treasury, seen only by its keepers but theoretically validating the common currency. The Gospel does not belong exclusively to the time of its first reception in Jerusalem, nor among the dust and cobwebs of what the catalogue of Oxonian Blackwell's quaintly calls 'Antiquarian Theology'. While rooted in a definite event at a well-known place at a certain time in history, the apostolic message of Jesus Christ is as living, contemporary and relevant to us now as it was to the Apostles then. The apostolicity of the Christian faith is a testimony to the truth of the confession, 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever' (Heb. 13:8). This means not only that Jesus Christ is timeless and unchanging in being, but that the work He has accomplished for man's forgiveness and salvation through His ministry, death and resurrection is as applicable now as it was then or ever shall be.

We are brought back to the question repeatedly: How do we devote ourselves to the perennially valid teaching of the Apostles, and how do we convey to men and women today?

Must we become Biblical literalists or fundamentalists, jettison the results of a century of critical theology, and hit the sawdust trail? Not at all! Although numerous Christians concur in their rigid convictions about Biblical inerrancy and the fundamentalist faith, there is no evidence at all that the saving faith in the crucified and risen Lord is held exclusively by them.

The method of Biblical study known as the historical-critical method during the past three generations has come as a timely gift to the Church. Who can show that it has not been a part of God's plan for this era of sky-rocketing intellectual advance and scientific discovery? Unfortunately many Christians think the word 'criticism' means negation of the Bible's message. On the contrary, textual and historical criticism has liberated the Word of God in the Bible from the restraining chains of obscurantism which over the centuries have bound it. Of course, the Biblical critics have at times run to excess and to the detriment of the Christian faith, as in the case of D. F. Strauss and F. C. Baur more than a century ago in Germany, or even to a lesser degree of Rudolf Bultmann today. Nevertheless the critical mode of Biblical exegesis is an indispensable means by which to learn that faith does not necessitate the surrender of sanity. This is not to say that a fundamentalist Christian does not have real faith in Jesus Christ. Of course he does. And he frequently draws others to Christ as well. But the inflexible dogmatism of his Biblical interpretation and of his view of the Christian life is often so cumbersome and unintelligible that it actually alienates many persons who would be drawn to genuine faith in Christ.

If not as fundamentalists, then, how do we know and share the apostolic Gospel? Do we dash to the opposite extreme, blue pencil in hand, to edit out any element of the apostolic tradition

which seems to offend common sense or smack of the supernatural? This is a deceptive snare into which even the very intelligent and sincere Christians fall. Trying earnestly to find universally persuasive verification of New Testament claims to Jesus Christ, the events of His life, and the effects of His death and resurrection, such would-be apologist inadvertently betrays the faith he wants to strengthen. He clutches at shreds of historical and archaeological evidence, hoping to show that if the Bible is factually true in one place it might be more credible in another. He scratches under the tables of biologists and psychologists for such crumbs of their lore as seem to explain Jesus' work of healing or to enhance the possibility of His bodily resurrection after two nights in the tomb. Or else he scours in a fascinating way the pages of contemporary drama and obscure poetry, rejoicing in their references to sin and redemption, in whatever veiled language or form, and trying to demonstrate thereby that there is some universal truth, after all, in the Christ-image. In appreciation of this labour we may agree that much of this prospecting for theological ore in the non-theological fields is highly important for the faith of the Church. But it seems questionable whether such material can be relied upon to provide empirical evidence and rational clarity for a faith in God's action which is essentially *mystery*. Faith which requires supporting prongs ceases to be faith and becomes mere supposition. It is an attitude of mind resting upon reason rather than a disposition of the whole person derived from both reason and will. It is the Protestant equivalent to the Roman Catholic's acceptance of the miraculous Veil of St. Veronica or the Holy Tunic of Trier.

The Gospel is advanced neither by uncritical submission to Biblical literalism nor by the findings of strictly secular studies. The intervention of God into the life of man on earth is authenticated by the Bible itself, even after it has been refined in the chemicals of criticism. The Word of God which speaks through the pages of the Bible is verily the *living* Word, even as the Fourth Evangelist declared that the power of life itself was in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word. The vivifying effect of the Word upon persons and groups which honestly seek to devote themselves to the Apostles' teaching as the summation of the Biblical message is readily discovered today. In student movements, in areas of missionary growth, in the ecumenical movement, and in congregations where a renewal of authentic faith is being experienced, the intensification of Bible study presents weighty evidence of the astonishing way God uses the Bible study for the achieving of His purpose.

Furthermore, in the historical experience of the Church and in the lives of countless Christians who have known the reality of the newness of life in Christ, there is attestation of the saving effect of His ministry, death and resurrection. The irrepressible vitality of the apostolic faith is discerned in the Church's susceptibility to reformation and renewal. It is seen also in the

Church's worship through prayer and Sacraments, and in its ability to withstand in the long run every tyranny and intellectual or religious attack.

In this admittedly difficult era for the Church it is discouraging for us Christians to realize that the world for the most part is not really hearing what we say we believe—and, if hearing, not interested in believing. Much of the reason for the Church's frustrating failure to capture men's lives for Christ is precisely the drifting away from the apostolic Gospel. It is the inability of the churches through their preaching, teaching and common life to make it known to the bemused or confused masses of men and women that these churches have as their main purpose the commending of their faith in the one God who has acted decisively in Jesus Christ for the salvation of His creatures.

The word 'Apostle' comes from the Greek *apostellein*, meaning 'to send'. In one of its earliest references in Greek usage it had to do with the launching of a fleet to carry an embassy of a government. That meaning still pertains to the apostolic Church. We who are privileged to bear the Apostles' message in this generation are like an embassy launched into human history to tell others about the One who has sent us. The quality of our life together in the Church, the openness of the Church to renewal, and the degree of our fidelity to Jesus Christ are all involved in the success or failure of that mission. And these in turn are measured by the teaching and message of the original Apostles.

The Church, however, was not 'a purely spiritual society', if that expression is taken in its modern sense as implying that all outward rites were optional, or that leadership in it was not an office but a matter of occasional inspiration. The Church practised baptism and the laying on of hands as its ceremonies of initiation. It observed the breaking of bread or the Lord's Supper as a solemn memorial of, and means of communion with, the Lord Jesus Christ; and its acknowledged ministerial leaders were the apostolic company which Jesus had at least begun to constitute before His death, and which He afterwards accredited as witnesses of His resurrection.

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