

# 1

## *Ad fontes*: Apostolicity in the Early Church

WHAT DOES APOSTOLICITY MEAN in a modern context? Certainly it would be tempting to delve immediately into this subject. But concepts about the marks of the church—unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity—lead us right back into the roots of the church. An assessment of what apostolicity connotes today cannot be properly discussed without an inquiry into what it meant for the early followers of Christ and theologians, i.e., for those who founded the church and whose ideas about the *notae ecclesiae* therefore must be considered if one wants to be faithful to theology's task of reinterpreting the Christian message in one's own age and contexts.

### The Gospels, Acts, and Paul

“Apostolos,” “someone who has been sent,” occurs eighty times in the New Testament. It can be translated as “messenger” of the Good News or “delegate” of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> “Saliach,” the corresponding term in Hebrew, appears to have been used by the early Christian community, connoting someone who has been given full authority.<sup>2</sup> The apostle has such authority that he or she can fully represent the one for whom they are a delegate. Further a “saliach” was understood as a prophet in the sense of

1. Betz, “Apostle,” in *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 41.

2. Ibid.

the Hebrew Scriptures' understanding of prophet since they spoke with the authority of God's word, but which came to include the message of the crucified and risen Jesus.<sup>3</sup> However, Jürgen Roloff and other New Testament scholars have shown that we cannot presuppose a unified concept of "apostle" in the early Christian communities.<sup>4</sup> Rather there are already tensions between the concepts of Paul, on the one hand, and Luke, on the other. Roloff points out that it is the Pauline notion that is crucial as Paul is the only apostle from whom we have an authentic interpretation concerning his office.<sup>5</sup> Paul often spoke about and defended his office.<sup>6</sup> As he was not one of the original Twelve, he seems to have needed to do so in order to clarify his role, even though he regarded himself as the least of the apostles (1 Cor 15:9). While Paul takes up previous ideas on the role of the apostle, he also contradicts such notions; thus his interpretation "provides a key" also for pre-Pauline and other notions of apostolate of that period.<sup>7</sup>

In 1 Cor 15:1–11 Paul mentions those in Jerusalem who had been there before him to whom the risen Christ had revealed himself: Cephas (Peter), the Twelve, "five hundred brothers and sisters," James (Jesus' brother), "then to all the apostles. Last of all . . . he appeared also to me."<sup>8</sup> Although he sees himself as "unfit" to be called an apostle because he persecuted the Christians, he is deeply aware that it is God's grace that has made him what he is and that he has "worked harder than any of them" (1 Cor 15:9–11). The Twelve "almost certainly" must be counted among the apostles, since Paul makes special mention of

3. Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now*, 11–12. Burkhard's book is an excellent study on apostolicity, both in its analysis of this mark of the church through history and in the relevance of apostolicity in a postmodern context for an ecumenical church.

4. See the comprehensive entry on "Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität" by Roloff in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie (TRE)* 3, 430–45, at 432.

5. "So ist *erstens* deutlich geworden, dass ein einheitliches urchristliches Verständnis des Apostolats nicht ohne weiteres vorausgesetzt werden darf; vielmehr ist mit der Möglichkeit zu rechnen, dass bereits in früher Zeit verschiedene Ausprägungen nebeneinander existiert und dass Entwicklungs- und Interpretationsprozesse stattgefunden haben. *Zweitens* ist man sich darin einig, dass das paulinische Apostolatsverständnis den entscheidenden Fixpunkt jeder Untersuchung dieses Themas zu bilden hat. Denn Paulus ist der einzige Apostel, von dem wir eine authentische Interpretation seines Amtes haben" (ibid., 432).

6. See Betz, "Apostle," in *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 42.

7. Roloff, "Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität," 432.

8. Biblical references are taken from the NRSV.

Peter as their leader.<sup>9</sup> A significant difference between Paul's and Luke's understanding is the fact that the former has a much broader understanding of "apostle" than the latter who only regards the Twelve as apostles (Acts 1:21–26).

The apostles' calling was a kerygmatic symbol of the twelve tribes of Israel in the eschaton, of Israel's restoration and redemption. The choosing of the Twelve therefore involves a profound eschatological dimension; the entire concept of the church's apostolicity and catholicity is underlined by this eschatological aspect born of resurrection faith.<sup>10</sup> In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the kingdom had already been revealed. It was Jesus' appearance after his resurrection that therefore "implied not only the confirmation of his own mission but also its revival for the disciples."<sup>11</sup> Luke makes clear that it is not just Jesus who institutes the apostles but that it is God who gives them their status; their choice is divine (Luke 6:12ff).<sup>12</sup> In Acts 1:2, moreover, we read that Jesus chose his apostles through the Holy Spirit. In this way one might speak of the triune God who chose the apostles, even if the dogma of the Trinity was, of course, not to be formulated for some centuries.

Wolfhart Pannenberg observes that "the apostolic" (*das Apostolische*) does not just entail "the conservation" of apostolic teaching, but, above all, the "presentation of the finality, i.e., the truth of that which occurred in the person of Jesus and was proclaimed by the apostles . . . the future truth . . . which is bringing this incomplete world to its completion."<sup>13</sup> The Twelve therefore are the symbol of God's covenant with God's people "now entering into its final, eschatological

9. Roloff, "Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität," 433.

10. See Pannenberg, "Significance of Eschatology," 410–29.

11. Ibid., 415–16. "The apostles' activity does not only result from God's eschatological action in Jesus Christ, but itself aims at realizing the content of the eschatological promise and itself becomes an instrument of God's activity, opening up the way to God's kingdom. The present power of God's reign in Jesus' teaching and work finds its apostolic counterpart in the universal mission to all nations" (416).

12. Jervell, *Luke and the People of God*, 86.

13. Pannenberg, "Significance of Eschatology," 417.

realization.”<sup>14</sup> For Luke their “primary task lies in the future.”<sup>15</sup> Roloff notes that while there is no reason to doubt the pre-Easter Twelve as being historical, one should not over-emphasize their importance. Although they were central in building the original community in Jerusalem, they were soon pushed aside from their leading functions. Already in ca. 35/37 AD, on his first visit to Jerusalem, Paul did not find the Twelve but the “apostles” whose leaders were Cephas and James. James did not belong to the circle of the Twelve. Further, it is quite certain that Andronikus and Junias also belonged to the apostles in Jerusalem. Thus in a very short time the concept of the Twelve lost its importance in the emergent communities.<sup>16</sup>

For Paul, then, the criterion of being an apostle is the calling and sending out by the risen Christ (1 Cor 15). This calling happens through God’s grace. In this way he can see himself as an apostle as he knows he has been chosen by Christ. Luke, on the other hand, limits the notion of apostle to those who are witnesses to the earthly Jesus and to his resurrection (Acts 1:21–22). He therefore did not regard Paul as an apostle. It appears that both Mark (6:30) and Matthew (10:2) shared this view.<sup>17</sup>

While in Jerusalem the apostolate was constituted by having been called and sent by the resurrected Christ, some rather different criteria developed in Antioch, its Syrian hinterland and in Gentile mission areas. Here we find an apostolate that was *pneumatic* and *charismatic* with a clear aim of mission.<sup>18</sup> In Acts 13:1–4 Paul and Barnabas are sent out through the Holy Spirit to mission (Cyprus). In Acts 14:4,14, Paul and Barnabas, on mission (in Iconium), are referred to as apostles. This, in fact, is the only time that Luke acknowledges Paul as an apostle. Thus both were regarded as apostles in Antioch since the Holy Spirit had sent them to bring the Good News to the Gentiles. Hence in addition to the calling and sending, and the apostles’ eschatological motivation, there is another dimension, the pneumatological one. It is for this rea-

14. Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now*, 3. See also Roloff, “Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität,” 438: “Der Apostel als Träger und Bote der abschliessenden eschatologischen Selbstkundgabe Gottes, des Evangeliums, das durch die Propheten lediglich vorherverheissen worden war (Röm 1,1f).”

15. Jervell, *Luke and the People of God*, 67.

16. Roloff, “Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität,” 434.

17. Ibid., 430, 433–34. Betz, “Apostle,” in *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 42.

18. Roloff, “Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität,” 435.

son that the wandering apostles were at times regarded as prophets.<sup>19</sup> These apostles, who included both women and men, were delegates or charismatic preachers sent out by churches, like Antioch.<sup>20</sup>

Paul incorporated in himself both the Jerusalem “type” of appearance-calling apostolate and the Antioch type of pneumatic-charismatic apostolate. The Christophany he had experienced on his way to Damascus probably led the community in Jerusalem to accept his apostolate as authentic. Moreover, he added a further significant dimension to the meaning of apostolate in that he considered it within a fundamental theological context: the community in Jerusalem accepted that the content of his apostolic mission was the proclamation of the Gospel, free of the law, to the Gentiles.<sup>21</sup> It was the apostles’ goal to give concrete shape to the Gospel and bring about the historical realization of the Good News in the church made up of Jews and Gentiles.<sup>22</sup> In his or her own very being and way of life the apostle had to explicate the Gospel.

Let us take another look at Luke. His idea of the twelve apostles was crucial to the concept of apostolic succession, a topic that continues to be a major point of controversy in the ecumenical quest. Roloff notes that for Luke the apostles were the “guarantors” of the Jesus tradition as being foundational to the church, and they were “prototypes” of eccle-

19. Ibid. “Neben die *eschatologische* tritt hier eine starke *pneumatische Motivation*: Die wandernden Apostel sind Geistträger; sie werden darum vielfach in dieser Traditionslinie nicht klar von den Propheten unterschieden (Matt 7,15. 21ff; Did 11, 3–12).” See also Jervell, *Luke and the People of God*, 93.

20. Betz, “Apostle,” in *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 42.

21. Roloff, “Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität,” 437. “Das paulinische Apostolatsverständnis ist jedoch mehr als bloss eine Synthese ursprünglich differenzierter Konzeptionen. Paulus hat vielmehr das vorgegebene Faktum des Apostolats dadurch auf eine neue Ebene gehoben, daß er es als Bestandteil eines fundamentalen theologischen Zusammenhangs begriff. Dabei ist die *christologische Begründung* durch den Auftrag des Auferstandenen nur eine Komponente, zu der als weitere die *Zuordnung zum Evangelium* und die *Ausrichtung auf die Kirche* treten. Apostolat ist für Paulus bevollmächtigter Dienst im Namen und Auftrag Christi, dessen *Ursprung* in einem geschichtlich einmaligen Akt der Sendung durch den Auferstandenen liegt, dessen *Inhalt* das in der Auferstehung Christi gründende, auf Wort und Weg des Menschgewordenen zurückverweisende, in Lehre und Leben des Apostels zu verkündigende Evangelium ist, und dessen *Ziel* im Bau der Kirche als des auf dieses einmalige geschichtliche Zeugnis gegründeten endzeitlichen Gottesvolkes besteht.”

22. Ibid., 439.

sial office holders.<sup>23</sup> However, it is now widely acknowledged among Scripture scholars and systematic theologians of various denominations that Luke did not intend to establish “the normative model of an ecclesial central office.”<sup>24</sup> To begin with, from Acts 16 onwards the Council in Jerusalem vanishes from sight, and nothing is said about its possible future role. As Jervell insists, the Twelve “are not the first ecclesiastical officials,” a college that will lead the church in the future.<sup>25</sup> In fact, Luke hardly had any interest in church institutions. Consequently it is impossible to ascertain what kind of church Luke envisaged. For Luke “the church is the continuation of Israel’s history”; the Twelve are not at the origin of any ecclesiastical office, nor is their position an “office.”<sup>26</sup> Appointments are not one of their tasks; it is Jesus who appoints, as, for example, in Luke 10:1–11, when “the Lord appointed seventy others.” The deacons, mentioned in Acts 6, are chosen by the congregation, not by the Twelve. Upon their election, the apostles “prayed and laid their hands on them.” A few times Acts also mentions elders, together with the apostles or as authorities in the congregations (e.g., 15:4, 6, 22f.; 16:4), but it is never said that the apostles were responsible in establishing the elders as an institution. It appears that Luke may not have known how the elders had emerged as an institution in the Jewish faith and culture.<sup>27</sup> Prophets and teachers are also mentioned in Acts but again there are no links made with the Twelve as those who might have appointed them. Thus, as Jervell concludes, we have “no basis for claiming that Luke traces the ecclesiastical offices back to the Twelve.”<sup>28</sup>

While the Twelve did not hold an “office” in the early church, the apostles represent an incipient office.<sup>29</sup> They had authority, as did the elders, deacons, teachers, and prophets, some of whom were female. The early Christian communities appear to have adopted the model of

23. Ibid., 442.

24. Ibid., 443. “Nichts allerdings deutet darauf hin, dass Lukas das normative Modell einer kirchlichen Zentralbehörde hätte schaffen wollen, denn das Jerusalemer Gremium verschwindet von Act 16 an aus dem Blickfeld, ohne das die geringsten Andeutungen über die Weitergabe seiner Konsequenzen gemacht würden.”

25. Jervell, *Luke and the People of God*, 94.

26. Ibid., 95. See also Hall, “Early Idea of the Church,” 42–43.

27. Jervell, *Luke and the People of God*, 95–96.

28. Ibid., 96.

29. Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now*, 21.

the synagogue for governance, “where elders, president, and assistant provide a pattern for what became the universal church,” i.e., presbyters, bishops and deacons.<sup>30</sup> The apostles were respected in the community, they prayed for the community and they laid hands on those who had been chosen by the community, such as the deacons. They also had concern for one another and appear to have aimed always at unity among themselves and in and between the communities.

Yet, in *Lumen Gentium*, article 19, we read: “These apostles he [Jesus] established as a college or permanent group over which he placed Peter, chosen from among them.”<sup>31</sup> I agree with Burkhard’s conclusion that one can hardly see the “strictly collegial character” in the first-century apostles. The twelve apostles, headed by Peter, are not the first existing college of bishops with Peter as Pope.<sup>32</sup> Communion amongst them was a concern (Gal 2:1–14), no doubt. This, naturally, would have been vital in building up the church. But there was also room for diversity and Rome as the central place of exercising power had not yet been established.

Why did apostolicity come to be of such importance in the church? The mark “apostolic” was, in fact, the last of the notes to be included in the creed.<sup>33</sup> Unlike unity and holiness, which can be clearly traced back to Scripture, catholicity and apostolicity are not scriptural. Yet, the latter two *notae* were to become increasingly significant in the face of heresies, notably Gnosticism in the second half of the second century, and in quarrels within the early church communities. As the church grew into an institution, the early theologians concerned themselves with unified teaching, church identity and leadership. Several of the early theologians are relevant in this context, especially in view of apostolicity and apostolic succession.<sup>34</sup> The aim here cannot be a detailed exploration of these but rather we will briefly note what recent scholarship has established about their writings on this issue.

30. Hall, “Early Idea of the Church,” 43.

31. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2:863.

32. Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now*, 21.

33. *Ibid.*, 25.

34. These include Clement, the Didache, Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage and the collection *Traditio Apostolica*, probably written by Hippolytus, a presbyter in Rome. See Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now*, chapter 3. See also Hall, “Early Idea of the Church,” 42–54.

## The Early Theologians

In the second century a comprehensive understanding of apostolicity emerged.<sup>35</sup> The transition from a more collegial type of presbyter-bishop to monarchical episcopacy was to be one of the most significant developments during this time. The letter of Clement I (ca. 95 CE)<sup>36</sup> was concerned with the legitimate powers of office in the church. Clement writes:

The apostles have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ [has done so] from God. Christ therefore was sent forth by God, and the apostles by Christ. Both these appointments, then, were made in an orderly way, according to the will of God. Having therefore received their orders, and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and established in the word of God, with full assurance of the Holy Ghost, they went forth proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand. (42) . . . Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate. For this reason, therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect fore-knowledge of this, they appointed those [ministers] already mentioned, and afterwards gave instructions, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry. (44)

While Clement is concerned with a “divinely willed orderliness in the church,” one can, however, only speak in a very limited way about apostolic succession, as all he does is mention a general legitimacy of church office as having been instituted by the apostles. He says nothing about their teaching or their personal individual authority. Moreover, he was addressing a specific church in a specific situation.<sup>37</sup> Walter J. Burghardt asserts that Clement in his instructions about approved men does not

35. Blum, “Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität II. Alte Kirche,” 445.

36. Some scholars suggest that this letter may have been written at a later date, either 118–125 CE or 125–138 CE. It is not clear whether Clement was an “anonymous presbyter writing on behalf of the governing body of Roman presbyters” or “the presiding bishop of the church of Rome.” Obviously the answer to this question would have implications for apostolic succession. Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now*, 43.

37. Ibid., 48. Blum, “Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität II. Alte Kirche,” 445. Hall, “Early Idea of the Church,” 45: “The church order presupposed for Rome and Corinth by Clement appears to involve government by a number of presbyter-bishops who have (although we have little detail) deacons to assist them.”



refer to a “succession to apostleship” but to a “succession to *episcope* which the apostles had exercised.”<sup>38</sup>

Ignatius of Antioch, writing between 100 and 118 CE, was the first to use the word “apostolic,” which meant to him the model of the apostle. He was concerned with the unity of the churches in Asia Minor and Rome. Ignatius regarded the bishop as a symbol of Christ and of the universal church. Contrary to Clement, Hermas, and the *Didache*, he insists that there is only one bishop “whose singularity symbolizes the unity of God” and with his congregation he also symbolizes Christ and the universal catholic church.<sup>39</sup> With Ignatius the idea of a monarchical episcopate arose. Yet, while he exhorts the Christians to do everything in harmony with their presbyters, deacons, and bishops (e.g., in his *Epistle to the Magnesians*), he does not supply an apostolic legitimization of a monarchical episcopal office.<sup>40</sup>

It was Irenaeus of Lyons who was central in developing a comprehensive idea of apostolicity and apostolic succession.<sup>41</sup> Writing against various gnostic unorthodox beliefs, which emphasized a notion of a pre-existent, heavenly, and spiritual church, Irenaeus concentrates on the unity of doctrine. For him apostolicity is not a speculative but concrete issue.<sup>42</sup> *Traditio* encompasses the whole life in the church and it is markedly apostolic. Apostolicity with him gained a more authoritative dimension.<sup>43</sup> As Christ had given full authority to the apostles, it

38. Burghardt, “Apostolic Succession,” 174.

39. Hall, “Early Idea of the Church,” 46. Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, 8:1: “[But] shun divisions, as the beginning of evils. Do ye all follow your bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and the presbytery as the Apostles; and to the deacons pay respect, as to God’s commandment. Let no man do aught of things pertaining to the Church apart from the bishop. Let that be held a valid eucharist which is under the bishop or one to whom he shall have committed it.” 8:2: “Whosoever the bishop shall appear, there let the people be; even as where Jesus may be, there is the universal Church. It is not lawful apart from the bishop either to baptize or to hold a love-feast; but whatsoever he shall approve, this is well-pleasing also to God; that everything which ye do may be sure and valid.”

40. Blum, “Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität II. Alte Kirche,” 445. Hall, “Early Idea of the Church,” 46.

41. Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now*, 49.

42. Ibid., 50. Hall, “Early Idea of the Church,” 47.

43. Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now*, 52. Blum, “Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität II. Alte Kirche,” 450: “Für Irenaeus ist die apostolische Tradition die umfassendste Konzeption für die Quelle, die Norm und die Aktualität der christlichen

is through them alone that we can ascertain truth. In the face of conflicting views of faith and church, Irenaeus saw the need for doctrine, which, although no substitute for the faith, would be instrumental in safeguarding it against false interpretations. Irenaeus developed the concept of the succession of presbyters (*episkopoi*). The bishop is the master teacher who teaches his community about Christ. Thus succession here does not mean sacramental ordination of those who had succeeded to the sacramental role of the original apostles, rather the bishops are now regarded as those who, like the apostles, guarantee the proper *paradosis* of the faith and are the charismatic leaders.<sup>44</sup> Irenaeus mentions both the succession of presbyters and of bishops that reflects the fact that bishop and presbyter had been used interchangeably in the early communities: “Wherefore it is incumbent to obey the presbyters who are in the Church—those who, as I have shown, possess the succession from the apostles; those who, together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the certain gift of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father.”<sup>45</sup>

Burkhard argues that the “reason for two forms of succession had to do with the tradition itself” as, in fact, the presbyter-bishops had been involved in teaching the faith.<sup>46</sup>

Irenaeus’ ideas were of far-reaching significance for the role of the Roman church. In *Adversus Haereses* 3.2 apostolicity and catholicity become deeply intertwined. Irenaeus refers to Rome as the place where the universal church had been founded by the *gloriosissimis* apostles Peter and Paul and he insists that all churches must be in agreement with Rome due to its “pre-eminent authority.”<sup>47</sup>

---

Wahrheit.”

44. Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now*, 55. Blum, “Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität II. Alte Kirche,” 451.

45. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 4.26.

46. Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now*, 56.

47. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.2: “Since, however, it would be very tedious, in such a volume as this, to reckon up the successions of all the Churches, we do put to confusion all those who, in whatever manner, whether by an evil self-pleasing, by vainglory, or by blindness and perverse opinion, assemble in unauthorized meetings; [we do this, I say, ] by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul; as also [by pointing out] the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by means of the successions of

Tertullian of Carthage, the first Latin theologian, employed a historical-empirical and functional understanding of apostolicity.<sup>48</sup> For him the notion of apostolicity is the key that establishes the conditions for the truth of revelation to be handed on and kept in the church.<sup>49</sup> He emphasizes apostolicity mainly with regard to the norm churches, Corinth, Thessalonika, Philippi, Ephesus, and Rome; a church is apostolic if it has been founded by a norm church, and if the churches stayed in communion with one another.<sup>50</sup> Like Irenaeus, he writes in the context of current heresies, but he does not employ one single criterion for judging the apostolicity of a church. He acknowledges the office of the bishop and speaks of their succession, yet he seems to limit the idea of apostolic succession as, for him, in the full sense it operates only in the normative churches. For Tertullian, the “office is not at the origin of the truth, only the apostles themselves are.”<sup>51</sup> For our own current ecumenical and ecclesiological contexts, John J. Burkhard’s comment is noteworthy: “Although Tertullian’s teaching regarding apostolicity lacks rigorous consistency, the abundance of theological perspectives more than makes up for this lack. It might be well for Christians today to remember this in their ecumenical discussions.”<sup>52</sup>

---

the bishops. For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its pre-eminent authority, that is, the faithful everywhere, inasmuch as the apostolical tradition has been preserved continuously by those [faithful men] who exist everywhere.”

48. Blum, “Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität II. Alte Kirche,” 452.

49. Ibid., “In *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* ist für Tertullian das Apostolische der Inbegriff dafür, unter welchen Voraussetzungen und Bedingungen die Offenbarungswahrheit in die Gegenwart hinein tradiert und von der Kirche bewahrt werden kann.”

50. Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now*, 57–58. Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 20: “They (the apostles) then in like manner founded churches in every city, from which all the other churches, one after another, derived the tradition of the faith, and the seeds of doctrine, and are every day deriving them, that they may become churches. Indeed, it is on this account only that they will be able to deem themselves apostolic, as being the offspring of apostolic churches. Every sort of thing must necessarily revert to its original for its classification. Therefore the churches, although they are so many and so great, comprise but the one primitive church, (founded) by the apostles, from which they all (spring). In this way all are primitive, and all are apostolic, whilst they are all proved to be one, in (unbroken) unity, by their peaceful communion . . .”

51. Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now*, 59.

52. Ibid., 58.

A collection known as the *Traditio Apostolica* is one of the most important texts of the third century, and it is of central importance concerning apostolicity. Its authorship is disputed, but traditionally it has been ascribed to Hippolytus. In fact, the text has been used in conciliar and postconciliar writings of Vatican II.<sup>53</sup> Blum has demonstrated that the author built on Irenaeus' ideas. He develops a predominantly pneumatological idea, which he relates to the *paradosis* of doctrine and to the whole life of the church.<sup>54</sup> In the face of heresies within the church he does not focus on apostolic succession; rather a totally new perspective emerges, as he sees the ordination of bishops as a creative act, whereby the Spirit is bestowed. The church is seen primarily as the creation of the Spirit, who continues the work of Christ in salvation history.<sup>55</sup>

Cyprian of Carthage similarly wrote in a situation of internal dissent. Apostolic-evangelical teaching, according to him, manifests itself in the Scriptures. He was convinced that the life of the church is dependent on its bishops, which in the face of schism does not surprise. For him the church is one and so is episcopacy.<sup>56</sup>

And this unity we ought firmly to hold and assert, especially those of us that are bishops who preside in the Church, that we may also prove the episcopate itself to be one and undivided. Let no one deceive the brotherhood by a falsehood: let no one corrupt the truth of the faith . . . The episcopate is one, each part of which is held by each one for the whole. God is one, and Christ is one, and His Church is one, and the faith is one, and the people is joined into a substantial unity of body by the cement of concord.<sup>57</sup>

However, Cyprian considered the pope as *primus inter pares*. The bishop of Rome is only attributed an honorary primacy, "the true apostolic tradition is always entrusted to the whole church and not to one community."<sup>58</sup>

53. Ibid., 61–62. He was definitely not Hippolytus of Rome.

54. Blum, "Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität II. Alte Kirche," 453.

55. Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now*, 53–64. See also Blum, "Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität II. Alte Kirche," 453.

56. Blum, "Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität II. Alte Kirche," 454. Hall, "Early Idea of the Church," 52.

57. Cyprian of Carthage, "On the Unity of the Church."

58. Blum, "Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität II. Alte Kirche," 454. See also Cyprian,

In the school of Alexandria, Clement and Origen wrote primarily in pneumatological terms on apostolicity. Gnosis/the gnostic is the key concept in Clement's writings. In the *Stromata* he continuously refers to the true gnostic: "On every hand, then, the Gnostic alone testifies to the truth in deed and word. For he always does rightly in all things, both in word and action, and in thought itself" (*Strom.* 7.9). He speaks about apostolic truth, the unity of doctrine and the supernatural status of the church. For him the pneumatic *paradosis* is not given through church officials but rather by a chain of teachers.<sup>59</sup>

In *De Principiis*, Origen notes that the ecclesial kerygma coheres with the apostles' message of salvation.<sup>60</sup> As with Clement, his ideal is the spiritual-intellectual Gnostic, but he has a greater regard for the institutional, outward church.<sup>61</sup> His is a mystical and speculative theology. "What matters to him is that his spiritual-intellectual explication of Christian faith does not require any legitimation through a chain of teachers or office holders." He thought that Christ himself had shared his spiritual understanding with a small group of apostles and with the initiated.<sup>62</sup> The bishop's power is dependent in how far he shares the faith of Peter. Yet Origen points out that the church is not built on, and the keys are not given to, Peter alone but also to the other apostles: "But if you suppose that upon that one Peter only the whole church is built by God, what would you say about John . . . or each one of the Apostles? Shall we otherwise dare to say, that against Peter in particular the gates of Hades shall not prevail, but that they shall prevail against the other Apostles and the perfect? . . . For all bear the surname of rock who are the imitators of Christ."<sup>63</sup>

Origen goes so far as to say that the spiritual layperson can be superior to the bishops "who disgrace their profession."<sup>64</sup> Indeed bishops

---

"On the Unity of the Church": "Assuredly the rest of the apostles were also the same as was Peter, endowed with a like partnership both of honour and power; but the beginning proceeds from unity"

59. Blum, "Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität II. Alte Kirche," 454–55. Hall, "Early Idea of the Church," 49.

60. Blum, "Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität II. Alte Kirche," 455.

61. Hall, "Early Idea of the Church," 50.

62. Blum, "Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität II. Alte Kirche," 455.

63. Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 12.11.

64. Hall, "Early Idea of the Church," 50. Cf. Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 12.14.

and clergy are obliged to seek personal holiness so that their way of life reflects their teaching.<sup>65</sup>

Augustine, finally, regards the apostles as the fathers of the church. They are the foundation on which the church is built. Like Cyprian, he held that the bishops are the apostles' successors. For him, however, "the guarantee of the true tradition (*Überlieferung*) is neither the unity of the episcopate founded by Peter nor the primacy of the bishop of Rome, but rather the lifelong connection of the invisible pneumatic church to Christ, her head."<sup>66</sup> However, Peter's primacy is sign and symbol of the universal church, as he has received the keys. Hence apostolicity and catholicity are closely connected. It was Augustine's spiritual concept of the invisible, hidden church that would feature a millennium later in Luther's writings amongst others.

## Conclusion

What has emerged in our brief analysis is the fact that there is no clear and unified understanding of apostolicity in the early church. Rather, we find a diversity of emphases, from empirical, functional, and authoritarian notions to pronounced pneumatological and charismatic ideas of apostolicity. These ideas would have been influenced by the religious, theological, cultural, social, and political environment in which the early theologians and communities found themselves, as well as by these theologians' own interpretations of how the *ecclesia Christi* ought to develop and be shaped in the future. The early church had to defend herself against persecutions in the Gentile and Jewish world and had to discern orthodox teaching in the face of heresies from without and within. This played no small role in the development of ideas of a unified, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. The dominant emphasis on the need for unity does not come as a surprise, since minority survival was a primary issue for Christians in the first few centuries until the Christian faith finally emerged as the state religion in the Roman Empire in the late fourth century.

It is clear that the apostles—not only the Twelve—were seen as essential to the handing on of faith, as they were the ones who had been

65. Hall, "Early Idea of the Church," 50.

66. Blum, "Apostel, Apostolat, Apostolizität II. Alte Kirche," 457.

entrusted with the definitive truth of Christ. They had been given full authority; they were teachers and prophets. While the early theologians evidently laid stress on apostolic succession, the somewhat simplistic notion of an historic apostolic succession in a seamless “clinical” chain of a laying on of hands from the apostles to the bishops into our own time certainly cannot be defended. In fact, most scholars no longer adhere to this understanding, even though apostolic succession and the role of the episcopate has been re-appraised in recent ecumenical dialogues, notably in the Porvoo agreement and in the agreements between the Lutheran and Episcopal Churches in the United States.

Bishops were appointed but not in a physical “pipeline” succession. Also, as we saw, Irenaeus refers to the succession of both bishops and presbyters. What is relevant in our contemporary context of ecumenical discourse between episcopal and non-episcopal churches is the fact that *both* bishops and presbyters were entrusted with “the certain gift of truth” (Irenaeus). Primary was the handing on and guarding of the Christian truth.

For Tertullian, apostolicity is the condition to establishing that the revealed truth may be properly handed on. Reading the church fathers, one is struck again and again by their focus on truth. Having to defend the Christian faith in the context of Greek philosophy, such emphasis on the notion and defense of truth is not surprising. In the various writings, apostolic succession seems to be taken for granted and is not so much under discussion, while the *content of the message* which is to be made known in the gentile world is what occupied the early theologians. This is particularly apparent in Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and the *Traditio Apostolica* (Hippolytus) who proposed ostensibly pneumatological ideas concerning apostolicity: Hippolytus (*Traditio Apostolica*) with his idea of the bishop’s ordination as a Spirit-filled act, the church as a creation of the spirit, and his concern with Christian teaching to be imparted to the whole church; Clement and Origen for whom it is the “true Gnostic” who testifies to the truth. A chain of teachers (Clement) hands on the truth, and the teaching of the faith requires no legitimization through a succession of office holders.

The apostles and apostolicity are of central concern in the early writers, but, as we have seen, there are various emphases, tensions, and inconsistencies, not least in understanding the role of the bishop and of apostolic succession. Of course, bishops were to safeguard unity

in doctrine and unity in and among the churches. Yet, evidently, the church fathers do not all attribute the same significance to the bishops' apostolic role. What is definite is that offices in the earliest years of the church were not completely new but rather developed from the model of the synagogue communities. Offices in the church arose earlier than a unified understanding of these, i.e., there was no cohesive development of offices in the early church communities. The most significant example is the fact, as Otto Hermann Pesch points out, that while far into the second century the Roman community was still led by a collegiate of presbyters, the "monarchic" episcopate had already been established in Palestine.<sup>67</sup>

SAMPLE

67. Pesch, "Hermeneutik des Ämterwandels?," 424–25.