

Discussions with Churches

1. With Anglicans

(a) The Apostles and the Ministry of the Church

Discussions with certain groups of Anglo-Catholics have regularly to reckon with a powerful non-theological factor at work in their outlook, a deep-seated inferiority complex over against the Roman Church which repudiates the validity of their orders. It is this which leads them to lay such an unbalanced emphasis upon narrow theories of the episcopate in their restless efforts to justify the Catholicity of the Church of England by its orders rather than to understand the orders of the Church of England in the light of its Catholicity. This is of course quite un-Anglican as well as un-theological; in fact it is a definitely sectarian approach. But that is precisely the approach adopted in the notorious volume, *The Apostolic Ministry*, edited by the late Kenneth E. Kirk. Unfortunately the re-publication of this volume under the editorship of Dr. A. M. Farrer does nothing to modify that approach, for the new foreword shows very little understanding of the theological positions of those within and without the Church of England who have opposed it; all that Dr. Farrer has been content to do is to attempt to rebut a few arguments abstracted from their main theological basis and to oppose a figment which he calls a “Yes-or-No Protestantism” with a manifestly sectarian spirit and a little logic-chopping that he characteristically mistakes for theology! Why is it that these Anglicans are so unsure of themselves, and of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church of England, that they must always be casting round for some novel theory of the episcopate as something which secures to them the Holy Spirit? Fortunately this is very far removed from the position of the Church of England itself, which does not hold that episcopal succession guarantees the Holy Ghost, and which has a far profounder and more theological understanding of the Apostolicity and Catholicity

of the Church. It is time that the Church of England reasserted its historic position. Ever since the publication of *The Fulness of Christ*, there are signs that it has begun to do so with a powerful scholarship and a profound theology. That is to be welcomed everywhere, for Anglican witness without an adequate positive theology behind it cannot play a very constructive role in the world-Church to-day. Indeed, in the last ten years the situation in the Church of England has changed so much that the republication of *The Apostolic Ministry* appears like an anachronism.

It remains true, however, as Dr. Farrer avers, that that volume did throw out a challenge to rethink the doctrine of the apostolic ministry. And that must be done both within and without the Churches of the Reformation, not least by the Church of England, especially with regard to the place and significance of the apostolate itself.

The apostolic Church means the Church that is created in the apostolic mission of Christ from the Father, and of the apostles from Christ. "As the Father hath sent me, so send I you." The sending of the apostles is dependent on the sending of Christ by the Father, but is also correlative to the sending of the Holy Spirit in the Name of Christ upon the apostles and the Church. It is the Spirit who is Christ's Apostle in the strict sense in which the apostle or one sent is identical with the one who sends. Christ is Apostle in this absolute sense, for He wholly represents God in His person and work, and is the God whom He represents or manifests. The apostles, however, are sent to represent Christ in such a way that while their message is Christ's own Word, they are not personal representatives of Christ; that office is fulfilled by the Holy Spirit, the Apostle-Spirit, who is Christ's personal Representative and in whose presence it is Christ Himself who is present in Person. We have to think of the apostolate, therefore, in a twofold way: It is the mission of the apostles from Christ, but, along with that historical mission in handing on the Word of Christ, there is the Mission of the Holy Spirit from Christ who confirms that Word and through whose presence the Finished Work of Christ is really present and operative in the Church. The Church on earth is founded historically upon the apostles commissioned by Christ, but founded supernaturally by the baptism of the

Spirit sent by Christ at Pentecost; so that the Church has a double relation to Christ, historically through the apostles, and supernaturally through the Holy Spirit.

These two missions, of the apostles and of the Holy Spirit, are not to be thought of as running only in dialectical relation to one another, but as grounded in the *New Covenant* which Christ established in His Body and Blood. In this New Covenant the people of God are made one Body with Christ and the Holy Spirit is poured out upon their hearts, for God's New Covenant is not only cut into the flesh of the Body through the crucifixion of Christ but cut into the innermost beings of His people in the heart and mind of the Church. That marks the difference between the Old Testament Church and the New Testament Church, for in the New Testament Church the Word of God incarnate in Christ is incorporated into our humanity, and it is in that incarnate Word that the Church is given to participate through the Spirit. In other words, the Church is given to participate in the Covenant as it is fulfilled in Jesus Christ in His incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. The apostles were given a special place in that New Covenant at its inauguration at the Last Supper and it is through their unique relation to the Incarnate Word and the Spirit that they are constituted the foundation of the New Israel, the People of God filled with God's Spirit and incorporated into Christ as His Body. Here in the foundation of the New Covenant the apostolic obedience is knitted into the obedience of Christ, or rather, the obedience of Christ in fulfilment of the Covenant draws into itself the obedience of the apostles, so that the apostolic obedience to Christ is given a basic pattern and structure in the New Covenant as fulfilled in Christ Jesus. Because this is grounded in the New Covenant it is not a pattern and structure of obedience that rests upon its own persistence, but reposes upon the faithfulness of God in the Covenant which undergirds the apostolic obedience to Christ, sanctifies and secures it in Christ, and gives it an architectonic function in the foundation of the Church on earth. As such it is caught up into the authority of the incarnational revelation of God in Christ, and the incarnational obedience of our humanity in Christ to the Father.

That bond of the New Covenant remains steadfast and sure,

and nothing can prevail against it. It is that covenanted faithfulness of Christ which undergirds the whole foundation of the Church and the whole of its continuity throughout all the changes and chances of history. But as part of the Covenant, and in fulfilment of the promise of the Covenant, God bestowed upon His Church the Holy Spirit through whom the Church as founded upon the apostles is given to have communion with Christ really and supernaturally, as well as historically, to share in His obedience, His love and His divine life. Now the outward form that this Covenant takes in the life of the apostolic Church is found in the Holy Sacraments, the pledges of God's faithfulness in Christ, the signs and seals of His fulfilled promise. The inward form which the Covenant takes is the communion of the Spirit through which the apostolic Church is given to share in the love and life of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is that communion in the very life and love of God, that continuity through communion of the redeemed life of the Church in Christ, that is the inner substance and heart of the apostolic succession or continuity in the apostolically-founded Church.

The whole continuity of the Church in its apostolic foundation depends upon the unique character and function of the apostolate. The apostles were the chosen vessels appointed to be with Christ, to receive His Revelation and to assimilate it in their obedience to Christ and to be assimilated to it, and in that way to pass it on to the Church. But they did that as special instruments in the hand of God under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for through the Spirit Jesus Christ Himself returned to them clothed in His Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, and gave Himself to be fully known, the same historical Jesus but now shining forth in the glory of the resurrection. As such He was appropriated by the apostles in His own Spirit, in His own Truth, and in His own Light, and in all that it was Christ Himself who returned to fill out all things and to fulfil in the apostolate His own Self-Revelation and Reconciliation. That was the apostolic mission, and the primary function of the apostolate. In it we do not have the initial stage of a continuous process, but the perpetually persisting foundation of the Church and its grounding, in the incarnational Revelation and Reconciliation.

In this sense there can be no talk of apostolic succession, for that apostolic function cannot be transmitted. That is made very clear in the New Testament, in the separateness of the apostles from the other ministers in the Church. The apostles never had hands laid on them, and even when Matthias was appointed to take the place of Judas he had no hands laid on him. As Dr. Arnold Ehrhardt has pointed out, the apostles do not belong to the succession of the ministry, for they are not within it – the whole succession *depends* on them and is entirely subordinate to them. That is also clear from the fact that when the apostles died no attempt was made to fill their place, and so to give them successors in their apostolic office. (The idea that bishops are successors of the apostles was of late invention and entirely unknown to the apostolic Church itself.) Moreover, the very fact that the apostles appointed other ministers by the rite of laying on of hands – an essentially “lay-rite” – showed in unmistakable terms that they were not appointing successors to themselves but ordaining a ministry dependent upon them but of quite a different character and order, and without their judicial or magisterial authority. Only the apostles were appointed by Christ to sit upon the twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel; only apostolic witness is Holy Scripture, for their word is of judicial and magisterial authority through assimilation by Christ to His own Word. It was as such that they built up the Church, ordered it and gave it shape in its ministry and its ordinances, and above all by supplying it with the authoritative oracles of the New Testament. It was as such that they commanded the Church to be followers of them as they were of Christ, and as such that they instituted a continuing ministry different from but entirely dependent on their own.

There is therefore a secondary sense in which we can speak of “the apostolic ministry” – in relation to a succession; and this is twofold. It refers first to the Church that continues to be obedient to the apostolic teaching and commands from generation to generation. This Church continues to be apostolic when it moves out into history shaped and moulded by the apostolic tradition both in doctrine and in ordinances, and so continues to proclaim the apostolic *kerygma* and to be ordered by the apostolic *dogmata*, as the early fathers called their commands.

The Church has not only been grafted into or rooted in Christ through the apostles, but is built up and compacted together by them, and as such it multiplies and increases and is extended throughout history. And so apostolic succession means that the Church as the living Body apostolically begotten through the incorruptible Word of God continues in being in history, in reliance upon the Covenant-promises of Christ. This Church continues to be apostolic in that it continues throughout its movement and change from age to age to be schooled in the apostolic tradition, and determined by the apostolic Gospel. It is therefore a succession through the Spirit in obedience, in mission, a succession of service, of faith and doctrine, all in the continuity of the redeemed life of the people of God.

Within this apostolic succession we have also to speak of the apostolic ministry, that is of a ministerial succession within the apostolic succession of the whole Church grounded upon the apostles. That does not mean that we can think of the ministry of the historical Church as a self-perpetuating continuity, or simply as the handing on of powers apostolically delegated, but that we are to think of the ministry above all in terms of what is ministered, namely Word and Sacrament. The New Testament conception of *kerygma* takes its importance not from the preaching but from what is preached and from the source and authority from which it is derived; likewise the New Testament conception of *baptisma* takes its importance not from the rite but from the objective Christological event behind it in Christ and therefore from His Name as the source and authority for its administration. So it is with the ministry in the historical succession of the apostolic Church. The ministry of the Word is inseparable from the Word, and from the command and promise of the Lord attached to its proclamation to all nations.

The continuity of the ministry is to be understood in dependence entirely upon that living Word and within the whole continuity of the Church begotten by Him and maintained in covenant relation with Him through the apostolic Word handed on in the ministry of the Church. It is a fundamental error to abstract the ministry from that wholeness and to make it an essential and self-sufficient line of ministerial succession either of presbyters or of bishops upon which everything else is grounded from generation to generation. To isolate ministerial

succession into an independent principle is to make it demonic, for it is to make it usurp the place of Christ Himself in Word and Sacrament. There is a ministerial succession, and it is necessary for the life of the Church in history, but it is only a succession within the Body where it is used and honoured by the Lord in the freedom of His Spirit and in His *creatio continua* of the Church as His Body throughout history. It is not upon the faithfulness of the ministry or of the ministry's unbroken succession that everything depends – all that is involved in the relativity and fragmentation and contingency of our fallen world – but upon the Covenant-faithfulness of Christ Himself.

This ministerial succession within the Body of the whole apostolic tradition, which is undergirded and upheld by Christ's own faithfulness, is "the power of the keys". That is, it is a ministerial succession in relation to the power of Christ's own Word and Spirit, and the faithfulness of His own promise in sending out His apostles and the apostolic Church on its mission of proclaiming the Word of reconciliation: "Whosoever sins ye remit they are remitted, and whose soever sins ye retain they are retained." "All things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." Here the stress falls not upon the ministers of the Word of forgiveness but upon the objective Word and its divine enactment above and beyond, and, thank God, in spite of the ministers and their inadequacy and faltering faithfulness. This is the focal point in the continuation of the Church from generation to generation, namely, that it is the Word through the power of the Spirit which is mightily active to effect that which God has sent it to do, so that it does not return to Him void. The continuity of the ministry depends entirely upon that Word which is Christ's own Word and which He will unfailingly fulfil.

Now in order to understand this apostolic succession in the ministry, or rather the succession of the ministry within the whole apostolic succession of the Church, we have to note how

the Church went out from the apostles into history. The apostles were the wise master-builders, the architects, of the Church's pattern of life, faith, and ministry in conformity to the pattern of the obedience of Christ. What were the basic traditions which the apostles gave to the Church? What were the fundamental things they did in order to equip the Church for this historical mission? Here we are concerned with three things which are ultimately inseparable from one another, and they all emerge into the open toward the end of the second century as the expression of the apostolic ordering of the life and faith of the Church, but they go back to the apostles themselves. These are (1) the canon of Holy Scripture; (2) the Rule of Faith, that is the canonical structure of doctrine and worship; and (3) the apostolic ministry.

We make a big mistake if we separate the doctrine of the Scripture from the doctrine of the apostolate, and so from the apostolic foundation of the Church, but we cannot separate it altogether from the rise of the Rule of Faith either, which came eventually to have the form of the Apostles' Creed, for it was partly through the Rule of Faith that the canonical Scriptures were set aside and others rejected, and the apostolic tradition was sharply differentiated as normative and authoritative from all other tradition; while it was again the regular and responsible devolvement of the ministry from the apostles, in obedience to the apostolic commands, and within the apostolic tradition, that attested and secured the faithful keeping and handing on of the apostolic Scriptures and the Rule of Faith. While we certainly must accord the canon of Holy Scripture its supreme place, we cannot truthfully separate it either theologically or historically from its integration with the Rule of Faith and the apostolic ministry. All these three factors are inescapably intertwined and have to be considered together, and one must not be isolated from the others. That applies above all to the apostolic ministry and its continuity in the life and mission of the Church. That means, as we can see at once, that if the ministerial succession is separated from continuous subordination to the apostolic Word in the Holy Scriptures, and from sound doctrine as attested in the Rule of Faith, it is a false succession, no matter how historically unbroken the links may be. But it is also true that even if ministerial succession is broken