

Apostolic Succession

Remember: The Challenge of Heresies

- Though different in their details, the heresies were united in the challenge they put to the early church: Who or what has the authority to define the boundaries of true gospel faith for the Christian church?
- The church's response was threefold: 1) Canon, 2) Creed, and 3) Episcopacy (Apostolic Succession).¹

Review: The Rule of Faith

- Alongside of the process of settling the canon of the New Testament, the church also developed written summaries of the gospel – statements of the “rule of faith,” “rule of truth,” etc.
- Such summaries are rooted in the apostle Paul’s command (2 Tim. 1.13) and example (1 Cor. 15.1-9).
- The Rule of Faith was not a rival to the Bible, but rather a gospel summary “gathered from the plain passages of Scripture and from the authority of the church,” (St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 3.2).
- The Rule of Faith was used to instruct new converts, as a guide to interpreting Scripture, and as a standard of doctrine. Forms of the Rule were confessed by adult converts when they came for baptism.
- The Rule of Faith also grew into the church’s early ecumenical creeds: the *Apostles’* and *Nicene* creeds.

The Appeal to “Apostolic Succession”

- Basic Idea: The apostles appointed the church’s 1st bishops, handing down to them their teaching. These 1st bishops handed down their teaching to successors, and so on, down to the present.
- This unbroken line of bishops from the apostles guaranteed doctrinal integrity:

It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and the succession of these men to our own times; those who neither taught nor knew of anything like what these [heretics] rave about. For if the apostles had known hidden mysteries... they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the Churches themselves. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.1)

- This unbroken line of bishops also guaranteed the unity and validity of each individual church:

[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... 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). (Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*, 20)
- In a sense, the concept of apostolic succession was simply a stronger form of what we might today refer to as “institutional memory” – and it was seen as the ultimate proof against heresies:

If Jesus had some secret knowledge... he would have entrusted that teaching to the same apostles to whom he entrusted the churches. If those apostles had received any such teaching, they in turn would have passed it on to those who were to follow them... Therefore, had there been any such secret teaching, it should be found among the direct disciples of the apostles, and the successors of those disciples, the bishops. But the truth was that those who could... claim direct apostolic succession unanimously denied the existence of any such secret teaching... [and therefore] the Gnostic claim that there is a secret tradition with which they have been entrusted is false.²

- Note: “Apostolic succession” does not mean that the *office* of the apostles continued through bishops. Rather, it means that the *teaching* of the apostles continued to be handed down through bishops.
Question: *What did the early church mean by “bishops”? How did this office develop?*

Church Government: Three Primary Forms

- The basic question: To whom did Jesus entrust the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Mat. 16.19)?
- Episcopacy - The keys are entrusted to a hierarchy of bishops.
 - Congregationalism - The keys are entrusted to the congregation as a whole.
 - Presbyterianism - The keys are entrusted to a council of elders.

¹ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, revised ed., vol. 1. (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 75-81.

² Ibid., 80.

Evidence of Ancient Presbyterianism

In the New Testament:

- “Now from Miletus [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called the elders [lit. presbyters] of the church to come to him... ‘Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [lit. bishops]...’” (Acts 20.17, 28)
- “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers [lit. bishops] and deacons...” (Phil. 1.1)
- “Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders [lit. presbytery] laid their hands on you.” (1 Tim. 4.14)

In the Church Fathers:

- “[The apostles] appointed their first fruits, when they had tested them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons for the future believers.” (Clement of Rome, 40-100, *1st Letter to the Corinthians*, 42.4)
- “Polycarp, and the presbyters with him, to the church of God that sojourns at Philippi.... be obedient to the presbyters and deacons as to God and Christ.” (Polycarp, 69-155, *To the Philippians*, 1.1, 5.3)

The Shift to Episcopacy³

“Although there was no episcopate founded by the year 70, yet it can not be denied that, shortly after A.D. 100, it was firmly established, and that before A.D. 200 it was, so far as we know, universally received.” (14)

- Although the New Testament *teaches* a Presbyterian model, it also *shows* that in the Jerusalem church, one leader – James the Lord’s half-brother – was especially prominent (Acts 15.13, 21.18; Gal. 2.12). This tendency of a “first among equals” was the origin of the development of episcopacy in the church.
- During the first decades of the church, the elders of local or regional churches could communicate or even meet with the apostles (Acts 15.2, Rev. 1.4). But with the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) and death of the apostles, the church was plunged into a new and uncertain situation.
- In this situation, the “first among equals” pattern began to develop into more than an honorific position:
 - At first, the “bishop” was just the presiding officer of the council of elders to whom additional authority was delegated: “Not yet regarded as a separate order of men from the presbytery... they were all viewed as *chief presbyters*... not as a third, independent order or class.” (19)
- The development of the “bishop” into a more formal distinction can be traced through the writings of three church fathers: 1) Ignatius of Antioch, 2) Irenaeus of Lyons, and 3) Cyprian of Carthage:
 - Ignatius (35-110): The bishops are the physical glue of the church’s unity.⁴
 - Irenaeus (130-200): The bishops are the repository of the teaching of the apostles (*see above*)
 - Cyprian (200-258): The bishops are Christ’s personal representatives in the church.
Yet “[None of us may] set himself up as bishop of bishops.” (*Baptism of Heretics*)
- The Council of Nicaea (325) recognized the bishops of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch as “patriarchs,” and gave a similar honorary status to the bishop of Jerusalem. The Council of Constantinople (381) declared that “the Bishop of Constantinople shall have the primacy of honor after the Bishop of Rome.”
- The word “pope” means “father,” and was originally used to refer to any respected bishop – i.e., the Roman clergy write to Cyprian addressing him as “Father Cyprian” (*Letter #30*). Yet over time, the bishops of Rome made increasingly grandiose claims. The first really influential “pope” was Leo I (440-461):
 - In 452, Attila the Hun invaded Italy. The Roman Emperor was weak, and the Eastern emperor was unwilling to help. Pope Leo went out of the city to meet Attila. Their conversation was not recorded, but Attila did not attack Rome.
 - Leo believed:
 - Christ made Peter and his successors rock on which church built,
 - Peter was the 1st bishop of Rome,
 - Therefore, the bishop of Rome is the head of whole church.
- Note:** Despite such claims, “Bishops were not intended to be viewed, nor were they viewed... as successors of the Apostles... The episcopate was [originally] instituted as a higher rank within the presbytery.” (25-26)

Quite late in the ancient church period, St. Jerome (345-420) said the following of bishops:

“Presbyters are the same as bishops... But gradually all the responsibility was referred to a single person – therefore, as presbyters know that, *by the custom of the church*, they are subject to him who shall have been set over them, so let bishops know that they are superior to presbyters, *more owing to custom than to any actual ordinance of the Lord.*” (cited 19-20)

³ Quotes and insights under this section summarize J.B. Lightfoot, *Episcopacy: An Abridgement* (New York: Latimer Assoc., 1872).

⁴ See Ignatius, *To the Ephesians*, 1.3, 2.2, 4.1; *To the Philadelphians*, 4.1.