

# The visible church in the light of history

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# THE VISIBLE CHURCH

## IN THE LIGHT OF HISTORY.

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By the Incarnation, which is the sending of the Word with the mission of redemption, God has closely linked His spiritual eternal truth with our visible world of external facts and concrete realities. Let us then take Jesus Christ Himself as the starting point of that chain of mission in the human sphere for which we are seeking<sup>1)</sup> as the backbone of the visible Church, and our first step must be to ascertain whether He made any use of this principle of definite mission, or whether He simply collected round Him a band of disciples who full individually of His Spirit would shine as lights in the world so that men seeing their good works might in their turn glorify their Father in heaven.

He did indeed in this sense mean all His disciples to be His missionaries, and missionaries they all are whether for good or for evil if only because a city set on a hill cannot be hid, but He did not rest content with this, He went on to use all such means, all such modes of mission, as were now through His Incarnation in harmony with the work of redemption.

Thus on one occasion He chose out seventy of His disciples and sent them to proclaim the kingdom of God; the special responsibility of these men was as far as we know temporary, but in any case their appointment establishes the fact that our Lord did make use of the principle of definite mission.

But in the case of the twelve men known pre-eminently as the apostles—messengers, missionaries, delegates or ambas-

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<sup>1)</sup> A reference to the article «The visible Church» in n° XXX of this Review will make clearer the standpoint and bearing of the pages following here.

sadors just as we may prefer to translate the word,— we find a definite mission given to a chosen few made permanent.

This is evident even from the Gospel of S<sup>t</sup> John where all mention of external rites and official appointments is most markedly avoided, where even the distinctive and almost official name of apostle is never applied to the missionary band. For though the Evangelist does not call them by this name he continues to distinguish them as the Twelve, the Twelve specially chosen by their Lord.

Consider the special appeal made to them when many of the disciples had turned back. “Will ye also go away?... Did not I choose you the Twelve? And one of you is a devil.” And if in the aorist in English there is a suggestion that the state resulting from the action of the verb is a thing of the past, it is not so in New Testament Greek; indeed its use here if it could be pressed at all would rather emphasise the permanence of the distinctive position of the Twelve, inasmuch as while the act of the choosing is so completely a thing of the past that it can be appropriately referred to in the aorist, the Twelve are still the Twelve, an altogether distinct company as the whole context and circumstances plainly imply.

Or again let us take the events of the last Passover in the upper room, at the very close of our Lord's ministry. It is from S<sup>t</sup> Luke not from S<sup>t</sup> John that the direct statement comes that those who were then present were the apostles, but even from S<sup>t</sup> John we can learn that whether or no they were the original Twelve in person, they were there on a common special footing and the occurrences related are consistent with the presence of only a small company. We know the names of six of them, and these six are all of the original Twelve. Of these also one was Judas Iscariot, so that personal nearness to Christ was not what had brought them together. The discourse addressed to them, while containing much that has a very general application, contains much also that points to a specially chosen band, membership in which did not necessarily admit to participation in all the blessings spoken of. “I speak not of you all. I know whom I chose...He that receiveth whomsoever I send receiveth me.”

Or again, referring to a time after the resurrection, to say nothing of the date at which he is writing, S<sup>t</sup> John describes S<sup>t</sup> Thomas as “one of the Twelve”.

During then the whole of our Lord's bodily presence on the earth the position of the Twelve whom He had appointed as His peculiar Messengers remained so markedly distinct that we can find it without the possibility of mistake even in the pages of St John. Or if it be desirable to have some further evidence as to the forty days that followed the resurrection, we may recall the opening verses of the Acts. "The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach until the day in which he was taken up, after that he, through the Holy Ghost, had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen. To whom also he showed himself alive after his passion..., speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God."

But now before we trace further the continuance of the apostles' mission, it will be well to notice that while it is the fact rather than the content of that mission that is the vital point in this investigation, it would nevertheless be far from a simplification of our task to exclude all reference to the latter; let us always remember then that its centre and essence was the proclamation of the gospel of forgiveness and life through Jesus Christ and the admission of members to the brotherhood by baptism. As to additional elements we shall not concern ourselves, indeed to prove that there were such in the commission received directly from Christ would be no easy task. We know indeed that in the last forty days He spoke to the apostles of the things pertaining to the kingdom, and it would be natural to suppose that He then gave them such definite instructions as to the conduct of Church affairs that they would be distinguished in many additional particulars from the general body of the faithful, but a careful consideration of the subsequent narrative does not justify us in making any more definite statement than that there lay upon these a great implied obligation to accept, as in fact they did, the brotherly guidance of the apostles and in after days of those that were entrusted with the great commission.

Christ left the infant Church the necessary material and the right spirit for its own edification, but not a cut and dry code of canons, and the chosen Messengers on whom above all other he had urged the blessedness of humility and the glory of ministry were not at the last moment bidden to claim all

obedience as lords of the heritage by Christ's appointment; no, Christ's direct commission only bade them continue as Christ Himself had begun, and if we would know the nature of the things that He „commanded” we must turn to the Sermon on the Mount. We are not however called on positively to deny that there were any additional elements in the commission as it came from Christ, but only to assert that there was none other so distinct as the unique responsibility for preaching the gospel; and if S<sup>t</sup> Paul was able to exclaim that Christ had sent him not to baptize but to preach it must have been because he felt that whatever else the commission may have covered in addition was subordinate and accessory to the proclamation of the gospel. So then let this indisputable and undisputed element of the apostles' mission help to fix for us the all important fact that there was given to them a mission not given to the generality of the faithful, and help us at the same time to recognise it when it is spoken of in terms of its content.

This also is the place to notice that the due fulfilment of the mission, applying as we shall find it did to all subsequent ages, required that they who were its sole and plenary recipients should transmit it to successors, but that at the same time these two elements, the immediate performance of the obligation and the transmission of it, are separable to this extent that it would be a perfectly natural proceeding that one who had full authority should in certain circumstances send out another to preach without in any way empowering him to transmit to others the sanction he had himself received. Especially when the question of official position in the brotherhood was bound up with that of the apostolic sanction would this natural proceeding become inevitable; and this quite irrespective of the reasons by which it had come to pass that an official status was involved, it would matter nothing how far it was due to a necessity rising directly from the mission itself, and how far to the general action of the believers.

To return to actual history, we have seen that on to the end of the forty days the apostolic character of the eleven remained distinct and valid, and we now go on to see that as we might have expected the apostles not only retained their character after that, but also proceeded to transmit their commission to others, showing that they did not regard it as

a purely personal one that might be left to die with themselves, but rather as a permanent fount of evangelisation.

That in doing so they acted in accord with our Lord's intention is not only probable from the nature of the case but is also made very manifest from His final charge to the Eleven as recorded by S<sup>t</sup> Matthew: "Go ye therefore and teach all nations..., and lo! I am with you even unto the end of the world." It matters very little then whether or no there were any more explicit direction given to this end, the apostles' action was so obviously right and natural from every point of view that even on their own personal authority we should accept it as readily and as thankfully as their own contemporaries did.

For as we shall also see this commission was in fact recognised by the Church in general as justifying them in submitting to the leadership of the apostles, who in their turn were willing to work as true ministers not lording it over God's heritage.

Let one occurrence, the ordination of S<sup>t</sup> Matthias, suffice here to establish these points. It took place indeed before the signs of Pentecost had been vouchsafed, the apostles referred all that was done very directly to the action of God, and they did not as far as the narrative shows employ what afterwards became the usual ceremony of the laying on of hands, but not one of these things obscures for a moment the fundamental principles that ruled the appointment.

The office to which S<sup>t</sup> Matthias was raised was that of Christ's apostolate, that special apostolate distinct from anything inherent in the nature of simple discipleship; the transaction was carried through under the initiative and active authority of those who were already apostles; they did not however act as autocrats but as brothers in consultation with brothers.

The immediate motive of the appointment seems to have been to maintain the number of the apostles at twelve, doubtless in remembrance of our Lord's declaration that they would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel, and this supports the belief that they had received at most only a general direction to provide for the continuance of their office and that the manner of doing so was left to their own discre-

tion to arrange as circumstances might require. This conception of Christ's kingdom as an earthly one with its centre at Jerusalem under the hegemony of the children of Israel may also have had something to do with the appointment of James as Bishop of Jerusalem inasmuch as he was of the house of David; and we find the idea of twelve being the proper number for an apostolic college curiously illustrated at Alexandria, to which we return in a later chapter, but apart from these two cases we have here a unique feature in the ordination of Matthias but yet not one touching in any way the essence of his office.

Moreover the narrative shows us decisively that the apostolic office did not consist in the mere possession of certain qualifications, but was obtained by definite appointment after deliberate selection; naturally it was an eyewitness of our risen Lord that was chosen, but there were hundreds of eyewitnesses, and yet only twelve apostles. Neither is there anything in all this to afford the slightest presumption that those who were apostles would allow their mission to lapse when the supply of eyewitnesses should fail, just indeed when the need for men personally responsible and specially authorised for proclaiming the message would be growing particularly urgent.

But as the apostolic character is carrying with it an ecclesiastical status, and the church is a brotherhood, so though the appointment is made at the motion and under the sanction of the Eleven, the people are not ignored, they are invited and gladly respond to the invitation to cooperate by helping to select a fit person for the apostolate; it may be indeed, for the narrative is very condensed, that the whole active part was taken by the Apostles themselves, but in any case it was in the presence and with the assent of the people that the affair was transacted.

On the other hand there is no trace of any assumption on the people's part that they were on an equality with the Eleven as the fount or channel of the apostolate.

The ordination of Matthias illustrates both heads of our second proposition, namely that the Apostles in no way lorded it over their brethren, and that the people in their turn gladly gathered round the Apostles as a centre of corporate life.

As we continue our survey we find, with the exceptions already noted, no more trace of the conception of the Kingdom of Christ as subordinate to the Twelve Tribes with Jerusalem as its capital. The dispersion after the martyrdom of Stephen, the pressing in of the Gentiles with Cornelius at their head free from the law of Moses, the apostolate of S<sup>t</sup> Paul, all the realities that experience found would first impede and then make impossible the realisation of the original idea. For the rest then, the records present us with the formation of a graded ministry through the gradual devolution of the Apostles' responsibilities, beginning with the lower as is natural and ending with the higher; for the Apostles, whether as messengers of Christ or as accepted officers of the church, would first require help in the execution of their everyday labours, and their last necessity would be to coopt men into the fulness of their own authority. The ordination of Matthias which we have just examined does not indeed fall within this sequence of development, but it does not contradict it for there was a special motive that prompted it, that is, not the need of daily help, but the desire of formally perfecting the apostolate; further, as we have seen, the substance of the act was independent of any transient conceptions as to form, and we may still say of it what Lightfoot says of the appointment of the seven deacons that "it is in short one of those representative facts of which the earlier part of his (S<sup>t</sup> Luke's) narrative is almost wholly made up". (Diss. on the Apost. Age, pp. 144, 145.)

It is the appointment of the Seven that we must next consider. Here as before the Apostles initiate and direct the proceedings in a spirit of brotherly cooperation, they make however no immediate reference of the appointment to the direct action of God, but speak of it as being their own doing, and it is recorded also that they use the ceremony of the laying on of hands.

But the case of the Seven is important for us not only because they were appointed under apostolic authority, but also because they were not raised to an equality with the Twelve, but simply in order to do the work that the development of events had made it desirable that they should do. They were ordained to serve tables, and this shows us also that whether possible or no in theory to separate between the



purely apostolic character and that of an accepted guide and minister of the church, there was no separation made in practice, for if any function might be regarded as belonging to the people generally the serving of tables might be, and yet the Seven were appointed as fully under the sanction of the Twelve as S<sup>t</sup> Matthias had been. It is not of capital importance to know the exact terms of their mission, or to decide whether or no it corresponded exactly with that of those who in later ages were called deacons, for we are in no way contending for any inherent necessity in the threefold form of the ministry, but at the same time it is well worthy of remark that though tables alone are explicitly mentioned as their responsibility and were undoubtedly the cause that suggested their appointment, yet any reference to their actual doings describes them as preaching the word as if in obedience to a new responsibility, and certainly the ultimate aim of their appointment was that the gospel might be more fully proclaimed.

The unsettled forms of things themselves in N. T. times, as distinct from their inner life-giving principle, together with the fluid state of the vocabulary whereby there was as yet no strict technical terminology, would render it a very delicate and hazardous undertaking to press minute points into bearing witness in our investigation, and therefore we shall pass them by and touch only on such as stand prominently out as relevant to the crucial question whether or no the ministerial office maintained its initial character and continued to be apostolic, that is depending at least in part on the apostolic sanction, and not entirely deriving from the inherent prerogative of the whole Christian people.

S<sup>t</sup> Luke having in the opening chapters of the Acts given an account of the foundation of the church with typical examples of her operation turns to the narrative of the life and labours of S<sup>t</sup> Paul. Accordingly in the later portions, we find no further detailed accounts of ordinations but simply passing references to the fact of their having occurred, or glimpses of new men in evident actual possession of office, and thus if we are unable to find any good reason for believing that a change of method was introduced, and still more if we find continued indications of the apostolic or missionary character of the ministry, we must conclude that it did in fact

continue to be apostolic with regard at least to one of its main purposes and one of its essential sanctions.

When then we find James, the Lord's brother, who was not one of the original apostles, endowed distinctly with their title, acting not only as their equal but as their official spokesman at least in Jerusalem, and possessed also of a very distinct leadership in the church of that city; and when we find also mention of a body of presbyters as existing there, distinctly not the equals of the apostles, we are shut up to the conclusion that the ordination of S<sup>t</sup> James was essentially the same as that of Matthias, and that of the presbyters the same as that of the Seven, that is James was chosen with the hearty cooperation of the people to receive an office endowed with the full apostolic prerogative, the presbyters to an office endowed with part of it, in any case not to be undertaken without the sanction and blessing of those whom Christ in the flesh had sent, of those who were now the accepted guides and leaders of the church.

Turning now to S<sup>t</sup> Paul we find that he likewise was an apostle, and that in the special sense of the term, for he not only held Christ's commission, but he had also received it directly from Christ Himself. He was "an apostle not of man, not even (*οὐδὲ*) through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead<sup>1</sup>)".

And we cannot read a letter of his without feeling that this commission was the mainspring of his activity and the ground of his boldness in exhortation and in rebuke. "Though I preach the gospel I have nothing to glory of, for necessity is laid upon me, yea woe is me unto me if I preach not the gospel. For if I do this willingly I have a reward, but if against my will, I have a stewardship committed unto me." (I Cor. IX, 16.)

But all important though it be rightly to understand S<sup>t</sup> Paul's mind on this point yet it is so obvious that we need quote no further in support of it. Only let us keep clear before our minds that he never once attributed his stewardship to the

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<sup>1</sup>) Gal. I, 1. It is perhaps right to regard *Θεοῦ* as governed grammatically by *διὰ*, but it is evident that S<sup>t</sup> Paul's point of view is that God the Father is the source of the mission, and Christ the transmitter. But the point of the description as it affects the argument in the text is not touched.

popular voice, and that if he thankfully accepted the laying on of the hands of the “prophets and teachers” at Antioch, it was neither from them nor through them that he obtained his high office. This incident may have something to say as to the meanings and uses of the ceremony of the laying on of hands but it has nothing to do with S<sup>t</sup> Paul’s apostolic character; we have to refer to it again in connection with S<sup>t</sup> Barnabas, here let it suffice to notice that the historian is markedly careful not to apply to the action of the church in Antioch any word implying mission, and that certainly S<sup>t</sup> Paul could never have described himself as he habitually does if he had in any sense received his apostleship from or even through the prophets and teachers of Antioch. Even where he finds it desirable to appeal to the formal recognition of his position it is not their action to which he points but to the fellowship accorded him by those who were apostles before him, James, Cephas, and John, of whom one as we have seen was not appointed directly by the Lord<sup>1</sup>).

But now before we ask how S<sup>t</sup> Paul for his part faced the question of the future, and what provision he made that the responsibility laid upon him should continue to be met after his own day, it will be fitting to glance at the position of men like Barnabas and Silas who though they were in Christ before him were yet associated so closely with his work that it would not be safe to consider their position merely with regard to the organisation of the old Church in Jerusalem. We have seen a real solidarity existing between S<sup>t</sup> Paul and the original apostles, and we might assume that it was complete but it is at least safer to examine every point independently, and so in the present instance to ascertain what we can about these two men who served in both branches of the church, and whether any apostolic position accorded to them in Jerusalem was recognised by S<sup>t</sup> Paul.

We must remember however that S<sup>t</sup> Luke in the Book of the Acts is not writing a treatise on primitive church government for the benefit of the twentieth century but, especially when he has taken up the story of S<sup>t</sup> Paul, is drawing a picture of the founding of the churches from a personal point of

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<sup>1</sup>) For S<sup>t</sup> Paul’s position see also note on *χαρίτις* at end of chapter.

view for the sake of those who accepted the constitution of the Church as an obvious matter of fact; hence we must not think it strange that he does not pause to explain the exact official position of every wellknown name that he has occasion to mention, and as silence is significant for the negative only when it is inconsistent with the positive, we must not press it in the present case and must be thankful for casual references and sidelights in our search.

S<sup>t</sup> Barnabas was a man noted for fervent charity and earnest speech; he was sent out by the church in Jerusalem (*ἐξαποστειλλω*) to visit Antioch when it became known that Christ was being preached in that city, evidently for the purpose of examining and if necessary correcting the doctrine there being taught and of uniting the two cities in the bands of brotherhood. Are we to infer from the terms used that the apostles had for this special occasion abdicated their functions, and that this mission had its whole sanction in the popular will? No more than we should infer from the expression "the Scottish Church sent Seabury to the United States" that Seabury never received due episcopal consecration. The apostles have up to this time taken a distinctive part in such matters, on the very next occasion of the kind the sending of Judas and Silas they receive prominent mention, it would then be wholly gratuitous and even against all probability to suppose that their sanction counted for nothing in the mission of Barnabas; moreover as there was no intrinsic superiority of Jerusalem over Antioch the meaning and utility of his mission would be singularly attenuated by any such supposition.

Both in narrative and in fact S<sup>t</sup> Barnabas is associated with S<sup>t</sup> Paul on terms of equality, and even at first as having a precedency of honour: We find the two described as "the apostles" (Acts XIV, 14); it has indeed been strangely suggested that this term means that they had been sent out by the church in Antioch, but such a description of them would be wholly irrelevant to the circumstances and to be intelligible would require a genitive of the sender, and the name is clearly used in some absolute and familiar sense, and this can be only the sense in which it applies to S<sup>t</sup> Paul elsewhere, to the Twelve, to James of Jerusalem and the like. What S<sup>t</sup> Paul himself would have felt inclined to say about his title of apostle being due to Antioch S<sup>t</sup> Luke must have been perfectly

well aware, and as said above we find him very careful to avoid the use of any expression that would seem to suggest that S<sup>t</sup> Paul received any authority whatever from the church in that city, the prophets and teachers are bidden “separate” him and Barnabas for a work to which they had already been called, and accordingly after blessing them they “let them go”, they do not “send them out”.

Finally (I Cor. IX, 6) S<sup>t</sup> Paul places Barnabas with himself very distinctly in the category of the apostles, asking indignantly if they two had become subject to disabilities unknown to all other of like rank.

Barnabas then was in the natural sense of the term an apostle, and his case carries us one step further in showing the permanency of the apostolic office itself and the ease with which the significant title of apostle might have been retained had not the lapse of time increased the reverence men felt for the original Twelve and at the same time dimmed their perception of the essential note of the permanent office.

The consideration of the case of Silas, or Silvanus, who like Barnabas comes from the Church in Jerusalem and is associated with S<sup>t</sup> Paul as of equal rank, would yield with hardly less distinctness the same result, and though opinions may differ as to the exact weight to be attributed to such cases as being in themselves independent proof of what we maintain as to the apostolic office, this is due to the fact that history sheds on them only an imperfect light, and it is no small thing that there is nothing about them that needs to be explained away, that they appear exactly as the truth of our proposition requires that they should.

Again as S<sup>t</sup> Paul’s association with these men shows how thoroughly united he was with the Church in Jerusalem, so also a detailed consideration of the ecclesiastical acts in which they were joined with him would throw back light in the nature of the office they brought with them, but for brevity’s sake we shall not enlarge upon this, but shall now centre our attention upon S<sup>t</sup> Paul himself, and speak of him as the originator of those arrangements in his own field of work which he certainly sanctioned and in the carrying out of which he had so large a share

He then very early in his career began to appoint elders, or guardians as they are sometimes called, in the various churches

which he founded, and about these men we notice the following points: —

In all references to them and their work there is a complete avoidance of the old hieratic terminology; the proper signification of this is outside our present scope inasmuch as we are looking at the fact of the apostolic commission and not at its content beyond the proclamation of the Gospel, but we must not allow this remarkable point to blind us to the essentially spiritual and doctrinal character of the elders' office as S<sup>t</sup> Paul designed it. For an illustration of this his mind let us turn to his address to the Ephesian elders at Miletus; there he speaks first of the fulness with which he himself when present among them had declared the whole counsel of God, and then proceeds to tell them that in his absence it was their duty in like manner to take care of the flock and shield it from wolves, that is men speaking perverse things. This is the burden of the address and we see from it that the elder was called upon above all things to perform that work which is the functional part of the apostolic office itself so far as we have looked into it.

In the epistles to Timothy and Titus we find the same thing with fuller glimpses into the other duties that of necessity fell to the shepherds of a settled flock in the then existing social conditions.

But there is nowhere any indication of these elders receiving the apostolic office in its entirety; nowhere do we find them coopting fellow-workers into their ranks.

And as to the part of the people in general, did we look for a universal and cast-iron system of procedure, we should even have some difficulty in explaining the total absence of any trace of the popular voice in the selection of those whom S<sup>t</sup> Paul and his colleagues appointed; but it is not really material whether this be due to a somewhat remarkable omission in the narratives or to the pioneer nature of the work which compelled the apostle as a general thing to retain a great deal in his own hand which in the more settled churches, as in Jerusalem, would naturally fall to the people.

J. T. F. FARQUHAR.

(To be continued.)

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