

Returning to the Apostolic Message

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There were once Christians who knew the apostles. This fact is almost unbelievable for Christians today. Peter, Paul, John, James son of Zebedee, James the relative of Jesus, and the others were once really alive, talking and living with their converts. Today, those men stand within the Christian community as almost larger than life figures. Millions of people around the globe are named after them, and many types of art have attempted to capture them. Perhaps most importantly of all, they (and possibly also pseudepigraphers writing in their names) are among the most widely read people today with their texts contained in the New Testament and revered by many as the infallible word of God. It would seem that today (and, for that matter, ever since the apostles died), Christians are trying to relive the experience that that first Christian generation had, that of learning under and living with the apostles.

While the reasons for this are fairly obvious, it would do no harm to summarize them here. The central event for the Christian is Jesus' resurrection, and the impact of that event is primarily learned from Jesus' teachings and instructions during his lifetime and, most importantly, during his post-resurrection appearances. Thus, those to whom he appeared are the recipients of the greatest divine revelation in history. This revelation, aside from being the simple announcement that Jesus had been resurrected, in some early Christian texts also appears to be a commission to go and spread news of the resurrection and its significance within the context of Jesus' early ministry. We see this, for instance, in the first canonical Gospel when the resurrected Jesus states, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you..." (Mt. 28:19-

20a). The recipients of this calling, the apostles, then went on to carry out this duty and spent the rest of their lives evangelizing.

However, as time went on and they died (Peter, Paul, and James, Jesus' relative, appear to have been executed in the 60s; James son of Zebedee died much earlier, and John perhaps lived later), Christians lost their direct connection (the apostles) with the most significant event of all time. They could no longer rely on the apostle's teachings directly, and instead had to preserve what teachings had been made and carry them from generation to generation – a tradition Christians continue today. Thus, the church remains founded and totally dependent on the apostolic message that had been given to that first Christian Communities. Christians ever since have tried to replicate as accurately as possible the experience of the first generation, which is why, unlike some other philosophies and religions that have been able to evolve freely over time, Christianity has remained rooted in an unshakable core: for it to retain its significance, it must remain rooted in the resurrection, which means rooted in the apostolic message. As Ralph Keen writes,

The impulse to preserve as much as possible of the first generation's experience points to an important fact about the early church. Instead of being a body of concepts that could be refined and perfected, even completed, over the course of time, the core of early Christianity lay in a set of experiences....¹

Thus, an understanding of that first generation is of supreme importance to Christians today

With that in mind, we will now attempt to delve into that fascinating time period. It is, of course, futile to think that we can fully examine the whole church of that time

¹ Ralph Keen, *The Christian Tradition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Inc., 2004), 43.

right now, but we can examine its by far most important feature, namely, its relationship with the apostles. In other words, if Christians today wish to sit at the apostles feet as the early Christians did, they would be wise to examine how the apostles led the early church and how much authority they claimed for themselves. To do this, we will discuss two important points that are sometimes misunderstood (particularly among conservative Christians) about the apostles' claim to authority and, through this, their relationship to the church: (1) the apostles' ministry was primarily oral and was not a systematic attempt to set out the apostolic message in written form, and (2) the apostles, when they did write, never considered themselves nor were considered as perfect reflections of God's word.

To look at the first point, it is perhaps most enlightening to compare the early church's relationship with the apostles in light of its differences with how many Christians today view their current relationship with the apostles. Today, Christians' most important apostolic link is through their surviving writings. This has generated a false impression that the apostles' most important role was creating a written theology and code of conduct for the church. This false impression is, of course, understandable: a person's writings, being physical, will survive long after their conversations, thoughts, and actions have been forgotten, and thus future generations will tend to think of a person in terms of his or her writings. Thus, the contemporary Christian, while of course still remembering the apostles' actions, is more inclined to think of them as writers rather than oral teachers.

This, however, is completely different from the early church's impression. They had personal relationships with the apostles and listened to their oral teachings. While they did read (and, as can be seen from the texts' preservation, cherished) the apostolic

writings, they were much more grounded in the apostles' physical presence among them. The apostles that founded churches were, after all, traveling evangelists; they would go from place to place, interact with the local people, share their message, and then work with their converts in organizing a Christian community. Usually, their writings only came once such a community had been established and then usually as an addition or clarification to already-given oral teachings. Paul, for instance, clearly did not consider his writings to be superior to his oral ministry, as can be seen in a small but very significant side note in 1 Corinthians: "About the other things I will give directions when I come" (11:34b). Clearly, no one composing a systematic and total theological statement would write like this. (A similar sentiment can be seen in the probably later letter by the author of 2 and 3 John: "I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink; I hope to see you soon, and we will talk together face to face" (3 John 13-14).)

Also, of supreme importance, the epistles were only written when an apostle was away and could not use his preferred medium of verbal teaching, nor, also importantly, do we know of any case in which an apostle went to a city and arrived presenting a prepared written text to supplement his teachings. In addition, it is very significant that no New Testament text explicitly states that it is written for the community in which the apostle was residing; they were either sent elsewhere to act as replacements for the apostle's physical presence or had unstated destinations. What this all means is that the apostles were not interested in establishing a systematic theology in written form. Had they been, the first churches would have been quite different. The apostles would have collectively prepared a standard written text or collection of texts, and those writings would have been presented to the new converts (and, most likely, would have survived to

this day). It is very important to remember that the New Testament as we know it did not form until long after the apostles' deaths; had they wanted to found the first churches under a canon, they could easily have done so). Thus, we can say that a fundamental quality of the early church was that it was led by direct relationships with and teachings from the apostles, and that these relationships were not written ones (as the apostle's relationships with later Christians would be reduced to) but personal and interactive.

With regard to my second point, the first generation did not live under the impression of the apostles as the infallible spokesmen of god. While some Christians today think this (again, largely because they have been reduced to a relationship merely with the apostles' writings), it is difficult to see how the apostle's contemporaries would have had such an opinion, for they actually lived with the apostles and saw them as simple human beings and experienced them as sinners like everyone else.

They also did not see the apostles as theologically infallible because they witnessed the infighting that went on among them. After all, the early Christians could hardly consider the apostles the bearers of a systematic, unified, and perfect word of God when Paul is doing such things as publicly writing to the church in Galatia criticizing Peter: "But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas [Peter] before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Gal 2:14). Thus, while Christians today might consider the apostles a unified, holy group, Christians then would not have thought this at all, and some would even have considered themselves as supporters of one apostle against another. We must always remember that the Apostolic

Era was not a time of theological bliss but was, just as every future Christian generation would be, marked by theological disagreement.

In addition, the apostles did not likely expect such a meticulous adherence as some Christians give to the New Testament today. Paul, for instance, did not consider all his writings to be the infallible word of God, as is evidenced in such statements as this: “Now concerning the unmarried, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy” (1 Cor 7:25). No one who thinks he is writing the word of God would say such a thing. As Keen states, “Originally meant as private communications, often from one apostolic leader to a community, the Epistles were probably not intended to carry the universal and binding authority that they were later to acquire.”² It is thus important to note that there is little in the New Testament to suggest that the authors thought that they were writing scripture for the early church.

This is not to say, though, that the early Christians were at all blind to the power of apostolicity. Paul, in his surviving writings, repeatedly relies upon the power of his apostolic position, such as in Galatians: “For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:11-12). This can also be seen in the authority that he exerts over the apostles' converts, such as Philemon: “Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say” (21). Thus, while the early Christians could not have felt the same aura about the apostles that some Christians do today, they certainly revered and submitted themselves to apostolic authority.

² *Ibid.*, 42.

In summary, then, the early church stands as a fascinating and extremely important time in church history. As Christians today seek to understand that generation as their gateway to the apostolic message, there are a couple major aspects of that church that they should remember. First, the early church was not based on a canon but on direct interaction with the apostles. This point is particularly ironic when one considers that today many Christians use their canon as a means to return to an era that itself did not have a canon. Second, the early church could not have considered itself as living in the midst of infallible messengers of God in the same way as many Christians today consider the apostles as infallible writers of God's word. With the infighting among the apostles and the churches' personal knowledge of the apostles' shortcomings, they could not have held the simplistic view of today that the apostles were in any way perfectly inspired. Both of these points are critical in understanding the early church in terms of its most important and unique characteristic, the direct leadership of the apostles. These points should also be remembered the next time one reads the New Testament. After all, if the early church is so important, wouldn't it be best to read the apostles' writings in the same frame of mind that the early church did?