

AFTER THE APOSTLES

Mark Schuler
(*emeritus*, Concordia University, Saint Paul)

Abstract: In the post-apostolic period, a synthesis emerged so that *ἀπόστολος* from that point on referred to the Twelve and Paul. No other person carried that designation. The authority exercised by the apostles was transferred to the bishops through a process of succession that developed in response to false teaching and disunity in the church. This apostolic succession protected the teaching of the church and clarified authority within the church. Simultaneously but more gradually, the canonization of the New Testament came to preserve the content of apostolic witness and teaching about Jesus, his death and resurrection, and the theological implications of his person and work for the church. Forged by Trinitarian and Christological controversies, the church catholic emerged with a bi-polar structure that vested authority in a monarchical bishopric succeeding the apostolate and a canonical text preserving the teaching of the apostles.

INTRODUCTION

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul asserted, “Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph 4:7). Then he enumerated, “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles...” (Eph 4:11). These verses set the itinerary for our time together. Who or what are these “apostles”? And what is the significance of this gift of Christ for the church today?

Yesterday, we looked at Biblical materials to ascertain the origins of early Christian apostolicity. The most important conclusions of this initial study of apostolicity were twofold:

1. that we must seek our understanding from the words of the New Testament and
2. that various New Testament writers do not use *ἀπόστολος* in the same way.

Paul uses *ἀπόστολος* as his primary self-designation and fills that word with his particular experience – his call from Jesus on the road to Damascus, his life-long mission to the Gentile world, his willingness to serve, his proclamation of the Gospel, and even his sufferings. What God made of and did through Paul is the primary meaning that Paul gave to the term *ἀπόστολος*. But it was not the only meaning, for Paul could use the term as a designation for other fellow workers (without explaining exactly what he means by that) and could even use the term broadly when speaking of “apostles and prophets.” For Paul, the term is specific to himself but also applies to others.

Luke has a narrower range of usage. For the most part, the *ἀπόστολοι* are the Twelve, especially in their roles as leaders of the community and authoritative witnesses to the words and deeds of Jesus. This usage also is replicated in most other occurrences of *ἀπόστολος* in the New Testament.

Who or what is an apostle? And who were the first apostles? The usage in the New Testament is not uniform. It depends on the writer and the situation being addressed by the writer.

Today, we turn our attention to the time immediately after the first Apostles. We shall do so in three parts. Firstly, we shall look at the use of *ἀπόστολος* in post apostolic writers. We shall discover in so doing that the Pauline usage disappears and the Lucan usage becomes an essential component of a new synthesis in Irenaeus and subsequent writers. Secondly, we shall trace two new developments in early Christianity as the first apostles passed from the scene: the concept of apostolic succession and the formation of the canon of the New Testament. These two trends were concurrent and competing.

Let us begin in the name of Jesus.

ΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΣ IN POST-APOSTOLIC WRITERS¹

A more fluid definition of ἀπόστολος, as we saw in Paul, continues in some post-apostolic writers.

In *1 Clement*, from the end of the first century, the author states that God has sent Christ. Christ has entrusted the gospel to the apostles. The apostles installed bishops or presbyters and deacons, and at the same time gave command to them that after their death other approved people should be entrusted with these offices by the whole community.² But Clement does not use the language of the Twelve. Two of the "good apostles" are named: Peter and Paul.³ Both qualify also in distinction from Apollos, as apostles.⁴ Elsewhere, Paul is called the "blessed apostle,"⁵ and the apostles are distinguished from the "pillars" as Paul distinguished himself in Galatians 2.⁶ These passages fit quite well into the picture of the apostle which was well known to Clement from the letters of Paul and which lay close at hand, a picture which is not limited to the Twelve.⁷

Ignatius of Antioch, who died in the first third of the second century, mentions the apostles in his writings. The apostles are the guarantors of the true gospel, with whom one must be in agreement;⁸ for from them come the δόγματα⁹ and δαιτάγματα,¹⁰ which are in conformity with the will of God.¹¹ The apostles are holy figures of the past whom one must honor.¹² Ignatius cannot place himself on a par with them.¹³ But he often compares them with the πρεσβύτεροι: "Subject yourselves to the presbyters, as to the apostles of Christ, for the presbyters act in the place of the συνέδριον of the apostles."¹⁴ Thus, Ignatius knows the apostles primarily as a group of several persons. From among their company only Paul and Peter are mentioned by name, and in fact jointly in the *Epistle to the Romans*.¹⁵ Paul, the chief apostle, is also mentioned explicitly if extravagantly in the *Epistle to the Ephesians* 12:2.¹⁶

Polycarp was the Bishop of Smyrna. He died in 155 CE. Although he was a bishop, he never calls himself one. Instead, he places himself with the πρεσβύτεροι.¹⁷ For him as for the Philippians, Paul is the true authority because he has perfectly taught the Word of truth.¹⁸ Polycarp does mention "the apostles who evangelized us" (οἱ εὐαγγελισάμενοι ἡμᾶς ἀπόστολοι),¹⁹ to whom the community is indebted. He also writes of the "other apostles" (λοιποὶ ἀπόστολοι) who appear alongside Paul.²⁰ Paul, probably Peter, and then the λοιποὶ ἀπόστολοι of I Corinthians 9:5 most likely are the apostles whom Polycarp knows. There is no mention in Polycarp of the Twelve.²¹

The *Shepherd of Hermas* from the mid-second century consistently places "the apostles" (οἱ ἀπόστολοι) together with "the teachers" (οἱ διδάσκοι) in a formal fashion, as distinct from the apostolate

¹ The primary source materials are conveniently gathered and summarized by Walter Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church*, ed. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 235–55, 278–86.

² Clement of Rome, *1 Clement*, 42:1–5.

³ 5:3.

⁴ 47:4.

⁵ 47:1.

⁶ 5:2–6.

⁷ Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church*, 244–45.

⁸ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 11:2.

⁹ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Magnesians*, 13:1–2.

¹⁰ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Trallians*, 7:1.

¹¹ *Epistle to the Magnesians*, 7:1.

¹² *Epistle to the Trallians*, 12:2; Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Philadelphians*, 9:1.

¹³ *Epistle to the Trallians*, 3:3.

¹⁴ 2:2; 3:1; *Epistle to the Philadelphians*, 5:1; *Epistle to the Magnesians*, 6:1; Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, 8:1.

¹⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Romans*, 4:3.

¹⁶ *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 12:2; Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church*, 239–40.

¹⁷ Polycarp of Smyrna, *Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians*, 1:1.

¹⁸ 3:2; 11:3.

¹⁹ 6:3.

²⁰ 9:1.

²¹ Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church*, 241–42.

of the Twelve.²² Only once do the apostles appear without an explicit mention of the teachers. The number of the apostles and teachers is given as forty.²³ There seems to be little to distinguish the two groups.

In addition, some patristic sources name a range of individuals as apostles in a manner like Paul's flexible use of the term. They include James,²⁴ Stephen,²⁵ Apollos,²⁶ Timothy and Titus,²⁷ Luke,²⁸ Mark,²⁹ Thaddaeus,³⁰ the Seventy,³¹ and Philip the deacon.³²

As stated in the previous lecture, the understanding of ἀπόστολοι is more restricted and rigid in Luke.

[The] special task [of the apostles] is the mission, indeed the world mission (Acts 1 :8). The call to their ministry had already come during the lifetime of Jesus; even Judas had in fact been a called apostle (Acts 1:16 ff.). A precondition for their ministry was that they had been together with Jesus during the whole time in which Jesus was at work, thus from the baptism of John onward; and further, that they were witnesses of his resurrection (Luke 24:48; Acts 1 :21-22) . Therefore, they know everything which the Lord has proclaimed during his earthly activity and are likewise acquainted with the words of the resurrected One which he spoke to them about the kingdom of God during the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension (Luke 24:45 ff.; Acts 1:3). No one equals them in knowledge of these things. But they also have the gift of the Holy Spirit. The possession of the spirit is a precondition for the exercise of the apostolic ministry (Acts 1: 8). Thus, the twelve awaited in Jerusalem the reception of the Spirit, as they had been commanded to do (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-5). On Pentecost the promise is fulfilled. The Spirit sat upon the Twelve and they began to preach (Acts 2), "full of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 4: 8).³³

The *Epistle of Barnabas* (dated between 70 and 132 CE) finds the origin of the apostolate and the number of twelve predetermined in the Old Testament.³⁴ It is the apostles who proclaimed the gospel upon the commission of Jesus Christ; they have τὴν ἐξουσίαν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου.³⁵

The *Didache* (dated 100-150 CE in Syria) is notably titled, διδαχὴ κυρίου διὰ τῶν δώδεκα ἀποστόλων τοῖς ἔθνεσιν. The terminology is that of Luke.

The writings of Justin Martyr come from the middle of the second century (d. c. 165 CE). Justin also speaks of twelve apostles. Their authority is demonstrable since already the Old Testament, for example, established the number of twelve for the apostles, and since it had frequently been foretold that the twelve disciples would proclaim the gospel to all the world from Jerusalem.³⁶ Peter,³⁷ John,³⁸ and the Sons of Thunder³⁹ are mentioned by name. The twelve apostles are the missionaries to all the world,⁴⁰

²² Hermas, *The Shepherd*, Vis. III, 5.1; Sim. IX, 15.4; 16.5; 25.2.

²³ Sim. IX, 15.4; 16.5.

²⁴ Johannes Malalas, *Chronographia*, 10 (Minge 97.392B).

²⁵ Didymus Alexandrinus, *De Trinitate*, 3.41 (Minge 39.988C).

²⁶ *1 Clement*, 47.4.

²⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1.63 (Minge 11.777C); Philostorgius, *Historica Ecclesiastica*, 3.2 (Minge 65.481A); Theodoret of Cyrus, *Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah*, 11:14.

²⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpta Ex Theodoto*, n.d.74 (Minge 9.693A) [unless ὁ ἀπόστολος refers to the angel]; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations*, 33.11 (Minge 36.228C).

²⁹ *Orations*, 33.11 (Minge 36.228C).

³⁰ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.13.11 (Minge 20.124B).

³¹ *Contra Celsum*, 2.65 (Minge 11.897C); John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, 38.4 (Minge 10.355D); Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 4.17 (Minge 8.1312A).

³² *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.24.2 (Minge 20.493B; *Stromata*, 3.6 (Minge 8.1156A); G. W. H. Lampe and Henry George Liddell, eds., "Ἀπόστολος," in *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 211.

³³ Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church*, 247–48.

³⁴ *Epistle of Barnabas*, 8:3.

³⁵ *Epistle of Barnabas*, 8:3; 5:9.

³⁶ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 31; 39; 40; 42; 45.5; 49.5; 50; 53.

³⁷ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 106.3.

³⁸ 81.

³⁹ 106.3.

⁴⁰ *First Apology*, 39; 50; 53.3.

thus particularly to the Gentiles.⁴¹ As apostles of Christ, they begin their world mission in Jerusalem.⁴² They are the first ones to have been convinced of the necessity of Christ's suffering,⁴³ and this was done by the resurrected One, to whose resurrection they can bear witness.⁴⁴ Through the Gospels,⁴⁵ which are the ἀπομνημονεύματα τῶν ἀποστόλων,⁴⁶ they disseminate the knowledge of the prophecies of the Old Testament which are fulfilled in Christ, and of the proper use of the sacraments.⁴⁷ The teachers of the church teach nothing other than what the apostles taught, the ἀπομνημονεύματα τῶν ἀποστόλων· οἱ γὰρ ἀπόστολοι ἐν τοῖς γενουμένοις ὑπ' αὐτῶν ἀπομνημονούμασιν, ἃ καλεῖται εὐαγγέλια, οὕτως παρέδωκαν.⁴⁸

The Twelve are "specially selected by Christ ὁ σωτήρ ... τοὺς δώδεκα ἄ. ἀνακαλεῖται, οὓς καὶ μόνους τῶν λοιπῶν αὐτοῦ μαθητῶν κατὰ τι γέρας ἐξείρετον ἄ. ὠνόμασεν."⁴⁹ The Twelve are typified in the Old Testament by the twelve wells of Exodus 15:27,⁵⁰ by twelve bells on high priest's robe (Exodus 28:29, perhaps confused with Exodus 28:9),⁵¹ by the twelve stones on high priest's breast,⁵² by the twelve stones of altar (Exodus. 24:4),⁵³ and by the twelve loaves of shewbread.⁵⁴ The six loaves (1 King 9) symbolize sending out of apostles two by two. The twelve divisions of Canaan and the twelve stars of Revelation 12:1 are both types of apostles.⁵⁵ A cluster of writers uses the Lucan terminology from about 120 on including Quadratus, Aristides, Justin Martyr, and Tatian.⁵⁶

But a merging of ideas also appears, as the Twelve are regarded as thirteen when Paul is included: ἡμεῖς οἱ δεκατρεῖς ἀπόστολοι,⁵⁷ although Paul is usually distinguished from the Twelve: ἀπόστολοι δὲ δέκα καὶ δύο καὶ ὁ Παῦλος.⁵⁸

A synthesis emerges in a five-volume work, "Against Heresies," written in Greek in about 180 CE by the Christian bishop Irenaeus of Lyon. In that work, Irenaeus describes Paul as an apostle in the same sense in which Paul had written about himself as an apostle. Paul preaches that which he himself received from the Lord.⁵⁹ He is apostle to the Gentiles.⁶⁰ Beside him stands only Peter as an apostle of equal weight.⁶¹ The two have shared in the founding of the community in Rome.⁶²

When, in more than fifty passages in his *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus introduces citations with "the apostle said" or something similar, this apostle is always Paul. Paul is also otherwise simply called "the apostle";⁶³ he is the "blessed apostle"⁶⁴ and naturally also the "apostle Paul."⁶⁵ But the Twelve are also apostles in the way in which they are portrayed to us in the book of Acts. Thus, just as Paul is spoken of as the apostle without regard to the Twelve, the twelve apostles are mentioned without regard to Paul.⁶⁶

⁴¹ 42.4; *Dailogue with Trypho*, 53.1; 109.

⁴² *First Apology*, 45.5; 49.5; *Dailogue with Trypho*, 114.4; 119.6.

⁴³ *Dailogue with Trypho*, 76; 106.

⁴⁴ *First Apology*, 50.12.

⁴⁵ 66.3; *Dailogue with Trypho*, 88.3.

⁴⁶ *First Apology*, 67.3; *Dailogue with Trypho*, 100.4; 101.3; 102.5; 103.6, 8; 104; 106.1, 4.

⁴⁷ *First Apology*, 61.9; 66.3.

⁴⁸ 66.3; Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church*, 250–51.

⁴⁹ *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.10.7 (Minge 20.113A); Lampe and Liddell, "Ἀπόστολος," 211–12.

⁵⁰ Marcellus of Ancyra, *Fragmenta*, 20 quoted by Eusebius (Minge 24.988C).

⁵¹ *Dailogue with Trypho*, 42.1 (Minge 6.565A).

⁵² Cyril of Alexandria, *Letters*, 55.

⁵³ Cyril of Alexandria, *Glaphyra on the Pentateuch*, 1.330C.

⁵⁴ 4.356A.

⁵⁵ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 10.11; Lampe and Liddell, "Ἀπόστολος," 212.

⁵⁶ Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church*, 254.

⁵⁷ *Apostolic Constitutions*, 8.46.13.

⁵⁸ Athanasius, *Three Orations against Arius*, 2.27 (Minge 26.204B); Lampe and Liddell, "Ἀπόστολος," 212.

⁵⁹ Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, III, 13.2; 14.2.

⁶⁰ III, 13.1; IV, 24.1.

⁶¹ I, 13.6; 25.2; IV, 35.2.

⁶² III, 3.2.

⁶³ IV, 41.5.

⁶⁴ IV, 41.6.

⁶⁵ III, 15.1.

⁶⁶ III, 13.2.

Finally, the apostles are frequently spoken of in such a way that Paul and the Twelve are meant thereby.⁶⁷ Once Paul is explicitly placed as an apostle with the Twelve,⁶⁸ elsewhere mention is made of Peter, Paul, and the other apostles.⁶⁹

Thus in Irenaeus (and in all the ecclesiastical writers after him) we find precisely the concept of the apostle which dominates the unreflective thought of the Christian community, including her theologians, down to the present day. . . . "Apostolic" applies to the theology of Paul and to that of the Synoptics. Paul taught nothing other than what the other apostles taught.⁷⁰

By the time of Irenaeus, toward the end of the second century, the word ἀπόστολος includes Paul and the Twelve together. From that time on, early church writers did not apply the term ἀπόστολος to any other church leaders. It was reserved for the Twelve and Paul. The modern practice of using ἀπόστολος as a title for a church leader would be inconceivable. This synthesis will be reinforced by two emerging concepts: apostolic succession and the fixing of the canon of the New Testament. To these we now turn.

APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION

Apostolic succession is a theological construct used to define the transmission of spiritual authority from the apostles to bishops and priests of subsequent generations. The practice developed in early Christianity as the apostles died off. "The church of the sub-apostolic age was witnessing a transition from the flexibility and fluidity of a missionary situation to that of ordered communities which needed leadership, pastoral care and teaching."⁷¹

The origin of apostolic succession is often traced back to the apostles themselves, to their actions by which they appointed additional leaders to expand on and continue their work. For example, in Acts, we read that after the death of Judas Iscariot, the apostles chose Matthias to take his place as one of the twelve apostles (Acts 1:15-26). Similarly, we see the apostle Paul appointing Timothy as a pastor and instructing him to appoint other bishops to continue his work (2 Timothy 2:2). In his letter to Titus, Paul also instructs him to appoint elders in every town to lead the church (Titus 1:5).

Nonetheless, historic continuity and transmission does not seem to have been very much in the mind of the first and second Christian generation. It is only in the third generation that there was a clearly growing awareness of the need for historic continuity and transmission of the Christ event and, simultaneously, an awareness of the problems and dangers implied in this process of transmission. While, until then, it was considered sufficient to faithfully "guard what has been entrusted to you" (1 Tm 6:20; 2 Tm 1:12,14) or to preserve "the faith once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3), this idea of guarding and preserving shifted to the idea of faithfully "transmitting" and "handing down" the faith from generation to generation.⁷²

As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, bishops were seen as the successors of the apostles, and apostolic succession became an important concept in the Church. It was the Jewish Christian Hegesippus who expressed early concerns about apostolic succession or at any rate brought it to an extensive recognition.⁷³ Hegesippus' work remains only in fragments quoted by Eusebius that primarily deal with early Palestinian Christianity. Hegesippus' ὑπομνήματα ("memoirs") does not appear to be a carefully edited volume, but rather a collection of narratives. A significant issue in the preserved fragments of Hegesippus is his discussion of heresy. Presumptive bishops and sects within Palestinian Christianity were destroying its unity, a crisis already raised by the concern with false teachers in later

⁶⁷ III, 1.1; 14.1-2; 15.1, 3; 24.1; V, 20.1.

⁶⁸ II, 21.2.

⁶⁹ IV, 35.2.

⁷⁰ Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church*, 279–80.

⁷¹ George Leonard, "The Origins of the Threefold Christian Ministry," *Churchman* 96, no. 1 (1982): 38–39.

⁷² Harding Meyer, "Apostolic Continuity, Ministry and Apostolic Succession from a Reformation Perspective," *Louvain Studies* 21, no. 2 (1996): 169.

⁷³ John-Christian Eurell, "The Hypomnemata of Hegesippus," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 75, no. 2 (May 2022): 148–57, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s003693062200028x>.

New Testament works. The passing of the apostles aggravated this problem according to Eusebius.⁷⁴ The seeming purpose of Hegesippus' work is not to account for the origin of heresy, but rather to plead for the doctrinal unity and orthodoxy in the church.

"If heresy and ecclesial division can be regarded as central problems addressed in the surviving fragments of Hegesippus, the office of bishop is clearly Hegesippus' proposed solution to these problems."⁷⁵ Hegesippus travelled around to leading bishops, examined their succession and produced not only lists but also biographic anecdotes concerning those bishops. His is not a fully formed doctrine of apostolic succession. Rather, by examining the practice and recording supporting stories, Hegesippus makes proper, that is, apostolic succession one of the keys to preserving the unity of the church and its teaching. "To Hegesippus, it is the religious division present already in Judaism that is exported to the Jerusalem church and beyond. His solution is to consolidate the position of the bishops as legitimate heirs of apostolic teaching."⁷⁶ The significance of the bishops in Hegesippus is comparable to what can be found in the works of other early Church Fathers, such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Irenaeus of Lyons, all of whom wrote about the importance of apostolic succession and the role of bishops in continuing the work of the apostles.

Clement of Rome, who served as bishop of Rome in the late first century, wrote a letter to the church in Corinth in which he emphasized the importance of orderly succession of bishops. He argued that the apostles had appointed bishops and that these bishops had appointed successors, creating a continuous line of authority that should be respected and followed by all Christians. He wrote, "Our apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife for the office of bishop. For this reason, therefore, having received perfect foreknowledge, they appointed those who have already been mentioned and afterwards added the further provision that, if they should die, other approved leaders should succeed to their ministry."⁷⁷

Ignatius of Antioch, who served as bishop of Antioch in the early second century, also emphasized the importance of apostolic succession in his writings. In his letters to various churches, he urged Christians to follow the teachings of their bishops and to remain united in faith. He wrote,

It is fitting, therefore, that you should keep aloof from such persons, and not to speak of them either in private or in public, but to give heed to the prophets, and above all, to the Gospel, in which the passion [of Christ] has been revealed to us, and the resurrection has been fully proved. But avoid all divisions, as the beginning of evils. Follow the bishop, all of you, as Jesus Christ followed the Father.⁷⁸

Irenaeus, who served as bishop of Lyons in the second century, wrote extensively about the importance of apostolic succession in his work "Against Heresies." He argued that the apostles had passed on the teachings of Christ to their successors, the bishops, who had in turn passed them on to subsequent generations of Christians. He wrote, "The apostles, then, having founded and built up the Church, committed into the hands of their successors the office of the episcopate. . . . To these bishops the apostles delivered both the Church and the ministry of the preaching of the Gospel."⁷⁹

The process of succession was not always linear, nor was it consistent. "It must also be kept in mind that the succession here is not a succession of consecrations, as we today understand the *successio apostolica*, but rather a succession of incumbents of an episcopal see irrespective of how these incumbents were ordained and by whom."⁸⁰

Overall, Hegesippus, Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Irenaeus of Lyons all emphasized the importance of apostolic succession in early Christianity, arguing that the apostles had appointed bishops and that these bishops had appointed successors, creating a continuous line of authority

⁷⁴ *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.32.8.

⁷⁵ Eirell, "The Hypomnemata of Hegesippus," 155.

⁷⁶ Eirell, 157.

⁷⁷ *1 Clement*, 44:1-2.

⁷⁸ *Epistle to the Philadelphians*, 3.

⁷⁹ *Against Heresies*, III, 3.1.

⁸⁰ Hermann Sasse, "Apostles, Prophets, Teachers: Some Thoughts of the Origin of the Ministry of the Church," *The Reformed Theological Review* 27, no. 1 (January 1968): 20.

and doctrine that should be respected and followed by all Christians. Successors are not called "apostles," but they continue the apostolic work.

The truth behind the ... various ideas of an apostolic succession, be it a succession of persons who followed each other on a certain episcopal see, or of consecrations, is the continuation in the office of the bishop of the great offices of the apostles, prophets and teachers. It is the continuation of the Word of God in its various forms, in the oral proclamation, in the interpretation of the Scriptures, of the witness to Him who is the Word Incarnate.⁸¹

To preserve the unity of the church and its orthodoxy, apostolic succession gave to bishops the authority not to become new apostles but to continue the work of the apostles. A second innovation, the canonization of the New Testament would preserve the words and teachings of the apostles.

CANONIZATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The canonization of the New Testament refers to the formation of collection of books that were considered authoritative and inspired by God and were accepted as scripture by early Christians. The process of forming the canon was a gradual and complex one, many specifics of which are lost to history. More than three centuries would pass until this first list of books would emerge that is identical to the twenty-seven in our New Testament. But it is possible, at least in retrospect, to identify various factors and key moments in the process. I suggest that there are at least eight points worthy of mention.

1. The process begins in the New Testament itself. Paul wanted his letters read broadly. He addressed 2 Corinthians, "To the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia" (2 Cor 1:1). Galatians has a regional address. Paul's letter to Philemon is addressed also "to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house" (Philemon 2). The practice of circulating letters is demonstrated when Paul write to the Colossians, "And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea" (Col 4:16). By the time of 2 Peter, Paul's works are treated as a group: "our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him,¹⁶ speaking of this as he does in all his letters" (2 Peter 3:15).
2. Seemingly, the first to coalesce as a group were Paul's Letters. The letters of Paul had been widely circulated and were accepted as authoritative by early Christians. These letters were written to various churches and individuals and dealt with a range of theological and ethical issues. Paul's letters were seen as providing guidance and instruction to the early Christian communities and were therefore highly valued. By the early part of the 2nd century, Paul letters were known as a group and quoted as such by Ignatius and Polycarp. However, when Gnostic writers embraced Paul as the only pure apostle, Paul's works fell out of favor among orthodox believers and were rarely quoted in the middle of the second century. Tertullian, in his writing against the Gnostics, rehabilitated Paul.⁸² Subsequently, a thirteen-book collection of Paul's works circulated, including Hebrews which was incorrectly attributed to Paul by such writers as Clement of Alexandria.⁸³
3. Next to emerge were the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). Initially, these works were regionally affiliated. Matthew was first quoted by Ignatius of Antioch.⁸⁴ John was associated with Ephesus. Mark, although written in Rome, came to be identified with Alexandria in Egypt. Luke may have been affiliated with Rome. These Gospels were widely recognized as authoritative and were used for teaching, worship, and evangelism. In the second century, their usage became nearly universal. Tatian, a Syrian apologist and ascetic, tried to combine the textual material of the four gospels into a single coherent work call the *Diatessaron*. The *Diatessaron*

⁸¹ Sasse, 20–21.

⁸² Tertullian, *Five Books against Marcion*, 5.1.

⁸³ *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.14.2.

⁸⁴ *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 19:2-3; *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, 1:1.

was used as the standard Gospel text in the liturgy of at least some sections of the Syrian Church for possibly up to two centuries, but no other traditions adopted it. Theodoret, bishop of Cyrrhus on the Euphrates in upper Syria in 423 CE, suspecting Tatian of having been a heretic, sought out and found more than two hundred copies of the *Diatessaron*, which he "collected and put away, and introduced instead of them the Gospels of the four evangelists."⁸⁵ In the second and third centuries, other gospels appeared, such as Gospel of Marcion, Gospel of Mani, Gospel of Apelles, Gospel of Bardesanes, Gospel of Basilides, Gospel of Thomas, and many others. Most were associated with Gnosticism.

4. In addition to the Gospels and Paul's letters, other writings began to circulate among early Christians, including Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation, the Didache, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Epistle of Barnabas. These books were initially accepted by some Christian communities but not by others, and there was a great deal of debate and disagreement about which books should be included in the canon.
5. There were no formally adopted criteria for determining which books should be included in the canon. Nor, as appears sometimes in the popular realm, there was no one meeting at which a formal decision was made about New Testament texts done so in part to suppress womanist perspectives. But some principles seem to emerge in the process. The most important criterion was apostolicity, which meant that a book had to be written by an apostle or someone closely associated with an apostle. Other criteria included orthodoxy (whether a book was consistent with accepted Christian teaching) and catholicity (whether a book was accepted by the broader Christian community).
6. By the second century, various Christian leaders had compiled lists of books that they believed should be included in the canon. These lists varied in their contents, but they generally included the four Gospels and many of Paul's letters. Notable lists include the Muratorian Canon (c. 170 CE) and the list published by Eusebius (c. 324 CE).⁸⁶ But the Codex Sinaiticus from the 4th century included also the Epistle of Barnabas and part of the Shepherd of Hermas. The first to publish the list of twenty-seven books as we know it was Athanasius of Alexandria (367 CE).⁸⁷
7. In the fourth century, various councils and synods included in their decisions a list of books which were in the canon. These regional councils were not convened solely or primarily to address the content of the canon. Rather they affirmed for their jurisdictions the list of twenty-seven books that make up the New Testament canon today. These include the Council of Hippo (393 CE) and the Council of Carthage in 419 CE.
8. Augustine (427 CE) supported this canonical list⁸⁸ and Jerome's translation of the Vulgate (383-404 CE) would finalize the process.

Ultimately, the canon was formed through a combination of factors, including catholicity, namely, the recognition and use of certain books by early Christian communities, apostolicity, and orthodoxy. This process was affirmed by the decisions of councils and synods.

CONCLUSION

In the post-apostolic period, a synthesis emerged so that ἀπόστολος from that point on referred to the Twelve and Paul. No other person carried that designation. The authority exercised by the apostles was transferred to the bishops through a process of succession that developed in response to false teaching and disunity in the church. This apostolic succession protected the teaching of the church and clarified authority within the church. Simultaneously but more gradually, the canonization of the New Testament came to preserve the content of apostolic witness and teaching about Jesus, his death and resurrection, and

⁸⁵ F.L. Cross, ed., "Tatian," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁸⁶ *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.25.1-7.

⁸⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Epistula Festalis Xxxix*, n.d.

⁸⁸ Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.8.

the theological implications of his person and work for the church. Forged by Trinitarian and Christological controversies, the church catholic emerged with a bi-polar structure that vested authority in a monarchical bishopric succeeding the apostolate and a canonical text preserving the teaching of the apostles.

Over the centuries the church would grow and spread and struggle about matters of apostolic authority and teaching and over the use of the term "apostle," factors which continue to impact the church today. But that is the topic for tomorrow.

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