

The Line of Apostolic Succession

Apostolic Succession, in Christianity, the teaching that bishops represent a direct, uninterrupted line of continuity from the Apostles of Jesus Christ. According to this teaching, bishops possess certain special powers handed down to them from the Apostles; these consist primarily of the right to confirm church members, to ordain priests, to consecrate other bishops, and to rule over the clergy and church members in their diocese (an area made up of several congregations).

The origins of the doctrine are obscure, and the New Testament records are variously interpreted. Those who accept apostolic succession as necessary for a valid ministry argue that it was necessary for Christ to establish a ministry to carry out his work and that he commissioned his Apostles to do this (Matthew 28:19–20). The Apostles in turn consecrated others to assist them and to carry on the work. Supporters of the doctrine also argue that evidence indicates that the doctrine was accepted in the very early church. About AD 95 Clement, bishop of Rome, in his letter to the church in Corinth (First Letter of Clement), expressed the view that bishops succeeded the Apostles.

A number of Christian churches believe that the apostolic succession and church government based on bishops are unnecessary for a valid ministry. They argue that the New Testament gives no clear direction concerning the ministry, that various types of ministers existed in the early church, that the apostolic succession cannot be established historically, and that true succession is spiritual and doctrinal rather than ritualistic.

The Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Old Catholic, Swedish Lutheran, and Anglican churches accept the doctrine of apostolic succession and believe that the only valid ministry is based on bishops whose office has descended from the Apostles. This does not mean, however, that each of these groups necessarily accepts the ministries of the other groups as valid. Roman Catholics, for example, generally regard the ministry of the Eastern Orthodox churches as valid but do not accept the Anglican ministry. Some Anglicans, on the other hand, consider episcopacy necessary to the “well-being” but not to the “being” of the church; therefore, they not only accept the ministries of the other groups as valid but also have entered into close associations with Protestant groups that do not accept apostolic succession.

Related Topics: canonization apostolic succession catholic congregation communion of saints church, in Christian doctrine, the Christian religious community as a whole, or a body or organization of Christian believers.

The Greek word *ekklēsia*, which came to mean church, was originally applied in the classical period to an official assembly of citizens. In the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament (3rd–2nd century BCE), the term *ekklēsia* is used for the general assembly of the Jewish people, especially when gathered for a religious purpose such as hearing the Law (e.g., Deuteronomy 9:10, 18:16). In the New Testament it is used of the entire body of believing Christians

throughout the world (e.g., Matthew 16:18), of the believers in a particular area (e.g., Acts 5:11), and also of the congregation meeting in a particular house—the “house-church” (e.g., Romans 16:5).

After the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, his followers went forth according to his mandate to preach the Gospel and developed facilities for those who were converted. Rebuffed by the Jewish authorities, the Christians established their own communities, modeled on the Jewish synagogue. Gradually, the church worked out a governmental system based on the office of the bishop (episcopacy).

Various controversies threatened the unity of the church from its earliest history, but, except for small sects that did not ultimately survive, it maintained unity for several centuries. Since the East-West Schism that split the Eastern and Western churches in 1054 and the disruption of the Western church during the 16th-century Protestant Reformation, however, the church has been split into various bodies, most of which consider themselves either the one true church or at least a part of the true church.

A traditional means of discussing the nature of the church has been to consider the four marks, or characteristics, by which it is distinguished in the Nicene Creed: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The first, that of oneness or unity, appears to be contradicted by the divisions in the church. It has been held, however, that since baptism is the rite of entry into the church, the church must consist of all baptized people, who form a single body irrespective of denomination. The holiness of the church does not mean that all its members are holy but derives from its creation by the Holy Spirit. The term catholic originally meant the universal church as distinct from local congregations, but it came to imply the church of Rome. Finally, apostolic implies that, in both its church and ministry, the church is historically continuous with the Apostles and thus with the earthly life of Jesus.

The fact that many Christians hold nominal beliefs and do not act like followers of Christ has been noted since the 4th century, when the church ceased to be persecuted. To account for this, St. Augustine proposed that the real church is an invisible entity known only to God. Martin Luther used this theory to excuse the divisions of the church at the Reformation, holding that the true church has its members scattered among the various Christian bodies but that it is independent of any organization known on earth. Many Christians, however, believing that Jesus intended to found one visible church here on earth, have worked to restore the unity of the church in the ecumenical movement. Evangelical Christians believe that for church unity to come to pass, fidelity to apostolic doctrine and practice must be restored. In 1948 the ecumenical World Council of Churches (WCC) was founded as “a fellowship of Churches which accept Jesus Christ our Lord as God and Saviour” in order to foster the unity and renewal of the Christian denominations.

St. Irenaeus, (born c. 120/140, Asia Minor—died c. 200/203, probably Lyon; Western feast day June 28; Eastern feast day August 23), bishop of Lugdunum (Lyon), Apologist, and leading Christian theologian of the 2nd century. His work *Adversus haereses* (Against Heresies), written about 180, was a refutation of gnosticism. In the course of his writings Irenaeus advanced the development of an authoritative canon of Scriptures, the creed, and the authority of the Episcopal office.

Early career

Though his exact birth date is unknown, Irenaeus was born of Greek parents in Asia Minor. His own works establish a few biographical points, such as that he, as a child, heard and saw St. Polycarp, the last known living connection with the Apostles, in Smyrna, before that aged Christian was martyred in 155. Eusebius of Caesarea also notes that after persecutions in Gaul in 177 Irenaeus succeeded the martyred Pothinus as bishop of Lugdunum. According to Eusebius, who wrote a history of the church in the 4th century, Irenaeus, prior to his becoming bishop, had served as a missionary to southern Gaul and as a peacemaker among the churches of Asia Minor that had been disturbed by heresy.

The known biographical data—if taken together with his published works—are sufficient to give a picture of an unusual life. Historical sources testify to a close cultural connection between Asia Minor and southern France (the Rhône valley) during the 2nd century. According to tradition, St. John the Apostle, as a very old man who had “seen the Lord” (i.e., Jesus), lived at Ephesus in the days when Polycarp was young. Thus, there were three generations between Jesus of Nazareth and Irenaeus of southern France.

The era in which Irenaeus lived was a time of expansion and inner tensions in the church. In many cases Irenaeus acted as mediator between various contending factions. The churches of Asia Minor continued to celebrate Easter on the same date (the 14th of Nisan) as the Jews celebrated Passover, whereas the Roman church maintained that Easter should always be celebrated on a Sunday (the day of the Resurrection of Christ). Mediating between the parties, Irenaeus stated that differences in external factors, such as dates of festivals, need not be so serious as to destroy church unity.

Irenaeus's writings: conflict with the gnostics

Irenaeus adopted a totally negative and unresponsive attitude, however, toward Marcion, a schismatic leader in Rome, and toward Gnosticism, a fashionable intellectual movement in the rapidly expanding church that espoused dualism. Because gnosticism was overcome through the efforts of the early Church Fathers, among them St. Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus, gnostic writings were largely obliterated. In reconstructing gnostic doctrines, therefore, modern scholars relied to a great extent on the writings of Irenaeus, who summarized the gnostic views before attacking them. After the discovery of the gnostic library near Naj' Hammādī (in Egypt) in the 1940s, respect for Irenaeus increased: he

was proved to have been extremely precise in his report of the doctrines he rejected.

All his known writings are devoted to the conflict with the gnostics. His principal work consists of five books in a work entitled *Adversus haereses*. Originally written in Greek about 180, *Against Heresies* is now known in its entirety only in a Latin translation, the date of which is disputed (200 or 400?). A shorter work by Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, also written in Greek, is extant only in an Armenian translation probably intended for the instruction of young candidates for baptism.

Irenaeus asserted in a positive manner the validity of the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament), which the gnostics denied, claiming that it upheld the laws of the Creator God of wrath. Though Irenaeus did not actually refer to two testaments, one old and one new, he prepared the way for this terminology. He asserted the validity of the two testaments at a time when concern for the unity and the difference between the two parts of the Bible was developing. Many works claiming scriptural authority, which included a large number by gnostics, flourished in the 2nd century. By his attacks on the gnostics, Irenaeus helped to diminish the importance of such works and to establish a canon of Scriptures.

The development of the creed and the office of bishop also can be traced to his conflicts with the gnostics. On the basis of the New Testament alone, which is concerned with the salvation of humankind, the creed would not be expected to begin with an article about the creation of the world and humans. But, because the gnostics denied that the God revealed in the New Testament was the Creator, the first article of the creed was for polemical reasons directly connected with Genesis (“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”). Irenaeus refers to the creed as a “Rule of Truth” used to combat heresy.

The oldest lists of bishops also were countermeasures against the gnostics, who said that they possessed a secret oral tradition from Jesus himself. Against such statements Irenaeus maintains that the bishops in different cities are known as far back as the Apostles—and none of them was a gnostic—and that the bishops provided the only safe guide to the interpretation of Scripture. With these lists of bishops the later doctrine of “the apostolic succession” of the bishops could be linked. Even the unique position of authority of the bishop of Rome is emphasized by Irenaeus, though in an obscure passage.

Though there is no evidence, other than legendary, about his death, the last decade of the 2nd century is generally assumed to be the period in which Irenaeus died.