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Ministry in the New Testament and the Early Church

Patrick T. R. Gray

An historical investigation of the issue of ministry, by which is meant authoritative ministry, which is to be of any use for an ecumenical dialogue and at the same time responsible to the insights of contemporary historical research, has to do more than discover what forms of ministry existed in the New Testament period and thereafter. The time is past when historians could naively seek *the* New Testament form of church order and thereby justify some modern church order that imitates it (whether episcopal, presbyterian, or free church). Even if there were a single New Testament church order (which there manifestly is not) the problem of being true to the New Testament is today generally seen as a more complex matter than simple imitation. This study will try to discover, so far as is possible, the interplay of dynamic forces that were at work in the process of development beginning in the New Testament and issuing finally in the well-known threefold ministry of the fourth-century church, with its claim to being in the apostolic succession. If authentic and prior concerns can be discovered behind certain forms of ministry, perhaps the forms can be relativized to a certain extent, and negotiations can be pursued more faithfully about them in relation to something more important than they are in themselves.

The argument to be developed follows these steps: (1) Jesus did not establish any authoritative ministry; (2) certain "apostles" became the first leaders, in the midst of many and various other ministries, many of them charismatic, i.e. spontaneous exercises of gifts rather than ordered ministries; (3) reservations were felt on several sides about any move towards second-generation authoritative ministries at the expense of charismatic ministries; (4) nonetheless authoritative ministries did develop, and in particular the ministry of elders in some

Jewish Christian communities, and the ministry of bishops and deacons in pauline communities, with their fusion by the end of the first century in some important communities; (5) the central task of these offices, their authority, was to teach the faith; (6) the deaths of the apostles left the churches with a crisis about their traditions, since everywhere people emerged to interpret traditions in new ways; (7) the presbyteral and episcopal/diaconal teaching authority was seen always centrally in terms of the need to protect a tradition and keep it true to its "apostolic" foundation, not the need for rulers, and the forms that developed did so precisely because they were innately suited for this task; (8) in the second and third centuries this development proceeded on the same lines, with the meaning of apostolic succession in particular being defined ever more clearly over against the options presented by Gnosticism and other radical developments of the tradition; (9) the development of an authoritative ministry was parallel to the development of the New Testament canon and an orthodox creed, all being part of the same struggle: (10) therefore the present-day discussion of ministry should take seriously the issue of faithfulness to the tradition as the most important prior and authentic concern behind the development of traditional forms of ministry; (11) present-day discussion should also take account of the apostolic and later reservations about any authoritative ministry which may stand over against spontaneous charismatic ministries, the pauline ideal of service, and the individual's relation to God through Christ.

Jesus and Ministry

The problems involved in trying to reconstruct the original words and deeds of Jesus are well-known. He does not seem to have set any conditions for entry into the circle of his followers, a circle remarkable for its openness. The ascription of special leadership roles to certain disciples in the literature about Jesus (by Matthew to Peter, for instance; or by many writers to the "Twelve": or by John to "the beloved disciple"—who may not even be one of the Twelve, for all one can tell; or by the gnostic gospels to Thomas) says a great deal about the leadership situation of the writer's community at the time he or she writes, but one cannot with any confidence assert that

Jesus himself gave any of them such a role. Even the distinction between apostles and others is not clear. Sometimes the term seems to include only the Twelve, sometimes many more (Paul uses it of himself, though he had never been a follower of Jesus). John avoids the term altogether! One can cautiously conclude with James Dunn that, "If we choose to speak of the disciples of Jesus as the 'church' then we should recognize the character of church thereby denoted—namely, a group or groups of disciples gathered round Jesus with each individually and together *directly* dependent on Jesus *alone* for all ministry and teaching."¹ We cannot think of any authoritative ministry at that point, except that of Jesus himself.

The Apostolic Generation: The "Apostles"

It would be natural to expect that the Twelve, as having been Jesus' closest followers by most accounts, became the first leaders of the church after Jesus' resurrection. The early chapters of Acts give some support to this view. However, the main function of the Twelve seems to be a symbolic one: to stand for the twelve tribes to be gathered into the Kingdom at the end. The earliest evidence comes from Paul, who says that James (one of the Twelve, or the brother of the Lord?), Peter, and John were "pillars" of the Jerusalem Christian community, a term implying some leadership role (Galatians 2:9). Of John's actual role one knows nothing (nor does one know about James, if the brother of John is meant). Paul and Acts make it clear that Peter became a major missionary from, and representative of, the Jerusalem Christians. However, they also show that, by the end of the first decade of its life without the historical Jesus, the Jerusalem community's most important leader was James, the brother of the Lord. He was not, of course, one of the Twelve, though Paul considers him an "apostle" like himself and Peter (Galatians 1:19).

It is not known how James came to exercise authority at Jerusalem. It is known that Paul was able to exercise "apostolic" authority from entirely outside the circle of Jesus' followers. He did so simply by the force of his personality in the conviction that he was an authentic preacher of the gospel about Jesus. He was an apostle because he was sent, he felt. He was an apostle, too, in the sense that he was a founder

and teacher of Christian communities, one who was willing to exert this authority—and even that of his co-workers—over his followers and their local ministers (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 5:12). In the “beloved disciple” a glimpse is caught of another and unusual “apostolic” founder, one whose right to found a tradition is based solely on his superior discipleship in love.² Whatever the form of apostleship, it became widely felt that ministry by apostles, the founders, could not go on forever. The first generation began to disappear, precipitating a crisis of leadership. Before turning to it, however, a look is needed at the various kinds of other ministries which emerged while the apostolic generation was still alive.

The Apostolic Generation: Other Ministries

Acts, though it dates from a later time, preserves some record of various ministries, such as those of the itinerant evangelist and teacher Philip (chapter 8). Paul knows of local leaders exercising a prophetic ministry at Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 5:1); Acts 13:1 mentions prophets and teachers at Antioch. Paul knows, too, of the many spirit-given ministries at Corinth (1 Corinthians 12): and of bishops and deacons—but with what functions?—at Philippi (Philippians 1:1). If James is early, as some argue, then it proves the early emergence, on the model of Judaism, of the council of elders as the chief authority in some early communities.³ Acts supports this evidence.

The ministries that developed seem to have been as various as the communities they served. It is worth noting that there was a strong connection between the ministry that developed in a certain community, and the particular version of apostolic preaching that community was founded upon. Writing—as some think very early in his career—to Thessalonica, Paul emphasized exclusively the Christian hope for Christ’s imminent return (1 Thessalonians throughout). It is no surprise, then, that those who hear this message have prophets—whose ministry it is to re-affirm that hope—as their ministers. By comparison, the community or communities to which James is addressed are instructed in a kind of Christian law presented in very rabbinic style—and appropriately enough are ministered to by a council of elders. The church in Corinth, instructed by Paul in the meaning of baptism as death with Christ and the

beginning of life out of the power of God's Spirit, emphasizes (rather too enthusiastically for Paul) ministries given by the Spirit.

It is important to grasp the thrust of Paul's criticism if one is to assess 1 Corinthians' implications for ministry correctly. Paul does not seem to have established any "regular" authoritative ministries to replace his own apostolic role as authoritative teacher of the gospel to his communities. And he certainly believed that God's spirit provided many ministries for the church, seemingly without any need to organize such or submit them to an authority other than his own—he did not establish "bishops" (by whatever name) to take charge of his churches. Nonetheless, it is perhaps a mistake to see the ministries at Corinth, a community which went much further with the emphasis on the spirituality of gifts than Paul did, as Paul's normative vision of ministry. He includes, somewhat pointedly, administration and other sober functions among the gifts of the Spirit, for instance (1 Corinthians 12). More importantly, Paul's criticism of those who exercise their ministries badly (whether it is the ecstasies at Corinth or the judaizing teachers at Antioch referred to in Galatians) in every case makes the point that his gospel is the Cross as the symbol of Christ's self-emptying and therefore openness to receiving life entirely from God. Anyone who exercises a ministry under that gospel cannot do it to achieve authority, or power, or fame for himself or herself. Paul is therefore against any claim to glory over another by one's ministry. He is in favour only of those ministries which include their exercisers' self-emptying in service to the community. This pauline critique of authority wrongly used did not go unheard. When authority-bearing ministries did develop, they were considered to be ministries for a special kind of service to the community. It may also be true that a certain resistance to the development of authority-bearing ministries of *any* kind (his own apart) was felt by Paul because of his opposition to self-glorification on the basis of his gospel, and that therefore he did not make provision for a ministry with authority to replace his own, relying instead on the Spirit to provide ministers, and on the gospel to keep them as servants rather than masters of the church.

In this earliest period, then, the emergence of many forms of leadership is seen, some charismatic in the broad sense (i.e. the

exercise of various ministries by those who believe they have been given the gift to do so by God, rather than according to some system of ordination or appointment) and at least one, using a Jewish model, centring on a council of appointed elders. A strong critique by Paul is also found, one preserved in his communities through the preservation of his correspondence, a critique of any authority, charismatic *or* appointed, which involved a claim to rule over others. On the other hand, the authority of "apostles" to found churches and teach them the faith was never questioned, except perhaps in the community of the beloved disciple.

The Second Generation

The crisis of leadership occasioned by the demise of the apostles (remembering that any founder might claim to be an apostle) meant that authority would have to be either foregone or invested in some ministerial group or groups. The Gospel of Matthew reveals part of the struggle in the things it chooses to record. Matthew emphasizes the gospel of the new Christian law, and sees the church's task as the teaching of Jesus' "commandments" to the world (28:20). In accordance with this rather Jewish gospel, it ascribes a leadership role first to Peter (16:17-19) and then to "the disciples" (18:18) in terms of the rabbinic power of the keys. All this may be taken as representing something of the character of leadership in the communities where Matthew was written—i.e. a teaching ministry with some genuine authority to include and exclude members. Nonetheless, Matthew includes also material strongly critical of anyone's claim to exercise authority in Christian communities (23:2-12)! Thus, at this later date (*ca.* 85) an ambivalence about leadership authority is found rather similar to Paul's, but in a quite different kind of community. The need for teaching is apparent, and some are commissioned to do it—but they must not make their authority an occasion for self-aggrandizement. The Fourth Gospel is decidedly critical of all special ecclesial ministries—it even opposes to the idea of presidency at the eucharist, with claims that that might entail to authority, the image of foot-washing as the real mark of discipleship. Even so, John's redactor, apparently a member of the johannine circle, seems willing to recognize the ministry

of Peter's successors (bishops by 90 A.D., or presbyters?) as authentic (21:15-19).

Acts' account of the emergence of Christianity is often criticized as too eirenic by far. Indeed, Luke presents a far too idealized picture (at least for the modern historian's taste) of the transfer of power from the original Jewish church to the burgeoning Gentile church of his own time. His aim, of course, is more kerygmatic than historical. Nonetheless, the picture he paints reveals a good deal when carefully studied. For instance, the sudden appearance of a system of elders in the second half of the book (from chapter 11 on) would seem to reflect a historical fact, i.e. the growth of that style of leadership, eventually even in the Gentile churches. Thus, while it is a little difficult to imagine Paul establishing councils of elders in his new churches, given his absolute silence about that kind of ministry, Luke's account of his doing so (Acts 14:23; 20:17) reflects the fact that by his time Paul's foundations had accommodated this style of ministry. Likewise the account of the appointment of deacons (everywhere else a Gentile form of ministry) by the Twelve (associated with the system of elders, if with any ordered system—e.g. Acts 11:30) in Acts 6 must reflect the combination of two styles of ministry in Luke's own time.

It is indeed frustrating that there exists no record of developments in the tradition of Paul between his own letters and the deutero-pauline letters of the first century. It is known that the followers of Paul separated into at least two different traditions, with rather different ideas of ministry. In the more "left-wing" tradition represented by Ephesians and Colossians, the tendency to establish a more regular ministry alongside the charismatic ministries is probably expressed in the addition of pastors to the list of ministers, along with apostles, prophets, evangelists, and teachers (Ephesians 4:11). In the more conservative pauline tradition represented by the Pastorals is found a firm affirmation of authoritative ministries, for in them there is attested both the development of the ministry of bishops and deacons, and the consolidation of that form of ministry with the system of elders (the very development attested also in Acts). That there is here a blending of two systems is indicated by the way the writer usually refers to bishops and deacons together, but to elders only in a different place. As

elsewhere. though, there has been consolidation: bishops are conceived of as coming from the council of elders, or as becoming members of the council upon becoming bishops.

What is most noteworthy in the Pastorals is the clear sense that the episcopate is an established office with definite authority. In this context ordination appears clearly for the first time (though it is evidenced also, though with a less clear sense in Acts). Only outside of the New Testament, in the near-contemporary epistles of Ignatius of Antioch. is there found as high a view of episcopal authority. Writing to churches of Asia Minor, and campaigning actively for the idea of a monarchical bishop. Ignatius supposes that each community ought to have a single leader with authority to demand acquiescence to his teaching. He sees the bishop as embodying the faith of the community, and as expressing the community's unity in the faith in his presidency at the common eucharist. (It need not be assumed that Ignatius' ideal was in fact realized in the churches he addressed, of course.) Though Ignatius knows of presbyters and deacons, it is not nearly so clear what their functions were to be, or with what authority they were thought to be invested. Between them, Ignatius and the Pastorals show that the three-fold ministry, with a strong emphasis on the teaching authority of the bishop, was well-established in the pauline churches of Asia Minor by the end of the first century.

In Rome a similar development may be seen. By its ascription to Peter of ideas very characteristic of Paul, 1 Peter shows that traditions were being blended there as well. The work preserves Paul's idea of charismatically spontaneous ministries, yet at the same time envisages a circle of elders exercising pastoral ministry (5:1-5). *1 Clement*, a closely-related work, urges the case for episcopal and presbyteral leadership, and is even willing to see their authority as analogous to that of military leaders (37.2). temple-officers in the Old Testament (44.4), and secular office-holders in general. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, while it mentions charismatic ministries, clearly sees the real office-holders as bishops, presbyters, and deacons. Thus it can be seen that the pauline churches of Asia Minor which stood most clearly for an orthodox pauline position, and the church in Rome, stood for a consolidated three-fold ministry, agreeing on the important central authority of bishops and/or presbyters to teach the faith, by the end of the first century. These churches were inevitably very influential patterns for other churches.

A fascinating look at how one tradition was transformed toward this end is provided by the *Didache*, a document which reveals the situation of a Christian community of Syria, or perhaps even Palestine, towards the end of the first century. In this community, clearly enough, leadership has traditionally been exercised by charismatic leaders, apostles, prophets, and teachers (11). While still urging great respect for those leaders, the *Didache* shows that bishops and deacons, elected officers of the local church, are taking over from the charismatic leaders as teachers (15), and perhaps also as presidents at the eucharist (10). The change of generation is thus clearly shown. Other aspects of this account will be dealt with later.

That not all communities welcomed such developments is clear from the johannine epistles (as might be expected from the community of the beloved disciple), perhaps in some sense from a deutero-pauline work like Hebrews, and from the Apocalypse, which suggests only prophets as proper leaders.

The Motive for Developing Authoritative Leaders: Teaching

In the absence of any directive from Jesus about leadership in the communities of his followers, authority was exercised in the first generation by the founding missionaries. Communities were established in certain traditions by the characteristic gospel of the founder, who thus set for that community its idea of "apostolic" faith. During the lifetime of the founding apostle, there was no real problem about authority, since the founder could be consulted about the real character of his gospel. In this period there was some development of the system of elders among Jewish Christians, and there were certainly many other ministries—but not authoritative ones—in all communities. Somehow, most communities moved towards the hybrid model of three-fold authoritative ministry, though, once the apostles had died. Why did this happen?

It is tempting to attribute the rise of authoritative ministries simply to human nature: people need to rule and to be ruled. However, the evidence of the extant documents belies this interpretation. Ignatius, for instance, does not celebrate, even unconsciously, the power of his position. He, like virtually everyone else who speaks of such authoritative ministries,

sees the bishop's authority as the authority simply to teach the faith; over and over again it is seen that the function of authoritative ministries is to maintain the "apostolic" faith of the community, where "apostolic" means the traditional faith inherited from the founder.

On reflection, it is evident that the phenomenon of writing letters in the founder's name is in itself a claim to teach what the founder taught, and thus part of the attempt to maintain the tradition. It is no surprise, then, that in the deuteropauline letters the chief function of the emerging authoritative ministries is to do that very thing. The writer of Ephesians insists that his hearers are "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (2:20), and sets the founders apart as "*holy* apostles and prophets" (3:5). In the Pastorals the point is even more strongly put: Paul is said to have been "entrusted" with "the glorious gospel of the blessed God" (1 Timothy 1:11) and to pass on this trust to "Timothy", who certainly stands for all other bishops/presbyters (1 Timothy 4:16; 5:17; 2 Timothy 2:2; 2:15. cf. Titus 2:7). Turning to Acts, one finds Paul depicted in similar terms as having received a ministry of preaching the gospel, and as passing on this ministry to the leaders of the church at Ephesus, who are to be "bishops" maintaining the faith once he is gone (20:24f., 28). This story reveals Luke's sense of a problem in his own time, of course: how is the tradition to be maintained, once the founder is gone? His answer is that it is to be maintained by ministers with teaching authority, significantly called bishops. Similar patterns can easily be seen in Ignatius' and Clement's letters. By contrast, one tradition of the community of the beloved disciple, represented by Diotrephes, seems to have been attacked by a representative of the more traditional view (the elder) for accepting teaching authority (3 John 9); the elder—rejecting what is usually associated with that title—seems to feel that the only authentic response to the problem of deviation from the tradition is appeal to the Spirit (1 John 4:1–3). The readers of the *Didache* are assured—though the writer does not seem entirely convinced, as his later reference to the rise of bishops and deacons confirms—that they will somehow be inspired to tell the difference between true teachers and those who "prove themselves renegades" and "teaching otherwise contradict all this" (11:1–2). Such assurances were, as it

turned out, not sufficient protection, from the point of view of most of the church—and indeed as the threat of gnosticism, above all, to take over traditions and remake them in its image demonstrated all too clearly. Authoritative teachers were necessary to defend the “apostolic” faith.

In Acts, in the passage referred to earlier concerning Paul’s instructions to leaders at Ephesus, it is clear that Luke is describing precisely the problem of his own time through the words of Paul predicting the future: without the apostle, “fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and *from among your own selves* will arise men speaking perverse things, *to draw away the disciples after them*” (Acts 20:29f.). It is in this context that Luke has Paul appoint bishops—a clear indication of why bishops actually were appointed in the second generation. Bishops, or some authoritative teaching ministers, were needed because, within the communities themselves, splits developed between factions over the true meaning of the tradition. We have seen that Paul’s followers, even within the New Testament canon, split between left- and right-wing groups. Outside the canon stand the opponents of the Pastorals, for instance. They are apparently followers of Paul who teach baptismal resurrection as an interpretation of Paul’s teaching about baptismal regeneration, a view the writer of the Pastorals opposes by an assertion of Paul’s notion of eschatological reservation and a future resurrection (2 Timothy 2:17f.). One can see the later development of the opponents’ position in second- and third-century Gnostic paulinists.⁴ Ignatius too lauds episcopal teaching authority in the face of a proto-gnostic docetism that seems to be an interpretation of Paul’s “life in the Spirit” (*Smyr.* 4 and 5). It is not so clear precisely what they teach, but it is clear that youthful leaders teaching novelties are opposed by *1 Clement* in favour of the sober teaching of presbyters.

Here a significant connection becomes apparent. The forms of ministry championed by the defenders of conservative interpretations of the tradition (all of the orthodox figures mentioned) were not only oriented towards teaching the traditional faith, but also structurally suited for the task of maintaining traditions. This point is easily seen of presbyters—elders naturally represented the conservative mind of their communities (*1 Clement* illustrates the point repeatedly). The case

for this view of bishops is not so self-evident, yet here again, the *Didache* points to the connection. The writer reluctantly, in the face of the community's deep respect for its traditional leaders—apostles, prophets, and teachers—admits that there is a problem with those who introduce innovative teachings and subvert the traditional faith. In this situation he urges the community to “elect for yourselves bishops and deacons who are a credit to the Lord, men who are gentle, generous, faithful, and well tried. For their ministry to you is identical with that of the prophets and teachers” (15.1). The point is that bishops and deacons, unlike leaders designated “by the spirit” through their possession of charismatic gifts, are *elected*. Therefore they can be chosen for their faithfulness—they can and will represent the mind of the community and not threaten its traditional faith. The fact that bishops were elected—and nowhere are bishops mentioned who were not elected—is probably the central fact about them that guaranteed their rise to authority as the authoritative teachers of the tradition. No doubt the bishop's traditional role as the unifier of the community through his presidency over the eucharist also played a role.

By the end of the New Testament period, then, as evidence from both the New Testament and contemporary literature shows, the only really authoritative ministries to emerge were those of presbyters, on one hand, and those of bishops and deacons on the other.⁵ While the origins of the former lay in Judaism, and of the latter lay in the gentile churches, nonetheless both implicitly and explicitly were developed to meet the challenge posed by radical representatives of non-apostolic ministries who developed interpretations of the traditional faith of their communities that did not seem, to the conservative majority, to accord with what the founding “apostles” had taught and their traditions had maintained. The authority of presbyters, and the authority of bishops (with deacons never far away) was always simply to teach with authority the “apostolic” faith. It is in this sense that such ministries emerged precisely to be “apostolic” ministries. The consolidation of the two forms of ministry into the well-known threefold ministry of later catholicism seems to have taken place in some important and pattern-setting areas well before the end of the first century. That pattern, with its focus on the apostolic task, was

to prove decisive for succeeding generations, and the issues, though posed in new forms, were fundamentally the same.

The Second and Third Centuries

To say that the issues were fundamentally the same in the second century is to say that the problem of confronting suspect developments from within the Christian traditions remained the central problem, and the development of conservative ministries with authority to teach continued to be a major response of the "orthodox" majority.

A classic representative of early second-century orthodoxy was Polycarp of Smyrna. He was able to write a letter to Philippi as bishop with his presbyters (*Phil.* proemium). He says that he rejoices "because the firm root of your faith... still abides..." (1:2). Paul, as the founding apostle of the church at Philippi, is said to have "taught you accurately and fully the word of truth", and to have written letters which "will enable you, if you study them carefully, to grow in the faith delivered to you" (3:2). Everywhere the appeal is to a deposit of faith, a tradition which needs to be rightly understood and then defended. The danger is false teachers, who propose a new interpretation of the tradition from its beginnings: anathema is pronounced against "whosoever perverts the sayings of the Lord to suit his own lusts and says there is neither resurrection nor judgement..." (7:1). The opponents are like those of the Pastorals, but now they are misinterpreting (by Polycarp's lights) both the teaching of Paul and the teaching of Jesus himself. The struggle against new interpretation from within goes on, and the bulwark against it is still the faithful teaching of authoritative ministers like Polycarp himself. But the question of Paul's teaching and Jesus' teaching raises a new question, appropriate at this new distance from the founding moments: what version of the literary expressions of the tradition (gospels or epistles of Paul) is the correct one? The question of canon emerges as part of this struggle to defend and define the tradition.

In fact, the second century saw the advent of radical Christian movements which made daring claims about the tradition and the canon. Marcion, a radical paulinist who took Paul's rejection of the law so seriously that he could not conceive of the

Old Testament God of the law and of creation as identical with the New Testament God of grace, was the first to create a set of Christian authoritative books—a canon—including versions of Paul and an amended version of Luke. The Montanists, late in the century, challenged the whole idea of a fixed tradition with the claim that inspired charismatic prophets could, at least in theory, receive “new revelation”. But the major challenge came from gnosticism. Soon gnostic paulinists, gnostic proponents of Thomas, gnostic claimants to virtually every Christian tradition emerged. While it is possible to see clearly the radical departure that gnostic exegetes took from the original meaning of traditions, and while the speedy choice of resurrection-discourses as the favoured medium for gnostic teaching can be recognized as a handy way of avoiding the traditional records of Jesus’ original teaching, still the gnostics tended to claim that they were not in fact being innovative, but were simply bringing forward the true and spiritual meaning of Jesus and the apostles, which had lain secret and misunderstood. Gnosticism could claim to “own” the real intention of many traditional sources, and quickly produced other gospels and epistles (e.g. the *Gospels of Thomas*) in support of its positions. The question of the canon was thus a major battle-ground. At the same time the issue of ministry was hotly argued over. Some gnostics recognized the relation between episcopacy and the orthodox claim to own the authentic tradition: the *Apocalypse of Peter*, for instance, has Jesus identify the true followers of Peter as “the remnant whom I have summoned to knowledge,”⁶ whose authentic understanding of the (gnostic) Christian faith is to be contrasted with “others of those who are outside our number and name themselves bishop and also deacons, as if they have received their authority from God. They bend themselves under judgement of the leaders. These people are dry canals.”⁷ The true tradition, such a gnostic is claiming, is their “secret tradition” handed down in the private circle of true believers. No such living faith has been handed down in orthodox circles—its bishop and deacons, through whom it is claimed to come, are dry canals through whom no living water flows! In such terms as these was the struggle to define the tradition engaged in the second century. It is no wonder that the eventually triumphant three-fold system of ministry, though it was dominant in Rome and around the Aegean by the end of the

first century, was not accepted in areas dominated by gnosticism (like East Syria and Egypt) until the end of the second century, or even later.

The great orthodox champions in the later second century were Irenaeus, Hegesippus, and Hippolytus. The former two were the first to point to something like an apostolic succession in responding to gnostic claims. Compared to the gnostic "secret tradition", they can point to an open tradition of what has been taught faithfully and consistently in the great orthodox centres (Rome is the foremost example) by a succession of bishops.⁸ The appeal is to the openness of the tradition, and its clear consistency from the earliest sources in the founders down to the present time. Apostolic succession is here primarily a claim to *de facto* faithfulness in handing down the tradition. It is not a claim, yet, to *ex officio* authority to define what the faithful tradition is. With Tertullian at the beginning of the third century, however, the thesis that office is handed down from the apostles "is a thesis which in his time no longer needs to be proved; it is taken for granted".⁹ By the subtle shift from the notion that certain bishops are in the apostolic succession because they have been faithful, to the notion that they are faithful because they are in the apostolic succession, the final moment of the development found here is reached. Hippolytus of Rome, about the same time as Tertullian, himself attempts to chastise and correct the errors of heretics precisely as a bishop and because he is a bishop, and who in his record of ordination prayers in the *Apostolic Tradition* reveals a belief that there is a special grace for each office;¹⁰ the bishop in particular has the gift of the "ruling spirit" given to him. It is evident enough that these ordination rituals described by Hippolytus symbolize nicely the way in which the bishop is fitted into the network of orthodox Christian communities: he is elected, and accepts the call, but he is "ordained" by the laying on of hands *by other bishops* and by a prayer for the Holy Spirit.

The development just chronicled of the threefold ministry, emphasizing in this period the special authority of the bishop, proved decisive, along with the development of the canon and orthodox creeds. Gnostics, for instance, could claim a secret tradition, but could not document its early existence or descent convincingly over against the antiquity of the "apostolic" writings canonized by orthodoxy and the "apostolic" tradition of

its great centres. Compared with the powerful monarchical authority of bishops, now supported by the ideology of apostolic succession, and formed into a single network by the system of ordination, the claims of gnosticism's "inspired" teachers faded in credibility. In the three-fold ministry, orthodoxy had forged for itself, through the crisis of leadership which has been the theme throughout, a crushing weapon against divergent traditions from within.

The Lessons of History

It should be clear from the whole investigation so far that the issue of discovering a way to ensure faithfulness to apostolic traditions was the primary motivation behind the development of the form of ministry which is now known as catholic. The authority of bishops, presbyters, and deacons was always primarily the authority to defend the apostolic tradition against innovations. Such leaders began to appear as a result of the demise of the apostolic generation, and grew to prominence, and eventual dominance in the church in the face of radical movements like Gnosticism. The form which their offices took was a quite secondary concern: in some communities, the older Jewish tradition of a council of elders was adopted; in others, the elected officials for oversight and service who emerged turned out to be ideally suited for the primary task. In any case, the threefold model of ministry was a product, and that by assimilation, of originally diverse approaches. It was eventually in the episcopate above all that the needed authority was felt to reside most centrally, and there that the ideology of apostolic succession was applied.

People who speak today of apostolicity and the question of ministry, will find it useful to keep in mind the forces which required the birth of this notion, and their relation to the actual forms which emerged. If anyone is to claim apostolicity today, it must be in terms of faithfulness to the founders first and foremost, and the question of forms must be discussed only in the second place.

Finally, there is some point in being reminded of the reservations expressed in the New Testament about the emergence of apostolic ministries and the authority attached to them. It is true that such ministries did act to the detriment of the spontaneous and charismatic (remembering the broad sense in which

that term is being used here) ministries of Paul's communities. And it is true that such ministries inevitably provided opportunities for the very self-aggrandizement over the possession of authority that Paul found so inimical to his gospel, and that Matthew and the johannine corpus in their very different ways warn against. There is something disconcerting about the insistence of the Pastorals on the maintenance of right doctrine, compared with the lively offer of life in Christ of Paul. If it is essential, as it surely is, that there be ministries which have the authority to defend the faith, it is also essential for the real life of the church that the faith be more than a tradition, and that the other ministries which assist at the birth of living faith have also their place. Raymond Brown reminds the church that its New Testament canon, while forged as a weapon to exclude unfaithful developments of the tradition, includes a profound sense of those other ministries:

... the church's hermeneutical decision to place it [the Gospel of John] in the same canon as Mark, Matthew and Luke... means that the Great Church... whether consciously or unconsciously, has chosen to live with tension. It has chosen... not either a Spirit who is given to an authoritative teaching magisterium or the Paraclete-teacher who is given to each Christian but both.... Like one branch of the Johannine community, we Roman Catholics [or Anglicans, or Lutherans] have come to appreciate that Peter's pastoral role is truly intended by the risen Lord, but the presence in our Scriptures of a disciple whom Jesus loved more than he loved Peter is an eloquent commentary on the relative value of the church office.... The greatest dignity to be striven for is neither papal, episcopal, nor priestly; the greatest dignity is that of belonging to the community of the beloved disciples of Jesus Christ.¹¹

Notes

1. James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, 1977), 106.
2. On John, see Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).
3. For the early dating of James, see especially the recent work of John A.T. Robinson.
4. E.g. "Treatise on the Resurrection", in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 50-53.
5. H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). 285.

6. *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 340.
7. *Ibid.*, 343.
8. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*; Hegesippus, in Eusebius, *Church History*, esp. IV, 22, 3.
9. H. von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, tr. J.A. Baker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 174.
10. *Ibid.*, 176.
11. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 163f.