

The Scripture View of the Apostolical Commission

by J.H. Newman

The sermon explores the significance of Apostolic Authority and its enduring relevance in the Church today.

Scripture: John 20:21, Acts 2:1, 1 Corinthians 14:37, Ephesians 2:20, 2 Timothy 1:6

Topics: "Apostolic Authority", "Church Unity"

Description

J.H. Newman preaches on the duty of submission to spiritual authority, emphasizing that although the Church has changed since the days of the Apostles, the authority of Holy Scripture should not be set aside. He explores how the Apostolic Authority was not solely based on miraculous powers but also on the transmission of divine knowledge through the Holy Spirit. Newman delves into the Apostles' role in establishing and strengthening the faith of believers, highlighting the importance of unity in the Apostolic Church. He discusses the continuation of Apostolic Authority through successors like Timothy, emphasizing the ongoing transmission of the Apostles' testimony and teachings in the Church.

Transcript

IN referring to the Epistles of the New Testament for proof of the duty of submission to Spiritual Authority, we are sometimes met by the objection that the case is very much altered since the days of the Apostles, and since the extraordinary gifts of the SPIRIT have been withdrawn from the Church. Now it will readily be admitted on all bands, that the state of the Church is very greatly altered since these miraculous powers have ceased; but at the same time we must not allow a general principle of this sort to set aside the authority of Holy Scripture, as far as regards our own practice, until, by a diligent and careful study of the Apostles' writings, we have found that the principle does really apply to the case in question; as, for instance, that the Apostolic Authority is grounded in Scripture upon the possession of miraculous powers, and therefore necessarily ceased when those powers were withheld. Let us then examine this point more particularly.

Have we then considered, in reference to this matter, that the extraordinary gifts of the SPIRIT were not confined to the appointed teachers of the Church, but were shed abroad upon the congregation at large, upon the young and the old alike, upon the servants, and upon the hand-maidens? (Comp. Joel ii. 28, 29.) It was the promise of the Old Testament, that, under the dispensation of the New Covenant, GOD would write His Law in the hearts of His people, so that they should teach no more every man his neighbour, and

every man his brother, saying; Know the LORD, "for they shall all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD." (Jer. xxxi. 33, 34.)

This promise, we are told in the Epistle to the Hebrews, was fulfilled in the Gospel; and St. John, in his First General Epistle, expressly acknowledges the accomplishment of the Prophet's words. He says to his " little children," "Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things. I have not written unto you because ye know not the truth, but because ye know it. These things have I written unto you concerning them that seduce you. But the anointing which ye have received from Him abideth in you, and ye need not that any may teach you; but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in Him." (I John ii. 20, 21. 27) Such general illumination by GOD'S Holy Spirit might seem to make any authoritative Apostolic declarations altogether unnecessary for the converts; but we still find St.

John writing to them, and declaring his testimony to the Christian doctrine with much earnestness; and why? Let us hear his own words at the beginning of his Epistle; "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with US; and truly OUR fellowship is with the FATHER, and with His Son JESUS CHRIST. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full." Here we have the object of the Apostle's affectionate address fully and clearly stated.

He and his Fellow-Apostles, the witnesses of their Master's Life and Death and Resurrection, had received from Him a glorious revelation to communicate to the world: they had seen and did testify, that the FATHER sent the SON to be the Saviour of the world; upon this foundation they were commissioned to build the Christian Church; and it was their holy and blessed office to "stablish, strengthen, settle" the faith of their "little children" in the Gospel; to tell them how they might keep themselves from the spirit of error, and continuing "stedfast in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship," might through them have fellowship with the FATHER and the Son, and so "rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory."

We now see the full force of St. John's authoritative language. He was marking the lines of "the foundation of the Apostle and Prophets," in order that his disciples might duly be built upon their most holy faith into a temple meet for the habitation of God through the SPIRIT: they were GOD'S building, and the Apostle was one of the "wise master-builders," whom CHRIST had appointed to build His Spiritual House. And this view of the matter will become still clearer, if we study well the prayer which CHRIST offered for His Church at the solemn moment when He was just about to purchase it to Himself by the shedding of His precious blood.

We there find our Blessed LORD, having first declared that His work was finished on earth, and having earnestly besought the FATHER now to glorify Him, proceeds to pray for His Apostles, that His FATHER would preserve them in unity, and truth, and holiness. He says, "I have manifested Thy name unto the men which Thou gavest Me out of the world; I have given unto them the words that Thou gavest Me, and they have received them; Holy FATHER, keep through Thine own name those whom Thou hast given Me, that they may be one as We are.

Sanctify them through Thy truth; Thy word is truth. As Thou hast sent Me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth." Thus did CHRIST lay the foundations of His One Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church;--in the remainder of His prayer He intreats like blessings for all who should be built on this sure foundation, that they might be so joined together in unity of spirit by the Apostles' doctrine, as to be made a holy

temple acceptable to GOD through Him. (Collect for St.

Simon and St. Jude,) "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word; that they all may be one, as Thou FATHER art in Me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me." Accordingly, we read that when, on the day of Pentecost, three thousand were brought to believe on CHRIST through St. Peter's word, they were baptized into that holy communion, " and they continued stedfast in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship according to a text already quoted,) and the LORD daily added fresh members to this Church.

And in later times, when false teachers were gone abroad seducing the disciples, the Apostles wrote to them, declaring and reminding them what the Apostolic doctrine was, that they might have the joy fulfilled in themselves of knowing that they were in the unity of the Apostolic Church, one in CHRIST and in the FATHER. And so St. Paul explains why he wrote to the Corinthians, "not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy; for by faith ye stand." (2 Cor. i. 24.)

St. Peter, again, in his Second Epistle, uses exactly the same language with St. John. He writes as "a servant and an Apostle of JESUS CHRIST, to them that have obtained like precious faith with US; according as His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness; exceeding great and precious promises, that by these ye might be partakers of the Divine nature:" i. e. he does not draw any line of difference between himself and his brethren, as if he had miraculous powers which they had not; but rests his teaching on the plain fact of his being commissioned, and commissioned with the simple object of communicating the doctrine which had been disclosed to him. He addresses his converts just as St. John does, not as though they were ignorant or unmindful of the truth, but in order to strengthen their conviction of those holy facts and doctrines to which he and his brother-Apostles were commissioned to bear witness. "I will not be negligent," he says, "to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth. Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance. Moreover, I will endeavour that after my decease ye may have these things always in remembrance. For WE have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our LORD JESUS CHRIST, but were eye-witnesses of His Majesty, and this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with Him in the Holy Mount." Again he says, "This Second Epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance, that ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy Prophets, and of the commandment of us the Apostles of the LORD and SAVIOUR." For by adherence to the commandment of the Apostles, and the doctrine of the Prophets, it might be known that Christians were building themselves up on the only true foundation, even JESUS CHRIST.

But it is in St. Paul's writings that we shall find the fullest and clearest view of Apostolical Authority; and it is well worthy of our observation, that the Church upon which the Apostle most strongly enforces that Authority, is the very Church which is most distinguished in the New Testament for the abundance of its Spiritual gifts; so that clearly it was not an exclusive possession of miraculous powers, which constituted the distinction between Apostles and private Christians He begins his First Epistle to the Corinthians by thanking GOD on their behalf "for the grace of GOD which was given them by JESUS CHRIST, that in every thing they were enriched by Him in all utterance and in all knowledge, so that they came behind in no gift."

But the Apostle goes on immediately to reprove them for their want of unity; it had been declared to him, that there were contentions among them. And how did these contentions arise?--in low views of

Apostolical Authority. They had forgotten that there was but One Foundation; One Building of GOD; One Rule, according to which the several builders must carry up the structure which Apostles had founded. And how did the Apostle endeavour to drive out the spirit of schism?--by asserting and enforcing his own authority over them, as the one only father whom they had in the Gospel, (though they might choose for themselves ten thousand instructors,) and by sending Timothy to bring them into remembrance of his ways which were in CHRIST, as he taught every where in every Church.

Thus were they to be brought back to the blessed unity of spirit of the One Catholic and Apostolic Church--And here, by the way, we have light thrown upon the doctrine contained in the Epistles of Ignatius. Remarkable and consolatory to the inquirer after truth as is the evidence therein afforded to the divine appointment of Episcopacy, perhaps there is mingled with his satisfaction some surprise at the earnestness and frequency with which the Holy Martyr urges the doctrine.

But it is plain, what the Apostles are in St. Paul's Epistles, such the Bishops are in those of Ignatius centres of unity; and as St. Paul, when denouncing schism, magnifies the Apostolic Office, in just the same natural, or rather necessary way, does Ignatius oppose the varieties of opinion in his own day by the doctrine of Episcopacy.--To return: the same Apostle writes to the Church of Rome; "I myself am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another.

Nevertheless, brethren, I have written the more boldly unto you in some sort, as putting you in mind, because of the grace that is given to me of GOD, that I should be the Minister of JESUS CHRIST to the Gentiles, ministering the Gospel of GOD." (Rom. xv. 14--16.) The passage which follows is worthy of especial notice, as showing that the Apostles marked out for themselves distinct provinces, so that each had his own Diocese, as it were, his own peculiar sphere of duty and authority.

St. Paul tells us he strove to preach not where Christ was named, lest he should build upon another man's foundation (ibid. v. 20.). Each laid down for himself his own "measure," and would not stretch beyond it (2 Cor. x. 14.). And this will perhaps help to explain the fact, which early tradition hands down to us, of the wide dispersion of the Apostolic Body. At all events, it is certain from History, that the different Churches claiming Apostolic Descent, were very careful to maintain the practices which they had severally derived from their respective Founders.

To the Church of Corinth accordingly St. Paul writes as its sole Founder and Father, claiming upon this ground Supreme Authority over it in the name of JESUS CHRIST. And with this Epistle before us, we cannot doubt of the conclusion which, we have already seen, may be clearly enough deduced from other Epistles of the New Testament, viz. that the Authority which the Apostles claim for themselves, they claim, not on the ground of high supernatural endowments, (for these were the possession of the Church at large,) but on the ground of "the Grace and Apostleship" which they had received from CHRIST, the Head of the Christian Church, "for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name."

That is, they refer directly to their Commission, as His Apostles, to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature; they refer to the authority with which He invested them, when He stood in the midst of them, and said unto them, "as MY FATHER hath sent Me, even so SEND I you," and bade them receive the HOLY GHOST, to be with them in the prosecution of their High and Holy Office. This point is very strikingly exhibited in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, because there the possession of extraordinary gifts, and the possession of Spiritual Authority, are brought into immediate contrast with

each other.

The Corinthians, proud of the gifts of new teachers, had raised parties in opposition to St. Paul, and questioned his authority. How then did he maintain it? not by claiming higher gifts and graces for himself, (though he spoke with tongues more than they all,) but by referring to his Office, as a Minister and an Apostle of CHRIST, whose One Spirit governs the whole body of the Church, appointing divers orders, and dividing to every man severally as He will. That he was an Apostle he proved by the fact, that he had been equally favoured with the Twelve; that he had seen our LORD JESUS CHRIST in the flesh: and had received the doctrines of His Gospel, and grace to preach them to the world.

This was the simple ground on which he claimed Authority; it was not because of the gifts or graces which he, as an individual, possessed; nor was it because he had laboured more abundantly than all the other Apostles; nor because of his signal labours and afflictions for CHRIST'S sake. He mentions these in his Second Epistle, to show that, if he chose to adopt the language of his adversaries, he had a better right than they to glory; but all the while he tells the Corinthians that he was "become a fool in glorying;" that they had compelled him; that he could show the signs of an Apostle, and needed no epistles of commendation.

It was in right of his office that he claimed Authority; it was for the sake of that Office that he endeavoured to give no offence in any thing, but in all things to approve himself as the Minister of God.

Now, perhaps some persons may be disposed to think that this Apostolical Authority would terminate with the Apostles themselves, with the favoured men who had been " eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word," and could declare to others what they had themselves heard and seen. This might appear probable, if we had only our own reasonings to go upon; but Scripture teaches us a very different lesson. When St. Paul felt that his time was now nearly come, he writes to Timothy, his "dearly beloved son," giving him his last solemn charge, as to one who was hence forth to occupy the post which hitherto he had himself maintained in the battles of his LORD.

He earnestly commands him, "watch THOU in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an Evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of MY departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished MY course, I have kept the faith." This faith, which St. Paul had so vigilantly kept was now to be committed to Timothy'S care; he had already been put in trust with the Gospel by the HOLY GHOST and the imposition of the Apostle'S hands; and now upon him was to devolve the solemn responsibility of being left in charge of the Apostle'S testimony, and of handing it down to future ages.

"Be not thou therefore ashamed'S' says the Apostle, "of the testimony of our LORD, nor of me his prisoner; Hold fast the form of sound words which thou hast heard of me in faith and love which is in CHRIST JESUS. That good thing which was committed unto thee, keep, by the HOLY GHOST which dwelleth in us." And, in reminding him of this indwelling of the HOLY GHOST, the promise of CHRIST to His Ministers, the Apostle labours, with evident anxiety, to embolden Timothy, by filling him with a due sense of the authority and power committed to him.

"I put thee in remembrance, that thou stir up the gift of GOD which is in thee by the putting on of my hands. For GOD hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." "Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in CHRIST JESUS. And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.

This last passage is very important, because it shows so clearly that the testimony which the Apostles bore to CHRIST did not cease with their ministry, but was to be transmitted along the sacred line of those whom they ordained, and so handed down to them that were to come after.

And where does this line end? Blessed be GOD, it has not ended yet; and CHRIST'S promise gives us the comfortable assurance that it shall last "even to the end of the world." Down to our days, the Church has been "a witness and keeper of Holy Writ;" (Art. xx.) and so faithful a witness, and so watchful a keeper, that we can feel as certain of the facts of the Gospel History, and so of the glorious doctrines which they involve, as if we heard them from the Apostles' own lips.

And how beautifully are we reminded of St. Paul's dying charge to Timothy, when we see the Fathers of our own Church laying their hands on the heads of their sons in the faith, bidding them receive the HOLY GHOST for their high office and work in the Church of GOD, and charging them to be faithful dispensers of the Word of GOD and His Holy Sacraments; and then delivering into their hands that Holy Book which the Church has transmitted, and giving them authority to preach it in the congregation!

Thus is the testimony of the Apostles still handed down in the Church, which is "the pillar and ground of the truth;" and thus do their Successors declare it with authority, "GOD also bearing them witness," not indeed now "with signs, and wonders, and divers miracles," but still, according to His own most true promise, with invisible "gifts of the HOLY GHOST.

Let us now return to see how St. Paul exercised his Apostolical Authority. He had been consulted by the Church of Corinth upon several questions which had caused difference of opinion among them;--how then does he decide these questions? In the first place, he draws a broad line of distinction between the points on which he had an express commandment of his LORD to go upon, and those on which he had to give his own judgment. In some cases he says, "I command;" in others, "not I, but the LORD As a Minister and Steward of CHRIST'S household, his first consideration was, whether, in the course of His ministry, his Master had left him any explicit commandment; if he found no such commandment, his next duty was to decide the question by the principles of CHRIST'S Gospel. In this case, he gave his "judgment, as one that had obtained mercy of the LORD to be faithful," as having been "allowed of God to be put in trust with the Gospel;" and in such decisions he felt assured that he had the SPIRIT of God. Accordingly, he says with confidence, "If any man think himself to be a Prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the LORD;" referring at the same time to his Apostolical Authority, "What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only?"--is it nothing to you that the Apostles have so ordained, and the Catholic Church so received and practised? (1 Cor. xiv. 36, 37.)

And now I would ask, in conclusion, where is the essential difference between the Apostolic age and our own, as to the relation in which God's Ministers and His people stand to each other? I do not say that the Ministers of His word in these days can feel so sure as the Apostles could, that in the commandments which they give they have the SPIRIT of GOD; very far from it. But I do say, that neither can the people feel so sure as in those days of miraculous gifts, that they have the SPIRIT of GOD with them; and thus the relation between the two parties remains unaltered. Since the Apostolic times and the age of miracles, the City of GOD is, as it were, come down from heaven to earth; the scene is changed, but the city remains the same. The Corner-stone is the same, its foundations are the same: if it be not built up by the same heavenly rule, it will not be the city that is "at unity in itself," the city of Him, who "is not the Author of confusion, but of peace, as in all Churches of the Saints." His HOLY SPIRIT works at sundry times, in

divers manners, according to His own Almighty wisdom; sometimes He descends upon His Ministers with an audible sound and in a visible form 1 and sometimes in visible, amidst the deep silence, and the prayers of His faithful congregation 2. Outward appearances may be changed, yet His Mighty Agency remains the same; and it will be our wisdom and our blessedness to feel and acknowledge His presence in the "still small voice," as well as in the "great and strong wind," and in "the fire." For though miracles and tongues may have ceased, He has never ceased to send forth Apostles, and Prophets, and Evangelists, and Pastors, and Teachers; nor will He cease to send them until the work of their ministry is accomplished in "the edification of the body of CHRIST;" "till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the SON of GOD, of CHRIST.

The question to which these few observations refer, is one, it must be allowed, of great importance. Our blessed LORD declares to His Apostles, "AS MY FATHER hath sent Me, even so send I you." Again He says, "He that heareth you, heareth Me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth Me." It becomes then a grave question, to whom did Christ address these words? To the Twelve Apostles exclusively, or to them and their successors to the end of the world? It is surely worth our while carefully to search the Scriptures with a view to ascertain this point. And while we do this, let us bear constantly in mind that slight intimations of our LORD'S Will are in their degree as much binding upon us as express commands; that he who knows what probably his LORD'S will is, will be judged as one who had probability to guide him; that he who knew not through negligence or slothfulness, will have his negligence or slothfulness to answer for. It will not be a sufficient excuse for us, that we thought all that was said in the New Testament of Apostolical Authority could only apply to the Apostolic age. Let us remember, as a solemn warning to us, how it came to pass that the Jews despised and rejected CHRIST. They saw no sign from heaven, and therefore thought He could not be the Prophet like unto Moses. Their fault was, that they did not humbly and heartily "search the Scriptures."

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