

Who Are the Successors of the Apostles?

One of the major doctrinal divides between Catholic and Protestant is the Catholic concept of apostolic succession. According to this Catholic doctrine, the authority of the original apostles has been passed down to the Catholic bishops through a mechanical, religious rite called "Apostolic Succession."

Since Peter, they argue, was the chief of the apostles whom Christ gave the keys, and since he founded the church in Rome, his authority over all the church has been passed along to the bishop of Rome (the pope) through this rite of apostolic succession. Beginning in the latter part of the second century, lists began to be made of this succession.

According to the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly known as the Inquisition), since Protestant "communities" do not hold to this Roman Catholic doctrine and practice of "Apostolic Succession," or maintain a "sacramental priesthood," they cannot be called churches.

Being able to trace a mechanical, institutional succession back to the apostles is, according to Catholic doctrine, what makes Roman Catholicism the true church and is what disqualifies Protestant "communities" from being called churches.

No Biblical Evidence of Such a Succession

There is, of course, no evidence that either Jesus or the first apostles established permanent church offices that were to be occupied by a succession of church leaders/bishops. Judas was replaced out of necessity because he had been one of the 12 and by his apostasy he had reduced the number to eleven.

When James, who is also one of the 12, is put to death by Herod in Acts 12, there is no attempt to replace him. He held no continuing office that another must fill, nor does any Christian leader in the New Testament. Instead of establishing permanent offices, Paul and the 12 understood that the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit in the church guaranteed that He would raise up leaders when and where they were needed.

The Idea of an Apostolic Succession Began in the Second Century

The idea of permanent church offices occupied by a succession of bishops did not surface until the latter part of the second century with the church father, Irenaeus, who used it as a tool to combat heresy. Irenaeus pointed the heretics to the apostolic churches of his day—the churches of Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi, Rome and others that supposedly had been founded by Paul or one of the Twelve. According to Irenaeus, if the heretics were not in communion with one of these churches (or a church in communion with those churches), then they had no claim of Christian legitimacy.

The Roman Catholic Church claims that Peter founded the church in Rome and passed his authority along through a succession of bishops down to the present pope. The Eastern Orthodox Church, on the other hand, claims that the true apostolic succession has continued in their churches, through their bishops. They assert that, with the division between the eastern and western sectors of the church in 1054, the true succession continued with them, while the western Church (Roman Catholic) veered from the true faith into heresy.

The Lutheran Church also traces a succession, although their succession of bishops changes at the time of the Reformation. Lutheran historian, Lars Qualben, says, “The Lutherans did not form a new Church after the schism with Rome. They merely formed a continuation of the early Christian Church, as we

know it from the New Testament and from the early Christian Fathers.”

The Anglican Church’s claim of apostolic succession would be similar to those above. In fact, all the older churches that claim an ecclesial, organizational succession have continued the model begun by Irenaeus with modifications to fit their own unique historical situation.

No Institutionalized Apostolic Succession

There is, of course, no Biblical basis for an institutionalized, apostolic succession. The New Testament writers, in fact, show very little concern for church offices and organizational structure. This is why the New Testament scholar, Dr. Gordon Fee, says that the New Testament is full of surprises, “but none is so surprising as its generally relaxed attitude toward church structures and leadership.” He and others point out that, excepting Phil. 1:1, Paul never addresses himself to a leader or group of leaders in any of his letters to the churches.

Lists of succeeding bishops, such as that begun by Irenaeus, tend to be based on dogma and expediency rather than factual history. Dr. Hans Kung, who is the most widely read Roman Catholic theologian in the world today, says, “An uninterrupted sequence of ‘laying on of hands’ from the apostles to the bishops of today, an unbroken chain of succession (of the kind cited in later lists of succession) cannot be demonstrated historically.”

John Wesley, who as an Anglican minister, initially held to an apostolic succession through the Anglican bishops, found his views refined in the fires of the 18th century Methodist revival, which he spearheaded. Through his diligent study of the New Testament and after observing the Holy Spirit raise up powerful ministries from the ranks of the common people outside the Anglican Church, he declared that “neither Christ

nor his apostles prescribed any form of church government.”

In his classic work, *The Primitive Church*, Professor Burnett Streeter agrees with Wesley and says: “Whatever else is disputable, there is, I submit one result from which there is no escape. In the primitive church there was no single system of church order laid down by the apostles. During the first hundred years of Christianity, the Church was an organism alive and growing—changing its organization to meet changing needs. Uniformity was a later development.”

True Apostolic Succession is a Thing of Faith and of the Spirit

The idea that there can be no church without this Catholic rite of Apostolic Succession, diminishes both faith and Christ. It makes a doctrine—and a tenuous one at that—to be predominant and central. It makes both church and the apostolic appear mechanical and doctrinaire.

Jesus, on the other hand, said that where two or three are gathered together in His name, that he would sanction that gathering with His presence (Matthew 18:20). Is His presence not adequate? Paul echoes this in Colossians 2:9-10 where he says that all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Christ and that *you are complete in Him*.

For many Protestants, the Catholic approach to Apostolic Succession, wherein the authority of the apostles is passed along by a programmed religious rite, does not make sense or pass the test of Scripture.

I would ask my Catholic friends to consider the following questions. Should not Apostolic Succession be a thing of substance—of faith and of the Spirit? Should it not be a succession in apostolic faith, apostolic commitment to Christ, and an apostolic experience of the Spirit? Are we not all responsible for adhering to the faith and vision of those first apostles?

Apostolic succession as a thing of the Spirit cannot be restricted to a religious ritual that is mechanically repeated generation after generation—as though the Holy Spirit could be confined to a particular ecclesiastical order. *The wind blows where it wishes*, Jesus said (Jn.3:8). This is why Henry P. Van Dusen, former president of Union Theological Seminary, declared, “The Holy Spirit has always been troublesome to Church officialdom, because He does seem to be unruly, unpredictable and radical.”

The Whole Church Is Apostolic

The apostles recognized all gatherings of believers as true churches. Although neither Paul, Peter, nor any apostle had been to Colosse, Paul recognized the believers there as forming a true *ekklesia*—a church. Even though the church in Antioch was not under Peter’s authority, as evidenced by the fact that Paul publicly rebuked him when he came there and waffled on the issue of the Gentiles equal acceptance in Christ, there was no question of Antioch being a true church.

Apostolic succession is the responsibility of the whole church—of every Christian. A church is not apostolic because it has a leader who calls himself an apostle, bishop, or pope. Every believer must seek to walk in the same selfless devotion to Christ as those first apostles.

Every believer must live in the same selfless love toward others that characterized the early apostolic church. And every believer must live in a radical dependence on the Holy Spirit as did those first followers of Christ. Only then can the church today make any claim to being apostolic.

Apostolic succession is neither mechanical nor automatic. Apostolic succession is a succession in apostolic commitment to Christ and apostolic life in the power of the Holy Spirit.

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the Quest for Apostolic Authority and Control Has Divided and Damaged the Church, *available from Amazon in both paperback and Kindle. To read about his vision for another Great Awakening, visit his website at .*