

# The Apostolic Succession In Recent Lutheran Discussions

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VERY recently there have been prominent studies in Lutheran circles on the apostolic succession, and although they have appeared on other continents, they cannot fail to evoke an interest in the American synods. Hermann Sasse treated the subject in *Lutherische Blaetee*<sup>1)</sup> in 1956 in response to the inter-Communion established between England, Sweden, and Finland. Edmund Schlink has written in *Kerygma und Dogma*,<sup>2)</sup> and in the current year also an African committee on doctrine has prepared an extensive study published in *Lutheran World*.<sup>3)</sup> Further discussions may be anticipated, especially in light of developments in the World Council of Churches.

The Lutheran churches in the World Council of Churches are brought face to face with the Anglican insistence that the Risen Lord provided for His successors before the Ascension by establishing the apostolate, and that this apostolate must be a self-perpetuating institution if the promises of the perpetuity of the Gospel are to be realized.<sup>4)</sup> This apostolate, they hold, is visibly conveyed by the laying on of hands in the ordination and requires a strict supervision over the "succession", if the authority to minister in the name of Christ is to be properly established. While many Anglican writers will acknowledge that Scriptural proof for this theory of succession is lacking,<sup>5)</sup> they will maintain that the Church canonized the "apostolic ministry" in the same manner as the books of the New Testament canon,<sup>6)</sup> and that the ministry of the apostles necessarily has priority over the writings in time.<sup>7)</sup> Since the Church came into being before and without the New Testament books, it is concluded that the "apostolic ministry" must also have priority over the Scriptures in matter. Various other refinements have been developed in this "doctrine" of the succession with the result that the churches which claim to possess it have difficulty in recognizing the ministerial acts of the churches which are held not to possess the succession.<sup>8)</sup>

This latter condition makes the apostolic succession the most knotty problem in the ecumenical movement today. Outside of the Lutheran churches the discussion and debate has been vigorous and not lacking in acrimony, even among Anglicans.<sup>9)</sup> The Anglican and the Orthodox have been the most insistent that the succession is of the essence of the Church, though it need not be traced to the same apostle. When the Russian Orthodox Church is added to the World Council of Churches, the advocates of the succession will have gained further strength. None of these successionist churches accepts the doctrine of the Roman Church, viz. that a valid ministry can be traced only to Peter.<sup>10)</sup> The World Council of Churches aired this problem at Lund in 1952 with the result that a variety of irreconcilable positions was revealed. Since then it has been apparent that progress toward union is stymied.<sup>11)</sup>

The Lutheran writers have focused their attention also upon the experiment in South India where a number of episcopal and non-episcopal churches united, agreeing that all new pastors entering the union should be ordained in the historic episcopacy.<sup>12)</sup> The view in India is that no doctrinal interpretation is to be imposed, but that each member is to be allowed his own interpretation. The Anglicans have not been able to recognize this Church of South India as possessing the true apostolic succession,<sup>13)</sup> and strongly unharmonious voices are heard from within the Church of South India.<sup>14)</sup> North India and Pakistan and Ceylon are in the process of forming similar unions, in which they hope to improve upon the policy concerning the succession. New churches are to be formed in which the entire ministry is unified in a special ceremony at the inception of the church. This is not to be considered a re-ordination. For want of a name for such a service it has been referred to as "a ceremony without a name".<sup>15)</sup>

Among the "younger churches" which find this problem urgent there are also Lutheran churches, especially those of Africa. In a convention of the Lutheran churches of Africa, held on Madagascar in 1960, the various constituent bodies were asked to establish doctrine committees to study among other matters also the historic succession. (The Swedish Lutheran body in Africa has a bishop.) This study has resulted in the report published in *Lutheran World* (above), in which it is revealed, however, that many emendations have been suggested by a reviewing committee, tending to weaken

the claims of the succession. This report, as also the treatise by Edmund Schlink, are Lutheran in character though they recognize that a church can in Christian freedom organize along episcopal lines without the customary doctrinal implications. Neither the Africans nor Schlink find the succession taught in Scripture, and therefore not essential.<sup>16)</sup> Both state that even if the succession could be historically demonstrated, it would not guarantee the true succession in the apostolic doctrine.<sup>17)</sup> On the other hand, both Schlink and the African report consider some form of succession desirable in the light of present day ecumenical conditions.

The German and the Danish Lutheran churches have in the past not considered the Roman apostolic succession valid, much less have they sought it. There existed indeed a local episcopal succession in Denmark, but one which under the King of Denmark, who brought Bugenhagen to ordain his superintendents, "made it quite clear that an absolute break with the past was intended."<sup>18)</sup> Bishop Berggrav has spoken out strongly against the Anglicans because of the doctrinal implications.<sup>19)</sup> The Swedish Lutheran Church has been in the succession by an accident of history, but they have not considered it essential. They have used the words that they possess it "as though they had it not".<sup>20)</sup> The Norwegian and Icelandic Lutheran churches also remained aloof from the inter-Communion established between England, Sweden, and Finland.<sup>21)</sup>

Various studies of the office of the ministry have appeared in German, generally opposing the universal priesthood of the believers as basic for the ministry. They do not find the universal priesthood in the New Testament, or they refuse to find any connection between it and the ministry. So Regin Prenter in *Theologische Literaturzeitung* (May, 1961). Joachim Heubach, *Die Ordination zum Amt der Kirche* (1956), defends the personal character of the succession, but not of bishops exclusively. He argues that it belongs equally to the bishops, presbyters, and deacons, and that it is theirs only if they preach and serve the Gospel. On the latter point Edmund Schlink speaks the same language.

In the various countries mentioned there is movement in both directions, toward the apostolic succession and away from it. The Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, etc. are traditionally much more anti-episcopal than the Lutherans, and in this matter

the ecumenical appeal seems to have little effect on these churches. (Witness the recent proposals of Moderator Blake.<sup>22)</sup>) The Anglicans despair of winning these over.<sup>23)</sup> The Lutherans appear to be more easily won, because they have in many cases had an episcopal succession, though not the apostolic succession, and they have a high regard for much ecclesiastical tradition. Recent liturgical interests have produced even a higher appreciation of pre-Reformation traditions. From the recent studies named, however, it would appear that the Lutherans outside America are not so charmed with the thought of being in the "catholic" tradition that they are willing to forget the basic tenets of the faith and enter into union or practice fellowship with divergent churches solely because the episcopal succession is held in common. They are not ready to consider the historic succession the only condition which must be met for the establishment of church fellowship.

In an age when the voice of syncretism (amalgam of religions) is heard almost as loudly as the voice of unionism in (disregard of doctrinal difference) a Christian church which seeks to worship God in the spirit of the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran confessions may rightly refrain from establishing fellowship merely on the basis of an *adiaphoron* (apostolic succession), lest it be found in the company of those who deny both the mighty acts of God and the words of Christ.

## NOTES

1. *Lutherische Blaetter*, 8. Jahrgang, Nr. 48, Juni 1956.
2. *Kerygma und Dogma*, Summer 1961. Lead Essay.
3. *Lutheran World*, Vol. VII, No. 3, 1960, "From Lands and Churches: Africa", pp. 337-350.
4. E. R. Fairweather and R. F. Hettlinger. *Episcopacy and Reunion*. London: A R. Mowbray & Co., 1952. Pp. 4ff.
5. *Op. cit.*, p. 68. "The basic authority for Anglicans is Scripture, and if we could find a definitive statement of Church order in the New Testament we should be a long way towards solving our difficulty." (Hettlinger).
6. *Op. cit.*, p. 7. (Fairweather)
7. Gustav Wingren, *The Living Word*. Phila., Muhlenberg: 1960. P. 101.

8. Kenneth E. Kirk, *The Apostolic Ministry*. London: Hodder & Stou reprinted 1957 with new foreward. Title essay, p. 25. "Witho succession . . . the ministry is no ministry."
9. Kenneth M. Carey, *The Historic Episcopate*. Westminster, rep 1955.  
Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, "Is There an Apostolic Succession?" *tianity Today*, Vol. V, No. 2, Oct. 24, 1960.
10. *The Pope Speaks*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1961), p. 66: "The symbol a guarantee of this unity is the Pontiff, who takes the place of Petu stands at the peak of the sacred orders."
11. J. H. S. Burleigh, *A Church History of Scotland*. London: Oxford versity Press, 1960. Page 419: "It must, moreover, be frank mitted that in Scotland the movement towards organic unity enco one of the thorniest problems in the whole ecumenical discussion Unhappily it was treated by many in Scotland as an attempt to bishops upon the Kirk, and has been rather summarily dealt w the presbyteries."
12. *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. XI, No. 2, Jan. 1959, pp. 177-18
13. Stephen Neill, *Anglicanism*. Penguin Books. Reprinted with rev 1960. Page 380.
14. *The Church Quarterly Review*, April-June 1961. Pages 210-223
15. Stephen F. Bayne, Jr., *Ceylon North India Pakistan*. A study in menical Decision. London: SPCK, 1960.
16. R. Newton Flew, *The Nature of the Church*. London: SCM Pres: 1951. Page 84.
17. Compare also Heubach, Joachim. *Die Ordination zum Amt der E* Berlin, 1956. Page 146.: "Die Ordination ist darum keine perma Garantie wahrer apostolischer Sukzession."
18. Stephen Neill, *op. cit.*, p. 375.
19. The Churches of England and the Churches of Norway, Denmar Iceland. Report of the Committee Appointed by the Archbishop Canterbury in 1951. London: SPCK, 1952, p. 27.
20. Stephen Neill, *op. cit.*, p. 374f.
21. *Ibidem*, p. 376.
22. *Time*, Vol. LXXVII, No. 22, May 26, 1961, pp. 62-68.
23. Stephen Neill, *op. cit.*, pp. 378-379.