

NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIANITY
(PART FOUR)

Introduction

1. This is the fourth lesson of a series designed for those who are seeking to be members of Christ's church and who desire to practice simple, New Testament Christianity.
2. A brief review of the first three lessons:
 - a. In lesson one we discussed two major points:
 - 1) We saw that Jesus promised to build or establish ONE CHURCH, His church (Matthew 16:18). We then turned to Acts where we saw the fulfilment of Jesus' promise: the apostles were immersed in the Holy Spirit, Peter preached the first gospel sermon, and believers were commanded to repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:1-38). It was these saved ones that the Lord added to His church (Acts 2:47).
 - 2) We saw how Christianity began to spread throughout the world and how new congregations were established. We paused at this point to expound on the difference between establishing a new **congregation** and a new **religious organisation**. The apostles established **new congregations** that belonged to Christ. We then explained how, over hundreds of years, men established new religious organisations (i.e., all those religious bodies that claim to be Christian).
 - b. In lesson two we discussed two major points:
 - 1) We carefully compared the three accounts of The Great Commission in the synoptic gospels. Jesus commissioned His disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel and baptise those who believe in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. They were to teach disciples to observe all of His teachings (Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:46-49).
 - 2) We then carefully studied Acts chapter two – It is here that Luke begins to record the apostles faithful fulfilment of their commission. We saw what one must do to become a Christian and how one is added to Christ's church (Acts 2:1-47).
 - c. In lesson three we discussed two major points:
 - 1) We saw that once a person has obeyed the gospel and been added to the church by the Lord, it is essential to find a local congregation of Christians with whom he can place his membership. In the first century this was a relatively easy task because there was only one church and every congregation belonged to the Lord. Nowadays, though, it is not such an easy task because there are literally hundreds of religious organisations that have been established by men and each of these organisations has their own congregations scattered throughout the world. However, we saw that finding a congregation belonging to the Lord (or, finding a church of Christ) is a lot easier than we might have supposed.
 - 2) We then asked, "Once a person has found a congregation that belongs to the Lord, does that mean our search is over?" The short answer is no! Look around at the hundreds of different religious organisations and you will note the differences in hierarchies, governments, doctrines, forms of worship, and mission or work concepts. Is a congregation free to organise itself as it chooses? Worship how it wants? Do whatever work it wants? Believe whatever it wants? Does any of this really matter?
3. In this lesson we shall answer the following questions: Is a congregation free to organise itself as it chooses? Worship how it wants? Do whatever work it wants? Believe whatever it wants? Does any of this really matter? The answer is yes. We shall demonstrate this by discussing three major points: (i) The Biblical case for apostolic authority (ii) Apostolic authority in the early church (iii) The historical record and the principle of apostolic authority. Please note, we only have a limited time to present the material and so these notes will be brief.

I. THE BIBLICAL CASE FOR APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY

The Apostles were chosen by the Lord to be the revealers of His will. Their actions and teachings were not arbitrary or incidental; they were **intentional** and **authoritative**. The practices they ordained were in accord with Divine will. The churches were “ordered” by apostolic authority. The directions given by the apostles to local churches were **uniform** and **binding**. Therefore, every instruction given to local churches, and every example of their conduct, was a matter of apostolic precedent.

A. The apostles were commissioned by the Lord to complete the work of revealing God’s plan.

“These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, **He will teach you all things**, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you” (John 14:25-26 NKJV).

“The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after **He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen**” (Acts 1:1-2 NKJV).

B. The apostles were “credentialed” for the work of revelation; this by their association with the Lord to be witnesses of His resurrection (In the letters of Paul you will notice how he zealously defends his apostolic credentials – this is because of the authority vested in that office¹).

“And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son of James... **Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection**” (Acts 1:13-22 NKJV).

“**Am I not an apostle?** Am I not free? **Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?** Are you not my work in the Lord?” (1 Corinthians 9:1 NKJV).

“I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. **Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds**” (2 Corinthians 12:11-12 NKJV).

C. In the New Testament, revelation is inseparably connected with the apostles (and those strongly related to them, including Mark and Luke).

“If indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), **which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets**: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel” (Ephesians 3:2-6 NKJV).

“Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), **that you 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 Savior**, knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:1-4 NKJV).

“Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they **continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine** and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:41-42 NKJV).

¹ The word “Apostle” is defined thus: “A *delegate*; specifically an *ambassador* of the Gospel; officially a *commissioner* of Christ (‘apostle’), (with miraculous powers): - apostle, messenger, he that is sent” (Strong).

D. The church was built on the foundation of apostolic authority.

“Truly I say to you, **however many things ye may bind on the earth will be things that are bound in heaven**, and however many things ye may loose on the earth will be things that that are loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18:18 ACV).

“Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of **the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone**, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:19-22 NKJV).

“Therefore, brethren, stand fast and **hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle**” (2 Thessalonians 2:15 NKJV).

E. Local churches were “ordered” by the instructions of the apostles.

“But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I **ordain**² in all the churches” (1 Corinthians 7:17 NKJV).

“**Therefore I urge you, imitate me**. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, **who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church**” (1 Corinthians 4:16-17 NKJV).

“But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, **nor do the churches of God**” (1 Corinthians 11:16 NKJV).

“Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, lest you come together for judgment. **And the rest I will set in order when I come**” (1 Corinthians 11:33-34 NKJV).

“Now concerning the collection for the saints, **as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also**” (1 Corinthians 16:1 NKJV).

“These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so **that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God**, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:14-15 NKJV).

“In hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began, but has in due time manifested His word through preaching, which was committed to me according to the commandment of God our Savior; To Titus, a true son in our common faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ our Savior. **For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you**” (Titus 1:2-5 NKJV).

THE BIBLICAL CASE FOR APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY

- ☞ The Apostles were commissioned by the Lord to complete the work of revealing God’s plan.
- ☞ The apostles were “credentialed” for the work of revelation; this by their association with the Lord to be witnesses of His resurrection.
- ☞ In the New Testament, revelation is inseparably connected with the apostles.
- ☞ The church was built on the foundation of apostolic authority.
- ☞ Local churches were “ordered” by the instructions of the apostles.

II. APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The writers of the New Testament appealed for uniformity of teaching based on the message that had been delivered. Also, early church literature is filled with appeals to apostolic authority.

A. New Testament writers and their appeal for uniformity of teaching based on the message that had been delivered to the saints:

“**As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him**, rooted and built up in Him and **established in the faith, as you have been taught**, abounding in it with thanksgiving. Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ” (Colossians 2:6-8 NKJV).

² The word “ordain” means, “To *arrange thoroughly*, that is, (specifically) *institute, prescribe*, etc.: - appoint, command, give, (set in) order, ordain” (Strong).

“This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5 NKJV).

“If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness” (1 Timothy 6:3 NKJV).

“Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle” (2 Thessalonians 2:15 NKJV).

B. We also find appeals to apostolic authority in three periods of history: (i) Ante-Nicene³, (ii) Reformation, and (iii) Restoration. They frequently cited apostolic writings as the standard to determine sound teaching and practice.

1. The Ante-Nicene period (A.D. 33-325): Clement of Rome⁴ (A.D. ? – 101): “These things, dearly beloved, we write, not only as admonishing you, but also as putting ourselves in remembrance. For we are in the same lists, and the same contest awaiteth us. **Wherefore let us forsake idle and vain thoughts; and let us conform to the glorious and venerable rule which hath been handed down to us;** and let us see what is good and what is pleasant and what is acceptable in the sight of Him that made us” (1 Clement 7:1-3).
2. The reformation period (A.D. 1517-1555): Ulrich Zwingli (A.D. 1484-1531): “Those who model their teachings upon the pattern of the Scriptures cannot be said to teach according to the whims of their own feelings, but those who go to work without resting on the authority of the sacred writings, contrary to Paul’s directions to Timothy... (2 Timothy 3:14). Timothy had learned from Paul, and Paul from Christ, but both had been led by the same spirit into the knowledge of holy things... **Those who give assent unto flesh and blood, regulate their teachings according to their own sweet will; those who give assent unto the spirit of God sweetly breathing from the Holy Scriptures and ever freshly blooming, regulate their teaching according to the thought and purpose of God.** And He is by no means of recent origin, for the prophet called him the Ancient of days... They therefore, who refer all things to His purpose, and examined all things by the standard of His thought, do not set up a new standard, but go back to the old...”
3. The restoration period (A.D. 1794-1835): Thomas Campbell (A.D. 1763-1854): “3. **That in order to this, nothing ought to be inculcated upon Christians as articles of faith; nor required of them as terms of communion; but what is expressly taught, and enjoined upon them in the word of God. Nor ought any thing be admitted, as of divine obligation in their church constitution and managements, but what is expressly enjoined by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles upon the New Testament church; either in express terms, or by approved precedent.** 4. That although the scriptures of the Old and New Testament are inseparably connected, making together but one perfect and entire revelation of the Divine will, for the edification and salvation of the church; and, therefore, in that respect cannot be separated; yet as to what directly and properly belongs to their immediate object, the New Testament is as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline, and government of the New Testament church, and as perfect a rule for the particular duties of its members, as the Old Testament was for the worship, discipline, and government of the Old Testament church, and the particular duties of its members.”

Apostolic Authority In The Early Church

☞ N.T. writers appeal for unity based on the message delivered to them.

☞ Apostolic authority has been the appeal throughout history.

³ “The *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, subtitled ‘*The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*’, is a collection of books in 10 volumes (one volume is indexes) containing English translations of the majority of Early Christian writings. The period covers the beginning of Christianity until before the promulgation of the Nicene Creed at the First Council of Nicaea” (Wikipedia).

⁴ Little is known about Clement (who in Roman Catholic tradition is regarded as the fourth Pope), but he seems to have been a presbyter in the church in Rome and his letter to the Corinthians, generally known as First Clement, was widely circulated among early Christians. First Clement (circa A.D. 94-100) is one of the oldest extant Christian documents outside of the writings in the New Testament.

III. THE HISTORICAL RECORD AND THE PRINCIPLE OF APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY

While it is true that apostolic authority became the most persistent source of authority for those seeking uniformity of practice and teaching, we acknowledge that even before the end of the first century, heresy abounded and churches were awash in controversy and corruption. This was due to three basic authority systems that had emerged to support competing doctrinal claims: Gnosticism, Apostolic Succession, and Apostolicity; these systems more or less mirror modern alternatives.

- A. Gnosticism encompasses a very wide range of religious and quasi-philosophical movements sharing some common themes. Gnosticism refers to a ‘revealed knowledge’ available only to those who have received the secret teachings of their respective gods. This means that the rest of us are bereft of truth and trapped in ignorance. This is subjectivism, and subjective authority offers justification for many systems of religious teaching and practice. Throughout history, countless systems of thought have been based on various forms of “Gnostic,” private, subjective, knowledge - such movements as Postmodernism, Transcendentalism, Romanticism, Mysticism, and Pentecostalism are examples in the last three centuries. Private knowledge, when offered as a basis for truth claims, has been and is the source of confusion, extremism, and division.
- B. Apostolic Succession refers to the “doctrine that ministry in the church derives from the apostles in historical continuity... Irenaeus of Lyons drew on the idea of the succession of bishops to formulate an orthodox response to the Gnostic claim of a secret tradition...” (Everett Ferguson in Encyclopedia of Early Christianity).
- C. Apostolicity is the belief that all authority for doctrine and practice must be based on the apostles’ teaching. In deciding which books would be included in the New Testament, apostolic authorship became the primary test. Other books, like Mark and Luke, were eventually accepted because of their clear identification with an apostle. The general acceptance of the New Testament canon was a final confirmation that apostolic authority was the “rule” for the churches.

Summary

1. The Biblical case for apostolic authority:

- a. The apostles were chosen by the Lord to be the revealers of His will. Their actions and teachings were intentional and authoritative. The directions given by the apostles to local churches were **uniform** and **binding**. (i) The Apostles were commissioned by the Lord to complete the work of revealing God’s plan. (ii) The apostles were “credentialed” for the work of revelation. (iii) Revelation is inseparably connected with the apostles.
 - b. The writers of the New Testament appealed for uniformity of teaching based on the message that had been delivered. Also, early church literature from the Ante-Nicene, Reformation, and Restoration periods are filled with appeals to apostolic authority.
 - c. While apostolic authority became the most persistent source of authority for those seeking uniformity of practice and teaching, a great deal of heresy also abounded and churches were awash in controversy and corruption. This was due to three basic authority systems that had emerged to support competing doctrinal claims: (i) Gnosticism, which is basically subjectivism, (ii) Apostolic Succession, which refers to the belief that the ministry in the church derives from the apostles in historical continuity, and (iii) Apostolicity, which refers to the belief that all authority for doctrine and practice must be based on the apostles’ teaching. These systems more or less mirror modern alternatives.
2. Our first proposition regarding apostolic authority reads: “Restorationist thinking assumes that the Apostles were given specific authority to define doctrine and set in order churches. This authority was perpetuated in the inspired writings of the New Testament.” This is not an arbitrary or recent assumption - it is one of the most fundamental themes in Christian history. A belief in apostolicity is profoundly Biblical and deeply rooted in the thinking of centuries of serious Christians; it is a concept that deserves respect, study, and emulation.
3. The doctrine, organisation, worship, and work of a local church - Does it really matter? We have demonstrated that, yes, it does matter. So what does it mean for the person who has found a congregation belonging to the Lord? It means he is responsible to study the scriptures to find out how congregations were organised, how congregations ordered their worship, and what work they did. This will be the subject of the next lesson.