THE TRADITION OF THE APOSTLES

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY AND THE EARLIEST TRADITION OF THE CHURCH¹

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Dissertation Summary

1. Research Questions, Hypotheses, and Goals

I had two questions in mind when I began my research on the relationship between apostolic authority and the earliest tradition of the church: is it historically justified to talk about a normative tradition, and, if yes, how can we demarcate it?

It was my initial hypothesis that the existence of a normative tradition is both *warranted* and *demarcated* by apostolic authority. I also presumed that apostolic authority on the one hand meant an authentic representation and embodiment of the tradition received from Jesus; on the other hand, it meant a legitimacy for authoritatively defining this tradition. If this latter hypothesis is true, apostolic authority was both *ministerial* authority (submitted to the earliest tradition given by Jesus) and *magisterial* authority (the only legitimate definition of this tradition) at the same time.

The goal of my doctoral thesis was to test these hypotheses in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the dynamics between apostolic authority and the earliest tradition of the church.

¹ Ádám Szabados, 'The Tradition of the Apostles: The Relationship Between Apostolic Authority and the Earliest Tradition of the Church' (Ph.D. dissertation, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, Budapest, 2019). Supervisor: Prof. Dr Peter Balla; Co-supervisor: Dr habil. Ferenc Pap.

2. Research Methodology

My research is primarily *historical* and, because I approach history through texts, *exegetical*.

I divided the subject into three parts. First, I researched the origin of the concept of apostle (including the research history of the subject), whether it is warranted to speak of a uniform apostle concept in the New Testament, and if it is possible to demarcate a narrower circle of authoritative apostles.

The second part of the thesis is about tradition. It focuses on two challenges to the traditional view that understood apostolic preaching as a reliable bridge connecting the tradition handed over by Jesus and that preserved by the Fathers. The first challenge is the Bauer hypothesis on the plurality of tradition (and the revisions of Koester, Dunn, and others); the other is *Formgeschichte*, originally developed by Bultmann and Dibelius. After examining both challenges, I make a claim that there existed an authoritative tradition which was inseparably connected to apostolic authority.

In the third part I focus on this authority. After giving an overview of the research history on apostolic authority, I explore the existence of authoritative apostles who could warrant the emergence of a normative tradition out of potential Jesus traditions. I also examine whether and how these apostles could contribute to the formation of a legitimate, reliable, and normative tradition. Then, through the examples of Peter and Paul, I examine what dynamics characterised the relationship of this apostolic authority to early tradition.

The chronological and thematic *liminality* of the thesis was the single greatest difficulty I faced during my research. My topic was situated in the middle of a ‘busy crossroads’ where every road would eventually lead me far away from my chosen topic. I myself chose this risk because I was interested, from a *chronological* perspective, in the apostolic authority between Jesus and the New Testament canon, and, from a *thematical* perspective, in the dynamics of the relationship between tradition and apostolic authority. The triangle of *apostles*, *tradition*, and *authority* staked out the boundaries of the space within which I could examine the dynamics of these three.

3. *Research Results and Theses*

The following theses can be formulated from my research with regard to apostolic authority and its relationship to the earliest tradition of the church.

1. In the primitive church there clearly were authority figures who played a crucial role in the development of an authoritative – legitimate, reliable, and normative – tradition. Irrespective of the diversity of the apostle concept, we should recognise a narrower circle of apostles to which these authority figures belonged. The authoritative tradition of the church is the tradition of this circle because their remembrance of the words and deeds of Jesus was considered to be more weighty than the teaching of others. It is especially significant that the apostles were viewed as the traditionist ‘elders’ of the universal church.

2. Paradoxically, the other significant implication of my thesis is that the dilemma of where *exactly* the circle of apostles ended is *not* significant. Those authority figures who without question belonged to this circle could demarcate and control the apostolic tradition which they themselves had received from Jesus. Apostolic authority is personal authority, but only in the sense that the apostles were legitimate, reliable, and normative witnesses to the gospel tradition of which they were ministers. The focus was not on the persons of the apostles but on the tradition of Jesus of which they were witnesses. That is why it is not apostolic *authority* but apostolic *tradition* that ultimately counts, the tradition of which they could testify with unique authority.

3. If apostolic tradition is more important than the demarcation of the circle of the apostles, then it is of little importance that most of the tradition fixed in the New Testament *has not been formulated by the Twelve*, but by such people as Mark, Luke, James, Jude, or Paul. If apostolic tradition is more important than people, the real issue is whether the tradition is in harmony with the teachings of the Twelve, not whether they themselves wrote it down.

4. The role of Simon Peter (the ‘Rock’), and that he gave ‘the right hand of fellowship’ to Paul, is crucial in this regard. It is also significant that the early church presumed the authority of Paul behind Luke. The formation of the New Testament Scriptures seems to confirm that the most important thing was not the magisterial authority

of the Twelve but the tradition about which credible and authorised people witnessed, people who enjoyed the trust of the apostolic circle (especially that of Peter and the Twelve).

5. The New Testament canon shows the impact of the same four people whom the early church considered to be the most authoritative apostles: the three 'pillar-apostles' (Peter, James, and John) and Paul. Their role in the formation of the New Testament canon demonstrates that the most authoritative apostles of the early church played the most significant roles in the fixation of the apostolic tradition. It is a striking fact that behind the New Testament tradition we find the most authoritative figures of the primitive church, people who had received their authority from Jesus himself.

6. The earliest tradition of the church, therefore, does not consist of subjective fragments of memory, or editorial purposes reflecting the interests and life situations of anonymous communities, as many who accepted the form-critical assumptions believed, but it consists of authoritative testimonies. There seems to be no original pluralism out of which one single authoritative tradition would have emerged. Tradition had a backbone that sustained it from the beginning and created continuity between the person of Jesus and the congregations of the fast-growing church. This backbone is the memory-based witness of the apostles.

7. The pillars of tradition are the authoritative eye witnesses, the personally authorised envoys of Jesus Christ, the unique presbyters of the universal church, the new covenant prophets of Jahve, the interpreters of the 'Jesus event', the *apostles*. The earliest tradition of the church is *their* tradition. That is why it was considered to be a legitimate tradition, a reliable tradition, and was received as a normative tradition. The church is built on the confessing testimony of Simon Peter and the other apostles.