

Apostolic Teaching

Today I've been asked to talk—preach? teach? share?—about “apostolic teaching”. Problem is, I'm not used to talking about “apostolic teaching”; what is it?. Someone included apostolic teaching as one of 7 marks of the church, i.e. one of the activities that a group of people need to have to be a church; so what is it? And do we have it?

We've heard a text this morning, from Acts 2, telling us how 3000 people responded to the events of Pentecost, you know the story—wind, tongues of fire on top of their heads, speaking in other languages, Peter preaching a sermon, to which about 3000 people responded—and then it says, “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

So, most simply, we could say, “apostolic teaching” is the teaching of apostles! The apostles—another name for the first disciples of Jesus—apparently taught, somehow, these 3000 new followers of Jesus.

What did they teach? We're not told. But, if we look at the several proclamations of Peter that are recorded in these early chapters of Acts (2, 3, and 4), we might get some idea. Whenever Peter speaks to crowds of Jews or religious rulers in these days, he typically shares a few quotes from OT, the Psalms or the prophets. But he especially focuses on Jesus: how he was tortured and killed, and then raised from the dead by God and exalted.

And—get this!—he almost always make a point of saying “You crucified Jesus!” And then he urges his listeners to repent and be forgiven of their wicked ways, their sins, and be saved from this corrupt generation. In Acts 4, the religious rulers react to this accusatory tone, and order Peter and John to “stop all speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus”. Peter and John respond, “we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

So we might conclude that this first reference to “apostolic teaching” was focused especially on the disciples' experience and memories of Jesus: what they “saw and heard” of his behavior, his interactions with adversaries and needy people, his teachings to crowds and intimate conversations just with

the disciples, and finally his death, resurrection, and ascension. We can surmise they also talked about OT prophets and writings, showing Jewish listeners how Jesus fulfilled their ancestors' expectations and hopes.

So right here I want to pause and raise a query for us to ponder. I am suggesting that what these chapters tell us about Peter's very public encounters are clues to what happened in the daily teachings of the apostles; in other words when the other apostles met with the people to teach them, what they taught was similar to what Peter said in his public "sermons". We're told (2:46) "Every day the people met together in the temple and ate in their homes." Is this where the "apostles' teaching" happened? Do you imagine they met in large groups or smaller, more intimate, home, settings? And what were these teaching sessions like—classroom lectures or more like circle conversations? Since we're not given details, I'm simply asking us to ponder and imagine.

Now back to Acts 4, where the authorities reacted, apparently in the temple. We're told, "The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John... They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John and... put them in jail until the next day." The next day the religious rulers disputed with Peter and John, finally ordering them to "stop speaking and teaching about Jesus". Peter and John refused, but were released; the rulers couldn't punish them because of too much public support.

Willie James Jennings, in his commentary on Acts, writes, "The disciples knew this confrontation was coming. The struggle against those in power that marked the life and death of Jesus was coming for them as well." (p.46) If this is so, then consider how bold these disciples were in their dispute with authorities. Peter, again, was blunt:

"Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you

healed. Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’”(4:8f.) Not exactly a listener-friendly approach!

I want now to come back to the question: as a mark of the church, what is “apostolic teaching”? Is it different from just “teaching”? Say, Sunday School? Or Christian education? In other words, do you have to have a Christian education program to be a church? Probably most of us would say ‘no’. But somebody is saying you have to have “apostolic teaching” to be a church. I suppose we could dispute that, but let’s not. Let’s assume that apostolic teaching is important, if not essential, for a true church of Jesus. So what is “apostolic teaching”?

The word “apostle” refers to someone who is “sent”: a messenger, an emissary, an ambassador. In the early church it came to mean a person in a local church body who had gifts of establishing and nurturing other churches, a person, sent by God (or the church) whose character and gifts reflected the authority of Jesus, the wisdom, courage, and grace of God, who spoke and acted on behalf of God.

In that light, the word “apostolic”, like “apostle”, carries the meaning of authoritative, trustworthy, and “sent”. So “apostolic teaching” as a mark of the church should be happening in any true church; i.e. teaching that is inspired by God that is going forth with authority, with strength to the members of that church and beyond, to the wider world, touching other people or powers with God’s presence.

If we come back to the stories in Acts we’ve been considering, it seems clear that the Apostle Peter was doing apostolic teaching, or better, “apostolic proclamation”, in the accounts reported there. He stirred things up every time he opened his mouth: first, 3000 people repented, then, a lame man was healed, finally, the rulers were infuriated. So if this was happening in the public settings, I’m back to asking what was happening in the daily teaching sessions of the other apostles, wherever they were meeting, in a temple court or in homes. Given the drama that Peter and John were experiencing, it’s hard to imagine that James or Andrew or Mary Magdalene were giving carefully-prepared lectures on the atonement, or

were having leisurely discussions about eternal life, sitting in the local Electric Brew. That might be ok for Sunday school, but is that apostolic teaching?

All this is to suggest that apostolic teaching as a feature of church life is something that engages people, challenges them. It might happen in a Sunday school class, or a large lecture hall: it might happen in a coffee house, or even through a Sunday sermon! It might happen in a contemplative service, without many words, or in wild church, or even in a Poor People's Campaign protest on the streets. "Apostolic teaching", I think, wherever it happens, is teaching that carries the weight of God's glory, the penetration of God's voice. It may be a sharp and stern, or it may be tender and consoling. It touches the listeners, it touches us.

And so it is a necessary mark of the church. Where the church is, the voice of God needs to be heard, with some kind of presence and power. It needs to be spoken within the church, to its members, and through the church to the wider world.

Do we have apostolic teaching in FOH? Yes, throughout our life. Early on in Life in the Spirit and Discipleship courses we encountered the challenges of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit; we have been touched by the preaching of pastors: Nina Lanctot, James Isaacs, Biff Weidman, Rhoda Schrag, Suella Gerber; and through the voices of visitors: Virgil Vogt, Jim Croegaert, Shane Clayborne, Cora Brown or retreat with Alan and Eleanor Kreider. Many of you could name other ways we've been sustained or confronted by God's voice in our midst.

We are now at a tender time in our pilgrimage as a local church. Now as much as ever we need "apostolic teaching"; we need to hear God's voice: gentle, firm, gathering, sending, consoling, reviving. We need ears and hearts to hear God's voice, and courage to follow.

I want to close with the words of a poem that's touched me deeply. While its focus is on God's persistent impulse to be known in the natural world, I take it as representing God's fervent desire to be heard within the church as well. Perhaps we can receive it as "apostolic teaching" that pervades our whole experience as creatures of God:

God's Grandeur By Gerard Manley Hopkins

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all are seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

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Keith Kingsley