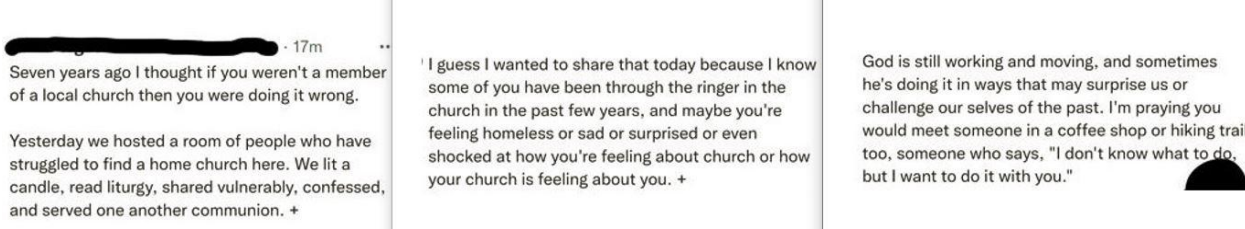


I got into a discussion this a week back with my monthly breakfast group (which I have dubbed the ecumenical council). We currently regularly have an Anglican (me), a Methodist (of the more progressive bent), an Eastern Orthodox fellow, and a couple of non-denominational guys. In the past we have also had a Roman Catholic. Anyhow, the discussion we had was about this tweet:



I rose to the defense of apostolic succession as understood in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglo-Catholic circles. I have a previous post [here](#) in which I lay out the *what* of apostolic succession and in which I detail my acceptance of the doctrine along with the implications of such belief. For the purposes of this post, I define apostolic succession as the valid transfer of sacramental and teaching authority by the apostles to their successors and from them to their successors on down unto the present through the laying on of hands.

Anyhow, I have been reflecting on the discussion over the course of the last week and would like now to present the biblical evidence I have found to support apostolic succession. Before I do so, I want to clarify that I do not hold to *Sola Scriptura*. Rather, the following quote best exemplifies my view (original article [here](#)):

Church tradition has a valid standing along with Scripture. In any matters, except those necessary for salvation, what Scripture does not forbid may be allowed. In this lie life and liberty. Furthermore, the Bible, while not the source or origin of doctrine, has a most important function of being the test of doctrine. No doctrine can be taught as necessary to salvation unless it can be proved by Scripture. It is the safeguard against those additions to the faith such as Rome has made and continues to make independent of Scriptural warrant.

So, I do not conclude on the basis of the following texts that apostolic succession is necessarily true. Rather, the following texts seem to be best explained by the doctrine of apostolic succession which would need to wait until Irenaeus in the mid second century to be fully fleshed out. But, much like the doctrine of the Holy Trinity (God is three persons in one substance) had to wait until the Council of Nicaea to be fully fleshed out but is still obviously the biblical teaching, so too the doctrine of apostolic succession is in the Holy Bible in nascent form and is spelled out in detail later. Incidentally, I see the universal witness of the Church Fathers on this topic as well as the practice of all churches over the course of the first 1500 years of the history of the church, to be insurmountable arguments in favor of the doctrine. Nevertheless, it is to the bible that we now turn. I will first quote a passage and then offer some brief commentary giving my understanding of the passage.

Matthew 16:13-19, NRSV

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

I won't get into questions of petrine primacy here (though, I think it is clear from this passage and others that Peter was *primus inter pares* with the other apostles), but it is worth noting that Peter is specifically singled out by Jesus and promised the "keys to the kingdom of heaven," which Jesus specifies the authority to "bind and loose." Binding and loosing was a well-known term used to refer to the authority of the elders of Israel to forbid or permit, to authoritatively rule on questions of the law. By extension, Jesus promises that Peter will be given the ability to make authoritative decisions for the Church. While I am aware of some recent scholarship that looks at Second Temple material in order to find that binding and loosing could refer to a number of other things and thus this mishnaic/talmudic take on binding and loosing should be discarded (see Mike Heiser's podcast [here](#)), I think Heiser's biases are really showing (he is allergic to tradition, creeds, and anything that smells like Sacerdotalism). Without getting super technical, I think we can conclude that binding and loosing has a broad semantic range that can include ruling on theological matters and church discipline. Indeed, in the Matthew 18 passage below, the immediate context for binding and loosing has to do with church discipline. For a very good account of how apostolic succession is rooted right in the Second Temple context, please see [this discussion](#).

Matthew 18:15-20, NRSV

15 "If another member of the church[d] sins against you,[e] go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.[f] 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

In this passage, Jesus extends the promise he made to Peter in Matthew 16 to all of the apostles. They each will have binding and loosing authority, but Jesus specifies—*where two or three are gathered*—that the apostles will work best collectively, as a college. This is on full display in Acts 15 when the question of what to require of Gentile converts came up. Peter eventually asserts that no strict burden should be laid on the gentiles and James agrees with him. The council then, unanimously, agrees to send some messengers along with Paul and Barnabas to communicate the council's decision. In the letter they send, the council writes "it seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden . . ." The college of apostles, along with other ordained men, speaking with one voice was able to communicate the will of God in an authoritative way.

John 20:19-23, NRSV

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

In this passage, Jesus appears to his disciples after the resurrection and gives them the Holy Spirit. He then clarifies that the disciples will have the authority to forgive or not forgive sins.

Acts 1:12-26, NRSV

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of [c] James. 14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. 15 In those days Peter stood up among the believers[d] (together the crowd numbered about one

hundred twenty persons) and said, 16 “Friends,[e] the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus — 17 for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.” 18 (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong,[f] he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. 19 This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) 20 “For it is written in the book of Psalms,

‘Let his homestead become desolate,
and let there be no one to live in it’;

and

‘Let another take his position of overseer [episkopos].’

21 So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us — one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” 23 So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. 24 Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place[g] in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” 26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

This passage is a clear depiction of the importance of succession to vacant offices in the church. Having committed suicide, Judas abrogated his office. On their own authority, the other 11 apostles decided that he needed to be replaced. And once the correct man was chosen, he was added to the apostolic college. It wasn’t just that Judas had been a leader and now he was gone, but rather that his office was empty and needed to be filled. Moreover, crucially, it was not Judas’s moral failure that ended his holding of the apostolic office. Rather, it was his death that triggered the need for the vacancy to be filled.

Acts 8:14-17, NRSV

14 Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. 15 The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit 16 (for as yet the Spirit had not come[c] upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). 17 Then Peter and John[d] laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

After Philip proclaimed the Gospel in Samaria and baptized converts, the apostles sent two of their number to Samaria to lay hands on them for the reception of the Holy Spirit. Philip, it seems, did not have such authority.

1 Timothy 4:11-16, NRSV

11 These are the things you must insist on and teach. 12 Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. 13 Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture,[e] to exhorting, to teaching. 14 Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders.[f] 15 Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. 16 Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.

In this passage, St. Paul advises Timothy on how to conduct himself as a leader of the church. And one of the things that Paul reminds Timothy of is the importance of his ordination, the gift that was given via the laying on of hands. Here we have an example of ordination to a church office without there first being a vacancy. People are ordained as necessary to carry on the work of expanding the church.

1 Timothy 5:17-25, NRSV

17 Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor,[e] especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; 18 for the scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves to be paid." 19 Never accept any accusation against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. 20 As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest also may stand in fear. 21 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels, I warn you to keep these instructions without prejudice, doing nothing on the basis of partiality. 22 Do not ordain [lit. "lay hands on"] anyone hastily, and do not participate in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. 23 No longer drink only water, but take a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. 24 The sins of some people are conspicuous and precede them to judgment, while the sins of others follow them there. 25 So also good works are conspicuous; and even when they are not, they cannot remain hidden.

In this passage St. Paul reminds Timothy that he should not hastily ordain anyone. That is, ordination is an important event that should not be taken lightly. To be ordained is to be set apart for the Lord's work.

2 Timothy 1:6-7, NRSV

6 For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; 7 for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

In this passage Timothy is again reminded of his ordination by Paul.

James 5:13-16, NRSV

13 Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 14 Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

This passage highlights the importance of anointing the sick and the need for the elders to be the ones to do this anointing. Tied to this anointing is the practice of confession which, with anointing by elders being its immediate context, seems to locate confession within the orbit of the elders.

So, what are we to conclude? I think the following is reasonable based on the previous texts:

- The offices of authority in the church are passed on to the next generation. There is clear continuity of teaching authority (Paul→Timothy→elders in Timothy's church labor in preaching and teaching).
- As the Church expands, there is additional need for leaders. And these leaders are commissioned by the laying on of hands (the apostles replace Judas and Paul ordains new leaders like Timothy to continue the work).
- Those who have been ordained by the laying on of hands—the successors of the apostles {variously referred to in the New Testament as overseer [*episkopos*] or elder [*presbyteros*]¹—have the authority to celebrate what became known as the Sacraments (see first chart below).

¹ It seems that in the earliest days these two offices were not carefully distinguished as they would become subsequently. I am not getting into the debate here except to say that I don't know if (in today's usage) a bishop is a priest with additional canonical authority (the two offices are ontologically the same) or if a bishop (though also a priest) has essential differences from a priest (the two offices are ontologically distinct). Another way of asking the question is whether a bishop is consecrated (set aside for a particular task) or is ordained (made to be something new).

What?	Who?	Scriptures
Sacrament of Ordination ²	Apostles, Elders	Acts 1:26, Acts 6:6, 1 Timothy 4:14, 1 Timothy 5:22, 2 Timothy 1:6-7
Teaching Authority	Apostles, Elders	Matthew 16:13-19; Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Timothy 5:17
Sacrament of Reconciliation ³	Apostles, Elders	John 20:19-23; James 5:13-16
Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist ⁴	Apostles	Luke 22:14-23; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26
Sacrament of Anointing ⁵	Apostles, Elders	Acts 28:8, James 5:13-16
Sacrament of Confirmation ⁶	Apostles	Acts 8:14-17
Sacrament of Baptism ⁷	Any Christian ⁸	Acts 8:12, Acts 8:38, Acts 9:18
Sacrament of Holy Matrimony ⁹	The Couple	Matthew 19:7-9 ¹⁰

² From the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*: “The Holy Scriptures and ancient Christian writers make it clear that from the apostles' time, there have been different ministries within the Church. In particular, since the time of the New Testament, three distinct orders of ordained ministers have been characteristic of Christ's holy Catholic Church. First, there is the order of bishops who carry on the apostolic work of leading, supervising, and uniting the Church. Secondly, associated with them are the presbyters, or ordained elders, in subsequent times generally known as priests. Together with the bishops, they take part in the governance of the Church, in the carrying out of its missionary and pastoral work, and in the preaching of the Word of God and administering his holy Sacraments. Thirdly, there are deacons who assist bishops and priests in all of this work. It is also a special responsibility of deacons to minister in Christ's name to the poor, the sick, the suffering, and the helpless.”

³ From the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*: “The ministry of reconciliation, which has been committed by Christ to his Church, is exercised through the care each Christian has for others, through the common prayer of Christians assembled for public worship, and through the priesthood of the church and its ministers declaring absolution.”

⁴ The celebration of the Eucharist is not described in detail in the New Testament aside from the Last Supper, but at the last supper (see second chart) in Luke and in Paul's words in 1 Corinthians before commanding his apostles to eat or drink Jesus says “do this in memory of me.” Do what? Eat and drink? No; they haven't done that yet. It seems that what they are to do is exactly what Christ did, namely taking bread, giving thanks, blessing it, breaking it, and distributing it. In Mark and Matthew there is also thanksgiving offered for the wine.

⁵ From *To Be a Christian*, the catechism of the Anglican Church in North America: “Through prayer and anointing with oil, the minister invokes God's blessing upon those suffering in body, mind, or spirit. God gives healing, strength, and peace, either for recovery from injury or illness, or for perseverance in adversity, especially in preparation for death.”

⁶ From *To Be a Christian*, the catechism of the Anglican Church in North America: “Confirmation is the laying on of the bishop's hands with prayer for strengthening by the Holy Spirit, following a period of catechetical formation. In confirmation, I make a mature confession of faith, publicly renewing the vows and promises made at my Baptism. In confirmation, I am further empowered and gifted by the Holy Spirit for daily growth in wisdom, courage, and humility before God in every aspect of my life and work.”

⁷ From *To Be a Christian*, the catechism of the Anglican Church in North America: “What is the inward and spiritual grace given in Baptism? The inward and spiritual grace is death to sin and new birth to righteousness, through union with Christ in his death and resurrection. I am born a sinner by nature, separated from God. But in Baptism, through faith in Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, I am made a member of Christ's Body and adopted as God's child and heir.”

⁸ The examples given here from the bible are examples of non-apostles baptizing people.

⁹ From *To Be a Christian*, the catechism of the Anglican Church in North America: Christian marriage, or Holy Matrimony, is a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman, uniting them in self-giving love, joy, and faithfulness. It is ordained by God for the procreation and spiritual nurture of children, the sanctification of husband and wife, the mutual support of their common life, and the flourishing of family, church, and society. Husband and wife enter into this covenant by exchanging vows before God and in the presence of witnesses.

¹⁰ Jesus here quotes and reinforces the idea that it is the couple who join with each other and then ratify that covenant before God.

	Mark 14:22-25	Luke 22:14-23	Matthew 26:26-30	1 Corinthians 11:23-26
Actions and words with the bread.	Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to his apostles, and said, "Take; this is my body."	Jesus takes a loaf of bread, gives thanks, breaks it in pieces, and then hands the pieces to his apostles. He then says "this is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."	Jesus takes a loaf of bread and, after blessing it, breaks it and gives it to his disciples. He then says, "Take, eat; this is my body."	Jesus takes a loaf of bread, gives thanks, and then breaks the bread and says, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."
Actions and words with the cup.	Jesus took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to his apostles, and all of them drank from it. He then said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."	There are 2 cups. Cup #1 happens before the bread and Jesus takes the cup, gives thanks, and then says "Take this and divide it among yourselves, for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes. After the bread, he takes a second cup and says "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."	Jesus takes a cup, offers thanks, and then says "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."	Jesus takes the cup and says "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."
Commentary	Jesus: Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."	Jesus: "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."	Jesus: " I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."	Paul: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."