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978-1-107-42908-6 - The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus

Translated into English with Introduction and Notes by Burton Scott Easton

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

I. CHURCH ORDERS

The early Church Orders were systematic manuals of disciplinary and liturgical rules for which the collective authority of the whole apostolate was claimed. They made their appearance in the second century, grew to considerable dimensions in the third, and reached their fullest development toward the end of the fourth century. They are sources of importance for our knowledge of the inner life of the church, and they were influential factors in the formation of the later canon law.

That legislation of a fairly detailed and elaborate character should sooner or later make its appearance in Christianity was inevitable. The local congregations were made up of men and women practically isolated from the rest of the world and brought into the closest contact with one another; their church was to them almost their entire universe. If human beings anywhere are to live together under such conditions, mutual affection and forbearance—be they never so great—are not enough. Regulations, which define rights and duties in unambiguous terms, are indispensable, and these regulations are bound to increase in number and complexity as the community grows.

As it happened, however, Christianity in its origins contained extraordinarily little material that could be used in forming these regulations. In theory Christians, for guidance in all matters, were to turn to Jesus Christ their Lord, whose teaching they regarded as totally divine and so the final authority in all things. But, as a matter of fact, Jesus' concern was not with concrete and specific problems, and when asked to rule on such he brusquely

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refused.¹ He occupied himself with ultimate moral principles, and left to individuals the task of applying these principles to the various special problems of their lives. Hence it is not at all surprising that in the apostolic and post-apostolic ages direct citation of his sayings is rarely used to settle disputed matters of practice;² his words are employed rather as general directives and to give inspiration to action.³

Nor did the apostles attempt in any systematic way to supply the concrete element that Jesus' teaching might be thought to lack. In only one instance⁴ does the New Testament give us anything that purports to be an apostolic decree, and it gives this only in a matter of fundamental importance. Yet even this brief ruling presents serious critical difficulties to modern investigators, and probably something less than full apostolic authority should be accorded it. In St Paul's Epistles, indeed, it is laid down as a fundamental principle that individual divergences should be tolerated as far as possible even in the same community,⁵ so that the apostle turns from general principles to detailed regulations only in the most extreme instances. Each of his churches was left free to develop under the guidance of the Spirit such customs as it might judge profitable—and was warned not to make even these customs too authoritative. And there is no reason to think that the other apostles differed greatly from St Paul in this regard. That some of them may have drawn up certain specific rules for their own communities is abstractly conceivable, but as to this there is no tradition

¹ Luke 12. 13–16.

² For exceptions see, e.g., Romans 14. 14 (= Matthew 15. 11), 1 Corinthians 7. 10 (= Matthew 19. 9), 1 Clement 46. 8 (= Matthew 18. 6, in substance), 2 Clement 12. 2 (apocryphal).

³ Especially in 2 Clement.

⁴ Acts 15. 28–29.

⁵ Romans 14, in particular.

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at all in the sources of the apostolic age and nothing of any value in later writings.

As a consequence, Christian congregations in search for material to use for legislative purposes could find very little in the primary authoritative teaching of their religion, and were obliged to look elsewhere. But abundant other sources were not lacking.

Of these the chief was the Old Testament, whose importance to the majority of early Christians can hardly be exaggerated. The ceremonial legislation of the Pentateuch was, to be sure, no longer regarded as binding on Christians; the Pauline controversies had settled this principle, even though a dissenting minority did not disappear until late in the second century. But acceptance of the principle did not debar endless debate as to the principle's precise extent: just what Mosaic precepts should be classed as "purely ceremonial"? St Paul, for instance, saw no inherent objection to eating things sacrificed to idols,¹ but in the decree of Acts 15. 28–29 abstinence from such food is regarded as axiomatically "necessary",² and Christians during the next three centuries generally took the same view. The duty of Christian liberality was defined more closely by the adoption of the Jewish law of tithing, and this law was even extended to include not only agricultural produce but income of any kind.³ Or, even when the literal force of an Old Testament precept was recognized as superseded, a transferred sense might be discovered that revived the rule for Christianity. So the command that tithes should be paid to the priests was construed to give the church's ministers a right to the Christian payments.⁴ Or the fact that the Old Testament ministry was strictly regulated led to the argument that divine regulations of

¹ 1 Corinthians 8. 8; 10. 25–26.

² Compare Revelation 2. 14, 20.

³ Didache 13. 7, etc.

⁴ Didache 13. 3, etc.

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equal strictness must hedge about the Christian ministry as well.¹

Since so much permanent value was detected in the older ceremonial legislation, it was only natural that the obligation of the “moral” laws should usually be treated as absolute. This led to a true moral legalism; that is, these laws were conceived to demand obedience not because of a higher principle contained in them but simply because they were “written”. Such, for instance, is the assumption throughout Clement’s letter to the Corinthians, where almost every argument is made to rest ultimately on an Old Testament precept. Nor does it occur at all to Clement that the Corinthians may find anything amiss in his method; he takes for granted that, no matter how much other parts of the Old Testament may have lost their meaning, God’s moral statutes will remain in immutable force for ever. And, we can scarcely doubt, such was a common opinion in Christianity from the very beginning, outside of Pauline and a few other circles; it was an attitude very like Clement’s that St Paul combated in his Epistle to the Romans.

This common opinion, moreover, was strongly reinforced by pedagogical needs. The sweep of the new religion and its gathering in converts from all sorts of curious moral highways and hedges had created a situation that taxed to the uttermost the powers of the Christian teachers. Multitudes of neophytes were constantly demanding instruction, and to teach each one of them how to apply Christ’s deeper principles to involved special problems seemed utterly impracticable; why engage in so intricate a task when a succinct Old Testament precept could settle the matter instantly? So catechetical moral training was usually given by means of short digests based on Old

¹ So very emphatically in 1 Clement 40–41. But Clement does not argue for a detailed parallelism between the two ministries.

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Testament laws, some of these digests being undoubtedly of Jewish origin.¹ But it is interesting to note that the most authoritative brief digest of Jewish morality—the Decalogue—does not appear as a whole in the Christian teaching.²

In Gentile Christianity concrete rules were taken likewise from Greek ethical works, whose standard was usually high. Only the learned, of course, could appreciate the moral treatises of the great philosophers, but a long succession of teachers—chiefly Stoics—had devoted themselves to bringing an understanding of good conduct within the reach of all. Among other means, these teachers achieved their purpose by requiring their pupils to memorize short gnomic formulas, or—the ultimate extremity of simplification—bare lists of virtues to be imitated or vices to be avoided.³ This last device was so convenient that even Greek-speaking Jews adopted it,⁴ and Christians found it invaluable. In fact they did not hesitate to take ready-made lists from Stoic and other sources,⁵ so giving Greek ethical concepts an unnoticed but authoritative entrance into Christianity.

Less formal but very real was the influence of established customs and conventions—on occasion, even superstitions—in contemporary life, whether Jewish or Gentile. St Paul, for instance, in 1 Corinthians 11. 4 holds it to be obvious that men should pray with their heads uncovered, and this

¹ Didache 3. 1–6 is an instance.

² The reason for this appears to be that at this period the Fourth Commandment was conceived to be wholly “ceremonial”, and to “keep the Sabbath” was regarded as Judaizing (Ignatius, *Magnesians* 9. 1, etc.). The belief that in Christianity the Sabbath laws have been transferred to Sunday is of medieval origin.

³ On these methods compare especially K. E. Kirk, *The Vision of God* (London, 1931), pp. 119–124.

⁴ As in *Wisdom* 14. 25–26.

⁵ Romans 1. 29–31 is largely of Greek origin; 1 Timothy 3. 2–3 and Titus 3. 1–2 are wholly so.

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passage has influenced all subsequent Christian practice. Yet the ruling rests on nothing more profound than the religious habits of the particular Jews among whom St Paul was brought up; other Jews in his day believed that God should be approached only when the head was covered, and this came to be the accepted Jewish practice. If St Paul had lived elsewhere—or if he had been born somewhat later—the declaration in 1 Corinthians 11. 4 would have shocked him.

To these customs inherited from their pre-conversion days, the various local churches gradually added customs of their own. Some of these were certainly introduced for very good reasons, others perhaps for no particular reason and more or less accidentally. But in religious bodies everywhere customs quickly grow to be revered simply because they *are* the custom, and are clung to tenaciously. Yet, to a certain degree, the churches were willing to learn from one another. The Christian communities in any geographical subdivision of the Empire had strong interests in common, and, in particular, they recognized as right and proper a certain leadership on the part of the church in their political capital. So the customs of this church were generally accepted as models for the whole region, with the result that by the end of the second century “local” use was quite generally converted into “provincial” use. And very large and important churches—especially Antioch, Alexandria and Rome—gained a corresponding ascendancy over the smaller capitals within their respective areas.

In some instances, in fact, rulings by outstanding churches or individuals might acquire an almost world-wide influence. 1 Clement, which states the Roman conception of certain rules governing the ministry, was accepted as authoritative in circles far away from the Corinthians for whom it was written. Indeed, many Christians came actually to regard it as an inspired New Testament writing,

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and in various later documents Clement figures as the medium through whom the apostles issued their decrees. Of equal significance was Ignatius of Antioch, whose directions on church organization appear to have been obeyed even in Rome itself. Just so later Church Orders were regarded as legally binding in provinces remote from their place of origin.

In most quarters this trend toward uniformity in the second century was simply taken for granted. Practices with a century of tradition¹ behind them were practically treated as irreformable: "This custom has been handed down from the days of the apostles and consequently has the apostles' authority behind it". But even by the end of the first century the apostles were regarded as a wholly inspired group, who were the divinely appointed custodians and interpreters of the faith.² Hence, it was commonly assumed, they must have been unanimous in all things; what one apostle taught all apostles must have taught. All Christianity rests on a common norm of doctrine and practice that was delivered to the church by the apostles.³

It is this conviction that lies behind the Church Orders and that gives them their peculiar form.

The most obvious objection to this theory, naturally, was the very evident fact that approved practices in different localities varied considerably; these could not all go back to a common origin. And in minor matters, assuredly, second- and third-century Christianity tolerated or even encouraged⁴ differences. But in anything regarded

¹ In 1 Clement 47. 6 the forty-five year old Corinthian church is called "ancient".

² Jude 17, Revelation 21. 14, etc. The meaning in Ephesians 2. 20 is probably a little different.

³ 1 Clement 42. 4; 44. 1-2, etc.

⁴ Even in the third century liturgical prayers were still normally extempore, and use of a fixed form was regarded as a weakness on the part of the officiant.

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as important local divergences could lead to bitter conflict. When the second-century Asia Minor churches were asked to change their date for Easter, they replied, “We must obey God rather than men”, and a schism in the church resulted.¹ And in this clash apostolic authority was passionately claimed by both sides, with the constant premise that such authority must in the main lead to uniformity.

Yet there were definite limits to the process of unification. As the generations grew into centuries, the general “ethos” of the more important local types of Christianity acquired a venerable dignity that commanded respect even from churches whose customs were different. In major matters of practice, moreover, a substantial agreement had been achieved, and the churches were organized along the same main lines everywhere. So when any church claimed apostolic teaching in support of special usages of its own—and such claims were made frequently—it usually did so fully aware that other churches could make similar claims with equal validity, and that its special usages might very well have been different. This fact led to a revision of the theory of apostolic unanimity. The complete agreement of the apostles was now thought to extend only to doctrine and the vitally important rules of practice; in other regards each apostle within his own territory had established a use of his own—and each of these uses was equally legitimate. So Alexandria appealed to St Mark, Jerusalem to St James, Ephesus to St John, Rome to St Peter, and so on; in due course the far east was to appeal to St Thomas or St Thaddeus.

Such a theory was not entirely novel; Irenaeus, for instance, urged it in an unsuccessful attempt to settle the paschal controversy. But as local customs became fixed the theory was more and more invoked, and it finally became a settled principle throughout Christendom. The

¹ Eusebius, *HE*, v, 24.

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fourth century was here the definite turning point; when the ecumenical councils met, they made no attempt to legislate in full details for the whole church. So when the compiler of the Apostolic Constitutions *ca.* 375 revived the Church Order formula that made all the apostles legislate minutely, we may presume that he was consciously adopting a style that was already somewhat obsolescent; Christians by now were becoming aware that collective apostolic authority could not be claimed for so wide an extent of regulations. And this consciousness brought with it the eventual end of the Church Orders; they were replaced by explicitly local collections of canons and by liturgical service books. Yet in many parts of the church the old Church Orders retained their authority, and they were incorporated into the manuals of canon law.

The following are the chief Church Orders:

THE DIDACHE

As this work is familiar to everyone its contents need not be described. Most scholars date it in the early years of the second century, but the possibility that its compiler used the Epistle of Barnabas as a source cannot be wholly disregarded.¹ Barnabas is usually dated about 131, with a possibility of belonging some fifteen years earlier, so if the dependence is accepted the Didache could scarcely have originated before the second quarter of the century and may even be somewhat later.

The influence of the Didache in the early church was wide and it was held in high honour. It was incorporated into the Didascalia, the Apostolic Church Order and the Apostolic Constitutions. So eminent and orthodox a saint as Athanasius speaks of it as a book very profitable for neo-

¹ See especially James Muilenburg, *The Literary Relations of the Epistle of Barnabas and the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, Marburg, 1929.

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phytes “who wish for instruction in the word of godliness”,¹ and he cites it as an authority more than once, even though he—very properly—refuses to recognize it as a canonical New Testament writing.² There consequently can be no reasonable doubt that the *Didache* originated in the broad stream of orthodox Christian tradition, not in some obscure heretical sect.

Much the most convenient edition of the Greek text is that edited by Dr Hans Lietzmann in his *Kleine Texte* series;³ it contains an excellent critical apparatus and is very inexpensive. There are many accessible English translations.

THE APOSTOLIC TRADITION

This work of Hippolytus, the subject of the present volume, is named here to preserve the chronological sequence. In its Coptic and other versions it was formerly known as the Egyptian Church Order.

THE DIDASCALIA

A substantial “handbook for the churches”, written probably in Syria, not far either way from 250. Its original language was Greek, but it has been preserved in Syriac and Latin; the latter is defective. It is concerned almost wholly with rules for church organization, church finance and church discipline, treating doctrine hardly at all and liturgical matters only incidentally. Its author was acquainted with the more important Christian literature of the second century, and there is some evidence that he knew Hippolytus’s *Apostolic Tradition*.

¹ 39th Festal Letter (367), 7.

² The details of the Patristic testimony are best seen in J. R. Harris, *The Teaching of the Apostles*, Baltimore and London, 1887.

³ *Die Didache*, Bonn; many editions.