



The “Great Testimony“

A crucial document of the Catholic Apostolic Church

(Part 1)

In this and the following article of our church history series we set out some important statements contained in the “Great Testimony“ in which the British apostles appealed to the heads of Christendom after they had addressed secular and ecclesiastical heads in England fourteen months before.¹

Genesis and Development

The Great Testimony was originally written in English. The English text has come down to us in various editions and variants. An expensive quarto edition for official presentation containing 89 printed pages has parallel translations into Latin, French and German, with identical parts of the text on each page. In Britain there was also a cheaper octavo² edition for everyday reference, with numbered paragraphs.

All editions are undated and there are contradictory statements as to when the Great Testimony was published. On 14 June 1836 prophecies called for such a testimony.³ It was compiled by Apostle Cardale in the same manner as the testimony to the Anglican clergy and on 21 February 1837 it was read to the “Council of Zion”, the assembled office bearers of the Seven Churches of London, and passed by it.⁴ It would appear that the document was published soon after, although there is an idealized tradition that it was presented to three chosen “heads” in Christendom in 1838 before it was made available to others.⁵

¹ Once again, the authors would like to thank Dr. Tim Grass of Horsham, West Sussex, for his help in checking the English version of this article for linguistic and stylistic accuracy.

² The traditional book sizes are based on the way in which sheets of paper were divided by the printer. If a sheet is divided into four, the resulting size is called quarto (with the back of a book up to 35 cm high); octavo means that the sheet is divided into eight (with the back of a book between 18.5 and 25 cm high).

³ Copinger, “Annals”, p. 62 (MS. addition).

⁴ Copinger, “Annals”, p. 69 states that it was read on 21 February 1837. On p. 72 he notes under date 21 February, 1838, that the “Catholic Testimony” [as the Great Testimony is also called] was “distributed by the Apostles to the Angels”; 21 February 1837 was a Tuesday, and the Council of Zion used to meet every fourth Tuesday. It seems unlikely that the angels were called together on 21 February 1838, which was a Wednesday. Possibly Copinger or his source thought 1837 was wrong because it differed from the later tradition that the testimony was presented to the public only in 1838. We may assume this to be the reason why there was a second entry for the same event.

⁵ The references for the conventional dating (1838) are collected in Johannes Albrecht Schröter, *Die Katholisch-apostolischen Gemeinden in Deutschland und der “Fall Geyer”*, Marburg ²1998, pp. 402-3. Schröter does not question this conventional dating. Events in England 50 years later seem to confirm 1837 as the year when the Testimony was first distributed. Apostle Woodhouse did indeed declare that 1888 was “the fiftieth or jubilee year, since the delivery of the great Testimony of the Apostles, to the Rulers in Church and State in Christendom, which testimony went forth in 1838”. (“Apostles Reports” for 1888, p. 2) In England, however, an 1888 reprint of the testimony had “Delivered A.D. 1837”



Once again following instructions given by the word of prophecy, Catholic Apostolics considered it important that three selected heads of Christendom – the Pope, the Austrian emperor and the French king – should be presented with the Testimony. Those three rulers were taken to typify three forms of rule. The Pope, though a priest, exercised secular rule as well, the Austrian emperor was thought to claim universal rule as successor of the Roman emperors, and the French king based his rule on popular consent. Thus they all usurped the privileges of Christ, who alone was worthy to exercise universal rule as a high priest after the order of Melchizedek (cf. Hebrews 5.6,10; 7.11-21), to which the people would willingly submit.⁶

The Pope was to receive the testimony in a Latin translation. In July 1838, it was presented to the English Cardinal Lord Acton in Rome who in turn promised to hand it over to the Secretary of Memorials at the Vatican and thus, so to speak, to the Pope.⁷ Clemens Prince of Metternich, Chancellor to the Austrian emperor, received the testimony in Milan in September of the same year.⁸ An attempt to present the testimony to Louis Philippe, the French

added on the title page. This is an exact reprint of the earlier octavo edition, probably from the old plates. It bore the title *Testimony Addressed to the Rulers in Church and State in Christian Lands* and was published by Strangeways & Sons [British Library pressmark 764.m.6.(2.)]. Together with an accompanying document (*To the Most Reverend the Archbishops, and the Right Reverend the Bishops, of the Church of England – “From the Angels of the Seven Churches in London”*) it was delivered to the participants of the Lambeth Conference meeting in London in that year (cf. “Apostles Reports” for 1888, pp. 2-4). As additional references for a publication of the English text in 1837 we have so far found the following: George F. H. Rheinwald, ed., *Acta historico-ecclesiastica seculi XIX*, for 1837, Hamburg 1840, pp. 793-867 (reprint of the English version of the Great Testimony in its unabridged form); Thomas Carlyle, *Die Geschichte des apostolischen Werkes in kurzer Übersicht*, edited by Heinrich Josias Thiersch, Berlin 1851, p. 13 (English translation with certain changes entitled *A Short History of the Apostolic Work*, London 1851, p. 14); George C[lement] Boase, *The Restoration of Apostles and the True Position of those who acknowledge them in Relation to the Rest of the Church*, London 1867, p. 14; “Spiritual Gifts and Spiritual Delusions,” *The English Review*, vol. 14, 1850, p. 124; a leaflet printed separately and apparently based on inside information by members of the CAC entitled *Extracted from the “Glasgow Daily Mail,” December 26, 1873. Unorthodox Glasgow. Catholic Apostolic Church, or Irvingites*. It is contained in a volume of collected pamphlets entitled “Narratives and Defences II”, now part of the library of the NAC regional church of Northern Germany in Hamburg.

⁶ Cf. [Francis V. Woodhouse], *A Narrative of Events Affecting the Position and Prospects of the Whole Christian Church*, ¹London 1847, pp. 59-60. As to the usurpation of Christ’s future rule cf. the Testimony to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican clergy, p. 41. Charles William Boase, *The Elijah Ministry to the Christian Church [Supplement]*, Edinburgh 1868, pp. 828 f. is based on Woodhouse. A slightly different interpretation by leaving out part of Woodhouse’s explanation, can be found in William Bramley-Moore, *The Church’s Forgotten Hope or, Scriptural Studies on the Translation of the Saints*, Glasgow and London ³1905, p. 265.

⁷ The statement that the Vatican received a copy of the Latin translation can be found in Bramley-Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 265n. Since, according to Boase, *Elijah Ministry*, p. 829, “the getting it properly translated into Latin, as the language common to all Christendom” was “the chief work” of 1837, the Pope could not have been presented with the Testimony before 1838. Rome as the place where Acton received the testimony is mentioned in Drummond, *A Brief Account of the Commencement of the Lord’s Work to Restore His Church*, Chiswick 1851, p. 23.

⁸ Boase, *Elijah Ministry*, p. 829. Milan as the place where the testimony was presented is mentioned in Drummond, *A Brief Account*, p. 23.



“citizens’ king”, failed and it was not repeated before that monarchy ended in the revolution of 1848.⁹

Organization of the text

The mere fact that the Great Testimony is such a bulky document means that a short account as attempted here cannot give a complete rendering of its contents. To start with, we give a survey of the themes discussed in it. In this we refer to the numbered paragraphs of the “working edition” published in octavo.

1. God must help His church because it is going from bad to worse. (Paragraphs 1-17)
2. For the marriage of the Lamb to take place the church must be provided with the sacraments and ministries ordained by God. (Paragraphs 18-42)
3. In her present condition the church is not fit to be translated. (Paragraphs 43-51)
4. Reasons why God has taken away the apostle ministry from His church. (Paragraphs 52-60)
5. Church history as progressive apostasy. (Paragraphs 61- 83)
6. “Catholic” and “Protestant” as two opposing models of church government and discipline that do not measure up to God’s ordinance. (Paragraphs 84-90)
7. Criticism of civil governments. (Paragraphs 91-100)
8. Appeal to the addressees. (Paragraphs 101-103)
9. A church according to the pattern given by God is in the course of being constituted. (Paragraphs 104-120)
10. Final appeal and blessing. (Paragraphs 121-124)

⁹ In some of the older accounts on the subject, e.g. Boase, *Elijah Ministry*, p. 830, we read that the French king actually received the testimony. Ludwig Albrecht, *Das Apostolische Werk des Endes*, Berlin 1924, pp. 17-8 [English ed.: *The Work by Apostles at the End of the Dispensation*, Dundee ⁵1955, p. 13] corrected this view based on a note by Apostle Woodhouse. That being the case, it had seemed an open question whether the testimony was presented at a later date. This is the view taken by, *int. al.*, Karl Born, *Das Werk des Herrn unter Aposteln*, Bremen 1974, p. 34 and Schröter, *Die Katholisch-apostolischen Gemeinden*, p. 402. However, we have found some further references that make it virtually impossible to keep the question open. [Langford R. Symes], *La Restauration et le Perfectionnement de l’Église Aux Derniers Jours*, Paris 1858, p. 93 states in no uncertain terms that there was no second attempt at presenting the testimony at the French court. Symes was one of the most important office bearers of the CAC for France. He writes: « Le chef du gouvernement français, représentant le principe de la souveraineté du peuple, dut recevoir le témoignage en troisième lieu. Cette mission fut dévolue à un apôtre; mais des obstacles en suspendirent l’accomplissement pendant tout le règne de Louis-Philippe. Elle n’a pas encore été remplie. » Apostle Henry Drummond, in charge of France, only mentions that the testimony was given to the Pope and the emperor (Henry Drummond, *A Brief Account*, p. 23). As possible dates for the attempt at presenting the testimony to Louis Philippe we suggest 1839 or possibly 1842 at the latest. This is based on the fact that according to Albrecht the court was in mourning. Louis Philippe’s daughter Marie died in 1839, and his eldest son Fernand Philippe in 1842. (*Meyers Konversationslexikon*, ⁵1897, vol. 11, p. 566.)



“Church” as central idea

The Great Testimony opens with an enumeration of Scriptural definitions of the term “church”, and the thought of the authors centres on a church that could actually fulfil her mission to the world. Such a church would be characterized by unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. “United under one administration, in ordinances given at the beginning, and never to be exchanged without sin against God and loss to itself” (paragraph 46); “*holy*, because of the Holy Ghost ... who createth men anew in the image of God” (paragraph 47); “catholic” or universal, “seeking to embrace all nations, and to pour forth rivers of living water throughout the wilderness of this world” (paragraph 48); and apostolic, for it has been sent into the world, “having apostles ... and, by the laying on of the hands of those apostles, having all other ministers ordained and all the people filled with the Holy Ghost” (paragraph 49).

According to paragraph 22 this church had already been decreed when God created man. We are referred to Ephesians 5.23 ff, and read that God in creating Eve from Adam’s rib had “in a mystery ... revealed the future glory of the Church as the bride of the Lamb, the partner of his throne”. This is an instance of what is known as typological exposition of the Bible, by means of which some conservative theologians of that time tried to ward off the historical-critical interpretation then advocated by more advanced theologians, which stressed the historical context of the biblical texts. They tried to prove that God, who alone is omniscient, had already laid down in the Old Testament in a kind of code, “in a mystery”, everything that was revealed clearly in the New Testament. and that the Old Testament could be decoded by the assistance of the Holy Spirit. If that was the case, the writer’s person and his involvement with the circumstances of his generation, to which the new theology drew attention, was of no importance whatsoever, seeing that it had been shown that God was the real author.¹⁰ There are examples of this interpretation of the Old Testament in the Epistle to the Hebrews and in the First Epistle of Peter, where such exemplary Old Testament events are referred to by the Greek word “*typos*” or designated as “shadows” of truths more clearly revealed in the New Testament.¹¹

¹⁰ To avoid misunderstandings, we would like to point out that this is not intended to describe all the uses to which typology was put or to cover all conservative thinking on historical interpretation of the Bible. The view outlined in the text was advanced by Thomas Newton (1704-1782), *Dissertations on the Prophecies which have remarkably been fulfilled, and at this Time are fulfilling in the World*, ed. W.S. Dobson, London n.d., pp. 9-11. This book was a standard exposition frequently referred to by the “Students of prophecy” who influenced Irving and the Catholic Apostolic movement. The concern to prove the consistency of divine revelation against modern attempts at showing doctrinal changes in Scripture is evident in [Henry Drummond], *Dialogues on Prophecy*, vol. 3, London 1829, “Conversation the Thirteenth” (pp. 1-101).

¹¹ The term *typos* (τυπος) occurs in Romans 5.14 and 1 Corinthians 10.6 and 11. Luther translates it as *Bild* (image) and also *Beispiel* (example), the *Authorized Version* [AV] translates it as *figure* in Romans 5.14, *example* with the alternative translation *figure* in 1 Corinthians 10.6 and *ensample* with alternative translation *type* in 1 Corinthians 10.11. In its original edition the *Authorized Version* contained notes “which elucidated the text or provided alternative readings” (Derek Wilson, *The People and the Book. The Revolutionary Impact of the English Bible 1380-1611*, London 1976, p. 147). These are left out in several editions, but included in the edition published by Thomas Nelson (Camden, New Jersey 1972) for the NAC in Canada and North America. *Shadow* (AV, Greek σκιά), in the sense referred to in this context, can be found in Colossians 2.17 and Hebrews 8.5 and 10.1. As an opposite to the Old Testament *type* the New Testament makes use of the term *antitype*. It is based on 1 Peter 3.21, which the AV translates *figure*. Cf. the entry “Typologie” in: *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*



If we take this interpretation of the creation of Eve to its logical conclusion it follows from the text of the Great Testimony that God, when he created man, already presupposed the Fall and foreordained the church as the means of salvation. The church is to be the body of Christ, ruled by Christ as her head; consequently the relationship between husband and wife continually testifies to the relationship between Christ and his church. This interpretation makes it impossible for Catholic Apostolic theologians to modify St. Paul's demand that wives are to be subject "to their own husbands in every thing" (Ephesians 5.24) as being, for instance, a reference to the social conditions of the time when it was written.¹²

The conception of the primitive church

In paragraph 116 the authors confidently assert "that His Church is rising from its ruins, according to the pattern given in the beginning". If that is so, one would expect to find in the Great Testimony the description of an early church that agreed with the pattern, but surprisingly, this is not the case. From paragraph 43 one might conclude that only the original assembly in Jerusalem in its very first days continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers – but they had not yet that order of ministry that (as we will show in due course) was supposed by Catholic Apostolics to be an indispensable part of a rightly constituted church. Instead, the development even of the primitive church is described as a history of apostatizing from God's ways and contempt of his apostles.

We read (paragraph 52): "The goodly order, framed by God for an end not yet accomplished, hath been maimed of its noblest parts, and disfigured in its fairest proportions; instead of going on unto perfection, the body of the baptized hath retrograded; they have cast aside, or carelessly let slip, the means, which God had vouchsafed for their perfecting." It is clearly stated that the perfect church must be ruled by apostles. A little later, however, we do find the remark (paragraph 53): "The Jews indeed would not receive this grace, and the ordinance of Apostle was for them given in vain ..." From among the Jewish people "His remnant at that time according to the election of grace was gathered out" whereas (in A.D. 70) "Jerusalem [was] judged, and the Jews scattered until this day." We draw attention first of all to the statement that according to the Testimony there had been a divine plan for all Jews that was not fulfilled, as well as another one for a "remnant" who was gathered according to the divine election. Thus there were, so to speak, two divine plans running along parallel lines. If the plan for the whole people of God is not fulfilled there is another one for "His remnant ... according to the election of grace".

Next, we read (still in paragraph 53) God had turned towards the Gentiles and "for this very end was Paul raised up". However, the mission to the Gentiles remained as ineffective as that to the Jews, for "even while St. Paul continued to labour among the Churches, he was compelled to complain that they had fallen from their first love into coldness, and from their grace and liberty into bondage". The way Paul was held in low esteem in the churches founded by him is demonstrated by further biblical examples, leading up to a time when "after but a few years of active ministry, he was delivered up bound unto the Romans". Towards

[TRE], vol. 34, pp. 208-224, which on p. 216 remarks on the importance of typology in 18th and 19th-century Britain.

¹² Columba Graham Flegg, 'Gathered Under Apostles'. *A Study of the Catholic Apostolic Church*, Oxford 1992, pp. 149-50, 474.



the end of his life the apostle had laid down in 2 Timothy “prophecies and forebodings concerning the evil days which were coming on the Church” and he had had to experience what it was like to be forsaken by everybody. Seeing that the office of apostle had been held in contempt, its being taken away by God was another divine judgement because the Gentile church, as well as the church among the Jews, had failed.

All this leads to the somewhat paradoxical result that the authors of the Great Testimony sought to ward off an historical interpretation of the Bible on the one hand, but on the other hand used it themselves to find an answer to the question why the apostle ministry had ceased to exist. The New Testament is made to yield a “pattern” of the only true church, but simultaneously it is shown that the church even in its earliest times failed to measure up to the postulated ideal.

“A Church under Apostles“

In the introductory paragraph of the Testimony “the Church of Christ” is defined as “the company of all who are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, without distinction of age or country, and separated by their baptism from all other men.” We also read: “Baptism alone marks off the Church from the world; every distinction by which the people of God are represented as only a part of the baptized, is an invention of men, making covenants of their own with God, and usurping His judgment.” (paragraph 27). This should be read in connection with the demand that the church ought to conform to the pattern given by God.

Against the background of this pattern, which through human sin has never yet been realized, deviations from the pattern are criticized. We find a declaration that the timeless ordinances of the church, “given at the beginning”, are “never to be exchanged without sin against God and loss to itself.” (paragraph 46). Since the church in its varied manifestations had, in the ages without apostles, laid aside those ordinances, the Holy Spirit had been quenched and “the Spirit, being quenched, hath refrained to manifest Himself as in the days of old” (paragraph 52). God’s ordinances cannot be “changed for others, or capable of substitution by any invention of men ... without a grievous mutilation of the body of Christ, and a stopping and hindering of God’s blessing: they are necessary, they are sufficient, they are terminable by nothing short of the accomplishment of the purposes for which they are given” (paragraph 59). Of God the Testimony says: “In vain He searcheth the face of Christendom for the *marks* of the Christian Church” (paragraph 52). Without apostles unity had been lost and heresies without number had found their way into the church (paragraphs 52, 56 et al.).

“But there hath been no change of plan, no secondary instrumentality for effecting His purpose, the first having failed, and been set aside as useless. The first indeed hath hitherto failed through the sin of His people, and He hath used what instruments he could, until He might again bring forth His first ordained means among a people who should have faith to receive them. But they have not been withdrawn, nor has their office been supplied, without miserable loss” (paragraph 63).

“If therefore God’s purpose is to be accomplished, the Church cannot be different from, or other than that which He constituted it; and if at any time it have deviated from its original constitution ... , that deviation must be overruled ... , and that which has become defective must be restored. The time must arrive when this purpose shall be ac-



complished, and in the way, and by the means which God hath indicated; for His Church shall never fail" (paragraph 29).

In the next article of this series we shall, against the background of the idea of the church outlined here, shed light on what the Testimony says about sacraments and ministries, about eschatology and about the duty of obedience in all social contexts.