



## Tertullian, Apostolicity, and the Apostles

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**Abstract:** How did Tertullian regard the apostles? This article investigates the references to them scattered through his writings both as individuals and as a collective. It reveals that individually the apostles were remote figures who appear in the pages of the New Testament simply as interlocutors of Jesus. Even Peter, significant as he was, was someone whose role was personal to himself and not a pattern for future leadership. Yet collectively the apostles performed an important function in Tertullian's ecclesiology; they were the first receivers and transmitters of the *regula fidei*, and their fidelity to that responsibility distinguished authentic Christian communities from heretical associations. The *regula fidei* was important to Tertullian. As a synthesis of the essentials of faith as preached and lived by Jesus, it provided the measure against which passages of Scripture and Christian belief and practice were to be interpreted. The *regula* relied upon the accurate and complete transmission of the message of Jesus via the apostles to the church and its leaders. The apostolicity of the church is at the heart of why Tradition is central to Christian theology.

**Keywords:** Tertullian; apostles; Tradition; *regula fidei*

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Among other things, the 325 Council of Nicaea issued five anathemas against unacceptable trinitarian beliefs, stating that they were issued by the “catholic and apostolic church” (καθολικὴ καὶ ἀποστολικὴ ἐκκλησία)<sup>2</sup>. It is to be noted that at this council the church itself was not

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<sup>2</sup> Concilium Nicaenum (325), *Expositio fidei*, ed. G. Alberigo *et al.*, *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Generaliumque Decreta*, v. 1: *The Oecumenical Councils from Nicaea I to Nicaea II (325-787)*, Corpus Christianorum Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Generaliumque Decreta [= CCCOGD] 1, Turnhout 2006, p. 5. See M.J. Edwards, *The Creed*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Y.R. Kim, Cambridge 2021, p. 135-157. For further reading on the first two ecumenical councils, see: K.J. Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church from the Original Documents*, v. 1: *To the Close of the Council of Nicaea, A.D. 325*, tr. W.R. Clark; v. 2: *A.D. 326-A.D. 429*, tr. H.N. Oxenham, Edinburgh 1894; J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, London 1972; L.D. Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology*, Wilmington 1983; J.F. Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church: A History*, Collegeville 2009; and

defined as an object of faith in the associated credal statement – as it had been in several other earlier statements from provincial synods, where the only adjective usually applied to it had been ‘holy’ – but merely was referenced as the subject issuing the anathemas. That definition in a universal council would have to wait until the 381 Council of Constantinople – which we know from the repetition of its credal formula at the 451 Council of Chalcedon – when it was declared that Christians believed in “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church” (εἰς μίαν ἁγίαν καθολικὴ καὶ ἀποστολικὴν ἐκκλησίαν)<sup>3</sup>.

The term ‘apostolic’ was not further explicated, although it would be self-evident that it must somehow be connected with those individuals who are named as apostles in the New Testament. Theological commentary today offers a variety of reflections as to what the apostolicity of the church entails. Ian McFarland, for instance, noted that the term refers to “conformity with the faith and practice of the apostles” and that “continuity with the faith of the apostles is a constitutive feature of Christian identity”, although, while some Christian denominations today insist that the church’s apostolicity is demonstrated through the apostolic succession of leadership, others regard apostolicity as defined by fidelity to Scripture<sup>4</sup>. Just what being in conformity with the apostles means is also the subject of debate.

The issues in contemporary theology in understanding apostolicity are not our concern here nor indeed is the understanding of the term as employed in 381. Instead, we shall try to appreciate the function of the apostles in relation to the nature of the church in the time prior to that as an attempt to explore what earlier Christian thinking might have contributed to the choice of apostolicity as important to include in the creed that was to be issued in 381. In particular, this paper explores the writings of Tertullian, the early third-century North African Christian who represents a Latin-writing starting point in theological reflection in the West,

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T. Graumann, *The Acts of the Early Church Councils: Production and Character*, Oxford Early Christian Studies, Oxford 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Concilium Constantinopolitanum (381), *Expositio fidei* (CCCOGD 1/57). One may note that the Latin translation provided alongside the Greek text omits *sanctam*.

<sup>4</sup> I.A. McFarland, *Apostolicity*, in: *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. I.A. McFarland – D.A.S. Fergusson – K. Kilby – I.R. Torrance, Cambridge 2011, p. 28-29. As an example of the first approach, T. Macdonald, *Apostolicity*, in: *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. J.A. Komonchak – M. Collins – D.A. Lane, Dublin 1987, p. 52-54, focuses exclusively on apostolic succession.

to analyse what he thought about apostles and their function in the church and the impact of that upon the nature of the church itself.

It will be argued here that for Tertullian that apostolicity was an essential component of Tradition and that to be apostolic meant that a church exhibited and transmitted the faith received by the apostles from Jesus himself.

While in Timothy Barnes' revisionary biography of Tertullian it was accepted that Tertullian's adoption of Montanism (or New Prophecy as Tertullian termed it) meant a change in his outlook – a further hardening of attitudes, an openness to ongoing revelation through the Paraclete, and less tolerance of Christian mediocrity – and a separation from the church<sup>5</sup>, more recent scholarship has argued that Tertullian's embrace of New Prophecy did not entail a split from the church but meant he was part of a community within the church who advocated reform and advocated a more rigorous adherence to the Christian lifestyle<sup>6</sup>. Even more recent scholarship has taken this further, asking about the degree to which Tertullian's views changed over time, if any actual change in his outlook can be attributed to the influence of New Prophecy, and even the reality of Montanism in Carthage being any type of identifiable community, even *within* the local church<sup>7</sup>. Did Tertullian's attitude to second marriage, to take the most famous instance, reflect the increased influence of Montanism on his thinking in later years<sup>8</sup>, was it a result of other factors, or was his underlying position constant although tailored to different occasions or different audiences? Is the contrasting emphasis on the church as an institutional and spiritual reality a sign of a chronological change of perspective or simply the result of differing needs and differing opponents on particular occasions? Indeed, interpreting Tertullian is a difficult task because his skills in crafting an argument meant that he could disguise,

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<sup>5</sup> T.D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*, Oxford 1985, p. 130-142.

<sup>6</sup> D. Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, Cambridge 1995, p. 27-38; C. Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*, Cambridge 1996, p. 68-69 and 73-76; G.D. Dunn, *Tertullian, The Early Church Fathers*, London – New York, 2004, p. 6-7; D.E. Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, Millennium Studies 14, Berlin 2007, p. 24-25 and 168-172; W. Tabbernee, *Prophets and Gravestones: An Imaginative History of Montanism and Other Early Christians*, Peabody 2009, p. 94; and J.P. Burns – R.M. Jensen, *Christianity in Roman Africa: The Development of Its Practices and Beliefs*, Grand Rapids 2014, p. 369.

<sup>7</sup> Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, p. 179; and D.E. Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity: An Introduction to a Unique Context and Tradition*, Abingdon 2017, p. 112-114.

<sup>8</sup> For this position see J.-C. Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique*, CEASA 47, Paris 1972, p. 89-142.

modify, or suppress, without ever compromising fidelity to the *regula fidei*, his own personal position on topics depending on the opponent or readership he was addressing on any particular occasion<sup>9</sup>. Seeing change or development in his thought is an almost impossible undertaking if a number of the markers to indicate the chronology of his writings are removed. That a writer addressed different situations on different occasions is just as true as the possibility of a writer changing their style and interests over time; separating between them is not always possible<sup>10</sup>. We need not try and find chronological changes in Tertullian's thinking about apostles and apostolicity. As we shall see, even if Montanism did change Tertullian's outlook, a Montanist Tertullian was just as concerned with the apostolicity of the church as a pre-Montanist Tertullian was.

### 1. Apostles as Individuals

The apostles as individuals seem not to have been particularly important to Tertullian as historical individuals. Some, like Andrew, Jude/Thaddaeus<sup>11</sup>, or Simon the Zealot are never mentioned at all. Some are mentioned only when Tertullian cited a verse from the New Testament, because it was something they said or asked or did that was of significance rather than they themselves. Philip is mentioned in the context of Tertullian's trinitarian debate against Praxeas because the answer to Philip's request in John's Gospel for Jesus to show the disciples the Father provides one of the three texts sufficient to demonstrate true Christian

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<sup>9</sup> R.F. Evans, *On the Problem of Church and Empire in Tertullian's Apologeticum*, in: *Papers presented at the Sixth International Conference on Patristic Studies in Oxford 1971. Studia Patristica 14*, ed. E.A. Livingstone, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur 117, Berlin 1976, p. 21-36; Dunn, *Tertullian*, p. 8; and Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, p. 62.

<sup>10</sup> See P. Mattei, *L'ecclésiologie de Tertullien. Bilan provisoire*, in: *Anthmpos laikos. Mélanges Alexandre Faivre à l'occasion de ses 30 ans d'enseignement*, ed. M.A. Vannier – O. Wermeltnger – G. Wurst, Fribourg 2000, p. 162-178; and P. Mattei, *Regards inactuels sur une Église en mutation. Tertullien et les paradoxes de son ecclésiologie*, RSR 75 (2001) p. 275-287, who argues that Tertullian's ecclesiology did not evolve over time.

<sup>11</sup> J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, v. 3: *Companions and Competitors*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library, New York 2001, p. 131, rejects the harmonization of names and suggests that during the ministry of Jesus one of the apostles could have been replaced by another.

belief in God<sup>12</sup>. Nathanael is mentioned because he recognised Jesus as Son, just as Peter would do, which for Tertullian meant a distinctiveness between Father and Son<sup>13</sup>, while Bartholomew, whom some identify as Nathanael, is not mentioned at all<sup>14</sup>.

Peter, James<sup>15</sup>, and John, the three leading pillars whom Paul confronted in Antioch according to Tertullian – although it should note that in Galatians 2:9 Paul mentioned them in Jerusalem and in 2:11-14, only Cephas is mentioned as going to Antioch – are mentioned in the context of Tertullian's debate with Marcion. For Marcion, the fact that Paul rebuked the apostles was, again according to Tertullian's account of Marcion's position<sup>16</sup>, sufficient to discredit their writings (leaving the non-apostolic Lukan writings and Paul himself)<sup>17</sup>. Tertullian's reply was that, just as Paul became all things to all

<sup>12</sup> Tertullianus, *Aduersus Praxeian* 20, 1, citing John 14:9-10 in response to the request in 14:8. The other two passages are Isa 45:5 and John 10:30, the second of which Tertullian claimed also to be a response to Philip when the gospel reports it as a response to the Jews. The passage from John 14 is repeated in 24, 2 and referenced in 25, 1 and 26, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Tertullianus, *Aduersus Praxeian* 21, 4, based on John 1:49-50 and Matt 16:17 (the only one of the four gospels where Peter affirms Jesus as Son rather than simply the Christ) and 23, 1.

<sup>14</sup> For questions about the identification of Bartholomew with Nathanael see C.E. Hill, *The Identity of John's Nathanael*, JSNT 20 (1998) p. 45-61.

<sup>15</sup> On the relationship of James, the brother of the Lord (Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3; Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1Cor 15:5-7, where he is clearly different from the Twelve; Gal 1:19, if indeed all these verses refer to him specifically), with James, son of Zebedee, or James, son of Alphaeus, and the author of the eponymous New Testament letter, see the widely differing views of R. Eisenman, *James the Brother of Jesus: The Key to Unlocking the Secrets of Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, New York 1997; R. Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Age*, New Testament Readings, London – New York 1999; *James the Just and Christian Origins*, ed. B. Chilton – C.A. Evans, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 98, Leiden – Boston 1999; and J. Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition*, Columbia 2004, and N. Last, *The Death of James the Just Revisited*, JECS 32 (2024) p. 17-44.

<sup>16</sup> On Tertullian's and Marcion's perception of Paul see M. Wysocki, *Paweł Apostol: Marcjona a Tertuliana* [Paul the Apostle: that of Marcion and of Tertullian], w: *Artem historicam aliis tradere. Księga pamiątkowa ku czci Księdza Profesora Anzelma Weissa*, ed. W. Bielak – J. Marczewski – T. Moskal, Lublin 2011, p. 445-466.

<sup>17</sup> On Marcion, see recently R.J. Hoffmann, *Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series, Atlanta 1984; J.D. BeDuhn, *The First New Testament: Maricon's Scriptural Canon*, Salem 2013; M. Vizen, *Marcion and the Dating of the Synoptic Gospels*, Studia Patristica Supplements 2, Turnhout 2014; and J.M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century*, Cambridge 2015.

people (1Cor 9:22), in such a way that he was not a hypocrite even though his actions differed from his words, so too Peter and even the *pseudoapostoli* (rather than ψευδαδελφους of Gal 2:4) were not being criticized for any deviation from the central tenets of faith<sup>18</sup>. He returned to this topic in the next book. There, although he mentioned all three pillars, he limited his criticism to Peter, omitting the other two<sup>19</sup>. Again, the argument is that Paul's criticism of Peter was not because he believed the creator god was in any way different from the Father of Jesus. Elsewhere, in *De praescriptione haereticorum*, a work that Barnes dates to between 198 and 203 and well before his other works against heretics<sup>20</sup>, Paul's rebuke of Peter (and Tertullian certainly accepted Paul as an apostle although not one of the Twelve) was explained as a failure to practice what he preached<sup>21</sup>.

On a more positive note, Tertullian observed that the occupation of Simon and the sons of Zebedee as fishermen was important and not merely coincidental, in that Jesus promising that they would fish for people (Luke 5:9-11) was fulfilment of the prophecy in Jeremiah 16:16, which was used as an argument to connect Jesus with Marcion's inferior god of the Hebrew Scriptures<sup>22</sup>.

Against the modalist Monarchianism (Patripassianism) of Praxeas, Tertullian could point to scriptural affirmations of the invisibility of the Father and the visibility of the Son to assert distinctiveness in the persons of the Trinity. The transfiguration, seen by Peter, James, and John (and Tertullian said nothing about whether or not this was the same James as in the Galatians incident), proved this distinction since the apostles could not endure the radiant glory of the Son, even though they would have been killed if they had seen the Father<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Tertullianus, *Aduersus Marcionem* 4, 3, 3-4. It would seem that this is not one of Tertullian's most impressive counter arguments. If Paul saw his own adaptations as acceptable then he would have been hypocritical for rebuking Peter for doing the same thing. Further, a separation of doing and saying could itself be open to criticism. See J.M. Lieu, *Heresy and Scripture*, in: *Ein neues Geschlecht? Entwicklung des frühchristlichen Selbstbewusstseins*, *Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus* 105, Göttingen 2013, p. 94-95.

<sup>19</sup> Tertullianus, *Aduersus Marcionem* 5, 3, 6-7.

<sup>20</sup> Barnes, *Tertullian*, p. 41 and 55.

<sup>21</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 23, 10, CCL 1, 205: "Ceterum si reprehensus est Petrus quod, cum conuixisset ethnicis, postea se a conuictu eorum separabat personarum respectu, utique conuersationis fuit uitium, non praedicationis".

<sup>22</sup> Tertullianus, *Aduersus Marcionem* 4, 9, 1-2.

<sup>23</sup> Tertullianus, *Aduersus Praxean* 15, 8. One may note that the apostles falling to the ground is in Matt 17:6 but not in Mark 9:2-8 or Luke 9:28-36.

At the end of *Scorpiace*, James as the author of the New Testament letter is mentioned as an example of those apostles who suffered for their faith<sup>24</sup>. Demonstrating a call to martyrdom was an important part of the arguments against heretics like the Valentinians. Tertullian lists significant apostles who provide a lived example: Peter (crucified), Stephen (stoned), James (the brother of John beheaded in Acts 12:2 but slain at the altar in Tertullian), and Paul (beheaded), although it is to be noted that Stephen was neither considered an apostle nor a New Testament author.

The situation is slightly different when Tertullian reported historical facts about some apostles that is not to be found in the New Testament. In *De baptismo*, we are informed that Peter baptized in the Tiber, a statement not derived from any surviving apocryphal New Testament literature<sup>25</sup>. The fact that Peter and Paul died in Rome and that John had been tortured in Rome before being sent into exile, facts that Tertullian had not derived from the pages of the New Testament but from other apocryphal traditions, gave Rome a particular significance as an apostolic church, although Tertullian did not stress anything unique about Peter nor assert that Rome's apostolicity was superior to that of other named apostolic churches, viz., Corinth, Philippi, Thessaloniki, or Ephesus<sup>26</sup>. The point to be made was that the Roman church had good ties with the African churches.

Peter indeed is the most frequently mentioned apostle. Most references are nothing more than to something Peter said in the New Testament

<sup>24</sup> Tertullianus, *Scorpiace* 15, 1-2.

<sup>25</sup> Tertullianus, *De baptismo* 4, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 36, 3. See G.D. Dunn, *Peter and Paul in Rome: The Perspective of the North African Church*, in: *Pietro e Paolo. Il loro rapporto con Roma nelle testimonianze antiche, XXIX Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità Cristiana, Roma 4-6 maggio 2000*, SEA 74, Rome 2001, p. 405-413; M. Monaca, *Pietro e Paolo a Roma nel De praescriptione haereticorum di Tertulliano*, in: *Pietro e Paolo. Il loro rapporto con Roma nelle testimonianze antiche, XXIX Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità Cristiana, Roma 4-6 maggio 2000*, SEA 74, Rome 2001, p. 431-444; and G.D. Dunn, *Clement of Rome and the Question of Roman Primacy in the Early African Tradition*, „Augustinianum“ 43 (2003) p. 5-24; J. Pałucki, *Św. Piotr biskupem Rzymu?* [St Peter – a Bishop of Rome?], *VoxP* 52/2 (2008) p. 819-826. On Peter and Paul in Rome, see in addition to other chapters in the SEA 74: D.L. Eastman, *The Ancient Martyrdom Accounts of Peter and Paul*, WGRW 39, Atlanta 2015; D.L. Eastman, *The Many Deaths of Peter and Paul*, OECS, Oxford 2019; and J.M. Lieu, *Peter in the Early Church: Apostle – Missionary – Church Leader*, BETL 325, Leuven 2021.

in order to illustrate a theological point Tertullian wished to make<sup>27</sup>. He is described as someone holding an office (*officio*) that was of singular importance<sup>28</sup>. He had ordained Clement as bishop of Rome, a piece of information outside the New Testament<sup>29</sup>. At the same time, Peter and Paul were equal in martyrdom<sup>30</sup>. But nowhere did Tertullian invest Peter with an authority that overrode that of the other apostles nor did he assert any overriding authority in the church of Rome. Peter did receive the keys of the kingdom and it was a power that was passed on to the church and its confessors, as Tertullian stated, not to any particular bishop<sup>31</sup>. The church of Rome, rather than its bishop, was of some significance for Tertullian.

In *De pudicitia*, a work Barnes dates to 210 or 211<sup>32</sup>, Tertullian discussed this power of the keys, giving perhaps his most detailed commentary on the role and position of Peter in the church. He distinguished sins against God from sins against other people, the latter of which are to be forgiven multiple times by those sinned against, as Peter was commanded in Matthew 18:22<sup>33</sup>. Tertullian's point was to distinguish apostolic teach-

<sup>27</sup> E.g., Tertullianus, *De carne Christi* 15, 1, where he used Acts 2:22 to argue for the true human flesh of Jesus against Valentinian opinion; Tertullianus, *Aduersus Praxean* 17, 3, where he used that same verse to show that the Son sitting at the right hand of the Father means the persons are to be distinguished; *De oratione* 7, 3, where he used Matt 18:21-22 to comment on the petition for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer; 25, 3, where he used Acts 10:9 to indicate what time Christians should pray; Tertullianus, *Aduersus Praxean* 28, 4, where he used Acts 2:36 to show that it was the Father who made the Son Lord and Christ.

<sup>28</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 23, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 32, 2. See Dunn, *Clement of Rome*.

<sup>30</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 24, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Tertullianus, *Scorpiace* 10, 8, CCL 2, 1088: "Nam etsi adhuc clausum putas caelum, memento calues eius hic dominum Petro et per eum ecclesiae reliquisse, quas hic unusquisque interrogates atque confessus ferret secum". The argument of S.K. Ray (*Upon the Rock: St. Peter and the Primacy of Rome in Scripture and the Early Church*, Modern Apologetics Library, San Francisco 1999, p. 172, n. 45), that to argue against Tertullian supporting Roman primacy is to argue from silence, is to ignore the clear statement that it was transmitted "to the church". In *Aduersus Praxean* 21, 4, Tertullian could use Matt 16:16-17, to show that at the same time Peter was confessing Jesus as the Son, it was the Father in heaven who had revealed that to him.

<sup>32</sup> Barnes, *Tertullian*, p. 55. Although on pp. 326-328, in his postscript that amounts to a revised edition, he accepts that he needed to date Tertullian's Montanist works less tightly and definitely after 207 or 208. How that affected *Pud.* in particular is not stated. If we question having a Montanist period at all, then the date of this pamphlet is more indeterminate.

<sup>33</sup> Tertullianus, *De pudicitia* 21, 3. See Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, p. 63.



ing (*doctrina*) and power (*potestas*)<sup>34</sup>, and to assert that only the apostles could exercise divine power<sup>35</sup>, in order to rebuke his opponent, the *pontifex maximus*<sup>36</sup>, in this pamphlet who was asserting illicitly a similar power<sup>37</sup>. That individual, Tertullian asserted, was restricted to following discipline. Tertullian argued that while the church had the power to forgive sins, it was a power that it chose not to exercise in light of further revelation from the Paraclete<sup>38</sup>.

The opponent's argument was that this was the power of binding and loosing vested in Peter in Matthew 16:18-19, and one which was transferred to every church resembling or like (*propinqua*) that of Peter<sup>39</sup>. Tertullian's response was that this was a power given to Peter personally and not to the church<sup>40</sup>. Further, Tertullian added, it was a power of binding and loosing the observance of the Jewish law, not dealing with sin<sup>41</sup>. Finally, even if such a power were to be transferred to others (and given what Tertullian wrote in *Scorpiace* 10 it would seem that Tertullian did accept that it could be transferred and argued against such an interpretation here to conform with his spiritualist view of the *regula fidei*), it would be to spiritual not psychic men, not bishops<sup>42</sup>. This differing interpretation of the Matthean passage is a reminder of Tertullian's abilities as a classically trained orator, able to use whatever argued proved most effective against an opponent, even if on other occasions he could argue somewhat differently from elsewhere<sup>43</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> Tertullianus, *De pudicitia* 21, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Tertullianus, *De pudicitia* 21, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Debate continues as to whether this was a bishop in Rome or in Carthage. For the former see K. McDonnell, *Communion Ecclesiology and Baptism in the Spirit: Tertullian and the Early Church*, ThS 49 (1988) p. 685; J.E. Merdinger, *Rome and the African Church in the Time of Augustine*, New Haven – London 1997, p. 32; and Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, p. 174-175. For the latter see Barnes, *Tertullian*, p. 247; and Tabbernee, *Prophets and Gravestones*, p. 122-123. Trevett, *Montanism*, p. 116 reserves judgement. In one sense Tertullian was arguing against anyone who asserted their episcopal status in opposition to what Tertullian believed were the revelations of the Paraclete.

<sup>37</sup> Tertullianus, *De pudicitia* 21, 5-6. See Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, p. 147.

<sup>38</sup> Tertullianus, *De pudicitia* 21, 7-8.

<sup>39</sup> Tertullianus, *De pudicitia* 21, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Tertullianus, *De pudicitia* 21, 10, CCL 2, 1327: “*Super te, inquit, aedificabo ecclesiam mean, et: dabo tibi clause, non ecclesiae*”.

<sup>41</sup> Tertullianus, *De pudicitia* 21, 12-15.

<sup>42</sup> Tertullianus, *De pudicitia* 21, 16-17. Tertullian used both *episcopus* and *sacerdos* as synonyms here. See Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, p. 115.

<sup>43</sup> See R.D. Sider, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Art of Tertullian*, London 1971; and Dunn, *Tertullian*, p. 25-29. What prevented Tertullian from being a relativist with no fixed

Thomas is used as an epithet for Tertullian's opponent in *De anima* when Tertullian challenged any who supported the notion that people could avoid death to produce a living witness who could be seen and heard and handled<sup>44</sup>. Other than that he is mentioned only when Tertullian was citing scriptural passages in which he played a part, such as John 14:5-7<sup>45</sup> and 20:25-27<sup>46</sup>.

As would be expected, Judas Iscariot is an apostle who is mentioned more frequently than most of the others. The wearing of the laurel military crown by a Christian soldier along with the reception of a donative was a betrayal of Christ just as Judas betrayed Jesus for silver<sup>47</sup>. The idea of Jesus being completely unlike the creator God, as asserted by Marcion, was dismissed by Tertullian who could point to Luke 22:22 to show that Jesus could be stern, as in the pronouncement against Judas<sup>48</sup>. Although unnamed in a passage in *De praescriptione haereticorum*, it is clear that the apostle who betrayed Jesus was Judas<sup>49</sup>. The reference is in order for Tertullian that anyone could turn against Jesus and that no one should be surprised at the presence of heretics.

Matthias, Judas' replacement, is mentioned once, in *De praescriptione haereticorum*, in a passage of some significance, which shall be considered below<sup>50</sup>.

## 2. Apostles Collectively

Although individually, the apostles are little more than characters in New Testament narratives, usually as interlocutors with Jesus who provide him with the opportunity to announce profound theological truths, it is an entirely different matter when they are presented as a collective. The apostles were the authors of the New Testament and, as such,

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views was that his arguments would always be in support of the *regula fidei*, as he understood it.

<sup>44</sup> Tertullianus, *De anima* 50, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Tertullianus, *Aduersus Praxean* 24, 1.

<sup>46</sup> Tertullianus, *Aduersus Praxean* 25, 2; and Tertullianus, *De anima* 17, 14, where Thomas' faith rather than doubt is stressed.

<sup>47</sup> Tertullianus, *De corona* 12, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Tertullianus, *Aduersus Marcionem* 4, 41, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 3, 11.

<sup>50</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 20, 3.

were the transmitters of the faith they had received from Jesus to future generations in a definitive written form<sup>51</sup>. Perhaps the most significant statements are found in *De praescriptione haereticorum*. In the context of this pamphlet, what Tertullian wrote was to distinguish true faith, which comes through the apostles, from inauthentic faith, which comes through heretics. Tertullian was truly a proponent of the apostolic nature of the church in that no one could have faith in Jesus unless it was through the faith transmitted by apostolic preaching and writing. The response of the apostles to the ministry of Jesus was to be the response of all successive generations.

While this faith needs constantly to be interpreted and applied in new and unforeseen situations, the point Tertullian wished to stress was that in transmitting it the apostles did not add to it. Future disciples were charged to do likewise; they had to ensure that what was taught in successive generations did not deviate from the definitive pronouncements recorded in the New Testament. This did not mean that every doctrine was to be found fully formed in the pages of the New Testament. For Tertullian, the central message of faith was the *regula fidei*, and the authentic interpretation of any verse of Scripture or any new insight about how Christianity was to be lived in new circumstances was the one that conformed to that central summary of faith. The *regula* was not so much a summary of the faith, but the total faith in its core or distilled or essential or fundamental expression, which naturally centred on the identity and salvific/redemptive impact of the death and resurrection of Jesus. This understanding matches the understanding of Tradition as expressed in Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* 9 (a more nuanced appreciation than the impression created by certain interpretations of the Council of Trent in the decree of 8 April 1546 that Tradition was equivalent only to the unwritten traditions derived from John 20:30, which for Tertullian could be expressions of faith provided that they conformed to the *regula fidei*, and the further revelations of the Spirit promised in John 16:12-13)<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> This is certainly the sense in which Tertullian refers to the letters of the apostles in *De praescriptione haereticorum* 4, 1. An even clearer reference occurs in *De praescriptione haereticorum* 6, 4, CCL 1, 191: "Apostolos Domini habemus auctores qui nec ipsi quicquam ex suo arbitrio quod inducerent elegerunt, sed acceptam a Christo disciplinam fideliter nationibus adsignauerunt".

<sup>52</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 3, 5; 13, 1b-5; Tertullianus, *De uirginibus uelandis* 1, 3; Tertullianus, *Aduersus Praxean* 2, 1; 30, 5; Tertullianus, *De monogamia* 2, 2; and Tertullianus, *De ieiunio aduersus psychicos* 10, 6. On the *regula*

“The *regula* is what was taught by Christ, passed on by the apostles, recorded in the Scriptures, and lived by the church”<sup>53</sup>. In this the apostles collectively rather than individually were lynchpins. They received directly from Jesus himself<sup>54</sup>. They transmitted what they received in a variety of ways: in their writings and teaching, in the communities they founded, and in the leaders they appointed. On this basis, I would contend that Tertullian would not be disturbed by the generally held modern scholarly position that none of the New Testament was written by any of the Twelve (and that some of the Pauline material was not written by Paul)<sup>55</sup>, provided that those who did write did so authentically and authoritatively transmitted what could be traced back to apostolic teaching. This is the sense in which the *regula* is prior to the Scriptures. Tertullian was certainly deriving his knowledge of the *regula* from Scripture, but the faith itself, expressed in the *regula*, was preached and embodied by Jesus and then the apostles before it was ever

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*fidei* in Tertullian, see L.W. Countryman, *Tertullian and the Regula Fidei*, “Second Century” 2 (1982) p. 208-227; W.R. Farmer, *Galatians and the Second-Century Development of the Regula Fidei*, “Second Century” 4 (1984) p. 143-170; E.F. Osborn, *Reason and the Rule of Faith in the Second Century AD*, in: *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. R. Williams, Cambridge 1989, p. 40-61; W.M. Gessel, *Der Ternar. Glaubensregel, Tradition und Sukzession nach De praescriptione haereticorum Tertullians*, in: *Sendung und Dienst im bischöflichen Amt. Festschrift für Bischof Josef Stimpfle*, ed. A. Ziegenaus, St Ottilien 1991, p. 139-154; P.M. Blowers, *The Regula Fidei and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith*, “Pro Ecclesia” 6 (1997) p. 199-228; Dunn, *Tertullian*, p. 21-22; B.M. Liftin, *Tertullian’s Use of the Regula Fidei as an Interpretive Device in Adversus Marcionem*, ed. F. Young – M. Edwards – P. Parvis, *papers presented at the Fourteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies*, *Studia Patristica* 42, Oxford 2003 – Leuven 2006 p. 405-410; G.D. Dunn, *Tertullian’s Scriptural Exegesis in de praescriptione haereticorum*, *J ECS* 14 (2006) p. 141-155; E. Ferguson, *Tertullian, Scripture, Rule of Faith, and Paul*, in: *Tertullian and Paul*, ed. T.D. Still – D.E. Wilhite, *Pauline and Patristic Scholars in Debate 1*, New York – London 2013, p. 22-33; M. Wysoki, ‘*Fides in regula posita est, habet legem et salutem de observatione legis*’ (*Tert., Praescr. 14*). *Legal description of the faith by Tertullian – preparing for Constantine’s turn and Ecclesiastical Law?*, in: *Lex et religio. XL Incontro di Studiosi dell’Antichità Cristiana*, SEA 135, Roma 2013, p. 485-495; and E. Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith: A Guide*, Cascade Companions, Eugene 2015. See Y.M.-J. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and Theological Essay*, tr. M. Naseby – T. Rainborough, New York 1967.

<sup>53</sup> Dunn, *Tertullian’s Scriptural Exegesis*, p. 147. See Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 13, 6; 19, 3; 20, 9; and 21, 4-7.

<sup>54</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 21, 1-4.

<sup>55</sup> On Tertullian and Paul see the essays and responses in Still and Wilhite, *Tertullian and Paul*.

committed to writing as Scripture. The *regula* is logically prior to Scripture, although its reconstruction by Tertullian's time could only be achieved through Scripture. In any case, both the *regula* and Scripture are apostolic in that they are the indispensable touchstone record of the apostolic faith response to the person and ministry of Jesus. Of particular importance to Tertullian was the fact that the apostles were commissioned to take the faith to non-Jews<sup>56</sup>. Here is where Tertullian mentioned the appointment of Matthias to replace Judas.

It was the apostles who providing the bedrock of Tertullian's ecclesiology of communion. "We are in communion with the apostolic churches insofar as we have no differing doctrine. This is evidence of the truth"<sup>57</sup>. A church like Carthage, which was not of apostolic foundation, to the extent that it shared the same faith as a church founded by an apostle was part of the one communion of churches. Thus, all churches sprang ultimately from the faith of the apostles in Jesus<sup>58</sup>.

The other point for which Tertullian argued was that what Jesus transmitted to the apostles was faith in its entirety. Thus Peter, the rock who received the keys of heaven of Matthew 16:18-19, received the whole faith, as did John the apostle who was beloved and leaned on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper (John 21:20)<sup>59</sup>. Further, Jesus himself had promised to send the Spirit, who would reveal more or a deeper insight into the truth (John 16:12-13), which was received at Pentecost<sup>60</sup>. These were important verses for Tertullian, particularly later in life, as we have noted above. With regard to that, Tertullian could also note that even though the apostles were the receivers and transmitters of the *regula fidei*, they were also guided by the Spirit<sup>61</sup>. Further, and equally importantly, those guided by the Spirit in the time after Pentecost (and therefore open to fresh revelation), as Tertullian seems to refer to himself in *Aduersus Praxean*, a work that Barnes would date late in a Montanist period in Tertullian's life when he no longer debated with his institutional opponents but simply derided

<sup>56</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 20, 3-4.

<sup>57</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 21, 7, CCL 1, 203: "Communicamus cum ecclesiis apostolicis quod nulla doctrina diuersa: hoc est testimonium ueritatis".

<sup>58</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 20, 7-9. On Tertullian's communion ecclesiology see McDonnell, *Communion Ecclesiology and Baptism in the Spirit*, p. 671-693.

<sup>59</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 22, 4-5.

<sup>60</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 22, 8-10.

<sup>61</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 8, 14-15.

them<sup>62</sup>, received nothing from the Paraclete contrary to the *regula fidei*<sup>63</sup>. Although the apostles are not mentioned explicitly, the link between *regula* and apostles was well established in Tertullian's thinking.

Even though Paul rebuked Peter, it was not because Paul preached a different gospel in any way (or that Peter deviated from the gospel), he preached exactly the same gospel, yet pointed out when Peter failed to live up to it<sup>64</sup>. Coupled with the first point, is Tertullian's assertion that the apostles transmitted everything they had received, although not to everyone<sup>65</sup>.

In spreading the faith, the apostles founded churches<sup>66</sup>. All such churches, and churches established from those churches, are apostolic, and only those churches that are apostolic are true churches<sup>67</sup>. Against the charge that churches might not have transmitted fully the faith they received from the apostles, Tertullian countered that the fact that churches everywhere believed the same thing was proof that there had not been errors in the transmission of faith<sup>68</sup>. Heresies only appeared later<sup>69</sup>. Elsewhere, Tertullian could write that the faith, which comes down from the apostles, is kept as a deposit (*sacrosanctum*). One could turn to the churches founded by Paul (Corinth, Galatia, Philippi, Thessaloniki, and Ephesus are mentioned), by Peter and Paul (Rome), and those associated with John, and argue that such churches and those associated with them not founded by apostles, were united in fellowship in the mystery of faith<sup>70</sup>.

The apostles also provided leaders for those churches. Tertullian referred to episcopal apostolic succession. Bishops can trace their predecessors back to apostles or apostolic men<sup>71</sup>. Thus, the church of Smyrna has Polycarp placed there by John to succeed him and the church of Rome has Peter ordaining Clement as his successor<sup>72</sup>. No heresy, so Tertullian

<sup>62</sup> Barnes, *Tertullian*, p. 45.

<sup>63</sup> Tertullianus, *Adversus Praxean* 2, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 23, 1-9.

<sup>65</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 25, 1-2.

<sup>66</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 20, 5.

<sup>67</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 20, 6-8.

<sup>68</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 28, 1-4.

<sup>69</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 29, 1-6. This is the position challenged famously by W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. R.A. Craft – G. Krodel, Minneapolis 1971.

<sup>70</sup> Tertullianus, *Adversus Marcionem* 4, 5, 1-2.

<sup>71</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 32, 1.

<sup>72</sup> See n. 26 above.

argued, could point to apostolic origin in their leaders or in their teaching<sup>73</sup>. What the ongoing role of those episcopal leaders was, in distinction from the Spirit or prophets, is debatable<sup>74</sup>.

The danger or weakness in Tertullian's apostolic ecclesiology lay with interpretations of John 16:12-13, a passage already mentioned above. If Barnes' argument that frequent reference to the Spirit as Paraclete is a sign of increased Montanist influence in Tertullian's later career<sup>75</sup>, the question is about what fresh revelation the Paraclete would provide that did not come through the apostles – if indeed that role of the Paraclete was taken as enduring in a time beyond that of the apostles themselves – and how that relates to John 14:26 where the Paraclete's role was both to instruct in everything and remind the apostles of what Jesus had said. David Rankin has pointed to a scholarly debate about whether the Paraclete in Tertullian's later career was a teacher only of discipline or of doctrine as well<sup>76</sup>. In other words, if the Paraclete were teaching doctrine it would be apart from the apostolic channel. Rankin's response is to state that while the Paraclete could reveal details of doctrine, such as the Trinity<sup>77</sup>, which had not come from the *regula fidei* or Scripture, the Paraclete introduces nothing new<sup>78</sup>. Indeed, the same notion of the revelations of the Paraclete never being contrary to the *regula* is in *Aduersus Praxean*, as we noted above. Rankin's conclusion is that “[t]he claim that Tertullian, under the influence of the Phrygian movement, subordinated the Scriptures to the oracles and writings of Montanus is manifestly untrue”<sup>79</sup>.

Even the prohibition of any kind of marriage was not a novel (*noua*) teaching of the Paraclete but the true intent of Jesus' own example of not marrying and of his teaching about marriage, continued in the apostolic teaching of Paul and John<sup>80</sup>. The Paraclete thus clarifies, deepens, and elucidates what is present in the *regula* and Scripture, but never rejects it. As Eric Osborn wrote, “When new truth is revealed, it may appear onerous and difficult; but the continuity of the paraclete with the gospel is

<sup>73</sup> Tertullianus, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 32, 7.

<sup>74</sup> See Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, p. 145-146.

<sup>75</sup> Barnes, *Tertullian*, p. 44.

<sup>76</sup> Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, p. 46-47.

<sup>77</sup> Tertullianus, *Aduersus Praxean* 2, 1.

<sup>78</sup> Tertullianus, *De monogamia* 3, 9.

<sup>79</sup> Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, p. 47.

<sup>80</sup> Tertullianus, *De monogamia* 3, 1-7.

evident because there is no change in the rule of faith”<sup>81</sup>. New is not new, but the old illuminated and justified, expanded but in continuity and harmony. Just as the Scripture and the *regula fidei* transmit the teaching of Jesus so the Paraclete transmits that apostolic transmission, dynamically rather than statically, but ever faithfully. It is the role of the Paraclete to direct the church back to apostolic teaching whenever there is a risk of compromising it or departing from it.

### 3. Conclusion

The apostolicity of the church was essential in Tertullian’s theology. He accepted that those who heard the message of Jesus accurately and completely passed it on to others in their words and actions. It was contained in the Scripture and for Tertullian any verse of Scripture, whether ancient or new, had to be interpreted in light of this central mystery of faith, the *regula fidei*, the Tradition as later theology, at its best, would understand it. The church existed in ever new situations and so that unchanging rule transmitted by the apostles had to be reinterpreted and re-applied afresh, under the guidance of the Paraclete. For Tertullian, any change from a traditional practice was because of the ongoing clarifying revelations given by the Spirit to that apostolic faith, but given in such a way as to confirm it. It is this sense of the church being apostolic that the later creeds of the church asserted.

Individually for Tertullian apostles simply were characters who interacted with Jesus (sometimes misunderstanding him) and who then spread the faith. Their recorded words, like Scripture itself more generally, often needed to be reinterpreted against unacceptable belief. None of the apostles, however, not even Peter, was that significant individually. Tertullian’s view on an apostle like Peter was not characteristic of later Latin theology, even among the North African tradition, which did not view the ongoing role of Peter as held exclusively by the Roman church<sup>82</sup>. Yet, his view of the centrality of the apostles to the handing on, the *traditio*, of the church’s faith preached and lived by Jesus, preserved in the *regula fidei*, and expressed in the Scriptures, even if not directly influential on the bishops who gathered at Nicaea

<sup>81</sup> E. Osborn, *Tertullian: First Theologian of the West*, Cambridge 1997, p. 211.

<sup>82</sup> See G.D. Dunn, *Cyprian and the Bishops of Rome: Questions of Papal Primacy in the Early Church*, Early Christian Studies 11, Strathfield 2007.



or Constantinople, was entirely consistent with their statement that the true church was apostolic.

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