

**The Organization of the Church in the
Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days**

(ca. 35-150 A.D.)

By Justin Alfred

Table of Contents

I.	INTRODUCTION	3
II.	The Organizational Background of the Early Church	6
A.	The Synagogue and the Sanhedrin.....	6
B.	The Essene Community	8
C.	The Greek Influence	11
III.	The Meaning and Usage of the Words <i>Episkopos</i> , <i>Poimen</i> and <i>Presbuteros</i>	13
A.	Episkopos.....	13
1.	Acts 20:17-32	15
2.	Philippians 1:1-2.....	20
3.	1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9.....	22
B.	Poimen.....	24
C.	Presbuteros	31
1.	Secular Literature.....	32
2.	Old Testament Literature.....	32
3.	The Role of Elders in the New Testament Church.....	34
IV.	The Witness of the Early Church Fathers Concerning Church Government.....	43
A.	Clement of Rome	44
B.	The Shepherd of Hermas	46
C.	Ignatius of Antioch in Syria	47
V.	Conclusion	52

I. INTRODUCTION

Whereas the foundational doctrines of our Christian faith are clearly defined in the Scriptures, there is no clear definition and picture given for the official organization of the church on a local or aggregate basis.

What we do have are Scriptures relating to the *attitude* that the various members of the body of Christ should have toward one another as in 1 Corinthians 12–13, and in 1 Corinthians 14 we are told how the gifts of the Spirit should be exercised in an orderly manner in public worship. However, when it comes to the *organizational structure* of a local church on a day by day basis and the specific method and manner of how the various offices of ministry are to function in relation to each another and the congregation, then we are left with only the guidelines of personal character and abilities that are necessary for a particular ministry. This can be seen in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 concerning the qualifications of an overseer. No mention is made concerning his relationship with other overseers, elders or deacons, nor is anything said with respect to his precise function in connection with the congregation as a whole other than that he be "able to teach" and "take care of the church of God." *How* he is to "take care of the church of God" is not indicated. Perhaps the reason for such vagueness is that the person who wanted to be an overseer at that particular time and place was acquainted with the responsibilities of that office; which responsibilities included his relationship to other overseers, elders, deacons and the congregation as a whole, as well as his role of spiritual and practical leadership. Thus, when Paul made mention of the overseer's responsibility to "take care of the church of God," he didn't need to elaborate further because the overseer candidate understood what that meant on a practical, day to day basis for his time.

Furthermore, Jesus never made any mention, nor did He give any instructions in the Gospels concerning the details of the organized structure and leadership of the local church with respect to pastors, overseers, elders and deacons. What Jesus did give, however, was the attitude that those in leadership should have, as well as all believers:

But Jesus called them to Himself, and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become rear among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.¹

The apostle Peter reiterated this same requirement for leadership in 1 Peter 5:2-3:

... shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; **nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but striving to be examples to the flock.**

Thus, it is apparent that Jesus' primary concern for leadership was that leadership have a servant's heart in order that the Gospel might be presented in truth and power. If a servant's heart is the foundation of leadership, then whatever the structure is, the Gospel will be presented. However, if a servant's heart is not present, then regardless of the structure the Gospel will be *mis*-represented. The noted church historian of the late 19th century, Philip Schaff, makes a salient point:

Christianity exists not merely as a power or principle in this world, but also in an institutional and organized form which is intended to preserve and protect (not to obstruct) it. Christ established a visible church with apostles, as authorized teachers and rulers, and with two sacred rites, baptism and the holy communion, to be observed to the end of the world.

At the same time He laid down no minute arrangements, but only the simple and necessary element of an organization, wisely leaving the details to be shaped by the growing and changing wants of the church in different ages and countries. In this respect, Christianity, as a dispensation of the Spirit, differs widely from the Mosaic theocracy, as a dispensation of the letter.²

The fact of the matter is that there was no constant uniformity of church government in the early church. Such uniformity did not come into being until around 150 A.D. as church historian Williston Walker points out:

No question in church history has been more darkened by controversy than that of the origin and development of church officers, and none is more difficult, owing to the scantiness of the evidence that has survived. It is probable that the development was diverse in different localities. Not all early Christian congregations had identical institutions at the same time. Yet a substantial similarity was reached by the middle of the second century.³

¹ Matthew 20:25-28

² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1985] I:484

³ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959], p. 39

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

Therefore, the picture given us in the New Testament has been variously interpreted to represent three basic types of church government: Episcopal, Presbyterian and Congregational (with variations of each). The supporters of each can find Scripture to support their particular form, but no one form can be said to be the ABSOLUTE form that God ordained because God was never that specific in His Word. What *is* specific are the spiritual and moral *qualifications* of leadership which affect *every* form of church government. Consequently, Leon Morris makes the following observation:

It is better to recognize that in the New Testament church there were elements that were capable of being developed into the Episcopal, Presbyterian and Congregational systems, and which, in point of fact, have so developed. But while there is no reason why any modern Christian should not hold fast to his particular church polity and rejoice in the values it secures to him, that does not give him license to un-church others whose reading of the evidence is different.⁴

Organization, therefore, is necessary for any church to function, but the form that organization takes is a *means*, not the *end* of that ministry. That is, the character, integrity and heart of those involved is of PRIMARY importance in order that the life of Christ might be lived and ministered to others. The leadership of any church must be seeking to function with servants' hearts lest the ministry simply become a carnal and mechanical implementation of men's ideas. However, Scripture does indirectly give us some insight as to how leadership functioned in the early church, and in the writings of some early church Fathers (Ignatius in particular) we see the practical, day by day leadership of the church as it matured by the end of the first century A.D. (i.e., 100 A.D.). The pattern for the organization of the New Testament church is never discussed in Scripture, although it appears obvious to have derived from a combination of Jewish (synagogue, Sanhedrin, Essenes) and Greek influence (the word overseer, *episcopes* is of Greek origin.) In addition, what we see organizationally of the church by 90-150 A.D. was a natural progression of God's providence and spiritual necessity, which providence and necessity are still with us today, and the pastoral epistles of Paul dealing with church leadership are seen by many as the beginning stages of that organization.

⁴ Baker's Dictionary of Theology, 1960, s.v. "Church Government," by Leon Morris

II. The Organizational Background of the Early Church

A. The Synagogue and the Sanhedrin

On the whole scholars agree that the synagogue began during the Babylonian exile (587-37 B.C.) in order that the Jews in captivity could have a place to worship in Babylon similar to the Temple in Jerusalem.

After they were released to go back to Palestine, the synagogue remained a center of worship even after the Temple was rebuilt; the synagogue became the religious hub of Jewish communities where both the public reading and study of the Law were conducted. The highest officer of the synagogue was the *archisynagogos*, or head of the assembly. His responsibilities were as follows:

... the presiding officer of the assemblies in the strict sense of the word. He was responsible for maintaining order during the meetings and removing disturbances . . . , he was authorized to distribute honors, such as reading of the Torah, reading from the Prophets, and preaching According to some scholars, in the first century the *archisynagogos* selected the prophetic reading on the Sabbath and thus could fix the topic of the sermons. Later the leadership of the *archisynagogos* extended beyond the limits of the meetings; he was probably the head of the synagogue building

Taking the term "head" literally, modern scholars are inclined to limit the office to one in each synagogue⁵

The officer just under him was the *hazzan*, or servant, and he was the *archisynagogos'* assistant in religious services and ceremonies:

The *chazzan* performed most of the duties of the *archisynagogos* in the conduct of public worship. He assigned the functions during the worship, handed the Torah and the prophetic scroll to the reader (Luke 4:20; Sof. 14.3), and received them after the reading. At the proper moment he called upon the priests to pronounce the benediction As assistant he accompanied the *archisynagogos* at funeral ceremonies and mourning feasts,

While the early literary sources show the *hazzan* primarily as assistant to the *archisynagogos* in his role as head of the religious meetings . . . late epigraphical material reveals him as assistant to the *archisynagogos* in his capacity as administrator.⁶

The third officer who was closely associated with the *hazzan* was the *sheliah zibbur*, or messenger of the congregation:

⁵ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Synagogue," by Isaiah Sonne

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

His main assignment consisted in reciting the prayers aloud in order that the congregation could follow his lead . . . The sages . . . confined the messenger's task to leading the members of the congregation in prayer. In the course of time the reciting of the prayers and the reading from the Scriptures became the main feature of the hazzan. The two terms, *hazzan* and *sheliah zibbur*, became synonymous.⁷

The fourth and final officer was the reader of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) who preceded the messenger reciting the prayer:

The reader of the Shema in the synagogue was called upon to unfold the scroll of the Shema and to promulgate the imperial edict, the Decalogue. He played the role of the herald in the sense used in 1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11.⁸

Based upon the functions of these various officers, many scholars see the archisynagogos as the *archetype* for the Christian pastor or overseer, the *hazzan* and *sheliah zibbur* as an *elder/deacon* combination and the *reader of Shema* as an *evangelist* of sorts. One can definitely see a correlation between the offices in the Jewish synagogue and those in the Christian church.

The Sanhedrin was the highest council in post-exilic Jerusalem⁹ with executive, legislative and judiciary functions. The general Sanhedrin had seventy-one members, as well as two lower tribunals consisting of twenty-three members. The president and convener of the Sanhedrin was a hereditary high priest; that is, one who received his position as a result of being a member of a priestly family. The Sanhedrin as a whole was made up of men whose lineage was of the priestly nobility. These men were supposed to be experts in the interpretation of the Law, and it was before the Sanhedrin that Jesus was brought and condemned, as well as Stephen and other Christians.

In Acts 15 we have the account of the Jerusalem church council, which met to decide the matter concerning the circumcision of Gentile believers in order that they might TRULY be saved. James, the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ i.e., after the Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity in 537 B.C.

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

Lord's brother¹⁰, was presiding over the council, and many scholars see this first recorded church council as analogous to the Sanhedrin:

The ministry of James, apostles, and elders in the mother church of Jerusalem was unique of its kind, and presented a Christian counterpart to the Jewish SANHEDRIN under the leadership of the high priest, with claims to much of the same prerogatives among Christian believers. Besides immediate oversight of the spiritual and material needs of the local congregation in Jerusalem, the group exercised a general supervision over the churches of Judea, and certain of its more orthodox Jewish members conceived of it as a final authority for the whole church

The leadership of James . . . over the Jerusalem church was due not merely to his apostolic dignity and the reputation of his character and piety, but in large measure to a *dynastic* principle. As the nearest male relative to the Messiah, he was his personal representative on earth until Christ's return. After James' death, the headship of the church in Jerusalem continued to be held by members of Jesus' family until, apparently, the line died out with Simeon in the early years of the second century. It is possible, however, that the ordering of the church in Jerusalem in the earliest days may have served in some way as a model for the later emergence throughout the church of the monarchial episcopate.¹¹

Thus, not only is there a clear resemblance of the New Testament church with the synagogue, but the church in Jerusalem appears to have been patterned after the Sanhedrin. Interestingly, we have before us two similar, yet *different* forms of organizational structure in Judaism that served as archetypes for the early church. There was more than one ABSOLUTE pattern of organizational structure that the church could legitimately follow and still be blessed by the Lord. This is because the structure was a means, not an end, to spread the Gospel. However, one thing is common to both, and that is the central figure who provided leadership to the rest of the body

B. The Essene Community

The *Essenes*, along with the Pharisees and Sadducees, were a Jewish sect that emerged in the second half of the second century B.C.¹² after the Maccabean revolution which secured the independence of Judea as a separate national entity from Syrian and Egyptian domination. The Essenes, Pharisees, and Sadducees had in common a desire to restore the Mosaic law as the rule and practice for every facet of life in Judea

¹⁰ Galatians 1:19

¹¹ *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Ministry, Christian," by M. H. Shepherd, Jr.

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

resulting in a nationalism totally separate from Gentile control. The Pharisees and Essenes evolved out of the militant revolutionary group known as the *Hasideans* who had joined with the Maccabees in revolting against the Hellenistic (i.e., Greek) dominance and influence exerted upon Judea by Syria and Egypt, whereas the Sadducees represented the old traditions of the priesthood and wealthy nobility. In contrast to the Sadducees, therefore, the Pharisees were a progressive religious movement from among the people who were quite legalistic in their separation. The Essenes, however, probably separated from the Pharisees because they didn't believe the Pharisees were strict *enough* in renouncing Hellenistic influence in the priesthood and religious life of the Hasmonean or Maccabean leadership under John Hyrcanus from 135-105 B.C.:

Coins from this regime have been found in the ruins of the Qumran community . . . , and the sect which resided there may well have originated at this period, perhaps as a protest against the prevailing Hasmonean worldliness.¹³

The Essenes viewed themselves as "the people of the New Covenant. They understood this 'New Covenant' to be at once the 'renewed old covenant' and the 'eternal covenant' to be established at the end of the days."¹⁴ In other words, they saw themselves as the faithful remnant of God through which God was going to establish His new order at the end of the age. Even the teachings of John the Baptist and Jesus are quite similar in many areas to that of the Essenes, but irrespective of the difficult question whether John the Baptist and Jesus may have been Essenes, an understanding of the teachings, practices, and organization of the Essene community in this period of Palestinian Judaism inevitably increases understanding of the contemporary Baptist and Christian movements."¹⁵ Thus, the fact that the Essene community exerted a theological influence on the early church is not contested by competent scholars, but the degree to which its organizational structure was patterned by the early church is an open question.

¹² ca. 150-100 B.C.

¹³ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Hasmoneans," by Nigel Turner

¹⁴ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Essenes," by W. R. Farmer

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

Some scholars see the *m^ēbaqqer* or overseer of the Essene community as the forerunner of the single bishop leadership in the early church. This type of leadership emerged in the early church by the end of the first century A.D. (100) and was in full flower by the mid-second century A.D. (150). The reason certain scholars see a direct link is that the *m^ēbaqqer*'s role in the Essene community was identical in points to that of the early bishops. The *m^ēbaqqer*, therefore, was the primary leadership figure in the Qumran community;

He had entrusted to him all important decisions about "the camp" and full members He had to decide who was to be received into the community. He could inflict punishment. Together with the judges, he controlled the community's welfare funds and had to give his approval to all legal and commercial dealings of members with outsiders. . . At the same time his office, following Old Testament analogies, is compared with that of a shepherd: "He shall love them as a father loves his children, and shall carry them in all their distress like a shepherd his sheep. He shall loosen all the fetters which bind them" . . .¹⁶

However, there are other scholars who although they see a definite relationship between the *m^ēbagger* of the Essenes and the single *episkopos* leadership of the early church, cannot be quite so dogmatic as to say former foreshadows the latter:

The finds of the DEAD SEA SCROLLS have brought to the fore some discussion of the possible influence of the Qumran and similar "Essene" communities upon the organization and ministry of the early church There is also an overseer who supervises the new members and looks after the finances of the community. Scholarly research on these new materials has not advanced sufficiently to date, however, to justify any positive conclusions respecting the relation of these groups to primitive Christianity; but the parallels of organization should not be ignored by students of Christian origins.¹⁷

Once again, the conclusion to be drawn is that even among the Essenes, singular leadership was recognized as a necessary element in providing the proper cohesiveness for the community. And although there is debate as to what degree the early church may have been influenced by the Essene's organizational structure, the evidence points to a definite similarity between the *m^ēbagger* and the *episkopos*.

¹⁶ *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 1975, s.v. "Bishop, Presbyter, Elder," by Lothar Colnen

¹⁷ Shepherd, "Ministry, Christian"

C. The Greek Influence

One very interesting thing to note is that while the term *presbiteros* (elder) has its Old Testament origin and counterpart in the word *zagen* (elder), the words *episkopos* (bishop/overseer) and *diakonos* (deacon) have their origin in Greek, secular usage with no specific Old Testament usage or counterpart:

There is no question about the derivation of the order of elders from the Jewish *presbyterate* But the terms for "bishop" (ejpivskopo~, overseer) and "deacon" (diavkono~, servant) are not found in Jewish sources to denote cultic or government offices of any kind. . . .

The term's "bishop" and "deacon" denoting officers of pagan cults and associations are frequently found in Greek inscriptions from all parts of the Mediterranean world. But it is difficult to determine their precise meaning in these contexts. In central Syria, especially, the title *episkopos* occurs in both sacral and civil lists, always with something of its primary meaning of "overseer"; but it describes not only directors, curators, and cashier, but also supervisors of provisions and buildings. The word "deacon" is much less frequent; often it denotes waiters in some cult association. The total evidence . . . shows that the terms were known and flexible enough to admit of varying connotations depending upon the specific community that employed them.¹⁸

In other words, as the church began to move into the Greek world, the terms *episkopos* (bishop/overseer) and *diakonos* (deacon) were employed to describe the ministries of overseeing and serving which were a necessary part of the total ministry of the church, and which ministries were already in operation but without specific reference. For example, the word "deacon" is not found in the New Testament except in Philippians and 1 Timothy, although many scholars would agree that the seven men chosen in Acts 6:1-6 were chosen to function in the ministry of a deacon through service even though the word *deacon* was not used:

The almost universal tradition of the church, going back at least as far as Irenaeus, sees in them the first Deacons . . . they are never called 'deacons,' indeed the word does not occur in the Acts at all: . . . They were identified with deacons no doubt because of the 'service of tables,' a service which in its turn also reacted upon the conception of the deacon's duties.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Richard Belward Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 13th ed. [London; Methuen & Co. LTD., 1947], p.86

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

Thus, the term *diakonos* began to be applied in the church to those who ministered to the various needs of the body in a similar fashion to the *diakonos* of secular Greek society with which the Gentile and Jewish believers were familiar with.

In like fashion, the word *episkopos* came to be used to describe the role of the “pastor” in the local church whose function had an Old Testament background as well as corresponding to the *episkopos* in secular Greek society, which, once again, the believers were familiar with.

For some people, the fact that these terms have a secular background in origin rather than a purely biblical basis (i.e., the words having a secular background not the ministries which they describe, which ministries were ordained by the Spirit of God) would be enough to jettison both the words and the ministries they describe were it not for the fact that they are both supported in Scripture. The fact that our God is a God of practicality, and that organization is needed in the church as well as secular society, and that such organization in both can be quite similar in function and scope, can be an eye opening experience for many believers, and especially for those who tend to approach the Scripture in a somewhat supra-spiritual manner.

Therefore, we can see that even among the secular Greeks, organization was essential for continuity, and the *episkopos* in secular Greek society functioned in a comparatively similar leadership capacity with that of the *episkopos* in the early church and vice versa, and such leadership in the early church was ordained, established and directed by God through the Holy Spirit.

III. The Meaning and Usage of the Words *Episkopos*, *Poimen* and *Presbuteros*

A. *Episkopos*

In the Koine Greek, which the New Testament is written in, *episkopos* is made up of two words: the preposition *epi* which means *upon* or *over*, and the verb *skopeo* which means *to look at, observe* and *contemplate*. Thus together, the verb *episkopeo* is formed, and it means *to look upon, inspect, oversee, look after* and *care for*, and it is from this verb that the noun *episkopos* is formed. Consequently, *episkopos* has as its basic meaning that of *overseer, guardian, superintendent, or head* of any Christian church.²⁰

In classical Greek, the verb *episkopeo* has the same basic meaning as that of the New Testament: *to look upon, to consider, to have regard to something or someone, to inspect*. It was used of a king to watch over his subjects, as well as a reference to deities who graciously watched over and cared for their devotees. The noun *episkopos* in classical Greek, therefore, has as its basic meaning that of *caring in a protective manner*:

Protective care, however, is still the heart of the activity which men pursue as ejpivskopoi . . .

ejpivskopo~ is also used in the sense of an overseer over goods as the work of a ship's captain or merchant . . . Market overseers have to rule. . . as those who are called to judge what is fair dealing and what is improper, . . .²¹

As has already been discussed, the title *episkopos* was used in ancient Greece (in which classical Greek was the language) to describe various official positions of government in Greek society:

In Athens in the 4th and 5th centuries ejpivskopo~ is a title for state officials . . . Their main concern was for public order and for the avoidance of friction with Athens. It is likely that they also had some judicial powers. They were maintained by the city in which they officiated . . .

More commonly the ejpivskopoi are local officials or the officers of societies. Theological research has

²⁰ Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 4th ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977], pp. 242-243

²¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1964 ed., s.v. ejpiskevtomai, ejpiskopevw, [et al], "by Hermann W. Beyer

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

shown more interest in this usage, since it is felt that here we have the basis of the Christian use, especially when the responsibilities concerned are related to the *cultus* . . . and it relates to a work of supervision or control, . . .²²

Therefore, we see once again the relationship between the secular and biblical usage's of the term *episkopos*; i.e., the function of a pastor in overseeing and supervising a Christian church corresponded to the supervisory role of the *episkopos* in secular Greek society. Consequently, for the church, which developed in Greek society under the leadership, guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit, the title *episkopos* came to be used for the pastoral role of oversight and supervision. And in addition, as an *episkopos* in secular Greek society was individually in charge of overseeing, leading and directing his particular office, so too in the Christian church did a pastoral *episkopos* eventually assume the ultimate responsibility of being the chief overseer, pastor and under-shepherd of a local congregation over which God placed him.

However, it needs to be re-emphasized that the ministry of an *episkopos* or pastor in the church originated with God alone as He ordained that ministry in Christ. It is only the name *episkopos* that the church borrowed from secular Greek society because it best represented to the believers in the Greek world just what the role of the pastor was (overseer, protector, guardian, supervisor, etc.). Therefore, many scholars have seen --

that the title of bishop was of Gentile origin in the church, first coming into usage in the mission churches founded outside Palestine, to denote those "elders" of the churches who were charged with the oversight of the common meals and the offerings of the faithful.²³

Philip Schaff also supports this view. As the Gospel spread in the Greek world and churches were established, the Greek believers were in need of organization and an established, pastoral authority as in the Jewish Christian congregations of Palestine. Therefore, according to Schaff, "The Gentile churches followed the example, choosing the already familiar term *bishop*."²⁴

²² Ibid.

²³ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Bishop," by M.H. Shepherd, Jr.

²⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 1:495

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

In the New Testament, the word *episkopos* occurs four times concerning men functioning as overseers, and we will now look at those occurrences:

1. Acts 20:17-32

In this section of Scripture, Paul is addressing the leaders of the church at Ephesus. This passage is of special significance because within it the ministries of bishop/pastor and elder are alluded to.

This was Paul's third and last visit with the Ephesian believers. His first visit came at the end of his second missionary journey, and he ministered there for only a very brief time.²⁵ However, it is important to note that he left Priscilla and Aquila there to minister, and this will take on more significance later.

On Paul's third missionary journey, he spent three years ministering in Ephesus with powerful results. Ephesus was a major crossroads culturally, politically, commercially and religiously. Therefore, the influence God exerted through Paul in Ephesus for that three year period reached throughout Asia and Europe.²⁶ However, at the end of that three-year period, opposition arose against Paul. At that time he felt led to depart for Macedonia and Greece for a period of time. On his return trip back to Jerusalem, he stopped at Miletus which was a short distance from Ephesus in order that the leaders of the Ephesian believers might meet him there. That meeting is what Acts 20:17-32 is all about. The Bible says Paul "called to him the elders of the church,"²⁷ and said to those elders that "the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."²⁸ Thus, Paul referred to those particular elders as also being overseers, and they were supposed "to shepherd the church of God." The Greek infinitive "to shepherd" comes from the verb *poimaino*. From this verb is derived the noun *poimen* which is

²⁵ Acts 8:18-21

²⁶ Acts 19:1-41

²⁷ Acts 20:17

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

translated “pastors” in Ephesians 4:11. Therefore, we see in this passage what eventually became the ministry roles of a *bishop/pastor* and an *elder*.

One significant point about this passage is the clear identification of the “elders of the church” from Ephesus as being “overseers.” From this identification, some might tend to draw the conclusion that *all* elders are *bishop/overseers*, but that is not the case. What is the case is that *all* *bishop/overseers* are *elders*, but not vice versa. Williston Walker points out that “a *bishop* would be a *presbyter*, but a *presbyter* not necessarily a *bishop*”;²⁹ and M.H. Shepherd, Jr. further attests that “all the *bishops* might be also accounted as *elders*, insofar as they functioned with the *elders* in ruling the churches. But not all the *elders* were *bishops*, but only those who presided over the Eucharistic assemblies.”³⁰ In other words, those *elders* who were *bishop/overseers* functioned as the *pastors* of local congregations, while the other *elders* helped the *pastors* in carrying out the ministry of the local churches. Indeed, many scholars recognize the *bishops* as being numbered among the *elders* on the *presbyterate*, but they see their office of ministry as being distinct:

The *bishops* were “appointed *elders*,” specifically ordained for liturgical, pastoral, and economic functions, in which the *deacons* assisted them. There may have been one or more *bishops* in the earliest communities, depending upon their size and number of congregations. But in any event, the office of *bishop* was always distinct, and its origin goes back to apostolic appointment of those who, being tested by the Spirit, manifested the appropriate charism for the office. The *elders* enjoyed a position of honor, not of ministerial office . . . *elders* had delegated to them by the *bishop* certain ministerial functions of a liturgical and pastoral nature.³¹

The question before us, therefore, is what about the “elders of the church” in Ephesus? Were they all part of one big congregation where there was no differentiation between them as far as leadership authority went, but one would simply preach, another would administrate, etc., with no *bishop/overseer/pastor* as their leader to provide direction? Many scholars see in the early church a college of *elders* leading local congregations based on the synagogue structure, but as

²⁸ Acts 20:28

²⁹ Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, p. 41

³⁰ *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 1962 ed., s.v. “Elder in the NT,” by M. H. Shepherd, Jr.

³¹ Shepherd, “Ministry, Christian”

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

has already been discussed, even in the synagogues there was a leader, the archisynagogos, who provided the direction and leadership for the synagogue and its elders; so too in the early church. This brings us to the practical organization of the church in Ephesus at the time of Paul's visit in Acts 20:17-38.

Paul met Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth on his second missionary journey and lived and worked with them for a while as he and Aquila were both tentmakers.³² However, after Silas and Timothy came to Corinth from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself completely to ministering the Word, and he remained at Corinth for one and a half years.³³ When Paul left Corinth for Ephesus, he took Priscilla and Aquila with him. He stayed at Ephesus for a very brief time, but Priscilla and Aquila remained there after he left and continued to minister.³⁴ This was probably in the fall of 52 A.D. In the fall of 53 A.D., Paul returned to Ephesus on his third missionary trip, and it is believed by a great many scholars that it was during this almost three year stay at Ephesus that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians in ca. 54 or 55 A.D. When Paul left Ephesus he went to Macedonia in late 56 or early 57 A.D., and it was from there at that time that 2 Corinthians was probably written. Upon leaving Macedonia, he went to Corinth around the late spring or early summer of 57 A.D., and it was from Corinth at that time that Romans is considered to have been written.

You may be wondering why I have emphasized these places and dates with regard to the organization of the church in Ephesus as well as the early church as a whole. The reason is in order to establish biblical evidence that presents the early churches of Ephesus, Rome, etc., as being comprised of small home churches with individual pastors over these churches, rather than one huge congregation ruled by elders without a single individual as bishop/pastor over the group. Indeed, in those larger cities we know that over a period of time there emerged bishops

³² Acts 18:1-4

³³ Acts 18:5-11

³⁴ Acts 18:18-22

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

who oversaw the ministries of the house churches as a whole. But the house churches themselves were led by individual pastors (i.e., overseers), and this can be clearly seen with Priscilla and Aquila.

As I mentioned earlier, Paul left Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus at the end of his second missionary journey in the fall of 53 A.D., where he remained for almost three years, and it was from Ephesus that he wrote 1 Corinthians in late 54 or early 55 A.D. Thus, from the fall of 52 A.D. to late 54 or early 55 A.D. is about two and one half years. In Paul's benediction to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 16:19, he makes a very interesting statement: "The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house" (1 Corinthians 16:19). Obviously, all the believers in Ephesus did not meet in the small home of Aquila, rather some met in his house and others in other homes. The significant thing is that this house-church ministry of Aquila and Pricsa (a shortened form of Priscilla as Bill is for William) in Ephesus lasted for at least two and one half years,³⁵ and that obviously was the structure of the church in Ephesus when Paul addressed the "elders of the church" in Ephesus at the end of this third missionary journey. And who were those elders? They were the pastors/overseers/bishops of individual house-churches over which God had placed them as leaders.

Paul left Ephesus in the fall of 56 A.D. and traveled to Macedonia and then on to Corinth in the spring of 57 A.D. It was from Corinth in 57 A.D. that Paul wrote Romans, and between the time he wrote 1 Corinthians in Ephesus in late 54 or early 55 A.D. and the time he left Ephesus, Aquila and Priscilla had moved back to Rome. And once they had moved back, they established another house-church ministry in Rome:

Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; also greet the church that is

³⁵ i.e., 1 Corinthians was written two and one half years after Paul left them in Ephesus, and they were still in Ephesus when he wrote 1 Corinthians.

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

in their house. Greet Epaenetus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia.³⁶

In other words, the house-church ministry of Aquila and Priscilla was not just relegated to one area of city, but it was a common form of structure of the early church wherever they went.

Noted New Testament scholar, John Murray, further clarifies this ministry:

It was necessary and appropriate in apostolic times, as on some occasions today, for Christians to make their homes available for the congregations of the saints . . . In a city like Rome or Ephesus (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:19) there would be more than one such congregation. The fact that the church in the house of Aquila and Prisca is particularly mentioned in this list of greetings shows that it did not comprise the whole church at Rome. Hence there would be other churches and it would be proper to speak of the churches in Rome.³⁷

Over each of these house-churches there would obviously need to be a leaders, as was Aquila in Ephesus and Rome, and Paul called such leaders "overseers."³⁸ M.H. Shepherd, Jr. points out that in all likelihood in the early church "there was a bishop-overseer for each house-church congregation."³⁹ Therefore, it would appear that congregations in the early church were led by a single pastor who would have elders helping him depending on the congregation's size. And where there may have been early congregations where there was no one single individual recognized as the bishop/overseer/pastor of that congregation, the elders of that congregation were directly accountable to Paul or whoever founded them. That is, the apostle who founded them functioned in fact as their bishop/overseer/pastor:

It is likewise obvious that Paul exercised jurisdiction over the churches which he had founded.⁴⁰

Yet Paul undoubtedly exercised a real missionary superintendence over the churches founded by him, and employed his younger assistants in the work.⁴¹

The apostles, by virtue of their singular commission to evangelize, were traveling missionaries and founders of churches . . . Their authority in the churches that they founded, if we may judge from Paul's claims, was absolute, they being final arbiters in all questions of worship, discipline, and

³⁶ Romans 16:3-5

³⁷ F.F. Bruce, gen. Ed., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968], *The Epistle to the Romans*, by John Murray, pp. 228-229

³⁸ Acts 20:28

³⁹ Shepherd, "Bishop"

⁴⁰ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953], p. 116

⁴¹ Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, p. 40

doctrine.⁴²

The Ephesian church, therefore, was not one big huge congregation that met in a single building, but rather it was made up of small house-church congregations led by individual “overseers” who were accountable to each other and to Paul. Consequently, the term *church of Ephesus* is referring to the body of believers as a whole in Ephesus made up of many congregations rather than a single mega-congregation.

2. **Philippians 1:1-2**

Paul came to Philippi on his second missionary journey in 50 A.D. His first converts were the families of Lydia and the Philippian jailer.⁴³ Thus, it was with these two families that the Gospel began to be ministered in Philippi and the church began to grow. It appears that Paul wrote Philippians from Rome during his first imprisonment while waiting to appeal to Caesar, aware that death might ensue,⁴⁴ and that would date the letter around 61 or 62 A.D. That means the church in Philippi was eleven or twelve years old when Paul wrote Philippians and it had obviously grown numerically during that period.

One very interesting observation is that “elders” are not mentioned in this passage or throughout the entire body of Philippians, only “overseers and deacons”:

Paul and Timothy, bond-servants in Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴⁵

Some scholars see the reference to “overseers and deacons” as merely a general reference to the men who had the responsibility of the oversight of the congregation at Philippi as a whole, while others maintain this is referring to specific offices of ministry. There is nothing in the epistle itself

⁴² Shepherd, “Ministry, Christian

⁴³ Acts 16:14-40

⁴⁴ Acts 28:17-31; Philippians 1:12-26

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

to give us a clear picture of just what the function of the “overseers and deacons” at Philippi was, but we can adduce by the Scripture we have already looked at that the evidence would tend toward specific offices of ministry.

F.W. Beare in his commentary on Philippians presents both views, saying that the reference alone to “overseers and deacons” doesn’t provide us with sufficient information to draw a conclusion. However, in relation to other Scriptures and the writings of the early church Fathers, there is a good possibility that the Philippian church had an organized ministry, and the terms “overseers and deacons” are . . .

an indication that the Roman penchant for organization had already given the Philippian church a regular system of office-bearers, . . . Perhaps the Philippian church had provided itself with a formal organization more rapidly than the other churches; . . .⁴⁵

M.H. Shepherd, Jr. further confirms this very real possibility that the “overseers and deacons” at Philippi were distinct offices of ministry, the deacons being assistants to the overseers:

It is also likely that Paul’s greeting in Philippians 1:1 to the “bishops and deacons” was used in a technical sense. This letter was a note of thanks to the Philippians for the material assistance sent the apostle during his imprisonment. It would be only natural that Paul would single out for special mention those ministers of the church who had been particularly responsible for the overseeing of this charity. Such men would be the ministers in charge of the Eucharist, who received and dispensed the offerings of the people at the common meeting for the breaking of bread.

It is possible that in the early days there was a bishop-overseer for each house-church organization.⁴⁷

In other words, the “overseers” Paul referred to in Philippians 1:1 can be seen as pastors of individual house-churches as in other metropolitan centers such as Rome, Ephesus, etc. In fact, P.H. Menoud states affirmatively that the “overseers” in Philippi functioned in a pastoral role of ministering the Word of God and watching over the flock administratively to make sure believers didn’t veer from the apostolic teaching:

⁴⁵ Philippians 1:1-2

⁴⁶ F.W. Beare, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians* [New York: Harper Brothers, Publishers, 1959], pp. 48-49

⁴⁷ Shepherd, “Bishop”

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

In the letter to the Philippians he salutes the “bishops and deacons” (1:1). But he does not state what their duties consist of. The bishops are, without any doubt, those who watch over the church in order to make sure that the members are persevering in the teaching received from the apostle; their ministry seems to be the same as that of the teachers of Corinth and of the elders or bishops in Ephesus. The deacons are most certainly subordinate to the bishops, since they are named subsequently. The bishops and deacons make their appearance also later in the Pastoral letters. . . . On the other hand, Philippi is the only church which never caused the apostle any worry, either in theological or in practical matters. Philippi was the model church. Consequently, the simple organization which existed in this church—bishops to carry out the ministry of the word and deacons to take charge of all matters of assistance—might have been the organization answering most nearly the desires of Paul, and which he established there where he was able to act freely, without—as was the case at Corinth—being hampered by local difficulties.⁴⁸

Therefore, the external evidence of other Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers would tend to support the view that the church at Philippi consisted of numerous house-churches with an individual bishop or “overseer” functioning as the pastor of a local house-church. Prior to the church’s growth at Philippi there was very likely one meeting place for the believers, and very possibly there was no one person designated as pastor or overseer/bishop among those who might have been elders because they were directly under the supervision of Paul and his fellow workers. But as the church grew and other house-churches were formed, God began to raise up individual pastors over each group as He did with Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus and Rome, and these several bishops would work together and “took charge of the communities in brother comity.”⁴⁹

3. 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9

The third and fourth occurrences of the word *episkopos* are found in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7 respectively. These two epistles, along with 2 Timothy, are commonly referred to as the Pastoral Epistles.

⁴⁸ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1962 ed., s.v. “Church, Life and Organization of,” by P.H. Menoud

⁴⁹ Beyer, “ejpskevtomai, ejpiskopevw, [et al]”

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

In Acts 28:30-31, we are told that Paul was placed under house arrest for two years in Rome.⁵⁰

However, due to the fact that Luke mentions nothing of Paul's death, it is believed that Paul was released for a period of time and traveled about ministering:

From 62-67 Paul traveled more or less freely, leaving Timothy in Ephesus and Titus in Crete, and then subsequently writing each of them a letter. Thus the approximate dates for 1 Timothy and Titus are perhaps 63-66. After being recaptured and once again imprisoned, Paul wrote Timothy a second letter, 2 Timothy. Thus 2 Timothy, dated approximately A.D. 67, represents the last Pauline Epistle.⁵¹

The question we are confronted with in 1 Timothy and Titus is just what was the context of Paul's reference to the overseer, deacons, and elders in those books? That is, what type of church government was in operation to which Paul was addressing?

With reference to 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7, there is a division of opinion as to why Paul referred to the "overseer" singularly; i.e., why he used "overseer" versus "overseers." Some scholars maintain that the singular usage of ". . . overseer is to be understood generically, and that a plurality of such officials is presupposed."⁵² Other scholars, however, see the singular usage of "overseer" and the plural usage of "deacons" (1 Timothy 3:8) as clearly referring to the form and structure of the early local church toward the end of the first century. Consequently, they see the Pastorals as written later, ca 100 A.D., by an anonymous pastor in the name of Paul encouraging proper church order since the Pastorals so aptly depict the form of church government and structure at that time:

In the Pastoral Epistles the 'bishop' is always spoken of in the singular. The simplest explanation of this fact is that monarchial episcopacy is by now the prevailing system, and that the one bishop has already become the head of the presbyterate, even if his supreme position is not nearly so strongly emphasized as it is in the Epistle of Ignatius. It is in keeping with this that the Pastoral Epistles no longer take the form of letters to congregations, but are directed to individual men, Timothy or Titus. These are portrayed not simply as personal disciples and intimate confidants of the apostles; they are also nothing less than his official representatives, who are to give effect in Asia Minor and Crete to the

⁵⁰ ca. 61-62 A.D.

⁵¹ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament edition [Wheaton, Illinois: SP Publications, Inc., 1983], p. 729

⁵² Henry Chadwick, gen. Ed., *Harper's New Testament Commentaries* [New York and Evanston: Harper and Row Publishers, 1963] *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, by John Norman Davidson Kelly, p.74

teaching and instructions set out in the letters.⁵³

However, as has already been seen with Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome where the believers in those cities were meeting in house-churches with individual pastors leading them, I see the Pastorals as being written by Paul between 63-67 A.D., and that he was giving both the generic qualifications of an “overseer” as well as indirectly describing the structure of the churches on a local basis; i.e., the criteria of leadership for the pastor/overseer and deacons of individual house-churches, as well as elders who functioned in an advisory capacity to the overseer in the larger churches. Von Campenhausen further attests to the leadership role of this “overseer” as depicted in the Pastorals:

In part, those addressed are persons within the individual congregation who are, however, entrusted with functions which can be exercised only by a governing bishop, and who are already beginning to rise above the level of their ‘fellow-elders’ . . . This corresponds to the actual situation at the beginnings of the monarchial episcopate . . .

The apostolic teaching is that with which the holders of the office have been ‘entrusted’, and which they must above all proclaim and uphold. This does not mean, however, that their position has ceased to be one in which they are concerned with every aspect of church life, or that the whole ‘care of the church’ has not been committed to them. The church’s preacher is also to be her example, her judge, and the ‘corrector of the recalcitrant’. Practical and economic affairs also come into the picture, and the customary warning has to be given against covetous malpractice’s. At the heart of everything, however, stands the ‘sound doctrine’, a phrase which covers a great deal more than just dogmatic truths. The official preacher holds fast to the undistorted tradition and to the sacred, inspired Scriptures, which the apostles have left behind them. Moreover, responsibility for the trusteeship of this inheritance is no longer vested in the congregation as a whole, but in the bishop and the elders as the professional holders of an established office, committed to them for this purpose.⁵⁴

B. Poimen

In the Bible this word means shepherd or herdsman, and metaphorically it refers to the presiding officer, manager, or director of any assembly. The verb, *poimaino*, means to feed, or tend a flock, and figuratively it means to rule or govern. Thus, the noun and the verb refer to a literal shepherd tending the flock, and

⁵³ Hans Von Compenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, trans. J.A. Baker [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969], pp. 107-108

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 108-110

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

metaphorically and figuratively to one who governs a body of people as Jesus rules over the church and as a pastor/overseer rules over a local congregation.

The idea of the leader of a group of people in the Near East being called their shepherd goes back to the earliest known inscriptions available in ancient Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian:

Already on Sumerian royal inscr. The king (from Tugal-zaggisi) is described as the shepherd appointed by deity. In Babylonian and Assyrian “re'u” (“shepherd”) is a common epithet for rulers and the verb “re'u” (“to pasture”) is a common figure of speech for “to rule.” . . . Gathering the dispersed, righteous government and care for the weak are marks of the shepherd function of the ruler.⁵⁵

In the Old Testament there are several metaphorical references to the Lord as being the shepherd of His people:

This may be seen from the great number of passages which use the rich shepherd vocabulary for Yahweh and depict God in new and vivid developments of the metaphor as the Shepherd who goes before His flock (Psalm 68:7 – parentheses and Scripture references mine), who guides it (Psalm 23:3), who leads it to pastures (Jeremiah 50:19), and to places where it may rest by the waters (Psalm 23:2; 80:1), . . . who protects it with His staff (Psalm 23:4), who whistles to the dispersed and gathers them (Zechariah 10:8; Isaiah 56:8), who carries the lambs in his bosom and leads the mother-sheep (Isaiah 40:11).⁵⁶

In addition, the Lord through Jeremiah declares that

I Myself shall gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and shall bring them back to their pasture; and they will be fruitful and multiply. I shall also raise up shepherds over them and they will tend them and they will not be afraid any longer, nor be terrified, nor will any be missing, declares the Lord.⁵⁷

In other words, the Lord is going to raise up men to guide His people as a faithful shepherd does with the sheep entrusted to him.

We have also seen in the Dead Sea Scrolls that the *m'bagger*, or overseer of the Essene community, was metaphorically viewed as the shepherd of the flock,⁵⁸ and in the New Testament, Jesus is viewed as the

⁵⁵ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1968 ed., s.v. “poimhvn, arcipoivmhn, poimaivnwn, poivmnion,” by Joachim Jeremias

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ (Jeremiah 23:3-4).

⁵⁸ (Colnen, “Bishop, Presbyter, Elder”),

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

“great Shepherd of the sheep” (Hebrews 13:20); i.e., He is viewed as the Messianic Shepherd prophesied in the Old Testament (Ezekiel 34:11-31; 37:24-28). In fact, Jesus refers to Himself as being the “good shepherd” in John 10 to the extent that He is one with the Father,⁵⁹ and thus, He is God incarnate, being the fulfillment of Ezekiel 34:11-31.

Therefore, as Jesus is the “Great Shepherd of the sheep”, He calls men to be His under-shepherds and care for His flock according to Jeremiah 23:4. Thus, it is no wonder that Paul uses this imagery in his exhortation to the overseers/pastors at Ephesus:

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.⁶⁰

The phrase “to shepherd” in the above passage comes from the verb *poimaino*, and from this verb comes the noun *poimen* which means shepherd or pastor. Therefore, it is clear to see from Acts 20:28 that the role of the overseer is that of a pastor, and the role of a pastor is to manage, govern, and direct a local church.

In the New Testament, *poimen* occurs eighteen times: fifteen of those occurrences refer to the literal shepherds of sheep, two to Jesus as the Shepherd of the Church, and one to men functioning as pastors. The one occurrence of men functioning as pastors is found in Ephesians 4:11-13 concerning those ministries Christ gave the Church for expansion and maturity:

And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

One important thing to notice in this passage is that apostles, prophets, and evangelists are listed as separate callings and ministries, whereas “pastors and teachers” are listed as being one in the same; i.e., the role of pastors is to teach and instruct, but not all teachers are necessarily pastors:

The absence of the tou;~ dev before didaskavlou~ indicates that the poimenev~ and the didavskaloi

⁵⁹ John 10:30

⁶⁰ Acts 20:28

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

were not two distinct orders, but designations of the same men . . . in different functions, the former defining them according to their office of oversight, the latter according to their office of instruction and guidance. The poimhvн would naturally be a didavskalo~; but there is not the same reason for supposing that every didavskalo~ would also be a poimhvн.⁶¹

We also find Peter exhorting his fellow elders (i.e., pastors):

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.⁶²

The word “shepherd” in verse 2 is from the verb *poimaino*, and what can be assumed is that the role of the pastor in a local church setting is being presented:

According to the following verses, the elders are leaders of their respective groups and are thus designated as shepherds (cf. The title “pastor”) who are directly subordinated to Christ as the Chief Shepherd, verse 4 . . .

The elders or the leaders of the congregations are admonished in verse 2 to be shepherds and to take care of the groups within the flock of the universal church which have been assigned to each.⁶³

Peter’s admonition to these pastors to view their pastoral authority in proper perspective, not “lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock,”⁶⁴ may be seen as a further substantiation of the structure of the early church where the pastor was the primary leader, director, and administrator of the local church over against the view of the local church being led by a group of elders, with no one elder being the primary leader, and the pastor having no more authority than any other elder. In other words, the very real possibility existed for a pastor who was vested with such singular authority as the chief overseer of a local congregation to abuse that authority and become dictatorial and tyrannical in his leadership rather than leading by example through humility and servanthood tempered with loving and caring firmness.

⁶¹ (W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, 5 vols. [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956], vol. 3: *Second Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians*, by Bernard, Rendall, Salmond, Kennedy, and Peake, p. 330)

⁶² 1 Peter 5:1-3

⁶³ (William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, gen eds., *The Anchor Bible* [Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964] *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*, by Bo Reicke, pp. 128-129)

⁶⁴ 1 Peter 5:3

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

There is another important point to be made concerning whether or not these elders can be considered as pastors of local congregations or simply leaders of a single congregation. The word “allotted” in verse 3 is from the Greek noun *kleros*, and “In classical Greek *klh`ro~* was an allotment of land assigned to a citizen by the civic authorities . . . , the distribution frequently being made by lot, . . . ”⁶⁵ We find in the LXX this same use of *kleros* where *kleros* indicates . . .

. . . that Israel did not conquer the land by its own achievements or indeed plan its conquest, but that God's free disposition gave Israel the land as its share, and that it has thus been conquered and possessed by Israel as a legitimate portion.⁶⁶

In the New Testament, *kleros* is applied generally to mean the “portion allotted to someone.’ As in the Old Testament, this is something which is given rather than won; it is given by God.”⁶⁷ Thus, when *kleros* is used in 1 Peter 5:3, it can clearly be seen to mean “the portion allotted to each individual elder.”⁶⁸

However, the question still remains concerning the structure these “elders” were operating in with reference to *kleros*; i.e., were they elders of one large congregation being assigned a certain number of the members to their oversight, or were they pastors of individual congregations? Indeed, both may be true as was pointed out earlier that in many of the new churches formed by the apostles there was at times no one individual singled out within the church to be the pastoral leader, but rather the leadership was maintained by a group of elders who were directly responsible and accountable to the founding apostle or his emissary. Thus, the apostle or his emissary functioned in fact as that group’s pastor, albeit a pastor at large. As these churches grew in size and the apostles and their emissaries died off, and as new churches were spawned from these churches farther away from apostolic jurisdiction so to speak, God raised up individual men to function as the pastoral leader in the place of the apostle or his emissary in these local churches. Therefore, the likely inference here in connection with *kleros* is to individual pastors of local

⁶⁵ Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The Epistle of St. Peter* [London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1961], p. 231

⁶⁶ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1965 ed., s.v, *klh`ro~* [et al],” by Werner Foerster

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

congregations. John Norman Davidson Kelly points this out concerning *kleros* in his commentary on 1 Peter:

Of the many conjectures put forward ... the most widely favored is that the term here denotes the spheres of duty, or portions of the whole flock, allocated to the care of the elders severally. The suggestion is that each has his own group, or 'parish', within the community for which he is pastorally responsible.

This gives an excellent sense both in itself and in relation to the next clause, and for that reason has been provisionally adopted . . . For we have no evidence elsewhere either of *kleros* signifying a group within the whole congregation or of congregations being organized in this fashion. Further, we know that the term later acquired the meaning 'ecclesiastical office' . . .⁶⁹

In other words, according to Kelly, *kleros* is referring to individual congregations over which these elders have been allotted the care, ministry, and authority in exercising pastoral oversight.

Once again, however, it must be pointed out that what Peter says is indeed applicable to lay elders who function as advisors and counselors to a pastor in a local church setting and are given overseeing responsibilities in that church by and under the supervision of that pastor.

There is one last aspect of 1 Peter 5:1-3 that tends to further substantiate the view that the elder's referred to are pastors of individual congregations, and that this is the participle that is found in many texts in verse 2 – "overseeing." This phrase as contained in the King James version reads:

Feed the flock of God which is among you, *taking the oversight thereof*, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;

The phrase, "taking the oversight thereof", is a translation of the present active participle ejpiskopou`nte~ from the verb epjiskopevw which means to care for, inspect, look after, and oversee. And from this verb comes the noun ejpivskopo~ which means overseer or superintendent, and it is applied to the

⁶⁹ Henry Chadwick, gen. Ed., *Harper's New Testament Commentaries* [New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1969], *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*, by J.N.D. Kelly, p. 202

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

"superintendent, head or overseer of any Christian church."⁷⁰ In addition, the present active participle indicates continuous action which could be seen as implying a full-time position of ministry that would coincide more aptly with the role of a pastor of a local congregation overseeing and caring for his flock than that of an elder who is a layman functioning in an advisory and assisting capacity to the pastor while being involved in full-time work elsewhere. And even in those instances when a pastor would have to do other work in order to support himself and his family, he was the primary one responsible for the oversight of the sheep and selecting other men to help him in that oversight.⁷¹

There is some question as to the authenticity of *ejpiskopou`nte~* in the original text. Based on the principles of evaluation of the internal evidence of a text,⁷² as well as the external evidence of the various manuscripts and their traditions, there is some justifiable reason to question its originality:

It is difficult to decide whether one should follow the authority of such important witnesses as X* B 33 al and regard the inclusion of *ejpiskopou`nte~* in p 72 X2 A and most other witnesses as an exegetical expansion (made perhaps in accordance with 2:26), or whether the shorter text is the result of deliberate excision, prompted either by stylistic considerations (namely, that after *poimavnate* the word is redundant) or by ecclesiastical conviction (namely, that Peter could never have admonished presbyters [ver. I] to exercise the function of bishops).⁷³

According to Metzger above, he sees a possible reason for the excision of *episkopountes* being that the early church Fathers and others saw the elders as lay advisors to the pastors (i.e., bishops/overseer), and, therefore, the role of *episkopountes* belonged specifically to the pastors of local congregations who were singly charged with the task and all it involved, including the selection of assistant pastors, elders, and deacons to help assist in the *episkopountes* (oversight). Thus, to charge elders (elders being lay advisors) with the task of overseeing the church was out of place because that responsibility belonged to pastors.

⁷⁰ Joseph H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977]. p. 243

⁷¹ 2 Timothy 2:2

⁷² i.e., the shorter reading is usually to be preferred, etc.

⁷³ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1971], pp. 695-696

Two other possibilities exist, however, and the first is, that it was written by Peter, and if so then we have a consistent apostolic witness concerning pastors being caned elders too in the early church.⁷⁴ The other possibility is that it was included by someone at an early stage of the church to emphasize the overseeing role of the pastor of a local congregation and just what this attitude should be toward the congregation (and, once again it should be mentioned that all pastors/overseers were considered elders, but not all elders were considered pastors/overseers). Such an addition, therefore, would be in keeping with the desire of early church Fathers and scribes to maintain orthodoxy in all areas, including church government and the proper attitude of pastors in the face of all sorts of heresies and schisms:

Intentional doctrinal changes which have received any appreciable mss. support have almost invariably been changes in the direction of orthodoxy or stronger doctrinal emphasis.⁷⁵

The role of the *poimen*, therefore, was and is a specific call and gift of God to a man to be the overseer of a local congregation and all that overseeing includes, and that calling, gift, and ministry can be clearly seen in the text of the New Testament as occurring in the early church under apostolic direction.

C. Presbuteros

The word “elder” in the New Testament comes from the Greek word *presbuteros*, and *presbuteros* is the comparative form of *presbus* which means “old” thus, *presebuteros* means *older* or *elder* with reference to *age*. However, before we can appreciate the application of this word to church leadership, we need to first of all see its usage in secular as well as Old Testament literature.

⁷⁴ In conjunction with Paul’s address to the “elders” at Ephesus in Acts 20:28 to “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [episkopous], to shepherd (poimainein) the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” [brackets mine] - and here as we have already seen these “elders” were pastors of local house-church congregations.

⁷⁵ J. Harold Greenlee, *An Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* [Grand Rapids: William OB Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964], p. 68

1. Secular Literature

In classical Greek literature, *presbus* (old), *presbutterous* (older), and *presbutatos* (oldest) were used to compare older men with younger men, and these words eventually came to be synonymous with honor, respect, authority, experience, and wisdom due to one's age. In fact, in the Greek city state of Sparta the word *presbus* came to be used for the president of a college, and in Egypt the *presbutteroi* were administrators of both secular and religious groups. However, in other parts of Greek society apart from Sparta, "the word is not a title; the *presbutteroi* are not fice-bearers but senior groups of various kinds (as distinct from junior groups), . . ."⁷⁶

Thus, in secular usage *presbutteros* referred to age as well as an administrative position of some type.

2. Old Testament Literature

The Old Testament word for elder in Hebrew is *zaqen*, and its basic meaning is from the verb *zaqen* which means *to be, become, or grow old*. The Hebrew noun *zaqen* means *the bearded chin of a man*, and these three letters together, *zqn* have the universal meaning of *beard* referring to an *older or adult man* in most Semitic languages.⁷⁷

In the Old Testament, the noun occurs 178 times with about a third of those occurrences referring to old age, while the remainder are primarily referring to those men who are regarded as spiritual and community leaders within Israel, and "Linguistic usage by and large makes a clear distinction between the man characterized by his age and the elder."⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament 1968 cd., s.v. *prevsbu~, presbuttero~, [et al]*," by Gunther Bornkamm

⁷⁷ Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, 1980 ed., s.v. *זָקֵן zaqen*; [et al], by J. Conrad

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

The Old Testament tradition of elders as community leaders in Israel is of quite ancient origin. They were the leaders of the various clans within the different tribal units, and during the time of Exodus and Conquest, they are presented as --

representatives of the whole people, and they are this only in the sense of mere representation, not with any initiative or governing power, but along with and under leading figures like Moses and Joshua.⁷⁹

However, during the time of the judges and under monarchial rule, their leadership role broadened:

Now for the first time we find elders who are leading members of the municipal nobility in various districts, no matter whether the towns are Israelite or not. In the hands of these elders lie decisions in political, military, and judicial matters . . . The history of the age of the judges and the monarchy shows what power lay in their hands especially in time of war and how advisable it was for ruling kings, or their opponents, to win them over.⁸⁰

As the monarchy came to a close and with the conquest of Judah by Babylon in 586 B.C., the tribal organization was also disintegrating and ultimately ceased after the Jews were taken into Babylon. However, the elders continued to play an important role "as guardians and representatives of the Jewish community both in exile⁸¹ and in the homeland."^{82 83}

With the cessation of the tribal organization, however, and even though the elders were meeting a need of the people, there remained within the Jewish community a desire and need for a greater communal strength and unity than what the elders by themselves could provide. Thus individual families began to emerge as the leaders of the Jewish community and began to form an "aristocratic ruling class."⁸⁴

It is not until the time of the Seleucids, and in particular Antiochus III (223-187 B.C.), that we see evidence of the Jewish Sanhedrin coming into existence. The Sanhedrin was composed of 70 or 71 members, and it

⁷⁹ s.v. Bornkamm, "prevsbu~, presbuvtero~, [et al]"

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Jeremiah 29:1

⁸² Ezekiel 8:1ff. cf. also the elders of the land who in Jeremiah 26:17 speak on behalf of the prophet.

⁸³ (*The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 1975 ed., s.v. "Bishop, Presbyter, Elder," by Loethar Colnen).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

was the ultimate and final authority for the Jews in religious and cultural matters. Within the Sanhedrin were the high priests, the scribes, and the elders, and the elders were considered to be the lay members

as distinct from the representatives of the priestly families, from whom the high-priest and president of the Sanhedrin was chosen, and also from the theological group of the *grammatei*⁸⁵. It is obvious that the direction of the Sanhedrin never lay in the hands of the *presbuteroi*. Yet one may assume that the elders, as representatives of the privileged patrician families in Jerusalem, usually followed the lead of the priestly Sadducees. . . . Their weakness in relation to the other two groups may be seen from the NT, which usually calls the members of the Sanhedrin the *ajrcierei*⁸⁶, *grammatei*⁸⁶, *presbytēpoi* in this order. . . .⁸⁵

The synagogues as well were lead by a synagogal council usually made up of seven members called *presbuteroi*. These *presbuteroi* were in turn led by an *archisynagogos* who was the presiding and highest officer of the synagogue. The *presbuteroi*, therefore, functioned as the advisory council in assisting the *archisynagogos* in his leadership of the synagogue.

In summation, therefore, the elders in the Old Testament are presented as being “leaders in war, judges in dispute, and givers of wise advise and witness in administration.”⁸⁶

3. The Role of Elders in the New Testament Church

The first mention we have of elders in the New Testament church has to do with the Jerusalem church. In Acts 11:27-30 we have the account of believers in Antioch sending aid to the believers in Judea by the hands of Paul and Barnabas, and they delivered this aid to the elders of the church in Jerusalem. The next reference to the church in Jerusalem is in Acts 15 where a council was convened to deal with the controversy of whether or not Gentile believers needed to be circumcised. Once again, I want to point out that the scholarly consensus of the Jerusalem church’s leadership is that it was modeled after the leadership structure of the Sanhedrin with James, the Lord’s brother, being the head:

⁸⁵ Bornkamm, *prevsbūl, presbūtērō*, [et al],”

⁸⁶ *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 1962 ed., s.v. “Elder in the OT,” by G. Henton Davies

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

Shortly after the ref. in 11:30 James is mentioned for the first time as the leader of the congregation. 12:17. . . . In Ac. 15; 16:4 the ajpovstoloi and presbuvteroi clearly function as a supreme court and normative teaching office for the whole church. . . . In this instance the ajpovstoloi, and presbuvteroi are patterned after the Jewish Sanhedrin . . . and not just the synagogue council. . . . In keeping with this modification is the fact that the ajpovstoloi and presbuvteroi alone are mentioned (without the ejhhlhsiva) in 15:2, 6, 23; 16:4 i.e. where they act as an authority for the whole church. . . .⁸⁷

As we have already seen, the elders on the Sanhedrin functioned in an advisory capacity, and the high priest provided the leadership and direction for the Sanhedrin:

At the head of the body, . . . stood the high priest. He was the leader of the Jewish people; he alone could preside in the Sanhedrin.⁸⁸

What follows, therefore, is that since the Jerusalem church was based on the leadership of the Sanhedrin, then James, as has already been mentioned, functioned in the same capacity as that of the high priest in being the leader of the Jerusalem church, and the elders functioned in an advisory capacity. This can be seen in James' authoritative response to Peter's exhortation that circumcision cannot be required of Gentile believers as a means of salvation since it is by the grace of God men are saved and not by works of the flesh.

After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. "With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,' SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO. "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.⁸⁹

In verse 19, the phrase "it is my judgment" is "ego krino" in the Greek. The King James translates it as "my sentence is" and the NIV reads the same as the NAS above. According to the translations given, you would expect the Greek to read "*e krisis e eme estin*" which literally translated is "my judgment is" or "it is my judgment." The translation in the English text gives the impression to the reader that "judgment" is a

⁸⁷ Bornkamm, *prevsbu!*, *presbuvtero~*, [et al],

⁸⁸ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1971 ed., s.v. "sunevdrion," by Eduard Lohse

⁸⁹ *Acts 15:13-20 New American Standard Bible : 1995 update*. 1995. The Lockman Foundation: LaHabra, CA

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

noun when in fact it is a verb. Thus, the literal, and I believe the more accurate translation is “I determine/resolve/decide/decree.”

In looking at the other usages of “*krino*” in the New Testament, there are two other places in which the English translation is “my judgment is.” The first is in John 5:30 where Jesus says “My judgment is just,” and the second is John 8:16 where Jesus says, “My judgment is true.” In both of these the phrase “My judgment is” reads “*e krisis e eme . . . estin;*” i.e., the word “judgment” is a noun.

Another important feature about Acts 15:19, is that the finite verb, *krino* (I determine, resolve, decree), is accompanied by the personal pronoun, *ego* (I), and whenever you find a personal pronoun accompanying a finite verb, the personal pronoun is attached for emphasis:

The pronominal subject of a finite verb is ordinarily not expressed, the person and number of the subject being indicated by the verbal ending. When the personal pronoun is used, it is for emphasis.⁹⁰

Therefore, James’ statement in Acts 15:19 needs to be seen as more than just a suggestion among possible other suggestions from the apostles and elders gathered there, with his suggestion carrying no more weight than anyone else’s. On the contrary, James as the head of the Jerusalem church was stating authoritatively and affirmatively, yet not tyrannically what should be done concerning circumcision of Gentile believers. James had heard both arguments, and when he gave his decision, there was no vote taken, nor was any more discussion of a theological nature concerning James’ decision about the matter.

19. “Wherefore my sentence is” literally “I decide.” The pronoun is emphatically expressed, and indicates that the speaker is deciding with authority.⁹¹

St. James apparently speaks as the president of the meeting, . . . and his words with the emphatic *ejgwv . . .* may express more than the opinion of a private member – he sums up the debate and proposes “the draught of a practical resolution” . . .⁹²

⁹⁰ H.E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1955] p. 123

⁹¹ J.J.S. Perowne, gen. ed. *The Cambridge Bible for Schools & Colleges* [Cambridge: The University Press, 1890] *The Acts of the Apostles* by J. Rawson Lumby, pp. 193

⁹² W. Robertson Nicoll, ed. *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 1956], vol.2: *The Acts of the Apostles* by R.J. Knowling, p.323

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

James' conclusion amounted to this: that all attempts to impose circumcision and its attendant legal obligations on Gentile converts must be refused. The way of salvation and the terms of church fellowship were to be the same for Jews and Gentiles alike: their basis was God's free grace in Christ, to be received by faith alone. The fundamental principle of the gospel was this safeguarded.⁹³

What did follow, however, was a consensus among the other apostles and elders, supported by the whole church, to send two other men from among them, Barsabbas and Silas, along with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch to deliver James' decree to the church there. In fact, the phrase "it seemed good" in Acts 15:22 comes from the Greek verb *dokeo* which transitively means to believe or think, and intransitively it means to appear or to have the appearance. Neither of these usages of the verb conveys any type of parliamentary procedure or voting that might have been necessary to approve James' decision. Thus, a somewhat amplified translation of its intransitive usage as it is here in the passage would be: "Then it appeared to the apostles and the elders with the whole church, *as the appropriate and next step to take* (emphasis mine) to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas-Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren."⁹⁴ Therefore, James' decision, after hearing the arguments and possibly counseling with the others (nothing is mentioned of a consultation with the other apostles and elders although such a consultation could have occurred since that was their role in working with and assisting James) was final, and the subsequent discussion had to do with who to send along with Paul and Barnabas. But there was not more discussion concerning James' theological solution.

In Acts' 16:4 is a reference to the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church and their decrees being sent to the various churches by Paul and Silas on Paul's second missionary journey:

Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe.⁹⁵

The phrase "had been decided" comes from the same verb *krino* which is used in Acts 15:19 with reference to James' decision *ego krino*. Furthermore, we saw in Acts 15:19 that James, not the apostles and elders,

⁹³ F.F. Bruce, gen. ed., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 1954], *The Book of Acts*, by F.F. Bruce, p. 311

⁹⁴ Acts 15:22)

⁹⁵ Acts 16:4 *New American Standard Bible : 1995 update*. 1995. The Lockman Foundation: LaHabra, CA

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

was the one who said *ego krino* (I determine/resolve/decide/decree), and that after he made his theological statement in Acts 15:20 his decision was considered as final. However, we also see in the subsequent verses, 15:23-29, that James' decision was viewed as the decision of the entire leadership:

"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."⁹⁶

On other words, even though nothing is said of any consultation James may have had with the apostles and elders before giving his decision, the overall tenor of Acts 15:23-29 would seem to indicate there was a consultation preceding James' theological resolve. Therefore, when we read Acts 16:4 about the decrees "which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem," we may assume that Luke is referring to the decision making process as presented in Acts 15:6-21.⁹⁷

The final reference to the elders in the church at Jerusalem is in Acts 21:18. It concerns Paul going before James and the elders after his third missionary journey and their directive (under James' leadership) that he take a vow with four other men in order to pacify Jewish believers.

The only other reference in Acts to New Testament church elders are in Acts 14:23 where Paul & Barnabas appoint elders in the churches they had established on their first missionary journey, and in Acts 20:17 where Paul meets with the elders of the Ephesian church at the end of his third missionary journey. I see the function and scope of the elders referred to in Acts 14:23 as being the same as that of the elders in Acts 20:17-32 which I have already discussed under *episkopos*; i.e., they were overseers functioning as pastors of the house churches, or where there was no pastor, they were lay elders under the direct supervision of the apostle or one of his emissaries.

⁹⁶ Acts 15:28-29 *New American Standard Bible : 1995 update*. 1995. The Lockman Foundation: LaHabra, CA

⁹⁷ i.e., There was a consultation and discussion among James and the other apostles and elders, and then James would give his decision, *ego krino* and it was settled.

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

In the Pastorals, there are four references to elders. The first one is in 1 Timothy 5:1 where *presbutteros* is referring to an older man per se rather than a church leader, although this could certainly apply to a church leader who also happens to be an older man.

The second reference is in 1 Timothy 5:17:

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.

Some have questioned whether or not this passage is referring to various levels of authority within the eldership of a local church. That is, does this passage imply a four-tiered level of leadership consisting of elders as a whole, then ruling elders, then elders who rule better than the average ruling elder (and what is the criteria for such a differentiation?), and finally elders “who work hard at preaching and teaching?”

Such a delineation

Is hardly possible. The associating of those who labor in word and doctrine with *kalw`~ preestw`te~* (“ones who have ruled well” – parentheses and translation mine) shows that the ref. is to elders who discharge specific tasks in the congregation. *oiJ kalw`~ proestw`te~* is thus a recognition of those who are called *katastaqevnte~* in 1 Cl., 44, 3 (“appointed” – from *kathistemi* which means to appoint or ordain, and *Clemenmt* is referring to those men who functioned as an appointed or ordained pastor/overseer in a local congregation – parentheses and comments mine), and *proi`stamenoi* *presbuvteroi* in Herm. v. 2, 4, 3 (parentheses and comments mine – the phrase in Hermas actually reads: *meta ton prebutteron ton proistamenon tes ekklesias* those elders who are *the pastors* versus those who are advisors, as *proistamenon* comes from *proistemi* which means to be at the head of, rule, direct, manage, and it is the same word used in 1 Timothy 3:4-5 to describe the role of the overseer/pastor in the local church as head, ruler, director,etc.). Their special ministry and not just their special excellence in it is honored.⁹⁸

Thus, it appears that the elders to whom Paul is referring in 1 Timothy 5:17 are those who are functioning as pastor/overseers in local congregations, and this certainly coincides with what the early Church Fathers understood to be the role of the “elders who are at the head of/rule the church.” In addition, it should be pointed out once again that the view of many scholars concerning the government of the early church with reference to the bishops and elders is that

Bishops may also have been members among the presbyterate. But not all elders were bishops. The bishops were “appointed elders,” specifically ordained for liturgical, pastoral, and economic functions,

⁹⁸ Bornkamm, “*prevsbu~*, *presbuvtero~*, [et al],”

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

in which the deacons assisted them. . . . The elders enjoyed a position of honor, not of ministerial office. . . elders had delegated to them by the bishop certain ministerial functions of a liturgical and pastoral nature (Shepherd, "Ministry, Christian").

The third reference in the Pastorals is in 1 Timothy 5:19-20:

Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.

This passage obviously applies to all elders, those who are pastors/overseers, as well as those who function in an advisory and assisting capacity to the pastor. Such a position of authoritative leadership for pastors and advisors also brings a tremendous sense of responsibility and moral, ethical, and doctrinal accountability. Thus, accusations against an elder should be thoroughly examined, as some accusations might be biased or unfounded, but when they are proven true, and if there is no repentance by the elder, then, that elder should be publicly rebuked before the whole church. This is to be done so that the flock may see the terrible consequences of overt and continued sinful disobedience.

The fourth reference in the Pastorals is in Titus 1:5-9:

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you—if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.

Here in Titus is presented the same type of elder-overseer relationship as that presented in Acts 20:17-32. That is, the word *elder* is used as an overall title of spiritual leadership with *overseer* is used for the particular function of certain elders. Therefore, the spiritual qualifications for all elders, be they advisors or pastors/overseers, is basically the same as they both represent the Lord Jesus Christ to the body of Christ as well as to the unbelieving world. However, the pastor/overseer's responsibility of being a faithful and accountable witness of Jesus Christ before believers and non- believers in his attitude, walk, and teaching is even greater than that of an advisory elder due to the simple fact of the function and exposure of the position he fills as pastor. As James points out with godly exhortation and wisdom, men should examine their desires and motives for ministering, and this is especially true for the

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

pastor/overseer who Sunday after Sunday, and week after week stands before his flock expounding God's Word:

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.⁹⁹

Therefore, in the Pastorals I see a representation of the early church government with the bishop/overseer as the pastor in a local church setting and the leader of the elders who functioned as his advisors, counselors, and lay assistants in certain areas of teaching and pastoral ministry. As the churches grew, other assistant pastors were brought in to function in full- time ministry alongside of and under the guidance and direction of the senior pastor and also with the help, advice, and counsel of the elders.

And although some would view the Pastorals as written later than Paul because of the advanced form of government presented, and others would say the singular and plural usage of bishop, elders, and deacons is only generic, I see the picture given in the Pastorals of church government as I have just described above, and that it was consistent with Acts 20:17-32, Philippians 1:1, et al, and represented the form of church government that was around and functioning in varying degrees of proficiency toward the end of Paul's life:

The BISHOP is always spoken of in the singular, whereas deacons and elders are invariably mentioned in the plural (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:7-9). It therefore seems likely that at the time of the Pastoral letters there was only one bishop to a community. The bishop fulfills the same ministry of the word as the elders, but he also undertakes duties which are distinct from those of the elders. . . In other words, it is the bishop who represents the church in the eyes of other churches and also in the eyes of the Gentiles among whom his community is established. What is more, the bishop does not confine himself to teaching like the elders; he must also be able to urge men to follow the sound teaching and to correct those who disagree with it; in other words, he must defend the traditional apostolic teaching against all deviation. The bishop is presumed to have had wider knowledge than the elders and a clearer understanding of the difficult situation in which the church was placed at the moment when the apostles, who were its mainstays during the first decades, disappeared from the scene of history. In a word, the bishop appears, at the head of the elders, as the leader of the local church.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ James 3:1

¹⁰⁰ Menoud, "Church, Life and Organization of"

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

Leaving the Pastoral Epistles we are now going to look at the five references to elders in the Catholic Epistles, and the first reference is in James 5:14. I see this reference in the same way as I have already described where the bishop/overseer was at times called an elder along with his lay advisors, who together functioned as the leaders of the church; thus, to "call for the elders of the church" for prayer for healing is to call for the spiritual leaders to pray for the afflicted.

The second reference to elders in the Catholic Epistles is in 1 Peter 5:1 which I have already discussed; i.e., the reference is to pastors of local churches, but the spiritual Qualifications are also quite applicable for elders who are lay advisors and counselors. However, the third reference in 1 Peter 5:5 is seen as referring to older men in general who might also be church leaders.

The fourth and fifth references to elders in the Catholic Epistles are found in 2 and 3 John, and they are seen by most scholars as referring to an elder/pastor/teacher at large who ministers to a number of different bodies of believers:

Their author describes himself as 'the elder'. By so doing, however, he is not representing himself as a member of a local 'presbytery'. . . . Not once does the Elder feel himself to be restricted to a particular individual congregation, but he exerts his influence over a wide area by means of letters and emissaries . . . ; he figures rather as a prophet or teacher of the earlier type, one of those 'elders' and fathers to whose testimony Papias and Irenaeus later appealed. . . . Whole congregations look to him as their spiritual father, or have members who enjoy his special confidence, . . .¹⁰¹

The twelve references to elders in Revelation are undoubtedly apocalyptic and cannot be applied to elders in New Testament church government.

We will now turn to the early Church Fathers and their witness concerning church government.

¹⁰¹ Von Campenhausen, pp. 121-122

IV. The Witness of the Early Church Fathers Concerning Church Government

As churches began to spring up in places independent of the direct supervision of the apostles and their emissaries, and as the apostles and their emissaries began to die off, we find that the heresies addressed in the Pauline and other epistles began to grow at an alarming rate, as well as the persecution of Christians by the Roman government. The apostolic teachings, therefore, were being challenged on every side, and in those churches where there was no central leadership, everybody wanted to be a chief, but nobody wanted to be Indians. Consequently, what Paul warned the Ephesian pastors of in Acts 20:29-31 was beginning to occur in the Church as a whole:

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.¹⁰²

The epistle of 1 John was written in part to combat Gnostic heresies (which denied the incarnation of Christ among other things) that were rampant throughout early Christian congregations, and John warns the believers of false teachers and false doctrines:

Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen; from this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us. . . . Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.¹⁰³

The need in the churches, therefore, was for strong, authoritative, yet humble and loving leadership that could guide the churches according to the apostolic teachings and protect them from divisions and heresies. As I previously stated, a large number of the divisions that emerged were based on everybody

¹⁰² Acts 20:29-31

¹⁰³ 1 John 2:18-19; 4:1-3

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

wanting to be in charge, but no one wanting to follow. Thus, in those churches where there was no central figure recognized as the pastor/overseer, chaos and confusion would reign among many of the so-called elders as each one wanted to follow his own way of doing things doctrinally and administratively. Therefore, because of spiritual pride, spiritual immaturity, lack of submissiveness, and lack of scriptural knowledge and understanding, churches were “tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming.”¹⁰⁴

It was the tension of threatened schism and the rise of heretical teaching in the postapostolic age that brought to the fore concern for an identifiable succession of leaders who could claim authority to speak for the Faith and order imparted to the church by its original founders and the disciples of the Lord.¹⁰⁵

The early Church Fathers had their hands full, therefore, in maintaining the truth of God’s Word in the apostolic teachings amid the rampant heresies of that time and in maintaining the unity of the believers through various schisms that were constantly surfacing.

There are three Fathers in particular that we are going to look at whose writings occurred at the end of the first and beginning of the second centuries AD. They are Clement of Rome, the Shepherd of Hermas, and Ignatius of Antioch in Syria.

A. Clement of Rome

Clement is considered by many scholars to have been a disciple of Peter. We know for certain he was the overall bishop of the Christians in Rome, and thus, his epistle is dated ca. 95 AD.

His epistle was written to the Corinthian church because certain arrogant, younger members of that church had unscripturally and immorally dismissed several older leaders. Clement not only rebukes the younger members for this action, but he calls on them to repent, to restore the leaders they dismissed to their former places of authority, and to leave the church because what they had done was a terrible sin

¹⁰⁴ Ephesians 4:14

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

deserving of God's judgment, for "the Most High is the champion and protector of them that in a pure conscience serve His excellent Name."¹⁰⁶

The significance of 1 Clement for us is that Clement reaffirms the apostolic origin of the pastoral office of bishop/overseer. One evidence of this is his coupling of bishops and deacons together in 42:4 as Paul did in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:1-13, thereby indicating the same established form of church government that was in operation in Philippi, Ephesus, et al:

So preaching everywhere in country and town, they (they being the apostles - parentheses and comment mine) appointed their first-fruits, when they had proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons unto them that should believe.¹⁰⁷

The other witness that is even more graphic is what Campenhausen calls Clement's "legal status of the episcopate" as an order and institution of the church created by the apostles and valid for all time.¹⁰⁸ That is, Clement states that the apostle ordained men to the office of bishop/overseer as a distinct office of pastoral care and leadership:

And our Apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife over the name of the bishop's office. For this cause there fore, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the aforesaid persons, and afterwards they provided a continuance, that if these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their ministration. Those therefore who were appointed by them, or afterward by other men of repute with the consent of the whole church, . . . - these men we consider to be unjustly thrust out from their ministration. For it will be no light sin for us, if we thrust out those who have offered the gifts of the bishop's office unblameably and holily.¹⁰⁹

In other words, as Campenhausen points out, Clement saw the office of bishop as an established fact throughout Christendom for godly order, not even some- thing that was debatable, and that the bishop could only be removed for some serious moral, ethical or doctrinal deviation:

In his concern with the concrete situation of conflict Clement only works out more precisely and

¹⁰⁵ Shepherd, "Ministry, Christian

¹⁰⁶ J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Horner, eds., *The Apostolic Fathers* [London: Macmillan and Co., 1891; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984], p.76

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 1 Clement 42:4, p. 75

¹⁰⁸ Campenhausen, p. 89

¹⁰⁹ Lightfoot and Harmer, 1 Clement 44:1-4, D. 76

systematically something which must have been taken more or less for granted in every church where the system of elders had gained control. . . .

. . . The bishops, therefore, are not flatly declared to be 'irremovable'; but a baseless dismissal, one where no offence has been proved, is a gross injustice, something wholly contrary to the nature of the office and of its solemn institution within the congregation.

. . . The characteristic mark of Clement and his religious thinking is precisely that for him the all-embracing principle of right organization and order is just as much a natural as a divine, a secular as an ecclesiastical principle, and must hold good everywhere and at all times.¹¹⁰

B. The Shepherd of Hermas

Hermas was a Roman prophet, and Origen identified the author of this work as the "Hermes" mentioned in Romans 16:14. Regardless of that, the strong internal evidence of this work would tend to date it between 90-100 AD, due in part to the mention of Clement who is considered by many scholars to be the Clement of Rome whom we have just discussed.

There are two portions in Hermas that are especially pertinent to church government. The first one in Vision II, 4:3 we have already looked at briefly. There Hermas is giving instructions about where his prophecy is to be read: "But thou shalt read (the book) to this city along with the elders that preside over the church."¹¹¹ The verb 'preside' is from the Greek verb *proistemi* which means to be *at the head of, rule, direct, and manage*, and it is the same word used to describe the pastoral oversight of the bishop/overseer in 1 Timothy 3:4-5. Thus, the elders spoken of here in Hermas are those who are exercising pastoral oversight as bishops/overseers.

The second reference in Hermas is in Vision III, 5:1 where Hermas delineates the four ministries of apostle, bishop, teacher (teacher here implying an elder who assists the bishop in ministering to the flock), and deacon:

Hear now concerning the stones that go to the building. The stones that are squared and white, and fit together ill their joints, these are the apostles and bishops and teachers and deacons, who walked after the holiness of God, and exercised their office of bishop and teacher and deacon in purity and

¹¹⁰ Campenhausen, pp. 91, 93

¹¹¹ Lightfoot and Horner, Hermas Vis. II, 4:3, p. 409

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

sanctity for the elect of God, some of them already fallen on sleep, and others still living.¹¹²

Thus, Hermas gives a clear picture in these two references of an established leadership in the churches of a bishop/overseer who functions as pastor; of elders who assist the pastor in areas of teaching, etc.; and of deacons who minister in a variety of ways to the body.

C. *Ignatius of Antioch in Syria*

Ignatius, the Bishop of the Christians in Antioch, was a contemporary of Clement of Rome, and martyred ca. 110 A.D. during the persecution of the church by Trajan. He wrote seven letters in all, and they were

written in two successive stages of a journey through Asia Minor while he was being conducted to Rome as a prisoner condemned to fight and die in the wild-beast shows.¹¹³

Ignatius wrote to Polycarp, Bishop of the Christians in Smyrna, and Polycarp in turn wrote a letter to the Philippian church concerning Ignatius (Ignatius was taken through Philippi on his way to Rome):

Polycarp requested information about his fate, copies of any letters of Ignatius that the Philippian church may have had, to add to those Polycarp had already collected and appended to his letter; and he was making arrangements, at Ignatius' request, for delegations from the churches of Asia Minor and Macedonia to visit the distraught church of Ignatius in Syria.¹¹⁴

Irenaeus stated that Polycarp was closely associated with the apostle John, and that he was appointed Bishop of Smyrna by the apostles in Asia. Therefore, Polycarp may be considered to have been very sound biblically and theologically, and we know from Irenaeus' writings that he made a powerful impact on nonbelievers as well as believers:

The pre-eminent integrity of his character was admitted even by the pagans who condemned him. To his own flock, Polycarp was a saint without peer; . . . The perspective of history has not dimmed the glow of Irenaeus' hero-worship, in accounting Polycarp the outstanding Christian leader of his generation.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Ibid., Vision III, 5:1, p. 413

¹¹³ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Ignatius, Epistle of," by M. H. Shepherd, Jr.

¹¹⁴ Idem, "Polycarp, Epistle of"

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

I have emphasized Polycarp's solid commitment to Christ and his sound orthodox background in order to establish Ignatius' theological soundness and correctness. As rampant as heresies and schisms were, Polycarp would have in no way supported, nor been in agreement with Ignatius had Ignatius not been

Theologically sound and correct. Shepherd points out Ignatius' solid theological beliefs that are the foundational truths of the Gospel and the bulwark against the Gnostic heresies of that day and this:

His doctrine of the Godhead and of the person of Christ is remarkably agreeable to the dogmatic definitions of later times. His ringing assertions of the reality of the Incarnation are frequently phrased in ways that suggest dependence upon created formulas. He affirms the Davidic descent of Jesus, his virgin birth, his baptism by John, His crucifixion under Pilate and Herod, and his bodily resurrection.¹¹⁶

Having established Ignatius' theological correctness and oneness, support, and agreement with the orthodox Church Fathers, we can see that had he not been correct in some major area such as church government, then he would have been rebuked and his error exposed by no less a person as Polycarp. Polycarp doesn't dispute anything Ignatius says about church government in his letters, but rather he supports Ignatius completely.

However, before we look at Ignatius' position on church government we need to first of all understand that Ignatius was in a fierce struggle with heretical teachings:

On the one hand, the Asian churches were being subjected to powerful Judaizing tendencies, both speculative and cultic. . . . On the other hand, those churches were infiltrated with teachers of the Docetic heresy that denied the historic reality of the Lord's birth, life, death, and resurrection in the flesh, and affirmed that his human nature was only a semblance. . . . The teaching was the same as that condemned in 1 John 4:2-3. Against this denial of the "flesh and blood" of Christ, . . . Ignatius was passionately aroused to express his dread, anger, and contempt.¹¹⁷

In addition, Ignatius was well aware of the instability in churches where there was no central leadership figure, but rather several leaders, all wanting to be chief and have the final say, and none being mature or grounded enough to lead the flock and feed them with the whole counsel of God's Word. Many such leaders were motivated by spiritual pride and an unsubmitting and rebellious attitude toward authority, including God's authority over them. Consequently, such churches; were ripe for schisms and divisions as

¹¹⁶ Idem, "Ignatius, Epsitle of"

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

a result of power plays and heretical teachings coming in and tearing the sheep apart because there was no shepherd to say authoritatively, yet humbly, "Thus says the Lord, this is the way to go, walk ye in it!" Therefore, just as there is today, so was there then the need for a central figure to be the pastoral leader of the sheep and point them in the way to serve and follow Christ. But this pastor was not a "one man show." On the contrary he was surrounded by a group of elders who were his advisors and counselors and to whom he was accountable and submitted "in the fear of Christ" for aid and assistance in the ministry, but he was in fact the leader, manager, and director of the church, and his decision was the final decision. The necessity of a single leader in the local church as the final, but accountable authority was and is essential as "Leadership, in any case, by a committee of equals is unworkable for any protracted time, . . ." ¹¹⁸

Ignatius, therefore, saw the bishop/overseer/pastor of the local church as the hub of the congregation in that he represented Christ to the people, and he was "the best weapon and protection against heresy." ¹¹⁹ Consequently, Ignatius exhorted the believers to follow the leadership of their bishop/overseer/pastor, elders, and deacons, and to not become a part of activities the bishop doesn't approve of in order to safeguard themselves from heresies and schisms:

[But] shun divisions, as the beginning of evils. Do ye all follow your bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the father, and the presbytery as the Apostles; and to the deacons pay respect, as to God's commandment. Let no man do aught of things pertaining to the Church apart from the bishop. Let that be held a valid eucharist which is under the bishop or one to whom he shall have committed it. Wheresoever the bishop shall appear, there let the people be; even as where Jesus may be, there is the universal church. It is not lawful apart from the bishop either to baptize or to hold a love-feast; but whatsoever he shall approve, this is well-pleasing also to God; that everything which ye do may be sure and valid. ¹²⁰

In the above passage is also seen the order of leaders: the bishop, the presbyterate (or elders), and the deacons. However, Ignatius was not trying to build some carnal hierarchy, but rather delineate what he saw as God's divine plan for order, cohesiveness, and unity in the Body with a structured form of leadership necessary for any group to function.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Walker, p. 42

¹¹⁹ Otto W. Heick, *A History of Christian Thought*, 2 vols. [Philadelphia: fortress Press, 1965], 1:52

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

Although Ignatius never wearied of remonstrating the congregations to adhere to the bishop in view of the threatened dangers of heresy, he did not intend his statements to be understood in a hierarchical sense.¹²¹

This can be seen even more clearly in the following passage in which respect for the leadership is enjoined as well as mutual love and concern for one another as fellow believers in Christ.

Seeing then that in the aforementioned persons I behold your whole people in faith and embraced them, I advise you, be ye zealous to do all things in godly concord, the bishop presiding after the likeness of God and the presbyters after the likeness of the council of the Apostles, with the deacons also who are most dear to me, having been entrusted with the diaconate of Jesus Christ, Who was with the Father before the worlds and appeared at the end of time. Therefore do ye all study conformity to God and pay reverence one to another; and let no man regard his neighbor after the flesh, but love ye one another in Jesus Christ always. Let there be nothing among you which shall have power to divide you, but be ye united with the bishop and with them that preside over you as an example and a lesson of incorruptibility.¹²²

In conjunction with the mutual love and respect all the believers were to have for one another is the submission the believers were to have toward God and His ordained authority in the church. For Ignatius, to be submitted to the bishop is to be submitted to Christ and vice versa. This is along the same line as the admonition given to believers in Hebrews 13:17:

Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

In the same manner, therefore, Ignatius exhorts believers to be submitted to the leadership God has ordained because to do so is to be submitted to God, and he also makes mention of the accountability and responsibility of those leaders:

For when ye are obedient to the bishops as to Jesus Christ, it is evident to me that ye are living not after men but after Jesus Christ, who died for us that believing on His death ye might escape death. It is therefore necessary, even as your wont is, that ye should do nothing without the bishop; but be ye obedient also to the presbytery, as to the Apostles of Jesus Christ our hope: for if we live in Him, we shall also be found in Him. And those likewise who are deacons of the mysteries of Jesus Christ must please all men in all ways. For they are not deacons of meats and drinks but servants of the Church of God. It is right therefore that they should beware of blame as of fire.

In like manner let all men respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, even as they should respect the bishop as being a type of the Father and the presbyters as the council of God and as the college of Apostles. Apart from these there is not even the name of a church. And I am persuaded that ye are so minded

¹²⁰ Lightfoot and Harmer, *Smyrnaeans* 8, p. 158

¹²¹ Heick, p. 52

¹²² Lightfoot and Harmer, *Magnesians* 6 p. 11-1

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

as touching these matters: for I received the ensample of your love, and I have it with me, in the person of your bishop, whose very demeanor is a great lesson, while his gentleness is power - a man to whom I think even the godless pay reverence.¹²³

Continuing on in the thought of submission to the bishop, Ignatius brings back into focus the truth that they are all one in Christ and are to serve and minister together as members of one body in order that they might remain in the truth and not enter into deception:

Give heed to the bishop, that God also may give heed to you. I am devoted to those who are subject to [he bishop, the presbyters, the deacons. May it be granted me to have my portion with them in the presence of God. Toil together one with another, struggle together, run together, suffer together, lie down together, rise up together, as God's stewards and assessors and ministers. Please the Captain in whose army ye serve, from whom ye will receive your pay.¹²⁴

Therefore as the Lord did nothing without the Father, (being united with Him), either by Himself or by the Apostles, so neither do ye anything without the bishops and the presbyters, and attempt not to think anything right for yourselves apart from others;¹²⁵ but let there be one prayer in common, one supplication, one mind, one hope, in love and

in joy unblameable, which is Jesus Christ, than whom there is nothing better. Hasten to come together all of you, as to one temple, even God; as to one altar, even to one Jesus Christ, who came forth from One Father and is with One and departed unto One.¹²⁶

And lastly, Ignatius lays out the responsibility of the care and ministry of the bishop to the people in shepherding and serving them:

I exhort thee in the grace wherewith thou art clothed to press forward in thy course and to exhort all men that they may be saved. Vindicate thine office in all diligence of flesh and of spirit. Have a care for union, than which there is nothing better. Bear all men, as the Lord also beareth thee. Suffer all men in love, as also thou doest. Give thyself to unceasing prayers. Ask for larger wisdom than thou hast. Be watchful, and keep thy spirit from slumbering. Speak to each man severally about the manner of God. Bear the maladies of all, as a perfect athlete. Where there is more toil, there is much gain . . .¹²⁷

Let not those that seem to be plausible and yet teach strange doctrines dismay thee. Stand thou firm, as an anvil when it is smitten. It is the part of a great athlete to receive blows and be victorious. But especially must we for God's sake endure all things. That He also may endure us . . .

Let not widows be neglected. After the Lord be thou their protector. Let nothing be done without thy consent; neither do thou anything without the consent of God, as indeed thou doest not. Be steadfast. Let meetings be held more frequently. Seek out all men by name. Despise' not slaves, whether men or women. Yet let not these again be puffed up, but let them serve the more faithfully to the glory of

¹²³ Lightfoot and Harmer, Trallians 2-3:2, p. 147

¹²⁴ Ibid., Polycarp 6:1-2a

¹²⁵ i.e., you alone have not received the Word of God and have the only *true* revelation [1 Cor. 14:36] - parentheses and comment mine

¹²⁶ Ibid., Magnesians 7

¹²⁷ i.e., no pain. no gain!

God, that they may obtain a better freedom from God. Let them not desire to be set free at the public cost, lest they be found slaves of lust.¹²⁸

After Ignatius' death in ca. 110 A.D. the Church continued to grow, and, consequently, so did the need for strong leadership on the local church level. By 150 A.D. therefore, the form of church government delineated so clearly in Ignatius' letters was the established form in most churches throughout Christendom.

V. Conclusion

I hope that this study of the formation and development of government in the early church has been both helpful and informative. Clearly, as Williston Walker points out, the development of churches "was diverse in different localities. Not all early Christian congregations had identical institutions at the same time."¹²⁹ And not only that, but Hans Von Campenhausen shows "how great the difference not only from province to province but even within one and the selfsame town may have been. . . "¹³⁰ What we do see in the first century with respect to church government is an infant church growing and developing at various rates of maturity, with some developing more quickly than others such as the more stable and mature Jerusalem church versus the church at Corinth. However, as we have seen in this study, the direction the churches were moving toward by the end of the first century was that of singular, pastoral leadership.

In his booklet entitled "Answering the Key Questions About Elders", John MacArthur states:

... the biblical norm for church leadership is a plurality of God-ordained elders. Furthermore, it is the only pattern for church leadership given in the New Testament. Nowhere in Scripture do we find a local assembly ruled by majority opinion, or by one pastor.¹³¹

John is correct in saying there was no rule by "majority opinion," but his other assertions are quite incorrect and misinformed as our study has shown concerning James and the Jerusalem church, Aquila

¹²⁸ Ibid., Polycarp, 1:2-3; 3:1; 4. pp. 160-161

¹²⁹ Walker, p. 39

¹³⁰ Campenhausen. p. 55

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

and Priscilla, 1 Timothy 3, et al. Throughout MacArthur's booklet he makes incorrect assumptions and conclusions with reference to the role of elders and bishops and the meanings of those words, such as "Episkopos is the secular Greek culture's equivalent to the historic Hebrew idea of elders."¹³² Indeed, as we have already seen, the word *episkopos* has no Jewish counterpart at all, rather the word *presbuteros* is the Jewish counterpart for elder.¹³³ And again, MacArthur says "as the apostolic era came to a close, the office of elder emerged as the highest level of local church leadership."¹³⁴ Here too, MacArthur has made a rather flagrant error as ample evidence has shown that the bishop/overseer began to emerge as the highest level of church leadership toward the end of the first century. And finally, MacArthur asserts that James "was not in any kind of official position over the other elders . . . no one was the leader of everything."¹³⁵ Once more we see that what MacArthur asserts is quite to the contrary of what is actually true.

Whereas there are numerous other errors I could point out in MacArthur's booklet with reference to the function of church government, I would also want to mention he does a very good job analyzing the spiritual qualifications of a leader. Whatever your position on church government might be, the spiritual qualifications of leaders are the same regardless.

However, I must say that works such as MacArthur's that propose a plurality of elders as the correct New Testament form of church government are at best misinformed and quite incorrect. On the other hand, those individuals who advocate a strong pastoral leadership surrounded by elders who function as counselors and advisors to the pastor in his decisions concerning the ministry of the church, thereby providing strong pastoral accountability, are quite in keeping with the New Testament pattern of church

¹³¹ John MacArthur, *Answering the Key Questions About Elders* [Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1984], p. 1

¹³² MacArthur, p. 9

¹³³ Shepherd, "Minister, Christian"

¹³⁴ MacArthur, p. 11

¹³⁵ MacArthur, p. 29

The Organization of the Church in the Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Days

government. And even though the pastor has the final word concerning the ministry and direction of the church, he should also be submitted to hearing correction and godly advice different from his own thinking if he wants to truly be blessed of the Lord. Many times such advice and an ensuing consensus among the pastor and elders will be the difference between victory and defeat. That pastor who does otherwise is being a fool and plotting his own destruction.¹³⁶ Therefore, the admonition of Peter in 1 Peter 5:3 is essential for that pastor who wishes to remain in the center of God's will, anointed by His Spirit, and delivered from presumptuous sins: "nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock."

May the Lord cause us all to seek Him with our whole heart and decrease in our own importance in order that "Jesus might increase."¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Proverbs 11:14; 12:1, 15; 13:10; 15:22; 17:10; 18:12

¹³⁷ John 3:30