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THE RISE OF THE MONARCHICAL BISHOPS IN THE ANCIENT CHURCH

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Introduction

Perhaps one of the most important studies a student of theology and history can undertake is to trace the origins and development of the early Church. Understanding the nature of the Church that Christ founded and its subsequent metamorphosis in the following century is bound to have a great impact on how the Church is governed today. What does the New Testament have to say about the Church and its leadership? How well did the following generations mirror those early beginnings? These are unavoidable questions that must be explored.

A Survey of the New Testament Church

It has been asked, “Is the Church properly understood as an organism, something that has and generates life, or [as] an organization, something characterized by structure and form?”¹ According to the Scriptures, the correct answer is “Yes.” Michael L. Dusing says, “Perhaps the best approach to this sometimes controversial issue is not to pose the problem as an ‘either-or’

¹ Michael L. Dusing, “The New Testament Church,” in *Systematic Theology*, ed. Stanley Horton (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1995), 545.

question, but as a ‘both-and’ solution.”² Just as Christ in His dual nature is fully God and fully man, so the Church is fully an organism and fully an organization. To properly talk of one, it is a necessity to talk of the other.

As An Organism

One of the earliest persecutors of the Church, Saul of Tarsus, was on his way to Damascus when suddenly he had a vision of Jesus Christ. Christ said to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4; NASB) To understand how Saul persecuted Christ by persecuting the Church, it must be understood that Christians are intimately joined to Christ spiritually. Just as Adam and Eve became “one flesh,” those who believe have become one with the risen Lord Jesus Christ. As the wife is the body of her husband, so are believers the body of Christ (Eph 5:28-32). It is impossible to be a member of “His body, which is the church” (Col 1:24) without being spiritually united with Christ. Thus, to touch the Church is to touch Christ.

To join the Church, a person does not do so through filling out a membership card, taking a class, or partaking in any “rites” such as baptism or communion. The Greek word used in the Scriptures to describe the Church is “Ekklesia,” which means “called out ones.”³ To join the Church, an individual must “come out” (Rev 18:4) of the spiritually corrupt, sin-filled world, and come into the kingdom of God by faith, and enter into a spiritual union with Christ. To be a member of the Church, an individual must be holy, as God is holy (Lev 11:44), for God cannot be an intimate partaker of those living in sin (1 John 1:5-8).

God blesses the members of the body of Christ “with every spiritual blessing” (Eph 1:3) and has “seated us with [Christ] in the heavenly places” (Eph 2:6). For “we have become

² Ibid., 546

³ Ibid., 526.

partakers of Christ” (Heb 3:14) and share in the glory, authority, power, and blessings that Christ enjoys as He sits at the right hand of God the Father in heaven. As Christ sits at the right hand of God, so all believers sit with Him. Because believers individually have fellowship with Christ, they universally have fellowship with each other (1 John 1:6-7). This universal fellowship transcends all time, space, geographical boundaries, political parties, social classes, and racial lines. The body of Christ is the common bond that unites all of redeemed humanity.

As An Organization

The Church is not an organization in the sense that it is registered as a legally sanctioned organization by various government agencies. Quite the contrary, the Church exists as an organization whether a government recognizes it or not. “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst” (Matt 5:20). Wherever believers come together, there is the Church. Whenever believers gather together, they can expect the presence of Christ to be manifest. However Christ is manifest, He can be expected to be shepherding His sheep.

Christ will manifest Himself in different ways, through any number of different believers present at any gathering, in order to tend His sheep. He will do this through various gifts of the Holy Spirit that are given to each and every believer (1 Cor 12:11), “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12-13). These gifts are many,⁴ and sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish between various gifts, because some share similar characteristics with each other. Such similarity can be seen in the various speaking gifts, such

⁴ See: Rom 12:4-8, 1 Cor 12:1-31, Eph 4:11

as words of wisdom and words of knowledge, and of most interest to the purpose of this paper, the similarity between apostles and bishops.

In the Scriptures, there are a number of apostles. First and foremost Christ is designated as an apostle (Heb 3:1). Then there are the original twelve apostles (Matt 10:2-4) that Christ appointed early on in His ministry. After Judas abandoned His apostleship, Matthias was “added to the eleven” (Acts 1:26) in his place. Later on, Barnabas and Paul were also called as apostles (Acts 13:1-5, 14:14). Other apostles included Timothy and Silvanus (C.f. 1 Thess 1:1, 2:6), James the Lord’s brother (Gal 1:19), Andronicus and Junias (Rom 16:7), Apollos (1 Cor 3:22),⁵ Titus,⁶ and it is possible that some of the other “coworkers” who traveled with the apostle Paul were considered apostles themselves. The word “Apostle” comes from the Greek word “Apostolos” that can be defined as “someone who is sent.”⁷ Apostles were heavily involved in missionary activity, going from city to city establishing churches, appointing leadership, and providing general pastoral care through letters and personal visits.⁸

⁵ While this verse does not specifically say Apollos was an apostle, his name is frequently mentioned throughout 1 Corinthians in the context of other apostles.

⁶ This is assumed due to the similarity of ministry functions charged to Titus when compared with Timothy. Titus appears to be fulfilling the same type of ministry as the apostle Timothy. Perhaps 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus would better be named "The Apostolic Epistles" instead of "The Pastoral Epistles."

⁷ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Ralph P. Martin, vol. 46 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 4-5.

⁸ Francis A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* (New York: The Newman Press, 2001), 49.

Early on in the apostolic ministry of Paul and Barnabas, they “appointed elders” (Acts 14:23) in churches they had founded. There were also elders in Jerusalem (Acts 15:2), Ephesus (Acts 20:17), Crete (Titus 1:5), Philippi (Phil 1:1), as well as in the churches that James and Peter wrote to (Jas 5:14; 1 Pet 5:1). In the apostle Paul’s sermon to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17), Paul says to them: “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” (Acts 20:28). In these verses the title of “Elder,” coming from the Greek word “Presbuteros” (also translated as “Presbyter”),⁹ is used interchangeably with the title of “Overseer,” which comes from the Greek word “Episkopos” (also translated as “Bishop”).¹⁰ This is also seen where writing to Titus, the apostle Paul talks of elders (Titus 1:5) and in the next breath calls them overseers (Titus 1:7).¹¹ The titles of bishop, overseer, presbyter, and elder are synonymous words in the New Testament, describing the same ministry office.

It is important to note that in each city, the apostles always appointed a plurality of elders who exercised pastoral care over the flock appointed to them. It is possible the apostles borrowed the concept of elders from the Jewish synagogue,¹² or the patriarchal state of society, in which a council of elders were formed from the heads of families in any community.¹³

⁹ Dusing, “The New Testament Church,” 558.

¹⁰ Ibid., 554.

¹¹ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 162.

¹² David A. Mappes, “The ‘Elder’ in the New and Old Testaments,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154, no.1 (January-March 1999): 88.

¹³ Edwin Hatch, *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches: Eight lectures delivered before the University of Oxford, in the Year 1880* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers,

These pastors formed a college of elders (a presbytery) who managed the affairs of the local church (as did Jewish elders),¹⁴ without any specific individual heading up the college as the “Senior Pastor” or “Bishop.” Rather, “we see a plurality of church leaders functioning on an equal par.”¹⁵ Furthermore, it is highly doubtful that the apostles would have ever appointed any single individual to serve as a sort of chief amongst the elders. For even though Christ was in heaven, the apostle Peter recognized Christ alone as fulfilling the position of Chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4).

Roman Catholic scholar Francis A. Sullivan says, “there is no evidence that St. Paul or any other apostle ever appointed one of these local leaders as the chief pastor of the whole church in a particular city.”¹⁶ Some might object, and point at Timothy, Titus, or James the Lord’s brother as such leaders. However, as previously noted, the Scriptures describe Timothy, Titus, and James as apostles, and they were only doing what the apostle Paul commonly did. These men would better be described as “resident apostles” than “bishops.”¹⁷ It would have been contrary to the theology of the apostles to ever recognize anybody (including themselves) as the head of any church, for it was recognized that Christ alone is head (Eph 1:22).

Therefore, doctrines such as apostolic succession have no foundation in the Scriptures. Apostolic succession says that the apostles looked to appoint a successor to continue on their

1999), 55.

¹⁴ Mappes, "The 'Elder' In the New and Old Testaments," 91.

¹⁵ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 163.

¹⁶ Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*, 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

ministry upon their death. This doctrine assumes that the apostles were bishops.¹⁸ It is true that when the eleven apostles were looking to replace Judas, the term “bishoprick” (Acts 1:20; KJV) was used in relationship to the apostolic ministry. However, this only shows there a similarity of ministry functions between apostles and bishops- this similarity does not mean they are one in the same office. The apostles went out and established churches, and exercised their authority over many churches and the presbytery they appointed in each city, whereas the bishops they appointed did not go out and establish churches, rather, they only managed the local church appointed to their care.

The New Testament offers no support for the doctrine that the apostles appointed successors in the form of a monarchical bishop to continue on their apostolic ministry after their deaths.¹⁹ Rather, more apostles continued to arise during their own lives (as is seen in the many apostles previously named in the Scriptures), and even after their deaths they expected more to arise, “until we all attain to the unity of the faith” (Eph 4:13; NASB). The doctrine of apostolic succession is based on the erroneous premise that the office of apostle ceased with the death of the original apostles, and was transferred to their sole successors, the bishops, who served as heads of the Church. The New Testament knows nothing of any such appointments, nor any such cessation, and consequently, no such succession or organizational structure.

The Subsequent Development of the Bishop’s Office

Writing towards the close of the first century, Clement of Rome in his epistle to the Corinthians recalls the actions of the apostles who, “appointed their first fruits (having proved

¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹ Ibid., 14.

them by the Spirit) to be bishops and deacons.”²⁰ Clement says this was done because “our apostles knew also, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife over the dignity of the bishop’s office. For this reason therefore, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the aforesaid, and after a time made provision that on their death other approved men should succeed to their ministry.”²¹ The comments of Clement bear witness with the New Testament that the apostles appointed a plurality of leaders in each locale, with no single leader being in charge- including in Rome. Though it is difficult to say if the reference to the successors being appointed upon “their death” is in reference to the death of the apostles, or the bishops they appointed. Sullivan believes the succession here is in reference to the bishops replacing deceased bishops.²² Even if the comments of Clement are in reference to the death of the apostles, his epistle shows that this succession was not in the form of a single bishop, but rather, a college of bishops.

Writing to an unknown Christian community most likely sometime in the second century, the Didache speaks of the continuation of apostolic ministry, and exhorts the church in that locale to, “let every apostle that cometh to you be received as the Lord.”²³ Just as the New Testament authors knew nothing of the cessation of the apostolic office, neither did the unknown author of the Didache. The church is also exhorted to, “elect therefore for yourselves

²⁰ Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 3d. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 69.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

²² Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*, 96.

²³ Bettenson and Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 71.

bishops,²⁴ showing the continuation of the New Testament model of a plurality of leaders governing the affairs of the local church. The only apparent difference between the New Testament model of government and the Didache, is that it appears that in the Didache the entire congregation selects its leaders, instead of an apostle appointing them.

Writing in the early second century, Ignatius of Antioch in his epistle to the Smyrnaeans exhorts the church to: “Avoid divisions as the beginning of evils. All of you follow the bishop as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and follow the presbytery as the Apostles; and respect the deacons as the commandment of God. Let no man perform anything pertaining to the church without the bishop.”²⁵ Ignatius is perhaps the first Christian writer to clearly elevate one of the presbyters above another in the form of a monarchical bishop. To Ignatius, the bishop is the rallying point of unity in the local church, and he cannot imagine anything being done apart from the consent of the bishop. It is safe to say that in the early second century, at least in part of the Roman world, each Christian church was led by a bishop, assisted by a council of presbyters.²⁶

At about the same time as Ignatius wrote his epistle to Smyrna, their bishop, Polycarp, wrote an epistle to the church of Philippi.²⁷ The letter begins with the following salutation: “Polycarp and the presbyters with him to the church of God which sojourns at Philippi.”²⁸ It seems that Polycarp indeed thought of his own office in the light of which Ignatius wrote.

²⁴ Ibid., 72.

²⁵ Ibid., 69

²⁶ Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*, 125.

²⁷ Ibid., 126-27.

²⁸ Ibid., 127.

However, it is quite interesting to see that in his epistle Polycarp is not aware of any bishop residing in Philippi. Polycarp writes: “Therefore one must keep away from all [sins] and be obedient to the presbyters and the deacons as to God and Christ.”²⁹ While Ignatius called on Christians to be subject to the bishop as to God and Christ, and to the presbyters as to the apostles, Polycarp calls for obedience to the presbyters and the deacons as to God and Christ. It is hard to explain his not mentioning the bishop of Philippi here unless there was not one at this time.³⁰ It appears that in Philippi, the church was still governed as it was when the apostle Paul wrote to it, by a group of presbyters with no single leader acting as its bishop.

Writing near the end of the second century, Tertullian in his *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* writes the following in an attempt to defeat the arguments of heretics: “Let them then produce their origins of their churches; let them unroll the list of their bishops, an unbroken succession from the beginning so that the first bishop had as his precursor and the source of his authority one of the apostles.”³¹ It is unlikely that Tertullian would put forth such an argument if each church was not being led by a single bishop at this time. It is also evident that Tertullian believed these bishops to be an unbroken chain of bishops having first been appointed by the apostles. Tertullian provides an important witness to the fact that by the end of the second century each church was being led by a bishop thought to be the successor of an apostle.³²

Conclusions

²⁹ Ibid., 128.

³⁰ Ibid., 128.

³¹ Bettenson and Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 77.

³² Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*, 160.

It is evident that within the first two centuries, there was a shift in the structure of the Church. Early on, the Church grew through the heavy missionary activities of the apostles, who would appoint qualified leaders in each locale, and charged them with the ministry of managing the affairs of the Church. The apostles appointed a college of elders in each church who would share equally in the ministry of overseeing, with no single leader being appointed as chief. The Scriptures provide no evidence whatsoever that the apostles appointed individuals as successors to their ministry. Rather, they continued to see the rise of other apostles within their own lives who would continue on the apostolic ministry they had originally been trusted with, and the Scriptures bear witness that they expected other apostles to continue to arise even after these.

The writings of the second century are a source of confusion, as there appears no uniform structure throughout the Church. Early on, in many locations, the churches began to exalt a single individual from the group of presbyters into the position known as bishop. It can be concluded that this development took place sooner in the churches of Syria and Asia Minor than in the churches of Europe.³³ Exactly how this development took place is unknown.

It is likely that in order to survive the onslaught of persecution and heresy, the Church increasingly rallied around and elevated the authority of its leadership.³⁴ The bishop, instead of Christ, became the central source of unity. By the end of the second century, a single bishop presiding over the affairs of the local church was the established norm. This development probably occurred when one of the presbyters stuck out as the most apt leader, and the community began to recognize him as its chief pastor.³⁵ Later Christians such as Tertullian,

³³ Ibid., 130.

³⁴ Dusing, "The New Testament Church," 530.

³⁵ Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*, 223.

when appealing to Church history mistakenly interpreted these honored leaders as having been specially appointed to a separate office, as successors to the apostles from the beginning.

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