

# Was there a Bishop of Rome in the First Century?

David Albert Jones OP

The aim of this paper is to examine the *historical* question: as to whether mono-episcopal government existed in the local Church in Rome in the first century AD. It is not intended to engage upon the related task of *theological* reflection upon the role of bishops within the Church and their claim to be successors to the apostles in this role.

There has been a development in the Church's understanding of ministry and authority, just as there has been a development in the Church's understanding of the Trinity or the Incarnation. Leo the Great was as certain of the authority of the Petrine office, as he was of the reality of the two natures of the one person of Christ. The task of showing whether such developments were legitimate is ultimately a theological one, though it is one that will involve reflection upon history. It is not *prima facie* obvious that a high doctrine of the papacy does require that a single bishop exercised magisterial authority in Rome in the immediate post-apostolic age. Yet this question is only raised at this point so that it may be set aside. Here we consider the simpler historical question as to whether the evidence available requires, suggests, or excludes the supposition that Christian ministry in Rome in the latter part of the first century was mono-episcopal.

## The standard view

The Catholic historian Eamon Duffy gives a useful starting point for this enquiry by his recent assertion that no such order existed in the first century Roman Church.

To begin with, indeed, there was no pope, no bishop as such. For the Church in Rome was slow to develop the office of chief presbyter, or bishop. By the end of the first century the loose pattern of Church authority of the first generation of believers was giving way in many places to the more organised rule of a single bishop for each city, supported by a college of elders<sup>1</sup>.

The position itself is hardly novel but represents the classic Protestant account of the matter dating from at least as far back as Harnack to the present. It rests on a considered reading of the New Testament data and the writings of the apostolic fathers, Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, the Shepherd of Hermas and the Didache as well as analogies from Jewish organisation.

Yet the data from all these sources is very limited and so an overall view has to be reconstructed according to certain underlying assumptions. The most deep-rooted and pervasive of these assumptions is the conviction that the diverse language of the New Testament and early post-apostolic sources reflects a process of *evolution* from one species of organisation to a later, quite distinct species. Quite how these forms of organisation are characterised varies, but three moves are commonly made:

First, forms of ministry are identified by considering the diversity of language used and perhaps by considering Jewish (and other) analogues.

Secondly, absence of the mention of a form of ministry is taken as evidence for the absence of the ministry itself.

And thirdly, the variety of ministries thus identified is arranged as some sort of *evolutionary* progress (as the skeletons of early hominids from ancestral ape to *homo sapiens*).

The picture thus constructed is of a transition from itinerant charismatic ministry to local ministry and a transition within local ministry from a twofold to a threefold system. On the basis of Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 12.28 (with consideration also to Luke 11.49, Acts 13.1, Ephesians 4.11 and especially the Didache 11, 15), Church order has been thought to have consisted, at first, in the threefold structure of "first apostles, second prophets, third teachers". All of these were grouped together as *itinerant* ministries. The local order that gradually replaced this first was thought (on the basis of Philippians 1. 1, 1 Timothy 3. 1–13, 1 Clement 42 and the Didache 15) to be a twofold ministry of a local college of bishops (also called presbyters) together with assisting deacons. This local ministry is supposed to have gradually developed from a twofold into a threefold structure as a chief-presbyter gradually rose above the others and took to himself the title of bishop. The threefold ministry seen in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch is then taken as the end point of such a process. Further, the lack of reference to a bishop in Ignatius' letter to the Romans is supposed to indicate that Rome had still not accepted the new mono-episcopal form of government, hence Duffy's assertion. This picture is so common as to represent the consensus of scholarly opinion.

When in due course the inspired race of apostles, prophets and teachers died out, this local ministry succeeded to the leadership, developing presently out of a twofold into a threefold form, with a single bishop ruling the church, a council of presbyters as his assessors, and the deacons to see to the relief of the poor and needy<sup>2</sup>.

### **Office holders in the Apostolic Church**

There are, however, problems with this evolutionary mindset. For a start it is clear that itinerant ministry could not really precede local ministry in a chronological sense. For, from the very first, the Church existed as a collection of local communities (to which missionaries come, and from which

they go), and therefore there must have been some sort of local organisation. The Acts of the Apostles mentions at least three such forms of local organisation, James and the presbyters in Jerusalem [Acts 15.2–16.4, 21.12], the prophets and teachers in Antioch [Acts 13.1], and the presbyters in Ephesus [Acts 13. 1]. Further we are told that Paul and Barnabas appointed presbyters in the local churches they established while in Derbe, Lystra and Iconium [Acts 14.23 cf Titus 1.5]. These forms of local organisation must have been contemporary with missionary forms of ministry

### *Prophets and Teachers*

It is probably a mistake to think of the threefold ministry of apostles, prophets and teachers, as all missionaries. This threefold ministry is presented as such only once [1 Corinthians 12.28]. More commonly apostles and prophets are mentioned together in a missionary context [Luke 11.49, Ephesians 2.20, 3.5, Revelation 18.20, Didache 11–13 cf Acts 11.27, 15.22, 15.32, 21.10]. On the other hand, the doublet of prophets and teachers where it occurs [Acts 13.1, Corinthians 12.28, Didache 15], seems always to refer to local pastoral ministry. The teachers referred to in the letter of James are not sent out as missionaries but again seem to be ministers of the local church [James 3.1]. Thus some prophets were itinerant preachers, like the apostles, but also, in certain churches (Antioch, Corinth and those represented by the Didache), prophets could have stable local leadership roles, presiding over the local church with the assistance of the teachers.

### *Presbyters*

However, the most common form of local order was not that of prophets and teachers, but of the presbyters. This seems to have been a Christian adaptation of the form of leadership found in the Jewish synagogue: that of the “elders of the Jews” so frequently referred to in the Gospels. As with Jewish elders the Christian presbyters could constitute a college, the *presbiterion* [1 Timothy 4.14 cf Luke 22.66, Acts 22.5]. Presbyteral government was government by older men, as the name suggests, for sometimes *presbuteros* is used simply to mean an old man [Acts 2.17, 1 Timothy 5.1] and the ruling presbyters could be juxtaposed to the “young men” who were ruled [1 Peter 5.5]. Nevertheless Timothy exercises the authority of the gospel despite his youth [1 Timothy 4.12] and the Christian presbyter cannot simply be equated with the older man. Luke mentions presbyters in Jerusalem [Acts 21.18], in Ephesus [Acts 20.17] and, as appointed by Paul and Barnabas in Derbe, Lystra and Iconium [Acts 14.23]. But the occurrence of presbyters also in the pastoral letters [1 Timothy 5. 17–22, Titus 1.5] and in the catholic letters [James 5.14, 1 Peter 5.1–5] means that it must be regarded as a very widespread form of Christian order.

### *Pastors and Teachers*

The idea of the Christian minister as a shepherd [*poimen*] of a flock is mentioned four times in the New Testament. First it refers to the special role of Peter in the Church [John 21.16]. Twice further it refers to the work of the presbyters [Acts 20.28, 1 Peter 5. 1–4<sup>3</sup>]. The fourth reference is in Ephesians to the ministry of Pastor [*poimen*, Ephesians 4.11]. If Luke is a trustworthy guide to the form of local ministry<sup>4</sup>, then we are given an insight into the interpretation of Ephesians 4.11. This list of ministries, while superficially similar, is in fact significantly different from the one in I Corinthians 12.28 in that teachers are not coupled with the prophets. Rather, teachers are coupled with pastors. It makes most sense to interpret apostles, prophets and evangelists as missionary ministries related to the universal Church, whereas pastors (meaning presbyters) and teachers should be thought of as pastoral ministries related to the local church. It would not be unique to find the positions of presbyter and teacher together in a local church for this seems to be the case in the letter of James [James 3.1, 5.14]. Thus Ephesians 4.11 reads:

And his gifts were that *some* should be apostles, *some* prophets, *some* evangelists, *some* [pastors and teachers].

### *Bishops*

In Paul's speech in Ephesus, as related in the Acts of the Apostles, presbyters are called *episkopoi* [Acts 20.28]. Yet this seems not here to be the name of an office but rather the description of a role of a presbyter, like being a leader [*egoumenos*, Hebrews 13. 7, 17, 24] or a ruler [*proistamenos*, Romans 12.8, Thessalonians 5.12]. Likewise, the first letter of Peter calls Christ, who as is the type of ministry of the *presbyter* as shepherd [1 Peter 5. 1–4], the shepherd and *bishop* of our souls [*epi ton Poimena kai Episkopon ton psuchon umon*, 1 Peter 2.25]. However in the letter to Titus when presbyter is made equivalent to bishop [Titus 1 .5, 1.7] this does seem to be the name of an office. Clement also writes of bishops (also, clearly, the name of an office) comparing them to the presbyters who have gone before [*proodoiporesantes presbuteroi*, 1 Clement 44]. Thus when Paul greets the bishops and deacons of the church of Philippi it seems that the former are office holders somewhat equivalent to the presbyters [Philippians 1. 1, 1 Clement 42, Didache 15].

### *Mono-episcopacy*

Yet it is striking that of the five New Testament occurrences of *episkopos* in the sense of an office holder, three are in the singular (with only Philippians 1.1 and Acts 20.28 in the plural). Whereas of the *forty-seven* references to *presbuteroi* meaning office holders, only *one* is in the singular [1 Timothy 5.19] — and this itself is indefinite and echoes a reference in the plural only two verses previously. Thus the attempt to

exclude any connotation of mono-episcopacy from the three references to *episkopos* in the pastoral letters, *all* in the singular, is unconvincing. For one would have to combine the coincidence that bishop occurs there always in the singular with the coincidence that when a single chief presbyter does clearly become the norm, it is under the same title of *episkopos*. The use of the term *episkopos* (in the singular) for the chief presbyter overseeing the local church was not the only use it could have in the first century, but it is one possible use of the term even then, and one that would later become standard.

### *Deacons*

The term bishop, *episkopos* used to designate a form of Christian ministry, is most often used in conjunction with the ministry of deacon [Philippians 1.1, 1 Timothy 3. 1–13, 1 Clement 42, Didache 15]. Both, as titles of religious ministry, are peculiar to the Christian Church. *Diakonein* in the contemporary Greek of the period, and in the New Testament itself, usually means to wait on or to minister to someone (as waiting at table), or to provide for them. Martha is anxious over much *diakonian* [Luke 10.40], when Peter's mother-in-law is healed she gets up and *diekonei autois* [Mark 1.31], the women who provide for Jesus and his disciples *diakonousai auto* [Matthew 27.55]. Paul uses *diakonia* especially for the financial aid he is organising for the church in Jerusalem [Acts 11.29, 12.25, Romans 15.25, 15.31, 2 Corinthians 8.4, 8.19, 8.20, 9.1, 9.12, 9.13, 11.8]. He uses the term servant [*diakonos*] for his ministry as an apostle. Yet he uses it, not with a technical meaning, but in exactly the same way as slave [*doulos*], fellow slave [*sundoulos*], worker [*ergates*], fellow worker [*sunergos*], and labourer [*kopion*]: as a metaphorical expression for the apostolic service of the gospel.

Though the Acts of the Apostles never mentions deacons, the institution of the seven [Acts 6.1–7] gives a helpful context for understanding diaconal ministry. The issue in this passage is the daily distribution of goods to the poor. The apostles declare themselves to be too busy to wait at tables [*diakonein trapedzais*], so they appoint the seven to this service, so that the apostle can be free for waiting upon the word [*diakonia tou logou*]. However the seven who are appointed do not seem to be exercising the ministry of deacons in this local sense. They are far more like apostles in their own right [Acts 6.8–8.40] and are rightly called evangelists [Acts 21.8 cf 2 Timothy 4.5, Ephesians 4.11]. Thus this passage makes better sense as the institution of the ministry of the diaconate than as originally concerned with the seven. For it gives us a credible role for them, reflects the meaning of their title and their relative position, and is congruent with what is known of the subsequent development of the diaconate. If the deacons were centrally concerned with the practicalities of the distribution of the church's goods, that

explains why they are directly linked with whoever had overall responsibility for the church and its goods [Acts 4.34–35]. Hence bishop and deacon are constantly linked.

### *Apostles*

Predominant among the missionaries of the Church were the apostles sent out by Jesus. The title apostle [*apostolos*] is used in a narrow sense to refer to the twelve Jesus chose from among his disciples [Matthew 10.2, Luke 6.13, Revelations 21.14]. However even in the Acts of the Apostles the word is used more widely and seems to include James the brother of the Lord [Acts 15.6–29] as well as Barnabas and Paul [Acts 14.14]. Paul in his letters also seems to regard James as an apostle [1 Corinthians 15.7, Galatians 1.19]. He is certainly closely associated with the apostles and is one of those, together with Peter and John, who are accounted as pillars [Galatians 2.9]. Barnabas and Timothy are both called apostles along with Paul [1 Corinthians 9.6, 1 Thessalonians 2.6] though it is not clear whether they would have this status on their own, or if it is just acquired through being companions of Paul. At the end of the letter to the Romans Paul greets Andronicus and Junias as men of note among the apostles [*episemoi en tois apostolois*, Romans 16.7]. On the face of it this certainly seems to mean that they are themselves apostles. However the figure most often called an apostle by Paul is Paul himself [Romans 1.1, 11.13, 1 Corinthians 1.1, 4.9, 9.1, 15.9, 2 Corinthians 1.1, 11.5, 12.11, Galatians 1.1, 1.7, Ephesians 1.1, Colossians, 1.1, 1 Thessalonians 2.6]. This claim seems to be important for him for defending the propriety of his mission to the Gentiles, and also for defending his authority within the churches he has established. He gives three grounds for his claim:

First, he is a witness to the resurrection (1 Corinthians 9.1, 15.3–9).

Secondly, he has established churches (1 Corinthians 9.2).

Thirdly, he does the works of an apostle (2 Corinthians 12.12).

This gives a basis for a wider meaning of apostle that just the twelve. In this more inclusive sense anyone who has witnessed the resurrection, being sent out by Jesus and has established churches, is worthy of the name apostle. This would legitimate a larger, but still a limited number of apostles (certainly including James [1 Corinthians 15.7] and possibly Andronicus and Junias [1 Corinthians 15.6]). The word may well have been used more loosely for missionaries of note of the apostolic generation, or for companions of the apostles; but the central meaning is clearly tied to being sent out by Jesus himself, rather than inspired by the Spirit or appointed by the Church.

### *Apostleship and Oversight of the local church*

The apostles were clearly missionaries who brought the gospel to Jews and Gentiles, within Judea and outside it, to the limits of the known world. Paul is the prime example but it is true also of Peter and John and also companions of Paul such as Barnabas, Timothy, Luke and John Mark. Hence one can see why the ministry of the apostles is thought of primarily as an itinerant missionary ministry. However this wandering existence did not preclude the apostles taking pastoral responsibility for local churches. Paul indeed thinks that such a relationship between the apostle and the local church is *essential* to apostleship.

Are you not my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord [1 Corinthians 9.1–2]

To the Corinthians Paul is not just an apostle but he is *their* apostle. He has authority and care within a local church because of his relationship with it as apostle. He is the spiritual father of the particular local church for whom he is an apostle.

I do not write this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. [1 Corinthians 4.15 cf 2 Corinthians 12.14, 1 Thessalonians 2.11]

That is why he can write

What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness? [1 Corinthians 4.21]

For though absent in body I am present in spirit, and as if present, I have already pronounced judgement in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. [1 Corinthians 5.3–5]

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you. [1 Corinthians 11.2]

In a similar way he can write to the Philippians

Therefore my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling [Philippians 2.12]

Brethren join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us [Philippians 3.17].

Whereas his letter to the Romans is of an altogether different tenor: exhortatory rather than imperative, circumspect rather than blunt. He is not here less aware of his status as an apostle, but his relationship with the local church of Rome is different from his relation to the Corinthian, Philippian, Galatian or Thessalonian congregations. He expects respect and honour but he is not their “father in Christ, through the gospel” as he is in the churches that he himself has established. He did not wish to “build on another man’s foundations” [Romans 15.20] or indeed tread on another man’s toes! The pastoral relationship Paul had with particular churches was not unique to him among the apostles, but was similar to that which James must have had to the local church in Jerusalem, or John to his local congregation (addressing them as “my beloved children” I John 2.1). Thus the role of the apostles was not only missionary and universal but also included a presiding role over certain churches. It is for this reason that Paul in Corinthians puts apostles, prophets and teachers together. These are *not* itinerant ministries but, on the contrary, all are positions of supervision, authority and responsibility for the *local* church. An apostle might be resident (like James in Jerusalem) or might be itinerant, but through visitation, letter and emissary<sup>5</sup> the wandering apostle kept a close supervision over his local churches. This pattern is also followed by others.

The latter group included Paul’s disciples Timothy and Titus, who had major regional responsibilities, the one in Asia the other in Crete, and Ariston and John of Ephesus, whose role was supervisory and itinerant.<sup>6</sup>

### **Origins of Christian Ministry**

The account so far has examined only office holders yet these will always be only the formal aspect of a general diversity of activity within the local church, showing hospitality, helping out, contributing in different ways towards the common work of the local church. This is carefully reflected by Paul who places discussion of office holders within the wider context of the variety of gifts present in the larger community [1 Corinthians 12]. However there clearly *were* office holders within the local church, and this is reflected everywhere in the New Testament. The primary forms of ministry owe much to Jewish models especially presbyter (elder), teacher (rabbi, or perhaps scribe [Matthew 23.34]) though one should expect these to have been reshaped by the context of the mission and community founded on Jesus and the apostles. The apostles are those who are chosen and “sent forth” by Jesus as he is “sent forth” by the Father [Matthew 10.1–42, 20.28 Luke 10.1–12, John 8.29, 20.21, Galatians 4.4–6, 1 Clement 42]. They are the most characteristically Christian and most clearly dominical of all forms of Christian ministry. The Christian prophets have their origins in the events of Pentecost [Acts 2.17] and their authority in the Holy Spirit that was given to the Church through Jesus.



The ministry of bishop and deacon reflects the organisation of Christian community around the distribution of goods to those in need. Even if one regards Luke's account in Acts as somewhat idealised, the impulse to communal charity clearly lies at the heart of early Christian identity and diaconal ministry [Acts 2.45–46, 4.34–5.11, 6.1–4]. Thus from the first one has a structure of authority (based on the authority of the Word and the Spirit) present in the apostles and prophets. Supervisory functions within the Church were exercised through a threefold order. For the apostles took responsibility for local churches in which a twofold ministry generally held sway (prophets and teachers; presbyters and teachers; or bishops and deacons [Acts 13.1, 1 Corinthians 12.28, Didache 15; Ephesians 4.11, James 3.1, 5.14; Philippians 1.1, 1 Clement 42, Didache 15, 1 Thessalonians 5. 12]).

### *Standardisation without 'evolution'*

What happened next is not so much a process of *evolution* as of *standardisation*, so that a single pattern and vocabulary become the norm. It may be compared to the early days of rail transport when a variety of gauge track was used, but then, for the sake of having a common system, one became standard and non-standard forms were phased out. What is happening in the Didache [15] is not the evolution of a more primitive into a more developed form of Christian ministry, but rather the acceptance of a common form by a minority church. Reasons for the preference of one system over another may be given, but the strongest force is simply the desire to produce a uniform common pattern (whichever it may be in the end). This is not to exclude all development whatsoever. Every historical reality is liable to change and development. It is merely to assert that the major changes seen are to be understood in terms of standardisation of form and language, rather than as radical evolutionary change of one form into another incongruous form as is often supposed to have happened with ministry in the apostolic age.

### *From threefold to threefold*

The office holders of the apostolic Church was then organised according to a threefold structure of apostle (or closely associated apostolic men), bishop/presbyter/prophet and deacon/teacher. After the apostles died, did the Church then adopt a headless twofold structure? If so what would give organisational unity to the local church? The supposition that there was no central figure in the local church in the days of the apostles is demonstrably false, for we know that, at least in some cases, the apostles themselves presided over particular local churches. What happened then? It seems that leadership of the local church was assumed by some sort of chief presbyter or head bishop of the local *presbuterion* (whose relation to the presiding apostle would have been like that of a prior to his abbot or as

a dean to his [present day] bishop). It is true that we have little evidence for the existence of such chief presbyters contemporary with the apostles, but then this is what one would expect. For the distinction between chief presbyter and his fellows would not be anything so great as the distinction between the apostles and (all) the presbyters. During the time of the apostles themselves, such local leaders would not have stood out. Yet we find from the beginning of the second century a threefold pattern of a single figurehead with a college of presbyters and assisting deacons has become the rule everywhere.

We find now [in the early second century] communities being governed by a single officer, whether known as “bishop,” “presbyter,” or simply as “chairman,” as in Rome in Justin’s time c. 150. Even Philadelphia, the church most favoured by the Seer of Patmos and later to be near the Montanist centers of the New Prophecy, was ruled by a bishop with presbyters and deacons under him. Polycarp’s congregation in Smyrna, a church of whom the Seer also approved, was a neatly graded hierarchical community centred on himself, with each grade in the church — the presbyters, deacons, widows, and “young men” — having its respective duties.<sup>7</sup>

Now this “development” is supposed to have happened simultaneously in many different places and without any signs of complaint from the (usually highly conservative) early Church. There is no sign whatever that these bishops are usurping the power of a wholly collegiate form of prebyteral government. Rather, the very existence of such a *purely* collegiate *presbuterion* is itself a speculative fiction. Even the elders of the Jewish synagogue would have had some sort of standing chairman. The impulse of Christian communities towards organisational unity must have been far greater due to the conception of the one Eucharist, one body, one *ecclesia* in which all are gathered together. This is especially so in Rome, for all its size and diversity. The letter of Paul to the Romans addresses a church that is renowned throughout the world, a community with a strong sense of identity. Clement writes from, and Ignatius writes to a particular church (never a group of churches without any strong association or identification with one another).

The standardisation of the language of ministry took many years and the identification of the chief presbyter/bishop as the *episkopos* and the fellow presbyter/bishops as *presbuteroi* was still not universal in the time of Clement. However the state of flux of language must not be taken for any uncertainty about relative roles (for diversity of language would cause confusion only between communities, not within a community). In a community in which the collegiate overseers were called *episkopoi*, there could still have been the *role* of head bishop, just as the same role existed in churches that used a different vocabulary. Nor must the absence of

mention of a particular officer be taken as evidence for the absence of such an officer. There are just too few texts for arguments from silence to have any strength at all. In truth what we know about late first century ministry must be a construction based on interpretation of the New Testament and early second century evidence. What we find in the New Testament is a stable threefold government of apostles and two kinds of local ministers. What we find in the second century is a threefold ministry of bishop, presbyters and deacons, with bishops presiding over the local church. This is the only clear evidence we have.

Let the *bishop* preside in the place of God, and his *presbyters* in the place of the assembly of the apostles, and let my special friends the *deacons* be entrusted with the service of Jesus Christ. [Magnesians 6, cf. Trallians 2, Philadelphians 4, Smyrnaeans 8]

In no case do we have any evidence of a loose egalitarian wholly collegial form of government, nor do we have any evidence that the second century church leaders sensed any great development in the structures of ministry. The (manifest) structures of ministry in the early second century thus give us a better guide to the (less evident) structure of ministry of the late first century than does the construction of an *evolutionary* process from pure collegiate to mono-episcopal government. The very supposition of such an evolutionary process is itself the most significant source of the distortion of the available evidence.

### **Rome in the first century**

It is necessary to take such a long preamble before examining the question of the form ministry took in the late first century *Roman* church, because direct evidence is slight and its interpretation is governed by what is considered to be happening more widely in the apostolic Church. Apart from general considerations, three sources give us direct evidence for the form of ministry in the late first century Roman church. The first is the letter from Rome to the Corinthians universally ascribed to Clement and usually dated to 90AD or so. The second is the letter written to Rome by Ignatius of Antioch before 120AD. The third is the Shepherd of Hermas, a work of uncertain date but of Roman origin that gives a passing reference to the role of Clement within the Roman church.

None of these sources calls Clement bishop of Rome or refer to the office of bishop of Rome. Clement seems to use bishop in the same sense as Philippians 1. 1 and Didache 15, in the *plural*, coupled with deacons, presumably for some collegiate presbyteral ministry. He does not give a threefold list of bishop, presbyters and deacons as Ignatius of Antioch does in various of his letters. He does not use bishop predominantly in the singular as the pastoral letters do. Ignatius of Antioch refers to bishops very frequently and sees their role as essential to preserving the unity and

orthodoxy of the local church, yet in his letter to Rome (alone of all his letters) he makes no reference to the local bishop. Rome has always had a tradition of being more conservative than other churches. Further, Rome was a very large city that would have had more than one Jewish synagogue. Therefore it is thought that the loose presbyteral form of church order lasted longer in Rome than in other local churches. Finally, it is noted that Clement does not write as bishop, or even from himself, but on behalf of the local church of Rome (1 Clement 1 cf. the letters of Ignatius and Polycarp). Hermas describes Clement not as bishop, but as the presbyter entrusted with the job of corresponding with other churches, a sort of secretary/ liaison officer for the local church of Rome. He is referred to in parallel with a certain Grapte who is responsible for instructing widows and orphans, so one may infer that he is not being given an exalted position, but just treated as a humble functionary.

Write two little books, and send one to Clement and one to Grapte. So Clement shall send it to the cities outside [Rome], for this is his appointed role [*epitetraptai*] while Grapte shall instruct the widows and orphans. But you shall read it to this city along with the presbyters who preside [*ton proistamenon*] over the church. [Herms V.2.4]

### *Weakness of the argument*

On examination this argument is very weak. Essentially it is an argument from silence based on only three letters. Further, the interpretation of the passage from Hermas is clearly dependent on what preconceptions one has formed of Roman ministry. It distinguishes three audiences for the book. Clement will send it abroad, Hermas and the presbyters will read it in the local church and Grapte will instruct the widows. Clement and Grapte have special responsibilities but it is nowhere implied that their responsibilities are alike. A simple test of this is to replace Clement by “the bishop” and see if the passage still seems natural. There is no awkwardness at all in the text even assuming quite a high role for Clement as bishop/chief presbyter. In fact the role of corresponding with other churches seems *prima facie* one which would be reserved to a high office. Crombie indeed takes *epitetraptai* in the sense “is permitted” as a legal term for a function that is reserved to the bishop<sup>8</sup>. For he dates Hermas quite late and thinks this is an anachronism. This might seem a speculative fancy, but what is quite clear is that the text from Hermas is equally compatible with taking Clement to be bishop in Rome or a humble secretary, so its interpretation must be guided by other texts.

Of the two remaining texts the more ambiguous is clearly the letter of Ignatius to the Romans. Now it is true that Ignatius always elsewhere stresses the importance of obedience to the local bishop except in his letter to the Romans. However this does not necessarily imply that there is no bishop in Rome. For a start, there may be good reasons why he does not

talk about the clergy in Rome. Rome is the end of his journey. He is concerned with his approaching martyrdom and with the possibility that someone might try and save him from the arena (something he does not want to happen). This is clearly the overriding object of the letter. Perhaps also he feels able to tell other churches to obey their clergy, but does not feel the able to do so for the Roman church. His reticence may reflect an august respect for the church of Rome (an attitude clearly demonstrated by his terms of address). Further, the argument proves too much. Ignatius does not mention presbyters, deacons or ministers of any sort in Rome. Are we to suppose that there were no presbyters there either? It seems perverse to take the absence of any reference to clergy (including presbyters) as an argument in favour of presbyteral government in Rome! In the end the whole basis for taking anything from Ignatius at all is an argument from silence, the weakest of all forms of argument. Elsewhere in fact Ignatius seems clear that for any church to be called a church it must display the threefold order of bishop, presbyters and deacons. All the less reason to interpret his ambiguous silence against his own clear words.

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 the college of the apostles. Nothing is called a church if it does not have these [*choris touton ekklesia on kaleita*]. [Trallians 3]

We are left then with only one significant piece of evidence for the form of ministry in the late first century church of Rome. This is the letter of Clement to the Corinthians. This is indeed the most important witness for it comes out of the Roman church of that time. Clement does not address the letter from himself but from the church in Rome. This is obviously a token of humility, yet the ability to represent the local church of Rome must imply some status and humility is not incompatible with episcopal office. Later, Clement talks of bishops and deacons [1 Clement 42], which presumably refers to a college of bishops taking a presbyteral role (as in Philippians 1.1, and Didache 15). Yet as was said above, reference to a college of bishops does not exclude there being a single presiding bishop any more than reference to a college of presbyters excludes there being a chief presbyter. In the local churches that had an order of bishops and deacons the one presiding obviously could not be distinguished by calling him "bishop", but it certainly does not follow that there was no head bishop. Clement's main concern here is that the Corinthians are trying to depose their bishop/presbyters [1 Clement 44]. He is not concerned at this point to defend the office of head bishop so much as to defend the apostolic roots of the clergy itself. So he does not clearly distinguish a head bishop from the college of bishops. Nevertheless he does give some hint of the existence of such a head bishop in the analogy he gives for the

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order that should exist when celebrating the Eucharist. This passage occurs just before the first mention of bishops and deacons.

The High Priest, for example, has his own proper services [*leitourgiai*] assigned to him, the priesthood has its own offices [*prostetaktai*], there are particular ministries [*diakonai*] laid down for the Levites and the layman is bound by the regulations [*prostagma*] affecting the laity. In the same way, my brothers, when we offer our own Eucharist to God, each one of us should keep his own degree. [1 Clement 40–41]

The use of *diakonia* here for the ministry of the Levite is surely not accidental but helps to link the order of High Priest, priests, Levites and laity of the old covenant with a head bishop, bishops, deacons and laity of the new covenant. This context is surely suggestive of a threefold order at the Eucharist that the head bishop offers the *leitourgia* together with his fellow bishops and assisted by the deacons. In the Rome of the early third century Hippolytus could identify the bishop presiding as a High Priest [*archiereus*]. There is no reason to think that this same identification could not be present already in the Rome of the late first century. This is only suggestive and is a long way from hard evidence but there is no direct hard evidence either way.

A list of bishops is certainly available in Rome from mid second century. Hegesippus claimed to possess such a list in the 160s AD [Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.22], but the first one we have extant is from Irenaeus in 170AD or so [*Against the Heresies* 111.3]. Yet Anicetus certainly exercised episcopal authority in the mid 150s AD as he received Polycarp and tried to persuade him to conform to the Roman date of Easter [Eusebius *E.H* V.24]. Between the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul in the 60s and the pontificate of Anicetus in the 150s there are few firm witnesses. Clement certainly wrote from Rome in the 90s and Telesphorus was martyred in the 130s, but whether these were each *bishop* over the local church of Rome is precisely what is debated. Yet these second century witnesses should not be dismissed without at least some grounds for doubting, and upon consideration it turns out that there are no good grounds for doubting, except for the preconception of a process of ministerial evolution.

Thus the argument for a loose presbyteral government of the church in Rome in the late first century is terribly weak, its strongest point being simply the lack of clear evidence available. The supposition that there was a chief presbyter in Rome in the first century, and that Clement held this office, is at least as probable on the (slight) direct evidence available. The prevalence of the opposite opinion comes then, not from a simple examination of the direct evidence, but from the view that is held of the shape of ministry as a whole in that period. In the construction of such a view, the role of the enquirer's underlying assumptions is not to be

ignored. This takes us back to the starting point of the paper: the tacit assumptions scholars bring to the investigation of the “development” of early Christian ministry.

### Underlying mindset

Partly because of a tendency to idealise the apostolic age, it is often supposed that, besides these two changes [missionary to local pastoral, emergence of mono-episcopacy], there was also a parallel transition from vitality to formalism, from freedom to rigidity, or even from a lay democracy to a clerical authoritarianism. The truth is not so simple<sup>9</sup>.

Yet though sensitive historians such as Chadwick can see the dangers of idealising the apostolic order of ministry, they are consistently unaware how deeply this mindset has informed the interpretation of the evidence. The whole notion of the evolution, revolution, or supposed radical development in ministry in the first century is in fact a supposition *imported* by the observer. It is a classic case of theory distorting observation. There is a pervasive underlying mindset that idealises early ministry as free, loose, inspired and lay, and sees the emergence of clerical forms as a fall from primitive innocence. Some antitheses that must have been co-existing (such as itinerant versus local pastoral ministry, and common responsibilities versus those of office holders) are confused with actual historical developments (such as the standardisation of a uniform language of ministry). Other concerns, wholly anachronistic in a first century context, especially the ideal of democracy, are also added to the mix. Finally a set of metaphors of warm, fluid and flexible versus cold, set and rigid exercise an enormous subconscious influence on the *flavour*, as it were, of early Christian ministry. One is left with a confused list that looks something like this (I am sure the reader could add other antitheses to this already long list).

Itinerant	vs	Local
Missionary	vs	Pastoral
Collegial	vs	Hierarchical
Apostolic	vs	(proto) Catholic
Lay	vs	Clerical
Ministry	vs	Authority
<i>Charisma</i>	vs	Order
Inspired	vs	Appointed
Vitality	vs	Formalism
Freedom	vs	Rigidity
Democracy	vs	Authoritarianism
Broad	vs	Narrow
Diverse	vs	Restricted
Loose	vs	Fixed
Warm	vs	Cold
Fluid	vs	Set

This incoherent yet evocative set of antitheses maps out the whence and the whither of the supposed evolutionary transition discernible below the few scattered witnesses to early Christian ministry<sup>10</sup>. It is this list that lies behind the endlessly repeated references to the “loose pattern of Church authority of the first generation of believers”<sup>11</sup>. Thus instead of taking second century witnesses as offering a possible model applicable already in the first century they are taken as witnesses to the end point of some hidden process. This is, *ex hypothesi*, antithetical to that loose, free, inspired, pattern of ministry enjoyed by the apostolic Christians. It is no simple step to escape this mindset (in which one may discern, as well as classical Reformation prejudices the more subtle influence of Hegel upon so much modern thinking). Yet to examine this attitude in the cold light of day is already to have gained a great deal. The witnesses to the form(s) of Christian ministry in the generation between the passing of the apostles and the more plentiful writings of the second century are few in number. The evidence is slight, but on balance favours standardisation and continuity over more radical evolutionary change. In this context there seems little reason to doubt the later witnesses to episcopal succession in Rome, and the presence of a bishop in Rome already in the first century, at least, so it seems to this author.

- 1 Duffy, E. *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*. Yale University Press. 1997. p.7 cf. Kelly, J.N.D., *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes*. OUP. 1986. p.7; Frend “The Origin of the Papacy c33–440” in Johnson, P. *The Papacy*. Phoenix Illustrated, 1997.
- 2 Staniforth, M., (ed. and notes) *Early Christian Writings* Penguin. Harmondsworth, 1968. n.7 p. 236, see also Beyer episkopos in Kittel, G., (Ed.) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Volume II* Eerdmans’ Pub. Co.. Grand Rapids Michigan, 1964. Examples need not be multiplied. This view is so widely held as not to be contentious.
- 3 This second connects Christ as Shepherd: 1 Peter 2.25, 5.4 (cf. John 10.11); Peter himself as shepherd: 1 Peter 5.1 (cf. John 21. 16); and the presbyter as shepherd: 1 Peter 5.1–4.
- 4 Luke is, after all, careful to distinguish different forms of ministry in Antioch [Acts 13.1] and Ephesus [Acts 20.17].
- 5 Paul often relied on Timothy for this function [1 Corinthians 16.10, Philippians 2.19, 1 Thessalonians 3.21].
- 6 Frend, W.H.C., *The Rise of Christianity*. DL&T, London, 1984. p. 139.
- 7 *Ibid.* p.140.
- 8 Crombie, F, (transl. and notes) “The Pastor of Hermas” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume II* Grand Rapids Michigan, 1983.
- 9 Chadwick, H., *The Early Church*, Penguin, Harmondsworth. 1993. p. 51.
- 10 with acknowledgement to Mary Midgley who used this technique to uncover a quite different set of prejudices Midgley, M., *Evolution as a Religion* Methuen. London, 1985. p. 98.
- 11 Duffy as quoted above, but this is a tendency so common that it would unfair to single Duffy out for any special criticism.