

Church Governance in Early Church Documents

Introduction and Definition of Terms

My preconception was that the Bible does not seem to prescribe a specific type of church governance, and adherents to the major schools of thought all have key verse evidence to offer. Independent churches especially struggle with finding both a biblical and workable model for church governance, with myriad resulting models. My own church had been on the extreme end of congregational leadership for five decades, but it has been my recent observation that the results of this democratic system have been the sheep trying to lead the shepherds, and often succeeding in hampering the work of the shepherds [pure democracy is merely mob rule, after all]. Yet, there are some things commendable about this system, in which people are far more committed to becoming servant-leaders [not just voting] and in which their ownership in the process inspires greater loyalty and team spirit.

I knew it would be interesting and instructive to see how the early church handled governance, and I believed it was an area in which the present day church might learn something from its predecessors. I believed the early church writings might give hints of how the church fathers understood the teaching of the apostles on this important aspect of practical theology. I limited my research to the first couple of centuries of original writings, while sampling some later writings for their historical analysis of the earlier church. I also focused on the governance of individual churches, rather than on the structure that bound them together, though some aspects of their interconnectedness comes through in the discussion.

As much as I could, I have verified consistent translation of the key terms, such that the reader's expectation should be that "bishop" corresponds to the lexical word ἐπίσκοπος in the original Greek texts, "presbyter" corresponds to the lexical word πρεσβύτερος in the original Greek texts, and "deacon" corresponds to the lexical word διάκονος in the original Greek texts.

Government Structure and Its Dissemination

Perhaps the earliest explicit mention of governance in the extant writings of the early church comes in 1 Clement, written about A.D. 95¹ from Rome to Corinth.² It is tangential but noteworthy that from Clement's letter we see a custom of one church community advising another, perhaps even of one community having consulted another.³

Clement appears to have used the term presbyter synonymously with that of bishop. In 44.1-4, he was discussing the appointment and permanence of office for bishops, and their unjust removal in Corinth. Then, in 44.5, he continued the discussion, but using the term presbyters. It is noteworthy that earlier Clement discussed the apostles' appointment of bishops and deacons, but with no mention of presbyters.⁴ Also, in the discussion of 44.1-6, in what appears to be the context of the Corinthian church's removal of their leadership, he referred to those removed from the bishop's office in the plural.⁵ Again, when he

¹ Michael J. Svigel, *The Church to the Modern Era* (unpublished class slides for HT101B, Dallas Theological Seminary, on-line distribution to registered students for Autumn, 2009). See also Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 33, 35, who says this was written in the last two decades of the first century.

² Clement of Rome, *1 Clement*, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), Salutation.

³ Christoph Marksches, *Between Two Worlds*, (London: SCM Press, 1999), 173.

⁴ Clement of Rome, 42.4.

⁵ See Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 399; he notes it is significant that "bishops" is in the plural for the single city of Corinth.

returned to the matter at hand later in the letter, he referred to those removed from office as presbyters.⁶ All this suggests that the terms bishop and presbyter were synonymous to Clement at that time. Considering 1 Clement 42 – which suggests a relational path from God the Father to Christ to the apostles to those the apostles appointed as bishops and deacons – Hannah interpreted Clement as believing in apostolic succession through the multiple presbyters and deacons, rather than through a single bishop.⁷

If a system of governance by multiple presbyters did prevail for a time, one reason might be that most local gatherings were in houses, with a presbyter over each and deacons to help them,⁸ so each gathering had one leader so to speak, but the leaders in a city would meet to work out any issues that affected all of them.⁹ Hannah wrote that scholars estimate there were over two hundred such house churches in Rome by the middle of the second century.¹⁰ Lampe believed that Rome had presbyter-led church government uniting the house churches until the second half of the second century,¹¹ though it is hard to believe that over two hundred presbyters acting as house pastors could remain in unity as a legislative body without some leadership among them. If they did not have a single ruling bishop, they surely must have nominated or at least recognized leaders among themselves.

Maier thought Eusebius projected his contemporary [fourth century] type of church governance back into history, and was wrong to consider Clement to have been a bishop with authority, he rather being just a presbyter with the role of outside communication.¹² However, it is interesting to look at Eusebius' choice of words, for while he considered Clement to be in charge of the ministry of Rome, he described it as being "over the ministry of the bishops of Rome,"¹³ suggesting Eusebius recognized the plurality of bishops and the synonymous nature of the terms bishops and presbyters in Clement's day, yet still considered Clement to wield some sort of authority over the others. Perhaps the fact that Clement penned this important letter has more significance than that he merely was the one chosen to be a scribe for the others.

Only a couple of decades after Clement, we get a stronger vision of single-bishop governance from Ignatius, the [ruling] bishop of Antioch in Syria who was writing [about A.D. 110¹⁴] to several churches in what is now Turkey. Ignatius repeatedly referred to a single bishop and a council of presbyters in each church [city], at least for those in Ephesus,¹⁵ Magnesia,¹⁶ Tralles,¹⁷ Philadelphia,¹⁸ and Smyrna.¹⁹

⁶ Clement of Rome, 57.1.

⁷ John D. Hannah, *The Church to the Modern Era, HT101* (unpublished class notes in HT101, Dallas Theological Seminary, on-line distribution to registered students for Autumn, 2009), 23-24. See also, John D. Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001), 262.

⁸ Arthur G. Patzia, *The Emergence of the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 169-171. See also Michael J. Svingel, "A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order," on-line [in four parts] at <http://svigel.blogspot.com> blog, accessed 10.30.09), Part I.

⁹ Lampe, 400-401.

¹⁰ Hannah, *The Church to the Modern Era, HT101*, 26.

¹¹ Lampe, 397.

¹² Paul L. Maier, *Eusebius: The Church History* (Grand Rapids: Kregal Academic, 2007), 116.

¹³ Eusebius, *The Church History*, in *Eusebius: The Church History*, ed. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregal Academic, 2007), 108.

¹⁴ Svingel, *The Church to the Modern Era*. Holmes, 170, said this was within a few decades of the start of the second century.

¹⁵ Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians*, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 2.2; 4.1; 20.2.

¹⁶ Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians*, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 2; 6.1; 7.1; 13.1.

Interestingly, in his letter to Rome – which admittedly had a specifically different purpose than the other letters – he never exhorted them about nor even discussed bishops and presbyters. He referred to the lack of bishop in Syria, now that he was on his way to Rome,²⁰ but never referred to the governance in Rome. Lampe found the absence of such discussion significant to his theory of slower development of the single bishop model in the west.²¹ Considering the evidence of 1 Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the lack of reference to a bishop in Ignatius' letter to the Romans, Guy concluded that as of Ignatius' day there was still a plurality of presbyters ruling in Rome, instead of one strong bishop.²² Hannah believed the body of evidence suggested that there was a plurality of presbyters in Rome through the second century, and quoted a Roman Catholic scholar, Hans Kung, as saying the first evidence of a single bishop as leader in Rome was A.D. 222.²³ However, Svigel used the Shepherd of Hermas to help make his argument that following the deaths of the apostles and their delegates, their authority was taken up by one of the presbyters rising to influence.²⁴

Other comments Ignatius made imply that this single-bishop form of government was widespread by his day. For example, in his letter to the Ephesians he referred to “bishops appointed throughout the world.”²⁵ It would be significant if in such a short time, the bishop not only became a single leader out of and above the presbyters, but also that he became quite a powerful and supreme leader, at least to Ignatius' mind. He wrote to the Magnesians, “Be eager to do everything in godly harmony, the bishop presiding in the place of God and the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles and the deacons, who are especially dear to me, since they have been entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ...”²⁶ This reveals a bishop strongly presiding over the presbyters and the presbyters acting as a ruling council over the ministry, at an early date. However, Guy thought it possible that Ignatius' stress on the authority of the bishop indicated his views on bishopric power were not universally held – perhaps even were considered innovative at that time – and therefore there was a need for his arguments in its favor, motivated as he would have been to protect the church from doctrinal waywardness and organization fragmentation.²⁷ However, Ignatius' views on single-bishop rule were strong for someone innovating, the test of one's entire doctrine being whether one was following the bishop, the bishop's

¹⁷ Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to the Trallians*, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 2.2; 7.2; 12.2; 13.2.

¹⁸ Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to the Philadelphians*, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), Salutation, 4; 7.1-2.

¹⁹ Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans*, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 8.1-2; 12.2. See also Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to Polycarp*, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 6.1.

²⁰ Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to the Romans*, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 9.1.

²¹ Lampe, 399, 410.

²² Laurie Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 43.

²³ Hannah, *The Church to the Modern Era, HT101*, 21-22. See also Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine*, 261-262.

²⁴ Svigel, “A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order,” Part II.

²⁵ Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians*, 3.2. This form of government still included deacons as seen in Ignatius' letters as follows: *The Letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians*, 2; 13.1; *The Letter of Ignatius to the Trallians*, 7.2; *The Letter of Ignatius to the Philadelphians*, Salutation, 4, 7.1-2; *The Letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans*, 12.2; and *The Letter of Ignatius to Polycarp*, 6.1.

²⁶ Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians*, 6.4.

²⁷ Guy, 42-43.

office being divinely appointed, and the bishop deserving respect as unto God.²⁸ According to Hannah, the combination of Clement's theory of apostolic succession with Ignatius' single-bishop model of government is what eventually led to the bishop-leader structure of each local church which was evident by the middle of the second century.²⁹

Svigel contended that if this system was so widespread so soon after the death of the last of the apostles, it must have come from their initiative.³⁰ His theory was that originally the apostles served as the ultimate authority over the presbyters of each church, but after their deaths there was left a void that originally was filled by nominating one presbyter to preside over the meetings of the presbyters and administration of the church in the city [of the many house churches in the city], and eventually this administrative position strengthened, though perhaps at different rates in different cities, as was needed to be effective in ministry.³¹ Thus, the New Testament church was more episcopal in nature than is commonly acknowledged and the early church less so. While differing on the process of change, Holmes agreed that the rise of the bishop was in part to fill the vacuum left by the apostles.³²

This is consistent with something Eusebius wrote in the fourth century, that Timothy was bishop at Ephesus and Titus on Crete,³³ while John was directing the churches in Asia following his return from exile.³⁴ Eusebius quoted Clement of Alexandria as saying that John would go when asked to appoint bishops or ordain someone designated by the Holy Spirit.³⁵ Svigel noted that many of the earliest of those designated as ruling bishops were appointed by the apostles,³⁶ which suggests they were intended to carry on the work of the apostles after their deaths. Guy agreed that James seems to have been recognized as a leader within the presbyters in Jerusalem, and also noted that Paul maintained a residual authority over the churches he had founded.³⁷ Writing in the early fourth century, Eusebius said James "was the first to be elected to the bishop's throne of the church in Jerusalem," and quoted Clement of Alexandria on the issue.³⁸ So scholars who differ on the rate of change in church governance agree that the change that did occur likely was in an effort to adapt to the loss of the apostles as a guiding authority.

Perhaps appearing between the times of 1 Clement and the letters of Ignatius, and emanating from Antioch,³⁹ the Didache does not deal much with church governance specifically, but it does mention that the people should appoint for themselves bishops [plural, implying presbyters] and deacons.⁴⁰ The Didache also indicated that itinerant apostles and prophets were still coming through frequently at that

²⁸ Hannah, *The Church to the Modern Era*, HT101, 23.

²⁹ Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine*, 263. See also, Hannah, *The Church to the Modern Era*, HT101, 25.

³⁰ Svigel, "A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order," Part III. See also Svigel, *The Church to the Modern Era*.

³¹ Svigel, "A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order," Parts I-III. See also Svigel, *The Church to the Modern Era*.

³² Holmes, 13.

³³ Eusebius, 81.

³⁴ Eusebius, 96.

³⁵ Eusebius, 97.

³⁶ Svigel, "A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order," Part II.

³⁷ Guy 85-86.

³⁸ Eusebius, 52-53.

³⁹ Svigel, *The Church to the Modern Era*. Hannah, *The Church to the Modern Era*, HT101, 21, suggests at least Syrian in nature, which would imply Antioch.

⁴⁰ *The Didache*. In *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 15.1.

time.⁴¹ Because of this, Holmes thought it had been written closer to the time of Paul and James than to the time of Ignatius.⁴² Holmes also thought the warning not to despise their bishops and deacons in favor of itinerants revealed resistance to a new organizational structure,⁴³ even before the rise of the single bishop model. His theory was that different forms of governance along the array of congregational to multiple presbyters to single bishop leadership were being tried in various places,⁴⁴ though he saw in the letters of Ignatius clear evidence of a movement toward a single bishop presiding over presbyters and deacons.⁴⁵ However, it is possible that rather than resistance to a new organizational structure, this passage in the Didache reflects the prestige the apostles and their delegates had in contrast to their local appointees, whose indiscretions would have been more closely observable. Svigel noted the Didache's discussion of one who taught the Word of God and should be singled out for special honor and respect, and concluded that this – in conjunction with the evidence in Revelation 3.15-19 that Jesus was addressing a specific “messenger” to individual churches – was evidence of the rise of the single-bishop to replace the itinerant apostles.⁴⁶

Writing in the second half of the second century, Irenaeus referred to a succession of presbyters, and Bettenson's footnote says that Irenaeus was referring to bishops, the two terms still being used synonymously at that time.⁴⁷ Irenaeus seems to be like Clement, believing in apostolic succession, but through all the leaders of the church, not just a single bishop. However, his succession list specified individuals in the church, for example saying that the apostles had named Linus a bishop in Rome.⁴⁸ This suggested to Lampe – who thought the list was a construction representing Irenaeus' contemporary reality more than what actually occurred in time⁴⁹ – that these were the ministers of external affairs, as he believed Clement to have been [Lampe earlier cited the Shepherd of Hermes for this fact⁵⁰], and that this position of minister of external affairs – an administrative position handling communication to the outside world, distributing agreeable letters received, and handling the funds for aid to other churches – is what developed in power to eventually be the office of a single bishop over the rest of the local church.⁵¹ Lampe also argued that Irenaeus' list was based on one by Hegesippus from around A.D. 180, which reflected the passing on of apostolic doctrine, not apostolic authority, suggesting a continuing plurality of presbyters, not a single identifiable bishop overseeing the others.⁵² Hannah took a different view of Irenaeus' writings, saying he emphasized single bishop leadership as well as apostolic succession.⁵³ Surely, Irenaeus knew of the distinction between a bishop and a presbyter in his own church, since he was a presbyter in Lyons before becoming bishop.⁵⁴ Also, he once wrote to the bishop of Rome, Victor, and

⁴¹ *The Didache*, 10.7; 11; 13.1-3.

⁴² Holmes, 337-338.

⁴³ Holmes, 13.

⁴⁴ Holmes, 7.

⁴⁵ Holmes, 12-13.

⁴⁶ Svigel, “A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order,” Part II.

⁴⁷ Henry Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 123, quoting Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.2-3.

⁴⁸ Eusebius, 162, quoting Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.

⁴⁹ Lampe, 406.

⁵⁰ Lampe, 398-401.

⁵¹ Lampe, 403-404.

⁵² Lampe, 405.

⁵³ Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine*, 266.

⁵⁴ Eusebius, 161-162.

mentioned that there were several presbyters who had served under the previous bishop.⁵⁵ Guy said Irenaeus provided evidence of the emergence of the ruling bishop model out of the multiple presbyter model by recognizing the bishop ruler of his day while tying the preservation of apostolic tradition to all the presbyters.⁵⁶

However, as Eusebius noted, Irenaeus said Hyginus was the ninth bishop of Rome in the 130s, implying a long-standing single bishop model in reality if not in name.⁵⁷ Hegesippus wrote that he had compiled the succession in Rome back “to Anicetus, whose deacon was Eleutherus.”⁵⁸ This would have been prior to A.D. 160. Hegesippus also considered James’ successor in Jerusalem, Symeon, to be a bishop and to have been appointed so with apparent distinction as James’ successor.⁵⁹ On the other hand, in this same section of Eusebius’ work, he said Hegesippus “tells of traveling to Rome and finding the same doctrine among all the bishops [plural] there.”⁶⁰ In any case, Eusebius agreed with Hegesippus about James, not only in quoting him, but discussing the same appointment of Symeon as to the bishop’s “throne.”⁶¹ Eusebius also referred to writings by Dionysius [around the 160s] which discussed specific men as bishops in Athens, including one who dated back to another Dionysius who was converted by Paul and became the supposed first bishop of Athens. Dionysius also wrote to specific individuals who were bishops of his day.⁶²

Tertullian, writing just a couple of decades later than Irenaeus, referred to the bishop as the supreme priest, with authority above that of the presbyters.⁶³ By the time of Cyprian, the idea of a presiding bishop seems to have been so entrenched that he could look backward and see it as ordained by Jesus: he used Jesus’ words in Matthew 16.18ff⁶⁴ and concluded that from these the concept of church government led by a local bishop had derived and been handed down through the first twenty-something decades.⁶⁵ At this time, each bishop apparently was still independent, and Cyprian considered each bishop to be part of a federation of equals.⁶⁶ It was not until the ecumenical council of Nicaea, in A.D. 325, that the bishops of Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome were given administrative authority over their respective regions, with the bishops within each region still seen as a community of equals.⁶⁷

Though he could not find a written record of the dates of the bishops in Jerusalem, Eusebius said he did have “documentary evidence” of their identity, and he provided their names through the siege following the second revolt.⁶⁸ These men in some way had been identified as leaders throughout history to that

⁵⁵ Eusebius, 180-181. Also interesting from this letter is how differences in doctrine were respected for a time, though less so as time went by.

⁵⁶ Guy, 91, discussing Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.2.

⁵⁷ Eusebius, 125, quoting Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.14; 3.4.

⁵⁸ Eusebius, 139.

⁵⁹ Eusebius, 139.

⁶⁰ Eusebius, 139.

⁶¹ Eusebius, 92.

⁶² Eusebius, 140.

⁶³ Bettenson, 206-207, quoting Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, 17.

⁶⁴ In my view, he used this passage incorrectly, but that is not relevant to the present discussion.

⁶⁵ Bettenson, 367, quoting Cyprian, *Epistle XXXIII*, 1. See also Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine*, 266.

⁶⁶ Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine*, 267.

⁶⁷ Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine*, 272.

⁶⁸ Eusebius, 120.

point. By Eusebius' day, there was seen a succession of bishops in each major city.⁶⁹ When talking of Cerdo ascending to the bishopric of Alexandria in A.D. 98, Eusebius described him as the "third in charge there after the first,"⁷⁰ and also mentioned specific early transitions in leadership for Ephesus, Hierapolis, Smyrna [Polycarp], and Antioch [Ignatius].⁷¹

Summary of Government Structure and Dissemination

When taken singularly each document gives only hints of the government structure and rate of change of its day, and often these are debated. However, when the body of literature is taken as a whole, in conjunction with the New Testament writings, it presents a fairly clear picture. As Svigel pointed out, the New Testament structure had the apostles and their delegates as the overall authority [evident throughout Acts and the epistles], so while they established the offices of presbyter and deacon to serve under them, this still in effect was a three-fold structure of authority, each element with specific responsibilities.⁷² The apostles established the office of deacon in Acts 6.1-6 for the purpose of carrying out the logistical aspects of the ministry. In Philippians 1 and 1 Timothy 3, we see this ministerial role was disseminated to other churches. The first evidence of presbyters in the church comes in Acts 11.30, for Jerusalem. Later, in Acts 14.23, we find the missionaries appointing presbyters in each church they founded. In Titus 1.5, we find that the apostles sometimes delegated others to appoint presbyters. In texts such as 1 Timothy 5.17 and 1 Peter 5.1, we gather that churches universally were to have presbyters.

The fact that this three-fold structure is exactly what came to be evident in the post-apostolic churches within just a couple of decades of the deaths of the apostles and their delegates strongly suggests that this was a structure of governance intended by the apostles to continue.⁷³ Svigel argued this was evident from 1 Timothy 3.1-15, in which Paul discussed presbyters and deacons, and then said he was [in Svigel's words] "both describing and prescribing how leadership in the local church should be ordered under the oversight of Timothy, Paul's personal apostolic delegate."⁷⁴ As early as 1 Clement, we have evidence both that the apostles set up a sustaining system of presbyters and deacons and that individuals were arising to supervise in individual churches.⁷⁵

What makes the discussion of the individual church documents confusing is the changing meaning of terms, but whatever people were calling the specific offices [the apostolic office became the role of the bishop, the bishop-presbyter office became just presbyter], the roles themselves remained fairly consistent, with a presiding leader overseeing a team of elders who each had charge of specific home churches [as pastors and teachers], all of whom were assisted by deacons.⁷⁶ It is worth noting as an aside that while each house church had functioning leadership of a presbyter, it was interdependently and administratively part of a larger city-wide body with multiple presbyters led by a bishop; also, while this city-wide body enjoyed significant autonomy, it saw itself as engaged with the other churches in other cities.⁷⁷

⁶⁹ See, for example, Eusebius, 74, for a transition in Alexandria decades before the end of the first century.

⁷⁰ Eusebius, 96.

⁷¹ Eusebius, 96, 105, 108.

⁷² Svigel, "A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order," Part I.

⁷³ Svigel, "A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order," Parts I-II.

⁷⁴ Svigel, "A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order," Part I.

⁷⁵ Svigel, "A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order," Part II.

⁷⁶ Svigel, "A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order," Parts I-II.

⁷⁷ Svigel, "A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order," Part III.

Characteristics of office

From Clement of Rome – who was writing to chastise the Corinthian church for unjustly removing their leadership – we get the notion that there was a permanence to the offices of bishop and presbyter: so long as one who had rightfully gained these offices continued to perform his duties blamelessly, there was no just removal of him from office.⁷⁸ However, if one was unrepentantly walking in sin [and thus not meeting what would become known as the biblical standards of office], there apparently were procedures for removing such a one from office, as evidenced by Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians, in which he discussed their affliction of an avaricious presbyter.⁷⁹

As Svigel noted, most of the first generation of presbyters were appointed by the apostles or by their delegates such as Timothy and Titus.⁸⁰ As an example, Svigel noted that Polycarp was appointed by the apostle John to be bishop of Smyrna,⁸¹ or in Eusebius’ words, “by the eyewitnesses and ministers of the Lord.”⁸² But there is a question about how subsequent presbyters and bishops attained their office. The *Didache* says, “Therefore appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord...”⁸³ Clement referred to presbyters who were appointed by “other reputable men with the consent of the whole church.”⁸⁴ Writing in the fourth century, Eusebius said James was elected to be the leading bishop in Jerusalem, quoting Clement of Alexandria on the issue,⁸⁵ but later said James was assigned to his post by the other apostles.⁸⁶

In Ignatius’ letter to Polycarp, he referred to the regional churches appointing messengers to Syria and convening a council.⁸⁷ One wonders if this council was convening to appoint Ignatius’ successor or at least to take part in the process. Writing about the appointment of a priest [which Bettenson said usually meant bishop in Cyprian’s writings⁸⁸], Cyprian wrote that the neighboring bishops of the same area should assemble with the people who needed a bishop. It appears that the neighboring bishops would choose the new bishop, but the people would have the role of revealing the character of the candidates and of final acceptance and approval of the choice. To Cyprian, this was a tradition received from the apostles and based on divine authority stemming from Numbers 20.25ff.⁸⁹

Markschies interpreted the writings of the period a little differently, for he wrote that bishops were chosen by the congregation and then approved by the presbytery and neighboring bishops.⁹⁰ Hannah quoted the same passage from Cyprian as Bettenson, and concluded it offered evidence that the neighboring bishops

⁷⁸ Clement of Rome, 44.1-4.

⁷⁹ Polycarp, *The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians*, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 11.1-4.

⁸⁰ Michael J. Svigel, *Heroes & Heretics: Solving the Modern Mystery of the Ancient Church* (Plano, TX: IFL Publishing House, 2006), 7-8.

⁸¹ Svigel, *Heroes & Heretics: Solving the Modern Mystery of the Ancient Church*, 8.

⁸² Eusebius, 108.

⁸³ *The Didache*, 15.1-2.

⁸⁴ Clement of Rome, 44.3-4.

⁸⁵ Eusebius, 52-53.

⁸⁶ Eusebius, 71.

⁸⁷ Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to Polycarp*, 7-8

⁸⁸ Bettenson, 368.

⁸⁹ Bettenson, 368-369, quoting Cyprian, *Epistle LXVII*, 2, 3-5.

⁹⁰ Markschies, 192-193.

did not exercise authority in the selection of a bishop for a church lacking one, offering also a quote from Hippolytus of Rome that suggested the neighboring bishops ordained the one chosen by the people.⁹¹ The most that can be said with certainty is that both the congregation [presumably with their remaining presbyters] and the neighboring church leaders were involved in the process.

Once in office, the bishop was responsible for evangelism, meeting people's physical and spiritual concerns [particularly those of widows], church unity, showing patient and enduring love [even for troublesome people], continued learning, alertness to threats, teaching and standing firm for sound doctrine, and unceasing prayer.⁹² Ignatius thought it proper for marriages to be with the consent of the bishop, "so that the marriage may be in accordance with the Lord and not due to lustful passions."⁹³ Tertullian wrote that only the bishop had the unlimited right of conferring baptism, though the presbyters and deacons could do so with the bishop's authority, and even lay people could if truly a necessity, though he viewed this as work assigned to the bishop.⁹⁴

As noted by Guy, even as the bishops came to dominate church governance, there were still other teachers prominent within the church, men such as Justin, Tatian, and later Clement of Alexandria and Origen.⁹⁵ Presbyters were to be loving leaders, bringing compassion, accountability, and care to the flock, particularly caring for the sick, widows, orphans, and poor.⁹⁶ In Acts 20.17-28, Paul told the presbyters of Ephesus that they were overseers and shepherds of the church. In 1 Peter 5.1, Peter also emphasized the role of presbyters in overseeing and shepherding, while adding that they were to live as an example before the others. James 5.14 says the presbyters are to pray over those who are weak in faith.⁹⁷ 1 Timothy 4.14 reveals the presbyters would ordain those joining the ministry. 1 Timothy 5.17 says some elders would preach and teach.

Deacons were to serve the ministries of God rather than the whims of people.⁹⁸ The office of deacon is first seen in Acts 6.1-6, where the apostles established the role – ordaining the deacons, but allowing the people to choose the individuals – so that the work of the ministry would be effectively accomplished without diverting the apostles from their priorities. There is evidence that at least some churches had both men and women serving as deacons, but apparently all bishops and presbyters were men.⁹⁹

Clement told the rebelling Corinthians they must submit to their rightful presbyters and accept discipline.¹⁰⁰ Ignatius wrote of obeying the bishop, the council of presbyters, and the deacons,¹⁰¹ for – at

⁹¹ Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine*, 267, quoting Cyprian, *Epistle 67* and Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, 2.

⁹² Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to Polycarp*, 1.2-3; 3.1; 4.1.

⁹³ Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to Polycarp*, 5.2.

⁹⁴ Bettenson, 206-207, quoting Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, 17.

⁹⁵ Guy, 89.

⁹⁶ Polycarp, 6.1.

⁹⁷ Some translate or interpret this to be prayer for the physically sick, but the context is spiritual weakness.

⁹⁸ Polycarp, 5.2.

⁹⁹ Svigel, *Heroes & Heretics: Solving the Modern Mystery of the Ancient Church*, 13.

¹⁰⁰ Clement of Rome, 57.1.

¹⁰¹ Ignatius, in the following letters: *The Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians*, 6.1; *The Letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians*, 2, 3.2; *The Letter of Ignatius to the Trallians*, 2.2, 13.2; *The Letter of Ignatius to the Philadelphians*, Salutation, 7.1-2; *The Letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans*, 8.1-2; *The Letter of Ignatius to Polycarp*, 6.1.

least in Philadelphia – they were established by Christ through the Holy Spirit.¹⁰² According to Ignatius, leaving the church led by the rightful bishop, presbyters, and deacons was no more an option than rebellion within the church.¹⁰³ Indeed, to do any church activity without the bishop’s knowledge was to Ignatius serving the devil, while honoring the bishop was to be honored by God.¹⁰⁴ Ignatius tied deference to the bishop and other rightful leaders to unity in the church; unity indeed was defined by submission to the leadership.¹⁰⁵

Ignatius repeatedly compared the respect due to the bishop, and/or the presbyters, and sometimes even the deacons, as akin to that due to the Lord,¹⁰⁶ even saying, “It is obvious, therefore, that we must regard the bishop as the Lord himself,”¹⁰⁷ for this would show we were living by Christ’s standards instead of human standards.¹⁰⁸ Polycarp echoed this sentiment,¹⁰⁹ and the Didache said believers were to honor the preacher of God’s Word “as though he were the Lord.”¹¹⁰ Even the presbyters were to defer to the bishop as “one who is wise in God” just as if to God himself,¹¹¹ and should encourage the bishop in his work.¹¹² As Svigel noted, “By unity and submission to the true teaching of the bishop, orthodoxy was preserved and heresy defeated.”¹¹³

Implications

There seems to be ample evidence, looking at the body of literature as a whole, that the apostles felt inspired by God to create a system of church governance which included three offices: a group of deacons to serve as spiritual leaders and meet the logistical ministry needs of the church; a group of presbyters to serve as spiritual leaders, teachers, evangelists, and administrators; and a single overseer [bishop] of the entire ministry.¹¹⁴ There is evidence of this three-fold structure in the New Testament and in the early church only a few years after the apostles and their delegates died off. This being so, there is a strong implication that Christians today should consider this structure of church governance to be the design of God. One might argue it is prescriptive, but – even if not – there certainly must be wisdom in it. To argue that such a structure would not fit into today’s culture is nonsense,¹¹⁵ for nothing Christ asks us to do fits into today’s culture, and not much of it fit into the cultures with which the apostles wrestled.

¹⁰² Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to the Philadelphians*, Salutation.

¹⁰³ Ignatius, in the following letters: *The Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians*, 5.3; *The Letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians*, 4, 7.1; *The Letter of Ignatius to the Trallians*, 2.2, 3.1, 7.2; *The Letter of Ignatius to the Philadelphians*, 3.2, 4; *The Letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans*, 8.1-2.

¹⁰⁴ Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans*, 9.1.

¹⁰⁵ Ignatius, in the following letters: *The Letter of Ignatius to the Philadelphians*, 7.1-2, 8.1; *The Letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans*, 8.1-2.

¹⁰⁶ Ignatius, in the following letters: *The Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians*, 5.3; *The Letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians*, 2, 3.2, 6.1; *The Letter of Ignatius to the Trallians*, 2.1-2, 3.1; *The Letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans*, 8.1-2.

¹⁰⁷ Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians*, 6.1.

¹⁰⁸ Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to the Trallians*, 2.1.

¹⁰⁹ Polycarp, 5.3.

¹¹⁰ *The Didache*, 4.1-2.

¹¹¹ Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians*, 3.1, 6.1.

¹¹² Ignatius, *The Letter of Ignatius to the Trallians*, 12.2.

¹¹³ Svigel, *Heroes & Heretics: Solving the Modern Mystery of the Ancient Church*, 38.

¹¹⁴ Svigel, “A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order,” Part III.

¹¹⁵ Svigel, “A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order,” Part III, while not advocating this argument, pointed it out.

Any structure of church governance is vulnerable to abuse by the corrupt, but there are systems in place in this structure to mitigate some of that risk. Leaders at all three levels were carefully chosen, recognized for their proven spirituality and servant hearts by the people and by the other leaders before given ordination. The bishop had ultimate responsibility to God for the spiritual health of his flock and the unity and sound teaching in his church, and so had the authority to match that responsibility. But the bishop was not monarchical in power, but rather a “prime among equals.”¹¹⁶ Ministry was a team effort, with the bishop and presbyters working together to plan and execute what was needed for the health of the church, with the help of the deacons. Each level of leadership had its own responsibilities and enough autonomy to deal with those responsibilities, while also being accountable to the others on the team. It is true that one form of accountability, that to the bishops of other churches, is lost to the independent church of today.¹¹⁷ Perhaps independent churches should find accountability partners, as they urge their parishioners to do, or band into relatively loose federations with like-minded¹¹⁸ churches in the local area, at least opening up communication between the pastors and elders of each church and coordinating on ministry efforts.

On the other hand, the democratic controls many churches have adopted from civil government structures are not evident in the biblical-historical model. As Svigel noted, the congregation was not in charge and there was not an “elder board” with leadership independent of the pastors: the bishop was the senior administrator of the presbyters [elders], who led the church assisted by deacons.¹¹⁹ Thus, today, the Senior Pastor would lead the team of elders, with the elders and pastors being the same people. While in the early church the congregation had an important role in helping to choose its leadership [which came from within the congregation], the congregational form of church governance we often see today does not “reflect at all the apostolic or post-apostolic order, which over and over again emphasized the authority and responsibility resting on the shoulders of the bishop, elders [presbyters], and deacons trained and qualified for the work of the ministry.”¹²⁰ The sheep helped recognize the shepherds among them, but the shepherds then led the sheep, which was seen as important for doctrinal purity, unity, and the spiritual health of the sheep. Access to the full body of scripture has not diminished the need for work to preserve doctrinal purity in the church nor to protect against false teachings, for almost all of the earliest heresies are still promoted today, and – worse – there is greater dissemination of them through television networks, movies, books, armies marching door-to-door, the internet, and churches down the street masquerading as Christian.¹²¹

In the congregationally structured church I mentioned earlier, I would say that their good intentions have led them astray. In an effort to have extreme accountability for their pastor/elders and involvement for their lay people, they have in some ways hampered their pastor/elders and actually deterred some of their lay people. The deacons in such a congregational structure often take the roles assigned to the presbytery, and – while we might simply think of them as misnamed presbyters in that case – this leaves a void the deacons were supposed to fill. Sometimes this diaconal burden falls back on the pastors, distracting them from their biblical roles, creating the same burden on them which the apostles hoped to avoid when they created the role of deacons in the first place. If the pastors are effective recruiters, then sometimes these diaconal burdens are pushed off on lay people, but then you have lay people trying to do the work of deacons without ordination and without sufficient authority and training.

¹¹⁶ Svigel, “A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order,” Part III.

¹¹⁷ Svigel, “A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order,” Part IV.

¹¹⁸ I would have high standards of theological agreement, which I know would limit the number of partners I could find.

¹¹⁹ Svigel, “A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order,” Part II.

¹²⁰ Svigel, “A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order,” Part III.

¹²¹ These issues were raised by Svigel, “A Biblical-Historical Model of Church Order,” Part IV.

Likewise, while I believe there must be accountability for leadership, it is not feasible to either make the offices of the pastors and elders vulnerable to the whims of the congregation nor to force the leadership of the church to get congregational approval for every decision. A leader who is elected and can be impeached at the whim of the crowd is one who faces the extreme temptation to serve the pleasures of the people instead of the needs of the people and the pleasures of God. Once the congregation has found its leadership, they should give them the autonomy and authority to effectively lead the ministry. In the church I attended, they had leaders chosen and equipped by God, but the church still struggled to function and they suffered constant disunity and factiousness, because they had forgotten that unity is to rally behind the ordained leadership as it pursues the cause of Christ. Instead, they were mired in infighting, as political groups within the church jockeyed for influence and pursued self-gratifying goals, while the chosen, ordained, gifted leaders were employed putting out fires, jockeying to keep coalitions together, and doing the work of deacons [who are doing the work of the presbyters]. The sad result of this is a church that has limited its effectiveness in evangelism despite having an evangelist on staff and investing heavily in amazing outreach events; limited its spiritual development despite having a gifted preacher and well trained staff; and suffered great disunity and social frustration despite choosing soft-spoken leaders and implementing a small groups program.¹²²

I adored that church, all of its senior leaders, and most of the other people in it, but I don't think it was operating under a biblical-historical leadership structure, and I wept to see it struggle under unbiblical attitudes of angry minorities instead of under the able leadership of its staff. I think such a church could continue with the congregational ideal in some senses – such as congregational involvement in choosing deacons, presbyters, and a senior pastor [bishop]; ministry team [committee] recruitment of lay people; voting on bylaws, the budget, and such things – while getting back to a more biblical-historical structure of allowing their chosen leaders to execute the ministry without constantly resorting to congregational votes of approval, holding their leaders up for respect and as pillars around whom to unify instead of distrusting every move they make [how can a congregation apply the preaching if they have not bothered to trust the preacher?], and rallying around the cause of Christ instead of seeking to tug the church one way or another in the “business meetings.” Structural changes in the governance of the church such that it would reflect what we see in scripture and early church writings would allow the leadership of such churches to discipline the disruptive members, do the work they were called to do, and in the end lead the church into stronger doctrinal teaching and unity to the glory of God.

¹²² This church eventually saw its senior pastor leave and its deacons persuade the crowd to vote in a new constitution making the deacons into all powerful elders, while stripping the pastoral staff of the elder title [something like what Clement addressed in Corinth!].