

The Monarchical Bishop vs Biblical Eldership

A Roman Catholic Explains the Biblical History of Eldership

Question: It appears that the early church resembled the Catholic Church because St. Ignatius teaches that a single bishop should lead the church together with several presbyters and deacons. What do you say?

Answer: Where shall we start? What is God's pattern for the leadership of the church? We would begin too late if we begin with the early church fathers. We should go back to the very beginning, to the churches in the apostolic era rather than the second century and later.

It is wrong to assume that the teaching and practices of the early church were necessarily correct simply because they were temporally closer to the apostles. Error springs up overnight. The apostle Paul was amazed that soon after his departure, the disciples in Galatia quickly fell into error. "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ" (Galatians 1:6, 7). Now if Christians could be so easily deceived about the most fundamental and cherished truth they possess, the gospel, how easily could they be misled about issues of secondary importance, such as the pattern of church government?

Therefore we must answer our question from the New Testament Scripture because therein we learn the original pattern rather than the modifications and changes that occurred in the subsequent centuries.

More importantly, we would build our case on shaky foundations if we had to lean on the writings of fallible men such as Clement and Ignatius. Respected as these early Church Fathers are, they are still liable to make mistakes; their writings are neither inspired nor infallible. That's another reason why we must rest on the Holy Scriptures, for these alone are given by inspiration of God, and therefore are certainly true.

So what do we find in the New Testament? Let us take a typical example: “And when they had preached the gospel to that city (Derbe) and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.’ So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:21-23).

Paul’s missionary work resulted in the formation of new churches in these cities. But he had to move on. What kind of leadership did he leave behind him? “They had appointed elders in every church.” He left a number of elders to take care of every local church.

Similarly, Paul writes to Titus: “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you” (Titus 1:5). Same thing: “elders in every city”—not one bishop and several priests.

This is the consistent New Testament pattern—every church was ruled by a group of elders, as the following scriptures illustrate:

Acts 11:30 - Elders at the church of Antioch.

Acts 14:23 -Paul and Barnabas appoint “elders in every church.”

Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4 - Elders at the church in Jerusalem.

Acts 20:17, 28 - Elders/bishops at the church of Ephesus.

Acts 21:18 - Elders at the church in Jerusalem.

Philippians 1:1 - Bishops in the church of Philippi.

1 Thessalonians 5:12, 13 - The congregation is to respect its leaders.

1 Timothy 5:17 - Elders at the church of Ephesus.

Titus 1:5 - Titus is to appoint elders in every town.

James 5:14 - “The elders of the church.”

1 Peter 5:1-2 - “The elders among you.”

Hebrews 13:7, 17 - Heed the leaders of the church, “for they are keeping watch over your souls.”

The Greek word translated “elder” is *presbuteros* (meaning: old, senior, elder) and is sometimes rendered “presbyter.” A different Greek word, *episkopos*, is translated “bishop” or “overseer” (meaning: superintendent, in charge of, overseer). Both words, elder and bishop, are used in the New Testament to describe church ministers. Are elders different from bishops? Or are elders actually bishops?

When Paul wrote to Titus to appoint “elders” in every city, he went on to describe the necessary qualification, “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you...for a bishop must be blameless...” Paul refers to every elder appointed as a bishop.

In Acts 20 we read Paul’s farewell speech to the elders of the church in Ephesus. “From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church” (verse 17). He said to these elders, “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God” (verse 28). The word “overseers” is the familiar word for bishop, *episkopos*. The same verse is rendered in the Catholic (Douay-Rheims) Bible: “Take heed to yourselves and to the whole flock, wherein the Holy Ghost hath placed you bishops, to rule the Church of God which he hath purchased with his own blood.”

We can conclude that “elders” and “bishops” are the same people, and the two terms are being used interchangeably. Bishops are presbyters; presbyters are bishops. This sounds strange to us because we are not used to the concept of a plurality of elders (or bishops) leading a local church. Yet that is the biblical pattern. Hence, when Paul wrote to the Philippians, he addressed the letter “to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.” The church in Philippi was led by a number of bishops, with the aid of deacons.

The biblical evidence is conclusive. The apostolic churches were led by a number of elders, who were also known as bishops.

We now leave the apostolic church, and the certainty of the Holy Scriptures, and move on to the second century. Did the early church follow the “plurality of elders” pattern? Sadly, the answer is no! Early in the second century, Ignatius of Antioch was already proposing a different model: one bishop above several presbyters, and deacons.

I salute in the blood of Jesus Christ, who is our eternal and enduring joy, especially if [men] are in unity with the bishop, the presbyters, and the deacons, who have been appointed according to the mind of Jesus Christ, whom He has established in security, after His own will, and by His Holy Spirit (Letter to the Philadelphians)

See that ye all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as ye would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God (Letter to the Smyrnaeans).

Was this the general pattern in the second century? No, there were other churches who still maintained the apostolic “plurality of elders” model. For example, the second century document, the Didache, says: “Appoint, therefore, for yourselves, bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men meek, and not lovers of money, and truthful and proved.”

Also, in the First Letter to the Corinthians, Clement consistently refers to a plurality of elders (or bishops):

Ye therefore, who laid the foundation of this sedition, submit yourselves to the presbyters, and receive correction so as to repent, bending the knees of your hearts. Let the flock of Christ live on terms of peace with the presbyters set over it. For ye did all things without respect of persons, and walked in the commandments of God, being obedient to those who had the rule over you, and giving all fitting honour to the presbyters among you. And thus preaching through countries and cities, they (the apostles) appointed the first-fruits [of their labours], having first proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who should afterwards believe.

An article on the Didache in the Catholic Encyclopaedia states: “The local ministers are bishops and deacons, as in St. Paul (Phil., i, 1) and St. Clement. Presbyters are not mentioned, and the bishops are clearly presbyter-bishops, as in Acts, xx, and in the Pastoral Epistles of St. Paul. But when St. Ignatius wrote in 107, or at the latest 117, the three orders of bishops, priests, and deacons were already considered necessary to the very name of a Church, in Syria, Asia Minor, and Rome. If it is probable that in St. Clement's time there was as yet no ‘monarchical’ bishop at Corinth, yet such a state of things cannot have lasted long in any important Church.”

Ignatius and Clement disagree; Ignatius has one bishop over the presbyters (the new pattern); Clement speaks of a number of presbyters leading the church, which he also calls bishops (the original pattern). Church Fathers are not

unanimous in their opinions. Who, then, should be the arbiter? How can we decide what is God's will? If we believe that the authority of God-inspired Scripture is above the opinions of fallible men, we would have no difficulty to answer.

Ignatius represents a step away from the original pattern, which gradually led to the "monarchical episcopate" (i.e. the church and clergy ruled by a single bishop). It also paved the way to evolution of the Patriarch; a bishop leading several churches in a large province (Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem and Constantinople), and ultimately, to the Papacy; a single bishop claiming authority over all other bishops and churches in the entire world!

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