

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ibs-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php)

## **Church Government**

**Very Rev. Dr A. J. Weir\***

Irish Presbyterian ministers are all required publicly to declare their belief that 'the Presbyterian form of Church government is founded on and agreeable to the Word of God'. How this may be interpreted by them probably varies. Some may take a more traditionalist, even exclusive, view in finding specific Biblical precedent for our particular form of Church government and office. More now might seek to derive these from examples and principles demonstrated in the New Testament, yet without claiming an exclusive derivation for our Presbyterianism.

Church history may chart the development of Christian theory and practice down the centuries in a variety of social contexts; yet a direct comparison of the New Testament Church, taken as a whole and not just from isolated texts read in the light of later practices, suggest: - that Peter was no Pope, nor Popes a continuing of Peter's ministry; that Apostles were not Bishops, nor Bishops generally Apostles; that the Jerusalem Seven were not models for our Deaconates; and that Biblical Presbyters were not Priests, nor even generally Presbyterian Ministers. Such generalisation, of course, may require qualification, yet still provide a truer perspective on the Church both then and now than would the reverse.

### **Papacy**

When considering the Papacy, the key text offered is, of course, Matt 16: 18, 'Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church.' There have been centuries of argument over whether, in these words of Jesus, the rock refers primarily to Peter as a person, or to the faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God; a faith from which he so speedily turned, to be rebuked so

---

\* Dr Weir is a former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and served as its Clerk of Assembly for many years. We hope in future issues to include occasional essays by members of various denominations reflecting on church government from their perspective.

devastatingly by Jesus with another title, 'Get thee behind me, Satan.'

In fact, the account which Acts gives of Pentecost and the early days of the Jerusalem Church does show Peter personally playing a key role in the initial proclamation of the Christian Gospel and the formation of the Christian Church; but there is no follow through, to show Peter exercising even a lifetime's exclusive presidency, let alone jurisdiction over or direction of the Church. It is Jesus' brother James who presides at the formal council in Jerusalem in Acts 15; and it is Paul who stands firm against the backsliding policies that are linked with both, whether in the later confrontation at Antioch, or by those who came to correct his liberating practice in his mission Churches. And in the Petrine epistles the apostolic author writes claiming only the status of a 'fellow elder' (presbyter) and a 'brother'.

The papal claim or deduction rests rather on the assumption that the new Church community must be organised according to the patterns of the kingdoms (not to say empires) of this world, rather than of God's kingdom or kingly rule — a fellowship in which none are masters, as Jesus describes it in Matt 23: 1-10. This sort of assumption repeats itself in other systems of Church government and organisation, in line with contemporary social structures.

## **Episcopacy**

Episcopacy, more particularly interpreted as Church government under a conventional 'three-fold ministry', and Bishops in an 'apostolic succession', may cite the account given in Acts 1 of the replacement of Judas in the number of the apostolic Twelve. In the second part of v.20 'His bishoprick (literally oversight, supervising) let another take.' The Hebrew word for oversight, as used in the Psalm, also appears in the book of Numbers to describe the oversight entrusted to Aaron's son Eleasar over 'those who had charge of the sanctuary' (3:32) as also 'of all the tabernacle and of all that therein is' (4:16).

If there was initially any intention of carrying into the new community Old Testament ideas of office and institutionalised succession this was not kept up by someone being appointed to succeed the Apostle James after his murder by Herod, as told in Acts 12. Nor is there any hint of a preoccupation with this aspect of office, on the lines of the Old Testament. The evidence rather is that the distinctive apostolic calling or function was to mission evangelism rather than Church oversight or administration, to spreading the good news of Jesus' life ministry, from the baptism of John till his resurrection, according to the qualification for Judas' replacement as set by Peter in Acts 1:22. This too was the function inherent in the title 'Apostle', as first given to the twelve disciples, according to Luke 6:13.

### **The Seven 'Deacons'**

The next evolution in the organisation of the early Church, after the replacement of Judas, is recorded in Acts 6. We are told how seven men were appointed to assist or relieve the Apostles, after complaints of neglect of the Grecians or Hellenistic Jewish widows in the administration of the Church's charity in the daily 'serving of the tables' (6:1-6). The Greek word for serving is indeed literally 'deaconing', and this event came to be taken as the origin for the office of deacon in the later Church, though the description could apply to all kinds of ministering service.

The book of Acts, in fact, never uses the official title 'Deacon' of the men appointed in Jerusalem. If, in making the proposal, Peter thought that the Apostles were freeing themselves from the hassle of caring for the practical side of Church life and settling the bickering between the two groups of disciples by generously handing over the whole administration to seven men who, if we go by their names, were drawn entirely from the aggrieved Hellenists, we may be sure experience would soon have disillusioned him! Acts gives us no account of how they dealt with the problem of the widows; but in later references to the members of the group speaks of them as the Seven, in the same way as the Apostles were also termed the Twelve. This suggests that they were seen more like auxiliary Apostles, appointed to reflect the

expanding character of the Church. And it was in apostolic work that they are so presented, in the persons of Stephen and Philip — not to speak of Stephen's more particular successor, in terms of cultural background, spiritual vision and missionary outlook, the Apostle Paul. If the New Testament does provide us with an informal, spiritual 'apostolic succession', it is to be found in the line Peter, Stephen, Paul.

When references are eventually made in the Pastoral epistles (and in the opening address of the letter to the Philippians) to 'Deacons' as distinct office bearers in the Church, they appear regularly associated with others who are entitled 'Bishops', though without defining their separate functions or relationships. Their qualifications in character, as set out in I Timothy ch.3, are fundamentally similar. Nor is the relationship of either with the office of Presbyter-elder, which is even more widely featured, anywhere clearly explained, though Titus 1:5 & 7 would suggest an equivalence between Presbyter and Bishop. In any case there is no New Testament presentation of a conventionally structured three-fold (or more accurately 'three grade') ministry.

### **Presbyter-Elder-Priest**

The third, middle partner in that threefold ministry is the Presbyter or Priest. Linguistically these are but the longer and shorter forms of the same word, but the characters or functions they describe are quite distinct. The Biblical Greek word 'πρεσβύτερος' refers to an older, senior person, a Church elder. The Bible has a totally different word for what is usually meant by 'priest', namely the Greek word ἱερεύς, appearing in our word hierarchy (or, in Latin, 'sacerdos', from which we have our adjective sacerdotal). These described the members of a priestly order who offered sacrifices and regulated or ran most religious institutions and observances, both then and now, for the majority of ordinary people who were the 'laity'. Yet the term ἱερεύς-priest is never used in the New Testament as a title or description of office in the organised ministry of the Christian Church; though it was such a prominent office in the religion of the Old Testament, and of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The letter to the Hebrews is indeed largely taken up with the idea of a Christian priesthood; but it is the high priesthood of Jesus Christ himself, the true heavenly, spiritual priesthood of a self-sacrifice offered once-for-all, that sacrifice to end our sacrifices and replace the provisions of God's old covenant with Israel with one that was radically new and better in every way. In speaking of Jesus in ch. 8:4 it says, 'If he were on earth he would not be a priest, seeing there are priests that offer gifts according to the law (of Moses)'. If there was no place for Christ to serve in office, or sacrificial gifts to offer as an earthly priest, how much less for any ministering in his Church to offer sacrifices on behalf of a Christian laity! The only other Christian priesthood referred to in the New Testament is where the word is used metaphorically to describe the ministry of the whole believing people set in an unbelieving world.

If we try to read the New Testament in its own light, and not so much in the light of later ecclesiastical developments, not just the early Church but also the whole of Jesus' own ministry takes on the character of what we may term a layperson's religious movement, rather than a priestly-clerical institution. Not only was Jesus himself a layperson, in Jewish terms, but so were his disciples (if we disregard some conjectures on John's family connections). The Lord's Prayer has the character of a layperson's prayer, simple, direct and brief; and even it had to be elicited from Jesus by the disciples so as to keep up with those of John the Baptist. There is none of that detailed instruction on ceremonial rites and rules, set actions, clothing, words, etc., such as are found prescribed in the Old Testament, or the roughly contemporaneous Dead Sea Scrolls, such as might be expected in the training of disciples. And Jesus' own attendances at the temple in Jerusalem or regularly at synagogue are treated incidentally rather than centrally to his mission.

How then did priesthood come to be the most widespread office in the New Testament Church - with twenty references to five each for bishops and deacons? The most obvious explanation is that, seeing how organised religions everywhere around them involved priests providing sacrificial services for their worshippers,

and as the Christian community grew and spread in competition with them, so it developed more of the customary forms of institutionalised religion in a Christianised form. The fellowship sacrament of the Lord's Supper became a sacrificial substitute, ritually performed for the benefit of worshippers by substitute priests.

### **Presbyterian Presbyters**

But if Biblical presbyters were not to function as priests, what was their office? In our form of Presbyterianism we too are inclined to seize on one text, interpreted in a particular way - namely I Timothy 5:17, 'Let the elders (presbyters) who rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in word and doctrine (i.e. in preaching and teaching)'. As a passing comment this is a slim basis for defining two distinct, permanent offices in the Church - interpreted as being the 'teaching elder', worthy of double honour, presiding over a number of co-operative 'ruling elders'. It should be noted first that it is not the teaching elder as such who is worthy of double honour, but all the elders who rule well, with the teaching thrown in as a special example.

There is no inherent reason why this text should be singled out and treated pivotally when compared with others which tell of a variety of descriptive offices in the early Church. These include what we might now interpret as the 'missionary' apostles, prophetic preachers and teachers, shepherding pastors, supervising bishops and ministering deacons. Paul's letters also list with these a variety of gifts or gifted persons provided for the Church's benefit, such as miracles, gifts of healing, helps, governments, diversities of tongues (I Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11; Rom. 12:6-8 etc.) All these titles are descriptive of particular functions or services being provided. The one exception is the presbyter, itself simply meaning an older, senior man, a church elder.

Elders are referred to in the life of Israel, both in the Old Testament and the New; and they are to be found in many societies as the natural local leaders of their communities, usually functioning as a representative, responsible group. Biblically it

seems significant that they had no part in the liturgical rituals or religious organisation of Israel. In so far as anything in Israel's vocation as God's chosen people could be termed secular, theirs was a secular office, lacking in the sacral overtones of royalty. Yet this was the title chosen for the formal office round which the early Church was organised, not only locally but also in Jerusalem in association with the apostles (Acts 14:23; 15:6 etc.)

The picture we are given is of a people's Church, exercising a remarkable freedom in organising its life and worship as the needs arose, and enjoying a spiritual life and fellowship both in unity and diversity. There was not so much a Church divided between clergy and laity — on the one side those who were providers of religious goods and services and on the other the people who were their customers or clients — Paul's picture of the Church is more that of a living body, in which everyone had their part to play as a vital member. These could cover a whole range of charismatic ministries or 'deaconing' services, under the 'episcopal' supervision of responsible, representative presbyter-elders drawn from the local Church.

As a religious movement the Protestant Reformation sought to recover the New Testament perspective in the context of their own contemporary world and its social and political structures. The local historical context and the individual personalities of the great Reformers contributed to the variety of forms this took, read back into the world of the New Testament. Presbyterian Churchmanship still bears the marks of its formative period in the bourgeois societies of the self-governing city states of Switzerland and the leadership of an independent minded gentry in France, the Netherlands and Scotland etc. It still bears the marks, too, of John Calvin's scholarly, not to say schoolmasterish, temperament, in which he seems to see the Church in the model of a school for Christians, or more theoretically and scholastically as a school for Christianity.

It was in this context that the Reformed Church sought to re-establish a version of the Biblical πρεσβύτερος-elder, by the appointment of responsible, representative leaders of the local



Christian community to share with the ministers of the Word in the oversight, government and discipline of Church life. However, despite Calvin's citation of I Timothy 5:17 (*Institutes* IV, xi, i) which he says, 'distinguishes two kinds of presbyters: those who labour in the Word, and those who do not carry on the preaching of the Word but rule well....who are appointed to supervise morals and to use the whole power of the keys,' in exercise of the Church's jurisdictional authority; it is soon clear that those who were merely ruling elders were seen as assistants to the teaching rulers, like school monitors in support, rather than the leading officers of the Church.

### **Teaching Priests?**

Many Reformed and Presbyterian theologians, in fact, have questioned whether our ruling elders are Biblical presbyters at all, or should not rather be seen in terms of the helps and governments listed in Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12, and so better termed 'Church governors' as done by the Westminster divines. For them the presbyter's office indicates only the teaching ministry. This was to create a new class of clergy set in contrast to the people, the teachers and the taught, the minister as master rather than as brother, giving rise to John Milton's punning criticism, 'New Presbyter is but old Priest writ large!' Some behaviour suggests that this may still apply.

There indeed is precedent in the history of Israel for a teaching ministry moving in to replace the priestly. Before the Exile it would appear (e.g. Jeremiah 18:18) that the temple priests were also responsible for instruction in the 'law', so that the destruction of the temple and exile in Babylon could only emphasise this aspect of their ministry, to be exemplified in Ezra, priest and scribe. It was this side of Jewish religion, based on the synagogue which developed up to Jesus' time, despite the rebuilding of the Second and Third Temples, and which has continued up to our own day, ministered to by Rabbinic scholar teachers - a title sometimes even given to Jesus in his lifetime.

It is clear too that there was a recognised ministry of teachers in the early Church (Acts 13:1; Rom.12:7; I Cor. 12:28 etc.) though, except for I Tim. 5:17, there is no particular association of this ministry with the office of presbyter-elder. When it came to naming this office, so basic to its regular organisation, the Church no more adopted the accustomed descriptive title Teacher than it did that of Priest. This should suggest that the essential function of the presbyter lay elsewhere.

### **Episcopal Elders and Diaconal Ministers**

It is a question of what really constitutes the Christian Church. Is it primarily, essentially, an agency for providing religious rituals, a juridical authority, an institution for promulgating a doctrinal system, or a fellowship of men and women who are living their lives with their Father-God through Jesus in the Spirit he has given. If the last, then its most representative 'face' is to be found, not in a priestly hierarchy headed by a pope, nor in a set of theologically trained professional teaching ministers, but in the dedicated representative layman or laywoman, the Church elder. I suspect that God, if indeed he is anything like Jesus, is far less interested in what many think of as 'religion', its rituals and dogmatic niceties, than are many of its devotees. Human life from the first was his creation, and more abundant life the purpose of salvation.

The Biblical Presbyter then is primarily the lay elder drawn from the local community rather than a specialist brought in from outside. And he or she is called to be a 'ruling' elder, a supervisor of the Christian life and work of that Christian community to which they themselves belong or where, in Biblical terminology, they have been called and appointed to function as 'bishops'. This is not to suggest that the elders should themselves be trying to provide all the ministerial services which the Christian life and work, worship and witness of the Church requires. There is every need for all our present ministries and more, both full and part time workers for the Church, in their most honourable diaconal services.

Can we get back to such a Church in today's world? An obvious first step would be to build up our present ruling eldership both in status and significance, in character and responsibility. A symbolic move would be to have ruling elders as Moderators of our Church courts, beginning with Kirk Sessions. This might help the public image of the Church as a people's Church rather than the minister's! Ruling elders then might be expected normally to preside at public worship, even if the actual preaching and praying were regularly left with those whose gifts and training for such ministries had been recognised officially through Church ordination. Indeed it would be a prime function of such eldership to try to mobilise the gifts and services of all the members, rather than vainly trying to cover all the field of services themselves. They should not try nor be expected to be 'mini' ministers!

### **But Would this Work?**

Might such an organisation then be practicable and effective? Something like it, some would say, has been followed for centuries by the Quakers or Society of Friends, later by the Brethren, and more recently in the Christian Fellowships or House Church movement. Yet these have tended to remain select sects rather than broad based Churches. And it might be argued that this kind of organisation would be particularly exposed to the dangers of heresy and schism. Even the New Testament Churches were not immune to such stresses, as shown for example in Paul's letters to the Corinthians, John's to the seven Churches in Asia, or when III John 9 speaks of 'Diotrephes, who loveth to have the pre-eminence'. Again and again strong-willed individuals have arisen to dominate and disrupt Church life, within both the most orthodox Churches and informal Christian fellowships.

Other objections of principle may be raised. There are those for whom Christianity and Church life are essentially things to be received and accepted, as from God who sent us Jesus, so from Jesus through his chain of personal representatives. These are people for whom the Holy Spirit characteristically is transmitted rather than shared in the Church. Others equally hold that it is the Word of God, speaking through the Scriptures and working through

the Holy Spirit, that gives faith; that it is the Word and Spirit which thus constitute the Church and which must rule. Then it is the minister of the Word that should be the key office bearer, providing his authoritative, ordained interpretation and application of that Word.

These may be sincerely held convictions. Yet clergy and ministers would not be human if we did not recognise that personal considerations and vested interest also may cloud our judgement. Even if we were to continue serving the Church much as at present, would we not lose out in prestige, in exercise of power, even maybe financially, if ours became seen only as 'deacon's ministries'? And could the ruling elders, chosen from among the people, really be trusted with the responsibilities and the duties as well as us? Think of the difficulty we so often have in getting suitable people to accept the eldership; so could they afford the time and energy to undertake a larger role? Would they not be handicapped by ignorance or bigotry, by worldliness, or their own local family connections and alliances and vested business or professional interests? As Jesus said, 'A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country and among his own people!' When Kirk sessions almost ruled the land (or Bishop's courts, or the Inquisition) were not Christian grace and love too often hard to find?

Some doubts might not only trouble ministers but be echoed also by Church members. Would we get as good, as open-minded, open-handed, open-hearted service from such an organisation? How would such a Church stand up in comparison and competition with others? Think of the problems of publicity even for our present Moderators compared with Bishops, etc.! How far, indeed, have we faced the impact of 'professionalism' upon Christian attitudes in general, and on the organisation of Church life and work in particular, when a second or third rate professional can so often achieve more than a gifted 'amateur'.

### **Does it Matter?**

Yet in the end we must also ask how far our controversies on Church government and ministerial order really matter. Also how

far should we still be striving to preserve or to restore the forms these took in previous centuries, or even in New Testament times. For the New Testament itself seems to set us an example of flexibility in these matters, of adaptability to local needs and circumstances, just as it shows a significant lack of that preoccupation with and detailed prescription for the Church's ministry and government, such as have marked Church life in later times, or in the Church of the Old Testament.

If the bottom line, the Biblical test, is to be found in the saying 'By their fruits ye shall know them' what should our verdict be? Christian faith and life has flourished under many forms and arrangements: though whether because of or in spite of these may be debated. Most, if not all of them, have also operated at times to distort, mislead and burden believers. We may debate the relative merits or correctness of our respective systems, their relative success in producing lives which are manifestly related to and revealing of Christ Jesus as Lord and Saviour, but it is hardly possible to argue that any of these, pragmatically considered, is automatically, universally successful, or any of these is automatically, universally a failure. Perhaps these things only matter when people think they matter greatly — and then they usually matter in an adverse way.

A. J. Weir.