

The Rise of the Clergy

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As we have seen in other articles, none of the first-century local churches were governed by "monarchical bishops" (i.e., "traditional one-man pastors"). Nor was the episcopate considered the upper echelon of a well-defined Clerical Order which governed "the laity." But if this is so, where did we get the idea that churches are to be ruled by "the pastor" and the elders, assisted by the deacons? And why do we talk about "laymen" (non-professional ministers) in the church? In this article we will flesh out the picture from a historical perspective, digging through layer after layer of ecclesiastical tradition to see how this paradigm formed and what its consequences were for the life of the church.

Church Leadership in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the terms "bishop" or "overseer" (*episkopos*), "elder" or "presbyter" (*presbuteros*) and "pastor" (*poimen*) are synonymous (Acts 20:17,28; Tit. 1:5,7; 1Pet. 5:1,2). The terms are used interchangeably. Never did one bishop/elder/pastor lead a church; these leaders were always plural in number,¹ and they led as servants by way of example rather than as worldly lords (1Pet. 5:1-5; cf. Mat. 20:25-28; Mk 10:42-45).

"The bishops and presbyters seem to be much the same (cf. Tit. 1:5,7ff)," writes Günther Bornkamm of the Pastoral Epistles, but he echoes a popular opinion when he goes on to write:

Yet the bishop [in the Pastorals] is always in the singular and the presbyters are always plural (even in Tit. 1:5ff). Already, then, there may be a tendency for a leading presbyter to take over administrative functions within the presbyterial college – the probable starting point for the later development of the monarchical bishop.²

As Hermann W. Beyer notes, however, "the use of the singular in 1Tim. 3:2 and Tit. 1:7 does not mean that there is only one bishop in each church; it is simply a reference to the bishop as a type. The point of the office is service rather than power." ³ Beyer goes on to write:

During the second century, however, the single bishop, distinguished from the presbyters, gradually achieves precedence (cf. Ignatius of Antioch). While providing stronger leadership, *this system tends to produce authoritarian bishops in direct antithesis to the recommendations to elders in 1Pet. 5:2-3.* ⁴

What is it that we find in the second century? What did Ignatius of Antioch teach about church authority? How widespread was his view, and why did he teach it?

Ignatius of Antioch

In the first part of the second century Ignatius, the bishop of Syrian Antioch, wrote several letters while being escorted under armed guard to Rome where he was to be martyred. In

¹ Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2,4,6,22,23; 16:4; 20:17,18; 21:18; Phil. 1:1; 1Tim. 5:7; Tit. 1:5; Heb. 13:17; Jas. 5:14.

² Geoffrey W. Bromily, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Abridged in One Volume (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 1985, reprint 1986, p. 933.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 248, emphasis mine.

his letters we encounter for the first time an ecclesiology which exalts one "bishop" over the rest of the "presbytery." In the opening of his letter to the Philadelphians, he wrote about the importance of "unity with the bishop, the presbyters, and the deacons." "It is therefore necessary that," he wrote to the Trallians, "as ye indeed do, so without the bishop ye should do nothing, but should also be subject to the presbytery" (*Tr.* 2:2).⁵

The language of obedience to the bishop and the presbyters is notably pronounced in his letters. "Your bishop presides in the place of God," he wrote to the Magnesians, "and your presbyters in the place of the apostles, along with your deacons." (*Mag.* 46:1). To the Ephesians he wrote: "It is manifest, therefore, that we should look upon the bishop even as we would upon the Lord Himself" (*Eph.* 6:1; cp. *Sm.* 9:1).

In his commentary on Ignatius, William R. Schoedel downplays this language, arguing that Ignatius does not actually place the bishop in the place of God but depicts him rather as one sent by God.⁶ Thus, though Ignatius' language may anticipate the exalted view of episcopal authority we encounter in later centuries, it is not as far developed. Even so, however, we have definitely moved beyond the ecclesiology of the New Testament. Never did Paul exhort Christians to obey "the bishop."

How widespread was this view of the monarchical bishop? Clearly it was not universal. Ignatius himself wrote of Christians who acted independently of the monarchical bishop (*Mag.* 4:1). In his letter to the Philippians, Polycarp (a contemporary of Ignatius) did not even recognize a single bishop in contrast to the presbyters (*Phil.* salu.; 5:3; 6:1).

Lastly, why did Ignatius use such strong language about "the bishop"? Commentators have frequently pointed out that Ignatius experienced no small amount of conflict in his own church. As an unpopular bishop, he certainly had a vested interest in writing about episcopal authority! "In any event," Schoedel writes, "a threat to Ignatius' authority by some Antiochene Christians evidently played a significant role in determining what Ignatius was to do and to say."⁷

The elevation of monarchical bishops within local churches is hardly surprising in light of human nature. As the Israelites clamored for a human king, so do many Christians. What is interesting is how early this worldly phenomenon was manifested in the church. Within only years of the death of its last apostle, the church saw the initial emergence of an ecclesiological system which was to have devastating consequences. The creation of a new caste of Christians was not far behind.

"Clergy" and "Laity"

In the New Testament, the Greek word *kleros* can mean "lot" (as in "casting lots") or "that which is assigned by lot, portion, share."⁸ Paul wrote that God has enabled Christians "to share in the inheritance (*klerou*) of the saints in the light" (Col. 1:12, NRSV). Christians

⁵ Cp. Ignatius, *Eph.* 2:2: "that, being subject to the bishop and the presbytery, ye may in all respects be sanctified."

⁶ William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 1985, pp. 22,23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸ Arndt & Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press), 1957, reprint 1963, p. 436.

are "heirs (*kleronomoi*) according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29, NRSV). In this sense, all Christians constitute "the clergy."⁹

The Greek word *laos* means "people." All Christians collectively make up the *laos* or people of God;¹⁰ it is a title of honor. In this sense, all Christians constitute "the laity." Thus, in earliest Christianity we do not find a distinction between "clergy" and "laity." According to the New Testament, all Christians are the people of God, heirs of salvation.

The Greek word for "laity" is *laikos*, from the term *laos*. The New Testament never uses this term. Remarkably, we find it only once in all the Christian literature prior to the third century.¹¹ In the fortieth chapter of his letter to the Corinthians, Clement of Rome (writing at the tail end of the first century) illustrates the need for church order by appealing to Old Covenant protocol. God's "peculiar services," he writes, "are assigned to the high priest, and their own proper place is prescribed to the priests, and their own special ministrations devolve on the Levites. The layman is bound by the laws that pertain to laymen" (*1 Cl.* 40:5). Although he used the term "laity" or "laymen" in describing the Old Covenant system, however, he did not use it in reference to Christians. Nor did he conceive of a class of Christians who are not actively involved in ministry (*1 Cl.* 41:1). The existence of a Christian "laity" was unknown to Clement.

The idea was unknown, in fact, throughout the second century. Ironically, Justin Martyr is frequently called "a layman" for the simple fact that he was not a bishop. Clearly this is anachronistic, for Justin would not have – in fact, could not have – perceived himself in this way.¹² Similarly, Irenaeus took seriously the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers: "all the righteous possess the sacerdotal rank" (*Adv. Haer.* IV.8.3).

Like *laikos*, the term *kleros* was not frequently used during the second century. We find it used mainly in reference to martyrs of the first part of the century; Polycarp's lot or destiny (*kleros*), as was that of Ignatius, was to be joined to Christ by martyrdom.¹³ With this exception, writes Alexandre Faivre:

We have to wait until the beginning of the third century before encountering the term *kleros* used to describe a limited group within the Christian community. It was only then that certain Christian ministers became clergy. It was also at that time that the term "layman" came to be employed again. This was not purely by chance. By analogy with the Old Testament layman, the Christian layman – insofar as there was any desire to admit his existence at all – could only be defined negatively.¹⁴

What church structure do we find in the third century? How did that structure develop, and why?

⁹ Alexandre Faivre, *The Emergence of the Laity in the Early Church*, trans. by David Smith (New York: Paulist Press), 1990, pp. 5,6. Cf. also Matt. 5:5; 19:29; 25:34; Mark 10:17; Luke 10:25; 18:18; Acts 7:5; 20:32; Rom. 8:17; 1 Cor. 6:9,10; 15:50; Gal. 3:18,29; 4:7,30; 5:21; Eph. 1:11,14,18; 5:5; Col. 3:24; Tit. 3:7; Heb. 1:4,14; 6:12,17; 9:15; 12:17; Jas. 2:5; 1Pet. 1:4; 3:9; 5:3; Rev. 21:7.

¹⁰ Luke 1:17; Acts 15:14; 18:10; Rom. 9:25; Tit. 2:14; Heb. 4:9; 1Pet. 2:9,10; Rev. 18:4; 21:3.

¹¹ Faivre, pp. 15ff.

¹² Faivre, pp. 26-31.

¹³ *Mart. Pol.* 6:2; Cf. *Tr.* 12:3; *Rom.* 1:2; *Phd.* 5:1.

¹⁴ Faivre, p. 23.

The Third Century Church

In the third century, we find that the Bishop, Presbyters, and Deacons together make up the "Clerical Order" as distinguished from "the laity" (Cf. Tertullian, *Monog.* 11,12). Clement of Alexandria referred to "bishops, presbyters, deacons" as "grades here in the Church" (*Strom.*, VI.13), the episcopate being the highest. His disciple Origen "refused to place the laity on an equal footing with the clergy," writes Faivre. He goes on to write that in Origen's works there is "a hierarchical scale in knowledge and perfection progressing from the laity and up to the members of the clergy. Priests had in principle to be perfect in their knowledge of doctrine as well as in their behavior and in virtue."¹⁵

Although Tertullian of Carthage distinguished "the clergy" from "the laity," we should note that unlike some of his contemporaries, he did not regard "the clergy" as superior to "the laity." In his work *On Monogamy* he argued extensively that what should be expected of "the clergy" should also be expected of "the laity," since they are on an equal footing, and since "laymen" may one day become "clergy." "If *all* are not bound to monogamy," he writes, "whence are monogamists (to be taken) into the clerical rank? Will some separate order of monogamists have to be instituted, from which to make selection for the clerical body?" (*Monog.* 12).

Tertullian also believed that "laymen" were fully qualified to perform clerical functions if expedience required it (this viewpoint did not last long in the church). Writing on the administering of baptism, he wrote that:

the chief priest (who is the bishop) has the right: in the next place, the presbyters and deacons.... Beside these, even laymen have the right; for what is equally received can be equally given. Unless bishops, or priests, or deacons, be on the spot, *other* disciples are called, *i.e. to the work* (*Bapt.* 17).¹⁶

Of course this privilege did not extend to women: "It is not permitted to a *woman* to speak in the church; but neither (is it permitted her) to teach, nor to baptize, nor to claim to herself a lot in any manly function, not to say (in any) sacerdotal office" (*Virg. Veland.* 9).

We do find an ecclesiastical "Order of Widows" in the third century church (cf. *Monog.* 11), but their status appears to have ambiguous. Although they were given respect, it appears that their ministry consisted mainly of praying for the church (*Apost. Trad.* 10), the very thing all Christians were to do. We also find "deaconesses" in the third century (*Const. Apost.* 2.26), women who could carry out some of the functions of the diaconate when inappropriate for men, such as visiting other women and assisting the bishop in the baptism of women (ritual nakedness was part of the ceremony; cf. *Const. Apost.* 3.15). The deaconess was not, however, considered part of "the Clerical Order." Neither was she part of "the laity." Significantly, no writer of the third century ever applied this term to women.

The fact that women were not even considered part of "the laity" is very informative and helps us to understand the role of "the layman" in the third century. As the head and financial manager of his household, "the layman's" primary ministry was the financial support of the church. The bishop, of course, was the head and financial manager of the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁶ We may also note that in the next chapter Tertullian discouraged infant baptism.

church, distributing funds to the clergy, widows, orphans, and others who were officially supported by the church. The bishop was in fact the "patron" of his church.¹⁷

The economic function of the bishop in the church was conceived wholly in Old Covenant categories (where else could the church have found a working model for its developing institutionalism?). Cyprian of Carthage argued that "every one honoured by the divine priesthood, and ordained in the clerical service, ought to serve only the altar and sacrifices, and to have leisure for prayers and supplications." He then wrote of:

The form of which ordination and engagement the Levites formerly observed under the law...Which plan and rule is now maintained in respect of the clergy, that they who are promoted by clerical ordination in the Church of the Lord may be called off in no respect from the divine administration, nor be tied down by worldly anxieties and matters; but in the honour of the brethren who contribute, receiving as it were tenths of the fruits, they may not withdraw from the altars and sacrifices, but may serve day and night in heavenly and spiritual things (*Epistle*65.1).

As the priest of the church, the monarchical bishop rapidly assumed near-divine status. The exalted role Ignatius had ascribed to the bishop barely holds a candle to that described in the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*¹⁸:

The bishop, he is the minister of the word, the keeper of knowledge, the mediator between God and you in the several parts of your divine worship. He is the teacher of piety; and, next after God, he is your father, who has begotten you again to the adoption of sons by water and the Spirit. He is your ruler and governor; he is your king and potentate; he is, next after God, your earthly god, who has a right to be honoured by you.... let the bishop preside over you as one honoured with the authority of God, which he is to exercise over the clergy, and by which he is to govern all the people (2.26).

Another factor that separated "the laity" from "the clergy" was the growing horizontal communication between bishops in making important decisions, an effective tool in uniting the churches in a time of persecution. This communication may have strengthened the overall unity of the structural church, but it certainly weakened the influence of "the laity."¹⁹ "The clergy" also assumed responsibilities (such as the education of the church) which helped turn an institutional barrier into a cultural barrier as well.

The Fourth Century and Beyond

With the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century came a number of other unhealthy developments, not least of which was the increased appropriation of Roman politics. Extensive legal privileges (including complete tax exemption) turned the priesthood into a lucrative and rewarding career. Bishops drifted even further from the congregations they "served," often leaving smaller churches for more prestigious ones. As

¹⁷ Cf. Faivre, pp. 97-104.

¹⁸ The largest collection of ecclesiastical law that survived from early Christianity. Supposedly compiled by Clement I, c. 97, and preserved by Clement of Alexandria, c. 180. It is now believed written in Syria about AD 380 by one compiler, probably an Arian (who believes that Christ is not divine but a created being). The first six of its eight books are an adaptation of the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, written in Syria about AD 250.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 126-128.

"the clergy" continued to develop, so did the concept of "the laity," which at this time was defined more broadly to include all non-clerics – including women.

As the church became more hierarchical and bureaucratic – in a word, more worldly – many Christians responded by embracing monasticism. Created in the fourth century as a "lay" movement, it soon precipitated the very thing Tertullian had feared – a special class of Christians within the church from whom "the clergy" could recruit its members.²⁰ Monk-priests began to fill the ranks of "the clergy," touting their asceticism and questioning family values. As "the clergy" continued to drift apart from "the laity," the church's hierarchy continued to evolve. The church catholic was rapidly becoming the Roman Catholic Church. As Earle E. Cairns has observed:

It was but a short step to the recognition that the monarchical bishops of some churches were more important than others. The exaltation of the monarchical bishop by the middle of the second century soon led to the recognition of the special honor due to the monarchical bishop of the church in Rome.²¹

Observations

In scrutinizing the origins of the monarchical bishop and the "clergy/laity" distinction, we may note many points of similarity to our own churches. The twentieth-century church is most like the third- and fourth- century church in many ways. First, our congregations are governed by lone leaders (pastors) who are considered superior to the other elders in the church. These monarchical bishops or traditional pastors possess the highest rank within the church. "Lay people" may often take lower church offices and work their way up through the ranks, toiling first as deacons and then being "promoted" to elders.

Second, "the pastor" is the omnicompetent administrator, teacher, evangelist, theologian, and counselor, the paternalistic authority figure in the church. Recruited from the ranks of budding seminarians, his education is wholly different from – if not superior to – that of "the laity." His ministry is a career; his pastorates are rarely permanent, and rarely does he truly unite with the people of the church.

Third, the development of this model of church government was entirely utilitarian; worldly authority structures offered expedient solutions to the church's administrative problems. Thus we should not be surprised that to this day nonbiblical ecclesiologies are often defended on purely utilitarian and pragmatic grounds.

What is most tragic, however, is the theological implication of this development. As we have seen, this ecclesiological structure was clearly patterned after the Old Covenant. Where else could one find a model of church government which exalted a priesthood over the rest of the people? In practical terms, this meant a resounding denial of the priesthood of all believers and the exaltation of Old Covenant principles in clear opposition to the New Covenant. Is it any wonder that so many churches deny the grace of God at so many points?

Note: All quotations from the Church Fathers are taken from Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, editors, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

²¹ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House), 1954, rev. 1967, reprinted 1978, p. 124.