

Presbyters and the Development of Church Offices

John-Christian Eurell

To cite this article: John-Christian Eurell (2023) Presbyters and the Development of Church Offices, Journal of Early Christian History, 13:2, 22-36, DOI: [10.1080/2222582X.2023.2279656](https://doi.org/10.1080/2222582X.2023.2279656)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2222582X.2023.2279656>



© 2023 The Author(s). Co-published by Unisa Press and Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 20 Nov 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 43



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Presbyters and the Development of Church Offices

John-Christian Eurell

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1212-6490>

Umeå University, Sweden

john-christian.eurell@umu.se

Abstract

This article questions two central presuppositions of recent research on early Christian ecclesial office. It argues that bishops and presbyters should not be too readily equated and that ecclesial office was not as closely connected to the providers of liturgical space (owners of house churches) as is often assumed.

Keywords: bishop; deacon; elders; episcopacy; office; Pastorals; presbyter



Journal of Early Christian History

www.tandfonline.com/RECH

Volume 13 | Number 2 | 2023 | pp. 22–36

<https://doi.org/10.1080/2222582X.2023.2279659>

ISSN 2471-4054 (Online), ISSN 2222-582X (Print)

© The Author(s) 2023



Published by Unisa Press and Taylor and Francis. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Introduction

The development of ecclesial offices in the earliest Christian era is a long-standing area of dispute. Although bishops, presbyters, and deacons are all mentioned in the New Testament, scholars are hesitant to read the tripartite (post)Ignatian structure into the earliest Christian documents. Furthermore, it is disputed whether or not bishops and presbyters should be viewed as separate offices. The most recent comprehensive study on the subject is Alistair C. Stewart's *Original Bishops*,¹ which argues that the early bishops were in fact leaders of house churches, who would be referred to as presbyters in regional gatherings. Stewart's study is highly commendable in many regards, but I find evidence for two of its central claims wanting, namely that bishops were leaders of house churches and that presbyters were in fact a regional synod of bishops. Rather, I will argue that presbyters are an older category of leaders that is not synonymous with the later bishops, but also that ecclesial office was separate from the patronage of wealthy house owners.

Scholarly Background

The consensus position on the development of church offices has until recently been that the terms *πρεσβύτερος* and *ἐπίσκοπος* were synonymous in the early church, and that the *ἐπίσκοπος* with time emerged as the leader of the *πρεσβύτεροι*.² As I have already pointed out, Stewart has challenged this consensus and argued that the leaders of the earliest Christian house church communities were in fact called bishops, whereas these same bishops could function as *πρεσβύτεροι* in regional gatherings.³ Stewart thus maintains the close connection between both groups, but challenges the conceptions of the order and manner in which these offices developed. Stewart thus modifies the consensus from (at least) the time of J. B. Lightfoot that *πρεσβύτερος* and *ἐπίσκοπος* are synonymous,⁴ and rather claims that they are peronyms. At the same time, there is also another scholarly tendency claiming *πρεσβύτερος* to be an honorary title rather than an office, which is quite convincing.⁵ Below we look at the earliest Christian references to *πρεσβύτερος* and *ἐπίσκοπος* and suggest that these terms are of different origin and

-
- 1 Alistair C. Stewart, *Original Bishops: Office and Order in the First Christian Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014).
 - 2 This consensus is of rather old date. See Olof Linton, *Das Problem der Urkirche in der neueren Forschung: Eine kritische Darstellung* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1932); Jochen Wagner, *Die Anfänge des Amtes in der Kirche: Presbyter und Episkopen in der frühchristlichen Literatur* (Tübingen: Francke, 2011).
 - 3 Stewart, *The Original Bishops*.
 - 4 Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Macmillan, 1881), 95–99; so more recently Benjamin L. Merkle, "The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2000).
 - 5 Cf. Joachim Jeremias, "ΠΡΕΣΒΥΤΕΡΙΟΝ außerchristliche bezeugt," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 45 (1957): 127–32; R. Alastair Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1994), in a Jewish pre-Christian context, but in opposition to Merkle, "The Elder and Overseer," 47–51, argued by Stewart, *The Original Bishops*, 139–40, also to be true in an Hellenistic context.

do not have a direct connection to the provision of space in homes for liturgical gatherings.

The Earliest Developments and Origins of the Presbyterate

The titles of the offices mentioned in the early church are not static over time, but rather develop. Our earliest reference to church leaders is found in 1 Thessalonians, which refers to them as “those who labour among you, those who rule over you in the Lord and those who admonish you” (τοὺς κοπιῶντας ἐν ὑμῖν καὶ προϊσταμένους ὑμῶν ἐν κυρίῳ καὶ νουθετοῦντας ὑμᾶς; 1 Thess 5:12). The untechnical language of this letter is symptomatic of its early date. Rather than using fixed titles, Paul refers to people in the church by describing their ministry with verbs.⁶ One might wonder why titles were not assigned to leading figures in the churches right away, but considering the imminent eschatology of the letter, it is not surprising that such definitions were not prioritised.⁷ The same tendency prevails in much of the other undisputed Paulines (cf. Rom 12:8; 1 Cor 12:28).

However, the rather general reference to leaders in the church is not confined to the earliest writings, but can be found also in later texts. Hebrews refers to “your leaders” (τοῖς ἡγουμένοις ὑμῶν; 13:17), and the same designation can be found in 1 Clem 1.3. Since Clement later refers to bishops and deacons, the use of non-specific language should not be taken to indicate ignorance of the existence of office titles, but rather as a general reference to leaders in the church. This might indicate two things. First, leaders might be a larger group than simply bishops, deacons, and the like. Secondly, it might indicate that the ordained ministries were thought of as primarily functional, and therefore could be spoken of in general terms as the “leaders.”

If we take the New Testament accounts of the Jerusalem church to be indications of the earliest church structure, we may note that the tradition of James leading the church in Jerusalem in conjunction with a group of elders comes across as rather widespread at an early stage. According to Acts, the church was originally headed by the twelve apostles themselves, who with time ordained seven deacons to help them with their practical ministry (Acts 6:1–7). Despite the author of Acts introducing the offices of apostle⁸ and deacon in the Jerusalem church, it is not to these office bearers that Barnabas and Saul turn to bring help from Antioch, but rather to the presbyters of the church (Acts 11:30), although the twelve appear to still be in Jerusalem.

6 So similarly also in Rom 12:7–8.

7 On eschatological developments in the New Testament, see John-Christian Eurell, “The Delay of the Parousia and the Changed Function of Eschatological Language,” *Journal of Early Christian History* 10 (2020): 61–80.

8 On the apostolate in Acts, see John-Christian Eurell, *Peter’s Legacy in Early Christianity: The Appropriation and Use of Peter’s Authority in the First Three Centuries* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 58–59.

It is also worth noting that the church in Antioch does not appear to have a church structure that corresponds to that of Jerusalem. While it is stated that the church in Antioch had prophets and teachers (Acts 13:1), this does not suggest that these functions were generally thought of as ordained ministries.⁹ As Erich Fascher pointed out, the prophets and teachers were probably—just as Barnabas, Paul, Jude Barsabbas, and Silas—considered ἡγούμενοι in the church at Antioch (cf. Acts 15:22).¹⁰ Although it is possible that ἡγούμενοι and πρεσβύτεροι are roughly equivalent in meaning, this cannot be precluded. The decree of Jerusalem was not handed over to specific clergy, but rather to the “brethren” (Acts 15:30–31). Yet, it is evident that the prophets and teachers spoken of in 13:1 were present, since Jude and Silas immediately start prophesying and edifying the brethren (15:32). This suggests that both Jerusalem and Antioch at an early stage had loosely defined groups of leaders referred to as πρεσβύτεροι and ἡγούμενοι, respectively.

Despite the terminological difference between Jerusalem and Antioch, the author of Acts deems it self-evident that presbyters are a constitutional element for a local church. Therefore, he states that Paul and Barnabas ordain presbyters in every church on their mission trip (Acts 14:23). Interestingly, it is stated that they appointed κατ’ ἐκκλησίαν πρεσβυτέρους, thus resembling the formulation found in Titus 1:5 where Paul urges Titus to appoint κατὰ πόλιν πρεσβυτέρους.

The most common designation of church leaders in the New Testament is that of πρεσβύτεροι. Regardless of whether one views it as an office or a title of honour, the term itself is admittedly pre-Christian. Not only does the Septuagint state that Moses had 70 πρεσβύτεροι (Num 11:16) and πρεσβύτεροι feature frequently in the Hebrew Bible, but the Gospels also mention the “traditions of the elders” (τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν πρεσβυτέρων; Mark 7:3), and Acts speaks of “rulers, presbyters, and scribes” in Jerusalem (τοὺς ἄρχοντας καὶ τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους καὶ τοὺς γραμματεῖς; Acts 4:5). Furthermore, 2–3 John are sent from ὁ πρεσβύτερος, and Revelation speaks of 24 heavenly presbyters (4:4, 10; 5:6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4), thus echoing the heavenly court in Isa 24:23.¹¹ Because of such factors, it is commonly believed that the early Christian churches inherited the presbyters from the Jewish synagogal structure.¹² However, evidence is lacking that there was a presbyterial structure in the Jewish synagogues that could be copied by the early Christians.¹³ On the other hand, πρεσβύτερος is a word used in a honorific sense for some members of Graeco-Roman

9 If these charismatic ministries were thought of in terms of mandatory official offices, it would be strange to put it this way. Rather, the presence of these charismatic ministers was something that was valued as a special resource in the church at Antioch.

10 Erich Fascher, *ΠΡΟΦΗΤΗΣ: Eine sprach- und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Gießen: Töpelmann, 1927), 184.

11 It should be noted that John does not write to any of the leaders of the seven churches holding the conventional titles of ordained ministry, but rather to the angels/messengers of the churches.

12 Stewart, *The Original Bishops*, 123, traces the origination of this hypothesis to Edward Stillingfleet, *Irenicum: A Weapon-Salve for the Churches Wounds* (London: Mortlock, 1662).

13 Stewart, *The Original Bishops*, 122–34.

associations of the time.¹⁴ In general, contemporary research has a tendency of viewing the development of the early Christian communities in light of Graeco-Roman associations rather than the synagogue.¹⁵ Considering that synagogues were often organised as associations at the time, there need not be a contradiction between the two.

Regardless of the exact origin of the term, it is evident that presbyters played a significant role in the government of the early church. If we look first at the Jerusalem church, Acts tells us that it was at an early stage headed by the twelve apostles and a group of presbyters (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22; 16:4). This suggests that not only the apostles, but also the presbyters were a clearly identifiable group of people in Jerusalem. However, it must also be noted that James has a special role in the account. He is not one of the twelve, and therefore likely to be regarded as one of the presbyters. However, he is clearly more prominent than the other (unnamed) presbyters (cf. 15:13–21). In his parallel account in Galatians, Paul speaks of James, Cephas, and John as the “pillars” (Gal 2:9). This suggests that James already had a prominent role in Jerusalem, despite not being one of the twelve. The same phenomenon is reflected in the account of Paul’s return to Jerusalem, where he meets with “James and the presbyters” (Acts 21:18). In this instance there is a clear distinction between James and the presbyters, although an office is not ascribed to him. In addition, the letter ascribed to James refers to presbyters in 5:14 and the tradition that the Jerusalem church was governed by James in conjunction with a group of presbyters must therefore be regarded as fairly early and widespread.

I think the above evidence should suffice to support the notion that presbyters were an early and widespread (although not universal) phenomenon in the early church. Although the book of Acts was likely written at a time when ecclesial offices were more clearly defined,¹⁶ the fact that older structures for church leadership are accounted for is not only a consequence of the sources available to the author, but also an indication of a consciousness among the Christians at the time of the development that had taken place.

The Development of Ecclesial Offices

Before looking into the developments within the New Testament itself, let us take a look at the portrait of the ecclesial offices that is found among the apostolic fathers. As for 1

14 Stewart, 134–44.

15 Cf. Mathias Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft: Soziologie und Liturgie frühchristlicher Mahlfeiern* (Tübingen: Francke, 1996); Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities* (New York: Clark, 2009).

16 Acts should probably be dated to the early second century, see Richard I. Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2006); Knut Backhaus, “Zur Datierung der Apostelgeschichte: Ein Ordnungsversuch im chronologischen Chaos,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 108 (2017): 212–58.

Clement, the first unequivocal reference to a presbyterial office is found in 57.1, where those who laid the foundation of the faction are urged to be subject to the presbyters (ὑποτάγητε τοῖς πρεσβυτέροις).¹⁷ This is a clear reference to the leaders of the Corinthian church in terms of presbyters. However, when Clement writes explicitly on offices, he only speaks of bishops and deacons (ἐπισκόπους καὶ διακόνους; 1 Clem 42). In Clement's opinion, these were originally appointed by the apostles themselves in connection with their preaching κατὰ χώρας οὖν καὶ πόλεις (42.4). This corresponds fairly well to the presbyters being appointed κατὰ πόλιν in Titus 1:5 and κατ' ἐκκλησίαν πρεσβυτέρους in Acts 14:23. Clement goes so far as to claim scriptural support for these two offices, although his case cannot be said to be all that strong.¹⁸

Furthermore, Clement argues that the apostles knew that there would be strife concerning the office of bishop (ὅτι ἔρις ἔσται ἐπὶ τοῦ ὀνόματος τῆς ἐπισκοπῆς; 1 Clem 44.1) and therefore ordered that there should be a succession of bishops (44.2). Having said this, Clement exclaims: μακάριοι δι' προοδουπήσαντες πρεσβύτεροι (44.5)—the presbyters of before are blessed since they did not have to fear to be deposed. Although this could be understood as a reference to a previous body of governing elders, there is nothing in the text itself to suggest that this is the case. Rather, Clement is referring back to the example of the Levites which he has just made (1 Clem 43). An understanding of “the old” referring to the heroes of the Old Testament is further strengthened by the examples from the book of Daniel in 1 Clem 45.

In his concluding prayer, Clement prays that they be obedient to “those who rule and lead us here on earth” (τοῖς τε ἄρχουσιν καὶ ἡγουμένοις ἡμῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς; 1 Clem 60.4) and thereafter they have been given authority to rule (ἔδοκας τὴν ἐξουσίαν τῆς βασιλείας) through the power of God, thus once again underlining that the leadership of the church works by divine ordinance, although not specifying the offices. Clement's way of speaking of the offices is thus diverse, since he speaks of bishops and deacons, multiple presbyters, and unspecified leaders respectively in different contexts. The references to leaders as τοῖς τε ἄρχουσιν καὶ ἡγουμένοις and πρεσβύτεροι come across as general, whereas the discussion of bishops and deacons appears to concern specific offices.

17 There are also some other uses of πρεσβυτέρος in 1 Clement, but these are more likely to denote age than office. Thus the references in 1 Clem 1.3; 3.3; 21.6.

18 According to Clement, scripture says that καταστήσω τοὺς ἐπισκόπους αὐτῶν ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ καὶ τοὺς διακόνους αὐτῶν ἐν πίστει (1 Clem 42.5). Clement is probably quoting Isa 60:17 (LXX) from memory, which reads καὶ δώσω τοὺς ἄρχοντας σου ἐν εἰρήνῃ καὶ τοὺς ἐπισκόπους σου ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ. Thus Donald A. Hagner, *The Use of the Old and New Testaments in Clement of Rome* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 67. Craig A. Evans, “The Citation of Isaiah 60:17 in 1 Clement,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 36 (1982): 105–7, suggests that Clement has conflated Isa 60:17 with Acts 6:1–6.

If we turn to the Didache, this early text speaks only of bishops and deacons that should be elected by the church (Did. 15.1). It is specified that these are to conduct the ministry of the prophets and teachers in the local setting, but nothing is said about presbyters.

If we look instead at the Shepherd of Hermas, we find that he is asked by the elderly lady to announce certain things to “the chosen ones of God” (τοῖς ἐκλεκτοῖς τοῦ θεοῦ; Herm. Vis. 5.1(II.1)), which are later specified as the presbyters (Herm. Vis. 8.2 (II.4)). The elderly lady also extends Hermas’s mission to communicate with three entities: Clement, Grapte, and the presbyters (Herm. Vis. 8.3). Clement is to communicate with foreign cities, whereas Grapte is to admonish the widows and orphans. Hermas himself is to read the document in the city together with the presbyters who lead the church (μετὰ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων τῶν προΐσταμένων τῆς ἐκκλησίας). Whereas it is not specified that Clement and Grapte have any particular offices, it is here clearly stated that the presbyters are the leaders of the church.

In the vision of the church as a tower, the apostles, bishops, teachers, and deacons who have done their work well are portrayed as white square stones that fit nicely together (Herm. Vis. 13.5 (III.5)). Thus, also Hermas shows the ambivalence of sometimes speaking of a governing presbytery and other times of the offices of bishops and deacons (as well as apostles and teachers).

The writings of Ignatius of Antioch are also of some relevance here. Not least the distinct difference between the authentic letter *To the Romans* and the other epistles when it comes to ecclesial office is significant to note.¹⁹ In *Rom.*, Ignatius presents himself as bishop of Syria (τον ἐπίσκοπον Συρίας; Ign. *Rom.* 2.2). While reflecting upon his incumbent martyrdom, Ignatius states that the church in Syria will now instead of him have “God as its shepherd in my place” (ἀντὶ ἐμοῦ ποιμένι τῷ θεῷ) and “Jesus Christ alone will be its bishop” (μόνος αὐτὴν Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς ἐπισκοπήσει; Ign. *Rom.* 9.1). The later pseudo-Ignatian epistles speak of a monarchical bishop surrounded by a presbytery and deacons (Ign. *Eph.* 2.2; 20.2; Ign. *Magn.* 2; Ign. *Trall.* 2–3; Ign. *Philad.* Preface; 7.1; 10.2; Ign. *Smyrn.* 8.1; 12.2; Ign. *Pol.* 6.1). However, when these are read together with *Rom.* as an early document, they tend to confuse the nature of the evidence in studies of the development of ecclesial offices. These pseudo-Ignatian epistles belong to the latter half of the second century together with Hegesippus and other similar writings that emphasise the significance of the bishop.²⁰

Interestingly, the description of the bishop found in Ignatius’s letter to the Romans corresponds fairly well to what is found in 1 Peter, which is from around the same time.²¹ 1 Peter describes Christ as the ποιμένα καὶ ἐπίσκοπον τῶν ψυχῶν of the recipients (1

19 On the authenticity of the Ignatian correspondence, see John-Christian Eurell, “Ignatius, Polycarp, and Their Reception in the Second Century,” *Early Christianity* 13 (2022): 188–204.

20 See Eurell, “Ignatius” and Eurell, “The Hypomnemata of Hegesippus,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 75 (2022): 148–57.

21 See Eurell, “Ignatius.”

Pet 2:25). Although the literal sense of “guardian of souls” is likely the primary message that the author wishes to convey,²² it is plausible that Christ is at the same time portrayed as the supreme bishop. Considering that 1 Peter originates from the last third of the first century,²³ the author would naturally be aware of the developing leadership structure. The most explicit reference to church office in 1 Peter is found in 5:1–4, where Peter addresses the presbyters and identifies himself as a co-presbyter (συμπρεσβύτερος). In 5:2 there is a clear allusion to the function of Christ as shepherd and bishop in 2:25 in the urge to the presbyters to ποιμάνετε τὸ ἐν ὑμῖν ποίμνιον τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπισκοποῦντες.²⁴ The presbyters are to follow the example of Christ and be examples rather than lords (5:3). Christ is in turn called the ἀρχιποίμενος (5:4) and thus a clear connection between the office of the presbyters and Christ is made clear. It is in relationship to the image of the elders being the co-shepherds of Christ that we might also understand the reference to Peter as co-elder in 5:1.

However, it is significant to note that it is not self-evident that the presbyters of 1 Peter should be identified as ordained ministers. In 5:5, the author turns to the νεώτεροι, thus suggesting that the passage deals with age rather than with office.²⁵ However, 5:2–4 make clear that church leadership is entailed in the role of the elders, and the main conclusion that can be drawn is perhaps that the leadership of the church consisted primarily of the senior members in the community.

Based on the above survey, two conclusions may be drawn concerning presbyters in the late first and early second century. First, being a presbyter is not a clearly defined office, but rather a loosely defined title of honour that is connected with church leadership. Secondly, presbyters are referred to in parallel with offices such as bishop and deacon. There is no clear indication that the terms are synonymous, although the peronymity suggested by Stewart remains a possibility. It is significant to emphasise the difference between what we find in the writings of this early period and the more hierarchical pseudo-Ignatians. When these are viewed as authentic early second century documents, it deeply flaws the reconstruction of the development of the church offices, and this problem taints Stewart’s study to a large degree.

House Churches and Leadership

Let us now turn to the issue of whether early Christian offices are to be connected with provision of space. It is widely accepted that the earliest Christian communities met in

22 So Francis Wright Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), 125.

23 See Eurell, *Peter’s Legacy*, 126–26.

24 However, it should be noted that ἐπισκοποῦντες is text critically uncertain.

25 Although some have taken νεώτεροι to refer to an office, based on Acts 5:6, there is no reason to do so. Another theory is that it refers to those who are young in the faith, see John H. Elliott, “Ministry and Church Order in the NT: A Traditio-Historical Analysis (1 Pt 5:1–5 & plls),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32 (1970): 367–91.

homes and that the home owners therefore had significant influence over these gatherings.²⁶ It is also in the house church setting that the *paterfamilias* would work locally as bishop, and regionally as a presbyter, in Stewart's opinion.²⁷ Although I agree that the patrons of the gatherings must have been influential, I am hesitant to consider their position as that of an ecclesial office. R. Alastair Campbell argues quite convincingly that the early presbyters were in fact not office holders, but rather senior members of the community who were of proven Christian character.²⁸ His claim that the title presbyter was not used individually, but only collectively is significant and corresponds to Stewart's notion of the presbytery as regional body.

If we look at Paul's extensive number of greetings in Romans 16, we in fact only find one clear reference to a house church. Some people are clearly gathering κατ' οἶκον αὐτῶν ἐκκλησίαν of Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:5). Furthermore, Priscilla and Aquila also had a house church when they resided in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:19). Most of the greetings, however, are directed toward individuals with no indications that they would be connected to a house church. Paul indicates that there are Christians in the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus (Rom 16:10–11), but there is no indication that the leaders of these households are Christians or that Christians are gathered in these homes (Rom 16:10–11). Likewise, Philologus, Julia, Nereus, and Olympas are clearly part of a local Christian community, but there is no indication that this community is tied to a particular home (Rom 16:15).²⁹

Apart from the reoccurring house churches of Prisca and Aquila in Ephesus and Rome, we learn only of the house church of Philemon and Apphia in Colossae (Phlm 1–2) and Nympha(s) in Laodicea (Col 4:15) in the Pauline literature. In addition to this, the Acts of the Apostles locates the early eucharistic celebrations to the homes (Acts 2:46) and speaks of Christian gatherings in the homes of Mary, the mother of John Mark in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12), and Lydia in Philippi (Acts 16:40). However, there is no clear indication that either Mary or Lydia were considered ordained ministers or even elders in the communities that gathered in their homes. The Jerusalem church was clearly governed by the apostles and eventually James and a group of presbyters, and Lydia is not greeted in Paul's letter to Philippi. Also considering that most Christian communities do not appear to be connected to a particular household (cf. Rom 16) suggests that a connection between office and venue is not self-evident. Paul's Cenchrean benefactor and deacon Phoebe (Rom 16:1–2) does indeed come across as a significant figure, but is not clearly connected to local leadership in Corinth. Furthermore, Priscilla and Aquila are doubtless influential Pauline co-workers, but are

26 Cf. Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. Macdonald, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

27 Stewart, *Original Bishops*.

28 Campbell, *The Elders*.

29 James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* (Dallas: Word, 1988), 2/898, suggests that these people were in fact members of the imperial household.

never referred to as holding local office, despite their house church. The equation of ecclesial leadership with providing space for liturgical activity is thus speculative.

Not only are most of the people mentioned in Romans 16 not connected to house churches: most gatherings in Acts are not connected to a home either. Already the pre-Pentecostal Jesus believers had the habit of gathering in an upper room in Jerusalem (Acts 1:13), in addition to the frequent temple visits (Acts 2:46; 3:1, 11; 5:12, 21). The church regularly gathered at vicinities that were not connected to a certain individual (Acts 4:23)—it is unclear if this place was still the upper room or another place.³⁰ Saul stays a few days with the disciples at Damascus (Acts 9:19), but there is no mention of a specific house church. Despite the conversion of Cornelius's household (Acts 10), there is no indication that Cornelius became an ecclesial officer.³¹ We learn nothing of house church fractions in Jerusalem in Acts 15. The house of the synagogue leader Crispus is central to the Pauline mission in Corinth (Acts 18:8), but Paul does not portray him as a particular leader in the Corinthian correspondence (1 Cor 1:14).

As far as the New Testament is concerned, I do not find any compelling evidence for Campbell's equation of provider of space and ecclesial office in the texts themselves. As pointed out by Hans-Josef Klauck, it is reasonable to assume that these roles could sometimes coincide, but this can by no means be regarded as a universal condition.³² This is rather a scholarly assumption that cannot be verified. In fact, even the assumption that the early Christians primarily gathered in homes should be nuanced in relation to the biblical material. The most evident example is the upper room in Jerusalem where the apostles and other followers of Jesus initially convened (Acts 1:13). The Jerusalem council in Acts 15 is held at a vicinity not connected to any specific benefactor (although this possibility cannot be excluded). Since both Paul and the presbyters of Jerusalem later gather "to James" (πρὸς Ἰάκωβον; Acts 21:18), it might be inferred that the church was connected to his household, but this is in no way made explicit. In Ephesus, Paul bases his ministry in the auditorium of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9), and the upper room used in Troas is not connected to a specific patron (Acts 20:8).³³ I am of course aware that drawing historical evidence from Acts is problematic, but as our most specific source of early Christian history, it must be taken into consideration that equation of the provider of the venue and ecclesial office is not taken for granted in Acts, neither are homes the exclusive venues at which the early believers appear to have met.

30 As pointed out by Ernst Haenchen, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 223, the 5 000 believers mentioned in Acts 4:4 could hardly have gathered in a single vicinity, but this does not hinder that the leadership had a particular place of meeting, thus Hans Conzelmann, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 34.

31 Although there is admittedly a tradition claiming Cornelius to be the first bishop of Caesarea, there is no indication that such an episcopacy would have been house-church based.

32 See Hans-Josef Klauck, *Hausgemeinde und Hauskirche im frühen Christentum* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981), 67.

33 Furthermore, the ordination of deacons in Acts 6:1–7 does not seem to presuppose a house church organisation.

We may thus conclude that the early Christian churches—in the same manner as Graeco-Roman associations of the time—could meet in various places, not only in homes.³⁴ Considering that members of Graeco-Roman religious associations could carry various offices importance without an automatic connection between house owner and cultic responsibility,³⁵ I see no reason to presuppose that such a clear connection was made in the early Christian churches.

The Pastoral Epistles

Let us now turn to the New Testament writings that are most known in relation to the issue of ecclesial offices, namely the pastoral epistles, more specifically 1 Timothy and Titus. In relation to the above discussion, it is significant to note that 1 Timothy makes a clear connection between household management and the ministry of an ἐπίσκοπος (1 Tim 3:5–6), but also to the διάκονος (1 Tim 3:12). The connection between the household and the church is further underlined when the author speaks of the church of the living God as the οἶκος θεοῦ (1 Tim 3:15). Furthermore, he who does not take care of his own household has in fact denied the faith (1 Tim 5:8). This, however, does not make the church synonymous with the household of the provider of space which was “extended” by the other members of the church, but is rather to be thought of as an indication of the skills necessary for keeping the household of God together.³⁶ Although the church is described as a household, it is not the household of the bishop, but of God himself. From 1 Tim 3, it is clear that the author envisions bishops and deacons to be the ordained ministries leading the church. However, in 5:17, we suddenly have a reference to presbyters. The presbyters are worthy of double honour if they rule well (Οἱ καλῶς προεστῶτες πρεσβύτεροι διπλῆς τιμῆς ἀξιούσθωσαν)—especially if they labour in the word and teaching. Thus, the bishops and deacons do not appear to be alone in their leadership since presbyters can apparently “rule well” and even labour in the word and teaching. The presbyters have also been mentioned in the laying on of hands on Timothy himself (4:14). Dibelius and Conzelmann think of the presbyters as a “more or less patriarchal committee.”³⁷ This judgment fits well with the image of a group of senior members of the Christian communities that I have suggested above.

If we turn to Titus, we find that the purpose of his remaining on Crete is that he might appoint presbyters in every town (καταστήσης κατὰ πόλιν πρεσβυτέρους; Titus 1:5). In the following verse, qualifications for the presbyters are listed that resemble the

34 See Richard S. Ascough, “Forms of Commensality in Greco-Roman Associations,” *Classical World* 102 (2008): 33–45.

35 See Richard S. Ascough, “Greco-Roman Philosophic, Religious, and Voluntary Associations,” in *Community Formation in the Early Church and the Church Today*, ed. R. N. Longenecker (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 3–19.

36 See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 216; I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (London: Clark, 2004), 480–81.

37 Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 78.

qualifications for bishops and deacons in 1 Tim 3. Thereafter, the author turns to speaking of further qualifications for the bishop (Titus 1:7f.). There are numerous suggestions as to how the presbyters and bishop of Titus 1:5, 7 should relate to each other.³⁸ Jerome Quinn argues that ἐπισκόπος was probably to be understood collectively about the presbyters.³⁹ A similar position is taken by Michael Theobald, who argues that γὰρ signals that ἐπισκόπος is an “explication” of the πρεσβύτεροι.⁴⁰ Yet, I do not find the equation of the presbyters and the bishop in Titus 1:5–9 entirely convincing. Although I find William A. Richards’s suggestion that the section on the bishop (1:7–9) as a later interpolation speculative and unsubstantiated,⁴¹ I agree that there is indeed a distinction between the presbyters and the bishop. Since the author begins by stating that the presbyters must be beyond reproach (ἀνέγκλητος; Titus 1:6), it would be strange to begin the list of requirements for the bishop with the same thing (1:7) if he were in fact speaking of the same office. If we presuppose that Titus was written in a similar early Christian milieu as the other texts we have studied so far, it would not be far-fetched to see here both a reference to the presbyters as a group of honourable and reputable senior men and to the office of bishop—which if one reads the criteria appears to concern doctrinal issues—in contrast to the presbyters.

Assessment

I have argued that the πρεσβύτεροι should primarily be thought of as a group of senior members of the Christian communities.⁴² These may at times be ordained to work as ἐπίσκοποι, but nothing suggests that this connection is automatic. As pointed out by A. E. Harvey, the idea of government through presbyters goes back to older tradition and is in that regard far from surprising.⁴³ What is novel to the Christian churches is the innovation of bishops and deacons.⁴⁴ Hans Lietzmann has a point in arguing that the system with presbyters and the system of bishops and deacons were originally separate, but puts too much emphasis on the difference.⁴⁵ Rather, the evidence suggests that the two systems coexisted from the beginning and eventually merged. As pointed out by

38 See discussion in Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 170–81.

39 Jerome D. Quinn, *The Letter to Titus* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 88. He argues that δεῖ γὰρ is a transitional phrase (cf. 1 Cor 11:19; 15:25, 53; Luke 21:9). Although this is arguably the case, I do not see that it can be used to determine whether or not presbyters and bishops are synonymous in this context.

40 Michael Theobald, “Von den Presbytern zum Episkopos (Tit 1,5–9): Vom Umgang mit Spannungen und Widersprüchen im Corpus Pastorale,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 104 (2013): 209–37.

41 William A. Richards, *Difference and Distance in Post-Pauline Christianity: An Epistolary Analysis of the Pastorals* (New York: Lang, 2002), 80–82.

42 However, the πρεσβύτεροι are not only based on age, but also on other qualifications. This is the reason for the specific appointing of elders in Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5.

43 A. E. Harvey, “Elders,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1974): 318–32.

44 Harvey, “Elders.”

45 Hans Lietzmann, “Zur altchristlichen Verfassungsgeschichte,” *Zeitschrift für Wissenschaftliche Theologie* 55 (1914): 97–153.

Frances Young, presbyters were senior members of the communities, whereas bishops and deacons were office holders.⁴⁶ There is no need to conflate and harmonise these systems in their earliest stages, since they serve different purposes and operate together in the same churches. Furthermore, there is no reason to equate either of the systems—presbyters or bishops/deacons—with the provision of liturgical space. The evidence for that is simply absent.

Acknowledgement

This research was funded by the Åke Wibergs Stiftelse.

References

- Ascough, Richard S. “Forms of Commensality in Greco-Roman Associations.” *Classical World* 102 (2008): 33–45. <https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.0.0038>
- Ascough, Richard S. “Greco-Roman Philosophic, Religious, and Voluntary Associations.” In *Community Formation in the Early Church and the Church Today*, edited by R. N. Longenecker, 3–19. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002.
- Backhaus, Knut. “Zur Datierung der Apostelgeschichte: Ein Ordnungsversuch im chronologischen Chaos.” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 108 (2017): 212–58. <https://doi.org/10.1515/znw-2017-0009>
- Campbell, R. Alastair. *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity*. Edinburgh: Clark, 1994. <https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30454>
- Conzelmann, Hans. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987.
- Dibelius, Martin, and Hans Conzelmann. *The Pastoral Epistles*. Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972.
- Dunn, James D. G. *Romans*. 2 vols. WBC 38. Dallas: Word, 1988.
- Elliott, John H. “Ministry and Church Order in the NT: A Traditio-Historical Analysis (1 Pt 5:1–5 & plls).” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32 (1970): 367–91.
- Eurell, John-Christian. “The Delay of the Parousia and the Changed Function of Eschatological Language.” *Journal of Early Christian History* 10 (2020): 61–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2222582X.2020.1724518>
- Eurell, John-Christian. “The *Hypomnemata* of Hegesippus.” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 75 (2022): 148–57. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003693062200028X>

46 Frances M. Young, “On ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΙΟΣ and ΠΡΕΣΒΥΤΕΡΟΣ,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (1994): 142–48.

- Eurell, John-Christian. "Ignatius, Polycarp, and Their Reception in the Second Century." *Early Christianity* 13 (2022): 188–204.
- Eurell, John-Christian. *Peter's Legacy in Early Christianity: The Appropriation and Use of Peter's Authority in the First Three Centuries*. WUNT II/561. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-161105-6>
- Evans, Craig A. "The Citation of Isaiah 60:17 in 1 Clement." *Vigiliae Christianae* 36 (1982): 105–7. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157007282X00017>
- Fascher, Erich. *ΠΡΟΦΗΤΗΣ: Eine sprach- und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung*. Gießen: Töpelmann, 1927. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111547206>
- Haenchen, Ernst. *Die Apostelgeschichte*. KEK 7. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977. <https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666516344>
- Hagner, Donald A. *The Use of the Old and New Testaments in Clement of Rome*. NovTSup 34. Leiden: Brill, 1973. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004266162>
- Harland, Philip A. *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities*. New York: Clark, 2009.
- Jeremias, Joachim. "ΙΠΕΣΒΥΤΕΡΙΟΝ außerchristliche bezeugt." *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 45 (1957): 127–32. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zntw.1957.48.1.127>
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. AB 35A. New York: Doubleday, 2001. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261721>
- Klauck, Hans-Josef. *Hausgemeinde und Hauskirche im frühen Christentum*. SBS 103. Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981.
- Klinghardt, Mathias. *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft: Soziologie und Liturgie frühchristlicher Mahlfeiern*. Tübingen: Francke, 1996.
- Lietzmann, Hans. "Zur altchristlichen Verfassungsgeschichte." *Zeitschrift für Wissenschaftliche Theologie* 55 (1914): 97–153.
- Lightfoot, Joseph Barber. *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*. London: Macmillan, 1881.
- Linton, Olof. *Das Problem der Urkirche in der neueren Forschung: Eine kritische Darstellung*. Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1932.
- Marshall, I. Howard. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*. ICC. London: Clark, 2004.

- Merkle, Benjamin L. "The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church." PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2000.
- Osiek, Carolyn, and Margaret Y. Macdonald. *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006.
- Pervo, Richard I. *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists*. Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2006.
- Quinn, Jerome D. *The Letter to Titus*. AB 36B. New York: Doubleday, 1990.
<https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261868>
- Richards, William A. *Difference and Distance in Post-Pauline Christianity: An Epistolary Analysis of the Pastorals*. StBibLit 44. New York: Lang, 2002.
- Smith, Dennis E. *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.
- Stewart, Alistair C. *Original Bishops: Office and Order in the First Christian Communities*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014.
- Stillingfleet, Edward. *Irenicum: A Weapon-Salve for the Churches Wounds*. London: Mortlock, 1662.
- Theobald, Michael. "Von den Presbytern zum Episkopos (Tit 1,5–9): Vom Umgang mit Spannungen und Widersprüchen im Corpus Pastorale." *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 104 (2013): 209–37.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/znw-2013-0012>
- Wagner, Jochen. *Die Anfänge des Amtes in der Kirche: Presbyter und Episkopen in der frühchristlichen Literatur*. Tübingen: Francke, 2011.
- Young, Frances M. "On ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΙΟΣ and ΠΙΡΕΣΒΥΤΕΡΟΣ." *Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (1994): 142–48. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/45.1.142>