

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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IGNATIUS AND THE MONARCHICAL EPISCOPATE

“For everyone the Master of the house sends on his business, we ought to receive as the One who sent him. It is clear, then, that we should regard the bishop as the Lord himself.”¹ So wrote Ignatius of Antioch.² Ignatius was bishop or overseer of Syrian Antioch³ during the reign of the Roman emperor Trajan (ca. AD 98-117).⁴ He was condemned as a Christian and “sent to Rome to be killed by the beasts in the amphitheatre.”⁵ In his letter to the Romans, Ignatius writes, “Suffer me to be eaten by the beasts, through whom I can attain to God. . . . From Syria to Rome I am fighting with wild beasts . . . bound to ten “leopards” [i.e., a company of soldiers],

¹*Ephesians* 5:1, Cyril C. Richardson, trans., “The Letters of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch,” *Early Christian Fathers*, Vol. I, The Library of Christian Classics, eds. Cyril C. Richardson, et al. (repr., New York, NY: Macmillan, 1970), 89.

²The letters of Ignatius belong to a collection of documents known as the Apostolic Fathers—“those Fathers of the age immediately succeeding the New Testament period whose works in whole or in part have survived. They are Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Hermas, Polycarp, and Papias, and the authors of the ‘Epistle of Barnabas,’ of the ‘Epistle to Diognetus,’ of ‘2 Clement,’ and of the ‘Didache.’” “Apostolic Fathers,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., eds. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1974), 76. Compare B. F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, 6th ed. (1889; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 19-63. Westcott limits the period the Father of AD 70-120 and includes only Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Barnabas (i.e., those writers who had personal contact with the apostles).

³This is based on the authority of Peter and Euodius, according to Eusebius, *The History of the Church* 3:22, 26, trans. G. A. Williamson (1965; repr., Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1975), 128, 145-147.

⁴Most scholars agree with this general dating of the Ignatian epistles.

⁵Kirsopp Lake, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. I, Loeb Classical Library, ed. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912), 166.

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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and they become worse for kind treatment.”⁶ While journeying from Syria to Rome,⁷ Ignatius wrote seven letters⁸—four from Smyrna to the churches of Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, and Rome and three from Troas to the churches of Philadelphia and Smyrna and to Polycarp, Smyrna’s overseer. These letters preserve practically all that is known about Ignatius.⁹ These letters also

⁶*Romans* 4:1; 5:1 (from Lake’s translation). All subsequent quotes from Ignatius will be from Lake’s translation (with the substitution of “overseer” for “bishop,” and “eldership” and “elders” for “presbytery” and “presbyters”).

⁷“The conditions under which Ignatius’ letters were written did not make for careful reflection. They are the letters of a prisoner on his way to martyrdom. Their religious character is popular rather than deep. Their style is compressed and turbulent. . . . Their grammar is not free from carelessness. Yet for these reasons they have a peculiar value. They disclose a real person, expressing himself in the moment of crisis, and so making clear the ruling passions in his life.” Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 74.

⁸This “shorter recension” of seven letters of Ignatius (in contrast to a “longer recension” of thirteen letters and a “Syrian recension” of three letters) is recognized by most as authentic. See J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., Vol. I (London, UK: Macmillan, 1889), 233-430; cf. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 81-83; Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. I, 167-171.

⁹“It is only for the few days when he journeys from Philadelphia to Troas under a military guard that we catch a glimpse of this early second century bishop.” Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 74. See W. J. E. Bennett, *The Fathers of the Church*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: J. T. Hayes, 1875), 79-123, for a detailed account of Ignatius’ encounter with emperor Trajan, his journey to Rome, and his death in the Colosseum. Bennett gleans much of his material from the spurious *Acts of Ignatius*. F. Cayre is correct when he writes, “Neither do we know anything of the persecution of which he was the illustrious and perhaps the only victim. All that is known, is that we was *condemned to the beasts*; and that he went to *Rome*, where he was to suffer. . . . The *journey* was accomplished partly by sea and partly by land across Asia Minor.” *Manual of Patrology*, Vol. I, trans. H. Howitt (Paris, France: Desclee & Company, 1936), 63. Add to Cayre’s statement the facts gleaned from Ignatius’ own letters concerning his interaction with the churches of western Asia Minor, and the authentic and reliable tradition concerning his life and person is exhausted. See Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., Vol. I, 1-49; and B. H. Streeter, *The Primitive Church* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1929), 279-282.

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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preserve valuable information about some of the churches in western Asia Minor and Ignatius' concern for those churches. One major concern of Ignatius relates to *the bishop* (from the Greek word *episkopos*) of each church.¹⁰ Ignatius is the earliest Christian writer to reflect what is called the *monarchical episcopate* or *monepiscopate*.

In the first century AD, no formal distinction in the offices of *episkopos* and *presbyteros* is noticeable. The *functional* and *official* aspects of the two terms should not be distinguished sharply.¹¹ Some development toward use of the terms as official titles, though, is to be seen in extra-biblical literature,¹² and the use of *episkopos* and *presbyteros* in the New Testament to

¹⁰The church at Rome is the only exception. Nowhere in his letter to the Romans does Ignatius mention *the overseer* at Rome (although he does refer to himself as “the overseer of Syria,” *Romans* 2:2, which probably means nothing more than “the overseer *from* Syria”; see Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., Vol. I, 201, “the genitive denoting, not the extent of his jurisdiction, but the place of his abode”). The simplest answer to this omission is that no overseer or leaders (e.g., elders and deacons) from the church in Rome were with him at the time of his writing. Ignatius writes to the Romans as a congregation unknown to him. But he writes to Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, and Smyrna as congregations known to him through their overseers—Onesimus, Damas, Polybius, and Polycarp, respectively (Ignatius gives no proper name for the overseer of Philadelphia). “I received in the name of God your whole congregation in the person of Onesimus, a man of inexpressible love and your overseer” (*Ephesians* 1:3). “I have received the example of your love, and I have it with me in the person of your overseer” (*Trallians* 3:2). “I have looked on the whole congregation in faith in the persons mentioned above” (*Magnesians* 6:1).

¹¹See Fenton John Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia* (London, UK: Macmillan, 1897), 212.

¹²See G. Adolf Deissman, *Bible Studies*, trans. Alexander Grieve (Edinburgh, UK: T. & T. Clark, 1901), 156, 230-231; and James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1930), 244, 535.

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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designate the recognized or “official” leaders of local churches cannot be denied.¹³ But the interchangeable and functional use of the two words should be underscored. For example, *episkopos* is translated properly as “overseer, superintendent, [or] guardian” instead of “bishop.” The word “bishop” conveys nothing to the modern reader of the sense of the original Greek word, that is, “to look after” or “to care for.”¹⁴ And the interchangeability of the word with *presbyteros*, as well as its functional meaning, comes out clearly on close examination of each context where the two words are used.

In Acts 20, Paul calls the “elders” (*presbyterous*, plural; v. 17) of Ephesus to Miletus. He tells them they have been made “overseers” (*episkopous*, plural; v. 28) by the Holy Spirit to “shepherd” the church of God. Paul leaves Titus in Crete (see Titus 1:5-9) to appoint “elders” (*presbyterous*) in every town. Paul then lists the qualifications for “the overseer” (*ton episkopon*, singular) who is said to be God’s “steward.” Paul points out that the “elder” must be blameless, and that the “overseer” must be blameless—they are the same individual, the same office. In the latter passage, note the strong repetitive emphasis of Paul, “[An elder] must live a blameless life

¹³See, for example, the use of *presbyteros* in Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 20:17; 1 Timothy 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; and 1 Peter 5:1; and the use of *episkopos* in Acts 20:28; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:2; and Titus 1:7. In fact, *presbyterion* (1 Timothy 4:14; cf. Luke 22:66; Acts 22:5) and *episkope* (1 Timothy 3:1; cf. Acts 1:20) denote “a body of elders” and “the office of overseer,” respectively. See William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 299, 706.

¹⁴See Lothar Coenen, “Bishop, Presbyter, Elder,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. I, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 188ff.

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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. . . [an overseer] must live a blameless life” (Titus 1:5, 6, NLT). Wolfgang Beyer notes, “There is an alternation of terms in Titus 1:7, where we suddenly have *episkopos* instead of *presbyteros*. This is another proof that the two terms originally referred to the same thing, namely, the guidance and representation of the congregation and the work of preaching and conducting worship when there was no apostle, prophet, or teacher present.”¹⁵

Furthermore, the two terms are typically plural forms. Paul and Barnabas appoint “elders” (*presbyterous*) in the churches of Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch (see Acts 14:23). Paul addresses his letter to the church at Philippi to “the overseers and deacons” (*episkopois kai diakonois*, Philippians 1:1, NASB). Peter exhorts the “elders” (*presbyterous*) of various Asia Minor churches (see 1 Peter 5:1), and the writer of Hebrews tells his readers to obey their “leaders” (*tois egoumenois*, see Hebrews 13:17). In the Pastoral Epistles, it is true, “elders” are referred to with plural forms while “overseer” is mentioned with the singular form. But this latter usage should be interpreted according to the context in a general way, that is, of the overseer as a class or type. Beyer clarifies this point: “If 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7 speak of the bishop in the singular and with the article, the reference is to the bishop as a type and not to the number of bishops in a given place. There is no reference to monarchical episcopate. On the

¹⁵Hermann Wolfgang Beyer, “*Episkeptomai*, etc.,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 617.

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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contrary, the evidence of the New Testament is clearly to the effect that originally several *episkopoi* took charge of the communities in brotherly comity.”¹⁶

In early second century post-apostolic writings, this same use of plural terminology for church leaders is to be noted. Clement of Rome speaks of the appointment of “overseers and deacons” by the apostles,¹⁷ strife for the title of “overseer,”¹⁸ and the “office of overseer” (*episkopes*) occupied by “elders” (*presbyteroi*).¹⁹ The *Didache* instructs its readers to appoint for

¹⁶Ibid. Compare Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Vol. 14, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. R. V. G. Tasker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 25-26. Note too the different English words for *episkopos* in the *King James Bible* and the comments by Jack P. Lewis, *The English Bible From KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 63: “It has been thought that the varied use of ‘bishopric’ (Acts 1:20), ‘overseers’ (Acts 20:28), ‘oversight’ (1 Peter 5:2), and ‘bishop’ (1 Timothy 3:1) was an effort to avoid identification of bishops and elders.” Compare the much stronger comments of A. I. Hobbs, “Ecclesiastical Polity,” *New Testament Christianity*, Vol. III, ed. Z. T. Sweeney (Columbus, IN: New Testament Christianity Book Fund, 1930), 538-539: “Why did not King James’ revisers translate *episkopous* bishops, instead of overseers. . . . Does the context forbid it? O, no! What then? This is the reason: Episcopalianism must have one bishop over a plurality of congregations in order to maintain its diocesan episcopacy. But this word, translated here as in other places, would have thrown heaven’s veto into the face of Episcopalianism, against its distinctive peculiarity, and in favor of a plurality of bishops over one congregation.” On the broader issue, see Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia*, 189ff.; and compare Streeter, *The Primitive Church*, 85, who leaves room for episcopal development and says, “It is clear, then, that there were at this time in the church of Ephesus several persons who bore the title *Episcopos*; it is also clear that *episcopoi* could be called ‘presbyters.’ It does not, however, follow that all presbyters could be called ‘*episcopoi*.’”

¹⁷1 Clement 42:4; cf. 1:3; 47:6; and 57:1.

¹⁸1 Clement 44:1.

¹⁹1 Clement 44:4-5.

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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themselves “overseers and deacons.”²⁰ Polycarp mentions “elders”²¹ and “deacons,”²² but he says nothing about “overseers.” Ignatius, however, knows only a singular “overseer” who is to be distinguished from the “elders.” This is one striking difference between Ignatius and other writers in the post-apostolic period (e.g., Clement of Rome).

Frederic Farrar draws well this contrast between Clement of Rome and Ignatius. He writes:

In reading Clement we are struck by his unlearned and practical simplicity. . . . In reading the Epistles of Ignatius we are, for the first time, in contact with two new elements—a vehement conviction of the need for “Episcopal” supremacy, and a passionate enthusiasm and reasonableness for death by martyrdom. Clement shows the reasonableness of a Roman; Ignatius writes with all the fire and impetuosity of an Oriental Greek. There is in his imagination “a touch of phantasy and flame.”²³

J. B. Lightfoot makes a similar observation about the temperaments of Clement and Ignatius. He says:

Nothing is more notable in the Epistle of Clement than the calm equable temper of the writer, the *epieikeia*, the ‘sweet reasonableness,’ which pervades his letter throughout. He is essentially a *moderator*. On the other hand, impetuosity, fire, headstrongness . . . are impressed on every sentence in the Epistles of Ignatius. He is by his very nature an *impeller* of men.²⁴

Both Clement and Ignatius are intense, but in different ways. In Clement is the “intensity of

²⁰*Didache* 15:1.

²¹*Philippians*, greeting; 5:3; 6:1; and 11:1.

²²*Philippians* 5:2, 3.

²³Frederic W. Farrar, *Lives of the Fathers: Sketches of Church History in Biography*, Vol. I (Edinburgh, UK: Adam and Charles Black, 1889), 32.

²⁴Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., Vol. I, 1-2.

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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moderation.” In Ignatius is the “intensity of passion.”²⁵ B. H. Streeter goes so far as to attribute to Ignatius a “neurotic temper,”²⁶ and Edward Gibbon recoils at the “stupid insensibility” and the “superstitious frenzy” of Ignatius’ zeal for martyrdom.²⁷ Perhaps these opinions of Ignatius are a bit strong. But when the intense personal experience of Ignatius and his devotion to the church are considered, “it would be the more remarkable if he could have written without emotion” and even an exaggerated urgency.²⁸ He is anxious about his personal situation.²⁹ He is anxious for

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶“Ignatius, like some other men of genius, exhibits certain characteristics of the ‘neurotic temper’; and he is writing under circumstances of great nervous strain. Hence whatever he writes is instinct with excitement and exaggeration, and must be interpreted with due allowance made for the mentality of the writer. . . . That same hypersensitiveness to impressions, which makes the genius quick to perceive what other men ignore, exposes him in early life to injury from experiences which would leave unscathed persons of more ordinary clay. A piece of grit that will derange a watch will not affect a traction engine.” Streeter, *The Primitive Church*, 169, 171.

²⁷“The sober discretion of the present age will more readily censure, but can more easily admire than imitate, the fervour of the first Christians; who, according to the lively expression of Sulpicius Severus, desired martyrdom with more eagerness than his own contemporaries solicited a bishopric. The epistles which Ignatius composed as he was carried in chains through the cities of Asia breathe sentiments the most repugnant to the ordinary feelings of human nature.” Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 5th ed., Vol. II, ed. J. B. Bury (London, UK: Methuen, 1909), 104.

²⁸See Virginia Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, Yale Publications in Religion, Vol. I, ed. David Horne (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1960), 24.

²⁹See *Ephesians* 1:2; 12:1; 18:1; *Magnesians* 1:2; *Trallians* 1:1; 12:2; *Romans* 5:1; *Philadelphians* 5:1; and *Smyrnaeans* 9:2.

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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martyrdom.³⁰ He is anxious over the church in Antioch.³¹ And he is anxious concerning himself and his authority. On this latter point, notice Ignatius' self-expressed need for humility,³² his use of his approaching martyrdom as an apologetic for the faith,³³ and even disclaimers of his worthiness and standing authority.³⁴ His mingled passions and anxieties urge him to forcefully insist on unity in the churches—a unity achieved by submission to the overseer, the eldership, and the deacons; a unity strengthened by obedience to the overseer; but a unity that can be destroyed by heresy.³⁵

³⁰See *Magnesians* 5:1, 2; and *Romans* 2–8.

³¹See *Ephesians* 21:2; *Magnesians* 14:1; *Trallians* 13:1; *Romans* 9:1; *Philadelphians* 10:1, 2; *Smyrnaeans* 11:1; and *Polycarp* 7:1, 2.

³²*Trallians* 4:1, 2; cf. his echoing of 1 Corinthians 3:1-2 in *Trallians* 5:1, 2.

³³“If it is merely in semblance that these things were done by our Lord, I also am a prisoner in semblance,” *Smyrnaeans* 4:2; cf. *Trallians* 10:1.

³⁴*Ephesians* 3:1; *Magnesians* 11:1; 12:1; 14:1; *Trallians* 3:3; *Romans* 4:3; 9:2; and *Smyrnaeans* 11:1. Streeter, *The Primitive Church*, 177, views these latter passages as examples of Ignatius' “egoism repressed,” but Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, 25ff., probably is closer to the truth in attributing Ignatius' feelings of “unworthiness” to: (1) the fact that he was a condemned man; (2) the fear that he might not endure to the end; and (3) his sense of “failure” at Antioch (e.g., in rectifying a schism). Corwin adds, “It is difficult to understand otherwise [apart from schism and “false teaching” at Antioch] Ignatius' complex sense of both failure and authority.”

³⁵For Ignatius' emphasis on unity, see Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, 247-271. Compare Cyril Charles Richardson, *The Christianity of Ignatius of Antioch* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1935), 33-39. On Ignatius' emphasis on unity as an antidote for the poison of heresy (i.e., Judaism and Docetism; *Ephesians* 7, 18, 19, 20; *Magnesians* 8–11; *Trallians* 6–9; *Philadelphians* 2–6; and *Smyrnaeans* 1–6), see Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., Vol. II, 16-17, 103, 147-148, 242-243, 285-286.

The explicit rule of Ignatius is unity based on submission to the *episkopos*. The Ephesians must “live in harmony with the will of the overseer,” even as the eldership “is attuned to the overseer as the strings to a harp” (4:1). By this unity, they will “sing with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father.” The overseer, if silent, is to be feared (6:1); he is not to be opposed, so “that we may be subject to God” (5:3). The prayer of the overseer, with the united church, carries great weight (5:2).³⁶ The Magnesians are “not to presume on the youth of the overseer” (3:1); they must “be subject to the overseer and to one another, even as Jesus Christ was subject to the Father” (13:2). The purpose of this admonition is so “there may be a union both of flesh and of spirit.” For the Trallians, obedience to the overseer is as obedience to Jesus Christ (2:1). They, and especially the elders, are to “refresh the overseer, to the honor of the Father, of Jesus Christ, and of the apostles” (12:2). The Philadelphians are exhorted to pursue unity and flee from divisions, because the Spirit says, “Do nothing without the overseer” (7:2). Those divisive persons the Lord will forgive, “if their repentance leads to the unity of God and the council of the overseer” (8:1). For “as many as belong to God and Jesus Christ—these are

³⁶Ignatius fears violation of the assembly of believers by schismatics. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., Vol. II, 44, notes: “The man who separates himself from the assembly of the faithful, lawfully gathered about its bishop and presbyters, excludes himself, as it were, from the court of the altar and from the spiritual sacrifices of the church.”

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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with the overseer. And as many as repent and come to the unity of the church—these also shall be of God” (3:2). Ignatius wants the church to be free of “evil growths” (e.g., heretical teachers).³⁷

He tells the Smyrnaeans, “It is good to know God and the overseer. He who honors the overseer has been honored by God; he who does anything without the knowledge of the overseer is serving the devil” (9:1). In light of prior warnings of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans concerning heretical factions, this strong statement is understandable. Appropriately, the overseer celebrates the Eucharist, assembles the congregation, makes lawful baptisms and love feasts—“whatever he approves, this is also pleasing to God” (8:2).³⁸ And Ignatius tells Polycarp, “Vindicate your office” (1:2).³⁹ “Let nothing be done without your approval, and do nothing yourself without God” (4:1). Celibacy “to the honor the flesh of the Lord” is not to be boasted or revealed except

³⁷“The Philadelphia Christians had strained out these dregs of heresy. They had separated themselves from the heretics; but this separation deserved the name of ‘filtering’ rather than of ‘division.’” So those who remained with the overseer, even after a division in the church, were of God and of Christ. See Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., Vol. II, 256.

³⁸“These Docetic teachers were separatists, as well as heretics. Their separatism however seems to have been only partial. They would mix with the Church generally, but they would have their separate rituals, e.g., the agape, baptism, etc.” Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., Vol. II, 309.

³⁹Or, “make it felt and respected by a diligent discharge of its duties,” according to Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., Vol. II, 333.

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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to the overseer (5:2). Marriage is properly “with the consent of the overseer,” so that “the marriage be according to the Lord and not according to lust” (5:2).⁴⁰

The unity of the church, for Ignatius, is based on submission to the *episkopos*. But the unity of the church is not based on submission to the *episkopos* alone. The *presbyteroi* (and the *diakonoī*⁴¹) are also a vital part of Ignatius’ church order. The Ephesians are to be “subject to the overseer and to the eldership” in one subjection (2:2); they are to “obey the overseer and the eldership with an undisturbed mind” (20:2). The fellowship of the Magnesians’ deacon Zotion is a special joy to Ignatius, because Zotion “is subject to the overseer as to the grace of God, and to the eldership as to the law of Jesus Christ” (2:1). Just as Jesus did nothing apart from the Father, so the Magnesians are to “do nothing without the overseer and the elders” (7:1; cf. 13:1); they are to “be united with the overseer and with those who preside over” them (6:2).

The Trallians are warned, “Whoever does anything apart from the overseer and the eldership and the deacons is not pure in his conscience” (7:2); they are to submit themselves “to the overseer as to the commandment, and likewise to the eldership” (13:2). The Philadelphians are to be “at one with the overseer, and with the elders and deacons” (1:1); they are to celebrate one Eucharist, just as there is “one overseer with the eldership and the deacons” (4:1); they are

⁴⁰The application of these instructions to ascetic Docetism are apparent. But to see in these statements of Ignatius the Catholic dogma of the bishop as “the high priest of the liturgy and the dispenser of the mysteries of God” is both anachronistic and a misconstruing of the evidence. See Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. I (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1950), 65-70.

⁴¹Ignatius says, “Reverence the deacons as the command of God” (*Smyrnaeans* 8:1; cf. *Trallians* 3:1; 7:2; *Philadelphians* 7:1).

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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to “give heed to the overseer, and to the eldership and deacons” (7:1).⁴² Ignatius encourages unity among the Smyrnaeans by telling them, “I salute the godly overseer, and the revered eldership, and the deacons my fellow-servants” (12:2). And he instructs Polycarp, “Give heed to the overseer . . . I am devoted to those who are subject to the overseer, elders, and deacons” (6:1).⁴³

In Ignatius’ thinking, both *episkopos* and *presbyteroi* have high authority. The overseer is to be regarded “as the Lord himself” (*Ephesians* 6:1). The overseer presides “in the place of God” and the elders preside “in the place of the council of the apostles” (*Magnesians* 6:1).⁴⁴ Submission to the overseer is “as to Jesus Christ,” and submission to the eldership is “as to the apostles of Jesus Christ” (*Trallians* 2:1, 2). The overseer is to be followed as Jesus followed the Father, and the eldership is to be followed as the disciples followed the apostles (*Smyrnaeans* 8:11).⁴⁵

⁴²Note the emphasis here on “one overseer” (*heis episkopos*). The heretics of Ignatius’ time violated the one flesh (e.g., the loaf) and the one cup of the Eucharist (e.g., the one altar).

⁴³“Ignatius here turns from Polycarp individually and addresses the whole Church of Smyrna.” Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., Vol. II, 351.

⁴⁴The comment of Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., Vol. II, 120, seems a little strained: “Ignatius is picturing to himself the gathering of the church, where the bishop and presbyters are seated on a dais, the bishop occupying the throne in the centre, and the presbyters sitting round (as in the Basilican arrangement) so as to form a corona.” Rather than an emphasis on the assembled church, Ignatius seems to be stressing the role of these offices toward the uniting of the church with Jesus and his apostles.

⁴⁵See too *Magnesians* 7:1; 13:2; *Trallians* 7:1; and *Philadelphians* 5:1.

What kind of episcopate is this, then? Frederic Farrar gives a reasonable assessment of Ignatius' *episkopos*. He writes:

Though we find in Ignatius the growth of the hierarchic system, though in him first appears the clear distinction between the bishop and the presbyter, yet there is in the genuine Ignatius no trace of sacerdotalism. He eulogises Episcopacy under the very peculiar circumstances of the Church of his day in Asia Minor, because he regards it as the sole means of preventing the Church from being at once split into factions and polluted by heresies. He is not writing a scheme of theology or even of Church government, but hasty occasional letters.⁴⁶

This type of episcopate is a far cry from later diocesan forms of the episcopate. Ignatius' view of the *episkopos* differs radically from the more developed theories of writers like Irenaeus.

Ignatius nowhere mentions any apostolic institution of or any apostolic succession of the *episkopos*.⁴⁷ His *episkopos* is "a parochial pastor" or "a congregational bishop."⁴⁸ Ignatius says nothing about an *episkopos* in Rome; his testimony is limited to Asia Minor. And he does not criticize any other form of church government. Positively, he does view the *episkopos* as the representative of Christ, and the *presbyteroi* as the representatives of the apostles. Several times he ties together both *presbyteroi* and *diakonoi* with the *episkopos*, seemingly in authority, and he never demands explicitly the submission of the whole body of *presbyteroi* to the *episkopos*. As Dom Gregory Dix well observes, "It is the whole ministry, bishop, presbyters, and deacons together, whose authority he is anxious to strengthen. He rarely mentions obedience to the

⁴⁶Farrar, *Lives of the Fathers*, Vol. I, 58-59.

⁴⁷See Cuthbert Hamilton Turner, "Apostolic Succession," *Essays on the Early History of the Church and the Ministry*, ed. H. B. Swete (London, UK: Macmillan, 1918), 113.

⁴⁸Farrar, *Lives of the Fathers*, Vol. I, 59.

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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bishop without in the same breath adding the presbyters and often the deacons as well.”⁴⁹ So Ignatius’ *episkopos* is not even *monarchical*; he is no more than a *congregational overseer*⁵⁰ exalted in rank above the other overseers or *presbyteroi* who also have a claim to authority.⁵¹

Where and when did this type of *episkopos* develop? No one knows. As Henry Chadwick says, “The exact history of this transition . . . to bishop, presbyters, and deacons is shrouded in obscurity. . . . Among the presbyter-bishops one rose to a position of superiority, and acquired the title ‘bishop’ while his colleagues are called ‘presbyters.’”⁵² Chadwick suggests four factors that contributed to this change: (1) the power to ordain by the senior member of the presbyteral college; (2) the correspondence between churches carried on by the presiding

⁴⁹Dom Gregory Dix, “The Ministry of the Early Church,” *The Apostolic Ministry*, ed. Kenneth E. Kirk (London, UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946), 251. Compare the comment of Thomas M. Lindsay, *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903), 195: “He evidently regards union with the college of elders as the same thing as union with the bishops.”

⁵⁰Lindsay, *Church and Ministry in the Early Centuries*, 2nd ed., 198, sees a presbyterian polity in Ignatius (e.g., the conciliarism of the Reformation period).

⁵¹A. G. Hebert, *Apostle and Bishop* (London, UK: Faber and Faber, 1963), 59, asks: “Was it the case that the episcopate emerged ‘from below’ in the sense that the Chairman of the Board of Presbyters became *the* ‘bishop’ or the holder of *episkope*? This could well happen, in view of the important consideration of the presidency of the weekly Eucharist, on the occasion when the local Church *assembled, together, as the people of God*. . . . The Presbyter who regularly presided at this solemn assembly of the Church could soon come to be regarded as the President of the local community.” But Lindsay, *Church and Ministry in the Early Centuries*, 2nd ed., 194, correctly notes that in Ignatius there is “no definite theory . . . as to the principle on which the episcopate claims allegiance.”

⁵²Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, Vol. I, *The Pelican History of the Church*, ed. Owen Chadwick (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1967), 46.

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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presbyter-bishop; (3) representation by the leading presbyter-bishop in various multi-church functions (e.g., ordination ceremonies); and (4) the focus of unity on one person to combat Gnostic heresies.⁵³

The above factors in the development of the Ignatian type of *episkopos* cannot be denied, and the last three factors exist in some measure in the letters of Ignatius. But the fact remains, except for the letters of Ignatius, there is no record for the existence of this type of *episkopos* as early as the reign of Trajan.⁵⁴ This gives a strong presumption in favor of this type of *episkopos* originating with Ignatius himself. Add to this: (1) the lack of any reference by Ignatius in his epistles to any other persecution of Christians apart from his own;⁵⁵ (2) the strong emphasis by Ignatius on unity as a deterrent to heresy; (3) the concern of Ignatius for the church in Antioch of Syria; and (4) the passion, zeal, and forcefulness of Ignatius in his letters. In all likelihood,

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴See Adolf Harnack, "Bishop Lightfoot on the Genuineness of the Ignatian Epistles," *The Expositor*, third series, III, no. 13 (January 1886): 21. Compare Dix, "The Ministry of the Early Church," 253, who traces the system to Diotrephes and says, "Diotrephes in 3 John decides arbitrarily who is and who is not to be admitted to the local *ecclesia*, and what is and what is not to be read out at its meetings. This autocratic presidency of corporate worship clearly marks him as the *episkopos* of the local Church, though he is not specifically so called." But the actions of Diotrephes are different than those of Ignatius' *episkopos*.

⁵⁵See W. M. Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire Before A.D. 170* (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1892), 312ff. Ramsay argues that Ignatius' case is not an isolated one, but it is typical of and similar to the general persecutions of the Flavian period. But it is disputed whether the official attitude toward Christians at this time was that of *non licet esse vos* ("the law does not allow you to exist"). Compare Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., Vol. I, 7ff. The important document is Pliny's letter to Trajan concerning the Christians in Bithynia; see Bo Reicke, *The New Testament Era: The World of the Bible from 500 B.C. to A.D. 100*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1968), 303ff.

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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Ignatius' three-fold organization of offices in the church reflects the way he conducted his own church in Antioch.⁵⁶ In his zeal, he imposes his concept of a singular *episkopos* on those church leaders (i.e., the presiding *presbyteros* of each church) who visit him on his journey across Asia Minor. But did Ignatius give the title of *episkopos* to these men, or did they bear that title already? It is hard to tell, but given a functional and official understanding of *episkopos*, as opposed to today's ecclesiastical understanding, such a distinction between the *episkopos* and the *presbyteroi* is not so drastic. It also must be remembered that the two terms at this time were interchangeable, so the shift in terminology would be less objectionable by Ignatius' contemporaries. J. B. Lightfoot seems to think otherwise. He states:

He mentions by name the bishops of Ephesus, of Magnesia, and of Tralles; and he refers anonymously to the bishop of Philadelphia. . . . Polycarp is spoken of as bishop. Writing to the Philadelphians likewise, he says that the churches nearest to Antioch have sent thither bishops to congratulate the Antiochenes on the restoration of peace. It is plain, therefore, that in those parts of Syria and Asia Minor at all events, with which Ignatius is brought in contact, the episcopate, properly so called, is an established and recognized institution. In one passage, moreover, he seems to claim for it a much wider diffusion: 'The bishops established in the farthest parts are in the counsels of Jesus Christ' (*Ephesians* 3).⁵⁷

But Lightfoot cannot prove his assumptions. The only evidence still comes from Ignatius himself. And even if Ignatius' type of *episkopos* predates (i.e., in western Asia Minor) his journey to Rome, it does not negate the local and recent nature of that episcopacy. At best, "the

⁵⁶See Streeter, *The Primitive Church*, 170.

⁵⁷Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., Vol. 1, 390. Compare Dix, "The Ministry of the Early Church," 253.

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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Ignatian episcopacy is congregational, not diocesan; a new and growing institution, not a settled policy of apostolic origin.”⁵⁸

⁵⁸Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. II, Ante-Nicene Christianity A.D. 100-325 (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1924), 148.

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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