

Elders & Deacons

A Biblical Study of Church Leadership

J.B. Myers

21st Century Christian



Table of Contents

	Introduction	11
1	Historical Background	15
	Who are Church Leaders?	
	The Elders of Israel	
	Leaders of the New Testament Church	
	After the Apostles	
	1 Clement	
	The Shepherd of Hermas	
	Didache	
	Ignatius	
	Polycarp	
2	The Pattern for Church Organization	35
	Apostolic Model	
	Departing From the Model	
	Terms Used for Elders in the New Testament	
	James and the Jerusalem Church	
3	Context and Purpose of the Texts	45
	Historical Context	
	Chronological Summary	
	The Elders and Sound Doctrine	
4	Elder Qualifications	61
	The Texts	
	The Six Qualifications	
	First Qualification: Character	
	(1) Self-control	
	(2) Discipline	
	(3) Temperate	
	(4) Not quick tempered	
	(5) Not violent	
	(6) Upright	

- (7) Holy
- (8) Loves what is good
- (9) Greed and the love of money
- (10) Drunkenness
- (11) Example

5 Elder Qualifications 277

Second Qualification: Leadership

- (1) Not lording it over
- (2) Not overbearing
- (3) Gentle
- (4) Not quarrelsome

Third Qualification: Family

- (1) The husband of but one wife
- (2) A man whose children believe
- (3) Children who are not wild and disobedient
- (4) He must manage his own family well
- (5) His children obey him with proper respect

Fourth Qualification: Reputation

- (1) Blameless
- (2) Above reproach
- (3) Respectable

Fifth Qualification: Service

- (1) Willing and eager to serve
- (2) Entrusted with God's work
- (3) Hospitable
- (4) Able to teach

Sixth Qualification: Faith

6 Men and Not Women95

The Principle of Male Leadership

Exceptions to the Principle

The Assembled Church

Assembly Teaching and Prayer

- (1) Role distinctions
- (2) Problems over the roles of men and women
- (3) Salvation and women's role

Objections to the Limitations on Women's Role

- (1) 1 Timothy 2 must be interpreted in view of Galatians 3:28
- (2) The prohibition is limited in scope
- (3) Not in a domineering way
- (4) Not intended to limit the role of women
- (5) A cultural condition that does not exist today

Silence in the Assembly

Conclusion

7 Christ and Culture115

The Influence of Culture

Head Coverings

- (1) The principle of distinction between male and female
- (2) The principle of subordination
- (3) The practice of the churches

What Does Paul Want Women to Wear on Their Heads?

Conclusion

8 The Authority of Elders129

Authority in the Kingdom

Why Some Elders Lord it Over the Church

- (1) Ignorance of the Bible
- (2) Ignorance of the flock
- (3) Fear of losing control
- (4) Fear of false teaching
- (5) Failure to appreciate the ministry of others

Words not Used for Elders or Their Authority

The Authority of Ministry

The Body of Elders

Authority as Representatives of the People

9 Elders and the Anointing of Oil143

Introduction to the Text

Miraculous and Symbolic

Prayer and Oil

Prayer and Medicine

An Idiomatic Expression

Anointing Oil and Washing Feet

Elders and Prayer

10	The Work of Elders	159
	Introduction	
	Leadership	
	Church Growth	
	Assigning Responsibilities	
	Elders Meetings	
	Business Meetings	
	(1) A substitute for leadership	
	(2) The men's business meeting	
	(3) The importance of planning	
	An Open Manner	
	Conflicts Among Elders	
	Deacons Without Elders	
11	How to Select Elders	175
	Getting Started	
	The Procedural Committee	
	The Elder Selection Committee	
	Elder Selection Committee Meetings	
12	How to Select Deacons	189
	Deacons are Special Servants	
	The Qualifications of Deacons	
	The Example of Leadership	
	(1) Families	
	(2) Self-control	
	(3) Theology	
	(4) Church attendance	
	(5) Unity	
	The Selection of Deacons	
	Leadership Decisions	
13	Preachers as Elders	203
	Introduction	
	Restoring the Pattern	
	The Church in Ephesus	
	Jerusalem and Ephesus	
	House Churches	

The Journey to Miletus
Preachers and Pastors
Conclusion

14 Preachers and Elders225

Selecting a Preacher
Church Identity
Common Sense Procedures
Researching the Candidate
Paying Preachers and Elders
Promoting Long-Term Ministry
Changing Preachers
Why Churches Change Preachers
 (1) The preacher has failed in his life
 (2) The preacher has failed in his ministry
 (3) The church has failed to be supportive
 (4) The church has failed to honor ministry
 (5) The church is never pleased
 (6) The church has unrealistic expectations
Leadership Decisions

15 Restoring the Pattern247

Pattern Concepts
The Law of Silence
Restoration Concepts
Restoration Perspectives
Conclusion

Study Guide261

Works Cited283

Introduction

Why a Book on Elders and Deacons?

Over the years, I have noticed a lack of information on the subject of elders and deacons. This book is an attempt to provide the information that is lacking in our fellowship. More is needed on this subject than just information on the qualifications of elders and deacons, so I have tried to cover all aspects of biblical teaching. In helping churches organize with elders and deacons, I have also noticed the need for information regarding some of the more practical issues, such as the mechanics of selecting church leadership, or how to apply the biblical teaching in a practical way to real life situations. Some books have been written over the years on elders and deacons, including one of my own in 1981, but I have felt that all of these have been inadequate. For example, no one has addressed the following crucial issues relative to the subject of elders: the historical development of elders and the change to a monarchical bishop; a justification for following the biblical pattern for church organization; a review and analysis of the teaching of the apostolic fathers on elders; the likely condition and environment of churches and elders in Ephesus and Jerusalem; the relationship of pastor, preacher, and elder; and the New Testament practice of preaching elders. In addition, I do not believe the following issues have been covered adequately: elders and the anointing of oil (James 5:14); the reason elders should be men and not women; the evidence for a plurality of elders in each church; a detailed discussion of the qualifications such as, for example, the

Elders and Deacons

meaning of “the husband of but one wife” (1 Timothy 3:2); and finally, some practical procedures for the selection of elders and deacons.

Based on my personal experience of over 30 years as a preacher for the church, I believe we have often misunderstood the work and even identity of biblical elders. We have also misunderstood some of the qualifications and have made others more stringent than originally intended, which means that practically no one can qualify. In some cases, this has resulted in a form of church government and leadership not found in the Bible. It is my hope that this book can help us focus on what is actually taught in Scripture regarding church leadership. Very few things can be more hurtful to the church and the cause of Christ than a failure in the selection of church leaders. Because of the lack of a hierarchical structure within our fellowship, each local church must attempt to find its own way in the selection process. This is often attempted without a very clear idea of what should be done. If the process is not done carefully, or not in harmony with biblical teaching, leaders can be appointed who are more harmful than helpful. Another problem occurs when churches fail to appoint leaders at all, or develop some other form of government, which is also not in harmony with God’s design for the church. It is my hope that this book will bring strength to the leadership of today’s church by increasing our understanding of biblical teaching.

How to Use This Book

It is likely that this book will tell you more about elders than you want to know. Do not feel compelled to begin in chapter one and read the whole book. Instead, it is my hope that this book can be a reference tool that you can put in your library and use from time to time as the need arises. For example, chapter nine (Elders and the Anointing of Oil), which primarily concerns the interpretation of James 5:14, is unlikely to be of interest to most who read this book. However, if someone sends a request to the elders to come to the hospital and daub oil on their heads before they go into surgery, then this chapter will be eagerly consulted. There are probably other chapters like chapter nine and the reader will have to decide what is important at the moment. So, feel free to skip over a section if it is not relevant to your current needs. Eventually, however, all of the material will be relevant if your experience is similar to mine.

Some of the chapters have discussion questions at the end in order to facilitate class discussion. The questions are in the same order as the material in

Introduction

the chapter, so if you don't know what to say about question one, just start reading the chapter at the beginning and you will come to the material you need.

Content and Style Issues

I like to use discursive footnotes to elaborate on some of the more technical points that I feel are important but tend to distract from the argument being made in the text. This allows the text to flow without getting bogged down as well as provide a technical justification for some of the arguments being made in the text. In addition, these footnotes have been used to cite what others have said that might be of interest. I do not like a lot of quotations in the text of a book, except for the ancient or primary sources. My goal is not to include in the text a string of quotations of what others have said. Besides, most readers just skip over the quotes anyway. The exception to this is when I am pursuing an argument that is closely tied to what someone else has already said and it would detract from the flow of the book to have the quote in a footnote.

Since the New Testament is written in first century Greek, it is necessary to refer to Greek words occasionally in pursuing the meaning of certain passages. I anglicize the Greek in the text but not in the footnotes. My goal is to present the Greek of the New Testament in such a way that the English reader can see the point being made without having to know the original language.

I do not italicize the ancient documents but I treat them as I do the Bible. We don't say *Romans* 1:16, so I say 1 Clement 44.1 and Ecclesiastical History 2.25.5-6. How to cite the ancient sources is sometimes difficult because modern scholars are not consistent in their citations. The reference to the murder of James in Josephus is sometimes cited as Antiquities 20.9 (*The New Bible Dictionary*), but I believe the average person will never find this reference. I prefer Antiquities 20.200, as it is cited in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, which is much easier to find. I have also avoided the outdated use of Roman numerals and Latin abbreviations, which continue to be used by modern authors for no apparent reason. For example, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (vol. 3, p. 621) cites Eusebius as *Hist. Eccl.* II.23.4-18. I see no compelling reason for this. Why not just say Ecclesiastical History 2.23.4-18? I have also avoided abbreviations such as *Hist. Eccl.* that make it difficult for the average person to identify.

Since I believe in Jesus and I am not politically correct, I refrain from such things as using C.E. and B.C.E. after dates. I just use AD and BC and I don't put periods after the letters. I do not use AD after every date, but only for

Elders and Deacons

the appearance of the first date in each chapter, or when there is a change from AD to BC.

There are many Bible quotations placed into the text. The reason for this is that many do not know what these passages say and they will not look them up. This may seem cumbersome to those who are well acquainted with the New Testament, but most readers will benefit from seeing what the text actually says.

Chapter 1

Historical Background

Who are Church Leaders?

Leaders of the New Testament church were known as elders, overseers (also translated bishops), and shepherds (also translated pastors). Of these three designations, the writers of the New Testament most often refer to these leaders as elders. The early church also appointed servant leaders known as deacons who were assigned various ministries. Other leaders in the church were evangelists, teachers, apostles, and prophets. Some of these leadership positions required special gifts of the Holy Spirit and soon faded away with the cessation of these gifts. For example, the apostles were chosen by God to lead the church after its establishment in Acts 2. Jesus had predicted they would have special powers to lead the church into maturity after he had returned back to the Father (Matthew 18:18; John 14:25-26; 15:26-27; 16:5-16; Luke 24:45-49; Acts 1:8). The apostles also had special powers from the Holy Spirit that enabled them to confirm the inspired message with miraculous signs (Acts 2:43; Hebrews 2:1-3).

The New Testament does not provide instructions for a continued succession of the special and gifted ministries such as apostles and prophets. Ignatius, writing in the first decade of the second century, illustrates how the early church viewed the apostles as having special authority from God: “I do not order you as did Peter and Paul; they were Apostles” (Ignatius to the Romans

Elders and Deacons

4.3).¹ This indicates that as early as Ignatius, the apostles were considered a temporary and special group of leaders. Although there was some initial addition to the original apostles, they seem to be a special and temporary leadership group in the church. We have an example of the replacement of Judas with Matthias near the beginning of the church (Acts 1:12-26) and the addition of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9 and 22) and apparently James (Galatians 1:19), but neither Jesus nor the apostles provide instructions for a succession to the apostles. Note that in the above examples there was also a direct intervention by God in the selection. God intervened directly in the selection of Matthias and Jesus provided a special post-resurrection visit to Paul (Acts 9:5) and James (1 Corinthians 15:7). Had there been a planned succession to the apostolic leadership of the first century church, it is hard to imagine how this could have been overlooked by those Christians of the late first and early second centuries.

Paul tells us that in the church God “has appointed first of all apostles” (1 Corinthians 12:28). In both chronology and importance we know that apostles were the first leaders. Paul then says that after the apostles, there are “second prophets, third teachers.” The inspired prophets and gifted teachers were certainly leaders in the early church but they do not seem to have had an abiding office that would involve the future administration and shepherding of the church. Instead, they occupied great and gifted ministries in the church that brought them the respect of fellow believers. Their gifts and ministries were also a direct way for God to show his approval to the newly established church. The other gifted individuals listed by Paul, including those who had gifts of administration, do not seem to refer to an ordinary ministry office but a special gifted ministry instead. In the New Testament, elders and deacons played a leadership role in the church that was in addition to the ministry of those who were gifted.

The church in Jerusalem selected special leaders to administer the distribution of food (Acts 6:1-6). These special servants remind us of the deacons we read about later. But are the deacons in 1 Timothy 3 the same as the servants in Acts 6? Although the men in Acts 6 were also appointed and recognized as special servants in much the same way as the deacons in 1 Timothy 3, they are

¹ It is possible to make more out of this statement than is really there. I believe it shows the apostles were a special group but it does not mean that Ignatius felt he could not give the church spiritual orders. Perhaps this is an exaggerated appeal to humility. Compare his statement to the Ephesians: “I do not give you commands as if I were someone great” (3.1). But Ignatius says of his speech, “I am a word of God” (Ignatius to the Romans 2.1) and “I spoke with a great voice, with God’s own voice” (Ignatius to the Philadelphians 7.1).

Historical Background

not described in exactly the same way. They were a special group known as “the seven” (Acts 21:8). Philip, the evangelist, was one of “the seven” just as John was one of “the twelve.” In addition to being teachers and evangelists, these seven men were also gifted with the Holy Spirit, which is not one of the qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3.

Other leadership positions in the church seem to be intended to be perpetual. Toward the end of his life, the apostle Paul gave instructions to Titus and Timothy regarding church organization. Paul told Titus to “straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you” (Titus 1:5) and Timothy was instructed to appoint additional leaders in Ephesus (1 Timothy 3). Paul’s instructions in 1 Timothy and Titus prepare the churches for the time when the apostles would not be available, which illustrates the need for the application of these letters to the churches of today. Notice that the possession of miraculous gifts is not listed among the qualifications of elders. The absence of miraculous gifts in the two qualification lists also suggests the temporary nature of these gifts.

Certain leadership positions in the New Testament church seem expedient and temporary and depend on special circumstances, as the men appointed to represent the Corinthian church in a delegation to Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:3). This indicates the churches had the freedom to appoint special servants to temporarily represent them in some matter when the need arose. Perhaps the appointment of the seven in Acts 6 is another example of a special and temporary leadership position. In practice, we also have special and temporary assignments of ministry. There are occasions today when the church appoints individuals to a particular leadership role or ministry, such as, for example, a committee to screen job-applicants, select elders, prepare financial statements, or purchase property. In like manner, the early churches found it convenient to appoint people to represent their interests at various times. In 2 Corinthians 8:18-20, Paul tells of a brother who was appointed by the churches to monitor the administration of the collection that Paul had gathered from the churches. Earlier, he had given the church instructions about the collection for the needy Christians (1 Corinthians 16:2-3) along with information about letters for the church-appointed delegates to Jerusalem. Later in the same chapter, he names three individuals who brought a message to him from the church in Corinth (v. 17). It seems unlikely that these men were self-appointed messengers. Perhaps

Elders and Deacons

they were asked by the church at Corinth to take Paul the list of questions we read about in chapter 7.

On a continuing basis, however, there were to be qualified leaders appointed to facilitate the growth and management of the church. In churches of Christ today, we call these leaders elders and deacons in keeping with their description in the New Testament. Other men, like Timothy, Titus, Artemas, Tychicus, Erastus, and Apollos, served in leadership positions as teachers and evangelists. These men were not the local preaching elders (1 Timothy 5:17), but evangelists and missionaries who moved from place to place preaching the word (see the discussion in chapter 13). It is not possible to know how all of these men were appointed. It may have been by the consent of the whole church or by the direction of the apostles themselves. Some may have never been appointed to any ministry by the church but were looked upon as leaders simply because of their dedicated lives.

In this book, the primary focus will be on the church leaders who are designated by the three descriptive terms of elders, overseers (bishops), and shepherds (pastors). Overseer and shepherd are descriptive of the ministry of an elder and all of these terms are used interchangeably in the New Testament and refer to one leadership position.

The Elders of Israel²

In the Old Testament, the Israelites appointed leaders called elders who represented them in various matters. The role that elders played in the Old Testament as shepherds and representatives of the people may give us some insight into the work of the elders in the church. The Hebrew word for elder (*zagan*) can refer to that which is old or identifies one as old. In the Psalms, it is gray hair (Psalms 71:18) and in Genesis it is failing eyesight (Genesis 48:10). The most likely characteristic associated with older people in the context of leaders is wisdom and good judgment: “Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding?” (Job 12:12). God’s people are commanded to “rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your

² “In most civilizations authority has been vested in those who by reason of age or experience have been thought best qualified to rule. It is not surprising therefore that the leaders in many ancient communities have borne a title derived from a root meaning ‘old age’. In this respect the Hebrew ‘elder’ (*zagan*) stands side by side with the Homeric *gerontes*, the Spartan *presbys*, the Roman *senatus*, and the Arab *sheikh*” (*The New Bible Dictionary*, p. 356). For a good summary article on the meaning of *zagan* and *presbyteros*, see Ed Glasscock, “The Biblical Concept of Elder,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, volume 144 (January-March 1987).

Historical Background

God” (Leviticus 19:32). Older men were selected as leaders of the people because they had wisdom and knowledge gained through years of experience. In addition, the people could observe the conduct of these men over the years and they could know something of their character. Of course, not all older men became elders in Israel and neither do wisdom and leadership skills always come with age.

The first mention of elders in the Old Testament concerns the elders of Egypt (Genesis 50:7). These elders probably held some official position in the land of Egypt as “dignitaries” (NIV) in Pharaoh’s court. The first time Israel is said to have elders in an official sense is in Exodus 3:16. On several occasions Moses provided the elders of Israel with the experiences necessary to make them teachers and leaders of the people. Moses and Aaron gathered together all the elders of Israel and taught them the things God had said to Moses: “So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak” (Exodus 19:7; see also 4:29-30; 12:21). From the general body of the elders of Israel, a smaller group was selected to represent Israel and to go with Moses when he went before the Lord. God said to Moses, “come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance...Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up” (Exodus 24:1, 9).

Moses, together with the elders, commanded the people to “keep all these commands that I give you today” (Deuteronomy 27:1). Along with the priests, the elders were entrusted with the law of God (Deuteronomy 31:9-13). Moses commanded them to read the law before the people “so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law” (v. 12). With the departure of leading figures like Moses and Joshua, the burden of leadership and teaching fell more on the elders (Joshua 23:1-11; 24:1-14). After Joshua died, the elders of Israel encouraged the people to be faithful to the Lord: “Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the LORD had done for Israel” (Joshua 24:31). Jewish tradition tells us that “Moses received the law from Sinai and committed it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders” (M. Avoth 1.1).

On many occasions, the elders of Israel did not live up to the great responsibility given to them by God. For example, the elders took part in the

Elders and Deacons

rebellion of Absalom (2 Samuel 17:4) and the plot to murder Naboth (1 Kings 21:11-12). Ezekiel indicates that elders of his day had idols in their hearts (Ezekiel 14:1-3).

In 1 Kings 12, Rehoboam sought the advice of the elders when the people requested a lighter yoke than what had been experienced under his father, Solomon. These elders may have been the older advisers of Solomon. The translation of “older men” (NRSV) seems to convey the idea that these men were not an official group of advisers while “elders” (NIV, NASB) is more likely to give a different impression. The problem that exists in Hebrew, Greek, and English is that the term “elder” can refer to one who is a member of a special group or simply to one who is older. For example, when Paul gives a list of qualifications for leaders in Titus 1:6-9, the translation of “elders” seems preferable over “older men” because a specific group of leaders is in view; however, in the next chapter (2:2), “older men” is preferred by most translators because the context does not seem to refer to a specific group. These examples indicate the need to consider the context carefully before one can conclude that something other than “older men” is in mind.

The designation of elder was often used by the Jews as an honorary title for their leading scholars; for example, “Shammai the Elder” is found in the Mishna (M. Orlah 2.5). A special council of elders, consisting of about 70 members, came into existence around the beginning of the second century BC under the Seleucid king Antiochus III. This council was similar to the Sanhedrin in the New Testament. At various times under the rule of the Greeks and Romans, a council of the Jews was granted wide powers. Julius Caesar, for example, extended the power of the Sanhedrin over all Judea. At the time of Christ and the beginning of the church, the internal government of the Jews was mostly in the hands of the Sanhedrin.³ This explains the power of the Sanhedrin in Acts to persecute the church. The composition of the Sanhedrin at Jerusalem included Scribes (legal experts), Pharisees, priests, and Sadducees in addition to the elders of the people (Matthew 26:3, 57; Mark 14:53; 15:1; Acts 5:17, 21, 34; 23:6-14). It is likely that many of the elders of the Sanhedrin were also Scribes and

³ See the relevant articles in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, volume 5, pp. 96f ; *The New Bible Dictionary*, p. 1142; E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, “Groups and Parties,” pp. 315f (note especially the chapter titled, “Who Ran What?”) and the articles on the relevant Greek words in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* and the *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. For an extensive treatment of elders in the Old Testament and early Judaism, see R. Alastair Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority Within Earliest Christianity*, pp. 20f.

Historical Background

Pharisees. Jesus predicted he would be rejected by the elders and suffer many things as a result of their opposition (Matthew 16:21; Mark 8:31). The elders of the Jews are generally pictured in opposition to Jesus; however, a local body of elders at Capernaum approached Jesus on behalf of a centurion (Luke 7:1-5).

One of the lessons learned from this historical survey of the elders of Israel is that elders are not infallible just because they have been appointed as elders. This would also apply to elders of the church. We may pray for them as leaders, but this does not mean that every decision they make is without flaw.

Leaders Of The New Testament Church (30-70 AD)

The first mention of church leaders as elders is around 46 when the church in Antioch of Syria sent relief to the Christians in Judea. The gift was presented to the elders of the Jerusalem church by Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:29-30). The church at Jerusalem had elders before the events recorded in Acts 11, but the leaders of the church at Antioch are not described as elders at this time. In 47, Paul began his first missionary journey from the city of Antioch. Luke describes the church in Antioch as having prophets and teachers but he makes no mention of elders (Acts 13:1-3). If there were elders at Antioch, one would think they would be mentioned at such an important occasion. It is possible, however, that the prophets and teachers in Antioch were also elders. For example, Peter was both an apostle and an elder (1 Peter 1:1; 5:1). The apostles and elders are mentioned together on several occasions (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22; 16:4). The elders are mentioned without the apostles in Acts 11:30; 20:17, and 21:18.

The prophets and teachers at Antioch laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas as they set them apart for this mission: “So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off” (Acts 13:3). The laying on of hands was a sign of approval and blessing by the church regarding the mission of Paul and Barnabas. We know from the New Testament that elders also laid their hands on others for a similar purpose. The elders laid hands on Timothy when he was set apart for his work as an evangelist: “Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you” (1 Timothy 4:14). Timothy received the gift through the laying on of Paul’s hands (2 Timothy 1:6) when (at the same time) he was ordained by the elders for his ministry of preaching. At a later time, Paul told Timothy not to lay hands on someone in a hasty manner: “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands” (1 Timothy 5:22). Timothy’s work as an evangelist in

Elders and Deacons

Ephesus required him to set apart certain men for special ministries. The qualifications of elders and deacons are given in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and it is probably these two groups of leaders Paul has in mind.

Before Paul concluded his first missionary journey, he appointed elders in all the churches he had established: “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust” (Acts 14:23). Sometime later (perhaps in 49) he wrote his letter to the Galatian churches but does not address the elders and deacons. In 50, on his second missionary journey, the church at Philippi was established. When Paul writes to this church about 10 years later, he addresses the leadership of the church: “To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons” (Philippians 1:1). After establishing the church at Philippi, Paul went to Corinth and stayed for 18 months (Acts 18:11). About three years later, in the spring of 55,⁴ he wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians from Ephesus but does not address the elders and deacons of the church. If leadership existed in the church at this time, one would expect that these leaders would be admonished to solve the great problems present in Corinth. Perhaps the reason the elders at Corinth are not mentioned is because they were a part of the problem. About 40 years later (or perhaps only 15 years later), the letter of 1 Clement indicates that the Corinthian church had been disloyal to its elders (1 Clement 47.6).⁵

In Paul’s first letter to Timothy (probably written a couple of years after 62)⁶ he wrote about the qualifications of elders in Ephesus. About seven years earlier in 57, while Paul was on his way to Jerusalem for the last time, he addressed the elders of the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:16-17). This indicates the church in Ephesus already had elders before Paul wrote 1 Timothy and that Timothy assisted the church in selecting additional elders. Sometime after he wrote to Timothy, he also wrote to Titus in Crete about the selection of church leadership (Titus 1:5).

⁴ John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, p. 352 and W. Harold Mare, *1 Corinthians*, p. 180.

⁵ George Edmundson (*The Church in Rome in the First Century*) argues for an early date for 1 Clement. John A. T. Robinson builds on Edmundson’s arguments and argues for a date in the early part of 70. Note, however, the comment in the introduction to 1 Clement in the *Apostolic Fathers* (Loeb Classical Library, number 24): “It is safest to say that it must be dated between 75 and 110; but within these limits there is a general agreement among critics to regard as most probable the last decade of the first century” (p. 5). There seems to be a consensus among authorities today for a date around 95 but I believe the arguments presented by Edmundson and Robinson have not been effectively refuted.

⁶ The possible range is about 62-68 according to Ralph Earle, *1 Timothy*, p. 344.

Historical Background

The historical evidence of the New Testament indicates that elders and deacons were appointed in some churches within months after their establishment. Other churches, however, do not seem to have elders and deacons until years later. They either do not have them or they are just not mentioned. Special gifts and helps from the Holy Spirit, such as the gift of leadership (Romans 12:8; Ephesians 4:11), certainly aided in the establishment of elders and deacons although it did not guarantee it. Special gifts by themselves would not automatically qualify one to serve since there were also family and moral qualifications.

In the first century letter of 1 Clement, the overseers and deacons are said to have been appointed by the apostles and were tested or approved by the Holy Spirit. The apostles “preached from district to district, and from city to city, and they appointed their first converts, *testing* them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of the future believers” (1 Clement 42.4). The Greek verb⁷ translated “test” in 1 Clement is *dokimazō* and it is also used by Paul in 1 Timothy regarding the testing or approval of deacons: “They must first be tested (*dokimazō*); and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons” (1 Timothy 3:10). What is the testing in this verse? This probably refers to the examination of qualifications and approval by the congregation. The word translated “test” has the sense of examination. This is evident in the following occurrences where the Greek verb translated “test” in 1 Timothy 3:10 is translated approve, test, and examine: “Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve (*dokimazō*) and send them with your gift to Jerusalem” (1 Corinthians 16:3). “Test (*dokimazō*) everything. Hold on to the good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). “A man ought to examine (*dokimazō*) himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup” (1 Corinthians 11:28). To examine, test, and approve men for these leadership positions would involve a qualification standard and the application of the standard to the candidates by the congregation. The Holy Spirit provides us with the standard in the qualifications set forth in the New Testament. Before such letters as 1 Timothy and Titus were written, the church had inspired apostles who were able to reveal the Holy Spirit’s will. Perhaps this is what the letter of 1 Clement refers to when it says the apostles were “*testing* them by the Spirit” (42.4). It may also be the case that it took some churches longer than others to find men who could pass the test and become approved.

⁷ The Greek verb is *dokimazō*. Some additional occurrences are: Galatians 6:4; Romans 12:2; and Philippians 1:10.

Elders and Deacons

After The Apostles⁸

The window of apostolic Christianity is roughly the 40 year period between the years 30 and 70. Most, if not all, of the New Testament books were written between the death of Jesus in 30 and the end of the Jewish rebellion in 70.⁹ The exception to dating all of the New Testament books before 70 would be the widely held view that the gospel of John, the letters of John (1, 2, and 3 John) and the book of Revelation are to be dated later in the first century. Glenn Barker, in his introduction to the letters of John,¹⁰ argues that the gospel of John was written somewhere around 75-80 and the letters of John around 85-90. Many commentators date the book of Revelation toward the end of the reign of Domitian (81-96), which would have the book written sometime after 90. The best presentation of the evidence for an early date of all the New Testament books is that of John A. T. Robinson in his book, *Redating the New Testament*. In spite of the possibility that a portion of the New Testament may have been written after 70, the information relative to the leadership and organizational pattern of the early church was written during the first 40 years after the death of Christ. This includes the period of the great missionary outreach recorded in Acts (30-62) and followed by the letters of Paul to Timothy and Titus (62-67).

The historical period after this time was very chaotic. The persecution instigated by Nero, which probably began in the spring of 65, put the church on the defensive throughout the Roman Empire while the church in Rome suffered great hardship and death. The church in Judea suffered disruption during the Jewish rebellion a few years later (66-70). Jesus had predicted the terrible events associated with the Jewish rebellion in the great Olivet discourse in Matthew 24. Jesus said, “For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:21-22).

It was during the persecutions and the chaos of the late 60’s that many from the original church leadership passed away. Historical records indicate the leadership of the church had suffered great loss in the first 40 years of its exist-

⁸ “By the mid-second century, most churches had one bishop at their head; a council of presbyters or elders who advised the bishop and could substitute for him; and deacons who assisted the bishop, especially in works of charity” (*Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* [first edition], p. 217).

⁹ See John A. T. Robinson, *Redating The New Testament*; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*; F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*; and the excellent introductions to the books of the New Testament in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*.

¹⁰ Glen W. Barker, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 301.

Historical Background

tence. For example, the apostle James (the son of Zebedee) was murdered by Herod Agrippa in 44 (Acts 12:1-2); in Josephus, we learn that James, the brother of the Lord and a leader in the Jerusalem church, was murdered by the high priest Ananus in 62 (Antiquities 20.200); and Eusebius tells us that Paul and Peter were murdered by Nero in his persecution of Christians sometime after the burning of Rome in 64 (Ecclesiastical History 2.25.5-6). Toward the end of this period, the losses in leadership must have been great due to both persecution and old age.

Little historical information exists about the church during the next 40 year period from 70 to 110. At the end of this period, however, one ancient source indicates a change was beginning to take place in the organization of the church in some places. A development toward one authoritative leader in each local church or city called an overseer (or bishop) is sometimes called the monarchical bishop.¹¹ Writings dated earlier than 110, however, do not indicate a change in the biblical pattern. The ultimate authority for determining how the church is to be organized is found in the New Testament. The purpose of citing historical documents outside the New Testament is to increase our understanding of when and why the early church departed from the biblical pattern.

1 Clement (69-95)

It is very likely that the earliest Christian document we have outside the New Testament books is a letter from the church at Rome to the church at Corinth. This letter has been attributed to Clement of Rome by tradition and has come to be known as 1 Clement. Eusebius, who wrote in the early fourth century, says there was a Clement who was the bishop of the church in Rome toward the end of the first century and that he wrote the letter we know as 1 Clement in behalf of the church in Rome (Ecclesiastical History 3.15-16). The writer of 1 Clement does not write authoritatively as an inspired apostle¹² or as Ignatius, who wrote with the authority of a monarchical bishop.

Dating 1 Clement around 95 seems to be based on speculation that the misfortunes and calamities mentioned in the beginning of the letter (1.1) refer

¹¹ Some argue that a more accurate term is moniscopacy since the single bishop is not necessarily a monarch.

¹² The phrase, "we have written through the Holy Spirit" (1 Clement 63.2) may refer to the manner in which the letter was written and not the inspiration of the writer (cf. Romans 5:5). On the other hand, compare similar phrases in the Greek text of Matthew 1:18 and Luke 10:21. According to Acts 1:2, Jesus gave instructions to the apostles "through the Holy Spirit" (*dia pneumatou agiou*) and Clement writes "through the Holy Spirit" (*dia tou agiou pneumatos*).

Elders and Deacons

to a persecution during the reign of Domitian. Kirsopp Lake, in his introduction to this letter in the Loeb Classical Library translation, says the date could be anywhere between 75 and 110 (p. 5). John A. T. Robinson¹³ points out the lack of evidence for a persecution in the reign of Domitian and skillfully argues for a date just before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70. He attributes the misfortunes and calamities mentioned in 1 Clement to 69, the year of political chaos and instability in Rome in which there were a number of emperors.¹⁴ An early date would help explain the statement in 1 Clement that seems to indicate the daily sacrificial system was in operation at the time of writing (41.2). Robinson's arguments for dating both 1 Clement and Revelation before the fall of Jerusalem are not adequately refuted elsewhere and the door must be left open for an early date for both books; however, the majority of scholars today still date both books around 95.¹⁵

Regardless of which first century date is given for the book, the point is that 1 Clement is very close to, if not within, the time of the writing of the New Testament books. This means the information the book provides relative to the organization of the church is important for us today because it sheds light on the practice of the early church. In addition, this book was highly regarded by the church in the second century and even considered as Scripture by some. The book is also important in what it says about the early development and acceptance of the canon of the New Testament books. One cannot read the book of 1 Clement without being impressed with the author's frequent appeals

¹³ John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (pp. 329f). This book represents a departure from the current critical orthodoxy of dating many of the books late. Robinson's work focuses on a historical reconstruction of the environment of the New Testament books. E. Earle Ellis adds to his argument by addressing some of the false assumptions of literary criticism ("Dating the New Testament," *New Testament Studies*, volume 26 [1980], pp. 487-502). Many assumptions have been made relative to the dating of the New Testament books that have been simply repeated from one scholar to the next. Robinson and Ellis are effective in addressing these assumptions.

¹⁴ See Michael Grant, *History of Rome* under the heading "The Year of the Four Emperors" (pp. 285f) for a good discussion of this period.

¹⁵ I disagree with the majority on the date for Revelation and I am in general agreement with the arguments made by Robinson for a pre-70 date for all of the New Testament books. His arguments for dating 1 Clement earlier also have merit; however, the arguments for dating the Didache before 70 AD are not as convincing. As for the date of Revelation, note the comments in 1981 by Alan Johnson: "In light of the present studies, the question as to when Revelation was written must be left open" (*Revelation*, p. 406). As for the date of 1 Clement, Campbell asserts that arguments for a precise date for this letter are "extremely weak" (*The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity*, p. 210). Although 1 Clement was written sometime in the second half of the first century, there seems to be about as much evidence for the letter being written in the late 60s as there is in the late 90s. For a contrary view, see *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, volume 1, p. 1060.

Historical Background

to the books of the New Testament. Students of 1 Clement have found citations or allusions to Matthew, Mark, Luke, perhaps John, Acts, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 Timothy, Titus, Hebrews, and 1 Peter.¹⁶ This is essentially the heart of the New Testament and shows that the books of the New Testament were copied, distributed, and utilized by the church at a much earlier date than many Bible critics would have us believe (cf. Colossians 4:16). It also indicates how Peter could refer to Paul's writings as Scripture (2 Peter 3:15-16) without our having to place the book of 2 Peter well into the second century. Note also Paul's citation of Luke 10:7 as Scripture in 1 Timothy 5:18.

The occasion for the letter of 1 Clement is the division that resulted in a rebellion against the elders of the church (47.6). We are not given the details of the division; that is, we are not told why it is the case that a large portion of the congregation, at the instigation of one or two individuals (47.6), has rejected the leadership of its current elders. The letter does not acknowledge that the elders did anything wrong.

¹Our Apostles also knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife for the title of bishop...³We consider therefore that it is not just to remove from their ministry those who were appointed by them, or later on by other eminent men, with the consent of the whole church, and have ministered to the flock of Christ without blame, humbly, peaceably, and disinterestedly, and for many years have received a universally favorable testimony. ⁴For our sin is not small, if we eject from the episcopate those who have blamelessly and holily offered its sacrifices. ⁵Blessed are those presbyters who finished their course before now, and have obtained a fruitful and perfect release in the ripeness of completed work, for they have now no fear that any shall move them from the place appointed to them. (1 Clement 44.1, 3-5)

There is nothing in 1 Clement that would demonstrate a departure from the New Testament pattern of church organization. The author speaks of "bishops and deacons" (1 Clement 42.4-5) as does the New Testament (Philippians 1:1).

¹⁶ *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (first edition), p. 151. Perhaps this is why many are reluctant to date the book before 95.

Elders and Deacons

The overseers at Corinth have a tradition of appointment that goes all the way back to the apostles. Some of the elders at Corinth who were appointed by the apostles were still alive at the time 1 Clement was written (44.1-3). Others were appointed by “eminent men, with the consent of the whole church” (44.3). The terms “elders” and “bishops” are used interchangeably (44.1, 4-5) as in the New Testament (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Peter 5:1-2). The idea of the monarchical bishop is as foreign to 1 Clement as it is to the New Testament.

The Shepherd of Hermas (about 90)

Portions of the Shepherd of Hermas (Visions 1-4) are thought to be as early as 90 or earlier.¹⁷ In Vision 3, white stones are used figuratively to represent “the Apostles and bishops and teachers and deacons” (3.5.1). The reference to overseers and deacons is similar to Paul’s description of the organization of the church at Philippi (Philippians 1:1) and Ephesus (Ephesians 4:11). Of these leaders, Hermas says “some of them are fallen asleep and some are still alive” (3.5.1), indicating that when he wrote some of the original leadership of the church were still alive. In Vision 2, Hermas addresses “the elders who are in charge of the church” (2.4.3). The description of the elders as being “in charge of” the church is similar to Paul’s description of elders: “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17).¹⁸

The references to church leaders in the Shepherd of Hermas indicate the church was led by men who were called elders or overseers. No distinction is made between elders and overseers and the church had a plurality of elders. The type of church organization in the Shepherd of Hermas follows the pattern of organization found in the New Testament. The references to church leaders in Visions 1-4 probably describes the church organization in Rome during the period 90-110. The absence of the monarchical bishop is significant because Ignatius was advocating this form of government around this time. Interestingly, when Ignatius writes to the church in Rome he does not indicate the church has a monarchical bishop, which is further evidence that the church in Rome had a plurality of elders, as indicated by Hermas, rather than the monarchical bishop, as advocated by Ignatius.

¹⁷ *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (first edition), p. 421. Robinson dates this material about 85 (*Redating the New Testament*, p. 335).

¹⁸ Hermas and Paul use the same word in describing the elders. The verb **proisthmi** may be translated “be at the head of” or simply “leader.” This is also the verb used to describe how the elder leads his family: “He must manage his own family well” (1 Timothy 3:4).

Historical Background

The Didache (first or second century)

The Didache, or Teaching, is a compilation of practical instructions to Christians. The book seems to be a compilation of Christian instruction collected over a long period of time. Some of the material may be very early but it is not possible to be certain about a particular date.¹⁹ The book was probably put together over a long period of time and there is no fixed date for the document as a whole. The scholars cited in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* suggest a range from 70 to sometime in the third century. The description of church leadership is similar to what is found in the New Testament: “Appoint therefore for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, meek men and not lovers of money, and truthful and approved, for they also minister to you the ministry of the prophets and teachers” (Didache 15.1). Leadership in the church is described as a plurality of overseers and deacons and these leaders were “approved”; that is, they were put to the test, examined, and approved by the congregation.²⁰ The church is admonished not to despise the overseers and deacons, but to honor them as they do the prophets and teachers (Didache 15.2). This may suggest that prophets were in existence at the time the author wrote. The significance of the Didache for this study is that it is another example of ancient church organization that is similar to the New Testament pattern.

Ignatius (110)²¹

Ignatius of Antioch was the first that we know of to advocate a change from the apostolic arrangement of a plurality of elders to a one-bishop rule. He argues for the monarchical bishop in his letters, written sometime near the end of

¹⁹ The Didache has been dated as early as 40-60 by John A. T. Robinson, *Redating The New Testament* (p. 352); 65-100 by W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 121; 80-120 by Clayton N. Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers*, p. 32; about 90 by Edgar J. Goodspeed, *A History of Early Christian Literature* (revised and enlarged by Robert M. Grant), p.13; about 120 by David Ayerst, *Records of Christianity*, volume 1, p. 57, and anywhere from 70 to the end of the third century according to authorities cited in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, volume 2, p. 197. See also *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (first edition), p. 262. The most likely solution to the dating of this document is to recognize that it is a compilation of material occurring over a long period of time ranging within the dates estimated by *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. If this solution is correct, then dating various parts of the document would depend on the known dating of other documents with similar material. For this reason, The Didache is not as helpful to us in this study.

²⁰ For a similar occurrence of **dokimazw** in the New Testament, see 1 Corinthians 16:3 (see also footnote 7).

²¹ “By the middle of the second century, the Ignatian type of church order, with a single bishop at the head of each community, was generally observed” (*Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* [first edition], p. 216).

Elders and Deacons

Trajan's reign (98-117) or about 110.²² Ignatius viewed the singular bishop as the authoritative leader of the local church: "Therefore, it is clear that we must regard the bishop as the Lord himself" (Ignatius to the Ephesians 6.1). The writings of Ignatius give us a different picture of church organization since he emphasizes a single bishop for each congregation. The churches still had elders, but they were to follow the leadership of the bishop. The bishop presides in the place of God and the elders in the place of the apostles (Ignatius to the Magnesians 6.1) and the elders are to be "attuned to the bishop as the strings to a harp" (Ignatius to the Ephesians 4.1). All in the church are to "sing with one voice" (4.2) and "not oppose the bishop" (5.3).

These letters were written at a time when Ignatius was being transported from Antioch of Syria to Rome to be put to death in the arena. Along the way, he was able to write letters to certain churches and one individual, Polycarp. Polycarp then wrote a cover letter for the collection and sent it to the church at Philippi. Both Polycarp and Ignatius suffered martyrdom for their faith in Christ. Ignatius tells Polycarp to "give heed to the bishop" and commends those who are "subject to the bishop, presbyters, and deacons" (Ignatius to Polycarp 6.1).

He tells the Christians in Philadelphia that in this matter he speaks with God's own voice when he says, "Give heed to the bishop, and to the presbytery²³ and deacons" (Ignatius to the Philadelphians 7.1).²⁴ Ignatius encouraged the churches to appoint delegates to visit his home church in Antioch of Syria. He reports that some churches sent bishops while others sent elders and deacons (Ignatius to the Philadelphians 10.2). These statements make it clear that Ignatius made a distinction between the bishop and the elders. According to Ignatius, the bishop presides over the church in the place of God (Ignatius to the Magnesians 6.1) and elders who yield to a youthful bishop are commended (Ignatius to the Magnesians 3.1-2).

²² See the introduction to the letters of Ignatius in the *Apostolic Fathers* (Loeb Classical Library, number 24) pp. 166f.; *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, p. 451; Clayton N. Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 53f; and *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, volume 3, p. 384.

²³ Or, eldership. The noun is singular and refers to the office of the elders, or presbytery, as in the translation by Kirsopp Lake (See also Ignatius to the Ephesians 4.1 and 1 Timothy 4:14).

²⁴ This is the threefold office (bishop, elders, deacons) that developed in many churches in the second century. "Ignatius of Antioch (110-117) urged the churches of Asia Minor to 'do nothing without the bishop,' but the frequency with which he repeated that refrain suggests that they had not yet adopted the threefold pattern. Indeed, many scholars have observed that Ignatius's obsession with the idea, as well as some direct statements in his letters, indicates that this form was not yet secure in Antioch either" (E. Glenn Hinson, *The Early Church*, p. 85).

Historical Background

Why did Ignatius advocate this change? It is likely that this was his solution to false teaching and division in the churches.²⁵ We know from his letters that false teachers were troubling the churches. Some of these doctrinal challenges were serious. Jewish Christians were leading other Christians back to the observance of the Law and other Christians argued that Jesus only appeared to suffer in the flesh. To us today, these issues are not a threat in any way, but in the first century these ideas were very influential and would have dramatically changed the theology of the church regarding Messiah Jesus had they gained acceptance. Notice that the efforts of Ignatius and others in the second century were totally successful. Despite the faults of church leaders during the first three centuries after the apostles, they prevented these ideas from becoming dominant. It is likely that the Christians of Ignatius' day did not want to make a wrong choice concerning these teachings and become separated from God. Perhaps many of them were confused and did not really know what to believe. The response of Ignatius is for Christians to listen to the bishop. To stay close to the bishop is to stay inseparable from God and the apostles (Ignatius to the Trallians 7.1-2). The appeal to tradition and church organization has been the solution for millions who profess the name of Christ to this day.

Did Ignatius represent New Testament Christianity? It should be obvious that he did not according to the first century evidence. Even if the monarchical bishop could be found in the New Testament as it is in Ignatius, the more complex ecclesiastical structures that followed Ignatius and that exist today did not exist in the second century.²⁶ What we have in Ignatius is the beginning of an evolutionary process of organizational change in the church. Furthermore, the efforts to find the Ignatian model in the New Testament are forced upon Scripture. The fact that Paul saw James when he went to Jerusalem (Galatians 1:19) or that James, along with Peter and John, are referred to as pillars (2:9), means nothing more than the three were respected and influential leaders in the

²⁵ This has been noted by a number of writers. I agree with the comments by Marjorie Warkentin: "The need for survival as a distinctive entity with a simple, homogeneous message was apparently the major factor leading to the centralization of authority in a rigid power structure," *Ordination*, p. 49. See also Wayne Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians*, p.122. R. Alastair Campbell (*The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity*, p. 214) has suggested on the basis of 1 Clement 54:1-2 that an attempted introduction of the monarchical bishop at Corinth was the cause of the problems in that church! See also E. Glenn Hinson, *The Early Church*, pp. 85-87.

²⁶ "There is also no convincing evidence in Ignatius of an overarching ecclesiastical authority above the level of the local bishop," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, volume 3, p. 386.

Elders and Deacons

church. Of the documents that we have, the historical evidence indicates Ignatius was the first to promote this style of organization. The fact that it is so vigorously promoted in Ignatius' letters may be a strong indication that the idea was new and meeting resistance.²⁷ For example, at Ephesus some Christians were resisting the pressure to join in the assembly where the bishop presided (Ignatius to the Ephesians 5.1-3). Ignatius may be referring to those who lacked a commitment to attend any assembly, but the context suggests the possibility that there was a real struggle taking place over the authority of the bishop: "For it is written 'God resisteth the proud;' let us then be careful not to oppose the bishop, that we may be subject to God" (5.3).

It is also important to place the writings of Ignatius in perspective relative to the apostolic period. If John the apostle were 25 years old at the death of Jesus, he would have been 105 at the time of Ignatius' letter to the Ephesians. There is a late second century tradition that the apostle John died of old age in the city of Ephesus. About this time, Irenaeus wrote that "all the presbyters who had been associated in Asia with John, the disciple of the Lord, bear witness to his tradition, for he remained with them until the times of Trajan" (quoted in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.23.4). Trajan became emperor at the death of Nerva in 98.

Archaeology has uncovered the foundation of a small church building in Ephesus dedicated to John in the fourth century. What visitors see today when visiting the site are the remains of a magnificent building built in the sixth century by the emperor Justinian. These buildings were built over the traditional site of the tomb of the apostle John and they indicate a strong tradition about his death. However, the evidence for this tradition is not as consistent as is often assumed.²⁸ For example, John could have lived and died in Ephesus at an earlier time in the first century. Or, the John who died in Ephesus late in the first century could have been another John. But if the apostle John actually lived and died in Ephesus near the end of the first century, does this mean the changes in church organization had the approval of an inspired apostle? In his letter to the Ephesians, Ignatius does not mention the apostle John. He mentions the work of Paul among the Christians at Ephesus (12.1), but Paul had been dead for over 40 years! Had the apostle John been alive shortly before or at the time of Ignatius' letter it is reasonable to expect

²⁷ *Ibid.*, "... there are hints that the arrangement is still somewhat in flux in Ignatius."

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 885f., *The New Bible Dictionary*, pp. 640-641, F. F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James & John*, pp. 120f., and John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, pp. 221f.

Historical Background

Ignatius to have mentioned him. Especially would this be the case if John had endorsed the changes Ignatius was making in church government. Of course, Ignatius may not have mentioned the apostle because John and his disciples were opposed to the changes Ignatius and others were making. This may seem inconceivable to us today but we must remember that in and near the first century period Christians did not always show respect for all of the apostles. For example, Paul's work was opposed by some brothers in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 15). He also had opposition in the church he established at Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:18-21) and Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:20). In recounting his difficulties as an apostle, Paul says he had been in danger of false brothers (2 Corinthians 11:26). Concerning the Roman province of Asia, where the city of Ephesus was located, Paul makes this astounding statement toward the end of his life: "You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes" (2 Timothy 1:15). About 30 years after the death of Ignatius, Marcion rejected all the apostles except Paul.²⁹

What did Ignatius say to the church at Ephesus? He commends their elders for working in harmony with the bishop (4.1) and admonishes the church to regard the bishop as the Lord himself (6.1). Apparently, some in Ephesus were not submitting to the bishop and not attending church assemblies or attending with another group. Ignatius says those who do not "join in the common assembly" where the bishop presides are proud because they oppose the bishop (5.3). If we speculate that John lived in Ephesus and died there in his old age, then the change in church organization must have occurred within perhaps 20 years of his death. This does not seem that unlikely, considering the swift changes taking place today among religious people.

Ignatius was probably doing what he thought was best for the church at the time. A man who was so willing to die a martyr's death for the sake of Christ must be granted pure motives. The church was suffering under a persecution by the Emperor Trajan and false teachers were causing division in some of the churches. For Ignatius and others, the solution to this crisis was to tighten the organization of the church by creating a new authoritative leader called the bishop. This is not the solution to division found in the letter of 1 Clement: "only let the flock of Christ have peace with the presbyters set over it" (54.2). Perhaps it was easier to say, "Listen to the bishop," than to ask, "What did the apostles say?" Perhaps many in

²⁹ *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (first edition), pp. 568f.

Elders and Deacons

the church accepted this change because it was much easier than the struggle required to work out one's own salvation in fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12; Acts 17:11). All that can be known is that these changes resulted in the evolution toward greater organizational complexity in the following centuries. What was worse than the change in organization was the change in the way Christians viewed religious authority. It was no longer Scripture alone but Scripture and Tradition.

Polycarp (About 117)³⁰

According to Eusebius, who quotes Irenaeus, Polycarp was famous in church tradition for having been taught by the apostle John and others who had seen the Lord (Ecclesiastical History 5.20.4-8).³¹ In the greeting of his letter to Polycarp, Ignatius addresses him as the bishop of the church in Smyrna. Sometime after the letters of Ignatius were written, Polycarp writes a letter to the church at Philippi, but in this letter he does not refer to himself as the bishop of the church in Smyrna. In the greeting of his letter to the Philippians, he only refers to the elders who are with him: "Polycarp and the Elders with him to the Church of God sojourning in Philippi." More importantly, there is no indication in his letter that a singular bishop presided over the church at Philippi. Instead, Polycarp mentions a plurality of elders (Philippians 6.1). This letter is another indication that not all of the churches had adopted the Ignatian model of church government in the early part of the second century.

Church leaders in later centuries appealed to apostolic connections and succession lists in order to give them the authority to lead the church. Although Polycarp lived near the apostolic age, he makes no appeals to famous connections. The attempt to verify a traditional connection to the apostles through a succession list became important only to later generations. The reason for this focus in later years was probably due to a change in the way Christians viewed authority in the church. The authority of tradition began to be emphasized in addition to the authority of Scripture. Because the singular bishop concept had no authority in Scripture, later church leaders had to focus on the traditional connections to the past, yet at the time of Polycarp and Ignatius the singular bishop was an innovation and the tradition had not yet been established.

³⁰ The *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (first edition) suggests a date around 117 AD for the letter of Polycarp to the Philippians (p. 742).

³¹ Polycarp's connection to John, however, is not as certain as it appears in Eusebius. "A link between Polycarp and John, then, seems just about as unlikely as a link between Papias and John." *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, volume 5, p. 391.